

The Phenomenology of Playing US-American Dystopias: *Fallout 4*



Talk 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



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Which player types are implied by *Fallout 4*?

A collage of various Fallout 4 player types represented by the Vault Boy character. The types include: a combat-focused player with a rifle and grenades; a survivalist player with a campfire and a 'BABY' t-shirt; a stealth player with a silenced pistol and a gas mask; a collector player with a camera and a '88' gear; a trader player with a red bag and a '88' gear; a scientist player with a microscope and a '88' gear; a hacker player with a laptop and a '88' gear; a pacifist player with a white dove; a dog lover player with a German Shepherd; a treasure hunter player with a treasure chest and a '88' gear; and a general adventurer player with a backpack and a '88' gear.

Framework of Play (Implied Player)

Act of Play



Empirical Player

Culture / World

Framework of Play built around a Theme

- **Conflict of ideologies** and the **mistrust, fear of the Other**
(Enclosure of space and ideologies / demystification of US-American history)

vs.

- **Utopian beauty of the environment** and **regenerative appeal of a fresh start**
(Openness, progressive, hope)



Riley

I swear. I'm not a Synth! Don't shoot! For God sakes, we're family!









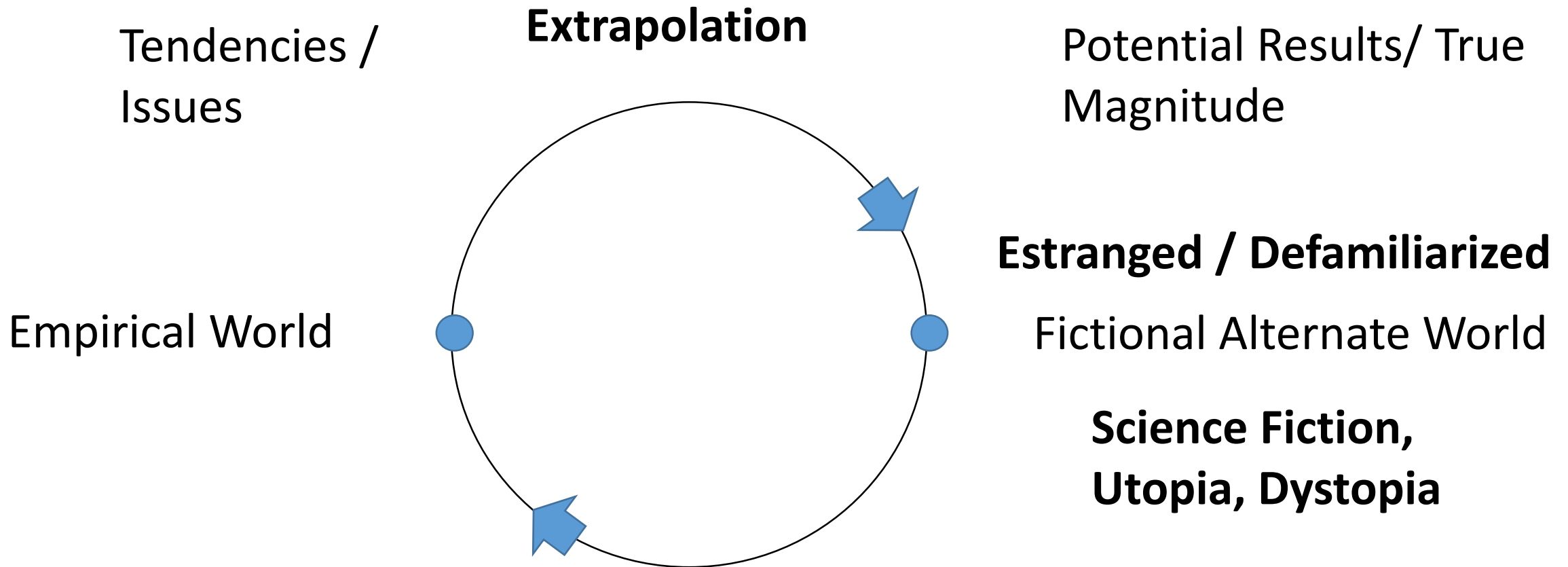
The Struggle for Utopia: *Fallout 4 as Critical Dystopia*

