3 Warning, Effectiveness, and Targets of the Video Game Dystopia

The pleasures of play are many, and there can be no strict delineation of what players may find aesthetically alluring during each and every moment of their gaming experience. Such a statement necessarily demands explanation, and it might be beneficial to start with the player's *supposed pleasures* of the previously described HALF-LIFE 2. In the game, the player is sent on a mission against a merciless order and comes to experience City 17 and its surrounding areas. These he explores in detail on a linear journey and plot to counteract the Combine regime through force and combat. By doing so, he meets several members of the resistance with whom he potentially establishes close relations (first and foremost, Alyx) and becomes emotionally attached to the narrative he helps to create.

It is easy to discern that the pleasures of HALF-LIFE 2, as I have described them, fit well with Gordon Calleja's six distinct but interwoven forms of player involvement: kinesthetic, spatial, narrative, ludic, shared, and affective.[1] Notwithstanding these possibilities, the previous chapter also hinted at a form of subversive involvement that resulted from the player's comparison of the game events to his empirical surroundings. This *aesthetic (or emancipated) involvement* is universal to the appreciator's engagement with representational art and due to an artwork's perspectival arrangements and the resulting interaction processes with the participant. In HALF-LIFE 2 these perspectives included the gameworld, which is ruled by a brutal regime, the combat actions against it, the countryside as a locus of utopian enclaves, and the relations/dialogues between the main characters. Closing the blanks between them, the player comes to see the ethical justifications for the combat and the necessity of such a resistance. Still, I also hinted at the possibility of an *uncritical playthrough* that focuses on the pleasures of combat

1 Calleja, *In-Game*, 37-38.

and a world in which the use of guns is generally accepted, while downplaying the plot occurrences and characters.

Such a playthrough is a viable option and ingrained in the implied player (see the discussion on player types in chapter IV). Yet in order for HALF-LIFE 2 to exercise its full (subversive) effect as fiction, a more contemplative interaction is needed from the player. This begs a more general question, namely, *what are the prerequisites for a video game dystopia's effectiveness*; that is to say, *how does it outline an aesthetic effect for the player to experience*? In this regard, the subversive potential of VGDs as a vehicle of social criticism and transformation has been widely acknowledged by video game scholars in different ways.[2] Lars Schmeink, for instance, talks about a "utopian moment within the agency of the player" which "strikingly offers more actual utopian impulse than a linear narrative ever could."[3] Aldred and Greenspan argue that dystopian games "provide a meaningful site" on which to explore societal issues against a "dialectic of utopian and dystopian alternatives."[4] However, not all VGDs (or supposed VGDs) adhere to these claims, as was described with the example of CALL OF DUTY: ADVANCED WARFARE, which remained caught up in pleasurable combat and a clichéd ending that confirmed rather than disapproved of such drastic measures without giving them further context.

Consequently, in order to fully elaborate on this aspect a more thorough investigation is needed in which I will suggest that there are primarily two constituents necessary for a VGD's effectiveness: 1) a game's *aesthetic complexity*, by which I mean its degree of openness or multifacetedness that allows for a diverse richness of playthroughs, imaginings, and interpretations—in the VGD this *complexity of*

2 Tulloch, "Ludic Dystopias;" Nyman and Teten, "Lost and Found," 3; Hall, "Trying to Believe," 78; Schulzke, "Virtual," 326, 331; "Bioethics," 49,56; Domsch, "Dystopian" 408; Maziarczyk, "Playable Dystopia," 253; Schmeink, "Dystopia;" Walz, *Toward a Ludic Architecture*, 139; Gibbons, "Wrap Your Troubles;" Packer, "Galt's Gulch," 209-210, 219; Aldred and Greenspan, "A Man Chooses," 479-480; Shannon OB. Wilder, "A Narrative of Synthetic Fear: Virtualizing Dystopia in a Gaming World" (PhD diss., University of Georgia, 2006), 26, 130, https://oatd.org/oatd/record?record=oai%5C%3Augakr.libs.uga.edu%5C%3A10724%5C%2F23760; Ryan Lizardi, "*BioShock*: Complex and Alternate Histories," *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 14, no. 1 (August 2014), http://gamestudies.org/1401/articles/lizardi; Grant Tavinor, "*BioShock* and the Art of Rapture," *Philosophy and Literature* 33, vol. 1 (2009): 95, https://philpapers.org/rec/TAVBAT

3 Schmeink, "Dystopia."

4 Aldred and Greenspan, "A Man Chooses," 479.

perspectives is anchored in the plot structure of *official narrative and counter-narrative*; 2) a certain player type that, given the diversity of player preferences in games, shows the necessary willingness to engage with a work of art on a complex level and in a self-aware manner. This *emancipated player* may savour all of the above-mentioned forms of involvement but, at the same time, subjects the enacted events to scrutiny and takes pleasures in the experience of meaning.

To prove these points will not be entirely possible within the confines of this chapter, and its results are rather to be seen as a premise to Part II and III, where I will go into detail about the implied player's dialectic with the emancipated player. Nonetheless, three important steps will be taken. The chapter will begin with a closer look at Utopia's universal *function as warning* to then expand the discussion to the VGD and the genre's *effectiveness in issuing a warning*—for not all dystopian games fall into the category of the VGD, because of their lack of aesthetic complexity. Lastly, a categorisation of the VGD's *real-world targets* will be made, together with the application of dystopia's *traditional plot structure* (official narrative and counter-narrative). This will give a good overview of the genre's diversity. Focusing on an enemy not uncommon to dystopian fiction, all targets discussed here—the threat of oppressive regimes, the capitalist world system, and the dangers of science and technology—centre on the universal theme of *human nature's dark side*, which shall be overcome by the player in a process of emancipation. Of concern here will be the perspectival arrangements of the VGD at hand and how they contribute to its aesthetic complexity.

3.1 THE VIDEO GAME DYSTOPIA'S PRIMARY FUNCTION AS WARNING

Considering the results of the previous chapters, it has become clear that there can be no deliberations on dystopia without regarding utopia, and the entire philosophy essentially shares a common denominator. To recapitulate, Utopia was described as setting the appreciator in a precarious situation and playing with humankind's innate fear of losing something of value. Jameson has called this phenomenon *a disruption of the present*, which radically breaks with the ideological chains of contemporary society to imagine a considerably altered now.[5]

Utopia, therefore, primarily functions as a *warning* to humankind. It attempts to raise awareness of societal issues and to arouse the individual from stupefaction and the paralysed state of the well-adjusted citizen—which, in the best case, may

5 Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 228, 233.

transform him into an active agent who gradually changes the world.[6] This persuasive attempt was described as being inherent to all of utopian and dystopian fiction, and it comes as no surprise that many scholars (as described in chapter II) regard both genres as being "part of the same project"[7] though differing in strategy. While utopian fiction closely investigates contemporary ills by evoking imaginings of a better future in the appreciator, dystopian fiction prefers a therapy of the worst kind to arouse his attention.[8] Both genres, however, clearly aim at the construction of an improved system. Otherwise, as Booker reminds us, dystopian fiction would be futile.[9] What follows is that in focusing on any one of these genres, its specific strategies of issuing warnings become of interest. These will shed light on the player's involvement in the respective genre and illuminate nuances of the types of dystopia I have described before. In the following, I will thus lay emphasis on the genre of dystopia—and observing it more closely reveals primarily *two kinds of warnings* that are of interest for the discussion of the VGD.

The first type of warning excites considerable anger in the player. It is characteristic of the *VGD as classical dystopia* and triggered by a gameworld that confronts the player with radical hopelessness and a confining system of rules from which there is no escape. Such dystopias are similar to what Moylan calls "dystopias of resignation."[10] They "embrace an anti-utopian pessimism" which, in the worst case, reinforces the player's "preference for the status quo or [helps] to … produce their capitulation to it as all hope for change is shattered."[11] Effectively, such a variant tends towards Anti-Utopia but still shows the potential of triggering in the "resistant reader" (or player) a subversive response, "by choosing to get and perhaps stay angry, and even to fight back rather than lapse into abject nihilism or trendy irony."[12] In fact, are works such as Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) or Galactic Cafe's THE STANLEY PARABLE (2013) not two of the most effective dystopias,[13] exciting considerable anger in the reader/player, who is confronted with a malignant story- or gameworld?

6 Vieira, "Concept," 6, 17.

7 Booker, "Impulse," 15.

8 Seeber, *Selbstkritik der Utopie*, 228.

9 Booker, "Impulse," 15.

10 Moylan, *Scraps*, 181.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 The opinion is shared by Schulzke, who claims "that some of the most effective … dystopias in this sense are those that do not preserve any possibility of hope." (Schulzke, "Virtual," 10).

The second type of warning also excites anger but does so in a more intricate manner. Similar to the resigned variant (the classical dystopia), the critical dystopia triggers a dismissive attitude towards the gameworld but, in doing so, retains a horizon of hope within its bounds—thus giving the player an incentive and, more importantly, the possibility (or agency) to change the situation. This type of warning can be compared to Moylan's "militant dystopias,"[14] whose effect on the reader he describes as follows:

> Although fear and outrage may inform the writings of such texts, the creative encounter with the realities of the social systems leads not to doubt and despair but to a renewed and focused anger that can be tempered with radical hope and visions.[15]

In the militant VGD (*the critical dystopia*), the creative encounter with the social system is intensified in comparison to non-ergodic forms of dystopia and leads to the arousal of fictional anger[16] towards the dystopian regime. Certainly, the classical dystopia may achieve this effect as well, but the critical dystopia goes further by giving the player ample opportunity to express his emotions through ergodic effort and to fight dystopia in virtuality (through ludic capabilities, as described with the example of HALF-LIFE 2). In other words, whereas the player's endeavours in the classical dystopia are exhausted, the critical dystopia allows him to focus his anger and effectively work towards Utopia. This is not to say that a reader's or viewer's involvement in dystopia is devaluated, or that such anger cannot emerge in these non-ergodic forms. However, it is the *possibility to react to emotions on an intradiegetic level* that the VGD allows, because of the medium's diverse layers of involvement that extend beyond that of a novel or film (as described at the beginning of this chapter). Consequently, the fictional anger accumulated in playing dystopia finds an *outlet* in the player's actions towards change in the virtual society. Often, this journey towards Utopia is, however, predetermined by the game's system (the critical dystopia variant I), yet this nonetheless gives the player the sensation of *actively doing something* against the dystopian regime.

