

# The Utopia of Open Space in Role-Playing Videogames

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### ABSTRACT

An account of a variety of utopianism manifest in the ludic and narrative elements of role-playing videogames. The paper concludes with some speculations as to how the utopia of open space may be realised in cultural production.

### KEYWORDS

RPGs, utopia, space, game studies.

### INTRODUCTION

Videogame studies has been consistently dogged by popular and academic attempts to demonise its objects. In earlier work [14], I posed games six through eight of the *Final Fantasy* series as counterexamples to claims that videogames promote antisocial and violent behaviour in youth. *Final Fantasy VI-VIII* focus their narratives on alienated and/or psychopathological individuals. These characters are shown to rehabilitated through supportive personal friendships, and through their integration into the party system common to role-playing videogames (RPGs), which is represented as an alternative and oppositional social grouping. In concluding that study, I called for further analysis of the political content and utility of videogames, with a particular emphasis on their representations of societies.

Many Japanese RPGs pit heroes filled with hope in human life and conviction of its value against nihilist villains. *Final Fantasy VI* [20] and the more recent *Suikoden III* [29] are just two of the most obvious examples. In their hopefulness, and in their positing of alternatives to undesirable social and material conditions, they may be characterised as utopian. Some Western RPGs display similar tendencies, though in contrast to many Japanese ones, they often appear less opposed to the status quo and the suffering it perpetuates. Analysing the presence of utopia and the impulse towards it in RPGs is one way to foreground their political significance. This paper begins with a theoretical discussion of utopia. It then argues that RPGs provide examples of what I call “the utopia of open space,” in which open conceptual and physical spaces are presented as necessary elements of a more perfect society, or conditions of its realisation. In conclusion, it offers some thoughts on how this utopianism may be manifested in practices of videogame production and consumption that challenge large capital’s control of the medium.

### UTOPIA

It is possible to identify two major currents in utopian studies. One, which I will label ‘philosophical’ is abstractly preoccupied with the nature of hope, freedom, and of posited alternatives to the status quo. Ernst Bloch and Theodor Adorno are two writers associated with this current whose work will be discussed here. The second is more concerned with analysis of utopia as a literary genre and spatial formation, which includes the work of

Darko Suvin, Louis Marin, and David Harvey. Despite their different focus, philosophical concerns are not alien to these writers.

I will offer one definition of utopia from each of these currents. According to Darko Suvin, who is concerned with utopia as a literary genre, it is:

a systematic verbal construction of a particularised community where sociopolitical institutions, norms, and personal relations are organised according to a more perfect principle than that prevalent in the author’s empirical society. [38] (95)

Utopias in RPGs are deficient in comparison to literary utopias, in that they do not usually offer sustained verbal description of a more perfect community. Yet in addition to offering “a systematic verbal construction of a particularised community,” literary utopias also present projects for the systematic organisation of subjects and objects in physical space, which facilitates the existence of the community in question. Videogame environments, too, are systematically constructed, represented spaces, and are thus able to mirror this aspect of the literary utopia.

Elsewhere, Suvin also defines utopia’s opposite, dystopia, as:

a community where sociopolitical institutions, norms, and relationships between its individuals are organised in a significantly *less* perfect way than in the author’s community. [37]

The definition I will offer from the philosophical current comes from Ernst Bloch. This quotation serves as a concise summary of Bloch’s conception of utopia as:

...the impeded future contained in the Now, the impeded technological benefaction, the impeded new society, with which the old one is pregnant in its productive forces. (Bloch qtd. in [43] xix)

The modern philosophical sense of utopia is founded on its existence as an impeded possibility, whose realisation is situated in the future. Early literary utopias such as those of More and Bacon situated their more perfect societies at locations in the physical world as yet unexplored by European colonialists. The location of utopia in a future time was inspired by “the French Enlightenment’s confidence in cognitive and social process” [38] (118), and became characteristic of the literary genre as a whole. For Bloch, a Marxist, the “impeded new society” is a classless, communist one. The impediments are the forces of capitalism and fascism; theses of the moment in a dialectical history at which his words were written. When we come to imagine how the utopia of open space presented by RPGs may be realised, it will be as the bringing of already existing productive forces to a revolutionary fruition in which ownership of the means of cultural production falls to those who utilise it, rather than those who profit from it by exploiting the labour-power of others.

Adorno places part of the impediment to the new society within utopia itself. He refers to “the prohibition of

casting a picture of utopia” [4] (11) in the work of Hegel and Marx, as “the defense that was actually intended against the cheap utopia, the false utopia, the utopia that can be bought” [4] (11). Marx’s consistent refusal to outline the structure of a communist society is well known. Instead, he described the contradictions of capitalism that he believed would lead to its eventual collapse. The Marxian utopian vision that influences Bloch and Adorno is of a negation of the present social order, which would allow for the emergence of a new, more perfect one.

