



Research Article

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Playable Concepts? For a Critique of Videogame Reason

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Abstract: The text discusses under which conditions video games can philosophize by outlining a “Critique of Videogame Reason.” Section 1 introduces the idea that academic research, especially in philosophy, uncritically assumes that writing is the most effective way of expressing and communicating ideas. Section 2 (“Transcendental Aesthetic”) discusses the representational status of video games, claiming that they amplify and stimulate a sensorimotor way of “seeing.” Section 3 (“Transcendental Analytic”) argues that for a videogame knowledge and thinking to be possible, there must be a “gamish” mindset in which writing and reading are not just confined to the act of putting words in lines, but also entail the design of sets of actions. Section 4 (“Transcendental Dialectic”) advocates for a medial progressivist approach revolving around an expansive view of philosophical practice, claiming that a videogame philosophy must be able to provide at least three *sui generis* performances: enlightening the multi-modal, sensorimotor dimension that also characterizes the most amodal, linguistic concepts; building and supporting “emersive” experiences capable of taking specific advantage of the power of immersivity; and taking part in and fostering an explicitly dialogical interchange among scholars and researchers. Section 5 (Conclusion) envisages a more liberal and inclusive future for philosophical practice.

Keywords: video games, metaphilosophy, media philosophy, game studies, transcendental conditions, virtual worlds, literacy, writing, emersivity

1 Introduction. The Media of Philosophy

This text approaches the question of gamification in a rather unconventional way by considering it not just as a new possible object for philosophical reflection, but rather as something that concerns the very heart of philosophical research. In this vein, it discusses the possibility that philosophical concepts become playable and suggests that this can be a good thing for academic, philosophical practice, at least under certain conditions. At first glance, this may even appear provocative, since in philosophy writing is taken as the most effective way for expressing, communicating, and elaborating ideas, radicalizing the “text bias”¹ or true “scriptism”² that affects academic research and more generally intellectual production, where the most highly valued works lack any sort of images and contain dense and graphically uniform pages of printed words.³ Philosophers most likely make this monomodalist assumption implicitly, engendering a peculiar medial oblivion that leads them – the exponents of the supposedly auto-critical, self-reflexive, omni-challenging,

¹ Baird, *Things Knowledge*, 1–8.

² Harris, *Rationality*, 11–2.

³ Kress and van Leeuwen, *Multimodal Discourse*, 1.

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etc. discipline *par excellence* – to forget to interrogate which expressive and technical media have supported, currently support, and can support their everyday practices.⁴ In particular, they assume that it is obvious and natural to do philosophy through written words. Hence, even in the metaphilosophical domain, the fundamental tenet is that “philosophy is done almost entirely in words” and even if “an occasional diagram may help, and some say (in words!) that wordless music, dance, painting, or sculpture can express philosophical ideas,” it remains that “to discuss the value of those ideas properly we must use words,” such that “language is the essential medium of philosophy.”⁵ In short, standard academic philosophy has to be conducted only in linguistic terms and must deal solely with propositions.

However, as an unavoidable consequence of our renewed “mediascape,”⁶ a more liberal and inclusive approach to philosophical research is beginning to take shape, in a double sense. On the one hand, the medial epistemic injustices implied by traditional institutional philosophical practice have been pointed out.⁷ On the other, here most importantly, proper attention has been directed not only at the existence of a “genre trouble” affecting philosophical writing, whose expressive and communicative potential is reduced to the format of the article,⁸ but also at the possibility of even doing philosophy through media other than the written word. From this perspective, new technologies can and should be used as a real way of changing the traditional practice of philosophy: that four-step process of writing, publishing, debating, and responding in new writing.⁹ In particular, such a pluralistic stance has been discussed primarily through the use of *films*¹⁰ but also through *comics*¹¹ and *video games* themselves,¹² as well as through the welcoming of *things* and *performances*¹³ more generally. In all these cases, the idea is that we are dealing not simply with new philosophical objects on which the traditional written discourse can be exercised, but precisely with new potential philosophical *media* through which philosophy can be pursued, at least if its fundamental medial assumptions are challenged. Moreover, the opportunity arises to consider how different media not only afford certain uses and possibilities, but also give rise to a new paradigm of attention, formulation, and dissemination – a renewed *forma mentis*.

Regarding video games more specifically, one can already find the sketch of a taxonomy of philosophical games¹⁴ or the proposal of a possible distinction between analytic and continental approaches to philosophy through video games.¹⁵ Even *Synthese* – for sure one of the most rigorous analytic journals – has recently published a contribution that discusses the relation between video games and philosophy: it argues the relation is still not very clear, not only because video games have been understudied as objects of critical reflections, but also and mostly because it has been largely neglected whether and in which sense video games can be considered *sui generis* philosophical.¹⁶ But there is more, since the existence of alternative ways of doing philosophy not only has been *said* through written texts but has already been put into practice as well: indeed, there are effective attempts to challenge the restrictive medial-exclusiveness of philosophy by using other media. It is the case not only with a PhD thesis in philosophy presented as a comic graphic essay,¹⁷ but also – more

4 Hartmann, *Medienphilosophie*; Kittler, “Forgetting;” Kittler, “Towards an Ontology.”

5 Williamson, *Philosophical Method*, 103.

6 Casetti, “Mediascapes.”

7 Pezzano, “The Media is the (Discriminatory) Message.”

8 Pezzano and Gualeni, “How to Do Philosophy.”

9 Hoffmann, “Changing Philosophy;” see also Bourget, “Paperless Philosophy.”

10 More recently, e.g., Nilsson, *Cinecepts*; Rawls et al., *Philosophy and Film*; Pippin, *Philosophy by Other Means*.

11 Cowling and Cray, *Philosophy of Comics*, 11–38; McLaughlin, *Comics as Philosophy*; Pezzano, “Comic Ideas.”

12 Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 85–111; Gualeni, *Virtual Worlds*; Gualeni, “Playing with Puzzling;” Lucci, “‘Horizon Zero Down’.”

13 Bowie, “The ‘Philosophy of;” Coccia and Michele, *La vita delle forme*; Coeckelbergh, *Using Words and Things*, 280–7; Coeckelbergh, *Introduction*, 230–68; Mol, “Material Philosophy;” Rietveld and Kiverstein, “Reflections on the Genre,” 6–7.

14 Gualeni, “Philosophical Games.”

15 Pezzano, “Giochi mentali.”

16 Spiegel, “Can Videogames.” Spiegel’s main claim – with which I agree – is that video games enable an experience that engages us visually, audially, tactilely, and mentally, so that the *player* can act, react, and choose: in other words, video games prompt a peculiar way of “illustrating” philosophical points by disclosing them in an experience, rather than declaring them in a propositional form.

17 Sousanis, *Unflattening*; see also the graphic essay Pezzano et al., *How to Do Concepts*.

relevantly – with video games deliberately produced with philosophical intentions, i.e. as research outputs that both intend to be intrinsically philosophical and are made through a medium other than the text.¹⁸ Clearly, intention alone does not suffice to define such works as genuinely philosophical, if for no other reason than attributions like this depend on social conventions and shared criteria too, as I will also insist in the conclusions.

My text aims to contribute to this promising *Video-ludic Turn* by also filling a gap in the debate on “philosophy & video games.” Indeed, the contributions in such a field are not only generally declined as a “philosophy of video games,” but they also tend to view a “philosophy *through* video games” primarily from the perspective of the gamer/game designer who might stumble into philosophical insights in an almost accidental way, and less from that of the professional philosophers who could engage with the possibility of expressing their ideas through means other than pages filled with lines of words (the few cases just mentioned are the exceptions but certainly not the rule). In other words, we need to understand under which conditions we could philosophize through video games precisely *qua* video games: in order to do this, my analysis will adopt a cross-disciplinary approach, involving diverse fields such as game studies, visual studies, media studies, aesthetics, semiotics, literacy studies, and others – which also explains the length of this study, which is admittedly longer than that of an average paper. This way of proceeding is challenging, but it is the most serious and effective way to tackle the two structural questions on which I want to focus:

- 1) What kind of showing can video games perform – if they actually show?
- 2) What kind of proper philosophical affordances can video games provide – if they actually can?

