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Book Review

Virtual Worlds as Philosophical Tools: How to Philosophize with a Digital Hammer by Stefano Gualeni

Reviewed by Jonne Arjonta

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Can virtual worlds be used for philosophical thinking? Stefano Gualeni argues that they can, in *Virtual Worlds as Philosophical Tools: How to Philosophize with a Digital Hammer*. This may not be radical in itself: few people dealing with the philosophy of games would think that games are not a sophisticated medium capable of being used for subtle expression. However, Gualeni is not content to present the argument in philosophical language, but shows with examples how, exactly, it might be done. It is hard to disagree with an argument that is well formulated – it is even harder when the argument is put into practice.

The style of *Virtual Worlds* is a curious hybrid of philosophy and game studies, with a discussion of Plato's *Phaedrus* meeting *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream 2010) and *Mass Effect* (BioWare 2007). When this works, it manages to ground recent issues in ancient discourses. When it does not, the detour through ancient Greek feels a bit forced – perhaps something philosophers have to do in order to be considered serious philosophers.

The book starts with a presentation of philosophy of technology, with a focus on Heidegger's thought (most importantly Heidegger 1977). A clear and readable presentation of Heidegger's philosophy is in itself a commendable achievement, since he is a notoriously difficult writer and thinker. Few presentations of his thought reach the clarity with which Gualeni presents them. However, it is probably not a sufficient introduction to Heidegger's thought, and some background in Heidegger's philosophy is probably necessary to appreciate the nuances of the theory.

Chapters 2 and 3 interrogate traditional notions of metaphysics through the philosophy of technology. Chapter 3 discusses the concept of the virtual and presents an overview of how simulations affect the organization of human thought. It is here that Gualeni's debt to game studies becomes more apparent, as the discussion relies heavily on ideas developed in relation to game studies (e.g., Aarseth 1997; Juul 2005). All examples of virtuality turn out to be from games. The ideas are smuggled in without really examining the relationship between games and virtual worlds.

Chapters 4 and 5 get into the central topic of the book: how virtual worlds can be used as tools for thinking. Chapter 4 builds the ground for the main argument by a discussion of how media (in the broad sense of including writing) affects how we conceptualize and think. This notion of media is discussed in relation to the modes of being that computational technology enables. At the end of chapter 4, Gualeni arrives at his main argument of virtual worlds as "technologies of the self," with a reference to Foucault (1988). To simplify, Gualeni argues that designing virtual worlds requires similar conceptual work as writing philosophical manuscripts, and as such can be used as tools to redefine ourselves. The examples given are again drawn from videogames.

The book is strongest in its argument when it stays close to Gualeni's personal experimentations with videogames. Especially chapter 5 builds on the game experiments that Gualeni has been involved in developing, attempting to show in practice what the rest of the book argues theoretically: videogames can be used as tools for thinking with.

The game *Haerfest* (Technically Finished 2009) is used as an example in thinking about the phenomenal character of sensory experience. The game offers the player an experience of being bat, and Gualeni contrasts it with Nagel's (1974) classic article "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?", which argues that humans are fundamentally incapable of understanding the phenomenology of a bat. *Haerfest* seems to give at least some kind of an idea of what it would be like to be a bat. Whether or not *Haerfest* shows Nagel to be wrong (it probably does not), it shows how a game can be used to examine a philosophical idea.

The eponymous game *Gua-Le-Ni* (Double Jungle and Gualeni 2011) is even more explicit in its philosophical goal. It is a commentary on Humean complex ideas, which are creative combinations of simpler ideas. The player is made to create these complex ideas by combining parts of animals and humans into more complex creatures. Gualeni also uses *Gua-Le-Ni* as an example in exploring the different senses of 'virtual'.

Last of the examples is the game *Necessary Evil* (Gualeni et al. 2013), which forces the player to adopt the role of an unimportant minion in a dungeon. It questions the assumption that the player is always central to the game and its presentation. Unlike the

previous two, *Necessary Evil* is not a reflection on a philosophical issue, but a reflection on videogames themselves. If the book is about thinking about philosophy with virtual worlds, *Necessary Evil* is about thinking about videogames with videogames.

