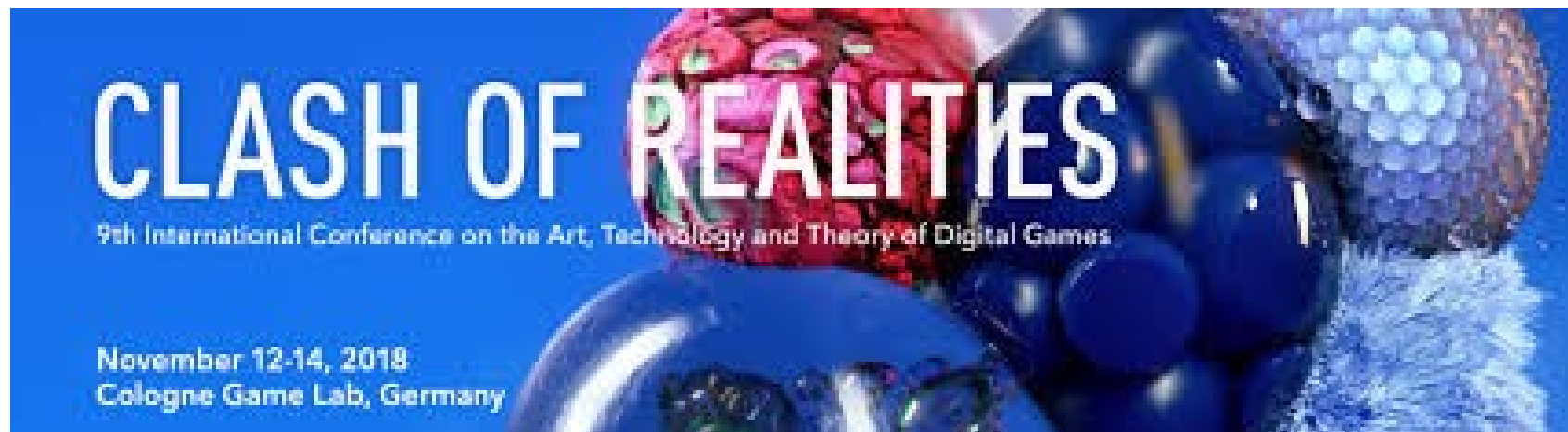# Gerald Farca

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Playing Dystopia
Nightmarish Worlds in Video Games and the Player's Aesthetic Response
(talk largely refers to the contents of the book)

Video games permeate our everyday existence. They immerse players in fascinating gameworlds and exciting experiences, often inviting them in various ways to reflect on the enacted events.

Gerald Farca explores the genre of dystopian video games and the player's aesthetic response to their nightmarish gameworlds. Players, he argues, will gradually come to see similarities between the virtual dystopia and their own 'offline' environment, thus learning to stay wary of social and political developments.

In his analysis, Farca draws from a variety of research fields, such as literary theory and game studies, combining them into a coherent theory of aesthetic response to dystopian games.

https://www.transcript-verlag.de/978-3-8376-4597-2/playing-dystopia/

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

[transcript] BildundBit

Overview

- The Philosophy of Utopia
- The (Anti-)Utopian Impulse in Game Design
- The Utopian Impulse in Games
- Video Game Utopias and Dystopias (Subgenres)

The Philosophy of Utopia

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

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

Utopia in the 21st century evokes a *cautious desire* and indicates "a direction for man to follow, but never a point to be reached" (Viera, *Concept* 22). It takes on "the shape of a process" and "a programme for change and for a gradual betterment of the present" (Vieira, "Concept," 23) (cf. 22-23).

Function of Utopia

Utopia shows us "the **future as *disruption (Beunruhigung)* of the present**, and as a **radical** and **systematic break** with even that predicted and colonized future which is simply a prolongation of our capitalist present"(Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 228; bold mine).

- **Utopian Impulse**

as a **warning** and **disruption** of the present

Anti-Utopia

Throughout modernity … the anti-utopian persuasion has systematically worked to silence and destroy Utopia, but Utopia … has always offered a way to work against and beyond these attacks" (Moylan, *Scraps*, 104).

