

Beyond Cultural Identity: A Critique of *Horizon: Zero Dawn* as an Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Simulator

Andrei NAE¹

¹ Interdisciplinary School of Doctoral Studies, University of Bucharest, Bucharest, Romania
andrei.nae@iils.unibuc.ro

Abstract: The post-apocalyptic game *Horizon: Zero Dawn* is a role-playing game that simulates the adventures of Aloy, a female protagonist, in a world where human civilization has returned to its premodern stage of development and the world's fauna has mysteriously become robotic. The cause for this regress into premodernity is revealed by the game's embedded narrative which explains that life on earth had almost become extinct as a result of a military AI going rogue. Implicit in the game's embedded narrative is a strong critique of global capitalism that highlights how neoliberal ideas such as corporate governance, deregulation, and automation imperil life on the planet. Despite its critique, gameplay is structured on the very principles that the game's narrative claims to reject. The world of *Horizon: Zero Dawn* simulates an entrepreneurial ecosystem in which the player must identify opportunities and manage resources in such a manner as to successfully beat the game. The in-game economy encourages the accumulation of natural resources and features no in-built mechanic to account for the environmental consequences of the playable character's actions, notwithstanding the environmental critique of the game's narrative. This article argues that, contrary to its scripted narrative, *Horizon: Zero Dawn* naturalizes capitalism by means of its procedural rhetoric. I further argue that the overt critique of capitalism diverts the player's attention from the capitalist principles that support gameplay, thus, paradoxically, consolidating the ideological nature of gameplay. The game's endorsement of capitalism dovetails with a meritocratic worldview which inflects the game's approach to cultural identity and diversity.

Keywords: *cultural studies; entrepreneurship; video games; cultural identity; ideology.*

How to cite: Nae, A. (2020). Beyond Cultural Identity: A Critique of *Horizon: Zero Dawn* as an Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Simulator. *Postmodern Openings*, 11(3), 269-277.
<https://doi.org/10.18662/po/11.3/213>

1. Introduction

Horizon: Zero Dawn is a highly popular role-playing game (RPG) developed by Guerilla Games under the direction of Mathijs de Jonge and released exclusively for the PlayStation 4 in 2017. The game simulates the adventures of Aloy, a female young adult, in a post-apocalyptic United States of America. The events are set in the 31st century when, contrary to the expectations raised by the transmedial science-fiction genre, Western civilization has regressed into premodernity finding itself in what appears to be the Middle Ages. As the player progresses, she learns that the cause for this regress is a series of events occurring in the 21st century. In the storyworld of *Horizon: Zero Dawn*, early in the 21st century the world experiences the devastating effects of rapid climate change. In order to make the planet habitable again, the private sector create robot systems that manages to cleanse the environment and prevent a climate apocalypse. Once the issue of climate change is no longer a threat, Faro Automated Solutions, the company which created the environmental robots, reorients itself towards the defence market and starts producing military robots and AI. The idea of self-sustained robot armies is well met and in a few years most of the world's armies are decommissioned and responsibilities transferred to the peacekeeping robots. However, at one point the software controlling the AI of these robots experiences a glitch. Consequently, the robots turn against Earth's human population and start using biomass as fuel. Facing sure extinction of all life on the planet, Elisabeth Sobek, a former Faro employee, comes up with the idea of creating an AI called Gaia designed to crack the rogue AI's programming and deactivate the army of robots. However, since this process is expected to take very long and be completed only after the robots have consumed all biomass on earth, Gaia is programmed to use cloning and terraforming technology similar to the one used to solve the climate crisis in order to recreate life on earth. Everything goes according to plan until Gaia experiences a glitch herself, which leads to one of her systems creating dangerous fauna-like robots that turn against the earth's new human population. It is up to Aloy, the female protagonist, to find the source of this disturbance and bring back order into the new world.

The complex backstory that informs the events simulated by the game conveys a critique of capitalism as the game repeatedly points out how the private sector's race for profit and lack of regulation have led to the literal obliteration of life on earth. However, contrary to its anti-capitalist rhetoric, the game's simulation is indebted to capitalist economics, especially

as far as its in-game economy is concerned. Taking the game's rhetorical ambivalence into account, in this article I aim to provide a rhetorical analysis of *Horizon: Zero Dawn* in order to show to what extent the meaning communicated by all the game's modes (visual, procedural, aural, textual, and kinaesthetic) amounts to a critique of capitalism. In order to show this, my argument will go through the following steps. I first expose the methodology which undergirds the present inquiry and briefly explain the critical concepts that I will be using in my examination of the game's rhetoric, in particular those of modal consonance, modal dissonance, entrepreneurial ecosystem, and procedural rhetoric. My next step is to investigate the means used by the game to communicate narrative meaning and the ideology which this meaning embeds. I argue that, despite the apparently contradictory attitudes with respect to capitalism conveyed across its multiple modes, the game naturalizes capitalism. In revealing the ideological workings of *Horizon: Zero Dawn* I wish to highlight the limits of postmodern studies' focus on cultural identity which can easily be deflected by the dominant culture to suit its own goals. In particular, the final stage of my analysis focuses on how cultural diversity in the game works in such a way as to ultimately endorse meritocracy and capitalism.