There are, however, other instances in which the utopian horizon lies virtualised within the game system, awaiting the player's actualisation. In such cases,

14 Moylan, *Scraps*, 181.

15 Ibid.

16 I agree with Walton in that emotions triggered by representational art are fictional and not real, for they lead to different reactions in the appreciator compared to those in real situations. (Walton, *Mimesis*, 195ff).

the VGD makes use of its full potential, as both failure and success become an option. The *critical dystopia of variant II* encloses the player within the confines of a hegemonic order but also invites him to escape it. By metaphorically lock-picking his way out of "the iron cage of Anti-Utopia,"[17] he transforms into an "agent … capable of effecting a real transformation of the global social and economic system."[18] Still, the player's route towards Utopia can be difficult, and the failure to attain it remains a constant companion. This is apparent in games such as BIOSHOCK (2K Boston, 2007) or METRO 2033 (4A Games, 2010), where the player is confronted with the precarious situation of potentially losing something of value. In these, the tiniest mistake may lead to the loss of Utopia, and any playthrough can result in a pessimistic, optimistic, or ambiguous outcome—that is to say, in a classical *or* critical dystopia. It would be a mistake, however, to determine a game's narrative genre via the outcome of a playthrough; rather the *potential of certain options* is the decisive factor.

As a result, while the VGD of resignation (classical dystopia) ergodically entraps the player in the gameworld (see THE STANLEY PARABLE) and the VGD as anti-utopia continues to foreclose imaginative possibilities (see COD: AW), the militant version of the VGD (the critical dystopia) does not halt at "a rattling of the bars"[19] and involves the player in a precarious situation. Being confronted with the choice of becoming a catalyst for social change and transformation, the player holds the possibility of acting upon solutions proposed by the game and of actualising the utopian horizon through imaginative and ergodic effort. Such a task is by no means easy and entails *responsibility* on the player's part. It requires considerable effort and the choices of an *ethical player* who searches for utopian enclaves within the system and actualises them out of the conviction that something can and must be done to counteract dystopia. As Sicart claims:

> [E]thical agents … create and practice their virtues and thereby become a better human being. … The model ethical player sees an opening in the game system, which might be a tease to play morally, and follows it. This player explores the gray zones of decision in *Fallout 3* ... sits down and waits for the child to finish dinner in *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream 2010), plays *Unmanned* (Pedercini 2011 [sic] to understand the mundane ethic of drone warfare … .[20]

17 Moylan, *Scraps*, 154.

18 Levitas and Sargisson, "Utopia in Dark Times," 16.

19 Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 232.

20 Sicart, *Beyond*, 78.

Like an emancipated player, thereby, ethical players need "to be empowered as ethical agents"[21] by the game design—this is to say, inscribed in the game system.[22] They cannot express themselves creatively if the game focuses on intense combat action without giving the ethical player additional perspectives on the enacted events, or the possibility of acting in a different, pacifist manner (which games such as METRO 2033 or FALLOUT 4 allow). As such, Sicart's observations underline my initial hypothesis that for a game to exercise its full subversive effect, both the aesthetic complexity of the game at hand and the willingness of an ethical or emancipated player become necessary prerequisites.

I will go into further detail in this regard in chapter V, yet for now these claims lead to an unsurprising question: is a VGD only effective when the player chooses to play in an ethically correct manner? What if he embarks on an unethical route with games such as INFAMOUS: SECOND SON (Sucker Punch, 2014) or the FALLOUT series?[23] I object to such a conclusion and suggest that even if one fails to actualise Utopia in one playthrough—or plays in a destructive manner—the experience this creates may still evoke a positive reaction in the player, if he ponders his actions within the virtual diegesis. Dystopia, then, seems to fit into the requirements of an *emancipated player*: a critical player who seeks pleasures in subversive experiences and tries to obtain a transcendental vantage point on the events by examining the encountered and co-created perspectives.

Consequently, if both prerequisites are met—the aesthetic complexity of a game and the open-mindedness of a critical player—the lessons of virtuality can be valuable (as are those of non-ergodic fiction) and beneficial for the player's conduct in the empirical world. Thereby, the new dystopias in video game fiction foreground problematic trends in the designer's empirical reality, and by letting the player tinker with alternative scenarios, involve him in creative solutions for these issues. As *playful trial actions* in estranged gameworlds, they create a precarious situation in which there is something to *lose*—and by this I do not only mean the prospect of a virtual future. By involving the player in the inner workings and "underlying logic"[24] of a dystopian system and having him work towards the utopian horizon (successfully or not), the player may lose certain ideologically infused perspectives on the real world. The inception begins with a terrifying but

21 Ibid., 78.

22 Ibid., 77-79.

23 FALLOUT (Interplay Entertainment, 1997); FALLOUT 2 (Black Isle Studios, 1998); FALLOUT 3 (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008); FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS (Obsidian Entertainment, 2010); and FALLOUT 4 (Bethesda Game Studios, 2015).

24 Schulzke, "Virtual," 10.

enlightening experience in virtuality (leading to a partial restructuring of the player's habitual disposition) and continues to exercise its effect in real life. Having learned from the lessons of the VGD, the player comes to see empirical reality for what it is and may be inclined to work towards Utopia in real life. Such a *warning and incentive to action* shall be seen as the VGD's *primary function*.

Given the magnitude of such a claim, the question of the VGD's effectiveness needs to be explored further—and the remainder of this study will continue to assess it. For now, I wish to extend the discussion to the realms of representational art and to the transmediality of the dystopian genre. Then I will come to detailed prerequisites concerning dystopia's hypothetical possibility and shocking proximity to the empirical world. Finally, I will apply these deliberations in the analysis of various VGDs in terms of their respective real-world targets and diversity of perspectival arrangements (or lack thereof).

3.2 THE VIDEO GAME DYSTOPIA'S EFFECTIVENESS IN ISSUING WARNINGS

It has been established that the VGD virtualises a negative society that foregrounds the problems of the designers' and players' empirical reality. These negative trends have been extrapolated into the future, or to some other alternative scenario, to show them in a magnified, distorted form. The VGD sets the player within this defamiliarising scenario and into an estranged gameworld he has to make sense of and involves him in a struggle against dystopia's ruling order. The genre thus holds the potential of issuing a powerful warning—but not every dystopian game (or supposed VGD) manages to do so.

The hypothesis is that the effectiveness of a VGD depends on both the game's aesthetic complexity and the player's willingness to experience meaning. Such deliberations are not new to the medium, and the aesthetic quality of games has been discussed in academia and the general public since their beginnings. In this respect, Markus Schulzke brings the discussion to the VGD. He argues that while the video game utopia has "generally failed … [to] perform a critical function because of their tendency of mirroring the real world,"[25] the VGD tends "to be very effective in presenting critical themes."[26] Although there is much truth to

25 In fact, whenever a game mirrors empirical reality, it does not count as any type of utopia/dystopia, because of the lack of extrapolation and estrangement necessary for the genre.

26 Schulzke, "Virtual," 315.

Schulzke's assertion (and he justifies it with various examples), one has to scrutinise such a claim further—which leads the investigation back to the questions of *effectiveness* and *aesthetic complexity*. Such questions are regularly asked when it comes to comparatively new media,[27] but they are important to pose for any kind of representational art—be it a new or an established form.

To approach the issue, it is beneficial to describe why the genre of dystopia is so popular in games but also which games stand out through their effectiveness in issuing warnings and which fail to do so and why. Being a transmedial genre, dystopia is essentially open to related genres—and the VGD makes no exception. Whether it is games belonging to the greater category of SF or its subgenres—post-apocalypse, cyberpunk, steampunk, posthuman—these settings invariably offer thriving grounds for the VGD. All of these worlds have a powerful allure for both the game medium and the players, and this is primarily due to three reasons.

To begin with, it is undeniable that the dystopian narrative is an ideal setting for action, since it justifies the player's opposition to masses of enemies with a dangerous regime. It thus caters to the tastes of first- or third-person shooter aficionados (or related action genres) and works in tandem with the quantitative explosion of FPSs in the last two decades—which promise high sales figures and revenue.[28] On this level, it equals a *power fantasy* that evokes humankind's drive to alter things through violent behaviour. Second, the dystopian setting has an alluring effect on the player, as do SF worlds. They speak to humankind's urge to explore faraway worlds and different cultures, and represent terrifying yet enticing escapes from the contemporary present. However, not every game that virtualises a negative scenario can be included into the genre of the VGD, for as Booker notes:

> It should be emphasized, however, that the mere fact that a novel or film features a grim future does not make the work dystopian. To be dystopian, a work needs to foreground the oppressive society in which it is set, using that setting as an opportunity to comment in a critical way on some other society, typically that of the author or the audience.[29]

27 Booker poses the same question for *young-adult dystopias*, where it is uncertain whether these new forms of dystopia are critical or that their "more positive conclusions" and "the fact that they often focus more on plot and character than on exploring the characteristics of their dystopian societies" robs them of their "effectiveness." (Booker, "On Dystopia," 14).

28 Maziarczyk, "Playable Dystopia," 235.

29 Booker, "On Dystopia," 5.

This is an important aspect and functions as premise for the third reason, which postulates the VGD as a reaction to the precarious times of the 21st century. It thereby magnifies these beyond recognition in order to scrutinise empirical reality.

Given the above described trichotomy, it follows that dystopian games can be diverse in their focus and not all will show the amount of aesthetic complexity necessary to fulfil the requirements and necessity of points two and three. Hence, when analysing a dystopian game and ascribing the status of a VGD to it, three requirements are of importance: 1) The society at hand stands in direct or analogic *extrapolation* from the designers' empirical reality—thereby excluding fantasy games. This is a necessary condition, because a gameworld based on cognitive estrangement remains in the realm of the believable—and, thus, the threat of dystopia seems palpable in both virtuality and the empirical world. 2) The plot foregrounds the "social workings"[30] of the society at hand and makes use of dystopia's narrative framework: the clash between official narrative and counter-narrative, which involves the player in a creative encounter with the dystopian regime and invites him to struggle against it. Only then does the VGD go beyond the mere depiction of a negative world and refrains from (mis)using the dystopian setting as "a decoration out of the toolkit of science fiction stereotypes"[31] to justify its spectacle.[32] 3) To achieve these points, the VGD intertwines its fictional setting with gameplay mechanics and creates participatory experiences that hold subversive potential.[33]

Many dystopian games fulfil the above-mentioned requirements and can be endowed with the status of a VGD. Gameworlds such as City 17 (HALF-LIFE 2), Columbia and Rapture (BIOSHOCK INFINITE, BIOSHOCK), Neo Paris (REMEMBER ME), the post-apocalyptic Russian metro tunnels (METRO 2033, METRO LAST LIGHT), or the floors of a random office building (THE STANLEY PARABLE) illustrate critical dystopian gameworlds the player will traverse and whose ludic experience shows the potential of triggering a subversive response in him. This is not to say that these games lose their entertaining allure: they are virtual dystopias that oscillate between *pleasure* and *terror*[34]—and successfully combine the layers of

30 Domsch, "Dystopian," 397.

31 Ibid.

32 Frelik, "Video Games," 236.

33 Domsch, "Dystopian," 396-397.

34 Wilder, "Synthetic Fear," 16.

entertainment and aesthetic education.[35] This multifacetedness elevates them beyond the mass of popular culture mediocrity into the status of what Umberto Eco has called *multi-layered artefacts*.

