**Playing the Good Life**

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**Introduction**

I am proud of my willpower. Throughout the years I have been able of quitting smoking, lose the weight gained afterwards, and even learning to enjoy changing diapers early in the morning. However wrong I might be, I think of myself as a stubborn, iron-willed person.

That’s why I surprised myself when in 2007 I decided not only take up running, but I would do so with the aid of the Nike+ services. At that time, Nike+ offered a feature that interested me: it was a cheap tracking system that would make it easier to follow a training program. Measuring my efforts would make it easier for me to follow the strict training patterns that would result in the successful completion of a marathon.

As it turns out, I did not run a marathon then, and I haven’t yet. I stopped using the Nike+ system on May 15th, 2009. I have, however, maintained the habit of running. I run at least 4 times a week, at least 5 km. I run with my children, alone, in the rain or sun or snow. I’ve listened to great books and cheap novels, and plotted articles and games and books while on the road. Running gives me a center, a focus, a practice of something radically different to my main daily activities.

In the summer of 2012 I decided to take one extra step in my habit and bought a GPS watch. I am the kind of runner that focuses on a schedule, and commits to doing it. I always found the sound feedback on the Nike+ application too intrusive. A GPS watch would give me distance and pace data without bothering me. I ended up buying a Nike+ watch, which made me return to that service. Then I realized its failure in making me a habitual runner, even though I did become a habitual runner.

In this chapter I want to explore this paradox, focusing on how gamified systems aspire to help us live a better life and promote good habits, and how their design might not always reflect what is actually needed to develop the virtues of a good life. I understand gamification as the design of services and products with the methods of game design, with the intention of engaging users in ways similar to those of games[[1]](#endnote-1). And I understand the good life as the philosophical notion of a fulfilling life in which humans practice and develop their potential, alone and together with others.

My main concern with many gamified systems is their focus on making the activities that lead a good life look like (competitive) games, disregarding the need for internal reflection and effort to perform activities that *we think* will lead to *our* good life. The good life is *not only* the practice of activities, it is *also* the capacity to reflect about the role of those activities in one’s life and sense of well-being. In this chapter I want to suggest how playful technologies can be designed to help us lead a virtuous existence, focusing on how play is a an activity that belongs to the good life.

I will present this idea of the good life, or *eudaimonia*, from two theoretical angles: Virtue Ethics and positive psychology. *Eudaimonia* explains the kind of virtuous life that we should aspire to live, in which we take efforts to explore our best potential, and develop it. To live a good life is to practice virtues, and reflect about them, further developing the ability to *live well*.

My critique of gamification will be based on the combination of two other disciplines – design research and philosophy of technology. I will critique how gamification has been designed and implemented for computing technologies, pointing at the philosophical and technical flaws that question their ethical validity. I will then propose a way of thinking about technologies for the good life that includes play and playfulness as a core driving inspiration for the design and the use of these technologies.

To support my arguments, I will use examples from Nike+ and the online programming teaching service Code Academy. Nike+ is a social, web-based tracking system for runners deeply embedded in the Nike/Apple technology ecosystem. Nike+ provides data for runners, as well as a number of competitive game mechanics delivered through its web presented. Code Academy is an online collection of interactive tutorials designed to teach users to write code in a number of programming languages. Code Academy uses extensively badges and other competitive elements to keep users engage and assure that they return to the website, while tracking their progress in the classes.

I will start by reminding what a good life means, the origins of the concept and its philosophical and psychological meaning. I will then present the idea of technology for the good life, or how philosophy of technology has reflected about the role of devices in the configuration and practices of a virtuous life. This will lead to a critical reflection on gamification, followed by a proposal on how design should think about the devices that would help us lead a good life.

This chapter should be read as a philosophical inquiry on design and playful technologies, based on my own experiences and reflections as a consumer of some of these services. My purpose is not to critique gamification. Quite on the contrary, I believe that a way of living a good life is by *playing* a good life, and that computing technologies can support this ideal. However, not all play, and not every playful design, is conduit of a good life. A good life is an internal activity of expression and reflection through action –very much indeed like a well-played game.

**Aspects of the Good Life**

Is running a part of the good life? Judging from both the large number of runners I meet on the streets every day, and the rhetoric that surrounds this popular sport, I would intuitively answer that for the middle and high classes in the western world, running *is good*.

If running is *good*, then services like Nike+ provide an element of enhancement of that goodness. By encouraging us to run and measuring our progress, we are theoretically better suited to continue the habit of running. Nike+ offers data-rich, communicable visualizations of our running virtuosity while we are rewarded for it.

What is this *good life* I am referring to? According to Aristotle (1998), to live a good life is the supreme goal of humans, towards which all actions and activities should be guided. The good life is an end in itself, a purpose that should guide all of our active behaviors, as well as our thoughts and practices. We should think and act with the purpose of developing a good life. In this sense, the Aristotelian concept of the good life is both a teleological one, since it presumes that there is an end towards which we strife, and a constructivist one, since we must act to develop that good life.

The teleological aspect of the good life is particularly important, since it establishes that to live a good life we must find our “true purpose” and practice it. According to Aristotle we should find our true calling, and follow it with actions, thus developing the virtues attached to that purpose[[2]](#endnote-2).

Of course, this purpose ought to be a virtuous one – the exploration and performance of functions that develop the good values that will result in a good life. To live a good life, we should act virtuously in a process of constant action and reflection towards developing our best being.

