What ELO23 taught us about *hacking the good life* — observations on the *Know Thyself* role-playing prototype

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we reflect on a surprising outcome of the workshop facilitated at the ELO2023 Conference in Coimbra.[1] The workshop was based on our research-in-progress of a sixteenth-century book-game on moral virtues by João de Barros. Barros' pedagogical device consists of a summary of Aristotle's *Ethics* in the form of a dialogue and a board game (to be cut out and assembled) to practice "the good life."[2] This board game contains a *volvelle* with three circular discs, a pointer, and rules and pieces for two players.[3]

In the workshop at ELO, we introduced our research questions about the book and the game, experimented with playing a few moves on the game board, made our own digitally rotating *volvelles* and finally, ended up sharing a prototype of a role-playing game that reworks and reinterprets some of the concepts that João de Barros presents in his work. In this article, we focus our discussion on the *Know Thyself* prototype presented at the workshop to document and analyse some emerging findings.

KEYWORDS

moral ethics, practice-based research, role-playing game, self-reflection

RESUMO

Neste artigo, refletimos sobre um resultado inesperado do workshop preparado para a conferência ELO2023 em Coimbra. O workshop centrou-se na investigação em curso de um livro-jogo do século XVI sobre virtudes morais. Esta ferramenta pedagógica é composta por um resumo da *Ética* de Aristóteles em forma de diálogo e de um jogo para praticar "a boa vida" com uma *volvelle* de três discos circulares e um ponteiro, regras e peças para dois jogadores.

Depois de uma introdução às questões de investigação relacionadas com o livro e o jogo, experimentámos alguns movimentos no tabuleiro de corrida, criámos

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1 "*Hacking João de Barros' 16th century Diálogo […] em modo de jogo, a combinatorial game about moral vices and virtues*."" Presented at *Overcoming divides: electronic literature and social change: book of Abstracts. ELO Conference 2023*, *Coimbra*, 2023.
2 See: KORSGAARD, 1998, for a definition of "the good life."
3 In the course of our research, we have designed a racing board for Barros' game because one could not be found in any of the few remaining copies of this book (of both the *princeps* and the second edition). Though we can not attest if a racing board ever existed, the author describes it in the text.

as nossas próprias *volvelles* digitais e, por fim, partilhámos um protótipo de um jogo de *role-playing* que aborda e reinterpreta alguns dos conceitos centrais que o autor (João de Barros) apresenta em sua obra. Neste artigo, expomos as nossas reflexões sobre o momento particular de experimentação com o protótipo *Know Thyself*, como forma de documentar e analisar algumas descobertas que emergiram a partir do workshop.

INTRODUCTION

While studying the printing houses working for the University of Coimbra in the 16th Century, Celeste Pedro came across a book and game by João de Barros called *Dialogo de preceitos moraes co[m] prática delles, em módo de iogo*, published in 1540.[4] The work uses the Classical style of a dialogue between a master and his students (in this case, the author's teenage son and daughter) to present Aristotle's theory of virtues as found in medieval and early-modern Christian commentators, with a strong influence from Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) and Jacques Lefèvre d'Etaples (1455-1536).[5] The late 16th Century saw the rise in popularity of precursors of the Game of the Goose,[6] but nothing similar to Barros' seems to have existed. The peculiarity of this book is that it contains a detachable board game that uses combinatorial methods to translate (conceptually and linguistically) Aristotle's moral theory. Moreover, in Barros' designs, it is hard to dismiss the resemblance to Ramon Llull's *Ars Magna* diagrams[7] (1305-08) on the one side and the *Libro delle Sorte* by Lorenzo Spirito Gualtieri[8] (1482) on the other. However, this work has effectively received little academic attention.[9] Pedro extensively studied and analysed the game in 2020, yet these results were never published. Our *Hacking the Good Life* project kicked off in the Autumn of 2022 and started by trying to make sense of the early-modern vernacular text and the complex mechanics of the game.

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4 Barros, João. *Dialogos de preceitos moraes co[m] prática delles, em módo de iogo*. Lisboa: per Luis Rodriguez, liureiro delrey nósso senhor, 1540. — [26] f. ; 4º(20 cm). Biblioteca Nacional de Portugal: res-5658-3-p. http://purl.pt/12149.

