The Stanley Parable: Dystopia and the Implied Player

Gerald Farca
Department of English Literature
University of Augsburg
Augsburg, Germany
gerald.farca@phil.uni-augsburg.de

Ever since its inception the literary dystopia has served as an instrument of critical scrutiny of the empirical present. In depicting visions of nightmare, dystopia suggests a fictional world as a possible destination for mankind and may therefore reveal flaws and potential problems already present in its author's empirical reality (Booker 1994, 18, Ferns 1999, 15 / 107; Sargisson 2013, 40). The reason behind such a strategy is simple. In depicting "the future as *disruption (Beunruhigung)* of the present" (Jameson 2005, 228), dystopia functions as a *warning* and a wake-up call for the recipient, reminding her or him, that although the depicted scenario may be just around the corner, it is not too late to avoid it (Booker 2013, vii; Ferns, 1999, 107; Viera 2010, 17). This *aesthetic response* is meticulously prestructured by dystopia's *implied reader* (a term coined by literary theorist Wolfgang Iser). Iser claims that a literary text postulates several perspectives (narrator, characters, plot-threads, etc.) that are cleverly arranged in order to guide the recipient's response. As the connections between these perspectives is unstated, blanks invariably arise. In literary theory this is where the empirical reader assumes a cognitively active role. During the process of ideation (which will lead to the creation of *the aesthetic object*, that is, the meaning of the text), the reader is in constant need to fill the blanks, and this s/he does by making use of her or his world knowledge (Iser 1978). In the case of dystopian fiction, the implicit comparison between fictional and empirical world, then, will allow the reader to come to the awareness that society as we know it isn't so far from dystopia after all.

The *video game dystopia* follows a similar strategy, yet grants the player a far more involved role than a reader or viewer could ever dream of. Having the player enact dystopia, in a direct feedback loop to her or his actions, games such as Galactic Cafe's *The Stanley Parable* (2013) allow for a far more intimate experience of the dystopian genre. There is however one aspect that remains the same, which is the player's prestructured aesthetic response. My claim is that *The Stanley Parable* makes use of an implied player that guides the empirical player towards a better understanding not only of the virtual world, but also of the dystopian nature of her/his empirical present. What is

more, the virtual experience of dystopia may trigger a subversive response in the player that, at best, will lead to a call to action in the real world.

This I will show by analyzing the player's *wandering viewpoint* that floats between the several perspectives s/he encounters in the diegesis. Such a process is inevitable when being confronted with a storyworld, and will continuously readjust images the player has composed so far during play. In contrast to literature, though, the player may create an additional perspective, which is constituted by her/his own actions. Hence, it makes perfect sense to pay particular attention the player's role within a confining system of rules from which s/he tries to escape. In order to ground my claims on solid theory, I will make use of Espen Aarseth's definition of the implied player defined 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'" (2007, 132). This physically prestructured role (on the level of the diegesis) will then be combined with Iser's original notion of the implied reader that focuses on cognitive aspects; not to mention the fact that physical interaction with a storyworld (by means of an input device) presupposes and entails cognitive one. Using Iser's theory of aesthetic response, I hope to shed light on this largely unexplored field in video game studies.

For such an enterprise, *The Stanley Parable* illustrates a perfect (even if obvious) example, as it addresses both the confinements of a particular dystopian regime as well as the physical ones imposed on the player by a game (limited agency within a confining set of rules). And this, the player will experience throughout her/his entire experience within the diegesis.

Analyzing *The Stanley Parable,* I will further show that in the case of the video game dystopia, the player is often able to tinker with dystopia's narrative structure: "the clash of the official narrative and the oppositional counter-narrative" (Moylan 2000, 152). *The Stanley Parable* illustrates a dystopia in the classical sense of the term, that is to say, one that will shatter the resistance of its diegetic characters most terribly (Baccolini et al. 2001, 240). The prospect of hope (even if slim) does however lie with the player. In an estranged vision of a bureaucratic consumer capitalism cramped into the microcosm of a random office building, *The Stanley Parable* shows our empirical present for what it really is. Within such a world individual agency is absent, but this is exactly what the player strives for. In her/his attempt to regain agency, the player ventures on a virtual journey of resistance (the counter-narrative, as so common to dystopian fiction). S/he confronts the dystopian regime, that is to say, the narrator, and strives to escape her/his entrapment. And while there may be no hope for Stanley (the player-character), as he is consistently crushed by the narrator, the player may succeed. At the very least, the virtual experience of dystopia will trigger a subversive question in the player, and one that will close the inevitable gap between fiction and reality: am I Stanley?

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