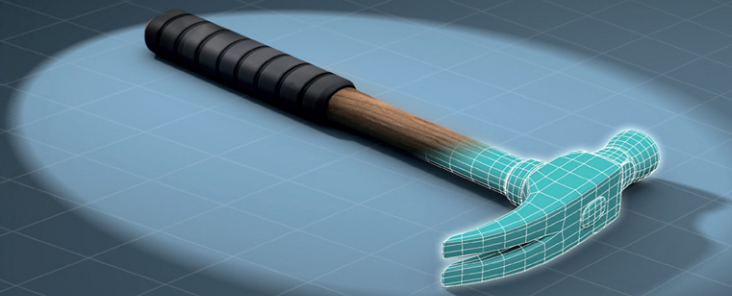


Virtual Worlds as Philosophical Tools

How to Philosophize with a Digital Hammer



STEFANO GUALENÌ



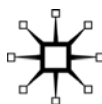
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How to Philosophize with a Digital
Hammer

Stefano Gualeni
University of Malta

palgrave
macmillan



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Foreword © Jos De Mul 2015

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This book is dedicated to that one cat I saw when I was five years of age.

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From the mediatic turn to *Gua-Le-Ni*

Foreword by Jos De Mul, Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam

In the last couple of decades a new discipline called media philosophy has entered the philosophical arena. According to Reinhard Margreiter, one of its proponents, the name media philosophy refers not merely, nor even predominantly, to the exploration of yet another ontological domain, but rather designates a fundamental transformation of philosophy itself. This fundamental transformation is characterized by a turn toward (the descent and history of) the mediatic foundations of philosophy. In his view, media philosophy might become a contemporary "*prima philosophia*" (Margreiter 2003, 151). Margreiter does not argue, however, for a modernist kind of foundationalist superdiscipline, but for a critical discourse that has to accompany every act of knowing.

Though the name media philosophy is a recent invention, the phenomenon is not altogether new. Fundamental reflections on the impact of writing on philosophy can already be found in Plato's *Phaedrus* and *Seventh Letter*, that is, on the type of oral philosophy that preceded written philosophy and that is still reflected in the dialogical form of Plato's writings. However, in the tradition of Western philosophy, which is strongly connected with the medium of the book, these kinds of reflections remained relatively scarce and marginal for a long time. Starting from Parmenides' identification of being and thinking, a dominant part of the metaphysical tradition was based on the presupposition that thinking and being – *nous* and *phusis* – share the same form (*eidōs*, *morphē*), guaranteeing the identity of what can be thought and what can be (cf. Allen 2004, 218).

Kant's transcendental philosophy can be regarded as the first radical critique of the outlined metaphysical equation of thinking and being. According to Kant there can, in fact, be no immediate and absolute knowledge of reality, as that human knowledge depends on the finite *medium* of our faculties of sensibility, understanding, and reason. However, as Kant deems this medium to be timeless and shared by all human beings, he could still adhere to the notion that the phenomenological world

constituted by this medium is something that has empirical objectiveness and, as such, is open to scientific explanation, prediction, and control. In post-Kantian philosophy two further developments can be distinguished, which together have resulted in what might be called the mediatic turn in modern philosophy.

The first of these developments has to do with the *historicization* of human reason (cf. De Mul 2004, 97–125). After Kant, the idea emerged that human reason is not a timeless entity but something that develops in – natural and historical – time. In Hegel's philosophy this historicization was still regarded as a process in which Absolute – that is, supra-historical – Reason finally becomes conscious of itself (and in this sense returned to a pre-kantian metaphysics). However, in the hermeneutical tradition – starting with Dilthey and radicalized in Heidegger and his post-modern heirs – the emphasis gradually shifted to the finiteness of human experience and the radical historical character of ontology.

The second development in the post-kantian philosophy I refer to is what might be called the *externalization* of human reason, which emerged from the realization that the thinking of being always requires an external medium. Already in the nineteenth century, Herder and Von Humboldt emphasized both the crucial role natural language plays in thinking, and the non-transparency of this medium. In the continental philosophical tradition it was in hermeneutics – in which we might include Nietzsche, the philosopher with the hammer who blamed grammar for our belief in God (Nietzsche 1980, Band 6, 78) – that this insight was developed further.

