2 Dystopia: Nightmarish Worlds as Distorted Anxiety Dreams

The previous chapter went into detail about the philosophy of Utopia and its manifestations in fictional narrative form. At their core was the drive towards a better future and the striving for the continual betterment of society as a whole. This undercurrent in the human psyche, called the utopian impulse, led to the formulation of Utopia's strategy, which extends to its fictional forms and revolves around enticing the reader to view empirical reality through a critical lens and to attempt to change reality. A further manifestation of Utopia's strategy can now be found in the *fictional dystopia*, a transmedial genre that encompasses literary works, poetry, painting, and film, as well as plays and video games. Though seemingly pessimistic, the dystopia similarly works towards achieving the utopian dream, though with an adjusted strategy.

Such a conclusion is not shared by every scholar, and there are tendencies to view the dystopian genre as the opposite of Utopia—and, specifically, the literary utopia. As Arthur Blaim claims: "The distinction between *dystopia* and *anti-utopia* has always been rather vague and confusing, to the extent that there is an evident tendency to use the terms … interchangeably."[1] Kumar traces back this *conservative thinking* and *antagonism* to the traditions of the Augustinians and the Pelagians. While the Augustinian (the utopian, such as Wells and Bellamy) is driven by a positive image of humankind and denies the concept of the original sin, the Pelagian (like Orwell or Huxley) is convinced that human beings are weak

1 Arthur Blaim, "Hell upon a Hill: Reflections of Anti-Utopia and Dystopia," in *Dystopia(n) Matters: On the Page, on Screen, on Stage*, ed. Fátima Vieira (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2013), 80; emphasis added.

and regularly succumb to "the sins of pride, avarice and ambition, however favourable the circumstances."[2] From this, Kumar concludes that "[t]he anti-utopian['s] … pessimistic and deterministic view of human nature leads him to the conviction that all attempts to create the good society on earth are bound to be futile."[3] In other words, "[t]here are those who fear … that utopia *can* be attained, and that it will be a nightmare."[4]

Figure 4: The fictional dystopia is a transmedial genre that immerses the reader/player in nightmarish worlds. In this picture of Irrational Games' BIOSHOCK INFINITE*, the destructive force of Columbia—the supposed Utopia and castle in the sky—can be discerned.*

BIOSHOCK INFINITE (Irrational Games, 2013), ch. The Atrium.

Contrary to these descriptions is a more modern consensus amongst scholars who opt for a differentiation between the philosophy of Utopia and what is called *Anti-Utopia*.[5] In their view, the latter tradition rather serves to undermine the utopian dream and to consolidate dominant ideology, thereby contributing to the downfall

2 Kumar, *Modern*, 100.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., 102; cf. 100-102.

5 Vieira, "Concept"; *Matters*; Baccolini and Moylan, *Horizons*; Moylan, *Scraps*; Sargent, "Three," *Utopianism*; Seeber, *Selbstkritik der Utopie*; Levitas and Sargisson, "Utopia in Dark Times."

of Utopia by locking it up "in the iron cage of Anti-Utopia."[6] Notwithstanding this distinction, these scholars remain aware of the perils of a misuse of utopian images.[7] Such an idea, of "utopia gone wrong,"[8] can be found in many fictions where promised castles in the sky turn out to be battleships in disguise—destructive forces of evil like Jonathan Swift's hovering island Laputa or BIOSHOCK INFINITE'S Columbia (Irrational Games, 2013). They remind the reader/player that the dream of Utopia, however noble it initially was, is fragile and may easily turn into a vicious nightmare if not treated with caution.[9]

Having this possibility in mind, the dystopian genre should *not* be regarded as an enemy of the utopian enterprise. I will thus follow Vieira et al.'s line of thinking in a recent anthology that "there are more affinities binding utopia and dystopia together, with regard to their aims and objectives, than differences setting them apart."[10] In fact, both genres are "almost correlative in their function."[11] Consequently, and to avoid definitional misunderstandings, this chapter will clearly distinguish between *dystopia* and *anti-utopia*,[12] which brings me to the following statement.

Triggered by trends hidden within the author's empirical present and fuelled by the fear of losing something of value—that is to say, the future itself—the *fictional dystopia* may be described as a vicious nightmare, *an anxiety dream in the*

6 Moylan, *Scraps*, 154; cf. 104; Levitas and Sargisson, "Utopia in Dark Times," 15.

7 Sargent, *Utopianism*, 9.

8 Vieira, "Concept," 16.

9 At this point, one has to underline that "one man's utopia" may easily be "another man's dystopia." (Booker, *Impulse*, 15). And that in order to declare a particular society—be it fictional or real—utopian, dystopian, or something in between largely depends on the personal disposition of the reader/observer—and one could extend this to intentional communities or other forms of belief systems. (Kumar, *Modern* 105, 125; Seeber, *Selbstkritik der Utopie*, 27; Lyman T. Sargent, "Do Dystopias Matter?" in *Dystopia(n) Matters: On the Page, on Screen, on Stage*, ed. Fátima Vieira [Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2013], 11). In addition, there is the issue of the historical time period, since the perception of a certain utopia may change according to the norms and perceptions of a better life that prevail in a specific historical moment. (Seeber, *Selbstkritik der Utopie*, 235; Sargent, *Utopianism*, 23).

10 Fátima Vieira, "Introduction," in *Dystopia(n) Matters: On the Page, on Screen, on Stage*, ed. Fátima Vieira (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2013), 1.

11 Ibid.

12 Baccolini and Moylan, "Possibilities," 240-241; Moylan, *Scraps*, xiii.

Freudian sense, which has distorted[13] and disguised its original meaning: *the wish for Utopia*. As such, dystopias across the media critically investigate the possibility of a worse future in order to *warn* their readers, viewers, appreciators, or players about potential trends apparent or present in discernible forms in their specific empirical present. As a strategy of Utopia, then, the fictional dystopia retains the strong urge to change the future for the better, and thus the element of hope. Consequently, it scrutinises utopian proposals (such as Columbia and Rapture—the gameworld of 2K Boston's 2007 BIOSHOCK) in a constructive manner, while the *anti-utopia* shall be confined to such fiction or nonfiction that rejects utopianism or a particular utopia—suggesting that the possibility for a better future is nonexistent. To put it simply, *there can be no hope in anti-utopia*.[14]

The reason for such a description of dystopia and the elaboration of the thematic that follows is not so much about recreating the academic argument that preceded my claims (for there has been a fair amount of discussion in this area)[15] but to establish *clear lines of orientation* for an investigation of the video game dystopia as a genre. The chapter will thereby answer two main questions: 1) what subgenres can be found in the fictional dystopia, and are these potentially useful for *a typology of the VGD*? 2) Is dystopia's *traditional plot structure*—the clash between official narrative and counter-narrative—to be found in the VGD, and if so, how do the ergodicity and spatial capabilities of the medium influence this framework? To give my discussion an illustrative example, I will conduct an in-depth comparison between Valve's HALF-LIFE 2 (2004) and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and describe the former's methods of involving the player. Finally, I will come to a first conclusion about the VGD, postulating the genre *as a new strategic form of the utopian enterprise*.

13 Kumar poses the question whether dystopias "contain, in however distorted and diminished a form, a utopian impulse." (Kumar, *Modern*, 286).

14 There is a slight problem with such a definition, because fictional narratives are ambiguous by design, and the appreciator might find glimmers of hope in the most pessimistic instances. However, in anti-utopia a strong trend towards the Anti-Utopian pole and a rejection of Utopia is discernible.

15 See Blaim, "Hell upon a Hill," 80-95 and Moylan, *Scraps*, 124-145 for a detailed discussion of the subject.

2.1 ANTI-UTOPIA OR DYSTOPIA?

Since the advent of the literary utopia, historical responses in the form of so-called *anti-utopias* were not long in coming.[16] Considered by Kumar "as the greatest of the older anti-utopias,"[17] Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) presented not only a ferocious attack (or even an outright rejection) on the society it sprang from (18th century England) but also chose its prey in Bacon's scientific wonderland *New Atlantis*.[18] Viciously haunting utopian aspirations, "[a]s a nightmare to its dream, like a malevolent and grimacing *doppelgänger*, anti-utopia has stalked utopia from the very beginning."[19] But quite unlike utopia, which pictures an improved society where many of the problems of the empirical present are overcome, the anti-utopia takes its readers "on a journey through hell, in all its vivid particulars. It makes us live utopia, as an experience so painful and nightmarish that we lose all desire for it."[20]

Naturally, there will always be those inclined to view the future with either hope or alarm.[21] But the anti-utopian persuasion goes further, mostly stemming from a deep frustration with utopianism itself.[22] In the 20th century, the "the two great utopian experiments [Russia and the USA]"[23] had failed, and the promised futures of Bellamy and Wells, their utopian thought experiments on what a socialist and scientific world-state could look like, could now be found as real manifestations in the perverted realities of the 20th century.[24] Yet narrative fiction had already warned what could come of these utopian visions. Viewed by Kumar as attacks on the Wellsian Utopia, authors such as E. M. Forster ("The Machine Stops", 1909), Yevgeny Zamyatin (*We*, 1920), Aldous Huxley (*Brave New World*, 1932), and, most famously, George Orwell (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 1949), explicated what the utopias of Bellamy and Wells implied.[25] They "simply [took utopia] one step further"[26] and showed the Wellsian world-state as the nightmare they felt

16 Kumar, *Modern*, 126.
17 Ibid., 105.
18 Ibid., 105-106.
19 Ibid., 98.
20 Ibid. 103.
21 Sargent, *Utopianism*, 8.
22 Kumar, *Modern*, 104.
23 Ibid., 381.
24 Ibid., 133ff., 194ff., 206-207.
25 Ibid., 205-206.
26 Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, 113.

it to be.[27] In this sense, the fictions above could be defined according to Sargent's definition of the anti-utopia as

> a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as a criticism of utopianism or some particular eutopia.[28]

Still, the definition at hand would do these literary works no justice, as their potential targets are not limited to the attack on Wells or utopianism in general. Indeed, utopianism might not be their target at all—as will be made clear later on.

"Can there be anything more commonplace than the pronouncement that, in the twentieth century, utopia is dead – and beyond any hope of resurrection?"[29] With hindsight it is clear that the 20th century became mankind's darkest hour so far. Events such as the rise of totalitarian regimes (communism, fascism, and national socialism), two World Wars, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Holocaust, and the Cold War smothered the belief in Utopia and left the world in a state of "cosmic pessimism."[30] Moreover, the rise of capitalism and modern consumer society led to the devaluation of the individual, reducing him to a cog in the mechanisms of corporate orchestras.[31]

It comes as no surprise, then, that narrative fiction should respond. Out of the horrors of the 20th century, dystopian fiction arose, producing minute "[f]orecasts" and "anxious anticipations"[32] of even darker times.[33] Consequently, the dystopias of Zamyatin, Huxley, and Orwell (Forster's can be included as well), represent fictional narratives that focus on "social and political critique."[34] All three "great defining texts of the genre of dystopian fiction"[35] qualify in that their targets are

27 Kumar, *Modern*, 205ff.

28 Sargent, "Three," 9.

29 Kumar, *Modern*, 380.

30 Ibid., 381.

31 Kumar, *Modern*, 380-381; Vieira, "Concept," 18-19; M. Keith Booker, "On Dystopia," in *Critical Insights: Dystopia*, ed. M. Keith Booker (Ipswich, Mass.: Salem Press, 2013), 2-3.

32 Ian F. Clarke, "The Pattern of Prediction 1763-1973: Methods of Prediction 1918-1939," *Futures 2*, no. 4 (December 1970): 376, 379, https://www.sciencedirect.com/journal/futures/vol/2/issue/4

33 Moylan, *Scraps*, xi.

34 Booker, *Impulse*, 19.

35 Ibid., 20.

to be found in *a specific historical moment*, which is their author's empirical present. Whereas *We* comments on dangerous trends Zamyatin spotted in post-revolutionary Soviet Russia, *Brave New World* illuminates the concerns Huxley had about Western consumer capitalism. Finally, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* targets a variety of issues, including socialism, capitalism, and totalitarianism.[36] As instances of "social criticism,"[37] then, dystopian fictions primarily revolve around "'real-word' societies and issues"[38] extrapolated into the future in order to show them in their terrifying magnitude—showing the reader not only *what could be* but, in a way, *what already is*.[39] The function of such a strategy is simple. In setting the reader "within the defamiliarizing context of an extreme fictional society,"[40] she is made vulnerable to her own critical judgment.[41]

As a result, dystopia elicits a specific *aesthetic (ethical) response*, which is that of a *warning*. Although a warning underlines the potentiality of the depicted, the reader is nonetheless reminded that the narrative she has read remains fictional, and that it might not be too late[42] to avoid the nightmare in the empirical world.[43] According to this analysis, then, the works of Forster, Zamyatin, Huxley, and Orwell could be classified as instances of dystopia, which Sargent has defined as

36 Booker, *Impulse*, 19-20; "On Dystopia," 8; Kumar, *Modern*, 266ff., 293ff.

37 Booker, *Impulse*, 18.

38 Ibid., 19.

39 Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, 15, 107; Lucy Sargisson, "Dystopias Do Matter," in *Dystopia(n) Matters: On the Page, on Screen, on Stage*, ed. Fátima Vieira (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2013), 40.

