

# Is [X] a waste of time?

**Post by “Joshua” of September 30, 2020 at 8:21 PM**

*TL;DR—This post is a bit rambling. Skip to the next one for a discussion of the question, "Are video games a waste of time?"*

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When I was a young boy—the middle child of three—my parents brought home a Nintendo Entertainment System. It had been an especially difficult pregnancy for my mother; she was often sick, and particularly struggled to keep down food. I was born with a significant deformity of the chest and nearly died. I was baptized at the hospital for fear that I wouldn't make it.

Based on these and other factors, my parents were informed of two probabilities. The first was that my poor prenatal nutrition predicted a lifelong struggle with overeating and weight gain, and the second was that my mental development and mind/body coordination would be slow and possibly foreshortened.

To help with the second problem, my dad convinced my mother that video games—then in their infancy—would help with developing coordination. I also did Hooked on Phonics, created the year before I was born, to help me keep up with my peers.

In fact I exceeded them. My senior year of high school, I took the ACT test and got a perfect score of 36 in Reading Comprehension. It was 2006, and I was bookish, with a high reputation among my teachers, and skinny as a rail.

And I still played video games. A LOT of video games. Like many young people, and especially boys, they became a part of my identity. They were the main focus of my peer group, the main use of my money from my first job, and the major use of my free time.

I am nearly 32 now, gainfully employed, and while I haven't owned a gaming console for several years, I still play them on my laptop. Sometimes I play for hours at a stretch, while new and unread books languish on the shelf.

The public conception among our elders that video games will turn us all into violent sociopaths seems to have abated in the intervening decades, but it's been supplanted by a milder one—we're lazy, and we're wasting our lives.

Let's explore the question!

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## **Post by “Cassius” of September 30, 2020 at 8:31 PM**

I have rarely played video games in last last couple of decades but I was a fan in my early years of computing.

Isn't there a huge variety in types of games? Won't it matter a great deal what type of game we are talking about?

Do we need to know "What type?" in order to discuss the question?

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## **Post by “Joshua” of September 30, 2020 at 8:45 PM**

Those are good focusing questions, Cassius. I wanted to explore the question of whether video games in broad terms are a 'waste of time'. Let us assume that this means they are unconstructive—designed not for education, or for research, or anything like that, but for mere enjoyment. I actually left the thread title vague because I think that a lot of things fall into this category—television, popular fiction, pornography, watching sports, etc.

So let's put it like this;

***Setting aside the moral aspects of the question, should an Epicurean spend large quantities of time in relatively passive content-consumption?***

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## **Post by “Joshua” of September 30, 2020 at 9:07 PM**

I ask this question because it comes up quite a lot in places like reddit, where 'Getting Your Life Together' is a constant refrain.

The general implication is that by spending time more wisely or more productively, we'll be happier, healthier, richer, fitter, more attractive, better respected—all of those great traits that humans yearn for. (Most marketing, of course, is geared for the desire for those same traits).

I myself have this same nagging feeling sometimes; if not for video games, I could have really learned Latin or Greek, mastered an instrument, improved my drawing, made tons more friends, explored the natural world, written a book, read hundreds more books, gone to the gym everyday—and on it goes. The pleasure of something I enjoy, soured by the anxiety of leisure.

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## Post by “Joshua” of September 30, 2020 at 9:08 PM

The Vatican Sayings are relevant here. Cyril Bailey;

Quote

10

Remember that you are mortal and have a limited time to live and have devoted yourself to discussions on Nature for all time and eternity and have seen “things that are now and are to come and have been.”

11

For most men rest is stagnation and activity is madness.

14

We are born once and cannot be born twice, but for all time must be no more. But you, who are not master of tomorrow, postpone your happiness. Life is wasted in procrastination and each one of us dies without allowing himself leisure.

78

The noble soul occupies itself with wisdom and friendship; of these the one is a mortal good, the other immortal.

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## Post by “Joshua” of September 30, 2020 at 9:17 PM

And the more immediate reason for me posting this thread was [this article](#).

For an Epicurean, the question must obviously involve individual hedonic calculus. But I'm curious to know how others handle it. Do you structure your leisure time? Does binge-watching a television show, for example, leave you feeling guilty?

What does your ideal day look like? Your ideal retirement?

