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'In this game that we're playing'
Nineteen Eighty-Four *and Video Games*

At roughly the midpoint of George Orwell's dystopian fiction *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), during a fleeting moment of respite from his nightmarish existence, protagonist Winston declares to his secret lover: 'In this game that we're playing, we can't win. Some kinds of failure are better than other kinds, that's all' (*NEF*, p. 142).

The game of which Winston speaks involves attempting to navigate a totalitarian system, wherein no conceivable winning scenario is possible. Full devotion to the 'Ingsoc' Party and its leader 'Big Brother' is compulsory down to the thought, to the minute expression or gesture, to minor aesthetic indulgence, and even to the very notion of a private act. The state, embodied in the figure of Big Brother, sees all. The internalization of the law is so complete that most citizens police themselves, the rest police each other, and any infraction is tantamount to sedition. Exerting one's individuality brings certain death, eventually. Winston and his lover Julia know it, but they pursue their free will in each other's fleeting company.

Traces of Orwell's critiques of totalitarian society, in both blunt and subtle forms, exist throughout video games. Major themes of dystopia, surveillance culture, technologies of control, authoritarianism, and the oppression of a large underclass exist in innumerable video game narratives and environments. Some of these are inspired by and refer directly to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, while others more obliquely borrow its themes and concerns. Games like the *BioShock* series (2007–), *Remember Me* (2013), the *Watch Dogs* series (2014–), *We Happy Few* (2018), *Orwell* (2016–), *Inside* (2016), and *Papers, Please* (2013) are among the more innovative and thoughtful video games addressing these issues. Do these simulations encourage critical thought around the eventuality of totalitarianism, of which Orwell warned? Or are these games merely systems in which to practise a kind of entrapment, in which so-called freedom may be practised within a medium that is

exceedingly ordered in its very constitution? Through the stories games tell, as well as in the very form of video games, is it even possible to truly stimulate a model of criticality? This chapter proposes that the critical influence of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* exists not only in video game narratives and the constitution of their navigable spaces but also in their wide variety of strategies, rule-based systems, rhetorical capacities, ethical problematics, and – critically – their effective deployment of failure to provoke thought in players.

Nineteen Eighty-Four

Orwell's novel details an alternative dystopian reality in which the world has been reduced to three great superpowers which engage in ceaseless war: Oceania, Eurasia, and Eastasia. The story follows Winston Smith, a subject of the government of Oceania, a totalitarian society dominated by the Party and its dictator, Big Brother. As the embodiment of the Party, Big Brother is purportedly protector and guide, but in fact functions as an all-seeing eye that dominates the culture in a draconian fashion, subjugating all under his gaze. This is emblematized in Big Brother's visage, which is exhaustively reproduced on Oceania's coins, books, stamps, banners, and packaging; his eyes seem to follow citizens everywhere. More pointedly, two-way 'telescreens' surveil behaviour and feed everyone a constant stream of Party ideology. Winston eventually learns that Big Brother is not a person but an idea embodied in an image, which is used to galvanize the authority of the Party. The notion that 'Big Brother is Watching You' – as Oceanic propaganda informs its citizens – organizes all logic around Party ideals, to the point of breaking all human bonds except those which serve the state. Social control extends to the relationships between people in terms of love, friendship, and fidelity: children spy and inform on their parents; marriage is mechanical and intended for reproduction, not love. Pleasure has been beaten out of the living, and only those closest to the leadership of the Party are offered anything more than base existence and a grey life of endless labour. It is a model of total repression, in which, as Winston puts it: 'Nothing was your own except the few cubic centimetres inside your skull' (*NEF*, p. 29).

Orwell places great emphasis on detailing how systemic rule-based control is exerted over society. The will of Big Brother is administered through Oceania's four ministries: the Ministry of Truth (addressing all avenues for information and thought), the Ministry of Peace (addressing war), the Ministry of Love (addressing law and order), and the Ministry of Plenty (addressing economic affairs). A low-level employee, Winston busies himself

in the Ministry of Truth, squirrelled away in a cubicle at the Records Department, manipulating news of the present and the past so that it always aligns with the Party's agenda. Of keen importance in this narrative is the manipulation of language as a means to control thought. This is so central an idea for Orwell that he dedicates an entire appendix to the concept of 'Newspeak', which is described as 'the official language of Oceania' (*NEF*, p. 5) and to whose principles more than a dozen pages are dedicated. With Newspeak, terms like *crimethink* (any thought against the party ideology), *sexcrime* (sexual immorality), *facecrime* (non-compliant facial expressions in public), and *ownlife* (individualism and eccentricity) are engineered as a system to foreclose the very possibility of formulating a thought outside of Party orthodoxies:

> The intention was to make speech, and especially speech on any subject not ideologically neutral, as nearly as possible independent of consciousness. [. . .] a Party member called upon to make a political or ethical judgment should be able to spray forth the correct opinions as automatically as a machine gun spraying forth bullets. His training fitted him to do this, the language gave him an almost fool-proof instrument, and the texture of the words, with their harsh sound and a certain willful ugliness which was in accord with the spirit of Ingsoc, assisted the process still further. (*NEF*, pp. 321–22)

All so-called Oldspeak is slowly being revised into Newspeak, and Orwell captures well the intellectually binding transformation of language taking place, and how eventually any way of being that is outside of Ingsoc ideology would be 'nameless and therefore unimaginable' (*NEF*, p. 324). Orwell intricately maps the ways that thought, human connection, and particularly sexual impulses are rerouted into 'war-fever and leader-worship' (*NEF*, p. 139). Through his detailed attention to the function of language and its connection to the regulation of thought, Orwell reveals the ideological strictures and value systems that are embedded in linguistic rules, and the way those rules ultimately engage in world-making.

Video Games as Rule-Based Systems

One of Orwell's most urgent concepts addresses how language can define the terms or rules around which a whole sense of world-making comes into existence. This intersects meaningfully with a major line of thought around the implicit qualities of video games as a medium. Video games consist of rule-based systems. The combinations of rules within a system result in a simulation with which the player engages. From the study of play even prior to video games, rules have been thought of as central to games. Roger

Caillois, in his introduction to *Man, Play, and Games*, wrote in 1958 that '[a]ny game is a system of rules. [. . .] They cannot be violated on any account, or else the game ends right away and is destroyed by the same fact.'[1] Many have argued that video games should be primarily understood as rule-based systems, and therefore properly studied not as narratives but as games, in terms of Caillois's 'systems of rules'. For example, the pioneering game scholar Jesper Juul famously argued for an approach to games in which they are understood as rule-based, formal systems, but eventually softened his position on games to a view in which they combine rules and fictional worlds.[2] Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman define a game as 'a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome'.[3] These positions are part of a long debate about how video games should be understood and studied. But for the purposes of this chapter, what is key to remember is that, as Rolf H. Nohr puts it, '[t]ogether, rules create the impression of a hermetically sealed autonomous world. [. . .] Rules have a way of erasing that which lies beyond the field of play, just as it normalizes actions within the game space.'[4] Or as Pat Harrigan has more pointedly declared: 'A game design is an argument.'[5]

If this is the case, then video games propose a version of the world through their simulations, and create the conditions under which it is possible to move within them. The utopias and dystopias in games embed players in systems they can experiment with, and in which they can contemplate their relationship to the ideals that have given rise to such spaces.[6] Like Orwell's Newspeak, the rule systems within video games set the terms in which the worlding of the game occurs. For example, in a game categorized as a 'shooter' it is likely that most of the core mechanics would be bent towards twitch-reflexes, an adversarial relation to other entities, and an understanding of space orientated towards optimizing strategic positioning. Alternatively, in a game emphasizing exploration and puzzle-solving, a relationship to space might be more open and inquisitive, encourage experimentation, and de-prioritize twitch-reflexes.

Video games' world-making properties have, likewise, long been considered central to the unique qualities of the medium.[7] Janet Murray, in her ground-breaking text *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997), foregrounds traversable space as a key asset of digital media.[8] Lev Manovich identifies eminently navigable space as a 'key form' of new media.[9] And Espen Aarseth argues: 'The defining element in computer games is spatiality. Computer games are essentially concerned with spatial representation and negotiation, and therefore a classification of computer games can be based on how they represent – or, perhaps, *implement* – space.'[10] Henry Jenkins proposes 'an understanding of game designers less as storytellers and more as narrative architects'.[11]

In his 'Game Design as Narrative Architecture' (2006), Jenkins describes game consoles as 'machines for generating compelling spaces'.[12] These spatial stories, Jenkins argues, 'are pushed forward by the character's movement across the map', and telling these stories well becomes about 'designing the geography of imaginary worlds, so that obstacles thwart and affordances facilitate the protagonist's forward movement towards resolution'.[13] Games as rule-based systems make space for certain kinds of engagements, while limiting or entirely foreclosing upon others. Video games present persuasive worlds that suggest certain things to the player about the nature of their relations within them. As a result, video games tread into discussions of ethics and have powerful rhetorical functions.[14] As with Newspeak, games communicate not only ideas but also values and ethics.