In classic philosophical terms, the idea of the good life is tightly coupled to that of flourishing – living a good live is becoming the best human beings we can. To flourish is to develop not only our virtues, but also the rational capacity to understand and evaluate the goodness in our own life[[3]](#endnote-3).

A common critique to Aristotelian theory has been its focus on the contemplative as the highest form of good life. Recent interpretations of the classic Aristotelian theory provide more nuanced understandings of the relation between the good life and flourishing as an outcome of performed actions. However, before moving on to positive psychology, it is important to mention that flourishing ethics has become a dominant trend in modern ethical theory, adapting the classic Aristotelian theories with Buddhist and Taoist discourses (Bynum, 2008). Modern flourishing ethics allows us to understand the good life as the performance of virtuous actions in the context of an ontology in which humans are not at the center of the universe. The good life is not anymore a concept that is exclusive of, or even necessarily centered on humans –the good life is the human flourishing in the context of an ecology where machines are moral agents, and thus active in the performance of the good life.

The philosophical concept of the good life is concerned with the performance of those virtuous activities that will lead to flourishing. The good life is not a passive state, or a situation that can be identified, but a process towards an end in which actions and activities constitute the meanings of a life well lived[[4]](#endnote-4). The good life is a process of acting and reflecting with the purpose of improving ourselves.

But is running really a part of the *good life*? Or are we confusing means and ends, activities with virtues? Running has a number of positive outcomes, it demands and fosters virtues, from self-sacrifice to personal fitness. But running is not the goal. Talk to a runner: what makes sense is not the miles, or finishing a marathon, though those things matter. What truly matters is the *practice* of running, an exercise in training the body and the mind. We run for the “runners high”, for the fugitive pleasure of being one with the road, for the realization that we can run one more kilometer. We run not for the activity, but for what *we make of the activity*. The data tracked by the Nike+ system does not reflect this purpose of running. It’s an excellent reminder of the need for running, but it only addresses one part of the virtuous life. It offers an external acknowledgement of a *manifestation* of the good life, a shadow image of a virtuous practice.

Before I go deeper into this critique, I need to briefly explain what do I mean by practice. In my way of thinking about how we use technology, I am deeply influenced by Albert Borgmann’s ideas on how we experience the world, as much as I am inspired by the ethical idea of morality as a *practical* science (Borgmann 1987, 2011). Hence, I call practices all those activities conductive to the development of an ethical life. Practices are the *actions* attached to *virtues*, from generosity to empathy, courage, and many others. Practices are not only actions, but also the reflection on those actions in order to pursue certain betterment in our moral life. A practice is constituted by actions, but also reflections. In this sense, the good life is constituted by and structured around practices.

But what do I mean by a good life? If running effectively makes me fitter, helps me lose weight and keeps me in a good mood, why is it that evaluating the performance of that activity is the wrong approach to designing for the good life? It is not enough to track, and make sure that I perform these activities – the good life is not about the results, but the process. A good life is a lived life, not an accounted one.

This idea of the good is heavily influenced by both Aristotelian philosophy and positive psychology (Ryan *et al.*, 2008; Deci *et al.*, 2008; Bruni, 2010.) These two theories share a focus on *euidaimonia*, on the art and practice of living well and why and how do we perform that activity.

Virtue ethics provides the ethical framework that explains the concept of the good life; positive psychology is the discipline that has paid more attention to the reasons why we act well, and why we want to act well. If virtue ethics provides the metaphysical and ontological reasons why we should act towards a good life, positive psychology provides the reasons behind the actual actions towards a good life.

Positive psychology has already provided a working definition of the good life, taking the Aristotelian concept of *eudaimonia* and applying it to a certain understanding of actions and activities, and the reasons behind them[[5]](#endnote-5). For eudemonistic positive psychology, the good life should be identified with an ongoing process rather than with an end, with a quantifiable outcome. Unlike hedonistic psychology, which is focused on the results that provide a sense of well-being, eudaimonistic psychology shifts the weight of responsibility to the actions that give the feeling of positive reinforcement, to the actions that lead to goals that lead to a good life[[6]](#endnote-6).

Positive psychology adds two interesting concepts to the Aristotelian idea of a good life: first, the good life is a process guided by intrinsic goals that are not necessarily, and not always effectively rewarded with external outcomes. The good life is the process of acting accordingly to our self to achieve these intrinsic goals, and the reflective capacity of the moral being is the capacity to identify these intrinsic goals, and act upon them.

The second relevant concept is that of psychological autonomy. Living a good life is the outcome of being and feeling autonomous, of setting goals and evaluating them intrinsically, without the requirement of a heteronomic reward system. Eudamonistic psychology identifies the good life as that which develops autonomy, through the action and reflection on intrinsic goals that provide us with the satisfaction of a live well lived[[7]](#endnote-7).

Autonomy, in positive psychology, is opposed to heteronomy, or the performance of actions that bring satisfaction for reasons external to the reflection of the self. Autonomy leads to intrinsically motivated actions, while heteronomy leads to actions performed by request of external regulators. This distinction will be useful when I analyze gamification further on in this chapter.

Summarizing: the good life is the life experienced as a process in which we perform the best of our virtues with the goal of flourishing, of exploring our potential as human beings. That flourishing is not externally determined or rewarded, but is the outcome of a process of internal reflection that leads to increased autonomy as human beings, as well as to the setting of intrinsic goals that we identify as constituting the good life. The good life requires the effort of living by the goals we set, evaluating them and experiencing a sense of wellness and achievement when we accomplish them.

