Dreams of Extraction[*]

The Techno-Ecological Imaginary of Bethesda Game Studios' *Starfield*

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Abstract

This paper takes up Bethesda Game Studios' *Starfield* (2023) as an aesthetic artefact, carefully attending to the thematics of the game's narrative in their operation as structuring 'thought patterns' for the player's experience of the game, thought patterns that give form to the 'sensible fabric' of the game and so constitute an imaginary or 'distribution of the sensible' that requires critique (Rancière, 2013). Utilizing the aesthetic and material-economic theories of Nicolas Bourriaud, Jacques Rancière, Jussi Parikka, and David Graeber, this paper examines the aesthetics of the techno-ecological imaginary that *Starfield* institutes, close reading the play of perspectives into which the game invites the player-character, and analysing this play in its problematic orientation to the key dramatic revelation of planetary catastrophe that occurs late in the game's main campaign. If, as climate and games scholar Benjamin Abraham writes (2022), '[b]ringing the climate crisis 'home' to all of our lives, all of our workplaces, all of our hobbies, is the necessary first step in acting to reverse climate action,' then illuminating and critiquing *Starfield*'s deployment of such a crisis will help players, scholars, and developers alike take the first step in learning to pay attention to the very 'modes of perception' that prevent us from effecting real change in the global technological systems that have brought us to the brink of planetary collapse.

I

No game studies on a dead planet.[1] As detailed by Emil Hammar, Carolyn Jong, and Joachim Despland-Lichtert in their 2023 paper bearing that subtitle, the work of game studies, and more broadly that of the games industry, is faced with a number of "interrelated crises," the ultimate consequence of which, if not remedied, is our cosmic home becoming a dead world.[2] For Hammar, Jong, and Despland-Lichtert, these crises can be grouped into four general categories—"wealth inequality," "climate catastrophe," "calls for war and military escalation," and "repressive attacks on minority groups"[3]—and the games industry, replicating this macrocosm in microcosm, faces four similar critical challenges: its "imperialist structure"; "[w]hite supremacy, militarism, and manufactur[ed] consent"; "[f]ascism, patriarchy, and repression"; and lastly, "climate apocalypse."[4] To combat these forces in games, and in the world broadly, the authors advocate for an alliance between game studies academics and industry professionals, a "combination of theory and practice" that must be brought to bear in the struggle to transform the "material realities underlying [our] existence."[5] As academics, we cannot theorize our way out of this trouble without putting theory into practice, but likewise, as industry, we cannot practice our way out of this trouble if we do not bring theory to bear on the transformation of our practice. But how to strike the right balance? How to avoid inclining too far to one pole or the other? How to ensure theory and practice remain closely tied? Through the critique to follow, this papers attempts to provide a model for such efforts.

To narrow our focus, we will concern ourselves with just one of the above four crises, that of the climate crisis. Aiding us in our struggle, Benjamin Abraham's *Digital Games After Climate Change* (2022) provides us with an invaluable practico-theoretical resource for inquiry and action, a thorough study of the games industry that not only performs the work of criticism proper to game studies, but also the empirical analysis of the material realities of the climate impact of game production and distribution, of gameplay, and of hardware manufacturing.[6] Furthermore, Abraham concludes his book with a robust framework of necessary actions for developers, manufacturers, publishers, platform holders, and consumers to take in order to realize a "carbon neutral games industry," which is the "moral responsibility" of all those who benefit from the industry's cultural productions.[7] However, while Abraham's book is certainly essential reading for academics and industry professionals alike, for

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[1] Emil L. Hammar, Carolyn Jong, and Joachim Despland-Lichtert, "Time to Stop Playing: No Game Studies on a Dead Planet," *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture* 14, no. 1 (2023): 31-53. https://doi.org/10.7557/23.7109.

[2] Hammar, Jong, and Despland-Lichtert, "Time to Stop Playing," 31.

[3] Hammar, Jong, and Despland-Lichtert, "Time to Stop Playing," 31.

[4] Hammar, Jong, and Despland-Lichtert, "Time to Stop Playing," 33, 34, 36.

[5] Hammar, Jong, and Despland-Lichtert, "Time to Stop Playing," 45.

[6] Benjamin J. Abraham, *Digital Games After Climate Change* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

[7] Abraham, *Digital Games After Climate Change*, 240-245, 239, 237.

the purposes of this paper, it will also serve as a foil to help develop a more robust understanding of aesthetic critique that might better serve theorists in the development of pragmatic approaches to their concerns, and in turn help practitioners to recognize the implications of their work that might otherwise go unscrutinised if theory is set aside.

Abraham is less concerned with the content of games, and more so with "chang[ing] the world itself—the world that players inhabit; the world that 'preforms' their senses," but he does remark that games can "perform ideological critique," and that they can do so most potently through "aesthetic engagement."[8] As a games educator, this has been my own approach to teaching on the theme of climate and games, utilizing an upper level course in video game aesthetics to fuse the theories of Nicolas Bourriaud, Jacques Rancière, Jussi Parikka, and David Graeber, and applying these theories to the careful analysis of contemporary video games. Aesthetics is a matter of seeing and *not* seeing, of visioning and *en*-visioning, of making sensitive contact with the world of our perception. So, while we should of course ask questions about the *production* of artworks, as Abraham does with video games, Jacques Rancière would argue that we should not be too quick to disregard the analysis of the "sensible fabric of experience" within which that production occurs.[9] For Rancière, aesthetics must be concerned *both* with "performance and exhibition spaces, forms of circulation and reproduction" *and* with "modes of perception and regimes of emotion, categories that identify them, thought patterns that categorize and interpret them."[10] Both "forms of circulation" and "modes of perception" make up the "fabric of experience"—or, to compare here with Abraham, who in turn draws on Max Horkheimer, we might say that forms of circulation and modes of perception *together* constitute the "current condition of human praxis."[11] Aesthetics should not be excluded from discussions of pragmatics because aesthetics, at least in Rancière conception, is fundamentally pragmatic as a mode of study.

As Rancière notes, the draw to "demystify" works of art by exposing the "prosaic conditions of their existence," their material conditions, is a powerful one, but this work depends upon the very "ethereal idealities of art and aesthetics" that provide the demystification with its necessary "markers" of significance.[12] It is too easy to become disenchanted with the work of criticism and aesthetics for lack of *material impact*, to turn our attention to "the world itself" at the expense of understanding the very *means* of that attention. Rancière, however, argues that "[s]ocial revolution is the daughter of aesthetic revolution," that we can only transform the world of our existence when we have first transformed how we *see*.[13] To change the world, we must ultimately change our material reality.

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[8]Abraham, *Digital Games After Climate Change*, 55, 48

[9]Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, 2011, trans. Zakir Paul (London, UK: Verso, 2019), x.

[10]Rancière, *Aisthesis*, x.

[11]Abraham, *Digital Games After Climate Change*, 45.

[12]Rancière, *Aisthesis*, x.

[13]Rancière, *Aisthesis*, xvi.

But, if we fail to attend to the "idealities" that maintain the "sensible fabric" of this reality, our efforts will inevitably be captured and recuperated by the systems that we seek to disassemble.[14] To say that the world itself "preforms" the senses of those who live within it is, therefore, to embark upon the work of aesthetics.

