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Rowan Tulloch and Craig Johnson

The Dystopia Industry: Video Games and the Commodification of Cultural Collapse

The modernist belief in a progressive increase in productive forces and energies has congealed into a static view of the future as dystopia.¹

1 Introduction

Dystopian settings dominate the modern video-game landscape. Video games seek to refine and perfect the aestheticization, mobilisation, and marketing of bleak visions of the future and post-catastrophe landscapes. In gaming, dystopia crosses both generic and aesthetic lines, from first-person shooters to role-playing games, and from large-scale 3D-rendered open worlds to linear pixel art side-scrollers. Many of the most popular and acclaimed video games of the last decade are unambiguously dystopian. They are commercial and critical successes offering uniquely crafted visions of the world gone awry, including, but not limited to, the failed cities of the *BioShock* games; the wasteland of post-nuclear North America in the *Fallout* series; the robotic-dinosaur infested landscapes of the *Horizon* series; the steampunk of *Dishonored*; the surreal nightmares of *Inside* and *Limbo*; the alien battleground of *X-Com* and *Crysis*; and the zombie apocalypses of *The Last of Us* and *Dying Light*. Even the most striking critical failure of recent gaming, *Cyberpunk 2077*, is perhaps, in terms of scale at least, one of the most ambitious dystopias to have been attempted. In short, video games have come to define contemporary dystopia, and dystopia has come to define contemporary video gaming.

Dystopias are not unique to gaming, of course. The post-apocalyptic failed society, the oppressive or anarchic world, the sterilising totalitarian state, the decaying city, the soulless sprawling suburbia, and the uninhabitable wasteland have all featured in countless books, comics, films, and television series. They allow writers, directors, and artists to play with and explore our fears and anxieties and to map political, social, technological, and environmental dangers onto futuristic and fantastical worlds. From *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to

¹ Fredric Jameson, *The Benjamin Files* (London: Verso, 2020), 207.

Blade Runner and *The Matrix*, dystopias embody the concerns of their days.² They give space for the examination and critique of prominent cultural and political logics and for the celebration of resistance, endurance, and defiance. Dystopias also work as fictional backdrops: they provide the gripping setting and context for stories of courage, love, hope, desperation, futility, and sacrifice. They offer audiences exhilaration and escape from the tedium of modern daily life, as well as entry into a fiction of relentless threat and life and death decisions, where the individual can make a difference. It is this ability to simultaneously reflect upon our social formations and offer escape from them that has made the dystopia such a prominent fictional form. As literary theorist Tom Moylan observes:

Dystopia's foremost truth lies in its ability to reflect upon the causes of social and ecological evil as systemic. Its very textual machinery invites the creation of alternative worlds in which the historical spacetime of the author can be re-presented in a way that foregrounds the articulation of its economic, political and cultural dimensions . . . dystopian critique can enable its writers and readers to find their way within – and sometimes against and beyond – the conditions that mask the very causes of the harsh realities in which they live.³

Popular culture dystopias have come to define how we imagine the future, and how and what we resist in the present. The aesthetics, anxieties, and conceptual imagery of dystopia have infused contemporary thinking. The dystopian novels *Neuromancer* and *Snow Crash* shaped the technology and terminology of the internet and social media age (introducing us to “cyberspace” and “metaverse”, respectively).⁴ *Blade Runner* has influenced countless urban planners.⁵ Public debate around government power, free speech, and personal liberties inevitably reference Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.⁶ Research into and legislation around artificial intel-

2 On the three phases of apocalyptic popular culture and how each period reflects the concerns and anxieties of its age, see Lorenzo DiTommaso, “Apocalypticism and Popular Culture,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature*, edited by John J. Collins (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 473–509. On video-game dystopias and contemporary anxiety, see Johnson, Craig, and Rowan Tulloch, “Video Games and Dystopia: Total Cities, Post-Cities and the Political Unconscious,” *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds* 9 (2017): 243–256.

3 Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (New York: Routledge, 2018), xii.

4 See, for example, William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace, 1984), and Neal Stephenson *Snow Crash* (New York, Bantam Books, 1992).

