

# What Philosophy Can Teach Us About Games?

**Serafeim A. Triantafyllou**

Computer Science Teacher in schools of Primary and Secondary Education of Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, Greece

## **Abstract**

Games make their presence apparent in every place. People of any age play games, talk about games and accomplish learning objectives with the right use of games. However, the basic question of what games really mean to players remains inadequately answered and further examination of the whole subject is needed. Conceptualizing the meaning of games and understanding their role in everyday life is the basic research area that Game Theory examines. Specifically, a major focus is given on the interaction that takes place when the players make their own decisions when playing a game. This paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of games from a humanistic perspective, examining at the same time the role of games in peoples' everyday life and how they can be helpful for promoting meaning in life. The existence of a connection between a theoretical goal of human life and games is possible, and to find out, we have conducted a theoretical analysis in order to examine Aristotle's conception of happiness, and other philosophical theories in relation to games. Next, an experiment was conducted, where young players could explore in a matching game, Aristotle's teaching about virtue, and specifically, that all virtues are means between extremes.

**Keywords:** digital games, philosophical theories, educational games

## 1. Introduction

The "*Nicomachean Ethics*", is the important and always up-to-date creation of the Stagirite philosopher - The concepts of "*good and virtuous life*", of virtue, justice and bliss as posed by the leading thinker (Burger, 2009). Modern man lives in a world characterized by a barrage of technological advances, scientific discoveries, and subversive changes. The predominance of digital technology has changed the field of science, economics and society, and despite the undeniable benefits of a predominantly practical nature, it has made its own subject secondary. So, the Aristotelian theory of mediocrity for the promotion of virtue is more relevant than ever.

Games make their presence apparent in every place. People of any age play games, talk about games, and accomplish learning objectives with the right use of games (de Aguilera and Mendiz, 2003). However, the basic question of what games really mean to players remains inadequately answered and further examination of the whole subject is needed. Conceptualizing the meaning of games and understanding their role in everyday life is the basic research area that Game Theory examines. Specifically, a major focus is given on the interaction that takes place when the players make their own decisions when playing a game (Blumberg, 2000; Triantafyllou, 2019; Triantafyllou, 2021). This paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of games from a humanistic perspective, examining at the same time the role of games in peoples' everyday life and how they can be helpful for promoting meaning in life (Cogburn and Silcox, 2009). The existence of a connection between a theoretical goal of human life and games is possible, and to find out, we examine Aristotle's conception of happiness and other philosophical theories in relation to games.

## 1. Philosophy And Games

### 1.1 "NICOMACHEAN ETHICS" by Aristotle

"Nicomachean Ethics" is a work of late creation by Aristotle and belongs to those treatises that revolve around ethical issues. Along with the two other works that have been saved, the "Ethical Eudimonia" and the "Ethical Megala", Aristotle attempts to define and verify the meaning of virtue that is identified with the meaning of good (Burger, 2009). The title of the work is approached by literary research with great care; however, it is certain that the dedication belongs to Aristotle's son, Nikomachus, who had died young. The "Nicomachean Ethics" extend to ten books and in general their theme focuses on the terms and conditions of human actions, the conceptual delimitation of bliss, the moral and mental virtues of man, as well as the right ways of behavior and action. Beyond the theoretical framework, which is philosophically appealing (Cope & Sandys 2010), the question that arises is: why should the modern reader study this work? What does it really have to offer him? Which questions will he/she find answers to?

**1.2 The Division of the Soul**

From the first book of the “Nicomachean Ethics”, the reader becomes acquainted with Aristotle's conception of the division of the soul (Aristotle, 2000). There are two parts that make it up: the irrational and the rational. Thus, the human body functions in two ways: a) based on its logic, b) in ways that have absolutely nothing to do with logic. The natural and the desirable are subdivisions of the irrational part and the rational having a part is subdivided into the desirable and the main reason having. Logic, then, plays for Aristotle a pivotal role in setting the right actions that in turn will lead to the conquest of the good, which is bliss (Aristotle, 2000; Burger, 2009; Cope & Sandys 2010).