Ascribing the status of a multi-layered artefact to a VGD is an important step, for such a status designates a vital premise to the player's aesthetic response to it. This is so because multi-layered works of fiction (such as postmodern texts) show aesthetic complexity in that they allow for a variety of readings. In this respect, Eco argues that an adventure story pertaining to this category can either be read for entertainment purposes—as Iser would say: the reader involvement centres on "the level of plot"[36] and affective emotions—or, and on an additional plane, can be understood on the level of concept—here, reader involvement extends to "the level of significance."[37] Of course, this may only be a simplification of the diverse pleasures fiction evokes. But it foregrounds a game of *distance* and *proximity* that is fundamental to the appreciator's involvement, which oscillates between the poles of "distanced investigation and vital participation,"[38] between the desires for "knowledge"[39] and "the gaze for illusion"[40] and the frenzy of "spectacle."[41]

This dialectic between the player's reflection of the enacted and his exploration of and interaction with the gameworld (in both ergodic and imaginative terms) will be discussed thoroughly in Part II. Still, it is important to hint at it now, for the implications are considerable. If the player's involvement in the dystopian

35 Similarly, Parker argues that that many VGDs are so-called "prestige games" (2) that attempt "to reconcile art and commerce in order to generate both economic and cultural capital." (Felan Parker, "Canonizing *Bioshock*: Cultural Value and the Prestige Game," *Games and Culture* [2015]: 3, http://gac.sagepub.com/content/early/2015/08/28/1555412015598669.abstract). Frelik confirms this observation for the SF genre in that he states that "[a]lthough most SF video games are, of course, far more invested in providing entertainment than in raising players' consciousness regarding global problems, it is the genre's future-oriented mode of perceiving the world that elevated the game's problem solving, an integral part of so many video games, to an actual engagement with the world outside the game." (Frelik, "Video Games," 236).

36 Iser, *Act*, 123.

37 Ibid.; cf. Umberto Eco, *Nachschrift zum >Namen der Rose<*, trans. Burkhart Kroeber (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1986), 76-82.

38 Rancière, *Emancipated*, 5.

39 Ibid., 2.

40 Ibid., 3.

41 Ibid., 4.

gameworld comes to full fruition in the life-giving tension between critical reception and illusive immersion, the initial hypothesis that both a VGD's *aesthetic complexity* and the player's willingness to engage with a game on an *emancipated level* are the determining factors for a VGD to fulfil its primary function as warning. This function is anchored in the VGD's underlying structure (the implied player) and enables a form of play that involves the player in *pleasurable, affective* yet also *subversive* and *regenerative* experiences. Revealing this structure's intricacies as a *perspectival network that composes the game* remains a vital task of this study—but before pursuing this road, the VGD's areas of investigation remain to be clarified.

For this purpose, the following and last section of this chapter will deal with the genre's range of *real-world targets* and how the plot framework of the *official narrative* and *counter-narrative* contributes to its warning (or fails to do so). Of particular interest here will be the *perspectival diversity* of the game at hand, which alongside its plot structure may include the destructiveness of the gameworld, the emotional bonds with the characters, and the ludic action—whether it revolves around combat or other forms of interaction. The aim is to show a general overview of the dystopian genre in video games and to establish a *categorisation* of its most recurrent points of attack (without being able to cover every single VGD in existence, for such research would go beyond the scope of this study).

3.3 TARGETS OF THE VIDEO GAME DYSTOPIA

It is undoubtedly difficult, if not impossible, to paint a complete picture of the historical moment and the potential directions in which it moves.[42] Still, utopian and dystopian fiction have invariably attempted to do so, with varying results. According to Jameson, Utopia works like a "*foreign body* within the social … a space in which new wish images of the social can be elaborated and experimented on."[43] The process of attaining such an insight and finding society's "fundamental ill" is a cumbersome one, and there are primarily two parties involved: "the material" and "the vocation."[44]

42 Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 14.

43 Ibid., 16; emphasis added.

44 Ibid., 14.

The *material* refers to the historical moment and to "the specific situations and circumstances under which [the] … composition"[45] of utopias (and dystopias) becomes possible. Out of these "building blocks,"[46] the Utopian creates his vision of a better (or worse) future. Philosophers, filmmakers, or game designers all have to bring a specific toolset: the ability to identify a certain problem and "the inventive ingenuity with which a series of solutions are proposed and tested."[47] This ability is what Jameson calls *vocation*: the talent of "the outsider … for seeing overfamiliar realities in a fresh and unaccustomed way" and of reducing reality to a comprehensible model.[48]

The Utopian, then, takes "delight in construction" and is motivated by the prospect of offering "a simple, single-shot solution to all our ills"[49]—a solution that "the social situation … must admit of … or at least of its possibility."[50] However, it is this "obsessive search"[51] for Utopia that can be dangerous, because one may be tempted to force the proposed solution onto humankind (a fact that Sargent explicitly warned about, see chapter I). Indeed, Utopians these days seem to be aware of the issue. For there has been change in the conception of the better (or worse) future, as "utopia no longer aspires to change the world at a macro-level … and is focused now on operating at a micro-level."[52] The question remains whether such 'micro' solutions are sufficient to overcome an "endangered today" and the dystopian situation we are currently facing.[53]

With these stumbling blocks in mind, the Utopian embarks on a venture "to extirpate this specific root of all evil from which all the others spring."[54] Having found it, or so he believes, the Utopian shares his vision in "dramatic or aesthetic forms"[55]—if the Utopian is an artist and chooses fiction as a means of communication. To do so, he makes use of his ability to condense "social totality … [to] a

45 Ibid., 11.

46 Ibid., 14.

47 Ibid., 11.

48 Ibid.; cf. 11.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid., 12.

51 Ibid., 11.

52 Vieira, "Concept," 22.

53 Darko Suvin, "Theses on Dystopia 2001," in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, ed. Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan (New York: Routledge, 2003), 187; cf. 187.

54 Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 12.

55 Ibid., 13.

small-scale model … on which the fundamental tendencies and the lines of flight can more clearly be read."[56] In a simplification of reality, and with eagle eyes, the Utopian reveals troublesome tendencies that plague his present, and, consequently, Jameson comes to the important conclusion: "that Utopian space is an imaginary enclave within real social space, in other words, that the very possibility of Utopian space is itself a result of spatial and social differentiation."[57]

Given this construction process, utopian and dystopian fiction is the artist's way to cope with the neurosis caused by empirical reality. Even though Jameson's observations focus on the genre of utopia, it is feasible that his insights hold true for dystopia as well—which brings the investigation back to the question of the vision's totality. In this respect, Kumar pointed out that, similar to utopia, dystopia has fragmented and narrowed its focus. Unlike Orwell or Huxley, who managed to compose an alternative society that centred on "a dominant trend or central principle in contemporary developments," recent dystopias "have had highly specific targets" and have generally failed to shock their readers "with a compelling sense of a march into a nightmarish future."[58] Kumar underlines this claim in a recent article where he maintains that "it was never the function of dystopia to give a complete picture of the world" but "to pick out the most distinctive and novel features of the time and to present them in the form of an imaginatively realised society."[59] Sometimes, however, specific trends have far-reaching effects—as with Huxley, who chose to attack consumerism in *Brave New World*, thereby touching a nerve that continues to resonate in the 21st century.[60]

These observations notwithstanding, the question remains whether dystopia's picture is partial—focusing on specific issues—or whether it manages to capture a dominant trend that plagues social totality. The VGD, for the most part, continues the trend of specific targeting, as it issues focused warnings that communicate

56 Ibid., 14. This facet connects the genres of utopia and dystopia to the procedural representations of *simulation*, which is generally understood as a simplification of empirical reality (see chapter V). In the words of Salen and Zimmerman: "simulation cannot depict every aspect of something; it has to choose a very small subset of characteristics around which to build its representation." (Salen Katie and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004], 423).

57 Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 15.

58 Kumar, *Modern*, 422; cf. 422.

59 Krishan Kumar, "Utopia's Shadow," in *Dystopia(n) Matters: On the Page, on Screen, on Stage*, ed. Fátima Vieira (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2013), 22.

60 Ibid.

greater contemporary problems to the players: the dangers of oppressive regimes, life in bureaucratic consumer capitalism and the consequent unfreedom of the individual, manmade environmental problems, or the dangers of science and technology. What is not so obvious, however, is that within these targets, a certain enemy not uncommon to dystopian fiction emerges: the hideousness of *(human) nature* and the inability to evolve past vital shortcomings. The following categorisation of VGDs will therefore illuminate the genre's points of attack and describe how these centre on the above-mentioned general theme. By doing so, I will illustrate how the VGD entraps humankind in a circular loop of interconnected events based on basic needs from which the player tries to free himself in a process of emancipation.

