

Filip Hauer – Digital Games and Algorithmic Work: The Politics of Exchange, Alienation and Performative Ideology

Review by Jaroslav Švelch, Charles University

In his dissertation, Filip Hauer investigates the potential of digital (and analog) games to express alternative perspectives on capitalism and extractivism. The dissertation is based on an extensive literature review that covers a broad range of literature from political economy to game studies. It introduces a three-level heuristic model for the analysis of exchange, alienation, and agency in games, which is then applied to several case studies and utilized in (as well as inspired by) artistic research.

Overall, the thesis fulfils its goals and, in my opinion, undoubtedly satisfies the requirements for dissertation research. The breadth of the literature review is impressive and Hauer shows familiarity with and deep understanding of a wide array of game studies literature. (There is just one publication that might bolster the theoretical discussion, which is Ted Friedman's 1999 essay *The Semiotics of Sim City*, which predates much of the cited literature on ideologies in games.) The interdisciplinary connections to political economy are welcome and well integrated into the dissertation's overall argument. For me, the application of Marxist analysis of exchange to video game simulations was a highlight of the thesis, as it breaks new ground in game analysis and critique. The main result of the thesis, the three-level heuristic framework, is a valuable contribution to the field and could be useful for other researchers.

At the same time, the thesis does have its drawbacks, mainly related to structure, method, and style. As for structure, large portions of the thesis read like an extended literature review. In gaming jargon, the text feels very "completionist" in trying to tick all the boxes and mention anyone who has written anything relevant to the topic. Some sections revisit classic milestones like Huizinga, Caillois, or the debates about games as art, without adding much new. These parts serve as a proof that the author has good knowledge of the field and did proper literature review – but they also detract from what is really new and interesting about his research. This overreliance on literature review (which is a common drawback of dissertations) makes the thesis too dense and, at times, difficult to read. Another structural issue is the placement of case studies at the end of the thesis. These case studies offer new insights that would have made the previous chapters more lively and relevant.

Regarding method, the thesis lacks a clear explanation of how the examples were selected. Using *Civilization* and *Age of Empires* games as examples of capitalist exchange is convenient – but how would a corresponding analysis be applied to avatar-based or multiplayer games? On the other hand, alienation is studied on *Death Stranding* and *Citizen Sleeper* – games with explicit agendas that are widely considered good examples of portraying alienation. It seems as though the author is cherry-picking

examples that work best for his purposes. This is possible but in that case the rationale behind the choices should be transparent and the potential limitations of the resulting framework should be clearly articulated. There are some claims that would need to be backed up with evidence from a production perspective. On page 54, Hauer writes that “alternative forms of economic production relations and forms of politics [...] were simply omitted from both games’ mechanics for ideological reasons.” This is a statement about designer intention (or, at least, design practice) but without supporting evidence. In fact, I would suggest that the reasons are more often practical than ideological.

As I have stated above, the analytical framework is a useful contribution to game studies. However, I think it could provide more specific methodological recommendations. For example, it does not distinguish between portrayal of exchange or alienation in game mechanics as opposed to narrative, although one would need very different approaches to either of those parts of the game. It is also not clear why the three components of the framework are called levels given that “level” is a spatial metaphor that assumes a certain hierarchy or a relationship between core and surface.

As for the formal qualities of the thesis, that are a few issues that detract from the overall positive impression. Some recurring expressions are unclear or ambiguous. “Game work” may refer both to the work represented in the games and to the work of playing games. Some parts are a bit jargony and difficult to decipher (like “allegory of the simulation”, on page 39, or “the ideology of the player agency is concealed in both games’ mode of exchange”, on page 44, etc.) This is sometimes compounded by unnecessarily complicated syntax or ambiguous formulations.

As I am not a design or arts professor, it is somewhat difficult for me to evaluate the artistic part of the thesis, but I appreciate that the process was participatory and that it inspired theoretical reflection. It would be interesting to discuss how challenging it was to balance complexity and accessibility in the author’s design practice. (I have attempted to play *Lithium* on PC but kept failing because of the game’s daunting complexity – or my lack of skill.) Having explored the theoretical underpinnings, what are some of the *practical* challenges of designing critical games?

Despite having raised several critical points, I admire the amount of knowledge and labor that went into the making of this thesis. It is a work an accomplished and knowledgeable researcher; it tackles a relevant topic and brings new inspirations and ideas to the field. To conclude, I am happy to recommend that Filip Hauer is granted the title of Ph.D.

Jaroslav Švelch, Charles University