Herein lies one of the problems with the book: the examples used are all videogames, and the argument advanced works excellently with the examples given, but unfortunately, the book is titled *Virtual Worlds* instead of *Videogames*. It argues more generally about virtual worlds and simulations, and while these may be categories related to videogames, they are not identical. All that can be said about videogames does not apply to virtual worlds and simulations, and vice versa. In *Virtual Worlds* the concept of virtual worlds is quite problematically mapped onto videogames. This relies on the conceptual framework of Heidegger's philosophy, namely the concept of a 'world':

a set composed of beings that are understood together with all their (detectable) properties and mutual relationships. (p. 6)

This very abstract definition is supposed to encompass both virtual worlds and videogames – but also obscures anything that might make it necessary to make distinctions between them.

As such, this does not seem like a huge problem: I believe the central argument of the book survives any skepticism we have of these two categories being the same – it seems plausible that both videogames and virtual worlds can be used for philosophical thinking. However, when concepts like 'simulation' and 'virtual world' are given a thorough and theoretically grounded examination, 'games' seems oddly left out.

This is one of the reminders that *Virtual Worlds* is not a book of game studies, but one of philosophy. It argues that virtual worlds can be used for philosophical thinking, and happens to use games as examples of virtual worlds. This, in itself, is not a flaw, unless you happen to be games studies scholar looking for a book about games. Conversely, for a philosopher the focus on videogames may seem odd, when simulations are much more familiar in philosophical literature.

Chapters 6, 7 and 8 move on and present new perspectives on the previous issues. Chapter 6 stands abruptly on its own: it explores bodies and phenomenology in relation to virtual worlds, and introduces Helmuth Plessner's (1928) philosophical anthropology. Purportedly, Plessner's ideas help in understanding the relation of bodies to virtual worlds, but the chapter seems to stand so far apart from the others that its contribution was difficult to evaluate. Perhaps Plessner's ideas are useful in fixing the defects in Heidegger's philosophy of technology, but it is hard to say.

Chapter 7 presents the idea of virtual worlds as poetic allegories. It starts off with a discussion of simulations as metaphors, but quickly returns to videogames. It uses Walter J Ong's (1991) "second orality" and Ian Bogost's (2007) "procedural rhetoric" as springboards to discuss digital worlds. The argument advanced is:

– I propose understanding digitally simulated worlds as media; as technologies that can disclose and afford meaning through semiotic processes that are not always identifiable with those of text or spoken language. (p. 134)

According to this understanding, virtual worlds are analogous to media like texts, but afford meanings in different ways. For a philosopher used to a very broad understanding of what 'media' can mean, this does not seem radical.

The rest of the chapter does an admirable job of unpacking the many strands that are tied to this notion of simulated worlds as media. The concept of metaphor employed is broad, perhaps a bit too broad, invoking both Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and Ricoeur (1977). This is all ground back into Heidegger's philosophy, with a more-than-cursory nod towards game studies thrown into the mix.

Chapter 8 summarizes strands from earlier chapters, and advances the idea that virtual worlds (again, with videogames as examples) can be used to explore new ways of experiencing and conceptualizing. It briefly tackles the problem of trying to figure out how we could build simulations for truly alien experiences. Two of the suggested sources are computer glitches and evoking psychotropic experiences, with the third one relating to remediating other forms of representation in new ways.

Virtual Worlds stands on the precarious ground between disciplines. While being a book about virtual worlds and philosophy of technology, it draws heavily on game studies. Videogames are not, however, discussed as videogames, but used as vessels for other concerns. This alone is not a grave sin: I hope game studies is past the stage where it must guard its territory with jealousy, and can instead celebrate in being able to contribute to other fields of study. The problem is rather that there is no field that would encompass all the issues Gualeni discusses – perhaps with the exception of the field that may emerge with this very journal.

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