

24th November 2025**PhD dissertation report****Ondřej Trhoň - “Embodied Politics: Avatars in 3D Video Games as Ideological Interfaces”**

As the title *Embodied Politics* already reveals, Ondřej Trhoň’s dissertation positions itself at the intersection of two primary strands of investigation in game studies (and several other secondary ones, notably affect theory and interface studies): existing work on avatars and embodiment through the lens of phenomenology, and politically-oriented (post-)Marxist ideological critiques of games. Both of these have been fruitful and enduring approaches to analysing the experiential and political significance of games, and continue to be relevant directions for research.

As such, positioning oneself at the intersection of these two approaches is a good move, and the question Trhoň identifies is a cutting and crucial one. The candidate is right to note that avatars and embodiment in digital games is ideologically structured, and that investigating the mechanisms of subjectivation at play in avatars and engagement is a necessary endeavour for unpacking the implicit ideological underpinnings of popular digital games. The bringing-together of post-Marxist ideological critique and phenomenological analysis thus stands to make a significant contribution to the field of game studies, one that goes in two simultaneous directions. Applying the Althusserian notion of interpellation to phenomenological perspectives of avatars and embodiment is a useful counter to the universalizing tendency of ‘classical’ phenomenology; meanwhile, in the opposite direction, scaffolding an ideological critique of avatar-based gameplay with phenomenological theories of embodiment serves to connect this critique to a rigorous understanding of the concrete experiential and formal structures of such gameplay.

In short, the research project Trhoň inaugurates here – and especially the idea of the avatar-as-interface as constituting an interpellation of the playing subject into a – could signal a novel and – The candidate demonstrates himself well-versed and up-to-date with game studies literature, and able not only to draw on a variety of sources within the field, but also to engage with these sources critically, bring them into conversation with each other, and position his own argument thoughtfully in relation to this existing work.

The close analyses of *Genshin Impact* in Chapter 1 and *Armored Core VI* in Chapter 2 are handled carefully and methodically. The theoretical frameworks and conceptual arsenal the candidate

introduces are brought to bear upon the case studies in a methodical and insightful manner, and the dissertation's engagement with the two games leads to some intriguing observations. The contrast between the discourse of freedom and the interpellation into structures of control through desire (such as the accumulationist logic of the game system) in open-world games (p. 51), and the argument for *Armored Core VI*'s configuration of the player's mechanical embodiment serving as an allegory for "how (the) player's own body is being reconfigured by the game" are particularly engaging.

It is also a positive that the chosen case studies cover a range of game modes and styles – in terms of economic model (free-to-play vs premium), mode of production (AAA vs indie), style, etc.

Having said that – and in spite of these demonstrable strengths and the evident contribution the dissertation makes to the field – there are also a number of points of concern that warrant remarking upon. I shall list some of these below as consideration for further discussion.

Delimitation of the 3D avatar

The candidate chooses to limit the remit of the analysis, covering not every instance of avatarial embodiment – or even of every avatarial embodiment in a 3D game – but instead limiting the analysis to instances of avatarial embodiment that fit the criteria of (i) being in a 3D game and (ii) utilising a third-person camera that (iii) follows the avatar in an over-the-shoulder perspective. There is nothing inherently wrong in adopting such limitations – in fact, it is even advisable to narrow, and thereby specify, the field of analysis rather than going for broad generalisations. However, this delimitation is founded upon an assumption that only avatars that meet these criteria create an affect of embodiment.

This is, at the very least, a debatable position rather than a self-evident one. Even if we agree that there is no relation of embodiment with 2D avatars (again, debatable), what about 3D avatars with fixed camera angles (as in the early *Resident Evil* games) or isometric cameras (like, say, *Baldur's Gate III*)?

Moreover, the theoretical distinction between 2D and 3D avatars in the Introduction appears to be built around selective examples, and to raise certain questions. To give one example: the dissertation claims that 2D avatar-based games employ kinetic and body stylisation, while 3D games afford kinetic and body realism (p. 20). If we use the examples the candidate provides – *Hotline Miami* and *Death Stranding*, respectively – this appears to be borne out, but a different pair of examples – say, *Prince of Persia* and *Super Mario Galaxy* – would create a contrast in the opposite direction, with a 2D game with a 'realist' body schema built around momentum and weight, and a 3D game with a heavily, even cartoonishly stylised sense of movement and embodiment. (This is not to mention the fact that 'realism' is not an objective or universal category, but one that is culturally contingent.)

Engagement with primary sources

The candidate's analysis in Chapter 1 is exemplary for the way it weaves an engagement with Althusser's development of the notion of interpellation as a primary source together with sources in game studies that – whether also directly drawing on Althusser or otherwise – examine game interfaces, avatars and gameplay from an ideological perspective (Dyer-Witherford & de Peuter; Garite; Bailes; Keever; Richert et al; etc.).

Chapter 2 would have benefited from a similar foundation in primary sources for its engagement with *Armored Core VI*'s allegory of videogame embodiment. Though there is an extensive and in-depth

engagement with work in game studies (especially Klevjer, Keogh and Kalmanlehto), here there is no equivalent effort to read this body of work in the context of a fresh revisiting of its theoretical underpinnings in phenomenological theories of embodiment, either conceptual frameworks and resources from 'classical' phenomenology of the body (Merleau-Ponty) or post-phenomenological engagement with the extension and blurring of the body schema through the enmeshment of human and technology (Ihde; Verbeek; de Mul...). Returning to these original sources could have allowed the candidate to engage more critically with existing game studies work on embodiment and body schemata, rather than (as happens in some of the dissertation's argumentative moves) resting on their conclusions.

