

# HACKING THE GOOD LIFE

João de Barros & the game of Moral Virtues

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“That moral virtue is a mean, then, and in what sense it is so, and that it is a mean between two vices, the one involving excess, the other deficiency, and that it is such because its character is to aim at what is intermediate in passions and in actions, has been sufficiently stated. Hence also it is no easy task to be good. For in everything it is no easy task to find the middle, e.g. to find the middle of a circle is not for every one but for him who knows; so, too, any one can get angry- that is easy- or give or spend money; but to do this to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way, that is not for every one, nor is it easy; wherefore goodness is both rare and laudable and noble.” [Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. 2, 9]

<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.z.ii.html>

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*Translator : Sandra Simões | Illustrator : Luradontsurf*



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# Hacking the Good Life

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## Context:

The *Diálogo [...] em modo de jogo* is an early-modern book on Aristotle's *Ethics*, written by João de Barros in 1540.\* It includes a board game which is meant to help players memorise virtues and vices, as well as learn new things from it. Barros created this game using schemes and interactive visualisations, adding playfulness so that it would be fun as a pastime for the young.

The *Diálogo* can be divided into three parts: a) Moral Theory: Barros writes about the meaning of the Tree of Virtues; b) the Game: Barros describes all parts of the game (the boards, the spinner, the pieces and the players) and how they interact; and c) the Rules of the Game. The central mechanics of the game imply that knowledge comes through practice by creating habits and triggering adequate emotional responses. Moves are calculated using the randomly obtained interaction between three boards and a spinner. The game's aim is to reach "Human Happiness" with as many points as possible.

This project was built to tackle the game's theoretical and mechanical complexity, performing hands-on testing of the game's playability, decoding the author's intentions and translating them into an organised dataset that can be critically analysed and reinterpreted.

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## Research questions:

1. To explore the originality of the game and the ontological base it can provide.

1.1 With this game's design, João de Barros reveals his literary influences, presenting the theory that it is possible to convey and extrapolate knowledge using a dynamic diagrammatical image. *Volvelles* were not rare, certainly not in the books the author had access to; *libri di sorti* and race games were common pastimes. Is this game original in any way?

1.1 João de Barros adapted well-established visual concepts (trees and *volvelles*) to illustrate his view on moral philosophy and then transformed these into a game that contains many levels of information. How can that information be translated into new visual forms and new games?

## 2. To understand the conceptual possibilities implicated in players' moves.

As players play the game, they memorise the patterns of behaviour which are most advantageous (patterns that correspond to a combination between actions, intentions and passions: the three circular boards of the *volvelle*). João de Barros believes this memory would expand self-awareness and awareness of others, influencing players' lives. What role do chance and probability have in the game and in the course of life? What is the significance of each symbolic layer of the game?

## 3. To adapt the existing diagrams to the author's objectives and to redesign the game.

3.1 Does it actually work? By analysing the different elements of the game that have survived, we have concluded that some parts need to be revised or added. Tests are continuously performed to answer doubts and contradictions between the game's many parts (boards, spinner, and pieces) and the game's rules. To do so, prototypes were perfected and rules simplified. Are the rules and game mechanics actually in line with the various dimensions of the theories related to ethics?

3.2 The players must perform a painstaking number of mathematical calculations during the game. At the same time, they are learning how difficult the path to happiness is. Can this game stand the test of time? Could any of its features be made more accessible and appealing?

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## Outcomes:

The sixteenth-century editions of the *Diálogo* are extremely rare, as are most of Barros' works. They are worth preserving, understanding and sharing. The uniqueness of Barros' methods and designs needs more research and his works need to be made digitally accessible. The outcomes of this project should reflect a comprehensive overview of the creation and the meaning of this game and how it fits modern conceptions of virtue and vice. We wish to keep a critical view of both the original work and of modern interpretations of Barros' moral theory, developing and testing new physical and digital prototypes that play with various elements contained in Barros' book and game.

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\* João de Barros, (1540 princeps edition), *Dialogo de preceitos moraes co[m] prática delles, em módo de iogo*, Lisbon: Luis Rodrigues. Can be accessed at <https://purl.pt/12149>.

# Virtues

João de Barros defines Virtue as “a habit of the soul, generated by the good deeds we carry out; and not only of one [deed], but of many and often.”

