

## Book Review

# **Old Lies, New Media — A Defense of Simulated Experience: New Noble Lies by Mark Silcox**

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Mark Silcox. 2018. *A Defense of Simulated Experience: New Noble Lies*. Routledge. Hardcover, 155 pp. + ix. USD 153.5. ISBN 9780429022593.

In *A Defense of Simulated Experience: New Noble Lies*, Mark Silcox presents a novel account of simulated experience and defends its positive social uses and effects. The introduction to the book describes how philosophers in the past have treated simulated experience as dangerously illusory or downright deceitful. Silcox discusses not only Plato's allegory of the cave, Baudrillard's notion of simulacrum, Nozick's negative judgements about plugging into the experience machine, but also the presentation of simulation in works of science fiction such as the movie *The Matrix*. Playing in counterpoint with these negative approaches to simulations and their dystopian and deceiving qualities, Silcox also examines the attractive varieties of simulated human experiences that are available to us in contemporary cultural life, such as computer games, virtual reality, social media, and various other online communities. Silcox wonders whether the ways in which simulated experiences can trick their users and take away their autonomy can be outweighed by the value of the "pleasurable, fascinating, or incredibly rich types of experiences" that are disclosed by modern technologies (14). Moreover, he suggests that there can be a distinct *political* value to simulated experience, which is further articulated in the second part of the book. In extreme synthesis, we could characterize Silcox's argument as a call for more nuance within discussions of simulations. The author embarks on a defense of simulated experience with the explicit goal of showing how "simulated experiences of a wide variety of types can be used to enrich the human condition" (15).

In the first chapter, he presents a tentative and highly schematic definition of simulation. Silcox critically analyses and engages with previous attempts at defining simulation. He considers uses of the concept within theory of mind, Baudrillard's notion of simulacra, and Bostrom's hypothesis that we are currently living in a simulation. In the

wake of his analysis, he proposes the following criteria for an experience to be a simulated experience:

*A person P is undergoing an experience a of type E that is a simulation of an experience b of type E'*

*IFF*

*I. P's experiential state a is of type E, and*

*II. Experiences of type E' are psychologically accessible to P,*

*III. P's experiential state a shares  $n (>0)$  actual similarities with some experience b of type E'. (24)*

He helpfully elaborates on the criteria of psychological accessibility and actual similarity, defining the first one roughly in terms of imagination, and the second one as referring to functional similarities between simulated experiences and whatever they simulate.

Although these criteria for what simulated experiences are remain quite vague, his definition allows him to focus on two characteristics of simulated experience that play an important role in his discussion on their political value. In particular, it clarifies the way in which simulations are related to make-believe and fiction, and the way in which they can succeed in deceiving their users/appreciators about their own reality. Within philosophy of fiction, fiction and deception are often interpreted as mutually exclusive categories, as their respective aims are to mandate imagination and to induce false beliefs. Yet, Silcox's broad definition of simulation allows him to both identify the socio-political value of simulated experiences as make-believe experiences without real-world consequences, and the possible paternalistic uses of the (self-)deceptive potential of simulated experiences.

The meaning and scope of his definition of simulation is further clarified when, in the second chapter, Silcox hones in onto case studies of kinds of simulated experiences, both voluntary and accidental. This chapter explores the role of simulation in make-believe games, dissociated identity disorder, theatrical acting, and virtual reality. For each type of simulated experience, he attempts to show how their negative appraisal is often based on inconsistent arguments or misconceptions, both when it comes to the way the process of simulation itself is understood and to the psychological, social, and epistemic effects of simulated experience. When it comes to virtual reality (VR), for example, Silcox points out that VR is commonly associated with notions like treachery,

illusion, and brain-in-a-vatism. This social stigma has led to “characterizations of VR that reduce it to a mere bugaboo of alarmist philosophical and fictional dystopias” (76). These associations have caused VR to be regarded as a potential threat to human good. In his book, Silcox reminds us that beside for being a potential threat to human well-being, VR can also enrich our lives in a number of ways, and provide insights into ourselves and the world at large.

His tentative definition proves to be practical and helpful in analysing the potential harms and benefits of the contemporary social uses of simulated experiences. Yet, Silcox himself acknowledges that his definition is ultimately vague and highly contestable, and expresses skepticism towards the sheer possibility of definitively and uncontroversially defining simulated experiences as a natural kind.

