1 Utopia and the Dream of a Better World

> Utopia is forward-looking, yes. Always just around the corner, always on the other side of the horizon, Utopia is 'not yet', elusive, glimpsed but never grasped. That's one of the things I love about Utopia. And yet, like you [Ruth Levitas], I want the world to be very different from the way it is now. I want to ride the wave of utopian impulse toward a new now.
> *Levitas and Sargisson, "Utopia in Dark Times," 20.*

The philosophy of Utopia, as Lucy Sargisson refers to it, fundamentally revolves around the principle of hope and the dream of a better world. It begins with the *act of imagination* itself, when the utopian thinker explores real or fictional alternatives to the contemporary present and, in doing so, induces a "transformative process"[1] that will grasp the recipient's attention.[2] This process begins "in the now,"[3] as the Utopian scrutinises empirical reality for potential ills and composes a vision of the future in which these issues are either solved or have turned into a nightmare.[4] Notwithstanding the direction of the utopian impulse, whether it results in a *utopia* or *dystopia*, "the desire called Utopia"[5] is deeply anchored in the human psyche and looks forward. However, there is a pitfall here, as Slavoj Žižek

1 Levitas and Sargisson, "Utopia in Dark Times," 16.
2 Ibid., 13, 16; Seeber, *Selbstkritik der Utopie*, 58.
3 Levitas and Sargisson, "Utopia in Dark Times," 17.
4 Booker, *Impulse*, 15; Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 11ff.
5 Ibid., 84.

warns: if desire is tipped out of balance, it may indeed be the greatest enemy to human happiness.[6]

Utopians have become aware of this peril, and the concept underwent critical changes mainly because of Utopia's abuse which occurred with the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century, including communist dictatorships.[7] This chapter will explore the route Utopia has taken to reach its *modern function* and will create a strong foundation for the discussion of dystopia in chapter II, which at its core similarly revolves around the wish for the betterment of society. For this purpose, I will make use of both older and contemporary deliberations on Utopia and its manifestations in fictional narrative form. I will describe the philosophy as moving away from abstract ideals and near-perfectionism. Utopia in the 21st century, then, evokes a *cautious desire* and indicates "a direction for man to follow, but never a point to be reached."[8] It thus takes on "the shape of a process" and "a programme for change and for a gradual betterment of the present."[9]

Defining the utopian terrain in such a way will be beneficial to describing Utopia's *function* and how the philosophy continues to exert influence on modern works of art such as the video game. Thereby, I will follow Fredric Jameson's overarching claim that most new utopias—whether they appear as real or fictional experiments in political thought, intentional communities, literature, film, theatre, or video games—function as "wish-fulfillments … and hallucinatory visions in desperate times"[10] but, in addition, conform to the postmodern need for "pluralism" and "the fact that all knowledge and all aspirations emanate from specific standpoints, that others will see differently, that negotiation is necessary."[11]

Such an understanding of Utopia (or utopianism) lays the focus on a *transformative discourse* and a *creative dialectic* between various parties, while it upholds Utopia's primary function as *warning*. In this sense, Utopia is driven by a relentless but cautious pursuit of an unfulfilled future and is best described as "a strategy"[12] and "a critical and diagnostic instrument"[13] to remind humankind that what is at stake is the future itself. To put it in the words of Jameson: Utopia shows

6 Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real! Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (London: Verso, 2002), 58-59.

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

8 Vieira, "Concept," 22.

9 Ibid., 23; cf. 22-23.

10 Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 233.

11 Levitas and Sargisson, "Utopia in Dark Times," 15.

12 Vieira, "Concept," 23.

13 Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 148.

us "the future as *disruption* (*Beunruhigung*) of the present, and as a radical and systematic break with even that predicted and colonized future which is simply a prolongation of our capitalist present."[14]

In order to approach this *disruptive effect* on the reader/player (which will be the main focus of Part II), I will begin with an investigation of the philosophy of Utopia and humankind's striving towards it, then move on to Utopia's fictional narrative form: the literary utopia. There, I will argue that Thomas More's legacy with *Utopia* (1516) continues to exert a strong influence on contemporary artwork. By comparing its plot structure to Irrational Games' BIOSHOCK INFINITE (2013), which was released roughly 500 years later, I will additionally argue that both works centre around a wish deeply ingrained in the human psyche. This wish for Utopia finds expression in fictional artwork in a disguised form and needs the reader/player to uncover it by comparing the fictional world to their empirical surroundings. Finally, the chapter will come to a close by detecting commonalities in definitions of the literary utopia, which will later inform my hypotheses on the video game dystopia.[15]

14 Ibid., 228.

15 A question I do not wish to answer in this study (for it goes beyond its scope) is whether there is a video game utopia. Such a potential genre, as Oliver Hall claims, springs from a deep dissatisfaction with reality and the urge to seek alternatives. (Hall, "Trying to Believe," 74). If this is so, what games would be classified as such? Can one include Maxis' THE SIMS 4 (2014) or Related Design's ANNO 2070 (2011), arguing that they project virtual spaces that allow for the exploration of utopian (and dystopian) possibilities? Could games like Blizzard's WORLD OF WARCRAFT (2004) be classified in this way as well? Needless to say, massive multiplayer online role-playing games enable the creation of online communities where players come together to experience adventures in a make-believe world. (Rudolf Inderst, *Vergemeinschaftung in MMORPGs* [Boizenburg: Werner Hülsbusch, 2009]). But do such communities create spaces that allow for the negotiation of potential alternatives to the empirical present? Do they enable explorations of better ways of social life that critically comment on real world issues—and, thus, as Patrick Jagoda claims, enable experimentation "with utopian societies and collective forms of organization?" (Patrick Jagoda, "Digital Games and Science Fiction," in *The Cambridge Companion to American Science Fiction*, ed. Eric C. Link and Gerry Canavan [New York: Cambridge UP, 2015], 146).

1.1 UTOPIANISM

In order to uncover the utopian impulse at the core of artworks, I wish to begin by referring to BIOSHOCK INFINITE, which thematises not only humankind's guilt for having lost Utopia but also the desire to regain it (see chapter VI for an in-depth analysis). The plot of BIOSHOCK INFINITE revolves around the floating city of Columbia (which took inspiration from the great world fairs of the late 18th and early 19th century in the U.S.). New discoveries in quantum mechanics have enabled scientists to build a city that hovers in the air, towering above the land of the United States of America. Columbia is an emblem of American exceptionalism, science, and religious beliefs, and was built following a dream of the self-proclaimed prophet Father Zachary Hale Comstock. However, the city is much more than a flagship of scientific excellence. It functions as a metaphor for a basic human trait: the dream of a better life. It is such a dream—of a utopia in the sky—that fuels humankind's utmost desires and gives people hope where none can be found. This is at the core of utopianism itself. As Henry David Thoreau once proclaimed: "If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them."[16]

Utopianism can be considered "a philosophy of hope,"[17] a hope that, according to Lyman Tower Sargent, is imperative to any endeavour to improve upon society[18]—and, obviously, there is good reason for mankind to try. For in living memory, people have always been frustrated and discontented with their own lives. This situation provides the main wellspring of utopianism itself, a deep-seated dissatisfaction with life and the urge to change things for the better.[19]

Utopianism, then, is of essential importance to humankind. For the German philosopher Ernst Bloch, Utopia even lingers in every aspect of the human experience. He opens the discussion in his magnum opus *The Principle of Hope* (1955–59) with the idea that people daydream with the "explicit wish for something we lack."[20] Even though not all of these dreams are utopian per se (for instance, dreams about private concerns, sex, or food), many of them are (dreams about peace, equality, freedom, or a sufficient food supply for all of mankind). To bring

16 Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2003), 292.

