6.3. The Utopian Impulse in the Post-Truth Era in the Visual Novel *Orwell: Ignorance Is Strength*

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Abstract

Orwell: Ignorance Is Strength is a story-rich video game that casts the player in the role of a government official in a top-secret department of the Orwell surveillance programme created with the purpose of protecting the nation at all costs. Besides raising awareness of the spread of fake news, misinformation, and their use in propaganda, the game recruits the player to actively take part in the perpetuation of an unnamed totalitarian state masquerading as a democracy. This essay relies on Michał Kłosiński's argument that video games, as an interactive medium, provide more room for the utopian impulse than traditional narrative media, such as novels, plays, or films. It focuses on the player's affective reactions to being implicated in upholding the system, and the possibilities for gaining agency. *Orwell: Ignorance Is Strength* replicates moral dilemmas that an average internet user is likely to face in the post-truth era, inducing the player to feel anger, disgust, and shame for being controlled and manipulated, ultimately leading to the desire to resist the system. The essay also demonstrates that the way this desire is achieved through the gameplay shows parallels with Megan Boler's "pedagogy of discomfort", which enhances the likelihood of transferring the insights gained and the utopian impulse to the real world.

Key words: video games, dystopia, *Orwell: Ignorance Is Strength*, affect, post-truth era

The title of the videogame which makes a homage to George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1989) is a clear indication of its main focus. *Orwell: Ignorance Is Strength* (Osmotic Studios, 2018) explores the nature of surveillance and engagement with propaganda but in circumstances updated to the digital era.

Osmotic Studio's visual novel, set in April 2017 in an unnamed country only referred to as "The Nation", is based on twenty-first-century concerns over privacy and internet safety, and most importantly, lays bare the process of the creation of fake news. Bordering the fictional state of Parges, The Nation is a surveillance state somewhere in the borderlands between East and West, recruiting agents to operate the Orwell surveillance system, a role that falls to the player. It is through this computer program that the player receives their tasks, and gathers all the information about the gameworld and the characters targeted by the secret service.

The game's relevance is heightened by the dystopian gameworld, which has much in common with the present "post-truth era". Although "post-truth", defined as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief", became the word of the year in 2016 (Oxford Languages, 2016), Patrik Fridlund cautions that it would be naïve to assume that politics in previous times were based on "truth" (2020: 216). Yet, it is in the twenty-first century that increasing concern has been raised over political speech becoming increasingly detached from a register in which factual truths are "plain", and the post-truth era is characterized by the propagation of falsehoods, lies, and misinformation, as well as outrageous exaggeration and the distortion of reality (Fridlund, 2020: 216). The role of the new media, whose interactivity can both encourage uncritical involvement with and the recognition and conscious scrutiny of the tendencies above, is imperative in the larger public's engagement in the discourse. *Orwell: Ignorance Is Strength* thus creates the perfect platform for this purpose, since videogames are "laboratories which allow us to simulate consequences of different social, political and economic policies in real time" (Kłosiński, 2018: 12), providing the opportunity to gain insight into how different social and political systems work.

Adapting Ruth Levitas's utopian method to video games, Michał Kłosiński demonstrates that video game virtuality can be regarded as a utopian project due to the fact that it offers a critique of social reality, it proposes alternative social, political, and economic orders, and may lead to a re-definition of being human, of ethics, and morality (Kłosiński, 2018: 12). What is more, the medium-specific characteristics of videogames allow for the player to become "a feeling and active subject" (Anable, 2018: xiv), in contrast to consumers of traditional media who lack the feeling of agency inherent in interactive games, where the narrative stalls without the player performing actions to move it forward (Owen, 2017: 47), thus providing the player with the possibility to experiment. In his investigation of the topic at hand, *Playing Dystopia: Nightmarish Worlds in Video Games and the Player's Aesthetic Response*, Gerald Farca draws the conclusion

that "the video game dystopia describes a new strategic enterprise of the utopian philosophy" (2018: 16). In his view, this enterprise is accomplished by the following technique:

> By sending the player on a journey through hell but retaining a hopeful (utopian) core, it involves her in a playful trial action (or test run) in which she may test, track, and explore in detail an estranged gameworld and an alternative societal model … This venture into the fictional reality of dystopia shows potential to warn the player about negative trends within empirical reality and to explore emancipatory routes that may transform the gameworld. It thus serves the player as a subversive example and inducement to effect social change and transformation in the empirical world. (Farca, 2018: 16)