## Post by “Joshua” of September 30, 2020 at 9:26 PM

I particularly enjoyed this passage from the above article;

### Quote

When people judge video games to be a waste of time, what most people probably mean is that there are better, more useful ways to spend one's time. However, this is a value judgment. To me, knitting would be a waste of time. If I really want a quilt, I can always buy one on Amazon. But for all the people who love to knit, more power to you!

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## Post by “Don” of September 30, 2020 at 9:51 PM

This same argument is made against [creating constructed languages](#). I've always thought David J. Peterson's [Conlang Manifesto](#) was an eloquent "defense" of the art, but this selection came back to me reading this thread:

### Quote

I would hope that many would agree that doing something that neither harms the doer nor anyone else is not wrong. That said, creating languages, to my knowledge, has never resulted in the harming of another human being, or of the language creator .... Like any other hobby or activity, the only requirement is a requirement of time, and time management has nothing to do with the activity itself, but only with the one performing it. Thus, it can't be argued that language creation is "a waste of time", it can only be argued that certain people are wasters of time—how they do it is irrelevant.

So, the person "wasting their time" is the only one who can really judge whether their time is being wasted. If they are not harming anyone or being harmed (Where have I heard that? 😊), where's the harm in what they're doing, literally.

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## Post by “Joshua” of September 30, 2020 at 9:59 PM

That is a really interesting angle, Don!

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### **Post by “Cassius” of September 30, 2020 at 10:30 PM**

I want to think more about this before commenting more substantively, and I don't want to just sound like I am reciting some form of "hedonic calculus" but I do think at this point that I am committed to the view that in practical terms, how one spends one's time has to be judged in "subjective" terms, and there's ultimately no way for one person to say in absolute terms that another person is "wasting" their time, if they themselves judge the time to be well spent. I would think that this subjectivity aspect, informed by the Epicurean observation that we have only one life to live, which is very short, has to be one aspect of any "Epicurean" response to this question.

Now having said that I suppose it is possible to raise the logical argument that "you" (the person being discussed) might decide later on that you have wasted your time on something that turns out not to have been as productive of pleasure as some after-acquired or after-identified alternative might have been, but again I doubt it is possible for one person to make that judgment for another person.

I certainly have favorite TV shows and favorite music that I have listened to or watched hundreds of times, but I always go back to when I need a "lift" from some particularly tiring situation.

I need to look at the article you linked.

{And thank you for starting a new thread!}

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### **Post by “Godfrey” of October 1, 2020 at 1:22 AM**

Personally, although some games sound interesting to me I've never been very interested in playing them. When my kids were little I tried some of their games but was always put off by the open ended nature of the games. Back then I didn't have the time to get sucked into a game; now I prefer to have some idea of the time commitment before I get involved in just about any entertainment. Even if I binge watch a show, I know beforehand how many episodes there are and how many I might watch in one sitting.

So I guess for me it comes down to a personal time commitment. I've spent many years working digitally and am all too familiar with the phenomenon of getting sucked into the screen and not coming out for hours. There's a certain pleasure to that sense of "hyper-focus," but it can also be damaging. One of the benefits of stumbling into Epicurus' garden, for me, has been in re-connecting to the pleasures of the big picture.

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## Post by "Cassius" of October 1, 2020 at 5:05 AM

I Would pick out this passage as well stated:

Quote

### **Are We Having Fun Yet?**

My response to Joe Rogan, and to others who claim video games are a "waste of time," is: not if you have fun playing them. According to a recent study by the NPD group, [73% of Americans over the age of 2 play video games](#) of some kind. They are popular for a reason. **They are a lot of fun, and fun is not a waste of time.**

However I kept looking for a deeper exploration of what "waste of time" even means, and it wasn't deep enough for my liking. I think once you try to elaborate on the meaning of that term and justify a "legitimate" meaning of it, it becomes clear that you're applying either Stoic/Platonic/Absolute value judgments, or you come down on the Epicurean side that *pleasure is not a waste of time*.

*-- And in fact, broadly speaking, pleasure is the only reason to do go through the pains of life.*

So in Epicurean terms is there really any way to evaluate whether any activity is "worth doing" other than from evaluating the total pleasure or pain it brings? Probably the video game question is a good example of they type of question that should lead us to evaluate ALL of the long and short term consequences of the investment of time, rather than just the pleasures of the moment.

