

# Introduction

---

In FALLOUT 3 (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008), the player embarks on a journey into the dystopia of the Capital Wasteland. The gameworld awaits her<sup>1</sup> in turmoil and in anarchical structures and factions that divide the wasteland. This survival of the fittest is experienced by the player in various forms and can be narrowed down to a chain of events that confronts her with a far-reaching *choice*—which is representative for my deliberations in this study.

Relatively early in the game, the player is sent on a quest to Tenpenny Tower, a (supposedly) utopian microcosm within the larger dystopia of the gameworld. Tenpenny Tower is fenced in by a wall to protect it from the surrounding areas and is the home of Allistair Tenpenny, a formerly renowned businessman who grants entrance only to the wealthy and noble. He is especially suspicious of a race called the ghouls. After the apocalypse, they were deformed by the radiation fallout and are now avoided by most wasteland inhabitants. Meanwhile, the word has spread about the sterile illusion of Tenpenny Tower, and the ghouls regularly attempt to gain residence in it. Based on this premise and the *perspectives* (positions) it holds, the player becomes involved in the events and is set in a precarious situation. In order to mediate between the positions, several possibilities are thinkable and potential for the player to enact: 1) eradicating the ghouls; 2) killing the inhabitants of Tenpenny Tower; 3) solving the issue through diplomacy (which might nonetheless end in catastrophe); 4) doing nothing. The prospect for an ethical solution, as Miguel Sicart claims, are thus slim<sup>2</sup>—but becoming creatively engaged in the situation holds *emancipatory potential* for the player.

---

- 1 Throughout this study, I will use the personal pronouns *she*, *he*, *her*, *him* interchangeably and in alternation with each new chapter. There is no agenda behind the constellations, the aim is for readability while upholding a gender-inclusive use of pronouns.
- 2 Miguel Sicart, *Beyond Choices: The Design of Ethical Gameplay* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2013), 96-98.

Consequently, to resolve the issue and have the situation exert its effect, the player becomes involved in a multi-faceted *form of play* that oscillates between her *literal* interaction with a set of rules and navigation of the gameworld and a *figurative* one that comprises her imaginative games within it.<sup>3</sup> In a mixture of *imaginative acts* and *ergodic actions*, therefore, the player approaches the issue and becomes *psychologically* and *aesthetically (emancipatedly) involved* in the action. To do so, she imaginatively closes the indeterminacies of the gameworld and sets the various elements and events in context. There are many blank spots and incomplete structures in FALLOUT 3—such as an inaccessible building or incomplete information about a character or a situation—and to fill in these particulars, the player draws from her real-world knowledge, that of other fictional worlds/games, and her experience so far in the game. This form of involvement is well-known in literature and film, but here it occurs simultaneously with the player’s navigation of the gameworld and her performance in it. As Henry Jenkins holds:

Narrative comprehension is an active process by which viewers assemble and make hypotheses about likely narrative developments on the basis of information drawn from textual cues and clues. ... As they move through the film, spectators test and reformulate their mental maps of the narrative action and the story space. In games, players are forced to act upon those mental maps, to literally test them against the game world itself.<sup>4</sup>

Espen Aarseth has described this latter quality of video game play—which he calls *the ergodic*—as a sort of physical involvement between “*ergon* and *hodos*, meaning ‘work’ and ‘path’,” where the player exerts “nontrivial effort ... to traverse the text [game]”<sup>5</sup> and fills in the gameworld indeterminacies by creating signifiers and personal perspectives on the game. This may occur when she decides to solve a quest in a particular manner, chooses from different dialogue options, discovers new parts of the gameworld, or may be as simple as the choice of certain equipment.

---

- 3 Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 2001), 16-17.
- 4 Henry Jenkins, “Game Design as Narrative Architecture,” in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004), 126.
- 5 Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1997), 1.

Ergodicity, therefore, enables the player to manoeuvre and act within a game-world through some sort of input device (such as a controller)—but this also presupposes “*a disposition* and readiness to act” on the player’s side, “not merely the action of pressing a button or pulling a joystick.”<sup>6</sup> Gordon Calleja thus rightfully claims that the ergodic requires “the player’s *cognitive effort*”<sup>7</sup> as she is planning her moves.<sup>8</sup> Still, this form of cognitive involvement is different from the imaginative involvement referred to above, as it is concerned with deliberations on ludic encounters and problem solving, whereas the latter also refers to the player’s engagement with a storyworld. Naturally, both forms are often intertwined, but a separation seems beneficial, as there are different things going on in the player’s mind in each situation of play.

Play, as such, involves the player in both imaginative and ergodic ways and draws on her real-world knowledge so that she can comprehend the gameworld and act within it. By doing so, play naturally interweaves gameworld considerations with those of the empirical world<sup>9</sup>—this is to say, while the player negotiates her options within the diegesis (ludic possibilities to exploration/interaction, gaining power/money by killing the ghouls, or solving issues in an ethical manner, and so on), her deliberations are informed by what she knows from the empirical world (familiar norms, conventions, processes, states of affairs, etiquettes, etc.). However, these elements are experienced differently in the dystopian gameworld, for the transfer to the fictional reality has distorted their appearance. By disrupting the vertical hierarchies of the empirical world elements, magnifying the differences, and reorganising them horizontally into gameworld perspectives/positions, they are partially freed from their usual interrelations. As such, the created reality confronts the player with a refracted mirror of what she knows and involves her in *games of estrangement* between what is familiar and unfamiliar. This state of matter may entice and bewilder the player at the same time, as it aggravates the referentiality between worlds, but, in doing so, it allows for the formation of hitherto unexpected connections between the dystopian gameworld and the opaque nature of social totality. Video game play, therefore, shows emancipatory potential so