However, Marcus Schulzke warns of a different scenario. In situations in which the diegetic rules of the gameworld are closely related to the problems the dystopia is supposed to draw attention to, the underlying logic of the game mechanics may "cause players to become participants in creating dystopia" (Schulzke, 2014: 14). This paper aims to investigate how the visual novel *Orwell: Ignorance Is Strength* affects the player who has no choice but to assume the role of the government agent, what type of estrangement is present in this particular game, and how the utopian impulse plays out in relation to these two factors.

The game starts with the player naming and customizing a fairly simplified avatar, then filling in an aptitude test to get a job as an agent working with the Orwell surveillance system, after agreeing to the following terms:

> I am willing to severely affect the lives of citizens and non-citizens of The Nation.
> I will do whatever is necessary to keep The Nation from harm.
> While working I will only adhere to the statutes and principles of The Office. (Osmotic Studios, 2018)

The tiny action of checking the box underneath to agree illustrates how players engage with videogames. David Owen argues that players experience a new form of suspension of disbelief compared with the theatrical or cinematic model: "the player chooses to join the fiction, imagines that the fiction affects them, personally, and identifies as an extension of themselves, the avatar" (2017: 3). The player becomes audience/participant/player/character at the

same time. Working as an agent requires interaction with websites, emails, podcasts, text messages, dating app profiles, medical records, bank account statements, social media profiles, for example, which all amount to the digital footprint of various characters. The game achieves immersion into a digital environment familiar to most contemporary Internet users, while the avatar is no more than an empty shell which practically fades and the player's physical screen overlaps with the screen the agent can see in the game. With no visible avatar, an unusual form of identification takes place. Normally, "the assumed (unseen) body of the character is mentally superimposed on that of the player's, as though the player were in the game environment" (Owen, 2017: 48), in this case, it is the physical screen of the player that turns into that of the agent and the game seems to protrude into the real physical world. Consequently, players find themselves in a very familiar situation: sitting at their own desks navigating a digitally mediated world, while the game overtakes this everyday situation by turning them into a government agent.

The main target under surveillance is Raban Vhart, a Pargesian refugee, who aims to expose government corruption in articles and podcasts on the website he runs. The agent's task is to find information to incriminate him or anyone close to him in order to destroy his credibility. This can be accomplished with the help of a top secret function of the surveillance system, dubbed the 'Influencer'. Ampleford, the agent's supervisor, explains how it operates:

> It can spread a story through social media channels efficiently and thoroughly. So find me datachunks to construct a narrative from … The first [piece of] information spread by your command alone. It's a beautiful thing, the destruction of truth, isn't it? I'm certain you can get me enough information to let me construct our own little conspiracy theory. (Osmotic Studios, 2018)

In a nutshell, whatever information Vhart intends to divulge on his website is countered by a narrative manufactured from half-truths and malicious intent. The Office exploits the smallest morsel of information the player manages to recover from Vhart's, his wife's, and his brother's digital footprint, leading to the suppression of the opposition and Vhart's death. If the player follows the orders and accomplishes the tasks set by The Office, the outcome is a very dissatisfying ending, which prompts the player to re-play and make different choices when submitting information about the targets. These strategies lead to several scenarios that have only slightly different consequences, invariably resulting in the death of both Vhart and the truth he seeks to expose, until the player starts looking for cracks in the system and takes down their superior, Ampleford.

It turns out that Ampleford (aka Melissa O'Brian) is the head of Operation "War is Peace", whose single aim is to ensure peace and prosperity in The Nation at the expense of its rival, Parges, by creating the circumstances for a permanent, armed conflict in the neighbouring country, in agreement with the president of Parges. When confronted with this information, Ampleford reveals the truth about the player's position as agent:

> If *you* expect me to become magically arrested now because *you* shifted the blame to me—no. This isn't the way things go with The Office. The Aptitude Test was never meant to check for *your* abilities as an agent. It was meant to check *your* character for manipulability. *You* still seem to be clinging to the faint hope *you* could change a thing in this. Make a difference. *Your* ignorance is [as] delightful, "agent," as it is pathetic. (Osmotic Studios, 2018, my italics)