5 Norman M. Klein, *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (London: Verso, 1997) 94.

6 George Packer, “Doublethink is Stronger than Orwell Imagined,” *The Atlantic* (July 2019).

ligence is shaped by the spectre of *Terminator*'s Skynet.⁷ When Julian Assange and then Edward Snowden revealed American government secrets, both were compared to hacker/saviour Neo from *The Matrix*.⁸ And when the online activist group Anonymous needed a likeness they took the Guy Fawkes mask popularised in the dystopian graphic novel and film *V for Vendetta*.⁹

Popular-culture dystopias themselves, however, are rarely created purely to inform popular discourse. They are entertainment forms and commercial products.¹⁰ Many have an explicit political intent, but this is not all they are. Indeed, these dystopias are defined by the cultural and economic contexts of their creation and the material specificities of the medium of expression. As noted, every era has its own anxieties and every medium its own requirements. Video-game dystopias continue the long heritage of this tradition, repeating and reimagining old scenarios and offering new takes on catastrophe. These dystopias, however, bring with them new configurations, possibilities, and experiences.

This paper traces the emergence of what we term the “dystopia industry”: a network of global creative enterprises that thrive by building upon a commercialised template of largely standardised grim visions of the future. Herein dystopia must be read as foremost an economic activity on a very large scale; dystopia in this context is not the underground force of many of its early incarnations. The dystopian form does not completely lack subversive potential, but that potential is configured differently and operates within specific limiting economic and social frameworks. This is a cross-media industry: from blockbuster films to popular young adult novels, from television series to commercials, and, of course, video gaming. We trace the rise of the dystopia industry by mapping the convergence of three, interlinked parallel historical trajectories: the twentieth-century collapse of the grand narratives of progress and utopia; the rise of neoliberalism; and the popularisation of “nerd culture.” It is these three forces that opened the possibility for the dystopia industry to take hold and gain its contemporary significance.

7 J. Marshall Beier, “Short Circuit: Retracing the Political for the Age of ‘Autonomous’ Weapons,” *Critical Military Studies* 6 (2020): 1–18.

8 Junto, “Snowden Is Neo,” *Medium* (8 August 2013), and Jonathan David Farley, “Julian Assange: The Man Who Kicked the Hornets’ Nest,” *HuffPost* (9 December 2010).

9 D.C. Elliott, “Anonymous Rising,” *LiNQ* 36 (2009): 96–111 at 96.

10 See also the discussion of the commercialization of apocalyptic popular culture in DiTommaso, “Apocalypticism and Popular Culture.”

2 The Decline of Utopia

The fascination for dystopias arises directly from the question of the future and what lies ahead on the historical path: where are we collectively going, what if things carry on in the same way, and what if they don't? This fixation on futurism stems from the grand imaginings of modernity and enlightenment, the defining radical projects of social transformation from the French Revolution onwards, projects that brought the question of "progress" to every aspect of a society's organisation, and the idea that with each change introduced, and each ruling class eclipsed, things would get better. Modernity developed so many (utopian) images of the future to strive for, to commit one's life to, with so many social and technological spoils to be won. The future was conjured as something worth struggling over, worth buying into, worth the hard work, whether the route involved the discovery of more efficient means of working together and the building of new worlds or the elimination of enemies and adversities – or both.

One might be forgiven for expecting that living with the knowledge of the absolute destructions of the twentieth century, the need to mediate a different future, a good future for its absence of war, absence of fascism and poverty, would be more meaningful than ever before. After the annihilating projects that defined the two World Wars and the subsequent Cold War, a compelling market of diverse and interesting *utopias* might have emerged. But rather than seeking images of escape into a better future that rights these wrongs, the late twentieth century oversaw an extreme marginalisation of utopia. Those who use the language of utopia, from politicians to religious and social leaders, are dismissed as deeply naïve or fraudulent. The abject failure of past utopian projects, and the cynical self-interest of those who have promised a better world, have transformed the concept of utopia from a desirable outcome to a suspect idea. This "incredulity toward metanarratives," as Jean-François Lyotard famously put it,¹¹ became a defining characteristic of late twentieth-century and twenty-first-century life.

The drying up of the production of desirable images of the future is a curious (and surely unanticipated) historical situation, but it is not unprofitable. The disappearance of utopian production, of a belief in it in the first place,¹² is a powerful condition for a market flooding of new products that maintain the question of the future but wrap it in scepticism towards the social orders and disorders to come. The question of where we are going is as important and widely examined

¹¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

¹² Craig B. Johnson, *Modernity without a Project: Essay on the Void Called Contemporary* (Brooklyn: Punctum, 2015), 8.

as ever, perhaps even more so, but the answers offer less hope. Dystopia then is a way of exploring the future through its darkest, or perhaps most realistic, possibilities. It offers an artistic and often highly commercial way of engaging with and critiquing the outcomes of contemporary logics and practices, without the perceived naïveté or self-aggrandisement of utopian rhetoric. Where utopia is perceived as suspect and dated, dystopia is seen as exciting, cutting edge, and potentially radical. Dystopia has become the uncontested framework for thinking about the future by evolving anxieties around features of the present, for worrying over what might happen if the more disagreeable attributes of the present system slip out of control, or, more simply, for regarding how the same system looks through the eyes of its victims.