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)

- **Hopeful enclaves** in the gameworld
- **Reasons for dystopia** are explained or implied
- **Ambiguous endings** / different endings (negative, hopeful)

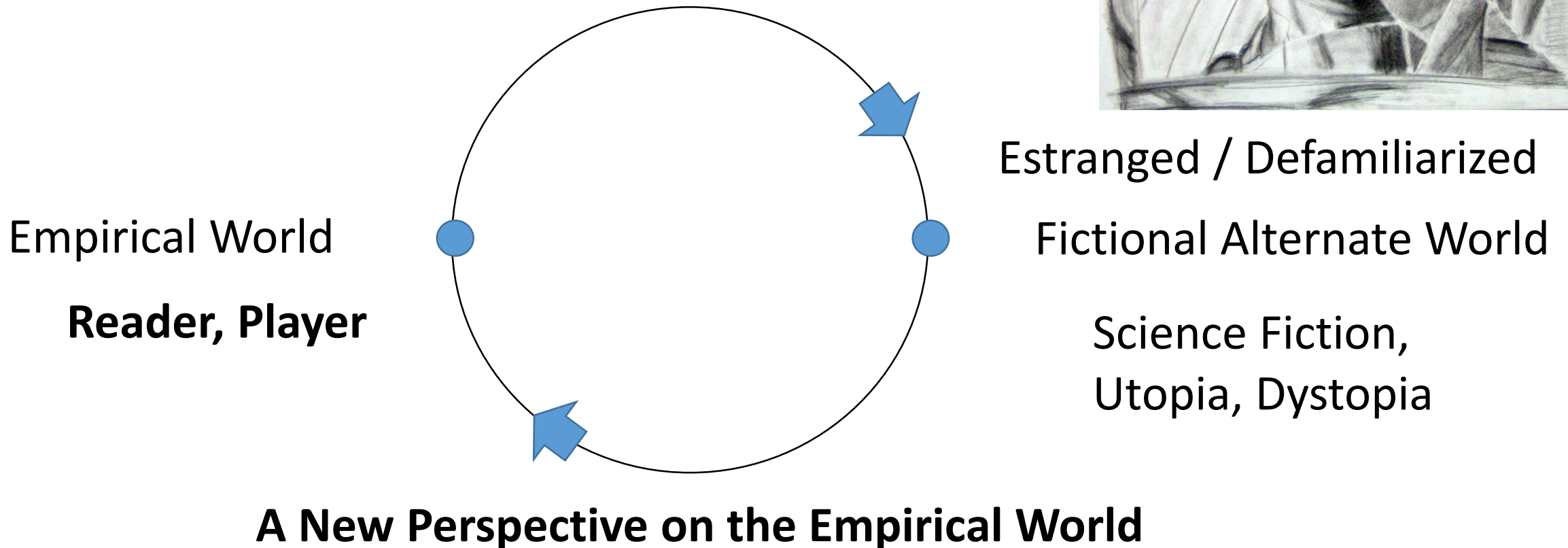
Cognitive Estrangement

Cf. Suvin, *Metamorphoses*, 75



Feedback Oscillation

Cf. Suvin, *Metamorphoses*, 71 ff.



