A DIALOGUE CONCERNING 'DOING PHILOSOPHY WITH AND WITHIN COMPUTER GAMES' – or: Twenty rainy minutes in Krakow.

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INTRODUCTION

In Davis Baird's view, building – meaning doing, constructing as a heuristic practice – offers an opportunity to correct the discursive and linguistic bias of the humanities. [1] According to this view, we should be open to pursuing and communicating scholarship through designed artefacts, whether digital or not. It implies the idea that language is ill-equipped to deal with entire classes of knowledge that participate to humanistic inquiry [2, p. 78]. Following Baird, Ian Bogost similarly discusses the activity of constructing artifacts as a viable and much neglected philosophical practice that "entails making things that explain how things make their world" [3, p. 93]

In a way that is perhaps better exemplified by academic fields that involve practice-based research or research through design, scholarly approaches that involve practical activities and various degrees of 'action' are becoming progressively more visible. Despite a growing interest in proposing and exemplifying the use of (playful) interactive digital environments as tools for philosophical enquiry and dissemination, what we mean when we talk about 'doing philosophy' with and within the digital medium remains largely undertheorized.

Our interdisciplinary academic community invites a number of philosophical approaches and contributions to its ongoing discussions concerning computer games and philosophy. Year after year, we have interpreted and used verbs like acting, interacting, doing, or practicing in various ways, with various meanings, and for a number of often-divergent philosophical scopes [4]. With the objective of highlighting those ambiguities, our paper makes use of the literary format of the philosophical dialogue (similar - in terms of literary style - to the work of Socrates or Galileo Galilei).

With this contribution, we propose a number of different perspectives to explore the following questions: how do computer games contribute to philosophical inquiry, and what does it mean to "do philosophy" with and within computer games?

Our goal is that of bringing to the fore the fact that what we understand as philosophy, its methods and scopes, has a determining but often unnoticed role in the *modus operandi* of our community.

PREAMBLE

'Philosophical dialogue' indicates both a form of philosophical inquiry and its corresponding literary genre. In its written form, it typically features two or more characters who engage in a discussion concerning morals, knowledge, as well as a variety of topics that can be widely labelled as 'philosophical'. Our philosophical dialogue takes place in Krakow, Poland. It is a rainy morning and two strangers are waiting at a tram stop. One of them is dressed neatly, and cannot stop fidgeting with his closed umbrella. The other was caught unprepared by the morning downpour and water is dripping from his worn, soaked jacket.

DIALOGUE

- HUMID MAN: Perfect, just perfect! How am I even supposed to go to the conference now?! Ma che cazz…!

- UMBRELLA MAN: (NOTICING THE NEW ARRIVAL) Uh?!

- HUMID MAN: (TALKING TO THE UMBRELLA MAN) I-I am sorry, do you speak English?

- UMBRELLA MAN: Hummm… I would say so. This, however, does not mean that I understand it. (CHUCKLES)

- HUMID MAN: Mrh?! I-I just needed a paper tissue or two, if you happened to have some on you, and…

- UMBRELLA MAN: Oh, Yeah, sorry! By any means! (HANDS OVER THE TISSUES, AND ADDS APOLOGETICALLY) Mine was just a 'Chinese Room' joke. I guess it's job conditioning, hehe! (SMILES)

- HUMID MAN: (DRYING HIS FACE): Uhm… So you make John Searle jokes as a profession, huh?! That's funny!

- UMBRELLA MAN: (KIND OF CONFESSING HIS SINS) Yeah, philosopher.

- HUMID MAN: So I am guessing you are also going to the Philosophy of Computer Games Conference.

- UMBRELLA MAN: Guilty as charged (CHUCKLES)! I am Joseph (they shake hands). Will present in the afternoon.

- HUMID MAN: (STILL TRYING TO DRY HIS NECK AND FACE) Name's Maximilian. Nice meeting you! Well… If we are willing to ignore the weather.

- JOSEPH: A fellow philosopher, I take it.

- MAXIMILIAN: Well, I am not sure. I mean, I 'do' philosophy, I don't know if that makes me a philosopher.

- JOSEPH: Hah! A very philosophical point, this one. (SMILES)

- MAXIMILIAN: Heh, I guess! So, what is your presentation about, Joseph?