The answers will be that – on the one side – video-ludic images can show, but only in a way that requires us to reconsider the meaning of “showing,” and that – on the other – video games can support philosophical practice, but in a way that appears to engage the very nature of philosophical reasoning. The ensuing discussion will not indulge in descriptions of philosophical video games: this choice may disorient, but it is justified by five key arguments presented in their increasing conceptual cogency.

- i. Almost every text about “philosophy & video games” already emphasizes several occurrences of philosophical games,¹⁹ and it is pretty difficult to find an outstanding or neglected case: thus, insisting on this line would tend to end up in a mere repetition of what has already been discussed.
- ii. A hypothetical list of philosophical games would simply be too controversial, due to the lack of a consistently accepted view of video game philosophy: no one can establish a canon all alone; the existence of a shared tradition is needed. After all, it is even difficult to provide a widely accepted list of philosophical books: depending on one’s privileged canon, there are still debates over whether – just to pick two examples – *On the Genealogy of Morality* (too little argumentation) or *Principia Mathematica* (too much formalization) can be considered strictly and fully philosophical.
- iii. The temptation of producing the umpteenth “philosophy of” is waiting around the corner, in this case under the form of a renewed ekphrastic reflection about/on video games which reduces their setting to a selection of some propositional samples, maybe even pretentiously accompanied by some static reproduction of gameplay. Avoiding this may better encourage us to ask whether we can actually play and – even before – design philosophical video games, rather than simply continuing to write about them.
- iv. Insisting on cases such as *Detroit: Become Human*,²⁰ *BioShock*,²¹ *The Stanley Parable*,²² *NieR: Automata*,²³ *Disco Elysium*²⁴ and the like can even be a counterproductive defence strategy. Indeed, these are examples of video games that were not intentionally designed to do institutional, academic philosophy. It would be like

¹⁸ All developed by Gualeni: *Necessary Evil*, *Something Something Soup Something*; *Here*; *Doors*.

¹⁹ Such as Cogburn and Silcox, *Philosophy through Video Games*.

²⁰ Quantic Dream, *Detroit*.

²¹ 2K Boston, *BioShock*.

²² Wreden and Pugh, *The Stanley Parable*.

²³ Platinum Games, *NieR*.

²⁴ ZA/UM, *Disco Elysium*.

insisting on novels with a high philosophical coefficient, or even on novels written by philosophers such as Sartre's *Nausea*, in order to demonstrate that they can be philosophical *essays*. Thus, it is more appropriate to refer to the few but existing cases which represent the video game equivalent of, say, Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, or – with a lower profile – of a paper discussing the descriptive possibilities of our language and the limitations inherent to thinking in analytical categories.²⁵

- v. Addressing the two *structural* questions mentioned above requires a more transcendental approach, that is, an analysis of the conditions under which something like a video-ludic philosophy is possible, which – paradoxically – should be applicable even if no philosophical video game has existed to date.

In other words, let me *pretend* that we do not yet have any example of philosophy through video-ludic images; given such an “as if not” device, the fundamental question becomes: which fundamental characteristics and implications should we expect from a philosophy made through video games? On which basis is a video game philosophy possible? What kind of features must be able to accompany all video game philosophical representations, so to speak? Given this, the two structural questions are taken as the inspiration for the sketch of a “Critique of Videogame Reason” in this article, with the first dealing with the form of videogame sensibility and the second with the form of videogame intellect: they are situated on the level, respectively, of A) a “Transcendental Aesthetic” and B) a “Transcendental Logic,” divided into a B1) “Transcendental Analytic” and B2) a “Transcendental Dialectic.” So, my contribution tackles the following three questions:

A) *Transcendental Aesthetic of Videogame Reason* (Section 2).

Under which conditions is it possible for video games to show something?

(Short answer: there must be an interactive, sensorimotor way of representing)

B) *Transcendental Logic of Videogame Reason* (Sections 3 and 4):

B1) *Transcendental Analytic of Videogame Reason* (Section 3).

Under which conditions is it possible to think through video games?

(Short answer: there must be a “gamish” mindset distinct from the “bookish” one)

B2) *Transcendental Dialectic of Videogame Reason* (Section 4).

Under which conditions is it possible to philosophize through video games?

(Short answer: the text-based approach to philosophy must be expanded but not surpassed).

Before entering the discussion, let me add two clarifications. The first is that I will conceive of video games as a wider cultural form and more precisely as the “prototype form” of all Extended Reality devices and solutions, for historical as well as medial reasons: indeed, with the introduction and spread of video games, we have grown accustomed to a medium capable of depicting a sensory environment, tracking the user's position within it and providing for user interaction within it.²⁶ In other words, it is true that a VR environment offers a richer experience than a console game in terms of interaction and immersion, since it is not restricted to visual modality but involves stereophonic or 3D audio, sometimes even haptic, kinaesthetic, and proprioceptive representation, being thus capable of providing a compelling sense of inhabiting and interacting with alternative spaces – the feeling of really being there. Nevertheless, such performances remain in continuity with video games, being a refinement of what they have begun to provide for the first time in our history, i.e. depicted images which are egocentric and interactive, as they respond to the movements of the players and allow them to perform actions on the depicted scenes.

The second is that this transcendental approach has two further advantages. First, it is programmatically open to a sceptical conclusion: we might find that the prerequisite for having a “gamish” philosophy cannot be satisfied without losing too much of what we are used to calling philosophy and of how we are accustomed to doing philosophy; more radically, we might even find that pursuing a videogame philosophy²⁷ would mean

²⁵ Such as Gualeni, *Something Something*.

²⁶ Which are the three key elements of VR media according to Tavinor, *The Aesthetics*.

²⁷ I will use the expressions “videogame philosophy” and “philosophy through videogames” as synonyms.

taking an anti-philosophical path (which is not my position, to be clear from the beginning). Second, a more transcendental interrogation can also be extended to other media which could be considered good candidates for the philosophical job, as it offers a more encompassing framework to understand the possible relations between philosophical thinking and media other than the written word, without being necessarily limited to the consideration of the video-ludic medium. Obviously, a single essay cannot provide the full, refined analysis required for such considerations; nonetheless, it aims to take a first step and pave the way for a more systematic transcendental critique of videogame reason, as well as of multimedial reason more in general.