17 Lyman T. Sargent, *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010), 8.

18 Ibid., 8.

19 Ibid., 4, 102.

20 Ibid., 109.

about real change, however, the utopian wish must not remain a daydream but has to take on the form of a forward vision. With this in mind, Bloch's famous dictum of *not-yet* becomes of paramount importance, implying a utopia that "express[es] possibility,"[21] a dream that can be realised sometime in the future.[22]

It is for these reasons that utopianism has often been considered a "common human phenomenon"[23] which "has existed in every cultural tradition."[24] This "anthropological dimension", "the wishing nature of man" and his "very disposition … towards utopia,"[25] represents an indestructible force that may drive people forward in times of discontent.[26] Scholars have defined the phenomenon of utopianism (or the utopian impulse) as "social dreaming,"[27] as "the basic human yearning for a better world" and "the urge to dream or speculate about a more perfect social order,"[28] or as "obscure yet omnipresent ... finding its way to the surface in a variety of covert expressions and practices."[29] Each time it is the *universal wish* hidden within the dream, the hope for the betterment of society as a whole, that plays a vital role. When Ruth Levitas speaks about her hopes for a different world—"I wanted, and still want, the world to be changed"[30]—it becomes clear what utopianism is about.

This universality of Utopia can, however, quickly become an issue, and differentiation becomes imperative—a pitfall that Sargent explicitly stresses. He therefore underlines the necessity to distinguish between the concept of utopianism, on the one hand, and the literary genre of utopia on the other, and further subdivides the thematic into what he calls "the three faces of utopianism:"[31] 1) the literary utopia; 2) utopian practice; and 3) utopian social theory. Whereas the literary utopia is comprised of narrative texts that can be categorised as fictional

21 Ibid., 111.

22 Ibid., 109 ff.; Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope: Volume One* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1986), 1ff.

23 Sargent, "Three," 19.

24 Sargent, *Utopianism*, 126.

25 Vieira, "Concept," 20.

26 Ibid., 20.

27 Sargent, "Three," 3.

28 Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, 32.

29 Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 3.

30 Levitas and Sargisson, "Utopia in Dark Times," 13.

31 Sargent, *Utopianism*, 5.

"thought experiments"[32] in which the utopian society is only imagined, the intentional communities of utopian practice rather serve as actual experiments.[33] In these, people tinker "with their own lives"[34] and organise their community according to what they believe is a more perfect principle.[35] Finally, there is utopian social theory, which, according to Sargent, deals with a plethora of phenomena: "utopia as a method of analysis", "the relationship between utopia and ideology," utopianism as an explanation of "social change," and "the role of utopianism in religion."[36]

Yet Sargent is not the only researcher to place importance on such distinctions. The Marxist and literary theorist Fredric Jameson suggests a similar segmentation of the utopian thematic when he distinguishes between "utopian form" (written texts) and "utopian wish" (the general utopian impulse he detects in everyday life). As a third category, Jameson adds "political practice," to which he assigns social movements that have actually attempted to achieve Utopia, such as intentional communities. More interestingly, though, is that he discerns an "indispensable starting point"[37] in his attempt to define the utopian thematic, which is, of course, Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516). From there, Jameson posits "two distinct lines of descendency:" a *utopian programme* and a more general *utopian impulse*. Under the first line he subsumes the literary genre of utopia as well as revolutionary praxis, the space of the city, and self-conscious attempts to achieve Utopia. The second line, on the other hand, "is more obscure and more various"[38] and revolves around the unconscious utopian impulse universal to human beings. Here, Jameson includes political social theory and reform, the individual building, and the four levels of utopian allegory: the collective, temporality, the body, and utopian investment.[39]

For the literary scholar, this bewildering variety of the utopian thematic suggests one thing above all: to limit one's interest to literary aspects and focus on how utopian ideals are represented in fictional narrative form. Naturally, the crossing of boundaries in an interdisciplinary field, such as Utopia, cannot be neglected—in particular utopia's complex relation to the empirical present and to a

32 Baccolini and Moylan, "Introduction," 11.

33 Sargent, *Utopianism*, 5 ff.

34 Ibid., 7.

35 Levitas and Sargisson, "Utopia in Dark Times," 19 ff.

36 Sargent, *Utopianism*, 7.

37 Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 1.

38 Ibid., 3.

39 Ibid., 3-9.

specific historical time period.[40] The literary utopia is only one of utopianism's potential manifestations, yet a very important one.[41]

1.2 THE LITERARY UTOPIA OF SIR THOMAS MORE AND *Bioshock Infinite*'s COLUMBIA

The founding text of the literary utopia and that which gave the utopian tradition its name is Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, which was first published in 1516. To name both his book and the imaginary island he describes, More created the neologism *utopia* from two Greek morphemes: the prefix *ouk* (later reduced to *u*, which means *no* or *not*) and the lexeme *topos* (which means *place*). By adding the suffix *ia*, the term *utopia* was born: the place that does not exist.[42] If not confusing enough, More then created a further neologism, and with *eutopia*—the good place—he slightly yet decisively changed the meaning of the previous term.[43] In essence, then, the island of Utopia can be described as both "desirable, yet unattainable"[44] and "[m]ore perfect than the real world, yet non-existent."[45] This "duality of meaning"[46] and its inherent ambiguity have accompanied the literary utopia and its manifestations ever since.[47]

With *Utopia*, More gave rise not only to a new literary genre but also established a blueprint that many authors have followed since.[48] Principally, any utopia (or dystopia) discusses the relationship between two societies: the author's empirical society and its fictional counterpart, the Utopia. Accordingly, More's story revolves around the travels of Raphael Hythloday, who recounts his trip to the remote island of Utopia, where he discovers an astonishing society. The book is divided into two sections: the first part portrays More's empirical present in a negative way (Europe and England in the early 16th century), and the second part details an imaginary society in which the issues of More's time have been overcome.

40 Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, 50; Seeber, *Selbstkritik der Utopie*, 60.

41 Ibid., 11; Vieira, "Concept," 7.

42 Ibid., 3-4; Sargent, *Utopianism*, 2.

43 Vieira, "Concept," 4-5.

44 Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, 39.