"The potentiality for constructive human effort exists, but it contends against the deeper inheritance of our animal nature."[61] In *On the Origin of Species* (1859, 1999), Charles Darwin describes the evolution of species in a process of natural selection in which the survival of a race is dependent on how well it adjusts to its surroundings.[62] This *survival of the fittest* was often regarded by proponents as "a triumphant scientific vindication of the law of progress, natural and social"[63] and was held responsible for humankind's potential to evolve past vital shortcomings and to reach Utopia. Besides such optimistic takes on Darwin's theory of evolution, there were more pessimistic, if not outright destructive, interpretations of it.[64] One of the most famous can be found in the works of T. H. Huxley[65] which, for Kumar, essentially boils down to the insight

> that the evolutionary process was blind, arbitrary and frequently hideous. There was no discernible purpose in evolution, and nothing to justify a belief in progress. The 'survival of the fittest' not only was the same thing as the 'survival of the best' – as humans understood that term – but was frequently its antithesis. If aggression and selfishness suited the conditions of the time, they would be selected by nature as against tolerance and altruism.[66]

61 Kumar, *Modern*, 177.

62 Charles Darwin, *On The Origin of Species* (New York: Bantam Dell, 1999).

63 Kumar, *Modern*, 175.

64 Ibid., 175ff.

65 Thomas H. Huxley, "Evolution and Ethics (the Romanes Lecture, 1893)," in *Evolution and Ethics 1893-1943*, ed. T. H. Huxley and J. S. Huxley (London: Pilot Press, 1947).

66 Kumar, *Modern*, 176.

Seen in the context of Social Darwinism, Huxley's negative take on the evolution of species can be transferred to human society (as one can observe today), suggesting "an unending process of struggle and strife, out of which the 'fittest' and 'best' would emerge in successive waves."[67] In this line of sight, man is unable to escape his animal nature and resembles a hideous beast: "he was selfish, acquisitive, aggressive, even murderous and predatory, like the wolf."[68]

Now, it is humankind's inability to free themselves from basic urges and needs—such as aggression, greed, selfishness, mistrust and fear of the Other, and the longing for dominance/power—that can be held responsible (at least partially) for a variety of interrelated issues that have plagued the empirical world for centuries. This major theme and its resultant issues are targeted by the VGD. Most often, thereby, the genre not only warns of potential futures dominated by such problems but, in addition, sends the player on a quest for agency and invites him to overcome these issues in a playful trial action.

3.3.1 The Ongoing Threat of Oppressive Regimes: Anti-Totalitarianism

To begin the discussion, I wish to direct attention to the offshoot of *oppressive regimes*, two of which I have addressed earlier—COD: AW as an unsuccessful example and HALF-LIFE 2 as a successful one. The issue still is highly topical in the contemporary world, and with instances of theocratic regimes in the Middle East, authoritarian ones in Turkey and Russia, and totalitarian regimes in China and North Korea, the VGD assumes an important role in addressing these problems. Moreover, supposed democracies in the U.S. and Europe (for example, Italy), continue to debilitate the individual's freedom, and the recent political and cultural swing to the right in these regions further aggravates the situation. It is as Moylan puts it: "We live in a world shaped by capitalism in its global stage, generally subject to authoritarian power (be it soft or hard), be it wrapped in an aura of democracy or served straight in varying degrees of overt control."[69]

67 Ibid., 383.

68 Ibid.; cf. 383.

69 Tom Moylan, "Step into the Story," in *Dystopia(n) Matters: On the Page, on Screen, on Stage*, ed. Fátima Vieira (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2013), 42.

Dystopian fiction has warned of the dangers of oppressive regimes (soft or hard) ever since its inception and foregrounds the "opposition between social control and individual desire."[70] Novels such as H. G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* (1898), Jack London's *Iron Heel* (1908), Robert Harris' *Fatherland* (1992), and films like Kurt Wimmer's EQUILIBRIUM (2002), Karyn Kusama's AEON FLUX (2005), and Gary Ross' THE HUNGER GAMES (2012) focus on the consequences of ideological extremes. Most effective is Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) as the ultimate vision of totalitarianism and a potential future that, as O'Brien puts it, pictures "a boot stamping on a human face—for ever."[71] The VGD figuratively follows in these footsteps, with varying results. Still, there are a variety of exceptions that go beyond the pleasures of combat and focus on ethical problems the player has to solve.

One example is Lucas Pope's PAPERS, PLEASE (3909, 2013), which involves the player in the mechanisms of a totalitarian regime and sets him in a precarious situation between duty and death. The player assumes the job of an immigration inspector and is responsible for safeguarding the country of Arstotzka from terrorists, spies, or smugglers, but often encounters people begging for help. This task confronts him with ethical dilemmas, since granting entrance to immigrants without proper documents puts the PC's family at risk.

Although PAPERS, PLEASE evokes the nostalgia[72] for a classical dystopia—in its 16-bit mood, which recalls Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*—it can be included in the realms of the critical dystopia of variant II, for a utopian horizon may pave

70 Booker and Thomas, *Handbook*, 65.

71 Orwell, *Nineteen*, 280.

72 In this respect, Mateusz Liwinski argues that PP combines the lectures of dystopia with a nostalgic look backwards at the 16-bit area of gaming (the 1980s), which he describes as "the utopian impulse of returning 'home' to the childhood gaming experience." (Mateusz Liwinski, "Nostalgia for Dystopia: Critical Nostalgia in Lucas Pope's *Papers, Please*," in *(Im)perfection Subverted, Reloaded and Networked: Utopian Discourse across Media*, Peter Lang Edition, ed. Barbara Klonowska, Zofia Kolbuszewska, and Grzegorz Maziarczyk [Frankfurt a.M.: Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2015], 227). This nostalgia "is a craving for a place or state which is currently idealized yet unattainable" and "also entails the recognition that the remembered state was only reachable in the past." (Ibid.; cf. 224-227). Such an insight is interesting, because it links the game to the nostalgia of the classical dystopia, which, for the most part, situated the utopian enclave in the prosperity of ancient times. PP expresses this desire of a "space of familiarity and security." (Ibid., 227). It thus harbours a particular wish: not only for the 16-bit era but for a future Utopia.

the way to a new order. The official narrative involves the player in the bureaucratic routine of an unnamed immigration officer whose job revolves around the task of inspecting documents of immigrants or interrogating them. For every processed individual, the player receives 5 credits, the sum of which he can use to provide for his family: for rent, health care, food, and so on. If he makes a mistake, however, penalties are enforced, which deprive the player of the much needed money.

At this point, the regime's penetration into the individual's freedom makes itself apparent. In Arstotzka, every niche is controlled by the government through various Ministries such as the Ministry of Information, Arstotzka's secret police, or the Ministry of Justice, which pursues supposed terrorists. Consequently, the player recognises that the job is more demanding than initially believed. In the course of the 31 days, he will encounter immigrants whose fates confront him with ethical dilemmas. There is, for instance, the story of Elisa Katsenja and Sergui Volda—a guard stationed at the player's border station. Eventually, Sergui will tell the player that he fell in love with a woman in Kolechia and that for them to be together, she needs access to Arstotzka, although she has no proper documents. However, showing compassion puts the PC and his family's life at risk—but this is also where the counter-narrative begins. Starting on an individual level of resistance, the counter-narrative soon becomes collective once the player chooses to work with a resistance group called The Order of the EZIC Star (but he may ignore them as well).

The resulting constellations give rise to *twenty different endings*, most of which result in the PC's punishment—he is either condemned to hard labour for disobeying the rules or killed for helping EZIC. On day 31, however (if the player manages to reach it), EZIC attempts to overthrow the government, and the player may contribute to this cause when he accomplishes at least four out of five missions for EZIC and refrains from shooting intruders. Having actualised this ending, he is offered a home and contributes to building a new Arstotzka. Although seemingly a 'good' ending, it is ambiguous—for EZIC's revolution was brutal, and it remains uncertain whether they succeed in building a better Arstotzka. In addition, there are endings where the player flees to Obristan (with or without his family) and those in which he fights EZIC and contributes to the consolidation of the status quo.[73] In the latter case, he sides with the official narrative and is rewarded with an endless code that enables him to play the game in an infinite loop.

73 Liwinski, "Nostalgia," 232.

Figure 9: Inside the office of the Immigration Officer in PAPERS, PLEASE.

PAPERS, PLEASE (3909, 2013).

PAPERS, PLEASE is a magnificent example of the VGD as critical dystopia variant II, because it not only warns of the dangers of totalitarian regimes and the mind-numbing tasks of bureaucracy but also offers a possibility space in which utopian horizons lay hidden. To actualise these, the player has to work hard, for it is not easy to fulfil the inspector's tasks. Even the tiniest mistakes are punished and, in combination with the repetitive tasks of a bureaucratic labourer, the player might ignore the immigrants' dilemmas[74]—thus processing human beings as if they were files and showing no sympathy for personal catastrophes (which links bureaucracy to the mechanisms of oppressive regimes).

Besides PP, there is a variety of other games that have more or less successfully targeted totalitarianism, for example RÉPUBLIQUE (Camouflaj, 2012), whose regime entraps so-called Pre-cals in the mysterious facility of Metamorphosis where they are educated. In addition, there is the METRO series,[75] which in an unsettling way targets the hideousness of human nature and the inability to evolve past cravings for violence and power, illusive father-figures, and resultant totalitarian regimes. Although involving the player in brutal ludic action—and, at the same time, because of it—the games succeed in conveying the atrocities of human conflict to the player and centre on humankind's innate fear and suspicion of the

74 Ibid., 230, 232.

75 METRO 2033 (4A Games, 2010) and METRO: LAST LIGHT (4A Games, 2013).

Other. Their effectiveness, thereby, is due to the employment of several perspectives that give the player additional points of view on events (for example, ethical deliberations of characters). This sheds a different light on the ludic encounters and foregrounds the player's hideous nature in combat. He is thus reminded that through such a behaviour, the nuclear genocide that led to the post-apocalyptic world is about to repeat itself. But he may also embark on a different, ethical route. Similar to the METRO series are TURNING POINT: FALL OF LIBERTY (Spark Unlimited, 2008)[76] and WOLFENSTEIN: THE NEW ORDER (MachineGames, 2014), the latter of which lets the player enact B. J. Balzkowicz's nightmarish delusion in which Nazi Germany has won the Second World War and established a totalitarian regime around the globe.

It is noticeable that many of the candidates discussed here are FPSs that involve the player in the act of war. Kaos Studios' HOMEFRONT (2011), for instance, lets the player enact the conflict between two ideologies: the liberal United States and communist Korea. Set in the year 2027, HOMEFRONT revolves around the expansionist policy of a reunited Korea that declares war on the U.S.—which is plagued by unrest due to economic problems and a deadly avian influenza. The Korean invasion therefore proceeds without interference, and only a small resistance group continues to fight the invaders. Part of this group is the player, who in the final battle for San Francisco sacrifices his PC's life to direct an airstrike, resulting in America's partial victory over their oppressors.