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## Post by "Don" of October 1, 2020 at 6:35 AM

Consider this: Those railing against some people "wasting their time" get pleasure from the sense of superiority they feel by telling people they're wasting their time.

However, I would also venture to say that that pleasure taken from feeling superior has a potential of turning into doing harm if they belittle or bully the so-called "time-wasters." I'm thinking of the stereotypical "geek" getting bullied by the "jock."

So, I'm going to also say that I would not recommend that pleasure from superiority and would place it in the category of "the pleasures of the profligate" since that feeling of superiority can lead to harm. There's nothing harmful about a sense of confidence in one's self but not a sense of superiority. This is said explicitly in Diogenes Laertius:

Quote

hatred, jealousy, and **contempt** are the motives behind the injuries that people cause each other...

There's also a cultural component. For example, video games are a "waste of time" but not sports watching. We're indoctrinated by culture to see value in some pastimes and not others. "Set sail in your own boat, free from all indoctrination."

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## Post by "Cassius" of October 1, 2020 at 7:06 AM

OK I apologize for being slow, because I think we need to discuss THIS aspect, as possibly the most important aspect of all -- or at least the most urgent for us to consider:

Is it possible to "waste time" pursuing something that is a pleasure, or is fun?

My answer would be OF COURSE YES ---- IF by engaging in that pleasure you deprive yourself of something that is a GREATER PLEASURE TO YOU.

This is probably near the root of the entire travesty of modern commentators saying that "painlessness" was Epicurus' true goal. Why would anyone accept "painlessness" as their identification of the good, when they have the opportunity to experience "the continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind, undisturbed either by the presence or by the prospect of pain?" That's the reason the texts have this statement: "We are inquiring, then, what is the final and ultimate Good, which as all philosophers are agreed must be of such a nature as to be the End to which all other things are means, while it is not itself a means to anything else. **This Epicurus finds in pleasure; pleasure he holds to be the Chief Good**, pain the Chief Evil." As well as: "And for this cause we call pleasure the beginning and end of the blessed life. For we recognize pleasure as the first good innate in us,

and from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance, and to pleasure we return again, using the feeling as the standard by which we judge every good. And since pleasure is the first good and natural to us, for this very reason we do not choose every pleasure, but sometimes we pass over many pleasures, when greater discomfort accrues to us as the result of them: and similarly we think many pains better than pleasures, since a greater pleasure comes to us when we have endured pains for a long time. Every pleasure then because of its natural kinship to us is good, yet not every pleasure is to be chosen: even as every pain also is an evil, yet not all are always of a nature to be avoided."

Why would you accept spending a lifetime eating bread and water when you have the opportunity to eat and drink things that you find much more pleasurable, and you can do that without incurring pain that you find to be too high a price to pay? "And again independence of desire we think a great good — not that we may at all times enjoy but a few things, but that, if we do not possess many, we may enjoy the few **in the genuine persuasion that those have the sweetest pleasure in luxury who least need it,** and that all that is natural is easy to be obtained, but that which is superfluous is hard."

That's the issue we have to confront -- accepting less pleasure than is possible, when that pleasure does not cost in pain more than we are willing to pay - I submit we should consider to be a huge mistake -- and indeed a "waste of time."

More Torquatus, stating this explicitly:

In a free hour, when our power of choice is untrammelled and when nothing prevents our being able to do what we like best, every pleasure is to be welcomed and every pain avoided. But in certain emergencies and owing to the claims of duty or the obligations of business it will frequently occur that pleasures have to be repudiated and annoyances accepted. The wise man therefore always holds in these matters to this principle of selection: **he rejects pleasures to secure other greater pleasures,** or else he endures pains to avoid worse pains.

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## Post by "Cassius" of October 1, 2020 at 7:24 AM

So in terms of Joshua's precise question this is where I see the heart of it:

[Quote from JJElbert](#)

I myself have this same nagging feeling sometimes; if not for video games, I could have really learned Latin or Greek, mastered an instrument, improved my drawing, made

tons more friends, explored the natural world, written a book, read hundreds more books, gone to the gym everyday—and on it goes. The pleasure of something I enjoy, soured by the anxiety of leisure.