Abraham, after Horkheimer, argues: to "understand the ways that even looking and how our sense faculties are actively shaped for us we must pay attention to the whole arrangement and 'praxis'—the practice and theory—of human life today as it presents itself."[15] This commitment leads him to focus "heavily on the production of games, the material stuff that gets made, and the economic forces involved," and admirably so; but, as we have argued, to take this move on Abraham's part as a cue to leave the work of aesthetic or ideological critique behind entirely would be to refuse to take up some of our most effective instruments for social transformation.[16] Abraham is rightly dismissive of those critiques that centre "distinctions between 'good' and 'bad'" design (in the moralistic sense), but we should take seriously his hunch that "there might be something about the nature of interaction itself which seems to accord with ecological thinking."[17] Indeed, as Abraham continues:

> If we look at the ideas and ideologies embodied in interactions within games—in other words, the nature of relationships between player and world, player and objects, player and other things as foregrounded or backgrounded by design—then we are just as much doing ecological thinking.[18]

When we pay attention to the "mechanical interactions [of a game] and the meanings they create, as well as the ideologies and attitudes about nature that they embody," we are thinking *ecologically*, and more so, we are becoming capable of identifying those idealities in the world at large that structure and reinforce the material realities threatening our planetary existence.[19] Rather than be embarrassed about the work of game studies in the face of overwhelming and interlocking planetary-scale crises, we should approach this work with both seriousness and gusto, recognizing the "ethereal idealities" of scholarly work as essential tools in the toolkit of revolution—if, of course, they are applied to such ends with militant commitment and fervent resolve.

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[14]This is a simple repetition of the Marxist dogma of the reciprocity of base and superstructure, but one all too easily forgotten. See Karl Marx, "Preface (to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*)," 1859, in *Early Writings*, 424-428 (London, UK: Penguin, 1992). On the "recuperat[ion] [of] all anomalies or resistances" by capital, with special focus on games, see Patrick Jagoda, "Gamification," in *Experimental Games*, 41-72 (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

[15]Abraham, *Digital Games After Climate Change*, 45.

[16]Abraham, *Digital Games After Climate Change*, 45.

[17]Abraham, *Digital Games After Climate Change*, 81, 80.

[18]Abraham, *Digital Games After Climate Change*, 80-81

[19]Abraham, *Digital Games After Climate Change*, 80.

To this end, this paper takes up Bethesda Game Studios' *Starfield* (2023)[20] as an aesthetic artefact, carefully attending to the thematics of the game's narrative in their operation as structuring "thought patterns" for the player's experience of the game, thought patterns that give form to the "sensible fabric" of the game and so constitute an imaginary or "distribution of the sensible" that requires critique.[21] Utilizing the aesthetic and material-economic theories of Bourriaud, Rancière, Parikka, and Graeber, this paper examines the aesthetics of the techno-ecological imaginary that *Starfield* institutes, close reading the play of perspectives into which the game invites the player-character, and analysing this play in its problematic orientation to the key dramatic revelation of planetary catastrophe that occurs late in the game's main campaign. If, as Abraham writes, "[b]ringing the climate crisis 'home' to all of our lives, all of our workplaces, all of our hobbies, is the necessary first step in acting to reverse climate action," then illuminating and critiquing *Starfield*'s deployment of such a crisis will help players, scholars, and developers alike take the first step in learning to pay attention to the very "modes of perception" that prevent us from effecting real change in the global technological systems that have brought us to the brink of planetary collapse.[22]

II

How do you make someone care about the planet?[23] While Abraham is most interested in the "very practical, concrete and achievable changes that can be made in and around games *today* which are guaranteed to have substantial positive impacts," the question of *how we make people care* remains an important one, one that will require answering if we are to plan for a just society to come—which is to say, a just society that has found its way *through* the climate crisis of our present.[24] We have seen the limits of self-discipline,[25] of gamification,[26] of representation,[27] and of persuasion[28] as strategies for making people care

[20]Todd Howard, *Starfield* (Windows, Xbox Series X/S: Bethesda Game Studios, 2023).

[21]Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 2013, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2013), 7.

[22]Abraham, *Digital Games After Climate Change*, 3.

[23]Abraham, *Digital Games After Climate Change*, 53.

[24]Abraham, *Digital Games After Climate Change*, 57.

[25]Jane McGonigal, *Reality is Broken: Why Games Makes Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2011), cited in Abraham, *Digital Games After Climate Change*, 28. Abraham is critical of McGonigal's project, which is "largely a self-disciplinary, or self-help project," a "brain hack approach to solutions [that] is immediately inadequate when applied to anything more complex than simple chores."

[26]Marigo Raftopoulos, "Has Gamification Failed, or Failed to Evolve? Lessons From the Frontline in Information Systems Applications," GameFIN Conference 2020, Levi, Finland, April 1-3, 2020, https://ceur-ws.org/Vol-2637/paper3.pdf, cited in Abraham, *Digital Games After Climate Change*, 36.

[27]Alenda Y. Chang, *Playing Nature: Ecology in Video Games* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), cited in Abraham, *Digital Games After Climate Change*, 38.

[28]Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), cited in Abraham, *Digital Games After Climate Change*, 43. As with McGonigal, Abraham is also critical of Bogost's project, which "treats ideology more like an

about social issues through games, and as Abraham remarks, such "didactic" approaches to player motivation are ultimately stultifying.[29] But, rather than leave behind the effort of making people care because these approaches have proved only minimally effective at best, perhaps we need to take these failures as symptoms of a more problematic root cause: the disciplining of our vision.[30] We are trained to see, and to *not* see. In Rancière's terms, "aisthesis" (perception) preforms the ground or territory for "mimesis" (representation).[31] Aesthetics is the means by which, whether intentional or not, the "prose of the world" is transformed into intelligible experience.[32] When this transformation results in a work of art, we encounter a "merging" of art's "own reasons with those belonging to other spheres of experience," the artwork coming to channel the motivations and projects and purposes from the sometimes very disparate "prosaic" regimes upon which aesthetics does its work.[33] Artworks thus become "scenes of thought" requiring analysis in order for us to understand the disciplinary function that

engineering problem to be overcome than something involving unpredictable and irreducible human complexity."

[29]Abraham, *Digital Games After Climate Change*, 51, 53. Here Abraham cites Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, 1987, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), as well as Gerald Farca's "The Emancipated Player," *Proceedings of 1st International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG* (2016), https://dl.digra.org/index.php/dl/article/view/762, in order to make the argument that the "emancipated player" ought to focus on "something much bigger in scope than changing the world through games," that the emancipated player ought to focus on changing "the world itself" (Abraham, 55). But the specific potency of *emancipation* as a concept throughout Rancière's work is precisely that which is found in the *enjoyment* of art, in the "workers' reveries" that supposedly stand in the way of "real social development" (Rancière, *Aisthesis*, xvi). I continue to quibble with Abraham on the matter of aesthetics because artworks, especially so conceived by the "aesthetic regime" of modernity, have the potential to "create ruptures" in the sensible fabric of everyday existence by "condensing features of regimes of perception and thought that precede them, and are formed elsewhere" (Rancière, xii). Artworks *work* with perception and transform it, teaching us *through* perception how to see in new ways. Through this experience of seeing anew, we encounter the "paradoxical link[] between the aesthetic paradigm and political community"—that the very emancipatory art that illuminates the path to social revolution simultaneously "does not allow any strategy to lay claim to it" (Rancière, xiv, xvi). Emancipatory art *makes no guarantees*, and this is precisely what makes it emancipatory. Emancipation is the ends of social revolution, and emancipatory rupture is the means, but this "movement" of emancipation "does not want anything" other than its own unclaimable realization (Rancière, xvi). We must continue to do criticism, to talk about works of art, to allow our vision to be transformed, while acknowledging the fact of *risk* and the possibility of *failure*, that the process of emancipation is always a *wager*. This is why our work requires *both* seriousness *and* gusto.

[30]"Discipline" as a concept is of course most associated with the work of Michel Foucault, but here I channel Foucault through the invaluable commentary of Cameron Kunzelman and Michael Lutz on their podcast *Game Studies Study Buddies*, on which the subject of discipline and games is a frequent topic of conversation. Perhaps as a best example, see episode 43 on Natasha Dow Schüll's *Addiction By Design*, January 31, 2022, http://rangedtouch.com/2022/01/31/43-schull-addiction-by-design/. For Schüll, see *Addiction By Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012). Schüll's theorization of the "machine zone" is the key concept to deploy here, derived from the subconsciously coercive functions of gambling machines.