*The 12 virtues and their extremes (vices):*

In Aristotle's view, the ideal personality has specific traits. To improve our character, we must first learn what moves us and what might steer our behaviour towards a mean state. Aristotle understands one vice to always be further from the mean (virtue) than another. The following depicts virtues and vices as a continuum, where 'X' indicates the mean: the closer the vice is to the mean, the less harmful it is. In addition, Barros assigns an order to the virtues (see the tree), which we follow in the descriptions below: the higher up the tree, the more important the virtue is, and the more intention is needed to turn a virtuous behaviour into a habit.



The virtue that steers all other virtues.  
Contemplate and make good decisions. Wait for the right opportunity.



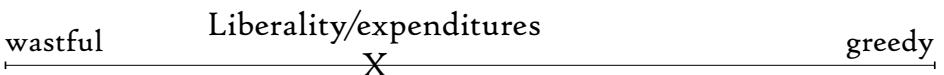
Do what is fair, keep equity.



Do not start anything with fear.



Repress the seductions of the senses.



Have compassion for others and be generous.

flaunts wealth      Magnificence      petty/stingy  
|-----X-----|  
Stand out by noble deeds.

vain      Magnanimity/sense of self-worth      unduly humble  
|-----X-----|  
Don't focus on eternal goods.

loves honor      Modesty      indifferent to honor  
|-----X-----|  
Remember the benefits you receive.

resentfully anger      Meekness      overlooks offenses  
|-----X-----|  
Do not be indulgent with evil.

arrogant/boaster      Truth      belittles oneself  
|-----X-----|  
Stick to the truth

people-pleaser      Affability/friendliness      disagreeable  
|-----X-----|  
Say what is useful and pleasant and act in the same manner.

bully      Humor/wit      oversensitive to jokes  
|-----X-----|  
Befit people, times and places.

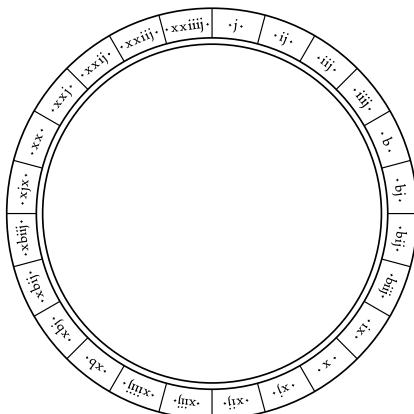
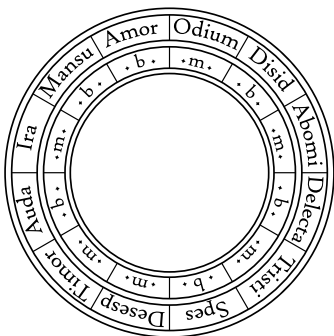
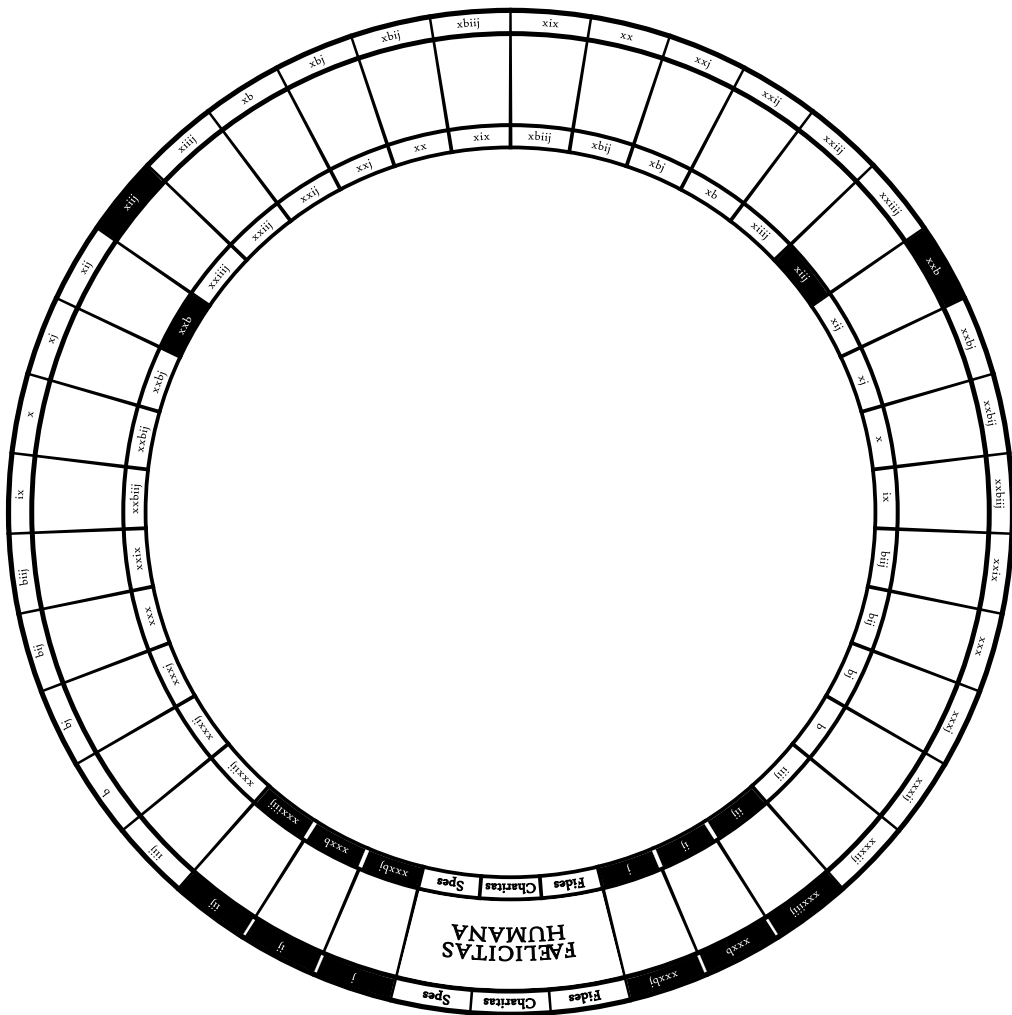
## Passions

