Between Empirical and Alternative Worlds: Board Games, Players and the Politics of Emotional Immersion

Teresa Pereira

NOVA UNIVERSITY OF LISBON/CETAPS

One of the most significant current discussions in Utopian Studies and Science-Fiction Studies is the idea of Singularity, described by Vernor Vinge in the article "The Coming Technological Singularity: How To Survive in the Post-Human Era" (1993) as "the imminent creation by technology of entities with greater than human intelligence" (Vinge, 1993: 12). The concept of singularity is central to the re-imagined *Battlestar Galactica* (2003-2009) as well as to the adaptive texts of the popular television series.

Having risen to prominence as an object of academic research, a large and growing body of critical studies – composed, for example, of *Cylons in America: Critical Studies in* Battlestar Galactica (2008), Battlestar Galactica *and Philosophy: Knowledge Here Begins out There* (2008) and Battlestar Galactica: *Investigating Flesh, Spirit and Steel* (2010) – has been published on *Battlestar Galactica*. Nonetheless, far too little attention has been paid to the renowned series' award-winning games. Stemming from the colossal success of the revisioning of Glen A. Larson's post-apocalyptical universe, *Battlestar Galactica*'s adapting texts promptly entered the lexicon of video and board game players. Although innumerable computer games have been recently designed, no single video game exists which adequately evokes the landscape of the space opera. While its digital counterparts highlight the bellicose rivalry between humans and Cylons, only *Battlestar Galactica: the Board Game* (2008), along with its various expansion packs (*Battlestar Galactica: Official Variant Rules*, 2008; *Battlestar Galactica: Pegasus Expansion*, 2009;

Battlestar Galactica: Exodus Expansion, 2010; and *Battlestar Galactica: Daybreak Expansion*, 2013), imports the political and social dimensions of the sci-fi TV series.

Drawing upon Science-Fiction Studies and the aesthetics of play, the following paper offers some insights into *Battlestar Galactica*. While research on the subject has focused mostly on the textual machinery of the space opera, the taxonomy of *Battlestar Galactica: the Board Game* will be at the core of this study. Perhaps the whole logic of the game is summed up in its overview:

> *Battlestar Galactica: the Board Game provides a unique gaming experience. Unlike most games where players win individually, Battlestar Galactica is a team game, with the added complication that which players are on which teams is kept secret. Each player is secretly assigned a team at the start of the game. The two teams are the humans and the Cylons, and each team has a specific objective. The human players are trying to find the map to Earth, while the Cylon players simply want to annihilate the human race. Players win or lose with the other members of their team… but must figure out who they can trust in order to lead their team to victory (Konieczka, 2008a: 2).*

Whereas similar games seek to remediate specific moments of the popular series, the board game brings players to the climax of *Battlestar Galactica*, giving rise to a conflict of allegiances between humans and Cylons.

A strand of indisputable relevance within dystopian science-fiction, *Battlestar Galactica* rethinks the empirical world of its author and readers:

> *sf is (…) "didactic", it (…) works by way of a readerly delight in the thoughtful and thought-provoking activity of imagining the elsewhere of a given text, of filling in, co-creating, the imagined (…) paradigm of a society that does not exist but that nevertheless supplies a cognitive map of what does exist (Moylan, 2000: 5).*

Generating "cognitively estranged alternative worlds that stand in a potentially critical relationship with empirical reality" (Moylan, 2000: 50), the television series' adaptation transports its players to an illusive 'elsewhere' of a semiotic nature" (Angenot, 1979: 14). As a result, "the process of working through the text (…) [launches] an adventure within the mind" (Moylan, 2000: 8).

Comparable to what has been suggested above, Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (1944) argues that play, owing to its capability to take place in an independent time and space, "only becomes possible,

thinkable, and understandable when an influx of the *mind* breaks down the absolute determinism of the cosmos" (Huizinga, 1944: 3). Moreover, the Dutch historian implies that:

> All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the "consecrated spot" cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart (Huizinga, 1944: 10).