5 See: BELLINI, 1994.

6 See: SEVILLE, 2019.

7 See: FIDORA, 2011.

8 Gualtieri, Lorenzo Spirito. *Libro delle Sorti*. Autograph manuscript. Perugia, 1482. — [63] f.; 243×174 mm. Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana: It. IX, 87=(6226).

9 Friedlein (2007) has written an extensive article on this book-game but, like in others, the interpretation of the game mechanics falls short, in practice; Portuguese scholars Fernanda Frazão (2008) and António Moniz edited contemporary transcriptions, along with a critical introductory chapter by Moniz (2017) in editions with small public reach; Nunes Silva (2018) has recreated the game's mechanism (the *volvelle*) in wood, and Pedro (2021) has studied the production and typographical details of the book. A few other researchers, such as Fernandes (2006), have written on the pedagogical relevance of Barros' didactic editions from 1540.

The *Hacking the Good Life* research project takes a practice-led research approach to the study of this work by Barros. Mäkelä writes: "artefacts are essential outcomes of artistic process, but in the context of practice-led research they have an even more important role. They function as a means of realising a thing which has to be perceived, recognized and conceived or understood" (Mäkelä, 2007: 159). We apply a practice-led methodology by analysing and reinterpreting the concepts and ideas in the work of Barros, creating prototypes or research artefacts to reach a deeper understanding of his work (Pedro and Marttila, 2023).

The game in the *Dialogo* plays out as a turn-based racing game where the *volvelle*'s circles are rotated to create random combinations of three elements: a virtue or vice, a degree of intention and a passion, which is something like an involuntary emotional state that emerges when one is faced with an object, situation, or dilemma. The random combination of the three elements results in moves forward or backwards (or no movement at all) of the pieces along the board and a score in points: positive, negative or null. The moves performed by virtues and vices, as well as the points, act as an allegory of the impact of moral actions on our course to happiness. For instance, a virtuous deed, executed with high intention and a benevolent emotion or passion, will move us far along the game board and grant us many points. By contrast, a vicious deed, executed with high intention and a malicious emotion or passion, will take us backwards on the game board and make us lose points. In between, those deeds that were virtuous, yet made with little intention or with a malicious emotional state, or vicious deeds made with little intention and a benevolent emotional state, do not allow us to move along and/or gain points. Barros utilises these game mechanics to materialise the complex causal relationship between this triad of factors that affect and guide our moral choices and behaviour.

The workshop, which we will discuss in more detail in the next section, was conducted in July at ELO2023 in Coimbra. We had 8 participants from various corners of the world and a relatively diverse age range (from 16 to late 40s). In the next section, we will first describe the workshop in full to contextualise the role of the *Know Thyself* prototype in the workshop and then focus our discussion on analysing its specific contribution to our practice-led research approach to the work of Barros.

THE WORKSHOP

We spent much of the workshop introducing participants to the complex book and game and its historical context, philosophical concepts and game mechanics. João de Barros makes use of mnemonic devices in many of his

books. The *Dialogo* also has a Tree of Virtues, a large woodcut printed as a flyleaf. The Tree is a diagram that integrates three distinct concepts: a) its trunk represents an ascending ladder towards happiness through virtue, b) its branches illustrate the Aristotelian conception of virtue as a middle path between opposite extremes (vices), and c) it presents the roots of the tree as an allegory of the mental processes of choice that allow Men to undertake moral actions. The objective is that players memorise this tree and understand what it takes to live "the good life"[10]. The author then turns this tree into a game so players can train themselves to make the right choices because virtue is a "habit of the soul"[11].

