A Philosophy of “DOING” in the Digital

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Abstract

Playing in counterpoint with the general theoretical orientation of the book, this chapter does not focus its attention on the recording and archiving capabilities of the digital medium. Instead, it proposes an understanding of the digital medium that focuses on its disclosing various forms of “doing.” This chapter begins by offering an understanding of “doing in the digital” that methodologically separates “doing as acting” from “doing as making.” After setting its theoretical framework, the chapter discusses an “interactive thought experiment” designed by the author (titled *Something Something Soup Something*) that is analyzed as a digital artifact leveraging both dimensions of “doing in the digital” for philosophical purposes. In extreme synthesis, one could say that this chapter is about several kinds of soups.

1. Introduction

US scholar Janet Murray observed that the way in which we customarily address digital media in their plural form is symptomatic of the ongoing academic confusion about the emergence of what is (in fact) a single medium (Murray 2011, 3). In this chapter, the terms “computer” and “digital medium” are used as synonyms, and will be used in their singular form.

A frequently invoked theoretical perspective on technologies of communication and representation proposes to understand all media as always “commenting, reproducing, and replacing” older media forms (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 55). Understood through the evolutionary perspective that was just outlined, the digital medium is recognized as offering, combining, and further advancing technical possibilities and ways of conveying information that were previously the exclusive domains of older technologies of communication, representation, and (playful)

interaction. To clarify this point, it might help to ground the multimediality of computers in rather dull examples taken from my own everyday existence. Just yesterday—on the battered laptop on which I am now typing these words I called up an old friend in Chicago, looked up ways to alleviate the prickling of eczema, listened to a radio podcast, did some boring accounting, practiced a dozen Contract Bridge hands against an artificial intelligence in preparation for an upcoming tournament, and watched a Woody Allen movie.

If the obvious versatility of the digital medium did not make it hard enough already to produce comprehensive statements about its "character" (its experiential possibilities and effects), the philosophy of technology reminds us that (as for any other technologies) computers are also and always appropriated by their users in ways that are adaptable, context-dependent, and often unpredictable. [1]

To this already messy conceptual "soup" about what the digital medium is and what the digital medium does, I believe we need to add an "ingredient" that several scholarly approaches consider central to the "recipe." I am referring to the fact that computers disclose methods of fruition and production that favor the active participation of their users (Murray 1998; Calleja 2011). Resorting to a perhaps brutal generalization (or maybe a helpful lie) we could say that information and representations that are experienced through the digital medium are not simply received and interpreted, as was the case with pre-digital forms of mediation. The computer discloses contents in ways that are less passive and linear than pre-digital media, and empowers its users to explore, manipulate, and produce information (Manovich 2001; 2013).

This book promises to further our understanding of the digital medium by concentrating its attention on the recording and archiving capabilities of the computer. The verb "to record" finds its linguistic roots in the Latin *recordare*, composed of the particle *re-* (again, anew), and the verb *cordare* (from the word *cor*, "heart," which was considered to be the organ responsible for storing memories and eliciting passions). Etymologically, the verb "to record" refers to the act of re-visiting or re-membering something that was previously thought, learned, or experienced. Words, images, smells, feelings, ideas, and sounds that we re-corded in the past can be re-vived in our experiential and emotional present with a degree of fidelity that depends on the technical medium utilized.

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Instead of largely focusing on understanding the computer as a medium for recording information, this chapter focuses on its qualities and possibilities as a technical mediator; that is to say, on its disclosing and inviting specific ways of acting, communicating, translating, experiencing, and understanding (Verbeek 2005). With this objective in mind, I deem it more fruitful to analyze the technical and experiential possibilities of the digital medium in ways

that are oriented towards prefiguring and configuring the future, rather than archiving and interpreting the past.
Before that, I believe it is relevant to clarify that I do not wish to portray the "recording" qualities of computers as merely driven by desires to preserve our personal and collective history. In fact, it is also (if not mainly) under the guidance of growing and increasingly more pervasive "digital records" of our past actions and choices that social policies, academic research, marketing campaigns, and industrial production decisions are pursued. By facilitating the gathering and interpretation of vast amounts of information, the computer allows manipulative, interpretive, and predictive possibilities that arguably transcend (at least in terms of efficiency and scale) those of any pre-digital technologies.

The ways in which information is interpreted and manipulated through the digital medium can certainly be interpreted as forms of recording. In this chapter, however, I will argue that our uses of the computer to filter, analyze, and make sense of recorded information are better understood as specific forms of (technically mediated) "doing."

The growing diffusion of digital mediation in social practices in the past four decades brought reflections, discussions, and hazards concerning the possibilities and effects of such mediation to the fore of a vast and interconnected number of cultural contexts, from theoretical philosophy, to lawmaking, to the very activities involved in developing digital technologies. In that context, I will propose an understanding of "doing in the digital" that focuses on the roles and activities that the digital medium frames for its users. In particular, I will discuss digital environments (accessed through video games and digital simulations) as technical mediators that disclose new possibilities and new "grounds" for the discipline of philosophy. In other words, I will focus on the computer in its capability for shaping our thoughts and our behaviors in contexts that are conceptually and experientially more flexible than our everyday relationship with the world that we share as biological organisms (Gualeni 2015, xv).

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I will commence this pursuit by clarifying that with "digital environment" I mean an artificial context upheld by digital technologies that permit specific kinds of experiences. These experiences are virtual [2] and are characterized by varying degrees of perceptual permanence, mechanical consistency, and intelligibility (Gualeni 2015, 6–7; Chalmers 2017).

Adopting this stance, artifacts such as an interactive database, a computer platform for the simulation of surgical procedures, a dungeon in an action-adventure video game, or the text editor I am presently working with can all be categorized as "digital environments" that are populated by "digital objects." (ibid.)

2. “Doing” in the Digital

Until this point, this chapter has outlined an understanding of the computer as a multimodal and multistable (see endnote 1) technological medium that discloses various possibilities for “doing.” As already outlined, some of those possibilities “reproduce and replace” those of previous media forms, while others can be recognized as specific ways in which the digital medium records, organizes, and reveals information and experiences.

Different digital environments in different socio-cultural contexts can reveal activities through which we can interactively express ourselves, and new environments where we can relate to one another, pursue self-reflection, entertain ourselves, and so on. If we are ready to accept these theoretical premises, then we also need to be open to embracing the idea that no single definition of “doing” can reasonably be expected to exhaustively capture the entire horizon of configurative and prefigurative practices that can be pursued and upheld in digital environments.