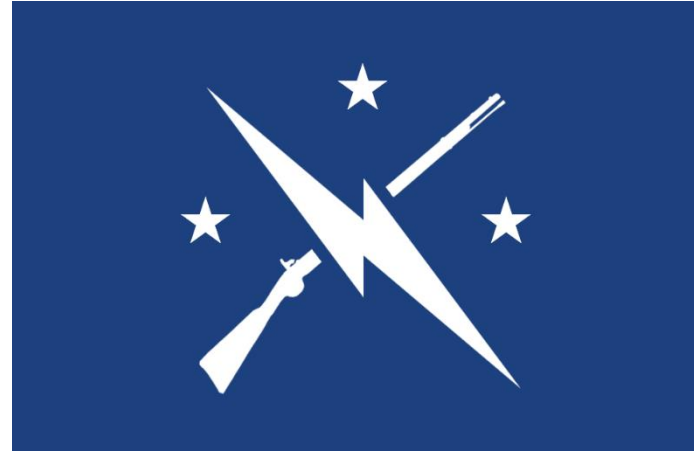
Factions as Major Perspectives



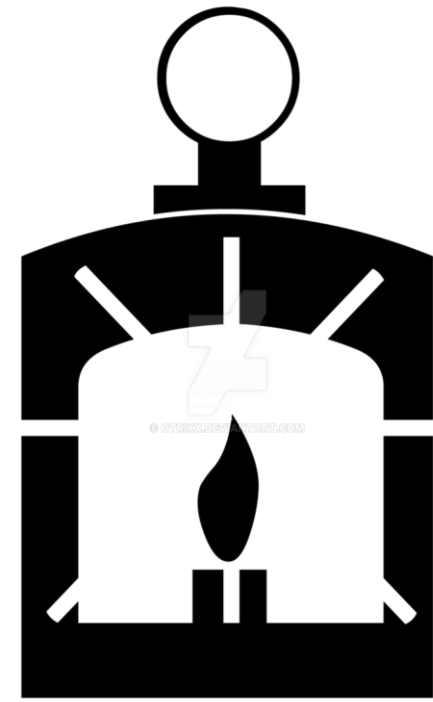
BHOS



Institute



Minutemen



Railroad

- **Trial action** for the player to test ideologies and participate in their agendas (or reject them)
- Struggle for **power** and to bring **order** to a state of chaos
- Each faction has their own **utopian ideas**

Brotherhood of Steel



Extrapolation of the US military-industrial complex

- Strive for supremacy through the accumulation of technology and weapons
- Their “ethical” goal is to cleanse the Commonwealth of threats like the super mutants or the synths.
- Unconscious struggle against their inner selves (super mutants)

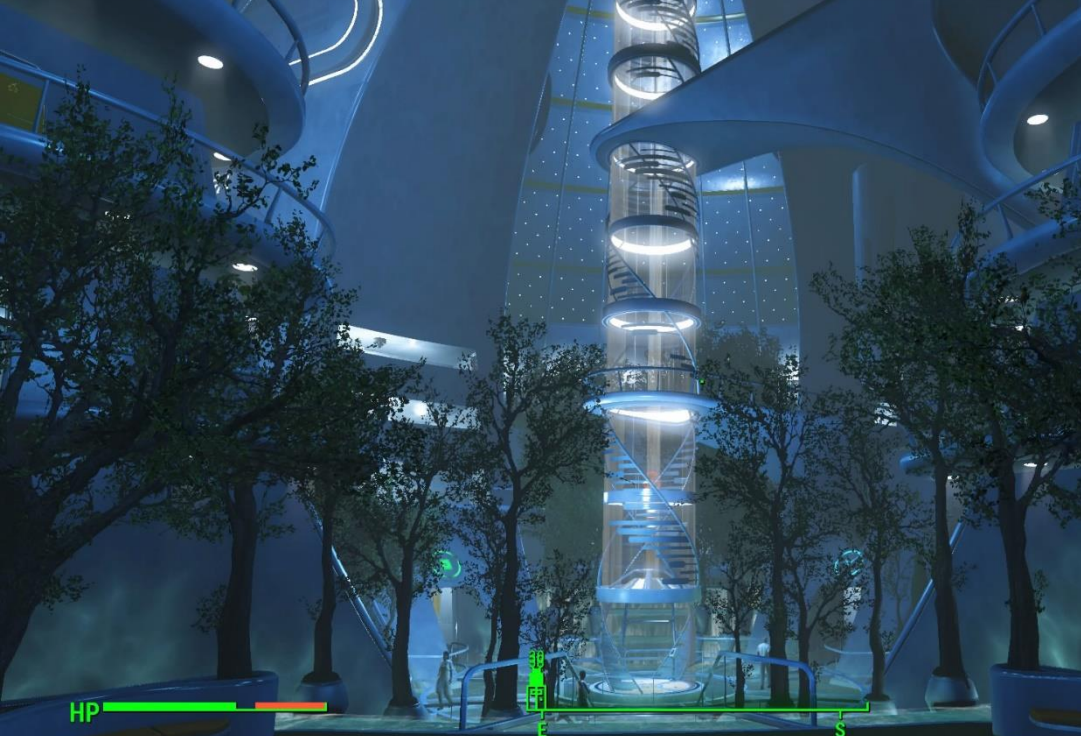


Institute



Extrapolation of mad scientists / hubris of man

- Want to eliminate the “filth” of the world above
- Use synths as weaponry and utensils
- Create a constant paranoia and mistrust of the Other on surface world