Although the concepts of bliss and mediocrity are best known in Nicomachean Ethics, it should be noted that Aristotle deals with other very important theoretical concepts, such as justice (Papin, 2008). It is no coincidence that the distinction of powers in all kinds of state systems is based on Aristotle and this book. Law is divided into natural and positive (legal) (Ezez, 2009). The first, is the result of man's free initiative, while the second, arises from the natural necessity of things that impose it. The validity of natural law arises from moral necessity while that of positive law from its conditional enactment. The latter includes written and unwritten rules of law and in general all rules that are not dictated by natural law. This is where the conflict between positive and natural law, which has occupied the legal science for a long time, begins (Ezez, 2009; Papin, 2008).

The above are aspects of the Aristotelian philosophical thought and were chosen to demonstrate this very necessity of reading the “Nicomachean Ethics”, not only for moral education but also for the conquest of eternal happiness (Aristotle, 2000; Ezez, 2009).

**1.3 Games And Philosophy**

Trying to explain the meaning of games and to suggest a wise use of them in everyday life is not an easy task. Game Theory examines this basic research area trying to bring important findings concerning the created interaction between games and the players, and the effect of players' decisions during the gameplay (Pietarinen and Sandu, 1999; De Bruin, 2010). Therefore, an empirical method of acquiring knowledge about games and their common use to everyday life, is to carefully study, detect and analyze some basic characteristics that can be found on games (Cogburn, & Silcox, 2009). The existence of a connection between a theoretical goal of human life and games is possible, and to find out, we examine Aristotle's conception of happiness in relation to games.

Aristotle proclaims that a good and virtuous life is a happy life. "*Extreme of practical goods*" he calls bliss, that is, the highest of the goods that people achieve with their deeds. So, man can conquer virtue, if he satisfies the condition of personal happiness (Aristotle, 2000). And what is the virtue for Aristotle? Virtue, then, does not arise automatically, nor does it pre-exist in human nature. It is the product and result of a coordinated mental process and active action that is freely chosen by the individual and is based on the choice, that is, the natural

tendency of man for something good (Cope & Sandys 2010). But the point at which the person concerned should focus is the one that is in the middle of things. And for this to happen, the person must have reason and wisdom, so as to avoid extremes that will lead him astray (Aristotle, 2000). Between exaggeration and lack, the two vices, lies the concept of mediocrity that is identified with virtue (Finley, 1970; Papin, 2008). For example, courage lies in the midst of audacity and cowardice, generosity between greed and waste, wisdom between contempt and anesthesia, and so on.

## 2. Methods

To better understand the theories and concepts that are associated with philosophy and games, a mixed method analysis is conducted which contains a theoretical analysis, and experimentation through a matching game. Specifically chosen documents are examined with the basic criterion to answer to the research question: *RQ: "What Philosophy can teach us about games?"*. In addition, a matching game activity is designed and implemented to explore Aristotle's view that all virtues are means between extremes.

A game is a rule-based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome (Cogburn and Silcox, 2009), where different outcomes are assigned different values. In particular, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are negotiable.

The basic aim of study was to try to give answers to what philosophy can teach us about games and to identify what is the role of games in human life (Triantafyllou, 2021; Triantafyllou, 2022a; Triantafyllou, 2022b; Triantafyllou, 2022c). The selected documents that were examined for theoretical analysis, were: "*Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*" (Aristotle, 2000), "*The Medium of the Video Game*" (Baer, & Wolf, 2002), "*The Question of Play*" (Zeigler, 1985), "*Philosophical Investigations*" (Wittgenstein, 2001), "*Man and the Game (Homo Ludens)*" (Rodriguez, 2006) and "*Fifty Years on, What Exactly is a Videogame? An Essentialistic Definitional Approach.*" (Bergonse, 2017). While the above-mentioned documents focus on games, Aristotle's conception of "*Eudaimonia*", is very important to understand how games can be helpful for promoting meaning throughout a person's life. The paper "*Medium of the Video Game*" gives a deep understanding of basic characteristics of games. In the Aristotle's "*Nicomachean Ethics*", the researchers can see aspects of the Aristotelian philosophical thought, not only for moral education but also for the conquest of eternal happiness. In the paper "*Question of Play*" there is special focus on the phenomenological concept of the world and how an individual sees the world.

