Martin Dolan



UNREALISM

On Hitman & Immersive Simulations

RECENTLY, I'VE BEEN STRUCK by the sense that technology makes our lives less real. I don't mean this in any moralistic, quasi-mystic "screen time is bad for the soul" type of way. What I'm trying to get at is merely the extent to which the quotidian tasks that once defined daily life are now mediated by software. We work by tinkering with Teams Chats and BPI Dashboards. We socialize with Tinder swipes and Instagram tags. All of this technology—from the most innocuous to the obviously silly—equates the logic of frictionless optimization with sophistication and comfort. It's the design sensibility of charmingly bland, functionally unfussy UI extrapolated out to nearly every aspect of our lives.

In a sense, we've outsourced our existence to a computer-mediated simulation of the human world. The inputs and outputs, to borrow the language of computer science, remain the same. We still gossip and shop and make art and waste time. It's just that the ways in which we now do those things—the actual acts of living—have been abstracted. We have automated the tedium away, "cleaned" our "data" for the sake of quick and predictable results, debugged our inefficiencies and irrationalities. Thanks to these technologies, there's little room for anything to go wrong, for the unexpected.

In this era defined by the values and frictionless aesthetics of Silicon Valley, the quintessential art form is likely the video game. Or, more specifically, the subset of games that also, in their way, try to depict a perfectly predictable sliver of the world: simulations. Sims predate what we'd even think of as video games, with roots in analog military flight simulators and ASCII text adventures. By the 1990s however, home PC technology had advanced sufficiently to allow for the kinds of games that most consumers today likely imagine when they hear the word "simulation." The *Sim City* games let players tinker with traffic patterns, highway arteries, and zoning rules. More gamey alternatives, like *Roller Coaster Tycoon*, took that same approach but toned down the hyper-realism, opting instead for predictably controlled chaos.

In these early sims, played via a top-down, omnipresent perspective, developers riffed on ideas of centralized planning as a power fantasy, growth and optimization as intrinsically motivational gameplay loops. An outgrowth of this sensibility emerged in the 2010s, applying the same logic of optimization-as-fun to even more quotidian tasks. "Day job sims" like *Trucking Simulator* and *PowerWash Simulator* took the conceptual hearts of top-down master planners and combined them with mechanics that more closely resembled physical, typically blue-collar, labor. The popularity of these games is, admittedly, a bit bizarre. But in an American economy characterized by email jobs and remote office culture, it makes sense that people are starting to find a sort of roundabout power fantasy in achieving finite, measurable tasks with their (simulated) hands. Succeeding in one of these fake jobs is fulfilling in a way that reality rarely is.

All these games—from the menial job sims to the ones that let you go god mode—are operating within our moment's paradigm of data-driven frictionlessness. They evoke the satisfying parts of city planning or trucking or whatever while minimizing the unpredictable human elements (such as other people, their wants and needs, and the demands of physical bodies). At a meta level, I get the sense that some of these sim games are supposed to come off as winking satire. Building a world with the overhead control of something like *Sim City* is obviously impossible, and any self-styled titans of industry who think otherwise are delusional. Yet as critiques, they have little teeth. Because they are built around mechanics that abide by the same rules and value systems as the cultural forces they're ostensibly critiquing, traditional sims feel limited. They're closer to irreverent parody than insightful satire. They recognize the theoretical limitations of our software-augmented existence, halfheartedly poke fun at this shortsightedness, but aren't able to offer any sort of alternative.

{}

Though at first glance they have little in common with their "hand of God" predecessors or quirky day job-evoking contemporaries, the *Hitman* games are my preferred video game sims. The *Hitman* series could be described—morbidly, reductively, though not at all incorrectly—as killing

simulators. Since 2000, developer IO Interactive has iterated and near-perfected its sandbox level design, creating little capsules of worlds with dozens of branching paths that each culminate in a gleefully gruesome assassination. The *Hitman* games of the early aughts were deeply flawed, conceptually ambitious but with gameplay throttled by the technological limits of the era's home consoles. It wasn't until a soft reboot of the franchise in 2016—called simply *Hitman* on release, and retroactively dubbed Part 1 of the "World of Assassination Trilogy"—that IO hit its stride, with technology catching up to the level of complexity they wanted.