This disappearance of utopian narratives, however, should not be seen as just a natural attrition of ideas or a reflection of political trends. The influence of the material and configurative logics of the dominant popular culture media forms must also be acknowledged. As we have observed, contemporary public discourses have been dominated by popular filmic, literary, and televisual fiction. Fiction, however, has its own logics and requirements, and these have flowed through to our contemporary imaginations. Dystopias, for example, are seen to have more obvious conflict and drama than utopias, which are encumbered by a reproach of boredom, whereby, as Fredric Jameson puts it, “by definition nothing but the guided tour can really happen.”¹³ As conflict and drama are key attributes of exciting fiction, dystopia, not utopia, becomes the default vision of the future that circulates within and informs popular imaginings.

The collapse of the grand narratives of utopia, and the medium specific requirements that reinforce it, can be seen in many video games. The classic *BioShock*, for example, is set in the underwater city Rapture, a failed utopia. Established as an objectivist dream, with no laws and limitations placed on the individual, Rapture has become a dangerous nightmare, its crumbling environments infested with crazed genetically modified inhabitants. The utopian vision of Rapture is shown to be self-delusional and megalomaniacal and the dystopian reality inevitable. *BioShock* reaffirms the cultural power of dystopia as the uncontested mode of imagining the future (or alternate past). This cultural power of dystopia, however, cannot be understood outside its ludic power. At their core, video games have a tension between play mechanics and game narrative. Dystopia helps resolve this tension in a way that utopia (and most other settings) cannot. It makes the conventions and idiosyncrasies of video gaming mechanics believable and appropriate within the gaming fiction. When analysing *BioShock*, game designer Clint Hocking coined the

¹³ Jameson 2005, 190.

term “ludonarrative dissonance.”¹⁴ He used the term to describe the immersion-breaking disconnect experienced by players if/when there is a clash between a videogame’s story and its gameplay mechanics. Perceived clashes between gaming mechanics (informed by the rules and pleasures of play) and game narrative (informed by the logics and histories of drama and fiction) can be commonplace, and the concept of ludonarrative dissonance has been widely adopted in game design and popular discourse. The popular *Uncharted* series, for example, is critiqued because while the narrative positions the protagonist Nathan Drake as an “everyman” hero, the gameplay simultaneously requires Drake to remorselessly kill hundreds of enemies. Video-game dystopias, like *BioShock*, must be read in this context; they are a deliberate, or unconscious, attempt to avoid ludonarrative dissonance, and achieve its opposite: ludonarrative harmony.

Dystopias work well for ludonarrative harmony as they offer game designers a way of matching the gameplay mechanics with a story and setting that would fit. Dystopia is thus a naturalising schema for a number of gameplay and narrative conventions. The most obvious example of this is violence. Video gaming has a long history of violence as a key gameplay mechanic. In many genres, such as the first-person shooter, violence enacted by the player character is the primary gameplay action, while injury and loss of life sustained by the player character is the key gameplay challenge. For such mechanics, then, dystopia can function as a ludonarratively harmonious setting. In the traditions of dystopia, violence, emergency, danger, and adversity are fundamental experiences. With their hostile worlds and life-or-death situations, dystopias thus make for ideal settings for video gaming; they render “believable” and offer narrative reason for the dangers of the gameworld and the need for the player to fight (often alone) to save themselves or even humanity.

Dystopia thus has a pedagogic function in video gaming. Video games require the player to make choices from the very start, and rather than having ludonarratively jarring exposition, or other forms of introduction to the gameworld’s threats and possibilities, dystopias offer designers a powerful and effective way of informing the player. Dystopian fiction across all its forms has established a set of common antagonists that video games can mobilise: authoritarian governments, evil megacorporations, merciless militias, and desperate but self-serving individuals. Many of these have accompanying visual rhetorics, including the homogeneity of authoritarian worlds, the monolithic modernist office block of the megacorporation, and the barbed wire and spikes of militia. Such imagery means that a game

14 Clint Hocking, “Ludonarrative Dissonance in *BioShock*: The Problem of What the Game is About,” *Well Played* 1 (2009): 255–260.

can quickly and easily signal the logics and power dynamics of its imaginary world through the player's intertextual literacy of dystopia as a form. These are dystopias that repeat and reinforce certain tropes such as the battle between individualism and a homogenising authority and the importance of agency and choice. The dystopia industry simplifies and mobilises these tropes to give audiences easily understood worlds with empathetic protagonists (the outsider, loner, rebel, punk) for which to champion and adversaries against which to demonise. The dominance of dystopia in popular culture also accords designers a rich resource from which to draw. With its violent, dangerous worlds and easily established iconography, dystopia is an effective tool for ludonarrative harmony.

