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***Finding Hope Within Hopelessness: An Exploration of Critical Dystopia  
and its Use in Modern Video Games***

**by**

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## **Abstract**

Since the term 'critical dystopia' was first conceptualised and explored by academics in utopianism studies, including Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini, there has been little research undertaken to exemplify how the form has been utilised in modern screen culture; mostly involving studies based on analysis of literature and cinematic texts rather than all facets of visual art and media. This dissertation aims to not only showcase the theoretical framework surrounding critical dystopia in comparison to its classical form, but to provide insight in to how its use in modern video gaming has proliferated whilst inheriting narrative and aesthetic traits traditionally associated with its literary and cinematic counterparts. This essay also argues that the integration of gameplay dynamics alongside narrative aspects further contributes to them being defined as such and provides a unique way to engage with discussions of world issues; including the integration of morality-based choice making, interactive narratives and a deep level of player immersion through use of realistic physics, sound, graphics and mechanics such as in-game construction. These elements aid in creating a personalised and multi-faceted approach to understanding the implied dystopia, and any utopian impulse or hope for positive progression beyond it.

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## Introduction: Critical Dystopia and the Utopian Impulse

Dystopian narratives have seen common use within literature and cinema, most notably within science fiction and horror to “defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own present” (Jameson, 2005, p286), presenting versions of reality that are reminiscent but simultaneously estranged from our own experiences, cultures, and politics. Dystopia tends to interrogate present-day societal issues, acting as what Moylan classifies as “products of the terrors of the twentieth century” (2000, xi). Historically, it has dealt with issues such as fear of totalitarian, fascist states, and a loss of individual identity associated with Communism; classically exemplified in the nightmarish thought-controlled, hyper-surveillance society of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Orwell, 1949); but later depicting destructive effects of capitalism; including the critique of Reagan-era economics in *They Live* (Carpenter, 1988), showing the working class as a lost generation among a poisonous culture of individualist greed, consumerism, corporate cost-cutting, and media control. In opposition to a utopian sense of narrative and aesthetic whereby the ideal society is presented as a form of positive “social dreaming” — the Sargent-coined notion of utopian desire for change towards something better (1994, p2) — classical dystopian texts offer their narratives as a more negative and anti-utopian form of imagination, acting as cautionary tales and a “prophetic vehicle [...] warning us of terrible socio-political tendencies” that could, if left unchecked, transform our world in disastrous and undesirable ways (Baccolini and Moylan, 2003, p2).

Post-apocalypse texts are known to share this pessimistic stance of showing the “temptation to despair” (Moylan, 2000, p186) and very worst outcomes within a dystopian world including *A Boy and his Dog* (Jones, 1975) and *Mad Max II* (Miller, 1982); both presenting humanity in societal extremis in carnivalesque fashion and showing enjoyment and fantasy of life without societal organisation. However, classic post-apocalypse fiction still shares the typical dystopian human condition as selfish and consumerist, unable to sustain any sense of progressive community or genuine empathy for one another; resorting to morally abhorrent action for individual gain, such as murder, theft, and even rape. However, it has been argued that this pessimism does not extend to all dystopian and post-apocalypse fiction, and has contributed to the conceptual exploration of a new form; one that inherits the same dystopian values of showcasing an undesirable world but exhibits a new oppositional and resisting form of writing, maintaining a utopian horizon in the pages of dystopian science fiction and in [...] anti utopian times” (Baccolini, 2004, p518), rather than using narrative for mostly cautionary function. ‘Critical dystopia’ is a variant within utopianism conceptualised in contemporary academic discussion by Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini, both arguing a proliferation of dystopian and post-apocalypse texts in contemporary film and literature that tend to avoid the deep pessimism routed in classic dystopia; foregrounding a “utopian impulse” of hope within the narrative not only for the characters but for the entire portrayed world-state (Baccolini, 2000, p18). This form aims to reduce the pessimism inherent in classic dystopian texts and provide an optimistic discussion of issues, showing undesirable worlds as not “being immune to some kind of positive transformation that could correct it” (Schulzke, 2014, p324) as well as critically debating the inevitability of dystopia due to the possibility for utopian change. Moylan defines the

form as “a textual mutation that self-reflexively takes on the present system” not only critiquing socio-political order but exploring “the oppositional spaces and possibilities from which the next round of political activism can derive imaginative sustenance and inspiration” (2000, xvi). The utopian impulse of hope residing within critical dystopia, opposing despair prevalent in classic dystopia, informs readers of potential for positive change within the narrative, and can thus potentially influence real-world activism and change through the association of the intrinsic link with reality that the text offers.

Despite a limited amount of academic studies on the use of critical dystopia in modern cinema, there has been very little exploration of the proliferation of such texts within modern video games development. Although dystopia has been a popular narrative form used in games to provide compelling plots and aesthetic backdrops to enhance playability, I argue that modern videogames inherit critically dystopian narrative structures found in modern cinema, and can be further defined as such through the implementation of interactive game dynamics. These include moral dilemmas, interactive narratives, and a deep level of player immersion by implementing realistic audio-visual factors and interactive dynamics including in-game world transformation via construction capabilities; all allowing for a personal and affective experience, positioning the player as an active agent for change and providing reflection of contrarian viewpoints, complexities, and their varying conclusions. Games may not only provide the utopian impulse that Moylan and Baccolini propose as an intrinsic force in critical dystopia, but allow for a more comprehensive understanding of those possibilities through ludic engagement alongside narrative. This study will provide a fresh look at critical dystopia,



engaging with academic discourse surrounding its original conception but also in associated studies exploring narratological and aesthetical concerns. Furthermore, understanding and evidence of its prevalence will be provided by investigating how modern cinema has utilised the form previously and how video games have continued the use of, and have been informed by, critically dystopian values while providing a unique mode of engagement to experience them. This ludic mode is one which permits the player a level of agency within the depicted world, its socio-political environment as well as giving a personalised and multi-faceted comprehension of issues raised by the text by providing a unique dystopian experience.

In the following literature review, I will explore academic discussions related to my study in terms of the use of dystopia and post-apocalypse within screen culture, highlighting clashes in understanding of critically dystopian narrative function, particularly in post-apocalypse texts and how they are presented in videogames. Following this section, a review of modern cinematic dystopian texts will be included to further define and exemplify the use of critical dystopia, including the texts *The Road* (Hillcoat, 2009) and *Blade Runner 2049* (Villeneuve, 2017); all aptly presenting the concepts set by Moylan and Baccolini associated with critically dystopian traits, but also inform the analysis of, and link to, key narrative and aesthetical traits utilised in the ludic texts chosen for my focus.

## Literature Review

In 2000, Raffaella Baccolini studied critical dystopia in feminist fiction, contributing definitions of the narrative form and components that set it apart from other variables in utopianism. She argues critical dystopia must contain a “utopian core” and aims to “deconstruct tradition and reconstruct alternatives” (2000, p13). Typical of dystopia, it creates a world considered undesirable by the reader but in a critical form may “create a space in which opposition can be articulated and received” (2000, p17). Although it is argued that all dystopias can be considered critical, the separate narrative form draws more attention to the sense of opposition and need for change, containing the “utopian impulse” (2000, p18) that Baccolini argues for in that it provides a more open-ended and optimistic resolution. She articulates that although the fictional text is a hyperbole of real world issues and potential resulting futures, there can be hope of rectifying them in the present, real world. This differs from classic dystopia as they show a more narratively determined view of an undesirable society, merely using it as a warning or pessimistic display of humanity. It has been a common trait in video gaming to use dystopia in a classic fashion, merely creating complex worlds and deploying common dystopian narrative traits to provide a compelling and playable game for the user, but it will be useful to apply the ideas explored by Baccolini about critical dystopia to that of modern video gaming, seeing where the utopian impulse lies within their dystopian narratives and how they are implemented and extrapolated.

Baccolini also concludes that critical dystopia functions most effectively when blended with multiple genres, noting “genre blending blurs the traditional boundaries of dystopia, which expands its capacity for critical and oppositional expression” (2000, p18). By approaching the form with the varying style and aesthetics from different genres, the critical dystopia’s oppositional quality is complemented due to drawing from a larger base of narrative and stylistic tools and being able to convey meaning to audiences in different ways. Although her study focuses on how feminism is used effectively in cinematic and literary critical dystopias, there is opportunity to consider how other genres, such as the post-apocalypse, can be used effectively alongside it and how other types of viewership or engagement, such as video gaming, can be used in conjunction with critical dystopia. This dissertation aims to address this gap regarding the critical function that videogames may contain when employing dystopian narratives, in the similar way that cinema and television utilise their narratology and mise-en-scene to convey meaning, but also with the implementation of immersive and interactive components that are unique to gameplay.

Although post-apocalypse is a derivative of dystopia in that it achieves similar goals in providing comment and critique of the world and its potential futures, there have been some clashing opinions on its critical role, whether there can be a perceived sense of utopian redemption in such dire circumstances and implied ruin. Briohny Doyle presents an in-depth discussion of the post-apocalyptic narrative and how it relates to the ongoing ontological debate of what it is to be human. She defines the genre as “a story of catastrophe that does not culminate in revelation, or through which revelation

itself is framed as a problematic narrative strategy. Post-apocalypse does not lend significance to a historical moment or define a new age. Rather, its sense of time and history becomes abstruse, (dis)located in the ambiguous aftermath of catastrophe” (2015, p100). The post-apocalyptic narrative tends not to detail the moments leading up to the catastrophic event, nor does it offer a definitive answer or progression to a new age, and may be framed as “an incomprehensive view of fragility and transience of anything that could be referred to as a human situation” (Doyle, 2015, p100). Post-apocalypse places its focus on the end and what is left thereafter in a purgatorial sense of time and place, otherwise known as the post-apocalyptic wasteland.

Doyle notes that the themes of “decay, disaster and ruin” are prevalent within these texts, and show “the possibilities that emerge” from them becoming a reality (2015, p102). The presentation of humanity in states such as chaotic disorder, near-extinction, or ultra-violent conflict can “present serious ruminations on what it means to be human and how we think about environments and community” (Doyle, 2015, p105), meaning that the post-apocalyptic text may take an ontological stance in questioning whether the apocalyptic situation has caused such a human reaction, or whether these troubling notions of behaviour and conflict were a defining factor of humanity all along. Doyle states that this notion can be argued as “a narrative claim that human lives are not sites of redemption and transcendence but simply vistas for processes of survival, witness and change” (2015, p100), meaning that narrative value is placed on whether humanity deserves to die, and the means and lengths it is willing to go to survive.

Doyle argues “the post-apocalyptic imagination is that which focuses on the excluded and the ruined, without providing redemption or revelation” (2014, p101). The point that Doyle seems to make here is that in the post-apocalyptic narrative, no matter whether a utopian impulse lies within the text or the narrative is left open in terms of potential for positive change — the text as whole still does not actually show these outcomes; the story must lie within the time and place of post-apocalypse to be deemed as such. There is a contested point within this statement which links to Moylan and Baccolini’s notion of critical dystopia that redemption and revelation can be argued as a form of ‘utopian impulse’ within the text, offering the potential and sometimes total revelation and utopian resolution to the dystopia itself. Doyle’s claim is questionable, given that these narratives tend to depict a time and space beyond capitalism, which, given Fukuyama’s claims that we have reached the ‘end of history’ due to the dominance of capitalism, can be considered positive. Post-apocalyptic texts tend to provide a carnivalesque space to explore notions such as identity contestation, spirituality, ecological and economic concerns, and in classic dystopian post-apocalyptic narratives there are indeed not always any sense of redemption or hopeful revelation present, leading to Doyle’s claims being true in that sense. However, critically dystopian texts utilise the established aesthetic and narrative qualities in post apocalypse but offer a utopian resolution, or at least hope of one, to critique the notion of dystopia itself and how utopia may still exist within or beyond it. This leads to my identified gap in this area of research, as there is a lack of studies that adequately use filmic texts to exemplify the critical dystopia as an arena for utopian hope and revelation, particularly within the post-apocalyptic setting within which Doyle is adamant there can be none of these ideas. Furthermore, one of the main areas of my study is to explore how critical dystopia has

also been widely utilised in modern video games to contribute to the notion that hope, revelation, and utopian impulse may lie within the dystopian narrative, and in doing so present discussions on issues that the current and real world societies need to address, not only in similar ways to cinema in the use of narrative and aesthetic but through its own unique set of ludological components that complement the critical nature of the form, including gamer immersion, moral choice-making, and interactive narratives.

Petter Skult defines post-apocalypse, describing it as “a narrative of a period of time from a pre-apocalyptic past through a cataclysmic event (or series of events) that culminates in an entirely new world order” (2015, p104), referring to how time is an important factor within the narrative form in that it deals with the end of the world as well as after the end. Skult’s analysis is in line with that of Doyle in that there must be a distinct focus on the decay and ruin of setting, but elaborates by stating the presentation is usually a “version of our own recognizable Earth, and thus comment on our own reality” (2015, p104). The recognisable quality of the aesthetic cements the overarching dystopian quality of post-apocalypse as it does indeed present a society to be deemed undesirable by the viewer, but allows for the critique and social commentary of reality to be communicated in its own unique aesthetic by showing a version of our own world as ruined and destroyed. Skult concludes that the role of place and the use of mise-en-scene related to destruction, decay, and ruin lead to establishing that “there are no longer places of permanent safety” (2015, p11). Skult describes post-apocalyptic aesthetic as entirely negative, stemming from surroundings being portrayed as an unsafe, destroyed and dead space that, in the classically dystopian sense, conveys warning against potential

outcomes of certain human actions and complements the undesirable nature of the post-apocalypse world state.

However, in his 2005 study of the post-apocalyptic terrain in cinema, Paul Williams makes an insightful observation, one that diametrically opposes the view of Skult, that post-apocalyptic presentations may serve as a canvas for exploring societal tabula rasa through the form of pre-colonial world development, bearing capacity to show hope and renewal through heroic action. Williams asserts the “post-apocalyptic landscape is an expression of two converse impulses: the terrifying contemplation of the empty space of the world after nuclear war, and the exhilaration that this blank canvas is the stage for feats of adventure and heroism,” further elaborating that “the post-apocalyptic world can be an arena for the replaying of the colonial encounter, frightening in its unintelligibility but alluring in its virgin promise” (2005, pp 301-304). Although post-apocalypse is commonly seen as a typically dystopian venture showing undesirable conditions via disastrous after-effects of world-ending catastrophe, the notion of post-apocalypse resetting society to a base age may also present the utopian impulse of exploration and heroic action in creating fresh societies, based on new “virgin” ideals rather than the old values that led to the original society’s demise.

Williams aptly uses *Mad Max III* (Miller, G and Ogilvie, G, 1985) to exemplify his argument, concluding that it “offers a vision of the post-apocalyptic world as terra incognita, comparable to pre-explored, pre-colonial soft places” (2005 p312), and that Max serves as a catalyst for societal renewal through unforced heroism, leading the children to safer lands and sacrificing himself in the process (2005, p311). Against the

common practice of post-apocalypse focusing on ruin, decay, and disaster as explored by Doyle and Skult, Williams observes how the post-apocalyptic landscape may also be showcased as an arena for adventure, heroism, and virginal exploration of new lands and societal structures, where the original places and historical understanding of them are obsolete. Williams manages to unintentionally link post-apocalyptic imagination and critical dystopia by exploring it as a space perceived as positive and hopeful, as opposed to pessimistic and hopeless. Although Williams validly makes this link, it is unfortunate that the narrative form of critical dystopia is not acknowledged, influencing my argument that critical dystopia requires further exemplification to be fully understood and relevant within Utopianism discourse. It will also be worth examining how games might use William's notion of the wasteland as a virginal space for utopian exploration, particularly in how construction mechanics are a common thread in modern games to allow the player to transform the in-game world or society in to something perceivably more desirable.