In the two-page interlude, Silcox argues that simulated experiences should be better understood as a ‘*normative kind*’, abruptly shifting the focus of his analysis to the political relevance of simulated experiences, claiming that “[t]he most fundamental, defining feature shared by all simulated experiences is that political actors have a special—and, in a certain rather unusual sense to be specified hereafter, *overriding*—type of obligation to bring about such psychological states, both for themselves and for their fellow citizens” (82).

Claims of this kind make his argument quite difficult to grasp. The idea of a ‘normative kind’ is a rather esoteric notion. Defining simulations as a normative kind does not provide more clarity than the definition of simulation as a natural kind that Silcox earlier provided.

In the third chapter of his book, he somewhat clarifies what he means with the normative character of simulations by illustrating the role simulated experiences can play within political utopianism. In this pursuit, Silcox discusses the forms of digital optimism defended by Peter Ludlow (2001) and Jane McGonigal (2011). Unlike these scholars, he disagrees with the commonly accepted idea that, for simulated experiences to be politically, socially, or culturally valuable, it needs to be possible to distinguish them from their real counterparts. Silcox claims, in fact, that “in our efforts to understand and bring about the greatest of political goods, human agents both can and should be prepared to *sacrifice* at least some of our capacity for distinguishing between reality and simulation” (105).

It is at this point that Silcox makes a surprising move in his defense of simulated experience: instead of denying or mitigating the deceptive character of simulations, he argues that their value might rather stem from the way they can bring about false beliefs. Silcox’s arguments about the value of simulated experience here “start to resemble certain well-known philosophical defenses of the permissibility of lying” (112).

The argumentation offered in the fourth chapter starts from Plato's idea that "political action is somehow, by its very nature, inextricably tied to the practice of deception" (117). In this chapter, Silcox describes the value of simulated experiences, defined as a normative kind, within (utopian) political action. He suggests that they might be used to inform political theory and shape a practice of quasi-respectful paternalism, in which political activities qualify "both as instances of simulated respect for individual autonomy and as actual paternalistic interventions in human decision-making" (135). Silcox describes how simulated experiences can be used to give people the illusion that their autonomy is valued and respected. On the basis of that illusion, people can be made to accept paternalistic public policy measures that actually take away their autonomy, so as to protect them from their "own everyday irrationality" (134).

### **Critical Analysis and Reflections on the Book's Relevance to Game Studies**

It is not typical of either of us, the authors of this review, to scribble on the pages of books. Even less characteristic it is for either of us to write so much on the side and the blank interstices of a book as we did while reading *A Defense of Simulated Experience: New Noble Lies*. Surprised with the unusual amount scribbling and note-taking we had done, we started to wonder what that unusual occurrence might say about the way we engaged with this timely and relatively short book. As we already mentioned, Silcox tries to answer very big and deeply-rooted questions concerning simulation, culture, and politics, and inevitably does so across several different disciplines including axiology, the philosophy of technology, political philosophy, media theory, psychology, and philosophy of mind, just to mention a few. Many of our scribbles marked our attempt to somehow hold the vast and fragmented theoretical horizon of the book together. Silcox's book offers an encompassing treatment of the theme of simulation and its varieties, values, and possible uses, but this herculean effort comes with a cost: that of making the text fragmented and dispersive. On top of those inevitable flaws, given the ambitions, Silcox occasionally diverges from the declared scholarly scopes of his book to develop some points that are not immediately relevant to his philosophical scopes.

Our notes reflect our difficulty to keep track of the main arguments and themes when he takes on the simulation-as-art debate (48-49), unexpectedly elaborates on his suspicion on certain diagnostic practices in clinical psychology (63), or offer a very valid but also somewhat unconnected criticism of McGonigal's superficial way to handle the idea of 'reality' (101). Taken separately, tangents like these can be relevant to psychological and philosophical issues connected to simulated experiences, but we found that it did not help following the main argumentative line of the book or its sense of cohesion.

Given its breadth and the wealth of inspiring passages, *A Defense of Simulated Experience* has relevance to game studies. This is particularly the case with regard to how

game studies has approached themes like simulation, the participation in political utopia, utopianism in general, and the risks of psychological dissociations. It is clear how Silcox's perspectives on simulated experiences can apply to the virtual worlds of digital games, although it is hardly ever the case that these applications are directly presented and discussed in the book. Additionally relevant to game studies is how he addresses how simulated experiences offered to us within game worlds can be inherently valuable as forms of harmless play that "retain much, if not all, of the hedonic and cognitive value of the competitive human behaviors on which they are often modeled" (144).