In light of these observations, I cannot aspire to offer a complete analytical definition of “doing in the digital.” Instead, what I propose is a working and inevitably incomplete taxonomy of future-oriented activities that the computer enables, frames, and translates. The perspective from which I propose to understand “doing in the digital” relies on identifying two fundamental meanings that can be ascribed to the verb “to do.” In English dictionaries, the definitions corresponding to “to do” refer to a number of practical activities such as preparing for use, traversing, arranging, mimicking, producing, killing, completing, sufficing, behaving, managing, and many more.

With the objective of

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using the verb “to do” in a way that is helpful and revealing in relation to the possibilities and effects of virtual experiences in digital environments, I propose to use the following, dual, categorization of “doing”:

1. “Doing” understood as performing intentional actions (or “doing as acting”).
2. “Doing” in the sense of designing or constructing something (or “doing as making”).

This distinction is obviously hard to defend in terms of sharpness and rigor, as the two categories have areas of conceptual overlap. In that respect, my objectives for the upcoming sections are to clarify the use of this dual understanding (sections 2.1, and 2.2) and to address the ambiguities and limitations inherent in taking this foundational methodological decision

(section 2.3). In simpler words, I will offer a detailed and practice-oriented account for each of the two proposed understanding of "doing," and will critically reflect on some of the ambiguities inherent in using this dual framework.

2.1. On "Doing as Acting"

Unlike the relationships that can be established with pre-digital technologies of communication and representation, I argued elsewhere that digital environments can disclose experiences, and not mere representations (see Gualeni 2015). These experiences, as already specified, are characterized by varying degrees of perceptual permanence, mechanical consistency, and intelligibility. Additionally, they often require inputs from their users-players. The latter are, thus, commonly understood not only as active participants, but also as active producers of the contents of the experience (Aarseth 1997; Calleja 2011, 55).

With "doing as acting" I indicate various types of experiences within a digital environment. These experiences are recognized as emerging from the users taking intentional actions within the boundaries set by the constitutive rules and the mechanical limitations of a particular environment. The "activity horizon" disclosed by a digital environment thus constitutes the material and conceptual context for "doing as acting" within it.

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In line with the work of psychologist James J. Gibson, in this chapter I use the term "affordances" to indicate the possibilities of action offered by an object or an environment (1979). Understood in this way, affordances invite or even frame ways of understanding environments and situations and possible behaviors within them. As for any other forms of technological mediation, digital environments present experiential and conceptual affordances in a number of ways: from materially disclosing certain possibilities of use, to inviting or rewarding specific interactions by means of aesthetic stimuli.

Adopting this perspective, we can say that "doing as acting" in a digital environment refers to the activity of operating with, within, and even against the possibilities of action it offers (its affordances). For the implied readers of this text, I imagine that activities such as playing a video game or sending messages through an e-mail client are relatable examples of "doing as acting."

"Doing as acting" within digital environments can function as factors of socio-cultural change in many, and often concurrent, ways. In relation to the objectives of this chapter, I consider the following to be among the most significant ways in which the digital medium invites and reveals ways of "doing as acting":

- in its offering the possibility to pursue professional training, for example in the aviation or medical fields, allowing people to attain a degree of practical expertise without the risk of causing actual damage to people or equipment;

- by exposing media users to a "procedural" form of rhetoric; that is to say, a form of persuasion that takes place through rule-based representations and interactions (Bogost 2007, ix);

- in its disclosing artificial experiential settings where various and innovative forms of psychotherapeutic activities, from behavioral conditioning to the treatment of anxiety disorders, can be pursued (Riva et al. 2016);

- by inviting actions in safe digital environments that elicit feelings of ownership, agency, and personal investment in relation to learning scenarios, making computers efficient and engaging educational technologies to be used in and out of schools (Gee 2007);

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- in its granting interactive access to virtual contexts where arguments, ideas, world-views, and thought-experiments can be shaped, explored, manipulated, and communicated (Gualeni 2015, xvi).

2.2. On "Doing as Making"

Not all forms of "doing in the digital" consist in operating within the existing affordances of a digital environment. There are practices that rely, instead, on adding, removing, shaping, and re-shaping those very affordances. In other words, with "doing as making" I indicate activities that are involved in framing "possibilities of action" within digital environments.

In section 2.1, I briefly discussed the use of video games and e-mail clients as examples of "doing as acting." For the sake of consistency and style, I am going to refer to the same two groups of applications to illustrate the second understanding of "doing" in digital environments.

Video games and e-mail clients can be relatively intricate digital artifacts. Their technical development typically involves several interconnected activities that frame the users' "possibilities of action" within their respective digital environments. Among those defining activities, we can include the programming of certain functional behaviors and the design of

methods for action and feedback (for example, the decisions concerning user interfaces, the size of its elements, the visual design of its various configurations, the ways they respond and adapt to user interaction, the mapping of controls over peripheral devices, and so on). Those activities exemplify a form of "doing as making" in digital environments, one in which the "designers" (those who "do by making") set up digital interactive "stages" for those who "do by acting" within them. In more general terms, I propose to understand "doing as making" as the intentional manipulation of affordances.

With the objective of clarifying how this second understanding of "doing" relates to the objective of contributing to our understanding of the socio-cultural meanings of our progressively more involved relationships with the digital medium, I believe it is helpful to introduce the concept of "building" as discussed by philosopher Davis Baird. In Baird's view, building (doing, constructing as a heuristic practice) offers

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an opportunity to correct the bias in the humanities which binds its methods and outputs exclusively to language (Baird 2004).

According to this view, we should be open to pursuing and communicating scholarship through designed artifacts, whether digital or not. Baird's perspective participates in the idea that language is ill equipped to deal with entire classes of knowledge that participate in humanistic inquiry (Ramsay and Rockwell 2012, 78). Following Baird, 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" (Bogost 2012, 93). Neither Baird nor Bogost exclude digital artifacts from their approaches. On the contrary, in his work as a game designer, Bogost openly addresses the possibilities to use digital environments (or video-game worlds) for persuasion and cultural change.

In a way which is comparable with the two perspectives outlined in the previous paragraph, my wider approach to the digital medium (rooted in the philosophy of technology and game studies) embraces digital environments as the contexts where new ways of pursuing the humanities have already begun to arise. More specifically, my work focuses on the experiential effects of digital environments (disclosed by "doing as acting" within them) and on the new possibilities for self-transformation as well as philosophical inquiry that become available while designing digital environments (emerging from "doing as making") (Gualeni 2014b, 2016).