[31]Rancière, *Aisthesis*, xi.

[32]Rancière, *Aisthesis*, x.

[33]Rancière, *Aisthesis*, xi.

they perform.[34] For this reason, critique, far from being a distraction, can in fact be emancipating, furnishing us with new paradigms of vision potentiating new means of action, means that will be necessary for us to respond to the climate crisis at the levels of scale, complexity, and haste that are required.

In *The Exform* (2016), Nicolas Bourriaud provides us with our first new paradigm of vision.[35] Bourriaud asks us to pay attention to "refuse and discharge," to the "realm of waste," to all that "resists assimilation" by global capital: "the banished, the unusable and the useless."[36] When we pay attention to this realm of the "unproductive" and "unprofitable," social "grey zones" start to come into view, wherein "surplus human beings"—the "undocumented" and "unemployed" and "untouchable[]"—find themselves relegated.[37] There is a new form to the "spectral dance" of capitalism, a "mutation" that entails new "effects . . . on our modes of thinking and feeling."[38] Bourriaud terms this form "the *real* of globalism," and importantly, because the function of this real is to render whole swathes of society, economy, and the planet itself as "zones of exclusion," fields of indiscernibility and invisibility, we need to make use of a new "optical machinery" if we are to become effective combatants against it.[39] The optical machinery we require operates in a "*realist*" mode—not in the sense of real-*ism* as colloquially deployed in the video games space as a measure of verisimilitude, but rather in the sense of "lift[ing] ideological veils which apparatuses of power drape over the mechanism of expulsion and its refuse."[40] The work of aesthetics thus becomes profoundly material. Insofar as there has been a "parallel evolution over the last two centuries" of the *aesthetic* and the *political*, Bourriaud argues, we discover that "[g]estures of expulsion and the waste it entails . . . constitute an authentically organic link" between these domains.[41] Just as we witness an "ever-renewed separation of the significant from the *insignificant* in art," so too do we witness new "ideological frontiers drawn by biopolitics . . . at the heart of a given society."[42] The aesthetic and the political are mutually determining, reciprocally reinforcing each other. To identify this reciprocal operation in action, therefore, we must maintain a *realist vision*; we must pay attention to the "realm of the *exformal*," to those "point[s] of contact," like "socket[s]" or "plug[s]," that mediate the "process of exclusion and inclusion" that "consigns beings and things to the world of *waste* and holds them there in the name of the Ideal."[43] When we learn to see the exforms at work around us, we are becoming sensitive to the systems of domination that overdetermine our lives.

[34]Rancière, *Aisthesis*, xi.

[35]Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Exform*, 2015, trans. Erik Butler (London, UK: Verso Books, 2016).

[36]Bourriaud, *The Exform*, viii.

[37]Bourriaud, *The Exform*, viii.

[38]Bourriaud, *The Exform*, viii-ix.

[39]Bourriaud, *The Exform*, viii, ix, viii-ix.

[40]Bourriaud, *The Exform*, x.

[41]Bourriaud, *The Exform*, x.

[42]Bourriaud, *The Exform*, x.

[43]Bourriaud, *The Exform*, x, xi.

Jacques Rancière provides us with our second paradigm of vision in his *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2013).[44] Where Bourriaud talks about the "exform," Rancière talks about the "distribution of the sensible," which he defines in the following way:

> I call the distribution of the sensible the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it. A distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts. This appointment of parts and positions is based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution. . . . The distribution of the sensible reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do and on the time and space in which the activity is performed.[45]

Thus for Rancière, like Bourriaud, there is "an 'aesthetics' at the core of politics," a "system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience."[46] This "primary aesthetics" performs a "delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience."[47] Political transformation is, consequently, as much about aesthetic transformation as it is about the transformation of material conditions. Indeed, if we follow Rancière's line of thinking, aesthetics is *entirely* concerned with material conditions, because aesthetics as a "regime" of critical thought is specifically concerned with the "forms of visibility" that give direction to our everyday actions.[48] The study of aesthetics takes up these "structure-giving forms," and in so doing also reveals the "artistic practices" that "intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility," helping us to grasp those forms that might otherwise exceed our capacities by virtue of their scale and complexity.[49]

We find our next paradigm of vision in Jussi Parikka's *A Geology of Media* (2015), in which we are invited to attend simultaneously to "scientific cultures," "technological reality," and "artistic perspectives."[50] In the same way that Bourriaud and Rancière demonstrate that there is a substantial link between aesthetics

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[44]Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, 2000, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2013).

[45]Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 7-8.

[46]Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 8.

[47]Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 8.

[48]Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 4, 8.

[49]Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 9, 8.

[50]Jussi Parikka, *A Geology of Media* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), viii.

and politics, Parikka emphasizes the "impossibility of detaching the political from the natural," the irreducible *mediation* there between.[51] The link between politics and nature is always a matter of mediation—"nature affords and bears the weight of media culture" and media culture in turn "leave[s] [its] mark, and the earth carries it forward as an archive."[52] Media "structure how things are in the world and how things are known in the world"; media "work on the level of circuits, hardware, and voltage differences"; and "media govern us humans on a semiotic level too."[53] Where Bourriaud has us look for sockets and plugs, Parikka focuses on "levers, layers, strata, and interconnections," the "abstract geology" that enables us to formalize, and so become capable of perceiving, the "medianatures" in which we are embedded.[54] Likewise, if Rancière's study of aesthetics helps us see the structures of action in everyday life, Parikka's media geology helps us to dig into the "record of actions" inscribed in the world around us, the scars of the simultaneously "epistemological" and "technological workings on/with the geophysical" that are indicative of our planetary-scale civilization.[55] So, to examine media, and to do the work of criticism on the "artistic perspectives" we find therein, we must inevitably reckon with those "forms of power that traditional humanities theory is incapable of understanding or grasping if it continues to talk about hermeneutic meanings or persists to operate with traditional sociological concepts."[56] In media, and especially in video games, we directly encounter the world "which the engineers as much as the military intelligence and secret agencies gradually recognized before humanities did," the "neotechnic age of electricity" that is "grounded in the wider mobilization of the materiality of the earth as part of industrialization, technology, and also media technological culture."[57] Our criticism brings us directly into a contest with the logics of planetary capitalism, which Parikka argues is "based on logistics of energy," a contest which, if we hope to win it, will require us to develop new "vocabularies" and use these vocabularies to tell new "stories," stories containing not only words but "material intensities and signifying structures" as such.[58]

Finally, in *The Utopia of Rules* (2015), David Graeber provides us with our fourth paradigm of vision, directing our attention to the social form of "bureaucracy" that "informs every aspect of our existence."[59] Graeber charts the rise of bureaucracy through the postwar period and the establishment of the "world's first genuinely planetary bureaucratic institutions in the United Nations and the Bretton Woods institutions," noting the significant shift from British

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[51] Parikka, *A Geology of Media*, ix.

[52] Parikka, *A Geology of Media*, viii, x.

[53] Parikka, *A Geology of Media*, 1, 2, 3.

[54] Parikka, *A Geology of Media*, 4, 5, 13. *Medianatures*, Parikka notes, is a "variation on Donna Haraway's famous and influential concept of naturecultures."

[55] Parikka, *A Geology of Media*, 22.

[56] Parikka, *A Geology of Media*, 2.

[57] Parikka, *A Geology of Media*, 3, 15.

[58] Parikka, *A Geology of Media*, 18, 20, 160 (footnote 57).

