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Preface and Acknowledgements

BENJAMIN BEIL, GUNDOLF S. FREYERMUTH,
HANNS CHRISTIAN SCHMIDT

Niklas Luhmann once asked in which forms the future might present itself in the present. One answer is that media narratives inform contemporary ideas of "the shape of things to come."[1] Games are currently making a significant contribution to this medial reservoir. On the one hand, they demonstrate a particular propensity for fantastic and futuristic scenarios. On the other hand, digital games often serve as an experimental field for the latest media technology. However, while dystopias are part of the standard gaming repertoire, games feature utopias much less frequently. Why?

This anthology attempts to provide some answers to this question. The idea of creating such a publication goes back to a Game Studies Summit which took place at the Cologne Game Lab of TH Köln in November 2018 as part of the ninth *Clash of Realities—International Conference on the Art, Technology, and Theory of Digital Games*. Its subject was "Playing Utopia—Futures in Digital Games." This volume documents the keynotes and lectures given at this summit and adds further perspectives and contributions. It collects various analyses of visions of a better world as they are presented in games as well as investigations of the role ludic elements play in such scenarios.

In the introductory essay "Utopian Futures. A Brief History of Their Conception and Representation in Modern Media—From Literature to Digital

1 Wells, H.G.: *The Shape of Things to Come. The Ultimate Revolution*, London: Hutchinson & Co. 1933.

Squire, Kurt: "Changing the Game: What Happens When Video Games Enter the Classroom," *Innovate: Journal of Online Education* 1/6 (2005).

Schulze, Matthias: "What I Learned Playing Democracy 3 or Why the World Will Not Change....," 2015; https://percepticon.wordpress.com/2015/01/07/what-i-learned-playing-democracy-3-or-why-the-world-will-not-change/

Yee, Nick: "The Gamer Motivation Profile: What We Learned from 250,000 Gamers," in: *Proceedings of the 2016 Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play*, ACM 2016, pp. 2-2.

Gamography

Civilization III (Infogrames 2001, O: Firaxis Games)

Democracy 3 (Positech Games 2013, O: Positech Games)

Democracy 3: Clones & Drones (Positech Games 2014, O: Positech Games)

Democracy 3: Extremism (Positech Games 2014, O: Positech Games)

Energetika 2010 (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung 2010, O: Takomat)

Foodforce (United Nations World Food Programme 2005, O: Playerthree and Deepend)

Genius. Im Zentrum der Macht (Cornelsen 2007)

Peacemaker (ImpactGames 2007, O: 2007)

The Concept of Utopia in Digital Games

Gerald Farca

In a talk at the Swedish Game Awards Conference 2018, Ubisoft Massive's COO Alf Condelius expressed that with Tom Clancy's The Division 2 (2019) the company refrains from making political claims and that the game is simply a product for entertainment.[1] To give context to his precise statement below, one has to be aware that The Division 2 is set in a post-apocalyptic Washington DC, where a virus outbreak has plunged the country into chaos. This virus is also known as the Doller Pox because it was distributed on Black Friday via infected dollar bills and spread like wildfire. In the meantime, the Capitol building is on fire, and the situation has become so severe that the Mexican government has decided to build a wall to protect Mexico from streams of U.S. refugees. Only small resistance groups, referred to as the Division, aim to restore order to the anarchy that prevails.

"It's a balance because we cannot be openly political in our games [...] 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. [...] It's a universe and a world that we created for people to explore how to be a good

1 This paper is a critical expansion of my work conducted in my dissertation and book, *Playing Dystopia*. Whereas the book rather focused on dystopian games, I am now integrating a discussion of utopian games and how a utopian impulse manifests in game fiction in general and in the games industry. Farca, Gerald: *Playing Dystopia: Nightmarish Worlds in Video Games and the Player's Aesthetic Response*, Bielefeld: transcript 2018.

person in a slowly decaying world. But people like to put politics into that, and we back away from those interpretations as much as we can because we don't want to take a stance in current politics. […] It's also bad for business, unfortunately, if you want the honest truth."[2]

Such a statement necessarily evokes discussion, given the state of the games industry in which developers (more often than not) feel responsible to cater to the tastes of certain gamer communities.[3] This may be an attempt to avoid losing large groups of customers (and satisfy the financial pressure of publishers) or to prevent outrageous outcries in forums—but it is also worth observing from a different yet connected point of view.

In recent history, game developers and academics alike have described video games as forms of art,[4] as showing the potential to affect players emotionally and aesthetically by making them ponder life, culture, and societal developments (and, in general, the many connections between the fictional gameworld and their empirical surroundings).[5] To do so is to approach the video game medium's aesthetic function as an implicit but subversive commentary on contemporary issues and ways of life—and one cannot but pose the question whether game developers, as artists they claim to be, assume a certain (utopian) *responsibility*. Of course, this responsibility may be two-sided: one the one hand, to ensure the success of the product and secure (their own) working places, while on the other hand, it is the artist's desire to question, comment, and meticulously unveil societal wrongs, to destabilize the

2 Taylor, Haydn: "Ubisoft Massive COO: 'We Don't Want to Take a Stance in Current Politics,'" *GamesIndustry*, October 17, 2018; https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2018-10-17-ubisoft-massive-coo-we-dont-want-to-take-a-stance-in-current-politics

3 Mortensen, Torill: "Anger, Fear, and Games: The Long Event of #GamerGate," *Games and Culture* 13, no. 8 (April 2016); https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1555412016640408

4 Tavinor, Grant: "Art and Aesthetics," in: Wolf, Mark J. P./Perron, Bernard (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*, New York: Routledge 2014, pp. 59-66.

5 With empirical surroundings/world, I refer to the extratextual surroundings (outside of the gameworld) and to what is usually meant when saying the 'real world,' the 'actual world,' and so on.

status quo in precarious times, and to suggest potential ways out of these dilemmas.[6]

In this context, George Orwell was very blunt about his *Nineteen Eighty-Four*[7] in which he describes the world situation back in the 1940s:

"I think that, allowing for the book being after all a parody, something like *Nineteen Eighty-Four could* happen. This is the direction in which the world is going at the present time, and the trend lies deep in the political, social and economic foundations of the contemporary world situation. … The moral to be drawn from this dangerous nightmare situation is a simple one: *Don't let it happen. It depends on you.*"[8]

Granted, Condelius' desire to leave the interpretation to players[9] is fundamentally important—and games certainly speak on their own. However, comparing his statement to the openness of Orwell's raises the question of whether game developers should succumb (so easily) to the influence of the status quo or the opinions of gaming communities. Shouldn't they rather promote their works as artists, and as the subversive products they are? For is the function of modern art "to reveal and perhaps balance the deficiencies resulting from prevailing systems,"[10] and to "propose [...] *trial runs* for approaches to what is."[11] This allows players, readers, spectators "to see everyday norms and conventions, social habits of thinking and feeling, in a different light [...] [and] to explore, in a kind of *trial action in a virtual*

6 Jameson, Fredric: *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, London: Verso 2005, p. 11-16.

7 Orwell, George: *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, United Kingdom: Secker & Warburg 1949.

8 Crick, Bernard: "Introduction," in: George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, New York: Clarendon Press, 1984, pp. 152-153, quoted in Kumar, Krishan: *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1987, p. 291.

9 H. Taylor: "Ubisoft Massive COO."

10 Iser, Wolfgang: *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, trans. Wilhelm Fink, Baltimore: John Hopkins UP 1978, p 13.

11 Iser, Wolfgang: *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology*, trans. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, original: Baltimore: John Hopkins UP 1993, p. 143, emphasis added.

environment, the consequences of breaking and transgressing norms without having to fear sanctions in real life."[12]

Specifically, science fiction (SF) and the utopian genre[13] (to which THE DIVISION 2 pertains as a variant of dystopia) do so in a reinforced manner. By having players engage with a gameworld that is both *strange* (a virus outbreak has transformed Washington DC into an anarchical sight) and *familiar* (places and objects, norms, ethics, social and cultural conventions that are generally known), THE DIVISION 2 involves them in a *feedback oscillation* between the fictional gameworld and their empirical surroundings. This allows players to not only comprehend the gameworld by comparing it to the empirical world (based on their cultural knowledge) but also to gain insight into the latter from a different point of view (in its cultures, norms, and politics).[14] Consequently, to deny that any game dealing with such a delicate topic is political is based on an incomprehension of art's creative faculties, or fueled by alternative motives.

This article aims to underline video games' aesthetic potential as art: as forward-looking, subversive commentaries on our contemporary world that meticulously unveil societal wrongs through play and introduce players to different cultures and ways of living. Specifically, I will focus on how digital games *negotiate the concept of Utopia*[15] and involve players in a form of play

12 Berensmeyer, Ingo: *Literary Theory: An Introduction to Approaches, Methods and Terms*, Stuttgart: Klett Lerntraining 2009, p. 79, emphasis added; cf. Perron, Bernard: *Silent Hill: The Terror Engine*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 2012, p. 12.

13 I regard science fiction as a broad genre that encompasses subgenres such as the posthuman, space opera, cyberpunk, steampunk, or post-apocalypse. Although I do not subordinate utopia and dystopia to SF (because of the genres' long traditions), there are many affinities between them. Suvin, Darko: *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, New Haven: Yale UP 1979, p. 4, p. 61; Sargent, Lyman T.: "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited," *Utopian Studies* 5, no. 1 (1994), p. 11; http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/20719246?uid=3737864&uid=2129&uid=2&uid=70&uid=4&sid=21101560295713

14 D. Suvin: *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, p. 4, p. 71.

15 Following Baccolini and Moylan, I use capitalisation to refer to the philosophy of Utopia (utopianism) and Anti-Utopia and to specific Utopias—a certain

that is *regenerative* in different ways: in that it helps them see beyond the inoculating powers of the status quo, differentiate societal issues, and explore potential solutions to these through play. By playing utopian and dystopian games, in other words, players implicitly compare the gameworld to what they know from the empirical world in acts of ideation (Ideenbildung).[16] They thus become involved in a *trial action* that may reveal their world's darkest secrets and hidden agendas, but through which they may as well explore ways to cope with contemporary dilemmas (such as capitalism, human greed, totalitarianism, ecological issues) and, potentially, move beyond them.