- JOSEPH: It is about how computer games relate to philosophy. Or rather, how they do *not* relate to philosophy. I am trying to argue that they are not – strictly speaking – philosophical media.

- MAXIMILIAN: As in not as deep or subtle as… Language? Text?

- JOSEPH: I mean, I think it is pretty obvious that computer games can narratively and systemically suggest philosophical topics. Or themes that are inspired by philosophy.

- MAXIMILIAN: Mhm…

- JOSEPH: But what I propose to do with William Ritchie Sorley is to understand "being philosophical" and "doing philosophy" as two separate activities [5]. The baseline here is that video games can help us be philosophical, that is to have a philosophical attitude, but they are not a medium through which we can "produce philosophy".

- MAXIMILIAN: Oh, that's interesting! And why is that? (JOSEPH LEANS FORWARD TO SEE IF THE TRAM IS COMING)

- JOSEPH: Well… (JOSEPH LEANS FORWARD AGAIN TO SEE IF THE TRAM IS COMING) It looks like we still have quite some time to wait, so I might as well try and explain that. (BREATHES IN HEAVILY) How to put it… We can understand philosophy as a discipline that tackles topics of a general and/or fundamental relevance. Right?

- MAXIMILIAN: Right!

- JOSEPH: And methodologically speaking, philosophy approaches scholarly enquiry in a way that is - one - theoretical in nature, and - two - pursued through language.

- MAXIMILIAN: Uhm…

- JOSEPH: And if that is where we stand, then "doing" philosophy can be understood as the activity of articulating linguistic statements or assessing their truth-function and their logical validity. Philosophy is the theoretical body produced by those activities.

- MAXIMILIAN: Mhhh… What if… Uhm… (PENSIVE)

- JOSEPH: So, if we are ready to accept this foundation, we can also agree that computer games are ill-suited for that purpose, as they are not about the validity of linguistic statements.

- MAXIMILIAN: I am just not sure I agree with the way you understand "doing philosophy", here.

- JOSEPH: Well, you mentioned that you yourself "do" philosophy.

- MAXIMILIAN: Yeah, among other things… Like catching a cold in flipping Poland!

- JOSEPH: (SMILES) Okay, so now I am curious about what *you* mean when you say you "do philosophy"?

- MAXIMILIAN: I simply mean that I engage with philosophical themes and notions in a way that is practical, or has direct applications in this wet world of ours. While I agree with you that philosophy is about general and fundamental knowledge, I do not think its horizon should be confined to theory…

- JOSEPH: Oh?! (CURIOUS / AMUSED)

- MAXIMILIAN: To get to the point, for me "doing philosophy" would mean to go beyond knowledge as mere abstraction, and to work with the concepts hands-on, as part of our lived experience… Very much in the vein of the existentialists, you know?

- JOSEPH: Let me see if I understood correctly the idea of "doing philosophy with computer games" would be to address the medium as a sort of "experimental, existential machine"?

- MAXIMILIAN: Mh, if you put me on the spot like this, I am not sure… I'd have to think about it. It sure does sound nice. (WITH GRANDEUR) "Experimental, existential machine". Haha!

- JOSEPH: That, it does haha!

- MAXIMILIAN: With your permission, I might even change the title of my talk to that!

- JOSEPH: Oh, you are also speaking?

- MAXIMILIAN: Yeah, tomorrow morning… Provided I am not sick or forget to wake up, that is.

- JOSEPH: And will your paper be about practically doing philosophy?

- MAXIMILIAN: Well, I try to take that pragmatic stance to its consequences: not only I claim that we can "do philosophy" with video games as players, but also - and more radically - as creators of digital worlds [6] [7]. With video games we are essentially putting together a delimited, material conceptualization of something… Similar to a working model! [1] [2, p.78].

- JOSEPH: (AFTER A BIT OF REFLECTION) You know what is funny? It is easier for me to embrace your second point, the one you characterize as the most radical, than it is for me to accept that playing a game is a philosophical activity.

- MAXIMILIAN: What do you mean?

- JOSEPH: Okay, allow me to start from the design of videogames. If we understand a video game world or a digital world more in general as a model or a metaphor, then conceptualizing and setting up that world might be understood as philosophical. After all it would not be too far from a set of logical, and maybe even linguistic operations.

- MAXIMILIAN: Well, quite literally we build those worlds using programming languages, right?

