The Future Past:
Intertextuality in Contemporary Dystopian Video Games

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“Games help those in a polarized world take a position and play out the consequences.”

The Twelve Propositions from a Critical Play Perspective

Mary Flanagan, 2009
Designing Digital Spaces

In everyday life, physical space serves a primary role in orientation — it is a “container or framework where things exist” (Mark 1991) and as a concept, it can be viewed through the lense of a multitude of disciplines that often overlap, including physics, architecture, geography, and theatre. We see the function of space in visual media — in film, where the concept of physical setting can be highly choreographed and largely an unchanging variable that comprises a final static shot, and in video games, where space can be implemented in a far more complex, less linear manner that underlines participation and system-level response. The artistry behind the fields of production design and visual design, in film and in video games respectively, are exemplified in works that engage the viewer or player in a profound or novel manner.

In video games, a multitude of factors that enhance player experience have been analyzed in depth by various sources, and the discussion of space in the medium is not entirely unexplored. Michael Nitsche, author of Video Game Spaces: Image, Play, and Structure in 3D Game Worlds, condenses the definition of space in video games by labeling it as a “supporting factor to bind the player into the game universe and to situate actions, objects, and other players” (2008) that also compels a study of games that links their design and analysis.

Since the transition to 3D virtual environments, beginning with Battlezone (Atari) in 1980 and later 3D Monster Maze (Evans) in 1982, the implications of space in video games have undergone vast transformations. Though many contemporary video games do not implement three dimensions as a key conceit of their level design, the proliferation of 3D environments in games parallels an exponential advancement of processing power in technology available to
consumers – in video game consoles like Microsoft’s XBOX 360, Sony’s Playstation 3, and personal computers. Space functions in video games in a multitude of manners, many of which have been examined at length, but for the purposes of this analysis, I focus on several contemporary games that feature dystopian environments and also implement the oft-cited concept of intertextuality in their treatment of visual design. More specifically, I examine the visual design of video games that feature a dystopian setting, and use intertextuality to depict distinct, cohesive game worlds. Through the practice of drawing inspiration across mediums and recontextualizing existing aesthetics in hostile, alien, and oppressive environments, designers employ intertextuality within the spatial context of the 3D game environment and juxtapose the perceived nostalgia of historical visual references with the intrinsic oppression of a dystopian game world. This analysis rejects the notion that the postmodern practice of intertextuality is an intrinsically negative one that dilutes our past – rather, in the games that are mentioned – intertextuality does the opposite. It puts the player in contact with the aesthetic trappings of the past, and in turn, creates an ongoing visual lexicon within a specific, nuanced cultural chronology of the dystopian aesthetic.

The video games included in this analysis all employ intertextuality – and all derive success in presenting engaging, fluid, and detailed dystopian worlds that are familiar, contradictory, and alien all at once. In each instance, current and past critical evaluations of intertextuality can be employed with varying degrees of success, and sometimes not at all. In contemporary visual media, the tendency to imbue dystopian settings with anachronistic aesthetic references is common – and now that video games are arguably the definitive medium of dystopian fiction – the practice of intertextuality within game worlds can help to define the
duality, tone, and nuance in the treatment of dystopian setting. Video games are “texts” in their own right, and their prominence in contemporary culture has been discussed at length. But the notion of “borrowing” or alluding to sources in video games is a topic that has not been explored as thoroughly as it has in other medium.

The myriad representations of dystopian settings in visual art – which is defined for the purposes of this analysis as painting, drawing, photography, film, television, graphic novels, (also textual) and video games – are accompanied by an established visual iconography that spans across mediums. These reoccurring visual tropes help us to understand the implications of fictional dystopian societies. Films like *Blade Runner* (Scott 1982), *Brazil* (Gilliam 1985), *Pleasantville* (Ross 1998), and *Dark City* (Proyas 1998) expound on this trait and have become consistently referenced as successful applications of retrofitting a historical visual style to suit the aesthetics of a dystopian world. Various narrative frameworks will be examined using current methods employed in critical media studies, game studies, film studies, literature, narratology, ludology, architecture, production design, and history.

The effect of visual style on the quality of a game is a hotly contested topic, and one that is not easily resolved in the current climate of games that feature rudimentary graphics but harbor massive fanbases, like *Minecraft* (Persson, Bergensten 2006) and *Dwarf Fortress* (Adams 2006), or alternatively, financially successful franchise iterations that use their graphics engines as selling points alongside weak or rehashed gameplay, like *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward 2007) and *Gears of War 3* (Blezinski 2011). The analysis of this particular treatment of visual design will attempt to resolve the efficacy of visual intertextuality within
dystopian game worlds. Note that much of the discourse will jettison quantitative analysis of gameplay over a thorough discussion of the aesthetic qualities of the video games at hand.
The origins of video games as a medium begin with *Tennis for Two*, a game that was developed in 1958 by physicist William Higinbotham at Brookhaven National Laboratory in Upton, New York. *Tennis for Two* was the first video game to use a graphical display, a screen that displays information visually according to player input. Now, video games are omnipresent and subject to theoretical analysis that rivals discourse on traditional media. The chronology of video games is short, in terms of the medium’s current cultural prominence, and the medium spans a vast range of functionally divergent forms, from the aforementioned crude ping-pong simulation to the multimillion-dollar productions that are released for major consoles today. The evolution of video games is one that has been recounted endlessly, and the nature of critical discourse on the form has paralleled the evolution of the medium itself. Now, video games are included in serious discourse about media and it can be useful to use terms that traditionally have been applied to other forms of media like literature and film.