What the old *Hitman* games flirted with, and what the World of Assassination Trilogy was finally able to truly offer, was totally freeform gameplay. You, the player, are dropped into an open-ended level—an exotic locale like Marrakesh or Hokkaido or Berlin—with nothing but a concealed handgun and a dossier about who you're supposed to, well, hit. How you do so is totally up to you. *Hitman*'s levels are sprawling, horizontally and vertically, populated by NPCs (pedestrians, police, partygoers) with scripted behaviors and physics objects (cameras, candles, car alarms) to tinker with. IO has dubbed this style of gameplay "social stealth," less interested in crouching behind cover and choking out bad guys than maneuvering the alternating public and private spaces that make up their worlds. Violence is secondary to distractions and disguises.

The *Hitman* games, along with contemporaries like *Dishonored* and the rebooted *Deus Ex* series, were part of a 2010s revival of a style of game design called immersive simulations. A quippy buzzword attributed to Warren Spector, the director of the original 2000 *Deus Ex*, immersive sims are action games set in open-ended simulated worlds instead of linear levels. The player character is controlled in real time, like a first- or third-person shooter, but the rest of the world's behavior is dictated by logic, physics, and other layered systems. These games channel traditional sims' spontaneous and emergent energy within the familiar videogame guardrails of narrative beats and bespoke level design.

The truism that functions as immersive sims' underlying philosophy is that everything the player thinks should work, will work. Think: using fire to burn down a wooden barricade, making a noisy distraction on one side of the map to draw enemy attention away from another, or being able to access a locked computer either by brute force hacking or by eavesdropping on a guard dictating the password during a phone call. These games emphasize depth, branching paths—using violence, stealth, or charm to achieve your goal—and replayability over the graphical fidelity and set-pieces that defined other action games of the era. For these reasons, immersive sims occupy a precarious place in the gaming landscape. Because of their complexity, they're cult favorites and critical darlings. But they're daunting, often inscrutable for casual players, and expensive to produce.

There's something charmingly aspirational to these games. They're idealistic, with heady ideas about what a video game could and should be. But in practice, they never work as well as intended. Physics objects glitch, NPCs get stuck in corners, and just because of their finite nature, once you've gotten a feel for level layouts and enemy behaviors, the simulation will necessarily feel less immersive. I've started to think of these as moments of unrealism: the seams in the stitchwork, the moments where the systems can't keep up and the artifice—once ignorable—becomes a gameplay system in and of itself.

{}

There are multiple overlapping levels of unrealism at play in immersive sims. One is the aforementioned technical issues—character models glitching and frame rates hitching and goofy physics collisions. These are the sorts of hiccups which remind you that you are, in fact, playing a game. But at a higher, almost metatextual level, there's also an inherent unrealism to the way players interface with any game. Players load into worlds at set spawn points, chase high scores, and can handwave mistakes by save-scumming. When you complete your objective, you can restart the whole level and try again from a new approach.

These gamey mechanics (some of which are deliberate inclusions for the sake of minimizing player frustration, others which are simply conventions of the genre) contribute to the *Hitman*

games' unreality. Yet they're also key to *Hitman*'s real power fantasy: mastery. You can run through the game's gauntlets as many times as you'd like, driven less by a need for completion than by curiosity, and each approach will add to a bank of knowledge that will always be true, anytime you boot up a level. The satisfaction you feel when this culminates in a perfect run—an undetected assassination, your hands practically unbloodied—is twofold. In the game's fiction, you were perfect, and in the real world, you've cracked the simulation. Your mastery becomes meta.

