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Postmodern culture has been marked by a loss of utopian energy that is the result of the cultural dominance of late capitalism. This loss has been represented, in small part, by the proliferation of the dystopian genre (which, incidentally, begins in the modernist era), whose very name suggests its being anti- or simply not utopian. More than outright bleak, however, dystopia as a genre is more cautionary, and is not without utopian energy. Therefore, dystopian works act as social criticism warning of what is to come if the system they are produced under is allowed to continue.

Related to the socially critical nature of dystopian works is the influence of technology on post-utopian culture. While Enlightenment utopianism stemming from scientific advancement was cut short by the sinister end reached after the development and subsequent use of the atomic bomb, new technologies such as the Internet are allowing cautionary, dystopian stories to be told in new ways. In spite of the technological pessimism that emerged after the attacks in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, technology's role in the transmission of these types of works is quite utopian. One example of this is the emerging genre of the Alternate Reality Game (ARG), which is a multi-media game that utilizes everyday tools such as the Internet, cellular phones, the postal service and more to put the player in an alternate reality wherein they are charged with solving puzzles, investigating mysteries and the like. Though its beginning is in viral marketing, the genre has taken hold in popular culture and has been all but appropriated from consumer culture by its most loyal fans.

*Year Zero*, an ARG that includes a recent studio release by the "industrial" rock band Nine Inch Nails, is a dystopian narrative that is unfolding in the ARG tradition. As a dystopian narrative game, *Year Zero* is able to harness the cautionary element of the game for social awareness and quite possibly social action. Technology's ability to resurrect its utopian energy by offering new ways of telling dystopian (and yet utopian) stories such as via the ARG is indeed ironic, but it is doubly important to finding utopian energy in postmodern culture and facilitating political action through gaming.

## Postulating Dystopia as Utopian

While it is paradoxical to think of the dystopian genre as having utopian energy, it is far from being an outlandish suggestion. That the dystopian genre exists at all is rich with utopian energy in that it warns against a bleak future resulting from the proliferation of the present system. This cautionary nature of dystopian works leads readers to question the present system under which they live, which forces the utopian imagination to emerge. Such an emergence of the utopian imagination in a dystopian ARG represents a call to action on the part of gamers. In imagining, as M.

Keith Booker articulates, "alternatives to the social and political status quo" (*Dystopian*, 1994, p.3) when reading dystopian works, readers are actually thinking historically, imagining the present as the future's past — the same might be said for the anticipatory narrative structure of a dystopian ARG. This logic attempts to "localize," to use the language of Fredric Jameson, "the synaptic chain that might lead the Utopian impulse to expression," at least in terms of that expression in dystopian works. According to Jameson, this thread is difficult to identify because of the loss of historicism that is one major characteristic of postmodern culture that he has identified (*Postmodernism*, 1991, p.xvi). Booker, too, has associated the loss of historicism as being related to a loss of the utopian imagination, writing that "a loss of utopian energy is... part and parcel of... a loss of the ability to think in terms of coherent historical narratives" (*Post-Utopian*, 2002, p.5).

However, if dystopian narratives force readers to think of the future as a consequence of the present, as has been suggested here, then they are thinking historically. Furthermore, once a game has, to use the words of Mulford Q. Sibley, "depressingly dramatized for us" a dystopian reality (Sibley, 1971, p.50), gamers too begin thinking historically, and can use the narrative elements of the game as a kind of map of the things which must change to avoid such a reality's being brought to fruition. For this reason, Kingsley Amis referred to dystopian narratives as "new maps of hell."[1] Dystopia's ability, therefore, to force readers to think historically reflects its revival of utopian energy in that it transcends perhaps the most important aspect of life under late capitalism.

Jameson identifies what has been called "late capitalism"[2] as having begun with the Frankfurt School, which described it as being made up of two parts: immense "bureaucratic control" and an almost indistinguishable relationship between "government and big business" (*Postmodernism*, 1991, p.xviii). However, according to Jameson the definition of late capitalism has changed, as "no one particularly notices the expansion of the state sector and bureaucratization any longer: it seems a simple, 'natural' fact of life" (*Postmodernism*, 1991, p.xviii). Further, Jameson gives an overview of late capitalism's new attributes as follows:

