

Ideology in Video Games

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What is ideology?

Ideology is an institutionalized system of ideas that shape people's beliefs, behavior, and vision for life (such as **racism** or **sexism**).

Marx ([1939] 1978) argues that **cultural leaders transmit and teach ideologies** to people through the “material conditions” of culture.

Gramsci (1978) and Althusser (2001) add that **media in popular culture** are part of these “material conditions” that transmit and teach ideology. Thus, **video games** can be said to transmit and teach ideology to video game players.

How do video games “teach” ideology?

Video game designers create **simulated models** that subtly teach ideology to game players through taken-for-granted assumptions such as **rules and images** (Frasca 2003; Bogost 2006, 2007):

- Rules that create the play of **militarism**
- Rules that create the play of **imperialism**
- Images that construct ethnicity in terms of **racism**
- Images that construct gender in terms of **sexism**

Often, game players do not critique video game rules and images because these things are assumed as **gameplay norms**.

Ideology tends to “haunt” video game designs

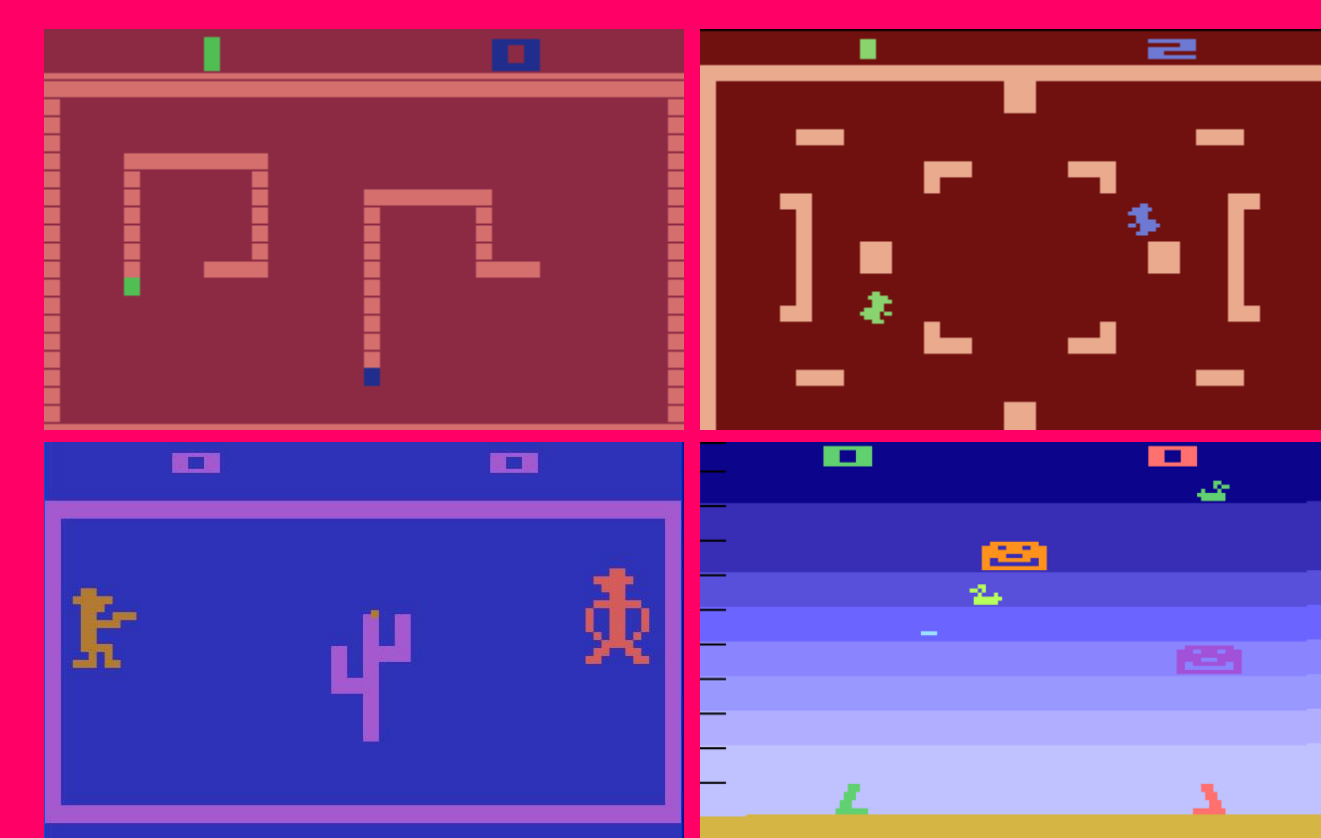
Ideology “haunts” video game design via the “**hidden curriculum**.”

The hidden curriculum is taught through “**rules, regulations, and routines**” (Jackson 1968) in both classrooms and video games.

The hidden curriculum is also a “**haunted curriculum**” in which the “ghosts” of past classroom architects exert a steady but subtle influence upon the learning environments of today (Meighan 1981).

Similarly, the “**ghosts**” of past video game architects exert a steady, subtle influence upon the video game designs of today.

Designers and players often take these “ghosts” for granted as gameplay norms, failing to question the ideologies hiding within.



Ideology in the 1970s

Crogan (2011) argues that the military origins of the computer “overdetermined” its early video game applications: tracking, targeting, shooting, acquiring, navigating, and striking (pp. xxv-xxvii). Three-fourths of the first-generation Atari VCS games (left) relied upon these rules, thus norming the gameplay of **militarism**.

Ideology in the 1980s

Kinder (1991) contends that early NES (Nintendo) games often taught children to accept masculine dominance. Provenzo (1991) adds that NES games typically cast women as passive victims.

Many NES games were modelled after popular '80s arcade games. In *Donkey Kong* (right top), Mario must outwit the ape in order to rescue a helpless damsel in distress. In *Double Dragon* (right bottom), gameplay begins with a scene in which “masculine” Jimmy Lee must rescue Marion--his sexualized girlfriend--from her abusive abductor. NES and arcade games rarely featured strong women, normally modeling female gender in terms of passivity and sexual objectification. Games like these normed the gameplay of **sexism**.



Ideology in the 1990s

Friedman (1999) maintains that *Civilization II* (below) turns the ideology of **imperialism** into a game, as the player vies for global dominance across history. He argues that games like this depersonalize and oversimplify colonization, teaching that “global co-existence is a matter of winning and losing” (p. 145).



Ideology in the 2000s

Langer (2008) notes that *World of Warcraft* pits “law abiding” Alliance pseudo-Europeans (below left) against “chaotic”, animalistic, Horde enemies such as Sultan Oogah the Sand Pygmy, and cow-like pseudo-Native Americans (below middle and right). This gameplay of **racism** leads Langer to observe, “the people whose cultures are being appropriated in World of Warcraft are in a double bind of sorts. They are marginalized both in the real world . . . and in the game world” (pp. 102-103).



Conclusions

Ideologies such as militarism, imperialism, sexism, and racism “haunt” video game design across the years. Hayse (2013) concludes, “Video games mediate more meaning than first meets the eye” (p. 442). To Hayse, the question of ideology is not “whether or not,” but rather ‘what kind,’ ‘what ways, or ‘how much’” (p. 448). In order to resist (or reject) ideologies in video games, **designers and players must critique and contest the underlying assumptions of video game rules and images, rather than taking them for granted.**