

**Re-imagining the Risky Modernity by Procedural Rhetoric:
A Case Study on Dystopian Indie Game *Not for Broadcast***

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Summary

The concept of “dystopia”, which was bred from “utopia”, has been a popular motif of numerous literature and artworks, including video games. Here in this article, the dystopian indie games are discussed both in horizontal and vertical ways, which is aimed at finding the commonness of dystopian games and the reason for their emergence by textual analysis combined with the socio-historical basis. Through the case study of Not for Broadcast, it is discovered that by adopting a series of sophisticated procedural rhetoric techniques for interaction design, Not for Broadcast shows its persuasiveness on empowering and motivating individuals to fight against authoritarianism, and furthermore to play an important role in stopping catastrophes in a global scale. Then, by a thorough investigation of all the listed dystopian indie games under the framework of Risk Society, this article finds out that although their themes and appeals are different from each other, they all intend to express the prevalent inner fear towards toxic modernity, which means, individuals have fallen prey to “accountability”, they are under control in the name of scientific management, alienated from themselves, and distributed with systematic social risks. Hereby, procedural rhetoric is adopted as a way to shape the behaviors of players as normal individuals, and simultaneously offers a chance for them to break the rules to feel the tension between individual happiness and authoritarian collectivism, and thus be equipped with rebelliousness towards the status quo. However, the possible limitations of dystopian indie games are also been proposed in this article, pointing out that they are not disclosing how the dystopia is originally formed, but merely asks for individuals to remain furious, which is of limited perception when it comes to solving systematic social problems.

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Abbreviations

NFB: *Not for Broadcast*

Introduction

Analyses of the social representations and popular video games have received noteworthy attention in recent years (Pe'rez-Latorre & Oliva, 2019). Since the representative literature work *1984* was published in 1949, dystopia as a genre of literature has been an increasingly discussed topic in artworks, including video games. There have been several renowned dystopian games, the early ones such as *Wolfenstein* (1992), *Fallout* (1997), and *Half Life* (1998), and recent ones such as *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020). These games are equipped with both mind-blowing stories and sophisticated mechanism designs.

However, in this article, I am not going to discuss these games produced by big companies but diving into the realm of independent games. Dystopian indie games are booming especially in recent years along with the complex socio-historical background consisting of the rapid development of technologies, the rising of a few huge Internet companies, and the dynamical yet tense international relationship, etc. As Denis, one of the producers of NFB said in the documentary, "We (human) are a negative race, we always see the worst of everything." (NotGames, 2021) Dystopian indie games are born to be sanguine about the future, they are based on specific social contexts and historical stage, and are aimed at preventing future catastrophes that the existing forces may cause in the worst situation. Brown (Brown, 2008) pointed out that games when "conscientiously designed and critiqued... may teach us to see the world differently and to understand the global conflict from new perspectives." Thus, by examining both the rhetoric and discourse hidden behind the interaction design, combined with the investigation in the in-depth driving force of the emergence of dystopian games, I would like to gain insight into what kind of social reality is been reflected by these games, why and how are they reflected, and what is the intention that the dystopian game developers are holding.

Farca wrote in *Playing Dystopia* that “play naturally interweaves game-world considerations with those of the ‘empirical’ or actual world.” (Farca, 2018) Through playing dystopian games, players are endowed with the capability to actively change the status quo, and hitherto find the connections between reality and the virtual. In the words of Hall, culture is about “the production and exchange of meanings—the ‘giving and taking of meaning’— between the members of a society or group” (Hall, 1997) The connection between the virtual and reality could be done by interaction, which in Bogost’s words, is called procedural rhetoric that aims at persuasion through the rearrangements of digital symbols, here, procedurality means “to tell the process, create, explain, or understand the process”(Bogost, 2007), and process refers to “the way things work – methods, techniques, and logics that drive the operation of systems.” (Bogost, 2007) Since then, analysis about game’s procedural rhetoric help to break up the game design into modules of behaviors which players have to complete following the rules so that the analysis of developer’s intention could then be conducted.

In the framework of procedural rhetoric, I will analyze the game *Not for Broadcast* (2020) as a case study, to examine how procedural rhetoric is used as a method to persuade the values of the game developers. In the first part, I will comb through the historical origin and iteration of the concept “utopia” and “dystopia”, figuring out what kind of games can be classified as dystopian indie games. Next, the narrative and mechanism design will be analyzed in detail to detect how persuasiveness works through predefined plots and limited choices. In the third part, the dystopian games will be discussed altogether in order to find out their commonness in persuasion, including the commonness of their dystopias, the possible socio-historical interweaving factors underlying the boom of these games, and the ideology that the developers are intended to convey. In this part, I will first go through the modernity theories, and put emphasis on the Risk Society theory, since it focuses on how modern risks are formed systematically, and to what extent do cultural reflections can help to prevent probable anthropic catastrophes imagined in dystopian games, just as Beck writes, “It is cultural

perception and definition that constitutes risk...The sociology of risk is a science of potentialities and judgments about probabilities...Risk, 'are' a virtual reality, real virtuality."(Adam et al., 2000) The cultural practices to hold back harmful conducts, which in light of Jameson's hypothesis is called "wish-fulfillment" (Hartley, 2003), deals with real historical issues or contradictions.

1 Dystopia and dystopian indie games

1.1 Utopia, dystopia, and the inner motivation of dystopia

To clarify the definition of Dystopia, the other key concept Utopia has to be introduced firstly. Utopianism can be considered "a philosophy of hope" (Sargent, 2010) It is convinced that Utopia could be dated back to the 16th century when Sir Thomas More established this concept to describe an ideal socialism society (More, 2012). Since it is set in an imaginary world, Utopia is "not yet" (Noch-Nicht), elusive, glimpsed but never grasped. (Farca, 2018) It is futuristic anticipation based on contemporary social structure; thus, it rather sets its main purpose on examining and criticizing the existing malpractices in real life than on seriously drawing a very much detailed blueprint to fulfill in future development. As a fundamental concept of 20th century's philosophy which was exemplified in Marxism, Anti-fascism, and Feminism, and Anti-war social movements, Utopia shows its great impact when invigorating people to emancipate themselves. There is an inner duality embedded in this concept: on one hand, it refers to a world where any inequality, poverty, and disconcertedness are eliminated, leaving merely a few terms, laws, and rules as the social contracts of a self-motivated society. On the other hand, it is an indirect way of expressing dissent towards the current society, in which no complaints can be found, but the dissatisfaction is easy to discern. Instead of proposing plausible strategies to reach an ideal situation, utopia adopts a long-term way of restructuring the whole society, showing its inherently pessimistic tone by an optimistic envision, thus its lucidity appears to be cynical yet constrained. As Jameson

revealed, the waning of utopias is a conjuncture between a weakening of historicity or of the sense of the future, a conviction that fundamental change is no longer possible, however desirable, and cynical reason (Gordin et al., 2010).

Dystopia was then developed from this motif, amplifying the dissent to show vigilance and resistance towards a calamitous future. It was firstly an offspring of the shattered Utopia under the centralized control of the Soviet Union, at this stage, George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, and Yevgeny Zamyatin were representative novelists who took the lead in sarcasm towards an instrumental rational and authoritarian society. Then comes World War II, leaving people in desperation with horrifying slaughters and invasions conducted by fascist political apparatuses. Sargent depicted dystopia as “a nonexistent society described in considerable detail and normally located in a time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which the reader lived” (Sargent, 2010). In this respect, dystopia is primarily a social milieu where all the atrocious possibilities are displayed, where the “not-yet” world cannot be found anymore before it is established. It appears to be a totally or segmentally wrong Utopia (or an expected normal society functioning in light of commonly recognized notions). Furthermore, dystopia can also be motivative to prompt actions in the real world aimed at making betterments and seeking progressive values. During the 1960s and 1970s, which was a time of awakening, the streets were flooded with people expressing their overt progressive opposition to the ruling order in the United States, Europe, and around the globe in a myriad of liberation movements, dystopian expression then took a back seat to a revival of utopian writing (Moylan, 2018). Ernst led up the topic of utopia to activism, which asks for realizing the “not-yet-consciousness” by turning the blueprint to specific actions, inspiring dystopian narratives to foster progressive values (Bloch, 1995). It is a perception of social problems, and simultaneously, plays a motivative role in making changes. As Farca writes, in the traditions of dystopia, emergency, danger and adversity are fundamental experiences: ontological crisis and a protagonist’s eternal fight for survival are rendered

normal and appropriate (Farca, 2018).

