Preface to Part III

Part I and II served to create a viable framework for describing the player's venture to dystopia from a phenomenological standpoint and constituted the premise for a close playing of dystopian games.

Part I thereby laid the groundwork for the theory of the player's aesthetic response to dystopia in that it distinguished between four subgenres of the VGD: the anti-utopia, the classical dystopia, and the critical dystopia in variants I and II. Going into detail concerning their respective plot structures and differing approaches to the negotiation of hope, a viable initial framework for the VGD was established, which revolved around the opposing structure of official narrative and counter-narrative (the player's experience of the dystopian regime and eventual revulsion against it). Finally, Part I came to a close by alluding to the VGD's aesthetic potential and describing the genre's real-world targets.

Building on these insights, Part II intensified the discussion of the VGD's aesthetic complexity by scrutinising the preconditions leading to the player's aesthetic response. It incorporated the conclusions on dystopia's plot structure into the comprehensive framework of the implied player. Chapter IV thus combined a multi-faceted discussion of representational art, fictionality, structuralist narratology, and reader-response theories with related insights from video game studies and concluded by describing the perspectival network of a game. The chapter illuminated the existence of the VGN as a genre and pointed at strategies of player involvement (or guidance) at a game's disposal. These were described as guiding the player on an ergodic and imaginative level through a system of perspectives and contributing to his understanding of the gameworld and plot. In addition, they offer the player a gateway to a more complex dialectic that extends into the realms of significance and creates ties to his empirical surroundings. Through various images created in acts of ideation, the player steadily builds a secondary *gestalt* that complements the first, which arose out of plot developments and gameworld

events. This secondary *gestalt* was illustrated as more diverse and as tantamount to an approximation of the aesthetic object.

The gained insights from chapter IV were extended in chapter V, where the general reflections on the VGN were combined with specifics of the SF/dystopian genre. Consequently, strategies of estrangement and extrapolation were given priority and the methods by which these involve the player in a distorted dreamworld—which is organised by the fictive and made palpable by the imaginary permeating the player's mind and actions. By involving the player in confusing games of estrangement and fictionality, the VGD was described as creating an aggravated referentiality to the empirical world—and to close the blanks between both worlds, the player's activation in the act of play (as an emancipated being) became necessary, which is governed by a feedback oscillation between fictional and empirical reality.

All in all, the conclusions here are twofold: first, there is a naturalness of aesthetic response to playing dystopia, once the player engages with a game with an open-minded attitude. Second, the insights into the act of play helped construct a framework for analysis that outlines/schematises play's underlying processes, the player's reactions to them, and makes them tangible for the critical observant. The structure of the blank is thereby of utmost importance as is how various perspectival arrangements give rise to it. Blanks constitute the basis for all sorts of communication, and in this respect, Iser's distinction of four types of perspective arrangements in narrative fiction become of interest: "counterbalance, opposition, echelon, and serial."[1] In order to prevent premature conclusions, however, the discussion of perspectival arrangements was postponed to Part III.

Consequently, the following and last part of this study elucidates my theoretical deliberations by applying them to two thematically diverse VGDs. These close playings complement the many examples I have dispersed throughout this study. Hence, I will describe two critical dystopias of variant I: BIOSHOCK INFINITE and THE LAST OF US: REMASTERED. These games address issues such as religious fanaticism, oppressive regimes, ecological catastrophes, and capitalism and convey their warnings by juxtaposing several perspectives and placing them in dialectical opposition and within echelon structures. Through the player's continual renegotiation of previously composed images, the experienced meanings diverge from player to player but are nonetheless outlined by the perspectival arrangements of these games.

---

1   Iser, *Act*, 100.