

# Dystopia and The Implied Player

Gerald Farca,  
English Literature, University of Augsburg, Germany



***The Stanley Parable***

**DiGRA 2015**  
Leuphana University Lüneburg  
15.05.2015

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://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.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](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

# Thesis 1: The Virtual Trial Action

In *The Stanley Parable* the player embarks on a virtual trial action in the course of which he will gain a better understanding of his dystopian present. This plot of education is meticulously prestructured by the video game dystopia's *implied player*, in both the player's physical possibilities to action and subsequent interpretive thought processes.

(at least one of the implied player's potential manifestations)

# The Implied Player (Espen Aarseth)

- can be seen as a role made for the player by the game, a set of expectations that the player must fulfil for the game to “**exercise its effect**” (132).
- as a boundary imposed on the player-subject by the game, **a limitation** to the playing person’s freedom of movement and choice (132).

# The Implied Reader (Wolfgang Iser)

- He embodies all those **preconditions** necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect ... (34).
- **a textual structure** anticipating the presence of a recipient ... (34).
- **a network of response-inviting structures**, which impel the reader to grasp the text (34).

⇒ **Aesthetic response**

# The Repertoire of *The Stanley Parable*

Consist of all the familiar territory within the text

[game world / storyworld].

- references to earlier works, or to social and historical norms ...
- to the whole culture from which the text has emerged – ... the “**extratextual**” **reality** (Iser 69). [utopia / dystopia do that very clearly]

Conventions, norms, and traditions ... are always in some way **reduced or modified**, as they have been removed from their original context and **function** (Iser 69).



# A Bureaucratic Consumer Capitalism





# WHAT DO PEOPLE WANT???

- THINGS.
- ~~HAPPY~~
- MONEY
- MORE MONEY...
- THINGS - BUT WITH MONEY TO BUY MORE THINGS?
- GRAPHS?
- GRAPHS ABOUT THINGS + MONEY

THE STOCK MARKET IS SOMEWHERE HERE!

MIKE JAMES YOU ARE FIRED.

WE HAVE OUR NEW PRODUCT.



COLORS IN SEGMENT



WHAT IS HOT?

PROFITS  
PROFITS  
PROFITS  
PROFITS  
PROFITS

BUSINESS LETTERS AND CO.

FAX

TO: MRS. JONES	FROM: J. SMITH
123 MAIN ST.	456 MARKET ST.
ANYTOWN, CA 90321	ANYTOWN, CA 90321
TELEPHONE (415) 555-1234	TELEPHONE (415) 555-5678

ALL INFORMATION CONTAINED HEREIN IS UNCLASSIFIED

Using slides to assure employees that everything is okay

Make sure your slide has a slick blue graphic in the header, and throw some bevel on all the text.

This will ensure a calm and productive work environment.

To DO:

- SYNERGIZE CORE VALUE EXPENDITURES
- SHIFT GLOBAL MARKET PARADIGM
- MONETIZE FREE TO PLAY!



# Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon









# Thesis 2: The Wandering Viewpoint

The player's process of comprehension is guided through her **wandering viewpoint**. In the course of the virtual trial action the player will encounter **several perspectives** the game's diegetic world has to offer. These represent informational units (offers to the player) he cognitively arranges into a coherent whole. As the connections between those perspectives usually remain unstated, **blanks invariably arise**. It is now up to the player to fill in the unstated connections by using his world knowledge.

In video games, however, the possibility space allows for the creation of an additional perspective, which is the player's herself. **By filling in physical gaps through choice and action the player will create his own perspectives.**

# Perspectives in *The Stanley Parable*

- **The gameworld** (environment, artifacts, etc.)
- **The narrator**
- **Stanley** (external focalization on the player character)
- **The player** (internal focalization, subjective point of view: feeling of an almost unmediated story experience / creation)
- The player's **actions** (by filling in physical gaps [the indeterminacy space of the video game] the player creates his own perspectives).
- **The dynamic system** (a confining set of rules that limits player action)



# Official Narrative and Counter-Narrative

(cf. Baccolini / Moylan)



# The Narrator and Dystopia's Official Narrative

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



# The Narrator and Dystopia's Official Narrative

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

- **Blank** between player action and outcome (as there is none).

**Walking in loops** the entire game.

- **Blank** between player action and repetition.





