DO NOT WORRY
IF YOU HAVE BUILT
YOUR CASTLES
IN THE AIR
THEY ARE WHERE THEY SHOULD BE.

NOW PUT THE
FOUNDATIONS
UNDER THEM!
(Henry David Thoreau)

CASTLES
IN THE
AIR

**Swedish Game Awards Conference**
Stockholm: Södertörns Högskola, 09.03.2014.

GERALD FARCA

# Dystopian Narratives in Video Games

# 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



Gerald Farca
**Playing Dystopia**
Nightmarish Worlds in Video Games and the Player's Aesthetic Response

[transcript] BildundBit

# 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).
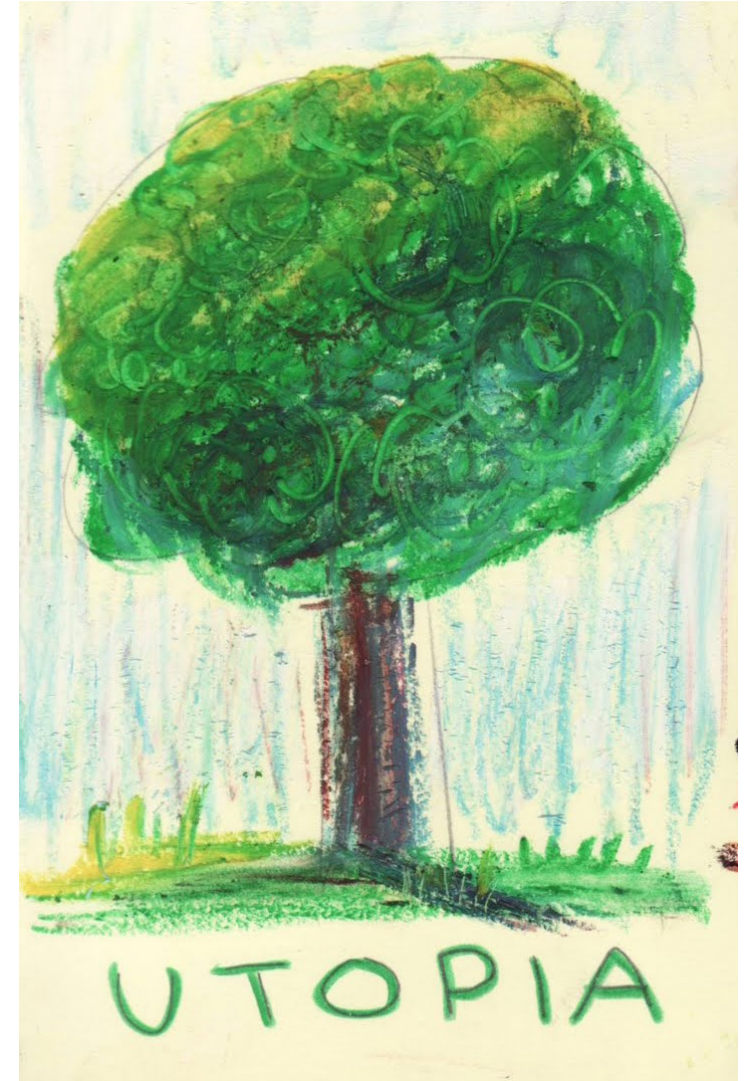


UTOPIA

# 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

- **Aesthetic Response:** If we do not act, these fictional nightmares might come true.

- A warning implies that **choice**, and therefore **hope**, are still possible (Sargent 26).