When comparing the arguments set forth by Skult and Williams in their views on how to perceive the post-apocalyptic space and presentation, it is apparent that neither are wrong. The post-apocalyptic terrain may either be perceived as negative or positive, but narrative dictates this notion and whether the stance of the text is classically or critically dystopian. I will argue that this is the very strength of critical dystopia as it usually utilises the established presentation of wasteland but narratively offers utopian hope within its environment, critiquing the issues evident within its iteration but also dystopia in general, mostly in how undesirable elements of real life do exist, but there is



always potential for change towards something better. In contrast, classic dystopia presents the wasteland in more of a Doyle sense in that undesirability of the situation is focused to serve as warning of potential disastrous consequences of human actions, rather than explored as a set of complicated issues that need to be addressed to develop in to something positive, or to be avoided. Considering that videogames usually place the player in a heroic protagonist role, it will serve this study to deploy the concepts of Williams when analysing modern dystopian games, and how the function of the player as hero or agent for positive change in the game-worlds define them as critical dystopia, given that they can represent utopian impulse and hope within a hopeless situation.

Luke Goode and Michael Godhe coined the field of 'critical future studies', arguing for a multi-disciplinary focus and a critical analysis of popular culture to investigate the scope of imagined futures, contributing to the ongoing public debate of futural public spheres. They mention their goal is to "challenge a contemporary cynicism about our capacity to imagine alternative futures while trapped in a parlous present", referring to how neo-liberal and capitalist ideologies have dominated the world's geo-political landscape since the fall of Communism. To combat this lack of imagination for alternate futures, Goode and Godhe argue that an "open-ended social critique" is required to create any potential for societal change (2017, p109).

They continue to stress critical future studies as crucial due to the current wave of right-wing populist nationalism, solidifying the notion that "neoliberalism is no longer the only game in town" (2017, p110). Therefore, utopianism is vital for debating the public

sphere and “there is a case to be made that imaginative ambition is now a perquisite for averting catastrophe” (2017, p110). This links to Sargent’s notion of utopianism as ‘social dreaming’, in that by imagining different futures or societies we may avoid the undesirable or inherit positive solutions by inciting action towards change. Utopianism and Critical Future Studies have similar objectives by both promoting discussion and analysis of all forms of imagined futures, whether it is in the hard, factual arena of science, political and cultural discourse, or in the fictional level of literature and filmic texts, and aim to promote these elements as viable contributions to a better futural public sphere. My study aims to contribute to this call for a multidisciplinary focus on future studies and critique of popular culture as video games remain a vital part of screen culture, and I will argue can serve as a critical platform for discussing world issues and potential issues in the same light as cinema.

Marcus Schulzke offers a study highlighting the strength of utopian values being present within video game culture, noting how games “create worlds with their own organizing logics, institutions, and ways of life,” and in doing so produce a space for critique and social commentary in the same traditional sense that classic texts within utopianism employ their narratives (2014, p315). He then acknowledges the arguments in academic discourse between ludologists and narratologists, particularly in how the games should be analysed. Narratologists subscribe to the notion that a video game narrative is a text “to be read and interpreted” in ways that other types of media would traditionally be analysed such as the textual analysis of cinema and television (2014, p317).

Ludologists, however, argue games have their own unique elements such as programmed

algorithms, interactivity with narrative and game world, a unique level of immersion and audio and visual values that set them apart as texts to be analysed on their own terms. Although both approaches are valid and aptly argued, Schulzke approaches his study with a combined ludological and narratological focus, successfully showcasing that a multi-disciplinary approach to game analysis may yield a greater level of understanding as opposed to that of a single-minded approach.

Schulzke observes the strength of dystopian game texts where they “give users the chance to explore different identities and to act in settings that are free from many of the consequences that would come with such experimentation in ordinary life” (2014, p321). Although this may refer to the idea of people being able to indulge in escapist fantasies in the game world, it may also lead to the notion that game texts are a form of thought-experiment and not mere entertainment. Dystopian games can utilise narrative and ludic elements to explore potential societies or futures, and any implications that may arise from them.

Using the examples of *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development, 2012), *Bioshock* (2K Boston, 2007), and *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008), Schulzke exemplifies how the dystopian narrative is used to great effect in providing grounds to reference real world struggles and issues, and the implications that may arise from them. He also uses these texts to exemplify the notion of actual participation in dystopia, as opposed to the traditional “detached” viewing experience witnessed in cinema and television (2014, p327). Although games and filmic texts both require active engagement from a

viewership perspective, Schulzke makes it clear that the element of personal interactivity with the text via controlling character action and affecting the game world leads to an even more active sense of engagement, and the closest one can come to an actual experience without physically encountering it. Although Schulzke does use *Fallout 3* to exemplify the use of dystopia in open-world, first-person perspective role-playing games, he places the majority of his analysis in the two texts of *Bioshock* and *Spec Ops: The Line*, which may contain trace amounts of true interactivity with plot in terms of a few variations in ending, depending on the way in which the player interacts with certain characters, along with personalised character development through the choice of powers to accumulate, but these games are strictly more of a linear experience and limited in their ludological potential to engage with critical dystopian structures. Schulzke does acknowledge this, but argues that the limited freedom for the player in both the narrative and interactive sense can be a strength, stating “the constraints imposed by the games should be seen as having a central role in constructing the dystopian narratives” (2014, p330), meaning that the underlying message of a lack of freedom be an effective critique on existing societal issues, a concept commonly used in classically pessimistic dystopian narratives. Although this is a valid observation by Schulzke, it does more to justify the choice of text than to explore the full potential of critical dystopia being used in modern video games, particularly in how player freedom and the ability to choose is arguably what makes the medium the most effective at presenting critical discussion and meaning.

Schulzke also misunderstands the overall concept of critical dystopia in relation to its variants. Although he recognises the discussion raised by both Moylan and Baccolini

that “the defining characteristic of critical dystopia is the effort to prevent the dystopian world from being too pessimistic or from being immune to some kind of positive transformation that could correct it” (2014, p324), he observes dystopia as generally critical in all cases, in line with Sargent’s earlier studies. He acknowledges the power of classic dystopia in that the image of an undesirable society and the inability for it to be changed in any way gives them a more striking critical impact, stating “the most effective critical dystopias [...] are those that do not preserve any possibility of hope” (2014, p324). Although the idea that all dystopian texts contain a critical element in commenting on real world issues and using the text as a warning of potential outcomes is an apt notion to discuss, Schulzke ultimately fails to distinguish classic dystopia and critical dystopia as two separate narrative forms. For this very reason, this thesis aims to explore the unique way critical dystopias present a utopian impulse and optimism within the narrative, and will provide a detailed analysis of examples to contribute to a better understanding of the narrative form.

Angeline Khoo argues that modern video games can be perceived as moral educators. Due to the success of interactive narrative and moral choice-making games in modern gaming culture, “game developers have been encouraged to develop moral content that include not just non-linear good and evil choices but more complicated ones that involve a matrix of complex and ambiguous choices without clear good or bad answers” (2012, p425). Khoo uses *Fallout 3* in her analysis, stating the game explores “Aristotelian moral concepts, encourages players to think about their actions in the moral world and make the connection to their behaviour in the real world. Non-player

characters in the game also react to the players' responses" (2012, p425). *Fallout 3* morally challenges the player in the decisions made, interactions with other characters, and the game environment. It uses the interactive medium to critique possible outcomes of differing ideologies and social cultures becoming dominant or universally accepted based on varying moral decisions being made, and in a typical dystopian sense, contributes to the ongoing ontological discussion of human nature.

Khoo details how *Mass Effect* (Bioware, 2007) exemplifies how modern games act as moral educators, noting the game is "able to engage players in moral choices within a Neo-Kohlbergian framework which includes moral judgment, moral sensitivity, moral motivation and moral action" (2012, p426). Due to the game utilising morality in character interaction and strategic combat, *Mass Effect* showcases the cause and effect that one or all can have on the world, and as a result can contribute to a positive future in which we may "see more players involved in moral discussions with their peers" (2012, p426), and catering towards a form of counter-public sphere to current political events.

Khoo recognises the potential effect that video games can have on players in terms of encouraging discussions on moral decision making and the effects of certain lines of thought, but unfortunately does not relate her study to utopianism discourse; specifically regarding the aims of this study in how video games use this type of gameplay to influence real-world debate, as well as providing a unique means to imagine better or worse alternate futures or societies and how they may be created, prevented or progressed beyond.

## **Review of Critical Dystopia in Modern Cinema**

As noted in the introduction and literature review, there has been a lack of textual analysis and understanding in modern discussion of critical dystopia. There have been missed opportunities to link the analysis of games and their critical strength to the wider framework of utopianism studies, as well as the critical mode of the narrative form being misunderstood. This is exemplified by the writing of Sargent and the later works of Schulzke where they have argued that all dystopias are critical in the sense they provide critique via the defamiliarising and reshaping of world events in their depiction, showing the undesirable effects of certain societal states regardless of an optimistic or pessimistic stance. Although this is true, it is not an accurate reflection of how critical dystopia extends its critique beyond that of its narrative iteration to the entirety of dystopia as a concept, containing the utopian impulse to imply possibilities beyond it, and arguing against any doom-laden ruminations of finality. It is for this reason that an analysis of critical dystopia in a few key texts in modern cinema is required to contribute to an understanding of Moylan's and Baccolini's concept, but to also inform my own analysis of its use and evolution in modern videogame development.

### **The Road**

*The Road* (Hillcoat 2009) is a critical dystopia that very effectively uses the post-apocalypse narrative and aesthetic to present ontological discussion and comment on

human nature, more specifically on the state of humanity in a globally dominant capitalist state. It also strengthens its narrative approach and communication of this discussion through the blending and re-appropriation of elements from other forms of writing, including grail and 'journey' narratives.

*The Road* combines concepts from journey narratives with post-apocalypse to create a critically dystopian text. One trait deployed is that the 'road' in journey texts "is not to be taken literally" and "teaches that the figural precedes the literal, that there can be no uninterpreted road," meaning the journey undertaken is not simply focusing on one point to another, but the spiritual and symbolic path that is being travelled (Morris, 2003, p26). Other journey narrative traits are used in the discovery and wandering present in the emotional and spiritual development of the father and son. Vogel expresses different variations occur in journey texts, most commonly in the "quest" form in which the characters have a distinct knowledge of where they are going and why, in contrast to "wandering" in which only the writers and readers know of the implied 'journey' taking place. In *The Road*, the 'quest' is evident from the father's expressed desire to reach the seafont, but 'wandering' can also be attributed due to nature of their spiritual and symbolic journey not necessarily being perceived within the character's reality. This symbolised journey is shown through the boy developing a sense of survival and courage within the post-apocalypse state in the company of his father, and likewise, the father is reacquiring feelings of empathy and conscience towards other people in peril via his son's insistence and moral questioning.



*The Road* manages to redeploy the utopian aesthetic of journey texts by reversing it entirely, showing 'the road' as a place of danger, uncertainty and one of ruin, decay, and disaster (figure 1). Skult contributes to this notion by stating it is "impossible to establish place, turning freedom of the open road in to nothing but vagrant, fearful flight from one event to the next" (2015, p114). The film closely follows the established visual aesthetic of post-apocalypse fiction through the depiction of the world after the apocalyptic event as lifeless; buildings have been reduced to eroded and decimated versions of their former structures, old rusted automobile carcasses are littered all over the empty and cracked highways. Natural woodland is bereft of any form of wildlife; trees bear no new growth, their roots dying.



*Figure 1: The bleak and perilous journey and landscape in The Road (2009)*

Colour is also faded to a bland and greyish tone to convey a further sense of the world as wasteland, drained of its former life. The one exception to this is the shift to the focus on bright colours when the father and son find the fallout shelter and acquire its contents. The vibrancy of colour is showcased via the labels of popular brand names of food and drink products from before the end of the world, such as the bright orange of the 'Cheetos' bags and the blue and green on various cleaning products. This seems an intentional method by Hillcoat to comment on the societal fascination and obsession with consumerism evident from the dominance of capitalism in modern society. This is also utilised in the scene where the father finds an old can of Coca-Cola, which he gives his son as a gift and seems to give it great value as a prized emotional commodity, rather than simply an item that could provide temporary nourishment. Even in the fallout shelter the son prays in thanks for the 'Cheetos', displaying a sense of worship over the relics from the old consumerist and capitalist world. The emotionality and vibrancy of colour implies that despite the apocalyptic world state, the problematic consumerist attitude still lives on and contributes to an ontological comment that the downfall of humanity was not the meteors decimating the landscape and population, but with our emotional dysfunctionality in the obsession for personal gain rather than community and sharing.

Despite the dystopian visuals, *The Road* still maintains a utopian impulse via the use of religious tones and references that make it a modern grail narrative, including the sense of a dying land and king, knights, and the grail itself along with its healing powers.

Firstly, Cooper observes that grail narratives consistently include a dying king and his kingdom, degraded down to a wasteland “infected by the root cause of his wounding” (2011, pp219-220). Arguably, this concept is symbolised in *The Road* through the post-apocalyptic wasteland and the remnants of human society that inhabit it, presented in the fact that humanity is on the brink of extinction not only physically through the lack of resources and inability to produce more, but spiritually through the lack of conscience, empathy, and community via a continued sense of destructive consumerist attitude. Value and worth is placed on goods by way of food, weaponry, and a ‘survive at any cost’ mentality, as opposed to being placed on maintaining conscience towards others or doing the ‘right’ thing. This apparent lack of ‘humanity’ has led to the rise of cannibalistic gangs, intent on preserving their own survival at the expense of others, and a general paranoia and distrust among everyone else, showing no sense of unification through communal suffrage. The state of the post-apocalypse society in *The Road* evokes a response to discourse surrounding the apparent rise to dominance of capitalism as a world ideology, particularly since the fall of communism in the late 1980s. Fukuyama discusses this notion, expressing “no one likes the moral implications of capitalism, or imagines that the way it distributes gains is perfectly just” (1995, p29), referring to the way in which the growth of free markets and liberated economics have led to an ever-increasing disparity between rich and poor, and that the ‘end of history’ in terms of ideological diversity will lead to a “very sad time” where idealism and imagination will be thrown aside for a focus on economics and cold scientific thought (1989, p18). It is the link to this very discussion that allows for *The Road* to pose the ontological question of whether it is the meteor shower that caused humanity’s downfall, or the ongoing destructive attitudes left over

from the old world, and leading to the film trying to find justification in whether society deserves to survive.

The ideological and emotional damage that has occurred in society is codified in the film as needing a grail force for healing, symbolised through the innocent and conscience-bearing son. The son may represent the grail in how the father beholds and protects him, and the use of spiritual rhetoric and religious connotations in the way he views the child being in contrast with how knights associate with the grail in their traditional narratives. In a narrated scene, the father says “all I know is that the boy was my charge. And if he was not the word of God, then God never spoke”. Not only does he love his son dearly, but he sees him as an embodiment of innocence and purity, one that is simultaneously unfamiliar with the “basic trappings” of the old society in term of greed and consumerism (Cooper, 2011, p222), evident in his confusion when he sees his father basking in enjoyment of alcohol and cigars, and his gleeful and emotional joy when finding a can of Coca Cola, but expresses emotions that the world seems to have lost, such as conscience, guilt and empathy. It is with this innocence and the son’s insistence on them being charitable and empathising with fellow survivors that solidify the boy being symbolic of the grail. Furthermore, the questions the son constantly asks the father may link to the trait in grail narratives in which correct questions must be asked by the knights to earn the grail’s healing powers, and in doing so provides a central crux in the film’s positioning in the ontological debate in to how humanity deserves survival. By questioning their morals in various dilemmas, such as providing the old man with food, returning the items to the starving thief and constantly asking if they are “the good guys,”

the characters are essentially proving that humanity may indeed exist in such dire circumstances. Although the father succumbs to his illness, the son is narratively rewarded through meeting the family with mutual conscience and moral integrity and being able to continue in survival. Cooper mentions that “the right questions are those that lead not to correct answers but to correct actions” (2011, p231), meaning that if humanity can internally question its own actions and appeal to conscience and empathy, there is hope for a sense of metaphorical healing to occur.