[59] David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2015), 5.

imperial colonialism to American *global administration*.[60] In this transformation of the international political order, we see a "gradual fusion of public and private power into a single entity, rife with rules and regulations whose ultimate purpose is to extract wealth in the form of profits"—a process Graeber terms "total bureaucratization."[61] Total bureaucratization paves the way for financialization, and with financialization comes a new distribution of sensibility, a new way of looking, a new ideology of perception: "that everyone should look at the world through the eyes of an investor."[62] The logic of "finance-driven capitalism" becomes the logic of social organization, ultimately "engulfing any location where any number of people gather to discuss the allocation of resources of any kind at all."[63] It is no wonder Bourriaud finds that the "most striking image of refuse and discharge occurs in the economic sphere: *junk bonds* with *toxic assets*."[64] The Great Recession of 2007 to 2009, and the more recent economic crisis within the technology and video games industries, are direct consequences of global financialized capitalism.[65] As Graeber summarizes:

> Increasingly, corporate profits in America are not derived from commerce or industry at all, but from finance—which means, ultimately, from other people's debts. These debts do not happen by accident. To a large degree, they are engineered—and by precisely this kind of fusion of public and private power [that total bureaucratization makes possible]. . . . One result of all this debt is to render the government itself the main mechanism for the extraction of corporate profits. . . . And insofar as bureaucratic logic is extended to the society as a whole, all of us start playing along.[66]

In an echo of Bourriaud's "zones of exclusion," Graeber continues to elaborate upon the bureaucratic game that has captured and restructured our planet:

> 'globalization' had almost nothing to do with the effacement of borders and the free movement of people, products, and ideas. It was really about trapping increasingly large parts of the world's population behind highly militarized national borders within which social protections could be systematically withdrawn, creating a pool of laborers so desperate that they would be willing to work for almost nothing.[67]

Against these dominating forces, Graeber's work as an activist was very deliberately a matter of *making visible* that which the powers that be would rather remain out of sight:

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[60]Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules*, 13.

[61]Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules*, 17, 18.

[62]Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules*, 20.

[63]Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules*, 20, 21.

[64]Bourriaud, *The Exform*, vii.

[65]Kody Cava, "Video Game Execs Are Ruining Video Games," *Jacobin*, May 16, 2025, https://jacobin.com/2024/05/video-games-union-zenimax-exploitation.

[66]Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules*, 24, 26.

[67]Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules*, 29.

> The actions operated like a magic charm that exposed everything that was supposed to be hidden: all we had to do was show up and try to block access to the venue, and instantly we revealed the existence of a vast global bureaucracy of interlocking organizations that nobody was supposed to really think about. And of course, at the same time, we would magically whisk into existence thousands of heavily armed riot police ready to reveal just what those bureaucrats were willing to unleash against anyone—no matter how nonviolent—who tried to stand in their way.[68]

In Graeber's critical aesthetics, if we might refer to it as such, we come to see bureaucracy as "financialization, violence, technology, [and] the fusion of public and private," all "knit together into a single, self-sustaining web."[69] This web is pervasive, massive, and complex, a truly planetary-scale form that is impossible to grasp in its entirety, and yet plays an overwhelmingly determinative role in our day-to-day lives. The enormity of challenging such a system can be paralyzing. But perhaps we do not need to grasp such a system in its *entirety* in order to become *sensitive* to it, in order to come to *care* about its local effects, to understand the distribution of sensibility that it performs, the narratives that it disciplines us to internalize, the projects that it teaches us to accept as given.

This is why, before embarking on the critique of *Starfield* to be developed in the third and final section of this paper, we have expended all these words in a defense of the work of aesthetics. If we are to take concrete steps toward an end *after* climate change, we must be able to *envision* that end, must be able to envision an end *worth wanting*. Aesthetics is not a distraction; it is the impetus for the *work*. Learning to see always goes hand in hand with learning to *act*.[70]

III

Existence itself is a mystery which yearns to be uncovered.[71]   So reads an important in-game text, "Among the Grav Jumps," a phrase that proves to be the thematic linchpin of *Starfield* as a narrative artefact. These words provide an education in how *Starfield* wants the player to see its world, but they also indicate the broader aesthetic structure of the game as one concerned with revelations of knowledge through progressive reframings of perspective.

The first mission of the game, "One Small Step," starts on May 7, 2330, at a mining outpost of Argos Extractors on the moon Vectera. The player-character goes through a narrative tutorial and introduction to the game, following two

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[68]Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules*, 29.

[69]Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules*, 42.

[70]Throughout my writings, I have emphasized the phenomenological foundation of vision in *touch*, in the *grasp*. For the theoretical underpinnings of this argument, see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 1945, trans. Donald A. Landes (London, UK: Routledge, 2012), 7, and throughout: "The visible is what we grasp *with* our eyes; the sensible is what we grasp *through* our senses."

[71]"Among the Grav Jumps," in-game text, in *Starfield*.

Argos employees as they make their way to the source of a gravitational anomaly deep in the mines. Argos has been contracted by Constellation, an "explorer's group," to unearth the anomaly, but has not been given any other information about what they seek.[72] When the player-character interacts with the anomaly, an etched piece of mysterious metal, they lose consciousness and experience a cosmic vision accompanied by an orchestral swell, verging on discordance. The player-character then awakens in the outpost's medical facilities and tries to articulate what they experienced to their colleagues.

Apparently unharmed, the player-character goes with the mining crew to meet Barrett, the representative of Constellation who hired Argos for the job. The player-character learns that Barrett has had a similar encounter with another anomalous artifact, and he invites the player-character to join Constellation. When asked what Constellation is, Barrett replies: "You ever stare up at the stars at night, wondering what's out there? That's us. There's where we go."[73] From their life as a "dusty," the player-character is thrown into a new existence of mystery and exploration. As Barrett enthusiastically continues, "[w]hile everyone else is busy playing politics, we're the ones braving the unknown. Charting the vastness of space. Without us, the galaxy's just a big room with the lights turned out."[74] Already, *Starfield* demonstrates a thematic interest in what is given attention and what is ignored, what is seen and what is unseen, what is known and what is unknown. The call to adventure and discovery is thus articulated as an *aesthetic logic*, a logic and attendant project of perception.

Upon arrival at the Lodge, Constellation's headquarters, the player-character meets the other members of the group and learns more about their mission to find other artifacts like the one found on Vectera. Importantly, the player-character is told that "[n]o manufactured material in the Settled Systems" behaves like the artifacts do, with one of the members of the group, the theologian Matteo, speculating that this must mean that the artifacts were made by "an intelligence outside the Settled Systems."[75] The player-character is then officially inducted into the group by Sarah Morgan, the Chair of Constellation, who reinforces Barrett's earlier declarations of purpose: "We're all here because we're committed to exploring space. Humanity may have settled the stars, but that doesn't mean we should stop diving into the unknown."[76] The universe must be uncovered.

In the next main story mission, "The Old Neighborhood," the player-character goes in search of another artifact, this time with Sarah along as their companion. This mission takes the player-character to the Nova Galactic Staryard, in orbit around the Earth's moon, where they learn two story details that will prove to be critical later on: first, that the Staryard is where "the first interstellar ships were made," and second, that "Earth and everything around it was abandoned a

[72]Heller, dialogue, in *Starfield*, "One Small Step."

[73]Barrett, dialogue, in *Starfield*, "One Small Step."

[74]Barrett, dialogue, in *Starfield*, "One Small Step."

[75]Noel and Matteo, dialogue, in *Starfield*, "One Small Step."

[76]Sarah Morgan, dialogue, in *Starfield*, "One Small Step."

long time ago."[77] Earth is an old, half-remembered memory at this point, closer to myth than reality for many of the denizens of the Settled Systems. Indeed, during the first mission, the mining boss remarks: "Half the crew doesn't believe Earth exists, but it's still there. Same with Constellation."[78] Humanity's original home, and the explorer's group that has brought the player to its doorstep, are both positioned as belonging to an unknown and invisible past.

