Video Games

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Introduction

Apocalypticism is and has always been a standard cultural-religious go-to for developers of video games. The apocalyptic visions, notions, imagery, and phrases provided by Daniel (from the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament) and especially the Revelation/Apocalypse of John (New Testament), including their massive cultural impact and reception history in the Western world up to the present day, have been used to paint culturally grounded and generally appealing and understandable dystopian narratives about a sudden but very violent ending of our world as we know it, an epic and all-consuming battle between the forces of good and evil, and—possibly—a way to survive this twilight of the gods in the form of post-apocalyptic civilizations. However, these remnants of the pre-apocalyptic world are often (but not exclusively) depicted as intellectually, morally, and spiritually inferior to us. Their fictional post-apocalyptic survival is meant as a warning for those who are still before the end battle and could possibly prevent it or perhaps delay it.

The genre of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic video games is a significant one: video games like *Brink* (2011), *The Talos Principle* (2014), *Mad Max* (2017), *Mutant Year Zero: Road to Eden* (2018), and *Far Cry 5* (2018), and series like *Fallout* (1997–2018), *Mass Effect* (2007–2012), *Metro* (2010–2019), *Rage* (2010–2019), *Darksiders* (2010–2019), *Dying Light* (2015–2022), and *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017–2022), feature an impending or actual destruction of the world and its existing social, political, and/or religious order as a primary part of their world-lore building. Frequently, these impending or actual destructions are related—both rhetorically and aesthetically—using religious terminology derived from the Bible as it has been received in the Western, Christian tradition, and specifically from the books of Genesis and Revelation, as outlined in the CDAMM article on "Apocalypticism".

In this article, we will make some general remarks on the genre of (post-)apocalyptic video games as such; discuss the (medium-)specific ludo-narrative characteristics of these games; discuss the semantical characteristics of these games; and, finally, give a four-fold categorisation of narrative variables in (post-)apocalyptic games. This categorisation will be based on causality (the cause of the apocalypse), comprehensiveness (the scale of the destruction), order of time (one-time versus recurrent event), and the remnants (the survivors of the apocalypse).

The Apocalyptic Genre

When the theme of apocalypticism is found in popular culture, there is typically a dramatic clash between good and evil, between the so-called 'good guys' and the 'bad guys,' accompanied by destruction and disaster. In the Western Christian-influenced tradition, this framing of the world initially took shape in Jewish apocalyptic literature and then in images, such as paintings, often based on the biblical book of Revelation. Since the end of the last century, these themes have been enthusiastically embraced in the gaming world.

However, there are two major differences between the ancient apocalyptic literature—the oldest form of this genre—and apocalypticism in modern culture in general and in video games specifically.

Firstly, ancient apocalyptic literature has a religious orientation, at least in the sense that God plays a part, and he is always the winner. In contrast, apocalyptic video games are not usually religious in the strict sense of the word and God as such plays no part in them. Sometimes an apocalyptic game appropriates the Jewish and Christian beliefs in the resurrection to a new life (e.g., *The Talos Principle*). In others, a (semi-)fictional religious context is created (e.g., *Far Cry 5*). This is discussed further under the heading Semantic Characteristics, below.

Secondly, the oldest apocalyptic literary texts tend to project the writer's own time and understanding of religious persecution onto another epoch. This happens in two different ways: projection onto the past or into the future. In the book of Daniel, for example, the contemporary religious persecution under the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes in the second century BCE is projected back onto the period of the Assyrian and Babylonian threats during the eighth to the sixth centuries BCE. In the book of Revelation, the contemporary religious persecution by Rome in the first century CE is projected into the future epoch of the End Times. The first form of projection does not occur in apocalyptic video games. The second form is predominant. Current concerns, for example relating to climate change and nuclear threats, are projected onto a derailed version of a predicted future (e.g., *Brink*). This is discussed further under the heading Ludo-narrative Characteristics, below.