HOMEFRONT's unofficial sequel, HOMEFRONT: THE REVOLUTION (Dambuster Studios, 2016) proceeds similarly, as do other games such as the RESISTANCE series.[77] In these, an alien race called the Chimera have invaded Earth by planting a virus in central Russia, which transforms human beings into fellow aliens. Similar to H. G. Wells' Martians in *The War of the Worlds* (1898), the invaders metaphorically represent the threat of communism and its oppressive ideology. With the help of their superior technology, the planet has fallen into their hands, and it is up to the player (and the resistance) to win a war against a superior enemy.

One may also enlist the GEARS OF WAR series here (Epic Games, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2013; The Coalition 2016), the KILLZONE trilogy (Guerrilla Games, 2004, 2009, 2011), and its sequel KILLZONE: SHADOW FALL (Guerrilla Games, 2013)—though it is debatable whether they are all effective examples of the VGD. At this point, it is useful to remember that for a VGD to be effective, involving the player

76 Inderst discerns a subgenre of VGDs that targets oppressive regimes: the anti-national socialist dystopia. (Inderst, "Endsieg," 182).

77 RESISTANCE: FALL OF MAN (Insomniac Games, 2006); RESISTANCE 2 (Insomniac Games, 2008); and RESISTANCE 3 (Insomniac Games, 2011).

in intense, pleasurable combat is not enough. Although such games are able to trigger fictional anger in the player towards the aggressor at hand, a careful juxtaposition of ideologies is lacking—which risks blatant criticism. Rather, what is needed is a diversity of perspectives that offer various points of orientation for the player and make him question the combat encounters and ideologies—as is done successfully in METRO 2033, BIOSHOCK INFINITE, and FALLOUT 4.

There are, however, other examples which do not fall in the ludic genre of the FPS such as the action-adventure BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL (Ubisoft Montpellier, 2003). Tending towards the genre of the fantasy but retaining a SF core of analogic extrapolation, BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL proceeds in the manner of a critical dystopia variant I. The year is 2435, and an alien force called the DomZ has invaded the mining plant of Hillys. To make things worse, the oppressive regime of the Alpha Section is established on the planet. Reassuring the people of Hillys to defend them against the DomZ, it comes out that the Alpha Section is colluding with the alien invaders. Meanwhile, a resistance movement called the IRIS Network attempts to retake the planet, and the player takes control of a single dissident. Jade is a photographer and becomes a member of IRIS. Together they confront the DomZ's High Priest and end the game on a hopeful, but ambiguous note—for the future of Hillys remains unknown.

In sum, BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL is effective in warning of the threat of totalitarian regimes because it offers the player various perspectives on the gameworld. Some of these are conveyed through likeable characters, such as Pey'j or Jade, who make the player care about this society and give him the ethical incentive to do something about it. Such a perspectival diversity does not focus solely on combat action (which in many effective VGDs is still present) but foregrounds ethical dilemmas and imaginings/actions about how to solve them—using force or other creative methods accessible to the player.

Table 1: Video game dystopias that primarily target oppressive regimes (authoritarian, totalitarian, theocratic).

HALF-LIFE 2 (Valve, 2004)
CALL OF DUTY: ADVANCED WARFARE (Sledgehammer Games, 2014)
PAPERS, PLEASE (3909, 2013)
RÉPUBLIQUE (Camouflaj, 2012)
METRO 2033 (4A Games, 2010); METRO: LAST LIGHT (4A Games, 2013)
TURNING POINT: FALL OF LIBERTY (Spark Unlimited, 2008)
WOLFENSTEIN: THE NEW ORDER (MachineGames, 2014)
HOMEFRONT (Kaos Studios 2011);

HOMEFRONT: THE REVOLUTION (Dambuster Studios, 2016)
RESISTANCE series: RESISTANCE: FALL OF MAN (Insomniac Games, 2006); RESISTANCE 2 (Insomniac Games, 2008); RESISTANCE 3 (Insomniac Games, 2011)
GEARS OF WAR series: (Epic Games, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2013; The Coalition 2016) KILLZONE trilogy (Guerrilla Games, 2004, 2009, 2011); KILLZONE: SHADOW FALL (Guerrilla Games, 2013)
BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL (Ubisoft Montpellier, 2003)
INFAMOUS: SECOND SON (Sucker Punch Productions, 2014)
ODDWORLD: ABE'S ODYSSEY (Oddworld Inhabitants, 1997)
THE SABOTEUR (Pandemic Studios, 2009)
DISHONORED and DISHONORED 2 (Arkane Studios, 2012, 2016)
CRACKDOWN (Realtime Worlds, 2007)
BIOSHOCK INFINITE (Irrational Games, 2013)

3.3.2 Capitalism and Its Momentous Consequences

VGDs often target more than one issue, and it can be difficult to separate different points of attack. This is also the case with the multifarious phenomenon of *capitalism*, which stands in close relation to the threat of oppressive regimes, for it continues to deprive the individual of self-determination and establishes a world system that is based on the unequal distribution of wealth. Alongside classics such as Frederik Pohl and C. M. Kornbluth's *The Space Merchants* (1953), Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), and the film BRAZIL by Terry Gilliam (1983), the greatest representative to target the issue is Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World* (1932). In contrast to Orwell, who firmly believed the world to be heading towards a totalitarian future, Huxley discerned in capitalism the major culprit of social unrest in his times. In *Brave New World*, there is "no atmosphere of fear and paranoia at all,"[78] as was the case in Orwell's London. To attain their goals of "COMMUNITY, IDENTITY, STABILITY,"[79] the Controllers refuse to employ brute force but rely on clever mind control. As the Director of Hatcheries and Conditioning states, it is mental conditioning that "is the secret of happiness and virtue – [the] liking what you've *got* to do."[80] With its mind-numbing forces, then,

78 Kumar, *Modern*, 260.

79 Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (London: Chatto & Windus Vintage, 2004), 1.

80 Ibid., 12; cf. Kumar, *Modern*, 258ff.

capitalism has created a form of oppression that, unlike classic dictatorships, works in disguise. In *Brave New World Revisited*, Huxley formulates this as follows and predicts a future that has now become a reality: "By means of ever more effective methods of mind-manipulation, the democracies will change their nature … [to] a new kind of non-violent totalitarianism," a sort of "democracy and freedom in a strictly Pickwickian sense."[81]

It is a now familiar story that the world system of capitalism can be held responsible for many interrelated issues, and the VGD targets it on a grand scale. Like in *Brave New World, The Space Merchants,* or *Fahrenheit 451*, one of the sub-targets is *consumerism*, which is a strategy of capitalism "to stupefy the populace by saturating their minds with useless information"[82] and coaxing them into buying goods they do not need. Given these deliberations, it is quite ironic that a medium that generated approximately 100 billion U.S. dollars in revenue in 2016 (and is predicted to top this in 2017)[83] functions as a viable resistance to capitalism, in the face of such unbounded consumerism. It is a central ethical problem that needs to be addressed here—that in buying these games, the player contributes to the capitalist production machinery that regulates the game industry. Nonetheless (and the same is true for Hollywood blockbusters and commercially successful literature), it is only through reaching a broad audience and making them aware of the central problems of their times through playful interactions that criticism may evoke counteraction in the empirical world.

Consequently, the VGD addresses various issues that arise out of the capitalist world system through both big budget AAA games and smaller indie productions. It thereby proceeds in a subtle manner and addresses these issues in an estranged way through gameplay. Such a mode of involvement has the player confronted with a gameworld that infuses its perspectives (and the potential ones created by the player) with traits of social norms, conventions, and ideologies known from the empirical world. It magnifies these, however, and distorts their interrelations by redistributing them among the game perspectives (see chapter V). The player thus steadily realises that the gameworld is not so far from the capitalist world system of his empirical surroundings.

81 Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World Revisited* (London: Chatto & Windus Vintage, 2004), 145-146.

82 Booker and Thomas, *Handbook*, 69.

83 "The Global Games Market Reaches $99.6 Billion in 2016, Mobile Generating 37%," *Newzoo*, accessed September 25, 2017, https://newzoo.com/insights/articles/global games-market-reaches-99-6-billion-2016-mobile-generating-37/

As such, games like the BORDERLANDS series,[84] THE STANLEY PARABLE (Galactic Cafe, 2013), FALLOUT 4 (Bethesda Game Studios, 2015), BIOSHOCK (2K Boston 2007), and BIOSHOCK INFINITE (Irrational Games, 2013) foreground a specific type of player that may succumb to the enticing pleasures of capitalist processes. This ludically oriented player aims to win the game and finds pleasure in collecting points or other tools—weapons, ammunition, upgrades, treasures—he does not necessarily need (see chapters IV, V, VI). The above-mentioned games are effective because they offer perspectives, such as dialogues or character fates, which scrutinise the player's behaviour and make him aware of the mind-numbing, destructive processes he participates as he neglects the needs of others.

A second point of attack are *multinational corporations*. These are the puppeteers behind the curtain of the capitalist production machinery and can be held responsible for the ever-increasing gap between the rich and the poor. In the VGD, corporations are often the *antagonists* against which the player competes. Powerful, illusive men (such as Andrew Ryan, Handsome Jack, Pirandello Kruger, and Hugh Darrow) have displaced the rulers of oppressive regimes—and, consequently, the VGD follows in the steps of dystopian fictions since the 1990s that have laid their focus on the corporate machinery that dehumanises its victims.[85] In the BORDERLANDS series, for example, corporate oppression can be found with Hyperion and ATLAS. These corporations are the prime weapons manufacturers on Pandora, a desert planet where human greed has become the norm. Various Vault Hunters embark on explorations to excavate the riches of Vaults, and the player participates in this survival of the fittest and in the estranged mechanisms of consumer capitalism which drives a wedge between social groups.

Besides the BORDERLANDS corporations, there are a variety of other examples like the infamous Tyrell Corporation in BLADE RUNNER (Westwood Studios, 1997), the Camerata in TRANSISTOR (Supergiant Games, 2014), ATLAS in COD: AW, Fontaine Futuristics and Ryan Industries in BIOSHOCK, and the corporations to be found in the DEUS EX series[86] such as Versalife, Sarif Industries, Tai Young Medical, and the Belltower Associates.

This list could go on (see the table at the end of the section), but it can already be discerned that the ramifications of a capitalist world system are comprehensive.

84 BORDERLANDS 1, 2, and THE PRE-SEQUEL (Gearbox Software, 2009, 2012, 2014); and TALES FROM THE BORDERLANDS (Telltale Games, 2014-2015).