When it comes to making differences, there are two types of dystopian narratives: anti-utopia and critical utopia (Pe'rez-Latorre & Oliva, 2019). Anti-utopia turns out to be much more pessimistic it is opposite to utopia since it is based on an already doomed society, quenching people's hope to change the status quo under the suppression of authoritarianism, yet critical dystopia does not have to be exactly a utopia inverted (Pe'rez-Latorre & Oliva, 2019). According to Farca and Ladeveze, critical dystopia "leaves its diegetic characters room for contestation and revolt against the dystopian regime." (Farca & Ladevèze, 2016). It offers the chance of expressing rage and rebellion or even overthrowing the autocrat in power. As Moylan describes,

Dystopia proved adequate to the task of catching not only the extent of the human and ecological devastation brought about by the latest configuration of capitalism and imperialism but also of finding the seeds of opposition within the tendencies and latencies of that existing social system. (Moylan, 2018)

Dating back to the origin of dystopia, this progressiveness could be found in numerous social movements, literature, and artworks, such as *Women on the Edge of Time* (1976), which takes the role of a leading ethos among those individuals who were eager to win back their dignity and freedom. Interestingly, utopian and dystopian narratives adopt different perspectives, the former tends to depict a grand schema of an ideal world, while the latter is inclined to tell stories from the point of view of the suppressed individuals, putting the audience in other's mindset to feel the inequality in person, and take measures to change the status quo. As to independent dystopian games, it is also the most common way to set up a dystopian background, and let players act as a character inside, where they have to take actions to keep the world functioning, make choices, and impose impacts on the world (or on themselves).

1.2 Independent dystopian games

Independent games, or namely, indie games, are those games funded, developed, and owned by a small team or even one person in the aspect of development and ownership. Consequently, when it comes to spiritual levels, the indie game developers can design this game following their own will, including the topic, mechanism, art style, and in-depth appeals, without being affected by marketing, bypassing and division issues that are commonly seen in large developers (but it does not mean that indie game developers do not worry about profit, indie games are not equal to free games, some developers count it as a way of making a living). Generally, indie game shows the team's or the individual developer's temperament, interests, and thoughts. Indie games are booming in recent years along with the rapid growth and iteration of technologies. Also, access to free or low-cost tools significantly diminished the time, resources, and labor required for game development (Whitson, 2019). Indie game developers are now enabled to bypass traditional gatekeepers, from console manufacturers to publishers and brick-and-mortar retail distributors (Whitson, 2019), to publish their works directly on platforms for PC or consoles such as Steam, Google Play, and PlayStation, or on mobile app stores such as iOS and Android. Except for violations of laws such as plagiarism and sexual abuse, there is no need to worry about being blocked by political censorship in certain countries, therefore, dystopian games are free to express their provoking thoughts against any inequality, suppression, or systematic disasters.

Thus, numerous dystopian indie games have sprung out in recent years. To name a few, *Republique* (2013) which is a meta role-playing game (RPG) based on Orwell's *1984*, is about saving a girl retained by the totalitarian government through hacking the government's surveillance system; *Papers, please* (2013), an RPG about the risky customs job and the poor life of an immigration officer, sets its historical basis in the tension between the German Democratic Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany in the 1980s; *Beholder* (2016), *Replica* (2016), *Orwell: Keeping an Eye on You* (2016), and *Orwell: Ignorance is Strength* (2018) are RPGs which let the players

step into the shoes of government officials, decide whether to monitor others' private life so as to sort out violators against the volition of current administrator; *Not for Broadcast* (2020) and *The Westport Independent* (2016) focusing on the censorship on mass media contents that controls what people can see and think. Aside from these, other games such as World War II survival game *This War of Mine* (2014), ARPG *Inside* (2016) about fleeing from a concentration camp, and RPG *Mind Scanner* (2021) about scanning rebellious thoughts in the name of mental cure are also included in the spectrum of dystopian games. These mentioned games are all based on historical or contemporary social issues, pointing out political and structural problems that have or might cause harsh damages to the society, such as the unbridled ubiquitous surveillance (e.g., PRISM scandal revealed by Edward Snowden in 2011), the totalitarian administration of the Soviet Union, and the territorial conflicts in Europe after the world wars. Most of these games tend to hold a leftist's standpoint, telling stories from an individual's perspective, and calling for personal freedom under strict control on behalf of collectivism. Usually, the players will start their journey in an already existed world, where the people are living without personal freedom and wealth, which are nevertheless seized by the government or the capitalists. In this world, the two apparatuses classified by Althusser (Althusser et al., 2014): Suppressive State Apparatus such as troops or absolute technical advantages, and Ideological State Apparatus such as media, families, and schools, are used to keep the society in order by both violent controls on the traitors, and spiritual assimilation such as propaganda, consumerism promotion and moral assimilation on the mass.

In this article, the dystopian indie games will be discussed as reflective materials through which the contemporary trend of thoughts towards the deemed highlighting social issues could be detected. As Farca pointed out, video game dystopia describes a new strategic enterprise of the utopian philosophy (Farca, 2018). 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 game world and an alternative societal model through imaginative and ergodic means. Gordin, Tilley, and Prakash pointed out that dystopia can also be understood as concrete practices through which historically situated actors seek to reimagine their present and transform it into a plausible future (Gordin et al., 2010). Since John P. Barlow, the forerunner of the independence of cyberspace, published the renowned *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* in 1996, the breakup of the real and the virtual world has been tied with political disagreements formally. For a long time, there exist groups of geeks, hippies, and creatives who believe in the independence, rationality, and liberty of cyberspace, among which the game developers also take up a significant position. How do indie game developers create the dystopia, and what do they think are possible solutions or what appearance should utopia be like, are the questions I would like to probe into. There are, indeed, many outstanding dystopian games produced by large companies with rich investments, such as *Bioshock*, *Cyberpunk 2077*, *Remember Me*, *The Last of Us*, *Call of Duty*, *Half-Life*, *Mirror's Edge*, etc., however, compared to these sophisticatedly streamlined works, the motivation of indie game developers will be more perceivable, for the games assimilate and distinctly show the personal will of the developers who are guided by the liberal doctrines in cyberspace rather than erase it.

