

8 Horizons and the Video Game Dystopia

The video game dystopia represents a new strategic enterprise of the utopian philosophy and a genre for cultural reflection. This study has shown that playing dystopia involves the player in a playful trial action in which she may ergodically and imaginatively explore an alternative societal mode through play that is considerably worse than the game designers' empirical present. This experience in the dystopian gameworld warns the player about negative trends within empirical reality and helps her explore emancipatory routes to attenuate the nightmare in both the gameworld and empirical reality. It thus succeeds in triggering an aesthetic response in the player and shows the potential to reach a wide array of people both young and old who are familiar with playing games.

To elicit this kind of reaction in the player requires a tripartite dialectic between dystopian game, player, and culture (world) that can be described in terms of fictionality. In this sense, the fictive permeates the structural concept of the implied player as it reorganises empirical world elements (norms, conventions, troubling tendencies, the state of affairs, and so on) in the dystopian gameworld and its perspectives and partially frees them of their vertical hierarchies. The result is a refracted mirror of the familiar and unfamiliar, which estranges the player and shows her empirical reality in doublings and distortions. In addition, this organised space of play excels through several conflicts that can be lived through by the player (ergodically, imaginatively, psychologically)—that is to say, clashes of perspectives (world/characters, plot/structure, system/agency) she may experience and co-create. It thereby opens up a space for the imaginary to manifest itself in the player's psyche, her ergodic and imaginative actions. This trial space is free from the usual restrictions of the empirical world and reduced in complexity and thus allows for playful explorations. In using her imagination and closing the blanks between the game perspectives, the player experiences an aesthetic effect that is well-known from engaging with representational art but differs from it in

that the experience the player lives through is more personal due to her extended involvement in it.

Whether these games of estrangement and fictionality are more subversive than those of non-ergodic art is left undecided, for there are a variety of factors that determine aesthetic response. However, it is indisputable that the VGD is utopian at heart and offers grand potential through virtualising storyworlds into malleable spaces for playful exploration that extend into the past and future and which are organised by a game's perspectival networks. In other words, playing dystopia involves the player in the inner mechanisms of dystopian regimes and functions as a disruption of the present through video game play. By doing so, it indirectly enlightens the player about the true nature of social totality and drives her to catharsis by having experienced a reduced but focused simulation of it in virtuality.

Playing dystopia is thus precarious and gives expression to a utopian impulse which is deeply ingrained in the human psyche. It aims to break free of the confines of *ludus*, to uncover its secrets within a systems of rules that organises the dystopian gameworld and official narrative, and to explore paidic routes and counter-narratives to it. These regenerative solutions affect the player's habitual dispositions, giving her hope where none may be found, and restructure her perception of the empirical world. They function as the opium of Utopia, which drives the player to emancipation and has her ride the steady yet tidal wave of utopianism towards the creation of a brighter future.

To come to such a conclusion required a couple of interrelated steps that gave rise to a variety of results. The most prominent of these is the description of the dystopian genre in video games and how it continues and expands on the legacy of utopian and dystopian fiction in non-ergodic art by involving the player. In this regard, it has been clarified that the utopian impulse manifests itself in a plethora of artwork in overt or disguised manners—and the VGD is a prime example of Utopia's pervasiveness. Thereby, the genre continues the tradition of utopian and dystopian fiction by relying on similar themes and tropes but expands on them through involving the player in a dynamic framework of play that goes beyond the reader's imaginative interaction with a storyworld. Instead, the player uses her imagination to participate ergodically in the gameworld and in dystopia's traditional plot structure—the clash of official narrative and counter-narrative—which has been expanded to a malleable framework in the VGD.

