

Fragments traversing the symbolic order: how games reenact ideology — games from the perspective of Žižek's political theory

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Abstract. Within human society, games constitute a form of activity that produces no direct practical utility, yet persist continuously, remain difficult to abandon, and possess distinctive significance. However, the essential nature of games and their intrinsic connection to human desire have not been subjected to sufficiently clear theoretical analysis. This study seeks to draw upon relevant theoretical frameworks to illuminate the relationship between games and human desire, as well as the operational logic underlying games themselves. Building upon the definition of games, this paper employs the theory of ideology developed by Slavoj Žižek to examine the relationship between games and human desire. By corresponding this analysis to the three stages of ideology proposed in Žižek's theory—"in-itself", "for-itself", and "in-and-for-itself"—the study traces the process through which games produce and regulate human desire. The study argues that the existence of games originates from unfulfilled human desire; games operate in the form of ideology, serving and manipulating desires that can never be fully satisfied. The historical development of games' production and regulation of desire corresponds closely to the three stages of ideology identified by Žižek. Furthermore, the ideological nature of games enables subjects to experience an accelerated passage through ideology. As an ideological form of existence, the operational logic of games may ultimately assist subjects in breaking through ideological fantasy and confronting the Real.

Keywords: philosophy of games, ideology, Slavoj Žižek

1. Introduction

In 2023, after the release of the gameplay demonstration for the *Black Myth: Wukong*, Chinese internet communities erupted into an almost carnivalesque discussion. On the one hand, players praised it as "finally, China has produced its own AAA game"; on the other hand, heated debates emerged around themes such as "cultural export", "national narrative", and "authentic immersion". Similar phenomena are hardly unfamiliar. From the global cultural dissemination sparked by *Genshin Impact*, to the shaping of war imaginaries through *Call of Duty*, and the way *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* came to represent a form of "second life" during the pandemic, games have long ceased to be mere entertainment commodities designed to pass time. People invest emotions, identities, and even value judgments into games, reorganizing their understanding of the real

world through virtual worlds. What is striking, however, is that games are universally acknowledged as fictional spaces, yet they often mobilize human desire more effectively than reality itself. Players clearly understand that the rewards on the screen are nothing more than codes and images, yet they still experience anxiety, excitement, and even addiction over equipment, levels, victories and defeats, or "daily quests". The problem emerges precisely here: why is it that something everyone knows to be "fake" can nonetheless exert such a real power over human actions and emotions?

This contradiction suggests that games are not merely tools for providing pleasure, but rather mechanisms for organizing desire. On the one hand, games present themselves to subjects through forms of freedom, immersion, and fantasy; on the other hand, through systems of rules, objectives, and rewards, they continuously prescribe how subjects should desire and how they should enjoy. Particularly within the context of contemporary digital capitalism, games increasingly function not as spaces of escape from reality, but as extensions of the real social order itself. Slavoj Žižek once argued that the effectiveness of contemporary ideology lies not in compelling people to "believe", but in embedding itself within everyday practices, such that subjects continue to act even when fully aware of ideology's fictional nature. Games provide precisely such a paradigmatic field: subjects knowingly recognize their virtuality, yet still immerse themselves within them and willingly submit to their rules. Consequently, if games are understood merely as entertainment media, it becomes impossible to explain the deeper structures of desire and ideological logic that underlie them. This paper therefore seeks to reinterpret games as a modern cultural phenomenon through the lens of Slavoj Žižek's political theory, thereby revealing how games reenact the structures of contemporary ideology through the production of desire and the operation of fantasy.

2. Desire propels humanity into games

When discussing games, two stereotypical impressions invariably stand before us. The first is that games signify amusement and provide pleasure to people. The second is that games are a form of "unproductive diversion", a wasteful consumption of practice and experience, detached from the constructive historical development of human civilization, existing instead like mistletoe parasitically attached to the ever-growing tree of civilization. Games rarely involve production in the same way as other human activities, whether the production of material goods or spiritual and cultural wealth. More often, they appear to entail the consumption of resources and the squandering of time. From the perspective of a utilitarian value system centered upon usefulness, games would seem to be entirely devoid of benefit. Yet why has such an activity survived for thousands of years within human civilization with such remarkable persistence? What meaning resides within this apparent waste and consumption?

