5 Estrangement Through World and Agency

Chapter IV has covered a lot of ground, from describing VGNs as a form of fiction in the semantic sense to detailing the framework of the implied player, which constitutes a dynamically incomplete work world and the affordance and appeal structure of a game that guides the player's participation (his game world) in all levels of involvement. This communication was described in terms of fictionality, as a dialectical communication between work of art, appreciator, and culture. Thereby, it was hinted that (similar to the appreciator) the player's acts of ideation and the constant renegotiation of images are responsible for creating the connection between both realities. Becoming involved in fictional gameworlds (and works of art) is thus different from how human beings perceive the empirical world or the purely virtual, for although the player (appreciator) makes sense of his experience through experiential *gestalt* groupings, these initial *gestalts* remain conceptually open and require a second filling to establish the connection between fictional and empirical world.

This process was described as being anchored in the openness of representations, which necessitate the appreciator's involvement in order to come to life in his imagination. As a consequence, the perspectival system of a game was illustrated in detail and included: the player's sensorial perspective, the items of setting and characters, the plot framework, and the system perspective. Furthermore, with the example of JOURNEY, the perspectives were described as oscillating in function between virtual game objects with which the player can interact and props that guide his imaginings—and, all together, as creating a vast network of indeterminacies for the player to fill in through both ergodic and imaginative action and by closing the blanks between the perspectives. Yet different players may negotiate these indeterminacies differently, and, consequently, the emancipated player was described as a necessity for a game to exercise its full (aesthetic) effect.

It is this process, now—*the player's experience of the aesthetic effect through acts of ideation*—that becomes the focus of attention in this chapter. For this purpose, I will integrate my findings into the realms of dystopia and describe the specific nature of this *playful trial action*—that is to say, how the communication between fictional gameworld and empirical world results in a form of play that is *precarious* and detrimental to the player's habitual dispositions in a positive, *regenerative* way. By granting him new insights into social totality, it reorganises his stock of knowledge and drives him to potential action. Such descriptions necessarily bring forth a conception of play that can be described as a *dialectical negotiation between guiding structure* and *playful expression,* between Iser's categories of *the fictive* and *the imaginary*, which take their inspiration from *the real*, yet, at the same time, negotiate its contents.[1] As such, the fictive permeates the gameworld. It models its realms after empirical reality (drawing from norms, conventions, social procedures) but disrupts reality through doublings and distortions, thus showing the player its result in a refracted mirror. In doing so, the fictive opens up a *space for play* for the imaginary to take a shape, which manifests itself in the player's psyche, his ergodic and imaginative interactions with the gameworld, and has him negotiate what the fictive has channelled. The player is thus invited to a trial action and a sort of boundary-crossing, vertigo, and transgression—and this form of involvement brings together the fictional and empirical reality in subversive ways.

In the VGD, the usual distortions/doublings of the fictive are thereby taken to an extreme and create nightmarish dreamworlds that are extrapolated from the empirical world and shown in a magnified form. They thus appear strange but, at the same time, familiar to the player, and to decipher these *games of estrangement through world and agency*, the player enters a *creative dialectic* with dystopia's implied player that has him close the *blanks* between the perspectives he encounters and co-creates. To describe this process, and the image creation in the act of play, will be the main purpose of this chapter. It will unite the strands from chapter IV, specifically how fiction in VGNs can be regarded from a phenomenological perspective. Such a perspective on the phenomenon does not contradict the gameworld's ontological status as a virtual object and seduces the emancipated player into a creative dialectic with the implied player, which is fuelled by the latter's strategies and the repertoire it employs, and eventually brings forth the aesthetic response and insight into the player's self and surroundings so important to dystopia. Of particular interest in this regard is the *function of the blank*, which is responsible for communication (play) to occur in the first place and induces the

1 Iser, *Imaginary*.

creation of *images of first and second order* in the player's mind. The second of these will align the fictional reality with the empirical world in a steady *feedback oscillation between* both worlds and the player's self. To better illustrate these theoretical manoeuvres, I will integrate an analysis of METRO 2033 into my deliberations.

5.1 PLAYFUL TRIAL ACTIONS IN DYSTOPIA

Fictional worlds invite appreciators into a sort of *trial space* that allows for imaginative explorations of estranged places and alternative imaginaries. This trial space—called make-believe—enables the appreciator to grasp these worlds, which are unknown to him, to explore them in detail, their curiosities and cultures, and to face situations that may prepare him for similar circumstances in real life. Consider a reader's exploration of the fictional Sprawl in *Neuromancer* (Gibson, 1984) or a player's of the virtual Japan in YAKUZA 0 (Sega, 2016), which introduces them to these respective cultures. Make-believe, in other words, allows the appreciator to perform alternative ways of living by endowing him with roles that are partially unfamiliar to him—and by practicing them, he gains insight into the lives of these fictional characters and his own self.[2] Such *explorations of alternatives in a playful manner* are far from the didactic lessons of the school teacher who imposes his wisdom on the pupil (to recall Rancière's observations). Instead, they offer emancipatory potential to attain a deep *understanding* of the imaginatively (or ergodically) enacted, and through this understanding to come to an insight into certain life situations and one's own self.[3]

Make-believe thus creates a harmless but, at the same time, subversive space for the appreciator. It allows him to fictionally explore perilous situations (like Captain Ahab's hunting of Moby Dick or the exploration of outer space in MASS EFFECT) within the relative safety of his home yet is simultaneously harmful on another level: the *psychological*.[4] This psychological infliction on the self—what is usually meant when the reader says that a story has moved him in a particular way, and by this I do not mean his interpretation of it, although these are necessarily intertwined processes—should by no means be seen pejoratively but as a positive ramification of fiction's enchanting spell. This *naturalness of aesthetic*

2 Walton, *Mimesis*, 12, 19, 272; Iser, *Act*, 19.

3 Walton, *Mimesis*, 34-35, 42, 228.

4 Ibid., 68, 241.

response triggers a *transformative process*. It restructures the reader's stock of knowledge and leads to a change of habitual dispositions.[5]

Such a subversive (regenerative) effect is of specific interest to the function of dystopia. For dystopia—similar to fiction in general, though with a reinforced effort—involves the appreciator in a *playful trial action* that sets him on a venture into a physically harmless but nonetheless precarious situation. By letting him playfully explore an estranged place, dystopia leads the appreciator to emancipation—in the sense of gaining knowledge, and through this knowledge to a radical break with the contemporary world system—and shows him in a creative manner what could be, what already is, and what can be done about it.[6] Dystopian fictions, in other words, invite the appreciator into a "complex dialogue"[7] with alternative imaginaries that are different from the rigid descriptions of nonfiction. This is because they produce reduced versions of social totality and "cognitive maps of the system,"[8] and through involving the appreciator in them, playfully question the norms and discourses of contemporary reality—thus revealing surprising perspectives that have thus far remained hidden in the social totality.[9]

Utopia, consequently—and fiction in general—turns into a "heuristic device … an epistemological and not ontological entity"[10] that gains additional value in video game fiction because of the player's increased involvement in a game. When Baccolini and Moylan thus speak of the non-ergodic dystopia's potential (in the form of the genre of the critical dystopia) to enable "an exploration of agency"[11] that offers an "avenue for *the necessary tracking and testing* of these new maps of hell and *possible paths through them*,"[12] the VGD comes to mind. For the genre not only offers the player cognitive maps to imaginatively engage with but simulates these in a virtual gamespace, allowing "players to become [ergodic] participants in the flawed worlds they simulate."[13] It thus offers *a participatory space*

5 Iser, *Act* 18, 24.

6 Baccolini and Moylan, "Introduction," 11; Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, x; Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 228; Levitas and Sargisson, "Utopia in Dark Times," 13-14, 17-18; Moylan, *Scraps*, 96-97; Seeber, *Selbstkritik der Utopie*, 33, 45-46, 106-107; Suvin, *Metamorphoses*, 52; Vieira, "Concept," 23.

7 Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, x.

8 Moylan, *Scraps*, 106.

9 Seeber, *Selbstkritik der Utopie*, 33, 45-46.

10 Suvin, *Metamorphoses*, 52.

11 Baccolini and Moylan, "Introduction," 8.

12 Moylan, *Scraps*, 107; emphasis added.

13 Schulzke, "Virtual," 327.

and "*play-ground*"[14] for *creative expression* and *trial action*, a fact that is widely acknowledged amongst scholars in different regards.[15] Schulzke, for example, links it to "[t]he exploration of possible worlds" in general, "especially when the possible worlds challenge prevailing assumptions about how social and political institutions should be structured and what values people should live by,"[16] and Domsch foregrounds that playing dystopia can "make us reflect on what it means to act within a system."[17] However, in order to explain the pervasive effect of the VGD on the player, it is not enough to reduce the emphasis on the aspect of simulation (though it necessarily includes it). What is of bigger importance is how fiction exerts its seductive charm on the player by involving him in *games of estrangement*. These create an aggravated referentiality between the fictional and empirical world, and it is only through the player's acts of ideation and a minute comparison between the gameworld and the empirical world (from which the former inevitably draws) that he will make sense of the enacted.

To understand this peculiarity of fiction, Iser's perspective on the concept becomes of fundamental importance. Contrary to ontological definitions, he rejects the often expressed "basic and misleading assumption … that fiction is an antonym of reality"[18] and continues to describe the concept not as "the opposite, but the complement"[19] to it—and thus in terms of *communication*. Fiction, here, turns into a *functional strategy* "of telling us something about our reality."[20] Yet in order to comprehend and respond to what is communicated (that is, to experience fiction's aesthetic effect), one has to become fluent in the language it employs. As Doležel argues:

> Fantastic fiction provides us with numerous examples of fictional encyclopedias that contradict the actual-world counterpart, as any visitor to the non-natural or supernatural worlds quickly discovers. As he or she crosses from the natural into the non-natural world, his or

14 Walz, *Toward a Ludic Architecture*, 142; emphasis added.

15 Domsch, "Dystopian," 395-397, 408; Hall, "Trying to Believe," 70; Nyman and Teten, "Lost and Found," 1, 4, 12; Schulzke, "Virtual," 318, 321; "Bioethics," 56; Walz, *Toward a Ludic Architecture*, 139, 143; Wilder, "Synthetic Fear," 125.

16 Schulzke, "Virtual," 318.

17 Domsch, "Dystopian," 408.

18 Iser, *Act*, 53.

19 Ibid., 73.

20 Ibid., 53; cf. 53.

her encyclopedia has to be modified. The visitor has to learn the encyclopedia of the alien world.[21]

Consequently, to understand fictional worlds, the readers' actual-world encyclopaedia is not enough and needs to undergo change to have them "become cognitive residents of the fictional world they visit."[22]

Things become clearer if one regards fiction as a form of "simulated reality" that "has organized itself"[23] in a particular form by converting materials drawn from empirical reality into something new—be it the imaginary worlds of literature or the virtual ones of the VGN. As such, this newly manufactured 'reality' seems strange to the appreciator, and he has to decipher its underlying code and establish the absent "frame of reference"[24] in order to understand it. Such a frame is vital to all forms of communication, and Iser describes the normal illocutionary act as based on accepted "conventions, procedures, and guarantees of sincerity"[25] that are familiar to all participants and ensure successful communication between them.[26] However, these conventions and procedures are partially frustrated in fictional communication and require the establishment of a common code to ensure a successful dialectic.

Before coming to this matter, I wish to elaborate on how the *simulated reality of fiction* is created. This aspect will become essential when describing how the VGD exerts its effect on the player, and to explain it, a step back to the *perspectives that compose the reality of fiction* becomes necessary. Such a process can also be discerned for video game fiction, where, similar to the literary text, the gameworld is created in a "process of fiction-making,"[27] that takes elements from the empirical world and redistributes them as representations throughout the gameworld. Consider the game HALF-LIFE, which takes familiar objects, such as "vending machines," "lockers," "a crowbar," "physical traits and behaviours" of

21 Doležel, *Heterocosmica*, 178-179.

22 Ibid., 181.

23 Iser, *Act*, 181.

24 Ibid., 60.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., 53, 60.

27 Julian Kücklich, "The Playability of Texts vs. The Readability of Games: Towards a Holistic Theory of Fictionality," *Proceedings of the 2003 DiGRA International Conference: Level Up 2* (2003): 101, http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/the-playability-of-texts-vs-the-readability-of-games-towards-a-holistic-theory-of-fictionality/

characters, "but also the interrelations between them,"[28] and sets them as virtual representations within the unfamiliar context of the game (in which an alien invasion functions as the imaginative novelty of this world).[29] None of this is surprising in the light of Jameson's "unknowability thesis,"[30] that one cannot imagine the radically Other without discerning familiar objects and relations.[31] As such, game-worlds are composed of both "realistic elements," which help foster the player's understanding of the world, and "exaggerations" of these elements that create excitement.[32]

While certainly a true observation, the problem lies in a different area—not so much in what kind of objects and relations are taken from the empirical world but in *how they are rearranged* as representations in the game to create *unforeseen connections*. It is the function of modern art "to reveal and perhaps balance the deficiencies resulting from prevailing systems,"[33] and this effort can be traced back to how conventions, values, and norms of the empirical world are distributed and rearranged in the textual perspectives to create unforeseen relations between them.

> The fictional text makes a selection from a variety of conventions to be found in the real world, and it puts them together as if they were interrelated. This is why we recognize in a novel, for instance, so many of the conventions that regulate our society and culture. But by *reorganizing them horizontally*, the fictional text brings them before us in *unexpected combinations*, so that they begin to be stripped of their validity. As a result, these conventions are taken out of their social contexts, deprived of their regulating function, and so become *subjects of scrutiny* in themselves.[34]

Literature, in other words, calls into question "conventional validity … not because it is without conventions (for then it could not call their validity into ques-

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid., 101-102.

30 Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 142.

31 Ibid., 106, 108, 114, 142.

32 Henry Jenkins, "The Art of Contested Spaces," Publications Henry Jenkins, 2002, accessed February 10, 2014, http://web.mit.edu/21fms/People/henry3/contested spaces.html

33 Iser, *Act*, 13.

34 Ibid., 61; emphasis added.

tion)—but because it disrupts this vertical structure and begins to reorganize conventions horizontally"[35] by redistributing familiar norms, values, and social conventions throughout the perspective of a text—in the characters, narrators, aspects of the world, and plot.[36] These conventions represent "the familiar territory within the text," its "repertoire."[37] They ensure that fictional worlds are understood by the reader because they link the newly created 'reality' to other works of art and to the social and cultural spectrum of the empirical world.[38] What remains to be shown for the VGD is whether this process of allocating norms, values, and conventions to the individual perspectives of a game holds true—which include the gameworld's underlying processes, player actions, and playing styles.

With the process of selection, the fiction-making is however not complete, and the estrangement the reader has come to know from fictional worlds is created in a second step. This is because during the selection process, norms, values, and conventions are "reduced or modified, as they have been removed from their original context and function,"[39] and this process is reinforced by the above-mentioned horizontal rearrangement of perspectives, which results in their depragmatisation. Consequently, the reader is set between *the poles of the familiar and unfamiliar*, between what is known from the empirical world and an estranged fictional world that draws its materials from the former. These materials are both *reduced* and *rearranged* in a creative manner and now enable the formation of unexpected connections while leaving the old ones partially intact to inform the reader's comprehension.[40]

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid., 61, 99. This stands in contrast to "rhetorical, didactic, and propagandist literature" (such as the anti-utopia) that "will generally take over intact the thought system already familiar to its readers. That is to say, it adopts the vertically stabilized validity of the thought system and does not reorganize its elements horizontally, as is always the case when norms are to be reassessed." (Ibid., 83). This is also where Iser separates *aesthetically complex literature* from those "of a more *trivial nature*." (Ibid., 77; emphasis added). While in the former prevailing systems of thought and conventions of the empirical world are undermined, the latter support "prevailing systems" by affirming "specific norms with a view to training the reader according to the moral or social code of the day." (Ibid).

37 Ibid., 69.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid., 61, 69-70.

It is this movement, now, from the known into the unknown, the creative dialectic between a familiar background and "an unfamiliar direction," that grasp the reader's attention[41]—*where the aesthetic effect turns into aesthetic response*. The result is the creation of something *new* that endows the old conventions and norms with new significance and has them shine in a different light, thereby revealing aspects that were previously hidden from the observer.[42] Fiction, as such, assumes *aesthetic quality* with the function of destabilising prevailing "thought systems or models of reality"—not by copying these systems or deviating from them, but by *reacting* to those "it has chosen and incorporated into its own repertoire."[43] Consequently, it is more than adequate to compare *fiction to a system itself*, which "gives insight into the reality it simulates"[44] by revealing "those possibilities that have been neutralized or negated by that system" and "by drawing attention to its deficiencies."[45]

It follows that fiction is not so far from the *concept of simulation*, which, similarly, offers a *reduced and abstracted form* of reality[46] and a *trial space* that Aarseth describes as

> an effective pedagogical tool that privileges – actually, demands – active experimentation, rather than observation, of its subject material. It is also a way to explore the partly unknown, to test models and hypotheses, and thus to construct and acquire new knowledge in a way narrative never could.[47]

Consequently, what links these concepts is the notion of a *personal experience* and the *participant's efforts* that go into the process of experimentation (although these are extended to the level of the ergodic in games). Having to work through both forms of simulation (the imaginative and the ergodic) requires considerable

41 Ibid., 70; cf. 61, 69-70.

42 Ibid., 69-70.

43 Ibid., 72.

44 Ibid., 181.

45 Ibid., 72; cf. 71-72, 181.

46 Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 439, 457; Klevjer, "Avatar," 16, 25-29.