Analysing this framework shows the benefit of approaching the larger structure of dystopia's implied player and, additionally, allows one to distinguish between several subgenres of dystopia in deciphering how they negotiate the question of hope by involving the player in it. As a result, there are four distinct dystopian subtypes that can be situated between the poles of Utopia and Anti-Utopia:

1) the VGD as anti-utopia, which is reluctantly included in the dystopian genre, for it represents a strategy of ideology that aims to coax the player into supporting the status quo by having her fall victim to the game's hypocritical pleasures and criticism; 2) the VGD as classical dystopia, a most powerful subgenre that encloses the player within its nightmarish system and has her follow a counter-narrative that is bound to fail. Hope, as such, is to be found with the player only and in a subversive response to the nightmare; 3) the VGD as critical dystopia of variant I, a variant of the critical dystopia in games that negotiates the poles of Utopia and Anti-Utopia in a more nuanced way. Although these worlds are still despicable, they hold out hope for the diegetic characters and virtualise one or more utopian enclaves to be found by the player—who is sent on a linear route to a hopeful or ambiguous ending; 4) finally, there is the VGD as critical dystopia of variant II, which confronts the player with the choice of either becoming a catalyst or contributing to Utopia's downfall. As such, variant II sets the player in a precarious situation and exposes her to a trial run and a search for utopian enclaves. This task estranges the player and has her ponder similar situations/solutions to empirical world dystopias.

Given these diverse forms of agency to negotiate hope, the VGD represents a genre that sensitises the player to the utopian impulse in different forms. However, whether the game at hand is effective or not in conveying a warning is a related question, and an answer to it may be found in a game's aesthetic complexity and consequent diversity of perspectives. Consequently, it was established that games that involve the player in hectic and pleasurable combat, without giving at least a justification for the spectacle to which the player can attach emotionally, are examples of unsuccessful dystopias. On the other hand, the VGD can usually be endowed with the status of a multi-layered artefact that involves the player in both pleasurable and subversive ventures to an estranged Other. Thereby, several perspectives (character and world situations/dilemmas, diverse ludic interactions, intricate processes, or music pieces) stand in conflict with each other. They structure the plot perspectives of official narrative and counter-narrative in a decisive manner and involve the player in games of estrangement that further aggravate the combination of the perspectives. To attenuate these tensions, the player enters a dialectic between gameworld and empirical world and uses her world knowledge to close the blanks between the perspectives. The result is a meticulous negotiation of both worlds which gives light to the newness of art and to a revelatory effect that has the player discern empirical reality differently.

These insights into the nature of playing dystopia and the player's aesthetic response to it are of additional importance to central concerns in video game studies. They first of all address the nature of the game-narrative hybrids (with the

VGD being a subgenre) and their specific modes of discourse and player involvement. Thereby, a plot framework that is organically integrated into the overall game structure and its system of perspectives is essential and illustrates the prerequisite for VGNs. It structures the loose gamespace elements and endows them with purpose and causality. The player contributes to this creation of plot/meaning and not only enjoys the possibility to explore the gameworld and act within it but also to create diverse plots in doing so. As such, the plot framework formulates a vital part of the implied player and its system of perspectives, which can be held responsible for affording play in the first place and driving the player to an aesthetic response.

In the light of these findings, the discussion of playing dystopia and its structural prerequisites has led to the formulation of the implied player as an intersubjective framework that anticipates play and implies various types of players—for there are many viable ways to play a game. In this respect, the emancipated player's implication in this structure was considered a prerequisite for aesthetic complexity, which unfolds its potential in a tripartite dialectic between (dystopian) game, player, and culture (world). Such a playful trial action in dystopia engages the player with a gameworld on a complex level and drives her towards aesthetic response. What is more, this interaction has to be regarded in terms of fictionality and estrangement, because the specific nature of the dystopian gameworld aggravates the referentiality to the empirical world. To create the connection between both worlds, then, and to experience meaning, the player has to exert efforts of ideation and fill in the blanks between the game perspectives. This facet necessarily construes the concept of fiction I am employing as a semantic phenomenon that involves the player in games of estrangement and holds the function of telling her something about reality that was hitherto inaccessible to direct perception.