40 M. Keith Booker and Anne-Marie Thomas. *The Science Fiction Handbook* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 65.

41 Suvin, *Metamorphoses*, 6, 71.

42 In this sense, Sargent compares the dystopia to the *jeremiads* of ancient times. These criticise people for their wrongdoings and detail the ways in which God will punish the sinners. But jeremiads also hint at the possibility of redemption, suggesting that if people are open to change, God may reward them instead of punishing them. Similarly, the dystopia illustrates the results of human wrongdoings (without the religious connotation) but includes the notion that it need not be that way. (Sargent, "Matter," 12).

43 Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, 107; Vieira, "Concept," 17; M. Keith Booker, "About this Volume," in *Critical Insights: Dystopia*, ed. M. Keith Booker (Ipswich, Mass.: Salem Press, 2013), vii.

a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived.[44]

It seems that these two perspectives on the same literary works have brought the investigation even further away from the attempt to distinguish between anti-utopia and dystopia. It is probably for these reasons that many authors conflate the terms dystopia and anti-utopia—and to a certain extent they seem to be right. Ferns, for instance, categorises literary works in which the former dream of Utopia has turned into a nightmare as examples of "dystopia – or anti-utopia – which both parodies and subverts the traditional utopian model as a means of satirizing and warning against some of the more alarming trends in contemporary society."[45] He thus describes dystopia to hold *a double function*: 1) parodying the traditional utopia and 2) warning against some contemporary trend the author deemed dangerous.[46] Similarly, Booker describes dystopian literature "not so much a specific genre [but rather] as a particular kind of oppositional and critical energy or spirit."[47] To him,

dystopian literature is specifically that literature which situates itself *in direct opposition to utopian thought*, warning against the potential negative consequences of arrant utopianism. At the same time, dystopian literature generally also constitutes a critique of existing social conditions or political systems, either through the critical examination of the *utopian premises* upon which those conditions and systems are based or through the imaginative extension of those conditions and systems into different contexts that more clearly reveal their flaws and contradictions.[48]

Although there is much truth to this claim, Booker might be mistaken in two points: first, not all trends in contemporary society qualify as utopian proposals.[49] Second, if dystopian fiction serves as a warning of a nightmarish future to come, by definition it cannot oppose Utopia. For as Sargent correctly notices: "[a] warning implies that choice, and therefore hope, are still possible."[50] As critique does

44 Sargent, "Three," 9.

45 Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, 15.

46 Ibid., 15, 109.

47 Booker, *Theory*, 3.

48 Ibid., 3; emphasis added.

49 Seeber, *Selbstkritik der Utopie*, 233-234.

50 Sargent, "Three," 26.

not entail rejection, it follows that *dystopia does not stand in opposition to Utopia* but rather functions as *a strategy* of the latter—or as Moylan puts it: "places the dystopia at least potentially in the camp of critical utopianism."[51] Dystopia, then, still remains a nightmare, but one that retains the wish for a better future in the midst of its despair—and it is exactly this notion of hope which the term anti-utopia does not imply.

2.2 ANTI-UTOPIA AS A REJECTION OF UTOPIANISM

> Throughout modernity … the anti-utopian persuasion has systematically worked to silence and destroy Utopia, but Utopia … has always offered a way to work against and beyond these attacks.[52]

Actually, the problem may lie with the term anti-utopia itself and with its denouncing connotation. Not only does the term imply a direct attack on a particular utopia, but it also evokes the disqualifying connotation of a rejection of utopian thought.[53] There is, however, a reason for such a denial, albeit a questionable one. In the opinion of so-called *anti-utopians*, "utopia is defined rigidly in terms of the quest for a state of impossible perfection, thus giving rise to a dystopian parody that satirically illustrates the futility and folly of all utopian aspiration."[54] This perfection can, according to the anti-utopian, only be reached through brutal force, by transforming the former utopian ideal into a totalitarian regime.[55] Looking below the surface of such an assertion exposes a particular strategy or agenda, however. In order to justify their ideologically induced claim that the empirical present "is indeed the best of all possible worlds,"[56] the anti-utopians resort to "the label *perfect* as a political weapon to justify their opposition."[57] Anti-Utopia, in this sense, functions as a strategy of dominant ideology. It postulates the end of history and discredits Utopia to praise and safeguard "the status quo and the satisfactions that

51 Moylan, *Scraps*, 136; cf. 105.

52 Ibid., 104.

53 Seeber, *Selbstkritik der Utopie*, 223-226.

54 Laurence Davis, "Dystopia, Utopia and Sancho Panza," in *Dystopia(n) Matters: On the Page, on Screen, on Stage*, ed. Fátima Vieira (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2013), 23.

55 Sargent, "Three," 9, 23.

56 Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia UP, 1994), 8.

57 Sargent, "Three," 9.

it delivers to its beneficiaries."[58] But perfection, as pointed out in the previous chapter, has never been on the agenda of Utopia in the first place. Indeed, "[w]ithout the use of the word *perfect*, part of the logic of the anti-utopian argument disappears."[59]

It is best, then, to differentiate between dystopia and anti-utopia in relation to *the question of hope*. Anti-utopias, in this sense, refuse "all utopian hope and effort."[60] They ridicule the utopian enterprise and are characterised by an utter disbelief in any utopian proposal.[61] Yet a slight problem emerges with such a strict classification, for absolute categories are difficult to uphold, above all when it comes to narrative fiction or art's inherent ambiguity. Consider an appreciator's response, and it might be difficult for a work of fiction to bear the impress of outright hopelessness, for the depiction may still evoke the desire to counteract dystopia in the real world.[62] In this line of thinking, Moylan's suggestion to situate Utopia's literary manifestations on "a complex continuum that stretches between"[63] "the historical antimonies of Utopian [sic] and Anti-Utopia"[64] is very beneficial.

2.3 VARIANTS OF DYSTOPIA: THE CLASSICAL AND CRITICAL DYSTOPIA

In *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*, Moylan maintains that in order to critically investigate dystopian narratives, it is first necessary to establish both "the formal differentiation of the dystopian from the anti-utopian text; and [also] ... the political differentiation between dystopian texts that work from a position of utopian pessimism and those that are fully anti-utopian."[65] Following this premise, he locates the literary forms of *u/eutopia*, *dystopia* and *pseudo-dystopia*, *anti-utopia* on the established continuum, claiming that "[d]ystopias negotiate the social terrain of Utopia and Anti-Utopia in a less stable

58 Moylan, *Scraps*, 131; cf. 129, 157.

59 Sargent, "Three," 10.

60 Moylan, *Scraps*, 139.

61 Vieira, "Concept," 16.

62 Moylan, *Scraps*, 157-158.

63 Ibid., 122.

64 Ibid., 157.

65 Ibid., 155.

and more contentious fashion than many of their eutopian and anti-utopian counterparts."[66] In other words, the tension between *hope* and *pessimism* and how this is negotiated in a dystopian narrative (and by the reader) becomes of vital importance.[67] To further differentiate dystopias on this point, Moylan deems it necessary to distinguish between those that maintain a "horizon of hope (or at least invite readings that do)" and so-called *pseudo-dystopias*, which "only appear to be dystopian allies of Utopia, as they retain an anti-utopian disposition that forecloses all transformative possibility."[68] As such, the (hopeful) dystopia is characterised by a "militant pessimism" and "works with an open, epical strategy [that] maintains a possibility for change or identifies a site for an alternative position in some enclave or other marker of difference."[69] On the other hand, the pseudo-dystopia (or "the anti-utopia-as-dystopia") is marked by a "resigned pessimism" and "recycles a closed, mythic strategy."[70] In doing so, the pseudo-dystopia "fails (or chooses not) to challenge the ideological and epistemological limits of the actually existing society"[71] and retains a close connection to the "cynicism" and "despair" of the anti-utopia.[72]

By means of this strategy, it becomes possible to differentiate dystopias according to how they negotiate the possibility of hope. The primary locus for this negotiation is dystopia's traditional plot structure: "the clash of *the official narrative* and the oppositional *counter-narrative*"[73] that emerges in the course of the story.[74] While the official narrative describes the dystopian society in detail and lays emphasis on its confinements, the counter-narrative deals with the life or lives of dissidents who struggle with their surroundings. They only slowly come to recognise the situation for what it is and eventually start to revolt against the ruling regime.[75] It is by means of this oppositional structure and by laying an emphasis on the negotiation of hope that a classification between different dystopian subgenres becomes possible.

66 Ibid., 147; cf. 157.

67 Ibid., 155-156.

68 Ibid., 147.

69 Ibid., 157.

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid., 156.

72 Ibid., 157; cf.156-157.

73 Ibid., 152; emphasis added.

74 The official narrative is also called "the narrative of the hegemonic order." (Baccolini and Moylan, "Introduction," 5).

75 Ibid.; Moylan, *Scraps* xiii, 152.

Let me illustrate this point with a few examples. While Zamyatin's *We* ends in the defeat of its protagonist D-503 and the obliteration of I-330, the attempted resistance (the counter-narrative) stands as a reminder that transformation towards Utopia remains an option (specifically if viewed in the larger context of the Mephi resistance and utopian enclaves located outside the walls of the One State). The defeat may only be temporary, and, as such, *We* can be classified as a dystopia that leaves a possibility for hope beyond its final pages.[76] Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, conversely, pictures a more pessimistic scenario. Indeed, Winston Smith's outright defeat (the fact that he betrays Julia and comes to love Big Brother) and the brainwashing he endures in Room 101 locate the novel close to the anti-utopian end of the continuum. With the view that no utopian enclaves are discernible—"[f]rom the proletarians nothing is to be feared"[77]—the counter-narrative results in utter failure.[78] However, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was written in "a very specific context"[79] and cannot be declared a conservative manifesto like those that Ayn Rand or Karl Popper have produced.[80] Even Orwell maintains that his prime intent with the novel is that of a warning:

> I think that, allowing for the book being after all a parody, something like NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR *could* happen. This is the direction in which the world is going at the present time, and the trend lies deep in the political, social and economic foundations of the contemporary world situation. … The moral to be drawn from this dangerous nightmare situation is a simple one: *Don't let it happen. It depends on you*.[81]

In these lines, Orwell makes something very clear: for all its despairing trains of thought and the terrors its diegetic characters are subjected to (above all Winston and Julia), *Nineteen Eighty-Four* may still elicit a *positive response* in its readers. It may give them the incentive to act in the real world before it is too late.[82] As an extreme form of the dystopia, then, Orwell's nightmare vision may be situated in the realms of the latter, yet it inevitably evokes the notion of anti-utopia.[83]

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76 Ibid., 139, 160-161.

77 George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Penguin Group, 1987), 219.

78 Moylan, *Scraps*, 139, 161-162.

79 Ibid., 161.

80 Ibid., 162.

81 Bernard Crick. Introduction. Nineteen Eighty-Four, by George Orwell, (New York: Clarendon Press, 1984), 152-153, quoted in Kumar, *Modern*, 291.

82 Vieira, "Concept," 17.

83 Moylan, *Scraps*, 162-163.

In view of these findings, the narrative genre of dystopia can be defined as a work of fiction depicting "a social 'elsewhere' that appears to be far worse than any in the 'real' world."[84] It reminds the appreciator of man's folly for always choosing the "longer and more tortuous"[85] route and foregrounds the need for a cleansing disaster necessary for mankind to learn its lesson. As a fictional thought experiment, dystopia fulfils said role and functions as "a dire warning" and a cathartic wake-up call "from our nightmare to realise that we still have time."[86] As such, it becomes a crucial step towards achieving Utopia and cannot be regarded as a far-fetched vision of a future not to be feared.[87] On the contrary, dystopia brutally recalls that the depicted "in many ways is already present and in the making."[88] Still, not everything is lost, and hope, in the sense of a "gloomy optimism, fearing for the worst, hoping for the best,"[89] may remain an option (at least for the appreciator). As a result, dystopias do not "temporarily refuse the possibility of radical social change [like the anti-utopia does]; rather they look quizzically, sceptically, critically not only at the present society but also at the means needed to transform it."[90] Consequently, "the depiction works *not* to undermine Utopia but rather to make room for its reconsideration and refunctioning in even the worst times."[91]

The message of dystopia, then, becomes very clear: even though we may live in precarious times, hope has not vanished entirely. Glimmers of utopian expectations notwithstanding, the dystopia in its traditional form remains a very pessimistic genre, which shatters the hopes and beliefs of its diegetic characters. It is for this reason that the classical dystopias already mentioned (*We, Nineteen Eighty-Four, Brave New World*, and "The Machine Stops") have been attested to locate

84 Moylan, *Scraps*, xiii.

85 Lucian M. Ashworth, "Dystopia and Global Utopias: A Necessary Step Towards a Better World," in *Dystopia(n) Matters: On the Page, on Screen, on Stage*, ed. Fátima Vieira (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2013), 68.