2.1. Definition of games

Before exploring the significance of games, it is first necessary to clarify the concept itself. Bernard Suits, a scholar devoted to the philosophy of games, defined games in the following manner: "To play a game is to engage in activity directed toward bringing about a specific state of affairs, using only means permitted by the rules, where the rules prohibit more efficient means in favor of less efficient ones; and where these rules are accepted because the activity would not be possible without them" [1]. Bernard Suits further identified four essential elements of games: the prelusory goal, the means for achieving the goal, the rules, and the lusory attitude. In any game, players always advance toward a particular objective. Whether it is forming an unbroken line of five pieces in Gomoku or defeating the final boss in an RPG, players establish before the game begins a specific state that can be attained, the realization of which simultaneously signifies both victory

and the end of the game. Without such a goal, action within the game would lack direction. Thus, the first defining element of games is the existence of a pre-game objective. To achieve this objective, players must proceed according to the pathways prescribed by the game's established mechanics. In other words, players must always employ particular game-specific methods to attain the desired end. In different games, this may involve eliminating enemies to earn points, conquering opponents' territory, or constructing buildings and infrastructures. The forms of gameplay are endlessly variable. However, most human activities are likewise goal-oriented and involve attaining objectives through specific methods. Therefore, these first two elements alone do not yet explain the distinctive nature of games. What distinguishes games is that additional rules are imposed upon the path toward the objective, as though players deliberately create obstacles for themselves. Within the confines of arbitrarily established rules, players could in principle move directly and unobstructedly toward the endpoint, yet they instead place reefs, rivers, forests, monsters, and enemies along the route. It is almost as if the designer possesses a sadistic inclination, refusing to allow participants to progress too comfortably. Yet this very obstruction constitutes the source of enjoyment in games. Rules, together with the challenge of overcoming the limitations imposed by those rules, form the third essential element of games. At this stage, the structure of the game itself appears complete, yet one final component remains necessary: the player. A game is not a naturally self-operating system existing independently in itself. What is crucial to games is the participation of players, for it is players who transform a structured system into an actual game. Players approach the activity with a particular attitude toward play. They willingly accept the restrictions and constraints imposed by the rules and willingly tolerate the hardships encountered along the way. Before the game even begins, they have already prepared themselves for entry into the game world. Their most important equipment is precisely this readiness to adopt the mentality of play. Although players in many games may gradually become deeply immersed in the game world, at the unconscious level they nevertheless enter the game from beginning to end as subjects pursuing enjoyment, as subjects prepared to embrace frustration and constraint. This disposition constitutes the "lusory attitude", which is the final essential element of games.

2.2. Desire behind games

Following the preceding interpretation of the definition and constituent elements of games, a paradox seems to emerge. Playing games is ostensibly undertaken for the sake of pleasure, yet the conceptual analysis above reveals that games fundamentally involve the imposition of obstacles—or, more radically speaking, a tendency toward masochism. Faced with this contradiction between function and essence, one must once again ask what kind of pleasure games truly provide and where the significance of games for human beings ultimately resides. In his work, Bernard Suits borrows from and reimagines Aesop's fable of the grasshopper and the ant. In the original fable, faced with the coming of winter, the ant diligently labors throughout the summer to store provisions and prepare for survival, whereas the grasshopper idly wastes the season and ultimately dies in winter. Yet the Grasshopper in Suits's version embodies an entirely different attitude: he voluntarily rejects the ant's charity and confronts winter and death with composure. Through the Grasshopper's voice, Suits further articulates the relationship between games and the ideal of human existence. This ideal of existence is situated within a utopian condition. The utopian thought experiment describes a state of extreme abundance in human society. Just as familiar theories of the "state of nature" imaginatively reduce society to its most primitive and elementary form, the utopian imagination projects the productive capacities of humanity to the point where all instrumental needs are fully satisfied. Material scarcity no longer exists; aging, illness, and death are overcome through technological progress; all scientific mysteries have been solved, leaving no unexplored frontiers. Under such conditions of absolute abundance, where the world becomes "a vast blank expanse", what meaningful activities would remain available to humanity? Suits's answer is: games. Suppose that within this

utopia all instrumental activities have disappeared. Machines perform all mundane labor, material resources exist in limitless abundance, and there is no longer any need for workers engaged in production, administrators managing labor, or financial and distributive systems regulating economic life. Medicine and psychology have advanced to perfection, granting every individual complete psychological well-being, rendering interpersonal conflict and psychological distress insignificant. Love, recognition, attention, and respect no longer require effort to sustain, for in the ideal world there are no flaws that demand tolerance. Within such a completed and perfected order, morality itself loses the conditions for its continued existence. Since no one encounters evil, there is no need for virtuous conduct; indeed, the pursuit of moral goodness becomes impossible, for morality derives its meaning precisely from the incompleteness of the ideal. Art likewise loses its sustaining subject matter. Art depends upon human action and emotion: desires and frustrations, hopes and fears, triumphs and tragedies, moral dilemmas, joy and sorrow. Yet none of these essential elements would remain within such a utopian condition. Knowledge itself becomes uninteresting once all unknowns have been explored. This condition may be described as humanity's "Alexandrian predicament", following Alexander the Great: "When there is no longer any corner of the world left unconquered, what awaits humanity is not satisfaction, but despair and loss" [1].

Of course, this is merely a thought experiment. Quite apart from whether human technology could ever truly satisfy all material desires or transcend mortality itself, the utopian project merely attempts to violently fill the abyss of human desire through the fulfillment of instrumental demands. Yet Suits's claim that humanity would still wish to play games within such a utopia reveals the crucial structure of the thought experiment: "Even within utopia, humanity would still want to play games". The key lies in the phrase "want to". Wanting signifies the persistence of lack; desire remains inexhaustible. Although this hypothetical setting assumes that every concrete need has been satisfied, desire itself continues to exist. It becomes the sharp thorn piercing the soap bubble of the perfect society, the breach within the walls of utopia itself. Human beings play games because desire exists.