---

6 Gordon Calleja, *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011), 41.

7 Ibid., 42.

8 Ibid., 41-42.

9 With the empirical world, I refer to the extratextual surroundings (outside of the game-world) and to what is usually meant when saying the ‘real world’, the ‘actual world’, and so on.

fundamental to the dystopian genre and equals the appreciator's experience in non-ergodic art, which also "resists translation into referential meaning."<sup>10</sup>

Play, in this sense, can be "pleasurable but risky, and potentially harmful,"<sup>11</sup> as it "disruptively reveal[s] our conventions, assumptions, biases, and dislikes."<sup>12</sup> This quality of play is expressed in the resolution of the Tenpenny Tower quest in whatever form, when the player compares the enacted events (the perspectives she encounters and co-creates, which foreground certain empirical world elements) to what she knows from the real world and composes creative connections between both worlds. The image of Tenpenny Tower that emerges in the player's mind thereby allows for the establishment of links to and associations with the empirical world—whether these revolve around the policy of building a wall to protect the United States of America from Mexican immigration and to marginalise ethnic minorities, or the cultural swing to the right in parts of Europe, where countries such as Poland and Hungary refrain from accepting Syrian refugees for fear they would pollute their immaculate Utopias. Such free-floating implications stand not simply in metaphorical nor allegorical relation to the empirical world but result from an intricate experience in the gameworld and the negotiation of its contents. In addition, they hold the potential to influence the player's in-game actions, and through this test run in virtuality, she may explore solutions (or attenuations) for similar crises in the empirical world. Of course, imaginings and consequent actions differ from player to player and the cultural surroundings they are familiar with, but they are nonetheless outlined by a game's structure—that is, what the player encounters and how it is arranged.

It is this dialectic between (*dystopian*) *game*, *player*, and *culture (world)* that will be the object of scrutiny in this study and which is responsible for affecting the player in a lasting manner. Representational art—including literature, film, theatre, and games—involves the participant in creative *games of fictionality* in different ways. These are informed by the artwork's guiding structure and the participant's freedom of imagination and action, and require a specific approach from her. This is because she not only tries to make sense of the work at hand, which was encoded in its transition to the fictional realm, but also because in doing so, the participant composes creative connections to the empirical world in a process of decoding that is filtered through her self and set in motion by her attempts to *close the blanks* between the work's perspectives. Wolfgang Iser has described

---

10 Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, trans. Wilhelm Fink (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1978), 11; cf. 61, 99, 184.

11 Miguel Sicart, *Play Matters* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2014), 11.

12 *Ibid.*, 15.

this process for the literary text as the reader's "attempt to ideate [*vorstellen*] that which one can never see as such" and that "the character of these images consists in the fact that they bring to light aspects which could not have emerged through direct perception of the object."<sup>13</sup> Therefore, playing dystopia (and video game narratives in general) comes close to—though it also differs in important respects—the reader's involvement in the literary text. For, in contrast to ideology, "heuristic fiction proposes *trial runs* for approaches to what is,"<sup>14</sup> and this allows "the reader to see everyday norms and conventions, social habits of thinking and feeling, in a different light ... [and] to explore, in a kind of *trial action in a virtual environment*, the consequences of breaking and transgressing norms without having to fear sanctions in real life."<sup>15</sup>

Such a playful engagement with fictional worlds is of great benefit to the philosophy of Utopia<sup>16</sup> and its manifestations in fictional narrative form: the genres of *utopia* and *dystopia*. These magnify the distance between empirical and fictional worlds even further as they involve the reader/appreciator in paradisiac or nightmarish worlds, respectively, and in an "exploration of alternatives in a way that supports or catalyzes social transformation."<sup>17</sup> In this study, I will focus on dystopian fiction, which is said to evoke a specific effect in the appreciator. By

---

13 Iser, *Act*, 137.

14 Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology*, trans. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1993), 143; emphasis added.

15 Ingo Berensmeyer, *Literary Theory: An Introduction to Approaches, Methods and Terms* (Stuttgart: Klett Lerntraining, 2009), 79; emphasis added.

16 Following Baccolini and Moylan, I use capitalisation to refer to the philosophy of Utopia (utopianism) and Anti-Utopia and to specific Utopias—a certain imaginary, virtual, or real place that fulfils the necessary aspects of a Utopia: for instance, the Utopia of Columbia in *BIOSHOCK INFINITE* (Irrational Games, 2013) or the island of Utopia in Thomas More's eponymous narrative (1516). Lowercase will be used for Utopia's manifestations, such as real-world practices or fictional experiments: the literary utopia/dystopia, those of film/theatre, and the video game utopia/dystopia. (Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, "Introduction. Dystopia and Histories," in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, ed. Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan [New York: Routledge, 2003], 11.)

17 Ruth Levitas and Lucy Sargisson, "Utopia in Dark Times: Optimism/Pessimism and Utopia/Dystopia," in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, ed. Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan (New York: Routledge, 2003), 13.

involving her in imaginative trial actions and letting her explore playfully a reduced and estranged version of social totality (in the fictional storyworld), the dystopian narrative functions as a *warning* to humankind. It reveals troublesome trends hidden within empirical reality while, at the same time, it investigates potential solutions to the nightmare<sup>18</sup>—and, thus, represents a “heuristic device ... an epistemological and not ontological entity.”<sup>19</sup> Consequently, and in a “*disruption (Beunruhigung)* of the present,”<sup>20</sup> Utopia evokes an *aesthetic response* in the appreciator that enlightens her through fictional trial actions and drives her to ethical action in the real world.