86 Ibid., 71.

87 Ibid., 69ff.; Levitas and Sargisson, "Utopia in Dark Times," 16-17.

88 Aline Ferreira, "Biodystopias Matter: Signposts of Future Evolution," in *Dystopia(n) Matters: On the Page, on Screen, on Stage*, ed. Fátima Vieira (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2013), 52.

89 Vincent Geoghegan, "Darkness and Light," in *Dystopia(n) Matters: On the Page, on Screen, on Stage*, ed. Fátima Vieira (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2013), 48.

90 Moylan, *Scraps*, 133.

91 Ibid.

a horizon of hope only outside their storyworlds, that is, with the reader. They thus paved the way for film adaptions such as Stanley Kubrick's A CLOCKWORK ORANGE (1971) and François Truffaut's FAHRENHEIT 451 (1966), and films such as Terry Gilliam's BRAZIL (1985), Richard Fleischer's SOYLENT GREEN (1973), and Ridley Scott's BLADE RUNNER (1982)—which are all caught up in pessimism about the future.

2.3.1 The Classical Dystopia and the Player's Enclosure Within its System

The question to be asked is whether video games follow this tradition. Given that the prevailing mood of the 1980s and 1990s was negative, it comes as no surprise that the *classical dystopia* can be found in game fiction as well, where it created "pessimistic dystopias" in which "the system has found stability, and it therefore negates human agency."[92] Like their forbearers in non-ergodic forms of art, such VGDs address the current state of the empirical world by virtualising imaginations of the future that are outright destructive.

In contrast to the classical dystopias of literature and film, however, the VGDs make use of the medium's ergodic capacities to involve the player and convey their message. They thus "emphasize the irreversibility of dystopia"[93] by making players "active participants in creating or perpetuating the problems that make game worlds dystopian."[94] In other words, the player and the diegetic characters alike are confined in a system of rules from which there is no escape, and therefore these games deny the player the possibility of redeeming these worlds: that is to say—she *cannot win the game* from both a story and (often) ludic point of view. Consequently, as Schulzke argues, such dystopias implicitly warn the player not to let the fictional nightmare become a reality, and invite her to work towards a solution in the empirical world, where these issues are still manageable.[95]

The 1980s and 1990s gave rise to a fair number of games with these attributes: for example, Vid Kidz's arcade game ROBOTRON: 2084 (1982), where the player struggles against never diminishing waves of enemies, or Evryware's MANHUNTER: NEW YORK (1988), which ends with destruction and mass murder. In addition, there is Bullfrog Productions' SYNDICATE (1993), where it is revealed that the player is in charge of a corporation in a ruthless struggle for dominance,

92 Domsch, "Dystopian," 401.

93 Schulzke, "Virtual," 330.

94 Ibid., 316.

95 Ibid., 330-331.

Beam Software's SHADOWRUN (1993), Infocom's A MIND FOREVER VOYAGING (1985), and I HAVE NO MOUTH, AND I MUST SCREAM (The Dreamers Guild, 1995). The latter game is an adaption of Harlan Ellison's short story of the same name (1967) and involves the player in a journey through infernal punishment. Although such classical dystopian games are not the majority—probably because some of them contradict the prevalent gaming trope of having the player *win* a game—the subgenre should not be underestimated. Domsch, for instance, negates the existence of pessimistic dystopias entirely[96]—which fails to acknowledge the diversity of the dystopian genre in games.

Besides these older classical dystopias, there are some recent games—such as EVERY DAY THE SAME DREAM (Molleindustria, 2009) and THE STANLEY PARABLE (Galactic Cafe, 2013)—that continue this legacy. The latter game especially is a suitable example to illustrate the VGD's unique features in this respect. THE STANLEY PARABLE is a classical dystopia that involves the player in the routine of the bureaucratic labourer Stanley and has her experience the confinements of an office job. During the game, Stanley eventually reaches a room with *two open doors*, which confronts him with a profound choice. This choice is not only representative for branching narrative structures in games but also addresses the player's curiosity about exploring additional parts of the gameworld. The narrator adds further zest when he exclaims: "When Stanley came to a set of two open doors, he entered the door on his left."[97]

Given the constellation of these perspectives, THE STANLEY PARABLE can be described as holding a dual meaning. It first of all addresses the player's *lack of agency* in VGNs on a meta-level. In this interpretation, the narrator assumes the role of a game designer who meticulously plans a story to drive a player to catharsis.[98] On a second level, the game makes accessible the confines of a bureaucratic consumer capitalism crammed into the microcosm of an office building and again foregrounds the player's (and Stanley's) lack of agency—reducing them to faceless workers stuck in servile routines.

THE STANLEY PARABLE thus offers the player an experience that viewers of films like Terry Gilliam's BRAZIL (1985) or Alex Proyas' DARK CITY (1998) are

96 Domsch, "Dystopian," 402.

97 THE STANLEY PARABLE (Galactic Cafe, 2013).

98 Michael J. Heron and Pauline H. Belford, "All of Your Co-Workers are Gone: Story, Substance, and the Emphatic Puzzler," *Journal of Games Criticism* 2, no. 1 (January 2015), http://gamescriticism.org/articles/heronbelford-2-1; Lars de Wildt, "Precarious Play. To Be or Not to Be Stanley," *Press Start* 1, no. 1 (November 2014): 3-6, http://press-start.gla.ac.uk/index.php/press-start/article/view/10/4

familiar with. Yet it grants her a more involved role and shows overlap with the experience of participants in the real-world Milgram experiment. Conducted by Stanley Milgram in 1961 and described in *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (1974),[99] the Milgram experiment tested the willingness of participants to obey authority figures without questioning their motives. Within the experiment, the participant assumed the role of a teacher, with the task of asking questions to a student she could not see (who was played by an actor). Whenever the student failed to give a correct answer, the participant was ordered to give him an electric shock by pushing a button. These increased in strength, but, encouraged by an authority figure, most participants obeyed even though they could hear the student's shouts of pain.

Such a connection to the empirical world is deeply ingrained in THE STANLEY PARABLE's structure and plot framework of *official narrative* and *counter-narrative*. Thereby, the official narrative involves the player in the oppressive structures of corporate powers and video game design alike and makes use of various gaming tropes to do so. This can be discerned in affordances that invite the player to push buttons with the expectation of consequences to their action (when, in fact, nothing happens), or doors closing behind the player's back once she has stepped through them (which stand as a reminder of spatial confinement in video games).

What follows from these observations is that player agency in THE STANLEY PARABLE is confined to moving within the limits of the gamespace and a few decisions that feign agency within "an artificial and fragile network of choices."[100] The narrator guides the player through the branching plot alongside the pre-established path. Following his orders, Stanley comes to experience a heroic story in which he discovers the machinations of the system—by encountering a Mind Control Facility and a Panopticon-style[101] observation room that monitors the workers—and eventually comes to destroy it. As a reward, Stanley is led to a gate that

99 Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (New York: Perennial Classics, 2004).

100 Heron and Belford, "Co-Workers;" cf. de Wildt, "Precarious Play," 9.

101 The Panopticon is a late 18th century experimental prison design by Jeremy Bentham, who can be considered the first representative of Utilitarianism—a branch of ethical theory that revolves around the maximisation of utility for the general public through action. Consequently, the Panopticon is constructed in such a way that all inmates can be simultaneously and constantly observed by a single watchman from the tower located in the middle of the circular structure of cells. As such, it reflects a more general societal tendency in which authorities constantly need to control data streams and the

opens on to a lush environment. His dreams of freedom are about to come true. But happiness comes at a price, and the player who wishes to explore her newly found freedom is frustrated when the game triggers a cutscene that strips her of control.

It is as Lars de Wildt holds: by following the narrator's orders (and the game's official narrative), Stanley and the player move "along with the proposed behaviour of the system, by following the rules of the game."[102] Such a "naive player subject necessarily follows the system's proposed world view"[103] and becomes rewarded with a *simulation* of her dreams. This ending aligns the game with films such as THE MATRIX (The Wachowski Brothers, 1999) or DARK CITY which thematise life in a *simulacrum* and a world that "foregrounds governance."[104] Yet it also speaks to a more fundamental tendency in society that Michel Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1995) as the steady change from the practices of public *torture* as a "theatre of hell"[105] to a "system of punishment"[106] that works in disguise but nonetheless subjugates the individual.[107] Through *discipline*—by which Foucault means the "methods … which made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body, which assured the constant subjugation of its forces"[108]—the design of punishment extended not only to prison designs but also explained how society operates as a whole. These "general formulas of domination"[109] produce "'docile' bodies"[110] that are well equipped to execute the tasks of social demand.[111]

In light of these arguments, THE STANLEY PARABLE's official narrative virtualises a gameworld that can be considered a microcosm of the larger Panopticon

activities of the public. (Booker, *Impulse*, 79; Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. *2nd ed*, trans. Alan Sheridan [New York: Random House, 1995], 195-230).

102 de Wildt, "Precarious Play," 3.

103 Ibid.

104 Ibid., 9.

105 Foucault, *Discipline*, 46.

106 Ibid., 89.

107 Ibid., 7-8, 138, 264.

108 Ibid., 137.

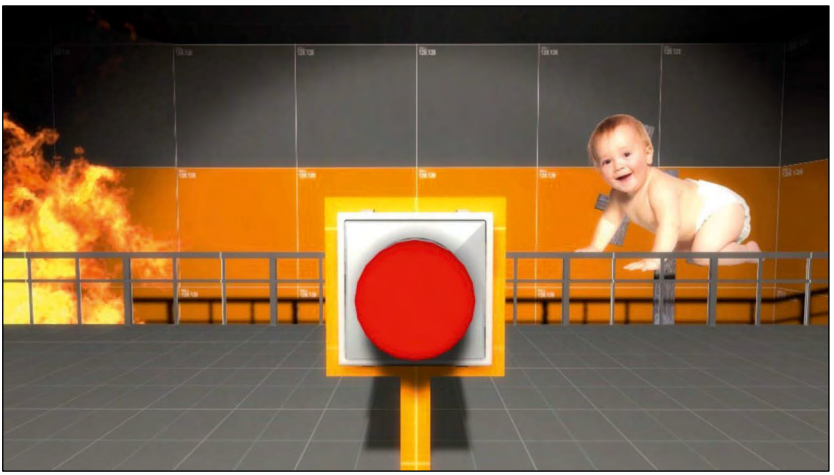
109 Ibid.

110 Ibid., 138.

111 Ibid., 137-138.

of game design[112] and of empirical society. It refers to both the *meticulous rule system of a game* that subjugates the player by having her execute repetitive tasks and follow pre-established lines of orientation, and to the *confinements of a worker's experience* in a bureaucratic consumer society, which is geared to profit while neglecting the self-expression of the individual. The player and Stanley are thus *docile bodies* caught up in their respective Panopticons.

Figure 5: The futility of choice is illustrated in a mini-game that has the player repeatedly push buttons for four hours to save a baby and a puppy from a burning inferno. As such, the game plays with player expectations of a reward for conducting (menial) tasks.



THE STANLEY PARABLE (Galactic Café, 2013).

However, THE STANLEY PARABLE is not resigned to such a negative view of society and grants the player the possibility of a *counter-narrative* that depends on her actions: different choices result in different endings to the game. This counter-narrative begins once Stanley *chooses the door on his right* and acts contrary to the narrator's instructions. Infuriated by the player's decision to ruin his well-crafted story, the narrator attempts to bring Stanley back on track by closing off allies, rebooting parts of the game, or triggering *The Stanley Parable Adventure Line*, which guides the player to catharsis. It is another gaming trope the game plays with, and is familiar to players of FABLE 2 (Lionhead, 2008), in which *a*

112 de Wildt similarly views games as "power structures in a Foucaultian sense." (de Wildt, "Precarious Play," 5; cf. 5-9).

yellow line guides them through an open world to the next objective. It follows that breaking away from these pre-established pathways describes an *act of transgression*[113] and an attempt to escape the confines of the office building and the plot alike. Yet it is exactly this transgression that is about to fail in THE STANLEY PARABLE. None of the endings suggest a hopeful outcome for Stanley—one time he is stuck in a room with the sole option of committing suicide, while on another occasion he turns mad and winds up dead on the pavement outside the building.