At the Lodge during the next mission, "Into the Unknown," the player-character participates in a debate between Matteo and Noel, during which the game narrative directly frames these characters as representatives of two competing imaginaries or worldviews:

> Matteo: I catch myself just staring at the Collection [of artifacts] sometimes. Wondering what it all means. Maybe that's how our ancestors felt when they were looking up at the stars for the first time?
>
> Noel: They didn't just gawk at the stars, Matteo. They explored. They tested. Science brought us to space, not day-dreaming.
>
> Matteo: I disagree. What's the point of science, if not to enable humanity's dreams? And where do those dreams come from?
>
> . . .
>
> Matteo: You're with me, right? Science or dreams? Which one is the true muse of space exploration?[79]

The player-character can side with Matteo or Noel, or refuse to pick a side, but the two affirmative choices are telling. If the player character chooses science, they say: "Without it, dreams aren't possible." If the player chooses dreams, they say: "Without them, science has no meaning."[80] In these potential dialogic paths, the game tells a larger story about *human knowing*, asking the player-character to intervene and to express one or the other perspective through their decision.

A few missions later, at the end of "All That Money Can Buy," the player-character and their companions encounter their first Starborn, piloting an alien vessel, the Helix, that has the same anomalous signature as the artifacts. The Starborn demands that the player-character hand over the artifacts, declaring that they "hold something [they] have no right to," that the player-character is "unworthy to possess the Artifacts."[81] Significantly, the Starborn continues: "Abandon your thirst for knowledge or drown in it . . . The more you understand, the more damage you will do."[82] Constellation's quest of discovery is here

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[77]Sarah, dialogue, in *Starfield*, "The Old Neighborhood."

[78]Lin, dialogue, in *Starfield*, "One Small Step."

[79]Matteo and Noel, dialogue, in *Starfield*, "Into the Unknown."

[80]Helix, dialogue, in *Starfield*, "All That Money Can Buy."

[81]Helix, dialogue, in *Starfield*, "All That Money Can Buy."

[82]Helix, dialogue, in *Starfield*, "All That Money Can Buy."

reframed as a dangerous one, a dive into cosmic waters that might ultimately swallow the diver.

In the subsequent mission, "Starborn," as the members of Constellation discuss this encounter, Walter Stroud, the "wallet" of Constellation, remarks that the experience was like being "children playing with their parent's things."[83] Barrett speculates that the Starborn are the "original creators from the furthest fringes of space"; Matteo invokes "the metaphor of avenging angels coming down to keep humanity from forbidden knowledge."[84] Science and dreams appear more and more as two sides of the same coin, the synthesis of which will require the player-character to become an actor in a higher-order domain of effectivity.

In "Further Into the Unknown," Matteo and Noel once again butt heads, *Starfield* asking the player-character to reflect on the purpose and dangers of their quest:

> Matteo: What if the Starborn are right? What if our hunt for the Artifacts is a fool's errand? Doomed to failure and catastrophe?
>
> Noel: You think we're doing the wrong thing? We just want answers. Isn't that why we all joined in the first place? The... 'noble quest of discovery?'
>
> ...
>
> Matteo: I just hope that this journey doesn't turn us into something that we wouldn't recognize from where we are now.

This construction of a debate invites the player-character's intervention, to reckon with their choices and to ultimately press forward to what Barrett will later describe as "the dawn of a new era of humanity."[85]

The mission "High Price to Pay" sees Constellation come under attack from another Starborn, the Hunter, whose assault forces the group to go on the run, leaving many injured and, depending on your affinity with different group members, one dead.[86] During this mission, the player-character learns about something called the "Unity" from the Hunter, who enigmatically states that there is "a greater purpose to all this," that perhaps the player-character will "glimpse the Unity yet."[87] These words remind Matteo of the teachings of Keeper Aquilus, the founder and priest of Matteo's religion, the Sanctum Universum. For the Sanctum, Matteo tells the player character, the "answers are out there in the stars."[88] The player-character and Matteo embark upon the next main story mission, "Unity," during which they go to speak with Keeper Aquilus, and

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[83] Walter Stroud, dialogue, in *Starfield*, "Starborn."

[84] Barrett and Matteo, dialogue, in *Starfield*, "Starborn."

[85] Barrett, dialogue, in *Starfield*, "No Sudden Moves."

[86] The four potential deaths are also the four romanceable characters: Sarah Morgan, Barrett, Sam Coe, and Andreja.

[87] The Hunter, dialogue, in *Starfield*, "High Price to Pay."

[88] Matteo, dialogue, in *Starfield*, "High Price to Pay."

begin uncovering the truth behind all of the mysteries that Constellation has encountered.

As the player-character and Matteo approach the Sanctum Universum, they hear Keeper Aquilus delivering a message to some followers:

> Keeper Aquilus: God has given us the intelligence, the ingenuity to reach into the stars. To travel his path. To truly find him. But we can't do it alone. The ONLY way is through...
>
> Andreas: Unity.
>
> Keeper Aquilus: Ha! Yes, Andreas! Yes. Unity.[89]

When questioned about "Unity," Keeper Aquilus says that unity is how "humanity comes together," that it is how "we are to love each other even as our universe becomes more complex."[90] When pressed to think if "Unity" might point to something secret, Keeper Aquilus says:

> There have always been mysteries that seem to defy our understanding of the universe. Beyond rational thought. We enter life as an act of someone else's faith in us. There's no way of knowing who we will become, and yet the risk is made anyway. So you've pushed into the unknown, not knowing where it would take you. And it has brought you here.[91]

Constellation's quest of discovery is here reformulated in religious terms, or, in Matteo's words, from the perspective of "dreams." Discovery, exploration, and the revelation of the unknown is not merely a human project but a metaphysical one, a demand of the universe itself.

The Keeper then tells a story about a Pilgrim who found the "true meaning of Unity," suggesting that perhaps there might be a "code" to uncover in the metaphor of the tale.[92] He directs the player-character to go speak to representatives of the two other major belief systems in the universe of *Starfield*—the House of Enlightenment and House Va'ruun—and to ask them about Unity. In each of these conversations, the player-character hears a variation on the Pilgrim's tale, as well as two alternative perspectives—as "beginning" and as "shadow"—on Unity.[93] Upon recounting their words to Keeper Aquilus, he is able to decipher the code and directs the player-character to the Pilgrim's final resting place. But before he sends the player-character off, he makes explicit the game's narrative positioning of the player-character that until now had remained subtext: "You've now spoken to many different perspectives on our universe. In a way, you'll be carrying their philosophies with you on this journey. I know you're looking for a specific 'Unity' but... if you had to guess what it was? What interpretation

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[89] Keeper Aquilus, dialogue, in *Starfield*, "Unity."

[90] Keeper Aquilus, dialogue, in *Starfield*, "Unity."

[91] Keeper Aquilus, dialogue, in *Starfield*, "Unity."

[92] Keeper Aquilus, dialogue, in *Starfield*, "Unity."

[93] Singh and Mir'za, dialogue, in *Starfield*, "Unity."

would you give it?"[94] The player-character exists in the world of *Starfield* as a focal point of vision, whose decisions play a structure-giving, form-shaping role in the overall narrative's potential outcomes. What the player-character chooses to say *resolves* the various probabilities of expression that make up the multiple different in-game worldviews, instituting a sensibility for that given playthrough that retroactively *becomes* the meaning of the player-character's actions. "Unity" is in fact to be found in the player-character as universal subject.