In the analytical tradition, a similar development took place in the, so-called, “linguistic turn” (Rorty 1967). This turn was accompanied with the “belief that the problems of philosophy may be solved or dissolved either by reforming language (the advocates of this were dubbed ‘ideal language philosophers’) or by a better understanding of the language we actually use (‘ordinary language philosophers’)” (Hacker 2007). Wittgenstein played a crucial role in both manifestations of the linguistic turn. In the mainstream interpretation of Wittgenstein – sketched broadly enough to abstract it from the many disagreements – in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein held that “the sentences of our language, fully analyzed, necessarily reflect the metaphysical form of the world” and that “all philosophy is a critique of language.” However, in his belief in the correspondence between being and the logical form of language, Wittgenstein – in spite of his radical restriction of meaningful language to elementary and complex propositions of science and his critique

of every philosophy that pretends to go beyond these propositions – remained a victim of Platonic metaphysics. In his later writings – I am still sketching the mainstream interpretation – Wittgenstein criticized his earlier position and developed a therapeutic philosophy that aimed to dissolve philosophical problems by analyzing the many confusions that characterize our ordinary language.

What distinguishes recent media philosophy from the earlier continental and analytical approaches is the fact that its scope goes far beyond the linguistic domain. Inspired by the emergence and impact of new media (radio, film, television, and the computer) and by the work of otherwise diverse thinkers, such as Cassirer, Langer, McLuhan, Ong, Goodman and Derrida, to mention a few, the mediatic self-reflection has been extended to (the symbolic and material dimension of) all cultural media of experience. In this mediatic turn the development of computer mediation in the second half of the twentieth century has become a central topic. One of the reasons for our fascination with computers is that, with the development of information and communication technologies (ranging from artificial intelligence and expert systems, to social media and Big Data analysis), the outsourcing and supplementation of human reason seem to enter an entirely new phase, which in its radicalism perhaps can only be compared to the externalization of thinking in writing, several millennia ago.

Stefano Gualeni's *Virtual Worlds as Philosophical Tools: How to Philosophize with a Digital Hammer* offers a highly original and recommendable contribution to the mediatic turn. In this interdisciplinary investigation he combines the theoretical insights of philosophy and media studies with his practical experience as a game designer. It is the ludic perspective of his work which makes this study especially worth reading. Of course, phenomena such as computer games, serious learning, and the "ludification" of human identity and culture has attracted much scholarly attention in the last couple of decades (cf. Frissen et al 2015). What distinguishes Gualeni's study is his penetrating analysis of the ontological dimension of computer games. Viewing man and world *sub specie ludi* is of course not an entirely new phenomenon. Already early on in Western thought, Heraclitus speculated that "the course of the world is a playing child moving figures on a board – the child as absolute ruler of the universe" (Sprague 2001, 26). And more recently, in his highly influential *Homo ludens* (first published in Dutch in 1938), Johan Huizinga claims that play is the very origin of all human culture: "It does not come from play like a babe detaching itself from the womb: *it arises in and as play, and never leaves it*" (Huizinga 1955,

173, italics JdM). Huizinga argues that this is not only true for cultural phenomena like rituals, sports, theatre, legal practice, and warfare, but is no less so for the philosophical attempts to understand the world with the help of concepts. Echoing Kant and Schiller, Huizinga emphasizes the crucial role of playful human imagination.

Gualeni's original contribution in his study is that he shows that the development of computer games has created an exciting new domain for philosophical imagination, by disclosing a digital space for exploration and experimentation. I am certain that the readers who follow Gualeni on his ludic path will not only experience that this study is a fun read, but that it will also expand their ontological horizon. Well, if that isn't serious gaming, what else is?

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Preface and Acknowledgments

What is it like to be a human being in a simulated world? Will experiencing worlds that are not “actual” change our way of structuring thought? Can virtual worlds open up new possibilities for philosophizing? *Virtual Worlds as Philosophical Tools* tries to answer those questions from a perspective that is informed and inspired by the philosophy of technology, media theory and the design of videogames. Despite being presented here in a form that is almost exclusively textual, its contents encapsulate the interdisciplinary work of a digital humanist and, as such, are characterized by a degree of practical involvement in the creation and repurposing of digital technology and digitally mediated contents. More specifically, this book emerges from the engagement “in design and development processes that give rise to richer, multidirectional models, genres, iterations of scholarly communication and practice” (*Digital Humanities Manifesto 2.0*, available online at http://www.humanitiesblast.com/manifesto/Manifesto_V2.pdf, page 6).