- **Dystopia's Central Theme:** This is what you should focus on; what every aspect of the game should centre on: **game world, characters, plot,** and **player agency**.
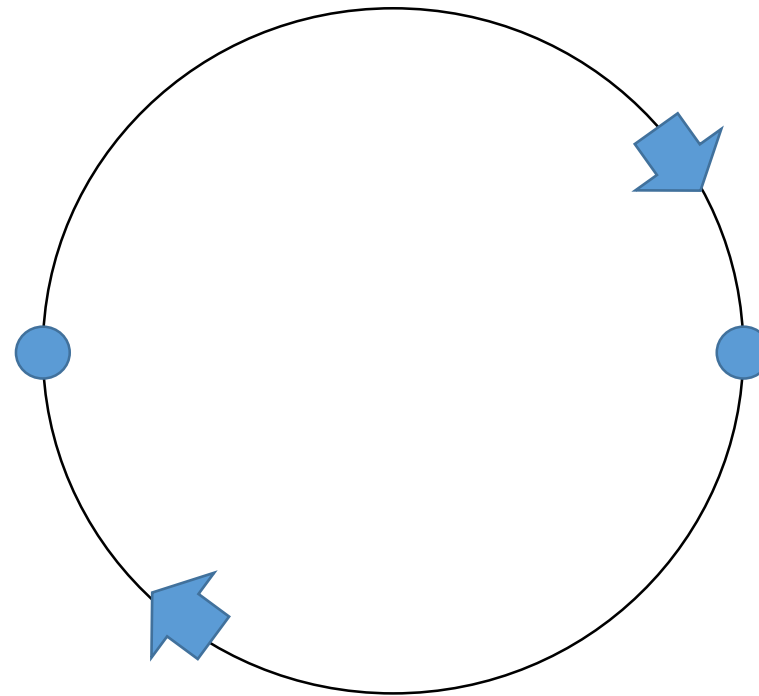
# Empirical World and Fictional Alternate World

**Empirical World** in dialogue with **Fictional Alternate World**
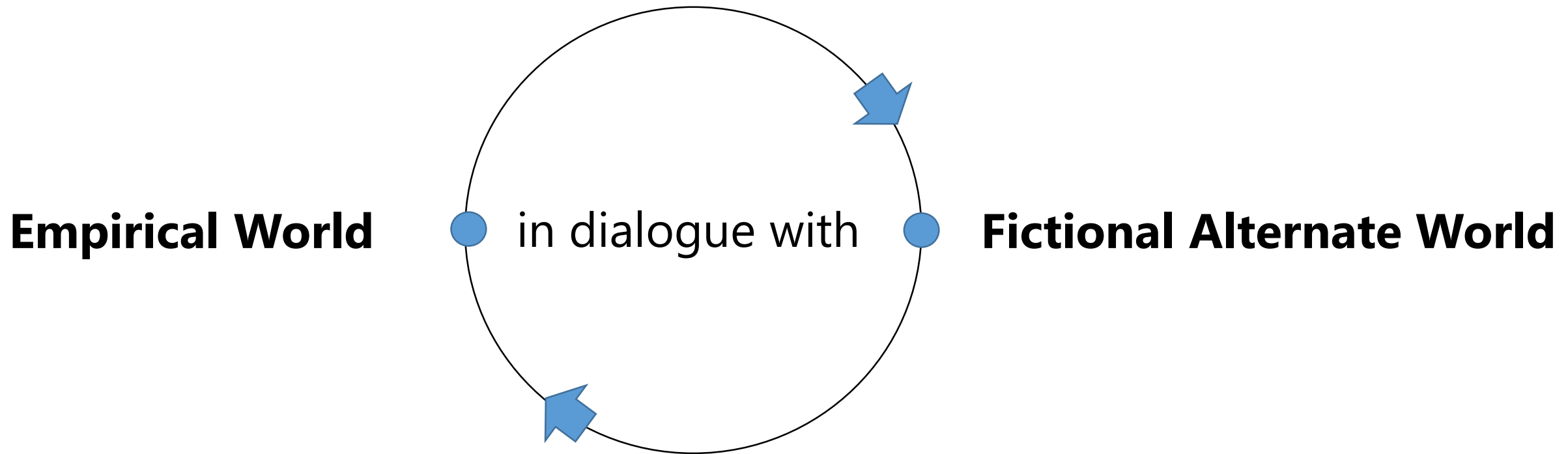
# Extrapolation