I would like to discuss *Not for Broadcast* (2020, hereinafter referred to as NFB) in particular. Different from other dystopian games, NFB tends to not predefine an existing dystopia, it holds a relatively neutral perspective between authoritarianism and populism. Concerning the specific dystopian narrative of games, Farca and Schulzke hold different opinions (Pe'rez-Latorre & Oliva, 2019). The former argues that players in dystopian games can take the initiative to direct the situation to a positive path, while the latter argues that games constrain players and lead them to act in ways that help to reproduce the problems of the dystopian worlds. The main difference lies in whether the player is capable to change the world and see instant feedback of this success in the game, whereas there is no essential disagreement between these two arguments, that is,

players will go through the whole process to see how a leviathan is established, from which the means to get rid of the dilemma could be found. To be precise, the mode of thought of NFB is inclined to resemble Schulzke's point of view, that is, other than holding a steadfast belief and making the narrative subordinate to the expression of this belief, NFB is more of an experimental field where different beliefs and volitions are developed through a constantly self-constructing media environment. No matter which standpoint the players choose, they will all inevitably fall into a dystopia, thus, NFB is not a game only speaking out its resistance to dystopia, it is in nature about how a dystopia is established. As the developers said when replying to players on Reddit, "...Both AI and I love dystopian fiction but much of it starts with the dystopia already established. We thought it might be interesting to show it establishing itself." (NotGames, 2020) In other words, NFB discusses how the dystopia is formed on the level of epistemology rather than propose what is dystopia in the aspect of ontology. Thus, throughout the process of construction, the developers' modes of thought and their intentions will be demonstrated more clearly.

2 Not for Broadcast: game design through the lens of individuals

2.1 Reproducing the absurd: narrative design of the dystopia

NFB is an FMV game (Full Motion Video game) that is formed by a sequence of pre-recorded videos. FMV is not a type of game but a type of narrative. As is in NFB, the story is told by edited frames, they are spliced in order as a meaningful collection of symbols for promoting a certain political party, and cutting off the risky parts which will stain its reputation. The editing is completed by the players themselves since editing itself is a core mechanism of this game. When discussing the relationship between fiction films and montage, Bazin writes that "fictions that do not derive their full significance or, at most, only derive their value, from the integration of the real and the imaginary. It is the aspects of this reality that dictate the cutting." (Bazin, 2004)The

reorganizing of moving images is inherently planted with specific ideas, standpoints, and ideologies. Through editing, players shall feel how the spiritual manipulation is completed in person.

The tone of NFB, which is of great difference compared to other dystopian indie games, is sarcastic and humorous since it got inspiration from slapstick comedies. This style brings about an absurd and maniacal sense to deconstruct the authority of political parties. The game starts with the television director's absence on the national television channel. As a cleaner who has non-experience in broadcasting and TV, the protagonist Alex was temporarily designated to be in charge of this vacant position and thrust into the swirl of mediated politics. The TV channel Alex works for is called National Nightly News. As a vital (and perhaps the most important) national information source, it offers both serious interviews of politicians and entertaining programs which are deliberately filtered by the party in power. It is noteworthy that most of the dystopian games mentioned above have all designated at least one political party, organization, person, or abstract ideology as the ultimate enemy that the players have to beat. However, In NFB, two parties respectively insinuate the authoritarianism and populism forces, the former is called Advance, which is the current ruling party, and the latter radical underground party which is called Disrupt.

The Advance party, led by Julia Salisbury and Peter Clement, won the election and promised to overtax the upper class so as to distribute the wealth to the whole society, as they proposed in the newly released Wealth and Assets Act, it is for eliminating poverty and building a "better, fairer future". However, evidence shows that the party members are frauds who force euthanasia on thousands of elders and patients, overdraw public wealth to conduct secret scientific experiments in the Dante karst. As the leader of Disrupt Allen James said, he should "slap hard on everyone" to wake them up from dreams.

Neither the hosts Jeremy and Megan nor the protagonist Alex and other normal people is convinced of the fabricated prosperity. People are fleeing from this country, including Alex's relatives, who ask for her passport to slip through the customs. Because of the absurd interviews, stupid sitcoms, polarized points of view, and perhaps, the broken air conditioner that cannot be fixed by the fled staffs and the public deficit, at the end of Season 2, Jeremy finally went hysterical about all of the ridiculousness and even attempted to commit suicide in front of all the audience.

The other hidden background is the wars between nations. The tension beyond the territory forms a strong comparison with the astounding peaceful and entertaining atmosphere shown in National Nightly News.

At the same time when Jeremy has gone mad, the war starts with an explosion in the near land, however, Advance seems to be happy with the result, and claims having thrown four nuclear bombs in neighboring countries in order to take the dominant position in the war, along with Megan's desperate self-account of the missing of her brother. The future is full of the unknown since the conflicts between the Advance and the furious people is intensified drastically. Interestingly enough, utopia, which represents a never reached world, is here created by Advance as a lure to induce people to support them, and the discrepancy between the utopia and the reality (in the game) together form the dystopia, referring to "a not-yet world can be found nowhere".

Making strong comparisons

The omens of catastrophe in the material world can be ascertained in these TV programs, for example, about 8000 thousand children were injured by the explosive toys called Mr. Snugglebug which are produced by Sofia Rymminton's company in the DLC: Not for Broadcast: Lockdown, without being fined for quality issues, this 23-year-old CEO is still planning to build a tunnel which is through the whole earth for quick travels; in Season 2, the farce-like sports board games in which the victory is won by missing the target is interrupted by flash mobs of naked rich protestors appearing in the live report,

since they are the “exploited” objects by Advance, they try to retrieve their past glories by such a farcical way, to paraphrase this phenomenon, either the rich or the poor are subordinate to exploitation, therefore, there is only one possibility left: the public wealth is taken up by Advance itself.

Perspectives from individuals

People in NFB are not numb and ill-informed, on the contrary, they know the foreseeable war and crisis are coming soon even though the Advance party is trying to whitewash the truth on mass media. Some people like Jeff Algebra (a former math teacher in a local secondary school) choose to follow the Advance party and write plays, especially for persuasiveness. It is hard to tell whether Jeff is devoted to his political career wholeheartedly, whereas it is for sure that he is in pursuit of the safety and wealth gained from joining this party. For yet another opposite side, the passive oppression of normal people is indicated mostly in three kinds of contexts:

(1) the accidental exposure of the “backstage” in live reports. For example, when Jeremy is talking with a professor about how Advance will fix the laws, social orders, and public financial problems in the live connection, the professor’s wife appears in his room, telling him she is leaving, and the live connection finally has to be interrupted. This is an indication of the status quo: many people are preparing to flee from the patronage of Advance and the forthcoming war.

(2) the comments expressing personal feelings of hosts and staff during the short rest between TV programs. When *Hey, friendship!* is on, players can hear Jeremy swearing backstage, calling these actors “stupid secondary school students”.

(3) the family talks, conflicts, and choices that Alex is engaged in. While the people are escaping from the country when the elders are being eliminated by Advance and the youths are trained into fascism supporters, Alex is also confronted with the problems in her family: her mother has Alzheimer, her son is asking for her consent to join the youth organization called “Go Getters” that highly resembles the Hitler Jugend, and her daughter is planning to travel far away beyond her reach, which means she might not be protected from a possible territorial conflict.

Although people are doubtful, the complaints do not stop them from reproducing the absurd social structure (at least in Season 2). On the contrary, they are serving for the growth of authoritarianism but are incapable of any changes, since their wealth and life are under control, if they will be or have been a burden to the country, they are going to be guided to obey the policies, buy public insurance, register their ID, or eliminated in the name of alleviating social burdens. Foucault describes this as Biopower, which is “an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations” (Stapleton & Byers, 2015). Individuals will be faced with two challenges in this case: the suppressive trolley which stops radical actions, and the spiritual pressure that comes from public opinions formed by the mass media environment.

However, as the producers stated in their documentary, they are not specifically partial to any of these two parties, it also can be seen from the narrative design, that even though *Disrupt* is on behalf of the suppressed people who call for subversion, the fight will be doomed since the leader Allen James is eager to be a new king in mind control, which could be told from his maniacal self-promotion of his book *Allen James is Right: The Freeman’s Guide to Waking Up*. Here, NFB points its critical spear towards a world that is ruled not by laws, but by the volition of power. Rather than ascribing all the tragedies to the Advance’s ruling, the game reveals a degraded leviathan where contracts between people are destroyed, the civilization and social system are collapsing, and those who are in pursuit of power are going greedy without limitation.