## **HYPOTHESIS: THE VIDEO GAME DYSTOPIA AS A NEW STRATEGIC ENTERPRISE OF UTOPIA AND PLAYFUL TRIAL ACTION**

The main purpose of this study is to explain why these claims apply so well to the *video game dystopia* (VGD), and to explore the player’s aesthetic response to nightmarish gameworlds. I will argue that the video game dystopia describes a new strategic enterprise of the utopian philosophy. By sending the player on a journey through hell but retaining a hopeful (utopian) core, it involves her in a *playful trial action (or test run)* in which she may test, track, and explore in detail an estranged gameworld and an alternative societal model through imaginative and ergodic means. This venture into the fictional reality of dystopia shows potential to warn the player about negative trends within empirical reality and to explore emancipatory routes that may transform the gameworld. It thus serves the player as a subversive example and inducement to effect social change and transformation in the empirical world.

This aesthetic response is meticulously outlined by dystopia’s implied player, which can be described as the affordance and appeal structure of the game that

---

- 18 Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2000), 96-97, 106-107; Fátima Vieira, “The Concept of Utopia,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, ed. Gregory Claeys, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), 6, 17; Hans Ulrich Seeber, *Die Selbstkritik der Utopie in der Angloamerikanischen Literatur* (Münster: LIT, 2003), 33, 45-46.
- 19 Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979), 52.
- 20 Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), 228.

holds all the predispositions necessary for the game to exercise its effect by endowing the player with a certain role (or roles). The effect I am referring to is well-known to the appreciator of representational art or the reader of literary texts and describes an *aesthetic effect* experienced in and through the act of play. Consequently, becoming involved in a dystopian game, the empirical player steps into a *dialectical communication* (a creative negotiation to discover the truth)<sup>21</sup> with the implied player, whose roles she accepts but, at the same time, exposes to scrutiny. These are embedded/virtualised in an entire system of perspectives (positions) that compose the game and its world and which the player co-creates through ergodic action. As the connections between the perspectives remain indeterminate (or are negated), the player is urged to close the blanks between them. She thus experiences art's aesthetic effect through acts of ideation and creates the revelatory connection to the empirical world in a continual revision of composed images and meanings.

This analysis of play's underlying structure shows the benefit of comprehending the player's involvement in dystopia—and video game narratives (VGN)—on a profound, structuralist level that anticipates participation. In other words, considering the specific mediality of the video game medium in relation to non-ergodic forms of representational art will help explain the structure that affords play in the first place and which drives the player to catharsis and aesthetic response. Such a player necessarily shows an open-minded attitude towards the work of art she is confronted with, and given the plethora of player types (that all savour play for different reasons: for ludic, narrative, or world pleasures, and so on), *the emancipated player* becomes a necessity for my deliberations. For this player type describes an empirical being who is willing to engage with the implied player on a complex level, to indulge in potentialities and imaginings that are evoked, while not blindly accepting any truths.<sup>22</sup>

What is more, by scrutinising the tripartite dialectic between (*dystopian*) *game*, *player*, and *culture* (*world*), the study will illuminate the relationship between

---

21 The term dialectic as it is used here implies a negotiation/discourse between two or more parties (in this case: game, player, culture) that engage in a reasonable yet subversive argument to discover unspoken or general truths about life and the world. This use resembles the way Aristotle defines dialectic in *The Art of Rhetoric* (367-322BC), where it is described as similar though not equal to rhetoric. (Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts [Megaphone eBooks, 2008], [http://www.wendelberger.com/downloads/Aristotle\\_Rhetoric.pdf](http://www.wendelberger.com/downloads/Aristotle_Rhetoric.pdf)).

22 Henceforth, I will speak of the empirical player in terms of an emancipated player if not indicated otherwise.

gameworld and empirical world in terms of *fictionality* and from a *phenomenological* point of view. Fiction, as such, is construed as a semantic phenomenon and as a functional approach that involves the player in an aggravated communication with the dystopian game—whereby I primarily follow Walton, Doležel, Iser, and their counterparts from science fiction/dystopian studies, Suvin and Moylan.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, this conception of fiction does not contest the ontological dimension of the gameworld as a virtual artefact but organically integrates it.

## STATE OF RESEARCH: THE ASSUMED POSITION WITHIN VIDEO GAME STUDIES

The benefits of these deliberations to video game studies involve first of all the establishment of a *framework* to categorise and describe the VGD as a genre. Such a work has not yet been done,<sup>24</sup> although there are several articles and conference proceedings that mostly focus on close playings of dystopian games<sup>25</sup> (often discussing the *BIOSHOCK*<sup>26</sup> series), while few attempt to categorise the VGD as a

---

23 Kendall L. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1990); Lubomír Doležel, *Heterocosmica: Fictional and Possible Worlds* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1998); Iser, *Act; Imaginary*; Suvin, *Metamorphoses*; Moylan, *Scraps*.

24 Frelik argues that “to date [2014] there has been little critical work on how video games in general and specific gaming genres in particular engage and transform traditional genre codes as derived from fiction and film.” (Pawel Frelik, “Video Games,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Science Fiction*, ed. Rob Latham [Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014], 229).

25 For example: William Gibbons, “Wrap Your Troubles in Dreams: Popular Music, Narrative, and Dystopia in *Bioshock*,” *Game Studies* 11, no. 3 (December 2011) <http://gamestudies.org/1103/articles/gibbons>; Joseph Packer, “The Battle for Galt’s Gulch: *Bioshock* as Critique of Objectivism,” *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds* 2, no. 3 (December 2010): 209-224, <https://www.intellectbooks.co.uk/journals/view-Article,id=10275/>

26 *BIOSHOCK* (2K Boston, 2007), *BIOSHOCK 2* (2K Marin, 2010), *BIOSHOCK INFINITE* (Irrational Games, 2013), *BURIAL AT SEA: EPISODE 1 and 2* (Irrational Games, 2013-2014).

narrative genre.<sup>27</sup> By doing so, the results of this study will be of additional importance to utopian studies in a transmedial environment, which invite the utopian inclined researcher to “stay open to new forms [of the genre] as they emerge” but that “will require new critical formulations.”<sup>28</sup> What is more, the practical areas of game design and writing benefit from the established framework, as it guides the designer while creating a dystopian game. Finally, my claims on fictionality and the description of a certain subtype of games I will refer to as the video game narrative (which includes the VGD) address central concerns of video game studies, which I will outline in the following.