2 Transcendental Aesthetic. “Seeing” Actions

Video games appear as absolutely singular from a representational point of view. They certainly make use of words (spoken as well as written ones), but one would hardly say that their main feature is to transmit words, i.e. that they are a verbal medium. They seem more akin to images and are often very sophisticated from an aesthetic perspective, even to the point of approaching art, as noted even in philosophical discourse.²⁸ Yet, video games show in a way that appears to change the very structure of showing: on the one hand, they have to be understood alongside painting, theatre, photography, film, television and the like, i.e. other visual media; on the other, they introduce a huge discontinuity in that history, challenging and even requiring us to alter our very notions about picturing.²⁹

On the one side, *video* game images share something with pictorial images (i.e. photography-like) as well as with spatial ones (i.e. diagram-like): as the former, they depict things, states of affairs, situations, etc.; as the latter, they offer representations not simply of “what is,” but rather of “what is possible.” Nevertheless, on the other, video-ludic representations also present a feature which seemingly places them even outside the realm of traditional, depictive images:³⁰ they are precisely *ludic*, which means that they are playable, made for interacting, and not merely for (re)producing. Indeed, they are fictional in the sense that they set up (*fictio*) an image of the world in its entirety, which means: an explorable context where one is called to move, evaluate, learn things, choose options, take paths, make experience, have feelings, and so on, so that the action of the users help generate what is displayed and deployed.³¹ In this sense, video games have been described as the most prominent example of self-involving interactive fiction:³² they represent a kind of *projective* image, capable of engendering a significant existential impact on the subjectivities involved, precisely because they are first and foremost called to play and impersonate, rather than simply taking an observational and receptive attitude.³³

In a video game, things are conjointly told, illustrated, and played – they are “stories for eye, ear, and muscles.”³⁴ This explains not only the difficulties in identifying what video games really are,³⁵ but also why, for example, in semiotics, the existence of a medium such as the digital game, which defined itself in experiential terms since the beginning, could appear at first even unexplainable in terms of signs and representations.³⁶ Indeed, video games fix, generate, and share a very singular kind of sign and meaning, i.e. *agency*:³⁷ gaming-simulated environments enable us to design and communicate sets of possible actions in a mechanically mediated way and this launches the age of the mechanical reproduction of agency, which follows and to

²⁸ Tavinor, *The Art of Videogames*.

²⁹ Tavinor, *The Aesthetics*.

³⁰ Klevjer, “Virtuality and Depiction.”

³¹ Lopes, *A Philosophy of Computer Art*, 36.

³² Robson and Meskin, “Videogames as Self-Involving.”

³³ Gualeni and Vella, *Virtual Existentialism*.

³⁴ Grodal, “Stories for Eye.”

³⁵ Videos? Games? Stories? Fictions? All of them? And how? See Rough, “Videogames as Neither.”

³⁶ Giuliana, “Believing the Virtual.”

³⁷ Following the pivotal Nguyen, *Games*, 74–100.

some extent encompasses the traditional mechanical reproduction of *text*, as well as that of *speech* (radio style), *sound* (gramophone style), *event* (photography style), and *process* (cinema style). This means that video games count among the technologies invented for recording aspects of (effective as well as imaginative) human experience and generating a public memory, specifically for inscribing and transmitting sculpted agencies, so that we are enabled to store and share modes of agency, creating an archive of crystallized agencies, thereby transforming the traditional meaning of library. Thanks to video games, we can try out the experience of choosing, strategizing, and trying out unfamiliar ways of being more easily and with greater flexibility: thus, they offer a true *yoga for agency*.³⁸

Actually, one may say that filmic images can also be associated with sensorimotor representations since movie scenes are capable of triggering embodied simulation through techniques such as camera movements, close-ups of facial expressions and bodily experiences, editing, sound effects, etc.³⁹ Nevertheless, it is thanks to video games that we have grown accustomed to images that enable us to do something effectively – to put it simply, no one really plays a movie. It is only *after* the diffusion of video games that we could start to see *ex-post* also other kinds of images and media as (proto)interactive, giving also birth to video-experiments such as – a perfect example of remediation – the episode *Bandersnatch* of the *Black Mirror* series (not to mention gamebooks). For example, McClelland⁴⁰ takes the question: “What philosophically can a film do ... that a book cannot?,”⁴¹ by stressing that a film is specifically philosophical when it is about cinema itself *and* in a participatory way, i.e. when the fact that the audience is watching a film is integral to its achievement, Socratically engaging it in a dialectical exercise of fulfilling (his case study is Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rear Window*). However, it is like saying that a film can be *sui generis* philosophical when it gets “gamish,” behaving like a video game: indeed, considering one’s own interpretative role as a spectator in the experience of the film whilst one is engaged in that very activity is – at most – one of the very few possible participative performances prompted by a film.⁴² Certainly, what for moving images appears at best an exception is in fact the rule for video-ludic images: the representations that they support and stimulate are truly sensorimotor in a structural rather than occasional way.⁴³ For this reason, it can be stressed that video game images at the same time do and do not belong to the category of the moving image, insofar as they can be regarded as a kind of video-medium but not as a kind of film.⁴⁴

Given all this, to what extent does this relate to *showing* then? Can video game images be interpreted as a subspecies of *visual* images? Or, reversing the question, is it justified to understand images as such primarily in visual terms? The fact is that our “image” of the image is patently eye-centred: this belief is due not only to anthropological reasons,⁴⁵ but also to cultural factors, such that the existence of new digital, simulative images finally places the “ocularcentric” attitude⁴⁶ in question. In this respect, video games force us to redefine the very meaning of showing in a non-visuo-centred way by providing “the primary physical vocabularies for humans to pantomime gestural grammars,” i.e. “grammars of actions”: they take the “action-image” as “the base foundation of an entirely new medium” for which “what used to be primarily the domain of eyes and looking is now more likely that of muscles and doing.”⁴⁷ This not only means that video games stimulate aesthetic experiences in the broader sense of also involving senses other than sight, but also that they disclose an *agential* participation that involves self-imagination, a sense of possibility, mental mapping, evaluation of

³⁸ Nguyen, *Games*. See also Schulzke, *Simulating Good*.

³⁹ Gallese and Guerra, *The Empathic Screen*; but for a similar account of TV images, refer to De Kerckhove, *Brainframes*.

⁴⁰ McClelland, “The Philosophy of Film.”

⁴¹ Goodenough, “A Philosopher Goes,” 12.

⁴² *The Matrix* provides another classic case of “what a film can do,” as its first scenes convincingly deceive the viewers, leading them to believe that what is seen on the screen is (fictionally) real, before revealing that it is (fictionally) fictive (Wartenberg, *Thinking on Screen*, 55–75). However, also in this case, even when the spectators are called to perform the action of “taking for true” in a very fine way, they are actually doing nothing but *watching*. See also *infra*, Section 4, point b2).

⁴³ Biocca, “The Cyborg’s Dilemma;” Gregersen and Grodal, “Embodiment and Interface.”

⁴⁴ Meskin and Robson, “Videogame.”

⁴⁵ Arnheim, *Visual Thinking*; Jonas, “The Nobility of Sight.”

⁴⁶ Jay, *Essays*, 102–14.

⁴⁷ Galloway, *Gaming*, 2–6.

courses of events, etc. Their images objectify and exteriorize not just what we see (and/or hear), but rather what we can do, i.e. our peripersonal space: with video-ludic images, the internal, simulative forecasting of our (peri)bodily possibilities becomes an external thing that we can manipulate, meditate on, and so on.⁴⁸ Without a doubt, video games are capable of showing under the condition that the conceptual and practical sense of visualization is redefined in such a way that showing must also encapsulate the “display” of behavioural affordances as well as the execution of actions.

But just as videogame thoughts without sensorimotor contents are empty, so too sensorimotor intuitions without videogame concepts are blind: thus, we must now turn to the intellectual side of a possible videogame reason.

3 Transcendental Analytic. Towards a “Gamish” *forma mentis*

Videogame knowledge must be able to take advantage of the specific communicative and expressive features of video game representations, i.e. their ability to show by displaying agency. But this involves a completely different setting than the one associated with our most ordinary way of knowing, which is based on the performances provided by another kind of medium: the book. Thus, for videogame knowledge to be possible, video games must be able to compete with books, remediating knowledge in sensorimotor terms. In order to pave the way for discussing this, I start with the following quotation from the pioneer computer scientist Alan Kay:

The intensely interactive and involving nature of the personal computer seemed an antiparticle that could annihilate the passive boredom invoked by television. But it also promised to surpass the book to bring about a new kind of renaissance by going beyond static representations to dynamic simulation. What kind of a thinker would you become if you grew up with an active simulator connected? ... The ability to “read” a medium means you can *access* materials and tools created by others. The ability to “write” in a medium means you can *generate* materials and tools for others. You must have both to be literate. In print writing, the tools you generate are rhetorical; they demonstrate and convince. In computer writing, the tools you generate are processes; they simulate and decide.⁴⁹

These lines are relevant in several respects, some of which have already emerged, while others are going to be discussed now. Indeed, they not only trace a clear difference between the engaging interaction with computer images and the passive consuming of TV images, but they also raise at least three relevant issues. First, they claim that the computer will compete with the book, by substituting the fixed written representation of reality with its living simulation (Section 3.1). Second, they suggest that this will have a disruptive impact on the very practice of thinking, that is, on our mindset (Section 3.2). Third, they sketch the contours of a new form of literacy based on reading/writing procedures rather than enunciations (Section 3.3).