45 Ibid., 3.

46 Vieira, "Concept," 5.

47 Ibid., 5.

48 M. Keith Booker, *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994), 53.

In Utopia, private property has been abolished, which has led to a quasi-socialist society that has done away with capitalist greed and its resultant hierarchical structures.[49] This "dual emphasis" on the empirical and fictional world has led to *primarily*[50] two readings of *Utopia*: "a clever parody of the social system in More's England" and "*Utopia* as a serious effort to envision an ideal society."[51]

As a literary genre, then, utopia enjoys the special status of a "hybrid genre."[52] It is, according to Chris Ferns, "both political … and aesthetic."[53] But this need not be a handicap and can be quite rewarding. In understanding utopia as a hybrid genre, the boundaries to neighbouring fields such as political and philosophical discussion open up, which enables a fruitful dialectic.[54] Was it not More himself who once claimed of his *Utopia*: "the truth, as if smeared with honey, might a little more pleasantly slide into men's minds."[55]

More's merit in *Utopia* is undeniable, and although he might not have invented utopianism itself, "he considerably changed the way this desire was to be expressed"[56] and gave it a "new distinctive form."[57] For Krishan Kumar, the modern utopia is a "product of a new age,"[58] the result of both the Renaissance and the Reformation.[59] It therefore represents "an attribute of modern thought"[60] based on the "humanist logic"[61] that reason and volition could actually transform the future—as for the first time in history, man's destiny was laid into his own hands.[62]

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49 Ibid., 53-54.

50 Primarily, because it is difficult to establish a clear separation for More's narrative, since the book's second part may be seen as a satire with ambiguous intentions. Ferns traces back this "ambivalence" to "the complex and sometimes contradictory character of the author himself," who, as a follower of the Roman Catholic Church, composed a fictional society devoid of religion. (Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, 36; cf. 36-37).

51 Booker, *Theory*, 53-54.

52 Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, 11.

53 Ibid., 5.

54 Seeber, *Selbstkritik der Utopie*, 11 ff.

55 Thomas More, "Letter 15: To Peter Giles [41A]," in *For All Seasons – Selected Letters of Thomas More*, ed. Stephen Smith (New York: Sceptre Publishing, 2012).

56 Vieira, "Concept," 6.

57 Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, 32.

58 Kumar, *Modern*, 21.

59 Ibid., 22.

60 Vieira, "Concept," 6.

61 Ibid., 4.

62 Ibid., 4-7; Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, 32.

As a result, *Utopia* is "not an abstract ideal,"[63] as Kumar observes with Plato's *Republic*, but "a concrete fictional portrayal"[64] "of a more perfect society in operation"[65] "in which we are invited vicariously to participate."[66]

Over the years, More's *Utopia* has inspired many followers and an entire tradition of utopian and dystopian narratives—with one of its most recent being Irrational Games' BIOSHOCK INFINITE. Released in March 2013, the game stands as a reminder that *Utopia*'s narrative blueprint still exerts a strong influence on contemporary artwork. The plot in BIOSHOCK INFINITE follows the journey of private detective Booker DeWitt to a wondrous city in the sky that was named after the fictive Archangel Columbia. In order to repay his gambling debts, DeWitt was assigned the task of freeing a mysterious woman. In the best of utopian tradition, he discovers and steadily explores the floating city of Columbia, which represents exactly such a society as described above—and one that shares many similarities with More's *Utopia*. When Father Zachary Hale Comstock first envisioned the city, he had a definite goal in mind: the dream of a society in which life would be better. But this time, it is not a distant reader who travels to Utopia in his imagination, but the player himself who embarks on this trip—not in person, of course, but in the form of a player-character (PC) he controls.

Assuming the role of DeWitt, the player experiences first-hand the journey to and tour around Utopia. Columbia presents itself as majestic, a new Eden on earth, floating many miles above the United States. The moment the player enters the city, he witnesses an extraordinary society rife with scientific marvels and technological brilliance. Most importantly, though, he sees a vibrant society that, as Kumar and others have ascertained for More's *Utopia*, is in "full operation."[67] Everywhere around the player neoclassical buildings built on hovering islands tranquilly bob up and down, while steampunk-style zeppelins, marvels of engineering, punctuate the summer sky. Meanwhile, the city's inhabitants go about their daily routines. One can hear their chatter and see their children play cheerfully in the streets. Everyone seems happy and content. Walking down the alley, a gentle breeze blows. The alley leads to a gigantic statue of Father Comstock, the city's prophet, which overlooks the square. Today is the day of the annual Columbian Raffle and Fair, and people all around the city have gathered to celebrate Columbia's magnificence. Obviously, I stress this vividness to underline a certain

63 Kumar, *Modern*, 25.

64 Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, 34.

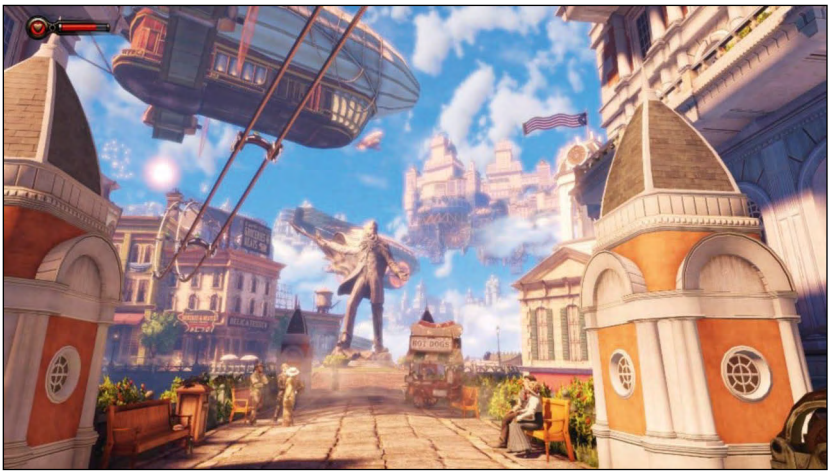
65 Ibid., 32.

66 Kumar, *Modern*, 25.

67 Ibid.

point. Columbia is an *archetype utopia*, a good place that only exists virtually. Once there, the player encounters an active society that is more perfect than his contemporary one—at least, at first glance[68]—in which he is encouraged to participate in a way that is not possible in non-ergodic media.

Figure 1: The city of Columbia and Father Comstock's statue.



BIOSHOCK INFINITE (Irrational Games, 2013), ch. Welcome Center.

The similarities between More's *Utopia* and BIOSHOCK INFINITE do not end here. As touched on above, More's blueprint of the journey to Utopia and the tour around it are present as well—on this occasion, though, enacted by the player. To explain it more clearly, let me briefly illustrate the origins of this narrative device. For all its variety, the literary utopia shows an invariable fixed point that is still present 500 years after *Utopia* was published (referring to BIOSHOCK INFINITE's release in March 2013): the genre's "framing narrative."[69] The typical utopian structure, Ferns argues, clarifies how the main character (and narrator) "reaches

68 Grzegorz Maziarczyk, "Playable Dystopia? Interactivity and Narrativity in *BioShock* and *BioShock Infinite*," in *(Im)perfection Subverted, Reloaded and Networked: Utopian Discourse across Media*, Peter Lang Edition, ed. Barbara Klonowska, Zofia Kolbuszewska, and Grzegorz Maziarczyk (Frankfurt a.M.: Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2015), 241-242.