2.3. The persistence of desire

Why does desire continue to exist indefinitely? Even within the utopian world described above, where every need has been satisfied and every imaginable want has overflowed into abundance, desire still compels humanity endlessly forward. At this point, it becomes evident that this form of "wanting" differs fundamentally from the various "wants" that were successively fulfilled on the path toward utopia. These belong to different categories—or rather, different levels—of wanting. Jacques Lacan distinguished among demand, need, and desire in his theoretical framework, and explained the emergence of desire itself. Need refers to purely biological instinct. It is directed toward specific objects, such as the infant's need for milk. This form of need originates from the biological organism and can be alleviated through the satisfaction of the required object. Demand, by contrast, is the articulation of need. In order to obtain assistance from the mother—or, more precisely, from the Big Other—the subject expresses need through language. Yet once language enters the process, the presence of the Other itself becomes part of the subject's need. This need exceeds biological necessity, for the presence of the Other symbolizes the Other's love. However, because demands must pass through the processes of linguistic encoding and decoding, a discrepancy inevitably emerges between the subject who issues the demand and the Other who receives it. Something always exceeds the explicit content of the demand. When a child asks for food, for example, the request usually contains not only the need for nourishment but also the desire for the presence of the Other. Precisely because demand contains this excessive dimension, it can never be fully satisfied within the inevitable gap produced by language. What the child truly desires is a return to the Real—a primordial state of unity with the mother. Yet once the subject

has entered the Symbolic Order through language, such a return becomes impossible due to the prohibition instituted by the Name-of-the-Father. The unfulfilled desire for love thus remains as a residue, sedimenting within the unconscious and becoming desire itself. As Jacques Lacan famously states: "Desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from subtracting the first from the second" [2]. Lacan repeatedly emphasized another well-known formula: "Man's desire is the desire of the Other". Desire emerges because the subject enters the Symbolic Order through language, becoming one node within the network constituted by chains of signifiers. Desire therefore ceases to be something purely individual and instead acquires a fundamentally social character. What governs and determines desire is no longer the autonomous subject itself, but rather the network of signifiers within which the subject is situated.

3. The poisoned wine of fantasy: games as ideological spaces

The preceding discussion has demonstrated that the existence of games is itself an expression of human desire. Yet this raises a further question: do the experiences obtained through games truly satisfy human desire? Jacques Lacan argued that desire has only one object, namely the *objet petit a*. After the subject is expelled from the state of infantile wholeness enjoyed within the Real, the subject is compelled to enter the Symbolic Order, where it is alienated and shaped by linguistic signifiers. The *objet petit a* appears like a residual umbilical cord connecting the subject to its lost homeland in the Real, preserving a faint and intermittent relation to that primordial fullness. Yet this fragile connection can never enable an actual return. Fundamentally, the object remains absent, while the *jouissance* associated with it is continuously diluted and obscured by the symbolic order of reality itself. Consequently, the subject can never return to that original condition of completeness, and human desire remains perpetually unsatisfied. What, then, do human beings obtain through games? Can games allow subjects to approach the *objet petit a* and thereby attain surplus *jouissance*? The answer is complex. Games may operate as a form of ideology that conceals surplus *jouissance*, yet they may also provide subjects with opportunities to momentarily encounter the *objet petit a*.

3.1. Why games constitute ideological spaces

The direct product of playing games is experience itself: the prestructured rewards generated within systems of rules, such as the joy of victory, the exhilaration of reaching the endgame, or the excitement of confrontation. These experiences are produced under conditions of predetermined control. This control does not merely consist in the player manipulating a character according to the rules of the game; rather, while players themselves "dance in chains" within the framework of game rules, they are simultaneously subjected to an ideological experience.

In *Mapping Ideology*, Slavoj Žižek defines ideology in the following terms: ideology may refer to anything from a contemplative attitude that misconstrues its dependence upon social reality, to an entire set of action-oriented beliefs; from an indispensable medium through which individuals sustain their relation to the social structure, to the false ideas legitimizing dominant political power. Ideology appears precisely where subjects attempt to escape it, while remaining absent where people explicitly expect to find it [3]. This definition reveals the ghostly and ubiquitous character of ideology in contemporary society: ideology permeates social reality while simultaneously concealing itself within it. Yet to understand the function and significance of ideology, one must return to the theories of subjectivity and desire inherited by Žižek from Jacques Lacan. In the theoretical frameworks of Lacan and Žižek, the subject, upon entering the Symbolic Order, continually encounters the prohibitive "castration" imposed by the Big Other. The subject's own existence is negated, hollowed out, and progressively symbolized by the symbolic order. As a result, the subject always exists as a