3.1 Medial Competition

The first step for understanding under which conditions we can think, read, and write through video games is to point out an error in market positioning that is quite widespread in discussions about the status of virtual and simulated worlds. Typically, digital, virtual reality is contrasted with what *ex-post* appears as the actual reality: simulation appears to be in competition with authenticity and the like, be it for expanding, diminishing, or substituting it.⁵⁰ This paves the way for the typical questions about realism: Does gaming divert from true life? Does gaming blur reality into fiction, thus negatively influencing real-world behaviour? And so on. Certainly, such ontological and metaphysical questions are meaningful and relevant; but, they have dominated the philosophical discussions of digital worlds at the expense of understanding them *as a medium*.⁵¹

⁴⁸ See also Casetti, *Screening Fears*, 116–31.

⁴⁹ Kay, “User Interface,” 193.

⁵⁰ For a recent, debated example, refer to Chalmers, *Reality+*.

For example, this has obscured the fact that the same questions could also be directed at books: Does book reading distract us from real life? Does reading drag us into a fictitious world, thus engendering negative effects in the real one? And so on. Manifestly, such worries appear hilarious today, but the past provides several testimonies of anxiety over the unpredictable consequences of the flood of distracting printed texts.⁵² Furthermore, we should never forget “the critique of written reason” offered by Plato-Socrates, which was based – among other things – precisely on the idea that the alphabetical technology was already “captologic,” i.e. the dead, virtual world of the text replacing the living, real one, made of face-to-face interactions and negotiations, where true thought, i.e. personal and not parrot-like, takes shape. After all, the so-called “Werther-effect” was induced textually, long before the (supposed) “Grand Theft Auto-effect” on school mass shootings: Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* was so immersive, engaging, enthralling, and the like that it erased any form of critical distance in its readers, unleashing a blind emulation in the world “out there.”

Thus, the digital game should not be compared to reality in the first instance, but instead with the book: the formerly dominant form of simulated, virtual, immersive, etc., experience.⁵³ Or, if one prefers, digitally induced experiences actually compete with “offline” experiences insofar as they compete with their former competitor – precisely print-induced experiences. Clearly, books and video games do not present the same kind of immersivity, be it for no other reason than the multifaceted nature of its immersion: for example, we can distinguish between representational, participatory, affective and narrative immersion, precisely in order to highlight the continuity as well as the discontinuity between new and old media.⁵⁴ But to accept the basis of such a confrontation acknowledges – which is here the crucial point – that video games provide the remediation about how knowledge is produced and transmitted in such a way that knowledge-making itself is put into question. Notably, the book served as the fundamental instrument of formation, learning, and thinking within the “Gutenberg Galaxy,”⁵⁵ insofar as it was the ultimate medium for shaping our mind and humanity. But it is the video game that now appears as the most suitable candidate for the position of culture’s new *organon*, realizing Schiller’s dream of transforming play into the prior form of communication, and thus into the medium for the education of human beings.⁵⁶ This may seem an exaggeration, but a more measured stance should take seriously how the traditional “bookish” *forma mentis* is – to say the least – accompanied by a “gamish” one today. It is this phenomenon that is commonly and too hastily labelled “gamification,” but – as Kay noted – it indicates a more structural change in the very meaning and practice of thinking (which also involves the philosophical mind, at least potentially).

In this respect, the question is: What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking when we are dealing with written ideas and what does it mean when we are dealing with embodied actions? Which kind of meaning accompanies the intuition of written words and which one is the intuition of sensorimotor representations?

3.2 From the Page to the Virtual Laboratory

The answer can be found by confronting two different mindsets (Table 1): the symbolic-reconstructive one and the sensorimotor one, which can be labelled as “bookish” and “gamish,” respectively.⁵⁷

The symbolic-reconstructive mindset is the kind of situation directly implied by books: there are lines of symbols that follow one unique direction and compress all possible information and perceptual contents; one

⁵¹ As also stressed by Tavinor, *The Aesthetics*.

⁵² Furedi, “Moral Panic and Reading;” Jackson, *The Fear of Books*.

⁵³ Ryan, *Narrative*.

⁵⁴ Balcerak Jackson and Jackson, “Immersive Experience.”

⁵⁵ McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*.

⁵⁶ Schiller, *On the Aesthetic*. See De Mul, “Games;” Zimmerman, “Manifesto.”

⁵⁷ Here, I draw particularly on Antinucci, *Parola e immagine*; Gee, *What Video Games*; Gentile et al., “The General Learning.” I take books and video games as the main, general cultural forms associated with the two mindsets, but this does not imply that all textual products are books (just think of this paper), nor that all experiential settings are playful in a strict sense (just think of XR applications for training surgical technicians).

Table 1: Main differences between the symbolic-reconstructive mindset and the sensorimotor mindset

Symbolic-reconstructive mindset	Sensorimotor mindset
Unidirectional	Multidirectional
Unidimensional	Multidimensional
Decoding	Perceiving
Extracting	Moving
Interpreting	Acting
Reconstructing	Repeating
→Sense	→Experience

must decipher (recognize their aspect) and decode them (find what they stand for), before reconstructing the references of the discourse and interpreting the intentions of the author, in order to finally master a set of facts. In other words, one is called to understand and represent the meaning of the discourse in one's mind, gaining a detached comprehension of what is described by the written characters into which any possible bodily and sensory process, now freed from its material conditions, has been converted. In this way, one is encouraged to reason via logic and general abstract principles detached from experience, making grand generalizations, finding comprehensive rules, contemplating, etc., as to store facts and memorize definitions and descriptions which are not necessarily associated with images, actions, experiences, and interactions in situated worlds. Despite the possible cultural differences, educational interactions in many disciplines today remain uncritically entrenched in this kind of "bookish" mindset: this happens mainly when the humanities are involved, as they are structurally based on general and purely verbal meanings, providing little opportunity for embodied actions in extra-textual contexts – if not prescribing stillness (try to read this paper while running!). Briefly, a symbolic-reconstructive mindset provides general, decontextualized, and disembodied meanings which are made to be represented and not to be practised – meanings that one has to be "conscious of": with all of its merits and flaws. It goes without saying, this kind of attitude is typical of the traditional, philosophical mind – or, more radically, it is taken to its most extreme limits by standard philosophy.

The sensorimotor mindset, on the other hand, concerns the design of concrete experiences whose environment generates effective and multidimensional engagement, that is, allows the learner or user to move and perceive, thus interact, in an environment which supports and promotes the possibility of circumspection, perception, inspection, intervention, modification, coordination, and so on. This produces a reinforcing feedback circle of effective pro-jection or action and retro-jection or counter-action, made of repetition and improvement, manipulation and critical reflection, observation, and transformation, etc. It is an iterative and augmentative cycle to probe, hypothesize, re-probe, and rethink, in which perception and action cooperate in building a first-person and first-hand apprehending, grasping, and catching in a truly pragmatic sense. This time, movement is prescribed (try to learn to swim without moving!). Briefly, the sensorimotor mindset provides situated, embedded, and embodied meanings (*viz.* experiences), which need not be verbalized and stated uniquely to be significant: again, therein lie both its affordances and its limitations. Traditionally, such a playful mindset was found in educational situations such as laboratory activities, craft knowledge transmitted within ateliers, apprenticeships, and the like. It did not have a specific extra-organic medium through which it could be stored, transmitted, shared, modified, etc., that is, become fully public.

