



Encyclopedia of Video Games

Encyclopedia of Video Games

THE CULTURE, TECHNOLOGY, AND ART OF
GAMING

SECOND EDITION

VOLUME I: A–F

Mark J. P. Wolf, Editor



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Dystopian Games

Dystopian games are a dominant subgenre in video game fiction. They take place in nightmarish futures and dark game worlds, settings worse than their developers' empirical surroundings, and stretch across science fiction genres, such

as classical utopias and dystopias, cyberpunk, steampunk, posthuman stories, alternate histories, and postapocalyptic stories. To count as a dystopia, however, it is not enough for a game to virtualize a grim world in the near or distant future; the focus needs to lie on societal issues (Booker 2013, 5; Domsch 2015, 397). Game worlds such as Rapture from *BioShock* (2007), the Commonwealth from *Fallout 4* (2015), Neo-Paris from *Remember Me* (2013), or the Detroit of *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (2011) explore real-world issues that are extrapolated into the future to have players explore them in their true magnitude, as "extensions or exaggerations of conditions that already exist" (Booker and Thomas 2009, 65). In this way, dystopian games make players aware of such things as rapturous forms of capitalism (as in *BioShock* and *Borderlands*, [2009]), the machinations of totalitarianism and sinister corporations (as in *Half-Life 2* [2004] and *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*), conflicts between ideologies (*Fallout 4*), humankind's inability to evolve past dark parts of their nature (*Metro 2033* [2010]; *MadWorld* [2009]), and the dangers of science and technology (*Remember Me* and *Watch Dogs* [2014]), to name a few.

Thereby, the method of addressing these issues is not didactic but avails itself of the sensualizing powers of fiction and its ability to convey themes implicitly. To do so, dystopian games involve players in estranged game worlds and dramatic, and sometimes satirical, plotlines that are built around a "fictional novum" (Suvin 1979, 69), a "cognitive innovation" (64). This novelty determines the logic of the world and its rules and defamiliarizes the surroundings players will encounter, granting them

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access to fantastic game worlds they have to make sense of (71). Often individuals or ideologies misuse the powers of the novum, which may include new technologies such as prosthetic limbs (*Deus Ex: Human Revolution*), devices to manipulate human memories (*Remember Me*) or time (*Quantum Break* [2016]), advances in gene therapy (*BioShock*), or simply an infection that transforms the game world into a postapocalyptic wasteland (*The Last of Us* [2013]).

Consequently, by postulating an imaginative leap but upholding the hypothetical possibility of the scenario, dystopian games function as warnings regarding contemporary tendencies the developers have deemed dangerous and that they present in “the defamiliarizing context of an extreme fictional society” (Booker and Thomas 2009, 65). Dystopian games, in other words, involve players in fictional trial actions that have them think and live through the ramifications of these tendencies (and the ethical dilemmas they entail) while inviting them to compare the estranged game world to their empirical surroundings.

HISTORY OF THE GENRE AND PLOT STRUCTURE

The history of the dystopian genre (in games) and its plot structure are closely tied to dystopia’s function as a warning. Dystopian games involve players in confining rule systems and nightmarish game worlds that often seem “beyond redemption” (Schulzke 2014, 330) and, by doing so, address contemporary trends prevalent in a specific historical time period. Nonetheless, *hope*, in the sense of “gloomy optimism, fearing for the worst, hoping for the best” (Geoghegan 2013,

48) is always an option; otherwise, these games would be pointless (other than serving as a product for consumption). In this sense, dystopian games do not remain caught up in a cruel pessimism about the future, as they often explore potential routes leading through the nightmare into a hopeful, utopian direction. They thus stand in the tradition of the utopian philosophy, which generally aims to attain social change and transformation through continuous negotiation and the struggle toward a better world (Vieira 2010, 22–23).

One can already discern this emancipatory function in the early games of the 1970s and 1980s, although their critique of the status quo remains marginal—and one might say, they are simply products for entertainment. Games such as *Death Race* (1976) and *Robotron: 2084* (1982) confront players with dark, rudimentary worlds and waves of never-ending enemies to eliminate. Even though they implicitly address issues such as humankind’s desire for violent spectacle and the evolutionary fear that robotic life-forms will replace us, their focus on combat, without giving much context, robs them of their critical nature, in contrast to the film *Death Race 2000* (1975), for example. In fact, *Death Race* sparked a discussion in the United States about violence in video games and the role of interactivity when running over pedestrians could not be explained as easily by the population’s sadistic desire for violence (which, when seen in context to the movie, the game wonderfully illustrates).

