Preface to Part II

Part I revealed significant aspects concerning a potential genre of the video game dystopia and has paved the way for further observations on it.[1] In establishing a solid classification of dystopia's subgenres, I have laid the groundwork for deliberations on and categorisations of the VGD. These include: the pseudo-dystopia or anti-utopia (which can be seen as a deceptive strategy of the status quo), the classical dystopia (that entraps the PC in a pessimistic world from which there is no escape), and the two variants of the critical dystopia (that most often disclose dystopia's past and offer the player one or several utopian enclaves to actualise or follow).

Hope, consequently, lingers at the VGD's core, pushing it at times into a considerable utopian direction (if one can look past the misfit of the anti-utopia). This is also reflected in dystopia's traditional plot structure of official narrative and counter-narrative, which finds ample application in the video game medium. The player, thereby, assumes the role of the dissident, and later, the catalyst. While at times it is clear that the world she plays in is a negative one, a process of gradual realisation can still be discerned—at least for the PC. It leads the player through knowing that something is wrong, to seeing it clearly, then to discerning connections between the fictional and empirical world, which are shockingly minimal.

1 Part II illustrates a *substantial expansion* of my conference paper *The Emancipated Player*, which I presented at the 2016 1st International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FGD. The focus has turned to *dystopia*, but the deliberations on representational art and the dialectic between implied and emancipated player remain conceptually similar. (Gerald Farca, "The Emancipated Player," *Proceedings of the First International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FGD* 13, no. 1 (2016), http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/the-emancipated-player/).

With such an incentive, the VGD is primarily about taking action and finding potential solutions to dystopia, which in the critical dystopia of variant II is allotted to the player.

Critique, it seems, is not enough for the VGD, although it certainly addresses a plethora of themes: the threat of oppressive regimes, capitalism, the misuse of science, and the dark side of human nature. Yet what the VGD suggests more pressingly is that something can be done—at least in virtuality—and that in learning from these lessons, the player's empirical world may not yet be lost.

To unravel the complex mechanisms behind such an aesthetic response and its effect on the player will be the main focus of Part II, which will lay the emphasis on the phenomenology of playing dystopia. Such deliberations can never be isolated from discussions of narrative and fiction, and I will therefore move into the realms of the video game narrative as a form of representation, which I use synonymously with fiction. Consequently, uncovering the deep structure of the implied player becomes of prime importance: the affordance and appeal structure of a game that offers all those predispositions for the game to exercise its effect—an aesthetic effect experienced in and through the act of play. As a structural construct, the implied player outlines the empirical player's participation in the gameworld by involving her in a creative dialectic with a comprehensive perspectival system (including the player's sensorial perspective, the gameworld, the plot framework, and player actions). As such, the implied player not only guides the player's involvement but also triggers structured acts within her, thereby altering her habitual dispositions by allowing for new experiences to pervade her mind.

Playing dystopia—and, in general, any aesthetically complex VGN—can thus be precarious, for it creates a space for play in which the fictive has outlined a gameworld that is permeated by distortions and doubling, while the imaginary takes hold of the player and finds an outlet in her psyche, imaginings, and ergodic actions. This is especially so for the genre of dystopia, since its gameworld appears strange to the player, though it is surprisingly familiar in some parts. As such, it is only through the player's act of ideation, of closing the blanks between the perspectives she encounters and co-creates, that the new reality of the gameworld can be understood. These perspectives have been taken out of their familiar context—from norms, conventions, and processes of the empirical world—but are magnified through extrapolation and rearranged in an unfamiliar manner in the dystopian gameworld, which is often taken to an extreme. They consequently confront the player with various games of estrangement that are similar to, though also differ in crucial respects from, those the appreciator has come to know in non-ergodic dystopian SF.

In other words, dystopia's implied player invites the emancipated player into a creative dialectic and dance with a distorting and nightmarish dream world. It offers a space for play and trial action that involves her in a constant feedback oscillation between two worlds (the fictional and the empirical world): an experience which may trigger a cathartic and emancipatory response in the player.