Throughout the brief but intense history of video game studies, a heated debate concerning the *ontological dimension* of the medium and its ways to *communicate meaning* has been conducted and is still ongoing (see also chapter IV). In this regard, three central issues have emerged that revolve around the following questions: 1) should video games be described in the tradition of non-digital games, or as forms of narrative, drama, or film, and so on;<sup>29</sup> 2) are gameworlds fictional or virtual realities; 3) how is meaning created: a) in the interaction of interrelated elements that necessitate the player’s intervention or b) through game rules that afford different kinds of processes?

Whereas the first area of investigation has been partially answered in that scholars nowadays describe what is usually called a game<sup>30</sup> (or a certain, widespread subtype of games) as *hybrids* between traditional games and participatory

---

27 For example: Marcus Schulzke, “The Critical Power of Virtual Dystopias,” *Games and Culture* 9, no. 5 (July 2014): 315-334, <http://gac.sagepub.com/content/9/5/315>; Sebastian Domsch, “Dystopian Video Games: Fallout in Utopia,” in *Dystopia, Science Fiction, Post-Apocalypse: Classics – New Tendencies – Model Interpretations*, ed. Eckart Voigts and Alessandra Boller (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2015), 395-410.

28 Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, “Conclusion. Critical Dystopia and Possibilities,” in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, ed. Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan (New York: Routledge, 2003), 247.

29 For different positions on the game medium, see Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan, eds. *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance and Game* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004).

30 The term video game or game (which I use interchangeably) designates a vague umbrella term that includes different phenomena, ranging from games such as TETRIS (Nintendo, 1989) to GRAND THEFT AUTO V (Rockstar North, 2013). It can therefore be misleading and should rather be used in a metonymic way. (Calleja, *In-Game*, 3; Espen

narratives,<sup>31</sup> the nature of this new genre and its specific modes of discourse remain unclarified.

Issues two and three, however, evoke more controversial arguments. This discrepancy is based on two positions that aim to describe the ontology of games from either a “ludo-fictionalist” perspective, “inspired by Kendell Walton’s radical and influential *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (1990)”<sup>32</sup> that regards the gameworld and its objects as props in imaginative games of make-believe<sup>33</sup> or from a “ludo-realist” point of view.<sup>34</sup> This latter perspective perceives the gameworld as a virtual artefact and as closer to the empirical world.<sup>35</sup> Consequently, the potential for confusion here is substantial when not clarifying one’s terms in a precise manner and pinpointing the concept of fiction/virtuality one is employing.

In addition, the innumerable attempts to determine the meaning-creation in games have proceeded similarly. An important school in this respect is the proceduralist approach inspired by Ian Bogost’s influential theory on procedural rhetoric, which argues that the emergence of meaning in games resides in formal structures and rules that give rise to interrelated processes—in other words: “The art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures.”<sup>36</sup> This approach is challenged by

---

J. Aarseth, “A Narrative Theory of Games,” *Proceedings of the International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games* (2012), 130, 133, <http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=2282365>).

- 31 For example: Aarseth, “Narrative”; Calleja, *In-Game*; Marie-Laure Ryan, *Avatars of Story* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Sebastian Domsch, *Storyplaying: Agency and Narrative in Video Games* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013).
- 32 Espen J. Aarseth, “Ontology,” in *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2014), 491.
- 33 For example: Ryan, *Narrative*; *Avatars*; Domsch, *Storyplaying*; Grant Tavinor, “Art and Aesthetics,” in *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2014), 59-66; “Fiction,” in *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2014), 434-421; *The Art of Videogames* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).
- 34 Aarseth, “Ontology,” 491.
- 35 For example: Calleja, *In-Game*; Espen J. Aarseth, “Doors and Perception: Fiction vs Simulation in Games,” *Escritas Mutantes*, 2006, [http://www.luisfilipeteixeira.com/fileManager/file/fiction\\_Aarseth\\_jan2006.pdf](http://www.luisfilipeteixeira.com/fileManager/file/fiction_Aarseth_jan2006.pdf)
- 36 Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2010), ix.

scholars who draw on the traditions of arts and aesthetics and describe the meaning-making process in terms of a dialectic between game, player, and culture. Thereby, a game's layers (system of rules and semiotic world elements) are engaged by a player in different modes of involvement.<sup>37</sup> In this conception, “procedurality” is seen as “necessary but not sufficient” to describe the act of play.<sup>38</sup> “The message is not in the mechanic or the fiction but in how both are put together—in the dissonance between action and meaning. The mechanic is not the message. The gameworld is not the message. Play is the message.”<sup>39</sup>

It is needless to say that such an approach leaves the realms of ontology (at least partially) and enters a discussion of *phenomenology* and *cognitive sciences*. Of specific interest here is Gordon Calleja’s influential work on player involvement that describes the relation between player and game as a form of incorporation that sets the player in a limbo state between virtual and empirical world. Calleja thus builds on the long discussion of immersion and presence in video game studies<sup>40</sup> and describes the player’s multifarious involvement in a game through kinesthetic, ludic, narrative, affective, shared, and spatial participation.<sup>41</sup> Various studies have continued in this phenomenological direction<sup>42</sup>—not to men-

---

37 For example: Aarseth, “Ontology”; *Cybertext*; Calleja, *In-Game*; Sicart, *Beyond; Play; Domsch, Storyplaying*; Susana P. Tosca, “*Amnesia: The Dark Descent*: The Player’s Very Own Purgatory,” in *Analyzing Digital Fiction*, ed. Alice Bell, Astrid Ensslin, and Hans K. Rustad (London: Routledge, 2014), 109–123.