Following this introduction, we asked participants to come up with words to describe virtuous and vicious behaviour that were collected and shared using Mentimeter[12] and compare them to Barros'.
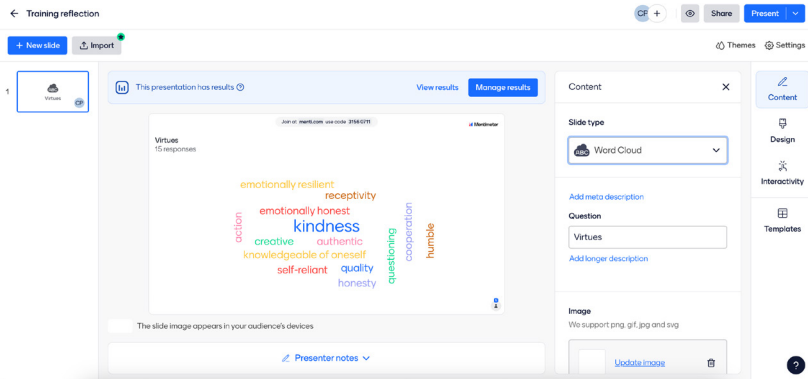

Figure 1. Screenshot from Mentimeter's interactive interface with some of the responses from participants.

The next step involved explaining the rules of the game. To try the game hands-on, we asked participants to break up the instructions for calculating moves into three distinct steps and noticed that most participants got the hang of it quite quickly.

We then had the participants fill out their own *volvelles* and photograph them to make them rotate digitally. The purpose of creating one's *volvelle* was to explore — in practice — a combinatory interface as a tool to organise information and concepts and create novel combinations of data (textual or

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10 João de Barros, 1563, f. 3v: "E porque minha tenção é per fabrica material darvos doutrina moral pera vos melhor ficar em a memória: quero pintar huma árvore em que vejais a ordem & processo das virtudes e dos seus estremos, & de que princípios naçem, & finalmente que fruito se consegue dellas."

11 Idem: "A definição em géneroidizem ser um hábito da alma gerado das boas obras que fazemos: e não somente de uma, mas de muitas e feitas a míude."

12 https://www.mentimeter.com/

visual). For example, workshop participant Christine Chong used the *volvelle* format to make a combinatory device to create *haikus*. Workshop facilitator Terhi Marttila made a combinatorial device for playing with different facial expressions and emotions (see Figure 2 below).
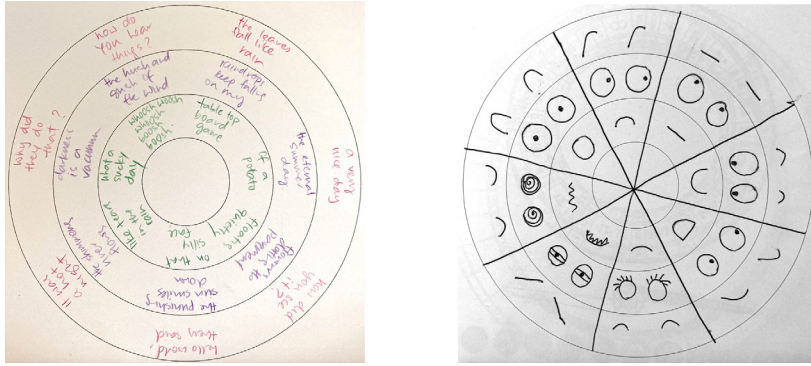

Figure 2. Volvelle devices created by Christine Chong and Terhi Marttila.

WHAT THE ELO WORKSHOP TAUGHT US ABOUT
HACKING THE GOOD LIFE

Towards the end of the workshop, two questions about Barros' work with moral virtues and ethics emerged. First, one participant pondered whether or not moral and ethical questions are relative to one's culture, positionality or life experience. On the other hand, another participant wondered whether the game could be used to reflect on moral questions in a group setting. We had thought about these issues, and once these questions were posed, we spontaneously decided to share a work-in-progress of the project (that we hadn't initially included in the workshop program) because we felt that it could serve as an answer to both of these questions. In this article, we take the opportunity to document this unpublished prototype and our observations of how the group engaged with the prototype.

First, we will describe the theory behind the prototype as presented (through Barros' book, board game and rules), then the prototype itself, called *Know Thyself*, and, finally, discuss its reception at the ELO workshop.