Single Tendencies

**Extrapolation**

Potential Results of these Tendencies
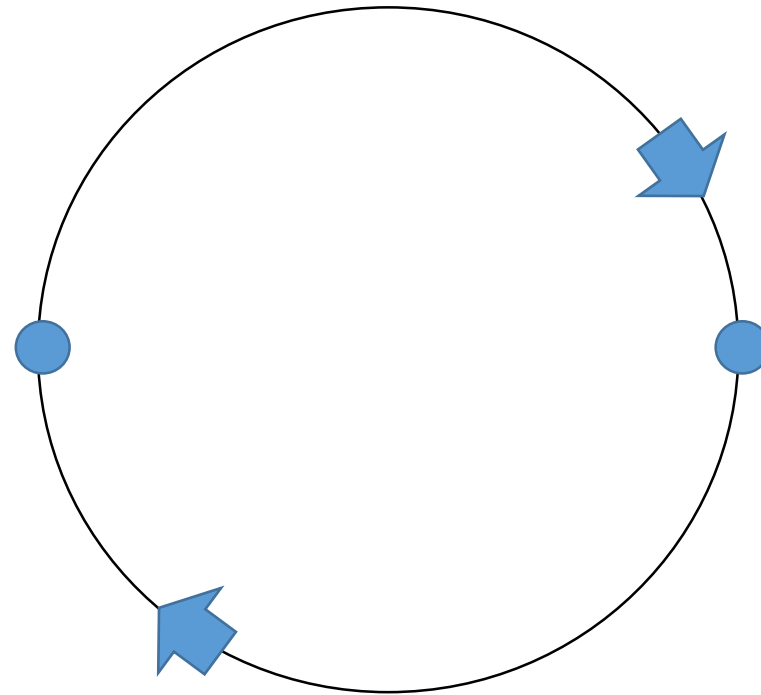
Empirical World