Is running, then, a part of the good life? The question in itself is misleading. Running is just an activity, a physical performance that leads to a number of results we give importance to. Running is only a part of the good life if we have reasoned that it is so, if we have actually developed as part of our understanding of the good life the idea that the effects of running are good.

Of course, some of its results are socially and culturally praised and recommended: physical fitness is a core virtue in modern societies. Furthermore, the type of physical endurance and patience that running requires are also fulfilling some of the rhetoric of stoicism that is popular in corporate language. Running is an activity that leads to many virtues, and that is therefore positively regarded in society.

However, running for the good life must not depend on that result. We might set as a goal to be more fit, and running is an instrument to it, but not a goal. Running can also be a meditative activity, or a social one – I listen to spy novels when I run, while some of my friends enjoy running in groups not only for the exercise and the competition, but for the social occasion: the shared activity, the shared goals that are explicit so the conversation can flow away from what is being done towards more interesting topics.

Running becomes a part of a good life if it fulfills some of our intrinsic goals –not all of them correlated with an activity that can be measured or tracked. The results, for many runners, are just an accident of an activity with another purpose than just achieving results.

Let’s look briefly at learning as another activity that is part of the good life. I will focus on learning how to program computers, and how to do it well. In our digitized western world, computer programming has moved from a fringe, esoteric activity to a desired knowledge. We value computer programmers because their knowledge is not widely available, but also because they hold the key to living in this modern world in which everything has a computer inside.

Knowing how to program a computer could then be seen as socially valuable and good skill. Both the activity of learning and the activity of practicing programming could be parts of a modern understanding of the good life, as I will explain later on. However, much like running, programming can be a painful and dull activity, and learning it can be even slower and more painful. Therefore, we have seen a number of technologies that try to help the learning process by gamifying it. I’d argue that this is so because programming can be considered a part of the good life that needs encouragement to be learnt and practiced.

But is it? Programming is just an activity, or a skill: the capacity of giving instructions to a computer in order to make it perform instructions we have previously designed. The virtues of programming do not lie in the activity itself, but on what the activity entails: a way of thinking, a way of solving problems, and a way of commandeering the technologies that surround us. The gamification of learning is as conflicting as the gamification of running – well intended, but focused on a heteronomic understanding of the good life. I will return to the gamification of learning programming later on in this chapter.

The question is now ready to be formulated: how can digital technologies help us live a good life, focusing on autonomy and intrinsic goals as part of the process of flourishing? We have done that through gamification, applying game design elements to the evaluation and encouragement of activities – but is that the right path to take?

In order to answer these questions, we first need to take a quick sidestep in the philosophy of technology, to understand how machines and morality relate, and how activities are connected to technologies as a part of the good life.

**Technologies and the Good Life**

I like comparing running to playing live music. Both share a sense of exhaustion, an embodied pleasure of being one with something else – both are, in my view, physical experiences of the world.

In the case of running, how does the Nike+ support this experience? Nike+ tracks distances and pace, as well as geographical locations, providing feedback on performance metrics once the run is finished. The Nike+ system allows users to set and publicly share online their own goals, a social layer that allows establishing ad hoc competitions. Nike+ excels at measuring performance, but is it encouraging the embodied pleasures of the sport? It focuses on what can be measured, on what can be tracked, on what a machine can compute – but the ways in which running can be a part of the good life go beyond crunched numbers.

I haven’t chosen to write so much about running by chance. Through running we can explain the relation between technology, gamification and the good life. Why running? I want to focus now on how technology can contribute to the game life, and I will begin with Albert Borgmann (1987, 2011), the philosopher of technology who attempted reforming the meaning and importance of technology in modern society by thinking about the relations between machines and the good life. The example of running is taken directly from Borgmann, and it serves as an excuse to introduce two key concepts in my understanding of gamification for the good life: focal practices and focal things.

A focal practice can be defined as an activity that requires skill, discipline, and practice, but that is also used to disclose the world. By this, Borgmann invokes those activities that explain the world from and for the user. To disclose the world is to experience it as a reflective being, demanding an engagement with others and with the world itself. For Borgmann, running is a focal practice because the runner experiences a unified experience of the road, the environment, and his own body. To run is to experience the world through an embodied practice that can benefit from the aid and support of technology[[8]](#endnote-8). The road, the landscape, the body, they all exist in a different way, and the runners’ capacity for experiencing and understanding that enriches their lives.

Focal practices are an interpretation and actualization of Aristotle’s idea that the good life is the result of a constant exercise of virtues. The development of the good life requires a practice, an activity that allows us to exercise virtues. Only through practice we develop the good life – of course, practice coupled with reflection, with introspection, with the capacity to reflect and learn and develop our moral sense from those practices. The development of habits is important, but not in itself, without the development of autonomous reflection.

Many of our daily tasks, of our activities, are mediated, cued, explored and explained through the use of technology (McCarthy and Wright, 2004). Some of these will help us disclose the world, becoming a part a focal practice[[9]](#endnote-9). For Borgmann, those are focal things: technologies that help facilitate focal practices. These things do not interfere with the experience, they do not get in the way of the focal practice – they just facilitate it.