69 Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, ix.

the more perfect society and obtains the opportunity to witness its distinctive excellences."[70] He bases his claims on Angelika Bammer's observations about utopia's basic plot and Northrop Frye's reflections on the nature of "a Socratic dialogue between guide and narrator, in which the narrator asks questions or thinks up objections and the guide answers them."[71] Ferns comes to the conclusion that the utopian narrative constitutes a "curious hybrid of classical dialogue and traveller's tale."[72] As a result of these observations, the basic utopian plot might be described as follows (describing Raphael Hythloday's voyage): the narrative structure of *Utopia* outlines the journey of a random traveller to the remote island of Utopia, which lies somewhere in the southern hemisphere. Utopia is isolated from the familiar world and its exact location is never revealed (which implies the sheer difficulty of attaining Utopia). Once there, the utopian traveller is given a guided tour of this different society and is told why Utopia is superior to other places. The journey comes to a close when the utopian traveller returns home, where he will be able to share his newly found insights with his contemporaries.[73]

The reason for such a structure can easily be discerned, for utopias are always "constructs made up of bits and pieces of the here and now,"[74] and this *now* for More was Europe in the 15th and 16th century. For Kumar there is no doubt here: the emergence of utopia shows "a direct causal connection" to "the European voyages of exploration and discovery."[75] In those times, Amerigo Vespucci and his followers "were literally discovering a New World, which was bound to stir the utopian imagination."[76] When Columbus discovered the American continent, he was convinced that he had found the lost Eden. Indeed, what the explorers had found was an unknown, exotic world inhabited by an indigenous culture that showed a principal similarity to More's Utopia: the absence of private property.[77] To put it short, "America, now newly found, was Utopia,"[78] yet as Kumar adds: a

70 Ibid.

71 Northrop Frye, "Varieties of Literary Utopias," in *Utopias and Utopian Thought*, ed. Frank E. Manuel (Boston: Beacon, 1967), 326. Quoted in Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, 13.

72 Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, 13.

73 Ibid., 38-40; Vieira, "Concept," 7.

74 Jameson, *Archaeologies*, xiii.

75 Kumar, *Modern*, 23.

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid., 23, 70-71.

78 Ibid., 70.

utopia "to be *made*."[79] Disappointed with the primitiveness of the indigenous people, the discoverers nevertheless aimed at the realisation of a better world.[80] "America had a *space* where utopia could be constructed"[81] and, therefore, this was "a God-given opportunity – or duty – to create a new Garden Eden, a new earthly paradise."[82]

Since Hythloday's sea voyage, then, the journey to Utopia has adopted many forms. There are parallel universes or travels through space to faraway planets, a sleeper awakes in a distant future, or a traveller ventures through time.[83] It is exactly this allure of the unknown and mysterious Other that has constituted a huge part of utopia's fascinating spell ever since.[84]

BIOSHOCK INFINITE continues the Morean tradition and lets the player set out on his personal journey to Utopia as "an outsider"[85] who will encounter the exotic place and enigmatic Other that is Columbia.[86] Every journey has a starting point, and this one begins with a lighthouse. The year is 1912, and Booker DeWitt is escorted by Rosalind and Robert Lutece to a small island off the coast of Maine. They travel in a rowing boat and it is pouring with rain. Once on the island, the player enters the lighthouse. Its floorboards creak, and the place is littered with religious writings that mention a "New Eden."[87] The player reaches the observation deck, where he gains access to the lantern room upon entering a secret code. The sky now flashes red, and horns sound penetratingly as Columbia and the lighthouse prepare for the pilgrim's ascension. DeWitt is strapped to a chair and finds himself locked within a space pod. With a bang, he is rocketed up into the sky on a marvellous journey to Utopia. When the pod breaches the clouds, DeWitt and the player are left breathless at the view of the extraordinary society of Columbia.

Shortly upon arrival, the player's tour around Utopia begins. In contrast to More's story, however, BIOSHOCK INFINITE uses a more implicit variant of the Socratic dialogue. When the player reaches Columbia, there is no guide to show him around, no one to tell him about the city's distinctive excellences. Yet, this is not necessary, for he experiences Columbia directly and absorbs its ambiance. Not

79 Ibid., 73.

80 Ibid., 71-78.

81 Ibid., 81.

82 Ibid., 73.

83 Ibid., 25; Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, 99.

84 Seeber, *Selbstkritik der Utopie*, 9.

85 Maziarczyk, "Playable Dystopia," 239.

86 Ibid.

87 BIOSHOCK INFINITE (Irrational Games, 2013), ch. Coast of Maine.

only does the player see the city through his own eyes (in a first-person perspective mediated through the PC's point of view) but he may move around it, enter its shops, read its billboards, and listen to the Utopians' conversations. Most importantly, though, the player witnesses the city's events and enjoys engaging in some of its activities.

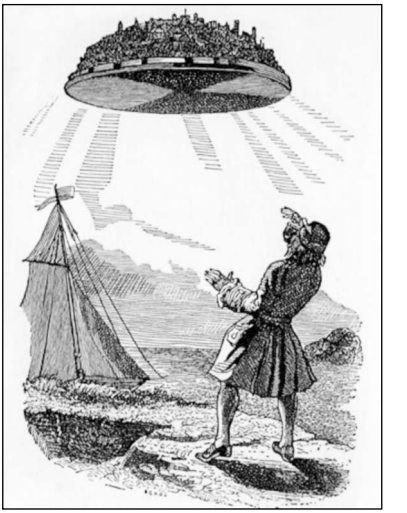


Figure 2: The scientifically advanced island of Laputa in Swift's Gulliver's Travels. *The city hovers above the realms of Balnibarbi and is ruled by an uncompromising king.*

Jonathan Swift. *Gulliver's Travels*, 1992.

Finally, there is another aspect implied by the player's journey to the sky, which again links BIOSHOCK INFINITE to *Utopia*. Like More's island, Columbia still belongs to this world, but its location has become remote.[88] After the events of the Boxer Rebellion, in which Columbia was revealed to be a battleship in disguise, there was a disagreement between Father Comstock and the U.S. government which led to a rupture. Out of this disappointment, Columbia vanished into the skies and could never again be found. Similar to Utopia—whose remote location and defensive structures provide shelter from the outer world[89]—Columbia is fortified to protect itself against unbelievers. It assumes a superior position over them by hovering above the land below and through the use of sophisticated technology—a fact that closely links Columbia to Jonathan Swift's Laputa in *Gulliver's*

88 Elizabeth Nyman and Ryan Teten link this aspect to the general conception of gameworlds as separate Otherworlds or islands. They argue that both gameworlds and island are similar in structure, for they "are by their very nature isolated and bounded," and because of this isolation and artificiality, they serve well "to mimic the unnaturalness of their society" necessary to utopian and dystopian games. (Nyman and Teten, "Lost and Found," 6; cf. 1-6). For these reasons, they come to the conclusion that video game utopias and dystopias (in their nature as islands) stand in clear connection to the tradition first introduced in More's Utopia. (Ibid. 5).

89 Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, 39.

Travels (1726). This is so because Laputa's bottom plate is constructed out of a robust substance called adamant. Consequently, whenever the king is in disagreement with the population below, he uses the flying city to block rain or sunlight. In extreme circumstances, he lowers the island onto the lands beneath to crush its cities.

As in the two above-mentioned fictions, the negative aspects of Columbia are hidden at first, and when the player is granted admittance to the city, he encounters a world of many wonders. He has reached *heaven*, or as one inhabitant of Columbia formulates: "Heaven, friend. Or as close as we'll see till Judgment Day."[90] There is no doubt here, the city of Columbia is a religiously inspired Utopia, though one that lies in this world. As such, it cannot be declared a metaphysical figment of the imagination but rather a dream that could be realised through human effort.