Video games require engagement; the player is expected to make decisions which, in the best games, have consequences. This creates the conditions for simulations that, as Miguel Sicart argues, can be especially useful for stimulating ethical self-inquiry in the player.[15] Video games, he asserts, require a degree of complicity in the player, and therefore what we play and the experiences we have while playing matter. Sicart suggests that we play by mobilizing our ethics as well as our skills, and that careful design choices can encourage players to consider their actions from a moral perspective.[16] Particularly in the case of being presented with more than playing as simply a 'good' or 'evil' character, being faced with the choice between a bad option and a worse one – what he calls a 'wicked problem' – can engender ethical self-inquiry.[17] Many of the best video games that explore Orwellian themes are potent because of the friction that results from engaging with systems that ultimately deny the player's ability to distance themselves from the moral complications of their choices. This is where the notion of how we might play, even though we may inevitably fail, takes on moral significance. Part of what is subtly communicated in Winston's musing on the 'game that we're playing' is that its rules not only virtually guarantee failure but set the terms by which a player must submit to the rules in order to play at all. In the next section of this chapter, several key games that exhibit the influence of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* will be discussed, particularly in terms of their implication of the player as complicit in ethically difficult contexts.

Nineteen Eighty-Four and Video Games

While dystopian authoritarian cultures surely proliferate as the setting for many video games, this is not necessarily the most crucial way in which the influence of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* can be detected. As suggested above, it is more precisely in the articulation of a relation between

authoritarianism, the weaponization of language, and excessive bureaucratization that the uniqueness of Orwell's vision lies. One of the most well-known and beloved examples of a dystopian world in video games is *BioShock* (2007), a first-person perspective shooter developed by 2K Boston (previously Irrational Games) and published by 2K Games. The game's creative director Ken Levine specifically mentions the literature of Ayn Rand and George Orwell as influences upon it.[18] Widely regarded as one of the best video games of all time, *BioShock* was also one of the highest selling of its period, and certainly one with continuing relevance to anyone interested in video game culture. Set in 1960, *BioShock* explores a defunct undersea utopia built in the 1940s by Andrew Ryan, a corporate billionaire. Ryan has created a utopian haven for the individualist, in keeping with the philosophical tenets of objectivism popularized by the works of Ayn Rand, particularly *The Fountainhead* (1943) and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957).[19] The main playable character, Jack, enters the defunct art deco underwater city of Rapture. In this retro-futuristic space, citizens were to pursue extreme self-realization and individualism, as a manifestation of the egoism of its leader's philosophy. Of course, it has not gone well. In the present day of the game, the utopian society is destroyed, and scantly populated by survivors of a civil war that decimated most of Rapture. Among those left behind are genetically modified and deformed 'Splicers'. Wandering this dystopia, it is up to the player to discern the truth of how Rapture fell.

One of the original interventions of *BioShock* that set it apart from games of its time was its sustained engagement with philosophical ideas, but also how players were implicated in ethically vexed actions through their in-game actions. Part of this was achieved by the upending of a sense of player autonomy, or free will. Within the narrative – and even for the player themselves – moral ambiguity, hypnotic mind control, and deception play a key role. This is smartly introduced through the narrative use of the repeated phrase 'Would you kindly', a critical hypnotic suggestion trigger revealed deep within the game. Jack (the playable character) falsely believes in his own free will and autonomy, while in fact the trigger phrase is used to drive actions and outcomes at key moments. Though the specific scenarios are very different from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the game recalls the novel's idolized and elusive autocratic leader, its focus on brainwashing, its bleakness, its attention to the crushing denial of free will, and its general focus on the connection between language and the parameters of what may be thought. In this respect, 'Would you kindly?' recalls the Ingsoc Newspeak catchphrases designed to suppress and corral free thinking.