While utopian and dystopian games follow a similar purpose in this regard—as a strategy of Utopia to promote social change and transformation[17]—they employ adjusted strategies in how they negotiate the issue of *hope*. Whereas utopian fiction starts with a positive premise (showing us a fantastic world that is described as superior to ours), dystopian fiction aims to shock players by involving them in visions of nightmares. This diverse spectrum of possibilities results in a plethora of potential subgenres—and to categorize these in a typology will be the main task of this article while explaining how regenerative play is afforded by them.

To do so, I will begin with a discussion on the concept of Utopia and how a utopian (and anti-utopian) impulse permeates the games industry. This is a first, important step, for it discusses the tensions between a highly capitalist, profit-oriented industry and works of art that shall criticize these machinations and point to ways beyond them. Second, I will scrutinize how this utopian impulse manifests itself in digital games in general and involves players in regenerative ways through 1) the exploration of space, 2) the experience

imaginary, virtual, or real place that fulfils the necessary aspects of a Utopia. Lowercase will be used for Utopia's manifestations, such as the literary utopia/dystopia or video game utopia/dystopia. Baccolini, Raffaella/Moylan, Tom: "Introduction. Dystopia and Histories," in: Baccolini, Raffaella/Moylan, Tom (eds.), *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, New York: Routledge 2003, pp. 1-12, here p 11.

16 W. Iser: *The Act of Reading*, p. 35.

17 Vieira, Fátima: "Introduction," in: Vieira, Fátima (ed.), *Dystopia(n) Matters: On the Page, on Screen, on Stage*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholar Publishing 2013, pp. 1-7, here p. 1.

of plot and thematics, 3) the interaction with characters and communities, and 4) systemic and creational aspects. This will finally lead to the main discussion of utopian and dystopian games. As multi-layered artifacts, these oscillate in function between entertainment and emancipation and involve players in either paradisiac or nightmarish gameworlds. Thereby, all of the discussed subgenres negotiate the spectrum between Utopia and Anti-Utopia (and the issue of hope)[18] in different ways, which results in a comprehensive typology of utopian and dystopian games. This typology includes 1) the classical utopia, 2) the critical utopia of variant I and II, 3) the critical dystopia of variant I and II, 4) the classical dystopia, and 5) the anti-utopia.

1.1 THE UTOPIAN IMPULSE IN DIGITAL GAMES AND BEYOND

"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."[19]

The philosophy of Utopia, as Lucy Sargisson refers to it, fundamentally revolves around the principle of hope and the dream of a better world. It begins with the *act of imagination* itself when the utopian thinker explores real or fictional alternatives to the contemporary present and induces a "transformative process"[20] that will grasp the recipient's attention.[21] This process begins

18 Moylan, Tom: *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press 2000, p. 147, p. 157.

19 Levitas, Ruth/Sargisson, Lucy: "Utopia in Dark Times: Optimism/Pessimism and Utopia/Dystopia," in: Baccolini, Raffaella/Moylan, Tom (eds.), *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, New York: Routledge 2003, pp. 13-27, here p. 20.

20 R. Levitas/L. Sargisson: "Utopia in Dark Times," p. 16.

21 Ibid., p. 13, p. 16; Seeber, Hans Ulrich: *Die Selbstkritik der Utopie in der Anglo-amerikanischen Literatur*, Münster: LIT 2003, p. 58.

"in the now,"[22] as the Utopian scrutinizes empirical reality for potential ills and composes a vision of the future in which these issues are either solved or have turned into a nightmare.[23] Notwithstanding the direction of Utopia, whether it results in a *utopia* or *dystopia*, "the desire"[24] for it is deeply anchored in the human psyche and looks forward. However, there is a pitfall here, as Slavoj Žižek warns: for if the desire is tipped out of balance, it may indeed be the greatest enemy to human happiness.[25]

Utopians have become aware of this peril, and the concept underwent critical changes mainly because of Utopia's abuse, which occurred with the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century.[26] Consequently, moving away from ideas of perfection and from blindly following noble ideals, Utopia is today rather understood as a *cautious desire* and indicates "a direction for man to follow, but never a point to be reached."[27] It takes on "the shape of a process" and "a programme for change and for a gradual betterment of the present."[28] Such an understanding of Utopia lays the focus on a *transformative discourse* and a *creative dialectic* between various parties, while it upholds Utopia's primary function as a *warning*.

Notwithstanding these claims, some scholars (such as Frederic Jameson) still regard the function of Utopia as a more radical one. In *Archaeologies of the Future*, Jameson describes a *utopian impulse* that permeates human society and comes to the fore in many aspects such as social struggle, communitarian projects, and fictional artworks.[29] Thereby, the imagination of a better future must be a radical one (although Jameson understands that this

22 R. Levitas/L. Sargisson: "Utopia in Dark Times," p. 17.

23 Booker, M. Keith: *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism*, Westport Conn.: Greenwood Press 1994, p. 15; F. Jameson: *Archaeologies of the Future*, pp. 11-12.

24 Ibid., 84.

25 Žižek, Slavoj: *Welcome to the Desert of the Real! Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates*, London: Verso 2002, pp. 58-59.

26 R. Levitas/L. Sargisson: "Utopia in Dark Times," p. 25.

27 Vieira, Fátima: "The Concept of Utopia," in: Claeys, Gregory (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2010, pp. 3-27, here p. 22.

28 Ibid., p. 23; cf. pp. 22-23.

29 F. Jameson: *Archaeologies of the Future*, p. 53.

might be difficult to imagine), which leads to the following conclusion. To Jameson, 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."[30] Given this phrasing, Utopia functions as "a critical and diagnostic instrument,"[31] but it also helps us imagine ways out of current dilemmas and gridlocked societal systems.

Such a conception of the future stands in stark contrast to what scholars have described as the anti-utopian imagination. "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."[32] To Tom Moylan, the anti-utopian persuasion is a strategy of the dominant ideology. It postulates the end of history and discredits Utopia to safeguard "the status quo and the satisfactions that it delivers to its beneficiaries."[33] In other words, the anti-utopian describes the empirical present as "the best of all possible worlds"[34] to keep societal change to a minimum.

Such views may be a matter of perspective, of course, and in need of precise differentiation. However, specifically today, dominant ideology follows a strict anti-utopian strategy. With authoritarian and totalitarian regimes strengthening their power by any means necessary and a capitalist, consumerist way of living that grants few to none alternatives, George Orwell's and Aldous Huxley's visions of nightmare in *Nineteen-Eighty Four* and *Brave New World*[35] have become a combined reality in the 21st century. One may ask now whether these fictions have missed their purpose (since their described futures have become a reality in some ways) or refocus one's interest in modern utopian and dystopian fiction and its regenerative appeal.

In fact, the 21st century has spurred on a new utopian countermovement which (steadily) breaks open the dystopian imagination and its post-apocalyptic fantasies. Noteworthy in this regard is the increase in ecological fiction, which expresses the current needs for climate protection, the struggle

30 Ibid., p. 228.

31 Ibid., p. 148.

32 T. Moylan: *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, p. 104.

33 Ibid., p. 131; cf. p. 129, p. 157.

34 Jameson, Fredric: *The Seeds of Time*, New York: Columbia UP 1994, p. 8.

35 Huxley, Aldous: *Brave New World*, United Kingdom: Chatto & Windus 1932.

against human pollution, and a fresh start on faraway planets due to a lack of alternatives. This function of Utopia (to counter-act problematic aspects of society and point to alternatives) has prevailed since Thomas More's *Utopia*[36] and its response to 16th century Europe. In the *Utopia*, More imagined a quasi-socialist society that has done away with capitalist greed and its resultant hierarchical structures,[37] which creates a *tension* between how things are and how things could be.

1.1.1 The (Anti-)Utopian Impulse in the Games Industry

This aspect, of a conceptually open future, is worth discussing in the larger context of digital games and the games industry. Specifically, if one regards the games industry as a piece of highly profited-oriented machinery (with global revenue of $135 billion in 2018),[38] several tensions between utopian and anti-utopian potentialities arise. Consequently, the following part will describe an (anti-)utopian impulse that permeates game design and address tensions such as games as capitalist products vs. games as art, AAA productions vs. independent games, and the struggle for heterogeneity and diversity vs. a male-dominated industry. These issues will not necessarily be answered here but shall inspire critical thought and utopian solutions to them.

To begin with, the example of THE DIVISION has already unveiled a fundamental tension concerning the status of *games as capitalist products* and *their critique of the capitalist system*. This aspect is noteworthy in many commercially successful games that also aim for artistic diversity—including the BORDERLANDS (2009-) and BIOSHOCK (2007-) series—and formulates an ethical problem to be addressed. For in buying these games, players contribute to the capitalist production machinery that regulates the games industry (and the same is true for Hollywood blockbusters and commercially

36 More, Thomas: *Utopia*, Habsburg Netherlands: More 1516.

37 Booker, M. Keith: *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide*, Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press 1994, pp. 53-54.