To conclude, *The Road* effectively blends elements common among post-apocalypse, journey and grail texts to present an ontological comment on humanity’s emotional and spiritual standing with the apparent rise of capitalism, consumerism, nihilism, and a reduced effort to appeal to empathy and conscience towards others. Baccolini explains that the “blurring” of genres and the “re-vision and appropriation of generic fiction” create an oppositional form of writing, allowing utopian visions to be present in otherwise dystopian and post-apocalyptic settings (1992, p13). *The Road* exemplifies this notion through its genre blend and its grail symbolism to not only critique the spiritual dilemma of humanity in current society, but to also provide a sense of utopian conclusion, one in which there is potential hope through the application of empathy, charity, and the push against nihilistic attitudes towards the suffering of others. As Knox claims, “survival requires finding a way to make sense of the world and of retaining the hope that community is possible” (2012, p99). The father and, more particularly, the son are indeed the ‘good guys’, and this ‘goodness’ is survived through the son in his longing for the sense of community and bonding with others, surviving in

unison as opposed to individual self-interest. In a post-apocalyptic place and time where “longing may itself be a form of redemption” (Cooper, 2011, p43), there may be hope for humanity moving forward after all.

### **Blade Runner 2049**

The original *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982) showed audiences a dark, gritty, and dystopian view of future Los Angeles, portraying a technologically advanced city filled with giant skyscrapers, holographic advertising billboards, and flying automobiles, all things that can be associated with a modernist utopian ideal, yet showcasing typical cyberpunk associations such as overpopulated, neglected, and crime-filled zones inhabited by the common section of society. In this sense the film can be considered a postmodern piece, as Fredric Jameson notes it is within architecture and visual aesthetics that postmodernism is mostly observed and where “theoretical problems have been most centrally raised and articulated” (1983, p111). Rather than showing the city as a realisation of modernist idealism in technological marvel and social order, the film “creates an aesthetic of decay, exposing the dark side of technology, the process of disintegration” (Bruno, 1987, p63) through its dystopian vision of a hyper-capitalist state where big business thrives and ordinary folk are forced to live in degraded conditions. In a typically dystopian way, the loss of humanity is symbolically shown through the disintegration and decay of the surroundings.

Narratively, *Blade Runner* presents an ontological discussion “explicitly concerned with the question of what it is to be human” (Mullhall, 2008, p29), using the posthuman via ‘Replicants’ to reflect on our own issues with morality, ways of life, and even dealing with mortality. David Macarthur argues that beyond this superficial reading, the film “is not about what makes us human but whether we can be saved from ourselves” and “from a state of moral and spiritual degradation” (2017, p373), referring to the notions of inhuman and morally questionable actions negatively defining humanity, and whether there is any possibility for redemption or positive progression for the human condition. *Blade Runner 2049* (Villeneuve, 2017) inherits the cyberpunk and dystopian presentation of Los Angeles as a technologically advanced yet socially dysfunctional city (figure 2), as well as the use of the posthuman Replicants to reflect the human condition. Rather than simply showing what it is to be human, or whether we deserve to survive, however, the sequel instead shows the viewer what it is to be genuine and real, continuing a postmodern sense that rather than submitting to social construction we may define ourselves through our own moral action.



*Figure 2: A technologically bright yet darkly dystopian presentation of Los Angeles in Blade Runner 2049 (2017)*

The music piece 'Peter and the Wolf', originally composed by Sergei Prokofiev, is featured consistently throughout the film as K's (Ryan Gosling) ringtone, and acts as a motif for the central idea that the film presents. The piece acts as a symphonic fairy tale, with the narrator telling the story of Peter, who goes against his grandfather's instructions by leaving the house to stop a predatory wolf from eating their animals. Peter is successful, but is scolded by his grandfather due to taking too much of a chance, and that he could have been killed. The story acts as a moral tale, teaching that sometimes authority and established social order must be defied to achieve something positive, which aptly links to the narrative within *Blade Runner 2049*. From the film's opening scenes, K is introduced as a replicant subjected to the command and ownership of the Los Angeles Police Department. After each assignment he is forced to sit through a test bearing similarity to the Voight-Kampff test from the original film, but more focused on checking on emotional irregularities via a quickfire set of personal questions, followed by



a phrase which K must repeat immediately. If he shows any sign of hesitation or being affected by the questioning, the test fails.

Where the original film asks whether Decker (Harrison Ford) is human or replicant, the sequel suggests that Deckard's status does not matter through the moral integrity and heroic selfless actions of K. The film proposes that rather than submitting to social construction – a postmodern concept – humans are defined not by the physical or the external force but rather by their own actions, choices and the way they treat others; implying that to live, or at least to deserve to live, is to simply want to, and want others to. K chooses to defy the power structure that has controlled him by taking the investigation into his own hands, and shows altruism by going against the wishes of the replicant rebellion to kill Deckard after dealing with Wallace's forces, instead freeing him and taking him to his lost daughter. The film ends with Deckard being reunited with his daughter, with the hope of a happy future, while K waits outside; evidently content in the results of his selfless and morally-guided journey despite being severely wounded as a result. In the same sense that Pinocchio becomes a 'real boy' through showing courage, conscience, and care for others, K confirms he is indeed 'real' by showing individual agency in helping others based on genuine, human empathy and conscience, and in doing so shows that moral redemption is possible, providing a positive and utopian answer to the question of whether humanity deserves to survive.

The post-human is a familiar concept within dystopian cinema, notably used within George A. Romero's series of zombie horror films, particularly within *Dawn of the*

*Dead's* (1978) depiction of zombies as post-mortal versions of humanity trapped within a decayed era of post-Reaganism; succumbing to a toxic repetition of consumerist greed represented by the physical consumption of humans and existing within a redundant and eroded post-capitalist world where money has achieved nothing, and those old world attitudes have in fact aided in its own demise. In the *Blade Runner* films, however, the post-human acts more as a mirror rather than a symbolic canvas of what humanity may become because of ideological continuance and reflects the very best and worst aspects of humanity back at itself; showing how we treat those we deem different to ourselves and the cultures that arise such as racism, homophobia, sexism, and xenophobia. This leads to the notion that the concept of what it is to be 'human' extends beyond the physical, and that the way we think and act may indeed be socially constructed by exterior forces such as the media and the ruling classes. The ontological discussion is therefore a complicated in whether one can act and define oneself autonomously, rather than acting based on constructed norms such as gender, sexuality, or affiliation with a certain culture, religion, or ideology.

*Blade Runner 2049* not only carries forward the notions from its predecessor of what it is to be 'human', but the central drive is more in-line with what it is to be 'real', or to simply 'live'. The utopian value within the text, cementing its definition as a critical dystopia, is simply that despite humanity being a complicated set of beings riddled with negative and dystopian aspects, there is still the presence of goodness which can prevail even in the worst of circumstances. It is all a matter of subjectivity and perspective, but the implied value of this text, alongside the other critical dystopias mentioned earlier, is perhaps that to be human is to be generally complicated, that it is possible to forego these paranoid and reactionary attitudes to others and approach with an appliance of moral integrity and

empathy to fully understand and coexist, rather than to vilify, attack or wholesale reject without any appeal to reason or conscience.

In the next chapter, I will outline the main questions I wish to answer with this study, justifying the choice of game texts used for textual analysis and moving on to explain how I will approach my analysis, drawing from arguments and debate from historical discourse involving ludology and narratology and informing what the most agreed and effective way of analysing ludic texts is, and justifying my choice of method for this study.

## Approach

In terms of the way I will approach the analysis of videogames, it is important to note the classic debates between ludology and narratology in whether games should be analysed within their own unique and exclusive academic framework, or whether they should be treated in the same way as any standard narrative-based text. Examples of statements aptly summarising these arguments include those made by Michalis Kokonis, mentioning ludologists' argument that "story elements in a game, if any, are of no real importance, as the gamer is least interested in them" (2014, p172). Richard Rouse III stresses that "what a player primarily seeks in the gaming experience is the challenge they offer," and gamers subscribe more willingly to games when totally immersed and allowed to act, as opposed to simply spectating a performed piece (2003, p2-13). Despite these arguments, contemporary studies have mostly taken the route of combining their approach to analysing games, acknowledging the dynamics of play from a ludological perspective while analysing their narrative functions and how they intersect alongside the gameplay – otherwise referred to as the 'ludonarrative' (Hocking, 2007). Rouse concludes that traditional arguments on game analysis are unfounded due to the development of games constantly evolving, and both fields should consider that "neither narratology nor ludology alone are sufficient for the study of the phenomenon," leading to my agreement that a Rouseian and a more "flexible theoretical grid" benefits a much more comprehensive study of videogames (2003, p176).

From developing a sense of the intrinsic value of critical dystopia through the discussion of various academic studies within the field, as well building an idea of its application via the analysis of narrative and aesthetic function within modern films, I will now seek to apply that knowledge in textual analysis of videogames, while acknowledging the ludological elements of gameplay present; including immersion, interactivity and moral engagement via dilemmas and choice-making, and how they affect the overall narrative experience for the player. The game texts I have chosen for this study are *Metro 2033* (4A Games, 2010), *This War Of Mine: The Little Ones* (11 Bit Studios, 2016) and *Fallout 4* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2015), and have been selected for the way they showcase a multitude of approaches via variations in play-style genres such as first-person shooter (FPS), open-world, sandbox-style role-playing game (RPG) and side-scrolling, resource management and survival game, and yet still can be argued to function as critical dystopias via the variance in ludonarrative approach. Furthermore, these games have been chosen as they bear similarities in narrative and story components found within the chosen film texts explored in the literature review, therefore an intertextual contrast and comparison will be made possible when analysing how the texts narratively and aesthetically build their dystopian worlds, and present their ideas and meaning to the player with a critical and impulsively utopian sense, rather than a classical and cautious pessimistic one.

The next sections will explore how dystopia has been utilised within the context of videogames, meaning that from a development standpoint dystopian games have historically used common narrative and visual traits to provide gripping and engrossing

arenas for gameplay to be undertaken – without necessarily using the text as an artistic way of providing a sense of comment on real-world issues – and mostly as a product for entertainment. These sections will then explore how critical dystopia has evolved within modern games development from a narrative sense in how actual world issues are defamiliarized and reformed to critique problematic aspects and explore utopian outcomes, but will show a natural mutation of the form by analysing the advancement of deep player immersion, implementing moral choice-based gameplay and interactive narratives that react and progress the game according to player activity. This leads to my argument that this type of gameplay complements the very notion of games becoming critically dystopian as they allow for players to comprehend the ramifications and consequences of their actions, as well as exploring alternate possibilities via the ability to replay, and providing an arena “to challenge prevailing assumptions about how social and political institutions should be structured and what values people should live by” (Schulzke, 2014, p318) through the engagement of the game-world.

## From Classic to Critical Dystopia in Video Games

Dystopia has been used widely by game developers throughout gaming history to create sublime, gripping worlds and stories to entertain and engage players. Even exploitation titles have been successful based on popular dystopian film franchises, including *Outlander* (Mindscape, 1992) which attempts to position the player in the role of a driver surviving the roads in a post-apocalyptic world filled with crazed bikers intent on murdering and plundering passing vehicles for food, ammunition, parts and fuel (figure 3), and contains narrative content clearly influenced by and exploiting the success of the brutal-yet-carnavalesque offerings of *Mad Max II* (Miller, 1981). *Technocop* (Gray Matter, 1988) is another dystopian game which places the player as a technologically advanced police officer fighting crime in brutal and violent fashion within a cyberpunk setting (figure 4), very similar to that of *Robocop* (Verhoeven, 1987).

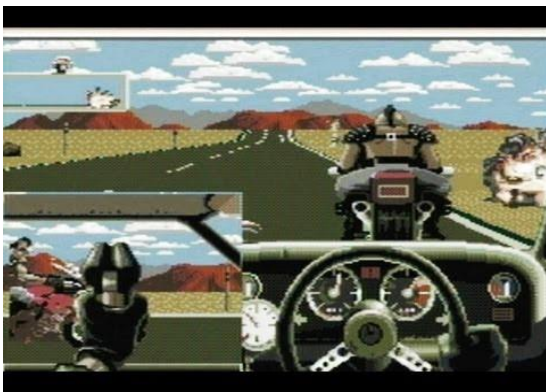


Figure 3: Surviving the wasteland on the road in *Outlander* (1992)



Figure 4: Brutal law-keeping in a cyberpunk world in *Technocop* (1988)

Despite the popular use of dystopia in games, this use has mostly been from a classical perspective in terms of being narratively closed and without a sense of utopian

progression past the implied undesirable state. In industry terms, it can be argued dystopia has acted as “mere windows dressing, engineered to help legitimate (and product differentiate) so much virtual violence” (Aldred, Greenspan, 2011, p480), rather than using robustly developed game worlds and narratives to provide critique not only on the issues presented within their iteration of dystopia, but commenting on the entire establishment of dystopia itself. This is shown in continued use in recent titles such as *Dead Rising 2: Off the Record* (2011, Capcom Vancouver) and *Borderlands 2* (2012, Gearbox Software), whereby both games tend to use the dystopian aesthetic as a mere backdrop to create a chaos-filled and carnivalesque arena for gamers to interact with; entirely enjoyable experiences, but from a simply entertaining perspective as opposed to an intellectual and thought provoking one (figures 5 and 6). This links to the similar relationship between classical and critical dystopia, in that the former not only shows a tendency to utilise dystopian narrative from a pessimistic and cautionary perspective but also sometimes in a carnivalesque sense, showcasing dystopian worlds playfully and catering towards the fantasy of places without rules or civilizational organising practice, indulging in the joy of chaos. The latter, however, tends to show a more optimistic attitude, as explored by Moylan and Baccolini with their previously mentioned ‘utopian impulse’ coinage, and makes a critique of dystopia in its entirety, not just within its own textual iteration.





Figure 5: Colourful and playful aesthetic within dystopia in *Borderlands 2* (2012)



Figure 6: Carnavalesque presentation of zombie apocalypse in *Dead Rising 2: Off the Record* (2011)

The use of critically dystopian narratives is also not a new concept when linking critical dystopia video games, as there have been key texts within the past few decades that have effectively used the combination of dystopia and science fiction to not only create a compelling work of narrative storytelling, setting and creative backdrop for the player to enjoy, but also provide a sense of critiquing not only world issues and societal states through reshaping and defamiliarization, but of the entirety of the dystopian concept by showing ways and possibilities for utopian change. One text exemplifying the use of critically dystopian narratives within video game history is *Final Fantasy VII* (Square, 1997), a Japanese roleplaying game (JRPG) that saw major worldwide success upon release and has since become a favourite among gamer communities for its strong use of cyberpunk aesthetic and dystopian narrative traits, components usually associated with science fiction and quite rare within the legacy of the series considering it is deeply embedded within classic fantasy. Through a blend of fantasy and science fiction elements, the centric focus of the game's dystopia is that the game-world is at risk of destruction as 'life energy' is drained from the planet and converted to fuel for reactors,

providing a source of power for the overall population but at a high price, due to being entirely produced and controlled by the hyper-capitalist and controlling economic powerhouse known as 'Shinra Corporation'. In the heavily cyberpunk-inspired fictional city of 'Midgar' where advanced technology meets under-class squalor (figure 7), the player assumes the role of Cloud; an ex-military man who joins a small group of freedom fighters called 'AVALANCHE' with the objective of destroying the reactors, stopping the life energy of the planet being consumed and the potential for planet-wide extinction. The player leads a team of people from various backgrounds, mostly characters affected personally by the immoral actions taken by Shinra through aggressive capitalist and totalitarian tactics, such as working-class hero of the urban slums, Barrett, who has witnessed the effects of deterioration in infrastructure and neglect of the poorest citizens of Midgar, leading to his decision to form AVALANCHE to fight back against the regime that is destroying the world he loves. Cloud also represents this sense of ordinary folk rising against the regime that has caused them harm, existing as an ex-soldier of Shinra, carrying bitterness and resentment towards them and exhibiting a sense of post-traumatic stress from his experiences.

The utopian hope present within *Final Fantasy VII*, one that defines it as a critical dystopia as opposed to a classical one, is through showcasing that utopian change is possible through community action, maintaining and valuing friendship, and a move away from nihilistic tendencies towards a totalitarian and destructively capitalist regime, standing up for what is morally right rather than succumbing to hopelessness and accepting terrible circumstances (figure 8). In choosing to become agents in their own

fate as well as protecting interests of others, the heroes of the game manage to defy the regime and eventually save the planet from extinction, showing that there is a world beyond capitalism and one that allows for an unpolluted and liberated world to be sustained.