### 2.1 What exactly is a game?

The basic characteristic to identify a game is the motivation for play (Triantafyllou & Georgiadis, 2022, Triantafyllou & Georgiadis, 2022e, Triantafyllou, 2022a; Triantafyllou, 2022b). Game players play games for fun, social interaction, and meaningful engagement. In learning, the basic goal for players to finish the challenges of a game is to develop a specific skillset and to get satisfaction after the accomplishment of game challenges. Wolf writes in

his book that there are four basic characteristics to identify a game: Rules, Conflict, Player ability and a valued outcome (Baer & Wolf, 2002; Arjoranta, 2019).

A paper in *The Computer Games Journal* (Bergonse, 2017) tries to answer to the basic question of what exactly a videogame is. The following text shows some important thoughts on the above-mentioned subject:

*“During the last five decades, videogames evolved into a major component of popular culture as well as a multi-billion-dollar industry. The medium diversified tremendously, currently encompassing simple implementations of numeric games on the screen of a cell phone as well as vast, persistent online worlds on last generation consoles and PCs. In spite of its cultural and economic relevance, few attempts have been made to define what a videogame exactly is.”* (Bergonse, 2017)

Ludology is a broad concept with many facets in game research, such as: 1) the study of games, 2) a game research approach, 3) a movement active to years 1998-2001. The term ludology was firstly introduced by Gonzalo Frasca as a new methodological approach to define games and structures of games, in relation to narratology, as the study of narratives (Frasca, 1999). An important event was the first Digital Games and Culture conference organized by the Department of Humanistic Informatics at the University of Bergen in 1998. Great researchers such as Gonzalo Frasca, Jesper Juul and Markku Eskelinen, brought innovative ideas about the study of narratives and digital games (Wolf, & Perron, 2014). In addition, another important conference in game research area was the first international game-focused humanities conference, at the IT University of Copenhagen in 2001 and the conference in Bristol at the University of the West of England. Ludology has been erroneously contrasted with *narrative theory*. Many papers were presented in the above-mentioned conferences about the narrative status of digital games (Wolf, & Perron, 2014). Frasca and many other researchers tried to form the methodological basis for game research. As Frasca mentioned: *“Our intention is not to replace the narratologic approach, but to complement it.”* (Frasca, 1999).

Ludwig Wittgenstein, wrote about games in his book *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein, 2001). In his book (Wittgenstein, 2001, paragraph §3) he writes about games, the following:

*“It is as if someone were to say: “A game consists in moving objects about on a surface according to certain rules...” –and we replied: You seem to be thinking of board games, but there are others. You can make your definition correct by expressly restricting it to those games.”*

Also, later in paragraph 66, Wittgenstein writes about games (Wittgenstein, 2001, paragraph §66):

*“Consider for example the proceedings that we call “games”. I mean boardgames, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all? – Don’t say: “There must be something common, or they would not be called ‘games’”-*

*but look and see whether there is anything common to all. – For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don't think, but look!"*

At first it seems that Wittgenstein claims that there is not a clear definition for games. But, if we look deeper into his sayings, we can see that Wittgenstein is writing for games, when he puts emphasis especially on how language works (Laas, 2017). Wittgenstein use games to show how language works. Consequently, the right conclusion is not that games cannot be defined, but that we should see games as a broad concept, and in particular, as a family of related concepts (Arjoranta, 2014).