In *Papers, Please* (2013), developed by Lucas Pope and published by 3909 LLC, a player takes the role of a border inspector in the fictive

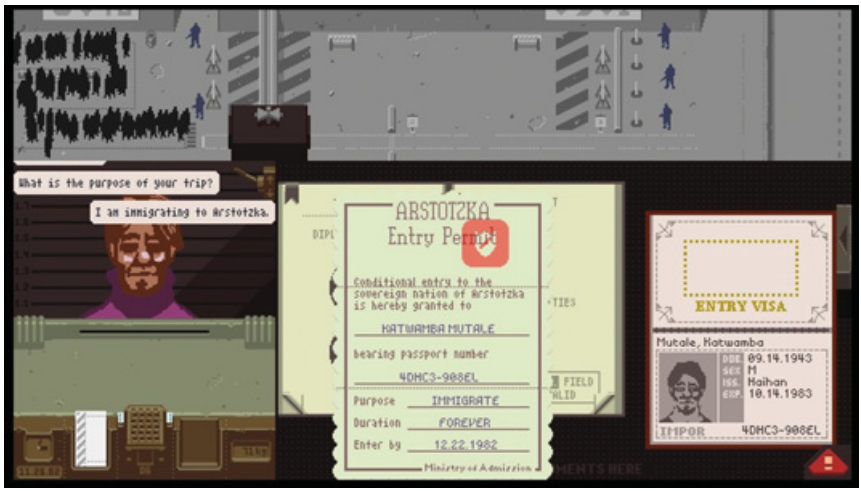

Figure 16.1 *Papers, Please* (2013), developed by Lucas Pope and published by 3909 LLC. Screenshot by Benjamin Tran for the author

Soviet Union-esque nation of Arstotzka. The game is set in 1982 and its aesthetics reflect the rendering capacities of games during that time (Figure 16.1): flat and blocky sixteen-bit imagery, with a click-and-drag interface. After winning the labour lottery, the player character is made responsible for checking the immigration papers of potential visitors and discerning, on the basis of the limited information presented, whether to accept them. The screen displays a view of the checkpoint, and beneath it an image of the migrant attempting to pass the border, as well as the paperwork they are presenting. Some are refugees fleeing war-torn countries, others wish to enter with a work permit, some are sex workers, and others are potential enemies of Arstotzka. One never has all the information necessary to make a fully informed decision. But one must work quickly to decide, because the day's labour is timed. Processing more people brings more credits, but of course the regulations change and grow incrementally more complicated. Overlook too many discrepancies in documentation and credits are potentially lost. Credits lost have an impact on the player's ability to provide shelter, food, heat, and medicine for their family members. The actions expected in gameplay simulate mundane dehumanizing procedure, what Pope himself characterizes as 'Orwellian communist bureaucracy'.[20] Sicart in his analysis of *Papers, Please* observes: 'The dull routine of these choices, such as the daily work of a border control guard, is bound up in rules and procedures, which can further remove the participant from feeling culpable. The emotional impact of *Papers, Please* is largely a result of this design.'[21]

A player immediately feels themselves a cog in a machine that is inhumane in its procedural functioning, and in which it is increasingly hard to make good choices. The game purposefully grinds the player down over thirty-one in-game days of play through the use of repetition, protocols, and instrumental rationality.[22] The rules of the game in *Papers, Please* are carefully curated to convey how authoritarian power bears down on the lowly bureaucrat, and how enforcement of the totalitarian regime comes as a result of a thousand small, often poorly informed decisions that add up to larger consequences. This endows the game with a rhetorical force. In disallowing the possibility of playing in an ethically fulfilling way, *Papers, Please* interrupts the ability to play for 'fun', or to achieve a satisfying win state.

Unlike the independent game *Papers, Please*, the AAA mainstream title *Remember Me* (2013) creates a richly traversable world in which the player is bound to be a glitch in the system, and to work against the repressive rules of an advanced hyper-capitalist, corporatized police state.[23] It is a third-person perspective (Figure 16.2), science-fiction action adventure set in a cyberpunk future, in which the commodification of memories has generated a dystopian reality driven by a memory economy. The game was developed by the French DONTNOD Entertainment, and published by Capcom. Set in Neo-Paris in 2084, the playable character is an elite memory 'hunter' named Nilin who has the power to hack, manipulate, and delete the memories of others. The problem is that she is imprisoned, her memory has been erased, and she no

Figure 16.2 *Remember Me* (2013), developed by DONTNOD Entertainment and published by CAPCOM. Image ©CAPCOM U.S.A., INC.