Any focal practice, then, can be supported by technology, as long as this technology reinforces the point of the practice, that is, the experience of the world through a network of contexts and people[[10]](#endnote-10). Focal practices are the center of such a network, and technologies should never become that center – just a node, an element in that network. The point of running is not the shoes, or the clothes, or the road, but they all play a role in the practice.

Borgmann, a technology skeptic, argued that most technology does not qualify to be a focal thing. He proposed a difference between focal things and devices, the later being any technology that gets in the way how focal practices develop relationships between people and environments. The treadmills, or the Walkman, interfere with running as a focal practice – running is not *running* anymore, is something we do while we listen to music, or while we are indoors[[11]](#endnote-11). Let’s remember that for Borgmann, focal things are centers of complicated networks of people and activities. Devices, on the other hand, are just machinery, simple objects with a function, but without the capacity to actually disclose the world[[12]](#endnote-12).

Borgmann’s take on technology falls short of providing a comprehensinve understanding of the effect and importance of these technologies in our life experiences. His theory is skeptic of the virtues that technology can embody and the positive behaviors it can help promote. Technology can help in the practice of the good life[[13]](#endnote-13). Machines have helped us develop better lives, structure society and construct better relations with the world, and they cannot be ruled out as important elements in the way we experience the world, also when developing the good life.

We need a concept that connects the concepts of focal practices and focal devices with the ways in which technology can contribute to human betterment. Technologies mediate our experience of the world, but we need to qualify that experience, to understand how the technology-mediated experience of the world can affect our moral understanding of it.

The Dutch philosopher of technology Peter Paul Verbeek provides a theoretical alternative that expands Borgmann’s philosophy in a more interesting direction. Verbeek proposes a hermeneutic approach to technology that explains how the world is experienced through and together with technology. We cannot understand the experience of the world without the mediation of technology[[14]](#endnote-14). Any experience of the world is intimately connected with technology. In fact, there is no divide between the world and humans and technology, but a continuum of relations and experiences. The world is experienced through technology, and the different modalities of that relation establish modes of experience and the different importance that technologies can have in our moral lives.

Technologies embody moral values, but also enhance the practice of morality – in Verbeek’s terms, they mediate morality. A classic example is speed bumps: these devices mediate our relationship with the world with a moral message, forcing us to lower our vehicle’s speed when the traffic conditions require it. This is not to say that speed bumps foster a moral practice, but as devices, they are encoded with values and moral meanings.

Technology, then, can mediate morality; it can have embedded ethical values that affect the way we experience the world through them[[15]](#endnote-15). This assertion is of particular importance for the idea of *playing* the good life, since it implies that technology can be *designed* so moral values are transmitted to a practice. If technology is designed with ethical affordances, and the behaviors it fosters are ethical, then we could design technologies for the betterment of our lives through the encouragement of virtuous activities.

However, the fact that technologies mediate morality does not imply that we become more virtuous beings by means of using them. Technologies *mediate* morality, but we *practice* morality, and we only do so if the activities we engage in are perceived to increase our autonomy. As I mentioned earlier, increased sense of autonomy is a sign of a good life according to positive psychology. We need to think about how technologies can be designed to *mediate morality*, while fostering a practice of life that increases our sense of autonomy. In this sense, technologies can become focal things that help develop focal practices. For that, gamification focused on the virtues of games, often praised for their capacity to engage users and make them learn behaviors and patterns.

Let me foreshadow my argument: the focal practice that gamification can support is play, and therefore we should think about how these devices could encourage a type of playful interaction that develops and fosters the good life. In other words: we can design focal things that lead to the focal practice of playing the good life.

Technologies can be used to practice the good life, as long as we understand them as focal things that are a part of a network that constitutes a focal practice. The way of understanding how technologies do that is by focusing on how they can mediate morality. Gamification design has looked at how game design can encourage, motivate, and pace activities that are a part of the good life. In the next section, however, I will critically look at a conceptual failure in gamification: its focus on the results of an activity, rather than on the playful practice of a good life.

**Gaming Virtues**

In the understanding of the good life I am advocating for, practice is key – it develops virtues and gives a feeling of autonomy. Of course, practice coupled with reflection, with the capacity for moral introspection. Practice and reflection, the development of skills and the capacity to think about them, require of time, dedication, and devotion. Technology can support this process: belts and alarms can remind us about safety in cars, Nike+ will help us track and measure our progress.

Because we often need support and encouragement for practicing virtues, philosophers and designers have considered the question of how to help people live the good life. Gamification is the design of activities using game principles in order to engage users following the positive and negative reinforcement loops of games. Even though gamification is being applied to many different contexts, I am exclusively interested in how it can be used to living a good life. Therefore, I will only focus on gamification applied to the development and practice of good virtues.

Let’s return to our examples. The Nike+ system is designed with the purpose of reinforcing the runner’s habits. In its most basic use, Nike+ is a tracking system, an old way of measuring athlete’s performances and preparing them for training. It is also a good tool to encourage novices into running, and to following training programs. From this perspective, Nike+ could be seen as a device that supports an activity that can be defined as a part of the good life.

However, Nike+ only tracks data and numbers. It does encourage users to engage with running, but it has little to do with the context of running, its role in a more complex network of activities, practices, reflections, and believes that constitute the good life. Running, for Nike+, is the activity of making kilometers at a certain pace, providing results that can be compared and matched with others. But even using the geotagging version of the application, Nike+ does not much care about the whereabouts of the running. Running, for Nike+, is an activity detached from a context. Users of Nike+ can only make sense of their experience of running through the data manipulation tools that the system affords, such as the limited description field for the run where users can describe the quality of the run. Nike+ in this way limits its users’ agency over the practice of running.