- JOSEPH: Precisely! But what I have difficulties with is embracing "playing" in a virtual world as a philosophical activity. Would not it be less controversial to qualify it as something that might, in some cases, encourage philosophical reflection or engagement, rather than the "production" (EMPHASIZING THE QUOTE-MARKS) of philosophy?

- MAXIMILIAN: So, in your view, someone interactively thinking through virtual situations and their consequences would simply "be philosophical", and would not be "properly" involved in the "production" (EMPHASIZING THE QUOTE-MARKS) of philosophy.

- JOSEPH: That's correct.

- MAXIMILIAN: …And until their insights are translated into a somewhat logical, linguistic form, then that is not "doing philosophy". I see.

- JOSEPH: Well, it is one way of framing this discussion.

- MAXIMILIAN: Yeah, and one that works really well in terms of excluding any other ways of pursuing or disseminating philosophical insights!

- JOSEPH: Hey, no need to get confrontational! After all, mine is a theory right?! Every theory is a specific way of looking at something. It is inherently both revealing and – to take your words – excluding.

- MAXIMILIAN: What I find particularly problematic with your exclusion is that it ties the methods of philosophical inquiry (and being a philosopher) to an exclusive relationship with a specific technology. As somebody with a linguistic approach to philosophy, you are likely to be familiar with the work of Wittgenstein, aren't you?

- JOSEPH: Not an expert, but yeah… I guess I can say I am familiar with it.

- MAXIMILIAN: And did not Wittgenstein characterize philosophy as an activity and not as a doctrine? Did he not claim, in his *Blue Book*, that "thinking is the act of operating with signs"? In other words, when we are writing, we are thinking with pens! [8]

- JOSEPH: (MUMBLING) Keyboards, nowadays.

- MAXIMILIAN: Yeah, whatever. But you see what I mean? Thinking can be pursued in many mediated forms! We think with our mouth, metaphorically speaking, when we engage in conversation like we are now. In this situation, we adapt our lexicon and arrange our arguments based on the context and on whom we are talking with. Following the same line of thought, why the heck cannot we think philosophically with game controllers?

- JOSEPH: Mhhh… Can you perhaps make a more concrete example of this "thinking with game controllers"?

- MAXIMILIAN: Mh… Ok, like. Ok, I made a few video games that try to do that… A bit clumsily I guess. You, see, there is this one about taking a lot of soups, and with these soups the player needs to…

- UMBRELLA WOMAN: […] "There is always something ludicrous in philosophical discourse when it tries, from the outside, to dictate to others, to tell them where their truth is and how to find it" [9, p. 9]

- MAXIMILIAN: Huh?!

- UMBRELLA WOMAN: Oh nothing, I was just practicing my presentation. Trying to get the timing right, you know?

- JOSEPH: Oh looks like we are not the only academics waiting for the tram in "sunny" Krakow! Welcome! I am Joseph and that is…

- MAXIMILIAN: Max, lovely to make your acquaintance.

- UMBRELLA WOMAN: Ha-ha, thank you, my name is Ursula. Nice to meet you both I have been overhearing your conversation; actually, it is more like it was imposed on me by how loud you were.

- MAXIMILIAN: So you were standing there the whole time? Oops…

- URSULA: Yeah, and I thought to myself: as I am already part of this debate, for better or worse, I might as well join actively!

- JOSEPH: But of course, please take a seat! We can squeeze in a little, right Maximilian?

- MAXIMILIAN: Certainly. (LOOKS AROUND TO SEE IF THERE IS SPACE)

- URSULA: Thanks. I'm good standing here. Actually, Max, I am familiar with your work. I once quoted your 2014 paper.

- MAXIMILIAN: Oh, neat! What's your angle?

- URSULA: I focus on a feminist-Foucauldian interpretation of playing as a practice of "self-fashioning". My talk is on the last day of the conference.

- MAXIMILIAN: Ohhh… Sounds so interesting! Then I guess you consider the idea of "doing" I was discussing with Joseph, here, to be definitely a philosophical one!

- URSULA: Well to an extent, I guess... I mean, I agree with you that philosophy should to be first and foremost an activity oriented towards practice, but it seems to me that the arguments of both of you end up being simply methodological.

- JOSEPH: Now, that's interesting. Please, continue.

