

# Let's Play Illiberal Democracy: Authoritarian Political Simulators as Playgrounds of History

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## INTRODUCTION

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the West triumphantly declared itself the winners of the Cold War, marking the 1990s as a Fukuyaman “end of history” victory screen. The spread of liberal democracy seemed inevitable across the Globe. However, the late 1990s and early 2000s saw the growth of an alternative strain of political organisation, illiberal democracy (Zakaria 1997). Despite holding elections, illiberal democracies are characterised by the erosion of civil liberties, government by decree, the flaunting of the rule of law, the hollowing out of the country’s constitution and electoral process, the fusion of powers, and the rise of a wealthy oligarchy controlling strategic industries and the media, which serve as mouthpieces of the state. Though elected democratically, strongmen like Erdoğan, Orbán, Duterte or Putin rule according to the same “illiberal playbook” of forging, bending and breaking democratic policies in the pursuit of authoritarian power (Pirro and Stanley 2022). But what if the same cavalier attitude that makes whole countries the playgrounds of the powers that be could be simulated in a game? Serving as thought experiments of illiberal rule, political simulators have offered a way to make state capture fun.

Playing as a ruler in digital games has a long history, starting with *The Sumerian Game* (Addis 1964) and *Hamurabi* (Dyment 1968), games that focus on economic resource management, policy decisions and consultations with the advisors of the titular ruler of Mesopotamia. More explicitly political was Chris Crawford’s *Balance of Power* (1985), set in the then-present day of the Cold War, where players governed the US or the USSR to undermine the other superpower while responding to foreign policy events. Their success led to the blossoming of digital political simulators. Predominantly featuring text-based choices, these games prompt the player to make rational decisions in order to maintain power and the welfare of the people, which are quantified in the political model of the game. As such, they simulate what Foucault has called *governmentality*, the “reasoned way of governing best and, at the same

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time, reflection on the best possible way of governing” (2008, 2). Consequently, these games teach their players to “see like a state” (Scott 1998) and min-max their political decisions to raise required statistical variables and prevent fail states such as coups, revolutions, character assassination or electoral defeat.

Interactive fiction (both digital and printed) is particularly adept at simulating the kinds of choices that political actors make in their quest for power. Niesz and Holland have explicitly argued for a genealogy of IF from training exercises devised for political scientists and military leaders “to simulate the effects of different possible approaches to real-world problems [and] imitate the uncertain outcomes of history and politics” (1984, 123). In my analysis, I employ the concept of governmentality, understood as “the art of government and empirical knowledge of the state’s resources and condition—its statistics” (Rabinow 1984, 15) to indicate how these IF works regulate the conduct of both the players’ virtual subjects (through player agency) and the players themselves (through the valorization of choices and the narrative vignettes’ tone) through choice structure, narrative and statistical feedback.

The paper investigates three interactive fiction games (two digital, one analogue) that range in geopolitical scope and temporality: *Hidden Agenda* (Trans Fiction Systems 1988), *Suzerain* (Torpor Games 2020) and the gamebook *NERnia krónikái* (Vir 2023). Written at the tail end of the Cold War, *Hidden Agenda* places player as El Presidente of the fictional Latin American country of Chimerica after the transition from dictatorship to “democracy.” Gameplay consists of meeting with advisors who present tough dilemmas and have political goals of their own, enacting public policy and monitoring statistics to negotiate a tense political landscape. Narrative role-playing game *Suzerain* has the player fill the shoes of Anton Rayne, president of the Republic of Sordland, which recently emerged from the dictatorship of Tarquin Soll. Choosing between political reform or democratic backsliding, players have to balance multiple interest groups vying for control, the unrest of minorities, the pressure of oligarchs, while foreign powers seek to exploit the political turmoil for geopolitical gain. Finally, the Hungarian gamebook *NERnia krónikái* is a viciously satirical take on current politics under Viktor Orbán’s System of National Cooperation (NER). Starting as a small-town publican, the player needs to build a career in government by making political connections, embezzling money, and participating in social gatherings of the seedy elite of Hungary in order to meet the Prime Minister and prepare the country for Huxit.

The analysis of the games highlight their common strategies of depicting the cutthroat nature of illiberalism by the strategically ambiguous representation of political intent in the choice structures of the games (Domsch 2013, 112-147). A close reading of the hidden consequences of public policy decisions and the interpersonal drama enables us to see the web of social favours that support the power dynamics of illiberal democracies. Finally, by identifying the decisions in terms of forging, bending, and breaking the policies of liberal democracies, we gain insight into how interactive fiction gamifies the political process of state capture.

With the results of the analysis, I qualify the claim made by Dyer-Witherford and de Peuter that games are “a school for labor, an instrument of rulership, and a laboratory for the fantasies of advanced techno-capitalism” (2009, xix). Even if this might be trivially true for select titles, the ludic structures of power play, *divide et impera*, and social manoeuvring can just as readily be applied to political simulators that forgo

the trappings of technocapitalism and reimagine governance in planned economies and hybrid regimes.

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