85 Booker and Thomas, *Handbook*, 72.

86 DEUS EX (Ion Storm Austin, 2000), DEUS EX: INVISIBLE WAR (Ion Storm Austin, 2004), DEUS EX: HUMAN REVOLUTION (Eidos Montreal, 2011), and DEUS EX: MANKIND DIVIDED (Eidos Montreal, 2016).

So far, I have described the impact of a consumer culture orchestrated by multinational corporations that reaches "out to every human being on the planet by means of images, sounds, and smells and by intensively reaching into every psyche."[87] "The protocol of this hegemonic order, of course, has its official narrative sequence: construct new consumers, capture new markets, increase profit, merge, increase power in the state apparatus and the society at large, take over more, make more profit."[88] One of the consequences of such a system is the aforementioned suppression of the individual, and I now wish to describe the related issue of *bureaucratic consumer capitalism* in selected games.

One example in this respect is EVERY DAY THE SAME DREAM (2011), a classical dystopia by the indie developer Molleindustria. Here, the player takes on the role of unnamed labourer and plays out his nightmarish delusions of bureaucratic consumer capitalism—a dream hiding at its core the wish for Utopia. The game begins with the ringing of an alarm clock as the player engages in his daily routine. He switches it off, puts on a black suit and a white tie, takes his briefcase, and passes his wife—who is preparing a breakfast he never gets to eat. In the meantime, the flashing television underlines the dreamlike character of the events and the mind-numbing forces of mass advertising. Not all of these actions are mandatory, but for now the player is playing the official narrative. It continues with him rushing to work, being stuck in traffic, and entering an office building where he sits down in his work cubicle. The place evokes imaginings of an army of faceless workers, for the game switches the size of the visible gamespace as the player moves forward: from initially displaying five cubicles to widen the shot to seven and ten.

EDTSD thus involves the player in the menial tasks of a bureaucrat and resembles dystopian films such as Terry Gilliam's BRAZIL (1985) or the game THE STANLEY PARABLE (see chapter II). When the working day ends, the player awakens the next morning in his apartment and resumes the servile routine for as long as he follows the described steps. This looping plot structure can, however, be interrupted, and a counter-narrative emerges within this world's absurdity.

Right after leaving the apartment, the player meets an old lady in the elevator with a message that makes him ponder: "5 more steps and you will be a new man."[89] The counter-narrative thus begins when the player refuses to put on his suit and goes to work in his underwear. He will be fired once he arrives and the day restarts. Yet it is one of the five steps that has the player transgress the official

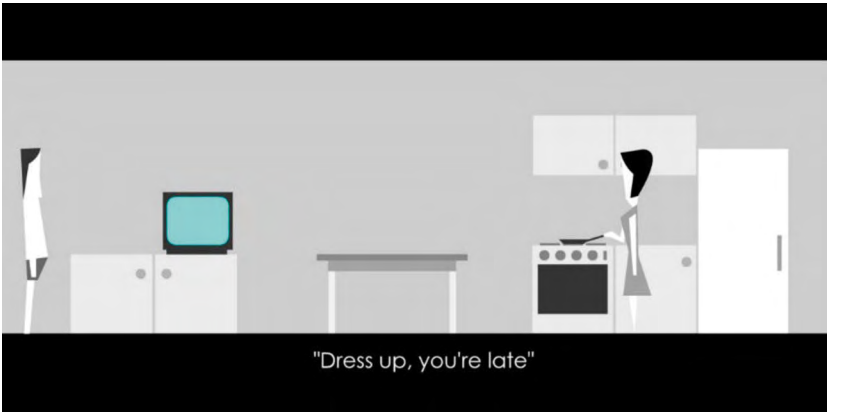
87 Moylan, *Scraps*, 170.

88 Ibid.

89 EVERY DAY THE SAME DREAM (Molleindustria, 2009).

narrative and invite him to explore the gameworld in creative ways. There is, for example, a homeless person who leads the player to a cemetery, or a cow he may pet if he decides to stop his vehicle and continue by foot. Finally, the last step involves walking through the office space towards a green exit sign. The player reaches a rooftop where he jumps to his death. Having completed the five steps—with all their ambiguity and the imaginings they evoke—the gameworld is now empty and the player's path leads back to rooftop where he witnesses an NPC jumping to his death (who is similar in appearance to the PC).

Figure 10: The counter-narrative in EVERY DAY THE SAME DREAM *revolves around the renunciation of the capitalist system through creative interactions.*



EVERY DAY THE SAME DREAM (Molleindustria, 2009).

EDTSD confronts the player with a pessimistic vision of life where the individual's worth lies in contributing to the income of big companies and where the only exit from the system is death. With the enacted events resembling the images of a dream, however, the game can be classified as a classical dystopia—and *not* an anti-utopia. It reminds the player through bright colours marking certain objects that it is not too late to escape the system and to seek refuge beyond its confines. Some of these objects are utopian enclaves such as the red stop sign, the cow's pink belly, the orange leaf plummeting to the ground, or the green exit sign. They encourage the player "to step outside the game," "to stop playing mechanically" and to search for interesting ways of interaction.[90] Indeed, most of the five steps distract the PC (and player) from his mind-numbing work and illustrate a journey to nature and to paying attention to the world's particulars. Consequently, even

90 Sicart, *Beyond*, 73; cf. 73.

though there is no hope for its nameless protagonist, EDTSD may trigger in the resistant player a focused anger against the capitalist world system. Similar to THE STANLEY PARABLE, the game thus functions as "a reflection on the repetitive tasks of modern labour and the wish to avoid routine."[91]

I have only sampled the complexity of the problem, but one can discern capitalism's ability to stomp on human will and convert the populace into obedient servants. Besides limiting human agency in the mode of oppressive regimes, the world system of capitalism can be held responsible for several *ecological issues* that plague the planet—which is the last point I wish to stress. According to Lucy Sargisson, the causes of climate change in ecological dystopian fiction can often be traced back to "hierarchical and exploitative societies characterised by such traits as mass selfishness, egoism, greed, consumerism, civic irresponsibility and a collective stupidity."[92] In addition, there is the problem of overpopulation, a theme that is addressed in the 1973 film SOYLENT GREEN by Richard Fleischer and the novel *The Space Merchants*.[93]

Because such problems often get out of hand, ecological issues are frequently discussed in post-apocalyptic futures where nature has made a forceful return and where the capitalist system was mainly responsible for the downfall of the old order. This can be discerned in an overwhelming number of games such as RAGE (id Software, 2011), S.T.A.L.K.E.R: SHADOW OF CHERNOBYL (GSC Game World, 2007), TOM CLANCY'S THE DIVISION (Massive Entertainment, 2016), and MAD MAX (Avalanche Studios, 2015)—not all of which qualify as typical VGDs. As Booker warns: although post-apocalyptic fiction is related to the genre of dystopia, it most often focuses on the struggle for survival in the aftermath of a widespread catastrophe such as nuclear war, an infectious plague, or environmental disasters. Out of this catastrophe, however, different societies and forms of dystopian regimes might emerge. Yet, unfortunately, post-apocalyptic tales often fail to foreground the particulars of the imaginary societies they describe or depict.[94]

Such is the case with Telltale Games' THE WALKING DEAD series,[95] which does *not* qualify as a VGD. In contrast to this game series, there are VGDs in which societies have emerged in the aftermath of the apocalypse, a famous example of which is the FALLOUT series. Here, the nuclear holocaust has paved the way

91 Ibid.

92 Sargisson, "Matter," 40.

93 Booker and Thomas, *Handbook*, 70; Moylan, *Scraps*, 170.

94 Booker, "On Dystopia," 5.

95 THE WALKING DEAD (Telltale Games, 2012); THE WALKING DEAD: SEASON 2 (Telltale Games, 2013-2014); and THE WALKING DEAD: SEASON 3 (Telltale Games 2017).

for different factions that are described in detail and are built around a specific ideology. In addition, the series deals with the environmental consequences of the nuclear catastrophe[96]—and FALLOUT 4 specifically goes into detail on this matter, with nature being shown as a sublime phenomenon and in an unsettling but utterly beautiful manner.

A game that places even more value on nature's return after the cataclysm is Ninja Theory's ENSLAVED: ODYSSEY TO THE WEST (2010), a critical dystopia of variant I set in a world devastated by war and where nature has reclaimed the planet. The tranquil scenery is misleading, however, as so-called mechs—remnants of a bygone age—roam the lands and enslave the human population. The game's events revolve around the journey of Monkey and his temptress Trip, who forces him to help her return to her village by placing a slave headband on him. The headband ensures that Monkey follows Trip's orders, and if she dies he shares the same fate. The counter-narrative in ENSLAVED is thus at first a forced one—at least for Monkey (a telling name for humankind's servitude to the machines) and the player who takes control of him. But soon the temptress will work her magic. During the game, Monkey and Trip establish a near romantic connection—and with Monkey now following Trip out of 'free' will, they confront dystopia's high priest, Pyramid. It is revealed that it was he who was controlling the mechs and slaves to protect humankind from the new environment. Pyramid did so by feeding them visions of the ancient world and entices Monkey into believing him. The utopian enclave is thus neither actualised by the player nor the PC, but Trip undertakes this action. Through a shutdown of the system, she kills Pyramid and frees the slaves by refusing to be caught up in memories of an old, paralysed order, and chooses nature as mankind's new destiny.

As so often in post-apocalyptic narratives, hope is thus located after the cataclysm "in the future renewal of Earth and its plant and animal species,"[97] which is established after the capitalist order. Consequently, the games described above—and also Naughty Dog's THE LAST OF US (2013, 2014) (see chapter VII)—fall into the category of eco-fiction and scratch the surface of the ecotopia: a genre that was established in the early 1980s and focuses on a society based on ecological principles and technology.[98]

All together, these conclusions underscore that the VGD does not capitulate to capitalism (contrary to Packer's observations mentioned in chapter II). It works against the anti-utopian claim "that this is the way things *are*, and that change is

96 Domsch, "Dystopian," 406–407.

97 Ferreira, "Biodystopias," 50.

98 Kumar, *Modern*, 405-407.

neither possible nor desirable"[99] and attempts to break away from it or, at least, attenuate its extent. The VGD thus fulfils Jameson's demand of Utopia's political function

> to concentrate on the break itself: a mediation of the impossible, on the unrealizable in its own right. This is very far from a liberal capitulation to the necessity of capitalism, however; it is quite the opposite, a rattling of the bars and an intense spiritual concentration and preparation for another stage which has not yet arrived.[100]

It is effective through a diversity of perspectives that constitute a particular game and that question the player's involvement in the estranged, capitalist processes he participates in. These may include dialogue lines or character fates that illuminate the true nature of the gameworld (ENSLAVED: ODYSSEY TO THE WEST) or juxtapositions that contrast natural worlds to old orders dominated by capitalism (ENSLAVED, THE LAST OF US). In addition, there are satirical elements that question the integrity of the gameworld events (BORDERLANDS series) or nuanced processes that align the act of play with the servile routines of a capitalist world system (EVERY DAY THE SAME DREAM). As such, the VGD targets capitalism on a grand scale, and even AAA productions may fulfil the requirements of social criticism and transformation.

