

# **Dissonance and Dystopia: *Fallout 3* and Philosophy Amidst the Ashes**

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The unreality of games gives notice that reality is not yet real. Unconsciously they rehearse the right life (Adorno 1974: 228).

This quotation, from Theodor Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, is, as the full title of the book suggests, a reflection on damaged life. Games, he says, provide a parallel, mimetic world that acts as a sort of window on utopia. What he refers to as the “right life,” free from debasement, inequality, and ignorance, can be imagined and, more importantly, performed through games. Play and games can provide a means for resisting dominant ideologies and reflecting on one's real existence in the world.

I propose that games be read critically, not simply as expressions of culture or as products for consumption, but as objects through which we can *think*. In this way, games function much like artworks, as pieces of visual culture that allow us to explore different avenues of reflection. In order to expand the scope of game scholarship, I call on Adorno's aesthetic philosophy. In his book *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno proposes a number of ways that artworks can reveal truths about unfree society.

My project, like Adorno's, is political. Through philosophical contemplation of the semblance character of works, individuals may come to realize how constrained and repressed life is in the contemporary world. Such reflective thought will, Adorno argues, ultimately promote positive social change. Much of Adorno's text centers on the ways that dissonance of various kinds can induce profound philosophical thought. Dissonance, as he says, is the truth about harmony (Adorno 1996: 110). He believed that the note that did not fit, the color that clashed, the brushstroke that did not mesh with the whole revealed more about life than perfect art objects could alone. In order to experience the philosophical force of art (or, in my case, games) viewers and players must contemplate how ugliness, dissonance, and shock are representative of contemporary life.

The game *Fallout 3* is rife with the sort of chaos that can reveal the tyranny and decay of instrumental society. Of course, the mere inclusion of turmoil and brutality does not necessarily imply philosophical viability. There are plenty of violent games that do not easily lend themselves to reflection. What is striking about *Fallout* is its dialectical approach to dystopian violence. Moments of hectic performance are balanced with the profound sadness of desolate landscapes and destroyed lives. The player is constantly bombarded by moments of dissonance, for example, hearing a 1950s jazz standard while looking out over a demolished city. I argue that Adorno's concept of dissonance and philosophical reflection is correct and, further, that *Fallout 3* displays the kind of discord that promotes such reflection. I will attempt to illuminate what an Adornian game studies might look like using dissonance as a touchstone. Then, I will describe how *Fallout 3* fits into such a picture.

Adorno is not primarily renowned for his love of popular culture, so it might seem strange that I look to him for a new path in game studies. It is true that writings such as “On Jazz,” the Culture Industry chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and “On the Fetish

Character of Music and the Regression of Listening,” are scathing indictments of administered culture. “Administered” in this case refers to products that are created and disseminated by those at the top of hierarchical power structures. The primary job of administered culture is to affirm the status quo, to offer just enough beauty, escape, and succor to keep the masses content, at least for a little while. Administered culture produces responses like “how super!” or “awwww” instead of profound thought about the nature of life, truth, and utopia (Adorno 1996: 201).

Much of Adorno’s work concerns how art objects can prevent the somnambulism that comes with contemporary life. Since videogames often embody the most sinister aspects of administered culture, for example, initiation into corporate drudgework via games like World of Warcraft (figure 1), in an Adornian aesthetic, players would use philosophy to prevent being crushed by the weight of received views. His concepts can be applied to games as well as artworks since, as I noted earlier, games can function as a way of envisioning possibilities for social transformation. I do not wish to debate whether “games are art,” nor do I claim that they may directly improve social consciousness. Instead, I argue that by using tools provided by Adornian aesthetic criticism, games can work as catalysts for social change.

Foremost among these tools is dialectical thought. The dialectic, wherein two opposing ideas meet, challenge one another, and come away changed, is the driving force behind Adorno’s philosophy. The dialectic is a kind of agonistic struggle and agonism is one of Roger Caillois’s categories of playful engagement (Caillois 2001, 12). Dialectical thought, then, is itself a kind of meaningful game. In particular, Adorno advocated what he referred to as “negative dialectics” wherein instead of focusing on synthesis or on what *fits* at the end of the process, a thinker is interested in the non-identical, that which does *not* fit neatly, that which is missing.

Focusing on the non-identical or dissonant goes against traditional modes of aesthetics, where integration and beauty are viewed as the highest good because of the harmony they provoke in man. Adorno was not particularly interested in harmony, but rather truth. Life, especially contemporary life, is decidedly unharmonious: technologies and modes of labor fracture our consciousness and create false needs; configurations of power alienate individuals from their surroundings and from each other. To promote art as a balm for what ails us is pernicious under such circumstances, for it conceals the true character of contemporary life and society.