> its features include the new international division of labor, a vertiginous new dynamic in international banking and the stock exchanges (including the enormous Second and Third World debt), new forms of media interrelationship (very much including transportation systems such as containerization), computers and automation, the flight of production to advanced Third World areas, along with all the more familiar social consequences, including the crisis of traditional labor, the emergence of yuppies, and gentrification on a now-global scale. (Postmodernism, 1991, p.xix)

The result of these attributes is postmodernism, which Jameson has called, in the very title of his work on the subject, "the cultural logic of late capitalism." According to that work, "it is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place" (*Postmodernism*, 1991, p.ix). It is perhaps no surprise that Jameson would see a loss of historicism as central to the postmodern condition, as several years before his *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* originally appeared he published "Marxism and Historicism" (1979), an essay outlining the relationship between the two. Jameson's work in that essay is useful presently

because of its implication of "Marxism as an absolute historicism," which "grounds the possibility of a comprehensive theory of past societies and cultures in the structure of the present, or of capitalism itself" ("Marxism," 1979, p.69).  Related to this is the idea of the "Marxian concept of a mode of production," which "is essentially a *differential* one, in which the formulation of a single mode of production... at once structurally projects the space of other modes of production by way of Difference," or "a systematic variation in the features or semes of any given initial mode" ("Marxism," 1979, p.68).  From this logic comes a "reformulation of the nature of this contact between present and past," in which

> we will no longer see the past as some inert and dead object which we are called upon to resurrect, or to preserve, or to sustain, in our own living freedom; rather, the past will itself become an active agent in this process and will begin to come before us as a radically different life form which rises up to call our own form of life into question and to pass judgment on us, and through us, on the social formation in which we exist. ("Marxism," 1979, p.70)

Dystopian works impose such thinking on readers by forcing them to consider the present as the future's past, as has already been suggested; quite specifically these works "pass judgment on us" in this way.  A dystopian ARG such as *Year Zero* similarly imposes such thinking on its players, and the interactivity of the game heightens the gamer's awareness of his or her ability to subvert the system in place — including its present dystopian conditions — and prevent the extremities they are taken to in the ARG's narrative.  But Jameson takes this logic one step further, which is central to the idea that dystopian cultural production actually brings about utopian energy.  He writes that "it is not only the past that judges us," because "if it is so that the proper articulation of any concrete mode of production structurally implies the projection of all other conceivable modes, then it follows that it implies the future as well and that the hermeneutic contact between present and past" demonstrates that Marxism is "also the anticipatory expression of a future society, or... the partisan commitment to that future or Utopian mode of production which seeks to emerge from the hegemonic mode of production of our own present" ("Marxism," 1979, p.71).  So, in forcing consumers of cultural products (including games) to think historically, dystopian works thereby force the utopian imagination to emerge; as Jameson puts it, they bear "a hermeneutic relationship to the past which is able to grasp its own present as history only on condition it manages to keep the idea of the future, and of radical Utopian transformation, alive" ("Marxism," 1979, p.72).

The utopian dimension of dystopian narratives, then, is manifest in more than just its ability to force the utopian imagination to emerge in the reader — inherent in it is an explicitly political ideology.  Anticipating the collapse of capitalism, dystopian works are able to keep alive this possibility, to use Jameson's words, "of radical Utopian transformation" ("Marxism," 1979, p.72).  The "transformation" Jameson refers to is specifically social transformation.  As dystopian works force the utopian imagination to emerge, they become almost preparatory to the new social system.  Games such as *Year Zero* go a step beyond merely keeping hope alive because, while they do just that, they also encourage the kind of action necessary to move closer to the new social system through game-specific, diegetic action while simultaneously inspiring greater attention to real-world issues that are important to maintaining the hopeful progression toward a better system.

While dystopian cultural production transcends the loss of historicism that has come about under late capitalism, its utopian energy (and, indeed, the utopian energy in all cultural production) is an important part of Marxist theory. What Jameson calls "the question of Utopia" is, according to him, "a crucial test of what is left of our ability to imagine change" (*Postmodernism*, 1991, p.xvi). Jameson's sense of utopia, and its relationship with Marxism, stems from the work of German philosopher Ernst Bloch, whose "vision," according to Jameson, "has something concrete and productive to offer us" ("Introduction/Prospectus," 1976, p.57). In reconsidering the "relationship of Marxism to Utopian thought" as the title of his introduction to the 1976 special supplement on Marxism and Utopia in the *Minnesota Review* promises to do, Jameson draws heavily upon the Blochian principle of "Hope," which he defines as "the permanent tension of human reality towards a radical transformation of itself and everything about it, towards a Utopian transfiguration of its own existence as well as of its social context" ("Introduction/Prospectus," 1976, p.58). Finding utopian energy in dystopian works is both socially critical in this way, as well as consistent with Jameson's contention that maintaining "that everything is a 'figure of hope' is to offer an analytical tool for detecting the presence of some Utopian content even within the most degraded and degrading type of commercial product" ("Introduction/Prospectus," 1976, p.58).