Good Ending

In apocalyptic video games, apocalypticism and eschatology do not necessarily coincide; usually, there is not an End of Times at all in these games. As with the notions of 'apocalyptic' and 'post-apocalyptic,' the notions of 'apocalypse' and 'eschatology' have become synonyms in the larger gamer communities, which will be further discussed below (Ludo-narrative Characteristics). Nevertheless, the question of endings is, of course, an important issue in apocalypticism. One of the characteristics of apocalyptic and cognate literature is that a crisis is eventually averted, so the story can end well. No matter how fierce the confrontation between good and evil is, the forces of good always win in the end. And even if the 'good guys' die, usually by voluntarily sacrificing their own lives for the greater good, there is some sort of resurrection to ensure these heroes can participate in the good ending. Apocalyptic video games also tend to end well for the protagonists, who embody the 'good guys,' but this is less to do with genre

requirements in the strict sense and more to do with medium-specific ones.

Since, in video games, the player is the hero/protagonist, frequently positioned as the head of, or at least as an important member of, the 'good guys,' games tend to have a positive ending for their avatar-cum-player. After all, a game is supposed to have some sort of happy ending and thus be satisfying for the player. Even in video games like *Wolfenstein: The New Order* (2014), *Fallout 3* (2008), or *Mass Effect 3* (2012), which feature an ending in which the hero-cum-avatar of the story dies for the sake of others, the 'good side' still wins despite the fact that the hero is no longer there to appreciate the satisfaction of the ending that he helped to create. The player, however, is.

Religious Substance

While apocalypticism in general is invariably religious in its form or content, apocalyptic video games seem to be an exception to this rule: in general, they are not religious in the strict sense of the word, and as such have no religious intent. However, existential notions—traditionally associated with the religious realm—can be communicated, such as the survival of Earth or of humanity.

Nevertheless, the plot of some apocalyptic video games does make use of religious material, either drawn from an existing religion, almost always from Jewish and/or Christian traditions (e.g., *Fallout 3*), or belonging to a fictitious religion (e.g., *Horizon Zero Dawn*). A mixture of both also occurs. In *Far Cry 5*, for example, a fictitious Christian movement is introduced into the game, constructed from negative aspects or characteristics associated with the history of Christianity. Common elements taken from Jewish and Christian traditions include exile, paradise, and resurrection.

Exile

An important element is the notion of the ending of some sort of exile. In some Jewish apocalyptic-eschatological stories and images, the end of an exile plays a prominent role. To give a well-known (biblical) example, when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem in 587 BCE, the population was taken captive and exiled. This was the beginning of the so-called Babylonian exile. This lasted until 538 BCE when the Persians defeated the Babylonians. Earlier, however, in 721 BCE, the Assyrians had conquered some parts of the biblical land and taken the people living there into exile. This exile is called the Assyrian exile. However, the people who were exiled by the Assyrians never returned. The people exiled during the Assyrian exile are held to return at the salvation of the eschaton. The end of the exile is thus an important element of apocalypticism and eschatology, especially in certain Jewish circles.

Exile, and liberation from it, plays a role in certain apocalyptic video games. In the *Dying Light* series, for example, the plague-ridden world of Harran knows of one safe haven, a large tower in the middle of the city. This place is both a refuge for those not afflicted with the zombie-virus and an exile from the 'normal' world outside the quarantined parameters of the fictional game-world. The same pattern occurs in *Brink*. The human-made floating island, the Ark, is—again—a refuge for those who try to flee the rising waters, but it also means an uneasy and bitter exile from the rest of the world.