Relatedly, there are 14 instances of "as cited in" in the dissertation, most for original sources that are easily available, and which the candidate should have engaged with in their own right rather than through secondary quotation. In general, it is good academic practice to avoid such secondary quotations.

Brevity and unbalanced structure

At just under 50,000 words, the dissertation is quite short for a doctoral thesis. This is not necessarily a problem in itself – length for length's sake is never advisable, and if the dissertation were to have achieved all its aims within this length, then the brevity would not be an issue.

However, the dissertation certainly feels like it could have used more room to breathe. Chapters 2 and 3 together are the same length as Chapter 1, and, while there is no requirement for all the chapters in a dissertation to be of similar length, the brevity of the later chapters is felt in the comparative hasty argumentation compared to the first chapter. The three case studies in Chapter 3, in particular, feel rather perfunctory.

There are also points where ideas are introduced without being sufficiently developed or followed up on. A particularly egregious case is the first interlude, with the title "Cute and Animatic," which starts off by promising to pay attention to the "aesthetic choices" in *Genshin Impact* and *Armored Core VI* but only does so for a single paragraph.

Further engagement with game studies

Overall, the dissertation demonstrates a familiarity with the field of game studies, referring to a broad range of sources. However, there are points where the argument touches upon ideas that have already been articulated in game studies, and where further engagement with existing work would have served to strengthen the argument.

When the candidate writes "the seductive rhythm of game interaction becomes second nature, obfuscating its ideological effects" (p. 55), Braxton Soderman's *Against Flow* comes to mind as a work that has similarly tackled the political implications of flow states in games.

At several points (e.g. p. 60), Moring and Leino's work on the (neo)liberal subjectivities of play seems like it ought to be a key reference.

Zagal & Mateas or Alvarez Igarzabal would have been useful reference points for unpacking the "multiple game timers" of *Genshin Impact* (p. 57).

The candidate describes Keogh's position as "post-human" (p. 87), a point which could have been expanded by engaging with the work of Poppy Wilde, Justyna Janik and others who have specifically articulated posthumanist perspectives on gameplay.

The argument that *Baby Steps* "can be understood quite literally as undermining the dressage players who picked up the title presumably attained during their gaming career" (p. 122) is a compelling one, but it's also very similar to the argument Rob Gallagher makes – through a gender studies perspective that associates ludic mastery with masculinist ideas of control – in relation to *Octodad*.

When counterplay is discussed, how would the work of Alan Meades – or, going further, Torill Mortensen and Kristine Jorgensen's work on transgression in games – have enriched the discussion?

Finally, when the candidate discusses failure in Chapter 3 (p. 130), this is done through Anable, who is certainly a relevant source, but an expansion of this section might also have found room for Jesper Juul, Bo Ruberg and Magda Kozyra's perspectives on the implications of ludic failure.

Further questions

- The dissertation convincingly builds the argument that avatar-based games establish an interpellative framework of subjectivation, and that this reflects the ways in which, in our everyday existence, we are always already interpellated as ideological subjects. The question I would ask in this context is – what, then, is the relation between our interpellation in games and the ways we are interpellated into our everyday bodily existence? To put the question differently – why are we drawn to, and freely choose to play games that repeat and reflect the patterns of interpellation we are already subject to? What is the significance – existential, psychological, etc. – of engaging with avatar-based games? Towards the start of the dissertation (p. 13) you describe "latent desires of humans to have some sort of digital puppet/proxy/body/persona." How do you read this desire, in the context of the idea of avatarial embodiment as interpellation?
- A related question: a central Althusserian notion is the idea that ideology is what makes individuals freely choose their subordination. How does our willingly choosing to submit ourselves to a game (when we could just as easily choose not to play) fit in with this?
- In Chapter 3, reflective games are defined as those which "force us to re-evaluate our embodied literacy and our subject position in relation to the gameworld." This is presented as a radical act, but – to provide a very different example – when the Nintendo Wii was released, it was often described in similar terms: the Wiimote required seasoned players to relearn their embodied literacies, a move which was read as having a democratising tendency by putting both old and new players on the same footing. Would you read this along similar lines?
- The idea of the interface is a central one in your dissertation, and it is appropriately articulated with reference to existing work on game interfaces, especially Jorgensen's. However, the exact remit of what constitutes the interface appears, at points, to be rather vague. The idea of the avatar-as-interface is a central one in the dissertation, but on pg. 63 we read that "the interface of *Genshin Impact*" is "the whole of the gameplay experience, including the physical model, the 3D landscape, the animations, as well as accompanying gameplay rhythms." Is the

avatar the interface between the player and the game, or is the entirety of the game itself an interface? And, if the latter, what does it interface between – the player and...?

While I have raised a number of issues with the dissertation – mostly related to points where expansion and further elaborations were warranted and even necessary – I remain of the opinion that – especially should some of these recommendations be taken up in the candidate's future work – this could be the foundation for a significant contribution to the field of game studies. As such, I am happy to **recommend the dissertation to proceed to defence, and for the awarding of the Ph.D.**

Regards,



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