47 Espen J. Aarseth, "Allegories of Space – The Question of Spatiality in Computer Games," in *Cybertext Yearbook 2000*, ed. Markku Eskelinen and Raine Koskimaa (Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä, 2001), 154, http://cybertext.hum.jyu.fi/index.php?browsebook=4

effort from the participant. While the reader tries to bridge the "apparent inconsistencies"[48] which the dialectic between fictional and empirical world unfolds, the player experiences the same pleasures with the additional benefit of acting on his deliberations and the cognitive maps of his creation.[49] As a result, both forms of involvement resemble a personal experience as described by Iser that has aspects of the empirical world shine differently, when "the familiar is transcended or undermined"[50] and restructures the reader's knowledge.[51]

So far, the interaction process described by Iser, in which the reader engages in a creative dialectic with a fictional world, are most fruitful for the genre of dystopia. They are, in fact, similar to Suvin's deliberations on a *feedback oscillation* that marks the reader's participation in the genres of SF, utopia, and dystopia (to which I will come shortly) and describe a form of play that is common to all sorts of emancipated involvement in representations. This form of play I would like to call *precarious play*. It is detrimental to the participant's self in a specific sense and restructures his habitual dispositions by granting him a different view of empirical reality, which may be *regenerative*. Precarious play is thus of particular interest to playing dystopia. For what is to be lost in the participation process is not only the prospect of a virtual future, by failing to attain Utopia in the fictional reality of the game, but also its loss in the empirical world. To avert this, the seductive potential of fiction drives the participant towards emancipation, allowing him to free himself from languid attitudes concerning contemporary world situations and pushing him onwards towards a utopian horizon.

What is precarious, then, in playing dystopia in any medium is the inherent conflict between the fictional and empirical world, and the ethical responsibility this ascribes to the participant—because the transition towards Utopia is injurious in both worlds and requires a self-sacrificing stance.[52] As such, it is not only the safety of the participant within the protective veil of fiction that is questioned but also the distressful route of liberating oneself from those deep-seated parts of the self that have become acclimatised to the status quo and the complexity of social

48 Iser, *Act*, 17. Indeed, Iser argues that modern works of literature "are full of apparent inconsistencies—not because they are badly constructed, but because such breaks act as hindrances to comprehension, and so force us to reject our habitual orientations as inadequate." (Ibid. 18).

49 Jenkins, "Architecture," 126.

50 Iser, *Act*, 131-132.

51 Ibid., 17-18, 69, 131-133.

52 Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, 202-203.

totality. This is "utopia's troubled, precarious, yet at the same time life-giving relationship with reality,"[53] which comes to full fruition in the video game medium.

5.1.1 Between Estranged Order and Creative Disorder: On the Notion of Precarious Play

To explain the notion of precarious play, it is beneficial to think back to 1950, when Johan Huizinga affirmed that *"[i]n play there is something 'at play'* which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action."[54] Such a focus on play's creative faculties and the creation of meaning have inspired many followers (such as Caillois or Sicart), and I wish to expand on this by resorting to Wolfgang Iser's *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology* (1991).

This work is beneficial to my argument in that it attempts to explain the literary work's anthropological dimension—that is to say, why human beings are dependent on their involvement in fictional worlds and the playful interactions these evoke. For this purpose, Iser basically discerns "the text as a space for play,"[55] where *the act of play* finds itself exposed to "the interplay between the *fictive* and the *imaginary*"[56] yet, at the same time, is created and regulated through it. These two primordial forces defy any attempts at an ontological definition and are only graspable through play itself—for "[t]hrough play they provide a context for each other, since what is groundless can assume tangibility only by being contextually assessed."[57]

Consequently, Iser explains the *fictive* as

> an operational mode of consciousness that makes inroads into existing versions of the world. In this way, the fictive becomes an act of boundary-crossing which, nonetheless, keeps in view what has been overstepped. As a result, the fictive simultaneously disrupts and doubles the referential world.[58]

53 Ibid., 205.

54 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955), 1; emphasis added.

55 Iser, *Imaginary*, xiv.

56 Ibid.; emphasis added.

57 Ibid., 271; cf. xv, xvii, 271.

58 Ibid., xiv-xv.

The fictive thus works in the mode of "disguise" through wearing a "mask."[59] It enables the reader's acts of boundary crossing and "to act out either what they are denied in the socio-historical world … or what seems impossible."[60] This sort of trial action as a playful act of transgression has the advantage of creating a "double-meaning, with the manifest meaning not supposed to mean what it says in order *to make the disguise reveal what it hides*."[61] As such, the fictive is close to how Freud describes the night-time dream, "whose disclosure through disguise corresponds to a basic desire to overstep boundaries" and whose true meaning can only be revealed through interpretation.[62]

In this sense, Iser's later observations stand in the line of his earlier ones, as the fictive holds the *specific function* of revealing those possibilities the empirical system has denied or that lie hidden in the confusing social totality. It thus offers all the preconditions necessary for art to reveal its *aesthetic effect,* to uncover its newness, and to trigger a subversive response in the appreciator. This statement is underlined by Iser's description of how the fictive *opens up a space for play* and "compels the imaginary to take on a form at the same time that it acts as a medium for its manifestation."[63] For although the *imaginary* is similar to what might be called "fancy, fantasy, and imagination," it nonetheless transcends these, because they are "specific, context-bound demarcations of the imaginary whose potential eludes cognition."[64] The imaginary, consequently, is rather described as "a featureless and inactive potential" which "has to be brought into play from the outside itself by the subject … consciousness … or by the psyche."[65]

As such, the creative interplay of these primordial forces—the fictive, which transforms the work of art into a disguised and distorted dreamworld that allows for boundary crossing and trial action, and the imaginary, which manifests itself through the appreciator's acts of ideation as an experience—shows the potential to trigger an *aesthetic response* in him, of instigating him "to extend beyond habitual dispositions"[66] in an act of "self-cultivation" or "fashioning."[67] To explain the inner workings of the fictive and the imaginary in more detail, and because the

59 Ibid., xv.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.; emphasis added.

62 Ibid. cf. xv; Freud, *Dreams*, 33.

63 Iser, *Imaginary*, xvii.

64 Ibid., xvii.

65 Ibid.; cf, xvii.

66 Ibid., 17.

67 Ibid., 297; cf. 17, 297.

two forces are difficult to grasp, Iser resorts to Roger Caillois' *four types of play*—this formulates an important aspect that will constitute the link to the form of precarious play I am proposing.

To do so, Iser begins to critically rethink the concept of play for the literary text as it occurs between the poles of *instrumental play* and *free play*.[68] "Games in the text always pit free and instrumental play against each other,"[69] and through this interaction "they break all the bounds of everyday pragmatic needs that otherwise hold our attitudes in check."[70] As such, the reader's imaginative play with the literary text is seen in a subversive manner, oscillating between the forces of "free play," which undoes "the possible results of gaming, and instrumental play as a recuperation of what free play disperses."[71] These two opposites stand in close relation to what Caillois describes as *ludus* and *paidia*: games that are determined by a strict set of rules and those in which freer forms of involvement are possible (but between which a clear line of demarcation cannot be drawn).[72] Taking a closer look at Caillois' original description reveals their overlaps:

> At one extreme an almost indivisible principle, common to diversion, turbulence, free improvisation, and carefree gaiety is dominant. It manifests a kind of uncontrolled fantasy that can be designated by the term *paidia*. At the opposite extreme, this frolicsome and impulsive exuberance is almost entirely absorbed or disciplined by a complementary, and in some respects inverse, tendency to its anarchic and capricious nature … to bind it with arbitrary, imperative, and purposely tedious conventions … I call this second component *ludus*.[73]

Although Iser does not directly equate these two forms of games with his established forces of the fictive and the imaginary, they nonetheless show a certain family resemblance in that *paidia* comes close to a sort of *unbounded fantasy*, whereas *ludus* channels this involvement into *a more guided form*. What is more, the similarities between the two opposites can further be discerned in the way Iser describes Caillois' four forms of play—*agôn, mimicry, alea, ilinx*[74]—as emerging

68 Ibid., 247, 258-259.

69 Ibid., 258.

70 Ibid., 260.

71 Ibid., xviii.

72 Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 13, 27; Egenfeldt-Nielsen et.al., *Understanding*, 36-39.

73 Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 13.

74 Caillois categorises these four different yet related forms of play as follows: "One plays football, billiards, or chess (*agôn*); roulette or a lottery (*alea*); pirate, Nero, or Hamlet

out of the spectrum of *ludus* and *paidia* games and which are permeated by the fictive and the imaginary in certain ways.

To illustrate this point, Iser compares *the meaning-making process of traditional games* to that of the literary text, where the aesthetic object emerges out of the interrelation of different attitudes and perspectives that it is composed of. Similarly, "games always express attitudes that are not manifested in rigid forms but take on their individuality only through interactive relationships."[75] In this sense, Iser continues to describe the game of *agôn* (conflict) as one that "consolidates the opposing norms, values, feelings, thoughts, opinions, and so on into positions"[76] or perspectives the reader encounters in the literary text. Yet, at the same time, it "initiates the surmounting of what has congealed into positions through the conflict."[77] *Agôn*, in other words, "has to be played towards a result that will overcome the antagonisms"[78] created by the frictions of the perspectives—and to ease this tension, the reader will have to close blanks, the unstated connections, between them (an aspect which I will discuss shortly). Together with *mimicry*—an aspect of role-playing and doubling so familiar to playing games—*agôn* is permeated by the fictive, which has taken dominance in both games.[79]

As such, the fictive seems to assume a directive role in the participation process, because it offers the reader various riddles and conflicts to be solved. But "[a]lthough the fictive gives cognitive guidance to the imaginary, in so doing it unleashes the imaginary as something uncontrollable,"[80] and it is through "this uncontrollability" that play can emerge in the first place, "*for play proceeds by changing whatever is in play*."[81] This liberating, expansive and ever-changing process of meaning-creation Iser now explains through the remaining games of *alea* and *ilinx*. *Alea* (chance) works against the confining games of *agôn*. By breaking "open the semantic networks formed by the referential worlds and also by the recurrence of other texts," it intensifies the difference between the textual perspectives and prompts the reader to maximise his combinatorial efforts.[82] The result of

(*mimicry*); or one produces in oneself, by a rapid whirling or falling movement, a state of dizziness and disorder (*ilinx*)." (Ibid., 13).

75 Iser, *Imaginary*, 259.

76 Ibid., 260.

77 Ibid.

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid., 271.

80 Ibid.

81 Ibid.; emphasis added.

82 Ibid., 261.

such games and their effect on the reader can be summarised in the last variant Caillois mentions: the game of *ilinx*. In the sense Iser is using it, *ilinx* can be understood "as a game of subversion whose 'vertiginous' element consists in the carnivalization of all the positions [perspectives] assembled in the text."[83] It thus clearly shows "an anarchic tendency … and this not only liberates what has been suppressed; it also reintegrates what has been excluded."[84] In *ilinx*, therefore, "free play is at its most expansive,"[85] negotiating what the fictive has presented and, by doing so, exerting a lasting influence on the reader.

The four games of *agôn, mimicry, alea,* and *ilinx* may, of course, occur in various combinations in a text, with each game occurring in a more or less dominant form, depending on the text at hand.[86] What is of importance to the VGN and dystopia, is that, similar to the literary text and representational art, there emerges *a dialectic between guiding structure and playful expression* (see my discussion in chapter IV). It is as Iser remarks: "Free play [*paidia*] triumphs over instrumental play [*ludus*], but no matter how drastically the former rejects the latter, instrumental play will still be a necessary foil in order to prepare for the unexpected."[87]

In this sense, the fictive permeates the work world of a game and its implied player. It offers guidance by structuring a system of perspectives yet, simultaneously, disrupts the apparent order through doublings and distortions—taking its material from the real, but showing the player its result in the refracted mirror of the fictional world. This form of confusion and disarray is further complicated by the opposing structures of the perspectives. Although these complement each other to a degree (thus contributing to the player's understanding of the game-world), they are often in dire conflict, leading to increased player involvement, as he tries to solve their riddles. If this is not confusing enough, the guiding structure of the fictive opens up a space for play for the imaginary to unfold. This space invites the player to cross boundaries, to vertigo, and transgression; in which the imaginary runs wild by taking form in the player's psyche, imagination, and ergodic efforts. The result of this interaction between various forces is a form of *precarious play* that is detrimental to the player's habitual disposition but, at the same time, offers the opportunity for new experiences to invade his mind—an aspect that is of indisputable importance to playing dystopia.

83 Ibid., 262.

84 Ibid.

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid., 263.

87 Ibid., 261.

To give my hypotheses further substance, I now wish to find approval in video game studies before applying them. Since Huizinga, the *(aesthetic) effect of play* has been discussed from various perspectives, and I wish to begin in the same manner I started to discuss the concept of play in representational art. There is no denying the fact that, like non-ergodic forms of art, VGNs and dystopias allow for a *playful trial action* in which players may explore within the relative safety of their homes a seductive but often perilous gameworld in a variety of ways: "to try out and observe the effects of different behaviours … test different strategies for problem solving … live in danger, and experience strong feelings."[88] Imagine the player of GTA V and how he acts out all kinds of behaviours, from savouring the environment and going shopping, to robbing banks and exploiting prostitutes. Such acts of boundary-crossing, vertigo, and transgression not only reveal the player's *innermost self*[89]—because "through play, we explore the forbidden, the impossible, the things that we are not allowed to explore in our daily lives"[90]—but also *disrupts the safety of the player* on the level of the psychological. As Miguel Sicart argues: "[i]n this sense, fiction operates much like play,"[91] and it is my belief that because of this connection, playing dystopia (and VGNs in general) is essentially precarious, in a similar manner to reading a novel, watching a film or play, or attending an art exhibition.

Consequently, it is more than adequate to state that *the gameworld as a space for play* is organised by the structural finesse of the implied player and is permeated by the fictive. Such playgrounds are artificially designed virtual spaces (by

88 Perron, *Silent Hill*, 12; cf. 12.

89 Similarly, the fictional character William in the television series WESTWORLD (Nolan and Joy, 2016)—based on Michael Crichton's eponymous 1973 movie—exclaims: "I used to think this place was all about ... pandering to your baser instincts. Now I understand! It doesn't cater to your lower self, it reveals your deepest self. It shows you who you really are." (WESTWORLD, season 1, episode 7, "Tromp L'Oeil," directed by Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy, aired November 13, 2016, on HBO [Warner Bros. Television, 2016], min 28). Westworld is a theme park that was established to allow ordinary people to act out their deepest fantasies within the relative safety of a physically harmless environment in which robots are incapable of injuring humans and programmed to fulfil the visitors' fantasies. However, once the machines are updated to experience reveries, they start to gain consciousness and eventually rebel.

90 Sicart, *Beyond*, 15.

91 Ibid., 15.

the game developers) that facilitate and afford play.[92] Yet this is only the beginning. In many regards play can be pleasurable as well as liberating. It frees players from "moral conventions but makes them still present, so we are aware of their weight, presence, and importance."[93] As such, play grants players the *necessary distance to see values and norms from afar*, and by practicing them—specifically in the estranged context of a fictional world, I might add—they challenge their applicability for the real world.[94] "Play", as Colleen Maclin puts it in a personal conversation with Sicart, "lets us explore new roles, be transgressive, and push at the boundaries of both the game's rules and the rules of society."[95] It is where the imaginary takes hold of the player—in his imagination, emotions, and ergodic efforts—and negotiates the fictive, thus turning the experience into a perilous one by breaking open its semantic veil.

> Play is always dangerous, dabbling with risks, creating and destroying, and keeping a careful balance between both. Play is between the rational pleasures of order and creation and the sweeping euphoria of destruction and rebirth, between the Apollonian and the Dionysiac.[96]

It is this "struggle between order and chaos,"[97] between the "sobriety of the Apollonian" and the "passionate, irrational, and irreverent" of the "Dionysiac"[98] that makes the act of play precarious and that creates a dialectic, and the potential transition from safety to danger.