38 Batchelor, James: "Global Games Market Value Rising to $134.9bn in 2018: Revenues Grew by Over 10 %, Mobile Accounts for Almost Half at $63.2 Billion," *Gamesindustry*, December 18, 2018; https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2018-12-18-global-games-market-value-rose-to-usd134-9bn-in-2018

successful literature). This may come to the detriment of developers, who often suffer from precarious working situations and must endure crunch-times during the development process. Such games are highly commercialized products that aim to affect broad audiences while trying to make them aware of the central problems of their times. However, this social criticism lies also in the artist's desire—and to reach a conclusion here is difficult. Maybe, one could argue that the benefit of AAA games (the subversive potential they offer to a large crowd) outweighs their negative impact as capitalist products. Yet, there might be an additional, connected train of thought worth mentioning.

In the recent decade, a new trend of independent games has given way to a utopian movement in game design.[39] These games are produced with a low budget (to AA) and developed by smaller groups of people. In their partial rejection of AAA productions (and the connected limitations in design), independent games offer the possibility for artistic diversity and experimentation. People often gather in creative communities and find like-minded in specific conventions and festivals. Independent games are thus not restrained by the pressures of big publishers (yet alternative means of funding are necessary) and are a means of creative expression to move the medium in different directions. Although often a retro-trend in design can be discerned (2D aesthetics and gameplay), these games nonetheless look forward. In taking up older ludic genres (such as 2D platforming and adventure games) and intermingling them with variants of storytelling, new forms of ludic expression become possible. One example is FEZ (2012) in which a supposedly 2D world and gameplay perspective are later expanded to a 3D realm. People in FEZ have forgotten about three of the four sides of their world, and players have to restore order by solving puzzles and rotating between four 2D perspectives. FEZ is thus a brilliant example of how old gameplay conventions (2D platform and adventures games) are creatively expanded to the modern era. By breaking away from ludic conventions as wells as linear worldviews, the game creates an open-minded environment in which many (cultural) perspectives are negotiated—not only to expand the horizon of game design but also the philosophical impact of digital games.

39 Juul, Jesper: *Handmade Pixels: Independent Video Games and the Quest for Authenticity*, Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press 2019.

An additional game worth mentioning is THE STANLEY PARABLE (2013) which has players experience the confinements of an office job and game design alike. During the game, the main character, Stanley, reaches a room with two open doors, which confronts him with a profound choice. This choice is not only representative for branching structures in games and players' lack of agency, but it also addresses the confines of bureaucratic consumer capitalism and the pettiness of the individual worker. Meta-games, such as THE STANLEY PARABLE, negotiate the current status of the medium and offer valuable perspectives on it. They follow on the function of independent games to explore creative ways of expression and attempt to create new ludo-narrative experiences.

While the effect of independent games may be limited to fewer consumers (due to their niche status), they affect AAA productions indirectly. They inspire AAA design and are a trial space for the development of big-budget productions, to test out what methods and forms of ludic expression are successful.

Yet, the move from AAA studios to smaller ones is also due to a different but connected reason. Although the video game industry is striving for diversity and heterogeneous working spaces, it remains a partially hostile environment for minorities. This may be so because of many reasons (and the negative influence of Gamergate shall not be neglected) and can often be discerned in the resulting games. One problem is the severe lack of women working in the games industry—and the success of violent actions games (mostly created by men)[40] may speak on its own. This anti-utopian and confining trend needs to be addressed in the foreseeable future, not only to create balanced and healthy working environments but also to push the creative boundaries of game design and include many different perspectives into the development process.

In this vein, a games industry that moves into a utopian direction should create a balanced and safe environment for the creative mind to thrive. It should embrace diversity and heterogeneity while overcoming linear worldviews and the hostility often to be found in it. Finding expression through games while retaining commercial sustainability is a difficult task,

40 Stuart, Keith: "The Last of Us, BioShock: Infinite and why all Video Game Dystopias Work the Same," *The Guardian*, July 1, 2013; https://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2013/jul/01/last-of-us-bioshock-infinite-male-view

there is no doubt here. Yet if one values the individual developer and her or his artistic creation, this is the inevitable route to take.

1.1.2 The Utopian Impulse in Digital Games and its Regenerative Appeal

The tension between commercial success and creative artifacts naturally translates to the game product. While any game needs to be successful to ensure commercial stability, one must not forget a game's aesthetic function. For digital games (as works of art and cultural artifacts) may evoke change by subversively commenting (directly or indirectly) on real-world issues and ways of life. Play induces a reflective and transformative process in players. It grants them the ability to enter a safe space for experimentation, pleasure, and relaxation, to escape reality, but also to see real-world issues from another vantage point. In this utopian sense, one clearly demands more from digital games than being commercial products to fuel corporate business. Specifically, if seen in Jameson's context of a utopian impulse (which permeates society and humankind's artistic creations), a particular *regenerative* dimension comes to the fore.

This dimension is implied by a game's structure (its implied player) and rests as a *potentiality* in it. Of course, different players will actualize this potential in different ways, and regenerative play is thus a result of the creative interaction between *game*, *player,* and *empirical world.* This is not to say that one cannot locate its origins in the game itself and as a structure that affords participation; in fact, this approach is most valuable when discussing games from a structuralist point of view that anticipates participation.

In the following, I will thus describe how a utopian impulse manifests itself in digital games as a regenerative force, before moving on to particular video game utopias and dystopias and how these negotiate the issue of hope. Thereby I will describe regenerative play as originating in a game's structural peculiarities and how these are negotiated by players—1) in the exploration of space, 2) the experience of plot and thematics, 3) the interaction with characters and communities, and 4) systemic and creational aspects—and explain how these elements afford utopian enclaves.

A first, indispensable source of utopian pleasures are types of *game spaces* that evoke specific emotions in players: for instance, those influenced

by "expressionism (which maps emotions onto physical space)[41] and romanticism (which endows landscapes with moral qualities)."[42] Both find their way into many digital games, such as the posthuman fantasies of NIER: AUTOMATA (2017) that juxtaposes natural spaces with the ruins of human civilization and consumption, while reflecting on the emotions of androids as they move through these. By embedding such spaces within the gameworld, utopian microcosms shine with marvelous scenery, architecture, and labyrinthine structures. They create a near-perfect design and behavior that result in delightful yet thought-provoking possibilities for play.[43] One could imagine here PROTEUS (2013), with its serene ambiance and myriad of colors pleasuring our vista, or FLOWER (2009), which contrasts dreamlike nature sections that have a calming effect on players to its bleak menu, depicting a rainy city. Such spaces may, however, transform into dystopian ones through inappropriate player behavior—Steffen Walz mentions SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS (2005), where players disrupt the tranquil scenery by killing behemoths.[44]

A further type of utopian spaces is an environment of untamed wilderness, of a world opaque to players in its totality,[45] which evokes in them the primordial affect of the sublime. Sublime experiences make players feel petty in contrast to the gameworld they explore and trigger imaginings about life, nature, and culture, which gives way to new insights into existence.[46] The result is not only a sentiment for the natural world but also the creation

41 Domsch calls such spaces "Seelenlandschaft," which depict "landscapes that reflect the mood of a protagonist, a scene, or a whole narrative (e.g. the fact that it is raining at a funeral)." Domsch, Sebastian: *Storyplaying: Agency and Narrative in Video Games*, Berlin: De Gruyter 2013, p. 103.

42 Jenkins, Henry: "The Art of Contested Spaces," in: *Publications Henry Jenkins*, 2002; http://web.mit.edu/~21fms/People/henry3/contestedspaces.html

43 Walz, Steffen P.: *Toward a Ludic Architecture: The Space of Play and Games*, Pittsburgh, PA: ETC Press 2010, pp. 137-138.

44 Ibid., pp. 140.

45 Vella, Daniel: "No Mastery Without Mystery: Dark Souls and the Ludic Sublime," *Game Studies* 15, no. 1 (2015); http://gamestudies.org/1501/articles/vella

46 Burke, Edmund: *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of the Sublime and Seautiful*, Calgery: Anodos Books 2017, p. 35-37; Garrard, Greg: *Ecocriticism*, New York: Routledge 2004, p. 70-75.

of a utopian enclave as "a place of freedom in whicsh we can recover our true selves we have lost to the corrupting influences of our artificial lives."[47] One example of this is Hello Games' NO MAN'S SKY (2016), which has players explore an infinite, procedurally created universe. The game thereby creates an experience of loneliness, known from robinsonades, and juxtaposes this with the sheer vastness of outer space and the unfamiliarity of alien planets, which players may explore at their own peril.

Similar, though with a focused magnitude, is FIREWATCH (2016). The game sets players into the role of Henry, who struggles because of his wife's sickness and involves them in a journey of self-discovery that leads into the depths of the human unconscious (underlined by the spreading of the June fire). Most noteworthy, thereby, are players' long strolls in nature. These take on the function of an escape from everyday routines as well as they are reflections on them. Nature, in other words, calms players through its serene ambiance and sounds yet terrifies by evoking feelings of loneliness and mystery. It assumes a sublime character, which endows the experience with a feeling of pettiness.[48]

There is no doubt that space creates an indispensable source of utopian pleasures, which in many cases is reinforced by the *plot* and its *thematics*. A good example of this is FIREWATCH, which intertwines nature experiences with the themes of personal loss and suffering. Such an experience potentially affects players on an affective and aesthetic level and has them move away from the game pondering. Plot, in fact, has since Aristotle been ascribed a *purifying*, cathartic effect. It sensualizes the abstract[49] and immerses us in fictional storyworlds, in the fate of characters or entire worlds, to show us different perspectives on the empirical world and have us leave the

47 Cronon, William: "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in: Cronon, William (ed.), *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company 1995, pp. 69-90, quoted in G. Garrard: *Ecocriticism*, p. 77.

48 This is reinforced by Henry's relation to Delilah, who keeps him company on the radio. Although standing in close contact to her, the relative distance to her watch tower seems insurmountable, while a potential romance is frustrated by every day live closing in.