Games may offer resistance to dominating schemas, but if they devolve into thoughtless “fun,” then they partake of the worst kind of archaizing or even fascist behavior. Mimicry, after all, is an important part of most game structures. If one mimics in a careless or insensitive way, one is likely to perform destructive deeds and to contribute to adoption of negative behaviors. Play and games, I argue, must go beyond the mindless recital of predetermined activities. They can create an oppositional space that promotes critical thought and brings truths about contemporary life to the fore. It is this kind of play that Adorno says is the way to the right life.

I argue, following Adorno, that dissonance is a means by which individuals may be jolted out of the spell of mimicry. I include most kinds of immersion under this rubric, especially narrative immersion, for as Douglas and Hargadon noted in their essay, “The Pleasures of Immersion and Interaction,” immersion and critical engagement are fierce rivals (Douglas and Hargadon 2004: 192-206). The dialectic between the two is part of what makes Fallout 3 (figure 2) such an intriguing model. Player and spectator alike become engrossed in gameplay, eager for the resolution of both narrative and combat elements, but are jolted out of their reveries again and again, providing a starting point for reflective comparison. (figure 3).

Fallout 3 is an FPS-RPG hybrid, combining aspects of first-person shooters and roleplaying games (figure 4). There is a heavy reliance on martial prowess, armament, and game tactics as well as an avatar-based leveling system. Fallout also has a robust narrative, which players are free to undertake or disregard as they choose. Even if one decides to avoid the main plot (find dad, defeat the Enclave, restore water and hope to the D.C. Wasteland – figure 5) there are a number of micronarratives that function as moments of constructive or provocative dissonance.

There are certain things we very reasonably anticipate from a game set in a dystopian wasteland. We might not know the whole story or understand all of the mechanics before we begin to play, but it is certainly no surprise when an irradiated scorpion or a monstrous Supermutant (figure 6) attacks us. Fitting with our expectations, some people will try to kill and rob us in order to survive (figure 7), some will work to make the wasteland a better place (figure 8). Such elements allow players to believe in the world and its stories and to thence to become immersed in the game.

There are, however, other stories sprinkled throughout the wasteland that do not directly contribute to either plot elements or more ludic aspects of the game, but nonetheless add a level of affect that may be developed by a thoughtful player. If she is overly focused on the main narrative or on combat skills, the player might pass over these tiny, yet significant vignettes. By invoking a sense of helplessness, pathos, and fear as well as subverting expectations, certain vignettes and side quests construct a mood or disposition that prepares the subject for philosophical contemplation.

Even if one logically knows that there must be stranded families or unconscionable acts taking place in the wasteland, when they actually turn up in the game, they separate the player from the flow state that she has achieved. In so doing, they open up her consciousness for a more analytical appraisal of the situations at hand and, hopefully, a critical comparison with contemporary life.

A number of examples can be seen in the abandoned radio relay stations strewn across the wasteland (figure 9). They do not add anything specific to the plot, nor do they change gameplay, aside from allowing the player access to some, usually ordinary, loot. However, if the player explores the area, she will find powerful, if loosely told stories of loss and helplessness. In a game largely concerned with action and achievement, the player forced into a helpless state that disrupts established patterns of play and gives her a moment for reflection.

The case of the Oscar Zulu signal is one of the most vivid (figure 10). At this radio tower, the player can hear the following broadcast:

If anyone can hear this, this is Bob Anderstein. My family and I have taken refuge in a drainage chamber not too far from a radio relay tower outside of D.C. My boy is very sick, needs medical assistance. Please help if you can. We're listening for your response. 3950 kilohertz.

The individual who recorded the message is long dead. Upon entering the drainage chamber, the player finds two huddled adult skeletons in the midst of blocks, a toy car, medical tubing, a crutch, and various other detritus. It appears that the youngest Anderstein did not make it; his body is missing. Perhaps he was buried somewhere in the wasteland or became a feral ghoul (figure 11.) (A number of feral ghouls have teddy bears on their corpses, a possible clue to their origin.) Instead of going on a quest to save him or to determine his whereabouts, the player is left helpless, unable to act and unable to determine the truth.