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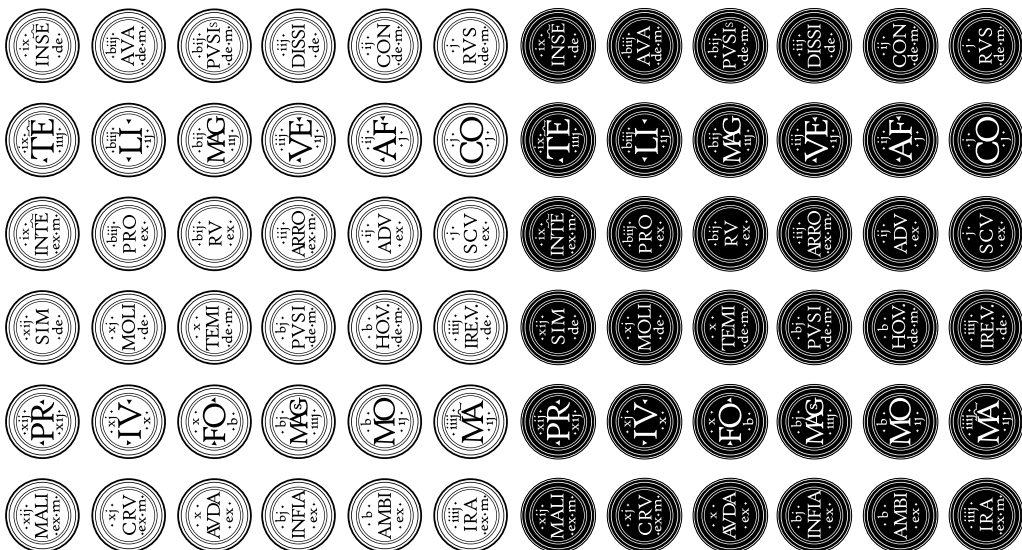
Aristotle names emotions/passions which we experience in different situations. We cannot choose how we feel, and we cannot control the emotions that various situations cause in us. João de Barros says emotions ignite or cool any act to a greater or lesser degree: if we speak the truth, guided by feelings of hate, we are not so virtuous; if we scream at our partner with a great desire to do so, we are being very vicious.