49 H. U. Seeber: *Die Selbstkritik der Utopie in der Angloamerikanischen Literatur*, p. 70.

fictional scenery pondering. Plot and the experience of a fictional world thus affect our habitual dispositions, the way we perceive things and the outside world.[50]

The effect of the plot is discernible in many games, and particular utopian energy is actualized while playing THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD (2017).[51] The game involves players in a dreamlike gameworld in which their unconscious desires for an ecological sustainable Utopia and romantic imagery of nature are evoked, exposed to distress, and eventually saturated. By sending players on the journey of a hero to restore order in a polluted but majestic world, the game connects the hero's desire to restore balance in Hyrule to the struggle for Utopia and ecological issues: to appease the four elements disturbed by Ganon and have a restorative influence on the land's ecosystems. For as Joseph Campbell would say: It is the task of the hero "to retreat from the world of secondary effects to those causal zones of the psyche where the difficulties really reside, and there to clarify the difficulties, eradicate them in his own case."[52] Yet this individual level (of a reenactment of the Oedipus complex and the unconscious desire for a return to the mother's womb)[53] is connected to a repression greater than the individual. This wish-fulfillment lies in our relation to Mother Nature, her ecosystems and elements, and human and animal cultures.

In BREATH OF THE WILD, this plot structure and its thematic have a regenerative effect on players. It not only sensitizes them to the utopian space of a vast, natural gameworld but also reinforces this process by sending players on the journey of the hero to restore balance in a polluted world. Plot, in this sense, is a fundamental aspect of utopian pleasures. It calms, excites, and terrifies players (for instance in tragedies such as NIER AUTOMATA), thus purifying their inner selves by having them involved in the fate of the gameworld, its races, and characters.

50 W. Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, p. 17, p. 297.

51 Farca, Gerald et al.: "Regenerative Play and the Experience of the Sublime in The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild," *Proceedings of The Philosophy of Computer Games Conference* (2018); http:// gameconference.itu.dk/papers/06% 20-%20farca%20et%20al%20%20regenerati ve%20play.pdf

52 Campbell, Joseph: *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Bollingen Series 18, 3rd ed., Novato: New World Library 2008, p. 12.

53 Ibid., p. 4, p. 11.

Figure 1: The experience of the sublime is arguably the most prominent form of regenerative play in THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD—when players are astounded by Hyrule's natural wonders.

Source: THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD, location: Hyrule Field

The discussion of plot, now, inevitably leads to players' interaction with *in-game characters*, entire *civilizations,* and *ideologies*, or *other players* themselves—which shows particular utopian energy. Specifically, online communities are highly interesting in this regard. Massive multiplayer online role-playing games, like Blizzard's WORLD OF WARCRAFT (2004), enable the creation of online communities where players come together to experience adventures in a make-believe world.[54] These allow for the negotiation of potential alternatives to the empirical present in that players explore different forms of social interaction "and collective forms of organization."[55]

Yet also single-player games that can be played cooperatively, like JOURNEY (2012), allow for utopian interactions between players. In JOURNEY, this not only includes the choice of taking the route towards the

54 Inderst, Rudolf: *Vergemeinschaftung in MMORPGs*, Boizenburg: Werner Hülsbusch 2009.

55 Jagoda, Patrick: "Digital Games and Science Fiction," in: Link, Eric C./Canavan, Gerry (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to American Science Fiction*, New York: Cambridge UP 2015, pp. 139-152, here p. 146.

mountaintop together but also of performing actions such as communicating via music tunes, waiting for the additional player, or helping her out in dangerous parts of the gameworld—a fact that Fahlenbrach and Schröter attribute to the social dimension of the game, which affords a feeling of solidarity between the players.[56] As such, these potential events shape a community between two people who share the way of life together, help each other out, die together in a freezing blizzard, and become resurrected in a frenzy of emotions (but of course, also the opposite is possible). Similar social interactions can be found in games such as FALLOUT 4 (2015), although the interactions are here geared towards NPCs in that players can build a community of egalitarian settlements in the midst of a nuclear wasteland and create utopian communities in between the Commonwealth's anarchy (see next part).

FALLOUT 4 is also a good example to illustrate a last utopian quality of digital games I want to lay focus on, which the primordial force of *creation* and players interaction with *game systems*. Player agency, also defined as "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices,"[57] shows particular regenerative energy, specifically in the interaction with utopian or dystopian processes. In FALLOUT 4, for instance, players may create vast structures and intentional communities within the wasteland. They may gather resources and use these in creative ways to promote either utopian or dystopian fantasies—for the communal well or to strengthen their own power. In this regard, MINECRAFT (2011) goes even further. Here players' imagination knows no bounds as they create a myriad of worlds out of Lego blocks, construct intricate structures and machines, found social communities, enact dramatic plot lines, and design game maps that detail players' creativity. This creational aspect, in negotiating a nearly perfect system of rules and its underlying system, shows a decisively utopian character in that it spurs on players' imagination and grants them a trial space to act out their inner fantasies, and to approach their inner self.

56 Fahlenbrach, Kathrin/Schröter, Felix: "Game Studies und Rezeptionsästhetik," in: Sachs-Hombach, Klaus/Thon, Jan-Noël (eds.), *Game Studies: Aktuelle Ansätze der Computerspielforschung*, Köln: Herbert von Harlem Verlag 2015, pp. 165-208, here pp. 198-200.

57 Murray, Janet H.: *Hamlet on The Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 1998, p. 126.

Given all these facets, *regenerative play* can be regarded as an expression of the utopian impulse. It is afforded by a combination of game elements (space, plot, characters, system) and the players' (cultural) knowledge, and manifests itself in the act of play—and thus in the interaction between *game*, *player,* and *world* (*culture*). Thereby, 1) *spatial aspects* evoke several emotions in players and have them reflect on the environment they traverse while experiencing the presence of an infinite, unknown Other. 2) Most often, these spaces are held together by the *plot* and its *unifying themes*. Becoming involved in an ongoing story can be purifying and cathartic. The plot helps players identify with characters, get to know cultures, their dilemmas, ideologies, and forms of belief. It thus shows particular utopian energy that makes players familiar with different ways of life, changing their stock of knowledge and dispositions in that it helps them gain a different perspective on their empirical surroundings. 3) Deeply intertwined with the notion of plot are *characters* or entire *communities*. Besides the aspects mentioned above, the creation of online communities and the interaction with other players can be regenerative in that helps players negotiate different forms of living and explore utopian (and also dystopian) possibilities while doing so. 4) Lastly, one must not forget the primordial force of *creation*, of leading the world into a utopian direction, refraining from doing so, or simply trying out different forms of interaction with the gameworld. This trial action shows fundamentally utopian energy, an impulse that may spur on players to effect change in the real world while showing them potential ways to do so.

However, one need to be cautious here, for misuse of utopian images may run contrary to this impulse—and several games use utopian images in a thwarted way. These include, for example, Aqua Moto Racing Utopia (2009) and The Sims (2000), which use Utopia either for commercial purposes as a brand mark or in an anti-utopian manner to promote capitalist, consumerist ways of living.

1.2 The Utopian and Dystopian Genre in Digital Games: A Typology

It has become clear that a utopian impulse manifests itself in video game fiction and comes to the fore in the act of play. However, this is not to say that all these games pertain to the genres of the *video game utopia* and

dystopia. For specific utopias and dystopias negotiate the spectrum between "the historical antinomies of" Anti-Utopia and Utopia[58] in a reinforced manner and need to fulfill certain prerequisites. Consequently, based on previous definitions of utopian and dystopian subgenres in literary works and film, the following part will detail the necessary conditions of games that fall under the utopian and dystopian genre. These endeavors will result in a typology that illustrates how each sub-genre and its specific plot structure negotiate the issue of hope. Thereby, the typology critically expands on previous definitions of utopian and dystopian genres in non-ergodic fiction to cater to the participatory and spatial medium of the video game.[59] It is ordered from optimism to pessimism and will be complemented by illustrative examples.[60]

58 T. Moylan: *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, p. 157.

59 A rather uncritical attempt to differentiate utopian sub-genres based on Lyman Tower Sargent's categories has been conducted by Michał Kłosiński, directly taking the definitions of utopia from literature and simply exchanging the terms 'author' with 'developer,' 'reader' with 'player' without pondering the peculiarities of the game medium and its specific utopian and dystopian subgenres. Kłosiński, Michał: "Games and Utopia," *Acta Ludologia* 1, no. 1 (2018); http:// actaludologica.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/01.-KLOSINSKI%E2%80%93-AL-1-2018.pdf

60 As with any typology, the boundaries between the subgenres are rather permeable than fixed, and often based on subjective dispositions of players. In fact, one has to underline that "one man's utopia" may easily be "another man's dystopia." M. K. Booker: *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature*, p. 15. And that in order to declare a particular society—be it fictional or real—utopian, dystopian, or something in between largely depends on the personal disposition of the reader/observer. H. U. Seeber: *Die Selbstkritik der Utopie in der Angloamerikanischen Literatur*, p. 27; Sargent, Lyman T.: "Do Dystopias Matter?" in: Vieira, Fátima (ed.), *Dystopia(n) Matters: On the Page, on Screen, on Stage*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholar Publishing 2013, pp. 10-13, here p. 11; K. Kumar: *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*, p. 105, p. 125.