In dystopia, this transition to an uncertain and perilous situation transcends the bounds of fiction and extends into the empirical world—if players miss acting upon the lessons of the VGD, their own future may be at stake. Consequently, such an intrusion into the self should not be seen in a negative manner and, instead, offers a *regenerative space* for cultivating the individual and encouraging him to incorporate the newly found experiences into his stock of knowledge. The disruption, in other words, is a positive one. Play "breaks the state of affairs,"[99] and by

92 Sicart, *Play*, 7.
93 Ibid., 5.
94 Ibid.
95 Sicart, *Beyond*, 68.
96 Sicart, *Play*, 9
97 Ibid., 10.
98 Ibid., 9.
99 Ibid., 14.

doing so, "disruptively reveal[s] our conventions, assumptions, biases, and dislikes."[100] It aids the player in "finding expression," in "understanding the world, and through that understanding, challenging the establishment, leading for knowledge, and creating new ties or breaking old ones."[101] As such, play incorporates the disruptive function of fiction into its repertoire and makes it graspable for the reader, spectator, appreciator, and player—for the aesthetic response that is activated through play is a direct result of the interaction between the fictive and the imaginary.

Consequently, it comes as no surprise that, like Iser, Sicart comes to the conclusion that play is "the source of the aesthetic experience,"[102] "the message," which cannot be reduced to a game's individual parts.[103] Since it is through play that players will satisfy their desire "for beauty, appropriate a context and rules, make them their own, and live and feel them through their values," and through this experience come to "a deeper understanding of [them]selves."[104] Play, in other words, leaves its mark on the player, but in order to experience its aesthetic response, "we should demand not only entertainment [from it] but also something that moves us and leaves us changed."[105] Consequently, it is only when the player accepts this "invitation to reflection"[106] that he emancipates himself from ignorance and decay—which becomes of specific importance to playing dystopia, for what is at stake is the future itself.

5.1.2 The Incompleteness of Gameworlds as a Basis for Communication and Play

To further elaborate on how (precarious) play emerges, I wish to return to a fundamentally important aspect. In chapter IV, I fostered an understanding of *representational art as a sort of incomplete construct* that needs the appreciator's participation to come alive and develop its influence on him. Fictional worlds, in other words, are basically incomplete, and it is because of this incompleteness that

100 Ibid., 15.
101 Ibid., 18.
102 Sicart, *Beyond*, 18.
103 Ibid., 96; cf. 96.
104 Ibid., 21.
105 Ibid., 95.
106 Ibid., 78.

communication with them is possible in the first place.[107] This is also what separates the fictional world from the empirical world, as "it shows that the opposition completeness/incompleteness reflects the contrast actual/fictional,"[108] and that "denying incompleteness to fictional entities is tantamount to treating them as real entities."[109]

To explain this facet of fictional communication, it is beneficial to resort to the concept of *indeterminacy*. For there is a sense, as Iser argues, in which *gaps* and *blanks* (dynamically open aspects and vacancies in a conversation that hinder the participants' understanding of what is communicated) promote and "function as a basic inducement to communication" of all sorts.[110] Of course, should this aspect hold true for the VGN and dystopia, it will help to explain the player's communication with a game and with the dynamically open work world of the implied player. Hence, before coming to Iser's observations, I wish to begin by pinpointing the *form* of indeterminacy to be found in game fiction—for as Klevjer claims: "in principle, games are no less 'complete' as fictional worlds."[111] My initial hypothesis, thereby, revolves around the fact that although VGNs are similar to non-ergodic forms of art in this respect—the video game, as Sicart claims, can be seen as a continuation of Eco's open work[112]—they differ from them in the way they employ this *incompleteness, indeterminacy, or virtuality*.

To prove this point, consider Christoph Bode and Rainer Dietrich's claim that *future narratives* (which include the VGN/VGD) do not "only *thematize* openness, indeterminacy, virtuality, and the idea that every 'now' contains a multitude of possible continuations" but also involve the reader/player in a specific manner, where his decisions move the plot in different directions and where "what happens next" depends on the player's "actions … values and motivations."[113] With this observation, Bode and Dietrich touch upon the different forms of involvement the VGN offers (which I have labelled as oscillating between the player's ergodic, psychological, imaginative, and emancipated efforts) and link the concepts of indeterminacy and virtuality.

107 Walton, *Mimesis*, 64; Doležel, *Heterocosmica* 22, 169.

108 Ibid., 22.

109 Ibid., 23.

110 Iser, *Act*, 166; cf. 166-167, 169.

111 Klevjer, "Avatar," 33.

112 Sicart, *Beyond*, 29, 158.

113 Christoph Bode and Rainer Dietrich, *Future Narratives: Theory, Poetics, and Media-Historical Moment* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 1; cf.1.

Such a point is well worth pursing, and Domsch aligns their deliberations with the VGN. To him, "[t]he existence of nodes" (which are a fundamental aspect of future narratives) not only "heightens the ludic quality of narrative"[114] but results in a *specific incompleteness* of the gameworld.

> Every fictional world also has blank spots, but they cannot be filled in without violating the integrity of the fictional world. In a game that creates a fictional world and … grants some degree of agency to the player, though, this world is *unfinished by design* and *can only be complemented through the active* [ergodic] *involvement of the player*.[115]

Although Domsch highly underestimates the complexity of what he calls "the usual activity of imagining it [the storyworld] and filling occasional gaps"[116] that mark the reader's involvement in the literary text, his observations point to the mutual filling in of indeterminacy through the player's ergodic and imaginative faculties. Consequently, it is not only the player's imaginative involvement that creates *narrative closure* (contemplating about the gameworld and using his world knowledge to establish links and connections) but also his ergodic one. This effort of actualising one of several paths results in a form of closure not available to the non-ergodic media participant[117]—and the creation of a perspective that is shared between the player and PC.[118]

So far, the observations on the incompleteness of gameworlds have revealed a form of play that, as Ryan has observed, "transposes the ideal of an endlessly self-renewable text from the level of the signified to the level of the signifier"[119] and

114 Domsch, *Storyplaying*, 2.

115 Ibid., 30; emphasis added.

116 Ibid.

117 Ibid., 30, 36.

118 Sicart offers a comparable description of the gameworld as a *possibility space* which is composed of "limited determinacies." (Sicart, *Beyond* 15). In this sense, players may fill in the semi-blank attributes of their PCs (they co-determine the PC's personality through actions) and the gameworld. (Ibid., 16). They are thereby presented "with a space of limited determinacies that are perceived as being open but that need to be closed and interpreted through play." Ibid. Hence, through "inserting the self into a system that is experienced as and through a world" players may narrow the possibility space of the story and its world. (Ibid., 27; cf. 27). Narrative closure is thus reliant on the player's ergodic and imaginative faculties, and Sicart argues that the "space of possibility" in games is both "physical and mental." (Ibid., 45).

119 Ryan, *Narrative*, 5.

oscillates between them. However, in order to describe the player's participation process in VGDs, a finer granularity of the topic becomes necessary, and a brief excursion into the concept of the *virtual as a form of indeterminacy*.

For this purpose, let me refer to Marie-Laure Ryan and her seminal work *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* in which she distinguishes between primarily two forms of the virtual: "the virtual as fake" (Baudrillard) and "the virtual as potential" (Lévy).[120] Such a distinction echoes my discussion of fiction and is underlined by how Ryan describes both senses of the virtual: an "*optical sense*" which "carries the negative connotations of double and illusion … the treacherous image" and a "*scholastic sense*" suggesting "productivity, openness, and diversity."[121] Given my current observations, it seems adequate to stick with the notion of the virtual as potential, because it will explain the possibility space of the VGN and dystopia, which players may fill in creative fashions. To underscore her claims, Ryan continues to establish a table of meanings of the virtual, the top part of which illustrates the scholastic use of the concept. Here, she enlists oppositions that stand in analogy to the overarching concepts of the *actual* and the *virtual* and that include: "enacted" and "potential," "closed" and "open," "complete" and "incomplete," "determinate" and "indeterminate."[122] Such a comparison not only aligns the concepts of virtuality and indeterminacy but further links the latter to my use of fiction.

Ryan, then, follows the concept of the virtual as potential. She emphasises Lévy's[123] remark that the virtual shall *not* be seen in opposition to the real and continues to describe the *dialectic* between the *virtual* and the *actual*. Here, "a phase of actualization" which offers a "concrete solution to answer a need" is complemented by a "phase of virtualization" that formulates "a return from the solution to the original problem."[124] This is an important aspect, because "reopening the field of problems that led to a certain solution"[125] after an apparent solution has been found (through actualisation) points to a *fluidity of meaning creation* and its constant rebuttal as described by Iser (for instance, when the player solves an issue in a certain manner, but its resolution creates further issues—such as in the

120 Ibid., 27.

121 Ibid.; emphasis added; cf. 27.

122 Ibid., 28.

123 Pierre Lévy, *Becoming Virtual: Reality in the Digital Age*, trans. Robert Bonono (New York: Plenum Trade, 1998), 16.

124 Ryan, *Narrative*, 36; cf. 35-37.

125 Ibid., 37.

Tenpenny Tower example mentioned previously). Ryan realises the similarity between such processes in literature and digital forms (hypertexts, virtual reality, and so on) and links her observations to theories of reader-response criticism.

She is thereby particularly interested in those of Roman Ingarden[126] and Wolfgang Iser, who both utilise the virtual (indeterminate) in the sense of potential.[127] Ryan thus begins by describing Ingarden's conception of the literary text "as an incomplete object that must be actualized by the reader into an aesthetic object" and which "requires of the reader a filling in of gaps and places of indeterminacy."[128] Each reader will fill in the gaps in his own way by resorting to his world knowledge, and, therefore, the literary text is best conceived as a *virtual object* (following Iser) that allows many fillings and the creation of possible worlds.[129] Such an insight is nothing new to my discussion (see chapter IV), but in order to expand on the usage of *virtuality-as-indeterminacy* to the digital era, Ryan underlines the importance of an "additional level" that fuels the hypertext's "textual machinery."[130] This additional level lies both in the fact that the hypertext is represented on the computer screen and that it offers the user the ability to actualise one of many potential manifestations of the text depending on his input.[131] One could argue that Ryan's conclusions cannot be directly transposed to the video game, since she only rarely mentions digital games, but this problem can be circumvented. For in video games the additional level is, of course, the *ergodic*—which Aarseth also uses in the sense of hypertexts[132]—which complements the player's *imaginative* participation in the game. The *virtual as potential*, then, and the concept of *indeterminacy* are undeniably close and will henceforth, and for my particular purposes, be viewed as synonymous.

Such an understanding of *indeterminacy-as-virtuality* is also beneficial in another way and helps to answer Egenfeldt-Nielsen et. al.'s question of whether one can consider the gameworld as "a prop for the player's imagination (in Walton's

126 Roman Ingarden, *The Literary Work of Art: An Investigation on the Boundaries of Ontology, Logic, and the Theory of Literature*, trans. George G. Grabowicz (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1973).

127 Ryan, *Narrative*, 44.

128 Ibid., 44.

129 Ibid., 44-45. Walton differentiates between *incomplete worlds* (which he equates to fictional worlds that require the appreciator's filling) and *possible worlds* (which are complete constructs). (Walton, *Mimesis*, 64).

130 Ryan, *Narrative*, 46.

131 Ibid.

132 Aarseth, *Cybertext*.

sense), or is the world a virtual object or stage for the game to take place on?"[133] The only answer to this question, then, is both—for the *gameworld* constitutes an amalgam of basically two layers: the *virtual gamespace* and the *fictional storyworld*.[134] This approach bridges the incompatible quarrels about the gameworld's ontological status, because it regards the gamespace as the *virtual and ontological layer* (following Aarseth, in that the actions of the player are real; see chapter IV), which is nonetheless heaved into the realms of fiction from a *phenomenological point of view* (where the storyworld functions as an all-encompassing veil that fuels the player's imaginings and where his actions create fictional truths).[135] Consequently, it is only through a negotiation of both layers on part of the player that the newly formed 'reality' of the gameworld appears and is understood—as Nitsche formulates: the "new 'reality' gameplay constitutes."[136] This reality "is part perceived … and part performed"[137] and requires the player to construct "mental images of both the game state and … the game's storyworld."[138]

The reason why I am stressing this aspect is that both layers of the gameworld (or *virtualised storyworld*) are fundamentally *incomplete* and require *filling* in particular ways. While the virtual gamespace represents a "setting for the gameplay"[139] that necessitates the player's ergodic motions to dynamically change as a result of this interference, the fictional storyworld prompts the player to imagine a larger space than actually exists.[140] As a consequence, storyworlds can be considered wide "expanses of time" and "space"[141] that make references to the past, foreshadow the future, and evoke imaginings about the present state of affairs. In fact, a storyworld includes everything there is to know about the diegesis.[142] As a result of these interactions (on an ergodic, physiological, imaginative, and eman-

133 Egenfeldt-Nielsen et.al., *Understanding*, 232.

134 Nitsche, *Game Spaces*, 35.

135 In this respect I disagree with Tavinor who, similar to my observations, claims that "games are typically *both fictional and virtual*," but he deems "virtuality … [as] a distinctive mode of depiction, whereas fictionality regards the ontological statues of what is thus depicted." (Tavinor, "Fiction," 438).

136 Nitsche, *Game Spaces*, 127.

137 Domsch, *Storyplaying*, 30.

138 Ibid., 29.

139 Egenfeldt-Nielsen et. al., *Understanding*, 206.

140 Nitsche, *Game Spaces*, 28, 33, 51.

141 Domsch, *Storyplaying*, 28.

142 Ibid., 28-29.

cipated level), the resulting reality of the gameworld cannot *only* resemble a cognitive image the player has helped to construct—as Domsch claims[143]—but goes further in constituting something graspable and real, which comes to life through play and in the oscillation between the fictive, the imaginary, the virtual, and the real (but differently to how Aarseth has described it).

Now, in order to apply this to the genre of the VGD, one has to regard the nature of the estranged gameworlds the player is confronted with. This will illuminate how the player makes sense of these worlds and acts upon his deliberations by filling in their indeterminacies and, by doing so, elaborates on the preconditions of aesthetic response. Paving the way to Part III (where my findings find application), the rest of this chapter will discuss theories of estrangement combined with a focus on the player's multifaceted involvement in a fictional gameworld. Finally, I will complement these through Iser's deliberations on the reader's process of ideation and the creation of the aesthetic object—a theoretical manoeuvre that adds to the foregoing discussion and which, to my knowledge, has never been conducted carefully in video game studies.

5.2 DEFAMILIARISED WORLDS AND PLAYER ACTIONS

"Where in the world am I? What in the world is going on? What am I going to do?"[144] Fictional worlds are always *estranged* to a certain degree. They confront the appreciator with things unknown to him and require effort to decipher. Within the genres of SF, utopia, and dystopia, this estrangement is magnified and sometimes taken to an extreme, confronting the appreciator with "a realist mode that is defamiliarized yet dynamic."[145] For Moylan, therefore, the questions stated above are essential when describing the reader's venture into an estranged world and an uncanny Other—and nowhere could they be more aptly asked than for the video game medium.

To approach the issue, I wish to begin with a detour into the *strangeness of gameworlds*, for they are often described as semi-detached from the empirical world.[146] Gameworlds "are totally constructed environments. Everything there was put on the screen for some purpose -- shaping the game play or contributing

143 Ibid., 30.

144 Moylan, *Scraps*, 3.

145 Ibid., 27.

146 Domsch, *Storyplaying*, 99.

to the mood and atmosphere or encouraging performance, playfulness, competition, or collaboration."[147] Imagine the open world of GTA V, which virtualises a fictional version of Los Angeles and its surroundings but alters the gamespace in such a way that it caters to challenge/gameplay[148] (by reducing the size of the map and rearranging the content). Gamespaces are often "reductive: they reproduce some features of the real world, but create their own rules in order to facilitate gameplay."[149] They are, in other words, "allegories of space," which "pretend to portray space in ever more realistic ways, but rely on their deviation from reality in order to make the illusion playable."[150]

However, it is not only space that creates distance from the empirical world but also a game's rules, which determine aspects of the gameworld. These create "an 'as if' situation"[151] similar to that of non-ergodic fiction and have the gameworld diverge from the empirical world in the same manner as "a fictional world is set apart by its fictional existents."[152] The "realist paradigm" is thus "never absolute,"[153] and encountering the newly created reality of fiction, players have to become familiar with these rules, as much as with the peculiarities of space. Consequently, to decipher these "disorienting 'otherworlds',"[154] a fair amount of "cognitive work"[155] is required from the player—which is especially so in spaces that seem "surrealist," "disfigured and distorted through" the "dream-like images"[156] they project.

Similar in scope and magnitude to the surreal spaces of horror games are dystopian gameworlds. While every gameworld in a sense differs from what one may

147 Jenkins, "Contested."

148 Gamespaces are often "contested spaces" that confront the player with a fierce struggle over space. Ibid. This is the case when the player tries to overcome environmental blockades (like the pipes in SUPER MARIO) or hazards such as large mountains, mazes, or snow storms, or enemies that roam the environment. (Ibid.; James Newman, *Videogames* [London: Routledge, 2004], 110-112).

