Variations on a Utopian Diversion:
Student Game Projects in the University Classroom
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I. Introduction

Raphael Hythloday's account of Utopia and its singular people contains not only an outline of the islanders' more serious convictions and customs but a depiction of the lighter moments in their daily lives. Among these is a brief report on the two "chess-like" board games that the Utopians play in their free time. Hythloday describes the first as a game of numbers in which "number loots number" (*numerus numerum praedatur*).[1] The second game, on the other hand, pits the virtues against the vices in a battle of strategy and cunning. Hythloday elaborates:

> This game shows very cleverly both how the vices fight among themselves but join forces against the virtues, and also which vices are opposed to which virtues, what forces they bring to bear openly, what instruments they use to attack indirectly, what defenses the virtues use to fend off the forces of the vices, how they evade their assaults, and finally by what methods one side or the other wins the victory.[2]

The detail of Hythloday's description as well as its approving tenor will come as no surprise to the reader of *Utopia*. Hythloday first mentions the topic of play in his conversation with More in order to condemn the morally unsound games of the English, prone as they are to betting and gambling.[3] Later on, near the end of Book 2, he does not fail to mention that the Utopians view games of chance as silly.[4] Hythloday's praise of the Utopian games thus serves to reinforce his critique of recreation in Europe as well as to promote the greater moral imagination of the Utopians. As the marginalia for this paragraph proclaim, "Even their games are helpful!"[5]

Furthermore, Hythloday tells More early on that all Utopians learn farming, their most important occupation, not through onerous instruction but through a sort of playful practicing.[6] That their games should reflect a similar pedagogical tack underscores how the broader theme of playfulness in More's *Utopia* is hardly random or trivial. Thomas More (the author) is clearly echoing the emphasis on playful instruction in Plato's *Republic*, where Socrates stresses time and again how the ideal education should not be coercive but playfully instigated and executed.[7] Play even emerges as a crucial element in understanding the often misty meaning of both the *Republic* and *Utopia*. In Book 1 of *Utopia*, for instance, only the sagacious Cardinal Morton can tell when Hythloday is serious and when he is teasing; every one else at the table mistakes his deadpan irony for earnest sincerity. Worse, when the friar tries to play the wit (*scurra*) as a way of coping with Hythloday's unconventional thinking, his strained attempt at levity quickly turns into an ugly exercise in humorless rage.[8] More's prediction in his prefatory letter to Peter Giles about the various ways in which people misread a text would seem to have more than a passing connection to their ability to distinguish the truly from the seemingly serious as well as to their capacity for recognizing when and in what way their legs are being pulled.

All of this is a rather elaborate way of saying that by the inner logic of *Utopia* play is a serious matter, which is one of the reasons why for the past three semesters I have given my Great Texts students at Baylor University an optional assignment: to design the very Virtues-and-Vices board game that Hythloday describes. This morning I would like to report on the fruits of their labor thus far.

II. The Assignment

When offering my students the opportunity to design and make a Utopian game, I stipulated that the finished product should resemble a commercially available, honest-to-goodness board game. This obviously requires not only providing written instructions for the game (which is where I, their grader, could most easily gauge their understanding of the reading material), but physically making a gameboard, pieces, etc. I allowed interested students to take on this project instead of submitting a written paper, and I required those interested in it to form groups of two, three, or four, a rule which I made for three reasons. First, I felt that the game project was too demanding and time-consuming for an assignment worth only 20% of their grade.

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[1] *latrunculorum ludo non dissimiles*, trans. mine (Miller, 62). Though I include the original Latin, all citations, for the sake of convenience, are from Thomas More, *Utopia,* Clarence H. Miller, trans. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).

[2] *Ibid.*, Miller's translation.

[3] *improbi ludi* (Miller, 25).

[4] *inepta laetitia* (Miller, 86).

[5] *lusus utiles quoque*. Q.v. the 1518 Basel edition, available online at http://www.ub.uni-bielefeld.de/diglib/more/utopia/. Translation mine.

[6] *quasi per ludum educti* (Miller, 60).

[7] *Republic* 7.536e; cf 4.424a, 4.425a-b.

