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**DYSTOPIAN FICTION AND VIDEO GAME NARRATIVES:
A STUDY OF *WE HAPPY FEW***

**CAMPINA GRANDE
2019**

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Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso apresentado ao Departamento de Letras e Artes da Universidade Estadual da Paraíba, como requisito parcial à obtenção do título de Licenciado em Letras - Inglês.

Linha de pesquisa: Literatura e Intermidialidade.

Orientador: Prof. Me. Auricélio Soares Fernandes

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PROMINENT ELEMENTS OF DYSTOPIAN FICTION IN THE VIDEO GAME
WE HAPPY FEW

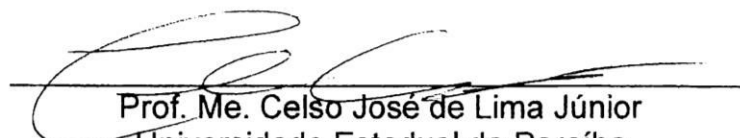
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Wisdom: that seems to the rabble to be a kind of flight, an artifice and means for getting oneself out of a dangerous game; but the genuine philosopher – as he seems to *us*, my friends? – lives 'unphilosophically' and 'unwisely', above all *imprudently*, and bears the burden and duty of a hundred attempts and temptations of life – he risks *himself* constantly, he plays *the* dangerous game

Nietzsche

ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to identify and discuss the main elements of the dystopian genre of fiction that are present in the narrative(s) transmitted through the video game *We Happy Few* (2018). As such, the video game in question is taken as a proper narrative medium, in accordance to narratological theories – like the ones presented by Thabet (2012) and Majewsky (2003) – that are progressively, albeit slowly, being consolidated in the field of video game studies. Narratology is taken as a source of useful conceptualizations for better understanding how the process of narration takes place in the specific case of interactive media. An introduction to the concept of dystopian fiction – which is mostly based on the works of Bedore (2017) and Claeys (2017) – is included and it serves as a source of information regarding the genre's main characteristic that are then sought in the particular object. In this way, it is possible to notice not only direct references to influential dystopian works of fiction, but also satirizations of sociopolitical issues, a proximity and conflict with utopian ideals, and the troublesome social nonconformity of the protagonists.

Keywords: We Happy Few, Dystopia, Video Game, Narratology.

RESUMO

O objetivo deste estudo é identificar e discutir os principais elementos do gênero de ficção "distopia" que estão presentes na(s) narrativa(s) transmitida(s) através do vídeo game *We Happy Few* (2018). Sendo assim, o vídeo game em questão é tomado como uma verdadeira mídia narrativa, em conformidade com teorias narratológicas – como as propostas por Thabet (2012) e Majewsky (2003) – que estão sendo progressivamente, apesar de lentamente, consolidadas nos estudos de vídeo games. Narratologia é tomada como fonte de conceitualizações úteis para uma melhor compreensão de como o processo de narração acontece no caso específico das mídias interativas. Uma introdução ao conceito de ficção distópica, baseada majoritariamente nos estudos de Bedore (2017) e Claeys (2017), está inclusa e serve como fonte de informações a respeito das principais características do gênero que serão, em seguida, buscadas no objeto específico. Desta forma, é possível perceber, além de referências diretas a influentes obras de distopia, a satirização de questões sociopolíticas, a proximidade e o atrito com ideais utópicos e o conflituoso não-conformismo social dos protagonistas.

Palavras-chave: We Happy Few, Distopia, Vídeo Game, Narratologia.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	INTRODUCTION	8
1	NARRATIVES IN VIDEO GAMES	11
2	DYSTOPIAN FICTION	17
3	WE HAPPY FEW	23
3.1	The Story World	25
3.2	The Protagonists	25
3.2.1	Arthur Hastings.....	25
3.2.2	Sally Boyle.....	26
3.2.3	Ollie Starkey.....	27
4	EXPLORING DYSTOPIAN ASPECTS OF THE STORY	29
4.1	Drugs	29
4.2	Compulsory Happiness	33
4.3	Erasing the Past	38
4.4	Utopia-Dystopia Tensions	42
4.5	Mass and Nonconformity	46
	CONCLUSION	49
	REFERENCES	51

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, in society, we can think of some places where fictional narratives are analyzed and discussed with increased interest and depth. Spaces where narratives are regarded as more than just ephemeral entertainment objects. We may point out, intuitively, that such activities are performed by movie reviewers and critics, book clubs, academia, and so on. Considering this context, the present study was provoked by a certain concern regarding a noticeable unbalance between a particular, continually growing, stock of fictional narratives and its social (especially academic) exploration. That disproportion makes reference to what seems to be a generalized lack of attention that is given to fictional narratives transmitted specifically through the video game medium. It is an especially concerning case when we take into account that many topics presented in those narratives could provide an abundant source of artistic and cultural expression, especially for reflecting upon, and discussing, a wide variety of issues related to individual and social uneasinesses, just like literature and cinema do.

That being the case, by analyzing and discussing a particular aspect of a narrative transmitted through the video game medium, this research aims to contribute to the academic discussion of this emerging area of scrutiny. The video game chosen for this purpose was *We happy few*, which was released in 2018 by Compulsion Games, and the aspects that we sought to analyze and discuss were the elements of dystopian fiction that are present in its narrative. In other words, this study hypothesizes that, by using the theoretical frameworks available so far, like the ones presented by Tamer Thabet (2012) and Jakub Majewsky (2003), it is feasible to treat video games as a proper narrative medium and, as a result, to scrutinize the narratives conveyed through them. Those theorists suggest, for example, that adaptations could be made to traditional theories of narrative (like those of Gérard Genette, Seymour Chatman and Manfred Jahn, which are already employed in literary and film studies) in order to be adequately used for the study of video game narratives.

For a better contextualization of the discussions to come, it may be interesting to establish a place, among current common fields of study, where this research could fit in. Considering that we will be addressing video games, narratives and dystopian fiction, it is safe to say, for starters, that this work belongs under the broad umbrella

field called “video game studies”. As we can see in the collection of writings entitled “Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies”, edited by Wolf and Perron (2014), the field of game studies is multidisciplinary and addresses video game matters through a variety of perspectives and approaches, including the narratological one. Narratology (also called narrative theory) is a discipline that deals with theories that aim to establish abstract narrative concepts and models. Those models attempt to define structural characteristics of narratives while providing conceptual tools that are useful for the interpretation of narrative texts (BAL, 2009). And dystopian fiction, in turn, seems to be discussed mostly within the disciplines of literary and film studies. Hence, the discussions presented in this text will be mostly situated in the intersection of those three areas.

When we look at the national (Brazilian) academic panorama, it is also intriguing to wonder “where” and “by whom” studies like this one should be carried out. We do not have any significant centers or programs dedicated to the study of video games in our universities. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to argue that, if we want to explore video games through a narratological perspective, those type of studies could find a relatively adequate place, at least temporarily, in university courses related to literature and film studies, for affinity reasons, since both of those areas have stories and storytelling processes as major topics of interest. In regards to this particular issue, it is worth noticing that Thamer Thabet – one of the theorists whose work bases this study – is a Professor who teaches the course of Letters (language and literature) at the Federal University of the valleys of Jequitinhonha and Mucuri (UFVJM).

When putting forward the idea of academically studying the narrative of a video game, we will most certainly find ourselves facing some problems. The most noticeable one is, arguably, the lack of a well consolidated theoretical common ground regarding a variety of video game aspects and how they should be approached. For example, according to Simons (2007), the study of video games through a narratological perspective has raised objections from “ludologists”. He then explains that ludology is a proposed theoretical framework for dealing with interactive media that rejects narratology as a foundation. He points out that some of those objections are aimed at particularities of interactive media that would, allegedly, make them incompatible with traditional concepts of narrative theory. Thabet (2015) recognizes the existence of such objections and states that using concepts of narratology for dealing with video games is considered heretic by some theorists. On the other hand, Aarseth and

Arsenault (2014) argue that such “apparent” disagreements were actually caused by a mutual misunderstanding of both parties’ intentions and arguments.

In order to achieve our objectives, the procedure to carry out this research will be constituted by the following steps (numerated according to corresponding section):

- 1) A literature review about narrative theory applied to video games. Here, we will try to understand how fundamental concepts of narratology could be forged or adapted to work along with the video game medium. This discussion will be mostly based on the works of Thabet (2012) and Majewsky (2003);
- 2) A literature review about the dystopian genre of fiction. Here, we aim at presenting a brief overview of the genre’s history, its main characteristics and its social relevance. The discussions of those matters will be mostly based on the works of Bedore (2017);
- 3) After that, a descriptive introduction to the video game’s story and gameplay aspects (like plot, rules, goals, and so on) will be presented. The exposition of those aspects will take into account the video game narratological aspects that were mentioned in section 1;
- 4) After exposing the main aspects of the video game’s story, we will attempt to identify which of its elements exhibit correspondences with the characteristics that should constitute a dystopian story, according to the theory presented in section 2.

This research complies with the guidelines proposed by Dionne and Laville (1999) for performing studies in the humanities, especially when it comes to the processes of literature review, collection of information, and interpretation. The analysis of the object of study (the video game's narrative), in light of the theories pertaining the dystopian genre of fiction, will serve as a basis for the establishment of analytical categories. Analytical categories are basically aggroupments of contents based on their affinities. Such aggroupments can be seen in the fourth section. Observation is employed as the main technique for obtaining data and pattern-matching is employed as a technique for data analysis. That means that we will be seeking for existing correspondences between theory and the observed object. This sort of qualitative analysis requires interpretation from the researcher and, in this case, the interpretative process will be based on what Selden, Widdowson and Brooker (2005) call reader¹-oriented narrative criticism.

¹ Yes, video game narratives can be considered texts. As Sercan Şengün (2013, p.2) puts it: “[The] reading of a video game text is still an elusive subject. [...] [A] video game is more of a Writerly Text than a Readerly Text [...] in the sense that the reader is no longer the consumer but also the producer of the text.”

1 NARRATIVES IN VIDEO GAMES

Since this study is meant to address specific aspects of a video game's story and storytelling process, it is important to define, beforehand, some concepts related to the particular way narratives take place in this type of medium, since they are fundamental for a better understanding of posterior discussions. We can start by pointing out that, nowadays, the study of video games through a narratological perspective seems to be almost unanimously accepted and, despite the lack of consensus on some specific issues, it is possible to find some common ground in the works of theorists. The points of disagreement regarding video game narratology are discussed in depth in the works of, for example, Simons (2007), Thabet (2015), and Majewski (2003). Yet, in this section, we will be addressing that rather extensive discussion very briefly, focusing on points of agreement rather than disagreement, and mostly based on the works of the latter two mentioned theorists.

