

Journey to Your Future Self: Aristotle as Inspiration for an Activity Tracker



Design by Karen González

Text by Pieter Desmet

Do you already own one of those *activity trackers*? You know, a little wristband with a step counter and heart rate monitor. Chances are you do, as these trackers are very popular nowadays. Being fit is the new norm. Getting plenty of exercise is part of that, and with activity trackers and health apps, we can all monitor our efforts. Market leader Fitbit has sold over a 100 million devices¹, and today over 33 percent of the world's population uses an app or tracker to monitor their health². In just ten years we've all embraced this trend: *Gradibus ergo sum* – I step, therefore I am.

Walking as work

I've had a step counter for a few years now too. It's nice to have the ability to see that I actually never complete 10,000 steps per day. With some embarrassment, I admit that this hasn't much improved since I started wearing the wristband. But I take comfort in the knowledge that I'm far from the only one. Research has shown that a significant proportion of users experience far less of a behavioural impact than they had expected³. In fact, in some cases the effect was a negative one⁴. Where walking used to be a way to relax, it has now become a means to satisfy the step counter – it's work. And we

already have so much of that. Isn't there a better way? That question was the starting point for designer Karen González to conduct a study into how people experience trackers and accompanying apps. This has resulted in her redesign, poetically named 'Journey to Your Future Self.'

Well done! You can do it!

The first trackers were developed for top athletes in the 1980s. Naturally, sports coaches served as the models for the accompanying apps. That is why most apps use two basic coaching strategies. The first one is *monitoring*: You get concrete insight into your behaviour, such as the number of steps you take, per week or per month. This then enables you to set specific targets. The second is *reinforcing*: Your achievements are rewarded, for instance with a badge; possibly shared on social media. In the long term, these two basic techniques don't work too well, unfortunately. In order to develop

a strategy to motivate people that is more effective while also supporting their wellbeing, Karen worked closely with a team of tracker users. They confirmed the limitations of the sports coach metaphor. They sometimes felt motivated by their trackers, but they were also described as demanding and pushy, reducing motivation and making them feel bad about themselves. The direct approach doesn't really match the reality of building a healthier lifestyle, which includes both ups and downs. As a result, users become frustrated and disappointed in themselves. Because the different parameters (steps, sleep, weight) are reported separately, you're not given a holistic view of your well-being. And since only achievements are rewarded, you miss support during periods of low motivation, which can lead to a vicious circle of disillusionment and reduced enthusiasm. ology into clothing in a meaningful way. This question resulted in Issho, her design of a smart denim jacket that encourages the



The Activity Tracker as Health Coach

wearer to be aware of the moment to create more spontaneity in our lives.

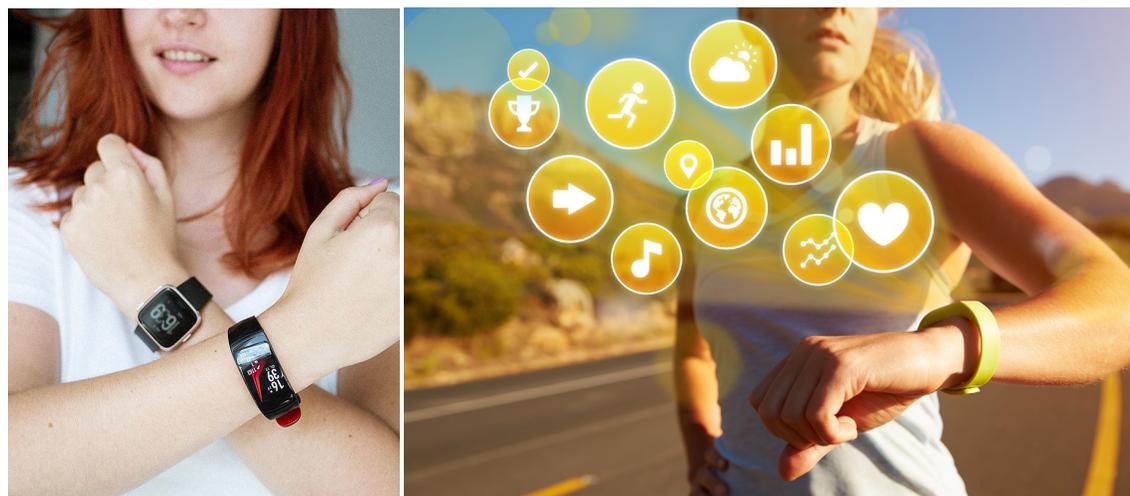
Aristotle and the Golden Mean

In her attempts to redefine the 'tracker conversation', Karen found inspiration in the Aristotelian virtues. Aristotle used 'a journey to a better version of yourself' as a metaphor for the path of virtuousness. The journey is not just focused on achieving predetermined goals, but also on developing life skills during the journey. Based on this metaphor, she developed the Journey to Your Future Self, with three core elements: (a) define goals, (b) visualise data, and (c) motivating notifications.

Define Goals You start your journey by choosing a character as an avatar for your future self. You then ask the question: What healthy habits do I have? Basically, you start a conversation with your future self, and that's how you come up with ways to describe healthy habits for your body and mind that are meaningful to you. You do this with activities that appeal to you in three domains: nutrition, physical, and mental activities. Examples can be dancing,

offline moments, reading, taking the stairs, drinking water, eating fruit, and so on. You start from a positive perspective; by visualising an optimistic expectation for the future, you make that expectation a potential reality, acting as the first step in your journey.