Finding utopian energy in games reveals an active project of transcending the dystopian elements of postmodernity and represents the way in which games, which until recently might have been thought of as "degraded commercial products," are an important cultural medium. Barry Atkins, on this point, said in 2003 that "the computer game has not, to date, received much critical attention as an independent form of fictional expression, rather than in passing as a technological curiosity or as a springboard for some extremely speculative theorising about the possibilities that might one day be revealed in virtual reality or cyberspace" (2003, p.5). It is with this purpose in mind that he wrote *More than a game: The computer game as fictional form*, giving it the fitting subtitle. Atkins clearly takes the perspective of a narratologist on the study of games, but it is important to recognize that not only does this type of attention to gaming rescue the medium from its "degraded" status, it also demonstrates the utopian potential of technology in cultural production — that is, it is the technology that allows for the production in the first place, and the product contains utopian potential.

The political angle of teasing out utopian energy in cultural production is in direct opposition to late capitalism and the symptoms of its cultural mode — postmodernism — because it forces the utopian imagination to emerge, thereby forcing historical thinking of the kind discussed above, and, in games, because it goes a step further to encourage the action necessary to not only anticipate a better system, but to bring it about. Postulating dystopia as utopian, then, is indeed paradoxical, but explicable by the fact that dystopian cultural production is rich in utopian energy and the tendency toward historical thinking, which go hand in hand, as well as via a recognition of the project of some dystopian cultural products to enact change.

## Technological Pessimism and the Loss of the Utopian Imagination

Technology plays a complicated role in Western civilization that begins with pre-WWII utopian hopes for its development. In the United States alone, as pointed out by Howard P. Segal in his *Technological Utopianism in American Culture*, between 1883 and 1933 "twenty-five individuals published fundamentally similar visions of the United States as a utopian society — visions that, they were certain, technological progress would eventually make real" (2005, p.1). Segal refers to these "individuals" as "technological utopians," and writes that they "took [their] convictions to their logical finale: they equated advancing technology with utopia itself" (2005, p.1). One such technological utopian was J. A. Etzler, who, in 1886, produced a pamphlet which Thomas Hughes, in his *Human-Built World*, uses to show that Etzler "intended to use high technology, figuratively and literally, to bring about the new Eden" (2004, p.35). But Hughes sees Etzler's "dominion-over-nature aspirations and utopian technological-transformation expectations" as exemplary of "the long history of naive technological enthusiasm among Americans" (2004, p.35). It is this naiveté which was crushed after the use of the atomic bomb in Asia and criticized by the technological pessimists the likes of Hughes and others.

M. Keith Booker sees the connection between technology and utopianism, but also between technology and a loss of the utopian imagination, writing that "science has played a major role in the history of utopian thinking, and in the modern turn from utopia to dystopia" (*Dystopian Impulse*, 1994, p.5). The turn that Booker mentions is probably manifest in what he has since identified as the "collapse" (*Post-Utopian*, 2002, p.1) of the utopian imagination — a loss which was fostered, in part, by the development and subsequent use of the atomic bomb, which he describes as "a final straw that broke the back of the American national narrative" (*Post-Utopian*, 2002, p.12). This loss of the utopian imagination and newfound technological pessimism, Booker notes, was sustained by the Cold War, as "the greatest American fear of the long 1950s [1946-1964]... was the fear of nuclear annihilation at the hands of the Soviets" (*Post-Utopian*, 2002, p.7). Booker holds that the loss of the utopian imagination is associated "with the beginnings of postmodernism" (*Post-Utopian*, 2002, p.3). Similarly, Leo Marx, in a discussion of technology's role in culture since the Enlightenment, writes that "in the aftermath of World War II... what had been a dissident minority's disenchantment" with technology "spread to large segments of the population" (1994, p.22), and, furthermore, that

