

Dystopia

AND THE PLAYER

Living Through the Nightmare

Talk inspired and is based on:

Playing Dystopia:

Nightmarish Worlds in Video Games and the Player's Aesthetic Response

<https://www.transcript-verlag.de/detail/index/sArticle/4330>

https://books.google.de/books/about/Playing_Dystopia.html?id=mRM0vAEACAAJ&redir_esc=y

https://www.amazon.de/Playing-Dystopia-Nightmarish-Aesthetic-Medienkultur/dp/3837645975/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1541699007&sr=8-2&keywords=playing+Dystopia

https://www.amazon.co.uk/Playing-Dystopia-Nightmarish-Aesthetic-Response/dp/3837645975/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1541699026&sr=8-1&keywords=playing+dystopia+farca

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Playing Dystopia

Nightmarish Worlds in Video Games
and the Player's Aesthetic Response



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Video Games as Fictions / Future Narratives

- Video games are a specific form of fictional experiences.
- The player can interact with a fictional (imaginary) world (not only on a cognitive level, but also on a physical one, via some sort of input device).
- Video games showing narrativity (possessing the quality of a story) can be declared a form of 'future narratives', in which the player may choose out of at least two **potential events** (cf. Domsch).

Trial Action in Fictional Worlds



Literary fictions allow the reader to see everyday norms and conventions, social habits of thinking and feeling, in a different light; they also allow readers to explore, in a kind of **trial action** in a virtual environment, the consequences of breaking and transgressing norms without having to fear sanctions in real life (Berensmeyer 79; cf. Iser).

Literary Utopia

(E)Utopia = the good non-place, 'not yet'.

– a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as **considerably better than the society in which that reader lived** (Sargent 9).



Literary Dystopia

Dystopia = the bad non-place, 'not yet'.

– a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as **considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived** (Sargent 9).



Dystopian **WARNING**

WARNING

Dystopian WARNING

cf. Booker *Critical* 6 f
Moylan xii,
Viera *Introduction* 1 ff.

- Alternative worlds to **foreground current social, political, and cultural issues**.
- “if this goes on” cautionary tale, warning of the dire consequences that might occur should **certain trends already under way** in some contemporary real-world society, usually the author’s own, be allowed to continue (Booker *Critical* 6 f.).
- **Aesthetic Response:** **We Have To Act, Before It Is Too Late**

=> **Dystopia, a Strategy of Utopia**

Typical Dystopian Plot (Despair)

Narrative of the Hegemonic Order:

Depiction of some sort of **oppressive regime or state**:

totalitarian state, multinational corporation,

Artificial Intelligence, etc.

- **Oppression of the individual.**
- **Other targets:** socialism, overpopulation and environmental collapse, consumer capitalism, bureaucracy, mass media, surveillance, etc.



Typical Dystopian Plot (Hope)

Counter-Narrative (of Resistance):

Dissident / Deviate: process of gradual realization of the dystopian circumstances.



- **Educational plot:** from apparent **contentment** into an **experience of alienation**.
- Individual or collective **RESISTANCE**. => **utopian horizon**

Reader Response Theory

What part does the reader play in the creation and realisation of **the meaning of a text** (Green 184)?

As reader, we exercise a power of narrative texts that is arguably as great as their power over us. After all, **without our willing collaboration, the narrative does not come to life** (Abbott 86).

Collaboration between **text and reader** (cf. Iser 5).

The Indeterminacy of Fictional World

Fictional worlds in a sense always **show indeterminacy** because they allow no referral to real-life objects and situations (cf. Iser 7).

The connection has to be inferred by the reader by implicitly **comparing his empirical world to the fictional** (cf. Iser 7 f.).

Filling in Gaps (Leerstellen)

Four major perspectives: **narrator, characters, plot, that marked out for the reader** (cf. Holub 89).

Between the **“schematized views” [perspectives the text offers] ... gaps** **are bound to open up**, and they offer a free play in the interpretation of the specific ways in which the various views can be connected with one another (Iser 9).

the degree of connection is usually not stated but has to be inferred. (Iser 9).