- Directed against utopianism
- Absence of hope
- Solidification of the status quo and conservatism
- The present world as the best of all worlds

(Anti-)Utopian Impulse in Game Design

- **Gamergate** vs. **heterogeneity/diversity** in games and game design

(see Carolyn Petit's keynote yesterday)

- **Triple AAA** productions vs**. independent games**

(see Jesper Juul's keynote before)

- Games as **capitalists products** vs. **critique** of capitalism

- **Hostile** working environments vs. creation of **artworks (function of art)**

(Anti-)Utopian Impulse
in Game Design

Alf Condelius (Massive Games)

- "It's a balance because we cannot be openly political in our games," Condelius said. "So for example in The Division, it's a dystopian future and there's a lot of interpretations that it's something that we see the current society moving towards, but it's not - it's a fantasy."

https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2018-10-17-being-openly-political-in-games-is-bad-for-business-the-division-developer-says

EUROGAMER   Abonnieren

Being openly political in games is "bad for business", The Division developer says

Capitol offence.

VON TOM PHILLIPS
17. OKTOBER 2018

Utopian Impulse in Games

Ecogames:

The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild

- Struggle for Utopia as the **hero's ecological desire/journey to restore balance in Hyrule**:

to appease the four elements disturbed by **Ganon's pollution** and have a restorative influence on the land's ecosystems (Farca et al.)
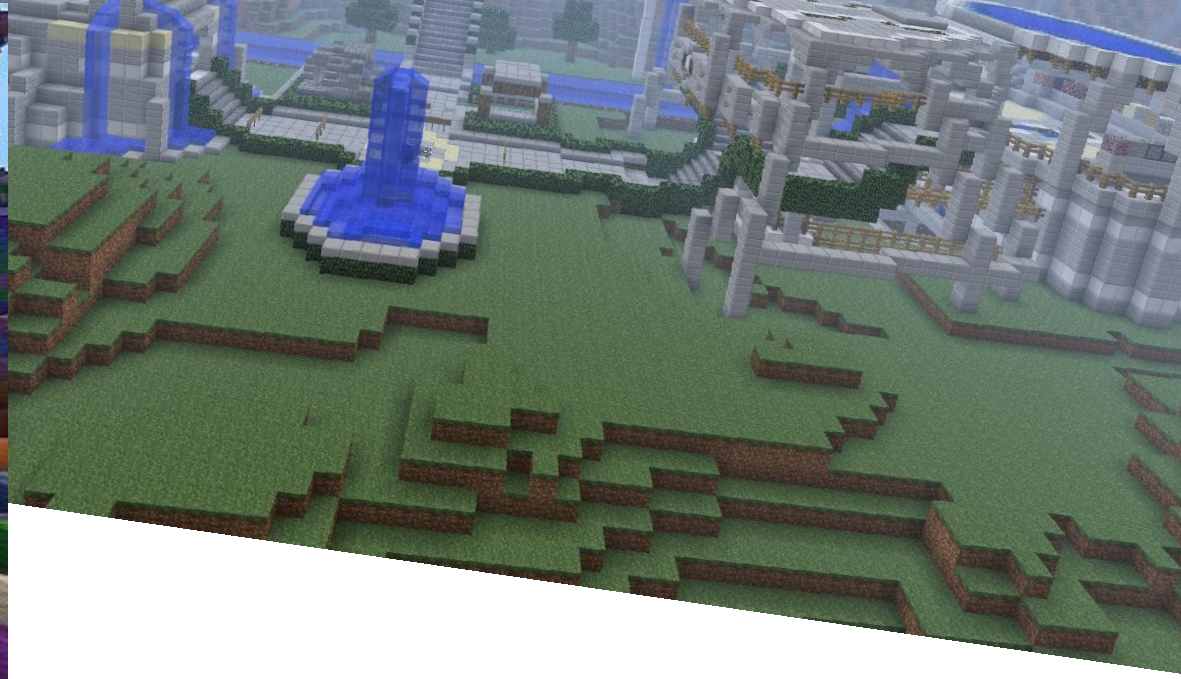
Red Dead Redemption 2

- **Nature'**s anarchical structures vs. confinements of **modernity**.