The issue at hand brings the investigation to the relationship between Utopia and religion, a topic that has given rise to much controversy. Generally speaking, Utopia belongs to this world, while religious projections of a better world belong to the next life. But this may not be entirely accurate.[91] Christianity's most famous visions of the afterlife are certainly heaven and hell, which have often been linked to utopia and dystopia, respectively.[92] For Sargent, hell represents an "archetypal dystopia."[93] Such religious visions may, however, not exclusively refer to the next world but also to this one: for example, the Garden of Eden, the millennium, and the Second Coming of Christ.[94] Eden, as they say, once "was eutopia,"[95] an earthly paradise where human beings (Adam and Eve) lived together in harmony with nature. Yet they were expelled from it when Eve tasted the forbidden fruit.[96] For humankind, the Fall marked a turning point that led away from closeness to God towards a life of despair. For all its elusiveness, though, the dream of Eden was never lost, and "actual and fictional expeditions to discover"[97] its whereabouts were undertaken.[98]

90 BIOSHOCK INFINITE (Irrational Games, 2013), ch. Welcome Center.

91 Kumar, *Modern*, 10.

92 Sargent, *Utopianism*, 96-97.

93 Sargent, "Three," 13.

94 Sargent, *Utopianism*, 86.

95 Sargent, "Three," 20.

96 Ibid., 20.

97 Sargent, *Utopianism*, 88.

98 Ibid., 87-88.

In addition, there are the myths of the millennium, the apocalypse, and the Second Coming of Christ, which occupy a similar limbo between metaphysical and this-worldliness. For Kumar, the concept of the millennium is "most replete with utopianism."[99] The idea illustrates "an imminent cataclysm in which God would destroy the wicked and raise the righteous for a life in a messianic kingdom."[100] The Christian Apocalypse especially, Kumar argues, is closely linked to Utopia. In order to prepare for Christ's Second Coming, which "would spell the end of all earthly history, and the beginning of eternal life in heaven,"[101] life in the City of God would offer perfect preparation. Of particular interest here are Kumar's observations of a specific "understating of Augustine's description of the City of God."[102]

> Regarding the City of God as a state of earthly preparation for the Second Coming, this could lead to the setting up of communities of perfected men and women who set themselves apart from the unregenerated society around them, and who saw themselves as owing no allegiance to the laws and customs of the secular state.[103]

In BIOSHOCK INFINITE, Columbia exactly fulfils this purpose. It is a city of more perfect men and women, prepared for Judgment Day, who show no allegiance to the lands below. The apocalypse in this case, however, is laid into the hands of Father Comstock (not to mention, the destructive force of Columbia) and, specifically, into his daughter's: Elizabeth.

Considering the previously mentioned facts, then, Kumar comes to the conclusion that

> the concept of the millennium [offers] an intermediate term between the purely earthly existence of fallen man and the purely heavenly existence of man redeemed. It is a transcendental concept, truly, but a transcendence that links earth and heaven rather than irreconcilably separating them.[104]

Without being able to solve the complex issue of Utopia and religion (which has only been touched on here), it still seems appropriate to distinguish between these

99 Kumar, *Modern*, 13.
100 Sargent, *Utopianism*, 92.
101 Kumar, *Modern*, 15.
102 Ibid.
103 Ibid.
104 Ibid., 17.

terms. Certainly there are convincing arguments that favour their close relation: for instance, that Sargent discerns a "close connection between Christianity and utopianism,"[105] and that Kumar declares religion to be "the unconscious of utopia,"[106] while underlining that "without the hope that religion ultimately offers, without specifically the paradisiac and millennial expectations that Christianity inspires, it may be that utopia becomes a lifeless shell … [and may not be] capable of arousing a significant and heartfelt response."[107] These arguments notwithstanding, it is important to mention that "Utopia is not religion"[108] and that the idea of the millennium may be "as close to it as Christianity ever got."[109]

1.3 THE SECRET WISH HIDDEN WITHIN THE DREAM

In order to define the genre of utopia, there remains an important question to be answered, namely that of its direction. Utopia, as previously clarified, occupies a universal dimension and formulates an inherent part of the human psyche. If that is the case, *the nature of the dream and the wish* itself become of central concern. The question to be asked, then, is: are utopias *progressive* or *regressive*, are they directed towards the future of humankind—"toward the new now"[110]—or are they "nostalgic in that they look back to an idealized past which is then moved into the future?"[111] Probably utopias are both. But the answer to the question is more intricate.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Sigmund Freud argues that "[*t*]*he dream is the* (*disguised*) *fulfilment of a* (*suppressed, repressed*) *wish."*[112] "These wishes," he continues, "existing in repression are themselves of infantile origin."[113] Based on this premise, Ferns describes the utopias of More and his successors as expressions of the "unconscious and unavowable desires"[114] of men and their longing for

105 Sargent, *Utopianism*, 101.

106 Kumar, *Modern*, 421.

107 Ibid., 420-421.

108 Ibid. 421.

109 Ibid., 17.

110 Levitas and Sargisson, "Utopia in Dark Times," 20.

111 Sargent, *Utopianism*, 21.

112 Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. A. A. Brill (Hertfordshire: Wendsworth, 1997), 68.

113 Ibid., 392.

114 Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, 40.

"maternal security through the institution of a masculine order."[115] That is to say, these early utopias depict metaphorical journeys to a lost "prenatal security"[116] and stand for "a *return* to the womb."[117] Especially indicative of this claim is Utopia's inherent symbolism, which becomes apparent in its shape and form. On closer inspection, More's island resembles a crescent in the form of the maternal womb, at the bottom of which a "phallic tower"[118] penetrates its entrance.[119] Ferns further justifies his assertion with the fact that More's Utopia is governed "by a conquering king [who is] remaking the world to his own image."[120] King Utopus thus has a strong similarity to European explorers such as Christopher Columbus.[121] However, it is not "the colonization of *terra incognita*"[122] per se that links these early utopias to prenatal wish-fulfilment, but more importantly, that the land to be conquered is often gendered as female.[123] Consequently, Ferns comes to the conclusion that "the utopian dream – at least as first formulated – is rather one of recreating … [the womb's] security by distinctive male means."[124] In this sense, the Renaissance utopias are partially regressive in that they depict a return to the safety, security, and well-being of a past lost long ago.

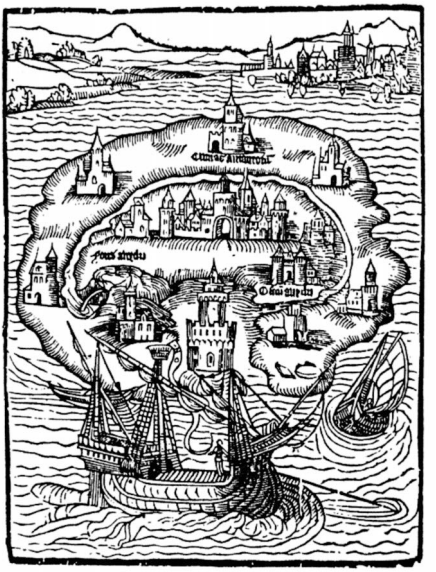


Figure 3: Cover of More's Utopia*. The island resembles a crescent in the form of the maternal womb.*

Thomas More, *Utopia*, 2009.