[8] Miller, 33-34.

Second, I was hoping that the creative exchange of ideas within a group setting would lead to a higher caliber product. Third, I wanted my students to experience firsthand a principle very much alive in More's *Utopia* and in every medieval and early Renaissance work we read during the semester, namely, that the good life consists at least in part of good friends getting together and discussing great books and great ideas.

The template for their own games was to be, of course, Hythloday's account, and so their work was to be partially judged by its fidelity to his description, e.g, it had to be chess-like, show which vices are opposed to which virtues, etc. Meeting all of these criteria on the basis of *Utopia* alone, however, is somewhat difficult, as Hythloday never tells us what virtues the Utopians thought were opposed to what vices and so on. Fortunately, *Utopia*'s lacuna became a perfect springboard for integrating the assignment with the rest of the course. I teach More's *Utopia* as either the last or penultimate book of a semester on the "Medieval Intellectual Tradition," and thus its placement affords a cumulative viewpoint from which to surmise the other things we have been reading. Several of our texts—such as Hildegard of Bingen's *Play of the Virtues*, Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*, and Dante's *Comedy*—do provide a more detailed account of individual vices and virtues, and so I instructed my students to use as much as they could of these writings. The one complication to this solution is that all of these ethical schemas were penned by Christian authors whose faith clearly informed their understanding of virtue, while the Utopian chess game would have ostensibly been made years before the Gospels had reached Utopia's shores. To circumvent this problem, I gave my students the option of either abstracting from quintessentially Christian virtues (such as Faith, Hope, and Love) or of making an "A.D." version of the game presumably designed by Utopians who had converted to Christianity. Finally, to make things interesting, I asked them to incorporate other details about Utopia, such as the geography of the island and the mores of its people (for the original assignment sheet, see the Appendix below).

III. Results

The results—as one can see from the samples that are on display around us (and the photographs I include here)—were impressive. Most of the students found ingenious ways of rising to the challenge I had set before them. For the sake of convenience, I divide their work into three often-overlapping categories: games of chance, tests of knowledge, and games of strategy.

A. Chance

Games of chance I define as ones that rely exclusively or primarily on a roll of the dice or a draw from a deck of cards in order to win the game. These are, of course, in flagrant violation of the Utopian disdain for gambling and dice, but I tended to be forgiving of this deficiency when it was overcome by the game's other strengths. A good case in point is "Virtopia," by Kaitlin Campbell, Amanda Heitz, Maddi Mullings, and Rachel Nelson, the object of which is to collect as many Virtue cards and as few Vice cards as possible before the first person reaches the last space and the game ends. "Virtopia" abounds in Utopian motifs. Everyone begins the game in a state of childhood and hence must wear cosmetic jewelry (generously provided for by the game's designers); only after passing a certain point on the board can one achieve adulthood and discard them. If a player lands on a "Battle space," he must draw a battle card, which represents an internal struggle of the soul. If the player does not have the pertinent Virtue card that overcomes the struggle, he is cast into slavery and must resume his wearing of jewels. Players may also land on other squares which reward Virtue cards for such acts as saving livestock from a fire and Vice cards for getting "hammered at a wedding." The player who wins is then given permission to commit suicide!

"Virtopia" by the team of Campbell, Heitz, Mullings, and Nelson.

Though "Virtopia" did not comply with all of the criteria, it earned a high mark for its cleverness, attention to detail and presentation, and incorporation of class material. Quite a few students had games of similar design, perhaps a lingering testimony to Milton Bradley's "The Game of Life" on the imagination of American youth.

B. Test-of-Knowledge

If most of the games of chance resemble "The Game of Life," the test-of-knowledge games that I received bear a resemblance to "Trivial Pursuit." A case in point is "Virtue Quest," by Elizabeth Le Coney, Haley Payne, and Emily Rodgers. On a game board resembling the island of Utopia, each player, representing one of the Seven Deadly Sins or one of the corresponding Virtues, must answer difficult questions about all of the semester's reading material, for "in the true spirit of Utopia, the mind is the final battlefront where wisdom and knowledge prove more powerful than physical strength." But as intellectual development alone does not constitute the good life, there is also a point system that gauges moral virtue. These points are determined by the card one draws, as each card gives the name of a literary character we encountered during the semesters and a calculation of how he or she measures up to seven moral virtues on a four-point scale.