Utopian Impulse in Games

- The desire for **creation** and utopian (**game)spaces**:

Minecraft

Utopian Impulse in Games

- **The desire of exploring** unknown worlds and the (infitite) **Other**
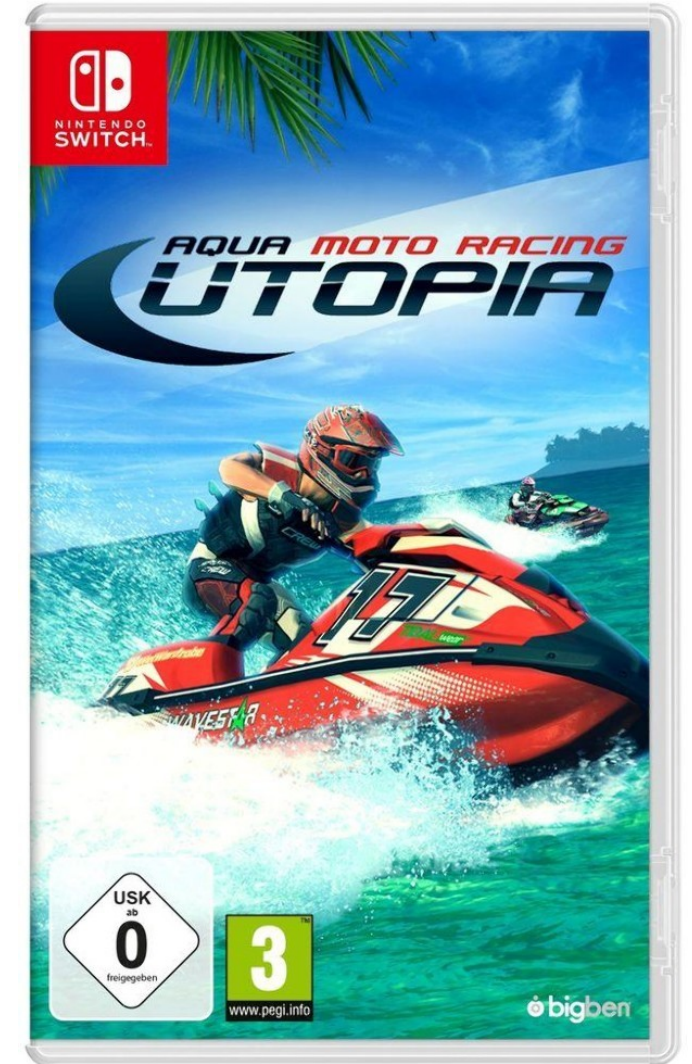
No Man's Sky

Utopian Impulse in Games

- The desire for creating (online) **communities**:

World of Warcraft:

Misuse of Utopian Images

The Genres of Utopia and Dystopia: Prerequisits

- A story about a better or worse world **is not enough**!

(e)utopia: 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, *Utopianism*, 6).
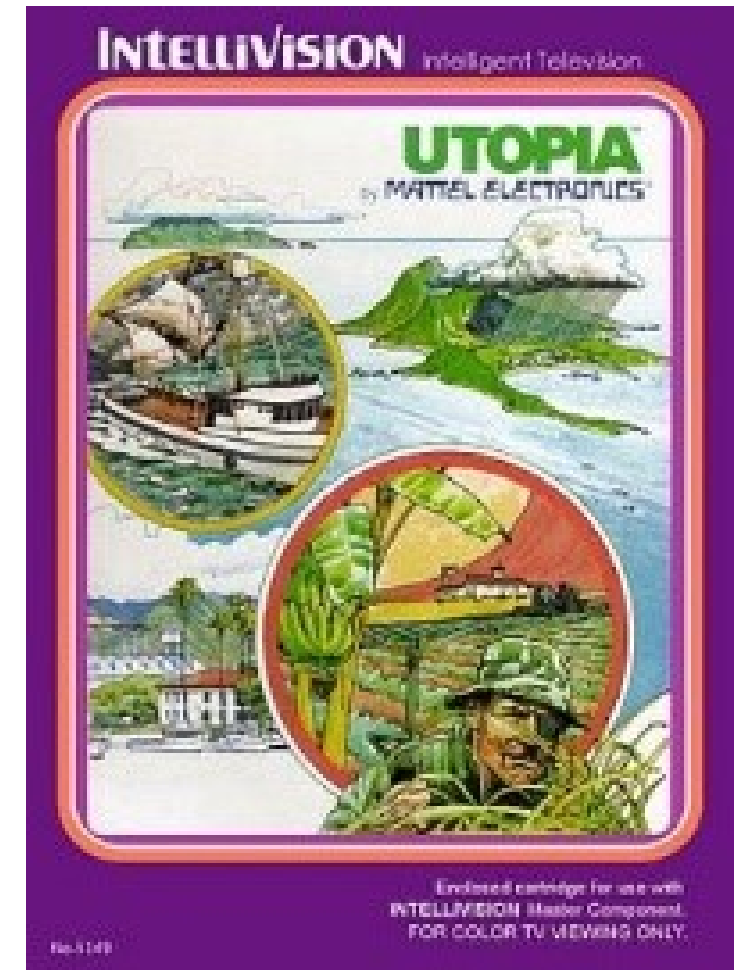