It may be interesting to start this discussion by pointing out one specific characteristic of video games that many consider to be what most strikingly differentiates them from other media commonly used for transmitting narratives: interactivity. As stated by Landay (2014, p.173):

Interactivity in video games or other forms of new media [...] most often refers to communication between a human and a computer. The person controls a computer system to do something that is meaningful to them; the system changes because of, and responds to, the user's input as one of the participants in the interaction, and there is a loop of information exchanged. [...] interactivity may be the element of video games that best distinguishes them from other media and cultural forms (such as visual art, cinema, literature, database).

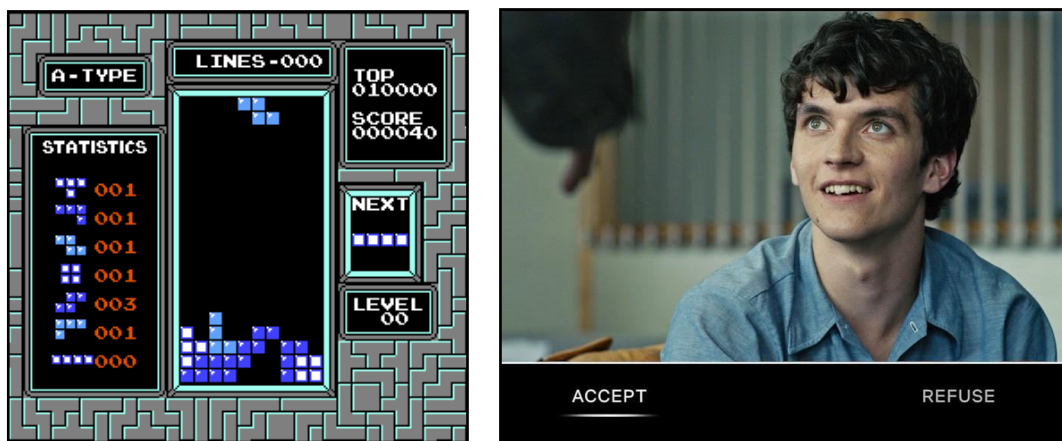
It is also important to mention that video games can be very different from one another. Majewski (2003) suggests that an initial basic differentiation should be made between those games that have significant narrative material from those that do not have it. According to him, video games containing significant narrative material tend to have the progression of the story as the player's main reward, whereas games with no significant narrative material tend to have points or scores as the player's main reward. That means that not all games are well suited for a narrative focused study.

[C]omputer games are not a single form – indeed, it is difficult to decide whether they even constitute a single medium [...] Thus, narrative is simply appropriate for some games, and inappropriate for others – not all criteria that can be used to study games will apply in all cases [...] Games where the non-narrative

element is the dominant one will reward the player with points [...] On the other hand, games that emphasize narrative may reward the player with nothing more than the conclusion of the story (MAJEWSKI, 2003, p.2-3)

Majewski mentions the classic puzzle game *Tetris* (fig.1) as an example of a video game that lacks significant narrative material. We can mention visual novels and interactive movies, such as *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (fig.1), as examples of video game genres² that are strongly narrative oriented. In such video games, the player's interaction is usually "restricted" to choosing, among some textually given options, the progression of the story by selecting the characters' responses to some situations.

Figure 1: Examples of non-narrative and narrative focused video games.



Sources: Screenshots.

Similarly, Thabet (2015), while presenting his views regarding theoretical aspects of video game narratives, explains that most of his considerations were made specifically with first-person 3D games in mind. He draws attention to the fact that any attempt to establish a single theoretical model comprising different video game genres would most likely end up in confusion. It is made clear that different video game genres require individualized considerations. He then engages in one of such individualized considerations when trying to adapt his theoretical model to third-person video games, explaining the differences that exist between the two types of games and how they affect the players experience. When the video game is in first-person, for instance, there is an overlap between narrator and focalizer, whereas in third-person there is no

² See <<https://www.idtech.com/blog/different-types-of-video-game-genres>>.

overlap, since the protagonist's point of view and the camera's point of view are different.

Majewski (2003) also suggests a classification of video games based on four categories that represent different types of narrative progression: 1) The string of pearls: In which the player has relative freedom to act at specific moments (levels), but after the completion of a certain expected task or after reaching a certain point, the story progresses linearly. *Sanitarium* (1998) is an example of this model; 2) The branching storyline: In which the choices that the player makes at specific points of the game will affect the path that the story will follow. In this type of game, it is common for the stories to have multiple possible endings. We can mention *Black Mirror: Bandersnacht* (2018) as an example of this model; 3) The amusement park: In which the player will find parallel sub-plots available to choose from when exploring the somewhat open game world. *Saints Row IV* (2013) is an example of this model. 4) The building blocks: In which the video game gives the player a roll of tools and options so she can build or personalize parts of the game world and its characters while having major control over the story and its progression. *The Sims 4* (2014) is an example of this model.

Thabet (2015) is one theorist who tries to systematize the study of video game narratives departing from structuralist-narratological conceptualizations towards an interpretive-critical approach. In his book entitled "Video Game Narrative and Criticism", he acknowledges that the development of a theoretical framework regarding the subject is late and also incipient, resulting in ambiguous conceptualizations and a lack of methodologies. Nevertheless, he presents a way for dealing with video game narratives that is based on rethinking, adapting and then incorporating certain narratological concepts (such as narrative, narration, characters, impersonation, performance, events, time and space) that are commonly used in traditional narrative theories. He also discusses how those concepts could play along with other aspects that are characteristically associated with video games (such as interactivity and gameplay) in order to create meaningful experiences for the player.

Thabet (2015, p.15) acknowledges and incorporates in his theory, for example, the definitions of narrative, narration and story presented by Herman & Vervaeck (2005, p.41) which are, by their turn, based on Gérard Genette's (1980) theory. According to them, a narrative is constituted by characters and a sequence of events (in the particular way they are presented by the narrator), narration is related to the

actual enunciation of the narrative by a narrator, and the story³ is a “reconstruction” or “rearrangement” of those narrative events in a linear\chronological order. Moreover, Thabet incorporates Manfred Jahn’s definition for the concept of “narrator”, according to which, a narrator is the entity that tells the story and, therefore, “who manages the exposition, who decides what is to be told, how it is to be told (especially, from what point of view, and in what sequence), and what is to be left out” (JAHN, 2005). According to him, the narrator is a hypothetical entity whose characteristics, including personality traits, can be inferred by the reader with the help of voice markers (such as subjective expressions) in the text. The narrator is often differentiated from the figure of the perceiving agent (also called focalizer), since they have different properties and since the former belongs to the level of narration while the latter belongs to the level of narrative.

Thabet (2015, p.23-27) also acknowledges how relevant film narratology can be for the case of video games, specifically because it addresses some important non-verbal elements commonly used in its narrating process (including images, cinematic clips, and soundtracks). Because of the features that are usually present in the storytelling of video games, they are more closely related to filmic narrations than purely verbal (written or spoken) narrations. It is interesting to notice that the genesis of film narratology was also, to a certain extent, based on adaptations of concepts that were originally from literary narratology. But those adaptations were also not without problems. As Fludernik (2009, p.22) explains, the existence (or non-existence) of a narrator in films, for example, is contested. Nevertheless, Thabet adopts both Chartman’s and Jahn’s ideas about what the cinematic narrator could be. Basically, for those theorists, the cinematic narrator is an abstract agent responsible for arranging and showing what the audience sees and hears. The cinematic narrator is differentiated from the voice-over narrator (which is the character who speaks). Thabet explains that if we were to transpose the concept of a cinematic narrator to video games, it would be associated with the task of rendering the whole game world (with all its objects and rules) through a variety of available resources.

Moreover, both Thabet (2015) and Majewski (2003, p.17) point out perceived similarities between the performance of a player in a gameplay session and the

³ Yet, out of the technical jargon, the words “narrative”, “plot” and “story” are often used interchangeably.

performance of an actor in a play or a film. In such comparison, the player is associated with the figure of both actor and spectator at the same time.

[P]erformance is an integral part of the storytelling in games, just as it is in film and theater, where the story cannot be told without the actors' performance. [...] Play is conceptually performative, and it is an obvious component of game fiction because the player is a performer in the story (THABET, 2015, p.13-14).

From what has been exposed so far, it is very easy for us to understand how the player will be, at least to some extent, responsible for what is going to be shown, whether by audio or video, when she is in control of, for example, the camera (which is also, if in first-person, an expression of the character's body movement and point-of-view). Therefore, whenever the player controls the character's behavior, she will also be exteriorizing her own subjective expressiveness, as well as influencing on how the story content is going to be presented, thus acting as an actual narrator (but not the only one). There are also many elements in video games that the player has no control over, and the presentation of those elements denotes the existence of another narrative voice: that of the game system. In fact, the player interacts with the storytelling as long (and as far) as the game system allows her to. This whole process of co-narration between the player and the game system is one of the most fundamental and distinctive aspects of narratives in video games. And it makes clear how those fundamental concepts of narratology, which can be very important for an enhanced comprehension of basically any narrative, will be affected by the interactive nature of video games. By acting as a co-narrator, along with the game system, the player will be actively taking part in the construction of the narrative (THABET, 2015).

Much of the ongoing discussions regarding video game narratives seem to be situated at the structural level. Even though structural concepts can be an interesting starting point for approaching narratives of any kind, this study will not be focused nor restricted to them, but rather on the actual story contents that are built over those structures – the "outer layers" of information and meaning. The narrative theorist Bal (2009) defines the structuralist narratology as a source of useful, yet limited, tools for interpretation. Adding that such tools can be helpful even when the use of theories that go beyond structure are relevant for dealing with certain matters. In this regard, it is interesting to see how Thabet (2015) divides his book in two main sections: the first one addressing structural aspects, and the second one addressing meaning making processes related to personal experiences, interpretation, and criticism.

[T]he tools proposed [by narratology] can be put to varied uses. I have myself used this theory for both aesthetic and political criticism [...] Hence, the need of more theory, beyond narratology: a theory that accounts for the functions and positions of texts of different backgrounds, genres, and historical periods. [...] One need not adhere to structuralism as a philosophy in order to be able to use the concepts and views presented in this book. [...] The scope of narratology, in my view an indispensable tool, is a limited one. The concepts that are presented here must be regarded as intellectual tools for interpretation. These tools are useful in that they enable their users to formulate an interpretive description in such a way that it is accessible to others. [...] But above all, the concepts help to increase understanding through encouraging readers to articulate what they understand, or think they understand, when reading or otherwise 'processing' a narrative artifact (BAL, 2009, p.x-4).

Indeed, since we intend to interpret a narrative, it is not hard to see how video game narratology can be useful for us. It helps to clarify, for example, how such narratives are constructed through a process of co-narration; how players act performatively according to their subjectivity; and how completely different narratives can emerge from a single video game – thanks to greater possibilities in terms of narrative progression (which is not normally present in books or films, since the narratives conveyed through those media will be exactly the same for any reader/spectator).