As discussed in Section 2, video games as a cultural form come into play here – literally: not only when a digital simulation is strictly designed to entertain, amuse etc., but also in settings which are, so to speak, unintentionally gameable, such as all those virtual laboratories offering a safe environment to experiment and fail without using expensive material resources, being exposed to dangers and producing real harm when doing (e.g. frog dissection and the like) or to directly do something which is simply not possible in the physical world.⁵⁸ Indeed, even in those cases, we are dealing with the design of situations in which one is called to do

⁵⁸ Lisborg and Tafdrup, "Virtual Laboratories."

and act in the form of testing, trying, experimenting, etc., in a separated and fictional world – i.e. is invited to *play*.

3.3 Writing/Reading Agency

To put it in scholarly philosophical terms, we could say that the “bookish” mindset has a Cartesian vocation, since it fosters a self-reflective mind disinterested in its own body, while the “gamish” mindset has a pragmatist vocation since it undermines the traditional contraposition “between knowing and doing, theory and practice, mind as the end and spirit of action and the body as its organ and means.”⁵⁹ Significantly, standard academic research – especially in philosophy and even in pragmatist approaches – practises knowledge in the Cartesian way, but leaves in the background how all its theoretical knowing still expresses the mastering of some particular doing represented by the *writing/reading game*. The fact is that today we can finally ask: Writing/Reading *what*?

Indeed, with computers such a game has ceased to be associable uniquely with words (rhetorical mode, made to demonstrate and convince, as Kay puts it) and has also become associable not simply with images, but more explicitly with forms of *doing* (processual mode, made to simulate and decide, as Kay puts it). More precisely, with video games this takes place from both sides of *designing* and *playing*: writing becomes *making* and reading becomes *acting*, giving birth to a process that is productive not only objectively, i.e. as the generation of cultural works, but also subjectively, i.e. as a technology of the self – of the selves of both the writer-designer and the reader-player.⁶⁰ This happens because – following the discussion in Section 2 – the meanings resulting from such writing/reading are not simply particular, situated, experienced, embodied etc. (i.e. associated with visual images such as photographs and videos), rather than general, decontextualized, detached, intellectual, etc. (i.e. associated with written words), but they are also participatory and interactable: it is an agency that is written/read.

Not all ways of reading and writing involve an engagement with written words: to understand how video games can be associated with literacy, we have to stop considering concepts uniquely as “the meanings of words” and propositions as “the centerpiece, if not all, of the world of what we know.”⁶¹ In other words, “we have to think beyond print” and its unique semiotic domain, that is, to go “beyond fixating on reading as silently saying the sounds of letters and words and being able to answer general, factual, and dictionary like questions about written texts.”⁶² Therefore, for a videogame thinking to be possible, the kind of literate action that can be performed and designed must not only be “write a text/read this text,” as if the only way for a discourse to take place is through its display in lines of words. We must also admit the existence of discourses which are not written in the traditional sense, as they interlock parts and behaviours in dynamic systems that enact and display interactive arguments, ideas, analysis, inferences, classifications, conceptualization, sequentiality, etc.⁶³

Finally, the “gamish” mindset should be able to compete with the traditional “bookish” one, which means aiming not to erase or eradicate it, but at least to integrate it, enlarging and enriching our possibilities to know – to do things, more in general.⁶⁴ But now the most important question emerges: Does this also apply to *philosophical* knowledge and thinking? Can it be communicated by generating/accessing agency and elaborated by interactive images, or is such an extension totally illegitimate?

⁵⁹ Dewey, *Democracy*, 343.

⁶⁰ Gualeni, “A Philosophy.”

⁶¹ DiSessa, *Changing Minds*, 65.

⁶² Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, 14, 16.

⁶³ Bogost, *Persuasive Games*.

⁶⁴ Bogost, *How to Do Things*.

4 Transcendental Dialectic. Between Medial Conservatism, Revolutionism, and Progressivism

To dream of a video game philosophy may seem a mere illusion, no matter how it is rooted in the natural need to stretch the limits of our knowledge: the mediascape might even be changing, but philosophy can only be supported by the medium of word-writing. This *medial conservatism* does not express a snobbish attitude but instead grapples with what appears to be its true transcendental limit: the medial conditions of the possibility of philosophy are actually indissociable from the word, since *only* writing can facilitate reasoning and enable abstract and theoretical thinking, as it has been variously claimed in anthropology⁶⁵, media studies,⁶⁶ and philosophy of mind.⁶⁷ Indeed, the peculiar “consistency” of philosophy derives from the fact that “it is written;” in this way, ideas are recorded “in principle forever,” making them available to rumination “over and over again” for present as well as future thinkers, which creates the opportunity to move “away from questions that are concrete and particular” towards “the generality and abstractness” of the arguments. Thus, saying that writing is “a sufficient condition for formal philosophy” is too much, even though it “certainly seems to be necessary.”⁶⁸ Similarly, Sloterdijk stresses that the theoretical attitude comprised of aloof observation and phenomenological *epoché*, found its own medial condition of possibility in the formation of mental attitudes prompted by the written word: practising distance from what is written accompanies keeping what is experienced at a distance, making oneself a “concentrate” and a “collector,” i.e. a subject fit for withdrawing in contemplation and being filled up with ideas and knowledge. The “nonchemical sedative” provided by the immersion in words, which is accompanied by the immobilization of motor functions through “keep-still exercises,” would lay the foundation for the immersion in oneself and one’s own thoughts.⁶⁹ In short, there is no philosophy without the alphabet.

If this condition is intended as a strict determination, video games would even represent the opposite of a medium suitable for genuine, philosophical reasoning, one capable of allowing the mind to depart from the realm of the senses, images, and particularities in a both symbolical (interior) and medial (exterior) way. That the mental worlds which were once recounted and described can now be materialized and experienced directly,⁷⁰ i.e. that the “bookish” may become “gamish,” would be more of a vice than a virtue for the medial conservative: after all, if we continue to turn to books, it is precisely because at times we wish only to see a little, preferring the freedom to see *in our mind*.⁷¹ What was already true in the past becomes even more urgent when humanity is “increasingly inundated by a flood of prefabricated images:” there is the risk of losing the “basic human faculty,” which consists of “the power of bringing visions into focus with our eyes shut, of bringing forth forms and colors from the lines of black letters on a white page.”⁷² The more we are invaded by materialized images, the more we are exposed to the traditional Narcissus-trap of no longer using images as a function of the world, but inversely treating the world as a function of the images, precisely because we lose the power to generate *our own* images: we need words precisely to regulate the traffic of images, i.e. to rule them instead of being ruled by them. If such alienation is dangerous for the mind in general, it is even more so for the philosophical mind, whose efforts also aim to suppress those inner, eyes-shut images, still too close to concreteness and thus even more exposed to the distraction of the digital, multimodal sirens.

For the medial conservative, this need to protect cognition becomes even more urgent when confronted by video-ludic images. Thus, rather than dreaming of weird avantgardes that throw philosophy into the visual and even sensorimotor arena, they instead worry about how the deep and critical thinking supported by

⁶⁵ Goody, *The Domestication*; Goody, *The Logic*.

⁶⁶ Havelock, *The Muse*; Olson, *The World*; Olson, *The Mind*; Ong, *Orality*.

⁶⁷ Menary, “Writing as Thinking.”

⁶⁸ Appiah, *Thinking It Through*, 339–53.