2.2 Mechanism design, procedural rhetoric, and persuasiveness

Rhetoric was firstly proposed by Plato, it derives from the word “rhetor” (or orator). In ancient Greece, rhetoric refers to “public speaking for civic purposes” (Bogost, 2007), it is a technique of using proper texts to polish up the speech, of which the ultimate object is to convince and persuade others to convey one’s thought. Rhetoric was then

developed as a systematic approach of persuasion by Aristotle by his syllogism, (Aristotle, 1996) persuasion thus became the indispensable nature and task of rhetoric. As Burke concludes, “there is rhetoric. And wherever there is ‘meaning’, there is ‘persuasion’.” (Burke, 1969)

The idea of rhetoric also inspired modern propaganda and promotion, which was a powerful tool heavily used by governments to enhance nationalism and the sense of collectivity during the World Wars. As Laswell pointed out, propaganda is the extension and elaboration of an organizational strategy through the communication of symbols (Lasswell, 1938). And the assembly of symbols ready to be published to the public can be persuasive rhetoric with a specific standpoint, a mode of thought, and even a sense of identity. The history of rhetoric is not the staple point I am about to discuss in this article, however, as can be seen in propaganda in modern wars and in post-modern promotions of commodities, the power of rhetoric cannot be ignored. It has been extended from verbal and oral domains to other areas, such as Visual Rhetoric, which in DeLuca’s words, is a concept of “image event” (DeLuca, 1999); and in the field of moving images, Eisenstein borrowed the concept Montage from Architecture so as to represent the editing and rearranging of a sequence of frames so as to convey meanings. In the age of post-industry, James P. Zappen introduced rhetoric to the digital world (James, 2005), and Laura J. Gurak then identifies several “basic characters” of digital rhetoric including speech, reach, anonymity and interactivity (James, 2005).

Ian Bogost proposed the concept of Procedural Rhetoric, it affords a new and promising way to make claims about *how things work* (Bogost, 2007). Procedural Rhetoric refers to “the art of persuasion through *rule-based* representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writings, images, or moving pictures”. Only if on computational devices could the rhetoric be procedural, since in light of Bogost, “only procedural systems like computer software actually *represent process with process*.” (Bogost, 2007) And, following Murray, interactivity is a participatory environment, thus, the primary

representational property of the computer is the codified rendering of responsive behaviors. (Bogost, 2007) Therefore, the game procedure discussed here could be seen as *a set of rules* deployed to guide players' behavior, and through a set of trained behavior, players thus accept, reject, or critically view the ideology they are imposed on. And Procedural Rhetoric does not merely mean the montage edited by the player, but *editing behaviors* itself through interaction. The total number and credibility of user actions are not necessarily important; rather, the relevance of the interaction in the context of the representational goals of the system is paramount.(Bogost, 2007) Additionally, procedural rhetoric is not objective in this respect, it is meaningful and persuasive. The persuasiveness hides in the process of conformation to the rules, or the repetitive attempts to complete the obeying. The common way is to set a score or award mechanism that guides the players to reach a goal by specific actions, however, the players can still retain their personal feelings when reaching the goal yet simultaneously denying to be obedient when interpreting the producer's intention.

Procedural rhetoric is different from the narrative. The narrative is in relationship with the story structure, it is focused on how to arrange the sequence and composition of *plots* to highlight the contradictions and while procedural rhetoric is about the specific *components* which fill in the plots, which means, what the players should do following the rules, what context and materials they will experience in this process, and what results they will ultimately get through the interaction. Thus, resembling the process of completing a sentence, procedural rhetoric forms the narrative in micro aspects by interweaving pieces of morphemes, from which the plots are formed as single words, and then the narrative is completed by words as a whole sentence.

As is mentioned above, NotGames (the producer of NFB) seems to hold a rather neutral and objective point of view to describe the formation of a dystopia, however, in terms of the mechanism design, or in other words, the "set of rules", there are two rhetoric means in NFB, which are:

(1) In the studio (procedural rhetoric)

To make distinctions between the levels, each level is presented as a group of TV programs, including interviews, news feeds, contests or entertaining programs, and advertisements. The audience ratings are the key assessment of players' behavior, representing both the requirement from Advance and the in-depth criticism towards the data-driven instrumental manipulation of mass media contents of the producer. To complete each level, players have to pass a series of break-up tasks, if the players fail to do any of these, the audience ratings will drop sharply until Alex is fired. Additionally, as the reminder writes before the game starts, “your wealth is affected by your choices at home and work”. If the player chooses to play videos that will taint Advance’s reputation (e.g., shots of protests, bad languages of Peter Clement, videos of Disrupt), the rating of this level will also decrease, as Alex experiences in her world, she will lose her salary because of these “mistakes”. The tasks consist of:

Editing (Mise-en-scène)

This is the basic requirement at every level. As is shown on the operation panel, players are told to switch between different screens so as to combine close-ups and middle-shots altogether, which is in accordance with the common practice of TV programs in our daily life. Also, the rule stipulates that: different shots have to appear alternately, with each close-up be kept within 3 seconds in length. The purpose is to “keep the audience interested and don’t let them feel bored”.

Playing moving images

This mechanism is basically about playing advertisements between the programs and choose “proper” images for the upcoming news reports. If the advertisements fail to come in when needed, or an improper image that has a negative influence on Advance’s image is chosen, the audience ratings and the salary of Alex will drop consequently. However, players have limited freedom to choose which advertisement they prefer to play.

The advertisements can be roughly classified into two categories:

(i) political ads: which refer to direct propaganda of Advance or Disrupt. The former is dedicated to promoting the official transition center for the elders and the “Go Getters” organization for youth’s future progress. And in the Disrupt ads, there is a Jesus statue behind Allen James, indicating that he is the only savior of the world, and Disrupt is the right choice.

(ii) commercial ads: such as the series of Crazy Neil which uses dazzling colors and provocative words to sell commodities like sofas, and the screw ad selling numerous kinds of screws that no one needs in the turbulent society.

Bernard Cohen pointed out that (mass) media can do well in telling people “What to think about” (Bernard, 1963), he first proposed the concept of “agenda setting”, which means by feeding information which has been filtered and processed out of specific reason to the audience, guiding the direction of the public’s focus and opinions. In NFB, Agenda Setting is well demonstrated by the process of choosing advertisements and pictures. As is extended by McCombs and Shaw in 1977, the agenda can affect not only what to think about, but also give a general idea of how to think by apply attributions to the information (McCombs & Shaw, 1973). For example, when choosing the pictures as the illustration of the news of Mr.Snugglehugs’ issues, players will decide on whether to pick the one with a child’s smile towards her new toy or the one with a worrying mother keeping her son away from Mr.Snugglehug. It depends on how players view Sofia Rymminton’s enterprise. Additionally, these scraps of information take up the space between TV programs, in the virtual world, it is more of an approach to stop the profound thinking of the audience by keeping their mind busy with superficial and lurid information.

Emergency response

This is exactly the most significant task for players. They can feed the audience with imperfect editing, but it is prohibited to play videos that include adverse ideas to Advance. Theoretically speaking, the main purpose of Alex is to leave the audience a

positive impression of Advance, so, players have to censor the improper words when they are on the fly, especially when Peter Clement, a philistine who occupies the leading position of Advance, speaks bad languages on air; they also need to cut in ads or switch to another camera when emergencies happen in the scene, such as naked protestors breaking into the sports contest or sudden quarrels between the interviewees; on top these, they have to twitch the panel to adjust frequency modulation in case it is affected by technical interrupts or telecom hijacks from Disrupt.