For the most part, the ideas discussed in *Virtual Worlds as Philosophical Tools* matured in relation to my passion for videogames and to my professional activity as a videogame designer. It was my involvement in the creation of virtual worlds that originally motivated many of the theoretical notions and philosophical perspectives presented in the book, as well as the idea of turning philosophical notions and thought experiments into concrete (and often playful) simulations. Materialized in the form of virtual worlds, philosophical perspectives and concepts can be objectively encountered and manipulated by both the recipients and the crafters (the designers) of the philosophical experience, *de facto* opening up new, experiential and experimental possibilities for philosophy. In that sense, virtual worlds are understood as the context in which new ways of pursuing the humanities have already begun to arise.

The secondary title of this book is a playful reference to Nietzsche's 1888 *Twilight of the Idols, or, How to Philosophize with a Hammer*. In Nietzsche's book, his metaphorical hammer materializes the force (that of his own ideas) with which he intended to “sound out” the “idols” of religion and traditional beliefs. By smashing these with his philosophical hammer, Nietzsche's philosophical goal was to reveal them as hollow and false. In my work, I embrace the metaphor of the hammer in a way

that is significantly different and more instrumental than Nietzsche's; in this book, the digital hammer represents the ways in which our perceptions and our cognitive and operational capabilities are extended by the experience of interactive virtual worlds.

The choice for the title might suggest that this book develops philosophical arguments by adopting a traditional, instrumentalistic perspective. I would like to clarify, right from the start, that I do not consider virtual worlds to be neutral tools, nor am I advancing the claim that technologies are tools over which we have complete mastery (both in their uses and in their social employment). From my perspective, technologies are never impartial instruments to be employed for good or bad purposes. Accordingly, in this book, virtual worlds are not understood as simply and discretely supplementing our perceptual, cognitive, and operational limitations; all technological artifacts that assist us, constrain us, co-shape who we are, are inevitably integral components of our social, ethical, and intellectual horizons. In other words, we are not shaping our thinking and who we are through a mere instrumental use of technologies, but we are shaping our technical horizon, ourselves, and our thought as part of the same cultural process. Put simply, this book understands all technological systems and artifacts as mediators. In particular, it presents the virtual worlds disclosed by videogames and simulations as tools that afford us the possibility for shaping our thoughts and our behaviors in contexts that are less inflexible and experientially homogenous than the world that we "actually" share as biological organisms.

In that respect, the American psychologist Abraham H. Maslow famously observed that even the brandishing of a simple tool has the potential to influence not only our operational capabilities, but also our cognitive structures. To a man holding a hammer, to paraphrase Maslow, everything looks like a nail. Analogous to the ways in which an actual hammer both extends and constrains our possibilities for thinking about the world and acting within it, in this book I understand virtual worlds as very peculiar ways in which human thought and human agency can be mediated.

Next to the deliberate, functional use of technologies and technological artifacts to complement our existence, the very design of technologies and technically mediated content can also be understood as a transformative "technology of the self" (a practice that assists individuals in objectifying and transforming themselves and their relationship to the world). As will be discussed specifically in the Chapter 4 of this book,

any technological design also contributes to shaping the subjectivity of its designers.

Embracing the digital-humanistic perspectives outlined above, I wrote this book with two objectives in mind:

1. to provide an ontological account of what “everything looks like” to our digital-hammer-wielding culture (a hermeneutical perspective);
2. to explore the expressive limitations and possibilities inherent in using virtual worlds specifically as philosophical mediators (that is to say, as ways to materialize philosophical concepts, perspectives, and thought experiments) and as “technologies of the self”.

Virtual Worlds as Philosophical Tools has been in development for about six years. During its conceptualization and refinement, many of the notions and perspectives that are articulated in this book were discussed in a variety of formats, including academic journals, videogame developers’ conferences, public lectures, academic conferences, and a doctoral dissertation. Having already acknowledged my debt to videogames as both designer and player (for having shaped videogames and for having been shaped by videogames), I would like to dedicate a few lines to expressing my gratitude to the individuals, communities, and institutions that supported and challenged me through the process of conceptualization and writing.