Playing in counterpoint with the theoretical and interpretative approaches adopted by other chapters in this book, this chapter not only proposes an understanding of the digital medium that focuses on its disclosing various forms of "doing," but also shows how this praxis-

oriented approach to digital mediation can be put into practice. In the second half of this chapter, the proposed dual perspective on "doing in the digital" will be expanded upon and concretely exemplified by my hands-on work as a game designer. More specifically, in section 3, I will analyze the design of *Something Something Soup Something*, [3] an "interactive thought experiment" that I developed in 2017 with the support of the Institute of Digital Games (University of Malta) and *Maltco Lotteries*.

The reason why it is relevant, if not crucial, that my arguments include and discuss practical applications should be evident to the reader. The

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choice of analyzing and discussing one recent work of mine in particular might be, instead, less clear-cut. I will focus on *Something Something Soup Something* as having worked on the design and the development of that video game (if we agree to call it such) offers what I consider to be definite advantages. My hands-on involvement with the project granted first-hand insights concerning how the "players" responded to the experience of "doing as acting" within its digital environment and what they took away from the experience. It also allows me to present and discuss the constraints, the contextual and technical factors that framed that specific instance of "doing by making."

The design process of *Something Something Soup Something* as well as its cultural strategies and aspirations will be presented as deliberately leveraging both dimensions of "doing in the digital" for philosophical purposes. Before that, as anticipated, I deem it necessary to propose some critical methodological reflections on the ambiguity and the shortcomings of having embraced this dual understanding of "doing" as the theoretical framework for this chapter. By offering those additional considerations, I am not merely pursuing the objective of academic rigor, but also that of clarifying the range of applicability of my argument.

2.3. A Tale of Two Doings

This chapter proposes an understanding of the digital medium that focuses on the computer's capability of disclosing experiential ways of comprehending and behaving. In this context, the verb "doing" was understood as having a dual meaning:

- "doing as acting" ("playing" with and within the affordances of a digital environment), and
- "doing as making" (designing and manipulating digital affordances, setting up virtual, experiential environments).

As noted before, the various analogies between the two categories often make it impossible to neatly separate them. To further elaborate on this point, I will yet again resort to examples from a specific, and hopefully specifically familiar, declination of digital environments: that of video games.

Several video games and video- game genres offer their players the possibility to modify some of the video game's parameters, to

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modify in-game avatars, to set up new environments for play, and more in general to produce interactive content. Given a playful digital environment that offers possibilities for the manipulation and creation of new content, are not its players engaging that specific video game also as "makers"? Or does the fact that those design activities are disclosed to the players as explicit affordances of the video game make them examples of "doing as acting" rather than "doing by making"?

Sharply separating the two categories of "doing" might be an even more daunting task if we consider "folk practices" related to video games, such as 'modding', where a community of players uses (or even develops) digital tools to modify the contents of an existing video game. Another practice that I find particularly relevant to examine in this line of inquiry is that of "playing with style" (Parker 2011). Players who "play with style" fashion their digital experiences according to specific, restrictive principles, and approach their inhabiting digital environments as occasions to "shape themselves" into specific ethical and/or aesthetic subjects.

Activities identifiable as "playing with style" can be recognized at many overlapping levels of the experience of "gameplay," where by "gameplay" I mean "doing as acting" within the functional and conceptual affordances of a playful (digital) environment. The stylization of players' actions can be exemplified in acts of videoludic sportsmanship (as forms of ethical and aesthetic self-fashioning in competitive multiplayer games), or in the time and attention dedicated to the creation and the aesthetic refinement of a player's in-game avatars (instances of aesthetic self-fashioning in both single-player and multiplayer games). They can also be recognized in acts of resistance and rebellion to various ideologies when those ideologies are framed in game systems in the form of functional and aesthetic affordances. Often cited instances of such "critical" and "subversive" ways of playing are pacifist runs (consisting in playing survival, war, or adventure video games resorting to violence as little as possible or not at all) or vegan runs (playing video games without pursuing in-game actions that kill or hurt in-game animals, exploit in-game animals, or make use of in-game animal products) (Westerlaken 2017).

As just observed, while practicing in-game self-fashioning, players often restrict their gameplay possibilities to uphold certain aesthetic values

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or some aspects of narrative consistency that they consider important. They may refuse taking unrealistic or unethical routes in the pursuit of in-game objectives. In general terms, “playing with style” consists in the players’ voluntary addition of personally meaningful restrictions to their always-already constrained possibilities of action within a certain digital environment (Gualeni 2014b). Should we consider these approaches to “gameplay” as forms of “doing as acting”? Or should we embrace “playing with style” as a way to critically engage with the affordances of a certain digital environment, instead of adapting to them? And if so, would not “playing with style” appear as a way to “make oneself” in a context that is less inexorable and serious than the world we inhabit and share as biological creatures?

With the objective of furthering and completing the exploration of these methodological ambiguities and limitations, it may also be useful to consider the perspectives of those who design digital affordances, that is to say those of the programmers and designers of digital environments. As should be obvious to anyone with a basic familiarity with computers, the design of applications and activities that takes place within the digital medium does not take place in a socio-technical vacuum: the time and money available to create a new piece of digital design are almost ubiquitous constraints, and so is the fact that cables, whirring fans, input devices, and electrical power are all still necessary, material components of any activity taking place within digital environments.

Evidently, a digital environment is always defined by affordances that are in place before any kinds of “doing in the digital” can occur. In relation to this point, it may be important to remind the reader that, by definition, all digital environments are upheld by digital technology, which inherently imposes a very specific understanding of rationality, of time, space, and causation as a prerequisite for most forms of “doing” with and within it. [4] Willard McCarty similarly emphasized the inherent dependence of any computing system on an explicit delimited conception (or model) of the world (McCarty 2005, 21). Additional affordances that are inherent in the digital medium can be identified in how programming languages and middleware invite or downright impose specific ways of understanding, storing, representing,

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and manipulating information.

Digital actions that were earlier identified as instances of “doing as making” can, from this perspective, always be understood as forms of “acting” in the digital medium. Any uses of computers can, in fact, be recognized as being always already constrained by the very “digitalness” of computers: by the structure of the languages devised for programming computers, by conventions and ways of operating that are required by specific software applications, and so on.

At the beginning of this critical sub-section, I clarified that “doing as acting” in a digital environment does not necessarily exclude a number of activities that can be ascribed to the category of “doing as making.” After that, I outlined the perspective of a designer of digital environments, for whom all forms of “doing in the digital” can be also understood as forms of “doing as acting.” In light of these ambiguities, skepticism towards the viability and the usefulness of the proposed distinction between “doing as acting” and “doing as making” seems to be well motivated.