longer has any clear sense of her role in this carceral nightmare. Nilin must navigate a dismal scenario in which a revolution in smart-tech has given rise to an extreme surveillance society whose primary economy consists of the encoding, commoditization, and exchange of memories. DONTNOD characterizes their possible world as one where the 'last remnants of privacy and intimacy have been swept away in what appears to be a logical progression of the explosive growth of social networks at the beginning of the 21st century'.[24] The Sensen memory technology has been developed by a mega-corporation called Memorize, and its control has created corruptive effects that the player's character is driven to uncover, along with her own true identity and relationship to the corporation. Edge, her elusive ally and leader of the anti-Memorize resistance group, the 'Errorists', has nebulous aims, and Nilin is never sure whom to trust, or what is real. In retrospect, Nilin's disorientation prefigures the reality of 'alternative facts' and the political struggle to strategically mobilize competing notions of the real. However, the game was, in its own moment, on the pulse of complicated ethical questions issuing around the rise of social media networks like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter, all of which emerged – seemingly unchecked – as powerful forces that shape political realities and galvanize a 'post-truth' era.

Notably the time period in which the game is set, 2084, is intended by the lead designer, Jean-Max Moris, to signal Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

> The book depicts a very vertical authoritarian society, the kind of society which is now pretty much non-existent in Western Europe and North America. But we believe a new insidious, horizontal form of control has emerged. Since the revolution of instant content sharing, people have been uploading more and more of their personal data onto social networks. What is being done with all that data, most people don't care to know, because the 'cool' benefits outweigh the perceived threat to individual freedom.[25]

Over the course of the game, the ethical implications of memory manipulation, the new social hierarchies that have emerged from the memory economy, and the pernicious by-products of advanced memory culture come to the fore. These culminate in a nefarious social cleansing plot against the most devastated victims of the Sensen technology, and a rude awakening as to the nature of the 'revolutionary' counsel Nilin has chosen to follow. In keeping with Sicart's ideas about ethical difficulty in games, the outcomes leave the player short of feeling like a conventional video game hero.

Anxieties about surveillance culture as exemplified in *Remember Me* are a dominant theme widely explored in mainstream video games, such as the hacker-themed *Watch Dogs* series. A third-person action-adventure video franchise developed by Ubisoft Montreal and published by Ubisoft, and

originally released in 2014, the game plunges the player into what reads as a technothriller. While each game's specific narrative varies, players must use their character's hacking skills in intrigues that explore common anxieties around the powers of advanced computation and digital surveillance culture. *Watch Dogs* feels less troubled about the nefarious dimensions of the networked society. And at times the game even seems to invest in power fantasies about commanding powerful technologies, even while it purports to critique them.

Among the games that harness the more potent rhetorical capacities of the medium is *Orwell: Keeping an Eye on You* (2016), which is especially relevant for its direct homage to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. An episodic simulation game developed by the indie German designers Osmotic Studios, and published by Fellow Traveller, *Orwell* immerses the player in an alternative present in which an authoritarian government called The Party has risen to power in 2009. Led by Prime Minister Blaine on the strength of his promise of a Safety Bill, which The Party was able to pass in 2012, The Nation has become a control society with total digital surveillance capacities and hypernationalist values.

In the role of an outside agent tasked with monitoring subjects as an 'Investigator' for The Nation, players attempt to create a profile for suspected individuals, poring over the details of their personal data in a covert surveillance system called Orwell (Figure 16.3). The system functions as

Figure 16.3 A view of the interface for *Orwell: Keeping an Eye on You* (2016), developed by Osmotic Studios and published by Fellow Traveller. Image courtesy of Osmotic Studios. Used with permission

a security programme that utilizes information retrieval from personal blogs, chats, news, and other resources, along with human-driven suspect profiling. Through frequent contact with an 'Adviser' (named Symes, after Winston's disappeared acquaintance Syme from the novel), you are trained to share the appropriate 'Datachunks' with higher-ups, to aid with anti-terrorism efforts against The Nation. The so-called Orwell Ethical Codex delegates the gathering of information to Investigators, and the execution of actions based on uploaded Datachunks to Advisers. The game's division of labour emphasizes the dimension of human discernment involved in surveillance by creating the conditions under which sending the wrong Datachunks may result in false positives with devastating results. There is a strong focus on social media and on technologically mediated conversations which can easily be surveilled, and on the prospect of doing this for the greater good. The player must decide which information is pertinent – which often involves conjecture. What becomes interesting is how quickly one slips into the goal-orientation of combing through the minutiae of strangers' lives, and ascribing meanings to those details. Playing feels only slightly dissimilar from scouring a Facebook profile, and surely the use of a similar blue, grey, and white colour scheme is no accident. The polygonized aesthetic has a distancing effect that encourages dispassionate consideration of systems that players might normally leave unexamined.