Figure 0-1 Operation panel in *Not for Broadcast*

As the difficulty added up in the DLC and Season 2, players also have to deal with other trivial affairs, for instance, flapping away the disturbing Snugglehugs that climbed up to the studio through the radio tower, turning on the fan to cool down the system when no one can be found to repair the air conditioner, and manually adding handclaps to highlight the rightness in Advance's programs when its fame is deteriorating in a fast pace. By these repetitive operations, players become increasingly familiar with the procedure of broadcasting, and gradually grasp what they should do in the rating system.

Goffman proposed his dramaturgical theory in his 1959's book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Goffman, 1956). He distinguished between the “front stage”, “backstage” and “off-stage” where people “perform” their life to others and manage their impression left in the audience’s mind. The front stage is where anything is well arranged and rehearsed; on the flip side, the backstage is full of the unprocessed original reality which is kept to the performer himself/herself with no one knowing. Meyrowitz extended this concept to “visible backstage”, which means the deliberate full disclosure of the backstage (Meyrowitz, 1985) of which the aim is to prompt the sense of truth and genuineness. In NFB, the backstage exists in the cut-off pieces, they appear without being fully noticed when the player is not familiar with the mechanism enough, as a result, some frames will inevitably be cut into the program. Therefore, the “inevitableness” shows the discrepancy between the truth and the illusion. If they are familiar with the mechanism, then they can be deemed as well-trained players who obey the rules, namely, in the context of NFB, they are unconsciously obeying the discourse power of Advance. Moreover, as the director, Alex is totally exposed to the backstage, she can censor the images for a few seconds before they are broadcast, the visible stage is right in front of her, or in other words, in front of the players, revealing how the social reality is actually constructed step by step. Players are then persuaded by NFB to re-examine their surrounding representations through the method of “disclosing the inside”.

(2) Alex’s daily life (verbal rhetoric)

Aside from rule-based procedural rhetoric, verbal rhetoric is also used in key transitions between levels. Players are informed of more background stories of Alex, and again, they can view the ubiquitous tension between social classes, political parties, and nations through the lens of individuals. By listening to conversations between Alex and her family members, and making tough decisions when faced with dilemmas, the aftermaths of an unreasonable social system imposed on individuals are displayed objectively and realistically. For instance, to sustain their ruling, Advance forces the

civils to buy its insurance, from which Advance could both collect personal information and gain profits. Alex received the promotion as well, she does not have choices besides acceptance, otherwise, she will forfeit her deposit. Those who subscribe will get an ID card, which stores their personal information and will always be scanned by the “CCO” (Community Cohesion Organization).

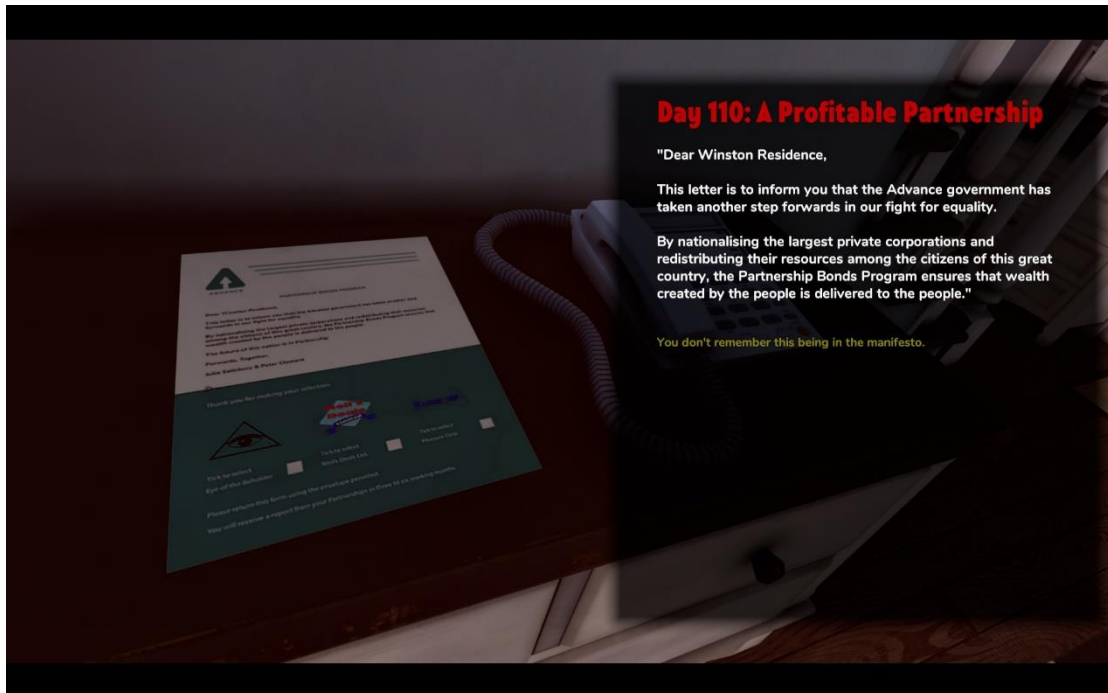


Figure 0-2 The promise of Advance in the insurance contract

In all, the player is both the audience and the performer. By sending back pre-defined results stored in different story branches, and let the characters break the fourth wall to speak towards the player, it brings about an illusion that the player has made this situation by his/her own will, which adds to the feeling of indulgence and involvement with high fidelity by burdening them with responsibilities and moral shackles in the virtual world. And as to the producers' intention, they are not purely upholding anarchy or liberalism, instead, they reveal how the establishment of dystopia is completed both by "the evil", which in NFB is political parties, and normal people who participate in this process and even play a fundamental role as well. In NFB, the society is not formed

by segments, but rather as a whole, with each part tightly connected to each other, and the whole society is constructed and reconstructed in a dynamic and infinite loop. The mass media is controlled by Advance, yet it is actually manipulated simply by a cleaner. From these TV programs, people are forced to accept biased information, yet they still have a chance to interpret the connotation of the combination of *who is speaking* and the *purpose of speaking*, to refuse what is imposed on their thoughts. Thus, National Nightly News becomes a significant space for muted retrospection, a stage for an inadvertent and accidental performance of truth, and at the end of Season 2, a place as a public sphere for directly releasing dissent, communication with the silent majority, and communication between the characters and players through the screen.

Since Season 3 is not yet completed during the writing of this article, the significance of different choices is not distinct enough to express the core appeal of this game. However, it can be seen from the end of season 2 that Advance's real face has been unveiled and the conflicts are intensified, the dystopia designed by the producers slides towards a grimmer direction no matter what choices have been made. The current plots end with a feeling of destiny, in which the dystopia is created step by step with the witness and help of the players. Some players deprecate themselves as entirely in a hurry without noticing any of the program content because the buttons and the sticks have already confused them for a long time. Indeed, such kind of panic is exactly what Alex will also experience on the first days in her new position. The difficulty distracts Alex from pondering and criticizing, hence, she will be obedient to do what she is expected to do. Such simulation of laboriousness is also a kind of dissuasion rhetoric of the dystopia.

According to Foucault, knowledge is not found from what is been told, but who is speaking, it is produced from called "discourse" rather than "meaning" since it is about the "relation of power", from which the knowledge is produced (Hall, 1997). In NFB, the power exists in controlling what and how do people think by manipulating media

contents. Nevertheless, the process is full of unknown interferences, tearing up the perfect persona of reality constructed by media contents. So, in this dynamic and contradictory process, the information authenticity may never be achieved, but the society authenticity can be outlined clearly. Those cut-off shootings can reversely raise the curiousness and rebelliousness of the players, driving them to the archive room for the hidden truth. Furthermore, the blocked access to the inhibited content, combined with the leaked backstage information, forms a sphere where people could feel the existence and supervision of the Big Other (Lacan, Zizek), and the vagueness of the social schema. The Chicago School also views mass communication from a social constructionism's perspective, arguing that what consensus is formed in people's communication, and the society is constructed during the process of exchanging symbols and applying meanings to them (Loconto & Jones-Pruett, 2006). Bogost argues that game vividness comes not from immersion, but from abstraction. (Bogost, 2007) The best interactivity comes from closest to real experience (Bogost, 2007). Although all the materials in NFB are fictional and fabricated, NFB yet reversely demonstrates a vivid copy of reality, for it is not simulating the appearance of the reality but its power structure. The witness of the construction process of social reality in the virtual dystopia, and the feeling of destined, are merged with the insinuated events in the real world, from which the criticism towards current social issues is derived.