Would it not be more fruitful not to attempt a formalization of “doing in the digital,” and instead to embrace a nominal understanding of “doing”? In other words, what are the theoretical or practical advantages in setting up that distinction? Is it not merely leading to exceptions and complications?

Faced with these questions and difficulties, I present two sub-arguments that pursue the following objectives:

- explaining why I consider my theoretical arguments fruitfully contribute to our knowledge of the transformative effects (both at the and the cultural scale) of digital mediation in social practices, and
- paving the way for the second, praxis-oriented sections of this text (sections 2 and 4).

My first sub-argument follows from what was observed in section 2.2, where notions such as “building” (embraced as a heuristic practice) were presented as a group of interconnected activities that allow us to pursue and communicate scholarship through artifacts. The growing interest in pursuing cultural objectives through activities and artifacts is also

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particularly visible in scholarly fields that embrace practice-based research methodologies such as research through design or artistic research. However, those activities as well as the various possibilities offered by practices and artifacts in terms of discovery, experimentation, and communication remain largely under-theorized.

A practical approach to themes and questions that involve the development of artifacts, the prefiguration and the configuration of situations and alternative possibilities of action, is

already a relatively common approach in the context of philosophical inquiry. This is particularly evident in branches of philosophy that are characterized by obvious fields of application such as the philosophy of science, the philosophy of design, and the philosophy of technology. The notion that one can "do philosophy" in the sense of a practical experiential engagement with something is an explicit theme of my own work as well as in that of Dutch philosopher Clemens Driessen (Driessen 2014; Gualeni 2014a; Gualeni 2015; Westerlaken and Gualeni 2016).

Regardless of the progressive diffusion of scholarly approaches that involve various degrees of "doing," it is still remarkably rare to encounter a description of what "doing" means with regard to cultural or academic pursuits. Despite several points of discomfort in the theoretical stance that I propose in this chapter, and despite its limited applicability, I find the distinction between "doing as acting" and "doing as making" to be useful in facilitating the discussion concerning the design decisions and the experiential effects concerning certain artifacts, regardless of their actual, digital, or hybrid constitution. I will demonstrate this idea at work in the next section of my text through an analysis of my work as a "digital doer." Admittedly, the "facilitation" discussed above is only such in a very restricted portion of what is, instead, a much vaster horizon of "doing." On the upside, the distinction between the two activities allows us to discuss artifacts and experiences in relation to those artifacts in ways that are not obfuscated by all-encompassing approaches to what "design" is (or could be), or by less-examined approaches to "doing".

My second sub-argument as to why my dual approach to understanding "doing in the digital" relies on the limited applicability of the proposed approach, a topic that was touched upon in the previous paragraph.

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Despite the ambiguities and difficulties with the offered distinction between "doing as acting" and "doing as making," I believe the approach can be viable and useful if we agree to limit its application to observations, experiences, and interactions with a certain artifact. What I mean to say here is that this approach to "doing" becomes viable only when disregarding the socio-cultural and technical factors that influenced the design and the development of the artifact in question. In the case of the set-up of a digital environment, this limitation is tantamount to focusing on the interactions, the experiences, and the operations that take place within that environment while ignoring the social norms, the economic conditions, the hardware limitations, and the software affordances that contributed to its design. In addition to that, and still as part of this second sub-argument, I should like to explain that I do not propose to understand "doing as acting" and "doing as making" as two separate and mutually exclusive practices, but rather as two active "roles" that an artifact can disclose for agents who are "doing" with and within it. Depending on the affordances offered by an artifact, these

roles can be completely divorced, can co-exist, can overlap, and can even dynamically shift among all those configurations.

To summarize the two sub-arguments that were just presented, I first identified the main theoretical stance of this chapter (presenting a dual understanding of "doing") as a problematic one, but one that can nevertheless be considered valuable. Its value was recognized in the possibilities it offers for further developing our understanding of "doing" as a cultural practice. Following this initial part, I delineated the field of validity of the proposed theoretical stance, restricting its use to observations, experiences, and interactions with the artifact in question, or (in our case) within a certain digital environment. Finally, I clarified that I do not consider the two understandings of "doing" as two separated practices, but as dynamic active roles framed and facilitated by the functional and conceptual affordances offered by a certain artifact. On the basis of these premises and critical reflections, in the next section I will articulate a practical understanding of "doing in the digital" in ways that are exemplified by the design decisions and the gameplay affordances of *Something Something Soup Something*.

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3. Philosophical Soup

The official website for *Something Something Soup Something* (http://soup.gua-le-ni.com) qualifies our video game as an "interactive thought experiment"; that is, as a mental exercise designed with a philosophical scope. Mostly presented through the mediation of language, thought experiments traditionally consist in imagining hypothetical situations and thinking through their possibilities and consequences. The interactive experience of thought experiments with and within digital worlds allows us to overcome, I shall argue, some of the limitations and biases that are inherent to the representational and hermeneutic possibilities of language.

My claim, as will be specifically explained in the upcoming sections of this chapter, is valid for "doing as making" within digital worlds as well for "doing as acting"; that is to say, both as people whose thought processes are activated by mental exercises and as people who design thought experiments.

The website for *Something Something Soup Something* also summarizes the narrative context for our video game as follows:

> The year is 2078. It has been a decade since Homo Sapiens-Sapiens perfected teleportation technology. Rather than using teleporters to overcome scarcity or to oppose various forms of oppression, this new technology is used to further promote economic exploitation. We hire aliens to manufacture goods on their planets, and then beam the products of their cheap labour back to Terra. Due to categorical differences in language and cognition, however, the aliens often misunderstand what humans ask them to produce.

In *Something Something Soup Something*, the "player" experiences the game-world from a first person perspective: that of a kitchen worker in a restaurant on Terra. The interactions with the digital environment of *Something Something Soup Something* begin in a dimly lit, dirty stairwell leading downwards. The disembodied voice of the narrator informs the player that she is supposed to head to the kitchen and activate the teleporter machine. Once the teleporter is activated, the narrator continues, it will materialize the dishes ordered by the human customers of the restaurant. As mentioned earlier, however, the aliens who remotely

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produce those food items often do not have a clear idea of what we want and what we mean by words such as "soup." This fundamental equivocality will put the player in a puzzling situation. *Something Something Soup Something* is a short, free video game that takes place in a game world composed of a stairwell leading to an underground kitchen and the kitchen itself. The player needs a mouse and a keyboard to interact with the digital environment and comply with his or her in-game duties as a kitchen worker.