- URSULA: What I am trying to say is that, ultimately, you seem to agree with one another as to what philosophy is, namely: the rational pursuit of abstract knowledge… Granted this foundation, all you are really arguing about are the best methods for getting there and fancy definitions.

- MAXIMILIAN: And so what is your position?

- URSULA: Oh, it's not *my* position, specifically! It is *a* position. One that is quite common, for example, in ancient Greek philosophy as well as in feminist philosophy.

One that you both decided to ignore, it seems. (BOTH MAXIMILIAN AND JOSEPH GAWK) According to that position - which I share - philosophy is not an activity that is concerned with rationality, and perhaps is not even a cognitive activity to begin with!

- JOSEPH and MAXIMILIAN at the same time: WHAT?!

- URSULA: Listen. For the Stoics, for example, philosophy indicated an artful, aware way of conducting one's life. For them it is not about teaching universal concepts or engaging with theoretical texts: it was an exercise towards wisdom, a concrete attitude that engaged the whole of being and the self. A kind of self-forming activity. [10]

- JOSEPH: Pffft… Next thing we will hear is that Philosophy helps against irritable bowel syndrome and is good for your posture!

- MAXIMILIAN: (TO JOSEPH) Well, to be fair *your* Wittgenstein did in fact considered philosophy to be a sort of therapy, didn't he?

- URSULA: (TO JOSEPH) And let me add to that, that I'd appreciated it if you would not make fun of me! I am merely pointing out that many other views of what philosophy is exist besides yours that you might not be aware of. All I am saying is that if Max proposes to widen the tools with which we "do" philosophy, maybe we could or perhaps should also broaden our understanding of "philosophy" as a discipline.

- JOSEPH: (ANNOYED) And what would philosophy look like then, if you don't mind my asking?

- URSULA: Well, I do not know exactly what it will look like, it could be many different things, but I believe that it will not fit solely within the Western-centered understandings of philosophy, where someone takes the stage and lectures others about what philosophy is and how it should be "done". Or making "thought-provoking" computer games with the function of explaining philosophical concepts interactively.

- MAXIMILIAN: Owww…Why bashing my little games now?! (SHAKING THE HEAD FUNNILY, TRYING TO SMOOTHEN THE SITUATION WITH A SMILE)

- URSULA: (LOOKS AWKWARDLY) Heh, don't get me wrong, Max. I am intrigued by your games. I think they propose interesting ideas. I am just wondering, how are you actually helping players "do philosophy"?

- MAXIMILIAN: Errr… I am not sure of what you mean exactly?

- URSULA: How do you help players develop themselves? Obtain wisdom, live more fully, or think critically? Does it happen while they play, or afterwards?

- MAXIMILIAN: I don't know what this "wisdom" is for you, but as I see it, my little attempts at "playable thought" put players in certain situations, and ask them to act within it, experiment with its limitations, to think them through… So, why cannot we see them as philosophical tools? Like interactive arguments or maybe playable thought experiments, or something?

- URSULA: Yes, that's a nice idea, but to be honest, I think what you are actually doing is sugar-coating philosophical notions with gameplay. I still see it as a traditional practice of lecturing from above, interactively explaining existing theories in the hope that they stick to the player. How is that allowing the player to engage in "doing philosophy" *themselves*? How is it any different from reading a text?

- MAXIMILIAN: (FUNNY) I think they might be better than linear text in materializing systems in space and disclosing causal relationships. In virtual worlds notions and arguments are actively experienced rather than remaining passive representations, and they are certainly less boring then text!

- JOSEPH: Wait, are we saying that written philosophy is boring, now?

- MAXIMILIAN: (DISREGARDING JOSEPH) But Ursula, I see what you are saying, and to a degree it is true: maybe my game design skills and the middleware I use are still limited in relation to presenting certain concepts or to flawlessly afford "philosophical doing". I am working on it.

- URSULA: Good, and I don't want to discourage you, but for now I remain skeptical.

- JOSEPH: Sorry to interrupt this moment between the two of you, but I don't think the previous discussion went anywhere. At least nowhere I found convincing! Ursula, you come with this new – or very old – idea of what philosophy is, but you still never offer a clear explanation of what you yourself mean with "doing philosophy".

- MAXIMILIAN: Yeah, what he said! And you state that things are complicated and that we could potentially embrace any activities as "doing philosophy". Do you mean to say that we could – for example – brush our teeth philosophically? Could we buy philosophical groceries? I think your point is not a point, really, but just a critique.