First and foremost, I wish to acknowledge Professor Jos De Mul, whose careful guidance made this book possible. I am sure that I will never be able to express sufficient gratitude for Professor De Mul’s humanity and support.

I am grateful to NHTV Breda University of Applied Sciences (the Netherlands) for having provided many of the logistical and economic resources that were necessary during the pursuit of this phase of my philosophical project. I would like to thank the Laguna College of Art and Design (California, United States), and in particular Sandy Appleoff, for the enthusiasm with which they have always embraced and supported my work. I would also like to express my appreciation to the University of Malta for believing in me and my project, and for giving me the opportunity to continue to work on both. Finally, a few words of appreciation go to the academic community of the Philosophy of Computer Games for graciously and constructively challenging and fostering the interdisciplinary and practice-infused perspectives that are presented in the pages that follow.

1

The Questions Concerning Digital Technology

1.1 What is technology?

In ancient Greece, the word *τέχνη* (*techné*) was used largely to indicate the attitude, the methodology, or the skill aimed at the practical creation of a material thing. This practice-oriented concept was later appropriated by the Romans under the umbrella term *ars* (art) (Fedier, 2001, 12–27). In English, the attitude towards “making” that the Greeks identified with the word *techné* is commonly translated as “craftsmanship,” “technology,” or “art.”

Martin Heidegger was a German thinker whose pioneering philosophical insights into technology had a foundational role in the structuring and development of the perspectives and ideas discussed in this book. In his 1938 essay “The Age of the World Picture,” Heidegger criticized the modern understanding of *techné*, finding the interpretation unfaithful to the original meaning. Heidegger explained that, in ancient Greece, the word *techné* never signified the action of making, but rather indicated an epistemological approach – a perspective capable of revealing the world in a specific “light.” Correspondingly, Heidegger (2008) described works of art as artifacts endowed with the potential to disclose worlds, that is to say, to open up new ways in which reality can “unconceal” itself. Although he never explicated in detail how he thought art could be capable of engendering such disclosure, Heidegger identified experiential influences in the way people structured their relationships with reality (and thus allowed for the emergence of “worlds”) as the sole cultural role of artistic production. In the final phase of Heidegger’s thought, he extended to all things the capability to let “things come into being” and to open up new worlds and worldviews, previously attributed only to artworks (Verbeek, 2005, 89).

Since the word *techné* was coined, the notions of craftsmanship, technology, and art have gradually developed into separate contexts. These contexts do, however, intersect in multiple ways and combinations. Dutch philosopher Jos De Mul observed that, in Western culture, the creations of craftspeople and artists have always depended on the mastery of specific productive or expressive tools, and contemporary artists are no less reliant on technological tools than were their prehistoric predecessors (De Mul, 2010, 139). The modern dependence of artistic and cultural production on technological mediation appears particularly obvious in the creation of content for digital media. The creative instruments afforded by computers disclose a vast horizon of combinatorial possibilities for expression and interaction – possibilities that are completely dependent on their technological platforms.

The historical shift and fragmentation of the meaning of *techné*, together with the baffling diversity of the possible interpretations of the word “technology,” inspired Stephen J Kline’s 2003 essay, “What is Technology?” Kline clarified that the term “technology,” rather than representing a single concept, currently refers to a variety of concepts bound together by the common characteristic of creating or employing man-made objects. According to Kline, the depth and intricacy of humankind’s involvement with technology is the reason for the ambiguous nature of the term as it is currently used. To demonstrate this ambiguity, the word “technology” can mean:

- Anything that the natural environment does not generate without human intervention, such as “refrigerators, eyeglasses, atom bombs, paints, automobiles, pianos, paper, rubber, glass, aspirins, penicillin, airplanes, copying machines, furniture, roads, rifles, printing presses, boots, bicycles and on and on” (Kline, 2003, 210).¹
- All the expertise and methodologies employed in the pursuit of a practical task of some kind. This description of “technology” can be identified as the closest to the original meaning of the Greek word.
- All the constituent parts required to produce different types of hardware, “including its inputs: people; machinery; resources; processes; and legal, economic, political, and physical environments” (Kline, 2003, 210, 211).
- The complex social and technical infrastructures through and for which artifacts are made and used, in addition to the techniques used by individuals to produce or employ these artifacts. In this interpretation, a car, for instance, cannot be considered isolated from the machinery that is used in the car’s construction or from the technical

limitations of this machinery. The way cars are built also relates to larger, interconnected technological systems such as roads and gas stations, and to traffic rules, laws regarding ownership, and the tastes and needs of the social group(s) for whom they are produced (Van den Berg, 2009, 23). The necessary relationships and dependencies among all these systems constitute the “socio-technical system of use.” When using a car, “[we] use the combined system (the autos plus all the rest) to extend the human capacity for moving ourselves and our possessions about” (Kline, 2003, 211).