The following two sub-sections of this chapter will discuss *Something Something Soup Something* as a digital artifact that leverages both dimensions of "doing in the digital" for philosophical purposes. This analysis will focus on the gameplay affordances that the video game offers and the game-design decisions that contributed to shaping its interactive argument. More specifically:

- **Section 3.1** will concentrate on the digital environment of *Something Something Soup Something* as it can be experienced by a player; that is to say, on how the game interactively discloses meaning and Information to someone "doing as acting" within it.

- **Section 3.2** will, instead, focus on the video game from the point of view of its "makers," examining the design decisions taken during the conceptualization and the development of the game in relation to its scholarly objectives.

3.1. Playing with Digital Soups (“Doing as Acting”)

With the objective of obtaining cheap soups from outer space, the player will enter the kitchen at the bottom of the stairwell. Looking for the teleporter machine to activate, the player has a chance to pick up additional details and information about the fictional world of *Something Something Soup Something*.

The kitchen seems to be neglected and dirty. From the looks of it, it has been quite a long time since anybody cooked in there, let alone cleaned it. A bulky piece of machinery occupies the back end of the room; in all likelihood, the conspicuous greenish apparatus is the very teleporter that the player is looking for (see Fig. 1).

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Fig. 1 - An overview of the dystopian kitchen of *Something Something Soup Something*

Over a rusty sink, a flickering screen reports that there is an outstanding order for the kitchen consisting of 20 soups.

Initially, trying to activate the large greenish machine does not produce any visible results: if that weird contraption is indeed the teleporter machine, it seems to be inactive, or possibly broken. While most of the elements of the kitchen seem either unresponsive or out of service, one small and quirky device at the center of the room captures the player's attention. That strange piece of technology seems to be functioning and ready to work. A couple of cables connect it to the (presumed) teleporter. Its instruction leaflet qualifies the device as an *STJ 1062 M* signal decoder, where the "M" indicates that the cosmic noise cancellation for this device is to be performed manually.

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Once turned on, the decoder automatically starts to receive a signal. In a way that is reminiscent of video game genres such as rhythm games or infinite runners, the player is prompted to interact with the decoder and to try and reduce the interference of the cosmic noise while the signal is being received (see Fig. 2).

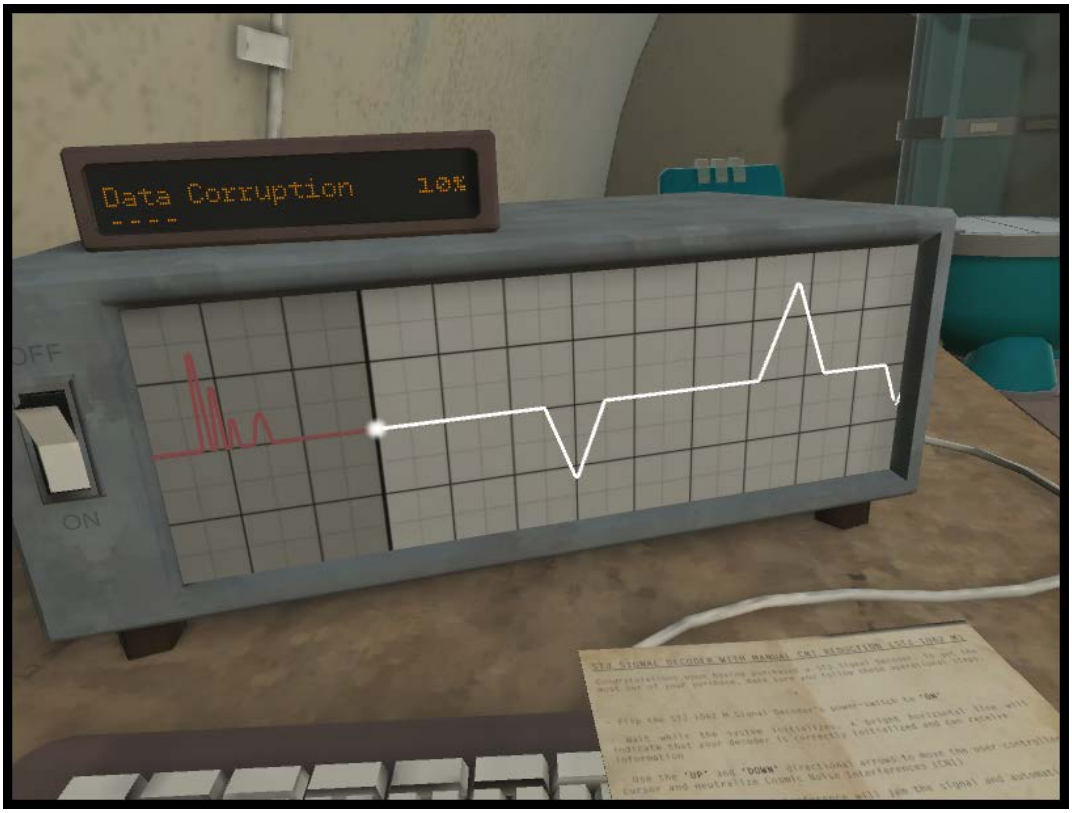

Fig. 2 - The *STJ 1062 M* signal decoder receives a noisy transmission from outer space

Failing to keep the level of corruption of the signal under control triggers a reset mechanism that automatically turns the decoder device off. Managing to keep the cosmic noise to a minimum instead allows the players to successfully complete the transmission. Once the signal has been properly processed, the decoder automatically powers up the teleporter machine, and the narrator grimly comments on the successful operation. “The soups have been beamed in,” he says, “but aliens often misunderstand what we ask them to produce. Which of the dishes in the teleporter are effectively soups? Which of them can be reasonably served as soups to the human customers?”

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Interacting with the teleporter machine, the players can now choose which dishes among the ones presented to them are viable soups for humans and which ones are not. In this phase of the game, *Something Something Soup Something* challenges the players to assess 20 different dishes defined by a number of different characteristics (constitutive ingredients, edibility, temperature, accompanying serving and eating tools, and so on).

The choice of whether each of the received items is a soup or not is performed for each individual dish by clicking one of two buttons on the teleporter itself. One button has the word “soup” printed on it, and its design features an upward-pointing symbol (hinting at the restaurant upstairs). The other button is characterized by the words “not soup” and a downward-pointing symbol (indicating the recycling chamber in the bottom part of the teleporter machine, see Figs. 3 and 4).