2 DYSTOPIAN FICTION

For achieving our objectives, it is also crucial to define what dystopian fiction is, as well as its origins and its cultural and social relevance. For that reason, this section is dedicated to presenting an introductory overview of those topics, mostly based on the works of the literary scholar Pamela Bedore (2017). It is worth mentioning that the discussions presented in this section are based not only on her written works, but also on recorded lectures that she gave to a course entitled “Great Utopian and Dystopian Works of Literature”⁴.

In this section, we are going to focus on two basic types of information: 1) The matters or characteristics that are considered relevant, recurrent or commonly associated with the dystopian fiction genre; 2) Matters or characteristics of other works of dystopian fiction. While the first criterion is of a generalizing and abstract nature, the second one derives directly from examples of dystopian expressions present in actual works of the genre, for that reason, and for the sake of comparisons that are made throughout the text, the second type of information may be regarded as possible or direct references to the video game.

Since we are going to discuss genres of fiction, it seems reasonable to start by addressing the concept of genre itself. We may think of genre, intuitively, as some sort of categorization of things based on their characteristics (a definition that is not wrong), but for literature⁵ and video games⁶, for example, the question of genre is often more complex than that. Bedore (2017) mentions two main approaches that may be used for defining literary genres: a genre could be seen as a formula or as a rhetoric (or both, since they are not mutually exclusive). If we take genre as a formula, it means that, in order to belong to a certain genre, a story must possess certain features that are always (or at least normally) found in works of that genre. Throughout this section, we are going to discuss what such defining features of utopia and dystopia could be. If we take genre as being rhetorically constructed, it means that genres are defined by the recurring ways rhetorical responses are given to certain situations. According to

⁴Available at: <www.thegreatcourses.com/courses/great-utopian-and-dystopian-works-of-literature.html>. (Accessed on May 12, 2019)

⁵ See “Genre: An Introduction to History, Theory, Research, and Pedagogy” by BAWARSHI, A. S.; REIFF, M. J.

⁶ See “Genre and game studies: Toward a critical approach to video game genres” by APPERLEY, T. H.

this approach, for some hypothetical social issues, for example, the utopian rhetorical response will be that of a blueprint for solving the problems, and the dystopian one will be that of a cautionary tale warning us, normally through satire⁷, about the horrible things that could happen if the problems are not dealt properly and in time.

According to Claeys (2017), the word dystopia was coined in 1747 (and was then spelt “dustopia”). In Bedore’s lectures, she explains that that term was popularized when John Stuart Mill used it, in 1868, to make reference to those who were proponents of things considered “too bad to be practicable”, as opposed to those who were proponents of things considered “too good to be practicable”, the “utopians”. Considering that, as we have seen in the example above, the term dystopia is very often defined as the plain opposite of a utopia, in some sort of mutually exclusive pure antagonism (which, according to some theorists, is not an accurate definition), we should explore the concept of utopia before engaging in any further examination of the concept of dystopia.

Originally, *Utopia* was the title of a story written by the English author Thomas More, which was published in 1516. In that story, More describes a fictional island that, only in later versions, was called Utopia. In an early version of that story, the island was called “Nusquama”, a name derived from the Latin word *nusquam*, which means “nowhere” and “at no occasion”. Utopia, the Greek word that replaced Nusquama, has basically the same meaning, since the word utopia literally means “no place”, but the word utopia is also a homophone of the word “eutopia”, which means “good” or “perfect place”. That homophony, Bedore (2017) explains, embeds the term with an interesting paradox, since the word that represents the perfect place sounds exactly the same as the word that represents a place that does not exist.

Still according to Bedore (2017), in More’s text, many aspects of the society that inhabited the island of Utopian are presented to the reader, in details, by the recounting of a European character that had visited it. Utopia was described as being basically some sort of communist society. Money did not exist in Utopia and its citizens were taught and trained to be productive (without being overwhelmed by excessive hours of

⁷ Encyclopædia Britannica defines satire as an “artistic form, chiefly literary and dramatic, in which human or individual vices, follies, abuses, or shortcomings are held up to censure by means of ridicule, derision, burlesque, irony, parody, caricature, or other methods, sometimes with an intent to inspire social reform”. A caricature, by its turn, is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as an “exaggeration by means of often ludicrous distortion of parts or characteristics”.

work) and contributive to the overall functioning and well-being of the society without having the expectancy of profit or other forms of personal enrichment. In this way, they had a fair and equalitarian access to the communally produced and owned goods, adequate for each one needs, and also fair shares of free time for leisure. They were a creed diverse people and relatively tolerant in regards to different religions (but not so much for atheism, which was just barely tolerated). They were highly opposed to wars and did not establish treaties with other peoples because they thought that a signed piece of paper was not at all necessary for treating others fairly and amicably. By that, we can clearly understand that the Utopians held cooperative, humanistic and cosmopolitan views, instead of selfish, greedy and nationalistic ones.⁸

In More's *Utopia*, Bedore (2017) explains, we can identify some features and themes that end up being considered common motifs of the utopian literary genre. For example: 1) There are links between the fictional world and the real world (the way labor was described in More's *Utopia*, for example, clearly contrasts with the situation of widespread unemployment and poverty of 1516 England); 2) The didacticism is emphasized over the plot; 3) Detailed descriptions of a hypothetical better society and the way it functions (which includes descriptions of its economy, government, law, philosophies, morals, and so on); 4) The description of the society is almost always made by a visitor character. More's *Utopia*, then, started to serve as an example of (and a reference for) literary works that speculated about what a perfect (or at least better) society could be. Later on, even though it was not the first text dealing with such matters, and in such a way (with Plato's *Republic* being an earlier example), the widespread public's association of *Utopia* with other works dealing with similar themes started to develop what is now called the utopian genre of fiction.

"A utopia gone wrong". "Two sides of the same coin". Those are expressions that Bedore (2017) uses to describe what a dystopia is while clearly emphasizing that it is not simply a plain opposite of a utopia. Along the same lines, Claeys (2017) explains that many different attempts to define dystopia in relation to utopia have been made. He states that those who consider dystopias to be some sort of opposite of utopias are actually focusing on the fact that dystopias very often derive from the defacement and corruption of a utopia or utopian intention. Claeys uses the term anti-

⁸ We are presenting Utopia in a good light here, since it seems to be the way Utopia became popularly and traditionally perceived. Yet, Claeys (2018, p.6) points out many dystopian aspects in More's Utopia.

utopia when referring to such antagonistically reversed definitions of dystopias. He explains that:

Some dystopias are not anti-utopian, but grow out of existing trends towards dictatorship, economic monopoly, the degradation of the poor, or environmental collapse. Some seemingly reject all forms of utopianism, others only one or other varieties. [...] 'anti-utopias' should be separated from dystopias insofar as the former reject utopianism as such, whereas the latter do not, or do so more obliquely (CLAEYS, 2017, p.274).

As we have mentioned, Bedore does not hold such an antagonistic view (which regards utopia and dystopia as plain opposites) but, nevertheless, taking a different approach from that of Claeys, she uses the terms dystopia and anti-utopia interchangeably. For Moylan (2000), the most accurate opposite of a utopia is an anti-utopia (for him, that means a scenario where any attempt to change the state of things is outright considered futile, thus evoking a strong sense of pessimism, resignation and nihilism) and a dystopia would be somewhat oscillating between those extreme concepts (of utopia and anti-utopia), sometimes leaning more towards one than the other. Thus, dystopias seem to be in some sort of parallaxic or ambiguously ambivalent relationship with utopias, mostly because of the "uncomfortably close proximity of utopian and dystopian traits" (CLAEYS, 2017).

According to Bedore, the modern genre of fiction that we call dystopia was strongly influenced and defined by three books (even though, similarly to what happened to *Utopia* and the utopian genre, they were not the first ones dealing with such themes and in such a manner), those books were:

1) Zamyatin's *We* (1924): A novel that tells a story set in a futuristic, logic and order obsessed, society. The story is narrated from the point of view of one member of the society whom expresses approval for the observance of the strict social rules (which controlled behaviors, schedules and tasks of the citizens' somewhat repetitive and mechanical lives) and expresses dislike for freedom, nature and basically anything reminiscent of the "primitive world". For him, only what was useful and rational could be valuable and beautiful. In that society, which was isolated from the outside world by a great wall, the citizens lived in glass rooms so they could always be publicly watched. The protagonist ends up joining a subversive movement aimed at destroying the wall and freeing the citizens so they could live together with the other humans. He is ultimately captured by the government and forced to have a brain surgery that turns him into some sort of will-less slave, completely subordinate and faithful to the state;

2) Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932): In this novel, we also have a depiction of an isolated futuristic society. But in this case, the citizens are genetically engineered and cultivated in an industrial fashion (never naturally conceived or born), separated by castes and conditioned⁹ not only to perform their social duties the best way possible, but also to be happy while doing them. While growing up, the children, according to their position in the social hierarchy, received electric shocks in order to become subconsciously averse to certain thoughts and behaviors. Also, during their sleep, they would be exposed to repetitions of slogans and advices in order to subconsciously internalize them. When adults, they would have unrestricted access to a pharmaceutical called Soma, which was used to make them feel happy and relaxed. Outside the boundaries of civilization lived the "savages". One of the characters of the story is a female citizen who gets lost after travelling to those primitive places, she then finds out that she is pregnant and unable to go back to her civilization because she feels ashamed;

3) Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949): A novel that, just like *We*, depicts a futuristic society full of strict social rules and whose citizens were always watched, but, this time, by devices similar to televisions with cameras ("telescreens") that were present in everyone's rooms. Those devices could not be turned off and were always broadcasting governmental propaganda. The protagonist works at the "Ministry of Truth", constantly rewriting the history of the state. Citizens who were considered a threat to the state, for whatever reason, would normally mysteriously disappear.

Considering the stories of those books, Bedore (2017) stresses how the socio-political anxieties of certain historical moments (like the ones in which those writers lived) are important to this genre of fiction. By looking at those stories, we can get a grasp of what sort of themes and questions dystopias deal with. They put in evidence, for example, the authors' concerns with the undesirable paths that their societies could end up following. Dystopias usually invite the readers to think about the importance and costs of certain sociopolitical questions, like the tensions that commonly exist between security and freedom, conformity and anarchy, and stability and change. Along the same lines, Moylan points out that:

⁹ In a way similar to the behaviorist concept of "operant conditioning". See any book of Psychology.

Imaginatively and cognitively engaging with such works can bring willing readers back to their own worlds with new or clearer perceptions, possibly helping them to raise their consciousness about what is right and wrong in that world, and even to think about what is to be done, especially in concert with others, to change it for the better (MOYLAN, 2000, p.xvii).