The player-character travels to the planet revealed by Keeper Aquilus, landing at the Pilgrim's Rest and proceeding to investigate what the Pilgrim had left behind. Across five writings, the player-character learns of the Pilgrim's existence as a Starborn, about their many "various pasts" and "possible futures," and their eventual relinquishment of Starborn glory and acceptance of a finite life, through which they might at last "live to enlighten the blessed universe before me."[95] A sixth and final writing begins the next mission, "In Their Footsteps," and points the player-character to another planet, where a puzzle provides coordinates to a point in space where the player-character comes upon the two prior Starborn that they had encountered: the Emissary (pilot of the Helix), and the Hunter.

The conversation that follows reveals the nature of the Unity as an in-game reality. Starborn were once human beings who discovered the artifacts and managed to assemble them all into something called the Armillary, an instrument that "open[s] the way to the center of [the] universe" where they encounter the "Unity," a "doorway to an infinite number of other[]" universes.[96] Having revealed this unknown and invisible structure to the player-character, the Emissary and the Hunter present them with a new dichotomy: to control who has access to the Unity or to allow any capable of seizing the artifacts to do so. The responsibility for the *distribution* of power is placed in the player-character's hands. But before they decide, the Emissary sends the player-character on one more mission, back to the moon and Earth, because there "are secrets there" that the player-character must still "discover."[97]

In "Unearthed," the player-character lands at the Nova Galactic Research Station on Earth's moon and begins to uncover *Starfield*'s final mystery. Through audio logs, the player-character learns about the first test launch of a gravitational drive equipped starship and is directed from there to the NASA Launch Tower on Earth. The tower is a great industrial structure rising out of the barren desert surface of the now uninhabitable planet, a final monument to the beginnings of humanity's interstellar adventure. Finding a way inside and delving down and down and down, the player-character makes a parallel descent into the records of the scientists who worked there, learning about Victor Aiza's discovery of the first artifact on Mars in the early 2100s, the secretive military-backed project that followed, and the improbable advances in the project's research

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[94]Keeper Aquilus, dialogue, in *Starfield*, "Unity."

[95]Pilgrim's Writing 5 and Pilgrim's Final Writing, in-game text, in *Starfield*, "Unity."

[96]The Emissary, dialogue, in *Starfield*, "In Their Footsteps."

[97]The Emissary, dialogue, in *Starfield*, "In Their Footsteps."

that opened the way for the first gravitational drive. In the final audio log the player-character finds, recorded September 8, 2160, Aiza makes his confession:

> My name is Doctor Victor Aiza, and if you're listening to this, then you probably already know the truth. I was young when I first headed the retrieval team of an odd gravitational anomaly on Mars, but I kept what really happened that day hidden from everyone except... one other person. Even she didn't believe me at first, but I have no reason to lie to anyone now, so I hope you'll accept this... confession, whoever you are. When I touched the anomaly, I experienced 12 days of lost time. I met... myself. He told me everything that has since come true. The Grav Drive equations. The tests on the Moon. Earth's atmosphere sputtering away because of what we had done. But he also told me about a city, thriving on a planet orbiting a distant star. Human culture, art, music, lifestyles evolving and shining brightly across all of space. What price would I be willing to pay for that future? Maybe you don't believe me. Maybe Judith was right, and I'm just a coward who wants to believe his mistakes were justified. But everyone has forgotten about the real origins of the Grav Drive. This... Artifact, from Mars.[98]

The Unity beckoned humanity into space through the artifacts, but, through the technology that human scientists developed to grasp the vision the Unity proffered, they tore the magnetosphere of their planet to shreds, rendering their homeworld a wasteland. The dream of the stars was realized through a profound ecological catastrophe, the uncontrollable and irrevocable destruction of the conditions of habitability on Earth. Aiza saw the promise of an interstellar culture as worth this sacrifice, and yet this final project log remains a confession, suffused with regret. "I hope you make better use of [the artifact] than I did," he concludes.[99] Returning to the surface, this is now the choice that the Emissary and the Hunter demand the player-character make.

The Emissary sees the scouring of Earth as an irreparable harm, but the Hunter argues that it was an "easy trade, honestly. Why have one world, when you can have all of the Settled Systems?" The Emissary counters: "They didn't get to make a choice. How many would've chosen Earth? What gave Victor Aiza the right to choose for them?"[100] The player-character, as they have done throughout the main story, is invited to enter the debate, to take a side or abstain, but, while this choice is framed as *the* critical choice of *Starfield*'s grand narrative, the resolution of every prior dichotomy, the materialization of the player-character's chosen philosophy, whatever one chooses, the outcome is virtually indistinguishable. The player-character goes to the Buried Temple, collects the last of the artifacts, assembles the Armillary, and makes the final grav jump to the center of the universe. The all-important choice, while framed as a

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[98]Victor Aiza, audio recording, in *Starfield*, "Unearthed."

[99]Victor Aiza, audio recording, in *Starfield*, "Unearthed."

[100]The Hunter and the Emissary, dialogue, in *Starfield*, "Unearthed."

choice about the fate of Earth, is not about the Earth at all. All of the decisions made over the course of *Starfield* can be remade on the other side of the Unity in new game plus, but the choice that destroyed the Earth remains permanently out of reach. Earth must always be destroyed for humanity to become Starborn, for the player-character to be invested with a freedom of decision that takes them beyond the universe itself.

At the Unity, the player-character's final conversation is with themselves, or a version of themselves, one who had passed through the Unity before them. This other self describes the player-character's "final leap" with the following words:

> In order to become Starborn, you must give the universe one last thing. Yourself. That intangible part of you, that 'something' that makes you unique amongst the infinite, will explode like a supernova. A part of you will fuse with the essence of this universe, while another part leaves it behind forever. Do you understand what I mean? This one final leap will change this universe forever, even as you leave it behind.[101]

The aesthetic logic of *Starfield* has built to this precise point over its many hours of gametime. Every narrative conceit, every flourish of imagination, ultimately resolves in this elevation of the player-character to a kind of godhood, an exit from linear time into the indefinite recurrence of new game plus. But as Bourriaud reminds us, the *gesture of expulsion* is precisely the moment where aesthetics and politics meet, and in *Starfield*, the ultimate realization of such a moment is in the simultaneous expulsion of humanity's dead homeworld into memory and the player-character's inevitable decision to step through the Unity. The Unity is an exform, a universal socket joining together a myriad of other such universes, mediating passage for that which can be seen and that which must remain hidden. Indeed, the player-character, as the mechanism of resolution for competing imaginaries, passes through the Unity as *visibility itself*, a Möbius eyeball—that for whom all of *Starfield* was necessarily built to be seen; that which constitutes the very structure of *Starfield*'s visibility as such. Every prior dichotomy of the game is *redistributed* by the Unity, every major choice made by the player-character presented to them one last time for their judgment. The reality of the game is shown to be thoroughly mediated by the vision the Unity affords, a techno-ecological imaginary in which the planet must always be sacrificed for humanity's transcendence, over and over and over again. This is the aesthetic logic at play in *Starfield*, and it is the self same logic that we must challenge in our own world, with all the seriousness and gusto that we can muster, if we are to leave this world better than we entered it for all the generations to come.

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[101]The Unity, dialogue, in *Starfield*, "One Giant Leap."

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Dreams of Extraction

The Techno-Ecological Imaginary of Bethesda Game Studios' *Starfield*

Eric Stein | @steinea | eric.stein@twu.ca

"No Game Studies On a Dead Planet"

Hammar, Jong, and Despland-Lichtert, "Time to Stop Playing," *Eludamos* 14, no. 1 (2023)

Four "interrelated crises":

1. Wealth inequality

2. War and military escalation

3. Repressive attacks on minority groups

4. Climate catastrophe

What are the stakes of game studies?

What can game studies actually *do* about it (if anything)?