Figure 7: The cyberpunk, capitalistic and polluted Midgar and Figure 8: Selfless call for revolution in *Final Fantasy VII* (1997)

While existing as a text mostly embedded within the fantasy genre, the heavy use of dystopian and cyberpunk aesthetic and narrative traits allows *Final Fantasy VII* to present commentary on the destructive nature of capitalism, not only how it leads to a vast disparity between class and economic background but also in the environmental impact caused by unchecked industrial practice. However, the critical dystopia present within the game is mostly in the narrative and mise-en-scene alone as the player arguably only has a limited amount of personal influence on the game-world, such as character setup, choosing the order of missions taken, alongside engaging in sub-plot content. The linear plot conclusion leads to an overall experience that isn't unique to each individual user, regardless of actions taken outside of the central narrative. Although this is still a

very effective way to convey a sense of critique in the same light that cinema does, in that the artistic and intellectual value and referential qualities in critiquing world issues are indeed present, I argue that modern video games take this a step further by adding various dynamics to create a more personal and immersive experience for the user to engage with their implied dystopias, while making the player take an active role as an agent for change in plot development, and in some cases, a reforming and reshaping of the physical, political, and social landscape. This notion gives an opportunity to explore critical dystopia in video games as more of a thought experiment; discussing aspects of social, political and cultural issues in varying degrees, alongside the exploration of ontological concerns, placing the player at the forefront of these discussions and giving constant opportunity for them to engage, influence, and even change events.

These games can arguably be deemed as the closest process available to experiencing actual events without physically being present, and from a safe and distant vantage point, using narrative and game dynamics to appeal to emotion, intrigue and curiosity to immerse the player in the game-world to fully comprehend its implied dystopian values and all possible scenarios, enabling them to “become part of the underlying logic of how these worlds are created and sustained” (Schulzke, 2014, p324) and appreciate “contrarian viewpoints” and possibilities for utopian hope and conclusion (Khoo, 2012, p425).

I argue there has been a distinct proliferation in the application of critical dystopia in video games by way of containing a utopian impulse within their narratives –

the main defining factor of the form – but also through an abundance of immersion in games via high quality audio and visuals, interactivity with plot, and the use of morality to provide an audience with a uniquely personal and emotionally affecting way of engaging with critical dystopia and its presented issues. Furthermore, I argue that these ludological elements intrinsic to gameplay further define these games as critically dystopian due to driving the player to explore all possibilities, reasonings, and effects of actions and choices made; sometimes even creating opportunities for the player to act an agent for change for the entire game-world, narratively and aesthetically. It is for this reason that Jessica Aldred and Brian Greenspan are apt in saying that these new forms of game “merit the same critical examination as their literary and cinematic counterparts” (2011, p480) as they may effectively contribute to ongoing social, cultural, and political discussion in the same degree that literature and cinema does, allowing a user to do so in a more personal and interactive way by taking a more “energetic role in the gameworld” rather than spectating from a more distant position (Loftus et al, 1983, p41).

Firstly, it is critical that an understanding of immersion and its varying levels, functions and application be ascertained before applying them to any game analysis. For this, I will focus on the two main sources within ludology academic discourse that define the concept and varying degrees of immersion games, which include the research made in a tandem work by Laura Ermi and Frans Mäyrä, as well as the research of Christoph Klimmt, and then explore how immersion is implemented and present within modern games including dynamics such as moral dilemma choice making and interactive narratives.

## **Gamer Immersion Explained**

As Laura Ermi and Frans Mäyrä observe, the experience of gameplay can be defined as “an ensemble made up of the player’s sensations, thoughts, feelings, actions and meaning-making in a gameplay setting” (2005, p2), meaning that playing a video game – particularly within games containing a roleplaying and open-world element – can be seen as a personal experience as opposed to a form of escapist and casual entertainment. Players can construct the overall experience of the game too through the engagement with multi-narrative structures and robust game worlds that are constructed to react to the player’s deeds and actions. Ermi and Mäyrä contribute to this notion, stating players “bring their desires, anticipations and previous experiences with them, and interpret and reflect the experience in that light” (2005, p2).

Ermi and Mäyrä simplify the concept of gamer immersion into three distinguishable categories; ‘sensory’, ‘challenge-based’ and ‘imaginative’ immersion. Sensory immersion, they argue, relates to the “audiovisual execution of games” (2005, p7), whereby games have become so graphically and technologically advanced, in terms of visuals and audio, that gamers become easily immersed in the game world due to it being realistically representative of reality. Challenge-based immersion is referred to as “most powerful when one is able to achieve a satisfying balance of challenges and abilities” (2005, p7), meaning the concentration and eventual satisfaction of critical thinking and solving problems in the game allows the player to become fully immersed. Lastly, imaginative immersion relates to how “one becomes absorbed with the stories

and the world, or begins to feel for or identify with a game character” (2005, p8), which links closely to how an audience becomes immersed when watching a film, being absorbed in the plot while being drawn to certain characters that mirror their own desires or issues.

Christoph Klimmt views gamer immersion in a similar light to Ermi and Mäyrä, but has a more scientific approach. He proposes an ascending three level structure of game enjoyment and immersion, which begins at the first and basic level relating to “a chain of single loops of users’ input and the computer system’s output” (2003, p249), where the player’s inputted command is responded to by the computer’s actions and leads to the basic enjoyment of an action-reaction relationship. This is exemplified by popular first-person shooter titles such as *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward, 2007) and *Battlefield 3* (EA DICE, 2011) in which players input simple commands, such as pressing directional and firing buttons to move and shoot, but gain enjoyment and immersion via the feedback response of the shot sound, the confirmation of a hit, and even the kinetic response of the controller vibrating when firing a gun (figure 9 and 10).



Figure 9: Sniping in Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare (2007)



Figure 10: Realistic immersive combat in Battlefield 3 (2011)

The second and more complex level is explained by Klimmt as being “composed of a sequence of interconnected episodes,” and within each of these episodes “the outcome [...] affects the configuration of the subsequent episode” (2003, p249). This concurs with Ermi and Mäyrä’s observation where the player may become immersed by the challenges and objectives that are offered to them and the satisfaction received upon their completion. The third and most complex level of immersion, according to Klimmt, relates to “narrative interconnections” and multiple episodes of play combined into a whole game world and narrative which allows the player to enjoy the game and become fully immersed in its storytelling, understand the fundamental socio-cultural and political aspects of the game while pseudo-experiencing any effects through their playable character. This leads to more of an overall emotional appreciation of the game’s artistic direction (2003, p249-250).



*The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011) is a game that aptly exemplifies the premises set by Ermi, Mäyrä, and Klimmt regarding gamer enjoyment and immersion. The game has been enjoyed by players due to its implementation of a graphically ultra-realistic game environment in terms of weather effects, lighting and geographical content (figure 11), but also the dynamics of its gameplay whereby the player is entirely free to enjoy their own itinerary and chronology of objectives and missions within the game world, and may commence with the provided main story when they so choose, becoming participants in a deep and engaging narrative. Although the game's narrative does not contain a multi-narrative structure leading to a single, universal ending, the game still reacts to the player's actions and choices in terms of their chosen strategy, such as gaining a bad relationship with a certain faction if participating in morally dubious actions such as theft and cold-blooded murder, managing to avoid negative response entirely by using stealth tactics, or receiving greater benefits from acting honourably within the belief systems integral to the game world.



*Figure 11: The realistic and immersive world of The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim (2012)*

Although there has been a distinct effort to make modern games as immersive as possible to give high enjoyment to players, there has also been a growth in the inclusion of ethical dilemmas and moral choice making in contemporary gameplay. Miguel Sicart notes “games can be designed to incorporate ethical systems” and “players dialogue with these systems, so ethical experiences might happen” (2013, p8). The predominant focus of these texts is to constantly challenge the player, and their own personal social and political beliefs, by placing them amongst dilemmas with multiple possibilities of resolution; some implied as positive, others as brutally negative or in some cases indifferent. However, the primary focus is to not only allow the player to act as an agent in the narrative progression but to make them bear witness to those decisions, experiencing the satisfaction of achieving the desired outcome or bearing the discomfort and distress of an undesirable one. As Sicart mentions, informal spaces, namely videogames, are crucial for the effectiveness of ethical and moral discussion, as “to play is to inhabit a wiggle space of possibility in which we can express ourselves” (2013, p9) in

terms of applying beliefs and political standing from a safe and non-real position, and being able to comprehend the resulting circumstances that evolve from those decisions and personally conclude which ones are justified, or not, and why.

Khoo notes that developers are enthusiastic to include this element in gameplay due to positive response from players engaging with it in popular contemporary titles, using “not just [...] good and evil choices but complicated ones that involve a matrix of complex and ambiguous choices” that leave unclear boundaries in terms of what is wrong and right (2012, p425). This aptly links to Sicart’s statement that use of simple reward and punishment structures harm the creative power of a game by providing too much of an obvious experience, rather than allowing for a more nuanced and multi-faceted approach to right and wrong. Game companies such as Telltale Games and Bioware are known specifically for their focus on such morally challenging gameplay content, such as the former’s title *The Walking Dead: A Telltale Series (2012)* where players are forced to make difficult choices within very short time limits at every turn which will affect the direction of the story. These set up dilemmas for the player to solve, literally choosing who lives and dies (figure 13) or simply choosing how to negotiate an intense social situation and dealing with the profound and lasting consequences of certain actions, sometimes positive and other times disastrous. Where Telltale implement morality into gameplay that represents only the basic level of immersion as conceptualised by Klimmt via exclusively basing their gameplay on multiple choice questions and giving occasional simplistic set-pieces for the player to negotiate, Bioware’s title *Mass Effect (2007)* employs similar intense decision making (figure 12) which affects the game’s narrative

direction, but integrates them in to a game world that includes some level of freedom for the player to indulge in challenge and objective-based gameplay in their own chronology whilst still being able to engage with the main narrative.



Figure 12: Conflict resolution in Mass Effect (2007)



Figure 13: Hard choices in The Walking Dead: A Telltale Series (2013)

In relation to the power of these games being drawn from witnessing potentials based on personal action within the gameplay as well as having the ability to replay and explore all variations of possibility, Jesper Juul notes “when we experience a [...] defeat, we really are filled with emotions of humiliation and defeat” and rather than purging these feelings from us, games “produce emotions in the first place” (2013, p3). Failure and emotions are a centric force in the effectiveness of video games, creating a challenge for the player but also bonding them to characters and immersing them within the narrative to feel a sense of importance in playing and achieving the best possible outcome. In the past decade of video game development, I argue that there has been a vast growth in dystopian titles that not only use narrative in a critical sense in the same light as the films discussed in the literature review; – including *The Road* and *Blade Runner 2049* – but combine various gameplay dynamics found in certain individual game

genres, such as mixing morality, roleplaying and first-person-perspective shooting to provide a unique ludic and immersive experience for players to engage with critical dystopia and its resistant, oppositional and genre-blended way in respect to the writings of Baccolini. In the next few chapters of this dissertation, I will closely examine key examples in modern gaming that I define as critical dystopias via the use of narrative and aesthetic, but also in how their utilisation of the mentioned concepts of player immersion, interactivity and ethical gameplay provide a unique dystopian experience for the play to engage with any ingrained critical and discursive value. These elements include multiple narrative paths, highly realistic audio and visuals as well as construction mechanics which allow for possibilities for utopian transformation within the in-game world. The analysis of these dynamics will serve to demonstrate the unique level of personal engagement with critically dystopian narratives and their raised issues and concerns, but also show how this ludological relationship further defines these games as critical dystopia due to presence of a utopian impulse via possibilities of positive and more hopeful resolutions to plot.

## **Critical Dystopia and the Interactive Video Game Narrative**

As earlier expressed, there has been an observable focus within this current decade of video gaming on creating complex and deeply engaging narratives that do not simply serve the basic need for stimulus and drive to influence gameplay, but are also designed and written in a way that aims to reflect and react to the player's style of play, actions and decision making. It is with these aspects that modern dystopian titles may be considered in a more critical sense concurrent with the writings of Baccolini and Moylan as there is always the presence of hopeful and redemptive conclusions. However, the unique way in which games now employ critical dystopia is through the sense of narrative primacy not necessarily being emphasised from either perspective of 'good' or 'bad', and placing the player to engage with plot and sub-plot within an immersive arena of play that contains constant opportunities to affect progression and style of outcome. As a result, a more exclusive and personal experience is achieved with which to partake in utopian discussion. A reductionist standpoint on this notion would likely relate to how narrative pathways within interactive media remain a preordained structure developed by writers, so despite multiple endings and possibilities being present, it is still constructed from certain points of view and therefore does not truthfully expand critical potential. Although this argument is valid, it can also relate to any form of visual or literary product, as the strength, validity and responsibility of narrative in texts within cinema and literature will always lie solely on the writer or maker. Films and literature will always be an effective vessel to contribute to utopian thought, but games now combine the critical and reflective strength of dystopian narratives with that of

immersive and reactive ludic dynamics to create texts allowing for “vicarious experiences in domains of life that cannot be accessed in reality” (Klimmt, 2003, p250), and despite bearing the same issue of writer standpoint, exist as a unique and personally affecting way to use critical dystopia to not only comment on societal issues and their cause or even to provide the utopian narrative horizon that the form requires, but most importantly allows for the player to be subjected to contrarian and clashing viewpoints in order to formulate and justify their approach, whether it be from one single playthrough and examining all of the varying possibilities or from witnessing differences from multiple playthroughs. As Klimmt states, “to perceive oneself as an effective agent [...] is pleasurable and functional at the same time” (2003, p250), meaning that not only do games enable users to experience different worlds virtually and from a position of safety, but gaining the ability to interact with and affect those worlds and apply their own personality, politics and views on to them is what makes these types of game intrinsically enjoyable and attractive.

*Metro 2033* (4A Games, 2010), *This War of Mine: The Little Ones* (11 Bit Studios, 2016) and *Fallout 4* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2015) are three key game titles from the past decade that I have identified for consideration as critical dystopias; both from their use of narratives to explore undesirable world states and their possibilities for utopian conclusion, and their use of dynamics in immersion and ethical gameplay to cater towards a more varied, comprehensive, personalised and emotionally affective experience for engaging with critical pondering of real world concerns. Before analysing my three examples for their dynamic engagement qualities, I will first explore how

narratives function within each individual text to justify them as critically dystopian before showcasing how the identified ludic elements complement their meaning and communication.

### **Post-Apocalypse Russia: History, Ideology and Desire for Cultural Exchange in *Metro 2033***

*Metro 2033* (4A Games, 2010) is a game that mostly serves as a first-person-shooter but also contains various roleplaying elements by way of allowing the player various opportunities for customization and interaction with the game world through optional social events, multiple pathways and ways to negotiate levels, and an embedded moral system – different endings occur depending on how the player chooses to play the game. It is very original for a worldwide, mainstream game release due to being both set in Russia and its narrative being focused from a Russian perspective in terms of both setting and characters. It has been a common trait in mainstream cinema and videogames to depict Russia and its people from a vastly stereotypical image and western lens. Films such as *Rocky IV* (Stallone, 1985) and *Snatch* (Ritchie, 2000) are prime examples that have contributed to this stereotype, the former showing Russia as an emotionless and coldly militaristic society without any insight into the internalised thought of its people, and the latter naming its Russian character the stereotypical ‘Boris the Blade’ (Rade Serbedzija), who shows sociopathic and militaristic tendencies without remorse or empathy. This stereotype is continued in games such as *Grand Theft Auto IV*



(Rockstar North, 2008) and *Command & Conquer: Red Alert 3* (EA Los Angeles, 2008) in which both games showcase Russian people as brutal, sociopathic and quick to violence, and via humorous and bombastic means.

