

Stefano Gualeni – Riccardo Fassone
*Fictional Games. A Philosophy
of Worldbuilding and Imaginary Play*

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Over the past sixty years, literary criticism has shown growing interest in a theme that has alternatively been foregrounded, served as a backdrop, or in some cases has functioned as a structural element in numerous fictional narratives: games. Games have been interpreted vis-à-vis the fictional texts embedding them primarily (and sometimes, systematically) as activities inscribed in specific spatial and temporal boundaries, being animated by well-defined moves and roles and having measurable outcomes; therefore, this definition of games differs from a more fluid conceptualization of play, as a ludic element rather associated with a playful performance, but not included in a rigid formal framework. Critical explorations of the function of games (and play) in narrative texts have thus mirrored their manifold nature, developing a plurality of theoretical and methodological approaches.

Moreover, from the 1960s onward, the emergence of postmodernism has resulted in games being increasingly forefronted as a metatextual and self-reflexive element (see Brian Edwards, *Theories of Play and Postmodern Fiction*, New York, Taylor and Francis, 1998) highlighting the authors' sense of disillusionment with previous, and more stable, understandings of reality and its representation. This "ludic impulse" (John Kuehl, "The Ludic Impulse in Recent American Fiction", *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, XVI. 3 (1986): 167-178) has occurred in parallel with the broader expansion of the notion of "narrative text", moving beyond the book to include contemporary narrative forms such as, for instance, video games. And yet, in this extensive overview of

ludic artifacts/activities and their role in fiction, one area of inquiry had fatally remained uncharted, namely the investigation of imaginary, or rather, *fictional* games included in a large variety of narrative texts. Stefano Gualeni and Riccardo Fassone's book *Fictional Games. A Philosophy of Worldbuilding and Imaginary Play* aims to fill this specific gap and provides a groundbreaking taxonomy to reflect on the «meta-reflexive potential of fictional games» (6); in particular, their in-depth investigation focuses on the quintessential unplayability and incompleteness of such games as a deliberate aesthetic strategy opening a pathway for «philosophical and meaning-making possibilities» (28) in the narrative texts they examine.

Gualeni and Fassone's analysis is theoretically grounded in both classic philosophical works on play and the most recent developments in the thriving disciplinary field of Game Studies; the two authors rely also on specific works of literary criticism to inform their reading of gameworlds within fictional narratives. The taxonomic impulse that animates this study is also evident from the structure of the book, which identifies four main operational functions of fictional games, and addresses them in four separate chapters. The first one, "Fictional Games and Ideology", considers fictional games as mirrors of the hegemonic cultural and sociopolitical patterns of the (fictional) society they are inscribed in. However, the reproduction of ideological dynamics in a fictional game inevitably carries a disruptive import, which is illustrated in the third chapter, "Fictional Games as Utopian Devices". Here Gualeni and Fassone underscore how fictional games nested in fictional worlds have the subversive potential of destabilizing the societal status quo, both at an intradiegetic level and as an extratextual strategy, eliciting the reader's political reaction. The dialectical relation between these two chapters is among the most interesting themes discussed in the volume, as it sheds light on one of the most ambiguous and yet intellectually stimulating features of games and play: their fraught relationship with institutional power, and the ramification of this complex interaction on the narrative framework which includes fictional (as well as real) ludic activities.

Chapter three, titled “Fictional Games as Deceptions and Hallucinations” is devoted to the treatment of ludic activities which, by thematizing deceptive games that confuse players and push them to the brink of mental insanity, question the very boundaries that separate reality from games. Although Gualeni and Fassone draw on the philosophical work of Hans-Georg Gadamer to interpret this category of games, the sense of dizziness, danger and bewilderment provoked by the players’ search for meaning also recalls sociologist Roger Caillois’ notion of *ilinx* (see Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, Champaign, University of Illinois Press, [1958] 2001), which can be similarly and productively applied to reflect on the impact of these representational stratagems on oblivious players. Finally, chapter four (“Fictional Games and Transcendence”) introduces hints of post-human perspectives, in describing and discussing games which foreground the possibility to overcome the limits of human subjectivity and existence. Such games are understood as generative narrative devices, which can foster opportunities for evolution for all the players involved.

For each of the four rich thematic categories, Gualeni and Fassone present a number of compelling case studies, centered on fictional games they unearth across different media and genres – ranging from novels and movies, to TV series and videogames. The corpus the two scholars take into consideration is composed of works by English-speaking authors, in an effort to approach the cultural conventions engaged by the ludic artifacts examined in a more conscious way; however, they observe that mapping artistic/cultural works in other languages may lead to results equally worth exploring in the future. Interestingly, the last section of the book briefly deals with the critical and/or satirical function of fictional games as *mise en abyme* of existing, actual games, in popular culture texts: one example in this sense are several fictional videogames featured in *The Simpsons*, which create intertextual connections between the cartoon and the movies/videogames referenced in the episodes. These inclusions alternately convey witty critical commentaries on upcoming technological development and commercialization of games, and caricatures of successful game franchises.

This last section in the volume is indeed particularly intriguing, and it offers a variety of insights for further expansion regarding the role of fictional games in different textual categories; to this extent, Gualeni and Fassone's elaboration in this respect may seem somewhat underexplored. However, upon closer examination, this openness to new and further research trajectories consistently fits in the volume's scope and methodological approach: the book admittedly tackles an underexamined issue intersecting a wide range of disciplines and narrative forms, and aims to start an academic conversation around fictional games, rather than providing a unified, definitive theory of the latter.

In fact, the lines of theoretical and critical experimentation traced and left open by Gualeni and Fassone arguably mirror the fascinating, generative and transformative incompleteness of their main object of inquiry: as they posit in the last pages of their study, they «believe that fictional games could be used as important case studies in new scholarly efforts in game ontology. We hope that this book will encourage such projects in the game studies community» (178). While Game Studies scholars are surely the privileged interlocutor for this academic endeavor, the wealth of close readings provided by Gualeni and Fassone and the many iterations of fictional games in narrative texts spanning several decades and across different media suggest that such project is worthy of further exploration also in fields such as literary criticism and philosophy – the symbolic potential encapsulated in fictional games seems yet to be disclosed.

L'autrice

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