Seductive and exotic, the textual machine forces its players to uphold the significant game world. Because of this, the player negotiates the processes of combining and constructing the symbols that interpenetrate the complex fabric of the science-fiction universe of *Battlestar Galactica: the Board Game*, stepping straight into an absorbing reality.

Within this framework, the overall structure of the following study has been divided into three parts, including this introductory section. The second part will deal with the ambiguous experience generated by an immersive platform – by analyzing the interplay between players and characters within the game world –, as well as with the elements that make up *Battlestar Galactica: the Board Game*. The final section will draw upon the entire paper, tying up the various theoretical strands in order to assess the enigmatic immersion of the player in the science-fiction narrative that characterizes both the television series and the board game.

Commenting on immersion, Marie-Laure Ryan argues that, within the textual world, one "plunges under the sea (…), reaches a foreign land (…), is taken prisoner (…), and loses contact with all other realities", returning "to the world of origin, somewhat changed by the journey" (Ryan, 2002: 93-94). The metaphor of transportation, developed by Richard Gerrig in his book *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: on the Psychological Activities of Reading* (1993), divides the experience of immersive reading into three dimensions: spatial immersion, concerned with setting; temporal immersion, connected with plot; and emotional immersion (at which the following section will take a closer look), related to characters.

Hinging on Aristotle's crucial term *catharsis*, techniques such as the omniscient narrator and internal focalization are able to elicit the emotional

immersion of the reader in the textual world. Because the one who reads gets to immerse her or himself in the secluded consciousness of an imaginary character, the reader becomes inextricably intertwined with the fate of fictional beings (Ryan, 2001: 148-150). An example of this is Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1877):

> *She did not take her eyes off the wheels (…), and drawing her head down between her shoulders threw herself forward on her hands under the truck, and with a light movement as if preparing to rise again immediately dropped on her knees. And at the same moment she was horror-struck at what she was doing. 'Where am I? What am I doing? Why?' She wished to rise, to throw herself back, but something huge and relentless struck her on the head and dragged her down. 'God forgive me everything!' she said, feeling the impossibility of struggling (…). The candle, by the light of which she had been reading that book filled with anxieties, deceptions, grief, and evil, flared up with a brighter light, lit up for her all that had before been dark, crackled, began to flicker, and went out for ever (Tolstoy, 1877: 757).*

By virtue of the power of literary discourse, the reader is located "within the center of consciousness of the characters [she or] he tries to understand" (Ryan, 2002: 111), thus launching her or himself at the universe in which Anna Karenina commits suicide. Although fictional, the novel's landscape allows one to create emotional responses, thereby permitting the reader to gaze helplessly in terror and pity at the heroine.

In the same vein, Peter Fitting's "Positioning and Closure: on the 'Reading-Effect' of Contemporary Utopian Fiction" (1987) emphasises that the science-fiction reader is hauled up into the text:

> *As readers, we are no longer addressed simply as listeners; we have become involved in an experience which goes beyond the discovery and apprehension of a better society, one in which the description of the ideal society forms the background to a sequence (…) of unfolding events which we follow through the eyes of a hero (….). (…) the "novelization" of utopia involves a significant transformation: from the positioning of the reader as the addressee in a philosophic dialogue who is persuaded through reasoned presentation, to the process of identification with a fictional character where the reader is implicated on an emotional and experimental level as well as on the intellectual one (Fitting, 1987: 29-30).*

Drawing upon the utopian works of Samuel R. Delany, Ursula K. Le Guin, Joanna Russ, and Marge Piercy, Fitting stresses that, by way of the reading convention of "positioning", the relationship established between the text and the one who reads suffers a major change.

Nevertheless, the reactions generated by the text are in the realm of make-believe. Central to the entire discipline of immersion, the parallel between fiction and games of make-believe is directly related to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's defence of the act of reading as a "willing suspension of disbelief for the moment" (Coleridge, 1817: 97). As suggested by Coleridge, the reader enters into a contract with the textual world, granting it the power to energize her or his mental set up.