The direct address — note all the second person pronouns in the quote above — would mean breaking down the fourth wall in film and theatre, which shatters the suspension of disbelief. Videogames, however, due to interactivity, can accommodate the second-person perspective, though rarely, and often with a didactic effect (Owen, 2017: 52). This is not the case in *Orwell: Ignorance Is Strength*: the direct address in messages sent by Ampleford is part of the immersion, and the player's frustration only increases upon finding out that they are exploited and lack agency within The Office, ultimately becoming all the more invested in proving Ampleford wrong. Thus, their only option to strike back is to leak the top secret information to the public, which finally brings a different ending.

Farca's in-depth examination of videogame dystopias concludes that the most efficient method to foster the utopian impulse is the following structure: "confronting the player with both the possibility of attaining a better future and its loss ... makes the player choose whether she wants to become a catalyst for change" (Farca, 2018: 27). *Orwell: Ignorance Is Strength* takes a different approach, as the visual novel presents no future options, and the gameplay encourages identification with the role of the loyal government agent. Becoming embroiled in the spread of falsehoods and witnessing the power of social media to distort reality, which also leads to Vhart's death, makes the player question their involvement with The Office, bringing about an affective situation akin to what Megan Boler terms "pedagogy of discomfort" (1999: 196–8). In "The Risks of Empathy" (1997), she argues that reading practices that foster critical thinking should be encouraged instead of identification and passive empathy. Boler demonstrates that maintaining an emotional distance leads to a different affective

response from readers: by preventing total identification with characters and not providing an emotional catharsis to bring closure to a problematic situation, literary works encourage "self-reflective participation". She argues for "an active reading practice that involves challenging my own assumptions and world views" to make the reader realize they are part of an oppressive system, and, in turn, prompt them to effectuate change in the real world (Boler, 1997: 263).

The "self-reflective participation" and "active reading practice" that Boler advocates are exactly what the medium of video games requires of the player. I contend that *Orwell: Ignorance Is Strength* is based on the principle of the pedagogy of discomfort, which can be clearly observed when mapping the player's affective response. First, the player follows instructions, takes up the role of the government agent, experiencing disillusionment, remorse at being complicit in one or more characters' death, and a growing feeling of being manipulated by a totalitarian system. The player's frustration with this ending prompts them to make different choices, but the game still ends with the repression of truth, enhancing the player's feeling of powerlessness. This scenario cannot be escaped unless the player formulates a new objective, one not specified by the game: the system that has incorporated them as agents must be overthrown by means of exposing government machinations. Once this is accomplished, the visual novel presents a new option. Raban Vhart survives to make a different final podcast:

> There is only one logical course of action: I call on you. I challenge you to finally stop believing lies coming from these corrupt leaders. Shake off the invisible hand on your shoulder! What becomes of the future is up to you alone. You, the people, need to shape your own truth! (Osmotic Studios, 2018)

The game ends with a direct address to the player, no longer a government agent but one of "the people" who, after playing the game, are supposed to recognize the pitfalls presented by propaganda and fake news in the post-truth era. *Orwell: Ignorance Is Strength* takes the player on a different affective experience from the one postulated by Farca: rather than placing the player into an estranged gameworld and an alternative social model to experiment in, the video game protrudes into the player's reality. The visual novel relies heavily on the familiarity of the digitally mediated world, and the direct address typical of the second-person perspective enhances the overlap of the player's and avatar's (that is, the agent's) screen. This emphasizes the player's complicity in supporting a totalitarian state when not attempting to challenge the post-truth

era. The morally questionable work prevents the player's total identification with the role of the agent, and its outcome builds up feelings of frustration and discomfort with their lack of agency. The strategy of implying what dire consequences everyday, uncritical engagement with a digitally mediated world may have causes the player to feel estranged from their own reality, making them reflect on their real-life media consumption, the trustworthiness of information, intentions, and identities in the digital realm, and even the consequences of the lack of fact-checking when sharing information. What is more, the game ends with the exposure of truth, but provides no resolution. Vhart's speech is a call for action that literally cannot be accomplished in the game, as the game ends, making a strong case for encouraging the player to transfer the utopian impulse to shape a better future to the real world.

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