Although *Metro 2033* includes the canon narrative from the original novel by Dmitry Glukhovski – released online in 2005 but later published in 2011 and classically dystopian in its closed and doom-laden conclusion with a pessimistic stance on human nature – the ludonarrative serves to provide an alternate and positive conclusion and opportunities for the player to act with moral integrity and to become an active agent in making the alternate ending a possibility. It is through these combined components of gameplay and narrative that I argue *Metro 2033* is a critical dystopia, due to allowing for utopian values to be present and possible within and beyond its world. *Metro 2033* is original for a modern first-person shooter in that every facet of the game – from its setting and characters – stems from an intrinsically Russian perspective. Alongside members of the development team being of Russian and Eastern European descent along with the original author of the book Dmitri Glukhovski, who aided with the writing of the game version, the game is empowered with real perspective and experience to inform its narrative elements and cultural references, managing to connote a sense of contemporary Russian issues while providing an opportunity for discussion of potential ways forward and progression.

The game is set in post-apocalyptic Moscow after a world nuclear event causes a small surviving portion of the population to seek shelter in the underground metro

system, hermetically sealing themselves inside to protect from the radiation and obliteration above. A few decades later, humanity still survives in the metro but in a state of widespread malnutrition, resource poverty, paranoia and a dysfunctional internal relationship (see figure 14). Not only is the above world entirely uninhabitable due to radiation, but it contains mutated creatures that make it extremely dangerous to venture above to salvage resources, even when armed and protected with breathing and anti-radiation apparatus (see figure 15). Furthermore, the metro below is a dangerous and precarious place for its surviving population as humanity has become entirely divided into various factions based on ideological belief. Wars are still being fought between these groups and atrocities are still committed despite humankind being on the brink of extinction. The centric focus of *Metro 2033*'s dystopia is through the surviving societal setup within the Moscow Metro, the historical significance of its structure and how it represents monumental historic achievement for Russia. This aids in the conveyance of what the text allegorically implies as both the issues Russia faces as a society and the possibilities that may exist to progress and move forward towards a better and more utopian conclusion.



*Figure 14: Remnants of humanity surviving in dark, desperate conditions deep within the Moscow underground in Metro 2033 (2010)*



*Figure 15: Horrifying and dangerous mutants roam the underground and above world in Metro 2033 (2010)*

Historically, the Moscow Metro has been known as a marvel of Soviet engineering and socialist utopian progress. Not only does it showcase a typical sense of utopian presentation in its efficient functionality and elaborately and richly decorated interior, it also served as a monument of socialist pride by providing a space where “ordinary Muscovites could encounter the Soviet metanarrative history on a daily basis” (Griffiths, 2013, p496), and exhibits “the realization of the Communist dream by building palaces instead of huts for ordinary workers” (Schwarz, 2016, p600). This leads to an opinion of the metro as a token celebration of the efforts made by workers while providing a marvellous and beautiful space for them to appreciate in their everyday working lives. Conversely, the notion of the Moscow Metro as a utopian symbol can be argued as a superficial window-dressing of the actual, real historical issues that surround not only what it symbolised, but in the physical construction of the building. Schwarz observes “on the one hand, the Soviet underground is the realization of a communist dream,” but on the other, this alleged “workers’ paradise was implemented in the 1930s with forced labor and extremely hard-working conditions in times of Stalinist terror and purges” (2016, p600). This notion contributes to the Metro as not so much a symbol of success and recognition of Communist efforts, but as one of a controlling state with the power of manipulating the lives and destinies of its people through an enforced nationalist agenda.

The use of the metro as the game setting, and by extension, Moscow, acts as a “synecdoche of Russia” (Griffiths, 2013, 481), aptly using historical significance of the Moscow Metro and past failed ideological stages of the country to imbue a sense of dystopian regression for its post-apocalypse society, as well as commenting on the state

of Russia's internal and external status. As Schwarz writes, the metro population lives in "a permanent state of emergency" with no lack of internal human struggles, and "the alleged threat for the metro world comes from the outside" via the mutant other (2016, p599), namely the 'Dark Ones' supposedly posing an imminent threat to humanity's entire survival. Throughout the game and journey the protagonist Artyom undertakes in his journey through the Metro, the player encounters the many struggles and disputes that exist between the remnants of humanity that have "fragmented in to competing, hostile models of society" (Schwarz, 2016, p591) and continue old rivalries and ideological engagements from Russian history. Communists are still at war with the Fascists (referred to as Reds and Nazis respectively), Hanseatic Leaguers (known in the game as Hansa) have become a powerful commonwealth of traders through their dominance in trade and wealth in resources, and many independent stations house ordinary people trying to survive within the chaos of ideological war and scheming, stuck between these disputes and suffering greatly as a result. Meanwhile, there are groups of bandits that have no distinct loyalty to any faction, and simply pillage for personal gain; a character archetype commonly established within dystopian and post-apocalypse cinema. This regression into past states of societal structure lead to ruminations in the plot on where Russian society "can go next, or even if it has anywhere to go" (Griffiths, 2013), meaning that looking backwards and resorting to history to seek a way forward for Russian society may not be the best way to achieve a utopian, or at least a less dystopian, sense of progression.

In an Episode of *Huang's World* (Munchies, 2014), a culture series commissioned by Vice Media, the presenter Eddie Huang visits Moscow and, from speaking to various groups and communities, concludes that there are three groups of people with different ideas of where they wish Russia to be ideologically as well as how it relates to the rest of the world. There are the widespread population of Putinists who are comfortable living under Vladimir Putin's leadership, and the older community that seem to long for the days of Communism mostly due to the provision of employment and healthcare, regardless of a lack of opportunities for personal choice and individuality. Lastly, there are communities of younger people that wish for an effort towards true cultural exchange with the rest of the world, and for a shift in mentality for how Russia approaches globalisation through public relations and cultural exchange rather than economic, fiscal and political dominance. From Huang's discussions with these communities, and the evident proliferation of younger Russian demographics inheriting fashion, language and lifestyle practices from worldwide influences, it is evident that it is indeed possible to exchange culture while retaining an original sense of national identity. This, I argue, parallels the implied utopian impulse within the ludonarrative of *Metro 2033* in that the possibility of any form of utopian hope for humankind is through the mutual understanding and trust that must be developed between the old-world Metro population, and the new-world 'Dark Ones' that are, in fact, seeking ways of communicating with the humans that they have peaceful intentions of co-existence, and may have the answer for their return to the above world.

It may also be argued that *Metro 2033*'s ludonarrative, referring to both the canon narrative alongside the variant based on gameplay, functions as a grail story much like *The Road* does in the appropriation and reversal of typical aspects within journey texts and combines them with identifiable grail story characteristics, presenting "utopian hope" from "dystopian failure" (Griffiths, 2013, p483) and thus defining the game text as a critical dystopia. *Metro 2033* can be considered a journey text due to the physical travel the player-protagonist makes from their home station all the way to the tower at the end of the game, and the task they are set to journey to Polis, the central and largest station in the metro which contains the last remnants of the pre-apocalypse government, 'The Order'. Hunter, a Ranger of this faction, is assigned as a special forces unit to deal with threats that concern the Metro in its entirety. Alongside the constant threat of mutated creatures dominating the above world and occasionally breaching the underground, Hunter makes Artyom aware that there is a new mutant threat known called the "Dark Ones" – humanoids bearing extraordinary telepathic abilities – and that they are murdering inhabitants of the Metro and causing widespread fear and paranoia of attack. Artyom is tasked by Hunter, in the case that he himself cannot complete his mission, to journey to Polis to inform them of this 'Dark One' threat and assist their efforts in dealing with it. Regardless of the outcome that the player achieves, the story counts as both the "quest" and "wandering" variant of journey texts as presented by Vogel (1974, p186), due to not only Artyom being fully aware of where he is headed and why, but also how only the reader and writer are aware of the more spiritual journey of "self-discovery" (Morris, 2003, p26) and uncovering truths that contribute to the text's implied utopian impulse of Russian cultural progression. In refusing to annihilate the 'Dark Ones', trust in their peaceful intentions, accept their help in saving Humankind from extinction, and

making efforts to lead the Metro of the past into the world of the future, *Metro 2033* symbolises how Russia may benefit from making efforts in true cultural exchange on a localised and global level, not only sharing its own unique cultural and social ways with the world but inheriting them from other cultures, learning from them in order to create a peaceful dialogue with the rest of the world and, in doing so, create a more progressive and utopian existence for themselves.

In terms of Grail story elements, *Metro 2033* is concurrent with *The Road's* use of the dying king and his land being represented as the world through its post-apocalypse wasteland and destruction, as well as the poor state of human relations in the continuance of war, famine and lack of any sense of universal community. Artyom and Hunter symbolise knights not only in the way they are represented as warriors with a sense of moral purpose in their quest, but also in the questions they must ask to achieve the healing powers the grail offers. This is symbolised through the opportunities consistently offered to the player to act using conscience, patience and applying a deeper sense of moral judgement when interacting with and negotiating the game world and its levels. If the player manages to accomplish these actions and applies this mentality, the game rewards its symbolic grail force not only to the world and characters within the text, but also to the player by allowing them the alternate and more utopian 'good' ending; showing firstly that a utopian horizon does exist beyond the veil of dystopian circumstance, but can only be achieved by making efforts to coexist, empathise with and fully comprehend those around us for a communal progressive future.



## **Fallout 4: Nostalgia and Pre-Colonial living in the Post-Apocalypse State of**

### **Nature**

Since before the release of *Fallout 4*, the entire series of games have been admired for their crafting of a dystopian world that consistently showcases a cynical and dark humour “parod[y]ing the ideologies that promote nuclear proliferation,” satirising the “naïve optimism of a pre-war America convinced of its invulnerability” (Schulzke, 2014, p325). The dystopia is common across all the titles in the series, showing the disastrous after-effects of an American society transfixed with the use of nuclear power, harbouring jingoist attitudes to foreign powers as well as a late capitalist ideological focus on consumerism, politics, class and environmental concerns (see figure 16). Each game shows this post-capitalist and consumerist world as a brutal wasteland in the typical post-apocalypse sense, with widespread degradation and ruin caused by nuclear devastation, high levels of radiation and famine leading to a very low quality of life for the surviving inhabitants, as well as the typical pessimistic display of humanity in extremis by way of a dominance in morally outrageous behaviour including murder, slavery, and even cannibalism.



*Figure 16: The ruined wasteland of Boston with nostalgic artefacts of late capitalism remaining in Fallout 4 (2015)*

Although the latest game in the series inherits all traits common within the series, this chapter will showcase how *Fallout 4* differs from its predecessors through providing more opportunities for utopian conclusions and progression within its narrative. As previously stated, the setting is consistent across all titles and contains a historical and fundamental divergence to our actual reality. After the bombing of Hiroshima in 1945, atomic power not only becomes the predominant source of energy production for the world but also becomes domestically viable, transforming the world-state into something reminiscent of futurist imaginings from the 1950s era – technology is vastly improved with atomically powered vehicles, robots replace human labour and assist with residential and domestic chores, there are major improvements to military technology such as laser and plasma weaponry, and heavily armoured protective suits are used by front-line soldiers and security forces. This nuclear-centric culture even goes as far as affecting the production and branding of domestic and confection items, such as ‘Sugar Bombs’; a breakfast cereal for children shaped as nuclear bombs, and ‘Nuka Cola’; a drink aesthetically identical to Coca-Cola apart from the name, but divergent in its variant

flavour 'Quantum' containing radioactive isotopes to give it a brighter and more appealing colour (see figure 17).



Figure 17: Ancient posters dot the landscape of products from a bygone late-capitalist society in the *Fallout* series (1997-2015)

As well as all manners of American society being technologically and atomically obsessed, the world of *Fallout* in its pre-apocalyptic state, although still being set years in the future in comparison to our own reality, is portrayed anachronistically in the style of the 1950s period with its fashion, entertainment and architecture, as well as the attitudes and culture bearing similarity to the actual 1950s American period by using the late-capitalist and modernist utopian aesthetic of pristine, technology-laden homes housing the archetypal middle-class, white and hetero-normative nuclear family (figure 18).



*Figure 18: A well-stocked, orderly, middle-class and modernised pre-apocalypse home in 2077 (Fallout 4, 2015)*

However, this portrayal is made in such an exaggerated, zany and humorous way that it appears to satire the 1950s as a period of consumerist and materialist self-indulgence via the obsession with technological and atomic marvels, gratuitous product placement and a culture of jingoist attitudes towards other foreign powers in the grossly negative and condescending media attitudes towards the Chinese government and communism (figure 19). This further relates to the Schulzke notion of the game showing the naivety and arrogance of late-capitalist America, centring itself on fascination with modernity and arrogant self-promotion, as opposed to the reality of social dysfunctionality. Despite the state of the world degenerating into a period of war and scarcity of resources, technologically advanced and hermetically sealed underground shelters, named 'vaults', are built in various locations across the United States, with the purpose of protecting and housing a certain percentage of the population in the event of



nuclear devastation, symbolically sealing and preserving the consumerist and jingoist values to resurface when the time is right.



Figure 19: Posters dot the wasteland from the old era of paranoia towards the threat of Communism in the *Fallout* games (1997-2015)

It is the continuity of these hyperbolised elements of 1950s culture in the post-apocalyptic state that gives the *Fallout* series of games their power in providing a sense of social commentary, as despite the world and its population becoming decimated after the nuclear event, the consumerist and jingoist cultures of the old world are maintained by the remnants of human society hundreds of years on. Even radio has survived, where songs of the 1950s, usually containing some form of atomic or nuclear-based lyrics such as “Atom Bomb Baby” by the Five Stars, and “Crawl Out Through the Fallout”, are

broadcast across the wasteland by characters with seemingly self-indulgent obsessions with becoming celebrity figures of the wasteland. This intentional use of late-capitalist aesthetic and atmosphere continuing beyond the apocalypse is a way of critiquing both the period itself and our current reality where such modes of modernist utopia still exist to obscure the postmodern reality of human life, namely destructive capitalism and social inequality concerns. As Buinicki notes, “nostalgia serves to obscure oppression” but can also be empowering and productive if “critically tempered and historically informed” (2016, p727). This aptly relates to *Fallout 4* and its prequels, as nostalgia serves to both inform the player of the apparent failure of one era, the continuing problematic attitudes leading into the post-apocalyptic era and the issues that must be remembered and overcome to achieve a sense of positive advancement towards a considerably better state.

Although previous *Fallout* games have contained some form of utopian hope within their narratives and player choice possibilities that may warrant their definition as critical dystopia, the fact that there is no real insight into a sense of entire societal progression from something universally dystopian diminishes the possibility of defining them as such. For example, in *Fallout 3* there is one single conclusion to the plot in which the player manages to acquire a ‘Garden of Eden Creation Kit’ (G.E.C.K), which are units originally provided to vaults as means to scientifically create an area of fertile land and clean water after a post-apocalyptic event, and uses it to clear the Potomac River of all radiation and pollution to provide fresh, clean water to the entire Washington D.C wasteland. Although this is a success, and the player is even given the choice to self-

sacrifice to achieve this by personally activating the G.E.C.K in the fatally irradiated control room, rather than choosing an NPC to do so, this only shows hope on a very micro scale and is something that may be achieved through selfish and morally questionable actions. It is also witnessed in subsequent extra content chapters, such as the “Broken Steel” add-on, in which the player-protagonist witnesses that the Washington wasteland has not entirely changed for the better. Yes, clean water is more readily available but is under the control of and distributed by a single faction rather than given away freely. Furthermore, the wasteland remains in its decayed and ruined state, still dominated by dangerous factions of sociopathic murders and thieves evidently continuing to benefit from the chaotic and uncivilised world, showcasing *Fallout 3* as more pessimistic and classically dystopian than it seems.

The overall narrative of *Fallout 4* begins in pre-apocalypse Boston, where the player assumes the role of an ex-military engineer who has settled down with his wife and new-born son in the comfort of 1950s-style modernist suburbia. After a brief introduction, a news bulletin informs them of an incoming nuclear attack, forcing the player-protagonist to evacuate their family to the nearby vault shelter to escape the devastating effects of nuclear bombardment. Unfortunately, when entering the vault, they are tricked in to entering cryostasis and are frozen alive; representative of the more sinister side to these survival vaults, which is to partake in scientific research while incarcerated for the fallout period. After an unknown period, the player temporarily reawakens to witness his wife being murdered and child stolen from its pod, before returning to cryogenic sleep. Once the player-protagonist reawakens properly, they

escape the vault to find hundreds of years have passed since they were first frozen, and realise they must traverse the now-hellish and apocalyptic world-state to discover where son has been taken, not knowing how much time has passed since his temporary awakening. The game now truly begins, forcing the player to navigate the wasteland, investigating what forms of society still exist, if any, and looking for aid in finding the boy. Eventually the player discovers a brutal world filled with raiders, mutated beings and various sub-factions and communities all involved in a convoluted level of varying conflicts with each other.