But we must always take into account that the ideas of what constitutes a good society or a bad society can diverge greatly from person to person, to the point that someone's utopia may be someone else's dystopia. Interestingly, Bedore (2017) also suggests that, underneath all those socio-political anxieties, the root and main concern of those authors was that we could eventually become unable to identify what is reality and what is not.

3 WE HAPPY FEW

This section is intended to present a descriptive introduction to fundamental aspects of the video game in which the objects of this study (the elements of dystopian fiction) are contained. We are going to overview what the video game project was originally intended to be (and how it came to be) according to its developers. We will mention how the video game was marketed to the consumer public, its gameplay main characteristics (including main goals and rules), and discuss how this game could be classified according to Majewskis' models of narrative progression. After that, we are going to engage in an – very brief – exposition of the fictional game world and its protagonists' main storylines. It is important to present such descriptions, that are basically plot summaries, because they will make the discussions proposed by this project more organic. We are also taking into account that video game narratives may not be so easily accessible for the broad general public. So, we aim at facilitating things for those who are, for example, interested in the discussion of dystopian themes but are not willing to play the video game in order to discover or verify how such matters are present in it.

We Happy Few was (and still is being) developed by a company called Compulsion Games. According to their website and internet forum¹⁰, the development began in early 2014, but it was in 2015 that its development was publicly announced. On that occasion, a short preview trailer was also released. The developers stated, then, that they were open to receive contributions (including feedback and crowdfunding) from enthusiasts. Their intention was to make all the prototype versions accessible to the public, so they could receive criticisms and new ideas suggested by the players themselves. In the developers' own words, the video game was said to be about "the story of a small group of moderately terrible people, who must survive in a doomed, happiness-obsessed, dystopian society until they are able to get the hell out". Among the inspirations to the video game, the following were mentioned: Aldous Huxley's novel *Brave New World* and George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

¹⁰ Internet forum at: <<https://forums.compulsiongames.com/topic/62-pax-east-2015-recap/>> (Accessed on May 2, 2019)

The way people use social media was also mentioned as a source of inspiration to the story¹¹.

When it comes to gameplay¹² (that is, the way players are expected to interact with the game), the developers compared *We Happy Few* to three other games: *BioShock* (2007), *Rogue* (1980) and *Don't Starve* (2013). From *BioShock*, we can see similarities regarding the dystopian nature of its plot and also the use of first-person perspective. From *Rogue*, we can see similarities regarding the way the game world is divided by sectors and how the player is expected to explore them. From *Don't Starve*, we can see similarities regarding the way players are expected to keep their characters alive by collecting resources from the game world environment and satisfying their needs.

During the game, the player will be able to play with three characters, each one having its own abilities. The characters are, in order of appearance: 1) Arthur Hastings: he is a good deceiver who is able to blend in easier with different crowds without raising too much suspicion. He is good at sewing clothes and crafting tools like lockpicks and metal bars. 2) Sally Boyle: she is a weak physical fighter, but good at making many types of chemical compounds (like explosives and intoxicants) that help her in fights. 3) Ollie Starkey: he does not fit in easily within crowds. He is more likely to raise suspicion (and thus, to be mob lynched). He is a strong physical fighter but has more demanding biological needs.

The game will present main tasks (which constitute the main storyline) and also optional tasks for the player to complete. Since the player needs to maintain the characters alive, she will have to search for food, water, and other useful items. The player is also expected not to draw negative attention (like suspicion) to the characters, this can be achieved by basically dressing and behaving as expected (like being, or appearing to be, happy).

Since the exploration of the somewhat open game world and the player's possibility to choose the order of execution of tasks among multiple available concurrent possibilities seem to be emphasized over linearity, we can say that this

¹¹ See <https://www.reddit.com/r/Games/comments/391jii/we_are_compulsion_games_the_developers_of_we/crzkmc7> (Accessed on September 10, 2019)

¹² Bernard Perron (2014) defines gameplay as "the actions of the gamer within the virtual playground (being a whole inhabited world or an abstract space) and the reactions of this playground". Jan Simons (2007) Also indicates that the term is sometimes used to make reference to the rules of the game, rather than its narrative.

game tends more strongly towards what Majewski calls the “amusement park” type of narrative progression. But it also shows, at specific points, to a lesser extent, traces of a “branching” narrative progression. Since the player’s choices are able to completely change the main story.

3.1 The Story World

The game\story world is the fictional English city of Wellington Wells, in the year of 1964. The story is based on an alternative development of World War Two. In this version of history, the English surrendered to Nazi Germany. More details about the city and its citizens are revealed as the player explores its areas (especially when finding documents, letters and diary entries that are scattered around the city), listens to other character’s chatter, and accomplishes the video game’s objectives for the three playable characters. Some of those details are going to be presented in the following subsections.

3.2 The Protagonists

3.2.1 Arthur Hastings

Arthur’s story starts with him sitting on a desk, in 1964, and deciding which archived newspaper articles should be censored and which should be kept intact. He then sees an article, dated 1952, announcing the successful testing of a new anti-melancholic drug. He sees another article, dated 1947, showing that he and his brother had won a prize together. For some reason, his bright, colorful and cozy office turns into a dark and eerie place, and he hears, through an auditory-flashback, his brother desperately calling for him. He holds a bottle of pills, branded Joy (the pills are obviously the anti-melancholic drug that the article was referring to), and two options are given to the player: whether Arthur should take the pill or whether he should remember. If he takes the pill, he will go back to being forgetful and happy while uttering the slogan “happiness is a choice” and the game will end there (with the closing credits rolling over the screen). If he decides not to take the pill and remember, the story will continue through another path.

A coworker appears and reminds Arthur of a party that he should attend. At the party, with the effects of Joy still oscillating, he is repulsed by the dirtiness and degradation of the real-world that, for a short moment, he is able to see. He sees the guests eating the guts of a smashed rat while hallucinatorily thinking they were eating candies inside a piñata. They notice that Arthur is off the effects of Joy, they call him a “downer” and start chasing him. After escaping, he finds himself in the Garden District (the place where downers are expelled to). In order to fit in and not to be attacked by locals, he must tear his clothes and look like a wastrel. His main mission is to get out of the city and try to find his brother.

While in his way, he finds out that a reporter that was investigating the poor maintenance of the city’s infrastructure mysteriously disappeared. He finds a note, from the municipal energy company, stating that the huge explosion heard coming from the energy center was “actually” caused by workers commemorating the “Victory Day” with fireworks. He then decides to continue the missing reporter’s investigation. He discovers that the quality of Joy has been deteriorating (resulting in increasing numbers of downers), that the production of Joy was releasing toxic waste (which was causing a maddening plague in some parts of the city), and that the inventors of Joy were trying to develop a “final solution” (a stronger version of Joy that would produce permanent effects).

When he finally manages to get out of Wellington Wells, he takes off the mask that all citizens were required to use – a mask that forces a happy expression – and he remembers, through a flashback, what happened to his brother: when they were kids, during the war, Germany demanded, for unknown reasons, all the city’s children under the age of thirteen to be transferred to their territory. Arthur, who was under thirteen at that time, convinces his older and mentally challenged brother to go with him (even though his brother was over thirteen). At the train station, with both his and his brother’s passports on his hands, Arthur decides to steal his older brother’s identity and impersonate him in front of an office guard in order to be able to escape the train. And his brother was sent to Germany in his place.

3.2.2 Sally Boyle

Sally’s story starts with her preparing a clandestine enhanced version of Joy in her lab (she is presented as a smart and skillful chemist). Corrupt police officers were

among her clients. Sally has a baby that she tries to hide at all costs. Normally, there should be no children in Wellington Wells since Joy is also a contraceptive.

Her lab perishes in a fire and her first main mission is to repair the damaged apparatus and collect ingredients in order to continue to work. While trying to do that, she discovers a group of downers in the Garden District that lived as if they were under the influence of Joy. They expressed admiration and a wish to go back to the way of living of those who take Joy, referring to them as civilized people. After fixing her lab and delivering the products that she had made, Sally tries to escape the city with her daughter. When she finally manages to leave the city, she throws away her mask.

Through flashbacks and cutscenes¹³, it is revealed that Sally, as a kid, was misfit among the other girls because, among other things, she used to like chemistry instead of dresses. It is also revealed that, during the war, when her mother learned that she would have to send her younger children to Germany, she decided to kill herself and the family through poisoning. Sally survived because she was not at home at that time. Sally was then invited by Arthur's father to live with them. Arthur's father ends up making sexual advances on her, who cedes in fear of becoming homeless.

3.2.3 Ollie Starkey

Ollie's story starts with him near some sort of memorial that he had built for his dead daughter. He is able to see and talk to an imaginary version of her that he had created in his mind. Arthur, Ollie's former neighbor, informs him that he had discovered that the German war tanks were actually made of *papier-mâché*. Arthur asks Ollie – a former soldier – if he knew about that. Ollie says that he could not remember and decides to ask the general about that. He discovers that he knew all along that the tanks were fake and decides to inform the citizens. When he finally gets to the broadcasting center, he discovers (actually, remembers) that the girl he thought was his daughter was in fact his neighbor's daughter who tried to get out of the train but ended up killed because Ollie denounced her. Ollie then broadcasts a video-tape which informs the citizens that the food of the city had run out and that they needed to stop taking Joy (it is shown that some of the citizen accept his warning and take of their masks). He then leaves the city.

¹³ A cutscene is a, usually short, noninteractive videoclip that is played at certain points of the game.

In a flashback, it is implied that Ollie's memories were damaged by a custom drug that he had acquired from Sally. "I was sad and ashamed [...] I don't know why [...] I can't help it if I don't remember", he is heard saying.

4. EXPLORING DYSTOPIAN ASPECTS OF THE STORY

He is immune to pills: red, purple, blue . . .
 How they lit the tedium of the protracted evening!
 Those sugary planets whose influence won for him
 A life baptized in no-life for a while,
 And the sweet, drugged waking of a forgetful baby.
 Now the pills are worn-out and silly, like classical gods.
 Their poppy-sleepy colors do him no good.

Sylvia Plath

4.1 Drugs

As we have pointed out, works of dystopian fiction make references, normally through satire, to sociopolitical concerns or anxieties of the historical moment in which they are created. Although it may be self-evident to the reader (or spectator; or player) what is wrong with the fictional dystopian world and how to make it right, sometimes it may not be such a trivial task to figure out how those allegorized problems are present and developing in our real-world societies and what could/should be done in order to avoid such terrible predictions of the future.

The use of drugs is certainly one of the most important themes in the video game's story. But when we take a closer look at the subject, we will surely be aware that it is quite a complex issue. If dystopias aim to warn us about problems with our societies (and, therefore, with the ways we are living our lives), what could *We Happy Few* be trying to warn us about when it shows a society where people are always under the alienating and contenting effects of a miraculous all-problems "solving" (actually masking) drugs? Could it be that the use of drugs will get so widespread and common that governments will eventually give up trying to control them and, instead, start using them in their favor aiming to gain control and conformity from the people that are under their rule? At first, especially if we take it literally, this possibility may seem quite unlikely.