In the process of studying Barros' board game, the related concepts and the text of the book itself, we eventually interpreted that Barros' strategy was to select the three "variables" of passions, intentions, and virtues and vices for the rotating circles of the game's *volvelle* (the device included in the game to calculate the moves and points for each player) to communicate first and foremost that in each of our actions (as denoted by the pointer

falling over the *volvelle* to create a combination out of the composition), all three variables play their role.
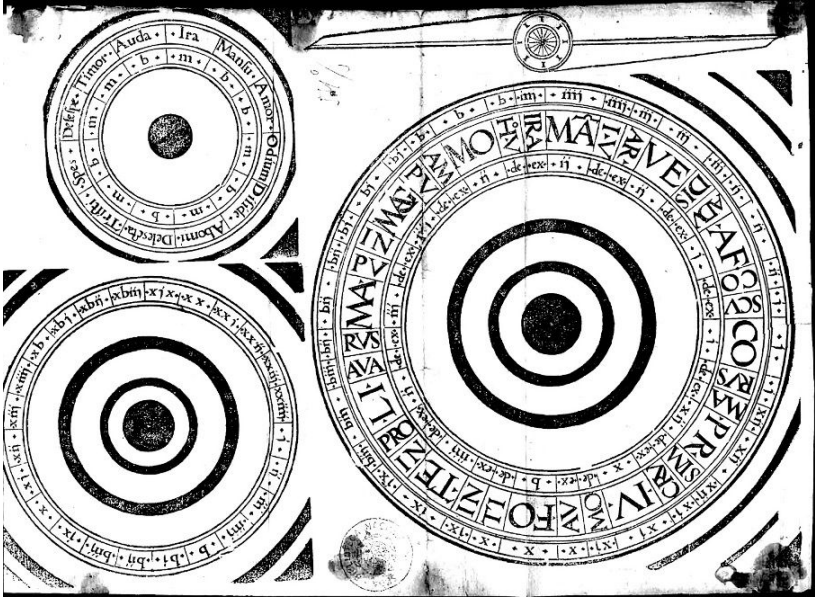

Figure 3. Placed as a folded flyleaf at the end of João de Barros' book, the three circular discs and pointer are meant to be cut and superimposed. Top left: circle of passions; bottom left: circle of intentions; top right: spinner; bottom right: circle of virtues and vices.

The passions (smaller circle) categorised as either "for good" or "for bad" can be thought of as the emotional states we feel in a specific situation. That is, did we donate money to the local association out of envy ("the neighbour also donated, and I don't want to do less than the neighbour") or out of love ("what they do is so important to the community"), and so on.

On the other hand, the circle of intentions (the middle one) attributes a value between one and twenty-four to the degree of intensity with which we acted. That is, "I did it, but I, really, really, really didn't want to do it" or, "I did it with all my heart" or something in between. In calculating the moves of each player's pieces, the degree of intention is important because for a virtue (virtuous act) to move forward on the game board, it must be performed with a degree of intention that matches a scale Barros calls virtue's "natural value." That is, for higher-order virtues which are difficult to attain in human life, we need all the more intention when we do them. If done with very little intention, we might move backwards along the game board. On the other hand, if we do a vicious act but with very little intention ("I did it, but I didn't want to do it at all"), we may see our viciousness forgiven and our game piece move forward — because although we behaved

in a bad manner, we were conscious that it was wrong and did it with little intention.

Finally, the virtues are depicted on the volvelle's outer (larger) circle, snuggled between their respective vices. With this positioning, Barros wants to accentuate the Aristotelian idea that virtue sits somewhere between its respective and extreme vices, known as the "theory/doctrine of the mean." Any particular real-world situation may be analysed through the lenses of one or more of the vices and virtues, and a single action can be taken to any of its extremes, as well as towards its "golden middle," not by limiting choice but by defining a continuous scale that can guide us on the path to the virtuous mean.

However, in Barros' game and its ruleset, there is very little didactic material that would allow a direct engagement with contemporary definitions of moral virtues and vices; what exactly does the virtue of Magnificence mean today? Barros briefly describes the virtues and vices in the book, and one must look to Aristotle to get examples of these characterisations of human behaviour. It may be that the target group of this didactic game (the youth of King John III's Court) was more familiar with classical philosophy. However, to make virtues and vices more tangible, we felt the need to bring real-world examples that would allow us to reflect on practical situations that depict these moral dilemmas in a contemporary context. For this reason, while studying the *Dialogo*, we developed a small role-playing game that ties in these three dimensions: the emotional state, the degree of intention behind our actions and the actual choice we made (categorised as either virtuous or vicious). Our role-playing game presents a real-world situation with a moral dilemma, depicted as an image and an accompanying textual description that the workshop facilitator reads aloud (see Figure 4 below). The workshop participants see the image depiction as the card is held up, while only the facilitator sees the text on the other side as he reads the text to the group.