38 Sicart, *Beyond*, 38.

39 Ibid., 96.

40 For example: Ryan, *Narrative*; Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on The Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998); Carl Therrien, “Immersion,” in *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2014), 451–458.

41 Calleja, *In-Game*.

42 For example: Rune Klevjer, “What is the Avatar? Fiction and Embodiment in Avatar-Based Singleplayer Computer Games” (PhD diss., University of Bergen, 2006), <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/b666/b2b75bb7923607a2cb202ff6c222707d3703.pdf>; Daniel Vella, “The Ludic Subject and the Ludic Self: Analyzing the ‘I-in-the-Gameworld’” (PhD diss., IT University of Copenhagen, 2015), <https://en.itu.dk/~media/en/research/phd-programme/phd-defences/2015/daniel-vella---the-ludic-subject-and-the-ludic-self-final-print-pdf.pdf?la=en>; Brendon Keogh, “A Play of Bodies: A Phenomenology of Videogame Experience” (PhD diss., RMIT University, 2015), <https://researchbank.rmit.edu.au/eserv/rmit:161442/Keogh.pdf>

tion those on affect and the psychology of playing games. They address the relation of the player's body to both the player-character (PC)/avatar and the game-world, while regarding this interrelation as one that oscillates between proximity and distance.<sup>43</sup>

Given these diverse strands in video game studies, I will describe the act of playing dystopia from a *phenomenological point of view* that is, nonetheless, anchored in *structuralism* and *narratology*. For as Iser argues: whereas "a theory of the aesthetics of reception (*Rezeptionstheorie*) ... deals with existing readers, whose reactions testify to certain historically conditioned experiences of literature," "a theory of aesthetic response (*Wirkungstheorie*) ... has its roots in the text."<sup>44</sup> However, such a theory never loses sight of the empirical reader's importance to this process and analyses this interaction "in terms of a dialectical relationship between text, reader, and their interaction."<sup>45</sup> As such, a theory of aesthetic response necessarily involves a discussion of *fictionality*, which I will describe as upholding a specific, aggravated relation (referentiality) between the fictional and empirical world. I am thus influenced by the previously discussed positions of video game studies in different ways, but I strongly tend towards a conception of games as multi-faceted phenomena and as hybrids between many things, the predominant form of which intermingles the qualities of traditional games and participatory narratives to involve the player in diverse ways.<sup>46</sup> Such a conception of games and play construes the meaning-making process as an interaction between different elements (culture, player, game), while rejecting linear approaches to the issue.

---

43 My notion of player-character is similar to Daniel Vella's "playable figure." (Vella, "Ludic Subject," 10). The playable figure combines the qualities of the terms avatar and player-character in that "it encapsulates both the fact that the entity is taken on and 'played out' by the player (in the sense that the player might say she is 'playing Bilbo' in The Hobbit), but also the fact that it remains a figure in its own right." (Ibid., 10). However, as I see no reason why the term player-character does not exhibit this meaning as well—and because of its acceptance in video game studies and design—I will stick to it, but in the mode of the playable figure.

44 Iser, *Act*, x.

45 Ibid., x.

46 Aarseth, "Narrative"; Sicart, *Beyond*; Calleja, *In-Game*; Tosca, "Amnesia"; Domsch, *Storyplaying*; Tavinor, "Art," *Art of*; Klevjer, "Avatar"; Ryan, *Narrative; Avatars*; Michael Nitsche, *Video Game Spaces: Image, Play, and Structure in 3D Game Worlds* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 2008).

Moreover, I will circumvent the ontological discussion of fiction and virtuality by describing the former phenomenon from a functional and phenomenological point of view. From this perspective, fiction respects the ontological integrity of the gameworld as a virtual artefact but endows it with a specific quality that sensualises the abstract gamespace and involves the player in a meticulous dialectic between gameworld and empirical world through acts of ideation. All in all, these are necessary steps to describe the nature of dystopia's aesthetic effect on the player and the meaning-making process in VGDs, which is the focus of this study.

## **METHOD: A CREATIVE ENCOUNTER BETWEEN GUIDING STRUCTURE AND PLAYFUL EXPRESSION**

It has been clarified that the VGD involves the player in a struggle for Utopia that is both similar to and different from the reader's/appreciator's participation in non-ergodic storyworlds. The similarity rests in the gameworld's imaginative evocative qualities, while the difference concerns the player's navigation of and interaction with this world, which is extended to the ergodic and situates the player as an active "agent ... capable of effecting real transformation of the global social and economic system."<sup>47</sup> These facets partially continue the tradition of non-ergodic dystopias in that the VGD relies "on the same utopian and dystopian tropes"<sup>48</sup> but extends them by altering the former's plot structure. Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini have described this framework as the "clash of the official narrative," the description of the dystopian society, "and the oppositional counter-narrative,"<sup>49</sup> the rebellion against the hegemonic order conducted by one more dissident thinkers.<sup>50</sup>

This framework is dynamically widened in the VGD by both the *systemic nature* of a game and the player's *agency*. For the video game as a procedural system offers the player an insight into the "underlying logic of how these [dystopian]

---

47 Levitas and Sargisson, "Utopia in Dark Times," 16; cf. Alexander C. H. Hall, "'I am Trying to Believe': Dystopia as Utopia in the *Year Zero* Alternative Reality Game," *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture* 3, no. 1 (2009), 71-72, <http://www.eludamos.org/index.php/eludamos/article/view/vol3no1-8/112>

48 Elizabeth Nyman and Ryan L. Teten, "Lost and Found and Lost Again: Island Utopias and Dystopia in the *BioShock* Series," *Games and Culture* 13, no. 4 (November 2015): 6, <http://gac.sagepub.com/content/early/2015/11/19/1555412015616510.abstract>