"Virtue Quest" by the team of Le Coney, Payne,
and Rodgers

"No Good Place" in *Ou Topia* Mode

"No Good Place" in Eu Topia Mode

The Pardoner in *The Canterbury Tales*, for example, gets low marks in all of the virtues, while Orlando in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* fares relatively better. Francesca and Paolo from Dante's *Inferno* get zero's in chastity and temperance, while St. Thomas More scores perfect fours in both. The game's designers made thirty such evaluations, along with forty-four trivia cards testing the player's knowledge of the intricacies of the *Divine Comedy*, the *Summa Theologiae*, the *Arabian Nights*, *Perceval*, and, of course, *Utopia*.

C. Strategy

Games that rely solely on strategy rather than chance or memory most closely approach the chess-like nature of Utopian games and hence most perfectly fulfill Hythloday's description. There are several outstanding examples that fall into this category, such as the gargantuan "Virtues & Vices" by David Jung, Windrik Lynch, and Trent Futral, which consists of a sixteen square foot wooden gameboard, a model wooden sailing ship, a handmade fort, and an agricultural field. Equally impressive is "Vices vs. Virtues" by Jay Jackson, Jeanine Novosad, and Paul Ryan Godfrey, which combines the rules of chess, the mountain of Purgatorio, and the ethics of Aquinas to form an excellent "A.D." game for Utopian devotees of the medieval Great Books canon.

One strategy game that is particularly clever is "No Good Place" by David Cheng, Kristen Fisher, and Katy Simpkins. This too is chess-like in that it has only two players who must move multiple pieces in order to capture the seven principal pieces of the opponent. These pieces are named after the characters about whom we read and represent the Seven Deadly Sins and their corresponding Virtues. The game is also somewhat like checkers in that pieces may acquire additional strength by successfully performing certain operations, but it is more complicated as it also contains "parasitic vices" that can attach themselves to particular Virtues. But the most unique feature is the gameboard itself which, as you can see from the photographs below, consists of four concentric circles that can take two distinct shapes. When a Vice piece reaches the innermost ring, the board is turned into the shape of a funnel, representative of Dante's Inferno.

The space is then called "No Place" (*Ou Topia*), and the Vice pieces gain the advantage by being granted greater mobility than the Virtues. But when a Virtue piece reaches the outermost ring, the board is flipped into the shape of a mountain not unlike Dante's Purgatorio. The battlefield is then called "Good Place" (*Eu Topia*), and the Virtue pieces regain the tactical edge.

IV. Conclusion

How should one assess the success of the assignment as a whole? Three different criteria come to mind: 1) the product itself, 2) the effect on the games' producers, and 3) the effect on the game's players. In terms of the product, I was in awe of the care, resourcefulness, attention to detail, and I daresay beauty of the majority of the submissions. If anything, the games taught me what the imaginative and well-read mind is capable of doing with a computer, laminating material, and a conveniently located Hobby Lobby. But this is not to say that the games were perfect in every way. One of the recurring problems I found was that most students had never actually played their own games after finishing them, and thus they missed a number of minor defects in their creations. (There is no substitute for a good old-fashioned test drive.) Similarly, several otherwise fine young essayists in the class had difficulty conforming to the genre—if I may put it that way—of rule-book writing, the result being a number of circuitous, byzantine explanations of rules which could have been explained much more simply and clearly. This phenomenon reminded me of the difficulty mechanical and computer engineers have in communicating their work to the American consumer, and why once upon a time so many VCRs in the United States, despite lengthy directions in English, French, Spanish, German, and Japanese, still had a blinking "12:00" for its time display.