Similarly (although in a notably different way), Huizinga asserts that play (which is analogous to a performance) captivates and enchants, "absorbing the player intensely and utterly" (Huizinga, 1944: 13). Separated from the everyday world, play – as a consequence of being an intermezzo – is a "stepping out of 'real' life" into an "only pretending" domain, abolishing, at the same time, "that troublesome 'only' feeling" (Huizinga, 1944: 8). The following quotation illustrates this point clearly:

> *Every child knows perfectly well that he is "only pretending" (…). How deep-seated this awareness is in the child's soul is strikingly illustrated by the following story, told to me by the father of the boy in question. He found his four-year-old son sitting at the front of a row of chairs, playing "trains". As he hugged him the boy said: "Don't kiss the engine, Daddy, or the carriages won't think it's real" (Huizinga, 1944:8).*

Comparable to Huizinga's anecdote, the player of *Battlestar Galactica: the Board Game* performs an act dissociated from common reality.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to discuss the game at issue. Transposing and commenting on the informing source, the television series' adaptation destabilizes the authority of the original text and brings into life a dynamic mosaic of textual surfaces (Sanders, 2006: 3). In a postmodern fashion "of borrowings and *bricolage*" (Sanders, 2006: 34), *Battlestar Galactica: the Board Game* ambiguously reshapes and rethinks the television series that itself reshaped and rethought the 70's space opera *Battlestar Galactica* (1978-1979).

A creature with multidimensional degrees of complexity, the board game – designed and developed by the widely acclaimed Fantasy Flight Games –, transports its players across humanity's, as well as Cylon's, plight to Kobol. As explained earlier, the narrative of the game takes place under the desperate struggle of both humans and Cylons for survival.

In addition to a square game board (on which *Galactica*, *Colonial One*, and the Cylon Locations – Caprica, the Cylon Fleet, the Human Fleet, and the *Resurrection Ship* – are, among other things, positioned), *Battlestar Galactica: the Board Game* is composed of ten character sheets (of which no less than three and no more than seven can take part in the game), fifty-two tokens (such as two basestars, twelve civilian ship tokens, and so on), one hundred ten bridge-sized cards (divided into Crisis, Super Crisis, Loyalty, and Quorum Cards and President and Admiral Titles), and one hundred twenty-eight small cards (organized according to Skill – thereafter arranged in politics, leadership, tactics, piloting, and engineering – and Destination Cards, including one Kobol Objective Card). Furthermore, among the component list of the game there also is an eight-sided dice, thirty-two plastic ships (consisting of eight vipers, four raptors, sixteen Cylon raiders, and four Cylon heavy raiders), and ten character stands (where the ten character tokens are placed).

Once the board game has been set up[1] and each player has been assigned a character sheet[2], the dice is rolled and whoever gets the highest score goes first. A turn-based game, *Battlestar Galactica: the Board Game* is played over a number of turns until either humans or Cylons have reached their ultimate goals. At the start of her or his turn (which is divided into six steps), the player selects the number and types of Skill Cards listed in his character's skill set (Receive Skills Step), moving, if she or he wishes, to a different location (Movement Step). During the Action Step, the current player chooses one action to perform (activate location, Skill Card action, character action, activate viper, Title and Quorum Cards, Loyalty Card) or does nothing. In the course of the fourth stage, the Crisis Step, a Crisis Card is drawn and subsequently resolved. Afterwards, over the Activate Cylon Ships Step, Cylon ships, if any are in play, may attack and damage their enemies. Finally, throughout the Prepare for Jump Step, the human fleet may proceed to prepare for jump.

Secretly appointed to the human or Cylon teams at the start of the game[3], a player may choose to reveal her or his true identity. On a revealed Cylon player's turn (which is organized in three steps), she or he selects two Skill cards of any type(s) (Draw Skills Step), moves to a Cylon location (Movement Step), and performs an action (Action Step).

Players must cooperate throughout the game in attaining their team's objective. Whereas human players must successfully jump the fleet enough times to reach Kobol, the main aim of Cylon players is to annihilate the human race. If at least one human resource (Fuel, Food, Morale, and Population) is depleted to zero or

if Galactica is either invaded or destroyed before humans manage to limp towards Kobol, Cylons win the game.