Despite similarities between film, video games, and other visual media, they are functionally divergent. According to Janet Murray in her seminal work, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, which discusses interactive media as a narrative form, analysis of game worlds hinges on moving past the notion of video games as a subclass of “multimedia” and towards an understanding of digital spaces as environments that are procedural, participatory, spatial, and encyclopedic (1997). Video game environments are procedural because they have the ability to “execute a series of rules” decided on by game designers. The fact that the procedural environments induce rule-generated behavior in a player
makes them participatory, a trait that contributes to the interactive nature of video games. As Murray notes, the “primary representational property of the computer is the codified rendering of responsive behaviors,” and interactivity is born from the marriage of digital spaces that are participatory and procedural. The spatiality of digital environments hinges on their function as representations of navigable space. Murray notes that books and film also portray space, but “only digital environments can present space that we can move through” (1997). The encyclopedic nature of digital spaces is evident in the medium’s ability to contain vast amounts of information — the average book contains approximately 100,000 words, or about one megabyte of space, and the capacity of digital storage continues to grow exponentially as costs decrease, allowing for the artists’ potential to “offer a wealth of detail to represent the world with both scope and particularity” (Murray 1997).

Though games possess qualities that set them apart, they are not exempt from much of the theoretical analysis that surrounds other media. Two terms that have been explored at length in various forms of media – primarily literature and film – are intertextuality and pastiche. The term intertextuality has been used since the early twentieth century, and pinpointing a widely accepted definition is difficult. It has been used confidently by many critics and theorists – primarily in literature – but no consensus has been reached on an exact definition or the implications of the word from a critical perspective. In simplest terms, intertextuality refers to the idea that a work is not the product of one author or creator, but is related to other “texts,” or works. We see this concept every day, and in all forms of media, from literature – in the classic example of Romeo and Juliet (Shakespeare 1597) and West Side Story (Laurents 1957), to visual art – like the two works A Pair of Shoes by Van Gogh (1886) and Diamond Dust Shoes (1980)
The nature of intertextuality often hinges on the way the practice is applied between mediums, and it is not often easy to delineate existing characteristics of a work from novel ones. Ultimately, intertextuality depends on “the figure of the web, the weave, the garment woven from the threads of the ‘already written’ and the ‘already read’” (Allen 2011). The term pastiche has been used widely, largely with negative connotations of plagiarism and unoriginality. We see the concept frequently in popular media, like *The Matrix* (Wachowski, Wachowski 2001), which is cited as an example of pastiche because of the vast range of disparate sources that inform the film, from William Gibson’s seminal cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer* (1985) to the neo-noir dystopian sci-fi film *Dark City* (Proyas 1999) and the Japanese anime *Ghost in the Shell* (Oshii 1995). Works that are heavily intertextual like *The Matrix* are often subject to criticism that they are unoriginal or simply recycling tropes – but this accusation hinges on the already unstable connotations of what can be deemed original and what can’t. It is not useful to apply value to originality or to condemn intertextuality solely based on its iterative qualities.

Left: Van Gogh’s *A Pair of Shoes* (1886), Right: Warhol’s *Diamond Dust Shoes* (1980). This juxtaposition of two paintings is a touchstone in discourses on intertextuality. The texts exist in relation to one another, particularly in their treatment of aesthetic.
The notion of intertextuality in contemporary media is far from a new one, and pastiche—a term first described by the art theorist Roger de Piles (Hoesterey 2001) in 1677—has developed an unattributed definition of “neither original nor copy” (Hoesterey 2001), harboring both negative, positive, and middling connotations. The term was applied to literature in the theoretician Jean-François Marmontel’s *Éléments de littérature*, where he described the practice as “an affected imitation of the manner and style of a writer” (Marmontel 1787; translation Hoesterey 2001). Marmontel noted that pastiche was not a complementary term but rather a derogatory one. Imitation in itself was not negative, but the added concept of affectation to a creative work was one to be denounced, according to Marmontel’s writing, and by extension, classical poets were also undermined. Now, the term is hardly seen as wholly negative and pinpointing its acute definition within the context of art criticism and its impact as a label is difficult and unnecessary for the terms of this argument. Simply put, and for the sake of this argument, pastiche is the result of referencing existing works out of their original context. For the sake of this analysis, the term pastiche will be enveloped by the more applicable variation of the concept—intertextuality—but will not be jettisoned entirely.

Intertextuality, and by extension, pastiche, are not always met with positive or even indifferent reactions in critical analysis. According to prominent literary critic Fredric Jameson, pastiche is the “imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, a speech in a dead language” (1990). Frederic Jameson's analysis of pastiche, part of which is included in this quote, is neither definitive nor universal though his observations parallel the negative connotations of pastiche as it applies to art. Jameson’s analysis preceded
much of the recent theoretical discourse on video games, though his framework applies to nearly all mediums – and his evaluation of the use of pastiche is far from gentle. According to Jameson, pastiche leads to a loss of connection with the past due to the incessant reuse and allusion to history. Then, the past can only be understood as a “repository of genres, styles, and codes ready for commodification” (Felluga 2011). Jameson’s assessment concludes that pastiche, and by extension, intertextuality, is intrinsically negative because the practice leads to cultural homogeneity and effaces the value of history by presenting the past in easily digestible and superficial ways, which complements our consumptive capitalist state. Video games are not exempt from financial motivations, but Jameson’s assessment of intertextuality as harmful discredits the fact that our visual language is ever changing and far from static. There are clearly trends in the presentational styles of media that can be traced across broad cultural movements, and though within these movements there appears to be levels of homogeneity, on the grand scale art is constantly evolving and forever recycling and reinventing texts.

The visual characteristics of literature, film, and 2D visual art have been examined at length by countless academics and critics alike. Production design, which was eloquently described by C.S. Tashiro in his book *Pretty Pictures: Production Design and the History of Film* as "a thorough knowledge of a film’s setting, from the basics of architectural style to the shape of a cufflink," plays a pivotal role in the overall look of a film, and depending on the individual responsible, a shot can be composed to a high degree or constructed with messy candor. The idea of tableaus, or “stage pictures” reverberates throughout visual media from 2D art to films and video games in the principles of composition, color, focus, and lighting. Digital
space provides ample opportunity to create tableaus that are not unlike those seen on the stage, in photography, or in film. The unique ability to create these tableaus with a level of “scope and particularity” (Murray 1997) that is unprecedented in other non-digital spaces, like a tangible stage or film studio, implicates the treatment of aesthetics in video games in a novel light.