Digital Games After Climate Change

Benjamin J. Abraham (Palgrave, 2022)

- A carbon neutral games industry is the "moral responsibility" of the games industry: producers, academics, and consumers (237)

- We must "change the world itself—the world that players inhabit; the world that 'preforms' their senses" (55)

- Strategies that haven't worked:
    - Self-discipline
    - Persuasion
    - Gamification
    - Artistic representation

- Abraham holds out some hope for "ideological critique" through "aesthetic engagement" (55, 48).

A Robust Aesthetics

- Before the study of specific *artworks* (the domain of artistic representation, "mimesis," imitation), we must develop a robust study of *aesthetics* ("aisthesis", perception)

- Aesthetics is the study of the "sensible fabric of experience" (x).

- Aesthetics includes analysis of *both:*
  - "forms of circulation and reproduction" (x)
  - "modes of perception and regimes of emotion, categories that identify them, thought patterns that categorize and interpret them" (x)

- "Social revolution is the daughter of aesthetic revolution" (xvi)

- We can only transform the world of our existence when we have first transformed how we *see*.
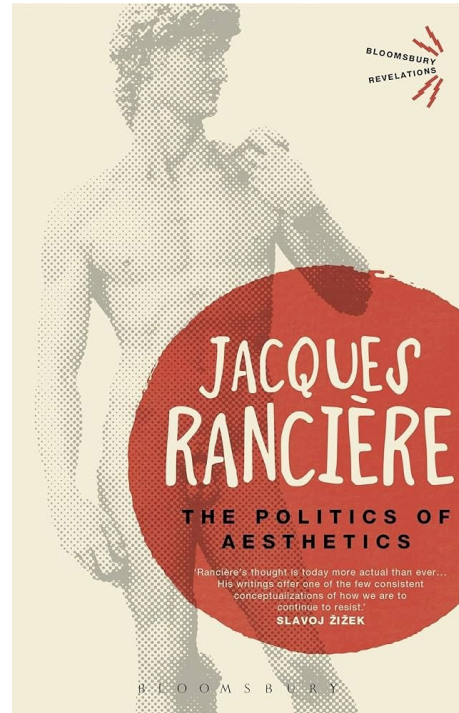

JACQUES RANCIÈRE

AISTHESIS

SCENES FROM THE AESTHETIC REGIME OF ART

Four Ways of Seeing

NICOLAS BOURRIAUD THE EXFORM
VERSO FUTURES
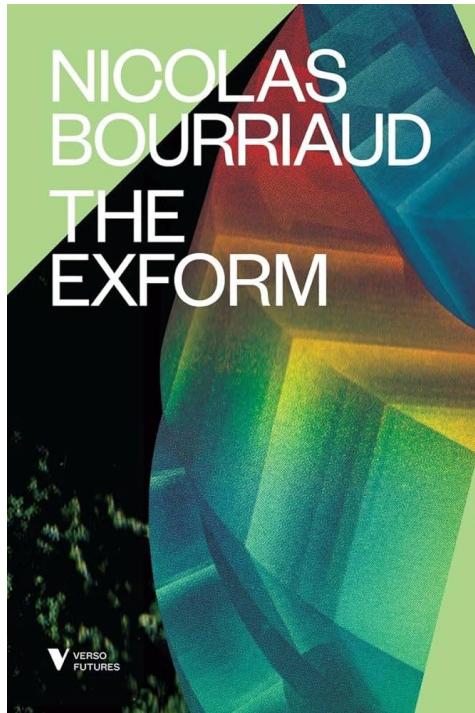
- The "realm of waste"
- "zones of exclusion"
- "gestures of expulsion"
- "sockets" and "plugs"

JACQUES RANCIÈRE
THE POLITICS OF AESTHETICS
BLOOMSBURY REVELATIONS

'Rancière's thought is today more actual than ever... His writings offer one of the few consistent conceptualizations of how we are to continue to resist.'
SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK
Bloomsbury

- The "distribution of the "sensible"
- The "'aesthetics' at the core of politics"
- "primary aesthetics"
- "structure-giving forms"

A GEOLOGY OF MEDIA
JUSSI PARIKKA
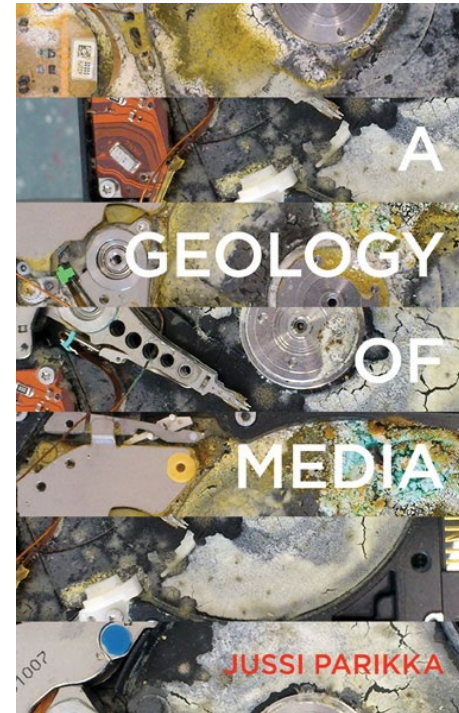
- "medianatures"
- "levers, layers, strata, and interconnections"
- "abstract geology"
- Earth as "record of actions"

The Utopia of Rules
On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy
David Graeber
Author of *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*
"A brilliant, deeply original political thinker." —Rebecca Solnit
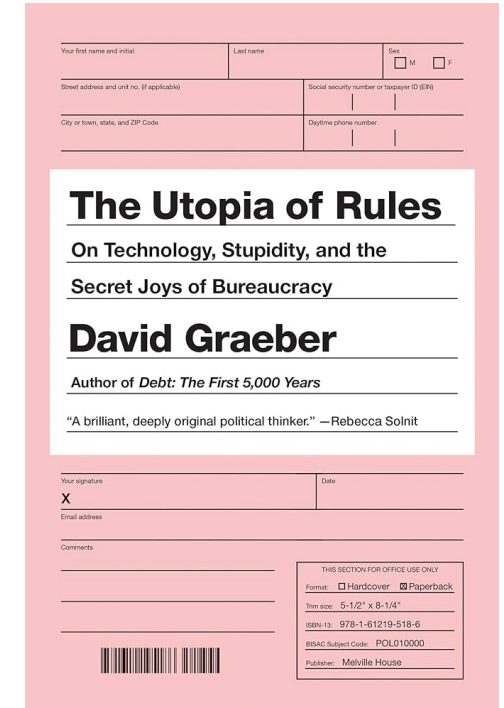
- "total bureaucratization" and financialization
- Planetary-scale administration
- A "single, self-sustaining web"

Starfield

- Earth abandoned

- Humanity populates the "Settled Systems"

- Player-character joins Constellation

- Search the Settled Systems for anomalous "artifacts"

- Encounter the "Starborn" and learn about the "Unity"

- Sent to Earth to learn the final "secret"

- Earth was destroyed by the development of gravitational drive technology that made the Settled Systems (and *Starfield* itself) possible

False Choice

- A profound material catastrophe
- A judgment of actions
- An unchangeable decision

The Dream of Extraction

- There are "real pleasures to accumulation, the satisfaction of having overcome scarcity, achieving comfort and security" (Abraham, 73)

- An *aesthetics of extraction*

- What do game mechanics *say*?

- What real-world logics do game mechanics articulate?

- What do our "dreams" (desires) produce ("desiring-production")?