Considering this helplessness, *utopian enclaves* are not discernible for Stanley. He is stuck within the procedures of bureaucracy and game design alike, within "a recurring, cyclical structure that endlessly repeats and occasionally introduces a random element"[114]—for with each failure the game begins anew. Hope thus lies solely with the player herself—and the game implies this in various instances. In one playthrough, a second narrator reminds the player that the only escape is to stop playing the game, while on another occasion—when the player does everything in her power to annoy the narrator—she ends up in a sequence where her ghost hovers over the paralysed Stanley. Consequently, it is only by refusing to play the games of larger power structures—and by breaking out of the *ludic contract* players have obliged themselves to follow in order to play a game[115]—that players may liberate themselves from them. In the vein of the classical dystopia, THE STANLEY PARABLE thus evokes the shocking insight that players might not be so far from Stanley—and that, if this is so, they should change their lifestyle by refusing to participate in bureaucratic madness.

2.3.2 The Critical Dystopia as a Liberating Route Towards a Better Future

The genre of the classical dystopia in video games can powerfully trigger an aesthetic response in the player, which is intensified (and personalised) by the medium's ergodic and spatial capabilities. Yet whereas games such as THE STANLEY PARABLE remain caught up in the pessimism they simulate, there is another variant of dystopia across the media that negotiates the poles of Utopia and Anti-Utopia

113 A hilarious, but powerful example to illustrate this point is when the player chooses to stay for a long period of time in a *broom closet*. The longer she stays there, the more infuriated the narrator becomes. Eventually, he reboots the level and boards up the broom closet, which suggests that even such an insignificant activity is not tolerated by the system.

114 Heron and Belford, "Co-Workers."

115 de Wildt, "Precarious Play," 10.

in a more neutral and ambiguous manner. Holding out the prospect of hope *within its diegetic storyworld* and exploring potential routes *through the nightmare* and towards a utopian horizon, *the critical dystopia* becomes of essential importance when discussing the VGD.[116] For in these "optimistic dystopias", the player becomes responsible for finding the "flaw" within a "seemingly stable" system, triggering a chain of events that will "lead towards its destruction."[117]

The critical dystopia is the dominant form of dystopia in video game fiction (402). It can already be observed in games from the mid-1980s and 1990s such as Capcom's STRIDER (1989), Midway's arcade shooter REVOLUTION X (1994), Micronet's ROBOTICA (1995), Revolution Software's BENEATH A STEEL SKY (1994), Origin Systems' CRUSADER: NO REMORSE (1995), and the optimistic sequels to their literary forebears NEUROMANCER: A CYBERPUNK ROLE-PLAYING ADVENTURE (Interplay Productions, 1988) and FAHRENHEIT 451 (Byron Preiss Video Productions, 1984). All of these games end on a hopeful or, at least, ambiguous notion, and their appearance thus works in conjunction with the critical dystopias of literature, which as "a new expression of the utopian imagination"[118] emerged in the political contexts of the 1980s and 1990s, in the wake of aggravated fundamentalist tendencies in modern society, environmental crises, and a renewed and solidified capitalism—in the form of a free market, regulated by "[m]ultinational corporations based in and supported by powerful nation-states."[119] With no clear opposition due to a weakened Left, utopian expression was on the decline, while dystopian fiction (mostly from the pen of SF writers) flourished. Especially the naissance of cyberpunk, which as a social (techno-punk) movement and literary genre "generated a usefully negative if nihilistic imaginary"[120] in its bewildering mixture of cybernetic prosthesis and imaginings about virtuality—to be found, for example, in William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) and Ridley Scott's motion picture BLADE RUNNER (1982), which is based on Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968).

However, the "authentically negative energy of cyberpunk"[121] in its first wave still yielded dystopias leaning towards the pole of Anti-Utopia, and it was not until a second wave of the genre that the critical dystopia began to appear. Starting with Pad Cadigan's *Synners* (1991)—*later than the critical dystopia in games*—novels

116 Baccolini and Moylan, "Possibilities," 239-240; Moylan, *Scraps*, 105ff., 147, 188.

117 Domsch, "Dystopian," 401; cf. 401-402.

118 Baccolini and Moylan, "Introduction," 7.

119 Moylan, *Scraps*, 184.

120 Baccolini and Moylan, "Introduction," 2.

121 Moylan, *Scraps*, 197.

written mostly by female writers[122] moved "beyond [the] nihilistic anxiety [of their forbears] into a new oppositional consciousness."[123] In what came to be known as the *dystopian turn*, the genre of dystopia experienced not only a revival but also a reformulation, opening "the door to a dystopian narrative that was, like its eutopian predecessors [referring to the *critical utopia*], *critical* in its poetic and political substance."[124]

As a form of narrative fiction, then, the critical dystopia allows for an *imaginative trial action* or *test run* in which its characters (directly) and the reader (imaginatively) participate.[125] Filled with horror on a journey through hell, they experience the dystopian society in all its particulars but, at the same time, are offered possibilities for social change and transformation.[126] In doing so, the critical dystopia offers *a way out* of the dystopian situation. It "opens a space of contestation and opposition" for its diegetic characters and maintains a "utopian impulse *within* the work."[127] This "radical openness,"[128] mostly to be found in its "ambiguous, open endings,"[129] combined with "an exploration of agency"[130] reveals "utopian trajectories against a seemingly overwhelming world system that is striving to achieve its historical goal of total external and internal exploitation of humanity and nature."[131] It is as Vieira maintains: "Dystopias that leave no room for hope do in fact fail in their mission,"[132] and the critical dystopia leaves fertile ground for utopian explorations in this respect.

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122 Moylan classifies novels such as Kim Stanley Robinson's *Gold Coast* (1988), Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* (1991), and Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) as critical dystopias. (Moylan, *Scraps*, 196). Peter Fitting includes films such as the Wachowski's THE MATRIX (1999) and Gary Ross' PLEASANTVILLE (1998). (Peter Fitting Peter. "Unmasking the Real? Critique and Utopia in Recent SF Films," in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, ed. Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan [New York: Routledge, 2003], 160ff.).

123 Baccolini and Moylan, "Introduction," 3.

124 Ibid., 3; cf. 2-3; Moylan, *Scraps*, 103-104, 183-184, 186ff., 197-198.

125 Ibid., 106-107.

126 Baccolini and Moylan, "Introduction," 7-8.

127 Ibid., 7.

128 Ibid., 8.

129 Ibid., 7.

130 Ibid., 8.

131 Moylan, *Scraps*, 105.

132 Vieira, "Concept," 17.

As such, the critical dystopia is *not only* about pure survival in a dystopian society, as it also prompts a search for *alternatives* to the system.[133] This it does by locating *utopian enclaves* as spaces of collective resistance within its story-worlds—for to change the hegemonic order, individual resistance is not enough and a collective upheaval becomes imperative.[134] Correspondingly, Sargent defines the critical dystopia as

> a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as worse than contemporary society but that normally includes at least one eutopian enclave or holds out the hope that the dystopia can be overcome and replaced with eutopia.[135]

Such an understanding of the critical dystopia becomes especially beneficial when discussing an ergodic medium. This is so because VGDs are often given "histories and futures that differ from their present conditions"[136] and encourage the player to influence the game's chain of events.[137] Consequently, they underline the element of "temporal development"[138] and most often lay the prospect of hope in the player's hands by confronting her with a gameworld that offers virtual possibilities to actualise—or at least gives her the opportunity to take the hopeful route. As such, the *search for utopian enclaves* within the gameworld (see Sargent) and the *ambiguous (hopeful) endings* of the critical dystopia that leave fertile ground for the betterment of society (see Baccolini and Moylan) become of particular interest for analysis.

Still, the differences between the classical and critical dystopia do not end here. An additional feature that distinguishes the forms is that the former often remains caged in a nostalgic look backwards,[139] while the critical dystopia strives

133 Moylan, *Scraps*, 189.

134 Baccolini and Moylan, "Introduction," 7-8; "Possibilities," 246; Fitting, "Unmasking," 161; Moylan, *Scraps*, 189-190, 193-194.

135 Lyman T. Sargent, "U.S. Eutopias in the 1980s and 1990s: Self-Fashioning in a World of Multiple Identities," in *Utopianism/Literary Utopias and National Culture Identities: A Comparative Perspective*, ed. Paola Spinozzi (COTEPRA/University of Bologna, 2001), 222.

136 Schulzke, "Virtual," 326.

137 Ibid.

138 Ibid.

139 Baccolini and Moylan, "Introduction," 5-6; Moylan, *Scraps*, 149.

"towards the unfulfilled, unachieved utopia."[140] In a rebellious look forward, the critical dystopia shows "the reader a road that must start in the present … from now-here."[141]

This orientation towards the future stands in sharp contrast to what Moylan classifies as *anti-critical dystopia*. Such texts

> remain in the camp of nihilistic or resigned expressions that *may appear to challenge* the current social situation but in fact *end up reproducing it* by ideologically inoculating viewers and readers against any form of anger or action, enclosing them within the very social realities they disparagingly expose.[142]

While some VGDs—such as Valve's HALF-LIFE 2 (2004), 2K Boston's BIOSHOCK (2007), and Deep Silver's METRO 2033 (2010)—are *critical* towards the society they attack in that they offer utopian trajectories for the player to find and follow, others—such as Sledgehammer Games' CALL OF DUTY: ADVANCED WARFARE (2014)—only pretend to scrutinise the contemporary present. As a matter of fact, the game can be classified as a prime example of the *anti-critical dystopia* (or *anti-utopia*) in video game fiction.

COD: AW involves the player in the dangers of private corporations assuming the role of monopolistic military powers that use warfare as a profitable business opportunity. In the year 2054, the U.S. government hands over most of its military interventions to the private corporation ATLAS. Led by the illusive father-figure Jonathan Irons (played by Kevin Spacey), ATLAS establishes an unprecedented military force that threatens to shatter the worldwide equilibrium of powers. Irons exploits the KVA attacks on nuclear power plants around the planet (a terrorist organisation under the command of Joseph Chkheidze, also known as Hades) and misleads the world population into believing the promises of his false Utopia—*hope*, *security*, and *progress*.

Correspondingly, COD: AW involves the player in an official narrative[143] and an agenda about profit and power that targets a variety of issues, including dicta-

140 Vita Fortunati, "Why Dystopia Matters," in *Dystopia(n) Matters: On the Page, on Screen, on Stage*, ed. Fátima Vieira (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2013), 29.

141 Ibid.; cf. 29.

142 Moylan, *Scraps*, 195-196; emphasis added.

143 In the first levels the player is part of ATLAS' strike forces and becomes a vital component of the game's official narrative. This is most prominent in the use and eventual

torships around the globe, U.S. foreign policy, allusions to Guantánamo Bay detention camp, the dangers of advanced war technologies, and the manipulative advertising campaigns of mass media. These promote stereotypical enemy images created by the U.S. military (in this case ATLAS) to make themselves seem glorious in victory—as a heroic figure the world desperately needs.

In the course of the game, however, a collective and worldwide resistance to Irons' agenda emerges. ATLAS declares war on the Western world and the player stands at the forefront of the counter-narrative. Notions of resistance notwithstanding, COD: AW remains trapped in the carnivorous plant of dominant ideology that it first seemed to criticise. When the player changes sides—from the private military corporation ATLAS to an international task force founded by the U.S. military—there is one thing that remains unchanged: her *following of orders* (for only then the game will proceed). Consequently, although game events reveal the truth about ATLAS and their false utopian promises, the player remains caught up in the lies of modern warfare and devolves into a faceless participant in the wars of greater powers. ATLAS, in fact, must be seen as an extrapolation of the U.S. military-industrial complex and the private corporations that financially back it—but this the player needs to decipher. Combined with a clichéd ending that glorifies the deeds of the U.S. military—reassuring players that *they* will be there if needed—the experience is robbed of its critical power.

On the grounds of these observations, COD: AW degenerates *into a propaganda machine for the U.S. military* and into an experience that solidifies current ideology. It can only be situated in the realms of dystopia if a deconstructivist counter-reading takes place—yet this is only possible if the player sees through what the game actually does with her. As a consequence, the game's true targets can be found in the player's pleasurable participation in the combat action and in her mindless following of orders—which robs her of the supposed agency she enjoyed during combat. Of course, such an experience may still trigger a militant response in the player by questioning her involvement in the devious plays of hegemonic orders. Whether this seeps through the clichéd story is another question, however.

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confrontation with advanced warfare and its deadly efficiency. There is, for example, the exoskeleton that grants the player superior powers or other cunning technologies like the mute charge, a grenade that silences a small perimeter for the player to act in disguise, and the use of drones. Even more deadly is the bioweapon Manticore which is programmed to target specific ethnic groups, while sparing the lives of those enlisted in the ATLAS DNA databank.