⁶⁹ Sloterdijk, *The Art of Philosophy*, 53–6.

⁷⁰ Schulzke, “Simulating Philosophy;” Gualeni, “Augmented Ontologies.”

⁷¹ Mendelsund, *What We See*.

⁷² Calvino, *Six Memos*, 91–2.

traditional writing/reading is attacked by the screen (un)civilization, which habituates the mind to reactivity rather than cognition, to excitement rather than reflection. Indeed, “the entrapment in dysfunctional virtual realities” seems to directly subvert “the capacities for individuals and societies to create the conditions for philosophy:” they warn us that to create philosophers “it is to writing and print that we must continually turn.”⁷³ What has already been said for aspiring philosophical films becomes even truer for aspiring philosophical video games: “pictures are for entertainment – if I wanted to make a philosophical point, I’d publish an essay in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*,”⁷⁴ i.e. by using a medium that is capable of guaranteeing a truly epistemic, abstract, argumentative work without the emotional infringements caused by the intrusion of concrete and particular elements.⁷⁵ Even if we could make use of sensorimotor ideas in the general domain of knowledge, we cannot extend them to the restricted realm of *philosophical* reasoning: there is a difference between an immanent use of sensorimotor ideas and a transcendent one. And yet, what if we wanted to try to give our dreams a chance?

In fact, for a videogame philosophy to be possible, i.e. for having what we could call true “gamecepts,”⁷⁶ we need philosophical practice to be *pluralized*, which means that it must be able to have more than one medial partner at the same time, as well as – consequently – to be prone to do more things than the ones supported by the written word, which defines the boundary of standard (meta)philosophy, i.e. philosophical knowledge as the propositional assertion of true, general, and explicit theses. This implies a *medial progressivism* to address the risk of the genetic fallacy: Does the historical fact that philosophy had the alphabet as its privileged evolutive partner *eo ipso* imply that its source coincides with its only possible end in both a teleological and a chronological sense? Are the medial transcendental conditions of the past “frozen” to the point of preventing a new possible conditioning? Is what was originally illegitimate meant to be so forever? If the answer is *Yes!*, then the *de facto* determines the *de jure*: we are “dependent on this logic of writing and it is not in our power to change it or exchange it for other logics, except on the level of irresponsible chatter and illusions.”⁷⁷ However, if we accept this, then philosophical thinking can have no other evolutive partner in the future: the contingency of the empirical or historical-transcendental of philosophy (whose existence is already no small concession for many) determines an eternal, univocal condition. This would mean, on the medial level, that the alphabet is the *only* necessary condition for genuine philosophy: wherever there is philosophy, there will be no other medium than written words. For the *medial revolutionary*, this kind of knowledge is so restrictive and unsatisfying that we are fully justified if we go radically beyond the limits of textual philosophy by surpassing and substituting it with game design or whatever else. Otherwise, we philosophers become the shepherds of a medium – the alphabet – which would become an unnecessary and useless luxury, while a new elite, having broken the link between thinking and words, would emancipate it from the discursive structure of verbal language.⁷⁸

Admittedly, the dreams of such a metaphysical spirit-seer can be considered too extreme, also because they seem to result in too loose a conception of philosophy, generally taken as a reflective attitude that can occur almost anywhere, at any time, and with any method. It is the case of those who stretch the belief that “all symbolic form is *ipso facto* philosophical, and none has the right to claim any higher capacity for achieving truth” so much that “a film, a sculpture, a pop song, but also a pebble, a cloud, or a mushroom can be philosophical with the very same intensity as ... *The Critique of Pure Reason*.”⁷⁹ However, there can also be a more realistic dream, based on the joint attempt to proceed in an “expansive” rather than a “reductive” view of philosophical practice⁸⁰ and to preserve the specificity of each medium. As a prerequisite, video games

⁷³ McLaren, “The Triumph,” 388, 410.

⁷⁴ Smith, “Film Art,” 39.

⁷⁵ Sicart, “The Banality;” Tavinor, “BioShock.”

⁷⁶ I owe the expression to Nilsson, *Cinecepts*, who uses the term “cinecepts” to refer to philosophical concepts created through audio-visual means.

⁷⁷ Sini, *L’alfabeto*, 269, my translation.

⁷⁸ Flusser, *Medienkultur*, 41–60.

⁷⁹ Coccia, *The Life of Plants*, 174.

⁸⁰ I borrow the distinction from Smith (“Film Art,” 34), who applies it to the discussion of whether and how films can be philosophical.

would not perform the same philosophical tasks as written texts (which would make the inclusive project even more untenable for the medial conservative and the temptation of substitutional dreams even more appealing for the medial revolutionary), but rather *their own* ones and perhaps even in such a way to appear as the most appropriate tool in some contexts and for certain aims.⁸¹ Once again, the new starting point is the technological possibility for expressing and articulating theories that were heretofore unavailable, one that also mobilizes abstract knowledge under the guise of embodied, playable ideas.⁸²

Considering the existence of this new class of public objects, a videogame philosophy, in the sense of a philosophy *made through* video games, must be able to provide *at least* three specific performances: enlightening the multi-modal, sensorimotor dimension that also characterizes the most amodal, linguistic concepts (Section 4.1); building and supporting “emersive” experiences capable of taking specific advantage of the power of immersivity (Section 4.2); taking part in and fostering an explicit dialogical interchange among scholars and researchers (Section 4.3). Let me present these three features.

4.1 “Gamecepts” as Multi-Modal Concepts

A videogame philosophy must be able to accompany – thus not to substitute – all verbal concepts with their interactive, sensorimotor counterparts, making it possible to see under a new light how philosophical knowledge is also embedded in a wider reality, *viz.* possesses an environmental dimension. For example, it should take a concept such as “peace” and combine its wordy definition and discussion with its enacted simulation, that is, convert it into the gaming act of ending a war and signing an agreement (a kind of *counter-version* of the CRPG *Tyranny*, one may say).⁸³ This would not simply provide a renewed simplification for educational and teaching purposes that uses the concrete dimension as an illustrative tool but instead reveal that it is also true for philosophical notions that the concepts governing our thought are not just matters of intellect but also metaphorically structured, *i.e.* body-based.⁸⁴ Thus, a videogame philosophy must enhance our ability to penetrate the practical dimension of (old as well as new) ideas, in order to counterbalance the dissatisfaction with the lack of concreteness usually attributed to philosophy – it would make us fully realize that such a deficit also depends on the limitations imposed by a way of codifying ideas exclusively based on the written word.

To better explain, let me take as an example the use of genealogy as a conceptual reverse-engineering tool for placing philosophical concepts back into human affairs, as defended by Queloz. For him, even “the abstract notions at the heart of philosophy, which seem to be the stuff of idle grandiloquence rather than effective action” can be shown to be rooted in practical needs and concerns: also “an abstract idea whose point eludes us, such as *truth, knowledge, or justice*” can be explained “by reconstructing the practical problems that these ideas offer practical solutions to.” Thus, we should “look at what ideas *do* rather than at whether the judgments they figure in are *true*,” tracing their points to their practical origin: this can happen through the method of “pragmatic genealogy,” which consists of “telling partly fictional, partly historical narratives exploring what might have driven us to develop certain ideas in order to discover what these ideas do for us.”⁸⁵ Traditionally, such a philosophical enterprise would pass through a medium capable of merely

⁸¹ In accordance with, respectively, the “means condition” proposed by Livingston, “Theses on Cinema;” and the “Best Tool Principle” proposed by McClelland, “Film as Philosophical,” while discussing the thesis of film as philosophy.

⁸² Wilcox, “Praxis Games.”