> as the visible effects of technology became more dubious, modernism lost its verve, and people found the romance less and less appealing. After the Vietnam era, the ruling theme of Progress came to seem too fantastic, and admirers of the old Enlightenment romance were now drawn to a new kind of postmodern tragi-comedy. (1994, p.22)

Marx sees postmodernism as "the name given to a sensibility, style, or amorphous viewpoint – a collective mood – made manifest in the early 1970s" (1994, p.22). Furthermore, Marx writes that postmodernism "embodied, from its birth, a strong current of technological pessimism" (1994, p.23). Marx's logic here stems, of course, from an increasing disapproval of technology since the use of the atomic bomb that has continued into the present day.

By all accounts, technological pessimism, which is marked by a loss of the (technological) utopian imagination, is yet another body underneath the umbrella of postmodern criticism. In terms of gaming, however, technology has fostered a cultural medium that does, in fact, contain a fair amount of utopian energy — without the technology of the Internet, as well as other technologies such as cellular phone service and spectrography, *Year Zero* would be neither as immersive nor therefore as effective as it is with the help of these and other technologies.

## Alternate Reality Games and the (Technological) Utopian Renaissance

Although technology under late capitalism has been viewed quite pessimistically, it has facilitated new methods of cultural production that allow for potentially utopian, and thus socially critical, energies to emerge. Booker cites "commercially viable film technologies," for instance, as one such method developed during the first thirty years of the twentieth century (*Post-Utopian*, 2002, p.23). Television marked another technology that allowed for these socially critical energies to emerge. More recently the Internet, though not without its lack of utopian energy, has provided a new platform for cultural production that allows for unique ways of transmitting said production. One way of doing this is by creating stories — texts — that are immersive. These texts can be broadcast across multiple types of media. An example of an immersive text is the Alternate Reality Game (ARG), sometimes called immersive or ubiquitous gaming.

Though a relatively new genre, the ARG allows for collective participation that takes place across multiple media platforms. The desire to participate in ARGs suggests that its participants are dissatisfied with reality and are seeking out an alternative, which is consistent with an emergence of the utopian imagination. But even more than this extrapolated sense of the utopian energy of the Alternate Reality Game, as the game scholar Jane McGonigal argues, "immersive gaming is actually one of the first applications poised to harness the increasingly widespread penetration and convergence of network technologies for social and political action" ("'This is Not a Game,'" 2003). This effect of ARGs is at least partly supported by the "this is not a game" (TINAG) mantra that underlies its structure — the game as a game is intentionally downplayed. This is discussed in greater detail by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman in their keynote address from the 2003 Digital Games Research Conference, wherein they discuss the "magic circle" (2003, p.14-15) of a game — the frame or context — and how blurring its boundaries to design the game "as a cultural environment is an effective way to mount a powerful cultural critique" (2003, p.28). Drawing on this concept, Wendy Ann Mansilla *et al.* found that "by blurring the border between fiction and reality," as they did in their *Autophobia*, "new expressive ways for creative storytelling can emerge" (2006, p.353). *Autophobia* was the authors' "mixed media content" — "an experimental story of fear or paranoia inspired by the tragic that world is facing today" — developed as a sample of what they call Alternate Reality Cinema (Mansilla *et al.,* 2006, p.353), an extension of the ARG.

The narrative of this game/medium also contains a level of interactivity and narrative that engages in considerable cultural critique. *Year Zero*, in fact, could be a

response to Salen and Zimmerman, who point out that "during the twentieth century, most forms of art and entertainment have engaged critically with their cultural environments," and suggest that "as a new century dawns, it is time for games to recognize their role within larger cultural environments" (2003, p.28).  McGonigal comments on the utopian energy of ARGs, writing that through them there are "ample opportunities... to explore a variety of goals and belief systems, and thereby to inspire grassroots, rather than hegemonic, action" ("'This is Not a Game,'" 2003).  McGonigal's analysis of the genre attempts to dispel technologically pessimistic attitudes about the "absorbing, virtual realities of 21st-century digital entertainment: first, that they are primarily escapist; and second, that they cause players to disengage with offline communities and problems" ("'This is Not a Game,'" 2003).  A gamer and ARG designer herself, McGonigal is in a unique position to examine this new genre, and her research shows that it is teeming with utopian energy.  This fact is supported by the recognition by several critics of the ARG as a culturally critical form.