Only Joshua can answer that for himself, but if in fact it was or is attainable for Joshua to achieve some of those other goals, and if in fact Joshua would experience greater pleasure from those goals than from the video games, then "yes" it would be proper to evaluate at least some amount of the time spent on video games as a less than optimum use of Joshua's time. I'll avoid the word "waste" as having more implications than might be appropriate, but I think "less than optimum" would clearly be applicable. We only have a limited and short time to live, and if we are truly setting our goal as the most pleasurable life that is possible to us, then in fact we should pursue *the most pleasurable life that is possible to us*.

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### **Post by “Don” of October 1, 2020 at 7:59 AM**

Good points, [Cassius](#) . It seems you took the internal perspective and I took the external perspective in our posts 😊 Both can be valuable. I see you saying that we are the only judge of our pleasure; I'm saying we need not be bound to external cultural judgements of the "value" of our pleasure.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of October 1, 2020 at 8:56 AM**

Yes I agree Don, and we're totally together. I think that OUGHT to be a relatively non-controversial point, but it's definitely worth making.

The other point is the controversial one. I just saw this below cross my email and I see it as another example of the problem:

Appeals to nature are ubiquitous in Epicurean ethics and politics. The foundation of Epicurean ethics is its claim that pleasure is the sole intrinsic good and pain the sole intrinsic evil, and this is supposedly shown by the behavior of infants who have not yet been corrupted, "when nature's judgement is pure and whole." Central to their recommendations about how to attain pleasure is their division between types of desires, so that we know which desires we should seek to satisfy and which ones to reject: the natural and necessary ones, the natural but non-necessary ones, and the vain and empty ones. Elsewhere, the Epicureans talk about the "natural goods" of political power and fame, and they contrast "natural wealth" with wealth as "defined by empty opinion." Finally, in their politics, Epicurus claims that the "the justice of nature is a pledge of reciprocal usefulness, [i.e.] neither to harm one another nor to be harmed."

Written this way, Okeefe is implying that Epicurus taught we should prioritize and even go exclusively for the "natural and necessary pleasures." I totally reject that interpretation with more energy every time I confront it 😊

The use of the categories is for ANALYSIS of the likelihood that a potential choice of action is going to come at a price of higher or lesser pain. BUT THAT ALONE DOES NOT TELL US WHETHER TO CHOOSE THAT COURSE OF ACTION OR NOT!

WE have to decide, based on our own view of obtaining the most pleasure at a cost in pain we agree to be worthwhile, what course to choose. We WILL sometimes choose pain, or avoid current pleasure, in order to achieve greater pleasure as the result.

If we don't make that EMPHATICALLY CLEAR then Okeefe's formulation is a prescription for disaster -- the equivalent of pilot nosediving his plan into the ground for the sake of making sure that his total net future pain is the least possible.

Every time I think about this stuff the angrier I get -- not, of course, at anyone here, but at these professional commentators. They have turned the modern understanding of Epicurus into Stoicism, or frankly, even worse than Stoicism, because the Stoics at least seem to think that virtue is a worthwhile goal. Painlessness for the sake of painlessness is just pure abject cowardice and its degeneracy is difficult to overstate.

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## Post by "Cassius" of October 1, 2020 at 9:00 AM

THIS is what I think, one thousand times over! 😊

Quote

On the other hand, we **denounce with righteous indignation and dislike** men who are so beguiled and demoralized by the charms of the pleasure of the moment, so blinded by desire, that they cannot foresee the pain and trouble that are bound to ensue; and **equal blame** belongs to those who fail in their duty through **weakness of will, which is the same as saying through shrinking from toil and pain.**

AMEN TORQUATUS! 😊

Again - I think the anger should not really be directed as much as those who by mistake make errors in these calculations, but at the commentators who take Epicurus and turn Epicurus into an **advocate** for this kind of degeneracy. They aren't acting on stupidity or "weakness of will," they are acting on the conscious choice to embrace corruption!

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### Post by "Susan Hill" of October 1, 2020 at 11:11 AM

Excellent reply's, all. I would only add, be careful of sacrificing "a bird in the hand".

The pleasure you derive from your gaming is a sure-thing. How lucky you are to have found such a consistently enjoyable activity! You imagine that perhaps you should try other activities that might make you appear or feel more accomplished, but such ambitions can be a terrible trap. Learning to play an instrument, for example:

Three years ago I became afflicted with envy for people who had such a skill, and so embarked upon learning the bagpipes. Now I have invested a huge amount of time, energy, and money into gaining some proficiency, and I have barely had a moments pleasure from it.

