

Hamlet on the Holodeck

And Narrative in Gaming



Presented by Eric Chirnside

Janet Murray

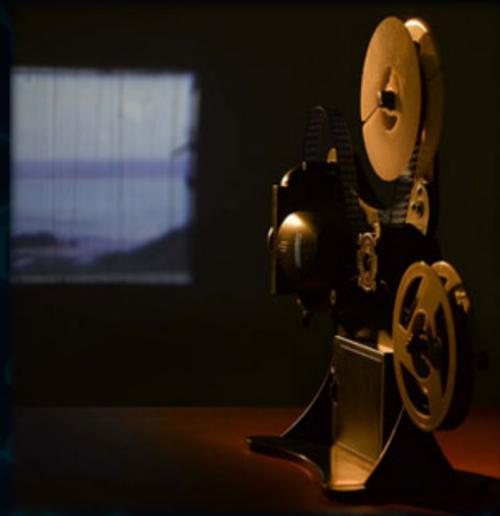
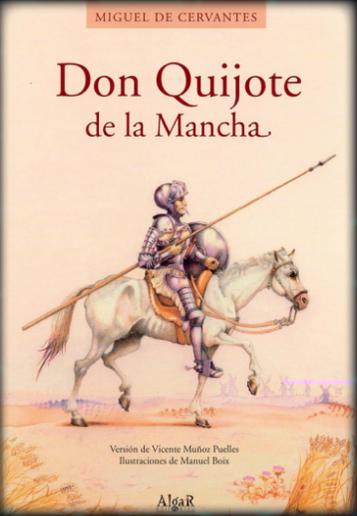
Author of *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*
Professor in the School of Literature, Media, and Communication at Georgia Tech
Digital media theorist and artificial intelligence researcher

Studies interactive narrative and how computers can provide whole new ways to tell stories.



Hamlet on the Holodeck

It took the invention of the printing press to develop disparate manuscripts into what we now know as the modern novel. Film technology was necessary to develop static photography into a visual medium for telling linear stories. *Hamlet on the Holodeck* asks whether computer technology can birth a digital narrative medium that is as expressive as film and novels.



Though there are many narratives where technology is shown as neither good nor bad, two common views of technology in books, movies, and on television, especially in science fiction, are utopia and dystopia.





Utopia

In a utopia, technology is used for the betterment of society. It's used to educate, heal, feed, clothe... It's used as a tool that improves quality of life while strengthening humanity's social bonds.

There are few depictions of a utopic society in our popular culture (Star Trek's United Federation of Planets is one), possibly because we have a long history of greeting new technology with fear.

A true utopia cannot exist in reality, because no world is perfect.



The Holodeck

Holodecks in Star Trek are a technology that allows characters to explore their inner life safely through adventure, romance, history, etc. The illusion looks, acts, and feels like the real world, and though it can be seductive, every user is an actor in their own fantasy and can start and stop it at will.

Holodecks are a technology born of a utopian society, intended for the betterment of its users through creative play, skill acquisition, and emotional exploration.



“The Star Trek holodeck is a universal fantasy machine, open to individual programming.”