2. Multimodal Communication in Video Games

The main assumption of this article is that video games are political and rhetorical media. They use a multitude of material signs deployed across multiple modes in order to convey a usually unitary meaning. In particular, video games use the screen, the speakers, and the controller to communicate visually, aurally, and kinaesthetically (Elleström, 2010; Nae, 2019, pp. 72-74). By means of image, sound, and interaction, video games employ multiple systems of signs in order to cue players to mentally construct their respective storyworlds (Ryan, 2006, p. 7). These systems of signs, called semiotic modes (Hawreliak, 2018, p. 12), do not share a one-to-one correspondence with the material signs emitted by the medium. Visually, video games offer mimetic representations of the storyworld, but they also show texts that players must read, speech balloons that remediate the conventions of comics, or they offer important ludic information by means of game-specific visual conventions. What is more, even the allegedly mimetic representation of the storyworld relies on a set of norms that are either game specific, or borrowed from cinema. Sound is also used mimetically to represent the storyworld, but it serves multiple other functions, as well. Like films, video games feature diegetic sound, besides the more game-specific sounds that

offer ludic information. Finally, the most important mode is the procedural one which is related to the interactivity of video games. The production of meaning hinges not only on the authorial control of the game designer, but also on the manner in which the player interacts with the video game. The player and the machine are in a constant feedback loop that determines the production of one set of material signs, or the other. The way the player interacts and the way the game limits her agency in the game's storyworld also conveys meaning. Moreover, the semantic potential of interaction encompasses the player's physical interaction with the controller, as some games have demonstrated.¹ Because video games are multimodal, Jason Hawreliak claims that the interaction between the modes of a video game can engender either modal consonance, which means that the modes complete one another and together produce unitary meaning (Hawreliak, 2018, p. 88), or modal dissonance, which means that the multiple modes are not in a relation of semantic complementarity and, consequently, the meaning that they generate is incoherent (Hawreliak, 2019, p. 136).

The meaning engendered by these modes is, according to Ian Bogost (2007), also of a political nature. As procedural media, video games feature a medium-specific procedural rhetoric which in many cases is used to conceal a particular ideology that structures the meaning conveyed by video games across their modes (Bales, 2018; Cassar, 2013). Like most mainstream media, AAA video games have the tendency to support dominant ideologies by establishing them as ahistorical via a process of naturalisation, i.e. they make these ideologies seem natural (Hawkes, 2003). Of great importance to naturalising ideology in video games is immersion understood as the games' ability to make the player dissociate herself from the physical world and direct as much attention as possible only to the world represented and simulated by the video game (Grimshaw et al., 2011; Jennet et al. 2008; Nae, 2016).

Finally, in conducting my analysis of *Horizon: Zero Dawn*, I will focus on its simulated in-game economy in order to show to what extent the procedural mode and the other modes of the game generate modal dissonance. An important concept in my discussion of the simulation of economy is that of entrepreneurial ecosystem. In accounting for

¹ In order to kinaesthetically communicate the physical effort that playable characters have to endure in order to perform a particular action, in some games the control scheme that activates the respective action is conceived in such a way so as to make the player's pressing of the buttons in the required combination physically tiring.

entrepreneurial initiative, scholars in the field adopt a more flexible definition of the business ecosystem, which

is characterized by the diversity of players which comprise it and through their shared objectives and skills. It is a system of heterogeneous independent players who, in so-called “coopetition”, establish a common strategic interest by sharing resources, skills and norms/standards of strategic behavior which take many forms (technological standards, shared know-how, shared visions, informal rules, etc.). [...] This specific of ecosystem allows participating actors (that is to say the individuals, businesses and society as a whole) to effectively merge resources with the aim of creating economic wealth and prosperity (Boutillier et al., 2016, p. 48).