3 Risk society, modernity, and dystopian indie games

3.1 Social risks shown in *Not for Broadcast*

To sum up the main idea of NFB, it is about changing players' minds by putting them into an imagined context of a dystopia, learning how the dystopia is established in people's daily practice, in which the pressure of living is also imposed on them so as to force them into making choices. In the procedural rhetoric, the contradictions existing in this society are revealed incisively. On the global level, here comes the hot war on

the city's periphery, in which nuclear bombs have been widely used; on the national level, the government Advance is planning on military expansion to other places, leaving an empty promise to improve the living conditions of the citizens; also, on the social and individual levels, individuals are bearing the pressure and anxiety towards uncertainty. Those who fled to another city might have been killed by the bombs (such as Megan's brother, and Alex's daughter, if players allow her to join a trip before); those who remain at home are confronted with the siege of a bunch of problems, such as population elimination on their old parents, financial deficits, brainwashed youths, and the untrustworthy mass media full of commodity fetishism and mediatized politics every day. By interaction, players are supposed to feel these imagined yet true to life risks that the protagonist is undertaking, and more importantly, they will experience the incapability of preventing systematic risks merely by sitting in the studio and playing videos. The risks in NFB are all derived from the society but not from nature, they are systematically produced and can be down to the dis-functioning of core institutions, which shows strong criticism towards issues in modernity.

3.2 Risk society from a cultural perspective: who to blame for risks

In terms of modernity, Weber created the concept of "iron cage" to describe the incapability of individuals under the rational and instrumental administration of bureaucracy (Weber, 2001), they are alienated from themselves to serve the society under "scientific and reasonable calculations". Bauman also discussed in his book *Modernity and Holocaust* how modern rationalism functioned in collective actions as a belief (Bauman, 1989), which rationalized the holocaust in WWII and finally made it come true. Giddens describes modernity from a political-economic perspective, deeming it as a mechanism of *disembedding* (Giddens, 1990), where time and space are reorganized by symbolic tokens and expert system, which allows the global affairs to be addressed asynchronously by trust, also, in this modernity, risks are open to being shaped by human intervention (Giddens, 1991). It is conceivable that once the

disembedding mechanism collapses, for instance, when the risks are not foreseeable enough or the expert system is not fully prepared, the risks will appear on a global scale that no one can escape. Beck proposed the concept of “the second modernity”, which in his perspective refers to the risk society. Here, risks are “dangers produced by the civilization which cannot be socially delimited in either place or time”, risk society is about *fabricated uncertainty*. (Beck, 1999), and “flexibility means a redistribution of risks from state and economy to individuals.” (Beck, 1999) In this article, Beck’s theory of risk society will be discussed along with the risks in NFB and other dystopian games in particular.

In Beck’s view, risks basically refer to those stemming from industrial technology, e.g., nuclear leaks and explosions, wars, ecological damages, poverty and famine, global unemployment, etc. In NFB, some of the typical risks mentioned above are noticeable, especially the nuclear explosion and wars which in Giddens’s words are called *high-consequence risk* (Giddens, 1991). Since Beck did not limit the definition of risk merely to economic and industrial technologies, Douglas and Wildavsky (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1983) extended the risk to a cultural level, they listed three kinds of cultures and the possible risks stemming from them, which are:

- (1) social risk: including domestic chaos, and overseas military menace, driven by the hierarchical - institutional culture;
- (2) economic risk: threats to economics, which are led by the market and individualism culture;
- (3) natural risk: aroused by the development of technology, which is led by the “sectarian” and “border” culture.

However, Douglas and Wildavsky based their theory on a of “deviate-control” mode, which means, although they distinguished between different kinds of culture-led risks, they failed to find out *why* these risks happen in the social-historical perspective, or find out the *subject* responsible for the risks, but it is understandable since their historical

context is set in late 1960s and early 1970s, which a time full of radical stands and parades such as the Hippies movements (where drugs are commonly and overly abused) which could be great menace to public safety, even when their enemies – patriarchy, cold-war and caucasianism had not caused any physical injuries yet, and that is why Douglas and Wildavsky believe that even when the risks are not increasing sharply after we entered modern age, the imagination of risks will still remind people of the possibility of risks constantly until they believe the risks are destined to happen, so as to adopt cultural approaches to prevent such catastrophes (e.g. *Silent Spring* on contamination of pesticide abuse). Scott Lash argues that “risk culture always starts from *who to blame*.” For example, when it comes to natural risks, he pointed out that Douglas and Wildavsky should not exclusively blame the “sectarians” but the emergence of disorganization of world capitalism (Adam et al., 2000), which hides behind the boom of modern technologies as an ontological fact.

3.3 Towards modernity: the target of the criticalness of dystopian indie games

Back to NFB, first of all, the risks could be classified as social risks in light of Douglas and Wildavsky, secondly, when it comes to who to blame, NFB tends to not only attribute the consequences to the fallibility of rationality, but also to the swelling and unsupervised power of Advance (political force), or in other words, the *conspiracy* of power and rationalism. Hence, aside from pointing out what kind of risks exist in modern society, NFB also seeks to show its critical attitude in finding out why these risks will happen in the socio-historical dimension. For example, the story of Jeff Algebra in NFB is furthermore concerned with the origin of risks: the pathological worship towards rationality, and the utilitarianism both the political and technological sides are deeply convinced of. Players are assigned with broadcasting a sitcom called *Hey, friendship!* written by a local secondary school math teacher Jeff Algebra and performed by his students. Before going onto the stage, Jeff expressed his enthusiasm in Math in an interview and suggests everyone learn Math because it is “useful”. His

point of view is also vividly demonstrated in the sitcom. The students in his story are divided into two contradictory groups, a 13-year-old middle-class girl who learns Math well is provoked by the boy called Johnny the Fist, who does poorly in school. Johnny comes from an underprivileged family living in a low-renting house, his father is an alcoholic and often commits domestic violence to him and his mother. Confronting such a boy, the girl said, “it’s your choice to be mean”, which attributes all the causes of social inequalities to the underprivileged, in Beck’s words, it shows “the individualization of social inequality” (Rigakos & Hadden, 2001). Also, at the end of the story, the students sing together, “I can be you. You can be me. Life can be peachy keen if you work as a team.” Here, NFB describes the split between the middle class who believes in instrumental rationality and the low class who are not equipped with the ability of reflection. The math here is possibly representing the technologies, or in a broader spectrum, the ideology or moral values of the knowledgeable middle class who believes in modern calculationism and computationism to manage their life. Moreover, although they call for collectivism, the truth is that this friable “community” is established as leeway for solidifying the power of Advance. At the end of Season 2, Jeff Algebra devotes himself to the propaganda affairs of Advance wholeheartedly, he writes another sitcom to praise collectivism and the usefulness of Math, which requires players to add the sound of claps when needed, this brings about a dramatic comparison between the fabricated consensus and the truth. The metaphor in Jeff’s story reveals that the tight connection between political power and technologies might lead to a myth that covers authoritarianism with the belief of technological progressivism and hereby causes systematic risks.

