

5.3. It's All Fun and Games: Countering the Boring Dystopia with the Exciting Utopia

Matthew Leggatt

Abstract

In 2015, the cultural theorist Mark Fisher started a Facebook group entitled Boring Dystopia as a repository for images of a tedious and mundane dystopian Britain. The group challenged the myth that dystopia is exciting. As we have seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, some dystopias provide boredom and yet more bureaucracy. As Albert Camus' narrator in *The Plague* discovers, "there is nothing less spectacular than a pestilence". Although monotony is more often regarded as the domain of utopia, in fact, utopian fiction is, at its heart, playful. One might think of the satirical fun of More's text and of the paradoxical word he coins. Ernest Callenbach, author of *Ecotopia* (2004), writes that "constructing an imaginary society is a little like designing a game: the society evolves rules, principles, and conventions, and the author is not entirely in charge". This essay is an effort to counteract the notion that utopia would necessarily be boring by drawing on a range of literary texts and examining them in relation to their fundamentally playful nature.

Key words: Boring Dystopia, utopia and play, COVID-19, utopian literature, Ecotopia

In 2015, the cultural theorist Mark Fisher started a Facebook group titled "Boring Dystopia". As a repository for images of a tedious and mundane dystopian Britain, the group challenged the myth that dystopia is exciting. As we have seen over the last couple of years, in everything from socially distanced queues at the supermarket or being stuck at home in various states of lockdown, to endless Zoom meetings where the only source of entertainment has come when someone's cat has idled in front of the screen, the COVID-19 pandemic

has, for many of those privileged enough to still have jobs, provided a dystopia of boredom and yet more bureaucracy. As Albert Camus' narrator in *The Plague* discovers, "there is nothing less spectacular than a pestilence" (2013: 138). This is not the dystopia of *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2011) or *The Walking Dead* (Darabont, 2010–2022); think more of Franz Kafka's *The Trial* (2009) or Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1985).

It is interesting, then, that monotony should more often be regarded as the domain of utopia: a genre which is at its heart notably playful. One might cite the satirical fun of More's text and the paradoxical word he coins, which has come to define the genre. More's style was also influential in the utopian fiction that was to follow. In fact, playfulness appears embedded in the genre by necessity as much as design. Reflecting on the modest success of his utopian novel *Ecotopia*, Ernest Callenbach (2014: 170) writes that "constructing an imaginary society is a little like designing a game: the society evolves rules, principles, and conventions, and the author is not entirely in charge".

A common source of anti-utopianism springs from the sentiment that any truly utopian society would, by nature, be boring. It would have no need for art or competition and thus both beauty and personal growth would be sacrificed. In Neal Shusterman's 2016 novel *Scythe*, set in a world in which death itself has been conquered, there is certainly some debate about the merits of such a utopia. At one point, early in the novel, the narrator suggests a direct accordance between equality and tedium:

The growth of civilization was complete. Everyone knew it. When it came to the human race, there was no more left to learn. Nothing about our own existence to decipher. Which meant that no one person was more important than any other. In fact, in the grand scheme of things, everyone was equally useless (Shusterman, 2018: 19).

A little later, the two central characters, Citra and Rowan, who are scythes in training, are taken to an art gallery by their mentor, Scythe Faraday. There the "post mortality galleries" are referred to as "uninspired" compared to the historical galleries which offered "the art of the dying", detailing "longing and elation, anguish and joy" (Shusterman, 2018: 48).

As dystopias do not have to be exciting, utopia does not have to be boring. To return to *Ecotopia*, a more perfect society does not foreclose on change. When the narrator challenges an Ecotopian on their "stable-state theory" and why it does not get "awfully static", they reply: "Well, don't forget that we don't have to be stable. The system provides the stability, and we can be erratic within it"

(Callenbach, 2014: 31). Indeed, if utopian texts are anything, they are efforts to *disrupt* the status-quo; they are the opposite of stasis. One of the most painfully predictable results of the current pandemic is that so little is likely to change. Already, all the talk is about attempts to return to “business-as-usual”, as if such business was somehow desirable or sustainable.