The conceptual or material negation of the status quo results in the opening of a corresponding conceptual or physical space. It is in this space that utopia arises. Yet detailed depiction (or realisation) of a utopian society and the systematically constructed physical spaces that facilitate it occupies a once open space, foreclosing on other possibilities for change that space offered, even as it offers an alternative to the status quo. Ordinarily, a posited or realised spatial or social formation, as a synthesis or projected synthesis that is one moment in a dialectical history, would itself become a thesis, and be negated in its turn. Yet the element of perfection attributed to utopia tends to place it outside of, or at the end point of history, as a final synthesis that will eternally and blissfully prevail. This tendency has profoundly counter-revolutionary and authoritarian implications, and this is why, for instance, Suvin stresses that utopia is not organised according to a perfect principle, but merely a *more* perfect one than that which organises the status quo.

In addition, positively depicted utopias may be cheap tricks, that present false hopes in which we may be caught up while ignoring real, if less glamorous possibilities of change available in our present historical moment. Suvin, while not endorsing Adorno’s injunction against the depiction of utopia, describes the ideal form of the cheapened vision of utopia: anti-utopia. Anti-utopia is either a vision of a “dystopia masquerading as utopia” [37] (e.g. Disneyland), or of a dystopia, particularly one initially presented as utopia, that is “explicitly designed to refute a fictional or otherwise imagined utopia” [37] so as to further undermine the possibility of thinking and realising an alternative to the status quo.

As David Harvey points out in *Spaces of Hope*, utopia walks a fine line between opening, and leaving open, a space for change, and failing to posit a genuine alternative to the status quo. Harvey calls the classic literary utopias, with Thomas More’s *Utopia* [27] at their head, “utopias of spatial form” [12] (173). These contain descriptions of systematically constructed spaces intended to “represent and fix a particular moral order” [12] (161), skirting perilously close to authoritarianism. Harvey also identifies “utopias of social process” [12] (173), of which the two most important examples are the bourgeois utopia of the free market, and the teleological, dialectical history of Hegel and Marx. These are proper utopias of negation of the sort Adorno champions, but because they are merely negative, their utility as blueprints for political movements aiming for social change by constructing alternative social and spatial formations is limited. In order to overcome the deficiencies in these two types of utopia, Harvey calls for a “dialectical” or “spatiotemporal utopianism” [12]

(182). This historicised utopianism would emphasise the way that depictions of utopias of spatial form may be modified in the process of their realisation. It would posit an alternative to the status quo at the same time as maintaining the space opened by its negation.

Harvey suggests that some utopian novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, mostly in the SF genre, have moved towards realising, in art, this spatiotemporal utopianism. Videogames, at least in the RPG genre, have in fact manifested a variety of spatiotemporal utopianism pre-dating Harvey’s call for it. The RPGs examined later are examples of it, many of them published before *Spaces of Hope*.

Analysis of utopia in RPGs is tied to the analysis of literary utopias on two fronts: space and play. Despite the differences in their approaches, both Janet Murray and Espen Aarseth, among others (see also [16]), have made the central role of space in videogames clear, through their attention to the role of exploration, navigation [28] (79, 129-30, 134, 137), and the hypertextual traversal function [1] (64). Conceptually and physically, utopia offers a space of freedom. In literary utopias, the spatial arrangement of geographical, social, and built features of the environment is linked to the perfection of the social order. In utopian studies, Louis Marin [21] and Michael Holquist [13] (132-46) have privileged play as an aspect of utopia. The spaces of utopia in videogames and literature alike may be considered spaces of play with ideas and with spatial relationships between real or described subjects and objects.

All the above considerations of utopia demonstrate a tension between the use of empty space as a space of play, and its filling with a depicted spatial and social formation as an alternative to the status quo. Both empty, or rather, *open* space, as a ludic<sup>1</sup> element of RPGs, and RPGs’ interpretation of that element as utopian, especially in narrative, are essential to the particular utopianism of RPGs.

For Marin, utopic discourse is “the empty...place of the historical resolution of a contradiction [between thesis and antithesis]...the ‘zero degree’ of the dialectical synthesis” [21] (xii). The element of play in videogames may also be considered in dialectical terms. Gameplay occurs in a space that opens inside the rules of a simulated model, in which players’ input (as antithesis) opposes the present state of the simulation (as thesis). The simulation’s response to the player’s input results in a synthesis, which is the simulation’s new state.

The cut-scenes in which many videogames make their most detailed narrative expositions constitute a break in their interactivity. This insight is taken up in the work of Jesper Juul [17] and Markku Eskelinen [8]. Without making it explicit, these essays appear to suggest that a videogame is not a game when it presents a cut-scene, or otherwise suspends the player’s ability to change the state of the game by providing input. This is fair, but accepting that *videogames* are not always games, I am still concerned to preserve their unity as cultural products and objects of study. Their uniqueness is not derived from their gameliness alone, but from their hybridisation of games and non-interactive forms of representation and narrative. Studied as a whole, many

videogames possess non-ludic aspects that need to be grappled with. Most, if not all videogames foreclose on play with varying degrees of frequency, even if it is only to present instructions, a high score table, or a demand for more coins. We can read the moments at which this occurs as foreclosures on change which compromise videogames' potential for spatiotemporal utopianism. However, the fact that most RPGs end without offering a detailed depiction of the society that emerges after their protagonists' victory is one of the things that saves them from the authoritarianism of the classic literary utopias. Despite this lack of detailed depiction, RPGs' ludic elements manifest a utopianism that is intensified by those elements' inflection by more representational and narrative elements of RPGs.