Fictional Alternate World

Cf. Booker 65; Suvin 81

# Cognitive Estrangement



Extrapolation

Empirical World

**Estranged / Defamiliarized**

Fictional Alternate World

**Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia**

Cf. Booker 65; Suvin 6, 71

# Feedback Oscillation

Cf. Suvin, 71, 84



Estranged / Defamiliarized

Empirical World

Fictional Alternate World

**Reader, Player**

Science Fiction,
Utopia, Dystopia

**A New Perspective on the Empirical World**
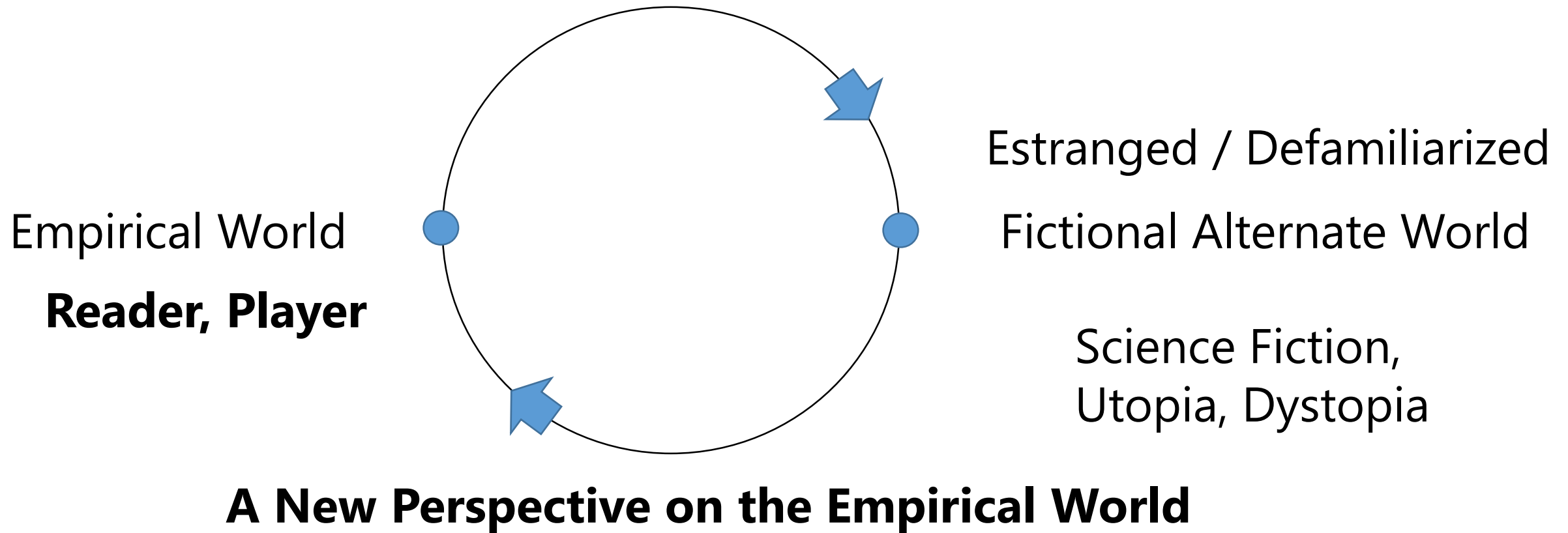
# Typical Dystopian Plot (Despair)



**Narrative of the Hegemonic Order:**

(cf. Baccolini 5, Moylan 148)

- 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, surveillance, etc.

# Typical Dystopian Plot (Hope)

**Counter-Narrative (of Resistance):**

(cf. Baccolini 5, Moylan 148, Suvin 79 )



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

- **Educational plot:** from apparent **contentment** into an **experience of alienation** (Moylan 148).

- Individual or collective **resistance**. => **utopian horizon**

# Typical Dystopian Plot (Despair and Hope)

**Possibilities for Game Design:**

- **Game world** as trial action for the player (oppression and way through).

- **The player** as active participant in the counter-narrative.

- **The process of gradual realization** should be experience by the player.

- **Player agency**: choice between resistance and compliance.

- **Personal responsibility !!! !!! !!!**

# A WORLD DRAINED OF AGENCY

(Jacobs 92)



"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).

# Lack of Agency in Dystopia

- **Agency** is compromised in the dystopia (cf. Jacobs 92).

- The **otherwise thinking** individual **will be crushed** (cf. Jacobs 92).

# A Bureaucratic Consumer Capitalism



- **Cogs** in a bureaucratic mechanism the individual cannot grasp in its totality.

**Faceless workers:**

- **Lacking democratic agency** in a world oppressed by corporate power, alienating capitalism, and meaningless, servile daily routines.

- **Lack of identity:** oppressed subjectivity and free will.

Cf. Glass 22, Moylan 102

# Narrative of the Hegemonic Order

- **Stanley pushing buttons** in a meaningless servile routine (for 4 hours !!!)

- **Walking in loops** the entire game.

- **The Matrix ending:** the worst possible ending!

# The Counter-Narrative



Stanley? Hello? Are you... is everything okay?

- The attempt to **regain agency**.

- **Driving the narrator mad** and ruining his story.

