

Stefano Gualeni

“The Experience Machine. Things to Keep in Mind while Designing Video Games and Other Tragic Technologies”

‘The Experience Machine’ is a thought experiment that was proposed in the seventies by American Philosopher Robert Nozick (Nozick, 1974). To quickly summarize Nozick’s thought-provoking exercise, he hypothesized the existence of a device capable of feeding a human brain with artificial experiences that are indistinguishable from those that we can develop in relation with the actual world. With ‘The Experience Machine’, the American philosopher challenged us to envision having access to a device that could indefinitely supplant our everyday *lifeworld* with a virtual one designed to maximize our pleasure and satisfaction. By presenting us with the possibility of an experience machine, he invited reflections on whether the way we live our lives is solely driven by the pleasure principle or if there is something else that we value other than how we feel ‘from the inside’. If such a machine existed, he asked, “would you plug in?” (ibid., 42)

Problematizing and supplementing some of the interrogatives raised by ‘The Experience Machine’, my contribution proposes a philosophical reflection on human experiences in the upcoming age of their ‘technical reproducibility’. The larger philosophical objective of my contribution is that of articulating an argument according to which virtual worlds are not different from any other technological systems in their disclosing new domains of self-discovery and self-construction (Verbeek, 2011; DeMul, 2009; Gualeni, 2014). Similarly to other technological artifacts, I will argue that the virtual worlds of video games and digital simulation cannot be expected to offer definitive solutions to the boring, painful, and even tragic dimensions of our existence. They are, instead, better understood as existential tools: as the new, artificial contexts where we can discover ourselves and negotiate various aspects of our (individual as well as collective) existence in previously-unexperienced ways.

In relation to this final claim, I will argue that human beings cannot be existentially ‘completed’ by technological means. Virtual worlds, in their peculiar ways, arguably offer those experiences and possibilities, and in that sense they contribute to our existential struggle both in allowing us to transcend some aspects of our everyday relationship with the actual world, and in disclosing new ways in which our very incompleteness can be experienced and understood.