Gaming is one of the dominant components of human activity. In the classic study “*Man and the Game (Homo Ludens)*” (Rodriguez, 2006), the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga precisely describes this dominant connection:

*"Civilization is, in its earliest phases, played. It does not come from play like a baby detaching itself from the womb: it arises in and as play, and never leaves it".*

All social relationships in the present moment of culture tend to fully integrate the features of the game. Even if we do not realize it, the benefits of play in life, is a dominant trend (de Aguilera and Mendiz, 2003). The main reason for this is the dominance of social media, the rapid development of information and communication technologies and the division of social aspects into corresponding applications and functions. With cross-cultural examples from the humanities, business, and politics, Huizinga investigates play in all its diverse forms—as it relates to philosophy, language, law, knowledge, myth, poetry, war, art, and much more (Rodriguez, 2006).

Starting with Plato, Huizinga examines the contribution of “man the player” through the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and early modern world. With its remarkable historical sweep, Homo Ludens defines play for generations to come.

### **3.2 Description of Aristotle's view with a matching game activity**

Young players explore Aristotle's view that all virtues are means between extremes, in a matching game. We can tell the group of players, that the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle introduced with his teaching several virtues (Aristotle, 2000; Burger, 2009). Then, we can place a basket with virtue strips before the group and ask the players if they know from their math studies what a "mean" is. We will tell them that it is not exactly a midpoint, nor an average, but a different kind of "middle." To Aristotle, a virtue might be a balanced way to behave, a moderate way to act that fits in between extremes.

In the second stage of the game, we can place a second basket before the group and invite the players of the group to play a matching game. Everyone pulls a virtue out of the first basket and works together with another person to find the extremes in the other basket. For our matching game, we suppose there are seven virtues in the baskets, though Aristotle defined more. After all the matches are complete, we can ask the participants if any terms need

defining. Afterwards, we can come to useful conclusions by asking the participants if they agree with Aristotle about virtue being a mean between extremes?

### **3. Suggestions for Future Research**

Through this study the findings showed that philosophical theories can lay the foundation for a better understanding of the role of games in our everyday life. After a detailed theoretical analysis and later through the phase of experimentation, we believe that we have contributed to the existing knowledge available in literature. However, we should mention that after a detailed search in the literature, the authors have not found many studies associated with philosophy and games. Thus, future research is needed to add more findings to the existing knowledge.

### **4. Conclusion**

Philosophical thinking gives us the opportunity to think from different perspectives. The basic principles of Aristotle's teaching give us many useful ideas on how to bring positive learning outcomes when playing a game. The main actions of a player in a game are focused on the construction of a game environment that is called natural cosmos. Considering Aristotle's ontological approach and procedural rhetoric in designing games for education, the player can combine the basic game elements correctly to construct a virtual game environment and through the game to accomplish learning objectives (Harper 2011).

Also, the basic principles of constructivism philosophical theory in education, has a lot to teach about to learn how to learn (Triantafyllou, 2022a; Triantafyllou, 2022d; Triantafyllou, 2023). Learning is always a building process whereby new knowledge can only be acquired in terms of knowledge that already exists. Constructivist epistemology suggests constructivist pedagogy such as always checking and activating prior learning (Dennick, 2016). Contrary to criticism by some conservative educators, constructivism does not cut out the active role of the educator. Constructivism modifies the role of the educator to let him help individuals to construct knowledge rather than to simply reproduce information. The constructivist educator can provide problem-solving and inquiry-based learning activities with which students produce and test new ideas, draw conclusions and construct knowledge in a collaborative learning environment.

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Aristotle consolidated the current form of research methodology and established the existence of a specialized terminology for every science. He was the first to set the basic principles for knowledge restructuring by subject, identifying specific problems and incorporating dialectical controversy objectively. The Aristotelian teachings are important contributors to later philosophy. Philosophy can help us to enhance the learning process and create educational games that are closer to students' learning needs and help them to accomplish learning goals.

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