Table 1: Typology of utopian and dystopian games

classical utopia	Outlines a gameworld whose society can be regarded as (or shows the potential of being) considerably better than the developer's empirical present. In this society, players become involved in a trial action to witness or construct more perfect alternatives to the current capitalist system, or at least tinker with it in sustainable ways.
critical utopia variant I	Outlines a gameworld whose society can be regarded as (or shows the potential of being) considerably better than the developer's empirical present, but in which difficult problems arise, which may or may not be solved, and that is critical of utopianism. Thereby, variant I of the critical utopia emphasizes plot over interactivity and moves towards a fixed yet ambiguous ending where both utopian and dystopian possibilities seem imaginable. Examples include games such as MASS EFFECT: ANDROMEDA (2017) and HORIZON ZERO DAWN (2017).
critical utopia variant II	Outlines a gameworld whose society can be regarded as (or shows the potential of being) considerably better than the developer's empirical present, but in which difficult problems arise, which may or may not be solved, and that is critical of utopianism. Thereby, variant II of the critical utopia is most often found the real-time strategy genre, which emphasizes interactivity over plot. Here, players become endowed with the role of founding fathers and are responsible for an entire society and which direction this society may develop. Examples include games such as SURVIVING MARS (2018), STELLARIS (2016), and ANNO 2070 (2011).

critical dystopia variant II	Outlines a gameworld whose society can be regarded as considerably worse than the developers' empirical surroundings, but which may move in a utopian (or further dystopian) direction through player action. Players enjoy the choice of being a catalyst, and every playthrough may result in either an optimistic, ambiguous, or pessimistic ending (or actualized world). This variant of the critical dystopia thus lays specific emphasis on the malleability of the gameworld and its future and foregrounds the need for change by suggesting several routes out of the dystopian dilemma (which players may actualize or not). Moreover, many critical dystopias lay emphasis on how the dystopian situation came about by embedding information about the gameworld's past into it. Examples includes games such as BLADE RUNNER (1997), BIOSHOCK, DEUS EX: HUMAN REVOLUTION (2011), PAPERS, PLEASE (2014), METRO 2033 (2010), and FALLOUT 4.
critical dystopia variant I	Outlines a gameworld whose society can be regarded as considerably worse than the developers' empirical surrounding, but which nonetheless moves in a utopian direction by locating utopian enclaves (as spaces of imaginative and ergodic resistance) within the gameworld. The prospect of hope thus lies within the bounds of the gameworld but is predetermined by the game's dynamic system. Players follow a linear trajectory (with the emphasis laid on plot over interactivity) towards one or more utopian horizons or ambiguous endings and are assigned the role of a catalyst without enjoying the choice to be one. Examples include games such as THE LAST OF US (2013), WATCH DOGS (2014), BIOSHOCK INFINITE, and MIRROR'S EDGE (2008).

classical dystopia	Outlines a gameworld whose society can be regarded as considerably worse than the developers' empirical surroundings and where the prospect of hope lies beyond the bounds of the gameworld. The counter-narrative results in failure and the gameworld's diegetic characters (and, figuratively, the player) are crushed by the dystopian regime, enclosing them in a rigid system of rules from which there is no escape. Contrary to the anti-utopia, this type aims to trigger a militant reaction in players. It evokes anger and a rejection of the confining system they have just experienced and may thus drive players to act in the real world. Examples include games such as MANHUNTER: NEW YORK (1988), THE STANLEY PARABLE, EVERY DAY THE SAME DREAM (2009), I HAVE NO MOUTH, AND I MUST SCREAM (1995), and NIER: AUTOMATA.
anti-utopia	Seeks to deceive players about its critical nature and involves them in pleasurable action to attenuate the system it represents. The anti-utopia thus forecloses the possibility for change and transformation and remains caught up in a resigned, nihilistic view of the current social order. Examples include games such as CALL OF DUTY: ADVANCED WARFARE (2014), CIVILIZATION (1991), and digital variants of MONOPOLY (2008).

1.2.1 The Lack of Classical Utopian Games

In order to determine what makes a utopian or dystopian game, one needs to take a closer look at how the genre was described before and at its obligatory conditions. For such an enterprise, the definition of Lyman Tower Sargent appears particularly useful. He defines *u/eutopia* as follows:

"A non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space. In standard usage utopia is used both as defined here and as an equivalent for eutopia or 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."[61]

Most important to Sargent's definition is utopia's need to describe *a society*, "a condition in which there is human (or some equivalent) interaction."[62] However, this society does not refer to any empirical one but is *non-existent*—a fact that underscores utopia's imaginary and fictional nature. In the case of utopia, though, the fictional place shows a specific quality: "All fiction describes a no place," and "utopian fiction generally describes good or bad no places."[63] Consequently, a certain utopia *describes in detail* (owing this part to its verbal form) an imaginary society that *contemporaneous readers* shall view as *considerably better* than their empirical one. Through this juxtaposition of worlds—and the dialectic quality it implies—utopia holds a critical attitude, which arises out of the connection between a specific historical moment (that is to be considered problematic) and an imagined solution in fictional narrative form.

A similar definition is Darko Suvin's, who regards utopia as a fictional genre:[64]

"Utopia is the verbal construction of 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."[65]

Like Sargent, who speaks of a society that is considerably better than the present one, there is no hint of *perfection* in Suvin's definition either, and he prefers the term *more perfect*. Both scholars thus explicitly stress that the

61 Sargent, Lyman T.: *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford UP 2010, p. 6.

62 L. T. Sargent, "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited," p. 7.

63 Ibid., p. 5.

64 D. Suvin: *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, p. 46.

65 Ibid., p. 49.

literary utopia, although sometimes near to it, does not aim for perfection. It is something "not inherent in the genre"[66] and has primarily been used by opponents of Utopia (anti-utopians) as ammunition for their attacks.[67]

The second aspect worth mentioning is Suvin's notion of 'cognitive estrangement' that arises out of an 'alternative historical hypothesis.' Such a quality fundamentally links the SF genre to utopia and excludes the fantasy genre, the fairy tale, and other noncognitive genres. This is so because both utopia and SF start with "a cognitive hypothesis"[68] that is *extrapolated* into the future "with totalizing ('scientific') rigor"[69] and in "a wide-eyed glance from here to there."[70] Through this creative approach, a fictional alternate world is created—both familiar and unfamiliar to the appreciator—that works around the logic of "*a fictional 'novum' (novelty, innovation) validated by cognitive logic*."[71] During this process, called estrangement, the reader shall confront "a set normative system—a Ptolemaic-type closed world picture—with a point of view or look implying a new set of norms,"[72] and thus gains a fresh perspective on the empirical world.[73] From this view, "utopia is a possible impossible,"[74] a fictional alternate world that nevertheless retains a strong connection to the empirical present from which it originates.

Given this function of the utopian genre, it comes as no surprise that one of its primary targets is found in the capitalist system—and the genre has imagined alternatives to it since More's *Utopia*. From this perspective, it is quite difficult to find classical utopias in video game fiction. Some games, like UTOPIA (1981) and UTOPIA: THE CREATION OF A NEW NATION (1991), virtualize hypothetical fictional scenarios that are concerned with the creation of a future society that can be described as considerably better than the empirical world. However, they fall short of letting players tinker with

66 Ibid., p. 45.

67 Ibid., p. 45; L.T. Sargent, "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited," pp. 9-10.

68 D. Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, p. 75.

69 Ibid., p. 6.

70 Ibid., p. 37.

71 Ibid., p. 63.

72 Ibid., p. 6.

73 Ibid., p. 6, p. 70, p. 71, p. 75.

74 Ibid., p. 43.

systems outside of capitalism and the current status quo. UTOPIA, for example, is a turn-based strategy game with RTS elements. It sets two players in a competition to build an efficient society on adjacent islands, spend gold bars in order to build types of buildings (factories, schools, hotels, and so on), and finance rebellions of the adversary island. Instead of imagining a just and alternative world system (or at least sustainable ways within capitalism), the game remains caught up in a hunt for high scores and a consumerist way of thinking to keep its populace happy and well-fed.

Figure 2: Whereas Thomas More's Utopia (1516) is critical about the capitalist system, the game UTOPIA (1981) simply functions as a prolongation of it by having players engage in a hunt for high scores.

Source: UTOPIA (left); Cover image of Thomas More's *Utopia*, colorized, illustrator Ambrosius Holbein (right)

Similarly works UTOPIA: THE CREATION OF A NATION which has players colonize an unknown planet and manage growth, taxes, trade, as well as the population to create a better future. The game thereby simulates a conflict between ideologies (in this case with an alien race) and grants players no choice for alliances. As such, both games fail to engage players in the imagination of alternatives systems, those that strive for Utopia in creating sustainable futures by negotiating differing perspectives. In fact, one could even argue that such games are a misuse of utopian images—and thus anti-utopias. They strengthen the status quo through play and foreground the inevitability

of the current belief system in which players are caught up. Of course, one could argue that there might be utopian solutions within capitalism, but these games fail to negotiate such possibilities.

1.2.2 The Critical Utopia

There is, however, a more modern utopian genre that has made its ways to video game fiction and that allows for the exploration of alternative forms of life. In overcoming claims of near-perfection and laying the focus on a continual struggle for Utopia, which requires the negotiation between many different perspectives, the *critical utopia* is a highly suited for the interactive medium of the video game. Although its premise is quite positive (the exploration of a supposedly better world or the promise of a fresh start), the critical utopia involves players in a constant oscillation between utopian and dystopian possibilities. Thereby, both imaginative and ergodic possibilities are thinkable, and players assume the roles of founders, who may choose in which direction the gameworld shall develop (variant II of the critical utopia). Sometimes, however, player choices lead to a fixed, ambiguous ending of the game, and only imaginative possibilities remain an option (variant I of the critical utopia).

One example of this first variant is MASS EFFECT: ANDROMEDA, a game that invites players to explore faraway worlds and foreign cultures and places them at the forefront of the struggle for Utopia. MASS EFFECT: ANDROMEDA thus follows a new utopian (ecological) trend in contemporary SF. It moves away from dystopian dreams of nightmare and envisions a positive premise in a faraway future in which humankind searches for a new home in the depths of space. The game endows players (in the form of Sara or Scott Ryder) with the task to transform the Heleus Cluster of the Andromeda Galaxy into a habitable space of co-existence with different races—for the supposedly Golden Worlds are not the promised Utopias the Initiative expected. A dark phenomenon, called the Scourge,[75] has made life on the planets unbearable, and it is up to the players to restore these ecosystems. This *attempt at a fresh start* confronts players with a conflict between ideologies and (alien) ethnicities they have to mitigate—the Angara/Roekaar (natives), Krogans (military), kett (colonizers), Initiative (colonizers)—and involves them in a regenerative but precarious struggle for Utopia.