Fig. 3 - An example of a bizarre dish (possibly a soup) that was beamed in by the teleporter

Among the players we observed and interviewed during the development of our interactive thought experiment, several asked us whether the bizarre and uncanny qualities of the supposed soups that appeared in

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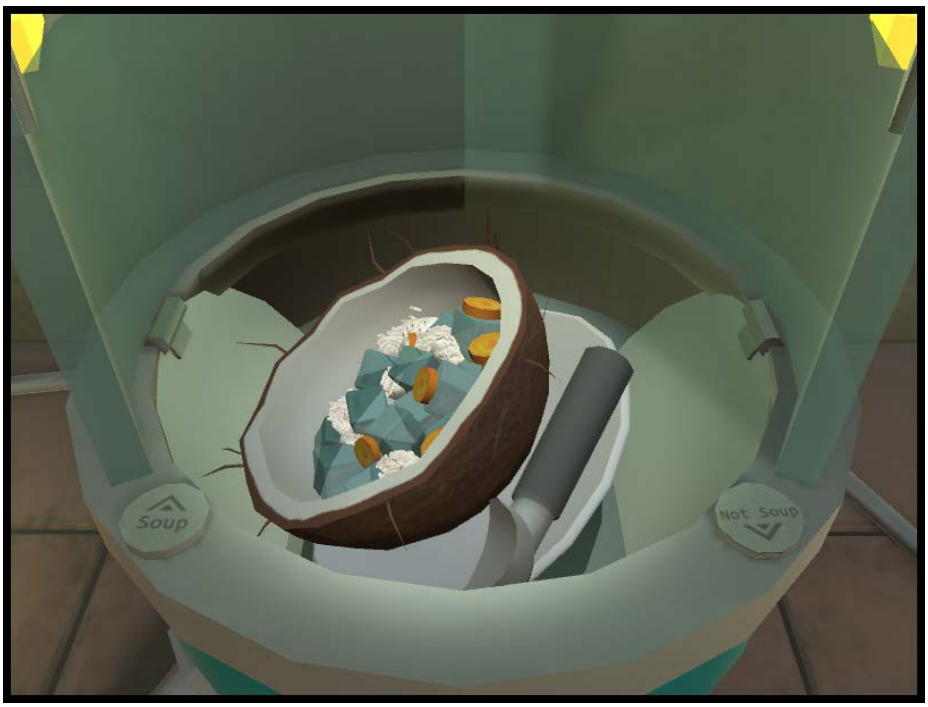

Fig. 4 – This particular dish was discarded by the player. Too cold for a soup? Too solid, perhaps?

front of them were the product of their poor performance with the cosmic noise cancellation task. Had they performed better at reducing the cosmic noise, the players wondered, would they have received more acceptable, more conventional soups?

This is the first philosophical question that we hoped to trigger in the players in relation to their practical interactions with *Something Something Soup Something*: would a more precise communication bypass problems of conceptual ambiguity? Could other philosophical problems be solved through a rigorous reformation of our language? This point and its design implications will be discussed in finer detail in the following sub-section.

The second, and perhaps more central, philosophical question that we hoped to instill in the players by means of (playful?) digital activities and interactions was, clearly, whether we can exhaustively and clearly define what soup is. A minority of the observed players took the

soup-selection task facetiously, and reasonably so: the video game takes place in what is obviously a fictional world, and the task itself has outlandish premises.

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Most of the other people we observed and interviewed concerning their interactions with *Something Something Soup Something* reported having taken the selection procedure seriously. While choosing which dishes could be reasonably served to humans as soups, this second group of players quickly came to the realization that making definitive decisions about what soup is (or what soup is for them) is neither banal nor unproblematic. Some of these players reported having reworked their conceptualization of soup in the process of selecting them, as the activity made them progressively more sensitive to possible discriminating factors as well as more aware of the very choices that they were making.

After having assessed all the received dishes from outer space, that is a batch consisting of 20 possible soups, the player is presented with video game shows the players a synthetic summary of their soup-related decisions on the kitchen display (see Fig. 5). This conclusive part of the experience of *Something Something Soup Something* serves the obvious purpose of making the players' own understanding of soup into an object for their own, as well as other people's, critical evaluation.

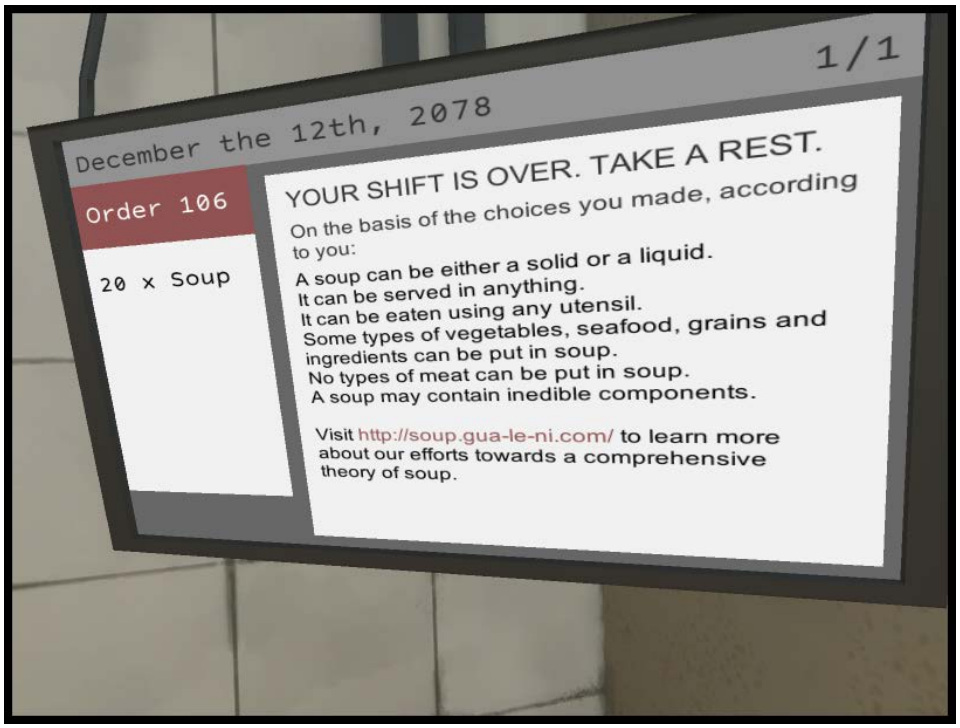

Fig. 5 - The players' soup-related choices are summarized on the kitchen display

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As indicated in the concluding summary on the kitchen display (see Fig. 5), the official website for *Something Something Soup Something* (http://soup.gua-le-ni.com) offers additional information concerning the video game, its design, and its philosophical aspirations. In this sense, the website functions as a companion to gameplay, disclosing and discussing aspects pertaining to the philosophical arguments of the latter in a more traditional (that is, more textual and linear) and explicit fashion.