The worries about uncertainty or extreme rationality are also shown in other dystopian games. For instance, in *Mind Scanner*, the political party called The Structure leans heavily on electrical power and its derivative technologies to “cure” mental problems. People in this city is not deemed as human but machines that can be “repaired” is suspected to have rebellious thoughts or diagnosed to have psychological problems by

the player, those who are “cured” will be too tame to behave like normal people, they tend to be suspicious or fearful before cure since no one knows whether there will be any accidents. On top of that, as the officer from *The Structure* said, these citizens “cannot live without technology”, however technology here is used to control people’s minds. Thus, it reveals a dilemma that people are increasingly relying on modern technology, whereas when the technology surrenders to political power, it will reversely accelerate the process of alienation of individuals. In *papers, please*, the uncertainty of border conflict exists in the moral choices of the players. If the player, as an officer in the customs, chooses to let the wife without a passport enter Arstotzka with her husband, then the customs will be bombed by the couple since they are radical revolutionists. In *Republique, Replica, Beholder*, and *Do Not Feed the Monkeys*, the risk that individuals are faced with is the ubiquitous surveillance in the networked society that they are not apprised of. Although they appear to realize the authoritarianism in the *1984* world (and indeed they do), they go even further on this topic, unveiling the origin of this modern authoritarianism, that is, the power of networked control of authority which is equipped with technology and a set of rationalism rules. Interestingly, players in these games are mostly set to be with the authority at first, they will experience how alluring it can be to abuse the power of manipulation with the help of technology or mass media, but will also soon discover that how individuals are suffering because of the manipulation conducted by themselves, and realize that himself/herself also fall prey to this sublime social machine, and hence, players have a make a choice between the given rules and revolting.

Another problem mentioned in most of the dystopian games mentioned above is hyperreality, while this is not by design but rather an unconscious consensus of the dystopian game developers. Hyperreality is firstly created by Jean Baudrillard to describe the virtual media environment people are situated in. It refers to an information environment created by *simulacra*, which means, by merely producing and reproducing symbols, the reality is eliminated yet revived in a distorted way following the media’s

reconstruction (King, 1998). In these games, hyperreality is represented by the interface, for example, in NFB, it is the panel with buttons, in *Replica*, it is the user interface of mobile phone, also, in *Papers, please* and *Mind Scanner*, it is the desk covered with several archives or interactive interface embedded in it, showing specific information of characters and the background world. In these (electronic) interfaces, players will be apprised with filtered, framed, and even biased information, they construct their knowledge of the real world by virtual means. Hyperreality is especially demonstrated as an indispensable part of NFB. By manipulating symbols, players control what the audience should see and think about, at the same time, advertisements add to the density of information, thus, when the audience are indulged in the media content, they can hardly escape from the bombing of superfluous information, and consequently, they (theoretically) become numb and do not care about what the reality is, as Debord described, in a society dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles (Debord, 1995). Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation. Alex, as the only audience who is an outsider of this media illusion, is recreating the hyperreality with her own hands. Hyperreality in fact is a specific phenomenon that appears in post-modern society, which seemingly contradicts with the second modernity that argues we have not entered post-modernism but halts at modernity. However, NFB combines these two modernities together, pointing out several possible risks that people would not like to come across in the future. In NFB, advertisements – a representation of post-modern consumerism, are also promoting rationalism (e.g., promoting transition center which in fact is a place for eliminating population) or utilized as an approach of making profits under careful calculation, or as a tool for seizing power for Advance, as a result, the unsupervised power entity systematically causes physical risks in the real world.

Therefore, the criticalness shown in NFB and other dystopian indie games cannot be simply classified such as anti-authoritarianism, anti-supervision or anti-war, etc., though it is definitely of no problem when labeling them with these descriptions, and

chances are that even the producers themselves have not realized what their games are really intended to tell. As an interactive literature genre, games are convinced to be born with specific cultures and values through which the contemporary social issues and ideological trends in the developer's age can be detected. Jameson created the concept "the political unconscious" to restore "to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality" (Jameson, 2002) of the underlying political and historical logics and conditioning determinants of literary works, and here, as a digital form of literature, games are also based on specific socio-historical background, which is demonstrated in narrative and procedural design even when the designers are not realizing themselves. It is meaningless to discuss whether one game is designed to replicate the world in *1984* or in *The Brave New World*, on the contrary, it will be meaningful to perceive what commonness the games have all shown to gain insight into what problems do the producers discern, why these problems, how they respond to them, and what kind of utopia should we head to.

Here I posit that these dystopian indie games commonly show anxiety towards uncertainty in an unprecedented high-entropy society where global conflicts, ecological damages, and domestic problems can happen without any notifications, and they all show an inner criticism towards extreme rationalism which is a feature of modernity that results in a polarized dystopian world where risks are uncertain, global, unforeseeable and imposed on individuals due to the uneven distribution of power and the procedural rationalization of the inequality. Here, "power" is not limited to political forces, since the risk society that emerges from an industrial society is in a relatively fast decline, as the market capitalization of Intel and Microsoft rivals those of General Motors and Ford (Adam et al., 2000). As is unveiled in *Not for Broadcast: lockdown* that is inspired by the COVID-19 pandemic, the unknown origin of the virus is replaced by a surely manufactured error in the production of the toy Mr. Snugglehug in this game, pointing out the negative externalities brought about by the uncontrolled expansion of monopoly companies, which in reality, are those technological behemoths such as

Google and Microsoft.

3.4 Limitations of dystopian games: mobilization of individuals based on reduced facts

As is analyzed above, the dystopian indie games in essence demonstrate common anxiety about where modernity (or post-modernity) should go when technology and its inner rationality is developing at a stunningly fast pace after the financialization of Internet enterprises and the globalization process in the 1980s, when a new round of redistribution of domestic power and world order is ongoing along with the increasingly tense relationship between different political and economic groups. In the risk society, the old hegemony is dying, but the new cannot (yet) be born (Adam et al., 2000). Dystopian indie games as a counterculture thus start from individual appeals, which strives to win back the right deprived of individuals by the looming enemies, and “offer a new way to model the world” (Turner, 2006).

As Jameson writes, modernism is itself an ideological expression of capitalism, and in particular, of the latter's reification of daily life, maybe granted a local validity (Jameson, 2002). Post-modernism, along with individualism, arose from the middle of the 20th century, they are responses to the “broken utopia” (namely, a “not-yet” world can be found nowhere) created by the Enlightenment. Their historical basis could be a series of interweaving events such as the world wars, Cold War, Cuban Missile Crisis, the Vietnam war and disintegration of the Soviet Union, etc., which cast shadows on the progressiveness of rationality, which is represented by the development of technology and appears as modernity. The collapse of modernism prompted the birth of post-modernism, which is dedicated to destructing the existing order and social structure other than construction, post-modernists such as Lyotard and Feyerabend show strong disagreement and vigilance towards consensus and grand narratives. The pessimistic tone widely appears in numerous pieces of literature in the recent half-century, which

also includes these dystopian indie games which depict a formidable future to shock and freeze the players and call for liberty and happiness for *individuals* from the oppressed perspective. Lash calls this “judgment of beautiful”, which resembles Kant’s aesthetics of beauty, pointing out that through the productive synthesis in our imagination, we construct the “terrible sublime” (Adam et al., 2000) to depict the possible catastrophes we might come across, and from which we confirm our finitude in reaching the “not-yet” utopia. In NFB, the war and nuclear explosion is the representation of the “terrible sublime” that Alex is definitely not able to stop on her own, although players can go against Advance by cutting in the broadcast of Disrupt, they are not able to prevent the trend that is formed by the convergence of not only the political parties but also the whole inactive system driven by toxic capitalism and inhumane rationality.