#### UTOPIA IN THE LUDIC ELEMENTS OF RPGS

This section will make a separation between the purely ludic elements of videogames and their more overtly representational and narrative elements. It will then relate a process of opening a closed game space to freedom of movement as an element of utopia and as a condition of the realisation of socialist utopias in the twenty-first century.

Since this is a generically situated analysis, it is first necessary to make some remarks about genre, and the RPG genre in particular. I make a distinction between two types of genre that operate in videogames: ludic and representational. Ludic genre is specific to games. The categories I use are derived mainly from those established by the videogame review press, but other categories may be added, particularly ones drawn from other types of games, like board games and sports. Representational genre, on the other hand, is derived from pre-existing textual media that videogames hybridise, such as literature, film, and music. The videogames used as examples in this paper are (mainly) situated in the ludic genre of the RPG. They are simultaneously situated in the representational genres of Fantasy<sup>2</sup> and science-Fantasy, derived from literature. They utilise other conventions belonging to genre-like groupings or periodisations, like romanticism in music. Game scholars have typically not utilised the concept of genre (especially ludic genre) well, either mangling its usage beyond recognition<sup>3</sup> or, as in Gonzalo Frasca's case, cursorily dismissing existing distinctions as "naïve rather than scientific" [9] (11).

An inadequate recognition that the videogame medium is host to a diverse range of ludic genres has been partly responsible for the demonisation of videogames based on observations made about violence in the RPG genre. It has also been responsible for some of the infelicities of textual analysis as applied to videogames, such as Murray's prescriptions for better narrative in *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, and the separation of videogames and narrative by Juul and Eskelinen, who largely ignore ludic genres that favour narrative. The observations made in this paper are specific to RPGs, though some (particularly in this section) may be extended to videogames in other ludic genres.

Generic distinctions utilised by the videogame review press require definition before they can be used with precision in academic discourse, because the review press groups games into genres intuitively and haphazardly. Similarities between games put in the same

genre by the review press are the result of felicitous use of reviewers' intuition. To avoid infelicities entirely, the characteristics of a genre need to be systematically described, and individual games placed in genres in accordance with their possessing particular characteristics.

For the purposes of this analysis, the RPG is a ludic genre that involves the player's interpretation and manipulation of an overtly presented statistical system representing the combative and other abilities of a character or group of characters controlled by the player, who increase in power through (usually quantified) experience in battle and the acquisition of items that augment their abilities. These characters are known as PCs (player-characters), and a group of them is called a 'party.' The goal of the PC or party (henceforth simply, 'the PC') in an RPG is to defeat an adversary. The statistical element of RPGs is the unique feature that defines them as a genre. However, it is not within the scope of this paper to examine that feature in detail. In relation to the utopianism of RPGs, it is subordinate to the nature of their systematically constructed game environments, and those environments' interpretation by game narratives. I will focus on these latter elements.

The genre's name gives rise to some confusion. Contrary to many people's expectations, role-playing videogames do not usually involve role-playing as such. In single-player role-playing videogames, as in series of books like *Fighting Fantasy*, dialogue and non-battle, non-explorative player activities are never entirely a matter of improvisation. Without a human game master (GM) or other players to respond creatively to human input, the possibilities of interaction and response in a role-playing videogame must be narrowly circumscribed to a range of pre-determined choices and responses. These must be generated within the current limitations of available human, creative labour time; digital storage capacities; AI programming techniques and processing capacities. Where the player has any control over the PCs 'character' in a role-playing videogame, it is usually only over the development of the statistics that define their abilities. Where role-playing videogames have tried to encourage players to play 'in character,' such as in the *Witch's Wake* [2] module for *Neverwinter Nights* [30], role-playing is a matter of the player guessing what the designer imagines the character 'should' do, and being rewarded with experience points if successful.

While I do not agree with Juul and Eskelinen that narrative and videogames are generally radically dissociated, the separation they make between games and narratives is valid and useful. So when I explain the basic model for systematically constructed game environments used in RPGs, and the process of its operation within these videogames, I will do so first at a *purely ludic* level. On this level, elements of the game are not yet represented as objects in the world (even imaginary objects in a *possible* world) whose behaviour they mimic. Following Eskelinen, "we are confronting the bare essentials of the gaming situation: the manipulation or the configuration of temporal, spatial, causal and functional relations and properties." [8]

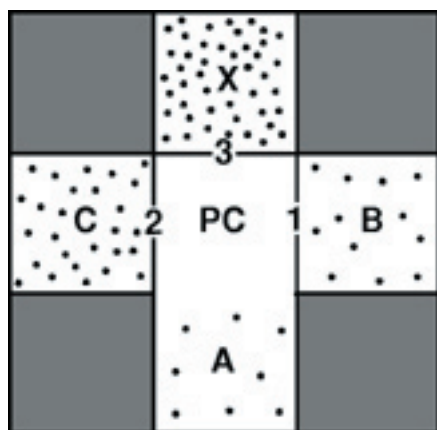
In the course of a typical RPG, the player navigates a game world in the process of gaining sufficient power to defeat the adversary. Once the adversary is defeated,

or shortly after, the game is considered completed, or in the terms Nick Montfort applies to text adventures, “won” [26]. The goal of defeating the adversary drives the player’s progression through an RPG. A battle with the adversary is seldom available at the beginning of an RPG. If it is, it is unwinnable. As in videogames of most other ludic genres, a series of intermediate obstacles are placed between the player and the game’s completion.