Nitsche writes in *Video Game Spaces* that the different methods of presenting space in a video game create a “narrative filter through which player interaction is framed into specific contexts” and the choice to allude to multiple sources is a conscious one (2008). In this paper, I will examine multiple dystopian video games that use intertextuality in varying degrees – and I will group them based on similarities in their treatment of visual design. In order to clarify intertextuality in action within a specific game, the first section examines two game dystopias that harken to the past in their aesthetic – the first-person role playing games *Bioshock* (2K Games 2007) and *Fallout* (Interplay Entertainment 1997). The second section will explore two game dystopias that are heavily stylized and are inspired by the works of past artists – the online first person shooter series *Team Fortress* (Valve Corporation 1997-2007) and the side scrolling platformer *Limbo* (Playdead 2010). These games are linked by their use of intertextuality, though they span a range of themes, play styles, and tones. The motif of historical allusion as an intertextual trait is present in all of these works – and this characteristic will be traced to address and largely reject Jameson’s intrinsically negative view of intertextual works in the postmodern age.
Modern dystopian fiction is far from scarce in the age where technology is ubiquitous – and the genre has been explored in contemporary video games as diverse as *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl* (GSC Game World 2007), which takes place in Pripyat’s Zone of Exclusion after the titular nuclear accident, and *Mirror’s Edge* (DICE 2008), which positions the player as a renegade foot messenger who skirts the sanitized oppression of the game’s de facto political entity. Popular dystopian fiction has its roots in the early 20th century, and Jack London’s *The Iron Heel* (1908) was called the “earliest of the modern Dystopian” (Fromm 1977) and went on to inspire *1984*. Dystopian fiction is set in a “bad place” (Sargent 2010), and for the purposes of this analysis, will be defined using selected classifications by Erika Gottlieb. Firstly, dystopian fiction features a protagonist whose trial is emblematic of injustice (Gottlieb 2001), and contains “dualities of law and lawlessness, propaganda and truth, advanced technology and regression to barbarism” that is ultimately exposed and expounds on the oppressive setting of the work (Gottlieb 2001). Like parallels in narrative, there are undoubtedly undercurrents and motifs in visual iconography that reappear often in dystopian fiction. There is no limit to the number of sources that can be drawn upon for visual inspiration, and though some elements reappear between works and even mediums, it would be disingenuous to imply that there is consensus as to precisely what imagery constitutes the visual lexicon of dystopian fiction, and there is no need for agreement. In lieu of exploring the vast breadth of imagery that accompanies dystopian settings in film and video games, it is necessary to hone in on certain visual elements that reappear between dystopian works, despite thematic differences.
The visual language of dystopian fiction is informed by a vast range of sources. From the sweeping, dramatic landscapes of Revelation to the abject oppression featured in the cities of *Brave New World* and *1984*, it is possible to delineate certain motifs that exist between works. These similarities are not always intentional, though when they are, they implement intertextuality.

The visual language of contemporary dystopian science fiction is an intertextual blend of aesthetic allusions and cannot be reduced to one description or applied to one set of practices to form a definition that satisfies the concept’s multiplicity of instances. The range of these depictions is evidenced in the varied production designs of films like *Blade Runner* (Scott 1982), which features a neo-noir aesthetic derived from Edward Hopper’s *Nighthawks* (Sammon 1996), “Hong Kong on a very bad day,” (Wheale 1995) the narrow, cramped architectural styles of Milan (LoBrutto 1992), and numerous other disparate references that have been articulated by those involved with the film as architectural styles, color palettes, literary allusions, and political ideologies, among other things. The costumes, designed by Charles Knode and Michael Kaplan, were designed to be “believably futuristic but with a nostalgic touch of the ‘forties’” (Mead 1982). *Blade Runner* has been discussed in depth by many as a film that all at once expounded on visual allusion while also becoming recognized for individuality and inventiveness – qualities that are not often compatible in the face of criticism over time.
Director Ridley Scott has said that he “was constantly waving a reproduction of [Nighthawks] under the noses of the production team to illustrate the look and mood I was after" for the production of Blade Runner (Sammon 1996).

*Blade Runner* is a work that has been written about extensively – but the fact that the film contains such an incongruent but inventive visual style using intertextuality allows its analysis to be approached from many angles and lends the film well to continuing passionate discourse. As a text, *Blade Runner*’s intertextual qualities go hand in hand with multifaceted discussions on the film’s design. The film’s dystopian setting is informed by a multitude of sources that underline the related pertinence of key images that can be seen across mediums in other dystopian fiction.

A massive, imposing tower that looms over the peons within a society is an oft-quoted visual icon that spans between dystopian texts – in literature (the Bible’s Tower of Babel), film (*Children of Men*), and video games (*Final Fantasy VII, Half-Life 2*). The idea of a man-made
structure that serves as a static focal point within a changing environment helps to ground settings within their dystopian trappings. Aside from the obvious implications of a structure that is ever present, unchanging, and typically representative of antagonistic and oppressive qualities, the central tower helps to separate “us” from “them,” or the audience’s sensibilities versus the dualistic nature of those who enforce a setting’s dystopian traits.

Top: *Half Life 2*’s imposing Citadel visually quotes other dystopian texts that contain a central, looming physical structure to underline the oppression of society. This still from *Children of Men* shows London’s Battersea Power Station serving as a central government structure in a world where women are barren and governments are increasingly oppressive.
This distinction between individuals is made even more explicit by the use of identifiers – like the physical appearance of characters and their style of dress, another functional way in which the trappings of a dystopia are represented. Uniforms, physical deformities, and physical beauty, among other superficial qualities are consistently used between mediums – from the all-black leather and latex getups favored by the hackers in *The Matrix* to the ragged, utilitarian garb worn by the survivors in the video game *Left 4 Dead*, the garments present in a work can express unique information about the world at hand while also utilizing references from previous works. It is well known that *The Matrix* alludes heavily to William Gibson’s *Neuromancer*, and not just only choice of costuming. The recurring Gibson character Molly Millions – a cyber prostitute and martial artist – is known for her black leather dominatrix getup, as is *The Matrix* trilogy’s Trinity. The zombie apocalypse game *Left 4 Dead* also implements multiple stylistic elements that recall B-grade horror flicks from the 1970s and 80s, and recreates filmic effects like grain and darkening of images near the edge of the frame. These visual motifs are prime examples of intertextual practices within dystopian fiction.