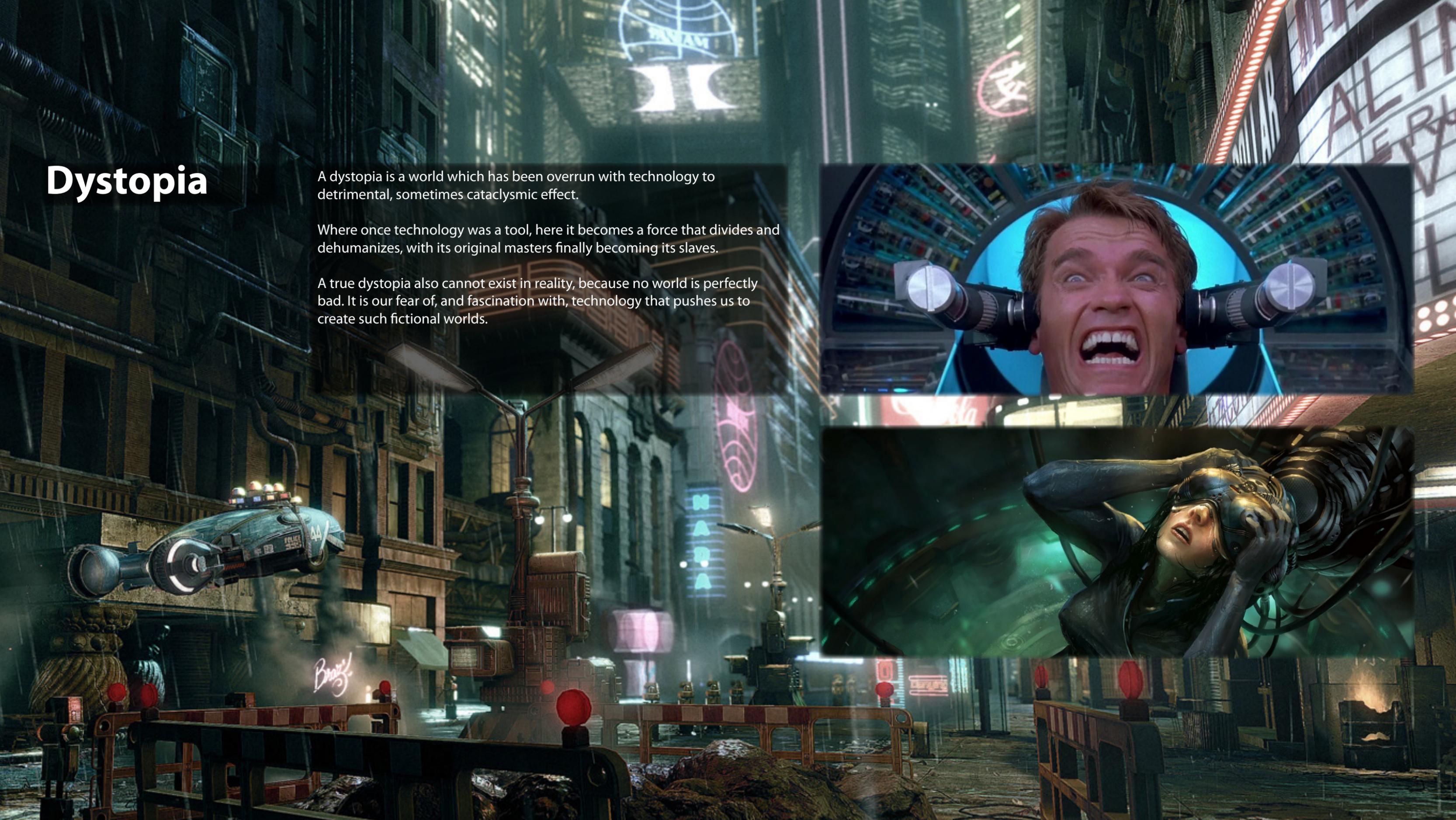
- Janet Murray

Dystopia

A dystopia is a world which has been overrun with technology to detrimental, sometimes cataclysmic effect.

Where once technology was a tool, here it becomes a force that divides and dehumanizes, with its original masters finally becoming its slaves.

A true dystopia also cannot exist in reality, because no world is perfectly bad. It is our fear of, and fascination with, technology that pushes us to create such fictional worlds.



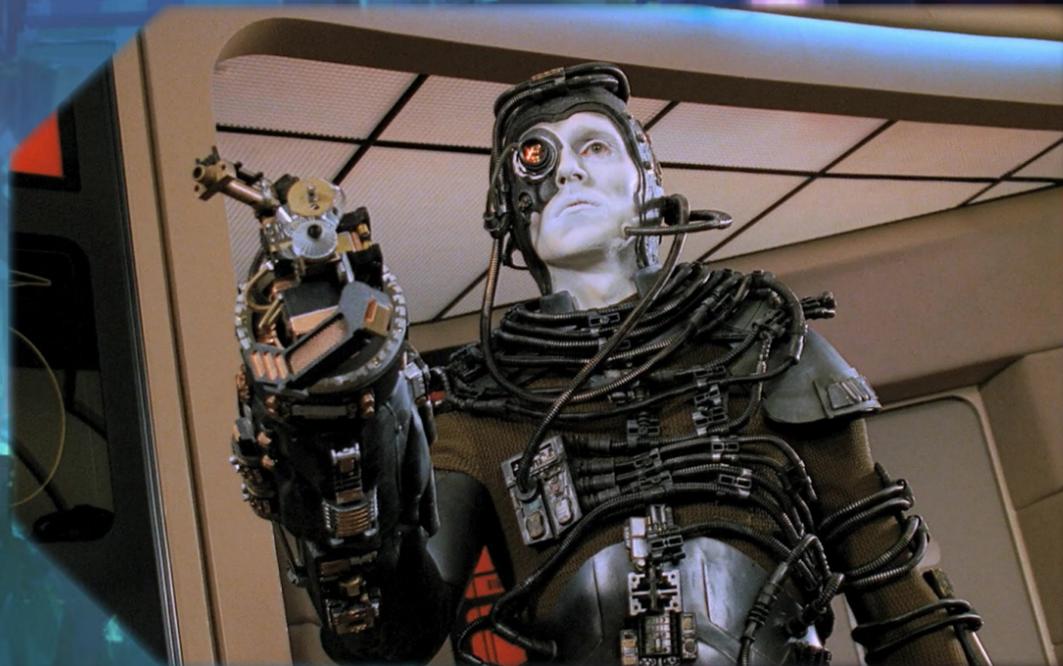
Addictive Dreams

Many technology-negative depictions such as the “cyberpunk” genre show a digital dystopia “which both eroticize[s] and demonize[s] the computer.” ‘Jacking in’ to cyberspace is often shown as equivalent to getting hooked on addictive drugs, with similar negative consequences.

There is a loss of humanity, here shown by the use of bionic implants and stronger connections to machine than man. There is a fear that people will get lost in the fantasy to the detriment of reality.

“For Huxley and Bradbury, the more persuasive the medium, the more dangerous it is.”

With virtual reality closer than ever before, will we let ourselves succumb to this seductive, possibly dehumanizing technology or will we use it responsibly?