3 The Rise of Neoliberalism

The collapse of utopian narratives is by itself not enough to explain the dominance of the contemporary configuration of dystopia. To map the rise of video-game dystopias we must understand the economic and political logics that have shaped contemporary thinking and practice. These gaming dystopias must be understood as a product and reflection of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism, the defining political ideology of our time, emerged in the late seventies and early eighties with the election of powerful conservative leaders including Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. Neoliberalism celebrates competition and choice, deregulation, individual agency, and belief in the power of the free market to solve social problems. David Harvey frames the shift in the relationship between individual and state that neoliberalism required:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices.¹⁵

The neoliberal turn fostered a consumer-oriented society fuelled by cheap production, advertising, branding, and an individualist ethos. Under neoliberalism western democratic systems became ideologically entwined with consumer society. The individualism at the heart of neoliberalism is both reflective of and instrumental in reinforcing the scepticism towards ideas of utopia and grand narratives of emancipation (while uncritically embracing the grand narrative of

15 David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2.

neoliberalism itself). This emerging ideology set the scene for new luxuries such as personal computers, video games, and other consumer technologies, but also created new heights of class division, corporate control, and expansion, as well as the commodification of necessities that had been collectively catered to in the postwar welfare state (education, housing, healthcare). Indeed, the perils of neoliberalism became increasingly visible: the psychological isolation brought about by individualist logics and anxieties of being in constant competition;¹⁶ the vulnerability caused by attacks on traditional labour and regulatory structures and accompanying wealth inequality; and environmental destruction.¹⁷ Neoliberalism both sought to empower the individual and seeded new dystopian conditions, which were inherited and maintained by successive ideological and economic regimes and redirected along lines of “globalisation” and later the “war on terror.”

Dystopian fiction across all genres has as one of its central foci the inter-linked concepts of freedom and choice. Whether it be the right to choose to live in reality rather than simulation in *The Matrix*, the freedom of thought and expression in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, or the choices made when the rule of law collapses in *Mad Max*, explorations of what it means to be free, and what our choices say about us, underpin the majority of dystopian works. With their emphasis on player agency and choice, video games align neatly with the thematic heritage of dystopia. Games require the player to be an active agent in the production of game experiences to make choices and react to scenarios.

Here again we see a ludonarrative harmony between dystopia and video gaming. The player character is quite literally the only character with human agency in a single player video game. Video-gaming dystopias that feature totalitarian governments and position the player character as the outsider – the lone individual who can fight the homogenising or conquering power or bring the world back from catastrophe through their individual agency – make good use of this harmony. The *Half-Life* series makes this explicit, naming the protagonist Gordon Freeman as “the one free man” and having him repeatedly referred to by this appellation. Likewise, open world dystopias like the *Fallout* series and *Rage* allow the player to shape their character’s identity and purpose through choice and action. Cyberpunk dystopias even allow the player to modify their characters’ bodies and abilities through their choice of upgrades. Freedom and choice constitute shared fascinations between video gaming and dystopia and come together in dystopian video games.

16 Jeremy Gilbert, “What Kind of Thing is ‘Neoliberalism’?” *New Formations* 80 (2013): 7–22 at 15.

17 David Harvey, *The Anti-Capitalist Chronicles* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), 32.

Freedom and choice in a contemporary context, however, must be understood as reflective of neoliberal logics. Video games, and the dystopias they offer, are shaped by neoliberal ideologies. Video-game theorist Andrew Baerg argues that video games are “entrenching subjects within a neoliberal ideology.”¹⁸ For him, video gaming emerged alongside neoliberalism in the late 1970s and was “one of the first media in which choice was paramount in the experience.”¹⁹ This, he argues, is a reflection of a neoliberal “market rationality of choice filter[ing] into processes of the development of media technologies like the digital game.”²⁰ Baerg also argues that the emergence of video games as a media form that foregrounds choice at the same time as neoliberalism is far from coincidental: both are reflective of a cultural and political *Zeitgeist* that privileges individual agency. In neoliberalism, individual agency takes precedence over state control and is facilitated by market deregulation. In video gaming, individual agency is the core mechanic of engagement: the player’s movements, reactions, and choices are translated into the game-world’s fiction, and determine how the experience unfolds. Both neoliberalism and video gaming mark a move away from collective experiences to more personalised and individually customisable systems of choice.