Each piece of music I have to memorize soon becomes an object of abject hatred for having to study and practice it ad nauseum, no matter how much I liked it at first. Practice is a terrible chore, as most musicians concede. I won't even get into the performance anxiety of being in a competition band.

But now I am stuck! Having invested so much, it seems a terrible waste and failure to quit. How could I let down my teachers? I also keep hoping that at some point it will surely become more pleasant...

Point is, we must do our calculus. Are you sure the musician you envy is happier practicing his/her instrument than you are playing your video games? Are you sure you would be? Ambition can be so deceptive.

I say, value your pleasure. It is not a waste, but the victor's laurel already won.

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### **Post by "Cassius" of October 1, 2020 at 11:20 AM**

Those are great points, and spoken by someone who has not only direct experience but who truly knows the meaning of "a bird in hand"!

I have always wanted to learn an instrument too, and I have some friends whose children are specializing in bagpipes, but to be honest it would never occur to me to pick bagpipes as a first instrument. Is there any relevance to this conversation to include how, of all instruments, you chose bagpipes?

Every time I tried to pick up anything (mainly piano/keyboards) I gave up in abject failure. I suppose I had an easier time with the calculus of "continue or stop" rather than "start this new project."

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### **Post by "Susan Hill" of October 1, 2020 at 11:55 AM**

Lol. Yes, Cassius, I think I can say that my life has gone to the birds, with 5 of them to take care of.

Odd reasons why I chose bagpipes:

- I love music that has a drone or eson, like the Byzantine Chant that I performed for several years.
- I had recently been to Scotland
- I wanted to choose something "different" or unusual
- I would get all emotional when the massed bands would play at Highland games
- lessons were free and nearby

So, relevant to this conversation? Not really! 😊

It really has been a shock to me to find out the insane amount of time one has to practice to learn an instrument. Half an hour a day really doesn't cut it.

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### **Post by "Don" of October 1, 2020 at 1:10 PM**

@Susan Hill : For what it's worth, I've tried to learn the pipes as well but NEVER got as far as you. I tried to learn on my own (for lack of teachers back in the day) and can sometimes get an almost-recognizable Amazing Grace or Skye Boat Song out of my chanter or small practice set of pipes. By now, I keep my expectations low and just play around with them for fun.

It might be easier for me at this point just to buy a kilt 😊

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### **Post by "Susan Hill" of October 1, 2020 at 3:24 PM**

[Don](#) : Brave soul for attempting to wrestle the beast! (Do the five appendages make it a "quinquepus"?) My electric chanter is far more friendly and even makes me sound good sometimes.

To keep things on topic, I watched a fascinating film on Amazon Prime yesterday called "Whiplash". It is about a music student who aspires to become "one of the greats" but finds himself under the tutelage of a horrendously abusive teacher. The film explores the dangers of aspiring for excellence at any cost. I recommend a viewing if anyone has access!

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### **Post by "Godfrey" of October 1, 2020 at 4:14 PM**

"Whiplash" really is a satisfying movie on many levels: nuance despite all the drama, well written, well acted. I second the recommendation! 👍👍

I've actually been thinking of taking up the blues harmonica as a form of breath work. Much simpler than the bagpipes, but I'll be taking into account the above comments. Very timely 🤔

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### **Post by “Cassius” of October 1, 2020 at 4:56 PM**

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

harmonica as a form of breath work.

HA! That reminds me i have one of these aging uselessly in a corner!  
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Didgeridoo>

[Health benefits](#) A 2005 study reported in the British Medical Journal found that learning and practising the didgeridoo helped reduce snoring and obstructive sleep apnea by strengthening muscles in the upper airway, thus reducing their tendency to collapse during sleep. In the study, intervention subjects were trained in and practiced didgeridoo playing, including circular breathing and other techniques. Control subjects were asked not to play the instrument. Subjects were surveyed before and after the study period to assess the effects of intervention.[33] A small 2010 study noted improvements in the asthma management of Aboriginal teens when incorporating didgeridoo playing.[34]

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### **Post by “Joshua” of October 1, 2020 at 5:14 PM**

Really great replies. Susan, I found your bagpipe story particularly interesting!

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### **Post by “Cassius” of October 1, 2020 at 5:37 PM**

Joshua it may now be up to you to get us back on track (after my digressions) with some analysis and reflection. Have we made any progress on unwinding the issues you were thinking about in the original post?