Stepping into the shoes of the character she or he chooses to represent, the one who plays pledges to be absorbed, in time and space, by the game world. By imagining her or himself as a member of *Battlestar Galactica*, the player becomes emotionally immersed in the cosmos to which she or he is transported.

Within this framework, Loyalty Cards (owing to the attributes of the board game and, to some extent, through the player's agency) are an efficient immersive mechanism. As explained earlier, players start the game with either a "You are Not a Cylon" card or a "You are a Cylon" card. Later on, during the Sleeper Agent Phase, players who had been portraying a member of the human team may be dealt an additional "You are a Cylon" card, thus experiencing the same enigmatic internal conflict that characterized Sharon "Boomer" Valerii for the duration of the first two seasons of the popular TV series. Shortly after shooting Adama, nearly killing the veteran of the First Cylon War, Boomer finds herself consciously rejecting her Cylon nature. Stripped of her own free will, Boomer's anguish is similar to that felt by the player who has been suddenly forced to engage in acts of sabotage against the human race (Moore, 2008: 111).

On the other hand, the "You are a Sympathizer" card introduces a three-dimensional effect of ambiguity. Besides human and Cylon players, the sympathizer embodies a member of one of the species previously mentioned who wishes to betray her or his peers. Much like Sharon "Athena" Agathon, the sympathizer deliberately transgresses the trust of her or his equals, siding with the other team.

Renewing permanently the adapting text, the player becomes utterly immersed. In the midst of the game world, literary mechanisms such as the omniscient narrator and internal focalization (already discussed above) are replaced by the imaginary "aura of presence" (Ryan, 2002: 158) of the player. Instead of gazing helplessly in terror and pity at the fate of the remnants of humanity and the Cylon species, the one who plays becomes momentarily a member of *Battlestar Galactica*'s universe.

As was pointed out in the introduction, this paper set out to assess the enigmatic immersion of the player – who is simultaneously a traveller (an idea highlighted by

Ryan) and a performer (as suggested by Huizinga) – in the science-fiction universe of the adapting text of the award-winning TV series. Having briefly discussed Marie-Laure Ryan's concept of immersion and the aesthetics of play, it is now possible to correlate science-fiction, the politics of immersion, and board games.

Comparable to what has been suggested by Ryan, the player of the board game at issue becomes emotionally involved with the textual structure of the estranged world. Or, in Fitting's previously mentioned words, she or he undergoes a "process of identification with a fictional character where the [player] is implicated on an emotional and experimental level as well as on the intellectual one" (Fitting, 1987: 30). Indeed, the active involvement of the player (who is located at the centre of the narrative) in the fictional world of the board game "includes performative strategies [related to the concept of "positioning"] which attempt to directly engage the [player]" (Fitting, 1987: 32).

Inside the symbol system in which the game is set, the player is invited "to identify with the fictional protagonist and the goal of the game" (Juul, 2011: 161). In spite of this, whereas the reader, as Coleridge suggested, suspends his disbelief – "which constitutes poetic faith" (Coleridge, 1817: 97) –, "you [the player] (…) are supposed to suspend your belief in yourself, rather than in the unrealism of the game-world, so you can *be* the character you're playing. (…) You have to enact the text's performative in order to play" (Walker, 2001: 45). Pulled into the game's dimension, the player actively engages in the processes of constructing, combining, and renewing the elements of the board game. Willing her or himself to the estranged shore, the one who plays sinks to the depths of the make believe realm of only pretending in which *Battlestar Galactica: the Board Game* takes place.

Works Cited

Aristotle (1996), *Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath, New York, Penguin Books.

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor (1989), *Biographia Literaria*, Columbus, Ohio State UP.

Eberl, Jason T. (2008), Battlestar Galactica *and Philosophy: Knowledge Here Begins out There*, Oxford, Blackwell.

Fitting, Peter (1987), "Positioning and Closure: on the 'Reading-Effect' of Contemporary Utopian Fiction", in Gorman Beauchamp (ed.) (1987), *Utopian Studies I*, Lanham, University Press of America, pp. 23-36.