But are the drugs represented in the video game's story really making reference to chemical drugs or are they a metaphor to something else? What do they represent, or could represent? And, if we are indeed talking about chemical drugs, are we talking about illegal drugs, like heroine, or legal drugs, like antidepressants, and what do the differences between those two types entail? What roles do drugs play in our societies? What are the psychological and psychosocial aspects that drive people to use drugs

(and to possibly end up becoming unable to stop using them)? Indeed, there are many possible ways to interpret and approach this particular issue.

Huxley, for example, was clearly aware and concerned with the complexity of certain social issues, like the one we just mentioned. In an essay published in 1958 he wrote that "abbreviation [was] a necessary evil" and that "[those who abbreviate] must learn to concentrate upon the essentials of a situation, but without ignoring too many of reality's qualifying side issues". When talking about those simplifications of social issues that he had performed in order to represent them fictionally, he wrote: "at least I have touched on many aspects of the problem. Each aspect may have been somewhat over-simplified in the exposition; but these successive over-simplifications add up to a picture that, I hope, gives some hint of the vastness and complexity of the original" (HUXLEY, 1958). Nevertheless, such complexities can often be noticed in texts of the genre. For example, Moylan explains that in a dystopia:

[N]o single policy or practice can be isolated as the root problem, no single aberration can be privileged as the one to be fixed so that life in the enclosed status quo can easily resume. Indeed, with its unfashionable capacity for totalizing interrogation, dystopian critique can enable its writers and readers to find their way within—and sometimes against and beyond—the conditions that mask the very causes of the harsh realities in which they live (MOYLAN, 2000, p.xii).

So where/how should we begin to approach this noticeable complex issue? Maybe we could initiate this discussion by taking a look at what drugs were meant to represent in Huxley's *Brave New World*, since that book was a main source of inspiration to the video game, with both stories having great similarities. In his non-fictional writings, Huxley demonstrated to be quite confident in his fictional predictions, discussing them earnestly. For him, a future similar to that of his novel was not only possible, but was actually getting closer and closer to become a reality. As such, the drugs portrayed in his novel were based on real world concerns. Soma, the drug that granted, with no side effects, the well-being and stress relief for the citizens of his dystopia, was described as being "not only a vision-producer and a tranquilizer; [but] also [...] a stimulant of mind and body, a creator of active euphoria as well as of the negative happiness that follows the release from anxiety and tension" (HUXLEY, 1958). In 1958, nearly 26 years after writing *Brave New World*, Huxley stated that he could not identify in his real-world society the existence of a drug as miraculous, hurtless and efficient as Soma. Nevertheless, he pointed out that many of its main

characteristics and effects were already easily (and sometimes cheaply) accessible by means of alternative psychotropics.

In that same essay, Huxley mentions many examples of those “proto-Soma” alternatives, including: 1) The easily accessible herbs, alcohol, tobacco and caffeine; 2) The medically controlled stimulants (amphetamines), analgesics (opioids), tranquilizers (meprobamate and barbiturates), antidepressants (iproniazid and deanol) antipsychotics (reserpine and chlorpromazine), and hypnotics (sodium amytal and sodium pentothal); 3) The illegal drugs, such as cocaine, heroin, LSD and cannabis (now legal in many places). For each one of those, he analyzes the effects produced by their use while always taking into account the individual and social costs as well. Huxley was aware that the use of psychotropics could make life more tolerable but, at the same time, he was concerned that their excessive and irresponsible use could alienate people from real world issues and duties (like raising children) and make them more susceptible to manipulation by ill-intentioned propaganda and political powers.

[S]oma ration was an insurance against personal maladjustment, social unrest and the spread of subversive ideas. [...] tranquillizers may prevent some people from giving enough trouble, not only to their rulers, but even to themselves (HUXLEY, 1958).

Let us hold on to Huxley’s original idea, which focus on chemical drugs, for a little longer. There are contributions from a psychological perspective regarding this matter that could surely provide useful insights for better understanding this particular issue. For example, to the psychologist Diamond (2010), addiction to drugs may be related to the

compulsive desire to alter, avoid, deny, and escape reality. [...] Psychologically speaking, addiction is all about escapism. Avoidance. Denial. Addicts run from reality, and in some cases have been running all their lives. The addict cannot tolerate reality and its vicissitudes. Neither internal reality nor external reality. They find reality repugnant, uncomfortable, and overwhelming, and prefer, like the psychotic, withdrawal into fantasy, bliss, or oblivion over reality. They seek constantly to alter subjective and objective reality to their own liking. For one thing, reality — the existential facts of life — can be both painful and anxiety-provoking (DIAMOND, 2010).

And that is precisely what happens in the video game’s story. In Wellington Wells, the citizens are living with the catastrophic outcomes of a highly destructive war. After the war, they find themselves forced to face the terrible reality and to continue living with the loss of, among other things, loved ones. They also need to deal with the resentment and/or guilt caused by damaging acts (perpetrated by themselves or

others). Years after the war, with the invention of Joy, the citizens see an opportunity to easily leave reality and memories behind and to start living a life of oblivion and artificially forged happiness. The drug allows them to have a chimerical perception of the world — as being better than it actually is — so they do not need to care about the painful past any longer; nor to try to fix anything that is wrong with their real personal lives or society. Indeed, at one part of the game we can hear a character saying “this is the best of all possible worlds! Nothing gets done and everyone’s happy”. This extreme refusal to face reality can be understood as an expression and a result of the great pain that they were suffering associated with the feeling of complete hopelessness. Could it be the case that reality was considered so awful that facing it was not even an option? Or could it be the case that the citizens were driven by the desire to choose the easiest way out of their problems? Whichever the interpretation may be, for Huxley, all a tyrant needed to do in order to make his subjects completely manipulable was make drugs easily available. The tyrant would not even have to force people to take the drugs, they would choose to take them spontaneously. He was clearly stressing people's perceived tendency to reach out for easy (or easier) solutions for their problems, not seeming to care much about the costs of such choices.

This issue can also be approached from another perspective, a more speculative perspective. Let us suppose that neither Huxley’s or *We Happy Few’s* intention was to warn us about chemical drugs specifically, but, in a broader sense, to warn us about anything that could function as a drug (having those same deleterious effects that we have just mentioned). “Drugs”, then, could be understood as anything that makes us somewhat deliberately alienated or apathetic to real world problems. They could represent the addiction to immediate gratification at the cost of growing indifference, inaction and accommodation in face of self and social deterioration. That seems to be the real issue that *We Happy Few* is trying to tackle. Huxley (1958) himself, although focusing almost exclusively on chemical drugs, seemed to engage in the exploration of broader interpretative possibilities when he, for example, compared Soma to religion: “Religion, Karl Marx declared, is the opium of the people. In the Brave New World this situation was reversed. Opium, or rather soma, was the people's religion” (HUXLEY, 1958). Religion, then, was said to produce Soma-like effects on society. So, we must ask ourselves: which are the “drugs” in our lives and societies that make us behave similarly to those citizens of those dystopias?

There is a broad range of interpretive possibilities regarding this question, but we can mention one example of how this concept, derived from a broader interpretation for drug addiction, is actually present and functioning in our real world: The revelation, in 2013, by Edward Snowden, that the American National Security Agency, without the knowledge of the American citizens, was maintaining massive operations of global surveillance capable of targeting and spying on literally anyone's communications, anywhere and at any time. It created a big mediatic fuss but, especially in regard to the general public, little practical effects or even interest¹⁴. People seemed to be so addicted to the convenience provided by mainstream technologies of communication that they did not care if their privacy was being violated (or even if their government was making such important decisions or engaging in such practices without their knowledge). As such, we have a situation that very clearly resembles Huxley's prediction, with the exception that, in Western societies, instead of having a powerful tyrant providing chemical drugs to manipulate its citizens, we have governments and big technology companies using their power and highly convenient technological tools to strip, with the help of the indifferent majority, citizens from their right to privacy. This issue is related to divergent understandings about what a fair balance between security and freedom should be¹⁵ (a theme that, as we have mentioned, Bedore identifies as being very common in dystopian fiction).

4.2 Compulsory Happiness

Another theme of major importance to the video game's story is the question of happiness. Happiness, along with forgetfulness and infertility, is one of the main effects of the fictional drug. Indeed, Wellington Wells is a place where people are supposed to be always happy (and required to be recognized as such by others), where happiness is what keeps the community united, and where those who do not act happy enough end up being ostracized. In this case, we will also notice similarities (and, maybe more importantly, differences) between *We Happy Few* and *Brave New World*.

¹⁴ Source: <<https://web.archive.org/web/20190918215816/https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/edward-snowden-revelations-not-having-much-impact-internet-users-1477189>> (accessed on September 18, 2019)

¹⁵ Additional reading: <<https://web.archive.org/web/20190918222039/https://harvardmagazine.com/2013/12/security-versus-freedom>> (accessed on September 18, 2019)

In Huxley's novel, Soma is just one aspect, among many others, that contributes to the unanimous sense of contentment and happiness in the civilization. The citizens of *Brave New World's* dystopia are genetically engineered, subconsciously manipulated, and conditioned to feel good while being themselves and performing their duties. Soma is used for relieving eventual feelings of overwhelmedness or discontentment, and also for recreational purposes. On the other hand, in *We Happy Few*, Joy is the sole source of happiness and the citizens are required to take it all the time.

Considering again that one of the main objectives of dystopian fiction is to question potentially harmful aspects in our ways of living — since they are rhetorically constructed as cautionary tales —, what could this obsession with happiness be referring to? In this case, the developers of the video game themselves have, once again, given us a lead to initiate this discussion, since they have stated that the way people present themselves on social media, which by its turn was considered to be part of a broader "culture of happiness", was an inspiration to the story.

We can have an insight into this particular issue by taking a look at, for example, Karla Freitas' (2017) dissertation entitled "The imperative *#happiness* in the social media platform *Instagram*"¹⁶. In it, she argues that happiness has been a subject of major social interest throughout history while having a wide variety of interpretations and definitions. In ancient times, some peoples believed that happiness was some sort of divinely conceded good luck or predestination, but, as time went by, happiness started to be associated with the possession of many sorts of valuables (like social relationships, wealth, health and beauty), immediate and ephemeral pleasure (hedonism), and personal achievements. Whatever the definition of happiness may be, there will often (if not always) be two important factors to take into account when considering it: the individual and the social idealizations of happiness. Therefore, the idea of happiness can be understood as being partially an individual aspiration and partially socially constructed through the sharing of certain values within communities. Both individual and social perceptions of happiness depend on a great number of factors and, because of that, they can be highly variable.