The first choice workshop participants have to make is to select their emotional state: how does that situation make them feel? Barros' twelve emotions or passions, originally in the innermost circle of the *volvelle* of the game, are depicted on twelve cardboard discs, which participants can select (see Figure 5 below). The grey background indicates a "passion for bad," and the white background indicates a "passion for good." In our workshop, participants selected very different emotions. For the case in question, one participant selected "hate," which we observed was quite a strong reaction and perhaps not a very virtuous one. We said, "Well, perhaps you are simply taking this role," to which the participant responded, "No, I am not."
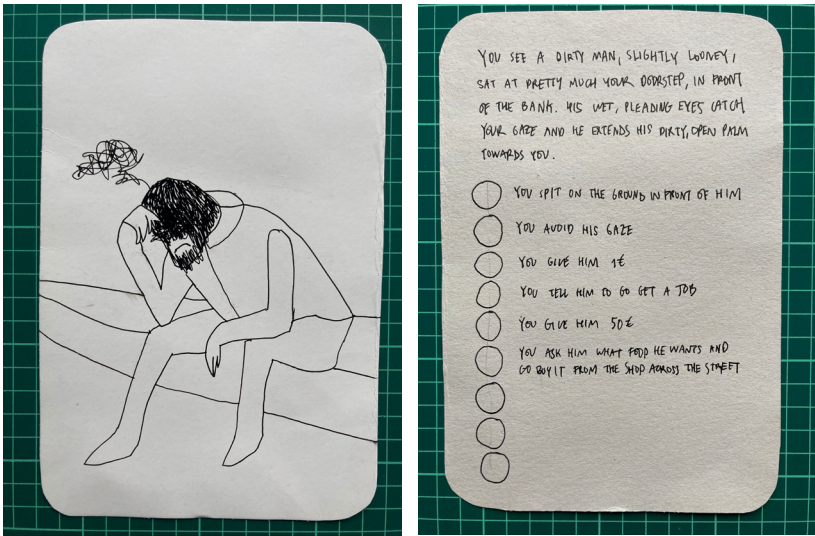
Figure 4. The "situation" card has an illustrative image on the front, a context and the first multiple-choice question on the back.

This was, in itself, an interesting observation: in the spirit of the game, participants can very well either choose what they would "really" feel, or they can choose what they think they should feel, or they can choose what they think they absolutely should not feel. Nobody can know whether the participant is role-playing or choosing to be true to their feelings and thoughts. In this sense, the role-playing game allows for plural perspectives without judgment and an open space for experimenting with different approaches to moral dilemmas. As Sicart writes about the affordances of play: "(...) through play we experience the world, we construct it, and we destroy it, and we explore who we are and what we can say. Play frees us from moral conventions but makes them still present, so we are aware of their weight, presence, and importance" (Sicart, 2014: 5). In line with this understanding of play, the *Know Thyself* prototype created a space for play and experimentation that allowed the group to take on different roles and explore situations from various perspectives.

After selecting the emotional state that the situation elicits, participants are presented with a range of choices: real actions they can take in reaction to the situation. Here, we link to Barros' game in the sense that we use the round game pieces with the virtues and vices as a didactic tool to label the different choices as vicious or virtuous. This is a group exercise. At the ELO conference, workshop participants also offered some alternative courses of action that we had not foreseen, and there was debate around which virtue or vice the action corresponded to. As such, we envisioned a version of the game with a blank slate where participants could co-create the responses

in conversation. This version could have circles that are the size of Barros'
game pieces (see Figure 6 below), allowing players to place the game pieces
inside the circle either next to predefined courses of action, matching action
to vice/virtue according to what emerges in the group dialogue, or by having
the players co-create possible courses of action which the players write on
the card and then attribute a vice/virtue by placing the game piece in the
circle next to the course of action.