By design, Nike+ is limited to gathering and processing quantifiable data on each run. As an application, it can hardly contribute to the idea of the good life through practice – it can support it, but it does not allow for the kind of autonomous thinking that the good life requires. It is a node in the network of a focal practice, just not the most important one.

My second example is Code Academy. Code Academy wants to help people learn to program with different languages, from Javascript to Python. For that, users can follow courses with different tracks, and they are rewarded points and badges when they complete some exercises. Through these methods, Code Academy intends to keep users engaged in learning.

Code Academy does only a few new things, but it does them very well. It provides a clear and well-developed framework for learning, a summary of many modern pedagogic techniques and online modules for learning. Code Academy sets off to teach people to program – but does it contribute to creating a practice that is part of a good life?

Programming can be seen as a focal practice, as the development of a number of mental skills and good practices that provide discipline. Because programming is the practice of having control and understanding computing machines, and therefore, albeit vicariously, understanding the culture and nature of contemporary culture. To be able to program is to have important knowledge about computation, about the inner workings of the machines that move the world. To be able to program is to gain deeper control over the machines that articulate many of our experiences, being able to give them instructions and adapt them to our needs and demands. We have delegated important parts of our emotional and work lives to machines – being able to program empowers us in that relation with computers.

Code Academy provides an important first step towards learning how to give instructions to a computer. However, Code Academy is based on the principles of teaching how to perform programming tasks, rather than understanding why programming is the interface between man and machine. Code Academy teaches programming, but only as an activity, not as a focal practice. It does not help understand the workings of computers, or the importance of thinking about how computers work.

Much like in the case of Nike+, Code Academy tracks the progress of users without allowing them to develop a focal practice. It helps developing habits, but does not contextualize them into an activity that makes for a good life. Code Academy tracks and rewards progress with relevant badges matched with a progression ladder that leads to learning a number of rote skills, but not programming as a focal practice.

Both Nike+ and Code Academy use computing power to gather, collect, compare and visualize data regarding activities users voluntarily log. The idea is simple enough –comparing this data can yield to responses from the system designed to engage users in the activities tracked. This type of gamification can be seen as an instrument for the good life if we presume that the activities tracked are a part of the good life, and that the way of tracking the data, or even the data tracked itself, support or are a part of the good life.

When a system tracks data and rewards pre-determined actions, there is a risk of forcing practices into users: we would only do what the system can track, and therefore we would comply with a set of practices that has been externally determined as constitutive of “good” behaviors. If we think about those applications specifically designed and marketed to help us improve our lives, I argue that their biggest mistake is to apply a very naïve understanding of virtue ethics and the good life.

Gamification tends to delegate virtues in data and rewards, neglecting the importance of practice *and* reflection in the development of the good life[[16]](#endnote-16). Technologies designed for improving habits have an apparent beneficial effect in quantifiable, trackable terms. However, these technologies do not help or contribute to develop a good life, since they do not require us to develop or practice moral values – just to *enact them*, to perform them as a mechanic repetition of tasks.

In other words, gamification run the risk of proposing an approach to the good life based on delegation to data, without developing autonomy. Focusing on heteronomy rather than autonomy, in goal-oriented activities that are trackable using computers, rather than in activities with internal rewards and goals, gamification runs the risk of focusing on the tracking technology rather than on the idea of a good life.

The practice of the good life needs to develop not only skills, or habits, but also, and perhaps more importantly, the capacity for self-reflection, the development of autonomy as moral beings. Gamification is doing some things right, but its focus on the habits through designs based on reward systems invokes a heteronomic relation of dependence with the gamified system. The good life requires autonomy, and therefore any technology that wants to support it needs to be a technology that fosters autonomy. It is the task of design to think and create such technology.

**Designing to Play a Good Life**

In this chapter I wanted to look at how gamification can support the development of the good life. To that purpose, we need to look at how design has understood the activity of play. I want to propose a way of thinking the design of gamification deeply rooted in interaction design, with the purpose of designing (for) play, rather than games. My intention is to inspire designers in aspects of the good life that can be designed for through play.. This is meant to be a reflective and inspirational approach – not so much a method as a set of ideas and provocations for designers.

So far, I have focused on systems that use *game* design elements to create behaviors that could be interpreted as a part of the good life. I am, however, not interested in games. Games are just one of the types of devices designed and created to *play with*. I want to challenge Gamification developers to think about play, and not about games, when trying to design for the kind of engagement games can create. My position is simple: if we want to engage people in the good life, we should start not by making games, but letting them *play the good life*.

I guess at this stage in the book play has been defined several times, and Huizinga, Callois, Sutton-Smith and Suits are familiar names for the reader. Hoping so, I will not bother you with yet another scholarly account of the history of play research, and its different definitions of play we can find. What I am going to do instead, dear reader, is assume that we both know what play is, and that we can identify playfulness too – otherwise, may I direct you to read Jaako Stenros chapter in this book, please? Just to make sure that we are on the same page: I am now being playful with my writing tone, and play is what we do with toys and games, in playgrounds and beds too.