Typical reasons for the impossibility of immediate victory in an RPG are as follows:

1. The adversary is unknown.
2. The PCs are too weak to defeat the adversary.
3. The PCs are separated from the adversary by an immovable spatial obstacle.

The overcoming of obstacles to movement is at the core of the utopia of open space in RPGs. Figure 1 is a diagram of the basic model for systematically constructed game environments in which this process takes place. Its simplicity does a disservice to the elegant complexity of environments a player may explore while playing an RPG,<sup>4</sup> but whether there are four or one hundred major areas to explore, the basic model remains the same.



**Figure 1: The Basic Model of RPGs' Systematically Constructed Game Environments**

At the purely ludic level, elements in the diagram are simply objects that behave in particular ways. The PC is in the centre. The outer border of the diagram represents the boundaries of the game world, which includes all elements of the game environment that can be seen, whether they are simulated or merely represented. The shaded areas at the corners are ‘places’ the player can see, but never go. The lines broken by numbers (1), (2), and (3) are obstacles to the PC’s movement. Objects (A), (B), and (C) allow the PC to remove or pass through obstacles (1), (2), and (3) respectively. (X) is the adversary, which is capable of defeating the PC and ending the game temporarily. Defeating (X) results in the player’s victory. Also capable of defeating the PC are enemies in the areas surrounding (A), (B), (C), and the adversary. The strength of those enemies is represented by the density of dots in those areas. Defeating lesser enemies earns the PC experience, and results in it gaining power. The area in which the PC begins is usually, but not always, devoid of enemies, and can be

navigated in safety.

Leaving aside the elements of mimetic representation and narrative in an RPG, we see that while (1) has the properties of a locked door, in that it impedes movement but may be passed through if the right object is used on it, it is not yet a door except if the player imagines it as such. Equally, (A) has the properties of a key, but it is not yet a key. The PC is not yet a hero, and (X) is not yet a villain.

The PC’s foremost intermediate goal in this environment is to overcome the numbered barriers. The player must obtain first object (1), between the PC and which there is *no* barrier. (1) removes (A), and so on, until (C) is removed, and (X) may be challenged. At the same time as the PC is obtaining the objects that will allow it to overcome spatial obstacles, it is also increasing in power through experience in battle, so that it will be able to defeat the more powerful enemies that lie behind the next spatial obstacle it overcomes.

To achieve victory by defeating the adversary, the player must transform a game environment dominated by barriers to movement into a completely open one, in which space is universally permeable. The process of play that involves overcoming spatial obstacles may be read as a narrative of empowerment through the achievement of free movement. The simulated game environment, which the player’s interaction gradually opens, comes to be RPGs’ dynamic substitute for the static, detailed written description of spatial formations found in literary utopias.

Open space may be posed as an essential quality of spatial formations in true spatiotemporal utopias. In David Harvey’s contribution to the body of literary utopias, “Edilia” [12] (257-81), walls separating row houses are knocked down to provide larger, open spaces that facilitate communal living [12] (265). The domestic communities of Harvey’s utopia are spaces in which constant experimentation with ways of living takes place, ensuring that perfection does not encroach on freedom. On the other hand, More’s *Utopia* shows its authoritarian impulses by using prohibitions on movement to preserve social order and to ensure people continue to work. Even so, in reference to the beliefs of the Utopians on life after death he writes: “*perfect happiness implies perfect freedom of movement*” [27] (121, emphasis added). For More, freedom is granted only to the disembodied souls of the dead. But almost five hundred years on, real increases in the permeability of physical space facilitated by fast international transport and telecommunications allow us to posit open space and freedom of movement for the living as qualities of one vision of utopia.

Freedom of movement is also part of the utopia of open space’s process of realisation. As is proper for a spatiotemporal utopia, the utopia of open space thus encompasses both spatial formation and social process. Freedom of movement may be one condition of the achievement of a global, classless society. This society would overcome not only national class divisions, but international class divisions in which citizens of the first world (regardless of their exploitation by national capital) occupy the position of a global bourgeoisie, which exports the majority of its labour to the post-

colonised, or imports the post-colonised as a cheap labour force. Colonialism has been replaced by a less transparently corrupt and enslaving imperialism.

In their seminal book *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri look towards the achievement of a communist society based on the joyful self-affirmation of the power of living labour, in which “biopower and communism, cooperation and revolution remain together, in love, simplicity, and also innocence” [11] (413). The first move towards the achievement of this society is for the multitude (proletariat) to demand global citizenship. Global citizenship would intensify present “mass migrations [which] have become necessary for production” [11] (398) to the point where the control of personal movement by capital and its allies (be they states, NGOs, or internalised panoptical discipline) is shattered. By “crossing and breaking down the limits and segmentations that are imposed on the new collective labour power” [11] (399), the multitude would become a power capable of overthrowing capital, bringing the tendencies of the current world system to the point that its own contradictions precipitate its collapse. The new, self-affirming power of the multitude would simultaneously be the basis of a new society.