This sense of agitation about the future, which the dystopian genre elicits and that Frederic Jameson has called a “*disruption* (*Beunruhigung*) of the present” (2005, 228), is more palpable in *Manhunter: New*

York (1988), in which Earth's population has been robbed of their freedom by a race called the Orbs. The game makes use of the traditional dystopian plot structure: the clash between the "official narrative," the depiction of the dystopian society, and the "oppositional counter-narrative" (Moylan 2000, 152), which brings forth a rebellion against the ruling order conducted by dissident thinkers (xiii; Baccolini and Moylan 2003b, 5). Players take on the role of an operative for the Orbs, tracking down human rebels, but they eventually become wary of the Orbs' true objectives (to harvest humans as a source of food). This is when players change sides and work to liberate Earth, which nonetheless ends with destruction and mass murder.

The pessimism of *Manhunter: New York* is beyond doubt and can be found in many games of the 1980s and 1990s. There is, for instance, *Syndicate* (1993), in which players are unknowingly in charge of a corporation in a ruthless struggle for dominance; *Shadowrun* (1993); *A Mind Forever Voyaging* (1985); and *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream* (1995), which involves players in a journey through infernal punishment without the possibility of winning the game. All the above-mentioned games, then, tackle fears of the era in different ways, including Cold War anxieties, the American population's desire for entertainment (with cable TV going mainstream), electronic innovations and the appearance of the internet (evoking fears of artificial intelligence [AI] and robotics), and a reinvigorated capitalism governed by multinational corporations. They thus stand in the tradition of classical dystopian fiction such as E. M. Forster's short story "The Machine Stops" (1909), Aldous Huxley's

Brave New World (1932), and the genre's prime example, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Hope in these stories lies outside the story or game world (the diegetic characters are doomed to failure) and is left to readers and players: to learn from the fictional experience and not let it happen in their world (Vieira 2010, 17).

Within the 1980s and 1990s, a further variant of dystopian games emerged in tandem with film and the literary works of these times. Holding out the prospect of hope within the story and game world, the *critical dystopia* explores potential routes through the nightmare and toward a utopian horizon (Baccolini and Moylan 2003a, 239–240; Moylan 2000, 105ff., 147, 188). In these more "optimistic dystopias," players become responsible for finding the "flaw" within a "seemingly stable" system, triggering a chain of events that will "lead towards its destruction" (Domsch 2015, 401; cf. 401–402). The critical dystopia is the dominant form of dystopia in video game fiction and present in games from the mid-1980s and 1990s. These include, for example, *Strider* (1989), the arcade shooter *Revolution X* (1994), *Robotica* (1995), *Beneath a Steel Sky* (1994), *Crusader: No Remorse* (1995), and the optimistic sequels to their literary forebears *Neuromancer: A Cyberpunk Role-Playing Adventure* (1988) and *Fahrenheit 451* (1984). All of these games end on a hopeful or, at least, ambiguous notion and thus negotiate the spectrum between utopia and anti-utopia on more neutral grounds than classical dystopian games (Moylan 2000, 147, 157).

This tradition of critical dystopian games continues in the 2000s and 2010s, with only a few classical dystopian games emerging, such as *The Stanley Parable*

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(2013). An additional shift concerns games' *ludic genre* and *targets*. While dystopian games from the 1970s–1990s alternated between text and point-and-click adventures, real-time strategy and role-playing games (RPGs) depicted from an isometric point of view, as well as 2-D (and some 3-D) action games, the modern dystopia that has shifted almost exclusively to the action genre (and only a few games explore routes that are more diverse: for example, *Mirror's Edge* [2008] and *Papers, Please* [2013]). Most popular are first-person and third-person shooters, such as *Crackdown* (2007), *Dishonored* (2012), *BioShock Infinite* (2013), and *Wolfenstein: The New Order* (2014), as well as action-adventure games such as *Enslaved: Odyssey to the West* (2010) and *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017). In addition, while still targeting totalitarianism and theocratic regimes, the negative impacts of capitalism, and the misuse of technology, a considerable shift toward environmental catastrophes and the end of the world, as we know it, is discernible. Most often, these are imagined in postapocalyptic worlds in which either nuclear fallout has given way to barren wastelands and anarchical structures (*Fallout: New Vegas* [2010], *Mad Max* [2015], *Rage 2* [2019]) or nature has reclaimed the planet in a nostalgic return. In the latter instance (*The Last of Us*, *Horizon Zero Dawn*, *Enslaved: Odyssey to the West*, and *Nier: Automata* [2017]), one often encounters a juxtaposition between an ancient technology-dependent capitalism that has failed and new forms of societies that have developed. These tend toward older forms of living (trying to reclaim a lost world) or explore alternative ways in balance with the natural world. Such environmentally focused

games show a strong utopian impulse and move the critical dystopian genre into a decisively ecotopian direction.