split subject. This means that within the subject there remains a dimension that can never be fully symbolized: a "traumatic remainder". Ideology functions precisely by wrapping this traumatic remainder within fantasy, thereby preventing the subject from directly confronting the emptiness produced by the symbolic order and sustaining the subject's symbolic existence. The traumatic remainder always stands at the intersection between the endless expansion of the Symbolic Order and the inevitable failure of total symbolization. This trauma persistently pierces the subject like a thorn in the flesh, reminding it of the contradictions and conflicts that reality cannot eliminate. The significance of ideology therefore lies in its concealment of the pain and anxiety generated by symbolic lack and traumatic residue. By enveloping and obscuring the subject, ideology enables the subject to maintain a distance from the trauma of the Real. Through fantasy, ideology provides the subject with objects of desire, allowing the subject to internalize ideological injunctions while pursuing these fantasy objects, thereby constructing the existence of the split subject within the Symbolic Order.

Games, as cultural phenomena, are likewise inevitably generated within networks of floating signifiers and become part of broader discursive systems. Elements such as game rules, narratives, and character settings may be understood as "floating signifiers" extracted and recombined from humanity's linguistic and symbolic systems. Within the specific cultural practice of games, these signifiers become temporarily fixed into structured networks endowed with particular meanings. Game rules do not merely ensure that games proceed fairly and orderly; they also imitate and reproduce social rules. The incorporation of competition, cooperation, fairness, and reward systems within games reflects broader social values and moral norms. For example, Monopoly, through its simulation of capital accumulation and property transactions, reproduces the values of competition and wealth accumulation characteristic of capitalist economic systems. Similarly, game narratives and character settings frequently draw upon real-world historical, cultural, and social contexts. These narratives and characters not only provide players with immersive experiences, but also reproduce and reinterpret human behavior and social relations under specific cultural and historical conditions. Most strikingly, games exhibit a particularly explicit form of manipulation over players' desires and enjoyment. The establishment of pre-game objectives, together with the victories, defeats, and incremental achievements encountered throughout gameplay, are all accompanied by predesigned rewards. Here enjoyment itself becomes prescribed by the Other. The game tells the subject when satisfaction ought to occur, when joy ought to be experienced. Emotions that should emerge spontaneously from the subject are instead performed on the subject's behalf by the Other. The injunction of the Other declares: at this moment, you should enjoy.

3.2. The structural homology between games and ideological forms

Following Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's analysis of religion through the dimensions of doctrine, belief, and ritual, Slavoj Žižek likewise divided the historical forms of ideology into three stages: "ideology in-itself", "ideology for-itself", and "ideology in-and-for-itself". He further argued that contemporary ideology exists precisely in this final "in-and-for-itself" form. Within games, one can similarly observe that the "fantasy" of games is structurally homologous with "ideological fantasy"; the formal structure of games closely parallels these three forms of ideology.

"Ideology in-itself" resembles religious doctrine: a composite of dogmas, ideas, and beliefs. On the surface, it appears to ask people to accept certain truths, but in reality its function is to preserve specific structures of power and interest. In the theoretical framework of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, the key term associated with ideology is "ideas", because Marx's critique of ideology was grounded in his criticism of German idealist philosophy, particularly its elevation of ideas and consciousness above material reality. Marx regarded the traditional philosophical privileging of thought over social practice as an inversion of reality itself. His analysis of ideology primarily targeted capitalist ideology, arguing that within capitalist society individuals

submit to false ideological structures and thereby bear "imaginary shackles", failing to recognize that the social world is produced through their own practical activity. This constitutes an inverted condition of existence. Functionally, ideology operates as a false complex of ideas that exercises control over individuals at the level of social consciousness. Such ideology corresponds to the formulation: "they do not know it, but they are doing it". This is ideology in-itself.

Within the domain of games, the relationship between game objectives and game rules similarly possesses this "in-itself" structure. In terms of temporal sequence, game rules and prelusory goals are both predetermined before gameplay begins, subsequently regulating players' operations and experiences. In the spatial dimension of the game world, the authority of rules is absolute. Although games grant players a degree of agency exceeding that of conventional dramatic characters—allowing them to act rather than merely perform predetermined roles—players nevertheless remain fundamentally constrained by rules. Even when players violate game rules, crossing this boundary effectively signifies the failure of gameplay itself. For example, in billiards, golf, or most ball games, if one abandons the prescribed methods and simply carries the ball directly to the hole by hand, the game immediately loses its meaning, and the pre-established objective can no longer genuinely be achieved. Within the injunctions established by game objectives and rules, players' desires and pleasures become prescribed and regulated like doctrines that cannot be disobeyed.