I am interested in play as an appropriative and expressive activity, one that likes to be bound only to freely play with and within those boundaries. Like Salen and Zimmerman wrote, play is free movement within a more rigid structure. The type of play I am interested can be expressed with objects created for that purpose, like toys (Benjamin, 1999a, 1999b), or as an attitude, an understanding of life or of a particular situation that brings forth the idea of play. In other words, we can play, or we can be playful.

There are, of course, a number of characteristics of play that are relevant: play takes things in its own seriousness, and it is often switching between the very important and the trivial. Play is also autotelic – its purpose is its very existence, which does not mean that it is not *important* for us – in fact, because it is autotelic is better suited to encourage autonomous thinking, even when playing under the heteronomic frames of rules. Play can also be dangerous, addictive and hurting towards those who do not want to play. What interests me here, though, are the expressive and appropriative capacities of play.

What do I mean by expressive? Let’s start thinking about how we play with dolls, for instance. Children’s play with dolls is “just” play, but if we listen to what they say, the worlds that are built through imagination, we can perceive that play is used to express their worldviews, what concerns them and worries them. Play, like music and painting, is a form of expression. When we are playful, we are expressing ourselves. Think about the playfulness in my writing tone before – it was a more personal, more direct tone than the somewhat dry approach I took earlier. Think also about all the other embodied expressions of playfulness we engage with, the little dance steps we perform when nobody looks, the back heel kick with which we finishing going down the stairs, to make sure that the stairs stay in place, … All these tiny performances enlighten the day, makes us take over our activities and express who we are.

Play is expressive because it discloses who we are and what we think of the world, even when engaged in mundanity and work. To play or be playful is one way to express our being in the world. Any designer invested in harnessing the power of play should have in mind how will she let users express themselves through play.

Play is also appropriative; it can *take over* situations and make them playful. In this process, whatever is appropriated might change meaning: a job interview might become a contest of wits, a conversation might turn into flirting, a vending machine can have personality we can argue with.

When play is expressive and appropriative, when we use it to take over a situation and express ourselves in it, it becomes a focal practice. Through play we can disclose the world, establishing a network of (play)things, people and situations through which we make sense of experiences. In this sense, the focus on designing gamification as objects and systems is appropriate but misleading: we should not concern ourselves with the design of the devices: we should pay attention to play as a focal practice, as an activity that uses things, as a part (sometimes the *central part*) of an experience that discloses the world.

Gamification, then, has taken the wrong focus when designing devices for the good life. It has seen the device as an embodiment of the practice, while it should have focused on the following question: how can we play the good life? How can we use the creative, expressive nature of play and harness it to develop the good life?

Let me be specific: there is nothing wrong in using reward systems or similar design elements when creating services and devices that would gamify the practice of a good life. However, the focus on these elements has made Gamification devices not always playful. Play and playfulness are the element that’s missing in the design of gamified services for the good life. Any focal practice is constituted by the practice and development of skills, and the reflection about that practice. Play becomes a focal practice when it is expressive and appropriative, when it takes over a situation to interpret as part of play. Gamification systems like Nike+ or Code Academy encourage the practice of skills, but never let users appropriate or express situations through them – they don’t let runs become more than data, they don’t let programming be more than giving instructions.

Designers should then think about what characteristics of play need to be addressed by the device/system/service that will aid in the development of a playful practice of the good life. In my terms, that would be how to design for appropriation and expression[[17]](#endnote-17). There are four elements designers of playful devices for the good life should take into consideration:

* The development of skills through practice;
* The development of an autonomous interpretation of these practices, that leads to self-reflection and evaluation (without resorting to external/heteronomic evaluations);
* The appropriative nature of play;
* And the expressive nature of play.

Caillois (2001) famously classified play types into two: *ludus*, or the playful activity that has goals and winners: and *paidia*, or the playful activity without goals. Designers should then ask themselves if users should engage with a service as an part of a *ludus* practice, with a goal and purpose objectively measure, qualified and ranked; or if they should approach it as a *paidia* activity, a playful appropriation that reveals its expressive possibilities.

Furthermore, Caillois typified the types of games as being a part of any of four categories: *agon*, or competitive games; *alea*, or games of chance; *mimicry*, or games of make-believe; and *ilynx*, or games of vertigo. These types of games can also be mapped to our idea of designing play: each of them refers to a particular form that constraints the playful activity[[18]](#endnote-18). For instance, chance limits the ways we can appropriate the world, and mimicry can be used as an expressive conduit through play, like in role-playing games.

In many uses of gamification, we can find *agon* and *ludus* as the dominant play types: competitive, externally rewarded practices of what should become the activities of the good life. Think about Nike+, that encourages competition with others; or Code Academy, which rewards you with different badges depending on your progression. These are not necessarily bad things, but they are superficial understandings of both the good life and the activity of play. Why don’t we have more gamification systems based on *mimicry*/role play, or in the bodily pleasures of *ilynx*? One reason might be the tight coupling between computing and the conventional ways of designing for *agon* and *ludus*, but also because we tend to think about play as an activity with goals played through games.

If we want to design a playful good life, we need to start focusing on four elements: how wills this practice help develop skills and virtues; how will this practice help develop autonomy; how will this practice be playfully appropriative; and how will this practice be playfully expressive. Designers should identify what elements of an activity constitute the good life. That identification should lead a process of reflection focusing on interpreting the key elements that lead to virtuousity and autonomy through the lens of expressive, appropriative play[[19]](#endnote-19).