We understand that liaising with game studies is neither a necessity nor a focus in Silcox's argument about the political value of simulations. That said, in the preface of the book, Silcox himself anticipates that the book constitutes a contribution to the emerging field of Game Studies. In light of that promise, we lament that the contact of his book with game studies is minimal and oblique. Aside from an extensive engagement with Bernard Suits, passing mentions of Gonzalo Frasca and McKenzie Wark, and a criticism of the specific form of utopianism that permeates the book of Jane McGonigal, Silcox does not explicitly enter in a structured discussion with authors and themes in game studies. Although his arguments often apply to the experience of games, his focus is on simulated experiences in general. Yet, Silcox's book invites reflections on how his approach to (the value of) simulations might be applied to digital games more specifically.

In the last chapter in particular, we felt that a more thorough engagement with game studies could significantly contribute to his argument about the political value of simulated experiences<sup>1</sup>. More specifically, Silcox does not consider ways in which simulated experiences could be (and indeed already are) culturally valuable and politically relevant. He does not discuss how simulated experiences, aside from substitutes for political action or paternalistic deceit, can also be factors and catalysts of *actual socio cultural change*. This aspect is of central importance in the current game studies discourse.

To make this point clearer, we want to direct the attention of the reader to the fact that, in this concluding chapter, Silcox claims that "the fundamental value of simulated experience consists in the way that it can serve both as a goal of, and a substitute for, utopian political action" (117). Silcox does not seem to believe that the experience of simulation can be itself transformational. He does discuss simulations as media for testing and assessing potential behaviors and courses of action (that is, as ways to exercise and explore the consequences of our values, beliefs, and regulations in simulated sce-

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<sup>1</sup> The authors of this review would have found it especially interesting, for example, to see Silcox's arguments enriched by Daniel Vella's notion of the duplicity of the ludic subject (2015), by Gerald Farca's thorough and exciting work on virtual dystopias (2018), and by the texts on transformative effects of virtual experiences produced in the last ten years by Barab, Gresalfi et al. (2010), Stenros (2015), and Vella & Gualeni (2019) just to mention a few.

narios), but he always seems to consider them as experiences that are “mercifully free of consequences” (112).

Differently from Silcox, in game studies and virtual worlds research, simulations and gameworlds are often presented and studied as media that can stimulate changes in their users, and modify their convictions, attitudes, and behaviors. In other words, *A Defense of Simulated Experience* does not offer a perspective on simulated experiences as tools that can also advance critical stances towards social, political, and more widely cultural processes and present rhetorical perspectives about them. Game studies in particular could have enriched and balanced his point, as scholars in the field take a variety of approaches focused on the persuasive potential of games and on their being directly (and inherently) instrumental to social change. The political relevance and the potential of game design to explicitly address socio-cultural issues could be exemplified by the overtly critical and rhetorical aims of the playable works of Nicky Case, *Molleindustria*, and *Colestia*, just to name a few.

We believe that the lack of engagement with the various discourses about the persuasive and transformative aspects of simulated experiences in Silcox’s book to be problematic, and especially so from a political point of view. In line with this critical point, the sub-title of Silcox’s book – *New Noble Lies* – explicitly refers to Plato’s *Republic* (Book III) where deception is characterized “as an instrument for maintaining the *status quo* in a society where those with adequate insight into justice have already taken power” (Silcox 2019, 118). Anticipating possible accusations that his vision of simulations appears as only having reactionary uses, Silcox points at his discussion on the role simulations can play in political utopias, and in the formation of not-yet-realized social institutions. Apart from those passages, his general characterization of simulated experiences as deceptions (and the exclusion of perspectives that might reveal simulated experiences themselves as factors and catalysts of social as well as personal transformation) remains worrisome for us with regard to its paternalistic and illiberal traits.

Silcox does not belittle or ignore the potential harmful effects of the (self-)deception inherent to our experiences of simulation. It is evident that those are simply not the focus of his book, since he considers treatments of simulation as mere illusion, escapism, or undesirable deceit to be already ubiquitous and based on dogmatic or ill-considered arguments. His aim is to show that the ‘gentle’ forms of self-deceit inherent to these experiences can have political value. Drawing on a strong philosophical background, he discusses some potential psychological, ethical, and political uses of simulated experiences in a way that leaves many strands to be picked up for further research into this subject. The absence of a more thorough engagement with game studies can be taken, in this vein, as a fruitful opportunity for game scholars to engage with Silcox’s ideas, especially regarding the political value of simulations offered to us within (digital) games. In sum, *A Defense of Simulated Experience* is a rich and encompassing book, albeit

dense, excursive, and fragmented. Due to its broad scope and its definite timeliness, it can speak to the interests of many.

## Games

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