149 Egenfeldt-Nielsen et.al., *Understanding*, 206.

150 Aarseth, "Allegories," 169; cf. Newman, *Videogames*, 118-119.

151 Domsch, *Storyplaying*, 14.

152 Ibid., 19; cf. 14, 19.

153 Ibid., 17.

154 Nitsche, *Game Spaces*, 47.

155 Ibid., 48.

156 Jenkins, "Contested."

call 'reality', the genres of SF, utopia, and dystopia push the degree of estrangement further to create a more complex relation to the empirical world.[157] As such, dystopian gameworlds are often considered as *other spaces of estranged nature*,[158] but it is rarely disclosed what exactly this means and entails. To answer this, let me start by thinking of the player of METRO 2033 (4A Games, 2010) who will experience first-hand the "disorientation"[159] the SF genre offers when he encounters a strange new world that was devastated by nuclear war and where the surface of the Earth is now contaminated by radiation, only traversable for those wearing gas masks, if they dare confront the mutants that roam it. The few who managed to survive escaped to the Moscow metro system, where several factions have formed—including bandits, fascist, and communists. Alliances were established to fend off the mutants and a trading network operates between the various stations. Most of the populace, however, has not learned from the mistakes of their predecessors. War continues to wage in the Metro, and an uncanny force called the Dark Ones causes fear and hallucinations. METRO 2033 is a critical dystopia of variant II in which the player undertakes a mission to an ominous tower where a decisive choice to determine the future awaits. But in order to accomplish the task to the full extent (to execute it and to relate such an action to the empirical world), the new reality of fiction has to be understood.

METRO 2033 and other VGDs stand in the tradition of many SF narratives that find "ways to explore and to go where others will not, might not, dare not go."[160] This is because the estranged gameworld the player encounters leaves him both awestruck and pondering the unthinkable. According to Suvin, such "a curiosity about the unknown"[161] is a basic feature of human nature and inherent to the SF genre. It is "where the thrill of knowledge join[s] the thrill of adventure"[162] and happens when the reader, spectator, or player encounter new environments and

157 On a basic level, dystopian fiction is a genre with tropes that the reader/player recognises: the destroyed/polluted world, cities in ruins, lack of people, gangs, etc. This does not mean, however, that more complex forms of estrangement may emerge—that the games of estrangement captivate the reader/player into creating connections to the empirical world that were previously unknown to him.

158 Frelik, "Video Games," 230; Jagoda, "Digital Games," 150; Newman, *Videogames*, 107-109; Nyman and Teten, "Lost and Found," 6-7; Schulzke, "Virtual," 1; Schmeink, "Dystopia."

159 Moylan, *Scraps*, 4.

160 Ibid., 4.

161 Suvin, *Metamorphoses*, 5.

162 Ibid.

their inhabitants. These range from hidden islands in unknown waters to isolated valleys and faraway stars and societies, inhabited by creatures and peoples unknown to the appreciator—from "aliens" to "strangers," from "utopians" to "monsters."[163] Such trial actions in estranged "elsewhere[s]" are highly pleasurable for the participant and reinforced in game fiction through the spatial representation of the world, which not only allows the player to navigate these spaces—thus increasing the "sense of alterity" of the scenario[164]—but also to experience their "awe, wonder, and estrangement" through "majestic vistas of alien worlds, futuristic cities, gigantic spaceships, and outer space."[165] It is as Jenkins puts it: "Games … may more fully realize the spatiality of these [SF] stories, giving a much more immersive and compelling representation of their narrative worlds."[166]

Figure 15: In METRO 2033*, the player encounters an inhospitable surface after the nuclear bombs have fallen, where people manage to survive in the Metro.*

METRO 2033, (4A Games, 2010), ch. Dead City 1.

163 Moylan, *Scraps*, 5; cf. 5.

164 Frelik, "Video Games," 230.

165 Ibid., 233; cf. 230, 233.

166 Jenkins, "Architecture," 122. In this sense, the SF genre and video games share a fundamental similarity: the pleasures of stepping into unknown words, exploring their boundaries and discovering their secrets through imaginative and ergodic action. As a result, they grant the player a sense of what Calleja calls *inhabiting* these worlds, which, in this magnitude, is a sentiment unknown to the reader, viewer, or appreciator. (Calleja, *In-Game*, 73-76).

However, although awe and pleasure are important emotions, the technique of estrangement goes further in that it offers the player a glimpse into the true nature of his reality. By showing him the familiar in an unfamiliar fashion, SF possesses a "most powerfully subversive potential, for if a reader [similar to the player] can manage to see the [empirical] world differently (in that Brechtian sense of overcoming alienation by becoming critically estranged and engaged), she or he might just … do something to alter it."[167]

Consequently, playing SF is by no means detached from the empirical world, although it aims to transcend it. The player is thereby confronted with a new world, a new reality that fiction has composed and which is constructed around the logic of a "cognitive innovation,"[168] "*a fictional 'novum'*."[169] This novum is of "totalizing" effect, because it "entails a change of the whole universe of the tale"[170] and creates distance to the author's empirical world. Thereby, various "degrees of magnitude can be discerned:" from simple inventions such as gadgetry, phenomena, or techniques, to entire settings, agents, or relations that are unknown to the empirical world.[171] As such, the fiction-building device of the novum can start as small as time working differently in BRAID (Number None, 2009) or the ability to alter time in Remedy Entertainment's QUANTUM BREAK (2016). It may involve the invention of a cloning tool in SWAPPER (Facepalm Games, 2013) or a portal gun in Valve's PORTAL (2007) that creates bizarre passages through space—a game that irritates the player "with uncommon, perhaps unpredictable, spatial rules."[172] Such agential powers change the old locus in a considerable fashion—but there are also entire worlds that are constructed around the novum's logic.[173] Take, for instance, the world of FEZ (Polytron, 2012) in which people are not accustomed to a third visual dimension or the many post-apocalyptic worlds in which after a certain incident the world as once known has vanished—due to a virus, environmental catastrophe, nuclear war, and so on.

Given these repercussions on the gameworld, there are two aspects to foreground: first, the novum assumes narrative hegemony in determining the logic of the SF storyworld (or gameworld) and sets it apart from the empirical world

167 Moylan, *Scraps*, 5.

168 Suvin, *Metamorphoses*, 64.

169 Ibid., 63.

170 Ibid., 64.

171 Ibid.; cf. 64.

172 Newman, *Videogames*, 108; cf. Jagoda, "Digital Games," 141, 146, 149.

173 Suvin, *Metamorphoses*, 79.

through estrangement;[174] second, and as a result of the foregoing aspect, the novum represents "a creative, and especially aesthetic category."[175] This is because the novelty induces the reader/player to engage in a complex *feedback oscillation* between empirical world and fictional world—not only to comprehend the latter but also to gain insight into the former. Suvin describes this important aspect as follows:

> Though I have argued that SF is not—by definition cannot be—an orthodox allegory with any one-to-one correspondence of its elements to elements in the author's reality, its specific modality of existence is a feedback oscillation that moves now from the author's and implied reader's norm of reality to the narratively actualized novum in order to understand the plot-events, and now back from these novelties to the author's reality, in order to see it afresh from the new perspective gained. This oscillation, called estrangement by Shklovsky and Brecht, is no doubt the consequence of every poetic, dramatic, scientific, in brief *semantic* novum.[176]

SF is thus not so much a genre about the future (this lies in the domain of futurology and is of secondary importance to SF) but rather reflects "on the author's own historical period and the possibilities inherent in it."[177]

In this sense, the world-building of SF, utopia, and dystopia is closely linked to the empirical world and dependent on the technique of *extrapolation*: "a scientific procedure [that] … is predicated upon a strict (or, if you wish, crude) analogy between the points from and to which the extrapolating is carried out."[178] Consider again METRO 2033, which takes as a starting point the ever-raging conflict between ideologies and extrapolates it into the future, into a world that now shows the ramifications of these conflicts, after the nuclear bombs have fallen. Instead of being an instrument of futurology, however, the game illustrates that these conflicts continue after the cataclysm and not only paints a bleak picture of what is to come but, further, of what already is, and what can still be averted by the player (in the virtual as well as empirical world). Such a conclusion underlines the effectiveness of many VGDs and points to the fact that the player's imaginings and

174 Ibid., 70.

175 Ibid., 80.

176 Ibid., 71.

177 Ibid., 76; cf. 28, 76.

178 Ibid., 76.

ergodic actions are never insulated from his empirical surroundings but are informed by them—as he both steps "away from a known world and yet [is] always in creative connection with it."[179]

As one can discern by my use of overlapping quotes, I do not distinguish between the reader's and player's experience in this respect. Both are confronted with an estranged world that shows their empirical world in a "grotesque distorting mirror"[180] which requires deciphering—a mirror that, as Suvin puts it, "is not only a reflecting one, it is also a transforming one, [a] virgin womb and alchemical dynamo … a crucible."[181] What is different, though, from the reader's experience is the player's extended involvement in the worlds of the video game. Similarly, Pawel Frelik warns that one cannot simply utilise "the set of generic protocols formulated from an analysis of literary SF" and apply them to the video game medium without having in mind the "consequences for the protocols themselves."[182] Consequently, when analysing VG SF, one shall consider the similarities and differences between media but focus on "a new set of approaches that recalibrate critical attention to those aspects that are inherent in the medium's unique deployment of the SF repertoire," which centre on "its species of visuality as well as its interactivity and performativity."[183]

I have formulated my own phenomenological approach to VGNs in chapter IV and will now integrate the specifics of the SF repertoire into my deliberations. For this purpose, it is necessary to expand on the notions of *estrangement* and *extrapolation* in games, and Patrick Jagoda's conclusions are helpful here. To him,

> [d]igital games alter the nature of cognitive estrangement, speculative thought, and world building that have been central qualities of science fiction literature. They do so through the introduction of gameplay mechanics, procedural capacities, navigable worlds, and multimedia interactions.[184]

Jagoda's conclusions are both generic and inspiring, for it is clear that with a new medium, new horizons await the researcher. However, they point to the fact that in the world-building of SF games, elements such as norms and conventions taken

179 Moylan, *Scraps*, 24.

180 Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, 109.

181 Suvin, *Metamorphoses* 5.

182 Frelik, "Video Games," 227.

183 Ibid., 228; cf. 227-228.

184 Jagoda, "Digital Games," 150.

from the empirical world are redistributed horizontally in the game and in its perspectives: in its world, rules, processes, and the player's actions. As such, they are magnified in scope, distorted, and disrupt the empirical world's vertical hierarchy of these elements.

It is as Doležel claims: "The author creating a literary fictional world draws on the actual world in many ways: adopting its elements, categories, and macrostructural models."[185] This "material coming from the actual world has to undergo a substantial transformation at the world boundary," and "actual-world entities have to be converted into nonactual possibilities."[186] Such a transformation of the known into the unknown (and the potential) fabricates a defamiliarised world for the reader/player to decipher, and to illustrate this process is to approach the *aesthetic function of the SF genre*. This is an important step, because SF is often described as a form of *escapism* from the frustrations of the empirical world that enables the appreciator an imaginative/ergodic vacation from the real (which is only partially true). Contrary to this claim, Suvin remarks that the escapism SF grants

> is an optical illusion and epistemological trick. The escape is, in all such significant SF, *one to a better vantage point* from which to comprehend the human relations around the author. It is an *escape from constrictive old norms* into a different and alternative timestream, a device for historical estrangement, and an at least *initial readiness for new norms of reality*, for the novum of dealienating human history.[187]

Consequently, SF, utopias, and dystopias offer the appreciator pleasurable as well as subversive ventures into estranged elsewheres and are *firmly anchored in the empirical world*.[188] They vividly "participate in reality in an active and productive way"[189] and "foreground both the connection between utopia and reality … and the essential conflict between them."[190] As such, the connection between worlds is similar to "the *heyiya*, or hinge—most commonly depicted as a pair of interlocking spirals"[191]—and this relation must not "be regarded simply as 'metaphorical' (worse yet, 'mythic') retelling of the present moment" but instead "pursues

185 Doležel, *Heterocosmica*, 20-21.

186 Ibid., 21.

187 Suvin, *Metamorphoses*, 84; emphasis added.

188 Ferreira, "Biodystopias;" 52; Booker, *Impulse*, 19.

189 Ibid., 14.

190 Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, 209.

191 Ibid., 216-217.

a more complex engagement that enters a *dialectical negotiation* of the historical tension between what was, what is, and what is coming to be."[192] It follows that to uncover the mysteries of SF depends on the appreciator's acts of ideation through which he will establish the connection between realities.[193]

To create the estranged world, then, there are primarily two ways of setting things up. The "trace," as Jameson argues,[194] between past, present, and "the not-yet-being of the future"[195] is created through the scientific strategy of *extrapolation*. This technique is the driving force behind the SF genre and occurs in *direct* or *analogic* form. In its first form, a "direct, temporal extrapolation"[196] from the present into a potential future creates worlds that "expose current problems and warn of the dire consequences."[197]

> Extrapolative SF begins with the current state of the empirical world, in particular the state of scientific knowledge, and proceeds, in logical and linear fashion, to construct a world which might be a future extension or consequence of the current state of affairs.[198]

This is also why extrapolation is suitable for dystopia. Consider Eidos Montreal's DEUS EX: HUMAN REVOLUTION—a 2011 critical dystopia of variant II—where in 2027 scientific advances in augmentation technology have enabled humankind to augment their physical and cognitive abilities through prostheses and implants. The game builds its premise on real-world augmentation technology (prosthetic limbs) and imagines the consequences of such technology and its use in a dark, cyberpunk gameworld. Corporate struggle for power, the hubris of pushing

192 Moylan, *Scraps*, 25; emphasis added.

193 Given this observation, it is not enough to describe video game fiction—and SF games in particular—in *a metaphorical relation* to the empirical world. Such an enterprise (pertaining to games in general) was conducted by Sebastian Möring, who claims that "games and play are always already metaphoric" (Möring, "Games and Metaphor," 57)—and "that there is not only a reciprocal relationship between play and metaphor but instead a triadic relationship between the concepts of play, metaphor, and representation." (Ibid., 106).

194 Jameson, *Archaeologies*, xv.

195 Ibid., xvi.

196 Suvin, *Metamorphoses*, 27.

197 Moylan, *Scraps*, 44.

198 Brian McHale, "Towards a Poetics of Cyberpunk," in *Beyond Cyberpunk: New Critical Perspectives*, ed. Graham J. Murphy and Sherryl Vint (London: Routledge, 2010), 4.

boundaries, and a two-tier society are the result, in which augmented people are driven into isolation and forced into addiction through the consumption of a drug that prevents the human body from rejecting the prosthetics. DEUS EX: HR is thus a good example of the novum's totalising hegemony. It virtualises a world that was meticulously built around a cognitive novelty and which is experienced by the player through both the world he perceives and the PC he manoeuvres—for Adam Jensen is highly augmented as well, and the player may experience the advantages and disadvantages of this technology through play.

Direct extrapolation thus creates a connection between empirical and SF world that is neither simple nor "flat"[199] but that rather stands "in a metonymic relation to the current empirical world."[200] Scientific accuracy are its hallmarks, and the technique is often employed in so-called *hard SF*, which requires meticulous deciphering by the appreciator.[201] Whether this results in the creation of an alternative history (BIOSHOCK INFINITE), a faraway future (DEUS EX: INVISIBLE WAR), or a near-future intensification[202] (WATCH_DOGS 1 and 2) is of no great importance, since cognitive estrangement is present in all of these, exerting its influence on the player.

There is, however, a second form of extrapolation that postulates a "more totalizing and more indirect"[203] relationship between realities, and this variant can be discerned in its analogic offshoot. This "richer, more complex model"[204] is sometimes connected to *soft SF* and "[s]peculative world-building."[205] It "involves an imaginative leap, positing one or more disjunctions with the empirical world which cannot be linearly extrapolated from the current state of affairs."[206] For Moylan, the analogic model does not stand in contrast to direct extrapolation but further, and in creative manner, defamiliarises the fictional world. He complements Suvin's deliberations[207] on the matter as follows:

> The simplest form of analogic modeling is close to the extrapolative in that it posits an alternative world that stands in almost a one-to-one relationship to the author's, even though

199 Suvin, *Metamorphoses*, 76.

200 McHale, "Poetics of Cyberpunk," 4.

201 Ibid.

202 What Seeber refers to as "Zuspitzung." (Seeber, *Selbstkritik der Utopie*, 38).

203 Moylan, *Scraps*, 44.

204 Ibid.

205 McHale, "Poetics of Cyberpunk," 4.

206 Ibid.

207 Suvin, *Metamorphoses*, 27-29.

the alternative space is as far back as the prehistoric or as far away as another galaxy or the end of time. … In the 'highest' form of analogic sf, the alternative world does not come across in a direct correspondence to the empirical world but rather is ontologically and epistemologically modulated and distanced so that rigorous work must be done to articulate the critical connections.[208]

Gleaning from this description, the analogic model is partially intertwined with that of direct extrapolation but requires intricate acts of ideation from the appreciator. This is so because the worlds he encounters are "quite fantastic (in the sense of empirically unverifiable) as long as they are logically, philosophically, and mutually consistent."[209] Thus, even gameworlds such as BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL's and far-off worlds like in HORIZON ZERO DAWN (Guerrilla Games, 2017) can be integrated into the realms of SF. Whereas the former is filled with anthropomorphic animals, the latter creates an intricate inversion in which humankind has been pushed back to tribal societies, whereas robotic dinosaurs roam the wilderness. Another example of analogy is TALES FROM THE BORDERLANDS. Here, corporations rule the planet Pandora from their towering skyscrapers (exemplified through the space station of Hyperion that harbours a variety of bureaucrats), while the populace suffers in the realms below, plagued by miserable conditions, violence, and greed: traits which are necessary to survive in such a world.