Minutemen



Extrapolation of Initial American Dream as Utopia

- Police force that aims to protect the citizens of the Commonwealth
- Try to rebuild the nation: agrarian settlements / egalitarian society
- An outdoor Utopia



Railroad

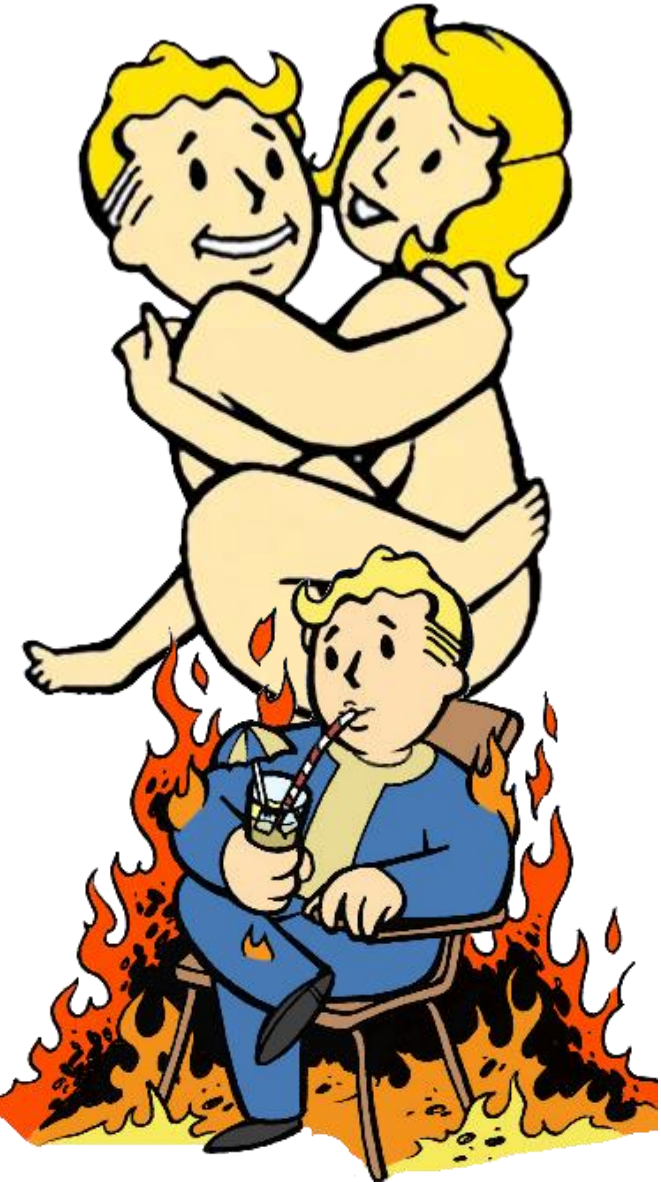


Extrapolation of Freedom Fighters: Underground Railroad Network

- Establish a network of routes and safe houses to protect the synths
- Integrating them into society requires memory loss
- Extravaganza of characters as a symbol of resistance
- The synths are more worth than people to them



The Struggle for (Anti-)Utopia in *Fallout 4*



The Struggle for Utopia in *Fallout 4*



References

Bethesda Game Studios. *FALLOUT 4*. Bethesda Softworks, 2015. Played on PS4.

Farca, Gerald. *Playing Dystopia: Nightmarish Worlds in Video Games and the Player's Aesthetic Response*. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2018.

Sargent, Lyman T. "U.S. Eutopias in the 1980s and 1990s: Self-Fashioning in a World of Multiple Identities." In *Utopianism/Literary Utopias and National Culture Identities: A Comparative Perspective*, edited by Paola Spinozzi, 221-232. COTEPRA/University of Bologna, 2001.

Suvin, Darko. *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1979.