In a piece on Ernest Cline’s novel *Ready Player One* (2011), Justin Nordstrom (2016: 241) asserts that,

while traditional utopias are not completely devoid of games, readers are left with the impression that utopians are nose-to-the-grindstone types. Perfecting society, utopian authors are want [*sic*] to point out, is not a frivolous task. Games, when they are mentioned at all, generally serve to highlight important roles and responsibilities—reinforcing utopians’ social hierarchies or moral sensibilities.

“Utopians might play games, but they don’t just play for fun”, concludes Nordstrom (2016: 241). There are certainly examples of this in other literary utopias. One might, for example, think of the way in which play is used in Lois Lowry’s *The Giver*. When protagonist Jonas asks his mother if she still played at all after the age of Twelve (an important age in his society because it is designated as the point at which children are essentially assigned a future career for which they must then prepare), she replies merely, “occasionally, ... but it didn’t seem as important to me” (Lowry, 2017: 22). Play is considered something one naturally leaves behind as they mature.

Or, we might think about the way in which play is co-opted by the forces of consumerism in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, where “Centrifugal Bumblepuppy”, essentially a game of catch that uses elaborate machinery, has become popular. The Director of Hatcheries sees this as the logical step in a consumer-led society, as he demonstrates stating that it was

strange to think that even in Our Ford’s day most games were played without more apparatus than a ball or two and a few sticks and perhaps a bit of netting. Imagine the folly of allowing people to play elaborate games which do nothing whatever to increase consumption (Huxley, 2004: 25).

Complexity has been developed for the sake of it with “new games [not being approved] unless [they] can be shown [to require] at least as much apparatus as the most complicated of existing games” (Huxley, 2004: 25–6). Thus, in

Brave New World, gaming (the state of free-play) has been co-opted by the state and commodified as part of the central drive to produce a society in which all desires are met.

You may wisely note that these literary texts are more readily considered dystopias than utopias proper, but they are, at least, representations of *failed* utopias. Nevertheless, play has tended to serve other purposes in the utopian imagination. Fundamentally, utopian visions upset hierarchies of power and knowledge, often through something as seemingly trivial as gaming. One historical example that might serve to illustrate this is the Roman festival of Saturnalia, which suspended many rules for the day and saw the up-ending of societal structures. Masters waited tables for their slaves or dined with them; slaves were allowed to disrespect masters without fear of reprisal; and some women were also allowed to attend banquets. It is the breaking of societal rules in the name of “play” that lends Saturnalia its fleeting utopian dimensions. Indeed, Gregory Claeys (2011: 204) cites Saturnalia as an example of how “it is possible to create utopic spaces or periods of time without reimagining an entire society recast as utopia”. Wright *et al.* highlight such play as having a use value beyond what we often see in utopian texts; that is, that play has a social function to both train future utopians and reinforce cultural norms:

In earlier historical periods, annual and monthly carnivals and associated festivities would provide social outlets for group play, with staged reenactments of sacred tales and sudden displays of body humor, and excess. Play was not simply a preparation for either serious adulthood or for war but also worked to reinforce group norms, by giving permission for periodic excessive behavior within clearly defined social boundaries (Wright *et al.*, 2010: 2).

In this vision of utopia, then, play is vital, and in many early conceptions this was certainly the case. Take the Land of Cockaigne, for example, an early medieval vision of abundance where visitors or inhabitants lived in a permanent state of holiday and relaxation. This was a place of utter indulgence where the primary problem of the day— that most of the populace toiled for long hours on the land and still struggled to have enough to eat—was resolved. Today, as people feel increasingly strung out, work longer hours, take work home, and struggle to make ends meet, it would be unsurprising to see a revival in utopian fiction to match, in particular, of fictions which imagine worlds where there is a significantly better work-life balance.

Utopianists are right to be wary of such escapism. After all, there are serious problems to address. But gaming does not have to be all about the relinquishing of social duties. You may notice that there is a tension here. On the one hand, I argue against a view of utopians as figures who only play when they want to teach or learn; and on the other, I suggest that play can serve an important social purpose. I propose that, if we use play imaginatively, it can be powerfully utopian, not in some overt didactic sense but rather in a more liberating way.