75 When players arrive in the Andromeda Galaxy, the planets of the Heleus Cluster suffer from an ecological catastrophe, called the scourge. This dark phenomenon and inexplicable web of energy is the result of an ancient conflict (the usage of a powerful weapon) between the Jardaan and an unknown race. The scourge not only sets the habitats into strife but is also a sublime phenomenon for players to ponder about.

Figure 3: MASS EFFECT: ANDROMEDA allows players to explore faraway places and culture and involves them in a struggle for Utopia that runs into many hindrances.

Source: MASS EFFECT: ANDROMEDA

As such, MASS EFFECT: ANDROMEDA foregrounds the encounter with the Other (known from postcolonial SF) and builds on the plot framework of the critical utopia. As described above, this variant of utopia has the protagonists/players encounter a promising but flawed world, where arising issues aggravate the struggle for a better future and demand the negotiation between many parties.[76] The critical utopia is thus neither caught up in pessimism nor pure optimism but negotiates the spectrum between Utopia and Anti-Utopia

76 L. T. Sargent: "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited," pp. 8-9.

on neutral, cautious grounds.[77] It is, as Davis claims, "capable of pointing the way" by breaking "open a horizon of possibilities"[78] while it remains aware "of utopian limitations." In rejecting naïve "blueprints," the critical utopia, therefore "initiates a process of critique and change"[79] and posits an imaginative openness that may lead to many possible outcomes.[80] To put it in Lyman Tower Sargent's words: the critical utopia represents

> "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."[81]

Given these facts, the *notion of regenerative play* is here linked to players' interaction with a conceptually open gameworld and its malleability in imaginative and ergodic terms. Players of MASS EFFECT: ANDROMEDA may choose, for example, whether to pursue military or scientific routes, which planets to terraform, and (how) to mitigate conflicts between different races and ideologies. Based on these choices, they will experience an imaginatively open ending to the game, which leaves room for speculation of how this world will develop further. In finding solutions to problems that plague the Heleus Cluster, players, therefore, participate in a trial action that may translate to their struggle for Utopia in the real world.

Each planet, thereby, is diverse in its ecosystems and confronts players with several (ecological) issues. Whether it is Habitat 7 and H-047c's hostile atmosphere, the scorching heat of Elaaden and Eos, or the tropical paradises of Aya and Havaarl, players directly experience the extent of the Scourge and its ecological consequences—but they are equally fascinated by this

77 Fortunati, Vita: "Why Dystopia Matters," in: Vieira, Fátima (ed.), *Dystopia(n) Matters: On the Page, on Screen, on Stage*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholar Publishing 2013, pp. 28-36, here p. 28.

78 Davis, Laurence: "Dystopia, Utopia and Sancho Panza," in: Vieira, Fátima (ed.), *Dystopia(n) Matters: On the Page, on Screen, on Stage*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholar Publishing 2013, pp. 23-27, here p. 25.

79 T. Moylan: *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, pp. 82-84.

80 Ibid.; R. Baccolini/T. Moylan: "Introduction," p. 2.

81 L. T. Sargent: "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited," p. 9.

Otherness and its unfathomable appeal. This presence of sublime phenomena in the Andromeda Galaxy evokes the feeling of pettiness and *astonishment*[82] in players—standing face-to-face to a strange and hostile wilderness—and foregrounds the need for sustainable ways of transforming the Helius Cluster in a prosperous environment.

Especially interesting in this regard are two conflicts in the Heleus Cluster, which players may choose to mitigate. One of these is a long-lasting problem with the Krogans, a warmonger race that reproduced easily, gained in numbers and plunged the Milky Way into chaos. Salarian scientists found a radical solution to the Krogan issue in the Genophage, a biological weapon that robbed them of their ability to reproduce. The Krogans were thus not only pushed to the edge of extinction, but they were also isolated in political affairs. In MASS EFFECT: ANDROMEDA players may now choose whether to repeat history (and isolate the Krogans on political and cultural grounds) or give them a say in the Initiative—specifically, whether to hand them a Drive Core to accelerate the terraforming of their planet, Elaaden, or use the core's power for the Nexus (an option preferred by Director Tann, a Salarian). Whatever players choose has the ending of the game shine in an imaginative ambiguity due to an unknown future of the Krogan society and how things will develop further.

A further conflict is that between the kett, the Initiative, and the Angara. When players arrive in the Heleus Cluster, they come across two indigenous races that seem to repeat human history: the Angara and the kett. The Angara are a friendly, colorful, and intelligent species that remind one of the Native American population. They welcome the Initiative but retain a skeptical distance. The kett, on the other hand, represent the colonizers of this galaxy. Their appearance resembles those of the Angara but in a much darker form. Indeed, players will learn that the kett are Angara themselves, changed through the method of exaltation (genetic manipulation, re-education camps, and tortures) into the horrible selves they have now become. The kett only choose the healthy, whereas weak Angarans are sent to working facilities. As a result of this colonization of the Other, the Angara forget their pasts and become metaphorical fanatics. It is no coincidence, thereby, that the kett

82 E. Burke: *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of the Sublime and Seautiful*, pp. 35-37.

resemble Catholic missionaries and priests that drive the native population into a loss of identity by imposing their culture on them.

In MASS EFFECT: ANDROMEDA, the Initiative and players alike are exposed to the demons of (their own) history, when white colonizers and missionaries imposed their culture on natives. Players may now choose to embark on this path of colonization in that they treat the Angara as inferior and exclude them from political issues or emancipate themselves from this by choosing a more post-colonial route. Here, the Angara will be included in the council founded at the game's end (main quest), and players may aid them in their endeavors to rebuild Havaarl (side quest). Notwithstanding these efforts, the colonizing aspect of games remains in the foreground—the dominant helping the supposedly weak—but utopian routes into a different future seem possible.

Figure 4: The conflict with the kett represent the Initiative's (and players') unconscious struggle against dark past when white colonizers and missionaries imposed their culture on natives.

Source: MASS EFFECT: ANDROMEDA

Choosing between a colonial and post-colonial way prepares the game's final act on Meridian, when the Initiative finds the first truly habitable planet. Although seemingly a hopeful ending, how players dealt with interracial conflicts gives it either an optimist or pessimistic touch. An imaginative openness marks this final act, as to how interracial relationships will develop

further, whether humankind may repeat history and purse linear worldviews or emancipate themselves from these to strive towards post-colonial negotiations between many races.

Besides MASS EFFECT: ANDROMEDA, there a many critical utopian games that allow for player involvement that decisively changes their endings and the route to get there. These are mostly located within the real-time strategy genre, which because of its world and society buildings aspects seems a perfect fit for the critical utopian genre. In SURVIVING MARS, for example, players are endowed with the task to colonize the red planet, to build infrastructures (housing, water, oxygen, and nutrition supply, etc.), and to survive environmental hazards (such as sandstorms, freezing temperatures, and meteor showers). In addition, players may choose a sponsor from Earth to fund their project. But this sponsor also has ramifications on their playthrough and on ethical or ecological decisions which may move the game in a fundamentally utopian or dystopian direction (or something in between).

There are several ways to play SURVIVING MARS, and most of these are very hard indeed, which simulates the struggle for Utopia in a beautiful manner. This foregrounds the inherent difficulties to attain a better future and the many pitfalls on this route. As a critical utopia of variant II, the game emphasizes the structural openness and malleability of such worlds and the many different plotlines players may embark on. This opens a vast array of potential endings and to hopeful, ambiguous or pessimistic outcomes. In this regard, games like SURVIVING MARS and STELLARIS—which expands this struggle for Utopia (but also for dystopia) to an entire universe—negotiate the spectrum of utopian and anti-utopian possibilities in a careful manner and confront players with the decision which potential world they deem best.

1.2.3 The Critical Dystopia

Very close to the critical utopia, in the negotiating of utopian and dystopian possibilities but starting with a negative premise, is the *critical dystopia*. The critical dystopia is a newer genre than the classical dystopia and emerged within the 1980s and 1990s in tandem with film and the literary works of these times. Even though it involves players in nightmarish gameworlds, the critical dystopia is not about pure survival in a dystopian society, as it

prompts a search for alternatives to the system.[83] This it does by locating *utopian enclaves* as spaces of collective resistance within its gameworlds—to change the hegemonic order, individual resistance is not enough and a collective upheaval becomes imperative.[84] Correspondingly, Sargent defines the critical dystopia as

> "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."[85]

Holding out the prospect of hope within the gameworld, the critical dystopia explores potential routes through the nightmare and towards a utopian horizon.[86] 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."[87]

83 T. Moylan: *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, p. 189.

84 Ibid., pp. 189-190, pp. 193-194; R. Baccolini/T. Moylan: "Introduction," pp. 7-8; Baccolini, Raffaella/Moylan, Tom: "Conclusion. Critical Dystopia and Possibilities," in: Baccolini, Raffaella/Moylan, Tom (eds.), *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, New York: Routledge 2003, pp. 233-249, here p. 246; Fitting, Peter: "Unmasking the Real? Critique and Utopia in Recent SF Films," in: Baccolini, Raffaella/Moylan, Tom (eds.), *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, New York: Routledge 2003, pp. 155-166, here p. 161.

85 Sargent, Lyman T.: "U.S. Eutopias in the 1980s and 1990s: Self-Fashioning in a World of Multiple Identities," in: Spinozzi, Paola (ed.), *Utopianism/Literary Utopias and National Culture Identities: A Comparative Perspective*, COTEP RA/University of Bologna 2001, p. 222.