It is important to note that the notion of an "alternate" reality is explicitly articulated. McGonigal writes that the "immersion" used in ARGs makes "the game world less of a 'virtual' (simulated) reality or an 'augmented' (enhanced) reality, and more of an 'alternate' (layered) reality," such that it avoids "the kind of special technology we normally associate with virtual or augmented reality, such as wired gloves, headsets or goggles, and interactive programs or simulators" ("'This is Not a Game,'" 2003).  Instead, players of immersive games might make or receive phone calls, send or receive packages via the United States Postal Service, find hidden messages in films and television shows, and receive emails — all pertaining to the game.  But these "real world" methods of participation help to hide the proverbial man behind the curtain, which maintains the TINAG mantra of the ARG.  Basically, ARG players discover some kind of clue in some kind of cultural production — a website, film or music recording, for instance — and that clue, when investigated via Internet search engines, turns up a fragmented narrative of some kind that gamers then set out, in their collective magnificence, to piece together or solve.  McGonigal shows how the collective energy exhibited by players of these games moves beyond the game world by calling attention to one particular ARG's players, who, in the days after the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001, suggested they could put their collective energy into helping to catch those responsible for the attacks.  McGonigal sees this as evidence of the utopian dimension of the ARG, because it highlights the possibility of "social and political action" ("'This is Not a Game,'" 2003) as brought about by participation in this new genre.

Because the ARG is technology-based, it calls attention to the possibility that there is a technological renaissance at hand, which is fueled by the utopian possibilities of technological development.  The Internet, especially, is allowing for such possibility, by providing the platform for utopian cultural production the likes of the ARG, and, perhaps more generally, by giving the masses a podium from which to voice their opinions to the world at large.  In any case, it would seem that technology is allowing for utopian cultural production, which contradicts the pessimistic attitude that many had toward it after the use of the atomic bomb and during the Cold War. Furthermore, games are coming into their own as a legitimate culturally critical medium of cultural production, and *Year Zero* is a testament to this fact.

## The Alternate Reality of *Year Zero*

Before releasing his sixth studio recording, Trent Reznor, the brains behind the "industrial" rock band Nine Inch Nails, sold a concert tour T-shirt at performances in Europe that had certain letters highlighted in the tour schedule to spell out the words "I am trying to believe."  Soon afterward, fans discovered that the words actually spelled out a website address — this was the "rabbit hole" of *Year Zero*'s ARG.  This beginning is consistent with ARG developer and author Dave Szulborski's contention that "to be completely faithful to the [This is Not a Game] philosophy, a game's beginning (or *launch*, as they are commonly referred to) should be unannounced" (2005, pp.47-48).  The website showed *Year Zero*'s narrative to be set in the near future — 2022, or "year zero" — during which time Americans are being exposed to a drug supposed to strengthen the immune system against biological attacks.  One such attack is said to have taken place, but the author of *I Am Trying to Believe* seems to think it was a staged attack that allowed the conservative Christian, totalitarian government in power to put the drug, "Parepin," into the water.  There are some side effects to the drug, which people who stop drinking the water notice they no longer have — these include an inability to think clearly and a loss of sex drive. Readers are encouraged to contact the site's author via an email address provided on the web page (*I Am Trying to Believe*, 2007).  Sending an email to the address yields the following reply:

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-----------------------AUTO_RESPONSE--------------_--

Thank you for your interest. It is now clear to me that Parepin is
a completely safe and effective agent developed to protect us from
bio-terrorism. The Administration is acting purely in the best
interests of its citizens; to suggest otherwise was irresponsible
and I deeply regret it.  I'm drinking the water. So should you.
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This message is probably intended to draw players into the world of the game and encourage further investigation.  In fact, using song titles from the forthcoming Nine Inch Nails album of the same name (which featured the song "The Good Soldier," whose chorus included the words "I am trying to believe"), gamers found even more websites, and discovered the game's complexity.  According to a wiki set up to track the *Year Zero* ARG, to date thirty websites have been discovered which contain clues about the game (*NinWiki*[3], 2007).  *Echoing the Sound*, a web message board, is the meeting place for gamers to discuss information and speculate the meaning behind much of it.  There are hours' worth of reading and discovering that go along with *Year Zero* that fans have been able to piece together in great detail — but much more, presumably, that they have not.