The imposing tower image is one that is deeply rooted in the pertinence of extremes in dystopian fiction – both in society and the aesthetics of the setting. Often, the divide between the downtrodden and their rulers is manifested in environmental characteristics – like the contrast between nature and civilization in *Lord of the Flies* (Golding 1954), the novel (Nolan 1976) and subsequent film (Anderson 1976) of *Logan’s Run*, and games in the *Portal* series (Valve Corporation 2004-12), among others. In these works, the structure (both literally and figuratively) of society is at odds with the chaos of nature, and this is often contrasted in stark differences in setting from one extreme to another.
These narrative motifs underline the shared mythology of the (largely) Western view of dystopias – and these characteristics have been quoted in countless works. Dystopian settings abound in popular culture and fictional narratives and a distinct number of works within this genre use visual stylings that are reminiscent of the past. *Blade Runner*’s neo-noir visual style, with a distinctly 80s-future flare, is hardly the first film to embrace the visual iconography of the past – other films that have approached their overall aesthetic in an intertextual blend of historic references are Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil* (1985), Kerry Conran’s *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* (2004), *Pleasantville*, and Jean-Pierre Jeunet’s *City of Lost Children* (1995).
Retrofuturism and the Decay of Civilization in *Bioshock* and *Fallout*

The role-playing franchises of *Bioshock* and *Fallout* are often cited for their critical and commercial success, and the latter’s 15 year presence as a best selling, multiplatform series speaks to the widespread appeal of the game over time. Both games are set in very distinct dystopias that are at odds with their respective visual styles – and both *Bioshock*’s adherence to art deco and *Fallout*’s visual motifs that recall the 1950s are indicative of their intertextual qualities.

Like other big budget games released on major consoles, the budgets of the latest iterations in both series most likely hover around, if not exceed the 30 million dollar mark. Though all game designers are faced with constraints in both technology and finances, the impetus behind adapting a retrofuturistic visual style for both *Bioshock* and *Fallout* wasn’t born from limitations, but rather a conscious process by both game’s design teams to implement intertextuality within the game worlds. The implications of doing so will be discussed in the following section.

As you cautiously descend the lush red-carpeted staircase, you hear the first melancholy notes of a violin version of Bobby Darin’s “Beyond The Sea” project throughout the lobby. Cast metal sunbursts and stylized ornamentation of aquatic life plate the interior walls of the room, and the defined geometry of the staircase and the details of fixtures call to mind an amalgam of past architectural styles – namely, art deco, with smatterings of that movement’s predecessor, art nouveau, apparent in the intricate embellishments in the metalwork.
In the middle of the room, nested between the two descending arms of the grand staircase, you notice a large metal plated spherical pod that is outfitted with numerous pipes, valves, and apparatuses. Its function as a submersible, particularly a bathysphere, isn’t readily apparent. The pod’s glass door is ajar, and you enter and inspect a lever in the center. When pulled, the door seals and the bathysphere descends underwater rapidly. Having no control, you look out and see a massive steel statue of an idealized, symmetrically angular male figure, reaching upwards towards the surface of the water. Schools of fish swim by, their scales catching the last rays of light that penetrate the increasing depth of the water in a fickle shimmer. The vessel comes to a halt, and a film projector displays a series of artfully hand-drawn slides onto a screen in front of you. A slide appears showing an image of a healthy, affluent looking man with a pipe, sitting in an armchair.

“I am Andrew Ryan, and I am here to ask you a question. Is a man not entitled to the sweat of his brow?” says a charismatic disembodied voice, assumed to be that of the Ryan in the picture. “‘No,’ says the man in Washington – it belongs to the poor. ‘No,’ says the man in the Vatican – it belongs to god. ‘No,’ says the man in Moscow – it belongs to everyone. I rejected those answers. Instead, I chose something different. I chose the impossible. I chose Rapture.”

The projector screen rolls up and reveals your surroundings outside of the bathysphere – a glimmering, submerged metropolis tinged with the vibrant, bleeding hues of neon advertisements and the imposing, vague silhouettes of gargantuan skyscrapers lies before you. A giant squid propels past above you as you drift through the pointed spires of Gotham-esque
buildings, witnessing a world that recalls the unnamed city in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927) if it had been in color and entirely submerged in the middle of the Atlantic.

As the vista of the cityscape passes beneath you, Ryan’s disembodied narration continues to expound on his vision of the city before you – “. . . Rapture – the city where the artist would not fear the censor, where the scientist would not be burdened by petty morality; where great would not be constrained by the small. And with the sweat of your brow, Rapture can become your city as well.”

The opening moments of *Bioshock* take place in 1960 in a remote area of the Atlantic ocean, where the fictional underwater city of Rapture was built by millionaire Andrew Ryan in an effort to create a utopia amidst the despair, confusion, and anxiety that was indicative of the international climate post-World War II. The individualist ideologies that pervade the creation of Rapture underline the setting’s similarities to Galt’s Gulch, a locale in Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged*, and the game often alludes to objectivist philosophy. Rapture, like Galt’s Gulch, is a capitalist, currency driven society with a structure that prioritizes individual freedoms and pursuits – but the lack of social programs and the emphasis on privatization eventually alienated the less fortunate and lead to Rapture’s dramatic decay. The introduction to Rapture sheds light on the story to come – but perhaps more precisely, it evokes a specific tone in its visual style that serves as a motif throughout the remainder of the game.