3. Contending Views on Capitalism: A Case of Modal Dissonance?

When playing *Horizon: Zero Dawn*, players are confronted with what appears to be a case of modal dissonance. On the one hand, the embedded narrative whose content has been summarized in the introduction to this article conveys a stark critique of capitalism. This embedded narrative consists of texts and audio logs scattered around game space which the player may collect as she plays (Jenkins, 2004, p. 128). On the other hand, the in-game economy simulates a capitalist entrepreneurial ecosystem in which the player has to be engaged in order to gather the resources necessary to obtain upgrades and better weapons which are essential for beating the game. In what follows I focus on the meanings conveyed, on the one hand, by the aural and textual modes, and, on the other, by the procedural mode.

The critique conveyed by the embedded narrative reflects many of the debates surrounding neoliberal capitalism after the 2009 financial crisis. In keeping with the political discourse of the left, the backstory of the events in *Horizon: Zero Dawn* highlights the negative effects that privatization, lobbying, automation, and shareholder management, i.e. the type of management whose main purpose is that of increasing the profit of the company, thus primarily serving the interests of the shareholders, can have not only on human society, but on life on the planet as a whole. All these points of contention can be found in several of the texts and audio logs comprising the embedded narrative. For example, in the dystopian 21st century of *Horizon: Zero Dawn*, private entities are legally allowed to run for public offices via proxies, by the mid-21st century most soldiers have been

decommissioned and defence responsibilities passed on to AI, and the race for ever-increasing profit determined Faro, the company responsible for the green robotics technology that saved the environment, to shift its activity to the arms industry, thus producing the self-sufficient military robots that would eventually go rogue. The fact that green robotics are repurposed for military needs, which leads to the extinction of life on earth, dovetails with the leftist critique mounted against the neoliberal claim that the current climate crisis can be solved by private initiative.

Paradoxically, in order to collect all the pieces of information that comprise this staunch critique of capitalism, like in most AAA action games (Oliva, 2018), the player must obey the very capitalist principles that the game overtly rejects. Success in role-playing games hinges on the player's ability to attain the necessary upgrades for defeating higher-level opponents. In order for these updates to be obtained, the player must participate in the economy simulated by the game so that she may obtain the necessary items or required amount of currency with which superior weapons and armour can be bought. Economically, *Horizon: Zero Dawn* simulates an entrepreneurial ecosystem involving many economic agents in which the player must behave like an entrepreneur seeking economic opportunities and accumulating as many resources as possible. What is particularly striking about *Horizon: Zero Dawn* is that, despite the eco-criticism embedded in its narrative, the natural environment simulated by the game functions as an infinite resource that always regenerates. In this sense, the procedural mode pays tribute to the position of radical climate change denial, which supports the unchecked exploitation of natural resources (Kramer et al., 2012, p. 82) by assuming the infinite regeneration capacity of the environment.

4. Naturalising Capitalism

Taking into account the previous section, it would seem safe to conclude that *Horizon: Zero Dawn* is a case of modal dissonance in the sense that the meaning engendered by the procedural mode contradicts that of the aural and textual modes. In this section, I would like to further elaborate on the rhetoric of the game by relating the notion of procedural rhetoric to that of naturalisation. My claim is not that the procedural mode is consonant with the other modes. Instead, I argue that the capitalist principles that undergird the simulation of the in-game economy are not made explicit, but rather that they are concealed by means of naturalisation. By immersing the player into its storyworld, the game renders capitalism a natural economy that is not subject to historical change.

Bearing this in mind, we can return to the overt critique of capitalism and reassess it from the perspective proposed by Stephen Klein, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig de Peuter who argue that

“the games industry, like the rest of popular culture, has learned that irony is a no-lose gambit, a ‘have your cake and eat it too’ strategy whose simultaneous affirmation/negation structure can give the appearance of social critique and retract it in the same moment—thereby letting everything stay just as it is while allowing practitioners to feel safely above it all even as they sink more deeply in” (Klein et al., 2003, p. 277).

Therefore, rather than actually undermining capitalism, the game’s overt critique further draws the player’s attention away from the capitalist principles underpinning gameplay. The fact that the game openly assumes an anti-capitalist message paradoxically contributes to the naturalisation of capitalism as players are constantly reassured that they are not playing a capitalist game. This rhetorical effect interpellates (Althusser, 1971, p. 70) players as capitalist subjects and establishes capitalism as the norm.