This all leads to the conclusion that the *anti-utopia* in video games forecloses the potential for change and transformation and suggests that there is no alternative to the current ideological system by seducing the (naive) player into believing in its agenda. While this might be clear with COD: AW, there are other examples in which such a conclusion is more difficult to infer. The BIOSHOCK series especially has been the topic of heated debate in this respect, for the games' ambiguous endings push researchers to situate it on both the pessimistic and optimistic sides of the scale.[144] Aldred and Greenspan, for example, argue that BIOSHOCK only appears to be a critical dystopia (with its critique of the objectivist utopian proposal), while at its core the game tends towards the anti-utopian spectrum—by foreclosing "radically on any hope for another world" in all of its endings.[145] Thijs van den Berg expands on their claim by suggesting that while the VGD (in its entirety as a genre) achieves a viable critique of the capitalist system, it fails to imagine a world that goes beyond "dominant neoliberal ideology."[146] I am more hopeful in this regard, and a more nuanced interpretation of these games suggests a different conclusion—in which the player encounters utopian enclaves and ways out of the current system, as inconsequential as these may seem (see chapter V and Part III).

144 Packer, "Galt's Gulch," 215, 219-221; Maziarczyk, "Playable Dystopia," 247; Gibbons, "Wrap Your Troubles;" Domsch, *Storyplaying*, 156-158; Lars Schmeink, "Dystopia, Alternate History and the Posthuman in Bioshock," *Current Objectives of Postgraduate American Studies* 10 (2009), https://copas.uni-regensburg.de/article/view/113/137; Schulzke, Marcus, "The Bioethics of Digital Dystopias," *International Journal of Technoethics* 4, no. 2 (2013): 50, 56, https://www.igi-global.com/article/the-bioethics-of-digital-dystopias/90488; Martin T. Buinicki, "Nostalgia and the Dystopia of History in 2K's *Bioshock Infinite*," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 49, no. 4 (2016): 731, http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jpcu.12440/abstract

145 Jessica Aldred and Brian Greenspan. "A Man Chooses, A Slave Obeys: BioShock and the Dystopian Logic of Convergence," *Games and Culture* 6, no. 5 (March 2011):486; cf. 484, 486, 490, http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1555412011402674. Similar to this interpretation, Buinicki views BIOSHOCK INFINITE (the third game in the series) as *anti-utopia* in Moylan's sense—and not as "dystopian narrative." (Buinicki, "Nostalgia," 734). This he justifies in that the game forecloses the potential for transformation due to the player's lack of agency to change game events or its pessimistic ending. (Ibid., 731-732, 734).

146 Thijs Van den Berg, "Playing at Resistance to Capitalism: *BioShock* as the Reification of Neoliberal Ideals," *Reconstruction* 12, no. 2 (2012): par. abstract, https://reconstruction.eserver.org/122/vandenBerg.shtml

Consequently, and to establish a clear grid to categorise the critical dystopia in video games, there is one last feature of the genre that remains to be addressed. This feature lies in the notion of the "adjective *critical*,"[147] which Peter Fitting understands as implying "an explanation of *how the dystopian situation came about* as much as *what should be done about it*."[148] This insight into the past enables the reader to understand the circumstances that led to the dystopian society and gives an "explanation of how it emerged from our present."[149]

Such an understanding of the critical dystopia is beneficial in a variety of ways. It first of all enables an *analysis of false utopian promises*, or "false utopian solutions to the dystopia of the present."[150] In this sense, COD: AW can be included in the category of critical dystopias (albeit with strong reservations), and more clearly the BIOSHOCK games. In these, the player experiences directly (in BIOSHOCK INFINITE) or with hindsight (in BIOSHOCK) how the former dream of Utopia may turn into a nightmare. The question of "how has it come to its present state"[151] thus permeates the player's imaginings, and both games uncover false (or misused) utopian promises[152] and could be classified as "*flawed utopia*[s]."[153] According to this understanding, then, the critical dystopia becomes "the alter ego of utopia … the Sancho Panza to utopia's Don Quixote, constantly challenging its impetus to transcend existing reality and pulling it back down to a more grounded sense of its own rootedness."[154]

Second, the critical dystopia seems particularly apt for application in video games because of the medium's ability to simulate storyworlds. The VGD uses this to its advantage and shows the potential of creating a *dynamic* and not static game- and storyworld by involving the player in both how the dystopian situation *emerged out of the empirical present* as well as *suggesting potential solutions* to it. In this regard, Schulzke claims that VGDs are more dynamic than their literary

147 Fitting, "Unmasking," 156.

148 Ibid., 156; emphasis added.

149 Ibid.; cf. 156.

150 Ibid., 164.

151 Maziarczyk, "Playable Dystopia," 240.

152 Packer claims that "Bioshock represents a counter-narrative to [Ayn] Rand's book Atlas Shrugged," (Packer, "Galt's Gulch," 215) from which the game draws inspiration, and to its underlying philosophy of Objectivism. (Ibid., 209).

153 Lyman T. Sargent, "The Problems of the 'Flawed Utopia'," in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, ed. Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan (New York: Routledge, 2003), 225.

154 Davis, "Dystopia," 23.

forebears. Although he underestimates the dynamic storyworlds of the critical dystopia—which in comparison to the classical dystopia are exactly this—he is generally right about the player's increased involvement in the gameworld.[155]

This anticipates my discussion in Part II on the dynamic nature of the video game that enables a *space of possibility* which extends into the gameworld's *past* as well as into its *future*. Most VGDs show the player how their societies "originated and what specific processes gave shape to them. They call attention to the historical development of dystopia as a means of engaging players."[156] Schulzke mentions BIOSHOCK, which foregrounds "dystopia's temporal development" and "calls attention to Rapture's past by gradually revealing its long history through flashbacks and audio files narrated by the city's residents."[157] I will call such VGDs *critical dystopias*. Yet in order to qualify as such, both the society's past and, more importantly, the changeability of the future must be foregrounded. For Domsch, it is "[t]his sense of agency" and games' "general nature as systems" that "so strongly relates them to utopian and dystopian thinking: both are concerned with the extent to which human/player agency is able to influence and change the system."[158]

Now, before coming to a *typology of the video game dystopia* by dividing it into *four distinct subgenres*, there is one last point that needs clarification. It has been established that the critical dystopia lays the possibility for Utopia into the hands of its protagonists, and this role is now ascribed to the player. The question of hope is thus negotiated in a dialectic between the game's dynamic system and the player herself, who searches for utopian enclaves hidden within the gameworld and a strict set of rules. When found, these may be actualised into utopian horizons that show the potential for transforming the gameworld into a better place. However, this is not always for the player to decide, and there are a fair amount of critical dystopias that prestructure and outline such a venture. Such games include HALF-LIFE 2 (Valve, 2004), BIOSHOCK INFINITE (Irrational Games, 2013), and THE LAST OF US (Naughty Dog 2013, 2014), in which the route towards Utopia (or an ambiguous ending) is fixed and will be actualised by the player when completing the game. Such dystopias, then, shall be classified as *critical dystopias of variant I*.

On the other hand, there are dystopias that go even further. In games like BIOSHOCK (2K Boston 2007), METRO 2033 (4A Games, 2010), and FALLOUT 4

155 Schulzke, "Virtual," 315ff.

156 Ibid., 329.

157 Ibid., 326.

158 Domsch, "Dystopian," 401.

(Bethesda Game Studios, 2015), the player is not only ascribed the role of the *catalyst* but is given the *choice* to be one. Such games lay their outcome into the player's hands and hold the potential for a pessimistic, optimistic, or ambiguous ending. This is an important distinction when it comes to the VGD, for choice is one of the medium's defining characteristics. Consequently, the above-described games shall be classified as *critical dystopias of variant II*.

2.4 FOUR VARIANTS OF THE VIDEO GAME DYSTOPIA: A TYPOLOGY

I have been most careful in introducing Utopia to the realms of video game fiction. As in chapter I, the current chapter was dedicated to provide a solid ground for Part II in which I will lay the focus on the VGD and the player's involvement in it. In addition, I have addressed dystopia's traditional plot structure—the clash between official narrative and counter-narrative—and alluded to its importance for the VGD. Analysing this oppositional structure, one can determine the locus of hope within any dystopian narrative—and this becomes essential when classifying a certain game as either *classical dystopia* (where there is no hope for its diegetic characters) or *critical dystopia* (in which fertile ground for utopian deliberations remains within the bounds of the gameworld). These insights, then, point to the following important conclusions.

In the VGD, the prospect of hope depends on two interacting features: *the game's dynamic system* and *the player*. It is this dialectic, now, that results in primarily *four different types (or subgenres)* of the VGD.[159]

1. **The video game dystopia as anti-utopia:** This type seeks to deceive the player about its critical nature or involves her in pleasurable action to attenuate the system it represents. It can only be ascribed to the dystopian genre with great reluctance. Examples include CALL OF DUTY: ADVANCED WARFARE,

159 One needs to stress that any boundaries a typology establishes are, to a degree, fluid—which may aggravate the categorisation of a certain VGD. In addition, my typology serves a particular purpose and focuses on the VGD's plot framework and the player's involvement in the negotiation of hope. Consequently, other typologies that categorise the VGD according to ludic genres, sensorial involvement, or historical time period are imaginable.

CIVILIZATION (MicroProse, 1991),[160] and digital variants of MONOPOLY (Hasbro, 1935),[161] which are only classified as dystopia should the player see beyond their agenda of consolidating dominant ideology. Such dystopias are rare and similar to Moylan's pseudo-dystopias.

2. **The video game dystopia as classical dystopia:** In this type of VGD, the prospect of hope lies beyond the bounds of the gameworld. The counter-narrative results in failure and the gameworld's diegetic characters (and, figuratively, the player) are crushed by the dystopian regime. Examples include THE STANLEY PARABLE (Galactic Cafe, 2013), EVERY DAY THE SAME DREAM (Molleindustria, 2009), and I HAVE NO MOUTH, AND I MUST SCREAM (The Dreamers Guild, 1995). Contrary to the VGD as anti-utopia, this type aims to trigger a militant reaction in the player, who, although having failed in virtuality, is driven to action in the real world.
3. **The video game dystopia as critical dystopia variant 1:** In this variant of the critical dystopia, the prospect of hope lies within the bounds of the gameworld but is predetermined by the game's dynamic system. Here, the player follows a linear trajectory towards one or more utopian horizons (or ambiguous endings) and is assigned the role of a *catalyst* without enjoying the choice to be one. Moreover, many critical dystopias lay emphasis on how the dystopian situation came about by embedding information about the gameworld's past into it. This variant includes games such as WATCH_DOGS (Ubisoft Montreal, 2014), BIOSHOCK INFINITE (Irrational Games, 2013), and MIRROR'S EDGE (DICE, 2009).
4. **The video game dystopia as critical dystopia variant 2:** Finally, there is a most promising variant of the critical dystopia in video games which makes use of the medium's full possibilities and where the prospect of hope is negotiated between the game's dynamic system and the player. In these VGDs, the choice of becoming a catalyst depends on the player—and every playthrough

160 Mäyrä describes *Civilization* as "[i]deological simulation" (94) that involves the player in the inner mechanisms of colonisation that have her adopt the hegemonic point of view of Western cultures (specifically that of the U.S). (Frans Mäyrä, *An Introduction to Game Studies: Games in Culture* [London: SAGE, 2008], 94). The game therefore exerts "hidden influence on its player" and can be seen as a strategy of the status quo to justify their ideology. (Ibid., 98; cf. 95-101).

161 *Monopoly* can be described as pleasurably coaxing the player into the processes of a capitalist system and as "an enactment of the allures and disappointments of a zero-sum economy in which one gets rich by impoverishing one's neighbors." (Murray, *Hamlet*, 143).

may result in either an optimistic, ambiguous, or pessimistic ending (or actualised world). Examples of this most powerful variant include BLADE RUNNER (Westwood Studios, 1997), BIOSHOCK (2K Boston, 2007), DEUS EX: HUMAN REVOLUTION (Eidos Montreal, 2011), PAPERS, PLEASE (3909, 2013), METRO 2033 (4A Games, 2010), and FALLOUT 4 (Bethesda Game Studios, 2015).

Part II and III will extensively deal with types three and four of the VGD, and I will say no more about type one because of its borderline status. For the remainder of this chapter, then, I would like to extend on my *elaborations on the critical dystopia*—and specifically on type three, in which the PC's and player's route towards Utopia are fixed. For this purpose, and to further clarify how *dystopia's traditional plot structure* finds application in an ergodic medium, Valve's HALF-LIFE 2 serves as an ideal example. The game can be seen as one of the prime representatives of dystopia in video games and shall be looked at in detail. HALF-LIFE 2 sets the player on a journey through hell and involves her in the oppressive circumstances of its gameworld. Yet, for all the terror it portrays, hope glimmers at the edge of the horizon, setting the player at the forefront of the resistance and leaving her with an ambiguous ending.