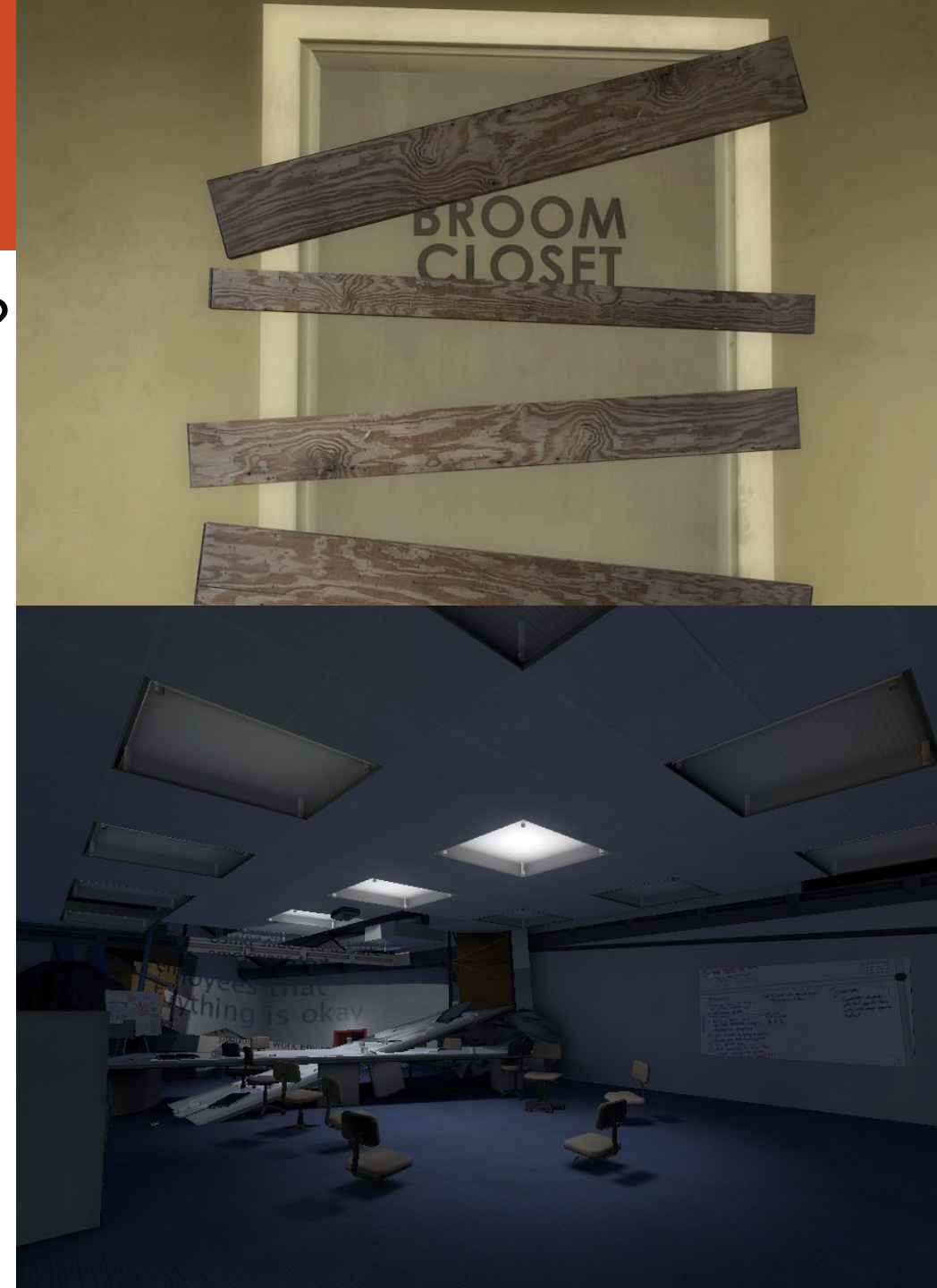
# Stanley chooses the door on his right

# The Counter-Narrative

- **Physical gap**: What happens if I try to revolt?

## Transgressive Play:

- The attempt to **regain agency (breaking the rules)**.
- **Driving the narrator mad** and ruining his meticulously planned story.





# The Question of Agency

- **The narrator** gives you the illusion of choice, in that he reacts to the player's actions.
  - **Blank creation**: Do I really have agency in the game?
  - Do I really have agency in real life?
- ⇒ Connection: **virtuality / reality.**



# Stanley and the Player

## Dystopia's Aesthetic Response

### - Plot of education:

From an external perspective on Stanley, to an “internal”.

⇒ Blank between Stanley and the player: **Am I Stanley???**

Warning: **Do not become Stanley! And if you think you have, do something about it!**

Gaining a better understanding of the empirical present.



Thank you very much!

Any Questions?

# Bibliography

- Aarseth, E. “I fought the Law: Transgressive Play and the Implied Player,” in *Proceedings of DiGRA 2007 Conference*. Available at <http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/07313.03489.pdf>
- Baccolini, R. and Moylan, T. “Conclusion: Critical Dystopia and Possibilities,” in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*. Eds. Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan. Routledge, New York, 2003, pp. 233 – 249.
- Galactic Cafe (2013) *The Stanley Parable* [PC Computer, Steam] Galactic Café, played 20.12.2014.
- Iser, W. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. The Johns Hopkins UP, Baltimore, Maryland, 1978.
- Moylan, T. Thomas. *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*. Westview Press, Colorado, 2000.