3.2. Designing Digital Soups (“Doing as Making”)

Section 2.3 (*A Tale of Two Doings*) briefly discussed the interactive experience of *Something Something Soup Something* as having the potential for disclosing a philosophical argument through gameplay.

The present one will try to articulate instead the most salient design decisions for *Something Something Soup Something* in relation to the
video game’s intended meaning. In the official webpage for the video game, we explain that *Something Something Soup Something* is designed to experientially and interactively disclose certain philosophical notions to the players. Its main philosophical point concerns the idea that even an ordinary, familiar concept like “soup” is vague, shifting, and impossible to define exhaustively.

As already explained, the players explore this concept as they struggle to identify what a soup is through a series of binary choices. The synthetic summary of their soup-related choices that is presented on the kitchen display at the end of each game session further emphasizes the intended message of the game, explicitly confronting the players with their inevitably incomplete understanding of what soup is (see Fig. 5).

Section 3.1 also explained that the soup selection part of *Something Something Soup Something* follows a real-time mini-game. In this mini-game, the player is asked to manually reduce the cosmic noise interference in order to correctly receive a signal from outer space (that is, to download a batch of soups into the teleporter machine). This playful real-time activity was designed to complement the main philosophical point of the soup-selection experience video game. In allowing the player to refine and perfect the transmission of data, the mini-game seems to suggest

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that there could be a way of receiving less problematic, less ambiguous soups… And maybe even of accomplishing a clear and complete analytical definition for what soup is.

Does the game offer the possibility for perfectly sharpening communication? Did the designers take a position compatible with Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's early work, according to which philosophical problems arise from our misunderstanding the logic of language (Wittgenstein 1961)? And if so, did they materially inscribe in the functional affordances and aesthetic aspects of *Something Something Soup Something* the perspective according to which philosophical problems and conceptual difficulties are ultimately caused by illogical and inaccurate ways of communicating? Or is the video game aligning instead with the later work of Wittgenstein and his belief that language is inherently messy, defective, and always determined by its contextual use?

The noise cancellation mini-game is designed to be impossible to execute flawlessly, meaning that despite the best intentions and the most attentive efforts on the player's part, data reception cannot ever be completely accomplished. In other words, our design aligned with the later Wittgenstein, that of the *Philosophical Investigations*, and was guided by the concepts of "language games" and "family resemblances" that the Austrian philosopher articulated in that text (Wittgenstein 1986).

Provided that the noise cancellation is sufficient for the reception of the signal (that is, data corruption remains below 100%), then the players' efficiency in reducing the cosmic noise is irrelevant. The bizarre dishes presented in our "thought experiment in a digital world" do not depend either in their order or composition on how accurately cosmic noise was reduced. Soups are, instead, generated by a fairly simple algorithm designed to ensure that the players encounter every possible "soup feature" [5] at least once in each individual game session.

The conceptual disconnection between the noise cancellation task and the soup selection one is not obvious, and is never explicitly revealed to the player. One might only start to realize how those two aspects of the games work in relation to one another only after several play sessions. Given the relative obscurity of this "interactive corollary" to the main philosophical theme of *Something Something Soup Something*, one might

raise the question of whether it was an efficient design decision to include the decoding mini-game to begin with. In response to this likely interrogative, I will introduce three arguments in support of why I consider the noise cancellation task to be a meaningful and desirable part of the gameplay of *Something Something Soup Something*:

1. As already discussed, the mini-game hopefully raises questions concerning the relationship between the signal from outer space and the qualities of the received soups. Through gameplay, players may discover that there is no obvious connection between the two phenomena beyond one being a simple on/off mechanism for the other. Regardless of how sharp and clear the players manage to make the signal, the soups' composition will remain odd and ambiguous. Metaphors aside, what the game is communicating here is that despite our attempts to reform language and sharpen communication processes, we still live and act in a world where the meanings we attribute to words are inherently indefinite and constantly shifting. We found this to be an important corollary to our main interactive philosophical argument, and we did not feel that the relative subtlety of this "interactive argument" was a valid enough reason to exclude it from the experience of gameplay.

2. The decoder mini-game contributes to making the embedded narrative to the game richer. Both its rickety design and the crude information contained in the instruction manual add further depth and thematic detail to the squalid game-world of *Something Something Soup Something*. Additional aesthetic and narrative detail in thought experiments (regardless of their literary, cinematic, or virtual mediation) has the potential to further stimulate the imagination of the recipient, which can also serve the philosophical purposes of the thought experiment itself (see Gendler 1998; Davies 2008, 10–11).

3. The traditionally ludological structure of the mini-game and its focus on the quantification of player performance was conducive to a third philosophical theme that we tried to weave into the video game and that was outlined on the official website of *Something Something Soup Something* as follows:

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> *Something Something Soup Something* is also designed to stimulate reflection on the possibility to analytically define what a game is. Our "interactive thought experiment" involves some narrative, it allows for a bit of exploration, it features a section that quantifies the performance of the "players" in relation to a pre-established goal [. . .]. But does the presence of those "ludological ingredients" warrant its definition as a video game? What if only a part of it could be formally recognized as a video game? Is it even wise or productive to strive for a complete theoretical understanding of concepts like "soup" or "game"? I find this point to be especially beneficial in contexts like introductory courses in game design or game studies. Either presented in class or assigned as playable homework, the experience of our short, free video game can become the occasion of discussions concerning the limits of formalism in analyzing and designing video games and playful systems more in general.

Until now, the discussion and analysis of the philosophical themes of *Something Something Soup Something* kept the activities recognized as "doing as acting (where experiences and arguments emerge from the experience of gameplay) tidily separated from those that, instead, could be identified as "doing as making" (activities concerned with building digital environments and taking design decisions).

Having spent a considerable portion of this chapter to stress the difficulties in neatly splitting these "roles," it would perhaps be confusing (or at least methodologically incomplete) if I did not take some time also to discuss the "gray areas" of *Something Something Soup Something*. In other words, for the sake of clarity and completeness, I consider it important to consider those moments of gameplay in which the players are also "makers," and those aspects of game development in which (given the limitations posed by the digital technologies used) the designers can also be recognized as "acting" within the constraints of digital environments.

In our small, dystopian game-world, the players (those who, once again, "do by acting") have admittedly very little space to express themselves or to deviate from the pre-determined tracks of the game and its narrative. *Something Something Soup Something* is set in an inescapable kitchen in which the players are supposed to behave like employees, a

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loosely defined identity that they are not allowed to abandon as long as they act in that specific digital environment. Players can however "style" their in-game activities in a number of ways, most of which involve sabotaging their in-game identity as employees. In other words, the players are not given opportunities to take the role of "makers" apart from their possibility to "style themselves" rebelliously against the video game's implied ideology and expected gameplay. Such subversive acts could be exemplified as deciding to not comply with the fictional role of a kitchen worker or to make random or nonsensical choices in relation to the proposed noise-suppression and soup-categorization tasks.