Figure 5. In the "emotion" card, the player places the piece corresponding to the second
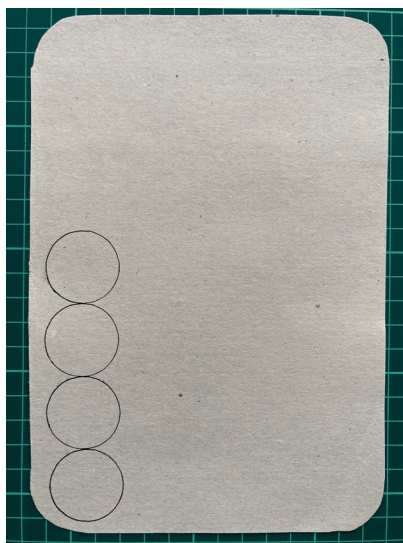multiple-choice question.

Figure 6. Card with empty slates to place the circular pieces of the game and write other
possible reactions to the situation at hand.

As a final step in the game, participants are asked to select their degree of intention when selecting the course of action. Here, the idea was to make the group reflect on how, after acknowledging the emotional response that a morally complex situation elicited and having selected a course of action, to think about to what degree they were committed to the action they chose. This step in our game corresponds to the middle circle in Barros' board game, the ring of "intentions and remissions," with numbers ranging from 1 to 24. Instead of depicting the degree of intention as a numeric value, we opted to create a scale of five degrees of intention, described verbally as: "I really wanted to do it," "I did it, but half-heartedly," "I just did it," "I really didn't want to do it, but I did it anyways," and "I actually didn't want to do it at all." Each of these verbal descriptions is colour-coded on a scale of red-warm to blue-cold, in opposite colours for virtues and vices, to denote the different quality of impact that intention has on virtuous and vicious behaviour (see Figure 7 below).
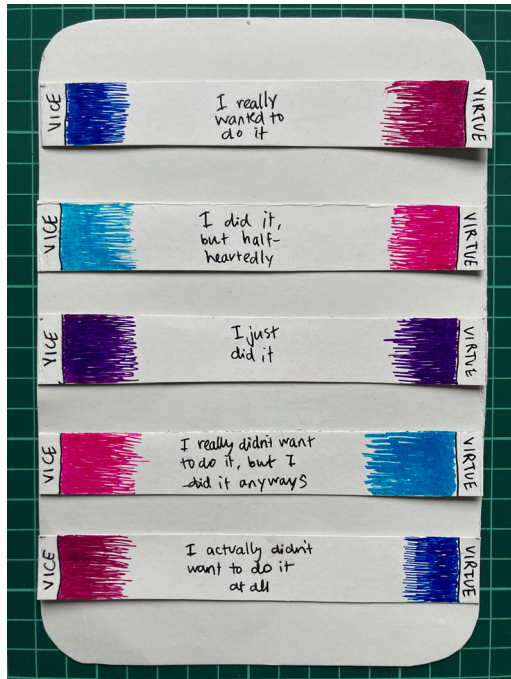

Figure 7. The colour-coded scales for intentions.

When a virtuous act is done with all one's heart, its colour is deep red to indicate warmth — a big intention complements a good deed. On the opposite end of the spectrum, a big intention with vicious behaviour is deep blue and very cold, making the vicious behaviour more deeply vicious. Switching to the other extreme, a virtuous deed committed, yet one that one "didn't

want to do at all," is dark blue and cold, the lack of intention detracting from the impact of that virtuous behaviour. A vicious act, yet one that one "didn't want to do at all" is deep red and warm and, as such, less harmful because what counts is that, deep down in one's heart, one did not want to do it. This final step of the roleplaying game allows participants to reflect further on the moral choice they made and allows them to take a moment to acknowledge the internal process that contributed to that choice: did I really want to do this, or did I do it because I felt like it was the right thing to do? Or did I do this but feel bad about doing it at the same time? This third level of reflection is significant because it allows us to see how our intention — not just the actual choice or concrete action — impacts our moral views.