*Bioshock’s* creative director Ken Levine hasn’t withheld the game’s disparate and numerous influences, from the works of Rand, Aldous Huxley, and Orson Welles to the novel and film adaptation of *Logan’s Run* and stem cell research (Perry 2006). These references tend to
feature instances of idealistic settings where the “people are not ideal” (Minkley 2007) – which situates the game’s dystopian setting. The art-deco influenced visual style supports the use of intertextuality and also the conscious application of a nostalgic visual style – all traits that converge to exemplify the game’s qualities that reappear in other commercially available (on either major consoles or PC/Mac platforms) video games that are examined in this analysis.

*BioShock* occupies a niche in its visual design that can be described as retrofuturism, to use a term coined by Lloyd Dunn in 1987 as the name of his fringe art magazine (*Retrofuturism: History* 2012). According to the magazine’s website, the term can be defined as the “act or tendency of an artist to progress by moving backwards,” a paradox that is pivotal in the understanding of retrofuturism and how it manifests in aesthetics. Retrofuturism, as a prescriptive rather than descriptive term, rejects the notion that originality is pertinent to the success of a creation because the emphasis on originality prohibits “useful expression”.

*BioShock* was received with a level of critical and commercial success that is exceptional for most triple-A titles. In their book *Digital Culture: Understanding New Media*, authors Glen Creeber and Royston Martin examine the game as a work of art, citing its release as a mark of the medium’s “coming of age” as an artistic form (2009). The Smithsonian American Art Museum announced an exhibit scheduled for 2012 titled *The Art of Video Games* in an effort to document the “40-year evolution of video games as an artistic medium with a focus on striking visual effects and the creative use of new technologies.” The exhibit’s curators turned to fans to select the games that would be featured in the exhibit, and *BioShock* was selected as the winner. It is apparent that the game, whose team was led by Ken Levine (story, creative direction) and Scott Sinclair (art direction), resonated with players and critics alike.
The intertextual qualities of the piece were acknowledged after the game’s release most explicitly in a review by Kristan Reed for the website Eurogamer, where the author stated that “Bioshock isn't simply the sign of gaming realizing its true cinematic potential, but one where a game straddles so many entertainment art forms so expertly that it's the best demonstration yet how flexible this medium can be,” (2007). Reed goes on to say that the game is “no longer just another shooter wrapped up in a pretty game engine, but a story that exists and unfolds inside the most convincing and elaborate and artistic game world ever conceived.”

*Bioshock* contains an amalgam of visual references, and the game spaces within the world are rife with allusion to the past. Here, the level Atrium contains a consortium of advertisements for the forgotten capitalist tendencies of Rapture.
The criticisms of the game mostly revolve around flaws in game mechanics, not aesthetic choices – but the distinct visual style of the game warrants a thorough analysis. Would *Bioshock* have been as well-received or as impactful as a work of fiction if the development team purposefully avoided visually quoting other sources? It seems that much of the game’s success lies in its presentational style – that is, the manner in which it presents a dynamic, believable world that is all at once familiar, anachronistic, and foreign. The retrofuturistic visuals heighten the duality of the game’s dystopian environment – the architectural decay, imminent threat of enemies, and eerie, lush ambiance all contrast with the glossy, capitalist patina of art deco and early 20th century luxury.

The game *Fallout* in many ways preceded *Bioshock* as an open world role-playing game, but the most obvious similarity in terms of aesthetic is the game’s retrofuturistic visual style. The game is set in 2161, several decades after a devastating global war incited by a worldwide petroleum shortage, and the chronology follows an alternate timeline that splits into fiction around World War II. Instead of rapid advancements in computing, the world of *Fallout* revolves around nuclear technology. The game, though set in a dystopian future, uses a cohesive and consistent visual design that alludes to the popular culture of the 1940s and 1950s and the overall aesthetic functions on the subsequent nostalgia associated with that era, particularly in contemporary western culture.

The game’s retro aesthetic is apparent in allusions to numerous texts from the era – from popular drugstore novels and pulp fiction to television shows and Cold War propaganda. The aesthetic is insinuated beyond the visual elements of the game, in objects like computers that use vacuum tubes instead of transistors; and energy weapons that operate on Flash Gordon-
esque technology. These in-game objects are art assets, which are pieces of digital media that are implemented in the creation of a larger production and can include textures, 2D models (also called sprites), 3D models, motion-captured or animated data, and audio/video. Art assets can be equated with what Nitsche calls evocative narrative elements, which are elements "that are implemented in the game world to assist in . . . comprehension . . . because they do not contain a story themselves but trigger important parts of the narrative process in the player.” These elements, according to Nitsche, eventually add up and can assemble into what he deems "a form of narrative" (2008). The emphasis on intertextuality extends into the game’s non-diegetic menu and loading screens, which mimic the styling of 50s advertisements. One of the game's loading screens is an Indian Head test card.

The settings in Bioshock and Fallout are punctuated by the chronic wear and dramatic erosion in environments – the majestic underwater and desert vistas are littered with detail and period flair marred by the shortcomings of civilization. An early promotional image from the game Fallout 3, which takes place in an expansive area that features Washington, D.C., northeast Virginia and parts of Maryland, shows a disintegrating Capitol building as the centerpiece in a landscape of destruction and despair. The computer generated destruction apparent in the image was so potent that major news networks began to run a story reporting that it had been posted on a radical jihadist website as a depiction of how “Washington D.C. would look after a nuclear attack” (Reuters 2008). Images of the nation’s capital in abject destitution resonated with gamers, reviewers, and academics alike – and the tableaus in the game employ an intertextual mix of the icons typically associated with dystopian fiction.
This promotional image for *Fallout 3* was mistaken by major news agencies for a doctored photo showing the potential effects of a nuclear attack on Washington D.C. Games in the *Fallout* series imbue their dystopian settings with anachronistic visual qualities largely gleaned from the 1950s.