Out of the funding and developing limits, the dystopian indie games mostly focus on the modification of an individual’s life in the modern age, which turns out to be a clever design that strikes a chord with the players, and simultaneously maximize its persuasiveness when the players experience what his/her own future life can be if in the dystopia. In dystopian games, procedural rhetoric is adopted not only to rectify the player’s behavior but also to convey a set of new ideologies by this means. To specify, players in NFB are told to remember several complex operations so as to run the TV programs successfully and earn credits or high ratings for their operations. When they are confronted with moral choices such as whether to play advertisements of Disrupt or of Advance, they will decide what rules they should by themselves but not by someone else telling them what should they do. However, this rebelliousness is also by design, and that is when the procedural rhetoric truly lies in. By letting the players decide on what is right “by themselves”, these games persuade their values and beliefs in an open and reasonable yet unconscious way. The discourse underlying is indicating that *individuals* are unprecedentedly responsible for fighting back and claiming their own happiness from the centralized ruling of authoritarian power. This individualism highly

resembles the core spirit of counterculture which originates from the cold war. Stewart Brand, who was grown in the fear of nuclear wars during the cold war and then became the pioneer of the counterculture and leader of the Hippies movement, launched his project *The Whole Earth Catalog* in the field of computer science, trying to gather knowledge and ideas from worldwide to inspire creative works. In 1958 Brand wrote in his diaries that “the responsibility of evolution is on each *individual* man...the matter [of] freedom – social, psychological, and potential – is of the highest importance.” (Turner, 2006) Here it is conceivable that the utopia Brand was longing for is formed by the *crowd of individuals*, but not by a *collectivity*. Therefore, a new ideology of individualism derives from the practices in the virtual world, with its aim anchored in the material world. As Lyotard argues, one cannot bear *witness* indifferently, it is an obligation for the thinker, the theorist (Lyotard, 1988). This individualism, combined with the easily accessible network technologies, formed a set of moral values and the relative virtual activism in cyberspace among geeks, hippies, and creative workers. Take NFB as an example, the producer NotGames is formed by a group of former playwrights, journalists, and technological supporters, they brought the techniques of creative drama to NFB, along with their left-wing individualism that blend with the procedural persuasiveness, which can be seen in the anti-collectivism sitcom mentioned above, and also, the empowerment of Alex which allows her to make choices and make a difference. In this regard, individualism as a rhetoric technique is quite motivating as it reminds players to think critically in every operation.

To sum up, dystopian indie games are trying to depict a terrible world by imagination based on reality, which is ruled by rationality and will perhaps go irrational in the future because of the systematic risks itself causes. These games did not give specific solutions to what kind of utopia should we chase, but inform individuals to be rebellious when there is inequality. However, though dystopian games are critical in this regard, they are in an awkward situation that makes them perhaps not critical enough. Due to its small scale of developers, the themes are mostly constrained to telling individual stories

so as to simplify the developing process. Indeed, it helps when players start to notice the surrounding surveillance or begin to critically review the discourse and power structure hidden in advertisements and political speeches, however, this is a dramatic yet distorted imagination of the reality. Dystopia is completely different from utopia in the aspect of imagination. The latter is full of wild dreams that conceive a brand new, a totally overthrown world as a *whole*, that is to say, it has its origin from the reality, however, it does not have to follow the reality but should feel free when proposing new blueprints; while the former inherits the continuity of the existing world, which means, the systematic risks are originated from inside, thus there has to be a *reason*, a *prerequisite* followed by the dystopia as its consequence. However, in the dystopian indie games, the dystopia exists as a prerequisite replacing the driving force. For instance, *Papers, please* has its historical basis on the German border conflicts, which explains the existence of dystopia from outside the game; but in *Mind Scanner* (which is developed by the same producer), the settings are virtual, it conceives a highly developed city where technologies are abused to control both the mind and the body of people as a background, the story, in essence, is still about revolting and saving loves, but has nothing to do with the (fundamental) origin of this dystopia. For the players, they are persuaded in gaming that something must be done to defeat the evil, but questions always come when they ask: when and why the evil is born? What is more, dystopia is systematically formed, while in the games, the possible solution is settled on the activism of individuals, which shows its reductionism since it simplifies the complex political, economic, and cultural factors that facilitate the dystopia. Thus, in this respect, dystopian indie games are more of motivative slogans cried out from individual developers, but not analytical anatomies of dystopia. They are inclined to offer a space for reflection to those who can purchase games and have spare time to play, which means this retrospection is constrained to a relatively small scale.

Conclusion

Through this case study, we can first draw the conclusion that dystopian games are persuasive. By procedural rhetoric, dystopian indie games persuade the players to put themselves into other's minds, and find out what is the right choice against the suppression in dystopia step by step. Its persuasiveness lies in the operations that players have to well grasp, by conforming to the given rules at the very beginning, and then breaching them on the basis of their judgment, players will see the inner duality of the game narrative, and figure out what is ought to be done to escape from this nightmare. However, although it appears to be the choice made on the player's own, this judgment is in fact made following the guidelines of the game designers that expounds their intention.

However, as can be seen in the listed games, the dystopias in different games wear various faces, but no matter the dystopia is depicted like the *1984* world which is full of surveillance and mind control or appears to be like that in *The Brave New World* where the authoritarianism cooperates with consumerism to paralyze people in a happy and unconscious way, the dystopias are altogether pointing out the conspiracy of power and rationality. Hereby we can draw the second conclusion: the target of dystopian indie games, or namely, the fundamental factor that forms these different dystopias is the monopoly and abuse of rationality, by which the risks produced are distributed to individuals. It could be a government holding the cutting-edge technologies and taking advantages of this ownership to conduct surveillance and assimilation to consolidate its domination; or, it can be a huge company seizing power from monopoly, gathering most of the society's wealth to satisfy itself, leaving the low-class a "low life" to struggle with; or, the rationality can be interpreted as an abstract guideline, a set of moral values, as Beck argues, modernity is not an age of decline of values but an age of values (Beck, 1999), here in the dystopia, individuals are included into "accountability" like machines, once there is an error, there is a "conversion" awaiting.

However, when it comes to the content of persuasion, these games are seemingly lacking persuasiveness. I would like to go further here as a final reflection. Pe'rez-Latorre and Oliva (Pe'rez-Latorre & Oliva, 2019) switched their emphasis from game genre to specific game design, or another word, the “content” of the game, then they have found the discrepancy between the genre (claimed ideology) and the mechanism (ideology below consciousness) in the case study of Bioshock: Infinite, though this game is defined as a dystopian game, yet the mechanism and rewarding system designs are persuading competitiveness, which is a typical ideology of Neo-liberalism that links individual's happiness with endless labor and alienation together. Back to dystopian indie games listed in this article, most of them are prone to create an existing dystopia as an axiomatic being but seldom offer background information about the formation of the dystopia. The process of formation ought to be explained in an ontological way but not in a narrative way. Even though NFB insists it is a game demonstrating how the dystopia is formed, it is actually showing how dystopia is *realized*. The necessity of dystopia is not explained from a socio-historical perspective but turns out to be determined by the choice of players. They focus on mobilizing the players to change the status quo by a dense sequence of interaction, burdening the players with moral responsibilities, nevertheless, they did not show sufficient reason for players, who are actors in the real world, to make a difference; reversely, the imaginary dystopia is rather utilized as a background setting for mechanism design, or as a social structure with uneven distribution of power to design the narrative and plots, which attracts players by a provoking appearance, yet the criticalness is reduced when players are motivated by the designed plots but could find no proper context for real actions, thus, the persuasiveness of dystopian games is rather effective in the long run as mind “vaccinations” for the vulnerable individuals in a possible terrible future.

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