According to Freitas (2017), it has been noticed that the perception of what happiness is can be deeply influenced by the way individuals perceive themselves in relation to others. Indeed, people tend to perceive their state or level of well-beingness

¹⁶ Original title in Portuguese: "O Imperativo da *#Felicidade* na Plataforma de Rede Social *Instagram*"

by taking other people's lives as points of reference, and not so much by more objective criteria. This situation creates some sort of hierarchy where people will try to find their place (and calculate their relative social value) among others.

It has also been noticed that, in consumerist societies, people are pressured by economic interests (especially through advertising) into ostensibly showing that they are happy. It is precisely that pressure what makes appearances and representations become extremely important to social life, sometimes even more important than the real things themselves. This shift of values is what Freitas (2017) identifies as being part of Debord's (1997) concept of "society of the spectacle". According to which, an individual is socially relevant as long as he is seen by others. It is a society in which the public recognition and approval of things is what grant them much of their value. This social pressure towards the exhibition of images of happiness grows to the point that happiness becomes some sort of individual obligation. And one way of fulfilling that obligation is through a performative construction of someone's identity and public image. Freitas (2017) mentions Goffman's (2002) definition of performance, according to which, a performance is constituted by actions of individuals who try to make others think that what they are representing is real. Therefore, with both happiness and public exhibition being heavily valued and promoted, those who exhibit happiness will receive the social rewards it offers:

[H]appiness – or its representation – can be understood as a socially praised attribute in modern societies, that is, what confers to the actor who manifests it a certain enunciative authority, making him an individual in possession of social capital (BOURDIEU, 2007) "In the era of compulsory happiness, it is convenient to be presented as well adapted to the context, irradiating confidence and enthusiasm, showing off an outgoing, extroverted and dynamic personality" (FREIRE FILHO, 2010, p. 17) (CARRERA, 2014, p.35, our translation¹⁷).

It is also in this context that those who do not appear to be happy, according to community standards, are socially penalized. As happiness (or the appearance of happiness) becomes increasingly fetishized, any expression of sadness becomes increasingly demonized. Those who show any sign of sadness are expected to get rid

¹⁷ From the original: "pode-se entender a felicidade – ou a sua representação – como o atributo socialmente enaltecido na atualidade, ou seja, aquele que confere ao ator que o manifesta uma certa autoridade enunciativa, tornando-o um sujeito dotado de capital social (BOURDIEU, 2007). "Na era da felicidade compulsória, convém aparentar-se bem-adaptado ao ambiente, irradiando confiança e entusiasmo, alardeando uma personalidade desembaraçada, extrovertida e dinâmica." (FREIRE FILHO, 2010, p. 17)."

of them by whatever means necessary: weather by medications, entertainment, self-improvement (like diets or plastic surgeries), or any other remedy (FREITAS, 2017). This demonization of sadness is also of huge value for a consumerist society, since the "remedies" for "unhappiness" can be highly profitable (CARRERA, 2014, p. 36).

Indeed,

the rules for living well - that is, for living happily - must be strictly followed in order to avoid the horrors of rejection, ostracism, and mockery. In the draconian social "diet" to achieve happiness, "unforgivable sins", like fatness, aging, tiredness, weakness, hesitation, insecurity, uncertainty, tedium, the many sorts of suffering and, above all, the pain of existence that makes us human, maybe too much human, must be avoided at all costs. It looks as if the very human condition was being challenged by this era of "compulsive and compulsory happiness" (CASTRO, 2010, p.343, our translation¹⁸).

As social media provide their users spaces for social interaction and expression of identities, they become a means for the exhibition and propagation of models of happiness. Social media allow users to be exposed to expressions of happiness of different social groups and socioeconomic realities. Because of the facilitated visibility social media give to users, individuals may feel pressured to pay more attention to the way they manage the performative representations of themselves and their public image, since they are going to be subjected to the audience's judgment. Such judgments are made possible by a variety of engagement features and indicators that are present on social media platforms (like followers count and like buttons). As such, users often tend to publicly present the appearances and behaviors that they think will elicit more social approval.

[I]t is the provided visibility, especially by social media, of social success, what intensifies the imperativeness of happiness (FRANÇA, 2010) and pressures people to pay more attention to the management of information that they share about themselves [...] Social media work as platforms that facilitate the recognition and approval of social values, ideas and attitudes (associated with the hyper-consumerism society and, consequently, with happiness) of individuals [...] [B]y the use of available social media capabilities, the possibility to choose and enhance what is going to be published is amplified, which concurs to the construction (or emphasizing) of an idealized self-image. [...] This way, aiming at presenting himself as continuously happy, the individual resorts to traits that he associates with the idealization of happiness that he

¹⁸ From the original: "as regras do bem viver – leia-se do viver feliz – devem ser seguidas à risca para que não se padeça dos horrores da rejeição, do ostracismo ou do escárnio. Na draconiana dietética social prescrita para se atingir a felicidade almejada universalmente, "pecados imperdoáveis", como excesso de peso, sinais de envelhecimento, fadiga, fraqueza, hesitações, inseguranças e incertezas, o tédio, os diversos tipos de padecimento e, sobretudo, a dor de existir que nos fazem humanos, quiçá demasiadamente humanos, devem ser evitados a todo custo."

believes to be shared among other participants of the interaction, in a process of self-image improvement. Those [social media] capabilities would be useful in order to manipulate the perceptions that others have of the actor [the individual] who, through the use of self-descriptions, “reveals a stereotyped image of perfection” (FREITAS, 2017, p.47-53, our translation¹⁹).

Pertinently, Freitas (2017) also points out that such expressions of happiness on social media are being increasingly perceived as deceptive or fake by the general public. Along with that perception, social movements seeking to “unmask the perfection” and reveal the concealed trueness and authenticity have also been noticed. Such insurrectionary attitudes towards excessive perfection aim at easing the pressure and guilt inflicted upon individuals who find themselves unable to correspond to unrealistic expectations promoted by socially imposed rules for appearances and behaviors. Being perpetually perfect, which includes being always happy, is clearly among those expectations.

We Happy Few is certainly not the only existing work of fiction that illustrates and satirizes the dynamics and underlying mentality of happiness expression on social media. One example of that is Shaun Higton’s short film called *What’s on Your Mind?* (2014). In the description of the film, Shaun Higton asks: “Facebook can be depressing because everyone else’s lives are better than yours... But are they really?”. His question corroborates Freitas’ claim that the verity of those representations is being contested. The short film’s story is about a man who notices that people on his social media network react favorably, by hitting the like button, whenever he posts positive (happy and fortunate) events of his life, even when those events are fabricated by him. He becomes addicted to that exposition followed by social validation. When his girlfriend leaves him, for example, he writes on his web page, in an enthusiastic manner, that he is happy to be finally single and ready to party. When, in fact, he is sad, sobbing and drinking alone in his car by the road. He stops sobbing for a minute

¹⁹ From the original: “é a visibilidade dada, em especial nos SRS, ao seu êxito social hoje, que intensifica o imperativo da felicidade (FRANÇA, 2010) e solicita das pessoas maior atenção sobre gestão das informações que compartilham sobre si. [...] SRS serviriam como plataformas facilitadoras do reconhecimento e aprovação social dos valores, ideias e atitudes do indivíduo associados à sociedade do hiperconsumo e consequentemente da felicidade. [...] a partir do uso dos recursos disponíveis nas plataformas digitais, amplia-se a possibilidade de seleção e otimização, daquilo que será publicado, o que colabora para a construção (ou acentuação) de uma imagem idealizada (ideal-self). [...] Assim, com o objetivo de se apresentar feliz continuamente, o indivíduo recorria às características que idealiza sobre ser feliz e que acredita compartilhar com os outros participantes da interação num processo de aprimoramento de sua imagem. Esses recursos serviriam para manipular a percepção que os outros têm do ator, que através de suas descrições pessoais “revelam uma imagem estereotipada de perfeição””

in order to take a selfie, in which he smiles and holds up the bottle in a pose that simulates a partying attitude, to publish on his social media. When he is fired from his job, he writes a post, also in an optimistic manner, saying that he has finally managed to leave his unfulfilling job in order to follow his dreams. When he finally decides to admit to his on-line audience that his life was not as great as he was trying to make it appear to be, it is shown that he immediately receives an unfollow. And the sort-film ends there. Other examples of such social dynamics represented in fiction are *Black Mirror's* episode *Nosedive* (2016) and Burnham's movie *Eighth Grade* (2018).

In all those examples, it is possible to see in action the dynamics of happiness expression on social media that was theorized in the paragraphs above. In *We Happy Few*, all that social pressure (enforced through rewards and punishments), unrealistic expectations and fakeness are present. The reward for being (or appearing to be) happy is being accepted as part of society. If someone does not dress, behave or looks as expected, he or she may raise suspicion, be attacked or even expelled from the community. It is important to notice how the concepts of fakeness and performance are crucial for the story. Not only the citizens' happiness was a drug-induced hallucination (thus fake), but people did not really need to take the drug in order to be socially accepted: they only needed to appear and behave as if they had taken it. For example, in the video game, it is possible to take an alternative drug that makes the character's pupils smaller (a typical side effect of Joy) in order to fit in better within society, without having to experience the other effects of Joy. The citizens' use of masks also concurs with this idea, since masks carry the symbolism of a false appearance that hides someone's true identity. Indeed, in the city of Wellington Wells, as we can hear one character saying, "Truth is the enemy of happiness".

4.3 Erasing the Past

Before the actual game starts, a loading screen with the phrase "Happy is the country with no past" is shown to the player. And the phrase "It is never too late to have a happy past" can be read in one of the city's walls. That illustrates quite well the general attitude of the citizens of Wellington Wells towards the past. As we have mentioned, they were forced to send their children to Nazi Germany without knowing what would happen to them. It is evident that they would never do such a thing unless they were under the pressure of a great threat. After that event, they find themselves

tormented by guilt and sorrow. The past is simply too terrible and too unbearable for them to live with. They feel the need to get rid of it by whatever means available. Their offensive (or resistance) against the past is carried out in two fronts: 1) Internally: by erasing their memories with the help of Joy; 2) Externally: by censoring old documents and publications; and also by publishing newspapers containing deliberately fabricated information in an attempt to rewrite history.