In sum, both direct and analogic extrapolation create gameworlds that depict not only *what could be* (or what could exist somewhere far away) but, in a sense, *what already is* (in the empirical world). They plunge the player into worlds unknown, creating "a sense of wonder"[210] established in diverse ways, and have him negotiate the connection between realities. However, it is sometimes difficult to discern whether the connection is purely direct or intermingled with analogic techniques, and many games employ a mixture of both forms.

What is of greater importance, though, is that the VGD involves the player in *games of estrangement* by placing him within an unfamiliar scenario he has to make sense of. These games do not exhaust themselves in spatial references (the layout, signs, or peculiarities of the gameworld) and its inhabitants (who seem strange to the player) but extend to the world's underlying processes and the player's actions. The aesthetic response of dystopia (and of all significant SF) can thus only be experienced through the player's acts of ideation and by closing the blanks between the perspectives he encounters and helps create. Consequently,

208 Moylan, *Scraps*, 44.

209 Suvin, *Metamorphoses*, 29.

210 Moylan, *Scraps*, 7.

and in a last theoretical manoeuvre, I now wish to turn to said discussion and to uncover the mysteries leading to the player's aesthetic response to dystopia.

5.2.1 Emancipated Play as the Player's Efforts of Ideation (Previous Research)

Throughout video game studies there has been a tendency to describe the player's combinatorial efforts while playing a game. What is surprising, though, is that while some of these theories mention Iser's contributions (and draw analogies to his work), his insights are employed only sparsely, although they promise insightful results.[211] Consequently, I will begin this section by giving an overview of previous research on the player's efforts of synthesis and ideation, to then develop my own model by integrating Iser's deliberations in a precise manner. These insights will be helpful to describe not only the forms of indeterminacy inherent in a gameworld and how the player fills them in through ergodic and imaginative action—what I will describe in terms of a creative dialectic with dystopia's implied player. In addition, they will illustrate how this process results in the creation/comprehension of *plot* and the *aesthetic object*, leading the emancipated player into the realms of significance.

I therefore wish to return to Calleja's discussion of *alterbiography*, an aspect I briefly mentioned in a footnote in Chapter IV. Calleja's observations are loosely related to Iser's phenomenology, and he describes the player's *process of synthesis* as the interaction "with both arbitrary and iconic signs (i.e., verbal text, images, and audio) as well as with the rules of the game."[212] This negotiation with what Calleja has deemed the *scripted narrative* (any aspect inscribed into the implied player) and the "stringing together [of] a series of causally related segments"[213] leads to the formation of alterbiography—which is to say, "the active construction of an ongoing story that develops through interaction with the game world's topography, inhabitants, objects, and game rules and simulated properties."[214] While touching on this important aspect, however, Calleja's observations fail to encompass the relations between the various elements—how the friction between them

211 For example: Engelns rejects Iser's theory on the basis that it seems too restricted to describe the dynamic medium of the video game. (Engelns, *Spielen und Erzählen*, 68-70).

212 Calleja, *In-Game*, 128-129.

213 Ibid., 129.

214 Ibid., 127; cf. 120-124, 127-129, 132.

create indeterminacy and compel the player to certain imaginings, actions, and the creation of the aesthetic object.

Nitsche proceeds likewise, with observations that are similarly based on Iser's process of ideation and describes how a game's structure can "foreshadow this ideation through the design of … *evocative narrative elements* [ENE], but it comes to life only through the work of the player" who weaves in the connections.[215] ENE include "anything and any situation encountered in a game world that is structured to support and possibly guide the player's comprehension."[216] Imagine the player of DEUS EX: HR arriving at his apartment after having suffered severe injuries and consequent modifications to his body. Entering the room, an artificial voice welcomes the player, while the electronic curtains of three large windows are raised. They give way to rays of light illuminating the room and a marvellous view of Detroit. No doubt the scenario triggers recollections of films like BLADE RUNNER and evokes a noir, cyberpunk image. The apartment is located in a skyscraper high above the grounds of the city and is filled with props that give the player insight into the PC Adam Jensen: the apartment's style, stacks of books on the floor, to a large television which hides a stash of weaponry, ammunition, and supplies. As such, the room evokes images of detective fiction, and in the adjacent room (with a bed, get-well cards, a box of cereal called Augmentchoo, and a book on prosthetic limbs) further insight into Jensen's psyche await: a smashed mirror in the bathroom suggests frustration after having seen his reflection after the modifications.

These props, ENEs, or perspective segments (whatever one wishes to call them) fuel the player's comprehension of this world and aid its *cognitive mapping*.[217] Every aspect in the room (and in the gameworld) was placed for a particular purpose and in a specific arrangement. What is lacking, though—what remains indeterminate—are the connections between the aspects, which have to be inferred by the player. Such a task is quite "demanding," since the gameworld often confronts the player with a "multiplicity of perspectives"[218] he has to negotiate and describes an activity that comes close to the reader's involvement in postmodern fiction, when he has to make sense of a highly fragmentary arrangement of events that each offer "but a glimpse of the overall story."[219] As such, it would

215 Nitsche, *Game Spaces*, 43; emphasis added; cf. 43.

216 Ibid., 37.

217 Newman, *Videogames*, 114-117.

218 Maziarczyk, "Playable Dystopia," 243.

219 Ibid., 243; cf. 243.

not be unfair to compare Nitsche's ENEs to what I have termed perspective segments, though his exclude ludic and procedural elements.[220] They can therefore be regarded as "the foundational building blocks"[221] of a game narrative, its "suggestive markings"[222] the player reads and combines into a coherent plot, but which he also "cocreates … and changes."[223]

ENEs thus exert a strong influence on player actions, and Nitsche comments on this by describing the end of DEUS EX: HR, where after a lengthy experience the collected impressions lead the player to action and the choice between three different endings—"each following a specific philosophy with its ethical qualities."[224] This decision was long in the making and stands as an example of how the player's imaginings influence his ergodic actions in the critical dystopia of variant II.

Consequently, although Calleja's and Nitsche's deliberations have gone further than others (which centre on how narrative is conveyed through gamespace), they only touch on the complex dialectic between fictional and empirical world a VGN affords. Instead, they remain caught up in the diegetic level of plot comprehension/creation and neglect to address how a game triggers an aesthetic response in the player. To move the investigation further into this direction—and into the realms of *significance*—it is beneficial to resort to theories of *environmental storytelling*, a world-building technique borrowed from theme park design that is concerned with the artful integration of story elements in the environment to create causation between them.[225] Such a technique is beneficial to the developers and the player alike, for the former may direct the plot and guide the player—as sort of "narrative architects" who "design worlds and sculpt spaces"—while the latter rejoices in the imaginings that are fuelled.[226] Although environmental storytelling theories focus on the player's comprehension of the diegesis, they nonetheless point in the right direction by suggesting that the gameworld formulates a *malleable space* which negotiates the past, present, and future of this world and creates

220 Nitsche, *Game Spaces*, 43.

221 Ibid., 37.

222 Ibid., 44.

223 Ibid., 45; cf. 37, 44-45, 52.

224 Ibid., 44; cf. 44-45.

225 Don Carson, "Environmental Storytelling: Creating Immersive 3D Worlds Using Lessons Learned from the Theme Park Industry," *Gamastura: The Art and Business of Making Games* (2000), https://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/131594/environmental_storytelling_.php

226 Jenkins, "Architecture," 121; cf. 124-126.

ties to realms beyond it—in the form of allusions to other fictional worlds and to what players know from the empirical world.

One important theory in this respect is Clara Fernández-Vara's discussion of *indexical storytelling*. Becoming involved in a VGN, players enter "a game of *story-building*, since the player has to piece together the story, or construct a story of her own intention in the world by leaving a trace."[227] This game is neither confined nor exclusive to the gameworld, and an important aspect of Vara's discussion is the use of so-called *indices*, "a type of sign" that "can help the player situate herself in the world … and relate her experience in the game with her previous knowledge."[228] Indices, as such, set the player in the role of a "detective"[229] and function as both "markers pointing the player towards what she has to do … but [also] encourage her to interpret and reconstruct the events that have taken place in the space."[230] Vara explains this aspect using the example of BIOSHOCK, whose gameworld is filled with signs that point the player in the right direction or give her information: for example, signs naming different areas of the game and directional signs, or Plasmid advertisements and propaganda posters that grant players further insight into the world's ideology.[231] In addition, Vara mentions indices that point to the gameworld's history—and to Rapture's fall from a utopian into a dystopian society[232]—by leaving a trace of bygone events for the player to decipher. Such traces can also be left through the player's actions, who in retrospect will interpret them as being part of this world's recent history.[233]

It is undeniable that spaces which trigger imaginings about the gameworld's past are important to the critical dystopia, which lays emphasis on how dystopia came into being or has developed from a previous Utopia. This process is often fuelled by what Jenkins has called *embedded narratives*. These transform the gameworld into "a kind of information space, a memory place"[234] in that they prestructure player participation by embedding micronarratives into the environment

227 Clara Fernández-Vara, "Game Spaces Speak Volumes: Indexical Storytelling," *Proceedings of the 2011 DiGRA International conference: Think Design Play* 6 (2011): 1, http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/game-spaces-speak-volumes-indexical-storytelling/

228 Ibid., 5.

229 Ibid., 6.

230 Ibid., 5.

231 Ibid., 8.

232 Schmeink, "Dystopia."

233 Fernández-Vara, "Indexical Storytelling," 5-6.

234 Jenkins, "Architecture," 126.

which prompt his imaginings (see my discussion of JOURNEY in chapter IV).[235] Embedded narratives often stand in close relation to the environment they were placed in and may include environmental signs, specific architecture like ruins, text notes, audio logs, pictures, hallucinations, video recordings, retrospective narration, or playable flashbacks that show the present environment in a different light, and so on.[236] Such references refuse to lock the dystopian game "into an eternal present"[237] and lay the focus on the extrapolative trace between *what was* and *what is.* They thus confront the player with at least two societies he has to negotiate: the fictional world's past/present and the empirical world from which these stem.

For all the benefits of environmental storytelling theories, which lay the focus on the gameworld's past, one must not forget gamespaces' concern for the future and how players make predictions based on their previous experience within the game. As Tosca claims: "Experiences are always a combination of past, present, circumstances and future expectations" and have "aesthetic potential."[238] The participant makes sense of things through "operations" such as "anticipating, connecting, interpreting, reflecting, appropriating and recounting."[239] Consequently, regarding the gameworld as a space in constant flux between *what was, what is, and what will be* is essential to playing dystopia. This can be explained in that the gameworld opens up a space for "performative simulations, conveying a sense of the malleability of the future"[240] to the player, who aims to decipher the moment utopian enclave mays transform dystopia. Gameworlds, in other words, exhibit a plethora of *pregnant moments* (known from pictorial representations) that open up a "temporal window" into the past but also "let the spectator imagine what immediately … followed the represented scene."[241] This occurs when the player draws conclusions from past/present moments and anticipates the near or far-off future, which may include predictions about his own actions (depending on the current situation), the blood on the wall that might announce further confrontation, a lit

235 Ibid.

236 Ibid., 127.

237 Ibid.

238 Susana P. Tosca, "Transmedial Museum Experiences: the Case of Moesgaard," *NODO: Transmedial Narratives* 18 (2016): 58, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/312024183_nodo_18_3067-13176-1-PB

239 Ibid. Tosca bases these claims on a theory developed by (John McCarthy and Peter Wright, *Technology as Experience* [Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2004], 6, 19).

240 Frelik, "Video Games," 229.

241 Ryan, *Avatars*, 15; cf. 15.

up barn that evokes imaginings of inhabitants, or dark clouds that herald a thunderstorm.

This dialectic between past, present, and future is an integral quality of dystopian games and helps the player decipher utopian enclaves hidden within the gameworld. Yet the connections he weaves are not confined to the gameworld and are inspired by his world knowledge, the cultures he is familiar with, and other fictional worlds or ludic conventions he has come to know. The prompters, thereby, may include characters, processes, or spaces that remind the player of other (fictional) personae, mechanisms, or architecture/styles he knows from the empirical world or previously visited fictions. Jenkins has called such spaces *evocative spaces*[242]—but these can easily be extended to include any element of the gameworld (characters, processes, or certain types of actions) that creates ties to other games, narratives, or things the player knows from the empirical world. This is the case, for example, in BIOSHOCK INFINITE, which through its damsel-in-distress structure and the tower in which Elizabeth is locked up reminds the player of the fairy tale Rapunzel, as well as other analogies to real-world entities like the Statue of Liberty or the World's Columbian Exposition are imaginable. Consequently, by involving the player in a world that seems strange yet familiar, *evocative elements* (to expand on Jenkins' term) either "enhance our sense of immersion with a familiar world or communicate a fresh perspective on that story through the altering of established details"[243]—which formulates an integral quality of aesthetically complex games and is an important incentive for emancipated play.

5.2.2 Utopian Enclaves as Vacancies Within the Gameworld

These deliberations pave the way for a discussion of utopian enclaves hidden within the gameworld that may lead the dystopian reality into a utopian direction. These may be found in a variety of aspects and references in the game, and they need not occur in a comprehensive form—one may recall in this respect *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Winston Smith's resistance in the form of a diary and his sexual relationship with Julia in the woods.

Consequently, utopian enclaves may be found in embedded narratives and allusions to the past, when the world was a better place (such as Artyom's hallucinations in METRO 2033, which for brief moments transform the derelict world of the game into peaceful scenery by showing glimpses of how it was before, when

242 Jenkins, "Architecture," 123-125, 129.

243 Ibid., 129.

playgrounds were filled with life and the cheering of children). They may be found in diegetic music tunes (in the songs of the band 'Die Käfer' in WOLFENSTEIN: THE NEW ORDER, which satirically comment on the prevailing system) and references to other fictional worlds or places in the real world that promise hope (for example, when THE LAST OF US creates connections to ecological fictions like the optimistic works of the French writer Jean Giono or triggers imaginings about a life in balance with nature, untouched by the viral nature of modern capitalism).

In addition, utopian enclaves can be found in certain types of spaces that evoke specific emotions in the player, for instance, those influenced by "expressionism (which maps emotions onto physical space) [244] and romanticism (which endows landscapes with moral qualities)."[245] Both find their way into many VGDs, such as the posthuman fantasies of NIER: AUTOMATA (Platinum Games, 2017) that juxtaposes natural spaces with the ruins of human civilisation and consumption, and reflects on the emotions of androids (who the player controls) as they manoeuvre through these spaces. By embedding such spaces within the gameworld in an artful manner, utopian microcosms often shine with marvellous scenery, architecture, and labyrinthine structures. They create near-perfect design and behaviour that result in delightful though thought-provoking possibilities for play.[246] One could imagine here FLOWER (Thatgamecompany, 2009), which juxtaposes dreamlike nature sections that have a calming effect on the player with its bleak menu, depicting a rainy city. Whereas such spaces can only transform into dystopian ones through inappropriate player behaviour—Walz mentions SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS (Team ICO, 2005), where the player disrupts the tranquil scenery through her actions by killing the behemoths—there are others that are inherently dystopian.[247] These still "provide pleasure in setting up entirely unenjoyable, i.e. frustrating places that must be playfully escaped, saved, destroyed, or equilibrated"[248] and can be found in game sections like arenas, multicursal mazes, or similar structures that afford pleasurable frustration.

All in all, these conclusions illustrate the range of hopeful possibilities that pervade the VGD and, at times, push the supposedly pessimistic genre towards a fully-fledged Utopia. The allusions and references to better times and places

244 Domsch calls such spaces "Seelenlandschaft," which depict "landscapes that reflect the mood of a protagonist, a scene, or a whole narrative (e.g. the fact that it is raining at a funeral)." (Domsch, *Storyplaying*, 103).