A consequence of interpellation is the adoption of a meritocratic worldview which has a strong bearing on how the game approaches cultural identity and diversity (Hughes, 2018). The population of *Horizon: Zero Dawn* is culturally diverse with many persons who belong to subaltern groups occupying positions of authority. While such an approach to social hierarchy is commendable (Murray, 2018; Navarro-Remesal, 2018), the game’s meritocratic worldview suggests that attaining such high positions in the social hierarchy is a result of individual merit, not of privilege. In this sense, the storyworld of *Horizon: Zero Dawn* is a liberal utopia where each individual, regardless of background, can achieve her potential provided that she strives hard enough.

5. Conclusion

This article has investigated the modal dissonance that characterizes *Horizon: Zero Dawn*’s attitude with respect to capitalism. I have shown that, contrary to expectations, the overt critique of capitalism contributes to the naturalisation of the already covert capitalist principles that undergird gameplay. Because players are told they are playing an anti-capitalist game, they are less critical of the ideology that structures gameplay, which makes

the said ideology implicit. In this case, capitalism functions as an ideology and benefits from the process of naturalisation.

Acknowledgement

This paper was co-financed by the Human Capital Operational Program 2014-2020, project number POCU / 380/6/13/125245 no. 36482 / 23.05.2019 Excellence in Interdisciplinary PhD and post-PhD Research, Career Alternatives Through Entrepreneurial Initiative (EXCIA), coordinator: The Bucharest University of Economic Studies.

References

- Althusser, L. (1971). *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (B. Brewster, Trans.). Monthly Review Press.
- Bales, J. (2018). Ideology and the virtual city: Social critique and conformity in video game power fantasies. *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds*, 10(2), 149-165. https://doi.org/10.1386/jgvw.10.2.149_1
- Bogost, I. (2007). *Persuasive Games. The Expressive Power of Video Games*. The MIT Press.
- Boutillier, S., Carre, D., & Levratto, N. (2016). *Entrepreneurial Ecosystems*, Vol. 2. Wiley.
- Cassar, R. (2013). Gramsci and Games. *Games and Culture*, 8(5), 330-353. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412013493499>
- Hawreliak, J. (2018). *Multimodal Semiotics and Rhetoric in Videogames*. Routledge.
- Elleström, L. (2010). The Modalities of Media: A Model for Understanding Intermedial Relations. In L. Elleström (Eds.), *Media Borders: Multimodality and Intermediality* (pp. 11-50). Pelgrave Macmillan.
- Grimshaw, M., Charlton, P.C., & Jagger, R. (2011). First-Person Shooters: Immersion and Attention. *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture*, 5(1), 29-44.
- Hawkes, D. (2003). *Ideology*. Routledge.
- Hughes, B. (2018). The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games: Why Gaming Culture is the Worst. *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics*, 14(3), 407-409. https://doi.org/10.1386/macp.14.3.407_5
- Jennet, C., Cox, A.L., Cairns, P., Dhoparee, S., Epps, A., Tijs, T., & Walton, A. (2008). Measuring and defining the experience of Immersion in Games. *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies*, 66, 641-661. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhcs.2008.04.004>

- Jenkins, H. (2004). Game Design as Narrative Architecture. In N. Wardrip-Fruin, & P. Harrigan (Eds.), *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* (pp. 118-130). MIT Press.
- Klein, S., Dyer-Witheford, N., & de Peuter, G. (2003). *Digital Play. The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing*. McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Kramer, R. C., & Michalowski, R. J. (2012). Is Global Warming a State-Corporate Crime? In R. White (Ed.), *Climate Change from a Criminological Perspective* (pp. 71-88). Springer.
- Murray, S. (2018). The Work of Postcolonial Game Studies in the Play of Culture. *Open Library of Humanities*, 4(1), 13. <http://doi.org/10.16995/olh.285>
- Nae, A. (2016). Immersion at the Intersection of Technology, Subjectivity and Culture: An Analysis of Silent Hill 2. *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae-Film and Media Studies*, 13(1), 7-19. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ausfm-2016-0011>
- Nae, A. (2019). *Horror Video Games as Procedural Narratives: Extreme Colonial Encounters in the Digital Heart of Darkness* Ed. Universităţii din Bucureşti.
- Navarro-Remesa, V. (2018). Gender, sex and romance in role playing video games: Dragon's Dogma, Fable III and Dragon Age: Inquisition. *Catalan Journal of Communication & Cultural Studies*, 10(2), 177-191. https://doi.org/10.1386/cjcs.10.2.177_1
- Oliva, M., Perez-Latorre, O., & Besalu, R. (2018). Choose, collect, manage, win!: Neoliberalism, enterprising culture and risk society in video game covers. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 24(6), 607-622. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856516680324>
- Ryan, M. L. (2006). *Avatars of Story*. University of Minnesota Press.