The demand of global citizenship is “simply that the juridical status of the population be reformed in step with the real economic transformations of recent years.” [11] (400) While RPGs only sometimes point explicitly to the overthrow of capital or analogous forces, it will be possible to ally their use of open space with demands that the field of cultural production be reformed in line with real developments in information technology. Recent years have seen the increasing popularity of mod-creation as a mode of fan participation in videogame production. This increase, in the RPG genre, has been facilitated by the inclusion of mod-creation utilities with games such as *Arcanum* [35], *The Elder Scrolls III* [3], and *Neverwinter Nights*. At the same time, consumers have tried to take control of videogame distribution, particularly on consoles, through practices such as mod-chipping, rom hacking, fan translation and piracy. These practices have the potential to emancipate the means of videogame production from the grasp of large capital, and this is one step towards the complete expropriation of the global capitalist class. The connection between RPGs and realised utopia will be further elaborated in this paper’s final section.

#### UTOPIA IN THE REPRESENTATIONAL AND NARRATIVE ELEMENTS OF RPGS

This section will examine how RPGs’ systematically constructed game environments and the process of their opening are inflected by their being represented in more closely mimetic and narrative manners. Such representation, and the placing of ludic elements within a narrative, can see them take on a more overtly utopian cast. The unfolding of RPG narratives along with their game environments also sees the emergence of a critique of utopianisms.

Moving from describing the purely ludic process of spatial opening in RPGs to read it as promoting a spatiotemporal utopianism leading to proletarian revolution is highly perilous if made without further justification. Reading the opening of space in an RPG as a narrative of empowerment through the shattering

of spatial constraints might seem purely imaginary. But the videogames themselves justify it. RPGs’ narrative elements encourage a reading of their ludic elements as utopian.

In the discussion so far, elements of an RPG—the PC, adversary, spatial obstacles and the objects that allow movement past them—have not been discussed beyond the ways they behave as parts of a simulation. Their representation as known or imaginable objects that behave in particular ways is a necessary step in the move towards overt utopianism.

A game where the player manoeuvred a square labelled “PC” over a landscape of flat shades of grey, obtaining lettered boxes in order to pass through black numbered lines and defeat another box, labeled “Adversary,” would undoubtedly be an aesthetic and commercial failure. It is even too crude, today, to merely represent the barriers as doors openable by keys. More complex representational and narrative codes are usually mapped onto an RPG’s bare ludic elements, to disguise them. These codes are usually derived from the literary genres of Fantasy, science-fiction, or their hybrid, science-Fantasy. Suvin has convincingly identified SF with literary utopia [38] (passim), and though it is beyond the scope of this paper, a case could be made for extending that identification at least a little way towards Fantasy.<sup>5</sup> As RPGs appropriate these genres’ representational codes, they also appropriate their connection to utopia.

Some of the most elegant instances of the disguising of the process of spatial opening that are not clearly narrative are to be found in *The Legend of Zelda* series. While *The Legend of Zelda II* [24] is the only true RPG in the series, due to its use of empowerment through quantified experience, the series shares the basic model for its particular systematically constructed game environment with RPGs. *The Legend of Zelda* has been a source of inspiration in the evolution of many game genres through hybridisation. The action-RPG subgenre (into which the *Zelda* games are often erroneously placed), which includes such games as *Times of Lore* [31], *Legend of Mana* [15], and *Brave Fencer Musashi* [42], clearly owes enormous debts to the *Legend of Zelda* games.

We can imagine a reinterpretation of Figure 1, constructed of visual elements from *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past* [25].<sup>6</sup> In it, the PC would be represented as the hero, Link, while the adversary would be the inhuman wizard Ganon. Barriers (1), (2), and (3) from Figure 1 would be replaced with heavy rocks, wooden posts, and a cracked wall respectively. (A) would become a magic glove that enables heavy lifting, (B) a mallet that hammers posts into the ground, and (C) a bomb that blows holes in crumbling walls.

This choice of representational disguises inflects the videogame’s underlying ludic structure. It adds a richer, more self-evident layer of meaning. The signs employed here clearly show the residues of the fairytale form, in Link’s elfin costume and mediaeval weaponry, the monstrous adversary, and the magic glove.

A much more subtle means of disguising the ludic process of spatial opening is to replace the objects that enable movement past barriers with event-related

triggers. When this is done, arrival at a location, performance of an action, or the passing of an amount of time will cause an event to occur that may or may not advance the game's plot. Where it does, the event will be presented in dialogue, or in a non-interactive cut-scene. Changes in the PC's possibilities of movement will have resulted. This is the most prevalent mode of representational disguise of the basic spatial model in contemporary RPGs. Some of the most transparent examples of this system of disguise can be found in the games *Baldur's Gate* [40] and *Suikoden III*, where new areas become available on the games' world maps after major plot points. In a more usual and subtle use of this system, event-triggered spatial openings allow the player to revisit areas where their progress was previously barred, and continue onward. For example, in *Final Fantasy VII* [19], some non-interactive sequences conclude with the party's acquisition of a new mode of transport that allows travel over previously impassable terrain.

Disguising the objects that overcome spatial obstacles by replacing them with event-related triggers situates the process of opening the game environment within narrative. Exposed and simulated events are placed within a temporal sequence with some degree of fixity, so as to tell a story. Despite the efforts of ludologists to separate games and narratives, it is still possible to say that as videogames, RPGs most often *do* tell stories, even if they are not games when they do so.