- URSULA: I agree. I think you both might be right that the definition risks being too broad. But, I was not trying to say that philosophy can be everything or that everything is philosophical. It is important not to confuse philosophy as an activity with the tools or objects that are involved with it.

- JOSEPH: Then what was it that you wanted to say?

- URSULA: Well, if we accept that philosophy could be an individual process that we can only practice in relation to ourselves, then we also need to accept that we cannot define what it means to "do philosophy" for someone who is not ourselves.

- JOSEPH: Fair enough, but what remains of philosophy when everything is or could potentially be philosophy? I think you are actually being anti-philosophical here!

- URSULA: Wait a second, why? Why cannot this be, instead, the beginning of a new, and more inclusive understanding of "doing philosophy"?

- MAXMILILIAN: Mh?!

- URSULA: A way of philosophizing academically that focuses on building a collection of *different* philosophical tools and practices without trying to determine which are better or more valid than others... A more inclusive view on "doing philosophy" that is not discussed much within our community.

- MAXIMILLIAN: Yeah, as a matter of fact what we mean by "doing" in a philosophical context is a point that is *never* discussed!

- URSULA: And on top of that, it seems to me that what we are doing in these conferences is having monologues within our own separate contexts, rather than engaging with one another's work.

- MAXIMILIAN: You know, I agree with you! Admittedly, we do not do a lot metaphilosophy about the work that takes place in the community, and we hardly have community-wide moments of philosophical reflection. I think we should raise both these points at the conference.

- JOSEPH: Which two points, exactly?

- MAXIMILIAN: Those about doing philosophy and about philosophy itself! How we understand "doing philosophy" and what the various participants mean when they say "philosophy" seem to me to be a largely overseen – and yet incredibly important - aspects of what we do.

- JOSEPH: I agree with you both that these are important and very interesting points to be raised, but try not to forget that our conference takes place on the background of tradition. Both on that of Western philosophy, widely speaking, and on traditions and *modi operandi* of its own... Specific to the community!

- MAXIMILIAN: No, absolutely. What I have in mind, here, was not to upset or overthrow our heritage. What I want is those traditions and *modi operandi* to become a topic of discussion, rather than something implied and never openly negotiated. For

example, it could be a great idea if contents, methods, and goals of our community were discussed in a specific time and space during the conferences…

- JOSEPH: Well, to be fair we had a whole panel about that last year. And these spaces are there, I think, they normally take place at the end of each conference.

- MAXIMILIAN: Yeah, but those "round-ups" always end up being about logistics: did we have enough time for questions, this year, did we have enough time to lunch? Who can host the next conference, what is the theme for next year, but they are never about philosophy. Did you notice?

- JOSEPH: (LOOKING OUT) Oh it looks like the tram is approaching soon!

- URSULA: Perhaps having more of these sessions could be a solution, but it's hard to hear everyone's voice in those. I think that also the individual contributor could develop the awareness that the philosophical space he or she inhabits is only one of many. I wonder what the others think about the points we have been discussing.

- JOSEPH: I think this is shaping up as a set of ideas and propositions that would be interesting to raise with other people at the conference!

- MAXIMILIAN: Or maybe, and I know I am insisting, we could try to engage our friends and colleagues in a more official and communal "space" instead of trying to talk to them individually or in little groups.

- JOSEPH: You mean, in another panel about methods to approach computer games philosophically?

- MAXIMILIAN: Yeah, or with a paper that specifically focuses on those points and tries to kick-start a discussion with the community there and then!

- URSULA: Hey, here's an idea! What about a collaborative paper that brings together different voices and perspectives and let them play together and push against each other.

- MAXIMILIAN: …And wouldn't it be fun if those perspectives would take the shape of – say – fictional characters who argue and develop their points with one another? It could take the format – say – of a philosophical dialogue.

- JOSEPH: Certainly that would be an original idea… As in "going back to the origins" of Western philosophy!

- URSULA: Besides, I think it would be a more interesting way to discuss "doing" philosophy than writing and presenting a traditional text! Let's do it for next year, guys!

- MAXIMILIAN: Yeah, let's!

- JOSEPH: Yes, but also let's start by making it to the conference this year, shall we? I don't want to miss this tram!

    [THE END]

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