*Year Zero*'s rabbit hole demonstrates the role of technology in the ARG — the Internet is a necessary component, which, given the genre's utopian energy, also demonstrates how technology would seem to have redeemed itself as a means toward utopia.  The utopian energy specifically within *Year Zero* stems from its dystopian premise.  The story is set in the near future — a future that is in the grips of a social system that has justified the distribution of a drug in the water supply, though that justification seems more sinister than protective.  The auto-response email (likely the result of government intervention) seems to satisfy this supposition given its dispelling of *I Am Trying to Believe*'s speculation about why Parepin was put in the

water in the first place.  Readers (read: gamers) must assume that this future stems from their own ongoing system.  For instance, the USA PATRIOT Act and its own seemingly sinister motives, as instituted by George W. Bush's presidential administration, is at least one sign of increased repression resulting in the kind of future society *Year Zero* depicts.  After all, if the USA PATRIOT Act gives the government the ability to "intercept wire, oral, and electronic communications relating to terrorism" (USA PATRIOT ACT, 2001) — a relative term — then there is little to stop that government from intervening against a "subversive" in 2022, should the Act remain in place.  Furthermore, Reznor is quite straightforward in his indictment of the Bush administration, as demonstrated in the song "Capital G" (among others) from the *Year Zero* album: a chorus in the song proclaims "well I used to stand for something/now I'm on my hands and knees/traded in my God for this one/he signs his name with a capital G" (*Year Zero*).  The assumption that the future depicted in *Year Zero* stems from the proliferation of the current system encourages historical thinking because it cites the present as the future's past.

Associated with Parepin is another important part of Reznor's invented world (invented with the help of 42 Entertainment, an ARG developer extraordinaire) — the widely available hallucinogen, "Opal," which may be the cause of people in the game world seeing what is referred to as "The Presence," a giant arm that seems to reach through the clouds and down to the Earth.  An early video hyped as a "trailer" before *Year Zero*'s album release, however,  showed what appeared to be home video footage from a car of The Presence making an appearance in the desert, but not before the videographers pass a sign on the road that reads "I am Trying to Believe" ("*Year Zero* Trailer," 2007).  The cover of Nine Inch Nails' album *Year Zero* is a picture of The Presence as viewed from inside a car.  According to *NinWiki*, there has been evidence found through game research that indicates that it is the government itself who is distributing Opal, and that it may be a "street version" of Parepin (*NinWiki*, 2007).  This mimics the drug "soma" from Aldous Huxley's classic dystopian novel *Brave New World*, keeping in line with a dystopic vision of the future, and is consistent with the utopian underpinnings of the dystopian genre.

Once the *Year Zero* album was released, it was discovered to be yet another piece of the puzzle.  A heat sensitive, color-changing disc reveals a set of binary code that, when converted to ASCII code, shows the URL for one of the ARG websites.  A seal from the "United States Bureau of Morality" on the album's back cover warns that "consuming or spreading this material may be deemed subversive by the United States Bureau Of Morality.  If you or someone you know," it reads, "has engaged in subversive acts or thoughts, call: 1-866-445-6580" (*Year Zero*, 2007).  Calling the phone number reveals the following message:

> This is a message from the United States Bureau of Morality, pursuant to statute 24.12.2, Disclosure of Surveillance.  Citizen, by calling this number you and your family are implicitly pleading guilty to the consumption of anti-American media and have been flagged as potential militants.  The United States Bureau of Morality has activated the tracking system embedded in your personal media and initiated citizen surveillance.  United States surveillance law gives us the right to search and seize information relating to subversive activities from your person, vehicle, workplace, or home.  Any attempt to hinder or prevent our investigation will be met with all necessary force.  You are now part of the problem. Your reeducation is about to begin. God bless America.  (18664456580, 2007)

The message is yet another method of developing the world of *Year Zero*'s ARG. Players now find a quality of the game that is very much like another classic dystopian novel — George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The message also seems, for the second time in the ARG, to satirically target the USA PATRIOT Act when it mentions "United States surveillance law." Moreover, the power that maintains the social context of *Year Zero*'s world is a repressive, right-wing, conservative Christian, totalitarian government, which is an attempt to satirize the United States' government under the administration of President George W. Bush. Gamers find themselves involved in the resistance to the government *Year Zero* depicts, which they discover is their role in the game. Finding hidden resistance propaganda, which can be pieced together later on the message boards and kept track of in *NinWiki*, becomes the goal.

