

Artificial Pleasures and Ideological Subjectivation in Video Games: The Function of Positive Artefact Emotions in the Naturalisation of Ideology

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Over the last decades, game studies has diversified its toolkit to include a wide range of methodologies and theories. On the one hand, discussions of video game rhetoric have veered towards more psychological approaches that investigate the affective/emotional dimension of gameplay (Anable 2019; Burgess 2020; Cummings 2021; Frome 2006, 2007, 2019; Ip 2011; Jarrett et al. 2021; Järvinen 2009; Lankoski 2011, 2012; Lin et al. 2017; Milesi 2022; Perron 2018; Smethurst and Craps 2015; Sundén 2012), while, on the other hand, there has been a growing investment in materialist approaches to games such as Marxism (Bailes 2019; Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter 2009; Garite 2003; Keever 2022; King and Krzywinska 2006; Nae 2025; Schröter 2024; Toscano 2020). This paper bridges the gap between analyses of emotional rhetoric and Marxist ideology critique by highlighting the manner in which emotions and empathy contribute to the naturalisation of ideology in video games. In order to account for emotions, empathy, and ideology in video games, I first draw on Jonathan Frome's taxonomies of player emotions which he classifies based on the level of game communication that triggers the emotions and the type of goal that the emotions are assessed by, respectively (Frome 2006, 2007, 2019). Second, I rely on Petri Lankoski's model of player empathic engagement that considers the representation of the characters, how information is conveyed to the player, and, most importantly for this paper, how the player is likely to ethically assess the expected actions of playable character(s) in the game world (Lankoski 2011). Finally, my understanding of naturalising ideology in video games pays tribute to the critical consensus in Marxist game studies according to which video games are an ideological state apparatus that interpellates player into an ideological subject position (Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter 2009, 192; King and Krzywinska 2006, 197). In this position, ideology is naturalised through the repetitive material practice of gameplay.

In this paper I show that, in order for the material practice of play to be ideologically effective, the game has to be successful in cuing player empathy with the playable character. According to standard Marxist criticism, it is the realism and the ludically engaging design of games that render ideology a natural state of affairs. True as this may be in very many cases, this cannot account for the naturalisation of ideology in those games where representation is anti-mimetic (see, for example the video games of the 90s and early 00s such as *Parasite Eve* where remediation is hypermedial) and/or the gameplay is unconventional in terms of ludic challenges (see, for example,

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a game like *Death Stranding* where the core gameplay activity is a form of grinding). While I am not arguing that realism and conventionally engaging gameplay are not conducive to the naturalisation of ideology, the point I wish to stress is that such unconventional games single out a third pillar of naturalisation which is the player's empathy with the playable character(s). If ideology is immoral because it (re)presents an artificial form of domination as a natural state of affairs, then the role of empathy is to morally validate the otherwise immoral 'natural' state of affairs justified by ideology.

As already mentioned, empathy presupposes that the player morally approves of the playable character's agency. Since a game world is not fully scripted, but also co-created by the player through the playable character, it follows that the ethical nature of play is directly transferred to the dynamic game world through game-world constitutive player actions and, very importantly, that the non-scripted game world in itself has a positive ethical potential that can also accommodate the moral agency exerted through gameplay. If empathy is a vehicle whereby positive moral value is transferred from the agency of the playable character to the game world and, consequently, its implicit ideologies, how does the game engine cue the player to construe the playable character's agency as ethical? The game engine achieves this through what Frome calls world-represented emotions and artefact emotions (2006, 18), the latter being of greater relevance for the argument of this paper. In terms of world-represented emotions, it is primarily by means of a scripted world-disrupting (see Herman 2009) event that the moral poles of the game world are established. This event renders the protagonist the victim of a wrongdoer. The act of victimising the protagonist engenders negative emotions, which contributes to the framing of the antagonist as being evil. (See for example the extensive use of cinematic language in *Parasite Eve* and *Death Stranding* in order to establish the moral poles of the game world and accordingly align the playable character and antagonist with them). Consequently, the playable character's endeavour to defeat the antagonist and restore equilibrium in the game world is rendered morally valid. The paper will nevertheless focus more on artefact emotions, which are emotions triggered by the artificial way in which the game world is represented. By drawing on a dominant aesthetic realist code, video games, especially AAA video games, rely on conventionally realist and aesthetically pleasing norms of representation to represent the playable characters and their corresponding spaces of familiarity, thus engendering positive artefact emotions. Conversely, they often employ excessive hypermediacy in order to represent the antagonist and spaces of otherness (see for example Alma in *FEAR 2: Project Origin* or the father of Senua's in *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*), which is expected to lead to negative artefact emotions. The opposing poles of the emotional reception of the artificial way in which the protagonist and the antagonist and their respective associated game spaces are represented encourage players to construe the protagonist and their goals as morally valid, empathise with them, and regard the desired ideological state of game world as a natural state worthy of striving for.

Keywords

keywords, help, identifying, suitable, reviewers, readers

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