Commentary

Title:

*"Video Games"*

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Video Games[1]
By James Boudreau

      Hey there, all my Commentary readers.   I know it's been a while since I rapped at ya', but you know how it is. James has to work too, and when it rains, it pours. Also, many thanks to everyone who reached out to tell us how much they loved my November 2019 Commentary "Vending Machines…"! Nice!

      So where are we going in Thought Experiment Land this time? Imagine a sort of video game world.   Characters, avatars, or whatever they're called are heterogeneous—they're all different in unique ways.   These differences are measured in terms of a finite number of characteristic categories that have numerical ratings. For example, consider two players rated in terms of just three categories: athletic ability, intelligence, and sociability. Their ratings are represented in the graphs below.
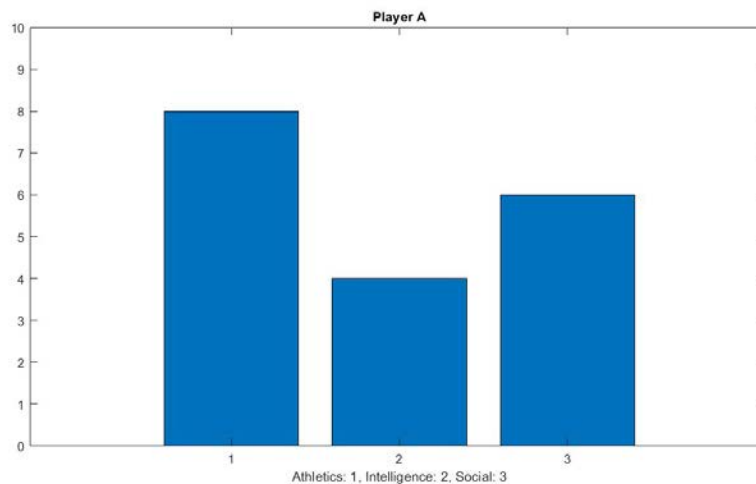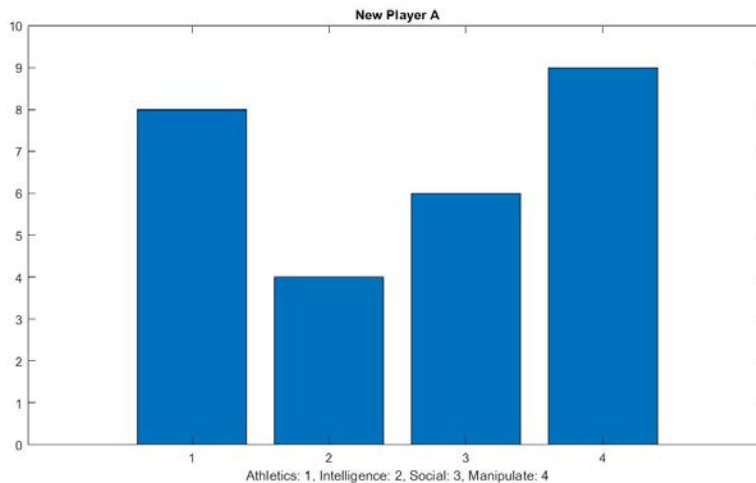