As such, a gameworld's incompleteness is the basic premise for the player's participation in the VGD/VGN and integral to unveiling the newness of video game art. This fundamental quality of fictional worlds is refined in video games in how the player approaches the gameworld. Two forms of indeterminacy can thereby be discerned. First of all, there are gaps in the gameworld that can be closed either through imagination or the player's ergodic movements within the diegesis, whereby virtualised potentialities await her ergodic fillings. These create important perspectives on the gameworld that, in combination with the remaining perspectives, are responsible for the emergence of blanks. The player can close these through imagination in order to understand the gameworld, but it also induces her to ergodically act upon the composed images: an integral aspect of video game involvement. In other words, whereas gaps speak to the player's urge to

completion, blanks evoke her desire for combination, allowing for an intricate understanding of the gameworld elements and their interrelations.

However, these initial images on the level of the plot give rise to further questions once the player compares her results to facts and situations from the empirical world. As such, the closing of blanks through the formation of images in the player's mind is due to the creation of two interlinked *gestalts*. Whereas the first *gestalt* assembles an image of the occurring plot, the cognitive mapping of the gameworld, its processes and characters, it nonetheless remains partially incomplete. This is because the closing can only come about through the formation of a secondary *gestalt* that unveils something that is not discernible through the mere perception of the object but is imagistic in character.

Hence it follows that fictional communication in VGDs (and VGNs) is similar to and different from how one perceives and interacts with the real world. For while it is based on natural rules of human perception, perceiving the empirical world in perspectival systems, it is only through acts of ideation and the creation of a secondary *gestalt* that unexpected connections between both realities (and their interrelations) are brought to the fore. Playing dystopia thus involves the player in games of fictionality that are structured by the fictive—the ludic organisation of the gameworld that excels with doublings/distortions—and negotiated by the player—in her imagination, ergodic manoeuvres, and resultant emotions. This interaction mitigates the conflicts between the individual perspectives and is propelled by the imaginary as an uncontrollable, paidic force. It creatively engulfs the player and expresses itself in the experience of the aesthetic effect that is so fundamental to conveying the VGD's message.

Given this potential of playing dystopia, the outlook for the genre is positive overall in establishing itself as the dominant genre in the transmedial environment of Utopia. In reaching a wide array of people all around the globe, the VGD is fundamentally important for suggesting emancipatory routes that lead out of the 21st century dystopia and involving the player in a negotiation of possibilities to do so. Thereby, the genre builds on a long tradition of despair and revolution that dates back to the 1980s and continues to arouse the minds of players both young and old in the 21st century. While not all VGDs necessarily fulfil this aesthetic function (as is the case with any medium), they nonetheless embrace the utopian impulse that can be found at their core. In addition, it goes without saying that several creative examples of the genre have emerged. These explore new subversive routes of player involvement and intermingle a variety of perspectives for the player to explore and aid in their creation. As a narrative genre, the VGD is thus permeated by several ludic genres (adventure games, action-adventures, FPSs, role-playing games (RPGs), strategy games, experiential genres, and so on) that

afford different player interactions. Moreover, it spices these up with diverse game structures (linear corridors, multicursal labyrinths, one-rooms, or open world structures) and different degrees of estrangement and extrapolation. These possibilities have to be employed in creative ways by the game designers, however, and with the anticipation of more heterogeneous game developer teams (including more women), the VGD may stand at the dawn of a new age of subversiveness that knows few bounds.

In this respect, current VGDs have already contributed their fair share of masterpieces such as the *BIOSHOCK* games, *THE STANLEY PARABLE*, *FALLOUT 4*, *METRO 2033*, *DEUS EX: HUMAN REVOLUTION*, *MIRROR'S EDGE*, *THE LAST OF US* and *PAPERS, PLEASE*. Although these games retain a thoroughly pessimistic shell and involve the player in nightmarish gameworlds, their core is fundamentally utopian (to different degrees)—which drives the player towards emancipation and the desire to counteract dystopia in the real world. Such an alignment towards Utopia is not surprising, given the contemporary world situation, which makes it difficult for dystopia to arouse and shock the appreciator/player, for she witnesses injustice and atrocity on a daily basis. Consequently, the VGD has opened its gates to explorations that lead beyond these confinements and give rise to outright utopian solutions (such as in *THE LAST OF US* or *FALLOUT 4*) that move the genre in a decisive utopian direction.