245 Jenkins, "Contested."

246 Walz, *Toward a Ludic Architecture*, 137-138.

247 Ibid., 140.

248 Ibid., 146.

thereby play an important role in the transformation of dystopia. But in order to effectuate successful change (that is, to escape the boundaries of the classical dystopia), more than pure imagination is needed, and the player's ergodic efforts of actualising the utopian horizon and setting the dystopian gameworld on a liberating route towards Utopia become of importance. Hence it follows that the enclaves to be found in the *gameworld's system* and the *player's agency* are the most promising.

To explain this issue, let me refer back to the systemic nature of a (dystopian) game and its system of rules that channels the player's movements and degree of agency through aspects such as labyrinthine structures, invisible barriers, cutscenes, obstacles, possibilities to act, and so on.[249] These constraints

> imposed by the games should be seen as having a central role in constructing dystopian narratives. The underlying message of the constraints on player freedom is that some situations may be so deeply flawed that they are beyond redemption. In such situations, even the most heroic and courageous character is powerless to fix the devastated world or to move it in a radically different direction.[250]

I have deemed this type of dystopia the classical dystopia and illustrated its confines with the example of THE STANLEY PARABLE and EVERY DAY THE SAME DREAM. Yet, with the critical dystopia, loss is not an option, and rather than succumbing to the confines of the game system, the player aims at discovering its glitches[251] and "the flaw of the system" that "invariably … underestimate[s] the player's agency" and eventually leads to its downfall.[252] This is the case in both variants of the critical dystopia, although in its second form, the player will be held responsible for finding it.

---

249 Domsch, "Dystopian," 398, 400, 402; Schulzke, "Virtual," 316, 327, 329, 330.

250 Ibid., 330.

251 Dystopian game systems *enclose the player within their confines* (to recall the player's failed escape in *The Stanley Parable*, chapter II). They do so by illuminating the system through "authoring arguments through processes" and making "claims about *how things work*" (Bogost, *Persuasive*, 29) but go further by prohibiting players "to raise *procedural* objections—that is, the player of a videogame is usually not allowed to change the rules of play." (Ibid., 37). In the VGD as critical dystopia, this prison house of procedural objection is flawed, however, and inscribed into the game for the player to find any glitches.

252 Domsch, "Dystopian," 402; cf. 400-402.

It follows that utopian enclaves with the potential to shatter the dystopian system are hidden within the processes of a game, its system of rules that affords them, and the player's agency to actualise these potentialities. They are *vacancies* in the game system and require the player's combinatorial efforts in deciphering them and his ergodic actualisation; otherwise the enclaves will remain hidden within the system (which is not to say that the player may not stumble upon them by pure chance). It is this "system-shattering agency" that makes the critical dystopia in video game fiction "utopian at heart"[253] and that requires a form of agency that has the player negotiate his possibilities for action within the context of a fictional storyworld and the narrative that fuels it (as described in chapter IV).

However, what begins in a process of realisation and the consequent measures to change the gameworld does not remain within the virtual space of the game but extends into the real world. In this sense, the actualisation of the utopian enclaves in the gameworld shows the quality of an *event* as described by Alain Badiou.[254] It creates a "rupture"[255] with the current state of affairs and in a risky but pleasurable act of transgression evokes an experience of "happiness" through "exceptional moments." One of these is when the player breaks with the repressive order in the gameworld and becomes sensitised to similar action in the real world. Such an action requires the activation of the player through *emancipated play*, which creatively negotiates what dystopia's implied player has offered. It occurs, for example, when the player of BIOSHOCK delays his need for immediate gratification and refrains from harvesting the Little Sisters to actualise a utopian horizon at the game's end (see chapter VI). This event powerfully extends into the real world (when the player realises that participation in useless consumption comes close to harvesting little girls or third-world workers) and illustrates the seductive power of fiction, when virtual actions create happiness and lead the individual to emancipation and to taking action in the real world.

Emancipated play, in other words, often entails precarious play, which is the result of an event that is risky but exceptional. It presupposes *a gap, a place of*

253 Ibid., 403.

254 Sicart similarly, though for a different purpose, employs Badiou's "événement" as "an experience of delimited boundaries with a series of imperatives that have to be assumed in order to become a subject" and considers it "operationally similar to" a game itself. (Miguel Sicart, *The Ethics of Computer Games* [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009], 71).

255 Alain Badiou, interviewed by Mira Davidson, "Happiness is a Risk that we Must be Ready to Take," *Verso*, https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2032-alain-badiou-happiness-is-a-risk-that-we-must-be-ready-to-take

indeterminacy that represents the player's primary desire for Utopia (what Jameson has called the unconscious utopian impulse), whose filling brings about the rupture needed to transform the current capitalist order. In order to sustain the event's effect on political thought and action, however, a "fidelity" to the event is necessary that manifests itself in "the continuous creation of the rupture itself"—that is to say, in its constant renegotiation "by way of a collective discussion."[256]

According to this argumentation, *aesthetic response* (created in and through the act of play) may transform into political action. In order to sustain the response's effect, however, a continuous negotiation between all parties involved becomes necessary and a willingness to change that requires a *self-sacrificing stance* from the player (in both the virtual and real world). It is the first step towards Utopia (as conducted by the ethical player of BIOSHOCK) that illustrates an endeavour which is, nonetheless, often aggravated through finding suitable actions to break with the status quo.

Fiction can thereby evoke additional confusion, for the distorting realities it creates may have players ponder the true meaning of the gameworld, its processes, and the goals they pursue. Think about the processes and player actions that occur in the BORDERLANDS series, and that the constant renegotiation of images these evoke transforms an initially fun experience of pursuing goals, conducting strategies, killing bad guys, or hunting down the treasures of Vaults into one of alienation. As a consequence, players will realise that what they are participating in is a defamiliarised form of capitalism's most brutal excesses. This state of affairs can be partially explained with the form of estrangement that marks VG SF—when a game "raises speculative questions through the immediate player experience of agential actions and interactive processes rather than the exposition of a science fiction novel" and combines those with "often-experimental mechanics."[257]

In other words, the experience of gameworld processes and certain player actions is distorted in the VGD, since they often do not mean what they denote. Let me briefly resort to animal play to explain this phenomenon, which, as Iser claims, is similar to a reader's involvement in the literary text in that the "signifier is fictionalized … because denotation is laid to rest and what is said is not meant."[258] Iser bases this claim on Gregory Bateson's observations that in animal play actions are generally not what they seem:

256 Ibid.

257 Jagoda, "Digital Games," 141.

258 Iser, *Imaginary*, 248.

Paradox is doubly present in the signals which are exchanged within the context of play, fantasy, threat, etc. Not only does the playful nip not denote what would be denoted by the bite for which it stands, but, in addition, the bite itself is fictional. Not only do the playing animals not quite mean what they are saying but, also, they are usually communicating about something which does not exist.[259]

For Iser, the result of this process is a "split signifier [which] signals that this is play" and suspends it "denotative function."[260] This vacancy gives way to something new. "By removing something, it makes something else possible" and thereby liberates the original signifier's "implications."[261]

Transferring these insights to playing dystopia is fruitful, since it clarifies why processes and player actions (and those of NPCs) often do not mean what they denote. It will help explain why the lock picking in BIOSHOCK INFINITE does not simply stand for unlocking the next area of the game but, on a further level, illustrates the unlocking of Booker DeWitt's unconsciousness. It will help illustrate why harvesting a Little Sister no longer means to simply kill a little girl but to succumb to the internal mechanisms of a rapturous capitalism. Finally, it will help explain why Elizabeth's tower not only resembles a prison under the guise of freedom for her but, on a grander scale, for any of those in the empirical world who relish their imprisonment in the iron cage of Anti-Utopia. What follows from these observations is that player actions are akin to *shifting images*, where signifiers lose their denotation and give rise to "free-floating implications."[262] These places of indeterminacy can be filled and deciphered, however, bringing to the fore unexpected implications—and it is through the player's acts of ideation and by closing the blanks between the various perspectives that this becomes possible.

5.2.3 The Repertoire of the Game and the Oscillation Between Completion and Combination

Before coming to the image creation in the act of play, it is necessary to point out that playing dystopia demands considerable work from the player and that the games of estrangement not only test his combinatorial and ludic skills but also his

259 Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology* (Lanham, Maryland: Jason Arson, 1987), 188.

260 Iser, *Imaginary*, 248.

261 Ibid.; cf. 247-248.

262 Ibid., 249.

world knowledge. This aspect is readily accepted by the player, for to understand the gameworld, he orients himself in the *familiar aspects of the game*: what he knows from the real world or from other fictional (game)worlds (a prototypical chair or landscape, certain norms and processes, or character behaviours). These aspects are called the *repertoire of the game*. They facilitate the player's comprehension of the game and enable him to establish links and associations with what he already knows.[263] "Understanding the repertoire is a matter of competence,"[264] and it is needless to say that the emancipated player's state of knowledge will ultimately determine the complexity of his interactions with the implied player.

(Dystopian) games thus demand a few competences from the player, and the first necessary requirement is the ability to play a game. Calleja has termed this form of involvement *kinesthetic involvement*, since it is only when players grasp the controls of a game that they are able to move around its environment and act out their fantasies.[265] A basic level of skill thus formulates the premise for (emancipated) play—and of further benefit is the player's knowledge of ludic or narrative genres (which fosters his understanding of the gameworld, its rules and conventions; raises expectations and creates ties to other games/narratives) or philosophical aspects (that have him ponder about the meaning of the experience).[266]

The repertoire of the game thus informs the player's playthroughs and narrows certain actions/imaginings/interpretations.[267] It helps him fill in the gameworld's indeterminacies and create closure through ergodic and imaginative interaction. This desire for the resolution of unanswered questions/non-actualised possibilities (or the frustration of such) is a basic inducement to the player's involvement. Every player will thereby communicate with a game differently by using his private stock of knowledge and expressing who is through play (to recall the different player types).This dialectic with the implied player is due to the structural openness of work worlds and oscillates between the desire for *completion* and *combination*.

Iser touches upon this important difference in the reader's involvement in the literary text and distinguishes between two categories of indeterminacy: 1) *gaps in the determinacy of the storyworld* and 2) *blanks that arise between the textual perspectives*. Such a distinction comes suspiciously close to what the player encounters in video game fiction, and, therefore, I wish to quote Iser at length:

263 Engelns, *Spielen und Erzählen*, 87-88; Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., *Understanding*, 204.

264 Ibid., 206.

265 Calleja, *In-Game*, 71.

266 Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., *Understanding*, 204-206, 216-217, 232-233.

267 Ibid., 206.

What we have called the blank arises out of the indeterminacy of the text, and although it appears to be akin to Ingarden's 'places of indeterminacy,' it is *different in kind and function*. The latter term is used to designate a *gap in the determinacy* of the intentional object or in the sequence of the 'schematized aspects'; the *blank*, however, designates a vacancy in the overall system of the text, the filling of which brings about an *interaction of textual patterns*. In other words, the need for *completion* is replaced here by the need for *combination.*[268]

Iser comes to this conclusion from the premise that "effect and response arise from a dialectical relationship between showing and concealing,"[269] and that the literary text indulges the reader in this dialectic through that "which is not formulated"[270] and has "the reader … work it out for himself."[271] I have already touched on what this means for the VGN, which, similarly though not equal to the literary text, evokes the player's participation through *what remains indeterminate/virtual* in a game (unspoken utterances and hidden aspects that remain potential for the player to actualise).

The difference between *gaps* and *blanks* as indeterminacies of the gameworld becomes apparent once one regards the incompleteness of the gamespace, which awaits the player's imagination and ergodic actions for completion. Gamespaces are the virtualised parts of the greater storyworld and resemble a "stage" that, as Nitsche argues, "is too big and too active to be fully comprehensible."[272] For this reason, game environments are often smaller than they appear.[273] They leave many gaps for the player to fill in and imagine the gameworld. Consider BIOSHOCK INFINITE's Columbia, where the player can only traverse small parts of the city and enter a handful of buildings, while in the background further regions supposedly await. In this respect, gamespaces are akin to the decorative function of film sets, and complete (contiguous) spaces are rare, if non-existent.[274] What the player instead encounters are "discrete areas physically unconnected with those already

268 Iser, *Act*, 182; emphasis added.

269 Ibid., 45.

270 Ibid., 47.

271 Ibid., 46.

272 Nitsche, *Game Spaces*, 106-107.

273 Calleja, *In-Game*, 78.

274 An exception is Hello Games' NO MAN'S SKY (2016), which has the player explore a procedurally generated universe that simulates completeness, where only the interior of planets is not visible.

present"[275]—and this includes open world spaces, which are often separated into individual parts, be it through mountains, rivers, or other barriers.

Such *environmental gaps* speak to the player's innate desire for completion and evoke in him the urge to cognitively map the gameworld.[276] But often, these gaps are not to be filled only by imagination, and there are a plethora of game areas that remain indeterminate only so long as the player has not discovered them—for example, the player can imagine the inside of a house only so long as he has not entered it. Consequently, besides closing the gameworld gaps through imagination, the player's ergodic efforts of exploration and task fulfilment are vital to finding closure in VGNs. They speak to his desire to discover hidden parts of the gameworld and the completion of its tasks and, thereby, create important perspectives in themselves. Imagine an area the player discovers which gives him further information about the gameworld, a character who tells him a personal story, or an entire city or society which awaits exploration. As such, to attain closure in a VGN, the player is either handed information in the ongoing plot (through cutscenes, scripted events, dialogue, text, or entire playable sections[277]) or is encouraged to do the work himself, by completing quests or other chores that will reward him with bits and pieces of the total picture.

Filling in the gaps in VGNs thus differs from what appreciators have come to know in non-ergodic fictions and oscillates between what Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. describe as the "story" and "action level."[278] Play is "informed by: our cognitive, often-unconscious filling-in-the-gaps, our sense of what we think we have to do within the game, and the hand–eye coordination that gives us our playing ability."[279] To illustrate their claims, they describe a section of RESIDENT EVIL: CODE VERONICA (Capcom, 2000) in which the player asks himself questions that will be answered by subsequent events: "Who is the guy? (open)—Umbrella guard who

275 Newman, *Videogames*, 105.

276 Calleja, *In-Game*, 78-79.

277 In this respect, Hensel mentions a gap in the plotline of THE LAST OF US that is filled in by the DLC of the game: THE LAST OF US: LEFT BEHIND (Naughty Dog, 2014). Not only does the DLC illuminate Ellie's back story, but it also closes an ellipsis the original game left unanswered, which describes (and has the player enact) how Ellie managed to treat the injured Joel. (Thomas Hensel, "Zwischen *Ludus* und *Paidia*: *The Last of Us* als Reflexion des Computerspiels," in *New Game Plus: Perspektiven der Game Studies*. *Genres – Künste – Diskurse*, e Benjamin Beil, Gundolf S. Freyermuth, and Lisa Gotto [Bielefeld: Transcript, 2015], 160-164).

278 Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., *Understanding*, 217.

279 Ibid., 219.

captured me (close); Why is he opening the door? Maybe he will kill me, maybe he is a spy (open)—he opens it because the base is under attack and wants to give me a chance (close)."[280] Because it is a game, however, such gap filling on a story level is complemented by the player's urge for completion on a ludic level—what I have termed the creation of perspectives through ergodic action.

> We are in a cellblock. Start off by going to your item screen. Go to the LIGHTER you see and use "Select" with the action button … grab the HANDGUN BULLETS. On the desk near the unconscious jailer is a COMBAT KNIFE. Once you have all the items, you may exit the room.[281]

Although the distinction between story and action level is viable for analysis, I will not distinguish between them, for I consider them part of a coherent whole. It nonetheless illustrates that the gap filling in VGNs differs from what the appreciator is used to in non-ergodic art. By activating the player's cognition and having him intervene in the plot, he attains closure through a combination of imaginative and ergodic action.

This completionist activity is however complemented by the *drive to combination*. Negotiating the perspectives offered by the game and co-created by the player formulates a vital aspect of the player's participation and will ultimately lead to the creation of the aesthetic object. Sicart comes closest to my deliberations in this respect as he describes *frictions* that may occur between the different aspects of a game: between "the narrative or the characters, the gameworld, the rules and systems, or the play settings and presence of other players."[282] However, in order to explore this aspect any further, Iser's deliberations cannot be neglected and shall inform the phenomenology of play I am proposing for the VGD (and VGN).