It can be argued that the utopian sense of progression and societal development in *Fallout 4* can be read from a libertarian view of how a sustainable world society should work and act. Although there is still some conflict between left and right-wing libertarians on some areas of politics, such as the left generally subscribing to the abolishment of capitalism and the private ownership of vital areas of production, as opposed to the right-wing stance of advocating laissez-faire approaches to free market and private enterprise, libertarian thought shares consistent belief that the ideal society is one that prioritises individual liberty through personal autonomy, political free-will, voluntary subscription to societal structures such as currency, laws and customs and are sceptical of any sense of centralised government or an overarching controlling state. This form of thought can be read in *Fallout 4*, mostly through the attitudes and actions of a key group in the game called the 'Commonwealth Minutemen', a revolutionary faction of people within the post-apocalypse wasteland of Boston that share common goals of liberating the wasteland from any sense of oppression through self-armament and helping to defend



fellow survivors while making efforts to rebuild areas of the city to sustain and develop peaceful communities united through communal aid, trade, and defence.

Using the term 'Minutemen' is entirely intentional by the game developers, as it refers to a similar group of civilian colonists in the American Revolutionary War period that trained themselves in militaristic practice, including tactics and weaponry, organising themselves to create a militia force capable of being ready within minutes' notice, hence the name. The same goes for that of the Commonwealth Minutemen who – influenced by the rich history of Boston and the state of Massachusetts in relation to being a key area of revolution during the British colonial period – seek to take back areas of the Boston wasteland from the mutant other, as well as aid in the development of friendly settlements with humanitarian and military aid, building trade relationships as well as ridding the wasteland of forces deemed oppressive, including the Brotherhood of Steel.

The Brotherhood of Steel is a quasi-religious faction that represent a force more associated with the works of Hobbes in terms of a sovereign power structure; one that demands loyalty and submission from its subjects in return for its protection and safety through law keeping, resource manufacture and distribution, providing opportunities to join their efforts in liberating the wasteland from its dangerous and mutated inhabitants and acquiring the control of new areas to extend their ideological reach. It is only by submission of personal autonomy and liberty that one may expect to be aided or welcomed by the Brotherhood, exemplified by the speech broadcasted upon the arrival of the 'Prydwen', the airship serving as their headquarters and symbol of power, in which

they introduce who they are and demand the dwellers in the commonwealth not “interfere” as their “intentions are peaceful,” despite sending airships full of troops to occupy key areas of the city to establish control. The name of the ship bears significance, referring to the name of King Arthur’s flagship vessel found in stories and historical literature. This ship-naming may relate to the Brotherhood existing as, or at least demanding to be known as, the Hobbes-inspired sovereign force leading the wasteland to their idea of a utopian future, one of a safe and controlled country at the expense of a surrender of personal liberty (figure 20).



*Figure 20: The arrival of the Prydwen, establishing control and power of the Brotherhood of Steel in Fallout 4 (2015)*

If the player chooses to side with the Brotherhood, they will have access to more powerful means of defence and will have a greater level of support when negotiating the wasteland. This includes higher availability of more technologically advanced resources, and continued support from the Brotherhood member Paladin Danse (figure 21), a

character available as a companion to aid the player in battle and carry items, but one considered to be most powerful due to already being heavily armed and armoured and keeping the player tied to the vast strength in resources that the faction offers while staying aligned. Depending on the subjectivity of the player, the outcome of siding with the Brotherhood may be considered a utopian one, as although they have strong and reactionary opinions to any form of life considered 'other', including seeking the eradication of non-human races such as super mutants, ghouls and synthetics, they have strong beliefs in preserving society through the veneration of technology, research and providing social order by offering protection, security and safety in return for submitting a certain degree of personal liberty, such as a percentage of resources being dedicated to Brotherhood forces and particular areas being off-limits to non-Brotherhood members.



*Figure 21: Paladin Danse of the Brotherhood of Steel, sporting a set of T-60 Power Armour in Fallout 4 (2015)*

Lastly, the Institute represent a purely logic-based scientific faction that strongly believe that the key to humanity's salvation is through use of biological science and technology. Their beliefs extend to the notion that humanity can be controlled, or even replaced, by highly-functioning and uncannily human-looking synthetic beings, otherwise known as synths. The Institute's ideology tends to showcase a wholesale disregard for hope towards the human condition surviving beyond the post-apocalypse, and strive to save those deemed worthy by any means necessary, even if it means unethical biological experimentation and secretive, underhanded tactics to socially engineer the wasteland population through placing synths as sleeper agents. In other words, the ends justify the means when it comes to saving the most privileged and 'useful' people of the wasteland to propel humankind forward. Of course, this faction serves as the most perceivable villainous force within the game due to the complete disregard for ethics and morality, but can still provide an additional layer of reflection for the player when witnessing the effects of their actions and decisions when choosing to align with the Institute.

In terms of overall narrative conclusion, the player-protagonist can join the Minutemen and free the post-apocalyptic Boston landscape from the authoritarian presence of the brotherhood, creating what can be perceived as a more libertarian utopian conclusion of localised government and a heightened sense of individual liberty in controlling one's own existence and opportunities. Conversely, the player may relate to the more Hobbesian sense of utopia by siding with the Brotherhood, catering towards a safer commonwealth by allowing for the continuing presence of the technologically advanced and resource-rich faction to control the fate of Boston, at the cost of some

level of personal freedom for its inhabitants and surviving communities by submitting to the demands of the Brotherhood by providing them supplies. Lastly, there is an option to side with the Institute, which would mean adhering to the extreme notion that humanity will survive, but at any cost, including the continued use of technology to build an intelligent form of post-human life to enslave as a military and labour force to serve humanity's needs, and allowing for unethical practices with human life to continue despite any positive potential in their aims.

The true critical strength of *Fallout 4* and its interactive ludonarrative is in the notion that there is no real universally perceived 'good' ending, rather that it is up to the player to decide how to provide the Boston commonwealth with the best possible future based on the application of their own ideological standpoint and emotions towards in-game experiences. Each faction has their own unique flaws and advantages for the player to reflect on and decide to adopt, with the focus on what they deem would be most beneficial to a more hopeful progressive future for post-apocalypse Boston. For example, if the player strongly believes that the wasteland would benefit from a sense of secure order and definite protection for the cost of some level of individual liberty in line with Hobbes' *Leviathan*, then they are most likely to side with the Brotherhood of Steel in their ability to protect their subjects effectively with means of technology and strength in numbers, but doing so by adhering to the inherent reactionary xenophobic and racist attitudes towards non-human entities. Conversely, if the player adopts a more libertarian attitude towards allowing the commonwealth to remain a localised community that defends and develops itself under its own jurisdiction, they will probably be inclined to

join the Minutemen in ridding Boston of the authoritarian and arguably fascist regime of the Brotherhood, and continuing efforts to unite communities via trade and development of civil relations. This represents the same notion explored by Williams referring to how post-apocalypse texts may be “an expression of two impulses,” one that is merely witnessing the terror and ruin of an empty, destroyed space, or “the exhilaration of this blank canvas as the stage for feats of adventure and heroism” (2005, p301). The wasteland does exist in the traditional dystopian and undesirable sense, but be a form of tabula rasa in restarting civilisation and replaying the pre-colonial phase of societal development. Not only can the player engage in heroic action on the micro level, aiding individuals and small groups with their struggles in a post-apocalyptic world, but can do so on the macro level of defining a new era of history and redefining the future of the wasteland based on whichever ideological or belief system they subscribe to.

Despite whichever conclusion the player achieves, and in the way Schulzke discusses the appreciation for contrarian viewpoints in these forms of games (2014, p324), the player always has opportunity to replay the game and experience different perspectives of play and outcomes based on different choices and faction alliance. This further links to the notion of modern games such as *Fallout 4* being considered both critically dystopian and interactive thought experiments as they use dystopian and post-apocalypse narratives in the typical critical mode as their cinematic counterparts. There is always possibility for utopian conclusion regardless of ideological position, providing interactive ways to engage and reform the narrative with a wider experiential lens with which to observe conveyed critical discussion.

## **Conscience, Community and Empathy existing within the Occupied War**

### **State in *This War of Mine: The Little Ones***

*This War of Mine: The Little Ones* (11 Bit Studios, 2016) is a side-scrolling, platform-based resource management game which takes inspiration from the Sarajevo siege during the Bosnian war of 1992 to 1996, and although not technically considered a post-apocalypse title, the game deploys aesthetic and narrative values commonly reserved for the genre, specifically in the faded and mostly colourless visual style as witnessed in *The Road*; focusing on aspects of decay, ruin and the dilapidated remains after a disastrous event and placing survival as its primary discursive mode. However, rather than taking place within a devastated world-state in its entirety, the game conveys its implied critique via a more microcosmic and localised arena of a fictional eastern European region named 'Graznavia', which is occupied by a military siege. Narrative perspective is centralised from that of ordinary citizens caught in the middle of the conflict and left to survive for themselves. The game provides a deep focus on the reality of war and the disastrous effects and hardships that it creates for ordinary people forcibly involved through circumstance, as well as giving the additional perception of such notions through the involvement of child characters. As well as having to deal with the brutal and unforgiving war-state, players are also charged with caring for child characters that emotionally respond to the actions and decisions made by the player through its adult characters, but their development as people – along with their faith and feelings towards humanity and their surrounding world – are also directly influenced by these actions (see figure 22).



Figure 22: The curiosity and innocence of children in *This War of Mine: The Little Ones* (2016)

In terms of the general narrative of the game, the player is tasked with controlling a small group held up within an abandoned house with the goal of surviving 40 days or more until there is a ceasefire. To do this, the player must task members with resource gathering from the surrounding area, maintaining the house in terms of making it more secure against potential robbers, creating self-sufficiency by building rudimentary means of production – such as water filters and crop planters – and trading with fellow survivors using materials gathered from other areas or things made via self-sufficiency, such as food, water, weaponry and even luxuries such as cigarettes and alcohol (see figure 23).





Figure 23: Maintaining the house in the daytime phase of *This War of Mine: The Little Ones* (2016)

What makes *This War of Mine: The Little Ones* different from the other titles discussed in this study is the way in which players create their own ongoing story and sub-plot by being placed within the ludic arena of play and engaging with its dynamic elements to achieve the ultimate goal of survival. For example, where *Metro 2033* has a strong cinematic sense of story and narrative structure that propels the gameplay while still allowing for a few variations in conclusion based on style of play, *This War of Mine: The Little Ones* uses the setting alone to place the player within its organisation of logic and institutions, and creating their own plot points based on play. By giving the player a small set of objectives but placing them within its harsh and unforgiving survival dynamics, it allows for the user to create their own ongoing narrative based on the choices made between how their bestowed characters interact with the surrounding world, the choices made in how resources are obtained and distributed, and how they

deal with various dilemmas presented to them throughout the proceeding gameplay. This eventually will produce their own exclusive timeline of events and conclusions to reflect on once completing a playthrough.

In further terms of its utilisation of dystopian and post-apocalypse narrative traits, the game presents its main critical discussion through presenting humanity in extremis, a concept otherwise known as the state of nature, which is a concept widely discussed within historic ontological discourse such as Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The state of nature refers to the condition of human society without the existence of sovereign or government control, societal structure, laws or organising practices, and reflects on how humanity acts in such a state of lawlessness and individual liberty. Hobbes and Rousseau take different stances on this discussion, the former exhibiting cynicism in believing humans are essentially brutal individuals, drawing parallel with the Machiavellian notion that humans will show selfishness, greed and deceitfulness when given the chance and the only establishment that may keep humanity in order and prevent a life that is “nasty, brutish and short” (2017, p103) in the state of nature is a sovereign controlling force; referring mostly to a monarchy but may also translate to a modern sense of centralised government. Rousseau, however, disagrees with Hobbes by insisting that humans are mostly good and decent creatures and that the state of nature would be a mostly peaceful one; eluding to the idea that any bad occurrence would mostly be due a corrupting force from the controlling power structure. Rousseau states that “Man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains” (1968, p49), answering Hobbes’ notion of sovereign power with an idea that this may only represent true liberty if the

laws are set by the people and they themselves set who leads them; an idea which clearly influenced the development of representative democracy.

These ideas of the state of nature and discussions on the human condition have existed as a common theme within post-apocalypse fiction due to presenting the state of society after an apocalyptic event and allowing the viewer or reader to ruminate on the state of humanity in a situation of ruin, survival and near extinction. Texts such as *A Boy and His Dog* (Jones, 1975) and *Mad Max II* (Miller, 1981) tend to take an approach to human nature close to that of Hobbes, showing the post-apocalypse society as brutal, violent and dominated by self-serving, sociopathic rapists and murders with any good and morally decent people a distinct minority with no power to change their surroundings or progress towards something better overall. However, films such as *The Road* or *The Book of Eli* (Hughes et al, 2010) show humanity in a light more in common with the likes of Moore and Rousseau, eluding to a conclusion that although there will always be a minority of brutishness and sociopathy, the good and better side to humanity can still prevail and aid in providing a more progressive and utopian future from a situation considered undesirable and dystopian.

These ruminations on human nature in an uncivilised situation are aptly presented from every facet with *This War of Mine: The Little Ones*, exploring the human condition within a lawless state of nature; mostly from how the player chooses for the group to interact with other groups of survivors, the choices made in various moral dilemmas, also using the innocence of children and infants to signify whether the player has acted in

good conscience or not. *This War of Mine: The Little Ones*, even more so than *Metro: 2033*, is vastly like *The Road* in that it offers an ontological consideration on whether conscience can prevail within a desperate and ruinous situation, and uses that as a central argument on whether humanity deserves to survive.

With a majority of the gameplay being centred around the acquisition and distribution of scarce resources in a desperate situation, the game aims to intellectually engage with the types of players that relate to the carnivalesque attitudes displayed in classically dystopian titles such as *Mad Max II* and *A Boy and His Dog*, as well as games such as *Borderlands 2* or *Dead Rising 2: Off the Record* that either appeal to a pessimistic sense of humour or desire for violence over the want for serious ontological or societal discussion. Broderick links to these forms of dystopian text and the audience they appeal to, stating “they articulate a desire for (if not celebrate) the fantasy of nuclear Armageddon as the anticipated war which will annihilate the oppressive burdens of (post)modern life” (1993, p362). *This War of Mine: The Little Ones* utilises “fantasies of consumption and bunkered community” (Audrey Foster, 2016, p292) to test the player into seeing where their spiritual and emotional priorities lie, whether in the self-centred, materialist and nihilistic mode of personal survival at any cost without concern for others or any consequence, or understanding the value of sharing, appealing to conscience and selfless action in a circumstance of communal hardship.

Much like *The Road*, this function serves to show the problematic notions of “egocentrism and faithlessness that are swiftly killing the planet” (Cooper, 2011, p223), and rather than simply allowing for the player to enjoy a distanced sense of violent

indulgence and materialist obsession with no real narrative punishment, the game shows the direct effects of decisions considered to reject empathic gestures or conscious efforts towards either others in need or the welfare of people within their own circles. The player is forced to experience how their actions have caused emotional distress and further hardship on to those that could have otherwise been aided towards a better and more optimistic outcome. Knox writes that “survival requires a way to make sense of the world and of retaining the hope that community is possible” (2012, p99), which can aptly link to the critical ludonarrative intentions of *This War of Mine: The Little Ones* which are to show how conscience and empathy can indeed still exist within perceivably hopeless circumstances, and although much hardship and struggle would be sustained in the process, a positive and utopian outlook and horizon may always exist beyond that of the undesirable dystopian present.