The sense of mastery is important. The reason diehard fans have been playing and replaying these levels for ten years is that they know exactly what will happen. The most diehard immersive sim players don't want the action-movie experience of zipping around cities, dodging incoming traffic, ducking debris, and having to react to a steady stream of challenges on the fly. They'd rather be like athletes in a gym, grinding reps and practicing plays. They're chasing perfection to an inherently unreal degree. Look up any number of speed run-adjacent clips of the *Hitman* games on YouTube. Mastering these games isn't simply reacting correctly to what the simulation is throwing at you. It's loading into a level and beelining for the nearest balcony with a sightline to the target, immediately shooting into a sliver of open air, and exfiltrating all within fifteen seconds.

That the (unstated by developers) ultimate goal of *Hitman*'s suite of sim mechanics is to break the rules is, I think, telling. The way players push the limits of *Hitman*'s systems, and the way *Hitman* embraces that exploitation, stand in stark contrast to how other sim games have internalized our moment's philosophy of tech-mediated seamlessness. In a world where we've convinced ourselves that software can functionally substitute for reality, the unrealism of high-level *Hitman* play has the effect of making the games feel like anti-simulations. Immersive sims like *Hitman* grapple with the incompleteness of any closed system. But rather than obscure or apologize for that incompleteness, *Hitman* leans into the unreality. *Hitman*'s systems are logical in that you can usually anticipate the game's response to any given action. Yet it doesn't strive for realism, or the aesthetically flat frictionlessness associated with perfect sims, at all. Instead, the *Hitman* games embrace the artifice inherent to any simulation and take such moments of unrealism seriously.

{}

This uneasy relationship between artifice and supposedly simulated spontaneous gameplay is a key tension in *Hitman*. And negotiating these two dimensions—not just disguising where they bump up against each other but making that collision aesthetically interesting—is *Hitman*'s narrative, which is both meticulously crafted and designed in a way that expects players to ignore it. Each level includes a myriad of narrative-inflected routes to the level's targets, authored by the developers to onboard casual players into their worlds. Usually, these are brief stories delivered with a wink—"look Agent 47, that model about to walk the runway looks just like you!"—to encourage unconventional disguises and guided paths through the levels. Like a traditional 3D action game, the "Mission Stories" often involve waypoints guiding you on the map, jokey set pieces that show off unique parts of the level, and conveniently culminate with you and your assassination target alone in a room together.

These Mission Stories don't flatten the sim because despite their scripted nature, you're able to bail on or disrupt these narratives at any moment and, for the most part, the game will react accordingly. This comes across clearest in the third act of the World of Assassination trilogy, *Hitman 3* (2021). After the prior two releases, the conventions IO is messing with—the "perfect" sim elements, the unreal edges of it, and gameplay that seamlessly ping pongs between—have been firmly established. And so, rather than repeat the same design beats, IO uses the series's last entry as an opportunity to subtly subvert everything they'd set up in the first two games.

Hitman 3's levels alternate between the series' most scripted and least, a sort of whiplash that has the effect of making you rethink some of the games' design ideas altogether. After opening with a straightforward mission set in a thinly fictionalized Burj Khalifa, the game's second feels pulled straight from a cozy mystery. Set in a rural English manor, your task is to assassinate the ma-

triarch of an old money banking family. The twist is that when you're dropped into the level, a different murder has just taken place, and the game not-so-subtly steers you towards a scripted narrative revolving around a private detective hired to take on the case. (Conveniently, this PI looks a lot like Agent 47). If you heed the game's advice and impersonate the detective, you're allowed to walk right into the mansion and talk to your mark, who tells you to solve her brother's murder, then report back.

So, while all the elements of *Hitman*'s simulation are present—disguises to don, guards to distract with tossed coins, gas lines to cut, chandeliers to drop from the ceiling—suddenly there's the introduction of a game within the game, an (admittedly, not very well designed or complex) whodunit.