In a development diary that chronicles the making of *Fallout’s* most recent sequel, *Fallout 3*, concept artist Adam Adamowicz outlined the game’s intertextual qualities that were apparent early on in the process:

"Visualizing all of the aspects of a make believe world is quite an educational experience. On any given day I could be simultaneously learning about multiple topics, from motorcycle engines to 50’s fashion design. It’s kind of like writing and filming a National Geographic documentary film for an actual sci-fi world. For this job, I think the more you read on a wide variety of subjects, the better equipped you are to create depth and realism, especially for a fantasy setting. The fantastic that’s grounded in real world elements and then elaborated and exaggerated upon, seem to work the best, and create a solid jumping off
point. This often creates fertile ground for generating additional story elements that can influence costumes, machines, and even motives for the various personalities inhabiting a made up world.

“Myself and the rest of the team poured over the lore, related our experiences playing the original, and researched everything 50’s we felt enhanced the drama, black comedy, and rich vintage sci fi that make this a truly unique game . . . When the dust clears, I hope what you see is a mutated beast stamped indelibly with its inimitable origins.”

The level of commitment to a multiplicity of sources is apparent in both _Bioshock_ and _Fallout_, and each game’s reliance on retrofuturism and the depiction of a decaying society to create a cohesive game world does not mesh with Jameson’s evaluation of intertextuality. Both works exist in a fictional chronology, but they do not jettison the value of history in lieu of superficial visual stylings that are only meant to conjure nostalgia. These games do not deny history – in fact they illuminate the vitality of past texts in their depiction of an oppressive future. These games are commercial products, but they are also products of a distinct place in history and a sense of time and place that underlines the value of history.
Innocence, Iteration, and Nostalgia in *Team Fortress* and *Limbo*

The games *Team Fortress* and *Limbo* may seem entirely unrelated based on their genre and premise — the former is a boisterous cartoonish team-based online first person shooter, the latter a quiet, disturbing single-player puzzle game. Though they do not share many traits in terms of their mechanics, the two games both implement a heavily stylized visual design that recalls eras of the past in both tone, setting, and aesthetic. Both game worlds do not exist in a specific time, but their aesthetic trappings do infer specific historical connotations. At a cursory glance, both games appear to have the visual stylings of children’s entertainment but contain thematic material that is highly mature and even disturbing. The design process of both games throughout their development is well documented — and both are known for their adaptive visual designs that recall exaggerated, impressionistic, and innocent visions of the past.

The distinction between games that adapt previous works via intertextuality and games that rely on a more superficial or straightforward aesthetic is not always simple to distinguish. In the case of the *Team Fortress* franchise, this distinction is readily apparent between the first iteration in the series, *Team Fortress*, which was released as an online multiplayer mod based on the popular first-person shooter *Quake* (id Software 1996). *Team Fortress* was designed and written by Robin Walker, John Cook, and Ian Caughley, who were hired by Valve Software after the success of the mod. The game was then updated and rereleased on Valve’s GoldSrc engine in August 1999. A sequel, *Team Fortress 2*, was released in 2007. Though the franchising and subsequent release schedule in the series is not exceptional, the aesthetic evolution of *Team*
*Fortress* is noteworthy from a design perspective. From the game’s first release to its current iteration, gameplay mechanics have remained relatively intact, albeit updated to be in line with current technical affordances. Aside from the vastly updated graphics, the franchise went through a series of changes in visual design that ultimately benefit the game’s aesthetic qualities, and in turn, help to reinforce the game world as a whole. The current iteration of the game, *Team Fortress 2*, implements a visual style that uses intertextuality to enforce the exaggerated, cartoonish gameplay and interaction between players.

*Team Fortress* began as a multiplayer *Quake* mod where players are divided into two teams — Red and Blue. Players define their role in combat choosing to play as one of nine classes — Medic, Sniper, Soldier, Pyro, Spy, Demoman, Heavy Weapons, Engineer, or Scout, each possessing distinct abilities and weaknesses. The class system remains in all official versions of the game, as does the team-based combat. After the first *Team Fortress* gained traction among gamers, *Team Fortress Classic* was introduced, updating the game for an official retail release under Valve’s support. *Team Fortress 2* was announced in 1999 as a contemporary war game that featured a commander with an aerial battlefield view who could control troop movements on a large scale (Dawson 2000). The game was perceived to function more as a combat-strategy game than a first-person shooter. When the sequel was delayed indefinitely with spare explanation, it was assumed to be a dead project. In reality, the team was committed not only to an overhaul in gameplay, but in the game’s visual design. Walker mentioned in an interview after the release of *Team Fortress 2* that the time in between the release of the original and the sequel was spent “building things that were known as (*Team Fortress 2*) internally,” as the public was not privy to the game’s progress. Walker stated that the development team
ultimately built “three to four different games,” noting that they “didn’t like many of them,” (Dawson 2000).

Preview screenshots for *Team Fortress 2* exemplify the visual qualities that pervade first-person shooters — there is little deviation from typical constructions of a generic military aesthetic. Accurately proportioned player characters are outfitted in camouflage and environments support the overall aesthetic with dusty, non-descript Middle Eastern towns.
Final player-character models for *Team Fortress 2* exemplify the visual design of the game, which references visual qualities of early 20th century commercial illustration by artists like Dean Cornwell, J.C. Leyendecker, and Norman Rockwell (Mitchell 2008).

The decision to depart from the aesthetic conventions of other first-person shooters like *Counter Strike* and *Day of Defeat: Source* was based in the effort to connect gameplay and design in an effective manner. According to the developer commentary of *Team Fortress 2*, the animated and exaggerated aesthetic of the game helped to divert realistic explanations of gameplay. Instead of focusing on closing the disconnect between non-fictional combat scenarios and the vastly divergent mechanics of an online first person shooter, the design team chose to use a distinct, stylized aesthetic and cartoonish characters (Valve Corporation 2007). Character models reference specific conventions of the commercial illustrator J. C. Leyendecker in shading, in which shadows are cool, not black, and in color saturation, which increases at the terminator with respect to a given light source. Folds in clothing are designed to mimic the effect
of a silhouette, and player-character silhouettes are given visual primacy with the implementation of rim highlights instead of dark outlines. The voices selected for each of the classes were based on imagining what people from the 1960s would expect the classes to have sounded like, according to writer Chet Faliszek (Reeves 2010).