Table 2: Video game dystopias that primarily target the capitalist system (corporations, bureaucracy, and environmental pollution).

THE STANLEY PARABLE (Galactic Cafe, 2013)
THE LAST OF US (Naughty Dog, 2013, 2014)
BIOSHOCK series: 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)
BORDERLANDS series: BORDERLANDS 1; 2; and THE PRE-SEQUEL (Gearbox Software, 2009, 2012, 2014); TALES FROM THE BORDERLANDS (Telltale Games, 2014-2015)
BLADE RUNNER (Westwood Studios, 1997)
TRANSISTOR (Supergiant Games, 2014)

99 Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, 232.

100 Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 232-233.

CALL OF DUTY: ADVANCED WARFARE (Sledgehammer Games, 2014)
DEUS EX series: DEUS EX (Ion Storm Austin, 2000); DEUS EX: INVISIBLE WAR (Ion Storm Austin, 2004); DEUS EX: HUMAN REVOLUTION (Eidos Montreal, 2011); DEUS EX: MANKIND DIVIDED (Eidos Montreal, 2016)
PERFECT DARK (Rare, 2000)
ODDWORLD: ABE'S ODYSSEY (Oddworld Inhabitants, 1997)
SHADOWRUN (Beam Software, 1993)
SYNDICATE series: SYNDICATE (Bullfrog Productions, 1993); SYNDICATE AMERICAN REVOLT (Bullfrog Productions, 1993); SYNDICATE WARS (Bullfrog Productions, 1996); SYNDICATE (Starbreeze Studios, 2012)
RED FACTION series: RED FACTION (Volition, 2001); RED FACTION II (Volition, 2002); RED FACTION: GUERRILLA (Volition, 2009); RED FACTION: ARMAGEDDON (Volition, 2011)
FALLOUT series: FALLOUT (Interplay Entertainment, 1997); FALLOUT 2 (Black Isle Studios, 1998); FALLOUT 3 (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008); FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS (Obsidian Entertainment, 2010); FALLOUT 4 (Bethesda Game Studios, 2015)
EVERY DAY THE SAME DREAM (Molleindustria 2011)
RAGE (id Software, 2011)
S.T.A.L.K.E.R: SHADOW OF CHERNOBYL (GSC Game World, 2007)
TOM CLANCY'S THE DIVISION (Massive Entertainment, 2016)
MAD MAX (Avalanche Studios, 2015)
ENSLAVED: ODYSSEY TO THE WEST (Ninja Theory, 2010)

3.3.3 On the Dangers of Science and Technology

With ENSLAVED I touched on an integral theme of utopian and dystopian fiction that leads back to Bacon's 1627 scientific utopia *New Atlantis*.[101] With Bacon as the "inspirer of … [Utopia's] fundamentally expansive and dynamic character," *science* became an integral part of attaining a better world.[102] However, the initial

101 Kumar, *Modern*, 29ff.

102 Ibid., 30; cf. 30.

Renaissance and Enlightenment dream of Utopia was damaged (if only temporarily) by the atrocities of the two world wars, in which technological marvels were used for mass murder.[103] As a consequence, even the SF of the 20th century—which for the most part retained an optimistic core—could not turn a blind eye to the horrible events.[104] What Kingsley Amis called the *New Maps of Hell* quickly became a dominant trend in the SF of the 1950s, depicting humankind's fears of a future marked by scientific and technological excess.[105] Yet one should recall that it is never science as such that can be blamed but rather its potential "applications."[106]

The range of VGDs that address the (mis)use of science/technology is too vast to address here, and only an excerpt will be taken into consideration. The history begins with the idea of the "artificial man"[107] and goes back to the roots of the SF genre that, arguably, began with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818).[108] Out of Frankenstein's "hubris"[109] and the thirst for "dangerous or forbidden knowledge,"[110] the monster was created, which drew from and inspired a range of artificial beings. Kumar names the golem, the android, the robot, and the cyborg, but one could easily extend the list to modern versions of posthuman composites or Artificial Intelligences (AIs). What is common to these artificial men and women is that they inspire terror and recall the dangers of scientific abuse—of refusing to take on responsibility for the created creatures.[111]

It would be a mistake, however, to incorporate any game that includes zombies (or other posthuman composite) into the realms of the VGD, because many of them fail to address the societal implications of the monsters. Nonetheless, there are plenty of games that qualify, such as the CRYSIS series (Crytek, 2007, 2008, 2011, 2013), Westwood Studios' BLADE RUNNER (1997), or the "Biodystopia"[112] BIOSHOCK (2K Boston 2007).[113] Also, the DEUS EX series, which belongs to the

103 Ibid., 42ff., 380ff.; Vieira, "Concept," 18.

104 Kumar, *Modern*, 385.

105 Amis Kingsley, *New Maps of Hell* (London: Penguin Books, 2002); Kumar, *Modern*, 403.

106 Ibid., 254.

107 Ibid., 114.

108 Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 1.

109 Kumar, *Modern*, 113.

110 Ibid., 112.

111 Ibid., 113ff.

112 Ferreira, "Biodystopias, 49.

113 Schulzke, "Bioethics."

cyberpunk/posthuman genre, deals with the benefits/dangers of augmentation technology and the related threat of AIs (see chapter V). Moreover, there are games such as NEUROMANCER (Interplay Productions, 1988), PORTAL 1 and 2 (Valve, 2007, 2011), I HAVE NO MOUTH, AND I MUST SCREAM (The Dreamers Guild, 1995), or REMEMBER ME (Dontnod Entertainment, 2013). The latter game addresses the related phenomenon of mingling with the human brain and is similar in theme to Christopher Nolan's film INCEPTION (2010) or Philip K. Dick's "We Remember for you Wholesale" (1966)—better known in its film version TOTAL RECALL (Paul Verhoeven, 1990). REMEMBER ME is a critical dystopia of variant I that takes place in the futuristic Neo Paris in 2084 (one hundred years after Orwell's London), where the corporation Memorize offers the possibility of erasing unwanted memories. The protagonist Nilin is a so-called Errorist who discovers her ability to extract/remix memories. Consequently, the player is able to mingle with the minds of characters, and this created perspective and the reaction of the subjects will be a shocking revelation to him in that it illustrates the technology's potential.

From Frankenstein's monster, then, the leap "to the atom bomb is not a big one,"[114] to the "fearful monster that had burst loose from the control of its masters."[115] In the 1950s, the fear of nuclear annihilation was omnipresent, and dystopian fiction thematised it widely. Similarly, there are a fair number of games that address the ramifications of a world ravaged by radiation and the related issue of automation—which in the 1950s "was beginning to make human labor obsolete, while at the same time turning people into machine-like automatons, living thoroughly scripted, regulated lives."[116] These include, for example, S.T.A.L.K.E.R: SHADOW OF CHERNOBYL (GSC Game World, 2007), METRO 2033, THE LONGEST JOURNEY series,[117] and the aforementioned FALLOUT games (the two latter also address the fear of automation). Similar in sarcastic tone to the film DR. STRANGELOVE: HOW I STOPPED WORRYING AND LOVED THE BOMB (Stanley Kubrick, 1964) is FALLOUT 3 (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008), where the city of Megaton was established around an undetonated nuclear warhead—a telling name, indeed. The bomb creates a beautiful metaphor of this world's dilemma, in which a faction called the Children of the Atom established a religious cult around

114 Kumar, *Modern*, 113.

115 Ibid., 389.

116 Booker and Thomas, *Handbook*, 69.

117 THE LONGEST JOURNEY (Funcom, 1999); DREAMFALL: THE LONGEST JOURNEY (Funcom, 2006); and DREAMFALL CHAPTERS: THE LONGEST JOURNEY (Red Threat Games, 2014-2016).

it. The player becomes involved in this problem and can decide between disarming the bomb (thus reassuring the safety of Megaton's citizens) or blowing it up (and receive an apartment in the nearby Tenpenny Tower).

Finally, I wish to end this part on the dangers of science/technology with the issue of *surveillance*, a thematic often considered synonymous with Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The intrusion into the private sphere is still highly topical in the modern world, not only since Edward Snowden's revelations about the machinations of the NSA, which have temporarily startled the populace. Again, there are a vast number of VGDs that tackle this issue, most often combined with some form of oppressive regime or corporation: from Camouflaj's RÉPUBLIQUE (2012) and REMEMBER ME, to THE STANLEY PARABLE and both MIRROR'S EDGE games—MIRROR'S EDGE (DICE, 2008) and its resurgence in 2016 with MIRROR'S EDGE: CATALYST (DICE).

In the original MIRROR'S EDGE, the player becomes involved in a society in which the dream for a comfortable life has led to a police state and where the power over the hegemonic order is negotiated between the state and private corporations. The game takes place in a vast urban area called The City, which awaits the player in majestic white, punctuated with an orange and blue colour palette. This 'clean' Utopia comes at a price, however. Creative lifestyles, bodily pleasures, and all forms of digital communication are regulated, and only a resistant group of parkour artists do not tolerate this state of affairs. They call themselves Runners and transport packages of non-digital data across the city's rooftops. MIRROR'S EDGE is thus built around a counter-narrative in which the player (in the role of protagonist Faith) relies on "spatial agency" and "the ability to make the avatar move through the gameworld in incredible ways."[118] The game warns about a hegemonic order's ability to intrude into the private sphere and involves the player in a resistance where the City's rooftops become the new undergrounds—ensuring a "free flow of information"[119]—and where the player's artistic mobility is juxtaposed with a world that is strictly organized. This renunciation of the hegemonic order and the city's sterile white is underlined by the PC's ability to discern strategic routes through the labyrinths of rooftops. The so-called Runner Vision clearly marks potential ways in red and offers the player utopian enclaves and possibilities of action he may grasp within the confines of the system.