Baerg goes further in his analysis of neoliberalism’s role in shaping games with his focus on risk-management. He argues that “[i]n neoliberalism, the risk management that was once centralized in government has been transferred to the private sector and to individuals who must manage and assess their own levels of risk in the market and beyond.”²¹ To be a neoliberal subject is to take on the responsibility of assessor and manager of individual economic wellbeing and risk. For Baerg, this risk management is all encompassing because within neoliberalism “[a]ll aspects of social behaviour are now reconceptualized along economic lines – as calculative actions undertaken through the universal human faculty of choice.”²² We can see this neoliberal shift from governmental to individual responsibility also manifest in video-game dystopias. These are worlds where governments do not exist or cannot be trusted. They are risky environments where resources (health, weapons, ammunition, allies) are rare, and where responsibility for life-or-death risk management lies firmly on the individual. Successes and failures of individual

18 Andrew Baerg, “Governmentality, Neoliberalism, and the Digital Game,” *Symploke* 17 (2009): 115–127 at 125.

19 Baerg, “Governmentality,” 120.

20 Baerg, “Governmentality,” 120.

21 Baerg, “Governmentality,” 123.

22 Nikolas Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 141, cited in Baerg, “Governmentality,” 123.

risk management determine the player's progress. Again, here we see the neoliberal idea of the celebration of rational individual choice.

Dystopian video games are not without their critiques of agency and choice. *BioShock*, as we have already discussed, frames its world through the failings of objectivist conceptualisations of freedom. Indeed, *BioShock* goes further and deconstructs the very notion of free choice in gaming with a narrative twist that shows that while players may think they have significant agency, often they are simply doing what the designers want. It was this twist in *BioShock* that inspired Hocking to coin the term ludonarrative dissonance. This moment of deconstruction of agency takes the player out of the game. The success of this moment is debated. For Hocking, it reflected a design flaw worthy of a new terminology, yet for theorists such as Rowan Tulloch²³ and Stefan Schubert²⁴ it was a political move by the game designers to interrogate notions of freedom. No matter how it is conceptualised, however, *BioShock*'s moment of radical player estrangement demonstrates how central and protected the notion of agency is in video gaming.

4 'Nerd Culture'

In 1977, *Star Wars* ushered in the age of the science fiction blockbuster. It quickly became the highest-grossing film of all time. Perhaps more importantly, it was not just at the box office where substantial revenue was made: an entire merchandising industry arose around *Star Wars*, from toys to t-shirts, bed linen to stationary, board games to video games. *Star Wars*, a production that even its creator George Lucas did not expect to make money (Rinzler 2008, 94), changed the global mediascape. It showed not only how successful a "niche" science-fiction film could be, but also transformed expectations of how a media form is consumed, and demonstrated the enormous profits that a dedicated fanbase, who might watch a film multiple times and consume, and collect, tie-in merchandise, can generate.

The success of *Star Wars* can be seen as a pivotal moment in the emergence of a new cultural and economic force that came to be known as "nerd culture."²⁵ The rise of nerd culture is often narrativised as a triumph of the "outsider",²⁶ where

23 Rowan Tulloch, "A Man Chooses, a Slave Obeys: Agency, Interactivity and Freedom in Video Gaming," *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds* 2 (2010): 27–38.

24 Stefan Schubert, "Objectivism, Narrative Agency, and the Politics of Choice in the Video Game *BioShock*," in *Poetics of Politics: Textuality and Social Relevance in Contemporary American Literature and Culture*, edited by Sebastian M. Herrmann et al. (Heidelberg: Winter, 2015), 271–289.

25 Weldon 2016.

26 Benson 2020.

literary genres and media forms that had long been dismissed, including science fiction, fantasy, comic books, and video games, became more and more popular. Indeed, this is an important narrative: with the domestication of personal computing technology in the 1980s, and the birth and growth of the internet in the 1990s and 2000s, the prominence and influence of nerd culture radically increased. By the third decade of the twenty-first century the biggest films are science fiction and comic book franchises, the planet's richest people are “self-confessed nerds,”²⁷ and those genres and pastimes that once were regarded as exclusive to nerd culture are now mainstream. Such narratives of nerd culture's triumph from the margins, however, often underemphasise the neoliberal pragmatism driving this transformation. It was not just the genres that were valuable, it was the type of engagement offered:

Nerds had spent decades creating and policing carefully wrought self-identities around their strictly specialized interests . . . What truly united them, however [. . . was] the nature of their enthusiasm itself – the all-consuming degree to which they rejected the reflexive irony their peers prized. Instead, these fans blithely surrendered themselves to their passion . . . In only a handful of years, their particular species of enthusiasm – “nerding out” – would supplant irony to become the dominant mode in which we engage with each other and with the culture around us.²⁸

Nerd culture brought with it a new economic relationship to media consumption, an identity based in transmedial fandom, where the media product itself was merely the nexus point for a range of other activities: from enthusiastic discussion and debate, to purchasing of merchandise and collectables, to buying tie-ins and games, and to queuing up for new releases. This passionate and dedicated fanbase not only generates revenue but also functions to promote the products to others, in some cases (like *Star Wars*) elevating the product to “cultural touchstone,” a canonical text of which knowledge is assumed and by which future texts are judged.

The boundaries that define nerd culture are heavily contested, and indeed it may be more accurate to understand the existence of multiple, parallel “nerd cultures.” Regardless the precise definitions, however, the shifting focus of popular entertainment towards those genres previously seen as niche and the changed relationship of this engagement is visible across all media forms. In cinema, *Star Wars* was followed by the *Alien/s*, *Terminator*, *Robocop*, *Matrix*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *Marvel Cinematic Universe* franchises, to name but a few. Television offered, amongst others: *Dr Who*, *Star Trek*, and *Game of Thrones*. In literature, it was the

²⁷ Page 2017.

²⁸ Glen Weldon, *The Caped Crusade: Batman and the Rise of Nerd Culture* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 5.

children's and young adult's genres that reached beyond the traditional demographic to become mainstream phenomena: the *Harry Potter* series eclipsed what was thought to be commercially possible for children's fantasy literature, as did *The Hunger Games*, *Twilight*, and *Ready Player One* in young adult literature.

Dystopian video games occupy an important place within nerd culture. Gaming itself is core to nerd identity. It is a defining media form of this subculture and rich in history and meaning for this audience. Dystopia also offers a powerful attempt to redress and combat perceived stigma circulating around nerd culture. Video games as a form are in a precarious artistic and intellectual position, and have been dismissed as childish,²⁹ artless,³⁰ or dangerously violent.³¹ These critiques are in themselves not new. Other forms of nerd culture such as comic books and role-playing games like *Dungeons and Dragons* have previously faced similar accusations, as has nerd culture as a whole.³² Dystopia has become a political concept through which video games, and nerd culture, have sought legitimacy. It anchors this new form within a history and a heritage of art and entertainment drawing a line back to the works of George Orwell, Philip K. Dick, Ridley Scott, and others now accepted as having artistic and political merit. This intellectual history positions many of video gaming's dominant tropes – violence, death, danger, etc. – as reinterpretations of existing artistic questions concerning human nature, mortality, and triumph over adversity. Dystopias also bring with them a perceived maturity. Where other game genres and staples of nerd culture like superhero comics bring with them perceptions of juvenile masculine power fantasies, dystopias are less often dismissed this way. The grimmer and more “adult” settings, themes, and aesthetics of many dystopias conveys an outward maturity to gaming experiences. Employing visual aesthetics and spatial design borrowed from filmic and literary dystopia becomes a shorthand for signifying these more adult experiences and aspirations.

Video-game dystopias are often explicitly referential in their aesthetics and design. Notable examples include the *Mad Max*-inspired wastelands of *Rage* and *Fallout*, the *Blade Runner*-inspired future of *Cyberpunk 2077*, *Deus Ex*, *Star Citizen*, *Transistor*, and *Detroit: Become Human*, amongst many others, and even the un-

29 James Newman, *Videogames* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 5.

30 Felan Parker, “Roger Ebert and the Games-as-Art Debate,” *Cinema Journal* 57 (2018): 77–100.

31 Henry Jenkins, “The War between Effects and Meaning: Rethinking the Video Game Violence Debate,” In *Digital Generations: Children, Young People, and the New Media*, edited by David Buckingham and Rebekah Willett (New York: Routledge, 2013), 31–44.