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The Genres of Utopia and Dystopia: Prerequisits

(e)utopia: a particular **quasi-human community** where **sociopolitical institutions, norms, and individual relationships** are organized according to a **more perfect principle** than in the author's community, this construction being based on **estrangement** arising out of an **alternative historical hypothesis** (Suvin, *Metamorphoses*, 49).

Utopia (Mattel, 1981)

- Two player game (**competition**)
- Turn-based **strategy** with RTS elements
- Spending gold bars to **build**

- Keeping the population happy
- Hunt for highscores.
- ➢ **No Utopia?**

Utopia: *The Creation of a Nation*
(Gremlin Interactive; Jaleco [SNES], 1991)

- **Colonization of a new planet**, build a colony and improve the life of citizens

- **Population management**, taxes, birth rates, trade.

- **In competition** with an alien race. There are no alliances possible. **No Utopia?**

Mass Effect: Andromeda

- **positive premise**: envisions a faraway future in which humankind searches for a new home in the depths of space.
- **a promising but flawed world**, where arising issues aggravate the struggle for Utopia and demand the **continual negotiation** between many parties (alien races, ethnicities).
- an **ergodic struggle for Utopia** and an **imaginative openness** that permeates the gameworld.
- **ambiguous/hopeful ending,** where the future of the Heleus-Cluster remains uncertain, depending on how players treated the individual races.

Mass Effect: Andromeda

Critical utopia: 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 better than contemporary society **but with difficult problems that the described society may or may not be able to solve and which takes a critical view of the utopian genre** (Sargent, "Three Faces," 9).

Critical Utopia: Variant I
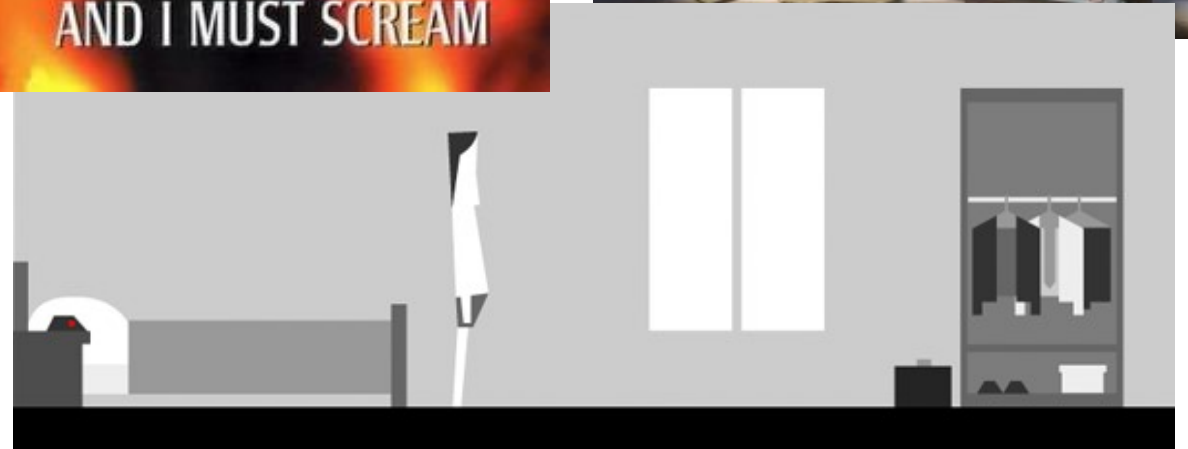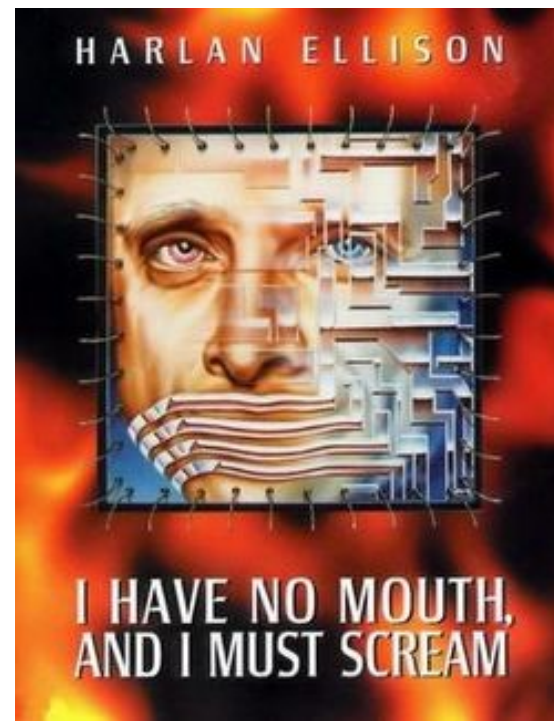
- **Predetermined Outcome / imaginative openness / ambiguity**