The primary reasons for shifting the visual design of the game were “gameplay, readability, and branding”, and the redesign of environments was intended to aid in portraying a compelling, immersive world (Mitchell 2008). Engineer and Project Lead for Team Fortress Charlie Brown explains the purpose of the exaggerated environments that stray from reality:

“With the real-world kind of base-on-base combat, which is what (Team Fortress) is, doesn’t make a whole lot of sense to have this real-world environment where there’s a hanger on this side of an airport runway, and a hanger on this side of an airport runway–but they’re opposing factions, and fighting across the runway. It didn’t really make a whole lot of sense so having fun with it and playing with the facades and doing that stuff it made a lot more sense,” (Berghammer 2007).

Game environments were also designed to aid in team identification, largely through the desaturation of color. The design was meant to reference an “impressionistic painterly look,” (Mitchell 2008) and implements a distinct dichotomy between the aesthetic of opposing teams that is present in the silhouettes of structures, in each team’s color palette, and in the contrast between surface textures. The red team features warm colors, natural materials and angular shapes, while blue bases use cool colors, industrial materials and orthogonal shapes (Hellard
The top image shows a level from the first *Team Fortress* — in contrast, the second image displays the updated visual style of the game’s sequel.

The visual redesign of the game hinges on the development team’s commitment to intertextuality — and the use of the concept complements the latest iteration of the game in contrast to the first release, which relied less on a cohesive visual style. The game’s final
mechanics after the first iteration were at odds with the visual style that sought out a level of realism. Instead of rehauling gameplay, the game designers adapted the game’s visual style to complement the game world. The development of the Team Fortress games is noteworthy because it allows one to trace the visual style of a franchise through several iterations – and the game designer’s well-documented intentions behind that process help to illuminate why this specific treatment of intertextuality within the game world was fully realized. The hyperviolent, cartoonish, Rockwell-meets-Pixar aesthetic of Team Fortress 2 sets it apart from other online shooters that strive for realism or rehash a generic sci-fi setting, like games in Bungie’s Halo series.

The designers behind Team Fortress have been vocal about their reasoning behind the visual overhaul of the series, which seemed to evolve as the team saw that the game world they had created lended itself to stylized environments. Like Team Fortress, the game Limbo was developed with a specific visual design that employs intertextuality by using references from history.

Limbo presents an intertextual array of allusion within the game’s 2D, side-scrolling world. Instead of a traditional fantasy/sci-fi setting, the game’s setting exists in a world with a visual aesthetic reminiscent of silent films, film noir, and works by David Lynch and Tim Burton. Its creators have noted that visuals were the foundation of the game’s design, and the art style did not so much evolve with gameplay, but precede it entirely.

The player is a young boy who must navigate through precarious traps and beasts to find his sister. The game was described in marketing materials as one where players learn through
“trial and death” due to the gruesome deaths that befall the boy when the player missteps on a level. The relatively simplistic gameplay are a resolute contrast to the content and thematic implications of the game, and the visual design of the game underlines the harshness and duality of the world within *Limbo*. The game is presented primarily in inky black-and-white tones, using a plethora of lighting techniques to emphasize shadows and lack of light. The grim tableau presented before the player is flecked with film grain and is highly reminiscent of early horror films – like *Nosferatu* (Murnau 1922) – or the films of the German Expressionist movement.

Unlike *Team Fortress*, *Limbo*’s art style was present from the beginning stages of development and played a significant role in the process of creating the game. Playdead’s co-founder and CEO Dino Patti noted that developing a visual style was the first goal in the process of creating the game, followed by the development of gameplay mechanics (Ostroff 2010). This innocuous statement underlines a continuing discourse on the importance of visuals in games, largely when quality of graphics seems to have taken precedence to games that are, well, fun.

“I think that are many examples of beautiful, classic games that have been remade in a way that destroyed the original aesthetic," said Patti in an interview. "[Playdead artist] Arnt Jensen started working on the look of *Limbo* in 2004, and the visual style he showcased in the original teaser trailer has remained every bit as powerful through the game's development."

According to Jensen, the impetus behind the design and the game’s 2D world was largely based on the team’s development constraints – as a small company with a limited staff, detailed 3D models for the game would have been impossible.

Patti later stated that Jensen used “dozens” of films as source inspiration, and graphic artist Morten Bramsen implemented those elements within the game itself (Brophy-Warren
2010) in effect recreating the trappings of film noir and Expressionism within the medium of a digital game.

The success of *Limbo* from a critical perspective is debateable – and inherently subjective – but the game can be analyzed from a perspective that measures its adherence to one specific visual style over any other. In a review for *The Age*, critic James Dominguez notes that praise for *Limbo* would have been less if it didn’t contain an amalgam of visual nods to other well-known and respected pieces of media.

The world of *Limbo* is colorless and grim, and the conscious application of intertextuality in the game’s visual design plays a large part in the overall success of the game.

“I doubt that *Limbo* would have attracted anything like the level of attention it has received had it looked more conventional. The same puzzles in a well-lit colourful world would
have played just as well, but would have lacked the emotional impact of *Limbo*’s stark black and white” (Dominguez 2010).

In the same review, Dominguez goes on to say that independent developers without access to massive financial backers need a “hook to grab gamers’ attention and stand out in a crowded marketplace,” and one way to achieve this is by designing games with a “memorable and original visual design.” In general, Dominguez’s observations parallel a certain reality that is apparent within the visual design of games – typically, mass-market games with commercial budgets tend to use conservative visual designs that boast technical prowess over distinctness of aesthetic, and many independent games use a stylized overall aesthetic due to budget limitations and sometimes because the art style is the responsibility of one individual and not a team. In the case of *Limbo* – both financial constraints and the emphasis on an artistic, largely individual vision synthesized to influence the game’s visual design.