In the game, a terror attack in Freedom Plaza occurs in the capital city of Bonton, and the player is set to work scrolling through windows of information to harvest clues about potential perpetrators. Two things become immediately clear: first, there are stakes involved in what gets uploaded to the system; second, it is impossible to definitively know which details might be the most important. Opposition to the authoritarian Nation comes in the form of Thought, a supposedly peaceful group headed by Abraham Goldfels. In reference to *Orwell*, the critic Colin Campbell notes that it 'offers some stark lessons in the way we all present ourselves online, to the various congregations we expose ourselves to, from family, friends and potential lovers, to employers and the government'.[26] Indeed, the clear, innocuous-looking interface and rational tasks of data mining belie a more pernicious system, in which elements of one's data profile may become ammunition to be used against a subject of investigation. Before long, one begins to ponder the amorality of the system, and the fact that another 'Investigator' is likely mining the player's data, as well.

Likewise, *Orwell*, according to Katherine Cross,

> puts the lie to the utopian ideal of 'sousveillance', the idea that ordinary people can avail ourselves of techno-snooping tools to act as a check on the powerful. Our judgment is no less fallible, no less prone to heedless destruction. Our dystopian future may not be the uniformed powerful against the masses per se, but the masses being drafted into oppressing each other using the tools of online surveillance.[27]

The oppressive dimensions of big data, as with the critique present in other games like *Remember Me* and the *Watch Dogs* series, would be extended here, but with a heavy emphasis on player complicity. In this sense, *Orwell* functions similarly to *Papers, Please* in its bureaucratic orientation and in the way it frustrates the player's ability to make fully informed decisions. Both games needle the player by making sure they never have everything necessary to really know the full consequences of their actions, while also forcing them to make decisions about the data they have before them. In its vision that combines nationalism and digital surveillance culture, *Orwell* effectively proposes a dystopian world that is a subtly different version of our own.

Inside (2016), a minimal, elegant design by the Danish company Playdead (Figure 16.4), uses form to eloquently convey a similar critique of authoritarian repression, but from the vantage point of the imperilled body, rather than the hyper-bureaucratic information society. The puzzle-platformer is a side-scrolling adventure that slowly unfurls a vast dark world of hard edges, robotic technologies, and inhumane spaces. Players are tasked with steering a small boy in a red shirt safely through a series of obstacles and

Figure 16.4 *Inside* (2016), designed and published by Playdead. Screenshot by Benjamin Tran for the author

dangers. Greyish, conformist, and slumped-over humans reminiscent of the workers in the film *Metropolis* (1927) make the playable character stand out as a dab of colour against the massive, perpetually gloomy environment. Alienating sites of total control, machines of mysterious purpose, cold experimentation facilities, and mind-control devices convey a sense of systemic domination. Moving stealthily, the boy must use his wits to solve puzzle-like challenges and keep his forward momentum. He is a spark of life, but endangered in a hostile world because of his failure to blend in. The aesthetic effect achieved by imaging a diminutive figure against a looming space suggests a fragile entity to be protected, and enhances the stakes of navigating his world carefully. In its long view of a totalitarian vision, the video game is extraordinary for the concentrated affective intensity it achieves without any dialogue, facial expressions, or didactic statements.

Similarly potent in its conveying of precarious living under hegemony is *We Happy Few*, an action-adventure survival game developed by Compulsion Games and published by Gearbox Publishing in 2018. The game's irreverent, satirical vision (Figure 16.5) presents an alternate reality in which Germany won the Second World War because the United States refused to participate in the conflict. Set in Wellington Wells, a fictive retro-future English city in 1964, the game images a society in full denial of its unpleasant past. Compulsory happiness is enforced in all aspects of society. Propaganda murals remind citizens: 'Happy is the country with no past'.

