Review: *L'esperienza del videogioco. Una ricognizione estetica del videogioco tra senso, arte e cultura*, by Manuel Maximilian Riolo. 2020. Eurolink University Press. 282 pp.

Pierre Gabriel Dumoulin

Université du Québec à Montréal, Canada

In *L'esperienza del videogioco. Una ricognizione estetica del videogioco tra senso, arte e cultura* [The Video Game Experience. An Aesthetic Ascertainment of Video Games, Between Meaning, Art and Culture]*,* Manuel Maximilian Riolo (2020) explores the ontological nature of video games from a Kantian epistemology nuanced by the theories of Italian philosopher Emilio Garroni.[1] Riolo draws from game studies and mostly continental philosophy to discuss how we interpret and experience video games. With their interactive and narrative possibilities, video games generate emotions and affects; they are cultural artefacts negotiating the human experience. In his book*,* Riolo argues that the cultural products under the "video game" umbrella are creative, aesthetic experiences yielding insights into the human nature.

In *L'esperienza del videogioco*, he invites the reader on a journey of presence and immersion in the virtual worlds of video games. In his first chapter, Riolo focuses on the fictionalization processes in virtual worlds, before discussing immersion in the second chapter. The third and last chapter tackles how the experiences arising from fictionalization and immersion are interactive, and how virtual worlds create meaningful experiences. Throughout his book, Riolo uses examples from a small sample of video games, including *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development, 2012), *Grant Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North, 2013), and *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red, 2015).

---

[1] Garroni has yet to be translated into English. For an English article about Garroni's notions of creativity and meta-operativity, both key terms in Riolo's thesis, see Manera, 2022.

In his first chapter, "Interazione videoludica. Finzionalità, potenzialità e agency" [Videoludic Interaction. Fictionality, Potentiality and Agency], Riolo discusses the interactivity and fictionalization processes in virtual worlds, and specifically the levels of immersion produced by games and experienced by gamers. He embraces the conceptual approaches of make-believes games (e.g., children fighting imaginary dragons with tree branches in hands) proposed by Kendall L. Walton (1990) and Alberto Voltolini (2010). In these games, players settle on shared rules, invest everyday objects with new meanings, and engage in virtual and fictional spaces overlapping with reality. Riolo argues that the virtual world itself is shaped by two driving powers: the game designers (the absolute power) create objects with latent possibilities realized, in some ways, by players or gamers (the ordinary power). Fictional objects, such as the games themselves or the objects' virtual components, are fashioned by properties and rules with the interpreting keys often readily available. These objects reproduce certain models (e.g., interacting with non-playable characters or with decorative doors coded to never open). In the virtual world, gamers are also confronted by to two levels of materiality. Beside the materiality of the interaction, Riolo suggests that virtuality is a form of materiality in itself: Virtuality corresponds to the material level of "electronic-computer-digital form of creations"[2] (p. 111, my translation). In framing the gaming experience in terms of fictionality, possibility, and materiality, Riolo shapes the basis on which he develops a theory of video game aesthetic.

To further develop his conceptual framework, the author raises the questions of immersion and presence in video games in his second chapter, "Trasporto videoludico. Immersione, presenza e immedesimazione" [The Transportation of Video Game. Immersion, Presence, and Empathy]. Riolo expands on the gamer's experience and how this experience may, in turn, further develops the ontological nature of video games. He first discusses the limits of Espen Aarseth's (1997) ergodicity, explaining that this concept cannot take into account the notion of presence, which is tightly tied to theories of immersion and fictionalization processes. To address these limits, Riolo mobilizes and explains Gordon Calleja's (2011) concept of incorporation, which considers the gamer's presence inside and outside the game as well as their involvement with(in) the game. As Riolo observes, presence is essential in video game aesthetics since it take into consideration the physical (e.g., the controller in the players' hands, the avatar moving on the screen) and the psychological characteristics (e.g., exchange of information, involvement) of the interaction. This leads the author to ponder if other words could be used to express the intricacies he discusses. In the context of the book, and to refer exclusively to the games and virtual environments studied, he opts to use the terms "actors" for gamers and "digitally mediated interactive experience" for a

---

[2] "un certo tipo di creazioni elettronico-informatiche-digitali" (p.111).

subcategory of video games that create meaningful experiences through fictionalization, immersion, interaction, and agency. This category excludes games such as *Bejeweled* (PopCap Games, 2001) and *Tetris* (Pažitno, 1985). Riolo concludes his second chapter by exploring the actors' dual roles in game environments as both the gamers and fictional characters, though both roles do not necessarily coincide.