280 Ibid.

281 Ibid.

282 Sicart, *Beyond*, 110.

Table 8: Forms of indeterminacy/incompleteness in VGNs

Gaps:	**Drive for completion**
Environmental	• Inaccessible parts of the gameworld (parts that were not constructed and function as decorative props). • 2D gameworlds, which hide certain regions. • Evocative spaces.
Abstract regions	• Reductions, condensations, or magnifications of space. • Physically unrealistic structures.
Plot progression	• Questions about the plot (what happened, how it will proceed). • Ellipses (distortions and jumps in time). • Parts of the gameworld that refer to its past or allow predictions about its future (through environmental storytelling). • Parts of the gameworld that refer to other narratives (embedded narratives).
Character personalities	• Character traits and personalities that are not explicitly elaborated and have to be inferred.
Possibilities for action (actualisation)	• Virtual possibilities for action (affordances in the gameworld that allow player participation).
Blanks:	**Drive for combination**
Between the perspectives	• Help the player understand the gameworld and the ongoing plot. • Allow him to compose images on the level of significance.
Between the gameworld and empirical world	• The level of estrangement (forms of referentiality) between gameworld and empirical world.

5.3 THE FLUX OF IMAGES AND THE PLAYER'S CREATION OF THE AESTHETIC OBJECT IN *Metro 2033*

It has been clarified so far that representational art—and the genres of SF, utopia, and dystopia in particular (through their games of estrangement)—denies direct access to the empirical world. Instead, representations involve the appreciator in creative games of make-believe. They urge him into imaginings of a certain kind and the player to action and grant access to their worlds through acts of ideation. This feedback oscillation between fictional and empirical world is largely encouraged by the creation of *images* and their negotiation as the player closes the blanks between the perspectives he encounters and co-creates. I have previously outlined the player's creation of images with the example of JOURNEY, and I now wish to go into further detail by resorting to Iser:

> The imagistic vision of the imagination is … not the impression objects make upon what Hume still called 'sensation'; nor is it optical vision … it is, in fact, the attempt to ideate … [*vorstellen*] that which one can never see as such. The true character of these images consists in the fact that they bring to light aspects which could not have emerged through direct perception of the object.[283]

The discussion of image creation in the act of play becomes of benefit to understand the player's venture into dystopia. It will not only illuminate how he is able to decipher the distorted dreamworlds but, in addition, will clarify the mechanisms behind the emancipatory window the genre offers—when the player catches a glimpse of the truth behind the experience and of the opaque nature of his empirical surroundings.

METRO 2033 does not deviate from this fact, and it would be hard to deny the naturalness of its aesthetic effect—sending the player on a cathartic journey to enlightenment and having him ideate the images that compose and arise from his experience. These are in constant flux and their ever-changing signifieds urge the player to reconsider his previous imaginings and actions. In this respect, the *tower* at the game's beginning and the image of the *Dark Ones* are of considerable importance. For, as Iser would say, they urge the player to imagine something that their iconic signs have not yet denoted but what is nonetheless guided through that denotation. Denotations transform into connotations, guided by the structural finesse of the game's strategies, which allows the player to see the gameworld in a

283 Iser, *Act*, 137.

different manner and to create unexpected connections to his empirical surroundings.[284]

Figure 16: The image of the tower will ideate in the player's mind and grant new insights into both the gameworld and the empirical world.

METRO 2033 (4A Games, 2010), ch. Prologue.

Perception and ideation are thus "two different [yet not mutually exclusive] means to access the world:" the former requiring an object's "presence," the latter its "absence or nonexistence."[285] Although video games differ in this respect from literary works, as the player perceives large parts of the world (similar to the spectator or the viewer, whereas the world of a book can only be imagined), it is still necessary for him to ideate the truth behind these impressions and interactions. Such an enterprise will ultimately lead to the creation of the *aesthetic object*, whose initial "insubstantiality … spurs on the reader's [/player's] imagination" and induces him to partially complete "its shape."[286] The creation of images, thereby, is by no means an arbitrary process but is guided by the textual positions and strategies that demarcate the reader's journey and which formulate the "lines along which the imagination is to run."[287] Following this train of thought, the *strategies of a game* become of fundamental importance to the participation process,

284 Ibid., 65-66, 137.

285 Ibid., 137; cf. 137.

286 Ibid., 92.

287 Ibid.; cf. 92.

since they guide the player on the lines of the ergodic and the imaginative, and set him in a dialectic with the work's implied player.

5.3.1 The Blank and Its Ideation-Inducing Function as Positive Hint or Negation

To better understand the player's acts of ideation, let me again resort to METRO 2033 in which the player takes on the role of twenty-year-old Artyom and embarks on a dreamlike journey of disclosure and disguise towards a mysterious tower. The tower is where the plot begins, at the story's end, and eight days into the future. Artyom and Miller are about to finish their mission of dealing with the Dark Ones, a race of hostile creatures that through their psychic abilities induce nightmares in human beings and attack their stations. The first perspective segments contribute to this image. The player is about to reach the surface of what used to be Moscow and puts on his gas mask when a shadow, resembling a werewolf, bids him welcome to a frozen world. The threat is palpable, and once the player reaches the tower, his military convoy is attacked by vicious creatures. These first moments of the prologue (after which the game jumps back in time) introduce the player to the gameworld of METRO and anticipate future events. They are pregnant moments that create a space of uncertainty (indeterminacy) and function as "existential presuppositions" that, similar to the opening of a novel, indicate what *can be found* in this world and what is *still to come*.[288]

What the game achieves by doing so is not simply enabling the player's understanding of this world but setting him on journey towards the truth. This journey is structured by the form of indeterminacy I have termed the *blank.* Blanks, as Iser argues, "are the *unseen joints* of the text, and as they mark of schemata and textual perspectives from one another, they simultaneously trigger acts of ideation on the reader's part."[289] In doing so, the blank controls communication with a text/game and sets into motion the perspectives (segments)[290] encountered and created by the player. The drive for completion is here intertwined with that for

288 Doležel, *Heterocosmica*, 175.

289 Iser, *Act*, 183, emphasis added.

290 The blank not only conditions the links between the perspectives of a text/game but also the indeterminate space between perspectives segments themselves. In combination, these compose a greater perspective: for example, if the reader/player is given only segments of a character's personality and composes a coherent picture of that character through combinatorial acts. (Ibid., 182-183).

combination, and this process of "passive synthesis"[291] induces the reader/player to slowly build up a *gestalt*, to create consistency by closing the blanks between the signs/perspectives.[292] The blank, as such, not only prompts the reader/player into imagining something that is not—the absent image upon which the player can act, not the reader—but it also structures this process in a decisive manner.[293]

Devising certain strategies, choosing how to proceed in a game, or imagining the gameworld's particulars and plot details designate processes that are fuelled by the blank's structure. In this form it is akin to what Doležel calls "positive (hints)"[294]—that is to say, it helps the player comprehend the plot and the game's ludic structure and enables him to make informed decisions from these deliberations. In METRO 2033 this means understanding that the Dark Ones pose a threat and that for the sake of the gameworld and to complete the game, it is important to tackle the goal of defeating them, while comprehending how it could be done. The strategies of the game inform this process, and various perspectives aid the player's comprehension, while virtualised potentialities enable him to actualise certain imaginings he deems possible and fruitful to enact.

This first function of the blank is complemented by what Doležel calls "negative (lacunae)"[295]—and herein lies the blank's "aesthetic relevance."[296] It is when play is at its most exciting that any attempts at "*good continuation*"[297] in the comprehension process and the act of play are shattered. This is not to say that in order to create aesthetic complexity a game should be unplayable. But what it should do is have the player ponder problems, his tactics, and not present him with premature solutions to both ergodic and imaginative issues. In such cases, blanks "break up the connectability of the schemata, and thus they marshal selected norms and perspective segments into a fragmented, counterfactual, contrastive or telescoped sequence."[298] The result is a confusing array of perspectives that often contradict each other and stand in opposition in an intricate game of *agôn*. As such, they

291 Ibid., 135.

292 Ibid., 118-120, 169.

293 Ibid., 135-136.

294 Doležel, *Heterocosmica*, 174.

295 Ibid.

296 Iser, *Act*, 186.

297 Ibid.

298 Ibid.

withstand convergence/synthesis—and this runs against the player's habitual dispositions in that his expectations of the game are shattered, or at least refuted, while he tries to solve the conflicts he is presented with.[299]

Such hindrances to play may occur in basic and more complex forms. For now, however, it suffices to say that art (or at least complex art), "impedes the acts of ideation which form the basis for the constitution of meaning"[300] and spurs the appreciator into creating a sequence of images that move on one another. In constant flux, they negotiate what is presented and in conflict and what is created by the player, and devise an unprecedented newness. This occurs through "various types of negation," which "invoke familiar or determinate elements only to cancel them out"[301] and coerce the reader/player into discarding previously composed images. First degree images turn into those of a "second degree,"[302] and it is the latter to which readers/players respond most intimately. For the potential of a perennial response lies in one's own creations, through acts of negotiation and revision and by imagining the unthinkable.[303] The player's increased involvement in a game intensifies these games of proximity and distance, there is no doubt, by testing and validating the created images through ergodic efforts and acting upon them.

METRO 2033 is a well-suited example to illustrate these issues and to address the guiding function of the blank as well as the ideation-inducing hindrance of negation. When the plot moves back eight days in the past, the player has already glimpsed the hostile world that awaits him. First impressions have formed, and these continue to be informed by perspective segments once we set out to discover Artyom's home station Exhibition. The section begins in Artyom's room, where postcards of the old world are pinned to a wall. He is informed that a man called Hunter is on his way to the station and sets out to find him. On the way there, the player is made familiar with life in the Metro. There is chatter about disease and mutant attacks, while a child cries in the background. People in Exhibition blame the Dark Ones for their current situation, mentioning how they damage their prey's minds through hallucinations. The existential fear of the Other is palpable in every respect, and the player passes a hospital area with men wounded by the attacks. What can be the solution to these issues, the player may ponder. For the situation is desperate and the station will no longer endure it.

299 Ibid.

300 Ibid., 187-188.

301 Ibid., 169.

302 Ibid., 186.

303 Ibid., 186, 189.

It is obvious that these perspectives contribute to the negative image of the Dark Ones formed in the prologue, and further insights intensify these impressions. Finally, the player meets Hunter, who seems to know Artyom, as he brings him a postcard of the Statue of Liberty to complement his collection. Hunter is a high-ranking Polis Ranger and constitutes the first important character perspective, with a clear motto: "If it's hostile, you kill it."[304] The conversation is interrupted by a sequence in which the mutants attack. The player quickly gathers a weapon and ammunition, tensely awaiting the upcoming action. Exhibition is saved for now—in a brutal skirmish—and an additional perspective that complements the horizon of past perspectives is created through the player's actions. For now, the situation seems clear: The Dark Ones pose a threat that needs to be dealt with, and the perspectives the player has gathered and co-created strengthen this insight. Various blanks were closed in the process, which guided the player's involvement in the game, and led to the premature solving of the conflict. These deliberations and actions are further propelled by another perspective created through the informational distance between Artyom and the player. Although these share a similar point of view (first person) and most of the action Artyom conducts (except in cutscenes), the player does not know Artyom. He lives in a world that is unfamiliar to the player, which is emphasised by Artyom's retrospective narration of the events leading up to the tower. This arrangement of affairs leads to the creation of the most interesting blank between the two, which comes to the fore at the game's end.

Blanks in VGNs thus arise between the perspectives the player encounters in the gameworld and co-creates through his actions. They are closed by the player's acts of ideation (and in imaginative games of *alea*), which are informed by his world knowledge and contribute to his understanding of the gameworld, and also to his ability to perform in it. The strategies of the game organise this involvement, as they structure "both the material of the text [the repertoire of the game, the familiar context it draws on] and the conditions under which the material is to be communicated."[305]

The conditions thereby refer to the aesthetic arrangements of the perspectives, which are cancelled once the experience of the game is narrated afterwards. What this means for the strategies is important, since they help the player understand the gameworld through employing his real-world knowledge but, additionally, expose it to meticulous scrutiny. They thus constitute the juncture with the empirical world—and so familiar norms, conventions, or references to other fictional worlds

304 METRO 2033 (4A Games, 2010), ch. Hunter.

305 Iser, *Act*, 86.

are reorganised horizontally in the game's perspectives and by virtualising potential actions and processes. Consequently, it is only through the player's acts of ideation that these blanks can be closed.[306]

5.3.2 The Player as Wanderer Between Sensorial Impressions and Playful Actions, Themes and Horizons

The process of understanding the fictional gameworld and creating connections to the empirical world is thus informed by "a *background-foreground* relationship, with the chosen element in the foreground and its original context in the background."[307] This is to say, familiar norms and conventions "establish a frame of reference" and background for gameplay. As they are liberated from their original surroundings, however, they are depragmatised in the fictional gameworld and allow for "hitherto unsuspected meanings."[308] Such a relationship is similar to "that of figure and ground in Gestalt psychology"[309] and helps the player not only to comprehend the plot on a basic level, but also the levels of concept or significance.

To do so, the reader/player creates a "primary gestalt [that] emerges out of the interacting characters and plot developments,"[310] the gameworld occurrences, and the player's actions within it. This primary *gestalt* is more diverse[311] than it could be in a novel or film, because different players create a great variety of plots arising from the same story (if the game allows them to). However, at times the creation of the primary *gestalt* runs into hindrances, as the games of *agôn* juxtapose seemingly incommensurable perspectives.

As a consequence, the creative function of *negation* begins to exercise its effect, which is complemented by the vivid games of *mimicry* METRO 2033 plays with the player. These doublings and distortions contribute to the primordial force of the fictive and begin to affect the player's involvement on a basic plot level. I have clarified before that the perspectives help the player get his bearings in the gameworld, but they may also stand in conflict to one another and negate them-

306 Ibid., 86-87.

307 Ibid., 93; emphasis added.

308 Ibid., 93; cf. 93.

309 Ibid.

310 Ibid., 123.

311 At the same time, it can, however, be described as less diverse. For when experiencing a novel, different readers may imagine the storyworld in different ways.

selves. This is because, similar to reality, watching a film, or reading a book, playing a game confronts the player with a panoply of vistas or perspectives, out of which only a fragmentary number can be discerned at any given moment. These are nonetheless "interwoven in the text [/game] and offer a constantly shifting constellation of views"[312] that bewilder the player. The "*theme*" thereby designates "the view" or action the player is "involved with at any particular moment."[313] It is substituted by additional themes that emerge in the course of play and moves into the background and the "*horizon*"[314] of previously encountered/enacted perspectives. The horizon of past perspectives thus includes both the inner perspectives of the text/game and the outer perspectives, which link the game to the empirical world, and conditions the player's subsequent actions and imaginings based on the information he has gathered before (from the fictional and empirical world).[315]

METRO 2033 aggravates these games of *agôn* with a distorted dreamworld in which the true nature (or meaning) of the perspectives remains oblique. This is the case with the created image of the Dark Ones and the current gameworld situation that induces the player to handle the supposed threat. Such is the inevitable conclusion at this moment of play as the player draws from the horizon of past perspectives to compose it. Yet this image is fragile and will change, since with new perspectives, new impressions inform the player's acts of ideation.

> The continual interaction of perspectives throws new light on all positions linguistically manifested in the text, for each position is set in a fresh context, with the result that the reader's attention is drawn to aspect hitherto not apparent.[316]

This statement gives a viable explanation as to why player actions are prone to assume different meanings in the aftermath of their execution—for example, when the player of THE WALKING DEAD feels guilty about actions he previously deemed noble but which, through the encounter with new perspectives, turn out to be quite the contrary, or at least ambiguous. Consequently, with each new perspective—whether it is a player action, a character telling her news, a sign or gameworld

312 Ibid., 96; cf. 96, 116.

313 Ibid., 97; emphasis added.

314 Ibid.; emphasis added.

315 Ibid., 96-97.

316 Ibid., 97.

process, "a retroactive effect on what has already been read [/played]"[317] is provoked, which results in potential "enrichment, as attitudes are at one and the same time refined and broadened."[318]

Iser has called this process of continuous revision the reader's "wandering viewpoint,"[319] an insightful and romantic term that is, nonetheless, not sufficient for the player. Because what he experiences rather resembles the venture of *a wanderer between sensorial impressions and actions*, between the floating of the spectator's imagination and the ergodic participant's navigation of and action within the gameworld. Such a feeling is unknown to a reader/viewer—think of how the player moves the virtual camera and catches a glimpse of an extraordinary event or discovers parts of the world that require his intervention. The perspectives he thereby encounters and co-creates are mapped to an entire panorama of sensorial impressions and actions that compose the horizon of perspectives that inform his subsequent actions and their potentiality (for players gain a feeling for what they can do in a game based on their previous knowledge/experience). This process, as Iser has remarked for the reader, is driven by a constant alternation between "retention and protension," between what *was* and what *is about to come* (once the player acts).[320]

What follows from these observations is that the reader/player's expectations are either confirmed by the newly encountered/co-created perspectives (this narrows down the semantic potential of the text/game; and to a degree the ergodic one) or they are frustrated and renegotiated in the flux of further perspectives in games of *alea*. The second option predominates in the literary text (in aesthetically complex literature) and forces the reader to constant reshaping of memory and the restructuring of the aesthetic object, when *alea* breaks open the semantic veil of the text and evokes the games of *ilinx* in the reader.[321] Such an initial frustration and semantic ambiguity occurs as well in METRO 2033 in the constant renegotiation of the image of the Dark Ones, whose formation is influenced by perspectives that stand in opposition. These hinder the player's comprehension of the plot (and choice making in this respect) as well as his acts of ideation on the level of significance. They nonetheless drive the player to a constant renegotiation of the aesthetic object.