115 Ibid., 104.
116 Ibid., 5.
117 Ibid., 41.
118 Ibid., 47.
119 Ibid., 41, 47.
120 Ibid., 49.
121 Ibid.
122 Ibid. 48.
123 Ibid., 45.
124 Ibid., 47.

Similar to the Renaissance utopias, BIOSHOCK INFINITE can be partially described as regressive, and as a return to the lost Eden. Still, such a description is incomplete, and one cannot help but stress the game's progressive vision, which reveals itself in the wish-fulfilment of a particular character: Booker DeWitt and his attempt to regain his daughter Anna (or Elizabeth). In the fashion of the Renaissance utopias, the city of Columbia is a society dominated by men, led by the father-figure Comstock. In one of his many incarnations, DeWitt (who at the same time *is* Comstock in another of the many worlds of the BIOSHOCK multiverse) travels to the city of Columbia to regain his lost daughter. With the trip to Utopia (Columbia), the regressive aspects mentioned earlier become apparent: the sexual connotations of the womb, the phallic tower, and male dominance. It is a lighthouse where DeWitt's journey to the sky begins, a phallic symbol par excellence. Furthermore, on top of the lighthouse is a space pod which ejects from the lighthouse's peak with DeWitt inside and rockets up into the sky, where in the moment it bursts through the white of the voluptuous clouds, the city of Columbia appears in all its glory. Such a chain of events naturally evokes an image of fertilisation in the player's mind.

Yet dreams, according to Freud, distort the original wish beyond recognition, to ensure the sanity of the dreamer. This wish, in its pure and undisguised form, may be found deeply suppressed within the unconscious.[125] It is for this reason that DeWitt, at least initially, is not aware that Elizabeth is his own flesh and blood and only unconsciously tries to fulfil his wish to retrieve her. Indeed, the entire game can be interpreted as only occurring in the mind of DeWitt, while he is dreaming in his office (having lost Anna in a gambling debt).[126] In this scenario, the game events represent a Freudian anxiety dream of loss and illustrate the unconscious battle against a dark part of the self (Comstock, but also Booker himself, having taken part in the Wounded Knee Massacre), which raises the additional question of *forgiveness*. Going one step further, DeWitt's dream may again be interpreted as a distorted anxiety dream that, on a more general level, depicts humankind's innate fear of losing something of value, like the future itself. In this

125 Freud, *Dreams*, 161, 382.

126 However, the game leaves open whether DeWitt really lost Anna, because she might still be lying in her cradle in the adjoining room after DeWitt awakes from his nightmare. In the case of loss, the dream functions as mental trauma processing and harbours the wish to regain Anna. In the case of her safety, conversely, the dream depicts anxiety about losing something of value, in this case, DeWitt's daughter. In both cases the wish remains the same: the safety of something precious.

regard, Elizabeth functions as a symbol of hope that should be preserved and safeguarded at all costs, and the true meaning of DeWitt's dream may revolve around *the collective fear of losing the prospect of Utopia*. Consequently, and in line with these facts, the Utopia of Columbia includes both regressive and progressive elements, and a strict delineation seems hard to establish.[127]

I will explain this matter in more detail in chapter VI, but what is of importance for the moment is the fact that, for all their emphasis on "stability, security, freedom from hunger, from endless toil, from war,"[128] the Renaissance utopias can be classified as "dreams of order" (29), which include: Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), Tommaso Campanella's *The City of the Sun* (1623), Francis Bacon's *New*

127 Viewed from a psychoanalytical perspective, it is interesting that the VGD comes first and foremost out of the pen of men—like the early Renaissance utopias, the later ones from Bellamy to Wells, and the first wave of classical dystopias. Ferns *Narrating Utopia*, 27. Consequently, gender-specific urges hidden within the unconscious may have ramifications for the content and form of the utopian dream—and thus on games such as BIOSHOCK INFINITE. In this respect, Keith Stuart comes to the conclusion that the VGD is dominated by "violence" and represents "masculinised post-apocalyptic fantasies." This argument is based on the fact that the game development community largely consists of men, and this is reflected by the content of the dystopian games. In these, the player takes control of vicious male protagonists who assume the role of father figures to the secondary and female cast. As a result of the player's involvement, he thus accepts the fact "that the future will be ruled by men of violence and fervour, and that we have to become them in order to survive." While basically true, Stuart's arguments oversimplify the act of playing dystopia. This is because he first of all neglects the games' endings and themes (BIOSHOCK INFINITE, THE LAST OF US), which are about forgiveness and a return to a peaceful society in balance with nature. Second, he ignores (or is unaware) that violent processes/actions in dystopian games seldom mean what they seem, because of their fictional nature. They rather refer to the social wrongs of the player's empirical present, which is dominated by the carnivorous mechanisms of capitalism and global powers (see chapter V). However, there is one aspect in which I agree with Stuart. This point revolves around the question of when the VGD will follow in the steps of the science fiction of the 1970s and 80s, for during this period the genre experienced a resurgence dominated by female writers. As such, a second (female) wave of VGDs is highly desired and anticipated. (Keith Stuart, "*The Last of Us*, *BioShock: Infinite* and why all Video Game Dystopias Work the Same," *Guardian*, July 1, 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2013/jul/01/last-of-us-bioshock-infinite-male-view).

128 Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, 14.

Atlantis (1627), and the later socialist Utopias of Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward* (1887), and H. G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia* (1905).[129] This "traditional utopia" (14) is "primarily centralist and authoritarian" and illustrates a safe haven for people "in a world of disorder"[130]—a fact that also applies to BIOSHOCK INFINITE. As a consequence, these utopias have reached "a state of perfection or near-perfection"[131] and have often been described as "static, ahistorical utopias" that "offer a frozen image of the present, and eliminate the idea of a future from their horizon."[132] The logic behind such a conception is simple: "there is no progress after the ideal society has been established,"[133] after "the end of history"[134] is reached.

With the dawn of the Age of Enlightenment, however, and the increasing faith in human reason and science, a major shift within the utopian genre occurred. Although Renaissance utopias offered visions of a better future, their realisation in the empirical world was to be doubted—as is implied by Utopia's remote location, which is nowhere to be found.[135] In the 18th century, then, a change occurred concerning "the nature of the *connection* between the writer's society and the utopian alternatives proposed."[136] Eutopia became *euchronia*: the good place that does not exist turned into the good place "elsewhere in time."[137] Heading towards the future of mankind, Utopia became progressive and was now seen as a true possibility, rather than mere speculative thinking.[138] Of course, this change of direction correlates with the mood of the time period and, as Fátima Vieira observes, is due to "a change of mentality presided over by the optimist worldview that prevailed in Europe in the Enlightenment."[139] Having in mind the significant breakthroughs of this period—in science, new technologies brought about by the Industrial Revolution, and Darwin's theory of evolution—the belief in progress as a constant variable in human history had reached unprecedented magnitude.[140] It was this "new

129 Ibid., 14-15, 74, 97.

130 Ibid., 14.

131 Ibid., 189.

132 Vieira, "Concept," 9.

133 Ibid., 9.

134 Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, 59.