32 Drew Chappell, review of Joseph P. Laycock, *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says about Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), *American Journal of Play* 8 (2015): 136.

equivocally referentially named *Orwell*. The evocation of canonical dystopias and the intertextuality that drives it have offered video games a powerful space for the accumulation and performance of subcultural capital. Nerd culture is built around the policing and demonstration of intertextual knowledge.³³ Gaming dystopias mix-and-match elements of previous dystopias to present a bricolage of greatest hits. For the audience and the fan community alike, this offers a rich space to “prove” expertise and knowledge, which in turn helps establish the conventions and boundaries of the gaming community. Those who can adequately demonstrate their subcultural capital are allowed into the community; those who are ignorant of that background are marginalised and kept out. This policing of knowledge, of course, is often highly exclusionary: it can be misogynist, elitist, and profoundly toxic. In this it is reflective of nerd culture’s internal tensions, of offering a place to the outsider and yet having such strong gatekeeping mechanisms that it fails to admit all but the select few. For those with the cultural knowledge, however, contemporary video-game dystopias are powerful fetishized objects, full of overt, and obscure, references and “Easter eggs” that connect the game world to myriad others, imbuing them with resonant meaning and intertextual significance.

Dystopia in video games, then, can be seen as an extension of the transmedia economic practices of nerd culture more broadly. Existing dystopian tropes are translated and represented in a new form. It is a refashioning of existing material to meet a new market demographic, analogous to a toy or tie-in novel. The material is not directly adapted; rather, it is the logics, aesthetics, and familiarity that are repackaged and sold. It is a more subtle and complex process of cross-platform commodification, but like its more explicit precedents it uses existing audience awareness and enthusiasm to sell its products.

5 The Dystopia Industry

Dystopia saturates popular culture. Yet for all its traction, it is often overlooked by scholars and in popular discourse.³⁴ It is treated as a subset of the film, literature, comic book, and video-game industries. It is, however, better understood as

³³ Benjamin Woo, *Getting a Life: The Social Worlds of Geek Culture* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2018), 69.

³⁴ In his paper on “Apocalypticism in the Contemporary World,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Apocalyptic Literature*, edited by Colin McAllister (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 316–342, Lorenzo DiTommaso charts the increasing prevalence of apocalyptic thinking

its own industry: a transmedia industry that spans forms and genres. By understanding the dystopia industry as a whole, rather than as segments of other industries, we begin to see the patterns and politics that shape this form. The dystopia industry is a product of the particular cultural and economic moment in which it emerged, a commercial capitalisation on the popular appeal and cultural significance of dystopia. It is the application of an economic strategy borne from the lessons in audience engagement of nerd culture entwined with the logics of global neoliberalism, and with the collapse of utopian grand narratives it has gained an uncontested power to shape our visions of the future.

Our use of the term “industry” here emerges from critical theory. It is indebted to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s critique of “the culture industry,”³⁵ and the many other explorations of industry that they inspired. For critical theory, an “industry” is understood as a set of standardised and homogenised products and processes, the function of which is that “of providing ideological legitimation of the existing capitalist societies and of integrating individuals into the framework of its system.”³⁶ Like Adorno and Horkheimer, we seek to highlight the political logics that come to dominate when an industry with its set frameworks of production and development, emerges. Unlike Adorno and Horkheimer, who saw little value in the culture industry, arguing that it was a “tool of ideology and domination,”³⁷ we argue that the dystopia industry has a valuable function: to foreground in collective consciousness the fragility of the present and its possible and impossible futures. Our work here has sought to propose a framework to understand the contexts and parameters by which future imaginings are commodified.

With a potentially highly profitable mode of fanbase engagement and influence over contemporary cultural and political discourses, the desirability of dystopia for creators and financial backers is obvious. The transformation of dystopia into its own differentiated marketplace exemplifies consumer capitalism; its most emblematic expression might turn out to be its success at rendering dystopia – how to see the worst in the future – into a safe, clean, domesticated, and desirable product that is exciting and, most of all, *meaningful* for its audience. The dystopia industry is a

over the past fifty years. Although some of the points that he makes adumbrate our thesis, “dystopia” and “apocalyptic” are distinct entities and overlap only in part.

35 Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 1979), and Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, edited by J.W. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 2001).

36 Douglas Kellner, “The Frankfurt School and British Cultural Studies: The Missed Articulation,” in *Rethinking the Frankfurt School: Alternative Legacies of Cultural Critique*, edited by Jeffrey T. Nealon and Caren Irr (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 31–58 at 32.

37 Stuart Jeffries, *Grand Hotel Abyss: The Lives of the Frankfurt School* (London: Verso, 2016), 236.

set of products, practices, and infrastructures established to create and sell dystopia to the mass-market. It is the collection of funding, production, distribution, and marketing networks and techniques, along with the associated big budgets, aggressive advertising campaigns, ubiquitous tie-in promotions, prominent merchandising placements, film-to-game and game-to-film adaptations, and more, which have transformed dystopia from a niche (even subversive) genre to a multibillion-dollar business that has reminded the undesirable future into an appealing product.