The Implied Reader

The implied reader is defined as both a textual condition and a process of meaning production: „The term incorporates both the prestructuring of the potential meaning by the text, and the reader's actualization of this potential through the reading process“ (Holub 84).

The Implied reader's response to dystopian fiction:

- **Shocking effect of a dystopian world** that although difficult to fight, **MUST** be fought.

Cognitive and Physical Interaction

Cognitive Interaction:

- The cognitive gaps that arise out of the clash of perspectives.

Physical Interaction:

- The player complements an “incomplete” fictional dynamic world, by means of action.

=> **Gaps out of player actions.**

Filling in Gaps in Video Games

Perspectives:

The Player
and his actions

Characters

Narrators

Player-Character

Game world

Events

Plot

If the connections between these perspectives is **UNSTATED**, the player will have to fill in the gaps.

The Implied Player?

Is there something like an implied player who steers a **player's** aesthetic response by the clever arrangement of perspectives offered by the game?

- **Shocking effect of a dystopian world** that although difficult to fight, **MUST** be fought.

What does the player do with the game?

What does the game do with / to the player?

A Fictive Trial Action for the Player



“The Stanley Parable”

Agency

Agency: the satisfying power to take meaningful action and to see the results of our decisions and choices (Murray 126).



The Capacity to **choose for oneself** and the capacity to **act upon one's choices** (Jacobs 92).

Dystopia: A World Drained of Agency

- **Agency** is compromised in the dystopia.
- The **otherwise thinking** individual will be crushed.



Gaps that arise out of Player Action

- Between the **fictional world** and the **player's actions**.
- Between the **narrators commands** and the **player's actions**.
- **Between Stanley and the Player**
- Always seen in context of the **implicit comparison**: **fictional and empirical world**.

The Narrator and his Narrative of the Hegemonic Order

- **Stanley chooses the left door.** Goes upstairs to his boss's office, shuts-off the mind control facility, reaches a beautiful landscape.
- **Gap:** What happens if I follow the narrator?
- **contradiction creates a gap:** **promise of unrestrained agency and the cut-scene.** The worst ending? Living in the simulation (Stanley is happy)!
- **The “Matrix” ending**



The Narrator and his Narrative of the Hegemonic Order

- **Stanley pushing buttons** in a meaningless servile routine (for 4 hours !!!).
- **Gap** between player action and outcome (as there is none).
- **Walking in loops** the entire game.
- **Gap** between player action and repetition.



Estrangement:

cf. Glass 22, Moylan 102

Seeing the Empirical World for what it is

Bureaucratic Consumer Capitalism

Faceless workers: Cogs in a bureaucratic mechanism.

=> Lack of Identity

- **Lacking democratic agency** in a world oppressed by corporate power, alienating capitalism, and meaningless, servile daily routines.
- Gap between Stanley and the Player: **Am I Stanley???**



Stanley chose the door on his right

The Counter-Narrative

- **Stanley chooses the right door.**
- **Gap:** What if I try to revolt?
- The attempt to **regain agency (breaking the rules)**.
- **Driving the narrator mad** and ruining his meticulously planned story.
- **Gap:** do I have agency in the game? (is there hope?)
- **Gap:** do I have agency in real life? (is there hope?)



Stanley chose the door on his right

The Counter-Narrative

Gap: Am I really able to change something?

Because Stanley, apparently, is not!

- **Hope** lies with the player, not with Stanley

- **WARNING:**

Do not become Stanley!

Do something about it!



The Player's Aesthetic Response

Pre-structured in the game's rules (resulting in player agency) and the fictional world .

The trial action in the estranged word of "The Stanley Parable" makes the player **think**
about his own role in the empirical present:

- Am I also a cog in the larger mechanisms of hegemonic orders? (Like Stanley)
- Or am I able to escape the confining, limiting rules that govern the dominant dystopian ideology?
- Do I still possess individual agency to do something about it?

Questions for Discussion

- 1) In how far is it possible **to guide / steer the player** towards a certain response (physically and cognitively)?
- 2) How is **the physical interaction** influenced by the **player's cognitive interpretation** of the game's events?
- 3) What **narrative strategies** can be employed to guide the player's response?

Thank you very much!

Any Questions?

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