In Barros' game mechanics, this idea is communicated through the third of the calculations for moving the pieces of the game: while each virtue and vice initially moves the number of their order in the tree of virtues (and then virtues move again according to their "natural value"), in the third calculation the degree of intention either makes the game pieces move forward (if the degree of intention is higher than virtues' natural value, or lower than the order in the tree, for vices), or move backwards (if the degree of intention is lower than virtues' natural value, or higher than the order in the tree, for vices), or stay still (if virtue's or vice's degree of intention is equal to their natural value or order in the tree, respectively).

Based on the observations made during the group workshop, the group seemed captivated by the weighing of their actions and internal states in the form of a role-playing game. What we were particularly intrigued with were the differences of opinion in attributing specific courses of action with different vices and virtues because it suggests that views on moral ethics are plural, and the role-playing game can make some of this plurality visible through the group discussion, which in turn, allows for nurturing dialogue on our values, or on why we position ourselves in different ways. The game's purpose does not have to be to convert anyone's value system but rather to make the plurality of ways of seeing the world visible.

AFTER THE WORKSHOP

After the workshop, we worked towards documenting our research process and outputs to date for publication in the third issue of The Digital Review, which was published in early October of 2023. The publication for The Digital Review includes the booklet we prepared for our workshop and a slightly improved version of the digital *volvelle* (see Marttila and Pedro, 2023). We also briefly analysed two digital prototypes related to the text and what we learned from and through making these small interactive artefacts.

One is called "words of wisdom," where one can use the browser's speech recognition to try to speak aloud all the precepts the author collected for the different virtues. Barros envisioned that players would speak out sentences in Latin as they moved their virtue pieces, and our prototype is an engagement with this aspect of the original work. We also created a page where users can toggle between the original, more archaic version of the text in English and a simplified/contemporary English version. The purpose of this page is to make Barros' writing more accessible.

In late October 2023, we also presented our work to a group of students in Design at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Porto. One of the questions at our talk was whether João de Barros' board game could be adapted to be used as a tool for self-reflection on one's actions. This would imply that we would be the ones "moving the pointer" instead of leaving the movements of the pointer up for chance, as per the original rules. This comment relates to our findings while testing the role-playing prototype informed by Barros' conceptual network between passions, intentions and virtuous and vicious actions. According to the initial testing at the ELO workshop in a group context, the tool allowed us to reflect together on our behaviour. While we had been thinking of this prototype as something adequate for sparking discussion in a group, the feedback at the lecture for design students made us realise that there might be other applications still to be studied.

CONCLUSION

This article traced the steps of the *Hacking the Good Life* project, with a particular emphasis on identifying our findings on the playtest of an unpublished role-playing prototype during the ELO2023 workshop. In the workshop, we decided to share, ad-hoc, a very preliminary prototype of a role-playing game that reworks the conceptualisation João de Barros tries to communicate through the three rotating circles of his game board, namely the interplay between passions, degree of intention and virtuous and vicious actions. The prototype translates the abstract definitions of the virtues and vices into contemporary, real-world situations that are easier to relate to. The group's discussion of the moral choices and their categorisation through the scale of more/less virtue/vice made it clear that people have different judgments of situations and unique moral compasses, making the discussion of moral choices particularly suited for group contexts as the group context makes it clear that moral issues and responses are plural and subjective.

The most relevant conclusion is that this role-playing game can take João de Barros' didactic tool to a more refined level by sparking critical thinking in complex matters at a personal and social level, namely, the interplay of

factors involved in moral ethics. This can be achieved by promoting group discussion around each choice and co-creating alternative possibilities within the game. In addition, it is easily adaptable to different character roles because players can be given the possibility to choose to impersonate their own or someone else's decisions and self-analysis. This finding supports, in our opinion, what Anderson (2019: 23) reports: "(...) when RPG's [role-playing games] are philosophically re-engineered to include these mechanics, it may enhance players' capacity to (a) apply reasoning to their own behaviour; (b) be open to opinions and viewpoints of others; and (c) reflect prior to decision-making."

The workshop findings suggest that, in an atmosphere of mutual respect, acceptance of plurality, and an attitude of listening, participating and contributing, this role-playing game can be a starting point to understanding one's own reasons and thinking about those of others as well. Future work includes further developing the prototype and creating a digital version designed for a group context or individual, self-reflective use.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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