It is the absence of action, progress, and definitive knowledge that are noteworthy at Oscar Zulu. The vignette is worthless, insofar as worth is determined by points, plot, or

success. Following Adorno, its worthlessness and lack of utility help to make it plenipotentiary of dialectical contemplation. It contains the power to stimulate thought through disparity, to provide a moment of desolate stillness within which the player might begin to reflect. It is certainly not for me to decide what the player will think about in her moment of helplessness. However, the scene lends itself to meditation on the futility of purposive action within damaged society, a theme that runs throughout the game.

While Oscar Zulu works by means of dissonant helplessness, the wasteland also has instances of dissonance that provoke a more visceral reaction. In a raider fortress made from overturned railroad cars, the player finds a disturbing contraption made from barbed wire and grocery carts. The raiders have constructed cages large enough only for children. One even holds a teddy bear. (figure 12.) The player cannot help but be arrested by the image and to speculate as to the atrocities that took place in those cages. Similarly, in Springvale Elementary School (figure 13) there is a cage that contains only child-sized skeletons. The cart cages and child skeletons are not the goriest or most conspicuous examples of ghastly behavior, but they have the added benefit of subtlety.

Moments of horror can either interrupt regularly scheduled play or be accepted as customary. When repugnance and revulsion are supplied to the viewer in an unending stream, for example in a game such as *Manhunt 2* (figure 14), contemplation is not typically forthcoming. In games of this sort, every action is rewarded with gore and bloodshed. Individual choices cease to stand out and carnage contributes to reactionary immersion rather than disturbing it.

However, encountering trauma *can* be an entrée into philosophical discovery. Adorno says, “[T]here is no longer beauty or consolation except in the gaze falling on horror, withstanding it, and in unalleviated consciousness of negativity holding fast to the possibility of what is better” (Adorno 1974: 25) Wishing that life were otherwise is the first step towards critical philosophy. Horrible things can act as a catalyst for such thought if they are not merely dismissed by the player as business as usual.

The third and final example I wish to discuss is found in *Vault 112*. Inside the vault is a simulated neighborhood (figure 15) called Tranquility Lane, which seems to be a 1950s style fantasy, but was actually created by a deranged doctor (figure 16) in order to manipulate the residents. In this area perky television theme music plays on a constant loop. No one (save Old Lady Dithers) is aware that the world is a simulation, and if the player suggests that Tranquility Lane is anything but the perfect neighborhood, residents become irritated. To quit the simulation, the player must put the residents out of their unbeknownst misery. She may kill them herself or set Chinese combatants loose in the neighborhood (figure 17.) Seeing soldiers mow down unsuspecting suburbanites is a startling contrast to the rollicking mid-century sit-com atmosphere.

The player has no “good” choices in this situation. Everyone must die in order for her to succeed. The contrast between the “perfect” neighborhood and the violent demise of its inhabitants is, no doubt, alienating. However, as Adorno notes in regards to the technology of motor vehicles, [w]hich driver is not tempted, merely by the power of his engine, to wipe out the vermin of the street, pedestrians, children, and cyclists?” (Adorno 1974: 40). What player does not in some way identify with the soldiers and their mission? Since she spends the majority of the game killing things in a similar way, the player cannot ultimately escape the sensation that she both caused this mayhem and imitates it in the larger game world, regardless of how she might rationalize her behavior as necessary or ethically permissible. What is noteworthy about the soldiers is not that their behavior is peculiar, but rather that it is so similar to the player’s own. The player may experience such a performance as dissonance or simply absurd humor, but nonetheless, the opening for reflection is there.

What is common among all of these examples is the arresting quality that jolts one

from immersive, flowing gameplay and interjects unexpected emotional response. The dissonant moments do not automatically produce enlightenment. They merely provide an opportunity for reflection. In order to benefit from them philosophically, the player must be receptive to such incursions into her flow state. When a player uses dissonant moments in a text for contemplation, she begins to imagine possibilities for living otherwise, visions of utopia.

Often these visions come to us only negatively, if a work is so arresting or ugly that we begin to realize just how damaged contemporary life is, how far from utopia we truly are. Games, too, have such power. In them, as Adorno says, reality is not yet real. They provide visions of possible worlds that we may either work towards or against. If players are conscious of how the mimetic tendency manipulates them and actively work against it, they are better armed against being manipulated in games and the world-at-large. Paying attention to dissonant moments and to unsettling micronarratives embedded into otherwise seamless gameplay is one way to reject thoughtless immersion and mimicry and to begin to water the seeds of philosophy amidst the ashes.

## Games

Fallout 3. Bethesda Softworks, PC, 2008.

Manhunt 2. Rockstar Games, PC, 2007.

World of Warcraft. Blizzard/Vivendi, PC, 2004.

## References

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