Taking the perspective of the designers (those who did *Something Something Soup Something* as makers), we need to acknowledge that their role of "makers" cannot be unambiguously separated from their "acting" within one or more digital environments. In the specific case of *Something Something Soup Something*, the game engine we chose, the 3D modeling software we used, and the computer platforms that we expected the video game would be played on (together with their respective technical specifications) had a formative influence on how several technical and conceptual game design decisions were made. The time and money allotted for the project were also influential in the development of *Something Something Soup Something* as they contributed to determine the amount of game elements (such as soup features) and game functionalities that could be included in the

video game.

As should now be obvious to the reader, the philosophical themes developed and materialized in *Something Something Soup Something* were not uniquely shaped by our understanding of the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein or by our sensitivities and design prowess. In a way that is not dissimilar to the expressive and conceptual restrictions that its traditional written form imposed on Western thought, "doing" philosophy with the digital medium is constrained and "shaped" by distinctive technical, contextual, and interactive limitations.

What I would like to clarify in these concluding paragraphs is that I do not consider "doing in the digital" as an exceptional (or even as a particularly desirable) way of pursuing humanistic inquiry, nor do I consider the computer to be the ultimate philosophical tool. The use of digital environments and other forms of practical involvement with

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research and education can overcome some of the inadequacies and limitations that are inherent to an exclusively linguistic (or more specifically textual) mediation of thought. It is, however, a form of "overcoming" that inevitably brings about new problems, limitations, and discontents. The embedding of video games and computer simulations in social and cultural practices (philosophy being one of them) might, thus, best be pursued on the basis of the understanding that, as with any other form of mediation, their virtual worlds disclose reality in specific ways, and that such ways are always inherently both revealing and concealing (Gualeni 2015, 94).

4. Conclusion

This chapter purposefully played in counterpoint with the general theoretical orientation of the book of which it is part. Instead of focusing its attention on the recording and archiving capabilities of the digital medium, it proposed an understanding of the digital medium that focused on its disclosing various forms of "doing."

On the basis of a theoretical framework rooted in media studies and game studies, this chapter focused on digital forms of "doing." The uses and advantages of the methodological separation between "doing as acting" and "doing as making" in virtual worlds were theoretically articulated in section 2 and then discussed in terms of their practical results and effects in section 3. In the third section, a playful digital world that I recently designed was specifically analyzed as leveraging both dimensions of "doing in the digital" for philosophical purposes.

Traditional scholarly approaches chiefly (if not exclusively) present insights, analyses, interpretations, as well as new perspective in textual form. In an attempt to overcome and complement the exclusively linguistic approach to the humanities (and philosophy in particular), I advocated for a compromissory and multi-media-driven approach to the development, negotiation, and dissemination of notions and arguments.

In concluding this essay, allow me to explicitly add that I am not proposing to understand the digital medium exclusively as a medium for

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"doing." I consider "doing in the digital" to be one of the current dominant uses of the computer. I want to clarify, however, that I am well aware that it would be limiting and perhaps counterproductive to embrace "doing" as the sole use of the digital medium. Other activities, such as recording, reading, discussing, and listening, can all coexist and collaborate with "doing" in developing content and shaping culture in a number of ways.

In this sense, the "soup" analogy might also be fitting for our interpretation of the meanings and effects of digital mediation. Similar to the conceptual definition for what a soup is, developing a coherent and complete understanding of the possibilities and effects of our digital activities is a messy task, one that heavily depends on cultural and historical factors, and one that, notwithstanding our categorization efforts, may remain impossible to capture exhaustively.

Acknowledgments

Several, recurring conversations with Michelle Westerlaken in the past months were both inspiring and shaping for the arguments offered in this chapter. If this text adds anything interesting or useful to the current discourse, she is probably the one to blame for that. In this acknowledgments section I would also like to thank Johnathan Harrington and Isabelle Kniestedt, who significantly contributed to the design and the development of *Something Something Soup Something*, to the preliminary research and technical work leading to it, and to the editing of this chapter.

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Endnotes

[1] The terms used to indicate this aspect of flexibility in our relationship with technologies are "multistability" (as introduced by Don Ihde) or "metastability" (coined by Bernard Stiegler, who adapted the concept from Gilbert Simondon). Both notions indicate, in different ways, that the

relationships that people establish with technologies and the meanings that they attribute to such relationships are always influenced by a variety of socio-technical factors and situations.

[2] The adjective “virtual” was originally used in modern Latin to encapsulate the idea of “potentiality.” *Virtualis* is a late-medieval neologism, the existence of which became necessary when Aristotle’s concept of δύναμις (*dynamis*: potentiality, power) had to be translated into Latin (Van Binsbergen 1997, 9). The concept of ‘potentiality’ at the etymological foundation of the adjective “virtual” provides the background for understanding why, at least in one of its interpretations, it is used to indicate the latency of certain possibilities inherent in a specific artifact, combination of artifacts, or state of things (Gualeni 2015, 54–5). A more common connotation of the adjective “virtual” was presented by Pierre Lévy, a connotation that did not stand in opposition to “actual” in the sense discussed above, but to “actual” in the specific sense of something that is pertinent to the world humans are native to (Lévy 1998, 14). The latter understanding of “virtual” has definite affinities with a digitalist approach to virtual reality such as the one heralded by David Chalmers (Chalmers 20176, 2, 3)

[3] *Something Something Soup Something* is available for free for a number of different computer platforms at http://soup.gua-le-ni.com. It was designed and written by Stefano Gualeni, in collaboration with Isabelle Kniestedt (art and programming), Johnathan Harrington (field research and additional design), Marcello Gómez Maureira (web-design and additional programming, Riccardo Fassone (music and sound effects), Jasper Schellekens (narrator and research support).

[4] See Chapter “8.1.2 Humans who calculate” in *Virtual Worlds as Philosophical Tools* (Gualeni 2015, 156–7).

[5] During the development of *Something Something Soup Something*, we had to identify the properties and features that different people in a variety of different cultures use to describe soup. By doing so, we tried to remove our personal biases about what soup is (or is not) from the conceptual design of the video game. Inspired by Eleanor Rosch and Carolyn B. Mervis’s linguistic experiments, we organized focus groups in different countries (Rosch and Mervis 1975). The various activities involved in those focus groups ensured that our conceptions of soup, as designers, were as inclusive as possible.