Similar in theme to the MIRROR'S EDGE games is WATCH_DOGS (Ubisoft Montreal, 2014), which belongs to the genre of the cyberpunk and confronts the

118 Domsch, "Dystopian," 403.

119 Ibid.

player with a chilling vision of the near future. In WATCH_DOGS, fictional Chicago has become one of the most surveilled cities in the world (just like the actual Chicago), because of a newly installed operating system. Developed by the Blume Corporation, the Central Operating System (ctOS) is used to create a smart city based on technological innovation—and thus a future Utopia. Thereby, the system does more than handle the city's infrastructure. In addition to controlling and optimising traffic flow, improving the health care system, and promoting environmental awareness, the ctOS facial recognition software reduces crime by calculating the severity of potential offences—similar to Dick's Precogs in "The Minority Report" (1956). With the promise of security, health, comfort, and limitless connection, the citizens of Chicago are coaxed into believing in this technological Utopia—and one can see them wandering the streets with their heads down, entrapped in the cyberspace of their phones.

To operate on such a level of efficiency, the ctOS is gathering vast amounts of data—about income, age, and history of disease, to citizens' precise locations. In WATCH_DOGS, information means power, and this is where the supposed Utopia fails. In a story of corporate intrigue, corrupt individuals, and data heists, various parties use the ctOS to their benefit. One of these is Dermot Quinn, who is involved in cybercrime and human trafficking and is close to the Blume Corporation and Chicago's mayor Donavan Rushmore.

In the midst of these intrigues, the player takes control of the hacker Aiden Pierce, whose niece was accidently killed by Quinn's men. His story is thus one of personal revenge and his development remains shallow. Although Pierce meets and is aided by Clara Lille (the supposed temptress and member of the hacker group DedSec) and Raymond Kenney (a former ctOS software engineer), he remains caught up in his thirst for vengeance. In the meantime, there is no sign from hacker group DedSec, which could have led to a collective counter-narrative and perspective on the events.

Consequently, through the absence of critical characters and plot developments, reflective distance is left to the player in his ludic ability to tinker with the ctOS by using his in-game smartphone. Chicago, as such, is at the player's mercy—for the hacking possibilities are vast and include control of Chicago's electric grid, accessing people's personal information and bank accounts, or intruding into their homes through cameras in their Xbox Kinects. As a consequence, the player becomes a voyeur who witnesses the citizens of Chicago playing games or engaging in sexual fantasies. Becoming involved in such a trial action is pleasurable without a doubt, but it is also thought-provoking by having the player ponder these possibilities in real life, and what it means to become a victim.

Figure 11: Quinn's human trafficking auction in WATCH_DOGS.

WATCH_DOGS (Ubisoft Montreal, 2014).

All in all, WATCH_DOGS is a critical dystopia of variant I that fails to unfold its subversive potential because the counter-narrative and critical character/plot perspectives remain in the background. The protagonist Pierce shows little change and is caught up in personal revenge; it is only at the game's conclusion that his attitude changes. Nonetheless, having experienced Chicago in the act of play and closing the blanks between the perspectives of his co-creation (the hacking and tinkering with the ctOS), the player may ponder the ramifications of such technology and what it means if corrupt individuals get their hands on it.

Table 3: Video game dystopias that primarily target the dangers of science/technology (environmental hazards, posthumanism, cyberspace, surveillance, and post-apocalypse).

ENSLAVED: ODYSSEY TO THE WEST (Ninja Theory, 2010)
CRYSIS SERIES (Crytek, 2007, 2008, 2011, 2013)
BLADE RUNNER (Westwood Studios, 1997)
BIOSHOCK series: 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)
NEUROMANCER: A CYBERPUNK ROLE-PLAYING ADVENTURE (Interplay Productions, 1988)
PORTAL 1 and 2 (Valve, 2007, 2011)

DEUS EX series: DEUS EX (Ion Storm Austin, 2000); DEUS EX: INVISIBLE WAR (Ion Storm Austin, 2004); DEUS EX: HUMAN REVOLUTION (Eidos Montreal, 2011); DEUS EX: MANKIND DIVIDED (Eidos Montreal, 2016)
I HAVE NO MOUTH, AND I MUST SCREAM (The Dreamers Guild, 1995)
REMEMBER ME (Dontnod Entertainment, 2013)
S.T.A.L.K.E.R: SHADOW OF CHERNOBYL (GSC Game World, 2007)
METRO 2033 (4A Games, 2010); METRO: LAST LIGHT (4A Games, 2013)
FALLOUT series: FALLOUT (Interplay Entertainment, 1997); FALLOUT 2 (Black Isle Studios, 1998); FALLOUT 3 (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008); FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS (Obsidian Entertainment, 2010); FALLOUT 4 (Bethesda Game Studios, 2015)
THE LONGEST JOURNEY series: The Longest Journey (Funcom, 1999); DREAMFALL: THE LONGEST JOURNEY (Funcom, 2006); DREAMFALL CHAPTERS: THE LONGEST JOURNEY (Red Threat Games, 2014-2016)
RÉPUBLIQUE (2012 Camouflaj)
THE STANLEY PARABLE (Galactic Cafe, 2013)
MIRROR'S EDGE (DICE, 2008); MIRROR'S EDGE: CATALYST (DICE, 2016)
WATCH_DOGS (Ubisoft Montreal, 2014); WATCH_DOGS 2 (Ubisoft Montreal, 2016)
NIER: AUTOMATA (Platinum Games, 2017)
HORIZON ZERO DAWN (Guerrilla Games, 2016)
ENTER THE MATRIX (Shiny Entertainment, 2003); THE MATRIX: PATH OF NEO (Shiny Entertainment, 2005)

3.3.4 (Human) Nature as the Main Culprit

It seems that the main culprit for humankind's inability to attain a better society can be found in the hideous elements of human nature. Ever since More's *Utopia*, whose "citizens have to be controlled—educated to do right,"[120] the dark parts of

120 Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, 42.

the human self have thwarted the dream of Utopia—the desire for power, "to consume, eliminate, and destroy the Other."[121] Whether it is oppressive regimes in the form of authoritarian states, or under the veil of democracy, inglorious leaders or corporate oppressors who use scientific advancements to their favour, they all are united by the VGD, which calls for emancipation from them.

The larger theme of the hideousness of human nature can be discerned in most of the VGDs enlisted in this chapter—and, specifically, with games such as the FALLOUT or METRO series, which deal with the difficulties of attaining Utopia because of who we are. In the line of these ideas, I wish to lay focus on two final examples. The first is the classical dystopia I HAVE NO MOUTH, AND I MUST SCREAM, which is similar to that in Dante's Inferno in the epic poem *La Divina Commedia* (ca. 1304-1321). Here, the supercomputer AM exterminated humankind except for five individuals and created a world in which agency is absent, as a punishment for their sins. The second example is Platinum Games' MAD WORLD (2009), which is similar in thematic to the films THE PURGE (James DeMonaco, 2013) and GAMER (Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor, 2009). In MAD WORLD, the fictional Varrigan City has turned into the setting of the ultra-violent television game show 'Death Watch' in which contestants engage in a brutal survival of the fittest. Originally created to satisfy humankind's lust for violence, it is revealed that the games benefit pharmaceutical companies. MAD WORLD thus stands as prime example of dystopia's major theme and involves the player in brutal carnage, letting him enact his unconscious desires.

Table 4: Video game dystopias that primarily target human nature.

BIOSHOCK series: 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)
METRO 2033 (4A Games, 2010); METRO: LAST LIGHT (4A Games, 2013)
FALLOUT series: FALLOUT (Interplay Entertainment, 1997); FALLOUT 2 (Black Isle Studios, 1998); FALLOUT 3 (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008); FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS (Obsidian Entertainment, 2010); FALLOUT 4 (Bethesda Game Studios, 2015)
I HAVE NO MOUTH, AND I MUST SCREAM (The Dreamers Guild, 1995)
MAD WORLD (Platinum Games, 2009)

121 Levitas and Sargisson, "Utopia in Dark Times," 25.

3.4 THE DIVERSITY OF THE PERSPECTIVAL NETWORK AS PRECONDITION FOR DYSTOPIA'S EFFECTIVENESS

Playing dystopia can be depressing at times, especially if you are playing these games for years consecutively. Nonetheless, the VGD achieves artistic merit in engaging the player with a cathartic experience and in the struggle for Utopia. This chapter has revealed interlocking themes and targets apparent in the VGD and illustrated the genre's diversity. Its effectiveness in issuing warnings has thereby been linked to a game's aesthetic complexity and to the amount of differing perspectives that involve the player in a reflective process.

These perspectives are outlined by dystopia's narrative framework of official narrative and counter-narrative, which seems to withstand transfer from different mediums. Perspectives such as the gameworld events, processes, and vicious characters introduce a game's hegemonic order as a palpable threat and serve as a justification for the (combat) action against it. This is done either in an explicit fashion—by setting the player in direct resistance to waves of enemies (RESISTANCE, HOMEFRONT, GEARS OF WAR)—or more implicitly—by involving the player in the underlying processes of the society at hand (BORDERLANDS, BIOSHOCK). As a result, the way the player acts against the official narrative can be as bland as shooting his way through waves of enemies or converge in creative counter-narratives and ludic expressions. This is the case in the player's artistic use of space in MIRROR'S EDGE and the way this gives rise to utopian enclaves, the hacking in WATCH_DOGS and tinkering with the ctOS, the solving of ethical dilemmas in PAPERS, PLEASE by exposing the life of the PC's family to risk when helping others, or the creative ways to interact with a bland society in EVERY DAY THE SAME DREAM, which gives rise to nature enclaves. In addition, likable temptresses and round characters like in BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL, ENSLAVED: ODYSSEY TO THE WEST, and HALF-LIFE 2 give the player private reasons to counteract dystopia, for he potentially establishes close relations to them.

All in all, it can be argued that the perspectival network of an effective dystopian game fuels the player's imaginings and ergodic actions and results in creative, ethical solutions to dystopia. Depending on which of the perspectives are foregrounded (either by the game or the player's actions), different constellations enable the player to close blanks in a variety of ways. These insights, then, shall stand as a premise for Part II, where the player's aesthetic response to dystopia shall be treated in detail and further prove the hypotheses and results of Part I.