

book review



All illustrations in the text are designed by Prof. Stefano Gualeni, while Rebecca Portelli handles the realisation process.



Philosophy through Fiction: *The Clouds*

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While teaching and communicating philosophical ideas is often limited to traditional forms such as texts and presentations, one local researcher looks to explore philosophical concepts through non-classical media forms: interactions and fictions. We talk to Prof. Stefano Gualeni (from the Institute of Digital Games) about his latest work. You might remember some of his 'playable philosophy works' presented here in **THINK** magazine, such as *Something Something Soup Something* (on analytical categories) or "HERE" (on the notion of indexicality).

According to Gualeni, author of the recent book *The Clouds: An Experiment in Theory-Fiction*, fiction has always been a useful tool for philosophy. 'Think of the Platonic dialogues,' he says, 'or the widespread use of thought experiments to guide reflection, discovery, and insight: those are fictions.'

Admittedly, Gualeni is not the first to try and articulate philosophical ideas through fiction; the existentialists often wrote novels, stories, and plays in support of their philosophical points. You might also have read Robert Pirsig's 1974 book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. What is original about Gualeni's work is that his book presents a novella (the fiction part), three classical essays that tackle the same philosophical themes (the non-fiction part), and an afterword (the reflective part) all prepared by the same author. 'Imagine three dinners, made with the same ingredients and by the same chef, but in different styles,' explains Gualeni, proposing a fitting analogy.

Set in Malta (and also featuring our local University Campus), the novella follows an atmospheric physicist at the University of Malta who tries to piece together a worrying meteorological anomaly. The novella itself is science fiction; however, it tackles three philosophical themes: the use of fictional games within fictional worlds, virtual existentialism, and unnatural narratology. These themes are further explored within the essays. 'The essays often refer back to the fiction, but they are self-standing academic texts,' explains the author.

Presenting, articulating, and criticising philosophical ideas through fiction can enhance a reader's understanding of these concepts through a deep personal and imaginative involvement with them. 'When you start reading texts like *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, for example, and relate them to your own experiences, they come alive; they become personally meaningful: something I care about intellectually as well as emotionally,' adds Gualeni.

If you're interested in exploring philosophical concepts, or enjoy a good read, it's worth keeping an eye out for *The Clouds: An Experiment in Theory-Fiction*! While the first few editions are aimed at libraries (i.e. they are prohibitively expensive), we encourage readers to pick it up from the local library, ask Prof. Gualeni for a draft... Or wait for the cheaper paperback release, due in 2025. **T**