135 Ibid., 38-40.

136 Ibid., 67-68.

137 Ibid., 83.

138 Ibid., 68; Kumar, *Modern*, 38, 39, 45; Vieira, "Concept," 9.

139 Ibid.

140 Ibid., 10; Kumar, *Modern*, 44-45.

zest for the future"[141]—or, as Vieira observes (referring to Anne-Robert Turgot and the Marquis de Condorcet), the strong belief in "the inevitability of progress" associated "with the idea of infinite human perfectibility" that led humankind to believe in "the splendour that would await,"[142] if they only worked hard enough to attain it. Hope now glimmered at the edge of the horizon, and mankind was eager to grasp it.[143]

Underlining Utopia's newly found forward character, which began with the euchronia, Jameson declares that "[t]he desire called Utopia must be concrete and ongoing,"[144] with the literary utopia being a manifestation "of historical and collective wish-fulfillment."[145] In order to justify his thesis, Jameson refers to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's categories of *Imagination* and *Fancy*, which he describes as follows:

> On some metaphysical level, Imagination is a theoretical concept, designating the primal creative force of God: which an aesthetic context reduces to the shaping power appreciated in the architecture of monumental literary plots (the so-called primary and secondary imaginations).[146]

He then links the two categories to Immanuel Kant's distinctions between *the Sublime* and *the Beautiful* and to Sigmund Freud's *dream-thoughts* (the undistorted dream harbouring the original wish) and *dream-content* (the manifest dream as experienced by the dreamer—that is, after the dream work has completed its work and distorted the original dream wish by means of condensation and displacement).[147] What is of interest now is that Jameson discerns a similar relationship between "the primal architecture of the *Utopian Imagination*"[148] and *expressions of utopian thought*—that is "Utopian fancies"[149] such as the literary utopia.[150]

Again, he turns to Freud and his observations on daydreams and art—the work of art represents the artist's disguised and distorted wish-fulfilment of which he is

141 Ibid., 39.
142 Vieira, "Concept," 10.
143 Ibid., 9-10.
144 Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 84.
145 Ibid., xiii; cf. 84.
146 Ibid., 44.
147 Freud, *Dreams*, 169ff., 190ff.; Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 44-45.
148 Ibid., 53; emphasis added.
149 Ibid., 53.
150 Ibid., 45, 53-54.

secretly ashamed[151]—to distinguish two types of wish-fulfilment: "a repellent purely personal or individual 'egoistic' type, and a disguised version which has somehow been universalized and made interesting, indeed often gripping and insistent, for other people."[152] What this means is that a personal, egotistical wish—that of the artist or that of a fictional character when dreaming—might become universalised through "aesthetic or artistic decoration"[153] to capture the mind of the public. But this wish has never been purely personal in the first place, which would reduce Utopia to a decorative farce of egotistical daydreams, yet it harbours a more profound signification. As Jameson declares: "Utopian fancies [are] … placeholders and symptoms of *a more fundamental repression*, of the coming up short of the Utopian imagination against taboos that prevent any wholesale redesigning of the social order as such", and these taboos Jameson identifies "as the baleful effect and influence" of Anti-Utopia.[154]

Building on these observations, I can confirm an initial hypothesis: Utopia is irrevocably ingrained in the human psyche and can be connected to the well-being and the protective shell of the mother's womb—which shall not be seen as regressive but as progressively heading towards a better future. This universal striving for Utopia is inherent to all of utopian and dystopian fiction, and to other fictional works out there. For the appreciator this means being confronted with the wish in its distorted form, and in order to uncover it, he has to exert interpretive effort, thus exorcising his inner demons. In other words, Booker DeWitt's unequivocal wish to retrieve his daughter Anna (Elizabeth) signifies on a further level—and for the player—the progressive wish to strive for Utopia and the fight against the delusive forces of Anti-Utopia. Utopia, therefore, assumes the form of *a collective wish-fulfilment* that is deeply ingrained in the human psyche and inscribed in a more or less disguised form in representational artwork. Such a statement, as my further investigation will show, holds true for the video game medium as well—and, in particular, for the VGD, which harbours "utopian energy"[155] that expresses itself in the act of play.[156]

151 Sigmund Freud, "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Volume IX*, trans. The Institute of Psycho-Analysis (London: Vintage, 2001), 141-154.

152 Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 46; cf. 45ff.

153 Ibid., 47.

154 Ibid., 53; emphasis added.

155 Hall, "Trying to Believe," 70.

156 Ibid., 70, 72, 74, 80.

1.4 DEFINING THE LITERARY UTOPIA

Utopia can assume a very comprehensive form, and there exists a general consensus that defining the concept presents the researcher with severe problems, even if he confines himself to the literary utopia.[157] Nonetheless, a precise definition that delimits the subject and establishes boundaries seems inevitable. Otherwise, as Sargent confirms, "we [would] have no subject."[158] In the following, I will therefore undertake an attempt to define utopia in its fictional narrative form (the literary utopia) and establish a preliminary hypothesis on the video game utopia and dystopia based on these observations.

For such an enterprise, the definition(s) of Lyman Tower Sargent appear particularly useful. He defines *u/eutopia* as follows:

> A non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space. In standard usage utopia is used both as defined here and as an equivalent for eutopia or 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 better than the society in which that reader lived.[159]

Probably most important to Sargent's definition is utopia's need to describe *a society*, which he already underlined in a previous essay: "But it must be a society – a condition in which there is human (or some equivalent) interaction."[160] However, this society does not refer directly to any empirical one, but is *non-existent*—a fact that underscores utopia's imaginary and fictional nature. In the case of utopia, though, the fictional place shows a specific quality: "All fiction describes a no place," and "utopian fiction generally describes good or bad no places."[161] Consequently, a certain utopia *describes in detail* (owing this part to its verbal form) an imaginary society that *a contemporaneous reader* shall view as *considerably better* than his empirical one. Through this juxtaposition of worlds—and the dialectic quality it implies—utopia holds a critical attitude, which arises out of the connection between a specific historical moment (that is to be considered negative) and an imagined solution in fictional narrative form.

157 Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, 10.

158 Sargent, "Three," 12; cf. 5ff., 12.

159 Sargent, *Utopianism*, 6.

160 Sargent, "Three," 7.

161 Ibid., 5.

A similar definition is Darko Suvin's, who regards utopia as primarily "a literary genre or fiction."[162]

> Utopia is the verbal construction of a particular quasi-human community where sociopolitical institutions, norms, and individual relationships are organized according to a more perfect principle than in the author's community, this construction being based on estrangement arising out of an alternative historical hypothesis.[163]

Like Sargent, who speaks of a society that is considerably better than the present one, there is no hint of *perfection* in Suvin's definition either, and he prefers the term *more perfect*. Both scholars thus explicitly stress that the literary utopia, although sometimes near to it, does not aim for perfection. It is something "not inherent in the genre"[164] and has primarily been used by opponents of Utopia (the so-called anti-utopians) as ammunition for their attacks.[165] The second aspect worth mentioning is Suvin's notion of *cognitive estrangement* (which he derives from Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*)[166] that arises out of an *alternative historical hypothesis.* Such a quality, he continues, fundamentally links the SF genre to utopia,[167] as both start with "a cognitive hypothesis"[168] that is *extrapolated* into the future "with totalizing ('scientific') rigor"[169] and in "a wide-eyed glance from here to there."[170] Through this creative approach, a fictional alternate world is created—both familiar and unfamiliar to the appreciator—that works around the logic

162 Suvin, *Metamorphoses*, 46.

163 Ibid., 49.

164 Ibid., 45.

165 Ibid., 45; Sargent, "Three," 9-10.

166 Bertolt Brecht, *Bertolt Brecht Poems 1913-1956*, ed. John Willet and Ralph Manheim (New York: Routledge, 1987).

167 Having defined science fiction "as the literature of cognitive estrangement," Suvin subordinates utopia to the former and declares it to be a "sociopolitical subgenre." (Suvin, *Metamorphoses*, 4, 61). Yet there are other opinions, like that of Sargent, who asserts that "utopia is the well-spring." (Sargent, "Three," 11). For the purpose of this study, I do not dwell on the issue of genre but appreciate that both SF and utopia share fundamental similarities.