FOUR VARIANTS OF DYSTOPIAN GAMES: A TYPOLOGY

As these examples muster, dystopian games oscillate in function between ludic entertainment (settings for actions) and a playful engagement with issues that plague our contemporary world. They are, in other words, multilayered artifacts that negotiate hope in different manners, often involving players directly into this equation. This gives rise to primarily four variants of dystopian games: three of which function as a strategy of utopia and can be seen as subversive responses to precarious times, whereas the first variant is rather a misfit.

The Anti-Utopia

The anti-utopia seeks to deceive players about its critical nature by involving them in pleasurable action to attenuate the system it represents. *Civilization* (1991), for example, involves players in the mechanisms of colonization that have them adopt the hegemonic point of view of Western cultures (Mäyrä 2008, 94). The game therefore exerts “hidden influence on its player” and can be seen as a strategy of the status quo to justify their ideology (98; cf. 95–101). A further example is *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare* (2014). By participating in hectic combat and blindly following orders, players devolve into faceless participants in the wars of greater powers. Thereby, the antagonist (the corporation ATLAS) can be seen as a direct extrapolation of the U.S. military industrial complex on

whose side (in the form of the resistance group SENTINEL) players are fighting.

The Classical Dystopia

In the classical dystopia variant, the prospect of hope lies beyond the bounds of the game world. The counternarrative results in failure, and the game world's characters (and, figuratively, players) are crushed by the dystopian regime. Examples include *Every Day the Same Dream* (2009) and *The Stanley Parable* (2013), which involve players in the confining mechanism of a bureaucratic consumer capitalism. In both games, the main protagonists are doomed to failure in their attempts to escape the system (the counternarrative). Such a militant stance may nonetheless trigger a subversive reaction in players, who, although having failed in the game world, may be driven to action in empirical reality. Other such games include *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream*, *Shadowrun*, and *A Mind Forever Voyaging*.

The Critical Dystopia, Variant I

In the first critical dystopian variant, the prospect of hope lies within the bounds of the game world but is predetermined by the game's system. Players follow a trajectory toward one or more utopian horizons (or ambiguous endings) and are assigned the role of a *catalyst*. There is, for instance, *BioShock Infinite*, which sends players to the utopian city of Columbia and onto a linear journey of redemption. Thereby, players are confronted with the sins of theocracy, racism, American exceptionalism, and bad fatherhood. In addition, *The Last of Us* involves players in a choice between two

ways of living after an infection has wiped out large parts of the human population. The scientific enclave of the Fireflies aims to return to a status quo where humankind and a bureaucratic consumer capitalism reigned, whereas people in Tommy's settlement live in balance with the natural surroundings, which represents a space for a posthuman ecological utopianism (in the form of Ellie, who is immune to the infection). This decision is for Joel to take (the main protagonist and not the player) and ends the game on an ambiguous note. Other such games include *Watch Dogs*, *Mirror's Edge* (2008), *Half-Life 2*, *Tales from the Borderlands* (2014–15), and *Enslaved: Odyssey to the West*.

The Critical Dystopia, Variant II

In the last variant, the second type of critical dystopia, hope is negotiated between the game system and the players, who enjoy the choice of becoming catalysts. Consequently, every play-through may result in either an optimistic, ambiguous, or pessimistic ending and negotiates the spectrum between utopia and anti-utopia in ambiguous terms. *Metro 2033*, for example, confronts players with the choice to repeat history and wipe out the Dark Ones with a nuclear missile blast or spare the post-human race. To make this decision, however, players need a positive balance in the game's morality system (by making ethical choices throughout the game), which represents a difficult task. *Metro 2033* thus involves players in a conflict between ideologies and the uncanny fear of the Other. Moreover, it sets them between various positions (perspectives in favor of sparing the Dark Ones and

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those who wish to wipe them out) and has them negotiate the prospect of utopia through their own actions. Other games that follow this strategy include *Blade Runner* (1997), *BioShock* (2007), *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, *Papers, Please*, *Fallout 4*, and *Nier: Automata*.

Given these four variants, it is easy to discern that the video game dystopia, as a genre, is highly prevalent and diverse in game fiction. It not only serves players as a reminder that something might be wrong with their world but also that something can and should be done to prevent the nightmare from becoming a reality. As a strategy of utopia, therefore, dystopian games are entertainment products that nonetheless look skeptically and quizzically into our future. They involve players in estranged game worlds and fictional trial actions with the aim to unveil societal wrongs, destabilize the status quo, and offer solutions to the dilemmas they represent.

Gerald Farca

See also: *BioShock* Series

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