In many RPGs, the telling of a story sees the process of spatial opening represented as a struggle against capitalist or analogous forces that seek to restrict movement, and thus to prevent the realisation of "the impeded new society, with which the old one is pregnant in its productive forces" (Bloch qtd. in [43] xix). *Final Fantasy VII*, one of the most overly political RPGs ever made, pits its heroes, initially members of Avalanche, an eco-terrorist organisation, against Shinra, a rapacious, environmentally destructive global corporation. In the dystopian city of Midgar, where the game begins, the lumpenproletariat and working class are spatially segregated from those literally above them. While the leadership of Shinra live in the sun, on top of a gigantic platform, the physically expendable poor struggle in the slums beneath its shadow. Avalanche fights the planetary destruction first threatened by Shinra's greed, then by the rogue paramilitary operative and aspirant god Sephiroth, whose destructive ambitions are partly the inadvertent product of Shinra's amoral pursuit of power and profit.

In their quest to defeat these adversaries, the members of Avalanche must progressively overcome Shinra's attempts at spatial containment of groups and individuals, as well as geographical obstacles including deserts, mountains, and oceans. On their way to blow up a Mako<sup>7</sup> reactor, members of Avalanche unsuccessfully use forged travel passes in an attempt to overcome restrictions on movement in effect in Midgar. Subsequently, the party stows away on a ship, commandeers the last remnants of Shinra's extinct space program, and ultimately hijacks the pride of its fleet, the airship Highwind, which they eventually fly to the final battle with Sephiroth. Despite Shinra's attempts to impede the party's progress, they render space sufficiently permeable to neutralise global capital's power over them. Shinra and Sephiroth are eventually

destroyed, and planetary annihilation is averted. *Final Fantasy VII*'s famously inconclusive ending is gloriously negative. After Sephiroth's defeat in battle by the hero, Cloud, Midgar, a blight on the land scape and symbol of global capitalism and the oppressions it perpetrates, is spectacularly destroyed in an FMV sequence. There is little to no resolution phase in the narrative. It ends leaving the prospect of an open space, just like that of utopia, in which the thesis of the dialectic has been negated, and the synthesis may freely emerge. No detailed picture of a utopian synthesis is cast, though in a short FMV coda following the credits, the player sees the ruins of Midgar overgrown by jungle. The haunting image suggests, but does not confirm, the emergence of an anti-humanist ecological utopia: a verdant landscape devoid of human life.

In a less militantly oppositional variation on the narrative inflection of the process of opening a game environment, *Suikoden III* shows the transformation of a castle on the border of two warring nations into a free trade zone. There, people from across the world, regardless of race or nationality, are accepted into a community based on capitalist enterprise. The castle comes to serve as the base for a united force that moves forth to defeat an aggressor which threatens the destruction of millions of lives. The castle's master, Thomas, expresses the importance of spatial openness, saying: "I want this castle to be a place where people can come and go freely. Anyone, from anywhere." While this utopia is unashamedly bourgeois, it still challenges the real restrictions on the movement of cultural product that large corporations in the videogame industry attempt to enforce.

The simulated and represented environments of RPGs replace the detailed written descriptions of perfect societies and their spatial organisation found in literary utopias. Sometimes their utopianism may not go beyond a dreamy visual splendour, but this can still be read. For instance, the lush domestic interior of Home in *Legend of Mana* reflects a consumer utopia of perfect, individualised comfort. On the other hand, *Suikoden III*'s bustling, under-construction castle town that expands as the player recruits new PCs exemplifies a spatiotemporal utopianism such as we have described, in which utopia is represented as the process of its own realisation. It even shows how the castle community's goals and strategies change as threats from outside force its inhabitants to forge new alliances and fight for their utopia's continued existence. This is one of the best examples available of a utopia that is never simply "cast in a picture" (Adorno in [4] 11).

RPGs also engage in a strong implicit critique of utopianisms, sorting out genuine utopia from anti-utopia and dystopia. Patrick Burger suggests that a central feature of literary Fantasy is an exploration of different modes of production, juxtaposed in space rather than in history [5] (61, 67). Likewise, most often drawing their motifs from the repertoire of literary Fantasy, RPGs place a series of variations on utopia in a relatively uniform sequence.

This sequence has three distinct phases:

1. Closed space is represented as utopian, then exposed as anti-utopian.

2. A represented dystopia is overcome through the opening of space.
3. Dystopia negated, an open space remains in which utopia can be realised. This utopia is typically not represented.

The movement through these phases comments on the nature of utopianism itself, exposing the deficiencies of utopias based on isolation and spatial containment. Showing the dystopia to which realisation of such utopias may lead, it depicts a process of spatial opening as the way to a negation of both the status quo and the false utopia “cast in a picture.” The negation of the anti-utopian and dystopian formations of the first two phases opens a space in which a genuine utopia could be realised.