86 R. Baccolini/T. Moylan: "Conclusion," pp. 239-240; T. Moylan: *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, pp. 105-106, p. 147, p. 188.

87 Domsch, Sebastian: "Dystopian Video Games: Fallout in Utopia," in: Voigts, Eckart/Boller, Alessandra (eds.), *Dystopia, Science Fiction, Post-Apocalypse: Classics–New Tendencies–Model Interpretations*, Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier 2015, pp. 395-410, here p. 401; cf. pp. 401-402.

Given this plot structure and its applicability to ludic conventions (a bad enemy and players as heroines and heroes who may save the world), the critical dystopia is the dominant form of utopia and dystopia in video game fiction. It is present in games from the mid-1980s and 1990s such as STRIDER (1989), REVOLUTION X (1994), ROBOTICA (1995), BENEATH A STEEL SKY (1994), CRUSADER: NO REMORSE (1995), and in the optimistic sequels to their literary forebears NEUROMANCER: A CYBERPUNK ROLE-PLAYING ADVENTURE (1988) and FAHRENHEIT 451 (1984). All these games end on a hopeful or ambiguous notion and negotiate the spectrum between Utopia and Anti-Utopia on more neutral grounds than classical dystopian games[88] (to which I will come shortly).

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. Most popular are first- and third-person shooters: for example CRACKDOWN (2007), DISHONORED (2012), BIOSHOCK INFINITE, and WOLFENSTEIN: THE NEW ORDER (2014), as well as action-adventure games including ENSLAVED: ODYSSEY TO THE WEST (2010)—and there only few game that explore more diverse ludic routes like MIRROR'S EDGE and PAPERS, PLEASE. In addition, while targeting totalitarianism and theocratic regimes, the negative impacts of capitalism, and the misuse of technology, a considerable amount of these games discuss environmental catastrophes and the end of the world. Most often these are imagined in post-apocalyptic worlds where either nuclear fallout has given way to barren wastelands and anarchical structures—MAD MAX (2015)—or where nature has reclaimed the planet in a nostalgic return. In the latter instance—THE LAST OF US (2014), ENSLAVED: ODYSSEY TO THE WEST—one often encounters a juxtaposition between an ancient, technology-dependent capitalism that has failed and new forms of societies that develop. Such environmentally-focused games show a strong utopian impulse and move the critical dystopian genre into a decisively ecotopian direction.

Variant II of the critical dystopia, now, involves players directly in the struggle for Utopia. Not only do these games posit an imaginative openness to their gameworld, but they also allow players a say in the choice of utopian and dystopian possibilities. This is also to say that ergodic failure or

88 Ibid., p. 147, p. 157.

unwillingness to attain a better future are an option—but the potentiality of a militant response on the side of players remains in the foreground.

One brilliant example of the critical dystopia variant II is PAPERS, PLEASE, which involves players in the mechanisms of a totalitarian regime and sets them in a precarious situation between duty and death. Players assume the job of an immigration inspector and are responsible for safeguarding the country of Arstotzka from terrorists, spies, or smugglers, but often encounters people begging for help. This task confronts them with ethical dilemmas since granting entrance to immigrants without proper documents puts the player-character's family at risk.

The game thereby makes use of the classical and critical dystopian plot structure: the clash between "the official narrative," the depiction of the dystopian society, "and the oppositional counter-narrative," which brings forth a rebellion against the ruling order conducted by dissident thinkers.[89] Consequently, the official narrative involves players in the bureaucratic routine of an unnamed immigration officer whose job revolves around the task of inspecting documents. For every processed individual, players receive credits, which they can use to provide for their family. If they make mistakes, however, penalties are enforced, which deprive players of the much-needed money.

In the course of the game, a counter-narrative to this oppressive system potentially emerges (that is if players choose so). It starts on an individual level, where players may help immigrants reunite with their loved ones, and potentially moves forward to a collective struggle for Utopia—once players choose to work with a resistance group called The Order of the EZIC Star. The resulting constellations give rise to *twenty different endings*, most of which result in the player-character's punishment—he is either condemned to hard labor for disobeying the rules or killed for helping EZIC. On day 31, however, EZIC attempts to overthrow the government, and players may contribute to this cause. Having actualized this ending, the player-character is offered a home and contributes to building a new Arstotzka. This ending is ambiguous, however, for EZIC's revolution was brutal, and it remains uncertain whether they succeed in building a better Arstotzka. In addition, there are endings where players flee to Obristan (with or without their family) and those in which they fight EZIC and contribute to the consolidation of the

89 Ibid., p. 152; cf. Ibid., xiii; R. Baccolini/T. Moylan: "Introduction," p. 5.

status quo.[90] In the latter case, players side with the official narrative and are rewarded with an endless code, enabling them to play the game in an infinite loop.

PAPERS, PLEASE is a magnificent example of the critical dystopia variant II, because it not only warns of the dangers of totalitarian regimes and the mind-numbing tasks of bureaucracy but also offers a possibility space in which utopian horizons lay hidden and may be actualized through ergodic effort.

This aspect of the critical dystopia variant II is also discernible in FALLOUT 4. The game involves players in a densely polluted gameworld, where vibrant colors and weather phenomena (such as radiations storms or deep mist) depict the Commonwealth as a destroyed yet picturesque environment where a fresh start seems imaginable. This regenerative appeal was never realized in previous games and transforms FALLOUT 4 not simply into a warning of nuclear disaster but also into an experience that suggests ways to cope with it and move forward in different directions. The game is set in 2287 (210 years after the Great War) and involves players in the role of the Sole Survivor who embarks on a mission to search for his lost son. Players may choose a female or male character (mother or father), but the focus soon shifts from the private sphere of the family to a societal struggle for Utopia. On their journey through the Commonwealth, players encounter memorable locations such as Diamond City (where people have found refuge from the surrounding dystopia), Abernathy Farm (a small, peaceful agricultural society), and Goodneibor (a community of ghouls and criminals exiled from Diamond City). All of these seek help in different ways, and players may choose to intervene. In Diamond City, for example, a strange paranoia infests people's mind, making them believe they are being swapped by identical-looking Synths (artificial beings that are created by the ominous Institute). This thematic links FALLOUT 4 to American science fiction films such as Don Siegel's INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS (1956) and foregrounds the game's satirical tone in conveying Cold War anxieties (particularly the fear of a hidden communist invasion).

90 Liwinski, Mateusz: "Nostalgia for Dystopia: Critical Nostalgia in Lucas Pope's *Papers, Please*," in: Klonowska, Barbara et al. (eds.), *(Im)perfection Subverted, Reloaded and Networked: Utopian Discourse Across Media*, Frankfurt a.M.: Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften 2015, pp. 223-234, here p. 232.

Figure 5: The creational aspect of FALLOUT 4 is foregrounded in players' ability to build a network of settlements. Thereby creative applications are possible—such as in this instance, where several doors metaphorically point to the malleability of the gameworld and players' agency in choosing a future for the Commonwealth.

Source: FALLOUT 4

The Synth issue and fear of the Institute are widespread in the Commonwealth, and several factions have their own ideas of how to deal with the supposed threat and chart ways into the future. Whereas the nationalist Brotherhood of Steel regards them as dangerous (as things that do not deserve to live), the Railroad functions as the humanitarian opposite. In their attempt to save the Synths and hide them in safe houses until they are integrated into society, a clear connection to the real-world Underground Railroad (that helped African American slaves to escape to the north) from the mid-19th century can be established. The Institute, on the other hand, pursues a different agenda. They are the underground bogeyman of the Commonwealth and aim to replace the anarchical filth from above with artificial beings so that they can establish a society of scientists. Lastly, there are the Minutemen, a faction with clear references to the independently formed, eponymous militia in the American Revolutionary War. Their agenda is to restore order to the Commonwealth by establishing a network of egalitarian communities and dealing with the Raider threat.

All these factions take inspiration from American history (but also create allusions to contemporary trends such as the refugee crises in Europe) and urge players to create imaginative connections between both worlds. This

manifests as well in how players may deal with the factions, for whom they will conduct missions, with whom they will side, and eventually how they will decide which of these ideologies they deem best to control the Commonwealth. A particular utopian (or dystopian) energy is thereby placed on the creational aspects of the game. Players may choose to build a network of egalitarian settlements dispersed throughout the Commonwealth where people of all races and ethnicities are welcome. However, they may also choose to do nothing or spend the resources they encounter to create phallic symbols of power to fuel their selfish desires.

Whereas the critical dystopia variant II lays emphasis on an ergodic and imaginative openness, *variant I* rather focuses on a densely structured plot that moves players in an ambiguous but nonetheless utopian direction. Here, players have no say in how the main plot develops but their imagination may still lead to utopian and dystopian possibilities (specifically concerning the interpretation of these games' endings). Irrational Games' BIOSHOCK INFINITE, for instance, sends players to the floating city of Columbia and targets a variety of issues, including theocratic regimes, a rapturous form of capitalism leading to a culture of Disneyfication, and humankind's unrelenting desire for power. To warn players of such potentialities, BIOSHOCK INFINITE entices them with a quest to save a mysterious woman by the name of Elizabeth as they come to uncover society's true nature. To do so, the game involves players in a struggle for forgiveness that is both personal and universalized. Whereas on a basic level, this struggle revolves around Booker DeWitt's guilt for having committed racist atrocities and losing his daughter Anna as a gambling debt, this guilt is transposed to players' current objective of saving Elizabeth. Here, they face the loss of Utopia by participating in hectic combat and an estranged form of capitalism. This gamist playstyle (which is focused on spectacle and gathering points) is aligned with consumer conduct in the empirical world (buying goods one is not in need of while ignoring the atrocities of the capitalist production machinery). In an intricate story of multiverses and negative potentialities, BIOSHOCK INFINITE's ambiguous ending reunites the thematic strands of the BIOSHOCK games and fortifies their attempt to denounce human nature. Yet it also expresses the possibility to break free from this vicious circle in the protagonists' struggle for forgiveness through self-sacrificial acts.