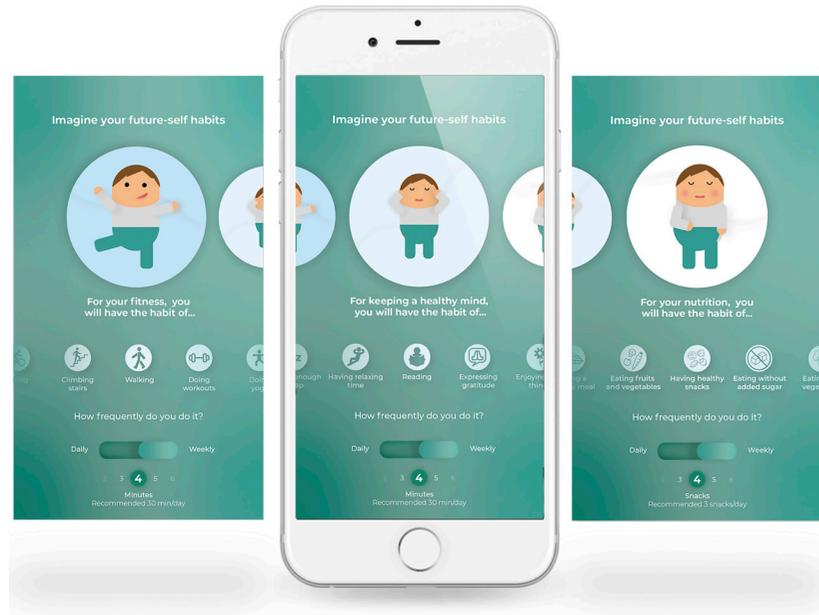
Data Visualisation The data is visualised as a hot air balloon ride. The hot air balloon is a poetic metaphor for your personal journey to your future self. Your activities are translated into the winds that push the balloon along. When you're not working on your habits, the balloon will slowly fall back to earth. At times like these, you can (if you choose to) receive a question that invites you to reflect on your (sometimes unconscious) obstacles in building your new habits. These questions emphasise



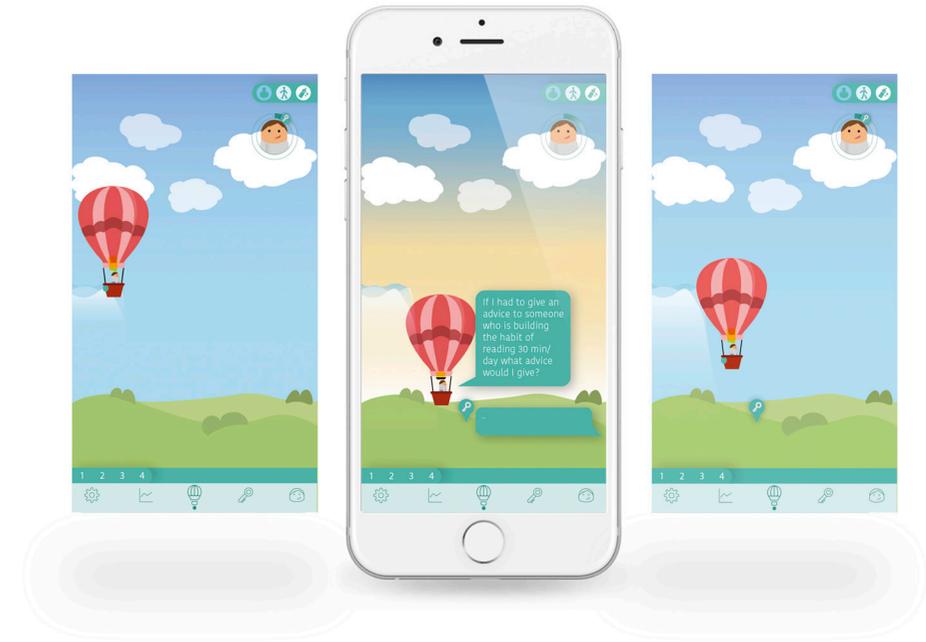
Activity trackers; the ultimate control over your health



Journey To Your Future Self; Develop Healthy Habits



Three domains for future habits: (a) physical and (b) mental activity, and (c) nutrition



(A) balloon flight during a balanced day;

(B) balloon sinks to the ground when there's little progress;

(C) click the key to get a tip

that temporary lack of progress isn't a negative, but a natural part of your journey. They aim to inspire hope and help you in building resilience during your journey.

Motivating Notifications Aristotelian virtues let you develop a skill by following examples set by others. That idea served as inspiration for a social aspect of the application: During low points, you can get inspiration from the personal insights from other users who have set similar targets (by getting in touch with other hot air balloons). That way you can let yourself be encouraged by the personal journeys of others, and the community can offer support for each other's journeys.

Technology and Personality

Interactive technology isn't neutral. It has a character, a personality. At the same time, an app is not

a person. How much is a pat on the back worth if it's generated by an algorithm? In other words, does an app that simulates human interaction by praising you after an achievement actually take us seriously? From her team of users, Karen learned that not everyone is satisfied by this. As she puts it, "My participants didn't feel like they were being taken serious by an app pretending to be a coach. As a designer, it's my job to develop a better conversation; the language of the technology should adapt to that of the user." A coach works for some, but others prefer an inspiring balloon ride. Diversity is the key - to motivate users and to support their physical and mental wellbeing. With her journey to your future self, Karen offers a refreshing new conversation about health, with an eye for imagination and a sense of poetry.



Karen González Fernández developed the journey to your future self in 2019 as part of her graduation project for the Master's programme *Design for Interaction* at TU Delft. The project was initiated by the TU Delft Cardiolab as part of a study into the ways in which digital sensor data can be used for positive healthcare. The project was supervised by Valeria Pannunzio and Pieter Desmet (TU Delft).

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2. www.statista.com
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Colophon

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