168 Suvin, *Metamorphoses*, 75.

169 Ibid., 6.

170 Ibid., 37.

of "*a fictional 'novum'* (*novelty, innovation*) *validated by cognitive logic*."[171] During this process, called estrangement, the reader shall confront "a set normative system – a Ptolemaic-type closed world picture – with a point of view or look implying a new set of norms,"[172] and he thus gains a fresh perspective on the empirical world.[173] From this view, "utopia is a possible impossible,"[174] a fictional alternate world that nevertheless retains a strong connection to the empirical present from which it originates.[175]

It is this fundamental characterisation of utopia that Hans Ulrich Seeber stresses as well, who deems *the imagination of alternatives* to be the genre's thematic core.[176] His definition of utopia thus includes:

1) The outline of an alternative order in which human beings live together in a mostly closed social system, which in comparison to the particular empirical society is either better (positive utopia) or worse (negative utopia), but at least different and hypothetically possible.
2) The alternative order (explicitly or implicitly) criticises the social ills of the author's contemporary present (utopian intention).

171 Ibid., 63.

172 Ibid., 6.

173 Ibid., 6, 70, 71, 75.

174 Ibid., 43.

175 It is here that one should separate the genres of utopia, dystopia, and SF from those of the fantasy, the fairy-tale, and the folk-tale. Following Suvin, I will not discuss these as instances of dystopia, because they lack hypothetical possibility. This Suvin explains in that the folktale is "indifferent to cognitive possibilities" and that "SF retrogressing into fairy tale … is committing creative suicide." (Suvin, *Metamorphoses*, 8). "Even less congenial to SF is the fantasy … a genre committed to the interposition of anti-cognitive laws into the empirical environment." (Ibid., 8). One has to confess that Suvin's claims are bold, but it is true that whereas fantasy, the folk-tale, and the fairy tale lie in "the realm of the impossible," SF, utopia, and dystopia must remain in the "domain … [of] the possible." (H. Bruce Franklin, "What is Science Fiction – and How it Grew," in *Reading Science Fiction*, ed. James Gunn, Marleen S. Barr, and Matthew Candelaria (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 23). This is a feature that fictions with dragons, magic, or dwarfs do not normally possess.

176 Seeber, *Selbstkritik der Utopie*, 11.

3) The rhetoric of fiction, which by means of its ability to sensualise the abstract (description, narration, dialogue) may give the utopian outline the illusion of the real and the probable. From the depicted, the utopia emits a persuasive intent.[177]

Taking a closer look at Seeber's argumentation, four observations seem particularly interesting: 1) the emphasis on utopia's *function* as an instrument of social criticism; 2) the potential of utopia as fiction to evoke a certain reaction in its audience; 3) the negative possibility of utopia—*dystopia*—as a manifestation of the genre; 4) the emphasis on the genre's believability and *hypothetical possibility*. Consequently, and having in mind the aspects of the two previous definitions, a first exploration into the genre of the video game utopia becomes possible, thereby gathering insights that will be of use for a definition of the video game dystopia.

1.5 TOWARDS THE VIDEO GAME DYSTOPIA

The preceding chapter has shown that *hope* has always been Utopia's dear companion and that the call for a continuous struggle towards it represents its essence. This dream of a better world, of a Utopia within reach, is universal to every cultural tradition and designates something deeply ingrained in the human psyche. Jameson has called the phenomenon historical and collective wish-fulfilment, and it is because of this quality that manifestations of utopianism can be found in a plethora of phenomena. One of these is the literary utopia: a representational work of art in which the reader embarks on an imaginative journey to a fictional and estranged place. The literary utopia thereby harbours a certain wish, slumbering in all of humankind, for the safety and the well-being of living in Utopia. In confronting the reader with distorted and condensed visions of his unconscious yearnings, utopia holds all the preconditions necessary to exorcise his inner demons.

Over the course of the last 500 years, the literary utopia and its plot structure have shown a strong endurance and continue to exert great influence on contemporary artwork. I have discussed one of these in the comparison of Thomas More's *Utopia* with Irrational Games' BIOSHOCK INFINITE. The game begins with Booker DeWitt's—and, vicariously, the player's—journey to a virtual society where they discover a foreign and estranged city that goes by the name of Columbia. At least in its opening hour, BIOSHOCK INFINITE represents an archetypal utopia (although already showing hints of dystopia) and mainly follows the traditional utopian plot: the journey to a remote location, the tour around Utopia, and the awareness that

177 Ibid., 70; my trans.

the society at hand shows considerable improvements over the player's empirical one. However, BIOSHOCK INFINITE is no utopia but rather resembles a malignant anxiety dream that in a Freudian sense harbours the wish for Utopia within all its terror. This insight leads to the more general conclusion (which I will explicate in the following chapter): that utopia is not opposed to dystopia, and that both genres essentially hold the same function—for at their core they are wish-fulfilment, revolving around the dream for a better future.

Moreover, the chapter has formulated an indispensable starting point for the venture into the VGD. It has detailed the similarities between utopian texts and games, and for this reason, I wish to end the chapter with a first hypothesis on the video game utopia—which, although not the focus of my argument, will be invaluable for the later discussion of the VGD. However, it would be a mistake to apply literary utopian theory to an ergodic medium without having in mind the differences between the media types in question (specifically pertaining to the player's involvement in a game). I will anticipate these and continue to elaborate on them in Part II, where precise advancements of these hypotheses shall be conducted. Consequently:

1. *The video game utopia represents a virtual society outlined in minute detail that the game designer(s) intended contemporary players to view as considerably improved over their empirical present.*
2. *This society is marked by estrangement and stands in direct or analogic extrapolation to the designers' empirical world, thus retaining the notion of a hypothetical possibility. As a consequence, the gameworld shows a specific referentiality to the empirical world—which is that of fictionality—and aims to criticise the latter's social ills.*
3. *Such an aesthetic effect and persuasive attempt is facilitated through the sensualising abilities of fiction that endow the abstract gamespace with life and creativity. They thus involve the player in a creative dialectic with Utopia in which she or he may participate ergodically, imaginatively, psychologically.*
4. *This playful trial action in an estranged gameworld offers the potential for utopian explorations (at times, laying the prospect of Utopia directly into the player's hands) and harbours at its core the desire to live in a better world.*