The second form, "ideology for-itself", corresponds more closely to the conception of ideology developed by Louis Althusser. Althusser distinguished between the repressive state apparatus and the ideological state apparatus. The former maintains class domination through the control and application of violence, whereas the latter functions by transforming the ideology of the ruling class into apparently universal values. This theory of ideological state apparatuses drew heavily upon Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror stage. According to this perspective, the disintegration of traditional social relations in modern society deprives subjects of stable communal identities through which subjectivity could previously be established. Consequently, when confronted by the interpellation of the Big Other, subjects urgently seek to occupy a social position and respond from within it. Through this process, subjects become fixed within the symbolic order. This response to ideological interpellation is not merely psychological or spiritual; it is embedded within material social reality itself. As Althusser notes, ideology always involves practices: these practices are governed by rituals inscribed within ideological apparatuses, whether in the form of church masses, funerals, sporting events, school ceremonies, or political gatherings [4]. This form of ideology for-itself is not simply imposed externally upon the subject through ideological indoctrination. Rather, it emerges spontaneously from the subject's own identification with the social position occupied in response to ideological interpellation. There is a sense in which the subject comes to "perform the duties appropriate to its position", relying upon its own response to ideological commands. As Althusser argued, every society necessarily contains fundamental economic activities, political organizations, and ideological forms such as religion, ethics, and philosophy. Ideology is therefore an organic component of every social totality. Human societies "secrete" ideology as naturally as they breathe, making it a necessary condition of historical existence [5]. Precisely because of this endogenous character, subjects tend to weaken or suspend their critical reflection upon ideology. The will and motivations produced under ideological apparatuses are experienced not as external impositions, but as the subject's own autonomous choices.

From the perspective of this transition from ideology "in-itself" to ideology "for-itself", one can observe that the historical development of games follows a remarkably similar trajectory. Games themselves have existed in many different forms. The simplest forms are purely mental games, played through the operations of the human mind and the use of language and the body. More complex forms emerged through the use of tools either accidentally discovered or deliberately created by human beings, such as footballs, badminton rackets,

and other sporting equipment. Today, with the support of advanced technologies, games have evolved into digital electronic forms capable of incorporating vastly greater degrees of material existence. The development of game media is not merely an accessory outcome of scientific and technological progress; it has also advanced one of the most important attributes of games: realism, or what is often called immersion. Games are frequently regarded as "another world", and one of the primary sources of pleasure within them lies in the distance separating the game world from reality. The more convincingly the game world resembles the real world, the stronger the player's sense of immersion becomes. Yet as virtual worlds parasitic upon reality, games are always separated from the real world by an unbridgeable gap: players know that the game world is fictional. Precisely this gap grants subjects a form of freedom unavailable in reality itself. The more players encounter alternative possibilities within worlds resembling their own, the more they experience liberation, release, and enjoyment. As Professor Jiang Yuhui observes: "It is precisely because these two worlds remain separated and clearly demarcated that they provide the necessary safe fortress for pleasure, allowing you, like a spectator watching a fire from across the river, to maintain the indispensable distance between yourself and the bloodshed and warfare of the virtual world" [6]. The most decisive leap in the development of this "real" dimension of games was undoubtedly the transition from traditional games to video games. Supported by modern computer technology, video games present gameplay mechanics and rules through codes operating within virtual worlds. This transformation signifies not merely a change of platform, but an exponential expansion in the amount of content games are capable of containing. Technological advancement allows vastly more information to be embedded within game rules and gameplay structures, thereby intensifying immersion. Digital technologies not only improve graphics, lighting, sound, and other audiovisual elements to approach the quality of reality, but also permit unprecedented quantities of text, narrative information, and systemic complexity to be incorporated into gameplay. Through algorithms and physics engines, game worlds can even simulate the physical laws of reality itself. As a consequence, games are able to provide players with increasingly rich sensory and emotional materials through which players locate themselves within the positions of the characters they control. Using these materials as symbolic building blocks, games nail elements of real-world social relations, institutional systems, and historical structures onto the surface of virtual worlds. These artificially reconstructed systems of social relations facilitate the generation of subjectivity within game characters themselves. A representative example is the *Assassin's Creed* franchise developed by Ubisoft, a series of action-adventure RPGs renowned for reconstructing real historical settings within fictionalized narratives. Throughout gameplay, players assume the role of an assassin protagonist who advances through missions and narrative objectives. In *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*, released in 2018, the story is set against the background of the Peloponnesian War in the fourth century BCE. The playable protagonist, Kassandra, is portrayed as the granddaughter of Leonidas I, while the central narrative revolves around searching for her lost family and dismantling the conspiracy of the Cult of Kosmos. In this game, the narrative and gameplay systems that propel players forward are inseparable from the protagonist's identity. The player is simultaneously a mercenary and a child separated from family. These identities weave together social relations, historical politics, and emotional motivations drawn from the real world into the fabric of the virtual digital world, thereby generating internally experienced responsibility and enjoyment for the player. The player's actions and desires are thus driven by this highly elaborate system. Although contemporary game development increasingly emphasizes player freedom, encouraging players to "freely" unleash their desires and imagination within virtual spaces, what remains unspoken is that this freedom is always exercised within frameworks already preconstructed by discourse and social structures.