In the last chapter, "Videogiochi ed estetica come filosofia del senso" [Video Games and Aesthetics as a Philosophy of Meaning], the author moves from a discussion on the ontological properties of video games to an analysis of their aesthetic characteristics. The chapter opens on Immanuel Kant's dialectics and aesthetics, which Riolo nuances by building on the work of Garroni (1992). For Garroni, *estetica* (aesthetics) is dedicated to the study of referents or arts through critical thinking to infer the nature of the experience. Riolo thus suggests that video games are a fertile ground to ponder the human experience, as their distinctive properties open new ways to grasp what it means to experience reality. One example he gives is the relation between the ordinary and absolute powers discussed in Chapter 1. As acting and potential tools, says Riolo, these powers can be addressed through a dialectic of control, where designers create controlled and coded virtual spaces that are then explored by gamers. These environments are spaces of action and play enforced by rules and understood through creative processes. Building on the work of Paolo Virno (2010) and Garroni (2010), Riolo argues that creativity is a constitutive component of the human experience, as it guides and shapes human interactions with other species, but also with the environment. As virtual, coded spaces, video games offer similar properties, notably sharing the uncertainty bounds to learning the structuring rules of a world, whether it is its materiality or its social structures. In this aesthetics reading, uncertainty builds meaningful experiences and cultivates subjective approaches to reality. The levels of determination and agency shape subjective, yet predetermined experiences and, as Riolo suggests, the interpreter-actor in a video game not only understand the meaning, but also act through it with various degrees of freedom.

In summary, Riolo navigates the broad horizons of video games by a thorough examination of their properties (interactive, immersive, fictional, and virtual). He goes beyond the scope of genres and medium, in a vein similar to Dominic Arsenault's (2010) "pragmatic of generic effects," to better grasp the ontological nature of video games. While Riolo only briefly discusses theories of interaction and immersion from a game studies perspective, he takes a refreshing approach to incorporation through the lenses of fictionalization. The shift from game mechanics to their effects in digital worlds are welcomed in an academic landscape striving to develop new theories. While Riolo's Kantian reading is of interest in the larger field of philosophy, one can wonder if Kantian aesthetics is the best conceptual framework to address meaning

in video games, particularly regarding the theoretical and conceptual paths open by semiotics studies. As Garroni suggested in 1977, a turn towards semiotics may yield interesting new results when interpreting the Kantian experience. In today digitalize and virtualized realities, it is indeed relevant to ponder on the meaning of "being human" as it is reflected in the video game experience.

L'esperienza del videogioco is a theoretical book that will suit game scholars with an interest in continental philosophy. It is written in a clear style readily accessible to those familiar with Kantian terminology, with few examples to better illustrate his arguments; however, the book might feel a little dense for those less familiar with the work of Kant. Scholars may find the book of interest when discussing the nature of video games as well as the kind of experience they produce.

References

Aarseth, E. (1997). *Cybertext: Perspectives on ergodic literature*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Arsenault, D. (2010). Introduction à la pragmatique des effets génériques : l'horreur dans tous ses états [Introduction to the pragmatic of generic effects: Horror in all its forms]. *Loading: The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association*, *4*(6). https://journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/article/view/87

Calleja, G. (2011). *In-game: From immersion to incorporation*. MIT Press.

CD Projekt Red. (2015). *The witcher 3: Wild hunt* [Multiple platforms]. CD Projekt.

Garroni, E. (1977) *Ricognizione della semiotica* [*Semiotics research*] Officina.

Manera, L. (2022). The notions of creativity and meta-operativity in Emilio Garroni: Recent interpretations in the Italian aesthetic debate on technology. *Aesthetica Prepint*, *119*. https://mimesisjournals.com/ojs/index.php/aesthetica-preprint/article/view/1976

Pažitno, A. L. (1995). *Tetris* [Multiple platforms]. A. L. Pažitno.

PopCap Games. (2001). *Bejeweled* [Multiple platforms]. PopCap Games.

Riolo, M. M. (2020). *L'esperienza del videogioco. Una ricognizione estetica del videogioco tra senso, arte e cultura* [The video game experience. An aesthetic ascertainment of video games, between meaning, art and culture]. Eurolink University Press.

Rockstar North. (2013). *Grand Theft V* [Multiple platforms]. Rockstar Games.

Virno, P. (2010). Prefazione. Per una storia naturale della creatività [Preface. A natural history of creativity]. In E. Garroni, *Creatività* [*Creativity*] (pp. 9–37). Quolibet.

Voltolini, A. (2010). *Finzioni. Il far finta e i suoi oggetti* [Fictions. To pretend and its objects]. Laterza.

Walton, K. L. (1990). *Mimesis as make-believe*. Harvard University Press.

Yager Development. (2012). *Spec ops: The line* [Multiple platforms]. 2K.