*Special Issue – The aesthetic significance of the everyday*

# Review of Stefano Gualeni & Ricardo Fassone, *Fictional Games: A Philosophy of Worldbuilding and Imaginary Play* (2023), London: Bloomsbury Publishing

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Stefano Gualeni and Riccardo Fassone's *Fictional Games: A Philosophy of Worldbuilding and Imaginary Play* is two things. One, it is an intellectual toolkit for the analysis of games. Two, it is a journey into the concept of narrative and, in so doing, an introduction into a certain narrative device that is the fictional game. Before all else, it is important to examine what exactly a fictional game is, and thanks to the toolkit character of the book, the definition of fictional games is clearly and continually stated throughout the book. A fictional game is an umbrella term for 'playful activities and ludic artifacts conceptualized as a part of fictional worlds'.[1] They are 'meant to trigger the imagination of the appreciator of a work of fiction and cannot actually be - or at least were not originally meant to be - played'.[2] Fictional games...

> are not typically presented in formally complete ways; rather, authors often simply hint at these games' rules, affordances, boundaries, exceptions and criteria for success, defining them just clearly enough to achieve their intended functions within the work of fiction.[3]

In other words, a fictional game is a playful concept, a game employed within a fictional world that is designed to stimulate the imagination without necessarily being fully playable and often has only hinted-at rules and structures that serve narrative purposes.

For the avid science fiction reader, as well as after being educated by the plethora of examples used in the book, it becomes immediately apparent how ubiquitous fictional games are in the art of fiction and storytelling. It is this presence of fictional games's ubiquity that highlights how stark the gap is that exists in the literature of aesthetics and the analysis of this concept. The task of this book is not only to fill this gap but also to create new gaps and trajectories of analysis for this fascinating, yet characteristically incomplete, concept. *Fictional Games* comprises five chapters and a conclusion.

The first two chapters, 'On Fictional Games' and 'Fictional Games and Ideology,' define fictional games through a series of glossary definitions that are complemented by examples of various games. From a theoretical point of view, what is interesting about these chapters is the conceptual groundwork that it establishes through the ideas of Gestalt and incompleteness. Gualeni and Fasscione utilise Marshall McLuhan's gestalt psychology, specifically the two categories of 'ground' and 'figure,' to conceptualize the relevance of fictional games within fictional worlds. A fictional game is conceptualized as 'ground' when it serves as a background element that contributes to the world-building of the fiction, and conceptualized as 'figure' when it plays a more acute role that serves as a device through which pivotal plot functions can and do occur. Insofar as fictional games are navigated through the lens of Gestalt psychology, which posits that an object is perceived not by its individual parts but as its whole, a fundamental tension arises: how is it that fictional games, which are by definition incomplete and reveal only fragments of themselves, are nonetheless approached as complete entities through the Gestalt psychological framework?

This paradoxical situation creates a unique psychological engagement for the reader who interacts with the fictional game. On the one hand, the reader is given an incomplete object yet, on the other hand, must treat it as a whole object insofar as the fictional world is taken to be sensible. What occurs is that the reader becomes an active participant in completing the concept of the game, without the author doing it themselves. Thus, whether conceptualized as a figure or ground within the narrative, the fictional game serves a dual function: it not only depicts the values and stakes inherent in the story but also alleviates cognitive strain for both the reader and the writer to articulate them. This cognitive easing is further enhanced as the fictional game evokes familiar concepts from the real world, prompting the reader to intuitively bridge the gaps in its formal structure. Consequently, the fictional game exists in a state of tension, perceived as a complete concept within its own world, yet inherently incomplete from an external viewpoint.

The third and fourth chapters, 'Fictional Games as Utopian Devices' and

'Fictional Games as Deceptions and Hallucinations,' extend this discussion by analysing their respective utopian benefits and deceptive pitfalls. The third chapter considers how the fiction-ideology of the fictional game serves as a reflective élan that enables the author to critique the real world — our world — by employing a meta-concept of a fantasy within a fantasy. The argument is that fictionality, even within a fictional world, gives rise to a sociopolitical critique for the narrative's reader, offering an image of utopia by highlighting the exaggerations inherent in the fiction. The fourth chapter advances the argument made in the third by considering how games at any level of fictionality are never separate from real life. This is to say that even though a fictional game does not have to follow the 'reality' of the fantasy in which it partakes, it is still in many senses bound to its rules or, in other words, its apparatus. Gualeni and Fassone's critique of the fictional game raises the question whether fiction is even possible. Fictional games might represent a continuation of the ideologies found in everyday fictional life, similar to how fictional works relate to the real world.

The fifth chapter, titled 'Fictional Games and Transcendence,' delves into what is perhaps the book's most important idea; that fictional games can serve as a platform for exploring the dissolution of knowledge boundaries. These games are posited not just as entertainment but as potent conduits for transformative and evolutionary social purposes. The chapter focuses on how fictional games impact, and are impacted by, human interactions with technology and their entanglements within the social and/or political *status quo*. This is not a religious transcendence; rather, it speaks to fiction's unique capability to imagine an escape from the constraints of organised bodies, incarcerating technologies, and the prevailing social and political order. This liberating aspect of fictional games enables a view of science and technology from angles unrestrained by prevailing ideological biases, and reorientated towards alternate ways of life. The chapter suggests that through this lens, fictional games hold the potential to foster emancipatory and unorthodox thought, reshaping our understanding of technology and social codes and their roles in society.

To conclude, *Fictional Games* is a significant contribution to the field of game studies. The authors skilfully navigate the complex terrain of fictional games, offering insights into their role as both narrative devices and ideological tools. By exploring the tension between the completeness of the Gestalt perspective and the inherent incompleteness of fictional games, Gualeni and Fassone illuminate the active role the reader plays in shaping these narratives. The book excels in demonstrating how fictional games transcend mere entertainment, serving as mediums for criticising and reimagining the interplay between technology, society, and ideology. Its exploration of the utopian potential and deceptive pitfalls of fictional games is compelling, inviting readers to reconsider the boundaries of fiction and reality. Gualeni and Fassone's thoughtful analysis does not just fill existing gaps in literature; it paves new

paths for understanding the intricate dynamics of fictional worlds and their impact on our perception of reality.

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## ENDNOTES

1. Gualeni and Fassone 2022, 2.

2. 2.

3. 3.

## REFERENCES

Gualeni, Stefano, and Ricardo Fassone. 2022. *Fictional Games: A Philosophy of Worldbuilding and Imaginary Play.* London: Bloomsbury.