Building upon Louis Althusser's conception of the ideological state apparatus and ideology "for-itself", Slavoj Žižek further argued that ideology in contemporary society has assumed the form of "in-and-for-itself".

As Žižek writes, "ideologicality" is a social reality whose very existence implies the participants' non-knowledge of its essence. Ideology is not merely a "false consciousness" imposed upon social existence; rather, it is social existence itself insofar as it is sustained through false consciousness [7]. In modern society, ideology influences subjects' thoughts and behaviors in subtle and often invisible ways. This influence is deeply embedded within social practices and everyday life. It no longer operates solely at the level of the ideological state apparatus in the Althusserian sense, but penetrates more profoundly into the rituals of institutions and the social practices of ordinary people, shaping cognitive and behavioral patterns unconsciously. The power of ideology thus exists beneath the subject's conscious perception of reality as a pre-conceptual and unconscious structure. It does not rely primarily upon rational persuasion or direct doctrinal control; instead, it operates through material social practices—daily behaviors, rituals, customs, and habits—that gradually mold subjects' perceptions. These practices constitute the "pre-understanding" through which human beings comprehend the world, serving as the foundation for the perception of reality and the construction of social coherence. This ideological fantasy or illusion not only structures the subject's basic framework for understanding reality, but also sustains the functioning of the social order itself. It operates as an abstract presupposition. Although subjects are not directly aware of its existence, it determines how they perceive the world and supports social activities, including political and economic structures. Through this invisible force, ideology maintains and reproduces existing social relations and structures of power.

The development of games demonstrates a parallel progression. Earlier forms of games imposed direct commands upon desire and enjoyment through rigid rules and objectives. Later, game worlds became increasingly realistic, reproducing within themselves the social and political orders of the real world and thereby enabling players to internalize and voluntarily obey ideological systems of belief. In its contemporary third stage, however, games aspire to present the real world itself within the game world, approaching concepts associated with the "metaverse". This represents precisely the form of ideology "in-and-for-itself". The convergence of the metaverse and gaming has become a new developmental tendency in digital culture, reflecting the increasing approximation of the game world to the real world. Under this tendency, practices, habits, and value presuppositions originating in real society are unconsciously transplanted into virtual worlds. Since the language of video games is itself derived from the linguistic systems of human society, games inevitably perform a secondary ideological processing of reality. In constructing ideological surface systems, floating signifiers are stitched together through quilting points into unified structures of meaning. In this sense, the game world resembles an illegitimate offspring of the Symbolic Order itself. Because the creation of virtual worlds necessarily relies upon humanity's existing linguistic and conceptual systems for describing and understanding objective reality, game worlds must inevitably draw materials from networks of signifiers and therefore remain subject to the influence of ideological quilting points. Ideological contamination is thus present from the very first moment of world-creation. The light illuminating this new world is not the light of nature or divinity, but the gaze of the Big Other. A representative example is *Red Dead Redemption 2*, released by Rockstar Games in 2018. This large-scale open-world game constructs an approximately seventy-two-square-kilometer simulation of the nineteenth-century American West. Yet despite its extraordinary level of detail, the game can never truly reproduce that historical spacetime as a perfect mirror image. What it ultimately presents is always a fusion of historical traces and cultural imagination. Even though players may experience immersive snowy mountains, dense forests, endless grasslands, shimmering blue lakes, desolate wildernesses, and bustling frontier towns—and may interact dynamically with animals, non-player characters, and environmental systems—the world remains a retrospective reconstruction produced by designers on the basis of their interpretation of reality. It is, fundamentally, an imperfect imitation of the real world. Although games continually pursue "authenticity" and "historical restoration", the digitally reconstructed Western

landscape presented in such games has already been inscribed with the ideological imprint of the "spirit of the West". Adventure, expansion, freedom, and individualism become invisible filters shaping the player's experience. Suspended between the virtual and the real, players unconsciously accept the distortions produced by this ideological coloration as though they were natural.

4. Piercing the fantasy: the antinomy of reality and virtuality

4.1. How to traverse ideological fantasy

The final component of Slavoj Žižek's theory of ideology concerns the question of how ideological fantasy may be traversed. According to Žižek's account of contemporary ideology, under the "in-and-for-itself" form of capitalist ideology, people may fully recognize that the lived social order and the structures within which they exist conceal the particular interests of the bourgeoisie. They may even perceive that this order is merely a disguise and staging of class interests. Yet despite this awareness, the social order is elevated into a sublime domain, appearing as untouchable and unquestionable as natural law or divine revelation. Subjects thereby fall into a cynical ideological condition: they know very well what they are doing, yet they continue to do it nonetheless.