49 Moylan, *Scraps*, 152.

50 Ibid., xiii; Baccolini and Moylan, "Introduction," 5.

worlds are created and sustained”<sup>51</sup> while sending her on a quest for hopeful possibilities and the “agency” capable “to influence and change the system.”<sup>52</sup> This increased involvement in dystopia reconfigures the old “conventions” by the “additional facet of … [the] ludic (i.e. play) dimension”<sup>53</sup> and creates an experience “that focuses anger”<sup>54</sup> through *agency*, whose lessons may “carry over into reality, giving gamers a better sense of how they can make a difference in life.”<sup>55</sup>

Doing justice to such a complex involvement in dystopia is the main task of this study. In disclosing the *preconditions of the player’s aesthetic response* and describing the *underlying structure* that affords play, I wish to arrive at a *unified theory of aesthetic response* for VGNs. Such an investigation is lacking in video game studies and represents a fundamental gap to be filled. Furthermore, this perspective on games is beneficial in that it

never allow[s] players to be insulated from gameplay. That means never forgetting, while observing game dynamics, that gameplay isn’t solely about what games make the player do, but about how and why he does it, what it does to him, and what he makes of it retrospectively.<sup>56</sup>

Consequently, and to avoid the mistakes of linear approaches to video games, my deliberations are heavily informed by theories on representational art and the appreciator’s involvement in it. Of specific interest here is Kendall Walton’s seminal work on mimesis and make-believe that describes the creative involvement of appreciators in the guiding structures of representations (which are equal to fictions in the specific Waltonian sense).<sup>57</sup> I will then refine these deliberations with

---

51 Schulzke, “Virtual,” 10.

52 Domsch, “Dystopian,” 401.

53 Rowan Tulloch, “Ludic Dystopias: Power, Politics, and Play,” *Proceedings of the Sixth Australasian Conference on Interactive Entertainment*, no. 13 (2009), <http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=1746063>

54 Jane Donawerth, “Genre Blending and the Critical Dystopia,” in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, ed. Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan (New York: Routledge, 2003), 30.

55 Hall, “Trying to Believe,” 80.

56 Samuel Archibald, “Literary Theory (Appendix),” in *The Video Game Theory Reader* 2, ed. Bernard Perron and Mark J. P. Wolf (London: Routledge, 2009), 362.

57 Walton, *Mimesis*.

Jacques Rancière's thoughts on an emancipated spectator who imaginatively engages with theatre plays,<sup>58</sup> Lubomír Doležel's contemplations on fiction as a semantic phenomenon that involves the reader in a multifarious communication with both the empirical and literary world,<sup>59</sup> and, primarily, Wolfgang Iser's influential theory on aesthetic response.<sup>60</sup> Here, the reader steps in an imaginative dialectic with the structural concept of the implied reader, which is composed of a system of perspectives. These outline the empirical reader's imaginative involvement in the fictional text through structural indeterminacies that open up between the perspectives and evoke acts of ideation in the reader—that is, the creation and continuous revision of images by using her real-world knowledge.

The truth of these observations and the creative encounter between *formal structure* and *playful expression* applies as much to the engagement with non-ergodic representations as it does to video game play or realms beyond. It can be found when a band composes a piece of music—orienting themselves in the elegance of structure and breathing in life through creativity and passion—in performing a play, dance, art, life, and the universe itself. For the empirical player this means stepping into a creative dialectic with dystopia's implied player and in an emancipatory encounter between the poles of orientation and free interplay, of conforming to the rules of a specific role and scrutinising one's performance—which sets the player in a liminal position between gameworld and empirical reality.

Of great importance to my theory is therefore the concept of the *implied player*, which I borrow from Iser's original take on the implied reader and Aarseth's use of the implied player in game studies.<sup>61</sup> This construct will be refined and, as briefly outlined above, is by no means to be confused with the empirical player. Instead, *it can be described in a non-personified form as both the structure of the game and a specific role (or roles) ascribed to the player*. In other words, *the implied player represents the affordance and appeal structure of the (dystopian) game that drives the player to aesthetic response. To do so, it confronts her with a vast system of perspectives and structural indeterminacies that require the player to complete them through ergodic and imaginative action*. These perspectives offer windows into the estranged reality of the gameworld and

---

58 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2009).

59 Doležel, *Heterocosmica*.

60 Iser, *Act; Imaginary*.

61 Iser, *Act; Espen J. Aarseth*, “I Fought the Law: Transgressive Play and the Implied Player,” *Proceedings of the 2007 DiGRA International Conference: Situated Play 4* (2007), <http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/07313.03489.pdf>

outline the player's involvement in and comprehension of it. Through their combination in acts of ideation, the player experiences a game's aesthetic effect and a cathartic insight into the empirical world. Thereby, the perspectives oscillate in function between virtual *game objects* with which the player can interact and Waltonian *props* that evoke specific imaginings. They comprise:

1. **Sensorial perspective:** the sensorial filter (visual, auditory haptic) through which the player is granted access to the gameworld.
2. **World perspective:** the (dystopian) gameworld including its settings, objects, architecture, and topological/labyrinthine structures; the sounds and music of this world; and the characters who inhabit it.
3. **Plot perspective:** the plot developments that are outlined according to dystopia's narrative framework: the official narrative and counter-narrative.
4. **System perspective:** processes, playing styles, and player actions that are outlined by the game's dynamic system and rules.

To explain the phenomenon of the implied player bears a couple of considerations, and the discussion of the appreciator's/reader's involvement in representational art/literature will be complemented by an investigation into *narratology* and the *indeterminacy/virtuality* of gameworlds. As such, I will describe the perspectival system of the (dystopian) game by resorting to *classical narratology* and intertwine these deliberations with relevant work from video *game studies* and *game writing*. Moreover, my claim that the gameworld formulates an incomplete work world in the Waltonian sense, and so requires the player's participation, will be fortified by insights on 1) *game fiction*; 2) *the structural peculiarities of game-worlds*; and 3) *environmental storytelling techniques* that describe the gameworld as an imaginatively incomplete space that extends into the past and future.