Again, technology reveals itself as a key to allowing the utopian energy of *Year Zero* to surface. Playing the compact disc warms it sufficiently for the coding to fully appear. Gamers must be able to convert the binary code that reveals a URL, which has information about a detainment camp for "subversive[s]" (*NinWiki*, 2007). Also, a telephone is necessary to access the message that flags gamers as "potential militant[s]" (18664456580, 2007). Entering more information during the phone call allows gamers to leave a message, but there is no indication that the message is ever returned. The mystery that surrounds this part of the game adds to the dystopian premise, but it also gives the reader a sense of being more than just a witness. In this way, the alternate reality is maintained, and calls attention to the fact that participants are interested in something more than their own reality, which has utopian implications.

Before the album was officially released, certain songs were "leaked" at concerts in Europe on flash drives, which also held clues to the game such as pictures, audio files and much more. Messages were found hidden in static within the songs themselves, which gamers had to use spectrograph analyzers to discover. In April of 2007, mere days before the American release of the album, some gamers were actually emailed and told to meet with a person who gave to them boxes with propaganda and, to some, cellular phones. When the phones rang, the gamers that answered were led to a Los Angeles locale where they had their personal cellular phones and electronic devices taken away, signed a waiver, boarded a bus and went to a warehouse where they were lectured by a game character, Neil Czerno (Monti Sharp). Czerno's lecture was as follows:

> What the hell were you thinking? You kindly agreed to carry tracking devices on yourselves. You showed up for a resistance meeting and you signed a waiver that gave us permission to do anything. You allowed yourselves to be hustled onto a van, you let us take away any communication with the outside world that you had. We then drove you to an unknown location and led you down into this room. If this was Nazi Germany, I would walk out that door laughing, and fucking Zyklon B would start hissing out of the vents. Look, you've seen some scary websites about what the future might become — me too — so let's start by saying that you're not crazy, and I'm not crazy, and go from there. Is this the future? I don't know. I sure as hell hope not. How about you? Unfortunately, that future is closer then you think. Think about what you all have witnessed in the last few years right here in America. In the aftermath of 9/11, the current administration has done unbelievable damage to civil liberties. So what are the

ordinary, real things we can do to make a difference?  Listen, you don't have to be Gandhi to get involved.  If politics seems big and vague, cut it down to size.  I'm just asking you to stop and recognize what matters to you, and make the same effort to actually change your world that other people do to vote on American Idol.  All I want is this: wake up and give a shit!  Open your eyes and pay attention.  Don't just swallow this spin, everyone is fucking spinning — governments, gangsters, the Fortune 500, the guy next door — do not swallow what they are shoving down you throat; wake up and give a shit!  And for God's sake, please, do not fall for the line of bullshit that I am giving you right now.  I do not want you to buy what I am selling.  What do I want?  I want you to wake up and give a shit!  Do your own thinking.  Find out where you stand on things that matter to you. ("L.A. Resistance Meeting," 2007)

After the lecture, Czerno led the gamers to a darkened room which turned out to be a makeshift music venue where Nine Inch Nails performed six songs for the lucky few that attended.  The concert ended abruptly, however, when armed officers, presumably of a SWAT team, cut power.  A video of the ordeal shows flashlights pointing from gun barrels — some shots seem to be fired as well.  Eyewitnesses say they were led back to the bus they were brought to the scene on, taken back to the meeting point and dropped off.  Although at least one website has been found since Czerno's lecture (dubbed the "L.A. Resistance Meeting" on *Echoing the Sound*), this is the extent of *Year Zero* activity since April 2007.  Nine Inch Nails' tour around the world in which they bypassed the United States (save for the "L.A. Resistance Meeting" and a stop in Hawaii) ended in late September, and a remix version of *Year Zero* came out on November 20th called *Y34RZ3R0R3M1X3D*.  So far, no new clues have been found using the remix album, and fans on the *Echoing the Sound* message board are avidly awaiting new developments.  Even with the release of the instrumental *Ghosts I-IV* and the free-to-download *The Slip* in 2008, little else has surfaced as part of the game, despite the fact that *Year Zero* material continues to dominate live concerts by the band, and *Year Zero* paraphernalia continues to be sold there.

