

Hegemony As Process? The Communication of Ideology in Video Games and Its Effects

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Keywords

ideology, hegemony, cultural studies, system theory, communication, strategy game, Age of Empires II

Since its release, *America's Army* (MOVES Institute 2002) has been quoted as a primary representation of how video games can function not only as a medium of pure entertainment, but also as a means of transport and reproduction of lifeworld elements and hegemonic culture (Dyer-Whiteford et al. 2007, 101; Galloway 2006, 76; Bogost 2007, 75-80). As Luhmann already establishes, the subject matter of television and literature, including that of video games (Jul 2011, 121), integrate familiar details of the real world, "(...) gerade wenn die Geschichte als fiktiv erzählt wird, [darf] nicht schlechthin alles fiktiv sein." (Luhmann 1996, 99) In this instance the argument remains that these details appear not only as objects or interactions, but also as a form of ideology that reproduces existing hegemonic structures. Central to this argumentation is the question of how video games communicate ideological constructs to the recipient, highlighting the phenomenon of systemic communication. Kept in mind for this proposed abstract should be the genre of strategy games and the game mechanisms and structures that pertain to it, to build up a theoretical concept for the analysis of further games of the genre. In a first step it is necessary to establish a definition of ideology and its reflection in products of contemporary society, the second step should be an exemplary analysis of the strategy game *Age of Empires II* (Ensemble Studios 1999) to determine certain ideological structures which can be found on different tiers of the game. The third and final step focuses on the aspect of systemic communication and develops a model to illustrate the communication between game and user, considering that this process is central for the transfer of ideological constructs. The argument presented here should furthermore emphasize that ideologies are not always intended be integrated into games, like the example of *America's Army* shows, and make a case for a more critical reading of video games.

It has been proven multiple times in former publications, that video games are indeed embedded in political, social and economical conditions. Focal in this case are the theories of Gramsci (2012, § 49) who accredits all objects of lifeworld ideological elements. According to Gramsci and later Hall (1982, 66) as well, ideologies first and foremost embody paradigms, those which each culture uses in a certain way to classify the world. Therefore a special kind of meaning and reality is produced, extending Luhmann's observation to real-world links in relation to fictional media, because they,

too, contribute significantly to the creation of a consistent proposition of reality.

With reference to Levi-Strauss, Hall additionally recognizes a central projection surface of hegemonic structures: „Whole societies and social practices apart from language could also be analyzed on the model of a language“ (Hall 1982, 67), which elicits the comparison between ideology and a linguistic grammar. It is exactly these linguistic-similar formations and fundamental modes of design that elevate ideology to a structural level apart from the content of a specific medium.

With regard to video games, Bogost develops a similar system related to central, originally language-oriented forms: The concept of *procedural rhetoric*, which assigns games a unique mode of persuasive argumentation. Bogost understands video games according to their general setup of computer applications, a chain of processes, which generate behaviors that are based on certain rules (Bogost 2007, 5). The procedural rhetoric manifests itself accordingly, whilst questioning *how* these enthymemes are shaped and to what they refer. For this reason, Bogost assumes that even symbolic systems can function rhetorically and conceives the order of game-based processes as models, which operate to achieve certain goals (Bogost 2008, 128).. Therefore ideology does not only appear as a certain opinion, imposed by the ruling class on the producers of medial commodities and then carried over onto the recipients, but more as a process which can be completely and unknowingly inscribed.

Using the example of *Civilization* (Firaxis 2001) Wark examines in this context, that these forms of rhetoric are not only present on a fictional level, but predominantly on the sub-structure (Wark 2007, 73), an observation which can be conveyed on other games of the strategy genre, for example *Age of Empires II*. Without a doubt this game reproduces a particular interpretation of an historical narrative (White 1984, 11) on the fictional level and, in reference to the goals of the game, the axiom that expansive-militant behavior and technological progress are crucial for the persistence of a civilization. Using *Age of Empires II* as an object of study, the paper will analyze the different fictional and rule-generating structures of the game and identify specific linking elements like technology trees and game objectives as repository for ideological structures. Referring to Wark, who likewise identifies this link between fiction and the rule-generating level of the sub-structure, these elements reflect contemporary society: The societies of control, a term coined by Deleuze, which describes the technologization and the anonymization of today's world, where computerized networks control society and individuals are represented by codes (Deleuze 1992, 5). Wark illustrates that video games reproduce this kind of ideology, and refers to the rule-generating algorithms that build the foundation of a game (Wark 2007, 73). This transfers strategy games like *Civilization* and *Age of Empires II* fictional elements into numerically logical algorithms, which become the central rhetoric of the game and represent present society allegorically.

Based on these observations the question arises: How do video games bring these rhetorical devices closer to the recipient? For this last thought, the game is considered, going back to Luhmann, a system that communicates with the player in a certain manner. In the special case of video games, Kiefer explains, they establish their flow of communication in the way of an artistic product and therefore classify as an autopoietic system, generating communication and connecting-communication (Kiefer 2007, 196). In reference to multiplayer games, a communication between two or more individuals is guaranteed, but it is questionable for the case of single-player games. Kiefer (2007, 196) suggests that the player is interacting with the system and the latter responds, but one could also transfer this observation to a discursive level between producer and recipient, which Kiefer negates. For this reason, we adduce the communication system of Stuart Hall, which highlights the practice of encoding and decoding . The video game appears as semaphore, characterized by the knowledge, the technological infrastructure and the

relations of production on the side of the producer (Hall 1999, 97). It may be seen as a meaningful discourse, which transports certain constellations of signs and is decoded by the recipient. Hall (1999, 107) also points out that this framework may certainly be ideological and formed by a hegemonic-dominant code.

Furthermore, it should be mentioned that the decoding of these signs can be totally automatic, what Kiefer calls the concept of *plotting*. He states, that video games can also imply elements of lifeworld, especially in the shape of fictional-narrative structures. Like Deleuze, Kiefer observes the dissolution of social rooms and a high social mobility, which make social action more complex (Kiefer 2007, 204). With the ability to use *plotting*, one is able to create an "Individualitätssemantik" (Kiefer 2007, 204) to produce narrative and individual identities by self-observation and self-description.

If we see plotting as a possibility to transport certain content to the recipient, it becomes clear that plot structures can possess ideological elements that socialize the recipient automatically (Genette 2010, 177). By production, distribution, circulation and reproduction of ideological discourse in the system of media (Hall 1999, 93), these rhetorical structures are consistently inscribed and manifested in conjunction with the social power relations as dominant-hegemonic code of a communication. Referring back to *Age of Empires II* or the strategy genre in general, these games use ideological plotting not only for presenting hegemonic concepts of interpreting history or culture in form of a fictional narrative, but also as a form of rule-based learning of game structures which can be seen as a reflection of hegemonic society.

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