It is in the second case that the similarities with Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* become more clearly noticeable. In both stories, there is an actual job, which is demanded by superiors and carried out by professional citizens, whose objective is to erase or rewrite any sort of register or evidence pertaining inconvenient past events that were preserved in, for example, official records and newspapers. Such censoring/falsifying activity is precisely the first task that is given to the player when she impersonates Arthur Hastings. There are many examples of this practice taking place in Wellington Wells: explosions caused by bad maintenance being reported as fireworks, health problems caused by toxic waste being downplayed by technicians, and, maybe most importantly, the commemoration of the "victorious war" (when, in fact, they had been defeated). Another similarity between both stories is that those who somehow represented a threat to the order of things — for example, those who were considered suspicious or dared to contest the government's actions or the official version of events — would, sooner or later, vanish. About this issue in particular, in Orwell's novel, we can read its protagonist saying:

In the vast majority of cases there was no trial, no report of the arrest. People simply disappeared, always during the night. Your name was removed from the registers, every record of everything you had ever done was wiped out, your one-time existence was denied and then forgotten. You were abolished, annihilated [...] Do you realize that the past, starting from yesterday, has been actually abolished? [...] Every record has been destroyed or falsified, every book has been rewritten, every picture has been repainted, every statue and street and building has been renamed, and every date has been altered. And that process is continuing day-by-day and minute-by-minute. History has stopped. Nothing exists except an endless present in which the Party is always right. I know, of course, that the past is falsified, but it would never be possible for me to prove it, even when I did the falsification myself (ORWELL, 1949).

The real problems that those stories are trying to address is what we call historical negationism (or denialism), censorship, and manipulation based on fabricated deceptive information. According to Berger (2002) and Conger (2009), there is a difference between historical revisionism and historical negationism. The former seeks a better and more accurate understanding of historical events based on

empirical evidence, while the latter aims at suggesting alternative reinterpretations of historical events despite the existence of evidence that contradicts their claims. For Crick (2007, p.155), Orwell's take on historical negationism is a direct satirization of practices that are similar or comparable to those that had taken place in the Soviet Union. One example of that, he says, is the case of Trotsky and the official depiction of his character and deeds by government-controlled means of information. In early editions of the official *Soviet Encyclopaedia*, Trotsky was presented as a revolutionary hero. Then, in later revisions, as a traitor. And ultimately, mentions of him were completely erased from the *Encyclopaedia*. All this process was part of a broader endeavor seeking to monopolize "truth", maintain power in the hands of the authorities, and exert major control over the citizens lives. Because "[w]ho controls the past [...] controls the future: who controls the present controls the past" (ORWELL, 1949). As Orwell puts it:

A totalitarian state is in effect a theocracy, and its ruling caste, in order to keep its position, has to be thought of as infallible. But since, in practice, no one is infallible, it is frequently necessary to rearrange events in order to show that this or that mistake was not made, or that this or that imaginary triumph actually happened. [...] This kind of thing happens everywhere, but is clearly likelier to lead to outright falsification in societies where only one opinion is permissible at any given moment. Totalitarianism demands, in fact, the continuous alteration of the past, and in the long run probably demands a disbelief in the very existence objective of truth (ORWELL, 1946, *apud* CRICK, 2007, p.156).

But *We Happy Few's* take on historical negationism has significant differences in comparison to Orwell's. In excerpts like the one above, Orwell seems to be more concerned with the threats posed by that type of practice when specifically enforced by strong oppressive entities, like tyrannical governments. In the world of *We Happy Few*, the impulse to erase and rewrite history comes primarily from the citizens' own feelings of aversion and repulsion towards the past. The citizens themselves prefer not to remember the real history and are way more pleased to accept a better version of what really happened, even if those happenings are fabricated. The fact that the authorities of Wellington Wells were taking advantage of the situation seems to be a collateral issue, rather than a master plan.

The citizens' second approach to erasing the past is aimed at the individual level: each person needs to effectively forget the traumatic events of the war that had taken place. It would be useless to rewrite every record and every newspaper if people

could still be able to remember everything. Joy provided them the means to get rid of unpleasant memories in their heads. And they decided to go along with that solution.

That way of dealing with traumatic events — by forgetting that they ever happened — clearly resembles Freud's well-known concept of repression. And this resemblance is one possible way to approach this issue. According to Storr (2001), Freud developed the concept while working with his colleague Josef Breuer on the treatment of hysterical patients through hypnosis and catharsis. During that time, they noticed that patients demonstrated great improvements when they were induced to remember and externalize the events that had first triggered the appearance of hysterical symptoms. In other words, they noticed that certain memories, of certain unpleasant events, were somehow related to the psychological and even physical unwellness of patients, and that trying to access or recover those buried memories could be a means not only to better understand the troubled individual's case but also to treat them in the process. In their own words:

[W]e found, to our great surprise at first, that each individual hysterical symptom immediately and permanently disappeared when we had succeeded in bringing clearly to light the memory of the event by which it was provoked and in arousing the accompanying affect, and when the patient had described that event in the greatest possible detail and had put the affect into words. [...] Hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences (FREUD, S.; BREUER, J., 1895, *apud* STORR, 2001, p.20).

And Storr (2001) continues to explain that their observations led to the conclusion that

the reminiscences were invariably painful, shameful, or alarming. It followed that there must be some mental mechanism, which tended to banish unpleasant memories from consciousness and make them relatively inaccessible. This mechanism Freud named repression; and repression, the first 'mechanism of defence', became the cornerstone of the psychoanalytic theory of neurosis (STORR, 2001, p.21).

Freud (1915, *apud* BOAG, 2011) then asserted that "the essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious". According to Boag (2011), although Freud considered the discovery of repression to be a breakthrough for the understanding of the human mind, similar ideas and conceptualizations had already been noticed by others before him. What the Freudian theory had of innovation was an explanation regarding the underlying dynamics of psychological conflict that prevented unconsciously repressed memories from reaching consciousness.

Repression required a constant effort from the mind in order to keep undesirable memories from being accessed and known. Paradoxically, repression required the mind to be constantly aware, even if unconsciously, of the existence of memories that needed to be suppressed. It required, as Maze and Henry (1996, *apud* BOAG, 2011) put it, "knowing in order not to know". Or the "blindness of the seeing eye", in Freud's (1895, *apud* BOAG, 2011) own words.

We do not need to go any deeper into this subject in order to be able to see the resemblance that exists between the concept and psychological dynamics of repression and the behavior of the citizens of Wellington Wells. In order to be happy, they need to forget the painful memories and live as if the war and its devastating consequences never happened, even though the evidence of its factuality are everywhere to be seen. Not to see it requires a constant effort from the citizens to seek for a "blindness" and an "amnesia" that are achieved through the use of psychotropic drugs.

4.4 Utopia-Dystopia Tensions

We have mentioned, in section 2, that the relationship and boundaries that exist between the concepts of utopia and dystopia are not very clearly defined and this issue affects the genres of fiction that derive from them. It is interesting to see, for example, scholars like Bedore (2017) hinting that they could be the same thing seen from different angles or perspectives. Claeys (2018) mentions the following observation that was made by the sociologist Krishna Kumar (1987): "Utopias commonly contain dystopian features, unseen and unintended by their authors [...] Might this not also be true of dystopias, that they contain, in however distorted and diminished a form, a Utopian impulse?"²⁰. According to Claeys, because both concepts are so closely related and with so many characteristics in common, some problems of definition have arisen. One of them appears when it is attempted to associate utopia with the idea of a good place and dystopia with the idea of a bad place. Claeys concludes that, in such cases, a question would inevitably follow: a good place and a bad place for whom exactly? The answer for that question will inevitably require idiosyncratic judgments of

²⁰ The Canadian author Margaret Atwood coined the term "Ustopia" in order to make reference to this utopian-dystopian proximity and overlap.

value that will diverge greatly from person to person and from context to context. In this section, we aim at exploring this question a little deeper, as well as discussing how it affects the construction of a utopian-dystopian dynamic in the video game's story.

According to Claeys (2017), some theorists have suggested that when a utopia is said to be a good (or better) place and a dystopia is said to be a bad (or worse) place, it should be presumed that they are so in comparison to the author's and/or the readers' reality. But Claeys points out that such definitions are somewhat problematic.

[C]ategorizing readers' perspectives is awkward. They inhabit so many different societies and groups that it is unclear when and where 'bad' and 'worse' apply. Further problems emerge with locating authors who move about: what is their chief reference point? The presumption is apparently that readers share the same class and/or values as authors, which is questionable. [...] Critics have often been concerned with whether the societies described are 'worse' than the author's real-life society (CLAEYS, 2017, p.280).

Claeys (2017) gives this example: many affluent people would regard More's *Utopia* as a worse place than their current ones, even in the time it was written. They would have to, for instance, give up a luxurious and idle lifestyle and start contributing to society, that is, through work. Those people would perceive Utopia island as an actual dystopia. Indigent people, on the other hand, would (probably) find the life in that place and community way better than their current ones. For them, it would be a utopia. He then gives another example: the actual life conditions in the Soviet Union were often comparable or worse than that portrayed in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. For a reader situated in that time and place, Orwell's novel would not exactly function as a dystopia.

Claeys (2017) also draws attention to the utopian life conditions of certain privileged groups within dystopias (like the "Inner Party" members of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, or the "Alphas" of *Brave New World*). He states that some theorists have tried to restrict the definition of utopia so that only those fictional societies that are able to provide the well-being for the majority of its members could be considered as such. Claeys seems to agree with this "well-being of the majority" criterion²¹. Yet, it is not hard to imagine how this could be problematic: it would not matter how bad a society treated its minorities, it would still be considered a utopia if the majority was happy (a

²¹ "The more universal the system of benefits, the more utopian the society." Whereas "dystopias are understood as primarily concerned to portray societies where a substantial majority suffer slavery and/or oppression" (CLAEYS, 2017)

Nazi-like society or a slave-based society could be considered actual utopias according to this view). Bedore (2017, p.6) points out that pondering the costs of a “perfect” society is a common trope of the utopian genre: “We see what looks like a perfect society, and then find out that it’s supported by something not so perfect”²².

Nevertheless, Claeys synthesizes that, nowadays,

the three main approaches to literary dystopias are through authorial intention, presumed reader context/response, and content, all of which are also interwoven with the interpreter’s perspectives on the text. [...] A content-oriented definition [...] suggests that we need to analyse social relations portrayed fictionally. (2017, p.290)

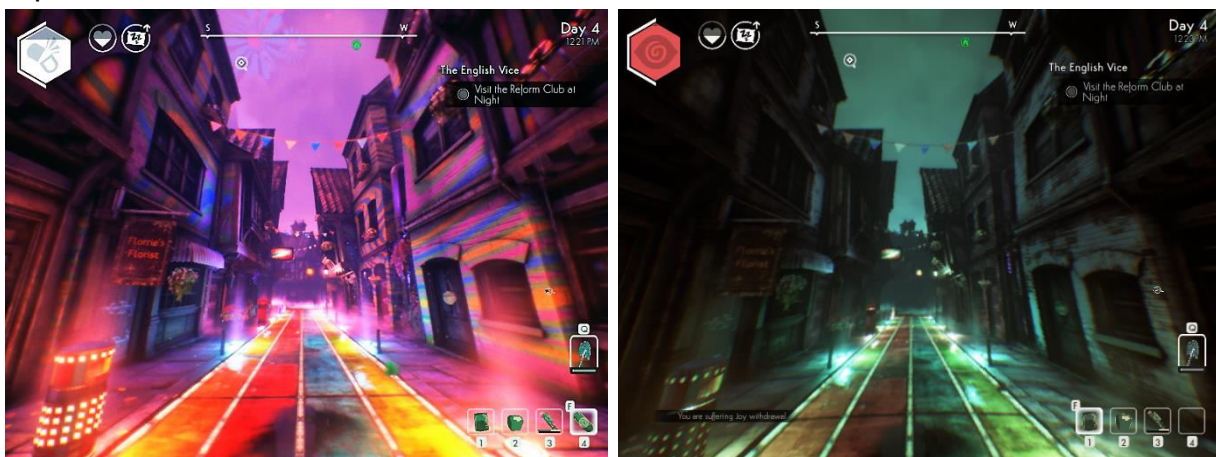
When it comes to *We Happy Few* then, if we want to take it as a dystopia, we should be able (or at least attempt) to answer Claeys’ troubling question: if a dystopia portrays a bad place, it is a bad place for whom? (and why is that so?). To answer that, from an “inside-the-fictional-world” perspective, we need to start by distinguishing three important chronological phases of the story: 1) the pre-war society; 2) the society during war time and its aftermath (until the invention of Joy); and 3) the society from the invention of Joy onwards. We also need to bear in mind that the first two phases are more direct representations of real-world scenarios. While the last one is more of a far-fetched speculation.