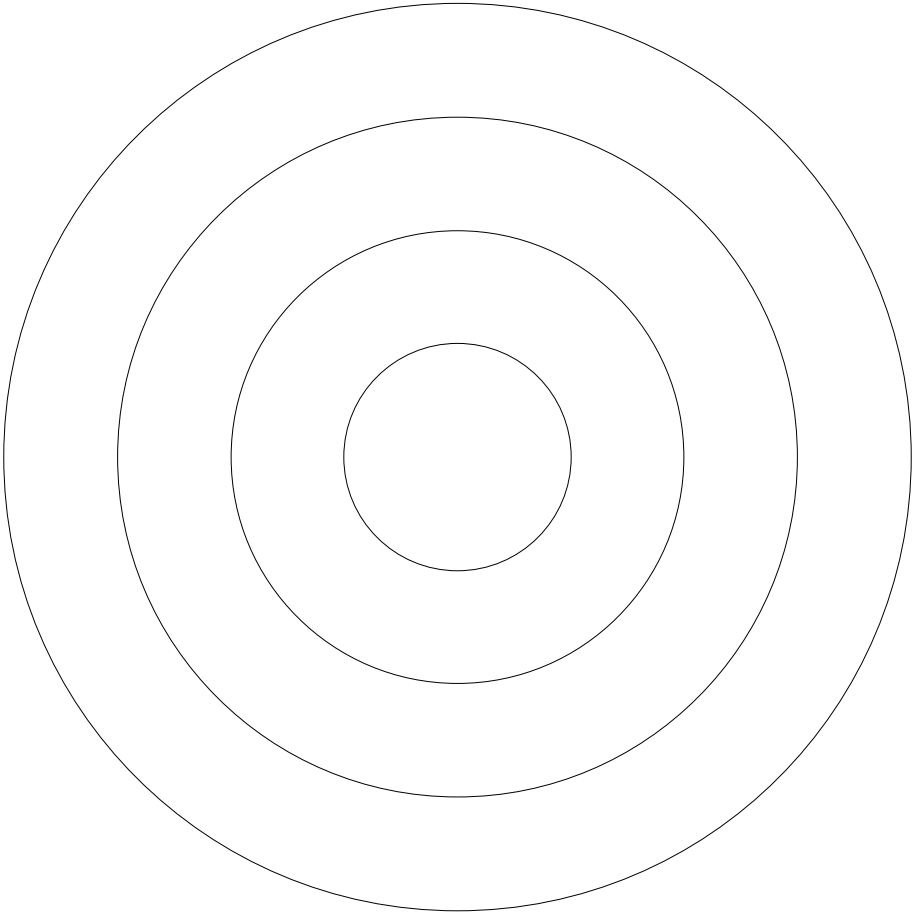
# CUT & PLAY

Ideally, print the following pages in A3.









Fill this scheme with images or words,  
photograph it and upload it to create  
your own digital *volvelle*.



<https://editor.p5js.org/terhi/sketches/Ps48-Vn0k>

# RULES TO PLAY THE GAME

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*This game contains:*

24 pieces for each player (12 virtues and 12 double-faced vices),  
1 large board to race the pieces,  
1 *volvelle* with three circles (virtues and vices, intentions, and passions)  
and a spinner to calculate the moves,  
1 booklet with the rules of the game.

There are two players, the *active* player uses the black pieces and moves them clockwise, the *contemplative* player uses the white pieces and moves them anti-clockwise. The board is divided into three thirds corresponding to the three stages of life: the stage of the *beginners*, the *proficient* and the *settled*.

All 24 pieces of each player are placed four by four on the squares of *innocence*: Courtesy, Affability, Truth, Meekness – 1<sup>st</sup> square; Modesty, Magnanimity, Magnificence, Liberality – 2<sup>nd</sup> square; Temperance, Fortitude, Justice, Prudence – 3<sup>rd</sup> square. Each virtue rests on its vices, and the face with the vice most contrary to virtue will be against the board.

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## Special squares:

*Innocence* squares: the first three squares of the first stage of life (beginners).

*Penance* squares: the last three squares of the last stage of life (settled).

12<sup>th</sup> Square: start of the 2<sup>nd</sup> third of the board (proficient).

24<sup>th</sup> Square: start of the 3<sup>rd</sup> third of the board (settled).

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## General rules:

**1.** All points gained in the *beginner's* stage are singular; in the second stage, for those who are *proficient*, doubled; in the third stage, for those who are *settled*, tripled; and losses follow the same rule: singular, doubled and tripled.

**2.** Every piece has one or two of four accidents: intention and remission, passion for good and passion for evil, as shown by the spinner.

In this game, vices are the opposite of virtue: intentions are a gain in virtues and a loss in vices; remissions are a gain in vices and a loss in virtues. In virtues, intention and remission are calculated using the number of natural value. In vices, intention and remission are calculated using their order number in the tree. When the circle representing the degree of intentions matches that number, there will be no accidental movement for virtues or vices.

Passions are used to calculate points in every move.

Example: I perform an act of Prudence (a virtue with 12 degrees of natural value) with 6 degrees of intention; if made with love, which is a passion for good, I gain 6 points. And if made with hate, it undoes the intention, and I neither gain nor lose. The loss is doubled when there is remission and passion for evil in virtue. Having no intention or remission, I gain as many points as the virtue's degree of natural value. If I perform a vicious act with 6 degrees of remission and a passion for evil, I gain 6 points. If performed with intention and passion for evil, I neither gain nor lose. The loss is doubled if a vice is performed with intention and passion for good.