Figure 16.5 *We Happy Few* (2018), developed by Compulsion Games and published by Gearbox Publishing. Screenshot by Benjamin Tran for the author

Television personality 'Uncle Jack' spouts his ceaseless ideology on the television and radio to reinforce the will of the authoritarian regime. Citizens are kept perpetually cheerful through a freely available hallucinogen called Joy, which provides an artificial high, and staves off both the ugly truth of their complicity in a wartime horror and the true misery of their present reality. There is a crushing social pressure to wear grinning white masks which shape the face muscles into a smile, to prevent what, in Orwell's Oceania, would be a facecrime. As three separate characters who – for very separate reasons – can no longer conform (i.e. crimethink), they begin to stand out as 'Downers' who threaten the authoritarian order. By refusing to take Joy, characters experience how the rotting truth reveals itself through the technicolor city's façade. They are policed as nonconformist by their fellow citizens, resulting in mob aggression, public beatings, forced Joy treatments, and worse by the local authorities. 'Get Happy!' they all shout, while meting out their corporal punishments.

The game feels like Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* combined with dystopian films about extreme repression, such as Stanley Kubrick's *Clockwork Orange* (1971) and Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1985). Nods to Orwell's novel circulate in the whole scenario of a society of people that inform on each other for any infraction of nonconformity. A shadow of Winston is particularly evident in the narrative of the first playable character, Arthur Hastings. Players are introduced to him in his role as a media censor, his hands moving smoothly between a pneumatic tube dispenser and a red 'Redactor' device which he uses to edit newspaper articles to suit the ideology of Wellington Wells. Like Winston, Arthur is a cog in the machine, until he sees something that jogs a painful memory which contradicts the party line. And like Winston, Arthur cannot force the contradiction out of his mind. Arthur quips at the beginning of the game, 'Do you think the canister wonders what life's like outside the tube? Of course he'd have to break the tube to get out, but that'll break it for everybody.' The slippage of language in which Arthur ascribes a male pronoun to the pneumatic canister suggests his identification with its condition. Its claustrophobic first-person perspective and heavy emphasis on scavenging for basic necessities suggests the cost of becoming an outcast. *We Happy Few* simulates the degree to which people are willing to go to preserve their illusions, and to delude themselves with alternative facts, for the sake of evading accountability and consequences. It simultaneously gestures to the dangerous but liberating dimensions of failure which, in the case of both Winston and Arthur, consists of finally seeing things for what they are.

The Revolutionary Potential of Failing the Game

The inevitable question arises: Does Winston's inability to successfully conceal himself constitute failure? In this game that he is playing, what constitutes a win state? And should there be potentials imagined other than successfully adhering to the rule-based systems of his dystopian society? In his acts of protest, Winston plays 'incorrectly' in the sense of not adhering to the rules of the authoritarian game to which he is subject. These are small acts at first: the procurement of real paper and a proper pen, the impulse to write down an idea of his own, the will towards privacy, the fleeting desire to hold on to a fragment of truth in the face of its erasure. But this snowballs into more blatant failures to adhere to Big Brother's law: the craving for human connection, his political acts of lovemaking, his increasingly anti-authoritarian thoughts, the purchase of something he deems beautiful, and his (albeit fleeting) force of will under the duress of torture.

Playing the game is, in some sense, submitting to the terms of the game. A player can bend them a bit, or exploit imperfections or contradictions, or find back doors, but partaking seems to implicitly include adherence to its rules. However, hidden in Winston's utterances about degrees of failure is the seed of a kind of protest. Judith 'Jack' Halberstam has theorized the notion of failure as something not merely to be overcome, but as a tool for breaking with dominant heteronormative patriarchal values. Halberstam writes: 'The queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being.'[28] Bonnie Ruberg has applied this theorization specifically to player engagements with video games, asking questions like: What if we choose to play incorrectly? What if we refuse to play altogether? What if we let ourselves 'be slowly and beautifully beaten', and, in doing so, subvert preconceived ideas about adhering to the rules? What new possibilities open up then?[29] Ruberg writes:

> If we adjust Halberstam's language for games, we can read normative 'advancement' as advancement through levels (or a refusal to advance), and 'capital accumulation' as in-game points accumulated (or ignored, wasted). 'Nonreproductive lifestyles' becomes the squandering of extra lives, the abandonment of hard-fought unsaved games. The queer takes on the guise of the bad subject, the bad player who rejects the regulating logic of the game and '[stalls] the business of the dominant', the cheater who exercises her unsanctioned agency[.][30]

This theorization dislocates the conventional presupposition that failure is to be avoided or that it is inherently self-destructive, and opens up possibilities

for failure as a site of agency, and a means with which to negotiate relations to powerful forces dominating one's life.