2.5 THE RESISTANCE OF THE ONE FREE MAN: CITY 17 AS ORWELLIAN NIGHTMARE

HALF-LIFE 2 (Valve, 2004) lets the player enact the story of theoretical physicist Dr. Gordon Freeman in his struggle against human subjection to a merciless oppressive order. In what came to be known as the Seven Hour War, an alien race called the Combine invaded Earth and established a totalitarian regime on its surface. When the player takes control, the situation seems desperate, but a collective resistance instigated by Freeman (the PC and, by extension, the player) culminates in humankind's partial victory over its oppressors. This is a crucial aspect of the critical dystopia, which involves the player in a struggle for Utopia that may not be entirely won at the game's end, but has the player achieve a first glorious victory.

In the following, and as an extension to the theoretical part on dystopia, I will address the genre's typical *plot structure* and *framework*: the "typical dystopian conflict" that arises "between the established order and the potential dissident."[162] This allows first of all for a careful analysis of how dystopia's plot structure is

162 Moylan, *Scraps*, 112.

transferred to the video game medium, and a comparison between HALF-LIFE 2 and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) will further illuminate the issue. In HALF-LIFE 2 the player discovers a strange and unfamiliar world she has to make sense of and, therefore, assumes a role similar to Gordon Freeman (the protagonist of the story) to whom this world is also unknown. In the vein of classical dystopian fiction, both Freeman and the player undergo a *process of gradual realisation* that will lead them to a better understanding of the dystopian gameworld and to eventual rebellion against its system. To contribute to this agenda, HALF-LIFE 2 makes use of the genre-specific conventions of the first-person-shooter and grants the player agency through *ludic capabilities* such as navigating the gameworld, talking to NPCs (non-player characters), picking up certain objects (guns, ammunition, or supplies), engaging in combat, and expressing herself in creative ways by combining these abilities and toying with the environment, its object, and NPCs.

In addition, by discussing the clash between official narrative and counter-narrative, I will lay the focus on the *negotiation of hope* and address the player's involvement in it. HALF-LIFE 2, then, illustrates a critical dystopia of variant I in which hope is predetermined by the game's dynamic system—for although the player assumes the role of a catalyst, the choice to be one is not given. This first strategy of the implied player (whose additional strategies I will discuss in Part II) outlines a specific insight: by letting the player enact a terrifying vision of how her world could be and to a degree already is, HALF-LIFE 2 issues an unmistakable warning. It targets the ongoing threat of totalitarian regimes to the contemporary present and shows the ramifications of such regimes in an estranged gameworld.

2.5.1 The Player as Dissident and the Process of Coming to Awareness

Considered by many as *the* finest example of the first-person shooter genre (FPS), HALF-LIFE 2 has acquired a near messianic reputation for its excellent gameplay mechanics and a thrilling narrative experience. It first of all handed over the (visual/sensorial) perspective to the player and combined this strategy with a so-called silent-player-character (SPC). With the help of these discursive devices, the player's feeling of presence in the gameworld was intensified and the story appeared to be discoursed in an unmediated manner, setting the player at the centre of story creation (see chapter IV for a discussion of discourse devices). Of course, this had been done before in games such as DOOM (Id Software, 1993) and the first HALF-LIFE (Valve, 1998), but HALF-LIFE 2 managed to perfect this *feeling of*

presence by how it discoursed its story. The game refrained from using non-interactive cutscenes, which would rip the player out of the immersion, and utilised modern discursive methods such as environmental storytelling techniques, scripted events, combat encounters, expressive characters and dialogue, and player action/navigation in a three-dimensional gameworld. It thus created an intimate experience of dystopia, considering the player's closeness to the action.

In addition, HALF-LIFE 2 is a forerunner of many dystopian video games in how it executes the genre's plot structure. As with many dystopian narratives in non-ergodic media, the game begins *in medias res*. The ominous G-Man has set Gordon Freeman and the player on their mission and into the nightmarish world where the events are about to occur. Once the player takes over Freeman's body, she finds herself in a train heading towards City 17. It passes a grey, industrial area reminiscent of Eastern Europe. People look terrified. They wear blue uniforms and hold black suitcases. From a citizen, the player learns that they are being relocated. But where to and to what purpose? Such questions are typical for the genre of SF and represent basic indeterminacies in the game- and storyworld the player ponders and that might be answered by subsequent events.[163] Right from the start, the player and Gordon alike thus experience the strangeness of this world, which hinders their understanding of it, as it creates "ideological distance" between the "elsewhere" of the gameworld and the player's "historical moment."[164]

This feeling of estrangement is underlined in that *Half Life 2* assigns the player a specific role the dystopian narrative normally reserves for its diegetic characters: the "dissident" or "misfit."[165] Most protagonists of dystopia are initially well-adjusted to their society and hardly see through its inner workings—but this state of mind is about to change. From their first sensations that something could be wrong with their world, dystopian protagonists incrementally come to see "the situation for what it really is"[166] and embark on an educational trip "from apparent contentment into an experience of alienation and resistance."[167] An illustrative example of such protagonists is Neo in THE MATRIX. Once the inception of the world's wrongness is placed, Neo inexorably seeks the truth, which develops from the initial realisation that the world as he knows it is somehow false to a revulsion and eventual resistance to it. Contemporary dystopian films like THE MATRIX or DARK CITY thematise this aspect closely and make viewers aware that "we are living in

163 Moylan, *Scraps*, 3.

164 Ibid., 112.

165 Ibid.

166 Ibid., xiii.

167 Baccolini and Moylan, "Introduction," 5.

an artificial or false reality as victims of sinister forces that control and manipulate us."[168]

Of course, there is a reason for the dissent's initial unawareness, which lies within the empirical present:

> Because we are socialized in a particular society and to an acceptance of its views, we are likely to be incapable of critical awareness of our situation, and we can define unfreedom as freedom, inequality as equality, injustice as justice.[169]

As Sargent illustrates, dominant ideology is well-equipped to rob people of critical distance and blind them to the truth of the situation. To elude such a trap, Utopia can offer an enlightening point of view to enable humankind "to break through the perspectives that tend toward the acceptance of the current situation, and this can be a shattering experience since it suggests that our current reality is simply wrong."[170]

It is this process of gradual realisation that, as Rudolf Inderst claims, the player will go through as well, taking on the role of the dissident and liberating herself from those ideologically inoculated perspectives that blind her. The result is a call to action in the gameworld—a form of "*gameplay dystopique*"—that may have the player affect change in the real world later on.[171] In HALF-LIFE 2, the player's understanding of the dystopian society continues when she arrives in City 17 and experiences a merciless order. Having disembarked the train, a Scanner (a flying surveillance robot) takes pictures of its passengers, and a voice coming from a large screen welcomes her to City 17.

> Welcome. Welcome to City 17. You have chosen, or been chosen, to relocate to one of our finest remaining urban centres. I thought so much of City 17 that I elected to establish my Administration here, in the Citadel so thoughtfully provided by our benefactors. I have been proud to call City 17 my home. And so, whether you are here to stay, or passing through on your way to parts unknown, welcome to City 17. It's safer here.[172]

168 Fitting, "Unmasking," 164.

169 Sargent, *Utopianism*, 113.

170 Ibid.; cf. 113.

171 Rudolf Inderst, "Stoppt den Endsieg! Das Videospiel Turning Point als Alternative History: eine digitale Fortsetzung Antinationalsozialistischer Dystopien," in *Contact, Conflict, Combat: Zur Tradition des Konflikts in digitalen Spielen*, ed. Rudolf T. Inderst and Peter Just (Boizenburg: Werner Hülsbusch, 2011), 180; cf. 180-182.

172 HALF-LIFE 2 (Valve, 2004), ch. Point Insertion.

It comes as no surprise that the key words Dr. Wallace Breen uses are *been chosen*, thus confronting the player with a society whose people lack self-determination. Already in the first minutes of the game, the dystopian mode of HALF-LIFE 2 is ubiquitous, and the player quickly composes a negative image of this society in her mind.

2.5.2 The Official Narrative and the Combine's False Utopia

HALF-LIFE 2 shines in letting the player explore an *official narrative* in a playful manner and in terrifying detail. On Entering City 17, a bleak and derelict picture awaits. The train station resembles a prison, with fences and barbed wire on both sides of the tracks. Police forces are searching incoming passengers and do not hesitate to use their truncheons. They call themselves Civil Protection (CP), but what they do is question, torture, and murder people. The player experiences these brutalities directly, as she is potentially hit and called in for questioning. Stepping into the interrogation room, terrifying expectations are aroused. Blood is spilled over the floor, and the CP officer asks for privacy. He switches off the surveillance cameras—yet, to the player's surprise, the man turns out to be Barney Calhoun, a member of the resistance, who will help Freeman escape.

By experiencing the events of HALF-LIFE 2, the player may discern fundamental parallels with George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and the game clearly takes the novel as inspiration. It employs depressing spaces to raise awareness of the situation's severity and depicts City 17 as an inhospitable location, whose rundown houses are juxtaposed with the towering Citadel, the glorious and phallic headquarters of Dr. Wallace Breen's Earth administration. Indeed, City 17 explicates what Orwell's London imaginatively implies and illustrates a misanthropic environment at the centre of which the oppressive order pompously rules.

Even outside the cities, the dystopian mood is palpable. Barnacles (slug-like creatures that glue themselves to the ceiling and suck people in with their tongues) are infesting suburban slums and sewer tunnels, while beach areas are swarmed with ant-lions. Another threat is the radioactive contamination that has transformed the once-idyllic countryside into the undesirable place the player encounters. The dangerous scenery culminates in the mining town of Ravenholm, which before the Combine invasion thrived with industry and life. Now it has become a ghost town, marked by burning houses and HALF-LIFE 2's most iconic enemies: the headcrabs (a parasitic life form that attaches itself to human hosts. They burrow into their victim's brain and transform the human host into a zombie). People do not go to Ravenholm anymore, and only a lunatic by the name of Father Grigori awaits the player when she passes through.

Figure 6: The patriarchal order of the Combine, exemplified through the towering Citadel and Dr. Breen as the archetypal father figure.

HALF-LIFE 2 (Valve, 2004), ch. Point Insertion.

It is clear that the alien invaders of the Combine have plunged Earth into chaos and established a totalitarian regime on its surface. Like the Party in *Nineteen Eighty-Four,* they are organised according to some tight principles: an ideology. To promote their cause, the Combine employ Earth Administrator Dr. Wallace Breen as their representative—and, above all, it is the lies by which he justifies their ideology that are noteworthy: disguising the Combine's siege as a form of Utopia.

As such, Breen assumes a role common to dystopian fiction. He represents an archetypal *father figure* and the elusive leader of the dystopian regime. Similar to Zamyatin's *We,* Huxley's Brave *New World*, and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, then, HALF-LIFE 2 resembles a "patriarchal order,"[173] which is reinforced by the fact that the Combine are addressed with the euphemistic term *our Benefactors.* The analogy this creates leads back to Zamyatin who used the term in his novel to describe "the larger-than-life figure … who rules the One State."[174] As leviathans to the ant-like citizens of Earth, then, and symbolised through the phallic Citadel, the Combine's superiority over humankind is ubiquitous. Earth, in fact, was not

173 Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, 115.

174 Ibid.

their first target and the hostile race had invaded a plethora of civilisations before—harvesting people (as their name suggests) and subjecting them to oppression.

To strengthen their rule on Earth, the Combine employ a technique common to totalitarian regimes. Through mind manipulation and propaganda, they create an *image of a Utopia* and lead people into accepting the false sense of safety and "womb-like security"[175] they promise. This shows itself in that the player is often fighting human NPCs, the Overwatch, who are suffering from memory replacement. They are physically superior soldiers enhanced through genetic and artificial augmentation—a technology offered by the generous Combine. As a result, it is only through this "suppressive use of technology and scientific advances" that the Combine are able to sustain their rule over Earth.[176]

In addition, Earth Administrator Dr. Breen propagates the false sense of safety through propaganda messages—so-called *Breencasts*—displayed via large screens and loudspeakers placed in key agglomeration areas, or through television and radio transmissions. Their function is clear: ensuring that people believe in their benefactors' caring nature. This brainwashing is further propelled by terms such as *our Benefactors* or *Civil Protection*, which recall *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* comprehensive falsifications of truths[177] and contribute to the fallacious sense of safety in HALF-LIFE 2. What further illustrates this point is that the falsification of history is enforced by substances the Combine have poured into the water supply. These make people forget the time before the invasion, and such a strategy serves the oppressive order a simple purpose: if you do not remember the past, how can you tell if it was better? So the present seems a little closer to Utopia.[178]

The image of womb-like security culminates in a suppression field the Combine have laid over Earth. It ensures that human procreation has dropped to zero—

175 Ibid.

176 Maximilian Heinrich, "The Role of Technology and Idea of Man in BioShock and Half-Life 2," in *Contact, Conflict, Combat: Zur Tradition des Konflikts in digitalen Spielen*, ed. Rudolf T. Inderst and Peter Just, (Boizenburg: Werner Hülsbusch, 2011), 185; cf 185.