Gerrig, Richard (1993), *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: on the Psychological Activities of Reading*, New Haven, Yale UP.

Huizinga, Johan (1944), *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, London, Routledge.

Juul, Jesper (2011), *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*, Cambridge, MIT Press.

Kaveney, Roz / Jennifer Stoy (2010), Battlestar Galactica*: Investigating Flesh, Spirit and Steel*, London, I. B. Tauris.

Konieczka, Corey (2008a), *Battlestar Galactica: the Board Game*, Minnesota, Fantasy Flight Games.

_ _ (2008b), *Battlestar Galactica: Official Variant Rules*, Minnesota, Fantasy Flight Games.

_ _ (2009), *Battlestar Galactica: Pegasus Expansion*, Minnesota, Fantasy Flight Games.

_ _ (2010), *Battlestar Galactica: Exodus Expansion*, Minnesota, Fantasy Flight Games.

_ _ (2013), *Battlestar Galactica: Daybreak Expansion*, Minnesota, Fantasy Flight Games.

Mendlesohn, Farah (2003), "Introduction: Reading Science Fiction", in Edward James / Farah

Mendlesohn (eds.) (2003), *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, pp. 1-12.

Moore, Robert W. (2008), "'To Be a Person': Sharon Agathon and the Social Expression of

Individuality", in Tiffany Potter / C.W. Marshall (eds.) (2008), *Cylons in America: Critical Studies in* Battlestar Galactica, London, Continuum, pp. 105-117.

Moylan, Thomas (2000), *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science-Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*, Oxford, Westview Press.

Potter, Tiffany / C. W. Marshall (2008), *Cylons in America: Critical Studies in* Battlestar Galactica, London, Continuum.

Ryan, Marie-Laure (2002), *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*, London, John Hopkins UP.

Sanders, Julie (2006), *Adaptation and Appropriation*, New York, Routledge.

Suvin, Darko (1979), *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: on the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, London, Yale UP.

Tolstoy, Leo (1995), *Anna Karenina*, Hertfordshire, Wordsworth Classics.

Vinge, Vernor (1993), "The Coming Technological Singularity: How to Survive in the Post-Human Era" in *Vision-21: Interdisciplinary Science and Engineering in the Era of Cyberspace*, Ohio, NASA Lewis Research Center, pp. 11-23.

Walker, Jill (2001), "Do You Think You're Part of This? Digital Texts and the Second Person Address", in Markku Eskelinen / Raine Koskimaa (eds.) (2001), *Cybertext Yearbook 2000*, Jyväskylä, Publications of the Research Center for Contemporary Culture, pp. 34-51.

Notes

1 The reader should bear in mind that a comprehensive review of how to prepare to play Battlestar Galactica: the Board Game is beyond the scope of this paper.

2 Additionally to character type – of which there are four categories (political leader, military leader, pilot, and support) –, abilities, and set up, every last character's skill set is listed on the character sheet. Because the skill set enumerates the skills the character has expertise in, each game turn the current player draws the number and types of Skill Cards specified on his character sheet (Receive Skills Step). By way of illustration, read the following transcript: "It is William Adama's Receive Skills step. He looks at his skill set, which lists 3 leadership and 2 tactics. He therefore draws three leadership Skill Cards and two tactics cards" (Konieczka, 2008a: 9).

3 At the beginning of the game each player is given one Loyalty Card in order to determine whether or not she or he is a human or a Cylon. Halfway through the game, during the Sleeper Agent Phase, an additional set of Loyalty Cards (containing the "You are a Sympathizer" card – which represents a human or a Cylon who wishes to support the opposing group) is dealt. This can be clearly seen in the following case: "Carl 'Helo' Agathon has two Loyalty Cards, one 'You are a Cylon' card and one 'You are Not a Cylon' card. Since he has at least one 'You are a Cylon' card, he is a Cylon player" (Konieczka, 2008a: 18-19). Even though these cards are kept secret, their owner may, during the Action Step, reveal them.