⁸³ The example is a reformulation of Grandin that stresses the need to question the dominance of verbal language as the foundation of how we think and acknowledge the existence of visual thinking: by explaining how she, as an autistic visual thinker, converts texts and abstract concepts such as those of philosophy into pictures, she also makes the example of “peace,” which she visualizes precisely “as a dove, an Indian peace pipe, or TV or newsreel footage of the signing of a peace agreement” (Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures*, 32).

⁸⁴ Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*.

⁸⁵ Queloz, *The Practical Origins*, 2–3.

describing a practical problem, that is, telling fictions and making reconstructions in words. Instead, a video game philosophy should be able to design an interactive setting to let users effectively explore such practical contexts, making such fictions and reconstructions virtually real, i.e. cultural objects all-round, and even staging them more flexibly, by changing the parameters, exploring counterfactuals, conditions, etc. – as is typical of simulations.

This example does not suggest that pragmatic genealogy is the best method for enlightening the meaning of concepts, nor that tracing the practical, sensorimotor origin of a concept (be it through words or simulations) involves a reductionist operation which erases the specificity of its abstract dimension, nor that – finally – such a philosophical orientation is the only one that can ground the search for a video-ludic philosophy. Rather, my point is that a videogame philosophy should be able to boost our ability to explore and make explorable the experiences to which concepts are related or can be related, in a historical-genealogical direction as well as with a theoretical or analytical interest: it must shed new light on how also highly disincarnate concepts such as “being,” “absence,” “categorical,” etc. may have sensorimotor roots, paving the way for a way of reasoning more sensitive towards embeddedness and situatedness, i.e. capable of giving more relevance to perception and action in higher-order cognitive functions, and of connecting practice and thinking more directly.⁸⁶ Finally, a videogame philosophy should be able to make the movement that traditionally goes from the sensible to the intelligible relievable and with a new awareness that puts an end to their separation: it must be able to make the same concrete movement of thought explorable, i.e. to make it a new object for thought.

4.2 “Gamecepts” as Emersive Experiences

The typical videogame absorption may even be taken as a contemporary way of practising an ascetic self-retreat from society,⁸⁷ one not typically valued as greatly as literary withdrawing because being engaged in what is played would fully coincide with what is experienced: it would signal the loss of any critical, detached attitude, and thus oppose any full absorption in abstract, disembodied reasoning. In other words, the immersivity in digital contexts creates an inverse relation between increasing emotional involvement in what is happening on the screen and decreasing critical distance to what is shown.⁸⁸ Thus, a videogame philosophy must be able not only i) to engender a kind of detachment, but also ii) to do so by leveraging the very power of video games to “glue” their players;⁸⁹ that is, it must use the tendency of video games to conceal their own appearance as a medium precisely to make their mediation visible.

i) There must be something like intentionally “emersive,” problem-maker video games, that aim to pull their players out of the feeling of presence, engendering a true frustration which is capable of exposing the implied presence of the designer, as well as the constructedness of video game experience and even experience in general.⁹⁰ These games or metagames must be designed to weaken immersion rather than foster it, stimulating the critical gesture of “rising up from water:” they must defamiliarize and shock the players by subverting their expectations, in order to reveal the mediated character of experience, generating an estrangement capable of enlarging awareness, a de-presentification capable of intensifying understanding. In other words, their goal must be to trigger transformative experiences that do not *solely* leverage the cogency of the better argument or the most justified reason, but also the capability to make the players go through situations that conflict with and disrupt their familiar ways of viewing the world.

⁸⁶ This idea of an open multimodal rationality is especially evoked by Kondor, *Embedded Thinking*.

⁸⁷ Triclot, *Philosophie des jeux vidéo*.

⁸⁸ Grau, *Virtual Art*, 13.

⁸⁹ Rigby and Ryan, *Glued to Games*.

⁹⁰ Actually, they do exist: Backe, “Self-Reflexive Simulacra;” Flanagan, *Critical Play*; Frasca, “Rethinking Agency;” Gualeni, “Self-reflexive Videogames;” Gualeni, “On the De-familiarizing;” Mosselaer and Gualeni, “Ludic Unreliability;” Mosselaer and Gualeni, “The Fictional Incompleteness;” Jagoda, *Experimental Games*; Kubiński, “Immersion;” Waszkiewicz, *Metagames*.

ii) Thus, it is still too general to say that philosophical video games must be no longer concerned with the question of how to create immersive experiences, asking instead “how to express and present philosophical ideas in a game system.”⁹¹ Rather, philosophical, immersive video games must be precisely concerned with the question of how to create immersive experiences that are capable of breaking the fourth-wall by leveraging the very power of video games to generate immersion. Notoriously, devices such as the rupturing of frames, the intrusion of the narrator, and the like have a very long history and are not confined to a single medium (just think of theatre, from Plautus to Beckett), especially with the triumph of postmodern metalepsis (just think here of the three-layered, meta-, and self-referential opening scene of the movie *Scream 4*). Thus, video-ludic immersion must take particular advantage of the infamous and pronounced tendency of the medium to “entrap”: the stronger the involvement, the more effective the dis-involvement.⁹² For example, while a philosophical paper may discuss whether we live in a simulation and a philosophical movie may make not only its intra-film characters (*The Truman Show* style) but also its extra-film spectators (*Matrix* style) believe that what they were seeing was *fictionally real* before revealing that it was *fictionally fictional*, a philosophical video game must be able to actually deceive its participants, that is to make them truly experience what it is like to live in a simulation⁹³ – the experience of contingency must not be *solely* explained or displayed, but also acted, suffered.

Definitely, if what happens in video games is never really only happening within them but also taking place or having consequences in real life *out there*, then this must also apply to all the reflective experiences that can be triggered *in there*. According to the famous verse of the German poet Hölderlin: “Where the danger grows, there grows the saving power also”: every medium behaves like the Derridean-Platonic *pharmakon*, namely, it cannot be toxic and depriving without also being curative and enhancing, in the precise sense that its vices are always the precondition of its virtues. And video games are no exception: if, for example, they are stigmatized because they so easily affect the far transfer of played violence into aggressive ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving in the real world, then they should also be praised, or at least seriously considered, for their potential to affect the far transfer of played reflectivity into reflective ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving just as easily.

4.3 “Gamecepts” as Video-Ludic Dialogues

A videogame philosophy must also be pursued by actually communicating through games, that is, philosophers must also be able to generate their knowledge by sending/receiving sets of actions and to save their research products for the next generations by also storing sets of actions. Thus, a videogame philosophy must be able to encompass not only a back-and-forth through video games, but also – for example – the response to a paper on the fictional, representative nature of doors under the guise of a video game whose concept is to challenge the players to complete an anthology of doors. It invites them interactively to examine existing theories in game studies and in the philosophy of fiction about how objects are represented in games and virtual worlds, and introduces ideas about the very nature of representation and about the handiness and affordances of daily objects.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Konzack, “Philosophical Game Design,” 33.

⁹² As also suggested by Micallef, “Illusion Master,” by combining the design of the video game *Immersion Master* and its written discussion.

⁹³ For example, Gualeni, *Necessary Evil*, takes its players and lets them believe that they are (as it usually happens) the main character of the game, before letting them find out that they are not just an extra within the show, but an enemy – in fact, a *minor* one – ready to be killed. Similarly, Gualeni, *Here*, challenges the players to engage the notion of indexicality by soliciting the several layers of “being here” that coexist in a digital world: the one of the in-game characters, the one of the in-game player’s character, the one of the players outside the game, the one of the designers behind the game.

⁹⁴ Such a game really exists: it is Gualeni, *Doors*; but see also Mosselaer and Gualeni, “Game Studies.” These contributions are a response to Aarseth, “Door and Perception.”