Consider *Ready Player One*, a novel which I loved but which also frustrates me greatly. In *Ready Player One*, a future dystopia is described. The world is in the grips of an energy crisis, the impacts of global warming are more overt, and there is widespread poverty in North America, and social degradation. Most of the inhabitants spend their time playing in a virtual world called “The OASIS”, where they take on new personas and can shape whole planets to their liking. Fundamentally, we can see that Cline, a self-confessed video game nerd, tells a story about how gaming is ruining the world (people are too busy escaping reality to actively engage in problem-solving). It is an odd conclusion to draw for someone so evidently keen on play. As a result, this message is diluted, becomes almost throwaway, because most of the fun of *Ready Player One* comes from the gaming world itself and from the format of the text. Megan Condis (2016: 2) calls *Ready Player One* a “ludic” novel, “not only about game playing but [requiring] game-playing and puzzle solving” on behalf of the reader. For Condis, the central quest narrative “serve[s] as a classroom wherein student-readers learn about the origins of gamer-dom, test their knowledge, and prove their geeky credentials by demonstrating their mastery of the texts Cline identifies as foundational to gamer culture” (Condis, 2016: 3). Broadening this out, Michael Holquist (1968: 119–20) recognises this as a trait of all literary utopias, writing “not only does the author of utopias play the game, so does the *reader* of utopias. And the best examples of the genre are arranged in such a way that they may be ‘played’ again as often as they are read”. In short, whatever the text actually says about gaming should always be read against the context that utopia is itself a game and utopian texts, therefore, the celebration of gaming as a creative outlet that generates ideas about better worlds.

I conclude by considering Italo Calvino’s novella, *Invisible Cities*, and its relationship to the game of chess. In his piece on utopia and play, Holquist suggests that the game of chess is an effort to bring structure, order, even perfection to a chaotic and irrational world, and this analogy is also played out in *Invisible Cities*. In the novella, Calvino imagines meetings between the Venetian traveller Marco Polo and Kublai Khan, emperor of the Mongol empire. Polo seeks to describe cities, both imagined and created, he has visited in Kublai’s empire, which he claims often to be on the fringes of the empire, in places Kublai would himself

never visit. As he does so, Polo paints a wonderful and often utopian picture of a fragmented, diverse, and rich collection of different customs, traditions, and architectural styles, which come to symbolise the cauldron of life itself. Kublai, as the representative of empire, seeks to make this cacophony of voices one. He is desperate to see something coherent and unified, something he might understand and hence control:

Contemplating these essential landscapes, Kublai reflected on the invisible order that sustains cities, on the rules that decreed how they rise, take shape and prosper, adapting themselves to the seasons, and then how they sadden and fall in ruins. At times he thought he was on the verge of discovering a coherent, harmonious system underlying the infinite deformities and discords, but no model could stand up to the comparison with the game chess. Perhaps, instead of racking one's brain to suggest with the ivory pieces' scant help visions which were anyway destined to oblivion, it would suffice to play a game according to the rules, and to consider each successive state of the board as one of the countless forms that the system of forms assembles and destroys (Calvino, 1997: 110).

In this passage, Kublai comes to the realisation that building communities plays out like a game in which the board continually evolves. It is not the case that societies rise and fall predictably into ruin, but rather that creating social realms is about assembling and destroying forms to further the state of the game. After all, practice makes perfect.

To some extent, what unites the utopias discussed here, from More's *Utopia* and Callenbach's *Ecotopia*, to Cline's *Ready Player One*, is as much their valorisation of play through form as it is any sense that play must be central to the narrative. *Invisible Cities* is no exception. As a member of the French School of writing known as Oulipo, Calvino used mathematics to impose a pseudo-rational order on our encounters with his imagined cities. As much as this imposed constraints, it was essentially a creative process, because it forced the writer to think imaginatively about narrative constructions and the architecture of the literary work itself.

Twenty-first century culture has fetishized the exciting dystopia, often at the expense of what has been perceived to be its dull cousin, the utopia. But, as Holquist (1968: 111) notes, a "generally playful quality [can] be found in even the grimmest utopian literature". As the pandemic has revealed how tedious a

dystopia really is, perhaps we can tell the naysayers that, just as dystopia can actually be boring, utopia is, by its very nature, a dynamic, exciting, uplifting, funny, liberating, and most of all, *fun* game.

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