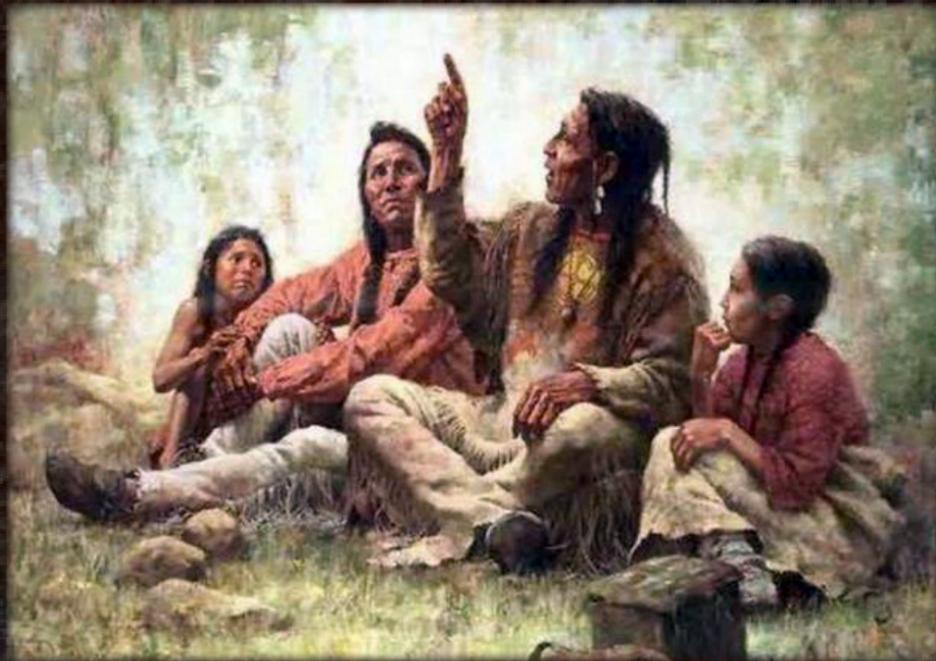


Born Storytellers

Ever since there have been humans, there have been stories.

The way we tell stories may change with the advent of new technologies, but what we tell stories about won't.

Mystery, love, intrigue, betrayal, friendship, adventure... All of these subjects have been part of our fabric for millenia, and will continue to be throughout the digital age and beyond.



The Multiform Story

The multiform story is a “linear narrative straining against the boundary of predigital media” in which the story explores multiple alternate outcomes of pivotal moments, whereas only one of those outcomes would come to pass in reality.

We sometimes get to see each of those outcomes play out completely, or the protagonist gets unlimited do-overs until they ‘get it right’.

Beyond traditional linear media, Star Trek’s holodeck is a place where safely exploring different outcomes without committing to them all becomes possible. I think that gaming is the closest we can currently get to experiencing something like this ourselves.



The State of Storytelling in Games

At the time of writing *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, games were still visually and narratively primitive. Murray laments the focus on trigger-happy gameplay and stories lacking depth to the point of inhibiting gameplay.

She mentions a text game called *Planetfall* which provoked a genuine emotional response in players, and a silly gunslinger game called *Mad Dog McCree*, which forced her to confront her dormant violent side.

Murray says there's no reason why developers shouldn't be making games that are meaningful to people on an emotional level.



Some mainstream games have worked hard to incorporate meaningful choices and emotionally resonant stories. However, many of those have just wrapped these choices around very standard violent gameplay.



However, the indie game scene contains several examples of games that provoke interesting choices and even uncomfortable emotions.

Gaming's Violence Problem

Mainstream games are still dominated by violent content as they were when *Hamlet on the Holodeck* was written.

Murray says that "all the representational arts can be considered dangerously delusional, and the more entrancing they are, the more disturbing." As video games are particularly entrancing, it's no wonder she has a problem with violent video games in particular.



"The horror of the feely theater lies in knowing that your intense responses have been calculated and engineered..."

Like Huxley's "feelies," many violent action games focus on sensory detail over story and meaning. The story is, in fact, quite irrelevant in these games. They ask players to kill virtual beings with the promise of an adrenaline rush, without ever allowing the question of whether or not their audience should be getting off on virtually murdering hordes of people.



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ENERGY

What Games Get Right

Great games contain elements of the holodeck, where we can explore different scenarios and make interesting choices like characters do in multiform stories, learning more about ourselves, about the authors, or about other players in the process.



Some games like MMOs (massively multiplayer online games) also foster as much community as they do adventure. These can be addictive in their own right, but here people are building real bonds with each other through their avatars, despite sometimes great geographic and cultural divides.



At a certain point, successful storytelling technologies become transparent. We stop paying attention to the format and concentrate on the worth and power of the story.

I think there will be a day when video games reach transparency, where there will be no such thing as a gamer and a non-gamer, just people enjoying stories and learning about their lives together.

As long as we act responsibly with this technology, we can use it to know more about ourselves as a species.

"We rely on works of fiction, in any medium, to help us understand the world and what it means to be human."

- Janet Murray