The dystopia industry harnesses and standardises the templates of dystopia. While political and cultural critique are not necessarily removed or absent, they align with a neoliberal and nerd logic suitable for widespread appeal and marketisation. These dystopias present worlds inspired by anxieties around neoliberalism's more overtly dangerous extremes, but still map well onto its core ideology. The ideas and iconography of canonical texts of dystopia, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Blade Runner*, *Mad Max*, and so on are stripped down and rendered as resources for new but familiar dystopias. At the same time, the downsides of neoliberalism offer a powerful backdrop through which to contextualise these tales: controlling global corporations, climate disaster, wealth inequality, and technological recklessness all could be extended to make for thrilling but believable visions of the future.

As a political force, the dystopia industry has an uncontested power to standardise our visions of the future and does so within a neoliberal framework. While the dystopia industry has simply done what industries do – i.e., commodify an idea and then package and repackage it for different parts of the market – its neoliberalist cultural logics have permeated every aspect of its function. Neoliberalism's primary concern is for the marketplace, for its protection, as the central path to the future (the future as more marketplace). While neoliberalism is amoral, its products often end up moralising and homogenising around neoliberal themes: individualism is a moral "good"; individuals make a difference rather than collectives; humans are better off imagining the end of the world rather than the (more modest) end of capitalism.³⁸ These imaginings affirm and refresh what we have (neoliberal normality) in the first place. From the ideological perspective, dystopias are more effective if they are bad or extremely affecting, since they reinforce all that is good about current neoliberal reality. The worst imaginable visions of the day after tomorrow are not suppressed or banned by neoliberalism (as they might be under an overtly repressive regime), but instead are celebrated and incorporated by the dystopia industry into entertain-

³⁸ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Lanham: John Hunt Publishing, 2009), 2.

ment. The dystopia industry has commodified a certain type of critique, but only enough to produce frightening images that can be sold for thrills.

6 Conclusion

In the preceding pages, we have analysed the dystopia industry as a specific cultural expression of a conjuncture between the end of confidence in grand narratives, the rise of neoliberalism, and the emergence and popularisation of nerd culture. We explored how this new industrial form has mobilised the cultural resources of twentieth century dystopia: both the classic texts and the actual historical terrors,³⁹ and how it has moulded, and been moulded by, the technological specificities of its media of expression. Video gaming, as we have shown, has arisen alongside, and entangled with, the dystopia industry. Gaming has been shaped by the same cultural forces that produced the dystopia industry, but also possesses its own requirements that have both necessitated and reinforced the dystopia industry's prominence. The dystopia industry is at a point in its history in which it has achieved a pervasive feeling of cultural permanence, to the point of "dystopia fatigue,"⁴⁰ as if it is natural to have a whole wing of cultural production devoted to a detailed imagining of how bad things might become in the future.

Dystopia is not simply one possible backdrop for video-game action, it is an economic, political, and cultural force that shows no signs of contracting or slowing down as we move further into the twenty-first century. At the heart of the dystopia industry, and contemporary life more generally, is a paradox: a simultaneous need to confront our conditions and a desire to escape them. The dystopia industry flourished in the early years of neoliberalism and has accelerated in the new century. The arrival of paradigm-altering historical events: the attacks of 9/11, the US-led invasions in the Middle East, global and economic crises, ubiquitous self-surveillance through social media, climate disasters, and the COVID-19 pandemic have reinforced and replenished the conditions of possibility for the dystopia industry. The more apocalyptic our world, the greater the resonance, power, and marketability of dystopia.

³⁹ Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, xi.

⁴⁰ Sean Guynes, "Dystopia Fatigue Doesn't Cut It, or, *Blade Runner 2049*'s Utopian Longings," *Science Fiction Film and Television* 13 (2020): 143–148.

Ludography

- BioShock*. 2K Games, 2008.
Crysis. Crytek, 2007.
Cyberpunk 2077. CD Projekt RED, 2020.
Detroit: Become Human. Quantic Dream, 2018.
Dishonored. Arkane Studios, 2012.
Deus Ex. Ion Storm, 2000.
Dying Light. Techland, 2015.
Fallout. Interplay Productions, 1997.
Horizon Zero Dawn. Guerrilla Games, 2017.
Inside. Playdead, 2017.
The Last of Us. Naughty Dog, 2013.
Limbo. Playdead, 2010.
Orwell. Osmotic, 2016.
Rage. Bethesda Softworks, 2011.
Star Citizen. Cloud Imperium Games, 2016.
Transistor. Supergiant Games, 2014.
X-Com: Enemy Unknown. Firaxis Games, 2012.

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