In Figure 1, the PC is placed in an initial position where its movement is constrained, but its survival is not directly threatened. Typically, this space is represented as a pastoral idyll such as those in which Hugo of *Suikoden III* and Alex of *Lunar: Silver Star Story Complete* [34] spend their formative years, or where Ashley picnics with his family in *Vagrant Story* [22]. Otherwise, it may become another space of safety and peace, typically with an air of domesticity such as that possessed by Nibelheim of *Final Fantasy VII* (which is a haven only in flashbacks); Candlekeep in *Baldur's Gate*, or the island paradise of Pandule in *Reiselied* [32]. These settings offer spaces of apparent perfection, free of obvious and intolerable poverty and exploitation imposed by capital, and undisturbed by conflict.

These settings represent naïve models of spatial and social perfection. The initial situation in an RPG is usually highly spatially constrained, and this is something that must eventually be overcome in the course of play. Usually, it is not possible to leave the starting area until a few small, domestic sub-quests have been completed. Very often the constraint is enforced by a few well-meaning guards posted at the village gates who will tell the player it is not safe to leave the area. When narrated events force the PCs to leave the initial area, they often leave no possibility of the conclusive restoration of the illusion of peace and safety it presented.

Reference to menaces outside the space of the idyll, from which the player and PCs must initially be protected, is the first indication that the initial formation is not one to be taken as perfect or desirable. Insularity, isolation, and constraints on movement are shown not to protect a community from the potentially harmful influence of forces operating in a wider field. When the idyll is inevitably threatened, disrupted or completely destroyed, the illusion of perfection and safety is broken: the theory that communities can avoid disruption by isolating themselves is exposed as a delusion. Here moral innocence and spatial constraint, some of the elements of More's *Utopia* most open to criticism, are unmasked as anti-utopian. They are bearers of false promises and a road to certain ruin.

The next phase of an RPG, which comprises its bulk, is the dystopian phase of conflict. Unmasking of anti-utopia does not lead directly to the utopia of open space, but to the revelation of a real situation of

further constraint, oppression, and suffering. An RPG's gameplay is shaped by the presence of spatial obstacles and the necessity of overcoming them. Dystopia justifies play by offering something for the player to oppose, but it is also used to describe the opposite of utopia, the conditions that must be negated in order for utopia to emerge. Spatial obstacles are central to RPG dystopias, but non-ludic, narrative elements may also be included, such as mystificatory religion in *Xenogears* [39], anti-humanist nihilism in *Reiselied*, *Final Fantasy VI*, *Lunar* and a host of other Japanese RPGs, and exploitation under global capitalism in *Final Fantasy VII*.

The dystopian phase of conflict begins to conclude as the heroes rally their forces and turn the situation to their advantage. This phase ends with the destruction of the adversary. Very few RPGs have an interactive resolution phase, and those that do, including *Lunar*, do not use them to describe new spatial and social formations (though *Lunar* does see capitalism triumph as Ramus' business prospers). The lack of a resolution phase may be attributed to the fact that, conflict being ended, there is nothing left to play. This final phase spills outside the boundaries of the text into the player's speculation as to what utopian synthesis may have emerged once the dystopian thesis has been negated.

The progression of these phases is a depiction of the ideational process of utopia's realisation. RPGs' utopianism begins with the fantasy of a pastoral or other idyll, which is exposed as anti-utopian by the emergence of dystopia. Dystopia identifies the elements of the status quo that need to be eliminated before genuine utopia can emerge. Here, even the process of *thinking* utopia becomes historical. This narrative movement is coupled with ludic elements which see the player overcome spatial obstacles in order to achieve victory. A closed, anti-utopian spatial formation opens onto a dystopian one, which is finally transformed into the utopia of open space. Whether RPGs offer a genuine, utopian alternative depends on whether open physical and conceptual space is considered antithetical to the status quo. Given the numerous restrictions on movement that apply to labourers and cultural product that apply even in the supposedly globalised economy of the present, it does not seem unreasonable to conclude that they do. However, the spatiotemporal utopianism of RPGs would be strengthened by more detailed simulation of the spatial organisation of utopian societies, and representational and narrative inflection of that organisation in extended resolution phases.

Games in the simulation genre, including *The Sims* [41], and the *Sim City* and *Civilization* series, also possess a strong potential for spatiotemporal utopianism. This arises from their allowing players to simulate the process of constructing domestic, urban, or world environments they may personally view as utopian. As videogames that offer little pre-determined narrative inflection, a reading of the utopian qualities of these games would need to add a study of player uses of them to an analysis of the ideological biases inherent in their simulation models.

#### **HORIZONS: REALISATION OF THE UTOPIA OF OPEN SPACE IN THE SPHERE OF CULTURAL PRODUCTION**

Any genuine utopia must be realisable outside the

bounds of the text in which it is promoted. In conclusion, I will offer some speculations on how the utopia of open space presented in RPGs may be realised first in the sphere of culture. Further research is necessary in this area. I present horizons, rather than firm conclusions.

I have hinted at the growing popularity of mod-creation as a mode of fan participation in videogame production, and at attempts by large capital to control videogame circulation in a situation where technology allows consumers to determine it themselves. These two phenomena are linked, since capital's control over videogame circulation also limits the control individuals can exert over videogame production.