The "L.A. Resistance Meeting," as well as the real-life events that led up to it, bring *Year Zero*'s alternate reality into reality.  The gamers' having met with real people after being summoned via email and telephone shows that *Year Zero* does reflect a utopian longing on the part of its creators.  Because the messages relayed in Neil Czerno's lecture, "Capital G" and throughout *Year Zero* suggest the current administration as a catalyst for the kind of future *Year Zero* depicts, and because Czerno's intent is to get his audience to "wake up and give a shit," it is fair to say that *Year Zero* is interested in the "social and political action" ("'This is Not a Game,'" 2003) that Jane McGonigal suggests ARGs are capable of bringing about, and the cultural criticism that others argue games are as capable of as other media.

## Conclusions

Dystopian narratives often depict a future world that is essentially an exaggeration of the present one.  In so doing, these works encourage the reader to consider what can be changed about their world to avoid one similar to those of dystopian works set in the future.  Because these cautionary-type works force readers to consider their

own present as a precursor to the future, they actually succeed in making readers think historically, which transcends the postmodern symptom of a loss of historicism. Dystopian works have utopian energy in this way, but also in that thinking historically undermines late capitalism, which translates to readers imagining social change to avoid the dystopic worlds portrayed in these works. Dystopian games are especially effective in bringing about such energy.

One aspect of the loss of the utopian imagination that is transcended in dystopian works is its affiliation with technology. Although once seen as quite utopian itself, technology became a major part of the loss of utopian energy after the development and use of the atomic bomb. A constant fear of atomic destruction during the Cold War brought about a pessimism toward technology that is another symptom of postmodernity. However, technology allows for utopian cultural production to be produced in entirely new ways. One example of this is the Alternate Reality Game.

The Alternate Reality Game is an immersive experience that harnesses the pervasive technologies of the postmodern era. It is a multi-media genre that brings together many people that collectively seek out an alternative reality to escape the constraint of their own reality. In its very nature as an alternative to the social hegemony of late capitalism, the ARG is rich with utopian energy. This utopianism is twofold: it is manifest in the desire of gamers to seek out an alternative to the social status quo, and it provides a means to creating a real one via the technologies and methods that are central to the genre's structure. In this way games put forth a call to action against the aspects of culture that are dystopian themselves. One example of an Alternate Reality Game whose attributes are consistent with the dystopian, yet utopian, "genre" discussed herein is *Year Zero*.

A dystopic view of what the future will be like if the current social system continues as is, *Year Zero* exemplifies the idea of the dystopian narrative as actually having utopian energy. The gamer is painfully aware of the premise of the game as the result of the current system's proliferation. This is made clear by the near-future setting, as well as the lecture by Neil Czerno that relates the damage to civil liberties under the current administration as being prophetic of the kind of future *Year Zero* depicts. Participants in the game, then, must think historically, which bypasses the postmodern symptom of a loss of such thinking — which is utopian in and of itself. Furthermore, the players find themselves members of the resistance, which puts them in a position to use the game as a means to a socially revolutionary end.

The experience of an ARG of this nature, it must be hoped, will carry over into reality, giving gamers a better sense of how they can make a difference in life under late capitalism, and help to avoid the kind of future *Year Zero* anticipates. This is achieved partially via the everyday, real-life tools that the participants in the game must use to "play" the game. It is also achieved through the use of technology — especially the Internet — and the collective experience that comes along with the nature of the game. There is an inherently utopian energy in the dystopian *Year Zero* ARG that is a testament to the dystopian narrative's utopian spirit. As a new genre, it is unknown whether the ARG will catch on, but it should be regarded as a socially critical, and thus utopian type of cultural production. As *Year Zero* shows, there is potential for the ARG to be especially utopian when it exists within a certain subgenre, just as there is for novels. The ARG's history lies in viral marketing, from

which it was appropriated by fans of the genre, who have developed, since then, numerous ARGs without the capitalistic ulterior motives of those developed for the purposes of marketing. As this continues, perhaps the ARG will become recognized as a genre like any other, and this perhaps because of its appearance at a time relatively close to that of widespread social change — that, however, remains to be seen.

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## Notes

[1]  See Amis, Kingsley.  *New Maps of Hell: A Survey of Science Fiction*.

[2]  See Mandel, Ernest. *Late Capitalism*. London: Verso, 1972.

[3]  *NinWiki* is a wiki that allows *Year Zero* gamers to collectively archive up-to-date knowledge of the game in an online database that users can add to and edit.