317 Ibid., 111.

318 Ibid., 99.

319 Ibid., 135.

320 Ibid., 111; cf. 110-111.

321 Ibid., 111-112.

5.3.3 The Emergence of the Aesthetic Object Through the Creation of a Secondary Gestalt

Various hints and possibilities to action point at a different conclusion concerning the Dark Ones, and these begin with the hallucinations they evoke in Artyom. These are unclear to him but imply that the intentions of the supposedly hostile race may be peaceful after all. This manifests itself in that the Dark Ones try to convince Artyom of their pacifism through pre-war images of a better world or sections in which they help him overcome the paranoia the Metro tunnels induce.[322] However, the hallucinations are not a reliable vantage point for now—for neither Artyom nor the player—and they could be a trick to stop Artyom from destroying the Dark Ones.

Figure 17: The image of the Darks Ones remains ambiguous. Are they attacking or surrendering?

METRO 2033 (4A Games, 2010), ch. Chase.

322 Indeed, the conflict between the Dark Ones and the humans was caused by a misunderstanding, when the former approached the humans with peaceful intentions, but the humans were arrogant in their concept of humanity. Too afraid of change and driven by the anxiety of evolutionary defeat, the humans declined to accept the posthuman solution the Dark Ones promised. As *homo novice,* the Dark Ones are better adapted to the new world, but they are a life form humankind does not understand (or does not wish to understand)—all of which the player is unaware of for now.

Indeed, it seems that the games of estrangement and *mimicry* METRO 2033 involves the player in are the main reason for his confusion. To blame here is the technique of "inversion,"[323] which creates "discrepancies" in the player's acts of ideation that "make him dispute his own gestalten" and induce him to constantly revise them.[324] This is because none of the game's points of view are entirely reliable (including the prologue and the section at Exhibition). Consequently, the *gestalts* the player is initially composing (of the plot, gameworld, and character relations) are flawed, which affects the creation of a *secondary gestalt* that complements the first and extends it.[325]

> [T]he plot is not an end in itself—it always serves a meaning, for stories are not told for their own sake but for the demonstration of something that extends beyond themselves. And so a gestalt that represents the plot development is still not completely closed. The closing can only come about when the *significance* of the action can be represented by a further gestalt.[326]

The potential for confusion here is considerable, because both *gestalts* are necessarily intertwined, and one should not underestimate the importance of any one of them for the player's acts of ideation. However, it is true that the secondary *gestalt* (which moves the player into the realms of significance and helps him understand the fictional world's relation to the empirical world) is more flexible than the first and allows for a variety of fillings. This can be discerned in the fact that people seem to discuss more vividly the interpretation of a narrative (and what it means to them) rather than its plot details.[327]

The creation of the aesthetic object is thus a complex process, although one that works naturally if one shows the necessary willingness to do so. This fact and the necessity for an emancipated player should not be dismissed so easily—specifically for the genres of SF and dystopia. For as Moylan argues, the SF story involves the reader in a complex world he must take seriously and whose logic he needs to understand in order not to misinterpret it. Otherwise, and in "[a] refusal of an engaged, cognitive reading process," he may "only find … [his] own position and prejudices bounced back at" him.[328] Playing dystopia proceeds similarly, and

323 Iser, *Act*, 131.

324 Ibid.; cf.131.

325 Ibid., 123.

326 Ibid.

327 Ibid.

328 Moylan, *Scraps*, 25; cf. 24-25.

there are a plethora of instances in which the naive player can misplay these games and resist their aesthetic function (see the discussion of player types in chapter IV). In METRO 2033, this entails the loss of the revelatory effect at the game's end, which I will come to shortly. The emancipated player resists such premature playing and, to experience dystopia's aesthetic effect, he composes two intertwined *gestalts* during play.

This interplay between images on the plot level and their significance can be discerned relatively early in the game with the psychoanalytic connotation of the Metro tunnels. These hide a dark secret and set the player within the deepest regions of the human unconscious, which is characterised by the innate fear of Otherness. Such an image is fostered once the player connects the narrow stretches of the Metro tunnel to Freud's deliberations on the night-time dream, while he passes through them with the phallic symbol of his weapon extended. In order to see this image more clearly, the acts of ideation need to be fed with additional perspectives. I have clarified that people in the stations suffer from deep trauma—not only because of the nuclear annihilation that caused the current state of affairs but more so in their mistrust of anything that seems different. Their lives underground are marked by isolation within the stations, and although there are trading networks, conflicts between the factions (ideologies) are ongoing.

An example of this is the never-ending battle at Cursed Station in which monsters (the Nosalises, a common enemy in the game) continuously attack the humans. They stand for those parts of the self that humankind cannot get rid of and that fundamentally revolve around the instinct of survival and the mistrust of the Other (an image the player will steadily compose). After a barbaric slaughter, the section ends with the player entering a shrine at the tunnel's end. It is guarded by shadows of fallen men, and access to it is only granted to the virtuous and pure at heart. Khan, who accompanies the player through this part of the game, leads him in. The experience thus serves as a reminder of the player's deeds, by reconfiguring their image and having him ponder their ethical justification.

The second image I wish to stress is when the player passes a bridge that is contested by both the Red faction and the Nazi faction. Not even the apocalypse could stop them from bloodshed, and the bridge creates a terrifying but, at the same time, beautiful image of the futility of these conflicts. The player may choose to either sneak below the bridge or participate in the frenzy of combat—but he

will certainly ask himself whether mankind is doomed to fight forever.[329] Consequently, through the experience of the factions in the game and how the player deals with them, he not only further comprehends this world but has already begun to compose a secondary *gestalt* by linking the enacted events to facts about his empirical world. This process is supported in that the factions and the rules by which they work are inspired by those of the empirical world—but they are crammed into the microcosm of the Metro stations and distorted in perception to have the player decipher this connection.

Important stations in the game thus include Hansa, the wealthy and capitalist trading centre in the metro, where a free market has been established and which is heavily guarded from the outside world. In addition, there is Polis, where the player encounters the head of the Rangers Miller. Polis is the centre of science and knowledge in the Metro. It is situated beneath the former Moscow State Library (a revelatory juxtaposition), and many scouting missions to extract its treasures are undertaken. However, although the best and brightest reside in Polis, they refrain from intervening in the issue of the Dark Ones, and, thus, the supposedly reasonable turn a blind eye to ethical issues. Miller, on the contrary, has a clear opinion. He exhibits militaristic characteristics of the empirical world and will accompany Artyom to the tower, after the latter has secured the D6 documents from the library—a place of knowledge and virtue, which the player scavenges for missile documents in the attempt to accomplish the game's goal.

It is revelatory that METRO 2033 outlines various images for the player to compose, which include the negotiation of what he encounters and what he participates in. The stations are thereby important points of orientation. By understanding their ideologies, the player gains vital perspectives that will inform both the decision that awaits him and the analogic connection of the enacted events to the real world. In playing dystopia, he may thus get a glimpse behind the opaque nature of empirical reality by testing its norms, conventions, and processes in the condensed and defamiliarised version of the fictional gameworld. In this context the player's actions also stand, which imply various signifieds: from a phallic symbol of power to the related one of waging a blind war against the Other, which has caused disaster before.

These possibilities notwithstanding, the player does not need to fall into this trap of naiveté, of following orders (or game goals) without pondering their ramifications. In this regard, there is an important perspective that may help him see

329 Here again, I wish to stress the difference between the (uncritical) playthrough of the gamist or achiever player and that of the emancipated player, for the former will probably not come to such a conclusion.

things differently. During the journey, he eventually meets *the tempter of this story*—the enigmatic figure *Khan*—who will become Artyom's and the player's mentor. Khan understands the psychic phenomena of the Metro and warns Artyom on various occasions that force is not the answer and that to "break this vicious circle one must do more than just act without any thought or doubt."[330] The Khan chapters thus lead the player into the darkest parts of the Metro and into the deepest spheres of the human unconsciousness. They illustrate that even beneath humankind's ugliest parts lies hope in the search for compassion and in a cathartic cleansing of the aggressions towards the Other. Shortly before the game's final moments and the player's ascension of the tower, Khan reminds him of these truths. He therefore exhibits those characteristics of empirical society that aim at prudence and dialogue, not war and destruction.

What enhances this image is that the conversation takes place in an old church underneath Moscow, which creates a beautiful inversion in that hell has extended to the surface of the planet, while only a few parts beneath it remain untouched. Khan's perspective is thus to be seen in terms of an altruistic world view that promotes benevolence towards the Other and which stands in strong contrast to that of Miller, who has established a base of operations within the church. As such, the player is presented with two opposing perspectives that have plastered his way before and is set between the seemingly incommensurable fronts of war and peace and in an intricate game of *agôn* to which he can ergodically react. However, METRO 2033 does not make it easy for the player to have a say in this choice after all, for only the virtuous and pure-hearted may take it and instigate a successful *counter-narrative* to this dystopia.

Of critical importance in this respect is how the player behaves in certain situations in the game, and METRO 2033 pays close attention through a subtle morality system. It is the big choices but even more so the little choices that matter in a world of despair—and, consequently, decisions such as passing through certain areas without engaging in conflict, being generous to those in need by handing them ammunition or rejecting rewards for helping them, or listening to people's problems (even to those of supposedly evil factions like the Nazis) will reward the player with morality points. A most precious example of such is when Artyom walks past a derelict playground and a vision of the Dark Ones fills it with life and the playing of children. If the player chooses to relish this moment, and even takes off his gasmask, he will receive a morality point, or even two. If he rushes through it, or shoots a bullet for any reason, the vision will end with a negative entry in the morality system. These are only a few instances in which the morality system takes

330 METRO 2033 (4A Games, 2010), ch. Sparta.

grip of the player, but it suffices to say that only if he has a positive balance in the system is he able to choose the future of the Dark Ones at the game's end.

The choice between killing the Dark Ones by the use of nuclear weapons or saving their species and averting a potential genocide thus soon awaits the ethical player. It is guided through various perspectives that negate each other and also (and probably more importantly) through virtualised potentialities inscribed in the gameworld. These are *utopian enclaves* the player can actualise or not—and it is only when he realises the stakes early enough that a utopian horizon to this dystopia can emerge. The image of the Dark Ones thereby remains ambiguous until the very end, and, consequently, the player is confronted with "incomplete information" and a choice that is based on "conflicting arguments for and against … that might have probabilities, but no certainties attached to them."[331]

The decision, in other words, creates a space of "uncertainty"[332] (indeterminacy) about its outcome (*alea*). While the game's primary goal is clear (defeat the Dark Ones), it also ascribes a major value to it, or what Domsch has called a "theological attitude" and "a clear hierarchical valorisation to the options offered."[333] The emancipated player, however, knows no such fetters of the "ludic"[334] and refrains from the relentless pursuit of the primary goal. Instead, he embarks on an "explorative" and "paidic"[335] route and enables the imaginary (the games of *alea* and *ilinx*) to permeate his body by closing the blanks presented by the fictive in a creative and playful manner. This attempt to attain a "transcendental viewpoint" over the "positions" of a text/game (which nonetheless can never be reached entirely) is tantamount to approaching the aesthetic object.[336]

METRO 2033 thus has a persuasive effect on the player. It is evoked by what Sicart has called "ethical cognitive frictions" that "might encourage a thoughtful kind of play"[337] and have the player close various blanks in the process. The thereby composed image of the Dark Ones remains incomplete, but it may tempt the ethical player to save them from annihilation and to pursue an open-minded route towards the posthuman. For he understands that in order to overcome this world (to not let history repeat itself), humankind has to evolve and to free itself from the suspicion and fear of the Other. The Dark Ones have paved the way for

331 Domsch, *Storyplaying*, 115.

332 Ibid.

333 Ibid., 116.

334 Ibid.

335 Ibid.

336 Iser, *Act*, 98; cf. 98.

337 Sicart, *Beyond*, 96.

it, but, in the end, it is up to the player to comprehend their message and to act accordingly.

Even in the game's final moments such emancipatory thoughts are put to trial in games of *alea*, and the player's abilities to think reasonably and to suppress irrational emotions or premature accusations are scrutinised. This can be discerned in his ascension of the tower, which evokes the psychoanalytical image of the phallus and humankind's greed for power in the survival of the fittest. Having almost reached the primary game goal, Miller and Artyom are attacked by a demon, a flying monster resembling a bat. Miller is nearly killed in the encounter, but Artyom succeeds in defeating it. The player may now be filled with fictional anger for having almost lost a dear friend, while Artyom's victory seemingly gets to his head. He now believes he is the strongest predator on Earth, and this frenzy of emotions is easily transferred to the player and furthered by the rapid ascent of the elevator, which like a seminal fluid shoots Artyom to its peak. Consequently, through this game of proximity and distance between the player and his PC, a blank emerges that can be closed in primarily two ways: succumbing to irrational instincts and the frenzy of combat (such as Artyom in this instance) or remaining calm by having in mind the greater picture (what Khan told the player).

Even the tranquil race of the Dark Ones are becoming nervous in the face of potential extinction. Although their reaction depends on whether the player shows a positive or negative morality balance, they utter doubt in both instances—going as far as trying to stop Artyom by inducing hallucinations in him. Playing METRO 2033 is thus precarious. It is driven by uncertainty and the loss of a potential Utopia, and yet it appears inescapable that the player has not become aware of these facts. Stepping into a creative dialectic with the game's implied player, he was exposed to a system of perspectives that he has helped create. Various images were evoked through this involvement and by closing the blanks between the perspectives while at the same time negotiating the plot and its significance. These images of a secondary *gestalt* differ from player to player, but they are nonetheless outlined by the game's strategies.

All in all, the experience of dystopia leads to the climactic moment where the player's acts of ideation are tested—even when he is declined the choice due to previous failures. The magic, then, lies in a revelatory moment at the game's end, which has the player ponder humankind's true nature, which is deeply flawed. The game has outlined several images to come to such a conclusion and provide the insight that only in overcoming these primitive urges, will it be possible to create a sustainable future for generations to come.

5.4 THE CREATED REALITY OF FICTION AND ITS AESTHETIC EFFECT

This chapter has shown that for the player to communicate with a fictional world and to create the connection to empirical reality requires the construction of images on both the level of the plot and significance (for the latter requires the former). Although this creation of experiential *gestalts* is similar to how humans perceive and process the real world, it differs from them in that these initial *gestalts* remain incomplete, for the fictional world is hard to grasp through its doublings and distortion (*mimicry*). Consequently, the closing can only come about by the creation of secondary *gestalts* that further negotiate the composed images. Thereby, the blank, and its function as negation, assumes utmost importance. It sets the perspectives of the game in conflict (*agôn*), which initially frustrates the player to then break open its semantic veil (*alea*). The result is an experience of subversiveness and vertigo (*ilinx*) that eventually results in the formation of the aesthetic object and the insight into the true nature of both the fictional and empirical world. The blank, as such, is not only responsible for affording and outlining the player's involvement in a game (on all levels) but spurs his imagination to experience art's aesthetic effect. It is here that the *fictive* permeates the implied player and outlines an estranged gameworld by drawing on the *real*, and the *imaginary* negotiates what the *fictive* has presented by manifesting itself in the player's psyche, imaginings, and ergodic actions, to then re-incorporate its results into the *real*. The following table illustrates these interrelations:

Table 9: Playing dystopia as the interplay between the fictive, the imaginary, and the real.

The Real	Inspires the *fiction-making* process that feeds back into the empirical world through *aesthetic response.*
The Fictive	***Agôn*****:** sets in conflict the perspectives (norms, processes, characters, actions, conventions, etc.). ***Mimicry*****:** aggravates the player's perception/understanding of the gameworld through games of estrangement (doublings and distortions).
Important Perspectives of METRO 2033	**Rangers of the Order (Hunter, Miller)**: militaristic, suspicion of Other. **Dark Ones:** ambiguous, posthuman, dangerous, misunderstood. **Station perspectives:** Hansa (capitalism), Exhibition (despair), Cursed station (never-ending strife), Black station (Nazi occupied), Polis (power and wealth). **Khan:** ethical, altruistic, tempter, reflective. **Artyom:** partially in flux, depending on player actions. **Player choices** with negative (unethical, selfish) or positive (ethical) impact on the moral system.
Blanks between the perspectives	**Closing** through imagination/ ergodic action
The Imaginary	***Alea:*** breaks open the interrelations between the perspectives and allows for blank closing. ***Ilinx:*** games of subversiveness, precariousness that result in the player's aesthetic response by re-incorporating their results into *the real* (empirical world).