- *The mind is a factory, not a theatre*
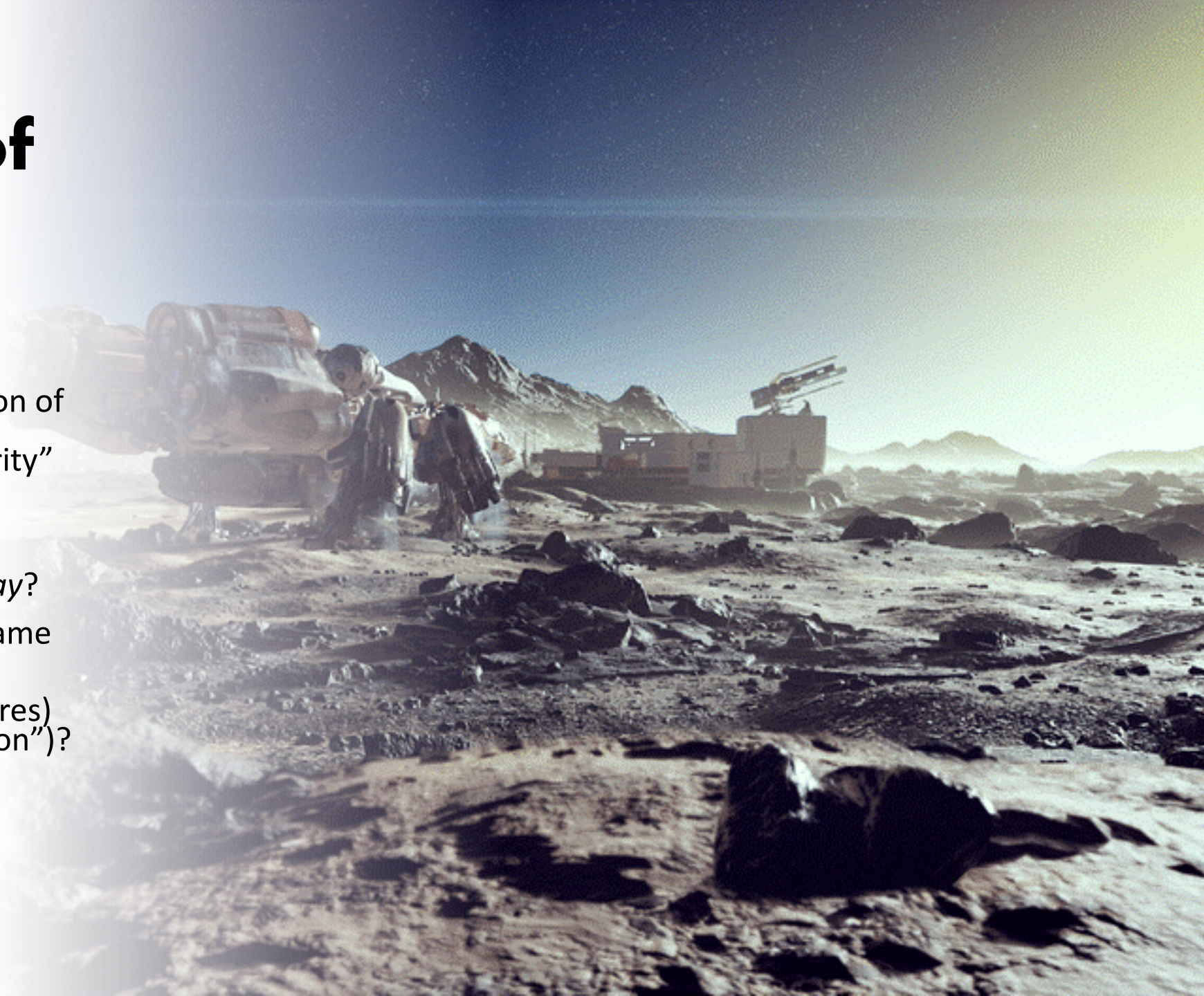
The Work
to Come

Mapping of the interlocking
logics of mining, crafting,
and base building systems

Mining

- Visualizing worlds
- Plotting extraction
- Hierarchies of resources

Schrodinger II
Schrodinger System

SURVEY   64%

TYPE	ROCK
GRAVITY	1.19 G
TEMPERATURE	INFERNO
ATMOSPHERE	STD CO2
MAGNETOSPHERE	POWERFUL
FAUNA	NONE (0/0)
FLORA	NONE (0/0)
WATER	NONE

RESOURCES   (2/8)

Pb U Cl W SiH₃Cl Ti Pu Ad

TRAITS   (0/3)

?   ?   ?

HIDE RESOURCES   R

STARMAP

MISSIONS L   SHOW ME V   SET LANDING TARGET MOUSE1   SET COURSE X   BACK TO SYSTEM TAB
HOLD TO EXIT

Crafting

RESEARCH LABORATORY – OUTPOST DEVELOPMENT

RESEARCH PROJECTS

PROJECT NAME		PROGRESS
HORTICULTURE 1	⊘ BLOCKED	0%
DOMESTICATION 1	⊘ BLOCKED	0%
POWER GENERATION 1	✓ COMPLETED	100%
POWER GENERATION 2	✓ COMPLETED	100%
POWER GENERATION 3	✓ COMPLETED	100%
POWER GENERATION 4	✓ COMPLETED	100%
ROBOTS 1	✓ COMPLETED	100%
ROBOTS 2	✓ COMPLETED	100%
OUTPOST DEFENSE 1	✓ COMPLETED	100%
OUTPOST DEFENSE 2	✓ COMPLETED	100%

REQUIRED SKILLS

OUTPOST ENGINEERING
RANK 3

SPECIAL PROJECTS
RANK 1

RESEARCH TREE

- Progression and development
- Exclusions of waste
- Frictionless production

REQUIRED MATERIALS

TASINE SUPERCONDUCTOR	3/3	CONTROL ROD	4/4	PB	LEAD	20/20
TAU GRADE RHEOSTAT	12/12	ROTHICITE MAGNET	2/2			
ISOTOPIC COOLANT	8/8	POWER CIRCUIT	4/4			
VYTINIUM FUEL ROD	4/4	W TUNGSTEN	16/16			

PREVIOUS CATEGORY Q   NEXT CATEGORY T   SELECT E   BACK HOLD TO EXIT TAB

Base Building

- Networks of abstraction
- Pure exchange
- Pleasures of systems
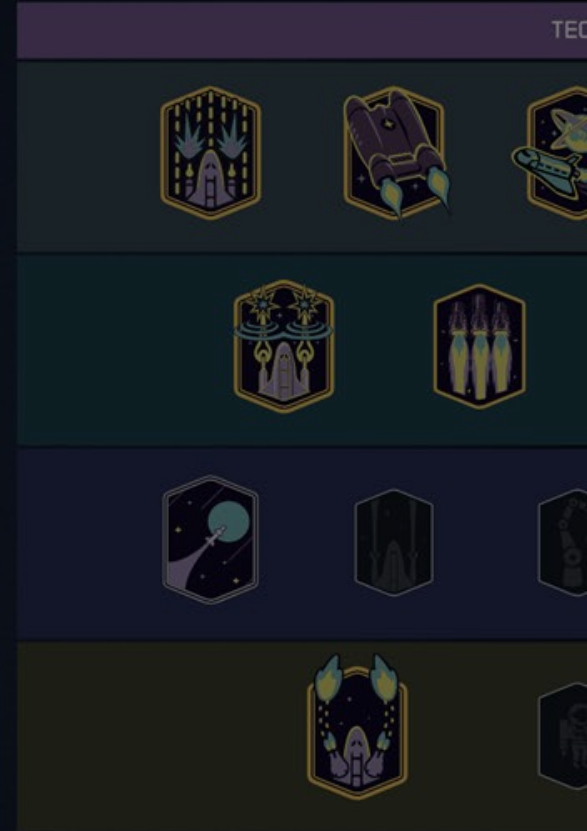
"Science" as Logic of Extraction

Thank you!

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