177 In Oceania, the Party employs the techniques of *doublethink*—"the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them"—and *newspeak*—the appropriation of language towards the needs of the hegemonic order. (Orwell, *Nineteen*, 223). This follows the purpose of reducing the diversity of expression and leads people into believing irrational equations such as 2+2=5. (Kumar, *Modern*, 292, 306, 322-325).

178 Ibid., 297, 324.

indeed, there are no children in HALF-LIFE 2. As such, the Combine have effectively obliterated the concept of the family from this world, and, with it, the last glimmers of hope. None of this is surprising, for the destruction of the private space is a common theme in dystopian fiction and links the game to novels such as P.D. James' *The Children of Men* (1992) in which humankind has become infertile.[179]

Thus an interesting image arises. In an inverted metaphor of the mother's womb, the suppression field functions as symbol of unfreedom and peril under the guise of safety and the promise of Utopia. Again, Dr. Breen justifies its necessity in one of his Breencasts:

> In order to be true to our nature, and our destiny, we must aspire to greater things. We have outgrown our cradle. It is futile to cry for mother's milk when our true sustenance awaits us among the stars. And only the universal union that small minds call 'The Combine' can carry us there. Therefore I say, yes, I am a collaborator. We must all collaborate, willingly, eagerly, if we expect to reap the benefits of unification. And reap we shall.[180]

To live up to the Combine's standards, the suppression field is of essential importance. Only when the day comes, Breen declares, when "we have mastered ourselves, the day we can prove we no longer need it", can it be shut down.[181] With the promise of a posthuman future where humankind will evolve to a higher state of being, the Combine have tricked them into oppression. Yet Earth's population is left no choice, and to survive at least for one generation, their sole option is adjusting to the reasonable and scientifically advanced Combine.

In the light of these findings, HALF-LIFE 2's gameworld resembles a *prison* the player wishes to escape from. Only few places are left untouched by the oppressive order, and this imagery links the game to dystopian fictions in which society is organised according to the principles of "conformity" and "uniformity,"[182] where every aspect is controlled by the ruling regime. For Ferns, it is especially "the extraordinary public character of life"[183] that the classical dystopia exposes.

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179 The destruction of the family further links HALF-LIFE 2 to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where family spaces are characterised by a "pervasive atmosphere of fear and distrust." (Kumar, *Modern*, 315). And its members have "become in fact an extension of the Thought Police." (Ibid., 319).

180 HALF-LIFE 2 (Valve, 2004), ch. Anticitizen One.

181 Ibid., ch. Point Insertion.

182 Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, 113.

183 Ibid., 112.

Like the traditional utopia, dystopia portrays a society which is regimented and hierarchical—and also one where adherence to the societal ideal is ensured by an almost obsessive concern with surveillance, with the subjection of the individual to public scrutiny.[184]

Similarly, the Combine have elected *individuality* to be their prime enemy—for, as Dr. Breen recalls, humankind's "true enemy is instinct", and this he links to "superstition," "unreasonable impulses," and to "the basest of human urges: the urge to reproduce."[185]

With instinct being an inherent part of the human self, the Combine's targets of attack become clear: human individuality and the striving for liberty. Besides the suppression field, mercilessly stomping on human will, enforced conformity is noticeable in other aspects of the game. Like in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the Combine strive to "control not just the external but internal world of men,"[186] which is executed through the forces of the Civil Protection. In many ways, they are HALF-LIFE 2's *thought police*, wearing white gas masks and threatening black uniforms. People live in constant fear of the CP, as they intrude into their homes and torture their loved ones. What terrifies most, however, is the threat of abduction. Dissidents are transferred to the Citadel where they are murdered or held captive to undergo memory replacement. Given the Overwatch's omnipresence, every inch of life is spied upon, and the intrusion into the private sphere is aggravated through the usage of Scanners. These are flexible variants of Orwell's telescreens that take pictures of people's activities or track down enemies of the state. In short, in the world of HALF-LIFE 2, human spirit is broken, and the player encounters a highly regulated gameworld in which even cities and highways are numbered. But thankfully, it seems not everything is lost just yet.

2.5.3 The Counter-Narrative and the One Free Man as the Opener of the Way

We now have direct confirmation of a disruptor in our midst, one who has acquired an almost messianic reputation in the minds of certain citizens. His figure is synonymous with the darkest urges of instinct, ignorance, and decay. Some of the worst excesses of the Black Mesa Incident have been laid directly at his feet. And yet unsophisticated minds continue

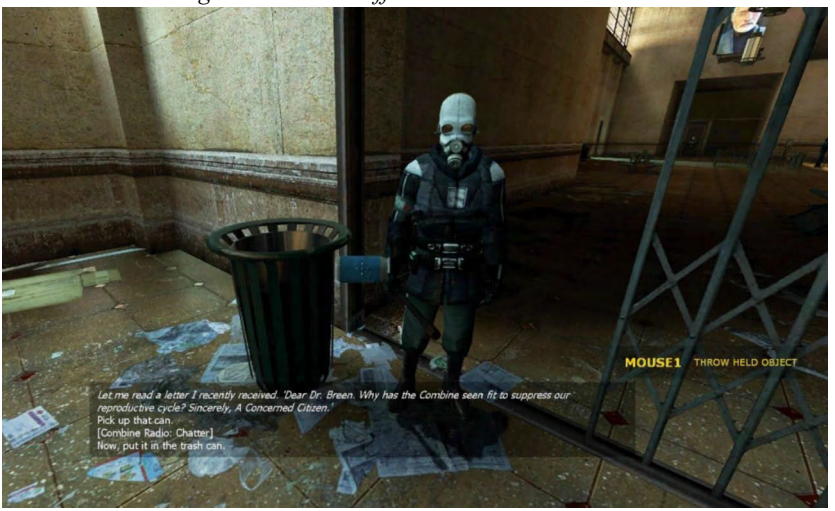
184 Ibid.

185 HALF-LIFE 2 (Valve, 2004), ch. Point Insertion.

186 Kumar, *Modern*, 306.

to imbue him with romantic power, giving him such dangerous poetic labels as the 'one free man', the 'opener of the way'.[187]

Figure 7: The counter-narrative begins with a minor but conceptually important event: with throwing a can at a CP officer.



HALF-LIFE 2 (Valve, 2004), ch. Point Insertion.

Walking through the alleys of City 17 and becoming involved in HALF-LIFE 2's official narrative, the player quickly becomes wary of the situation. On her trip through dystopia, she combines the gameworld's perspectives (including its spaces, conversations, combat encounters, and other plot events) and gradually comes to understand it on a deeper level. The first levels are thereby marked by the *absence of agency*. The player can only navigate this world, endure its injustice, and try to escape its reach by moving forward through the gamespace. This intimate experience of playing dystopia puts the player (similar to Gordon Freeman) in a state of revulsion and contributes to the urge to fight the Combine regime. The player's attempts to finish the game by taking the fight to the Combine are thus supplemented by her commitment to change dystopia for the better. In this respect, Dr. Breen confirms the existence of a *single disruptor*: Gordon Freeman and the player herself.

The counter-narrative in HALF-LIFE 2 begins with a minor but conceptually important event. When the player leaves the train at City 17's train station, she

187 HALF-LIFE 2 (Valve, 2004), ch. Water Hazard.

encounters a guard that commands her to throw a can into a nearby trash can. The player may comply with this request—which suggests a resigned and submissive stance—but she may also use her possibilities to act in creative ways: for example, if she throws the can at the Civil Protection officer. This action is optional but, when actualised, assumes substantial meaning. The player may be beaten in retaliation, without having the possibility to fight back, and so experiences the dystopia of HALF-LIFE 2 in a direct feedback loop. Such interactions point towards a militant/resistant attitude on the player's side and to a revulsion against the regime.[188]

Whatever the player chooses, in confronting her with the inner workings of a dystopian gameworld, she is led to the conviction that something can and must be done against it. The *counter-narrative* and *escape* from City 17 begins no later than when the player meets Barney Calhoun, a resistance member guised as CP officer who comes to the player's assistance. It is here that Freeman (a *telling name* to underline the opposition to the Combine regime) and the player acquire their first weapon. The *crowbar* has become notoriously popular amongst HALF-LIFE 2's appreciators and holds strong symbolism—a fact the Combine seem to be aware of. They are attentive to the single "disruptor", "the 'one free man'" they fear will become "the 'opener of the way'."[189]

The Combine's fear that even a "singular misfit" may tear "open the ideological veil of the system"[190] is an omnipresent theme in dystopian fiction. On his escape from City 17, the Overwatch relentlessly pursue Freeman by sending out troops, military helicopters, and dropships. Thankfully, all their efforts are in vain, and Freeman and the player manage to escape the city's confining spaces towards the countryside. This direction leads towards the picturesque spaces of nature and links Freeman's escape to that of dystopian dissidents such as Guy Montag's in *Fahrenheit 451* or the Savage's in *Brave New World*. Although nature spaces in HALF-LIFE 2 do not provide complete safety either (large parts of the gameworld have become contaminated by radiation or are infested by vicious creatures and Overwatch patrols), the countryside is where the resistance hideouts are located.

188 In this regard HALF-LIFE 2 shows its *satirical* nature. Besides the choice described above, the player may toy with the game system and go on a wild goose chase by provoking a CP officer and making him follow her on ridiculous routes through the environment. This sort of transgression naturally implies an opposition to the dystopian regime.

189 HALF-LIFE 2 (Valve, 2004), ch. Water Hazard.

190 Moylan, *Scraps*, 118.

Nature thus enables a space for utopian enclaves[191] and hideouts from the Combine regime—such as the research facility Black Mesa East, where Freeman meets key members of the resistance, including Dr. Eli Vance, Dr. Judith Mossman, and the charming Alyx Vance.

Figure 8: Alyx (to the right) is the player's companion and functions as the archetypal figure of the temptress.

HALF-LIFE 2 (Valve, 2004), ch. A Red Letter Day.

Alyx is a so-called companion character (the first of her kind in video games) and will accompany the player throughout most of the experience. In addition, she embodies an archetypal character of dystopian fiction, which is that of "the temptress."[192] In classical dystopian narratives, the *temptress* is most often a woman whom the main (male) protagonists meets and falls in love with—or establishes some sort of close relationship. The temptress functions as a *figure of guidance* as she charismatically helps the protagonist and reader gain insight into the dystopian

191 This is more apparent in HALF-LIFE 2: EPISODE 2 (Valve, 2007), whose events lead Freeman into a picturesque wilderness far away from the derelict city spaces of the main game. The game culminates in the battle at the White Forest base (a telling name indeed) and lead to a glorious victory for the resistance. Yet EPISODE 2 ends on an open, ambiguous note, for Freeman and Alyx are captured by Combine Advisors—thus fulfilling the necessities of the VGD as critical dystopia variant I.

192 Chad Walsh, *From Utopia to Nightmare* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1962), 101.

situation of the fictional society.[193] Thereby, her methods of seduction are diverse and range from enthusiastic, curious inquiries about the world—such as Clarisse in *Fahrenheit 451* or Julia in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, who both question the integrity of their society—to naive but nonetheless charming seductions in PLANET OF THE APES (Franklin Schaffer, 1968) or *The Time Machine* (H. G. Wells, 1895). In these, the female protagonists (Nova, Weena) foreground the society's paralysis through their juvenile behaviour and evoke in the protagonist a revulsion to the society at hand.

Alyx can be ascribed to the former methods of seduction. In HALF-LIFE 2 the player comes to know the woman when Alyx tutors her in the use of the Gravity Gun—the Zero Point Energy Field Manipulator. Here, the player also meets Alyx's robot pet Dog and is made familiar with the weapon in a game of fetch where Dog returns objects the player tosses into the air. Step by step, the player gets to know Alyx and (potentially) establishes a close relation to her and a *personal enclave* from the troubles of this world.

The reason for the player's emotional connection to Alyx has a couple of reasons. First of all, the game is displayed from a first-person point of view. Seeing the events through the eyes of Freeman, the player is addressed by Alyx, who in various conversations looks her directly in the eyes. Thereby, Alyx's facial animations enhance the feeling of connectedness. They range from serious, concerned, satirical, and quizzical expressions, to smiles and other charming emotions. Establishing such a connection to the temptress will propel the player to fight alongside her against the Combine—and although the player is not responsible for her safety (in combat Alyx will take care of herself), their mutual struggle strengthens the bond between them.