In other words, a videogame philosophy must have its own journals or their equivalent, that is a platform for debate that also hosts video games, coming to grips with identities, implications, and demonstrations involving actions, rather than confining the exchange to a logic of mere texts.⁹⁵ Moreover, this must not simply represent a way of writing by using the very materials that previously constituted an object of study, as it happens, e.g. with a however meritorious project such as *[in]Transition of the Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*.⁹⁶ A videogame philosophy must find its place not merely in a videogame journal of video games, but rather in a *videogame philosophical journal*⁹⁷ that can have as many objects of study as any other journal, without limiting itself to those which are more easily associable with gaming. After all, textual philosophical journals are not limited to analysing textual objects: they take the entire menu of reality as their potential source and this capacity defines writing as a real medium. The same must go with video games.⁹⁸

5 Conclusion. The Pluralization of Philosophical Practice between *de facto* and *de jure*

In this article, I tackled the issue of gamification by discussing the idea that we should not only have a philosophy “of” video games, but also one “through” them, i.e. playable concepts. Section 1 showed how the claim that standard academic philosophy is reductively practiced in linguistic terms and deals with propositions can find its place within the more liberal and inclusive approach to academic research in general and philosophical research more specifically that emerges in recent decades. Then, the structural questions about how video games can show and philosophize have been reformulated in transcendental terms by proposing the sketch of a “Critique of Videogame Reason,” articulated into a “Transcendental Aesthetic” (Section 2), a “Transcendental Analytic” (Section 3), and a “Transcendental Dialectic” (Section 4). Section 2 claimed that video games, as representations that show possible interactions, amplify and stimulate a sensorimotor way of “seeing,” thus questioning our way of defining images and visibility itself. Section 3 argued that, for a videogame knowledge and thinking to be possible, there must be a “gamish” mindset in which sensorimotor knowledge finds its own privileged medium in videogame images, and writing and reading are not only confined to the act of putting words in lines, but also entail the design of sets of actions. Section 4 advocated for a medial progressivist approach revolving around an expansive view of philosophical practice, claiming that a videogame philosophy must be capable of at least three *sui generis* performances: enlightening the multi-modal, sensorimotor dimension that characterizes even the most amodal, linguistic concepts; building and supporting “emersive” experiences capable of taking specific advantage of the power of immersivity; and taking part in and fostering an explicit dialogical interchange among scholars and researchers.

In this way, I did not defend a radical “non-discursive approach to philosophy,”⁹⁹ that is a “philosophy without texts,” a non-verbal investigation of “show, don’t tell.”¹⁰⁰ My point is not only that video games also tell, vocally and textually, but also that such an idea risks reiterating the same reductive attitude which one

⁹⁵ I am here paraphrasing Nyíri, who introduced the idea of a “post-literacy philosophy” capable of challenging “the literary bias of Western philosophy” precisely at a time when in everyday experience the sources of that bias, viz. “the dominance of the printed book as the medium of communication,” are “drying up”: he claimed that a post-literacy reason is destined not only to deal with “networks, interactions and flows”, rather than focusing on “self-contained entities, concepts, or meanings”, but also to come to grips with “identities, implications, and demonstrations involving images and sounds,” rather than confining itself “to a logic of mere texts” (Nyíri, “Post-literacy,” 185, 195).

⁹⁶ <https://mediacommons.org/intransition/>, last accessed on 3 July 2024.

⁹⁷ A notable example in this direction is the collection of “papers + experimental games” edited by Caruso et al., “Games on Games,” which has however still the universe of video game as its guiding topic.

⁹⁸ A similar point is made with regard to videos by Nilsson, *Cinecepts*.

⁹⁹ Hummels et al., “Non-Discursive.”

¹⁰⁰ Rietveld, “The Affordance.”

was trying to question, thus substituting an old-fashioned medium with an updated one. Being truly liberal does not mean exchanging one absolutism for another, but rather rejecting that absolutistic and monopolistic logic and thus admitting that it is precisely through confrontation and even competition, i.e. through relations, that different capabilities are formed and specific niches are identified. Eventually, we might even discover that video games provide, at best, an objectification of our practical reasoning – not of pure reason, which is meant to be inextricably bound to the alphabetic medium; nonetheless, this already represents an important turning point in the history of our cognition, if for no other reason than allowing us to individuate more distinctly two (or more) faces of our reasoning by associating them to two (or more) separate, privileged media. Not by chance, those – still very few – who endorse the use of video games and simulation as true mediators of philosophical thought see them as a way of supplementing the exclusively textual tradition of Western philosophy and of replacing it only in some specific, extreme cases (e.g. when reflection on virtual worlds is involved, or moral reasoning is at stake), but certainly not of usurping the function of the book or abandoning the text, thereby becoming the ultimate philosophical media.¹⁰¹ If on the one hand, we can say that “whereof one cannot write, thereof one can video-play,” on the other we should also remark that “whereof one cannot video-play, thereof one can write,” since it is a matter not of opposition but of collaboration.

Thus, the challenge becomes how to explore the specific way we can do philosophy through video games, discovering new possibilities as well as downgrading some of the old ones. For the video-ludic medium is just like other media: on the one hand, it is suitable for doing many more things than we tend to assume, exploring the most frivolous genres as well as the deepest ones; on the other, it constrains our opportunities, in the double sense that it discloses some possibilities and conceals others, since unveiling and veiling, incomes and losses, always go hand-in-hand in a medium. However, it is not sufficient to say that all we have to do is explore this territory in the first person, be it for no other reason than “an entire social practice must be cultured around the form, involving habits of time and attention” – as Bogost highlighted reflecting self-critically on his initial enthusiasm for the forthcoming triumph of “persuasive games” as a dominant cultural form.¹⁰² The spread of new communicational forms of open dialogue between peers – the very stuff of research – cannot merely be delegated to personal goodwill: it primarily depends on the existence of a given sociocultural humus. Therefore, the lack of an autonomous genre of “ludographic essays”¹⁰³ with a specific philosophical purpose should not be chalked up to individual old-school philosophers who are reluctant to engage routinely with their intentional design, nor should it be blamed on a conspiracy attributable to the clandestine spectre of the “priests of the word.” Rather, there are many effective motivations: from those related to economic and technical factors – after all, a pen and some sheets of paper are very cheap and do not pose the problem of mechanical obsolescence – to those related to educational and institutional dynamics – after all, we are trained in word writing since the earliest days of our education, the parameters for doing blind peer review of papers are well set, and there are no proper infrastructures for producing and disseminating philosophy differently. In short, the entire academic system of incentives is now entirely text-centric – if not, even more narrowly, journal article-centric.

Conversely, these should not become reasons for rejecting any kind of change *a priori*: if philosophical knowledge can be seen as the activity of designing those particular semantic artefacts named concepts,¹⁰⁴ then today we can at least consider the possibility that such design work could also be done by means and media other than the written word – returning the true graphical soul to designing. It is seriously time to ask not simply: “What is philosophical knowledge?,” but rather: “How is and how can philosophical knowledge be mediated?,” that is: “Under which medial conditions is philosophical knowledge possible?” What is currently true *de facto* is not by itself eternally true *de jure*, so we should not take for granted that there are sufficient *a priori* reasons – i.e. *unhistorically* transcendental – that make it impossible to philosophize through video games. Definitely, the “as if not” device that has driven the discussion was a fictional game and it can finally be

¹⁰¹ Gualeni, *Virtual Worlds*.

¹⁰² Bogost, “Persuasive Games, a Decade Later,” 32.

¹⁰³ Fassone, “Ludo Essay.”

¹⁰⁴ Floridi, *The Logic*, 27–52.

interrupted: as remarked in the Introduction and reported in the footnotes, we already have empirical examples of what this essay seeks on a transcendental level – the *de facto* has already begun to change, no matter how slowly and marginally. We are called to take this change seriously, not only as a new object of analysis but also and primarily as an inspiration for the philosophical practice to come.

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