In the first two phases, it is very clear: the pre-war society can be understood as a relatively good place, since all characters regard the war period and its aftermath as being drastically worse than the period in which they were living before. But, after the invention of Joy, things changed dramatically. Since people cannot go back in time and change the past (at least not in this story), the citizens of Wellington Wells had basically two options: 1) Face reality and (at least try to) move on with their lives by coping and overcoming the guilt and sorrow; 2) Take pills to instantly forget everything that happened and be happy. Most (although not all) of them choose the second option, which, progressively, ceases to be an option and starts to turn into a mandatory social policy. We can presume that the second option brings about the desired well-being for the majority of the people: it creates, for them, a truly better place (the best one possible in view of their circumstances). That society, based on artificially forged

²² She exemplifies this by mentioning Ursula K. Le Guin’s postmodern utopian story entitled “The ones who walk away from Omelas”. It portrays an extreme scenario in which the happiness and well-being of the whole society depends on the torture of a single, defenseless and scared, child.

happiness and forgetfulness, is, for them, a true utopia. And, interestingly, it is also regarded as such, ostensibly, by a small group of individuals that were expelled from the community (the downers). As for those ostracized individuals, since most of them express dislike for their current living conditions (sober and aware), since they miss the comforts of their former way of living (drugged and oblivious), and since they express hard feelings for being expelled from there, it can be inferred that the life under Joy's influence is, for them, considered better as well. Overall, the dystopia in that fictional world is a life without Joy. The contrast between those two perspectives or scenarios (the utopian and the dystopian ones) are visually represented in the game and it is especially noticeable when the characters are overdosing on Joy or suffering from its withdrawal symptoms (*fig.2*).

Figure 2: Overdose and withdrawal from Joy: A better place and a worse place visually represented



Source: screenshots

As for the protagonists: 1) Sally Boyle seems to be the only one, throughout the story, not at all interested in the benefits of any drug. And from the moment that she had a baby, Wellington Wells increasingly becomes a bad place (dystopia) for her. 2) Arthur Hastings, depending on the player's choices, could consider the drugged society a "good enough" place or a "not preferable to reality" place. He seems troubled whenever he has to decide which one is better. Whether Wellington Wells is a dystopia or a utopia for Arthur will mostly depend on the player's choices. 3) Ollie Starkey, despite expressing aversion towards the Joy users' way of living, deliberately chooses – even though he could not remember – to have his memories erased (or damaged). Since he is able to see how decadent the state of Wellington Wells really is (mostly due to its citizens complete alienation), he considers it a bad place. But he also

considers living with the memories of war time (which produced guilt, regret and sorrow) unbearable. Thus, for him, a life without hurtful memories and without hallucinatory happiness was the preferable state (utopia).

From an "outside-the-text" perspective, it is quite obvious that the vast majority of the public is supposed to consider Wellington Wells, after the invention of Joy, a dystopia. A dystopia when compared to their real-world societies. We have already seen that such generalizations are not without problems or objections, but for didactic and exemplifying purposes our hypothetical/generalized "real-world" here could be understood as some stereotype of a well-functioning democratic society. And the hypothetical general public could be people, from middle or upper classes, that are living in such societies. Such an audience would most likely object the requirement of being always drugged, happy, forgetful and numb to the problems surrounding them. And if not that (in a very radical hypothetical take), they would most likely object the complete deterioration of the society's life conditions, due to poor maintenance and cover-ups by authorities, which they would be unable to notice or fix because of their constant alienated state.

4.5 Mass and Nonconformity

Another theme that is very common in dystopian fiction is the struggle that exists between individuality and the social group's aspiration for uniformity among its members. Always taking into account its arrangements, costs and benefits, Claeys (2017) calls this aspect of such societies "collectivist dystopia". He also points out that this is an issue that is full of nuance and that often overlaps between the utopian and dystopian genres. The particular way an individual perceives his adequacy and personal contentment among peers may change in the following way, for example:

We may be at ease with one another in a markedly hierarchical society, secure in our places if prosperity and tolerance prevail. Alternatively, we may be anxious, paranoid, and fearful in an egalitarian society where nonconformity is suppressed. So we might portray the utopia/dystopia relationship in terms of a spectrum of anxiety, with relative peace, friendship, and the absence of fear at one end, matched by anxiety, paranoia, and alienation on the other (CLAEYS, 2017, p.8).

In this regard, Claeys distinguishes both genres by noticing that, in a utopia, people usually give up some of their individuality (or individual rights) mostly voluntarily

aiming at the common good, whereas, in a dystopia, the price to pay for the integration of individuals with the rest of the community may not be achieved purely by altruism and freewill (the punishment reserved for those who somehow deviate from the herd often functions as an important coercive pressure in such cases). Some of those misfits may find the costs too high or even disagree with its ends altogether.

In the utopian case [...] ‘enhanced sociability’, as it is termed here, is voluntary and freely engaged in. It is regarded as an acceptable price to pay for avoiding unrest and extreme inequality. In dystopia, however, these bonds more often appear as [...] ‘compulsory solidarity’. Here they are coerced, and even contingent upon the enslavement of others. This coercion fundamentally erodes all that is truly valuable in solidarity (CLAEYS, 2017, p.8).

Claeys (2017) also distinguishes two different angles of this collectivist dystopia:

1) The external: in which the group unites in order to protect itself from other groups and keep those who are not part of the community excluded and/or under control; 2) The internal: in which the pressure for unity is aimed at the community itself and comes from its own members (*We Happy Few* primarily belongs to this category). All of this is basically driven by a fear of “the other” intensified by a “mob mentality” and often exploited by political leaders during moments of crisis.

Typically, the collectivist dystopia assumes two main forms: the internal, where coercion pervades the privileged main group; and the external, where coercion defines the relationship to outsiders as a means of upholding the main group [...] internal dystopias, where coercion affects the privileged as well as the rest of society; and external dystopias, where outsiders suffer the brunt of repression. [...] These processes, in turn, are often linked with dystopia’s obsession with enemies, and its determination to eliminate them (CLAEYS, 2017, p.8).

This particular aspect also resonates with the common ways dystopian and utopian works of fiction are constructed. For instance, Bedore (2017) points out that it is a very common utopian convention that the imagined good society is shown from the point of view of an outsider character. In a utopian story, that visitor is the one who discovers and explores how the society works (as if in some sort of tour). And since generally there is no pressure or struggle for conformity, utopian stories tend to emphasize didacticism instead of the plot (it means that, usually, we will not be having as much “action” as in a dystopian story). In a dystopian story, on the other hand, the usual convention is that the bad place is shown precisely from the point of view of a misfit member of the community, the protagonist, as she or he suffers pressure for conformity from the undesirable social system. Moylan puts it in this way:

The [dystopian] story line then develops around that alienated protagonist as she or he begins to recognize the situation for what it really is and thus to trace the relationship between individual experience and the operation of the entire system. In some dystopias this narrative runs around when the power structure crushes the resistant dissenter - ending the text on a note of resignation that nevertheless offers the compensation of an apotheosis of the defeated individual. In others, however, the singular misfit finds allies and not only learns the "truth" of the system but also enters collectively into outright opposition (MOYLAN, 2000, p.xiii).

This question is also noticeable in *We Happy Few's* story (and gameplay). Indeed, the protagonists' journey are largely guided by their inability or unwillingness to fit in within society. For one reason or another, they end up finding the costs of being part of the community too high or undesirable, which leads them to eventually decide to leave it. The main social groups, the Joy takers and the ostracized downers, express ostensive hostility – which often escalates to violence – towards misfit individuals. For that reason, the protagonists must at least pretend to be a confirming member. They must dress and behave according to what is acceptable in each group.

CONCLUSION

Video games do not have to, necessarily, transmit any complex story, but they can be used to that end. With the help of advancements in technology, increasing numbers of video game developers started to include full-fledged narratives (instead of simple premises and shallow characters) in their projects. As the interest in those narratives started to grow, the development of theories aiming at better explaining the particularities of this newer modality of storytelling became increasingly needed. Narratology, the discipline that focus on structural aspects of narratives, was used by some video game researchers as a theoretical foundation. From that, it was possible to understand, for example, how video game narratives, unlike narratives conveyed by non-interactive media, are constructed through a process of co-narration between the player and the game system and that those narratives could be categorized according to different progression models.

We Happy Few (2018) is one example of video game that contains a relatively complex narrative, which is also a dystopian story. Based on the writings of specialists in that particular genre of fiction, it is possible to notice not only direct references to other works of dystopian fiction, but also correspondences that exist between *We Happy Few's* story and the features that should constitute a dystopian story. Among those correspondences, we can mention: 1) The explicit or presumed intention to satirize and raise awareness about contemporary sociopolitical issues, such as self-alienation, manipulation and social media obsessions; 2) The proximity that exists between the concepts of utopia and dystopia (which is largely a mere question of perspective: the characters' perspectives, the author's perspective, and the player's perspective, for example, can be explored); 3) The struggle that exists between individuality and community.

There are also other important themes in the story that could be interestingly explored through a dystopian perspective (such as World War II references, bureaucracy, propaganda, and so on), but, in this work, we attempted to focus on those themes that appeared to be more energetically emphasized by the video game developers and by the overall storylines of the protagonists. Still, the invitation is open to the readers of this text to reflect upon those other issues.

We Happy Few and Dystopias certainly are interesting subjects, but maybe the most important contribution that this work has to offer is simply the academic

exploration of a video game narrative. We can only hope that this type of study will become more common in the future because, inside video games, there are many more interesting themes waiting to be discovered and explored.

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