Player A

Athletics: 1, Intelligence: 2, Social: 3
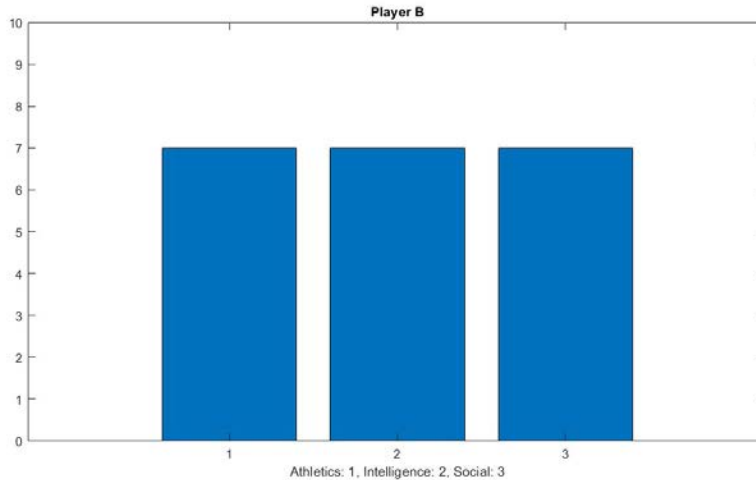
Player A is more athletic; Player B is more balanced in all categories. How will they ultimately be ranked compared to one another? Should their scores in each category summed, averaged, averaged using a weighted scheme that favors one trait over another? For the sake of the Thought Experiment, let's not take a stance on prioritizing any one skill over another, but acknowledge that there is some formula (however vague) that takes these traits and determines which player is superior overall in any particular competitive environment.

Believe it or not, that's irrelevant for this example. In this case, just suppose that somehow these disparate characteristics can be aggregated, and the players compared.

Now let's imagine a very similar world, but one in which the players are endowed with one additional characteristic: manipulation. Their ratings in each category then compare as follows.

New Player B

Athletics: 1, Intelligence: 2, Social: 3, Manipulate: 4
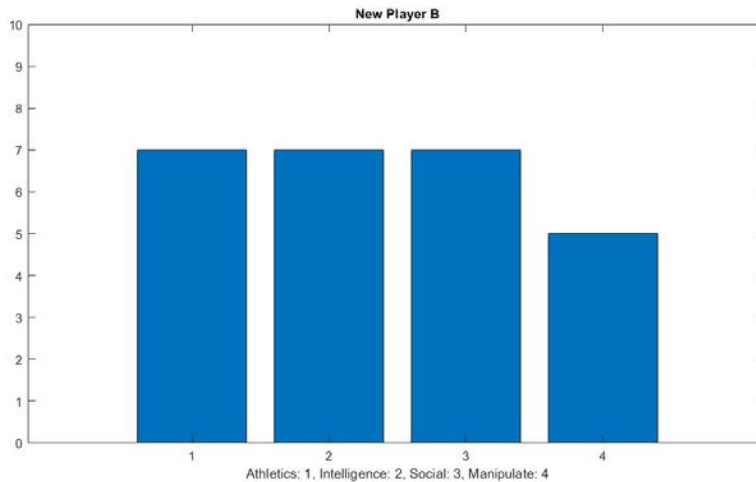
Again, there's no need to establish precisely how the categories are aggregated to form an ultimate ranking between the two players. What are we getting at? In the second example, the comparison of New Player A and New Player B, one player has a distinct advantage in the manipulation category.

Let's further imagine that the players develop these strengths in their various characteristics over time, and that some can be more or less encouraged. The term "manipulation" need not convey a negative connotation; however, suppose that some characteristics are not as economically productive as others.

So perhaps "manipulation" here means going along with a corrupt system. If you grow up in a corrupt economy, where the opportunity to advance via merit is less prioritized than "going along with the system," what will you tend toward? Or, suppose it's beneficial to devote time to picking out details in social media that demean others rather than excelling on any other merits.[2]

There's no way to tell for sure that encouraging manipulation of an existing corrupt regime or the use of nonsense social media is bad for economic growth. (Is there?) But imagine a simulation of two different societies: one which does not promote advancement based on manipulation and one that does. Is it possible to not promote manipulation? (Hint: yes.)

Perhaps there's no conclusive logical proof—not in the mathematical sense of proof suited for more rigorous academic research—for this short piece, but the point comes across nevertheless. Or it may not. It's only a Thought Experiment about video games, after all.

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[2] There are more academic references for this point, but instead I'll cite Dave Chappelle's (2019) Netflix special, "Sticks & Stones."