

External Ph.D. Evaluation Report

Academy of Fine Arts, Prague

Department of Theory and History of Art

Ondrej Thron's Ph.D. dissertation, *Embodied Politics: Avatars in 3D Video Games as Ideological Interfaces*, is a 143-page monograph offering a critical analysis of the ideological dimensions of avatarial embodiment in video games. The topic is highly relevant to theoretical game studies, and a study of this scope and ambition has so far been lacking.

The dissertation synthesizes classic works on ideology—particularly Althusser's theory of ideological interpellation—with recent research on self-embodiment, subjectivity, and ideology in video games. This synthesis results in a comprehensive and empirically sensitive account of how ideology operates through avatars. Theoretical contributions are developed primarily through case studies. The main method of investigation is essayistic close reading, integrating theoretical exposition with analytical observation and interpretation. Although this approach is relatively unusual for a Ph.D. monograph, it largely succeeds in producing original and coherent theoretical insights. The analyses are grounded in extensive first-hand experience with the selected game titles and include sections written in an autoethnographic style. Thron demonstrates a sharp analytical eye and engages in a creative and productive dialogue with relevant literature throughout.

The dissertation makes several theoretical contributions, most notably the central notion of avatars as ideological interfaces, which is a useful lens for analyzing avatar-mediated experience as a whole. The adaptation of established concepts of subject disciplining and “dressage” to avatarial self-embodiment is also instructive. The analysis of *Genshin Impact* productively expands the scope of avatarhood, particularly in relation to interlocking progression and reward systems, rhythmicity, and temporality. The account of how *Armored Core IV* constructs the minutiae of machinic self-embodiment as a site of play is revealing in its attention to detail and successfully highlights the ideological ambiguity of playing with hegemonic articulations of technology, violence, and war. The three main chapters of theoretical analysis capture a range of varied generic experiences and provide a multidimensional yet coherent view of the relationship between ideology and self-embodiment in video games.

In terms of language and presentation, the style is somewhat rough and hasty in places. A few broken sentences and textual repetitions create a slightly unfinished impression. Nevertheless, the dissertation is overall well written, with a good balance of theoretical synthesis and analytical interpretation.

The work does, however, have significant shortcomings that weaken its scholarly quality. The main weakness lies in its eclectic and relatively unstructured method of theoretical analysis and discussion. While each chapter presents a clear topic and perspective, theoretical discussions often proceed in an unstructured and seemingly improvised manner. Analytical applications of theory too frequently rely on evocative juxtapositions with direct quotations from the literature, leaving much interpretation to the reader. The downside of this organic approach is that findings remain relatively general and tentative. Given the originality and intellectual creativity of the analyses, the absence of systematic conceptual work is a missed opportunity, as becomes evident in the concluding sections. Although the dissertation offers numerous original and useful insights, it is lacking in conceptual clarity and coherence. A number of key issues are left relatively inconclusive: What are the defining characteristics of ideological resistance and critical engagement through avatars? Which concepts best capture the difference between subjectivization in *Armored Core* and in *Genshin Impact*? What is the relation between naturalization and “abstraction”? How do dimensions such as intelligibility, rhythmicity, or psychoanalytic mirroring—each seemingly important in the analyses—fit into the overall picture?

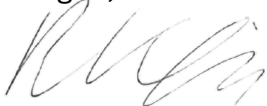
The essayistic approach also tends to favor associative synthesis over depth of argument. For example, the idea of the “contradictory subject,” despite its apparent centrality, is not discussed in sufficient detail. The topic listings on page 20 and pages 108–109 appear hastily added. The “Interlude” side-note chapters introduce relevant ideas but are weakly integrated into the monograph and, on their own, are too brief and tentative to warrant inclusion in a Ph.D. dissertation.

The issue of narrative deserves particular attention. Both *Genshin Impact* and *Armored Core* rely heavily on narrative contextualization. Although narrative aspects fall outside the stated scope of the project, the dissertation lacks a clear argument for why embodied politics in video games can be analyzed in relative isolation from narrative motive, theme, and characterization.

Conclusion

Despite these considerable shortcomings, the dissertation meets the minimum standard for the degree. Its breadth of scholarly synthesis, intellectual creativity, and original theoretical work make it a substantial contribution to the literature on ideology and self-embodiment in video games. I recommend the dissertation for defense and for awarding the Ph.D. degree.

Bergen, 26. November 2025



Rune Klevjer, Associate Professor, University of Bergen