*Limbo* is geared towards an adult audience – and though the protagonist is a young boy, and the game’s simplified, spare, and evocative visuals are undeniably striking. The 2D world possesses a layered spatial depth, and the game contains powerful tableaus that lack explicitness in narrative scope but a sense of interaction and agency that is unusual for other side scrolllers that rely on visuals.

Both *Limbo* and *Team Fortress*, though heavily stylized and even cartoonish – are games that present worlds full of nihilism, unrest, and violence. The juxtaposition of their nostalgic and naïve aesthetics with their adult content and gameplay functions as distinct, overlapping instances of intertextuality within the context of dystopian game worlds. Jameson would address
these games as empty shells of capitalism because they are not parody, nor are they inventive – instead, they represent “the 'past' through stylistic connotation, conveying 'pastness' by the glossy qualities of the image, and '1930s-ness' or '1950s-ness' by the attributes of fashion” (Jameson 1991). In effect, Jameson states that this nostalgic quotation of texts supplants a supposed “real” history. This argument is not sufficient in addressing intertextuality within Limbo or Left 4 Dead because these games do quote history, but by doing so do not somehow overshadow the texts that they allude to. Game makers readily acknowledge their inspirations, as evidenced by the well documented development process of both Limbo and Team Fortress. Instead, these two games, though not exempt all accusations of superficiality, present game worlds that not only incite discourse on their historical roots but also respect their ties the past. Ultimately, game developers are not responsible for the education of consumers about historical events, or any other subject matter.
Conclusion

“You can dress it up in many ways, but the game still comes down to: go here, touch this, go there, fight, etc.”

John Carmack, lead programmer, *Doom* (1995)

So, what does the use of intertextuality in video games mean for the medium?

The implications of intertextuality within contemporary dystopian video games are not easy to delineate – though the motifs that weave the various texts mentioned in this analysis together are too palpable to brush aside. The terms pastiche and intertextuality have been categorized in countless ways, and the condemnation of the practice as unoriginal or lazy is a reoccurring critique that is expounded on by Jameson’s analysis. The practice of intertextuality in dystopian video games has a practical and grounded impetus – the future is unknowable, and game designers often look to the past for visual inspiration when creating fictional dystopias. The game spaces that result in the conglomeration of source materials can vary widely, from the muted stylization of *Limbo* to the stunning, damaged facades of *BioShock*. Contemporary dystopian game spaces utilize many shared techniques in their visual design that reappear across mediums.

When a player enters a game world, they navigate “space of representational possibility through interaction,” and it is up to a game’s designer or designers to “build this space of
possible meanings . . . by creating chains of actions and outcomes,” (Salen, Zimmerman 374).

There is meaning in the choices that game designers make about how to handle the aesthetics of a game, and though that meaning can vary widely – like in the case of *Limbo*, where spare visuals were a product of budget constraints, or *Team Fortress*, where an exaggerated, cartoonish aesthetic was adapted to complement the game’s divergence from realism.

The fact that the games mentioned in this analysis share common traits in their treatment of visual design can help in to understand the connections between mediums and texts – and it can also help to clarify the implications of intertextuality within video games. The criticism of pastiche that reduces it to a mark of poor quality and unoriginality, largely embodied by Jameson, is too narrowly defined as intrinsically negative. His argument presumes that the referencing of other works subscribes to a certain cultural homogeneity. In reality, much of our media is driven by financial motivations – and video games are certainly no exception. However, it is reductive to imply that capitalism breeds pastiche and intertextuality, which in turn leads to homogeneity, because to do so ignores the ever-changing visual language that we perceive as “standard.” In fact, our notion of aesthetics is constantly evolving, and visual tropes change as frequently as our perception of the cultural movements that supply these tropes. Aesthetics are not static, nor are they universal, and Jameson’s criticism of intertextuality largely hinges on the presumption of a predisposed cultural norm in visual icons. In reality, there is no such consensus – and the visual tropes that pervade our culture are as impermanent as the reasons behind their waxing and waning prevalence.

The economic viability and potential of video games as a medium cannot be ignored. The development, production, and release of video games is inherently tied to financial concerns,
particularly in the case of 3D first person shooters intended for a maximum audience. Video games, like any art form, are restricted by impositions of marketability and profit potential, and not acknowledging this fact does a disservice to the “games as art dialogue. That said, the current critical discourse on the use of intertextuality goes back and forth from being a de facto practice in contemporary art to an empty designator with negative connotations.

When dystopian video games implement intertextuality in ways that echo the visual stylings of the past, the present dystopian reality is ignored – or at the very least, denied. The use of intertextuality offsets what we have come to accept as “reality” – and the games mentioned in this analysis speak to the efficacy of inspiration in lieu of many contemporary games that do not contain a distinct art style. Referencing other works is not inherently negative, nor does it imply unoriginality. The assessment that a work of visual media is innovative or unique is a subjective one and can not be used as the determining factor in the effectiveness of a piece. This applies across art forms, and includes video games.

The presentation of dystopian worlds within video games is largely indicative of the far-reaching cultural implications of intertextuality. In Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, Jameson cites E. L. Doctorow's Ragtime as exemplary of intertextuality’s negative effect on our perception of history: "This historical novel can no longer set out to represent the historical past; it can only 'represent' our ideas and stereotypes about that past (which thereby at once becomes 'pop history'" (1991). According to Jameson, texts like Ragtime, and by extension, the games discussed at length in this analysis promote the condemnation of history “by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach" (1991). In reality, these histories are closer and more tangible than ever within the video
games space. Unlike any other medium, these 3D game worlds possess spatiality and the
capacity to display nuance in visuals that is unprecedented in any other medium. In conclusion,
Jameson’s analysis is not resolute nor is it conclusive, as his negative perception of
intertextuality points towards the residual effects of allusion and not their outright impact. These
games utilize intertextuality not in a flagrant attempt to monetize, but an effort to familiarize the
unfamiliar, to inform the uninformed, to reinvent the existing, and ultimately, to recapture the
past.
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* Cover image courtesy Neuzeit Studios