## **Ethical Gameplay and the Push Toward Utopian Horizon**

As stated in previous chapters, there has been a vast growth in the inclusion of morally engaging content in modern games development. Adding this interactive material serves to emotionally connect the user to any actions or processes they may partake in, witnessing the direct or gradually accumulated results of their choices – good or bad – to their character, associated computer-controlled characters, or even the entire game world and its dynamics. Nacke and Lindley discusses this notion, noting “both emotions and affect are a vital part of the player experience” (2009, p5), referring to how achieving a deeply affecting emotional connection between player and text are imperative to give a sense of cognitive urgency and care in any decisions made that affect how the game progresses, as well as becoming fully immersed in the conflict presented from the narrative. This further links to Klimmt’s three level model of immersion in games in reference to the second level whereby players engage with linking objectives to achieve a certain goal, stating four elements exist within this stage including “possibilities to act, a necessity to act, the player’s attempt to resolve the situation, and the outcome of this action” (2003, p251). Much like the way that a compelling narrative or set of plot directions allow for the player-protagonist to enjoy the game by being empowered as a force for influence and change, these instances of moral challenge and dilemma further contribute to enjoyability, directly connecting the player to their actions and forcing them to consider and reflect on any results that occur, whether success or failure. In fact, Jesper Juul argues failure is one of the most important parts of these forms of gameplay, as games are “a safe space in which failure is okay” (2013, p4) and that despite being

aware of being subjected to unpleasant situations, players are “not playing to win but to learn” (2013, p113). This leads to my argument linking to the use of morality in modern critically dystopian games in that despite utopian conclusions always being possible, whether in a slight or major form, the player also has opportunity to subject themselves to clashing ideas and viewpoints by replaying the game to witness the alternate consequences of various actions made. This leads to a more comprehensive and multi-faceted approach to critical dystopia that strives to intellectually engage the reader from as many angles as possible and influence a higher level of discussion in the textually implied issues.

### **The Moral Difficulty in *This War of Mine: The Little Ones***

*This War of Mine: The Little Ones* uses moral choices as a primary ludonarrative function to make players serve as active agents in either “perpetuating the problems that make the game worlds dystopian” (Schulzke, 2014, p316) by indulging in destructively consumerist and conscienceless action, or making efforts to showcase survival of moral integrity and empathetic gestures in a state of ruin or desperation; not only by being resourceful and savvy within the game dynamics, but offering a sense of faith in others through peaceful trade and charity. Throughout the game, the player is constantly morally tested by being given many opportunities to steal resources by either using stealth to break in to others’ property, or simply use violence and threats to extort or rob resources from people directly. Usually these people are shown as entirely peaceful and non-hostile to players, but are connoted as distinctly vulnerable through a lack of security

and defences on their property, having no weapons to defend themselves. This can provide temptation to the player to commit robbery to help his or her group to survive longer due to the evident scarcity of valuable resources and ongoing sense of desperation. An example of this is when the player eventually has a group member visit an area called 'The Quiet House' on a resource-gathering mission. The player finds a house lived in by an elderly couple who happen to own a horde of very valuable materials and valuables, such as medicine, food and rare building materials. If the player enters the house, the couple become panicked and express worry of the sudden intrusion, and furthermore, if the player then decides to take resources, the couple then begin to cower in fear and beg for mercy, the man stating his wife needs the medicine to live and begging the player not to hurt them and leave enough for them to survive (figure 24).



Figure 24: Raiding the most vulnerable for resources in *This War of Mine: The Little Ones* (2016)



Regardless of what the player eventually takes, perhaps leaving peacefully without intruding for long or stealing any more than a few small items, the group member chosen for that mission will return home in a state referred to as 'sad', showing signs of post-traumatic stress disorder in referring to the incident with comments of regret and shame. Furthermore, if the player decides to put characters through these experiences on a regular basis, there is a possibility of that character reaching 'broken' status, whereby they are unable to contribute any actions to the household, can even worsen the mental stability of other house members if left unchecked. They may even eventually leave the house entirely, or worse, commit suicide. Conversely, if the player decides to act in empathy and conscience by aiding others or acting in selfless endeavours, the controlled group receive boosts to morale, evidently content that good deeds have been achieved. This links to the difficulty of the game in how the player must juggle efforts with the emotional status and survivability of their group against moral concerns and relationships with fellow survivors, but the very possibility of surviving with moral integrity gives the player incentive to try, and a sense of reward to hint as to why those actions are imperative for the possibility for hopeful and redemptive futures. Other instances of moral dilemma within the game include random visits from neighbours in need of resources, such as food or medicine, or tasks that need completing that have a chance of causing disastrous results, such as being killed by military forces while attempting to access impounded humanitarian aid drops. Within these instances, faith and conscience inform the player's decision to sacrifice resources and time to help others, as the potential for any return in kindness, such as the aided characters returning with rewards or gifts, are entirely randomised. Nonetheless, an important aspect to consider is how the player, as an extension of playable characters, are perceived by any

children under their care and how it affects their development towards and implied beyond the survival period.

The existence of the innocent, naïve point of view of children serves to further complement the critical nature of the game's moral dynamic, appealing to a sense of conscience in the player to always question their own actions, and by doing so, inform their decisions to create better chances for honourable and morally acceptable outcomes. Children in *This War of Mine: The Little Ones* serve as a constant reminder that every action has consequences, good or bad, and not just on one's own reality and destiny but for others as well. The implementation of emotional status of group members shows a stark display of consequences from how the player chooses to subject their characters to survival, exhibiting the dark reality of war and a state of nature where all are vulnerable to any collaboration of destructive and exploitative consumerist mentality. Allowing for the possibility for utopian hope via survival based on peaceful and empathetic means, regardless of the difficulty in doing so, posits *This War of Mine: The Little Ones* primarily as a critical dystopia, giving the sense that although a positive and progressive future is always possible beyond dire and perceivably doomed circumstances, a complicated and difficult set of events must be observed and undertaken for this to be achieved.

## **The Moral Points System in *Metro 2033***

Although the game is widely considered an atmospheric FPS, *Metro 2033* showcases elements that usually reside within the RPG genre such as the implementation of a morality system which affects the path of the narrative conclusion, and, although limited, some level of character customisation, as well as multiple ways to tackle levels, and interactivity with surroundings. Not only does the game provide a deeply challenging, atmospheric and emotionally engaging experience by effectively using cinematic visuals and surround sound, certain gameplay dynamics are integrated for the player to negotiate the narrative, allowing them to become agents in shaping the game's conclusion. This combined use of player experience and game dynamics lead me to argue that it is not merely narrative forces alone that may define these texts as critically dystopian, but that these implementations are an added force in seeking a utopian and redemptive impulse, showing that if progression and hope is obtainable within typically hopeless and dystopian situations, then the entire concept of dystopia is in question.

The narrative follows the canon ending established in the original novel from which the game is based, in which Artyom manages to complete his heroic journey of aiding Polis in dealing with the alleged 'Dark One' threat by helping to acquire a nuclear missile launchpad and laser designator from a secret military bunker deep within the Metro, known as 'D6'. Through many battles and travels through the dangerous mutant-infested Moscow city remnants, Artyom activates the nuclear launch with the designator atop an old television tower. However, the canon ending is perceived as a dystopian

failure, as the Dark Ones finally manage to communicate with Artyom just as the missile launches, revealing that their intentions aren't at all hostile. The player-protagonist is forced to watch this atrocity of genocide being committed by their own hands (figure 25), when they have been led to believe that their actions were for the good of humanity and its continued existence. Very rarely does the player physically encounter a Dark One before the end of the game, only hearing of rumours and tales from human Metro inhabitants and seeing them in mysterious dream sequences, which are understood as hostile and terroristic attempts at mind control or telepathic intimidation, given that the only context in the understanding of their race communicated to the player is entirely negative and based on human paranoia. Eventually their communications are understood by the player-protagonist as actually being peaceful, due to the Dark Ones being unable to speak the appropriate language and simply trying to convince humanity of their declaration of peace through mental imagery. Humanity causes its own downfall through its inability to communicate and co-exist with each other, but also in its inability to understand surroundings and external opportunities of progression, showing the traditional dystopian and pessimistic sense of using narrative as cautionary warning of potential consequences to certain practices, namely the lack of cultural exchange and maintenance of decent international relations.



*Figure 25: The canon 'bad' ending, showing nuclear annihilation of the Dark Ones in Metro 2033 (2010)*

However, it is not overtly communicated to the player that there is an alternative 'secret' ending that can only be accomplished via playing the game and interacting with its elements in specific ways. There is a morality system in place that keeps score of certain points in the game when the player decides to deal with conflict either peacefully, thoughtfully, or using non-violent actions. Examples of this include dealing with hostile situations via the use of stealth and avoiding conflict entirely, completing side quests that aid others and not necessarily the player – such as making extra effort to release hostages, saving children and refusing to accept a reward – and, lastly, very subtle opportunities to gain moral points, including simply exploring levels fully and listening to the stories and perspectives of station inhabitants in their entirety. By fully engaging and listening to opinions and experiences of others, as well as the above opportunities, the player experiences a very short audio-visual marker on screen to confirm this gain,

involving a flash of light and a subtle ringing sound. Conversely, there are situations that may take away a moral point from the player if they act without morals or choose an easier and more selfish way to navigate levels. This is exemplified by the act of murder when stealth and non-conflict options are available, theft of goods and acting in bad character such as excessively firing upon dead bodies or disobeying instructions from other characters that involve their safety.

If the player manages to gain enough positive moral points by engaging with these instances with an appropriately peaceful or empathetic way, it allows for Artyom to become receptive to the communication from the Dark Ones at the penultimate stage of the game. By managing to listen to the experiences of others, carefully think actions through before acting, and using conscience to determine them, Artyom may turn against instincts developed by the reactionary and hostile mentality rife within the Metro's population – exemplified by Hunter's original advice repeated in dream sequences, whereby he tells Artyom "if it's hostile, you kill it" – before firing upon Dark Ones. Through extra care in action and decision making, the realisation is met that they are not actually hostile as they telepathically plead to Artyom that they are peaceful, unlocking the choice to destroy the laser designator and prevent the act of genocide on a peaceful culture and race that can help in utopian progression for humankind. This ending concludes with the imagery of Artyom standing together with a Dark One, watching the sun rise over Moscow in a new era of hope and peaceful coexistence (figure 26).



Figure 26: The more hopeful and 'good ending showing humans coexisting with Dark Ones in Metro 2033 (2010)

With the allowance of a heightened sense of player agency through the game's deeply immersive audio, visual and gameplay dynamics alongside a multi-narrative structure affected by player actions, choices and moral action, *Metro 2033* exemplifies how a ludic text may not only convey a sense of critical dystopia via the use of narrative storytelling, but provides an opportunity to fully comprehend different aspects of the presented dystopian world, the moral implications of actions made and courses taken while always leaving the player with the possibility and, most importantly, the responsibility of a conclusion considered positive and even utopian. If critical dystopias are texts that further explore the notion of dystopia past its own narrative iteration, interrogating the entire concept via close examination of possible redemptive and progressive forces that may still exist despite the situation or world being depicted superficially as hopeless, then *Metro 2033* is a perfect example of this. By implicitly integrating a moral point system, the player becomes an active agent in seeking a better

alternative than the established, doom-filled fate set by the original story's canon. This, combined with providing deeply immersive gameplay to heighten emotional response in the player and naturally being able to replay the game, allows for all facets of the narrative and implied meaning of the text to be available within player's experience.

*Metro 2033* addresses issues raised with the modern state in Russian politics, most notably in the direction that Vladimir Putin has taken with Russian political and global affairs. Schwartz observes that although his leadership has brought a significant amount of economic and social stability, his regime is still an authoritarian one that maintains control and influence via the indirect control and nationalisation of Russian media (2016, p590). The game utilises ethical gameplay and encourages the consideration of peaceful action over reactionary hostility, as well as makes efforts to fully comprehend their ludic reality in terms of considering all possibilities to ascertain the least destructive way to progress and striving towards understanding of the codified other beyond populist opinion. By doing so, the game creates a critically utopian sense that the answer to Russia's utopian horizon, as well as universally for the world, links to a reformed sense of globalisation. *Metro 2033* argues that this can be an effective force for positive societal progression when supporting cultural exchange and an effort towards mutual understanding and cooperation between nations, as opposed to the aggressive stance of globalisation through acquisition and economic dominance which, in turn, can become a breeding ground for social and political tensions between cultures.



## **Morality and the Posthuman in *Fallout 4***

Khoo notes the use of “Aristotelian moral concepts” deployed in *Fallout* games to encourage players to “think about their actions in the moral world and make the connection to their behaviour in the real world (2012, p425). *Fallout 4* continues the ongoing dynamic of play that the series offers to limit escapist culture by intellectually and morally challenging the player, using the ludic medium to critique and comment on varying ideologies and social cultures becoming dominant or universally championed and providing ontological discussion in the typical dystopian sense. Despite considerations of ideology and politics existing within the general narrative world of *Fallout* games via the dialogue options and social standing with characters, the highlighted morality content present within *Fallout 4* stems from the posthuman element of synthetic beings created by the Institute as slave labour and existing as a feared and othered being within the wasteland. This is a primary concept within the narratives of both *Blade Runner* and *Blade Runner 2049*, and the game similarly deploys posthuman characters in such a way to discuss concerns of “the morality of slavery and our terrifying capacity for a motivated inattention to the suffering of others” and the ontological pondering of “whether humanity can be saved from a state of moral and spiritual degradation (Macarthur, 2017, p373). The game inherits the discursive power of the *Blade Runner* films in their argument that defining humanity goes beyond the physical, and people must be judged and perceive themselves by actions and values they uphold. The player can forego any efforts towards aid and defence of these beings, expressing nihilistic values unconcerned with the well-being of others and more focused on individual self-interest; an arc of

humanity that critical dystopias tend to critique as an antagonistic force in the effort towards utopian horizon. The Institute have created such a level of fear and paranoia from their secretive deeds that the general opinion of wastelanders towards Synths are that they are all under the agenda of the institute and only exist to commit atrocities towards humans with the eventual goal of replacing them entirely. This is not entirely the case, as the player-protagonist meets many independent Synths along their narrative path, including a publicly known being named Nick Valentine (see figure 27), who, although not entirely trusted by the locals, has gained his place in society working as a successful private investigator.



*Figure 27: Nick Valentine, a Synthetic being serving as a Diamond City private investigator in Fallout 4 (2015)*

By placing Nick in a pivotal position within the plot, specifically in befriending the player-protagonist and providing the means to track the whereabouts of their main

objective, the player gains the insight into how the socially constructed view of Synths are not accurate, and unfairly represent beings such as Nick who are simply trying to live their own lives as any human would, despite existing in a different physical state. The player-protagonist and Nick both discover that his personality was uploaded from a real human that existed as a pre-war police officer, which leads to Nick becoming distraught at the realisation he is an engineered being, and not 'real'. It is up to the player, through morally charged social interaction choices, to convince Nick that it does not matter how he has been constructed and that he is indeed a 'real' being that has autonomy over his actions, and can choose his own destiny regardless of how he has been constructed. Through this moral action, the player gains the insight into one of the main moral discursive objectives in *Fallout 4*, as well as other critically dystopian texts, using the posthuman to explore the human condition. As with the *Blade Runner* films, this conceptual addition to show humanity as defined beyond the physical serves to present humans as having "a distinctive capacity for empathy" (Macarthur, 2017, p374), and by having integrity in applying empathy, conscience and understanding towards each other, rather than submitting to populist perception and social construction, we can answer our own ontological question on whether we deserve to survive beyond the dystopian boundary, and if we are indeed 'good' beings. The game also includes a sub-faction named 'The Railroad', an underground rebel group of humans carrying the sole objective of liberating self-aware synths and transporting them away from the dangers of the Commonwealth. By gaining good relations with this group, only achievable if the player has shown enough conscience and empathetic action towards Synths to be considered towards membership, it gives the opportunity for players to act on their empathetic desires towards others in the same way that *Blade Runner 2049's* K achieves integrity and

a 'real' sense of humanity by acting for the well-being of others in peril over his own interests. This solidifies the notion as presented in most critically dystopian texts that only by acting on integrity and conscience to help and understand each other, as opposed to individual self-interest and nihilism, can any potential for utopian horizon be imagined or realised.