This is precisely what is missing on Gamification: the design of those elements that make playing a focal practice. Gamification focuses on skill training, but if it was augmented with the appropriative, expressive capacities of play, if it allowed users to play with and through the gamified system, then Gamification could support the development of a good life.

My trade is not that of design, but as an example, a redesign of a running tracking device that encourages a creative good life should add something like geotagging and a photo sharing application, so the runner is not oblivious of the landscapes where she runs. Or, if she is an indoor runner, the system could encourage talking to other runners in other treadmills by asking, as part of the daily logging routine, if she knew anybody else in the room when training or if there were other registered users of the tracking system.

Let me be clear: play itself is a focal practice, and what gamification should do is take from it the characteristics that constitute it as a focal practice, and apply it outside of the contexts of play. The good life is constituted by practices and reflection, by practicing both virtues and the capacity to understand how to become a better human being. It’s a practice, and a reflection. Play can contribute to practicing the good life by letting us appropriate a context, express ourselves through them setting autotelic goals that lead to our personal satisfaction.

My approach to this design challenge of applying playfulness to the creation of technologies for the good life is focused on two ideas: first, we must design for the homo ludens (Gaver *et al.,* 2004; Gaver, 2006; Gaver, 2008), for users who want to live a playful, better life. And second, technology needs to stay open to interpretation, avoiding functionalist efficiency for a more appropriative design of interactions and evaluations (Sengers *et al.*, 2005; Sengers and Gaver, 2006).

The idea of designing for the *homo ludens* advocates a type of playfulness that engages creativity within a context of which the device is just an element. This context might lead to the emergence of rules, but do not require these to happen – playfulness might not be bound to rules, and therefore there might not be need for evaluating any activity according to these. The opposite of playful design would be instrumentalized systems[[20]](#endnote-20), focused on processes and results rather than in the creation of situations.

A gamified system for the good life needs also to be open for appropriation or interpretation. In classic HCI, ambiguity and multiple interpretations were forbidden. However, when it comes to the interpretation of technology as a part of our value system, ambiguity can play a creative role that fosters autonomous thinking[[21]](#endnote-21). If we want to design technologies that users can playfully appropriate as part of their playful good life, we need technology that is interpretively flexible, that provides a space of possibility in which users can find meanings, and express themselves. Technology has to be, and stay open to playful interpretation, because in that openness play can be used to practice and develop values and virtues, to develop the good life.

Ambiguous technologies for the homo ludens would, by design, encourage the principles of eudemonia, of creating and developing skills and reflective capacities, as well as fostering a sense of autonomy in the process of moral development.

Gamification can support playful practices, appropriating contexts and letting users play with them. This would imply a step away from merely performing activities that can be rewarded. This also means embracing the most mischievous sides of play, with dark play (Schechner, 1988) or even deep play (Geertz, 1972) as the frontiers that should not be crossed, but can be explored: what if the Nike+ application mocked you for being slow, or lied about the distance? What if code academy made you type infinite loops forcing you to close the browser, only to return to learn why that happened?

Play is an opening for expressing who we are while taking over a situation, a context, a technology. Designers of gamification for the good life need to be aware of that the designing of playful, ethically relevant technologies needs to take into consideration the need for autonomy and expression that is behind the ideas of gamification for the good life. Let people play, and make play part of the practice of a good life, supported by technologies open to that circle of values and practices, of agency and creativity.

**Playing the Good Life**

I hope I have proposed in this chapter an argument for a better gamification. The success of gamification has been so fast and so overwhelming that it has encouraged many critiques. Like many other trends that promise a better world, gamification has been targeted for its sloppy theoretical and scientific backgrounds, the lack of empirical data behind the results showcased, and even for the naïve interpretation of humans and motivations that seems to fuel it.

However, gamification is just a symptom of a cultural trend: the vindication of play as a legitimate way of living, creating, and expressing. We enjoy using technologies to play, and we can harness it to live a good life. In fact, this is not new: political artists and educators already saw play as a way of addressing the cultural issues they were interested in addressing.

To be able to play the good life we need to think about play as a focal practice that can help develop virtues and practice morality. For that to happen, though, we need the support of technologies of play, from toys to playful devices. Designing these technologies is not easy: it requires thinking about designs that are open, contextualized in a practice at the same time that they take over such practice. More than mediating ethics, what playful ethical technologies should do is encourage and guide ethical practices through play.

The good life can be seen as a golden, unachievable ideal, usually at odds with the hardships of “real life”. Precisely because of that, because the good life needs practice and denying the easy way out, play is a good accomplice of morality – not because it engages us, but because it lets us express ourselves, who we are and what we do in a complete way. Playing the good life is important because playing is expressing ourselves, taking over situations, and shaping our world. We can do all those as an expression of our virtues, appropriating the world and acting as moral beings. There is nothing more serious than playing the good life.