This condition recalls the "third dream" discussed by Bernard Suits concerning games and life: "In the dream, every living being was actually engaged in an elaborate game, yet firmly believed that they were merely handling ordinary daily affairs. Carpenters thought they were simply practicing their craft, but in reality they were playing a game. Politicians, philosophers, lovers, murderers, thieves, and saints were no different. Every occupation and activity imaginable was, in fact, a game. This revelation was astonishing enough, but what followed was even more terrifying. In the dream, I continually persuaded everyone I encountered to accept this great truth revealed to me. I do not know how I persuaded them, but they were indeed convinced. Yet the moment they accepted it—that was the horror—they disappeared. The person listening to me vanished on the spot. Not only that, but I knew with absolute certainty that they no longer existed anywhere, as if they had never existed at all. The truth I proclaimed produced this consequence. I was horrified, yet unable to stop. Instead, I hurried to the next living being to deliver my message, until I had spread this truth throughout the entire universe and granted salvation to all through conversion. In the end, I stood alone beneath the summer stars in utter despair. Then I awoke, discovering that the world was still filled with sentient life, and I was relieved that it had only been a dream" [1]. Even when subjects recognize that they are controlled by capitalist ideology, they remain compelled to seek meaning and value within the system itself. More fundamentally, they must preserve the coherence of their own subjectivity and avoid the collapse of the self. This attitude—disbelieving yet continuing to act as though one believes—precisely enables capitalism to function smoothly. Yet does this mean subjects are entirely powerless before ideology? Žižek's answer is no. His proposed response is the traversal of ideological fantasy.

In contemporary capitalist society, where cynical ideology operates through deep "in-and-for-itself" mechanisms, subjects are trapped within multilayered dreamlike illusions that are extraordinarily difficult to escape. Traditional forms of ideological critique—such as exposing contradictions within official ideological discourse or revealing discrepancies between ideology and reality—are no longer sufficient. Žižek therefore draws upon psychoanalytic strategies to formulate a new mode of ideological critique. In his thought, this critique takes the form of traversing ideological fantasy, a process divided into three stages: interpreting the symptom, traversing fantasy, and confronting the Real. Only by interpreting symptoms can one expose the internal points of collapse within ideology itself. Only by traversing fantasy can one penetrate the ideological construction of society and subjectivity, revealing how ideology manipulates desire and enjoyment. Only by

confronting the Real does one discover that behind fantasy there is nothing at all: what humanity ultimately faces is a "desert of the Real". Genuine action must therefore address this impossibility directly, emphasizing the irreducibility of social antagonism and positively affirming impossibility itself as the aim of theory. Only in this manner can one escape the endless cycle of compromise with reality and thereby realize a true critique of ideological fantasy [8].

The concept of the symptom originates in Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory. For the patient, the symptom represents a traumatic event that cannot be fully explained or accepted. In order to preserve the coherence of the subject, consciousness represses the symptom into the unconscious. Yet this repression inevitably returns under specific conditions, and such manifestations of the unconscious become symptoms.

Žižek inherits the psychoanalytic conception of the symptom from both Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, introducing it into the political domain of ideological critique. For Žižek, the symptom is an element in which the universal principle fails to realize itself. Although it appears accidental, the symptom must remain as an exception, as the suspended point of the universal principle itself. If the universal principle were to apply completely even at this exceptional point, the entire universal system would disintegrate. Symptoms operate according to the logic of metaphor: one signifier substitutes for another through relations of similarity. Consequently, interpreting symptoms means symbolically deciphering them, thereby producing the spontaneous deconstruction of their apparent meaning [8].

4.2. How games pierce the bubble of fantasy

If, as argued above, games constitute ideological spaces, then where do the symptoms remaining within games emerge? Most players are familiar with a particular feeling: after prolonged gameplay, or during moments of interruption and rest, a sense of emptiness and disjunction suddenly descends like a nightmare. This emotion often drives players either to continue playing in search of new experiences and unexplored mechanics, or to abandon the game altogether and return to reality with a lingering sense of loss. This gives rise to a crucial question: why does an activity originally intended to provide pleasure and enjoyment ultimately generate trauma instead? Such a reversal signals the breakdown of the game's ability to guide and stabilize the player's desire. The failure of enjoyment—and even its inversion into dissatisfaction—is precisely what ruptures the supposed universality of the game's promise to satisfy desire. It is here that the symptom of the game emerges. How does this symptom arise? In satisfying desire, games rely upon borrowing rules and structures from the real world. As discussed previously, immersion depends upon the game world approximating reality through the abstraction, simplification, or imitation of real social rules and symbolic orders. Yet these structures are never entirely arbitrary creations freely legislated by game designers. Behind such "legislation" remains the deeper symbolic order inherited from the Symbolic Order itself. At the same time, the virtuality of games promises forms of agency and possibility far exceeding those available in reality. Within this special space, players enjoy the pleasure of temporarily deconstructing or transcending symbolic constraints, investing their libidinal energy into the game world. On the one hand, games construct fantasy frameworks by imitating the rules and orders of reality, thereby directing desire toward predetermined rewards. On the other hand, the virtual nature of games offers the prohibited pleasure of escaping or violating the limitations imposed by reality itself. The game world thus attracts players through realism while simultaneously promising unrestricted enjoyment through virtuality.