## **Player Immersion and the Dystopian Experience**

Immersion serves to complement the reading of critically dystopian values by immersing players deep within the arena of play and the dynamic economy that it offers, from the perspective of social interaction with other generated characters, the political and cultural landscape imbued in its design and any fiscal and economic values, processes and concerns included for the player to engage with. Games that aim to create successful levels of immersion manage to do so by effectively utilising game dynamics along with narrative to create a deeply engaging environment for the player to exist in for its offered gameplay, whilst games that are unsuccessful are ones that do not reconcile these elements correctly, and thus contributes to – but does not solely cause – a sense of ‘ludonarrative dissonance’; a concept introduced by Clint Hocking whereby a player’s immersion is broken by poor choices in narrative continuity combined with how the game is played. In other words, if the narrative and gameplay contain a clash in continuity, such as the game rewarding you for killing a high number of enemies despite playing a character defined as pacifist in nature, the player becomes distanced from the text due to the dissonant nature of the textual design, disallowing full immersion.

This notion of immersion in gaming works in a similar way to how the ‘novum’ relates to science fiction, a term used by Darko Suvin to describe the innovative element within the narrative which may be justified scientifically despite not existing in the reader’s own current reality. The novum is what distinguishes science fiction from that of fantasy in that the scientifically fictional elements are made plausible, as opposed to

impossible and entirely othered. This is otherwise known as cognitive estrangement, and the novum can be exemplified by concepts such as teleportation and hyperspace travel, as well as physical items such as floating cars and laser swords. The similarity between these notions and the immersive qualities in video gaming lies in how the crafting of the in-game world aims to achieve a close and personal relationship between both the player, narrative and the dynamic, reactive arena of play in which the player is placed. This leads to my argument that games achieving this sense of immersive player-ludonarrative exchange are ones that act as the most effective way of engaging with critical dystopia in video gaming.

Relating to the works of Klimmt, a deeply immersive and well-crafted virtual experience is the closest process currently available to actually living it, creating a safe space to enact “vicarious experiences in domains of life that cannot be accessed in reality” (2003, p252). Therefore, positioning the player as protagonist or empowered agent within a dystopian experience gives the opportunity for a deeper and more personally affecting way to negotiate the discussion of meaning in narrative. This does not mean video gaming can necessarily be decreed as the best means to do so, but can be defined as a unique way to experience critical dystopia in an interactive way rather than acting as a passenger or spectator when engaging with literature or film.

Immersion is a key factor in what makes *Metro 2033* a successful and effective text to communicate dystopian values. First-person shooter games typically follow a very simplistic approach to gameplay, distilled down to a case of simply negotiating movement with aiming and shooting as well as setting obvious and linear objectives to achieve and

progress the story. Although these games have a certain style of play enjoyed by certain types of player, this does not mean these texts cannot still be enjoyed as effective narrative experiences. Modern FPS games such as *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* have utilised high-quality audio, visuals and narrative writing, proving to be profound pieces of cinematic storytelling and have been critically well received as such. Furthermore, games such as *F.E.A.R 3* (2011, Day 1 Studios) have used cinematic audio and visuals, as well as quality storytelling, to offer a deeply atmospheric experience for the player in terms of heightening senses of terror and discomfort. Despite inheriting these common notions of FPS gameplay and deeply immersing players in their storytelling as observed in the higher tier of Klimmt's model of immersion earlier discussed, *Metro 2033* aims to engage players with multiple levels of immersion by developing increased sense of personal connection between player and game through implementing various gameplay mechanics and dynamics, complementing the notion of it being a survival horror and immersing the player more deeply into the overall experience and implied meaning.

The general gameplay is not a simple case of point, shoot and follow directions. The game is designed to place the player in a constant state of discomfort, dread and alertness to fully comprehend the dystopian experience using atmospheric visuals and sound, as well as unique survival-based ludic dynamics for the player to engage with. Firstly, audio is just as vital as visuals in immersing players within the post-apocalypse narrative by instilling a wide spectrum of cinema-quality sound effects and bedding to complement the notion of a living, breathing world in which the player is placed. Additionally, sound serves a facility for the player to utilise during play to their own

advantage. As explained earlier, there are areas within the game that allow for the opportunity for stealth tactics to progress through levels in non-violent ways, but require great concentration in noise discipline by way of movement but also in listening in for movements and voices from other entities. Apart from sensory immersion provided within the game's diegesis, non-diegetic audio by way of music also contributes to deeper immersion for the player by reacting to player action and decisions. This is exemplified by a swelling of alerting music if the player is discovered or engaged by an enemy, as well as sombre and more sinister pieces of music for dread-infused scenes of horror. As Grimshaw and Schott argue, "sounds offering imaginative immersion possibilities are those which help the player identify with her character and the game environment and action" (2008, p5), meaning all the uses of audio contribute to deeply immersing the player within the game's core ludonarrative atmosphere, leading them to become more receptive and personally bonded to narrative progression, along with its implied critical discussion.

Aspects that are taken for granted in other games are made a distinct premium in *Metro 2033*, such as flashlights with finite amounts of power that must be recharged at regular intervals using a hand-crank physically triggered by the player (figure 28). Oxygen is a factor to be constantly kept track of as a gas mask must be worn in certain areas due to either intense radiation or reduced air supply, meaning the player must routinely observe their oxygen meter and listen for their character's breaths to determine if the filter on the mask needs replacing. Lastly, resources by way of ammunition and medical kits are also limited, more so depending on difficulty level set. The player must be very



tactical when deciding on which weapons to continue with at each stage, as not only are the availability of certain weapons and enhancements offered at certain stages of the game, but ammunition levels must be observed. Military rounds can be used to provide more weapon power, but are also in finite supply and are a vital source of currency to trade for other resources, including the gas mask cylinders, medical kits to heal incurred wounds, and standard, weaker ammunition for weaponry.



*Figure 28: Manually recharging the flashlight to aid visibility in the dark depths of Metro 2033 (2010)*

Not only do these factors contribute to the immersion for the player via more physical and interactive ways to engage with in-game action, but further complement the primary dystopian and post-apocalyptic narrative mode of the in-game world, one of desperation, danger and survival. Ermi and Mäyrä state “the gameplay experience can be defined as an ensemble made up of the player’s sensations, thoughts, feelings, actions

and meaning-making in a gameplay setting” (2005, p2), leading to the idea that outside of the core narration of plot or story in a game, ludic texts can be viewed as more of an individual and personal experience, both in the way that the player engages with narrative in a more direct and interactive way than other mediums, as well as how they perceive and reflect on the implied textual meaning. Therefore, by playing the role of Artyom, existing as an agent within the ludic arena of play, witnessing feedback from their actions affecting narrative progression or conclusion, immersion proves a key element along with moral decision making and narrative storytelling in permitting a level of experience and personal effect on how players can engage with dystopian critique and discussion, along with negotiating possibilities for utopian horizon and conclusion in the typical critically dystopian mode. Without the benefit of having any sense of structured or scripted plot, *This War of Mine: The Little Ones* still manages to provide some sense of the Ermi and Mäyrä -coined “imaginative immersion” for the player, creating an atmospheric, dystopian and aesthetically informed setting to become emotionally absorbed and identified with. However, the predominant way the game positions players within its dystopian ludonarrative is via “challenge-based immersion” (Ermi and Mäyrä, 2005, p7) by placing the player in direct control and management of their survival group’s daily routine, task schedule and style of survival. Every facet must be micro-managed and set by the player in order of what they deem most important and valued, including which characters can rest, who gets to use resources from the supply cache such as food and medicine, and who will venture out at night in to the dangerous surrounding area to scavenge or trade for supplies (figure 29).



Figure 29: Planning the group tasks for the night-time section of *This War of Mine: The Little Ones* (2016)

The game tends to be merciless in terms of holding the player account for inefficient organisation of tasks and resources, so all decisions must be thought of very carefully and in relatively quick fashion considering that time is also a valuable resource to negotiate in the cycle of play. This culture of consistent challenge-based play and conflict of importance and value placement endorses the general discursive function of survival in chaotic and desperate conditions, purposefully creating a highly stressful and punishing environment of play to engage with the implied discussion of destructive nihilist, capitalist and materialist attitudes in a world filled with injustice, inequality and vulnerability. Likewise, critically dystopian values are still communicated via these immersive qualities by providing ways towards utopian conclusion, while acknowledging that complicated and vastly difficult processes and obstacles must be negotiated to achieve it, namely allowing space for generosity, empathy and charity in a resource-scarce and insecure environment.

*Fallout 4* is the first in its series to offer a much more optimistic and hopeful presentation of the post-apocalyptic wasteland, not only through its interactive multi-narrative structure but also by allowing the player to become an active agent in reshaping the dystopian surroundings into something more utopian, and reforming the social and political structure of the wasteland's remaining population from a chaotic and brutal arena into a more communal and safer environment for all. The game contains the deepest level of immersion via the implementation of a deep narrative and sense of character as mentioned by the model argued by Klimmt, Ermi and Mäyrä, but also makes great use of the central level explored by Klimmt in a consistent supply of objectives and material to engage with outside of the plot. As explored by Williams, the post-apocalyptic wasteland in dystopian fiction does not necessarily have to be a place where all things have ended and continue to decay and regress, but may connote a sense of tabula rasa through showcasing the post-apocalypse world as a fresh start for humanity in an almost pre-colonial space of virginal exploration, adventure and heroic action. This positive and more utopian interpretation of post-apocalypse fiction is evidently applied not only to most of the narrative pathways integrated within *Fallout 4*, but also dynamics of gameplay in which the player has the option of physically reshaping and rebuilding the surrounding environment in to something functional and sustainable.

The player may choose to continue working with the Minutemen by completing tasks set by Preston, mostly involving the liberation and defence of a nearby vulnerable settlement, or completing errands on the behalf of those settlements, such as finding

specific resources to meet their needs. Through these quests, the player unlocks these settlements as buildable spaces; meaning that the player may spend resources acquired from the wasteland to develop these areas to a better standard, such as creating more and higher quality living spaces for their dwellers, creating more effective defences to protect from randomised attacks and developing resource production and trading networks with other liberated settlements (see figure 30). It can be argued that this function may be used in destructive fashion by players, creatively ruining or degenerating areas for personal amusement, but the game rewards players for increasing the quality of each settlement by giving each a happiness rating, which in turn attracts more dwellers to live there and contribute to its economy if high enough.



Figure 30: Making improvements to settlements in the post-apocalyptic wasteland of Fallout 4 (2015)

A dynamic implemented to Fallout 4 that makes building more immersive and lessens dissonance from any sense of reality within the game is the addition of material and parts scavenging. Most physical objects in the game may be broken down into their



elementary parts in order to be reproduced into other items, such as acquiring wood from trees, steel from old rusted car shells and electronics from light fittings to produce buildings, lights and even generators. By redeploing the non-functioning, ruined and decayed post-apocalypse world-state into the production of new, revitalised areas for habitation and objects for aid and use (figure 31), the player can become immersed beyond the dystopian experience of fear, brutality and inequality to one of hope, progression and redemption; all qualities representing the notion of critical dystopia as conceptualised by Moylan and Baccolini.



*Figure 31: Structural beginnings of a high-rise apartment built by the player from salvaged wasteland materials in Fallout 4*

This notion of *Fallout 4* allowing the player to act as an agent for physical and political change within the wasteland links to the writings of Williams, particularly how

the post-apocalypse wasteland can act as an “arena for the replaying of the colonial encounter, frightening in its unintelligibility but alluring in its virgin promise” (2005, p304); the wasteland showing potential as a site of virginal exploration and heroic action via repeating elements of the American revolutionary period. Even in the most hopeless of situations, one that includes constant war, famine, hostile relations and widespread deterioration, *Fallout 4* shows that there can always be a utopian core present through the Sargent concept of “social dreaming,” imagining something better and aspiring to make it become a reality. Destroyed homes may be rebuilt, relations between people can always be developed peacefully, but most importantly, oppressive forces can always be overcome by community action.

## Conclusion

Throughout history, utopianism – and all its forms – have served to aid in the progression of society into something considered better than it was before. Acting as “repositories of our hopes and fears, both individual and collective” (Sargent, 2007, p313), the utopian and dystopian imagination has allowed for hopes and dreams to be imagined, presented and aspired towards, and our most dreaded nightmares showcased as conditions to either be avoided or prepared for in order to move beyond. Of course, utopian thought is always based on perspective and perceived reality, but the aim remains in pushing towards developing society into something inherently better. Although the utopian writings of Thomas More connote a lenient stance on slavery and a sexist attitude towards women and are rightly scrutinised by the modern reader, his humanistic approach to social dreaming allowed for a fairer society to be imagined and worked towards for the starving peasants of the period, as well as thoughts on freedom of religion. Hobbes, despite harbouring a pessimistic attitude towards the human condition in the state of nature, argued for an overarching power structure that would serve the needs of the people and protect their interests while preserving a secure existence for the most vulnerable in society; a work of writing that is one of the earliest influences on modern representative democracy.

The same comments made on utopian thought throughout history can also be said of dystopian fiction. From works of literature through to cinema, dystopias have been effectively utilised by writers to imagine potential futures based on societal flaws



reflective of their time-period, showing disastrous and undesirable consequences of a root-cause that must be avoided. Later, the genre evolved into that of the critical dystopia, reacting to the evident rise and dominance of capitalism and consumerist attitudes, ruminating on their negative effects on the world by offering a space for reflection and critique on dystopian finality, while providing a utopian horizon to aspire towards in the typically utopian sense.

The issue of which ideology will best serve humanity is not necessarily the key here due to personal subjectivity, but mostly in how utopianism is an integral part in what society needs at any point in time to reflect on issues and influence us to act upon them. Georg Lukács once theorised that a society or class is doomed to passivity if, from its vantage point, “the totality of existing society is not visible” (1971, p52), meaning that if we are not constantly reminded of the inequalities and problematic conditions that exist in our current world, nihilistic attitudes towards societal progression will prosper; leading to a failure in preserving a healthy and progressive future society. In today’s world, one dominated by capitalist ideology, conservative political organisation and a rise in right-wing populism, a continued and constant slew of reminders are presented through popular culture of our worries, problems and issues; whether it be from cinema, television or the most modern contribution of video gaming. However, as Goodhe and Godhe comment, “it would be a mistake to assume images of dystopia are inherently corrosive for a futural public sphere” (2017, p119). It is important that critical dystopia, in all its forms, continues to not only provide a way to imagine the dystopian consequences of our current societal flaws, but holds the aim in countering hopelessness in that no matter the conditions, there is always a way forward past the perceived finality of doomed circumstance into something better. The efforts made by modern video games

in their use of critical dystopia alongside uniquely interactive and immersive dynamics should not be disregarded in anyway, as a new generation of people are now able to critically reflect on potential futures, world issues and ontological debate in a much more interactive and personal way than ever before.

*Metro 2033*, *This War of Mine: The Little Ones* and *Fallout 4* are all prime examples of texts that don't just act as a vehicle for the user to act only as a reader, merely spectate their narratives and implied comment and critique on reality, but are virtual arenas that place the player as an active agent for change and give opportunity to explore varying facets of the issues in question and apply their own sense of logic, reasoning, empathy and conscience to affect the game world and personally witness the effects of their actions. It is the true power of this modern virtual arena that such games may be deemed as thought experiments by exploring cause and effect from different viewpoints and perspectives, contributing to a more comprehensive and educated overall discussion of world issues while providing opportunity for explorations of hope and utopian change. Baccolini once wrote "it is important to engage with the critical dystopias of recent decades, as they are the product of our dark times," and that "we need to pass through the critical dystopias of today to move toward a horizon of hope" (2004, p521). While inheriting the narrative power of their cinematic and literary predecessors and counterparts, video games act to broaden the imaginative canvas in which to present serious ruminations on the cause and effect of many facets in human existence. If by picking up a controller we can intellectually engage with these issues and possibly be influenced to act upon them in our own reality, rather than merely pacify ourselves with

a few hours of simple entertainment, then that can only be a positive and hopeful force for a healthy, active and progressive futural public sphere.

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