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1. By gamification, I understand here the type of design described by and advocated for in Deterding *et al.*, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c; Deterding, 2012. See also Dole, 2011. See also Raessensens 2006. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. “Thus, flourishing is the calling of a human being—it is the ultimate goal for the sake of which all subsequent “mini-goals” are pursued. And when we consider this fact, the move in the function argument in which Aristotle draws an analogy between craftsmen and human beings is defensible indeed”. (May, 2010; location 902) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. “ (…) morally virtuous activity is a developmental prerequisite for contemplative activity” (May, 2010; location 162) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The activities that lead to a good life also need to be qualified – they can be physical, but guided towards a development of character and wisdom: “Ethically virtuous activity is a complex rational activity that includes both the virtues of character and practical wisdom or phronêsis”. (May, 2010; location 1010) [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. “To summarize, the Aristotelian view of eudaimonia considers well-being not as a state of pleasure versus pain, but as living well. As he put it, ‘‘the happy man both lives well and does well’’ (p. 103). Living well entails actively and explicitly striving for what is truly worthwhile and is of inherent or intrinsic hu-man worth, and it contrasts with the pursuit of crass endeavors such as materialism or pleasure seeking that pull one away from virtues. Eudaimonia is characterized by reflectiveness and reason. Finally, eudaimonic pursuits are voluntary, and are expressions of the self rather than products of external control or ignorance. Together, Aristotle’s eudaimonia is thus charac-terized as living well, and entails being actively engaged in excellent activity, reflectively making decisions, and behaving voluntarily toward ends that represent the realization of our highest human natures” (Ryan *et al.*, p. 145) [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. “Rather, eudaimonic conceptions focus on the content of one’s life, and the processes involved in living well, whereas hedonic conceptions of well-being focus on a specific out-come, namely the attainment of positive affect and an absence of pain”. (Ryan *et al.*, 2008; p. 140) [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. “The term autonomy literally means ‘‘self-governing’’ and implies, therefore, the experience of regulation by the self. Its opposite, heteronomy, refers to regulation from outside the self, by alien or external forces. An autonomous act is one done freely and willingly by the actor. In the case of intrinsic moti-vation this is obvious, because intrinsic motivation represents doing an activity because of its inherent satisfactions, which one typically does quite freely. But in the case of activities that are not intrinsically motivated, the issue is not inherent enjoy-ment, but rather inherent and self-endorsed value. A person who acts autonomously reflectively embraces an activity as his or her own, endorsing it at the highest order of reflection.” (Ryan *et al.*, 2008; p. 157). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. The inspiration for this idea of embodied interaction comes from Dourish, 2001. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. “A thing is focal if it is what we give our time to and what we build our lives around. Like the fireplace, focal things richly interweave means and ends, point to the larger context of their setting in nature, the community, and culture, call for attention, effort, skill, and fidelity to regular practice, and invigorate individual and community life. Genuinely focal things stand over us as a commanding presence. Under the rule of the device paradigm, commodities provided” (Strong and Higgs, 2000; p. 32) [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. “While the function of a device captures one or a few aspects of the original thing, such as the exercise of muscles, devices sever most other relationships. At the health club, one might be reading a book, riding a stationary bicycle, and listening to music with headphones. Mind, body, and world are all dissociated from one another. In general contrast, then, a focal thing is not an isolated entity; it exists as a material center in a complicated network of human relationships and relationships to its natural and cultural setting”. (Strong and Higgs, 2000; p 23) [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. “What has replaced the thing is the device. The device provides what Borgmann calls a commodity, one aspect of the original thing (for example, in the case of the wood-burning stove, warmth alone), and disburdens people of all the elements making up the world, or context, and engaging character of the thing. This world of the thing, that is, its ties to nature, culture, the household setting, a network of social relations, mental and bodily engagement, is taken over by the machinery (the central heating plant itself) of the device”. (Strong and Higgs, 2000; p. 28) [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. “But where technology is intended as a thing to provide a focus and orientation in our lives, and to reveal the world in its essential dimensions, it makes no sense to measure it by the standards of the device”. (Tatum, 2000; p. 187) [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. “These demands and attractions of the focal thing's commanding presence make things engaging for mind and body, serving to unify them” (Strong and Higgs, 2000; p. 22) [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. “By mediating our actions and experiences, technologies help to shape the quality of our lives and of our moral actions and decisions. To deal adequately with the moral relevance of technology, therefore, the ethics of technology should incorporate the phenomenon of technological mediation”. (Verbeek, 2011, location 113) [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. “In my postphenomenological approach, technological mediation concerns action and perception rather than cognition; and moral mediation is not only about the mediated character of moral ideas but mostly about the technological mediation of actions, and of perceptions and interpretations on the basis of which we make moral decisions” (Verbeek, 2011, location 796) [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. I am referring to the type of gamification design adovated by Zichermann and others (see Zichermann and Linder, 2010, and Zichermann and Cunninghan, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. This idea resonates with some contemporary work in Interaction Design – for extended reference, see Dourish, 2003; Eriksen *et al.*, 2003; Costello and Edmonds, 2007; Desmet *et al*., 2007; Dix, 2007; Korhonen *et al.*, 2008; Bekker *et al.*, 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. This idea of “form” is inspired by interaction design work on the topic of aesthetics. See Crilly, 2010, or Hallnäs, 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. The notion of reflection is present in research as a goal of certain practices in interaction design. See Hallnäs and Redström, 2001;Boehner *et al.* 2004, 2006; Fallman, 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. This idea of instrumentalization is also resonant of the Frankfurt School’ understanding of modernity, and by extension, of technology. See Adorno and Horkheimer, 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. This idea has become quite popular in third wave HCI. See Gaver *et* al., 2003; Aoki *et al.*, 2005; Bell *et al.*, 2005; Bødker, 2006; Bilda *et al*., 2008; [↑](#endnote-ref-21)