While Halberstam's and Ruberg's theorization pertains to queerness and society, its logic has further-reaching ramifications applicable to other forms of repression, such as those modelled in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Winston's gestures, then, push against the presumed objective that he should become the perfected subject of Oceania. In his playing of the game which he is preordained to lose, Winston bucks a system of repression by embracing failure, and in doing so he finds a way to carve out a provisional space for himself outside the normative expectations of his society. This is not to diminish the profound cost extracted from him, in body and mind. But it is important to remember that for a brief time, despite the overbearing and pervasive control culture in which he exists, Winston attains his own personhood.

Salen and Zimmerman describe a game as 'a space of possibility' in which players can explore.[31] This functions similarly to speculative fiction, in which possible futures may be safely hypothesized and played out. Or, in some cases, present realities can be re-contextualized into the realm of fantasy or speculative fictions, in order to create literary models to be considered from a distance. What unifies the games above, which reflect the influence of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, is the mobilization of moral complication and even failure as a tool to stimulate ethical self-inquiry in the player. *BioShock*, *We Happy Few*, *Orwell, Remember Me*, *Inside*, and *Papers, Please* all complicate player expectations in some way, by questioning what it means to agree to play by the rules. The most stinging of these games do more than simply appropriate narrative elements or settings from Orwell's vision; they persuade by troubling player expectations of success or heroism, and by opening up a conversation about failure to 'play the game' as a site of agency within a repressive system.

By limiting options, or by withholding information, these games frustrate the player's ability to fully succeed or come to a morally comfortable resolution. Players engage with systems that ultimately won't exactly let them off the hook, which gives rise to a productive discontent. This discontent opens up the possibility of thinking beyond the rules, or of engaging in a critique of them as constituting a system that doesn't satisfy. In this regard, the terms of these rule-based systems point to their own limits, stimulating players to imagine other possible alternatives. To be sure, in these systems with which we play, some kinds of failure are better than others.

Notes

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3 Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), p. 80.

4 Rolf F. Nohr, 'Tetris: Rules', in Matthew Thomas Payne and Nina Huntemann (eds.), *How to Play Video Games* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), pp. 21–9, at p. 25.

5 Patrick Harrigan, 'Game History as Public Debate', *ROMchip: A Journal of Game Histories*, 1.1 (1 July 2019) [http://romchip.org/index.php/romchip-journal/article/view/75] (accessed 7 November 2019).

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9 Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, reprint edn (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), p. 252.

10 Espen Aarseth, 'Allegories of Space: The Question of Spatiality in Computer Games', in *Cybertext Yearbook 2000* (Jyvaskyla, Finland: Research Centre for Contemporary Culture, 2001), pp. 152–71, at p. 154.

11 Henry Jenkins, 'Game Design as Narrative Architecture', in Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (eds.), *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), pp. 118–30, at p. 121. See also Henry Jenkins, '"Complete Freedom of Movement": Video Games as Gendered Playspace', in Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins (eds.), *From Barbie to 'Mortal Kombat': Gender and Computer Games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), pp. 330–63, and Henry Jenkins and Kurt Squire, 'The Art of Contested Spaces', in Lucien King (ed.), *Game on: The History and Culture of Video Games* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2002), pp. 65–75.

12 Jenkins, 'Game Design as Narrative Architecture', p. 122. See also Jenkins, '"Complete Freedom of Movement"'.

13 Jenkins, 'Game Design as Narrative Architecture', pp. 124–5.

14 Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2010).

15 See Miguel Sicart, *The Ethics of Computer Games* (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 2011) and *Beyond Choices: The Design of Ethical Gameplay* (Cambridge,

MA: MIT Press, 2013). See also Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum, *Values at Play in Digital Games* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014).

16 Sicart, *Beyond Choices*, p. 29.

17 *Ibid.*, pp. 111–26.

18 Douglass C. Perry, 'The Influence of Literature and Myth in Videogames', *IGN*, blog (18 May 2006) [www.ign.com/articles/2006/05/18/the-influence-of-literature-and-myth-in-videogames?page=1] (accessed 7 November 2019).

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30 *Ibid.*, p. 203.

31 Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, p. xi.