

Efficient Machines of Anti-Profit: Going Against the Flow with The Games “Inscription” and “To Build a Better Mousetrap”

Zach Cohen¹

¹ Shenkar School of Engineering, Design and Art

cohzach@gmail.com

Keywords

flow, value, virtual economies, capitalism, immersiveness

This essay analyses two indie computer games that were created in the past ten years: “To Build a Better “Mousetrap (Molleindustria games, 2014) and “Inscription” (Daniel Mullins Games, 2021). The analysis is focused on how both games offer an effectively disruptive take on traditional gaming concepts such as “Achievement”, “Gain”, “Goods” and “Victory” in their familiar manner. In order to understand these disruptive maneuvers the essay revisits the concepts of “Flow”, originally coined by Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, through a critical lens. Braxton Soderman’s “Against Flow” offers a comprehensive base for this analysis, which relies on the understanding of the immersive experience of games. This “flowy” immersiveness, which is tightly coupled to the concepts of “play” in general, and is widely considered unequivocally positive, is challenged by the subversive nature of the two games at hand. While Csíkszentmihályi’s concept of Flow suggests that an individual can avoid alienation and experience personal agency by getting absorbed in playful activity, Soderman puts the focus on systematic social change.

Additionally, the economist Edward Castronova widely recognized parallels between real and virtual economies which in turn helped to perceive gameplay that incorporates capitalist values into digital games. From this perspective, both these games challenge common economic values with a gameplay that plays with genres and gaming concepts.

“To Build a Better Mousetrap” puts the player in the shoes of the manager of a factory, operated by anthropomorphic mice, in which the possibility of victory ranges between costly and nonexistent. Inscription, on the other hand, is all about understanding the rules and reality of the game itself, as what begins as a deck-building game expands, shifts and changes, while the game threatens to break the bounds between play and reality.

This is where the two games differ fundamentally from the majority of computer games, in that they act to challenge the comfort zone that most games create for the player. Unlike games that replicate familiar economic structures, these games cause players to face the “mechanism” in more than one way: Either by encapsulating and revealing the entirety of the

profit-making machine (“Mousetrap”), or by disrupting and even breaking the core mechanics of the “game” as a concept, unveiling in the process the conventions of profit, wealth, competition and victory (“Inscription”). In this sense, these games follow a long and rich history of radical artists like Bertold Brecht, Viktor Shklovsky and Augusto Boal. Artists who are known for creating art that goes against the FLOW by exposing the mechanism of pleasure and focusing on social change.

References

- Castronova, Edward. *Virtual Worlds: A First-Hand Account of Market and Society on the Cyberian Frontier*.
- Gruter Institute Working Papers on Law, Economics, and Evolutionary Biology. 2001.
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper Perennial. 1990.
- Pötzsch, Holger. *Playing Games with Shklovsky, Brecht, and Boal: Ostranenie, V-Effect, and Spect-Actors as Analytical Tools for Game Studies*. *Game Studies* volume 17 issue 2 December 2017.
- Soderman, Braxton. *Against Flow: Video Games and the Flowing Subject*. The MIT Press, 2021.