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

- **WARNING:** <span style="color:red">**Do not become Stanley! Do something about it!**</span>
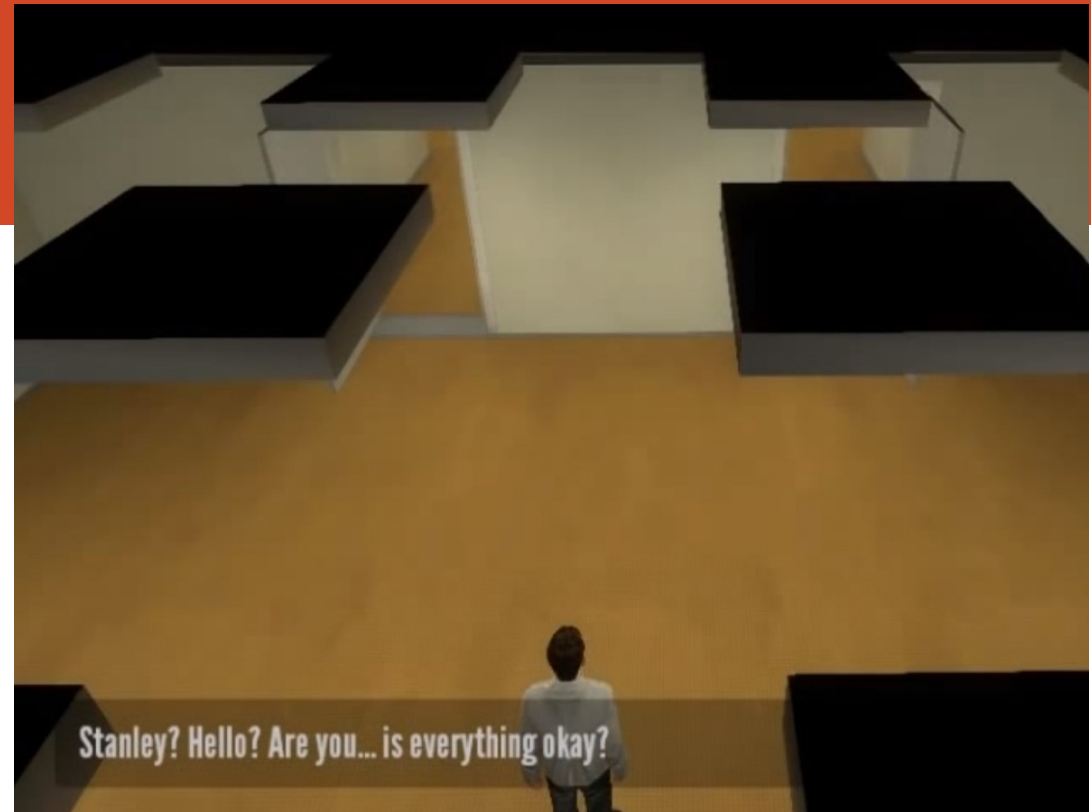
# Closing Thoughts (Do NOT)

- **DO NOT** use the dystopian setting as justification for mere spectacle and action.

- **DO NOT** tell a story about running, jumping and gunning! **Other game mechanics are needed !!!**

# Closing Thoughts (Suggestions)

- Intertwine **game mechanic** with the **needs of the story and its theme**!

- **Player Agency:** suitable actions! Employ **different kinds of activities**. There is no need for competitive challenge!

- **Story should be experienced:** the player remembers most **what HE has done!**

- Make the player **think about his actions** => will create a feeling of **personal responsibility**.

# Thank you very much!

Any Questions?

# Bibliography

- **Baccolini, Raffaella; Moylan, Tom.** *Dark Horizons. Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination.* Routledge: New York and London, 2003.

- **Glass, Fred.** *Brazil. Review.* 04. 03. 2014 *http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/1212482?uid=3737864&uid=2134&uid=2479177327&uid=2&uid=70&uid=3&uid=2479177317&uid=60&sid=21103585560907*

- **Jacobs, Naomi.** "Posthuman Bodies and Agency in Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis*". *Dark Horizons. Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination.* Eds. Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan. Routledge: New York and London, 2003.

- **Moylan, Tom.** *Scraps Of The Untainted Sky. Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia.* Colorado: Westview Press, 2000.

- **Sargent, Lyman Tower.** *The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited.* 21.01.2013. http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/20719246?uid=3737864&uid=2129&uid=2&uid=70&uid=4&sid=21101560295713

- **Suvin, Darko.** *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction.* London: Yale University Press, 1979.