Thus far, the discussion of HALF-LIFE 2's counter-narrative implies a strong role on the player's part. Assuming the role of the *catalyst*, the player becomes responsible for laying the foundations of social transformation and is set at the forefront of the resistance—which began with the flight from City 17 and establishing a relation to Alyx, and continues in her intervention in the high security prison facility Nova Prospekt, where the resistance turns collective. Consequently, Freeman (and thus figuratively the player) have gone through a *crucial transformation*: from the single dissident who barely escaped the Combine's grasp, to the one free man and the glorious leader of a worldwide resistance that aims to overthrow the Combine regime. Their intervention in Nova Prospekt thereby serves humankind as an example: that something can be done.

193 Ibid.

As a result of these occurrences, City 17 has turned into a battlefield, for both the resistance and the Combine are gearing up for war. More than ever, disturbing noises mark the scenery. There are, for example, the resonating sounds of dropships and other noises that warn of Combine activity—such as the CP's intermittent radio chatter or horns and alarm bells. Most terrifying, though, are Striders and their haunting screams. These three-legged mechanical walkers are deadly enemies equipped with plasma guns and take their inspiration from H. G. Wells' tripods in *The War of the Worlds* (1898).

Despite all these adversary forces, the fight to overthrow the Combine looks promising, however brutal and costly it is. The resistance has advanced into City 17, and in a declaration of independence, they tear down the monitors used to display the Breencasts—a scene reminiscent of the Iraqi people tearing down the statues of Saddam Hussein. The time has come now, as Baccolini and Moylan would say, for the "climactic event that attempts to change society", for "the critical encounter that ensues when the citizen confronts, or is confronted by, the contradiction of the society."[194] Almost at the game's end, the player is thus confronted with dystopia's high priest, Dr. Breen, who tries to convince Freeman that the Combine's ways are those to be followed. Such an encounter is a vital part of dystopia's plot structure, and Kumar links it to Fyodor Dostoyevsky's legend of *The Grand Inquisitor* (1879–1880).[195] In this parable, Christ visits the city of Seville during the period of the Inquisition but is thrown in jail by the Grand Inquisitor, who explains to Christ why his arrival is superfluous and that he shall be sentenced to death.[196] The purpose of such an event is to illuminate the necessity of the hegemonic order and to lead the protagonist (or player) astray, in order to convince them of the regime's noble agenda and the necessity of its measures. Like Bernard Marx, then, who is enlightened by the World Controller Mustapha Mond about society's necessity, Winston Smith, who faces O'Brien in Room 101 and endures reconditioning, and Guy Montag, who eventually kills Captain Beatty, this encounter now lies in front of the player and occurs as follows.

After a brief conversation, the encounter transforms into a boss battle. Freeman pursues Breen to the Citadel's Dark Energy Reactor and prevents the opening of a portal to the Combine Overworld. Breen is supposedly killed in the blast, yet Freeman survives with the help of the G-Man, who freezes time and reclaims his

194 Baccolini and Moylan, "Introduction," 6.

195 Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Grand Inquisitor*, ed. Helena P. Blavatsky (Auckland: Floating Press, 2009).

196 Kumar, *Modern*, 120.

protégé before the Citadel blows up.[197] The phallic symbol of the Combine oppression now lies in ashes, and HALF-LIFE 2 ends on a hopeful though ambiguous note. A first glorious battle has been won, but the fight is not over yet.

2.6 DYSTOPIA'S PLOT FRAMEWORK AND THE VIDEO GAME DYSTOPIA

HALF-LIFE 2 lets the player enact a terrifying vision of how her world could be and in some places already is—with existing totalitarian regimes in China and North Korea and authoritarian ones in Russia, Turkey, and other parts of the world. To make the player aware of these problems, the game targets oppressive regimes and the lies by which they justify their ideology. Becoming involved in the events, the player experiences dystopia's nightmares in a playful trial action. As a stranger in an unknown place, she ventures into the estranged gameworld of HALF-LIFE 2 and eventually comes to see behind its wrongs.

Consequently, in the course of the game, Freeman and the player have gone through substantial transformations. From the unwary fugitives who use a wrench to crack open dystopia's ideological lock and come to see behind the lies of its oppressive order, to the powerful leaders of the resistance who free themselves from dystopia's confines and demolish the Combine regime with the use of the Gravity Gun as a technical augmentation of their powers (which also includes the Mark V HEV Hazardous Environment Suit). Although the player has rather quickly discerned the situation for what is (also because we are so accustomed to totalitarian dystopias), she is reminded of its severity and might draw unexpected connections to her empirical world.

In any case, the dystopia of HALF-LIFE 2 encourages the player to counteract totalitarian movements in the empirical world as she gains inspiration for her virtual endeavour. Especially the game's final sections incite her to do so, where the Gravity Gun displays a *powerful sense of agency* and functions as a symbol of

197 Indeed, one could argue that Freeman enjoys no agency because of his dependence on the G-Man, who sent him on the mission. Heinrich, "Role of Technology," 192. The G-Man could therefore be regarded as the puppeteer behind the curtain and the events of Half-Life 2 as a meta commentary on the player's lack of agency in FPSs or dystopia. In the light of the previous discussion, however, such a conclusion is inappropriate, specifically when having in mind the plot's internal logic and Freeman's efforts against the Combine regime. Claiming that everything is predetermined by a mysterious figure behind the curtains is in this case an easy excuse.

"empowerment" for the "creative use" [198] of science and technology as utopian enclave.[199] *Force and revolution are the suggested solution*,[200] and the player as dissident not only struggles for victory (which would be the result of an uncritical playthrough that focuses on the pleasures of combat) but also for human compassion and freedom from an oppressive regime. HALF-LIFE 2 thus offers the player several perspectives that justify combat against the Combine and endow it with an ethical quality by creating utopian enclaves on a personal level with the characters—first and foremost, the relation between Freeman and Alyx.

The analysis of HALF-LIFE 2 has primarily discussed a most integral part of dystopia's implied player, which has been described as the (critical) dystopia's *narrative framework* or *plot structure*. It has revealed that the oppositional structure of *official narrative* and *counter-narrative* is a perfect fit for the video game medium, because it sets the player within the dystopian gameworld and at the forefront of the resistance. In the vein of traditional dystopian fiction, HALF-LIFE 2 employs tropes and features that draw from Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. These include: the beginning *in medias res*, the ideological distance created through estrangement, the claustrophobic mood of the gameworld and its misanthropic environment, the patriarchal order and its strict ideology that tricks people into believing the grand narratives of Utopia, and the archetypal father-figure who functions as the regime's mouthpiece. In combination, all these plot devices create a powerful official narrative and a dynamic framework for the player to participate in.

However, HALF-LIFE 2 would do no justice to the genre of the critical dystopia was it not to renounce its official narrative and give rise to a collective counter-narrative. Through Freeman's actions, a utopian horizon is actualised. Although this horizon is predetermined by the game system, it is also motivated by the process of realisation Freeman underwent—from initial unawareness and the mocking of the Combine regime to escape and revolution and to finding the enclave of

198 Heinrich, "Role of Technology," 186.

199 Science in HALF-LIFE 2 is displayed in a critical but not necessarily negative way and "as a double-edged sword." (Ibid). While the Combine's use of science can be regarded in a negative way as they use their technological superiority to suppress humankind, most human scientists are in fact saviours, endowing Freeman and the resistance with the means to fight back. (Ibid., 185-186).

200 Heinrich describes HALF-LIFE 2 as being built around "the logic of Charles Darwin's credo 'survival of the fittest', and that science and technology serve as extensions of the human species' capabilities and heighten adaptability in the Darwinian sense." (Ibid., 183).

human compassion and dialogue. This *coming-of-age* is moreover encouraged by the archetypal figure of the temptress, who helps both Freeman and the player comprehend the nature of the dystopian society and impels them to rebel against it. The player's journey thus led from the derelict spaces of City 17 towards the countryside, where utopian enclaves hide and prepare for revolution, and culminates in the encounter with dystopia's leader—closing the game on an ambiguous but hopeful note.

As a result of these observations, the VGD's plot structure creates a *malleable and dynamic framework for play* in which the player ergodically and imaginatively participates. It thus fulfils the requirements of what Grzegorz Maziarczyk has called "playable dystopias"[201] and involves the player in *a creative dialectic with the implied player* (which I will describe thoroughly in Part II). The result of this involvement is an *aesthetic experience* that translates into an *ethical response* by making the player reflect on the shortcomings of her empirical world and, potentially, inciting her to counteract dystopia. Such a reaction is certainly not unique to HALF-LIFE 2 and confirms Alexander Hall's hypothesis on dystopian Alternate Reality Games (ARGs). These possess a strong "utopian energy"[202] that comes to fruition in the act of play and evokes "the desire of gamers to seek out alternatives to the status quo."[203]

Hall is certainly confident about a game's potential to prepare the player for the task of confronting dystopia in the empirical world. Yet my descriptions of HALF-LIFE 2 came to a similar conclusion. By involving the player on both an

201 Maziarczyk, "Playable Dystopia," 237.

202 Hall, "Trying to Believe," 70.

203 Ibid., 80. The strategies of ARGs are close to the VGD's in that they ascribe the role of becoming "members of the resistance, which puts them in position to use the game as a means to a socially revolutionary end," to players. (Ibid). Thereby not only the player's physical interaction is of interest—although it "heightens the gamer's awareness of his or her ability to subvert the system in place" by encouraging "the kind of action necessary to move closer to the new social system through game-specific, diegetic action"—but also her imaginative interaction with it. (Ibid., 71). Dystopian ARGs are "cultural products" that force the player "to think historically," "to consider the present as the future's past" (Ibid.) and create cognitive "map[s] of the things which must change to avoid such a reality's being brought to fruition." (Ibid., 70). The desired real-world response is a "call to action against the aspects of culture that are dystopian themselves" (Ibid., 80) and a facilitation of "political action through gaming." (Ibid., 69).

ergodic and an imaginative level, the game created a private experience but also gave her the possibility to imaginatively connect the virtual events to her empirical surroundings. In other words, the player became involved in what Steffen Walz calls a "play-ground" that "feature[s] inherent conflicts and … goals for player-heroes to achieve in that they exhibit word-flaws [sic] [world-flaws] or imbalances that the player must overcome in order to turn dystopia into a regular, if not heterotopian world."[204] Through these *lessons on agency* in virtuality, the player is made susceptible to utopian alternatives in her empirical reality and is driven towards their realisation.

HALF-LIFE 2's warning is thereby only one of many communicated by the VGD—and the forthcoming chapter will clarify additional ones. Before moving on to this issue, however, let me close with the following assertion: besides the many ways dystopian gameworlds entice their players, the most important form of involvement can be found in the player's *aesthetic involvement* in a game. This emancipated involvement brings forth an intimate comparison between the gameworld and the player's empirical surroundings and gives rise to the newness art promises: an *aesthetic effect* that can only be experienced in and through the act of play.

Consequently, and as result of these finding, let me formulate four hypotheses on the VGD that are both general (applying to all variants except for the anti-utopia) and specific (describing the variant at hand more closely).

1. *The video game dystopia represents a virtual society outlined in minute detail which the game designer(s) intended a contemporary player to view as considerably worse than her or his empirical present. It either entraps the player ergodically in the gameworld—suggesting no solutions to dystopia (classical dystopia)—or holds out hope for the betterment of society in one or more utopian enclaves situated in the gameworld (critical dystopia). This is often (though not always) accompanied by granting the player an insight into how the dystopia came into being (critical dystopia).*
2. *The primary locale of the dialectic between hope and despair is the genre's plot framework: the clash of the official narrative and counter-narrative. Depending on the type of dystopia, the counter-narrative may end in despair and in imaginative resistance on the player's side (classical dystopia) or on a hopeful though ambiguous notion—which is either predetermined by the*

204 Steffen P. Walz, *Toward a Ludic Architecture: The Space of Play and Games* (ETC Press, 2010), 145.

game's system (critical dystopia variant I) or negotiated by the player (critical dystopia variant II).

3. *To retain the notion of the society's hypothetical possibility, the VGD works according to the logic of extrapolation and estrangement. In doing so, it emits a persuasive intent that is made tempting through the sensualising power of fiction and the participatory (ludic) affordances of the video game medium, which give rise to the player's ergodic and imaginative involvement.*
4. *As a consequence of such diverse qualities, the VGD shows the potential of issuing a powerful warning to the player and of triggering an aesthetic response in her, which will have her see the empirical world with different eyes and drive her to action in the most pessimistic times.*