The most interesting of these indeterminacies is the *blank*, which evokes the player's urge for combination and the negotiation between the different perspectives she encounters and co-creates. As such, the blank describes a vacancy in the overall system of the gameworld and will be distinguished from what can be called a *gap*. This latter form of indeterminacy rather addresses the player's desire for completion and the filling in of imaginative inconsistencies (such as an inaccessible house) or virtualised potentialities that can be actualised through ergodic action, which results in the creation of perspectives. Nonetheless, both forms of indeterminacy are very much intertwined and may occur in parallel.

Having clarified this structural framework of dystopia's implied player, I will continue to explain its dialectical communication with the empirical player. For this purpose, I will turn to the estranged nature of dystopian science fiction, which

further aggravates the player's comprehension of the gameworld and her own agency in relation to the empirical world.<sup>62</sup> These insights will be approximated to the video game by intertwining Iser's notion of imaginative play as the interaction between *the fictive, the imaginary, and the real*<sup>63</sup> with Roger Caillois' concept of *ludus* and *paidia*<sup>64</sup> and Sicart's conception of *subversive play* (what I will call *precarious play*) that oscillates between guiding structure and playful expression.<sup>65</sup>

Through these interrelated steps, I will arrive at a discussion of the player's formation of *images* during the act of play—based on Iser's deliberations on the act of reading<sup>66</sup>—and it will become clear that in *playing dystopia* the experience of meaning and the aesthetic effect do not reside in isolated elements such as the system of rules or semiotic layer of a game. Instead, they result from the complex interaction between the guiding structure of the implied player (which is permeated by the *fictive*) and the player's imaginative and ergodic interactions (that are propelled by the *imaginary*). Meaning is thus experienced in and through the act of play and through the player's acts of ideation that are informed by empirical reality (the *real*) but restructure the player's perception of it. I will demonstrate the viability of these theoretical manoeuvres in the analysis of various examples and close playings of dystopian games.

## STRUCTURAL OVERVIEW OF THE ARGUMENT

To give my argument a clear structure this study is divided into three interrelated parts:

‘Part I: Towards the Video Game Dystopia’ builds a solid foundation in discussing the concept of Utopia and its fictional narratives genres: utopia and dystopia. It thereby creates a framework to classify dystopian games and their plot structures according to several subgenres and introduces the game scholar/designer to the thematic.

---

62 Suvin, *Metamorphoses*; Moylan, *Scraps*.

63 Iser, *Imaginary*.

64 Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Brash (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

65 Sicart, *Beyond; Play*.

66 Iser, *Act; Imaginary*.

Chapter I will describe Utopia as a philosophy of hope that is deeply anchored in the human psyche.<sup>67</sup> This utopian impulse finds expression in a variety of artwork in different forms and manifests itself in video game fiction. To illustrate this facet, I will compare Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) to Irrational Games' *BIOSHOCK INFINITE* (2013), which was released roughly 500 years after its predecessor. Although separated in time, *BIOSHOCK INFINITE* continues the Morean tradition in that it employs utopia's plot framework of a stranger coming to an exhilarating Other. The chapter will end with a discussion of definitions of the literary utopia to situate the dystopian genre within a utopian framework and draw inspiration for a definition of the VGD.

Chapter II builds on these observations and describes the fictional dystopia as a transmedial genre that functions as a strategy of Utopia. By retaining a hopeful core within its nightmarish worlds,<sup>68</sup> dystopia is opposed to anti-utopia—two genres that are often regarded as inseparable.<sup>69</sup> Building on a differentiation of the fictional dystopia into various subgenres, I will finally establish a typology of dystopian genres in games. These include:

1. **The VGD as anti-utopia:** a deceptive strategy of the status quo and negation of utopian thought.
2. **The VGD as classical dystopia:** an efficient type in which the player relentlessly, though unsuccessfully, struggles against a merciless hegemonic order.
3. **The VGD as critical dystopia of variant I:** a frequent type of dystopia that often discloses the history of the dystopian society and ascribes the role of the catalyst to the player in having her actualise one or more utopian enclaves leading out of the dystopian confinement.

---

67 Primarily following Jameson, *Archaeologies*; Vieira, "Concept"; ed., *Dystopia(n) Matters: On the Page, on Screen, on Stage* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2013); Chris Ferns, *Narrating Utopia: Ideology, Gender, Form in Utopian Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1999); Lyman T. Sargent, "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited," *Utopian Studies* 5, no. 1, (1994), <http://www.jstor.org/doi/10.2307/20719246?uid=3737864&uid=2129&uid=2&uid=70&uid=4&sid=21101560295713>

68 For example: Moylan, *Scraps*; Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*; Vieira, *Dystopia(n) Matters*; "Concept"; Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, eds., *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

69 For example: Krishan Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987); M. Keith Booker, *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism* (Westport Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994).

4. **The VGD as critical dystopia of variant II:** a most promising variant of the critical dystopia that makes full use of the game medium's possibilities. By confronting the player with both the possibility of attaining a better future and its loss, the critical dystopia of variant II makes the player choose whether she wants to become a catalyst for change.

The chapter comes to a close by illuminating dystopia's plot structure of official narrative and counter-narrative. This framework formulates an integral part of dystopia's implied player, and its application to video game fiction will be scrutinised through a comparison between George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and Valve's *HALF-LIFE 2* (2004).