And yet this level, the series's most handholdy, is followed by its least, set in an underground nightclub in the outskirts of Berlin. Like the murder mystery in the previous level, Berlin subverts *Hitman*'s core gameplay loop, but this time by leaning even further into the sim elements. In the club, it's your character who's the assassination target, and you need to avoid an unknown number of roving, undercover agents trying to take you out. The agents hunting you are unmarked, disguised as regular NPCs. This means you need to explore and expose them yourself, and there's only the scantest amount of narrative hints nudging you in the right direction. It's *Hitman* pulled back to its barest bones, forcing players into the sort of totally contextual, system-driven playthrough that's usually reserved for the highest level of play.

This whiplash between authored structure and simulated, freeform gameplay—present in the earlier games but more fully dragged to the forefront in *Hitman 3*—functions to remind players that *Hitman*'s reality is far from exhaustive, and that it isn't meant to be either. By subverting player expectations, making a point to toy with the rules of the machine underneath the gameplay, *Hitman 3* resists being "solvable" in a way so many other sims are. This marks a key difference between *Hitman*'s approach and the prevailing logic in other sims, video games or otherwise. Rather than striving for completeness, getting as close as the technology allows to reality, *Hitman 3*'s levels are better understood as meticulously crafted artifice. Its rules are optimized for playfulness, rather than perfection. They're Rube Goldberg machines, toys that revel in their superfluousness. The fun comes not from any particular technologically impressive feat—realistic bullet drops or destructible environments or spontaneously-generated dialogue options—but from being able to explore, to test the system's limits, break those limits, and then reload the world to do it all over again.

{}

Hitman 3's experiments don't always work, but they reveal the preoccupations of IO's development team. They've built a great simulator, to be sure. Iterated over three installments, the *Hitman* series' mechanics are probably the best the immersive sim genre has ever seen. They toe the line between technically impressive and willing to waive the rules of their simulation for the sake of fun. And yet the real star of these games is the care and intentionality with which the levels were designed. IO's levels are designed to be mastered, its systems to be exploited, and its light narratives to be alternately followed and ignored. There's a humanity to the way these games are developed, a palpable sense of authorship that offers something totally different than what a simulation, even a brilliant one, would typically offer. A lesser game would feel hamstrung by the unrealism of technological limitations and game logic. And indeed, executives have begun envisioning how machine learning might erase this unrealism—by, for example, creating AI-operated physics engines that could run an immersive sim in real time, creating a sim that, from a gameplay perspective, would be functionally flawless. *Hitman*, though, leans into the disconnect. It turns the negotiating artifice into an art.

Games have a unique capacity to say something—narratively, visually, and mechanically—about our tech-saturated existence. Just because they're our highest-tech form of popular art doesn't mean they should surrender to the technology industry's lack of imagination. Yet too many games today feel informed by the data-driven, box-checking-on-a-Notion-page logic that informs the rest of our lives. No doubt this is at least partially because of industry-wide pressures that dictate what sort of projects get green-lit and receive generous funding. But, aesthetically, this is a shame. Developers are now innovating for the sake of UI-informed frictionlessness, not for unearthing any insight that games have the unique capacity to arrive at. From the biggest-budget studios to the scrappiest indies, few developers see technology as anything other than a means to an infinitely-optimizable end.

That immersive sims are partially informed by the wider tech industry's impulse to quantify and "solve" the world, yet riff on that logic in a subversive and aesthetically novel way, should be seen as a rallying cry for a medium that's starting to calcify. *Hitman* and games that share its design DNA prove that there is an alternative to Big Tech's ubiquity that resists the equally unimaginative reactionary analog movement. Such works will be complex and messy, yet they don't apologize for or try to disguise said messiness. They hone in on the unreality of digital life as something in and of itself worth grappling with. And embracing the artifice, taking it seriously, they feel all the more human.

Martin Dolan is is a writer from upstate NY. His essays have appeared in *The Baffler, The Point, The Nation*, and more.