3. When the position of free will (the spinner) in the virtues and vices circle cannot be determined, it fails. And in the other two circles, this failure is not considered: pieces move without their accidents (intentions and passions).

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## Rules of virtues:

4. In order to ascend to *supreme happiness*, all virtues must run the course of the board's 36 squares, and their moves will happen according to free will (the result obtained by spinning the *volvelle* and the spinner).

5. Every virtue can have three moves, two natural moves and one accidental move: the natural ones correspond to its two numbers (the upper one, which is the order, and the lower one, which is the natural value), and the virtue shall move such many squares. The accidental move will be to move as many squares forward as there are degrees of intention, and so many points it will accumulate, and, if there is remission, it will lose as many. If there is neither intention nor remission, it moves only twice with no other gain.

6. Every virtue, when moving to any square and finding one or even two vices in it, casts them out of the board and gains as many points as both have degrees of order (the upper number). If the virtue finds three vices in it, it will be placed in the empty square behind them without moving forward.

**7.** A virtue can “accept” two vices on its square; however, if a third vice comes, the virtue will be cast out of the board and enter its square of *innocence*.

**8.** Two virtues, *contemplative* and *active*, may be in the same square; however, if a third comes, the virtue that remains single will return to the unoccupied square behind it.

**9.** For every virtue that enters the first square of the second third of the board (*proficient*), the 12<sup>th</sup> square, if such square is empty, points are doubled (see general rule 1): plus 12 points for the 12 squares of life that it passed. In the first square of the last third (24<sup>th</sup> square), points are tripled: plus 24 points for the 24 squares passed. And if the virtue enters each of these squares without having gained anything (see general rule 2), it gains nothing; and if it enters with a loss, it loses what it would win.

**10.** When the virtue enters the *supreme happiness* square, it must have intention and passion for good. If it does not have these two qualities, it will wait until it acquires those two accidents. And by entering with them, it wins as many points as it has both of order and of natural value. By having the two accidents, the gain is doubled. The virtue wins 36 more points because of the 36 squares passed, and one more triumph worth 72 points for casting its vices out of the game.

**11.** The player who first collects all their virtues to the square of *supreme happiness* will, in addition to the individual gain acquired by rule 10, gain as many points as the virtues the other player has yet to collect and as many points corresponding to their vices.

**12.** Every virtue ordered to be played that is already collected at the *happiness* square shall be replaced by the one immediately before it according to the order in the tree. And if there is no virtue of a lesser number in order, it shall be of the greater number.

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## Rules of vices:

**13.** All vices can reach the three last squares of *penance* and no further, leaving the game and passing down its points to its corresponding virtue.

**14.** Every vice can have two moves, a natural move and an accidental one: the natural move is the degree number in the tree order, the accidental move

corresponds to the degrees of remission, and the vice moves as many squares, adding half of the remission in extra points, because remission in a vice is merit (see general rule 2). And, having intentions, the vice moves only the degree of order and loses as many points as intentions. And, not having intentions or remissions, it has only one move: that of the order in the tree, neither gaining nor losing any points.

Passions: Every vice operating with passion for evil and remission wins half of these two numbers; if it is the other way around, it loses the numbers entirely. Having degrees of intention with passion for evil, or passion for good with remission, one thing cancels out the other. And, not having intentions nor remissions, with passion for evil, the vice wins half of its order number in the tree, and, with passion for good, it loses as much.

**15.** Every vice entering any square containing one or two vices with the most extreme face upwards, and it enters with the least contrary face upwards, this vice casts out the other two vices and takes possession of the square. And if the square has a vice with the less dangerous face facing upwards as the vice wishing to enter, they may be together because they are both of one kind. And, if finding three vices, the vice will recede to the nearest empty square without moving forward, even though it might still have another move.

**16.** Every vice that enters the first square of the second stage and the first square of the last stage loses as much as virtue gains in these two squares (see rule 9).

**17.** Every vice that is ordered to be played, having already had a virtue triumph over it (collected at the *happiness* square), fails, and loses as many points as its order.

**18.** Every vice cast out of the square by some virtue shall wait to enter the square of its birth until free will commands it to play.

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## End-of-game rules:

When any of the players collects all their virtues in the square of *supreme happiness*, the game ends, and the prize is that, by playing, we will understand the internal war between reason and sensitivity. The winner is the player with more points at the end of the game, considering 1 triumph is worth 2 virtues and a virtue is worth 36 intentions (points).