The more important question, however, is whether the students actually learned anything from their efforts. Here I believe the answer to be a hearty yes, though not perhaps in the way I had anticipated. To some extent, the requirement to instantiate a schema of individual virtues and vices took their attention away from More's *Utopia* to Aquinas, Dante, Chaucer, and Hildegard of Bingen, and thus "the Utopian game project" became less and less Utopian in character. Since I had used the project as a way of summing up the entire course, I was not terribly upset by this result, but I

can understand how other teachers who focus more exclusively on *Utopia* may find this disappointing. I was also gratified, and a little concerned, to see how hard some of the students had worked. Some of them reported back in a survey I had asked them to fill out afterwards that they had spent as many as forty hours in eight days' time on the game. Further, one team mentioned that their project cost as much as two hundred dollars to make. Since I obviously do not want the assignment to become the sort of thing where raw financing trumps mental acuity and where less affluent students are put at a disadvantage, I intend to put spending caps on future assignments. (I later confirmed, incidentally, that there was no correlation between money invested and grades received.)

Though the propensity to excess is a potentially dangerous pitfall, it does at least make clear the fact that the project fired the students' imagination and channeled it in more or less the right direction, which is not something that happens very often in their world of bad cinema, music, and video-games. And it is equally clear from the finished product that it forced them to gain a greater mastery of the works we had read. Indeed, it later occurred to me that my students' enthusiastic reaction to the project was itself a perfect illustration of why Thomas More and his classical predecessors endorse the idea of "serious play" in the first place. For my students, designing the game was itself a game; it had an unavoidably playful, fun-loving element to it; it smacked of a challenge. At the same time, it required of them intellectual discipline and ingenuity, and it ordered them to a serious consideration of one of the underlying themes of the semester, what is the best way to live.

Finally, I was able to observe the effects of playing these games on two of my children, my six-year-old and four-year-old daughters. They had developed a keen interest in the projects ever since I brought them home to grade, and they quickly got hooked on "Virtopia," which they still play today. I must admit that it was this game rather than my own catechesis which introduced them to the notion of virtue and vice and to the shocking idea that jewelry and other Cinderella-esque paraphernalia are frivolous. While observing my own offspring hardly measures up to the rigors of a scientific case study, I can at least say that the experience has deepened my own conviction that Plato and Thomas More are right about the value of didactic play. And it strengthens my hope that these games and others like them may continue to mix the serious and the playful for the benefit of their creators and their players, all in a way that would make the Utopians and Sir Thomas More proud.

V. Appendix
The Game: Optional Assignment for the Final

On page 62 of *Utopia* Raphael Hythloday describes a chess-like board game "in which virtues are lined up in battlefront against the vices." Hythloday adds,

> This game shows very cleverly both how the vices fight among themselves but join forces against the virtues, and also which vices are opposed to which virtues, what forces they bring to bear openly, what instruments they use to attack indirectly, what defenses the virtues use to fend off the forces of the vices, how they evade their assaults, and finally by what methods one side or the other wins the victory.

Design the board game of the Utopians by combining Hythloday's description of it with:

1. Other details Hythloday gives us about Utopia e.g., the shape of the island, its cities, military practices, customs, etc.

2. Other writings we have read together this semester, the more the better. For instance, since *Utopia* does not catalog the virtues and vices, you should turn to St. Thomas Aquinas' *Secunda Secundae* or Dante's *Comedy* to figure out what vices should war against what virtues and so on. Technically, since the Utopians were not Christians when Hythloday visited them you would not have to incorporate the theological virtues of Faith, Hope, and Charity or any Christian ideas on grace or revelation. On the other hand, you are free to design an "A.D." version of the game, envisioning what modifications to their game the Utopians might have made had they come into contact with the same books that we have read. This may indeed be a more fruitful approach.

Your finished project should resemble a game you buy at the store, i.e., it should have a board and all the pieces along with written instructions that not only tell the reader how the game is played but how it ties in with Utopian life or the Medieval Intellectual Tradition we have been studying.

Finally, your game will be evaluated by four criteria: 1) its fidelity to Hythloday's description; 2) its incorporation of Utopian mores, etc.; 3) its incorporation of the other works from the course; 4) its presentation/appearance; and 5) its "play-ability," i.e., whether it is actually an enjoyable game to play.