Anyone who owns a computer, like anyone who owns a pen and a piece of paper, owns a means of cultural production. The proliferation of mod-creation utilities places non-commercial videogame production within the reach of individuals without strong programming skills. Printers and/or CD- or DVD-writers constitute cheap means to produce physical objects that carry cultural products as they may be conceived of in the abstract, as information. Seizure of any means of production also puts individuals in ownership of the products of their labour, which may free them, economically, from the oppressive influence of capital. Cultural production results in products that are salable, but consumption of which can only indirectly contribute to one's material welfare. As such, the primary benefit of a seizure of the means of cultural production is that it frees producers from capital's ability to determine the content of that production; particularly, its possible demand that culture be free of subversion. Having identified a thoroughgoing utopianism in RPGs, we should still admit that this demand, if made, is not always obeyed. Particularly, the creative individuals behind commercial blockbusters like *Final Fantasy VII* are so important to the videogame industry as to be beyond capital's direct control.

Small software development companies and private individuals pose threats to the profits of large corporations if their cultural production does not take place on large capital's terms. Large corporations in the videogame industry attempt to negate the liberating effects of popular ownership of the means of production by using their immanent power to control videogame circulation.

The major way in which videogame circulation is controlled is by the implementation of regional lockouts in videogame consoles manufactured by Nintendo, Sony, and Microsoft. These prevent unmodified consoles manufactured for a particular television standard or region<sup>8</sup> from running software not licensed for release in that region. They also prevent unlicensed or (legally or illegally) copied software from running. This includes original code written by amateur developers. Console manufacturers typically claim lockouts are intended to prevent piracy. Yet the technology was originally used in the Nintendo Famicom, and more intensively in the NES as Nintendo of America attempted to eliminate the possibility of another software glut like that which caused the Atari crash of 1982-3 (see [18] 219-40). Lockouts also allowed Nintendo to control software developers. In Japan, Nintendo, who held a near monopoly on the videogame industry, had already forced licensees to buy the cartridges, boxes and manuals

comprising their games as material retail products from Nintendo itself. Nintendo managed to profit not only from production of consoles and first-party software, but also from its licensees software. At the same time it could completely control software availability. Frustration over this situation eventually led a Atari Games to fraudulently obtain patented information in an attempt to produce unlicensed software for the NES, landing the company in court on several occasions.<sup>9</sup>

Regional lockouts persist to the present day. They have allowed console manufacturers to prevent software importation, modification of content, and the creation of original content. They have aided Microsoft's attempts to prevent the running of Linux, a free and open-source operating system and competitor to Windows, on its Xbox console. In the 1990s, they allowed Nintendo to force the censorship of games like *Mortal Kombat* [23] (see [18] 465) and the English translation of *Final Fantasy VI* for the SNES to accord with the perceived moral demands of the US public and Congress. Despite the fact at least one regulatory body, the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, has suggested that the prevention of videogame importation from other regions is anticompetitive and therefore illegal, Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo have all sought to prevent anyone from overcoming lockouts (particularly by the installation of mod-chips) in legislation and in the courts of multiple nation-states.

Despite this, many consumers engage in practices that actively thwart large capital's control over videogame distribution. These include mod-chipping, emulation, rom-hacking, fan translation, and piracy, all of which have the potential to make videogames both free in space, and just plain free. These practices are applied with great regularity to RPGs, because Japan's dominance of the genre on consoles, coupled with a lack of Japanese RPG releases in the US in the 1980s and early 1990s and in PAL territories (a phenomenon which persists), forces players to exert special, often illegal, effort to obtain significant games in the genre.

These practices allow individuals to control the distribution of commercial videogames, along with the means of cultural production they already possess, and also to strike out at capital. As realisations of the utopia of open space, they are indirectly supported by RPGs themselves. At the same time, the companies who produce the technology on which many RPGs are played attempt to deny the possibility of this utopia's realisation. RPGs point, however subtly, to the overthrow of capital, and the emergence of a communist society. This is the ultimate utopia of Marx, Bloch, Adorno, Suvin, and Hardt and Negri, along with many of the most significant writers of utopian fiction, including More, William Morris, and Ursula Le Guin. Wrestling control of videogame distribution from large capital is one presently achievable step towards the realisation of their vision, and the vision of some RPGs.

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#### ENDNOTES

1. I use ludic to mean 'gamelike,' as it is normally used in game studies. Gonzalo Frasca, who defines games whose rules allow for winning and loss as *ludus* (see [9] 9) gives 'ludic' a different signification.

2. I capitalise 'Fantasy' following Suvin, who differentiates the name of the genre from the word's ordinary uses and associations with "phantasy...fancy...or even imagination" [36] (244).

3. See Murray, who lists both *Tetris and Zork* as "puzzle games" [28] (315), despite their obvious differences.

4. For two classic examples of this elegance, though not from the RPG genre, (see [7] 6-7, 92-3).

5. Suvin's most generous reading of Fantasy can be found in [8]. His pitting of the genre against technologised capitalism provides some bases for my case.

6. I composited this image, but Nintendo of America's legal division did not respond to requests for copyright permission for its publication in the DAC 2003 proceedings. It will be displayed when I present this paper in person.

7. Mako can be considered an analogue for nuclear power and/or fossil fuels.

8. For instance: NTSC U/C (United States and Canada); NTSC J (Japan) and PAL (Britain and most colonies).

9. This paragraph draws on [33] (passim.)