Chapter III pursues the question whether the VGD is effective in conveying a warning. For this purpose, I will first discuss the nature of the dystopian warning to then transpose these deliberations to the VGD. In doing so, I will formulate an initial hypothesis that the premise for effective VGDs rests in the diversity of their perspectival network and consequent aesthetic complexity (by which I mean the potential range of playthroughs, imaginings, and interpretations). Consequently, whereas effective dystopias intermingle several points of view on game events (through characters, world issues, ludic interactions) and constitute multi-layered artefacts that are both pleasurable and subversive, ineffective dystopias focus on the pleasures of combat without giving at least a believable justification for the spectacle. The chapter ends with an overview of real-world targets common to the VGD and how these employ dystopia's framework to establish perspectival diversity. Thereby, the targets can be grouped into three overarching categories that centre on the general point of attack of (human) nature: the threat of oppressive regimes, the excesses of capitalism, and the dangers of science and technology.

‘Part II: Playful Trial Actions in Estranged Gameworlds’ composes a unified theory of aesthetic response to playing dystopia in particular and VGNs in general. It links a discussion of representational art, fiction, and reader-response theories to suitable research from video game studies and narrows down the established framework to the VGD.

Chapter IV describes the intersubjective framework of the implied player as the affordance and appeal structure of the game and as a network of perspectives that outlines the player's involvement. To do so, it introduces central concerns of video game studies that revolve around questions of narrative and fiction. These will be approached from a phenomenological perspective that views the appreciator's interaction with them in terms of a mutual dialectic. By describing two perspectives on the game medium—games as objects (framework) and processes (gameplay)—the discussion will be expanded to games, and I will describe the

implied player as an incomplete construct and a potentially multi-layered artefact that structures a work world in fundamental ways and implies different types of players. To fully actualise this virtualised potential, however, requires both active and reflective participation, and I will hint at the importance of the blank in the player's acts of ideation in an analysis of Thatgamecompany's *JOURNEY* (2012, 2015). The chapter will end on a detailed description of the VGN's perspectival system, which affords these blanks and involves the player in games of fictionality.

Chapter V will close several strands the previous chapter opened up and discuss the empirical player's interaction with the implied player in terms of a playful trial action that guides the former to aesthetic response. It will lay the focus on the importance of indeterminacies in the act of play which permeate the gameworld and can be grouped in two primary types: gaps (that fuel the player's urge to completion) and blanks (as overall vacancies in the system that drive the player to combination). The discussion will be geared towards dystopia here and complemented by theories of estrangement, since the gameworld awaits the player in modes of defamiliarisation that not only aggravate her understanding of this world but also her agency within it. The strings converge in a close playing of 4A Games' *METRO 2033* (2010), where I will transpose Iser's deliberations on the act of play and describe the player's attempt to make sense of the gameworld and its relation to empirical reality by composing two interlinked *gestalts*: the first to understand the gameworld, its characters, and plot, and a second that allows the player to weave connections to the empirical world, thus decoding the games of fictionality. Play, in this sense, is seen as *precarious* and as a *regenerative* force that comes to the fore in the interaction between the fictive, the imaginary, and the real.

'Part III: Playing Dystopia' puts my theoretical manoeuvres on trial by discussing two VGDs to the satisfaction of the established framework. It will complement the briefer examples from Part I and II—and it should be noted that my focus in this study lies on single-player games, for multi-player games and online worlds require an analytical framework of their own.

Chapter VI conducts a close playing of Irrational Games' *BIOSHOCK INFINITE* (2013), a critical dystopia of variant I that sends the player to the floating city of Columbia. The game targets a variety of issues, including theocratic regimes, a rapturous form of capitalism leading to a culture of Disneyfication, and humankind's unrelenting desire for power. To warn the player of such potentialities, *BIOSHOCK INFINITE* entices her with a quest to save a mysterious woman by the name of Elizabeth as she comes to uncover society's true nature. To do so in an efficient manner, the game involves the player in games of estrangement and in a struggle for forgiveness that is both personal and universalised. Whereas on a

basic level, this struggle revolves around Booker DeWitt's guilt (the PC) for having committed racist atrocities and losing his daughter Anna in a gambling debt, this guilt is transposed to the player's current objective of saving Elizabeth. Here, the player faces the loss of Utopia by participating in hectic combat and an estranged form of capitalism. This gamist playstyle (which is focused on spectacle and gathering points) is foregrounded by the game and aligned with consumer conduct in the empirical world (buying goods one is not in need of, while ignoring the atrocities of the capitalist production machinery). In an intricate story of multiverses and negative potentialities, *BIOSHOCK INFINITE*'s ambiguous ending reunites the thematic strands of the *BIOSHOCK* games and fortifies their attempt to denounce human nature. Yet it also expresses the possibility to break free from this vicious circle in the protagonists' struggle for forgiveness through self-sacrificial acts.

Chapter VII explores the post-apocalypse of Naughty Dog's *THE LAST OF US* (Remastered Edition, 2014), a critical dystopia of variant I in which humankind has been decimated by the Cordyceps Brain Infection and where nature has made a majestic return. *THE LAST OF US* warns the player about the ramifications of an uncontrolled capitalism that extends into most ecospheres and disrupts nature's intimate balance. Thereby, it involves the player in a dialectical opposition between confining city spaces and liberating outdoor spaces. Whereas the former remind her of the shortcomings of bureaucratic consumer capitalism and the scientific hubris of man, the latter offer a safe haven from the intense gameplay of the city and suburban areas. Although seemingly a didactic opposition, the journey is one of gradual realisation, where Ellie aids both Joel (the PC) and the player in savouring aspects of the natural world they might otherwise have forgotten. Given these juxtapositions, *THE LAST OF US* makes creative use of dystopia's plot framework of official narrative and counter-narrative.

Finally, chapter VIII summarises my findings in this study and dares to look into the future of the VGD in anticipation of games that involve the player in new forms of creativity and social subversiveness.

