

The Ambient Poetics of Neoliberalism in The Long Dark

Andrea Andiloro

Swinburne University of Technology
John, St. Hawthorn,
Melbourne, VIC, 3122
aandiloro@swin.edu.au

Keywords

atmosphere, ideology, neoliberalism, survival, enframing, technology

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the interplay of ideology and atmosphere within the survival genre through an analysis of *The Long Dark* (Hinterland Studio, 2014). I argue that the genre reinforces a neoliberal subjectivity by positioning individuals in a ‘player vs. the world’, survival of the fittest scenario, where everything is an exploitable resource. This is both reinforced and undermined at an atmospheric level. On one hand the genre’s harsh atmosphere of danger and precariousness enables the positioning of the player as a lone individual, constantly making cost-benefit calculations and on the hunt for more and more consumables in order to cope with critical conditions, in a reliably quantifiable way. On the other hand different atmospheric elements contribute to what amounts as critiques of ideas such as ‘consumption’, ‘greed’, and ‘technological dependency’.

The survival genre is characterized by a blend of exploration, resource-gathering and crafting, in a hostile environment where threat is always present, either as enemies, elements or conditions such as ‘hunger’, ‘thirst’, ‘disease’. What holds the genre together is a specific design orientation towards player agency that tends towards disempowering the player and which establishes an ‘aesthetic of uncertainty’ (Reid & Downing, 2018). I question the ideological assumptions that are present in the genre, specifically the distinctly neoliberal values it embraces.

Neoliberalism may be understood as a set of economic policies sustained by a technological infrastructure tending towards market deregulation and strong private property rights (Harvey, 2005; Neubauer, 2011), but also, importantly, as an ideology (Althusser, 2006) or as a form of governmentality (Foucault, 2008). In other words, neoliberalism is a structure through which subjectivities are created and a frame through which individuals self-discipline and conduct themselves. In neoliberalism, the market becomes the central societal institution, and all non-economic domains go through a process of capitalization, resulting in ideas of social, cognitive, biological, and human capital (Pellizzoni and Ylönen, 2012). Individuals are expected to be ‘entrepreneurs of the self’, fully responsible for cultivating their human capital and investing in themselves, as well as for their successes and failures alike. Other characteristics of the neoliberal subject are adaptability, flexibility, precariousness and consumerism (McGuigan, 2014).

Proceedings of DiGRA Australia 2022

© 2022 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

Ian Bogost's theory of procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2007) explains how videogames convey ideology through their mechanics and rules, and the processes they enable, but it has been criticized for downplaying the importance of other channels, such as narrative, visual and audio aesthetics (Anable, 2018, Scharpe, 2019). Furthermore, despite Bogost (2007) referring to games as 'possibility spaces', he does not go on to analyze how that space looks, sounds, or *feels* like. Procedural rhetoric may be fruitfully integrated by some type of 'atmospheric rhetoric'. I identify such an approach in what Timothy Morton (2007) calls *ambient poetics*, which they develop together with his idea of *ecomimesis* as a part of their ecocritique theory. Ecomimesis and ambient poetics are useful to understand how immersive atmospheres mount ideological discourses, with Morton's focus being on environmental writing and art which fetishize idealized notions of 'Nature' which are counterproductive for environmental thinking.

Through the example of *The Long Dark*, I explain how a survival game can presents a procedural rhetoric asking the player to be constantly on the move if they do not wish to die leaving them in a state of constant precariousness. The game furthermore places the player within a dynamic of resource accumulation and consumption, where outputs are consistent, and outcomes are predictable, which reduces the gameworld to a series of statistics, as exemplified by the practice of *theorycrafting* (Dooghan, 2019).

This procedural rhetoric is an expression of a technological enframing of the world (Heidegger, 1977), itself constituting the ontological basis of neoliberalism (Joronen, 2013). The procedural rhetoric is both sustained and undermined by an ambiguous ambient poetics. On the one hand the atmospheric setting of the *The Long Dark* places the player within a world in which enframing makes sense as the only viable way to play, and as such it naturalizes and renders self-evident ideological assumptions contained in the design and prevents their questioning. On the other hand, the game appears to directly mount a critique, not only through its narrative, but also through its space and atmosphere, of ideas such as, 'consumption', 'greed', and 'technological dependency', which critics of neoliberalism typically ascribe to it, and which are a recurring theme in many survival games set in the post-apocalypse (Pérez-Latorre, 2019). I conclude by observing that in the case of *The Long Dark*, the bleakness and pessimism that is conveyed also atmospherically ultimately appears to shut down any possible alternative to the radical neoliberal individualism it embraces.

Through an analysis of *The Long Dark*, this paper contributes to the currently limited literature of the survival genre of the non-horror variant, as well as to existing scholarship on spatial design and atmosphere in videogames, by focusing on the ways in which space is ideologically constructed.

BIO

Andrea Andiloro is a Ph.D. candidate at the Centre for Transformative Media Technologies at Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia. His research focuses on the phenomenology of affect and atmosphere in videogames, game genre, and ideology.

Citations and References

Althusser, L. [1970]2006. Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation). In *The Anthropology of the State*. Sharma, A. & Gupta, A. (eds.). Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons. 98-111.

Anable, A. 2018. *Playing with Feelings*. Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press.

Bogost, I. 2007. *Procedural Rhetoric: The Expressive Power of Videogames*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Dooghan, D. 2019. Digital Conquerors: *Minecraft* and the Apologetics of Neoliberalism. *Games and Culture*. 14(1). 67-86.

Foucault, M. 2008. *The Birth of Biopolitics. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Harvey, D. 2005. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Heidegger, M. [1954]1977. The Question Concerning Technology. In *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. New York, NY: Garland Publishing. 442-450.

Joronen, M. 2013. Conceptualising New Modes of State Governmentality: Power, Violence and the Ontological Mono-politics of Neoliberalism. *Geopolitics*. 18(2). 356-370.

McGuigan, J. 2014. The Neoliberal Self. *Culture Unbound*. 6(1). 223-240.

Morton, T. 2007. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Neubauer, R. 2011. Neoliberalism in the Information Age, or Vice Versa? Global Citizenship, Technology and Hegemonic Ideology. *triple: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Sustainable Information Society*. 9(2). 195-230.

Pérez-Latorre, O. 2019. Post-apocalyptic Games, Heroism and the Great Recession. *Game Studies*. 19(3). 1-12.

Reid, S. & Downing, S. 2018. Survival Themed Video Games and Cultural Constructs of Power. *Loading... The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association*. 11(18). 41-57.

Scharpe, N. 2019. The Rhetoric of Game Space: Lotman's Spatial Semantics as a Method for Analysing Videogames. In *Ludotopia: Spaces, Places and Territories in Computer Games*. Aarseth, E. & Günzel, S. (eds.). Wetzlar, Germany: transcript Verlag. 245-270.

Game References

Hinterland Studio. 2014. *The Long Dark*. Windows. Vancouver, BC, Canada: Hinterland Studio.