Although players have no saying in this ending, the imaginative possibilities of interpretation remain open to negotiation. Similarly works Naughty

Dog's THE LAST OF US, which allows a variety of interpretations to its ending and the ongoing plot. The game sets players in a world where humankind has been decimated by the Cordyceps Brain Infection and where nature has made a majestic return. THE LAST OF US warns about the ramifications of uncontrolled capitalism that extends into most ecospheres and disrupts nature's intimate balance. Thereby, it involves players in a dialectical opposition between confining city spaces and liberating outdoor spaces. Whereas the former reminds one of the shortcomings of bureaucratic consumer capitalism and the scientific hubris of man, the latter offer a safe haven from the intense gameplay of the city and suburban areas. Although seemingly a didactic opposition, the journey is one of gradual realization, where Ellie aids both Joel (the player-character) and the players in savoring aspects of the natural world they might otherwise have forgotten.

Having gone through this ecological counter-narrative, players are confronted with a decision about the future, which the game takes for them. The plot's logic dictates Joel's decisions (the choice for Tommy's settlement and against the Fireflies) and illustrates his reversion to the loving father he once was and the choice for a sustainable future in balance with nature. This view is however up to interpretation, which ends THE LAST OF US on a decisively ambiguous note.

1.2.4 The Classical Dystopia

The history of the dystopian genre (in games) and its plot structure are closely tied to dystopia's function as a *warning*. Video game dystopias involve players in confining rule systems and nightmarish gameworlds that often seem "beyond redemption"[91] and, by doing so, address contemporary trends prevalent in a specific historical period. Nonetheless, hope, in the sense of "gloomy optimism, fearing for the worst, hoping for the best"[92] is always an option—otherwise, these games would be pointless (other than serving as a

91 Schulzke, Marcus: "The Critical Power of Virtual Dystopias," *Games and Culture* (2014), p. 330.

92 Geoghegan, Vincent: "Darkness and Light," in: Vieira, Fátima (ed.), *Dystopia(n) Matters: On the Page, on Screen, on Stage*, Newcastle Upon Tyne: Camebridge Scholars Publishing 2013, pp. 46-48, here p. 48.

product for consumption). The critical dystopia is thereby a sub-genre that moves in a strong utopian direction, whereas *classical dystopian games* aim to shock their players most forcefully by involving them in a world where escape and rebellion are out of range.

This sense of agitation about the future is palpable, for example, in MANHUNTER: NEW YORK, where Earth's population has been robbed of their freedom by a race called the Orbs. Players take on the role of an operative for the Orbs, tracking down human rebels, but 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), where 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; the latter of which involves players in a journey through infernal punishment without the possibility of winning the game. All the above-mentioned games 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 and robotics), as well as 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,"[93] Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, and the genre's prime example, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Hope in these stories lies outside the story- or gameworld (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.[94]

Another frightening example of this genre is THE STANLEY PARABLE, whose official narrative involves players in the oppressive structures of corporate powers and video game design alike. Thereby, an unnamed narrator guides the players through the branching plot alongside the pre-established path. Following his orders, Stanley comes to experience a heroic story in

93 Forster, E.M.: "The Machine Stops", in: *The Oxford and Cambridge Review* (1909).

94 F. Vieira: "The Concept of Utopia," p. 17.

which he discovers the machinations of the system—by encountering a Mind Control Facility and a Panopticon-style observation room that monitors the workers—and eventually comes to destroy it. As a reward, Stanley is led to a gate that opens on to a lush environment. His dreams of freedom are about to come true. However, happiness comes at a price, and the player who wishes to explore her newly found freedom is frustrated when the game triggers a cutscene that strips her of control.

This ending aligns the game with films such as THE MATRIX (1999) or DARK CITY (1998) which thematize life in a *simulacrum*. Yet it also speaks to a more fundamental tendency in society that Michel Foucault describes as the steady change from the practices of public *torture* as a "theatre of hell"[95] to a "system of punishment"[96] that works in disguise but nonetheless subjugates the individual.[97] Through *discipline*—the "methods [...] which made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body, which assured the constant subjugation of its forces"[98]—the design of punishment extended not only to prison designs but also explained how society operates as a whole. These "general formulas of domination"[99] produce "'docile' bodies"[100] that are well equipped to execute the tasks of social demand.[101]

In light of these arguments, THE STANLEY PARABLE's official narrative virtualizes a gameworld that can be considered a microcosm of the larger Panopticon of game design[102] and of empirical society. It refers to both the *meticulous rule system of a game* that subjugates players by having her execute repetitive tasks and follow pre-established lines of orientation, and to the *confinements of a worker's experience* in a bureaucratic consumer society, which is geared to profit while neglecting the self-expression of the individual.

95 Foucault, Michel: *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 2nd ed., trans. Alan Sheridan, New York: Random House 1995, p. 46.

96 Ibid., p. 89.

97 Ibid., pp. 7-8, p. 138, p. 264.

98 Ibid., p. 137.

99 Ibid.

100 Ibid., p. 138.

101 Ibid., pp. 137-138.

102 de Wildt similarly views games as "power structures in a Foucaultian sense." de Wildt, Lars: "Precarious Play. To Be or Not to Be Stanley," *Press Start* 1, no. 1 (2014); http://press-start.gla.ac.uk/index.php/press-start/article/view/10/4

However, THE STANLEY PARABLE is not entirely resigned to such a negative view of society and grants players the possibility of a *counter-narrative* that depends on their actions. This counter-narrative begins once Stanley *chooses the door on his right* and acts contrary to the narrator's instructions. Infuriated by the players' decision to ruin his well-crafted story, the narrator attempts to bring Stanley back on track by closing off allies, rebooting parts of the game, or triggering *The Stanley Parable Adventure Line*, which guides the player to catharsis. Breaking away from these pre-established pathways describes an act of *transgression* and an attempt to escape the confines of the office building and the plot alike. Yet it is exactly this transgression that is about to fail in THE STANLEY PARABLE. None of the endings suggests a hopeful outcome for Stanley—one time he is stuck in a room with the sole option of committing suicide, while on another occasion he turns mad and winds up dead on the pavement outside the building.

Considering this helplessness, *utopian enclaves* are not discernible for Stanley, and hope lies solely with players themselves. In one playthrough, for example, a second narrator reminds players that the only escape is to stop playing the game, while on another occasion they end up in a sequence where their ghost hovers over the paralyzed Stanley. Consequently, it is only by refusing to play the games of larger power structures that players may liberate themselves from them. In the vein of the classical dystopia, THE STANLEY PARABLE thus evokes the shocking insight that players might not be so far from Stanley—and that, if this is so, they should change their lifestyle by refusing to participate in bureaucratic madness.

1.2.5 The Misfit of the Anti-Utopia

Although classical dystopias involve players in confined spaces that are far beyond redemption, they nonetheless evoke a militant response in players and a rejection of the systems they experienced. This is different for the misfit of the anti-utopia, which as Moylan puts it

"remain[s] in the camp of nihilistic or resigned expressions that *may appear to challenge* the current social situation but in fact *end up reproducing it* by ideologically

inoculating viewers and readers against any form of anger or action, enclosing them within the very social realities they disparagingly expose."[103]

In other words, the anti-utopia seeks to deceive players about its critical nature or involves them in pleasurable action to attenuate the system it represents. This is discernible, for example, in CIVILIZATION, which Frans Mäyrä describes as an "[i]deological simulation" that involves players in the inner mechanisms of colonization which have them adopt the hegemonic point of view of Western cultures (specifically that of the U.S).[104] The game, therefore, exerts "hidden influence on its player" and can be seen as a strategy of the status quo to justify their ideology.[105] A further example is CALL OF DUTY: ADVANCED WARFARE. 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) is a direct extrapolation of the U.S. military-industrial complex on whose side (in the form of the resistance group SENTINEL) players are fighting.

1.3 CONCLUSION

This paper has described digital games in their function as creative artworks and cultural artifacts that subversively comment on real-world issues and gradually change players' habitual dispositions and worldviews. It thereby focused on how a *utopian impulse* permeates human society and their creations. This impulse oscillates between utopian and anti-utopian possibilities and manifests itself not only in the games industry but also in digital games in general and video game utopias and dystopias in a reinforced manner.

The issue hope is therefore of essential importance and how utopian enclaves (spaces of imaginative and ergodic resistance) are ingrained into the gameworld as potentialities. Players may choose to actualize these and become involved in a form of play that is fundamentally *regenerative*. This utopian energy comes to the fore in the act of play (in the dialectic between

103 R. Moylan: *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, pp. 195-196, emphasis added.

104 Mäyrä, Frans: *An Introduction to Game Studies: Games in Culture*, London: SAGE, 2008, p. 94.

105 Ibid., p. 98; cf. pp. 95-101.

game, *player*, and *empirical world (culture)* and is outlined by the sensualizing powers of fiction and the different forms of involvement digital games allow: through their spaces, dramatic plot frameworks, characters and cultures, the primordial force of creation, and players' negotiation of the game system.

Regenerative play can thus be desired as a manifestation of the utopian impulse in digital games and is apparent in a reinforced manner in utopian and dystopian games. These function as warnings of contemporary trends and tendencies that may lead the world into negative directions and involve players in different ways in the negotiation of hope. The resulting *typology* has disclosed several strategies and plot frameworks to do so and has shown the diversity of the utopian and dystopian genre in digital games. Besides the misfit of the anti-utopia, all of these subgenres function as strategies of Utopia: to promote a continual society struggle for a better future but also warn of its potential loss.

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