- A combination of natural forces conveyed and combined toward certain human purposes. In this conception of technology, the successive stages of technological development can be interpreted as one of the objective externalizations of the historical process of self-understanding (Coolen, 1992, 250–271; De Mul, 2010, 113). In line with this idea, Heidegger’s 1954 essay “The Question Concerning Technology,” discussed the potential of different techniques to unveil different ways of being-in-the-world.

This book explores the role of *techné* (focusing specifically on its digital manifestation) as an influential factor in socio-cultural change. More specifically, *Virtual Worlds as Philosophical Tools* articulates an understanding of virtual worlds as capable both of mediating philosophical thought and of experientially fragmenting and augmenting the ways in which people can think, perceive, and operate, expanding the boundaries beyond the mere “actual” and extending into what is virtually “possible.” In structuring these two intricately related perspectives, I was motivated to adopt an interpretation of “technology” that could embrace interactive, digital worlds as constitutive components of the experience of being human. Also, I found it necessary to adopt an understanding of what “technology” means that would be suitable for encompassing most of the interpretations described above. With these objectives in mind, I drew on De Mul’s work, where technology is defined as “a conglomerate of... artefacts, specific forms of knowledge and capabilities...(embraced in their necessary relation with the relative) geographical and social infrastructure, economic interests and societal norms and values” (De Mul, 2002, 30).

1.2 A philosophical task?

In *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*, Michael Heim maintained that the way computers produce interactive virtual environments and allow smooth and controlled transitions “to the real and back” cannot

be satisfactorily framed with models and analogies used to analyze traditional forms of mediation or psychotropic experience. Rather, the profound cognitive, epistemological, and sociological implications of interaction with virtual worlds necessitate philosophical exploration and understanding. In line with Heim, I believe that, in the age of digital mediation, it is hard to imagine a *more* philosophical task than reflecting on how virtual experiences affect what it is like to be a human being. Another, and more Heideggerian, way to express the core motivation of this book is to phrase the main matter of exploration as a simple question: How can interactive digital technology assist people in “overcoming” the traditional boundaries of human ontologies?

This guiding question may be read by some as a provocative paradox; from a traditional humanistic perspective, the mechanization of the world and the progressive penetration of technology into social processes and practices are not customarily understood as conducive to people overcoming their limitations or being in any way liberated. Collectively, these processes are, in fact, more often dreaded as a force that constantly challenges and threatens the values that make up the fabric of human society. This perspective (known as the technologically deterministic standpoint), often paired with the perception of impending threats inherent in people’s increasing dependence on technology, was popularized by the paradigmatically techno-pessimistic cultural production of the early twentieth century.

Mary Shelley’s 1818 novel, *Frankenstein; or, the modern Prometheus*, is often recognized as a precursor to the use of fictional media to reinforce and spread the ideology that the interference of technology on a favorable balance of natural and social forces will inexorably lead to dehumanizing and tragic consequences for mankind. One example of this later techno-pessimistic cultural production is Edward Morgan Forster’s 1909 novel, *The Machine Stops*, which highlights the escalating detachment of humankind from the world through a complete and alienating dependence upon technology. In the artificial underground environment of *The Machine Stops*, machine technology is ubiquitous, inscrutable, indispensable, and revered in a quasi-religious sense. Only upon the final failure of the machine do the characters realize how far removed they have become from the (naively idealized) natural and social order of which they were once a part (Forster, 1985). Another remarkable early twentieth century example of techno-pessimism in cultural production is *R.U.R. (Rossum’s Universal Robots)*, a theatrical play created in 1920 by Czech playwright Karel Čapek. *R.U.R.* is often considered a milestone in