Yet no game can ever fully satisfy human desire. Precisely because games exist as hybrid worlds in which reality and virtuality coexist and jointly operate, the satisfaction they provide remains either an imperfect imitation or a constrained transgression. Neither can ever attain the authentic *jouissance* concealed beyond fantasy itself. What players take to be their own desires are, in fact, the desires of the Big Other: enjoyment is

prearranged like a "canned laugh track", informing the subject when it ought to laugh and feel pleasure. An illustrative example appears in *Death Stranding*, the open-world adventure game developed by Kojima Productions in 2019. Within the game's futuristic American setting, communication and delivery networks have unified society into an integrated system. The entire logistics network is fully automated, managed by artificial intelligence and carried out through drones. Unable to accept the complete replacement of human labor by machines, society passes legislation compelling humans to return to the delivery industry. Once recalled to work, many individuals become convinced that society would collapse without them. This belief gives rise to a new social pathology known as Delivery Dependence Syndrome. Delivery gradually becomes the sole driving force of their existence. They become obsessed with delivering cargo, addicted to the act itself, until their bodies and minds are entirely consumed by the desire to deliver. Eventually, they transform into the feared "MULEs"—a term originally referring to pack animals used for transporting goods. The gameplay of *Death Stranding* similarly revolves around delivery. Players control the protagonist Sam as he transports supplies across a United States fragmented into isolated territories by the cataclysmic event known as the *Death Stranding*, reconnecting the nation through acts of delivery. From the player's perspective, the MULEs may initially appear ridiculous, alienated by their compulsive desire to deliver cargo. Yet upon reflection, is not the player similarly driven and manipulated by the game's own objectives and delivery mechanics? How substantial is the difference between the desires and behaviors of the supposedly autonomous player and those of the programmatically scripted NPCs? This moment of reflection marks the emergence of the game's symptom. Once the symptom within the game world appears and is interpreted, players become capable of breaking through the game's fantasy framework and locating the fractures within it. The utopian bubble of the game world is punctured.

Through the breakdown of the game's "assembly line" of desire production, subjects become aware of the illusory nature of the game itself and may seek to escape from the game world in pursuit of something more real. Yet does this withdrawal from the game merely indicate a return to ordinary social reality under the order of the Big Other? Not necessarily. The desire to leave the game world may not signify a wish to return to mundane reality, but rather a longing to return to a more authentic and complete encounter with the Real itself. As Bernard Suits's "third dream" suggests, "every living being is playing an elaborate game". Yet the moment one is told this truth, one disappears. After experiencing the ideological form of games, subjects may appropriate this experience of traversing fantasy and apply it to everyday life itself, thereby achieving a return toward the Real. Within gaming culture, there exists a term known as "speedrun", referring to completing a game in the shortest possible time. This study argues that games themselves function as a kind of "speedrun" through ideology: a compressed experiential process through which subjects may break through fantasy and encounter the Real.

5. Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper, games were compared to mistletoe parasitically attached to the tree of human civilization. Yet mistletoe is not a useless plant. In Western Christmas traditions, there exists a custom according to which a kiss beneath the mistletoe brings happiness. In Western culture, mistletoe symbolizes happiness, love, hope, and fertility. In Baldr's myth from Norse mythology, the radiant god immune to all harm is nevertheless struck down by the sharp thorn of the seemingly soft and fragile mistletoe. To compare games to mistletoe is therefore to suggest that games represent a form of activity within human society that operates through desire and continually reproduces itself. Game spaces function through ideological mechanisms that manipulate human desire, regulate enjoyment and the pursuit of happiness, and shape both subjects' actions

and subjectivity itself. Particularly with the development of modern society, games have increasingly become discursive spaces that cannot be ignored. Games are no longer merely forms of entertainment; embedded within them are structures of power, ideological control, and forms of influence operating at both the micro level of individual subjects and the macro level of society as a whole. As Slavoj Žižek argues, contemporary ideology has entered the "in-and-for-itself" stage and continues to perfect itself. This deeply integrated condition, in which ideology permeates social reality as inseparably as fish within water, makes it increasingly difficult for subjects to traverse fantasy and encounter the Real. Research into the ideology of games therefore assists in piercing the illusion that ideology illuminates and nourishes the world as naturally and universally as sunlight. Such critique may provide resistance against the manipulation of human desire and behavior by the values and hegemonic discourses of capitalist society. Games should not be regarded merely as spaces of cultural entertainment. As the diachronic analysis throughout this paper has demonstrated, games are progressively approaching the real world. This process of approximation is not necessarily one-directional imitation. Emerging social developments—such as the metaverse and brain-computer interface technologies—are themselves increasingly shaped and inspired by virtual game spaces. Consequently, attention to games carries undeniable significance for political philosophy and for reflections upon the future forms of human social existence. When subjects pass from reality into the virtuality of games, and then emerge again through the painful rupture of that virtual fantasy, the sharp edge dividing the virtual and the real simultaneously wounds the very reality experienced by the subject itself.

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