Critical Utopia: Variant II

- **Ergodic and imaginative openness / ambiguity**
(hopeful, ambiguous, pessimistic outcomes)
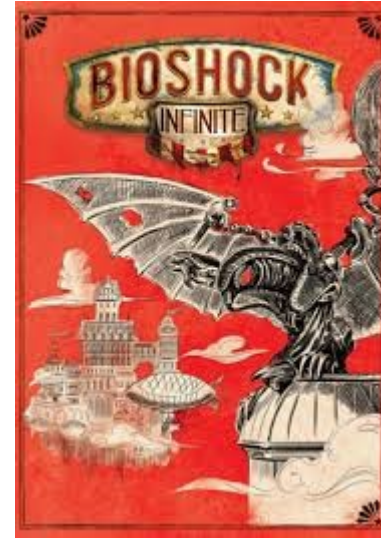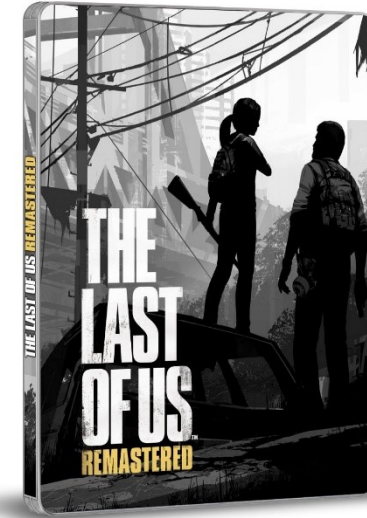
Classical Dystopia

- **Pessimistic premise**

- **The prospect of hope** lies *without* the bounds of the gameworld

- **Ergodic failure** to overthrow the dystopian regime

- **Imaginative hope** with the player and in a militant response to dystopia

Classical dystopia: 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, "Three Faces," 9).

Critical Dystopia: Variant I

- **Hope** lies *within* the bounds of the gameworld (utopian enclaves, places of resistance)

- **Explaining** how dystopia came about

- **Hopeful or ambiguous Endings**

- **Predetermined** by the game system

Critical Dystopia: 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 worse** than contemporary society but that normally includes **at least one eutopian enclave** or holds out the **hope that the dystopia can be overcome** and replaced with eutopia (Sargent, "U.S. Eutopias," 222).

Critical Dystopia: Variant II

- The prospect of Utopia is directly **laid into the player's hands.**

- But also the **failure** of attaining it.

- **Choice of becoming a catalyst** of change and transformation

- **Optimistic**, **ambiguous**, or **pessimistic** ending.

- **Ergodic and imaginative openness**.

Variants of Utopia and Dystopia

Negotiating the terrain between the **historical antinomies of Utopia and Anti-Utopia**

Utopia

Optimism
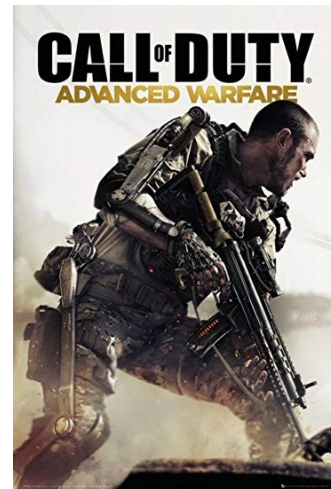
Anti-Utopia

Pessimism/Misuse
of Utopian Images

Classical Utopia   **Critical Utopia I/II**   **Critical Dystopia I/II**   **Classical Dystopia**   **Anti-Utopia**

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