Paradise

A second element regards images of a kind of paradise, now lost. In religious framings, and popular in the

history of paradisical thinking, the eternal salvation that breaks through the apocalyptic chaos is presented as an ideal garden (e.g., the biblical Eden) in which people live freely and can fully enjoy the fruits of this garden. Sometimes the paradise image is elaborated with the idea that humans have lost their original beneficial living situation through their failing behaviour ('paradise lost') and rediscover paradise through the apocalyptic chaos. The idea of 'paradise lost' originates, in its modern meaning, from the epic poem of the same name composed by John Milton between 1658 and 1663. In modern-day media, 'paradise lost' has become a shorthand for that which is tragically but irrevocably lost to humankind, to be remembered and to be longed for, but never to be regained (Quint 2014).

An ideal or idealised living environment also occurs in some apocalyptic video games. In *Rage* and *Brink*, for example, the notion of an Ark is used, a vessel that saves just a tiny portion of humanity from the impending disaster. In *Mutant Year Zero* and *Far Cry 5*, the notion of Eden is integral to the games' narratives: respectively as a reassuring ideal that one strives to find and as an image for humanity's next epoch, when God's rule will become all-powerful.

Resurrection

A third element is resurrection. Within Judaism and Christianity, resurrection is a crucial element of apocalypticism and eschatology, but in video games it is hardly present. The protagonists of games rarely survive their own death, if they die at all. With the exception of the *Darksiders* series, the majority of apocalyptic video games feature an immanent game world in which there seems to be no room for a life-after-death or for any other transcendent reality. Another possible exception is, perhaps, *The Talos Principle*. In this video game, humanity is wiped out by a deadly virus, leaving a human-like artificial intelligence (A.I.) to roam the world and create a new and improved version of humanity. In this game, the A.I. is portrayed as being in a paradise-like garden, reminiscent of Eden, and it is, in the end, portrayed as a new Adam.

Other mainly Jewish elements, such as the restoration of the Temple and the reestablishment of the Davidic monarchy, are, however, absent in apocalyptic video games.

Number Symbolism

Number symbolism is also a common aspect of apocalyptic thinking: for example, reference to the 1000-year reign in Revelation 20:2–7 features in Christian chiliasm or millennialism, and in Isaac Newton's calculations of the year the End of Times could take place based on his interpretation of biblical texts. However, in apocalyptic video games, number symbolism is almost completely absent. Again, there are some possible exceptions to the rule. In *The Talos Principle*, the number four plays an important role as a reference to the four-letter name of God (YHWH), as it was revealed to Moses in Exodus 3. Other exceptions are games like *Horizon Zero Dawn* and, again, *The Talos Principle*, two games that frequently feature the binary programming language of zeros and ones. However, here the issue is not apocalyptic number symbolism but numbers that are specific to the digital world of computers, robots, and artificial intelligences.

Ludo-narrative Characteristics

Victim, Survivor, Messiah

The fact that the majority of apocalyptic video games actually take place after a global disaster has certain narrative consequences and implications. The first of these is that the player's avatar-cum-game's protagonist (both almost always coincide) is usually both a victim and a survivor of the apocalypse. The survival of the protagonist is, of course, a narrative condition for the story to exist in the first place—no survivor means no story—but the avatar also usually belongs to the remnants of a civilization trying to rebuild something that vaguely resembles humanity's previous way of life.

In *Horizon Zero Dawn*, for example, the player takes on the role of Aloy, a thirty-first-century warrior of the Nora Tribe. Set in a post-apocalyptic United States, roughly in the present states of Colorado, Wyoming, and Utah, the remnants of humanity have fallen back into tribalism, being members of tribes of varying technological development, though not beyond that of the Middle Ages. Aloy appears to be the descendant of a twenty-first-century scientist, who tried to plan for humanity's escape from being devoured by killer-robots. These were designed by greedy corporations to extract fuel from biomass while not differentiating between flora, fauna, or humans. Aloy is the embodiment of the survival of humanity, although in a degenerated form, and a victim of the robot-induced apocalypse.

In apocalypticism, especially Jewish and Christian kinds, one of the most important characters is a Messiah figure. This Messiah is always the first of the survivors but can also be portrayed as one of the victims of the apocalyptic violence. Such a liberating figure frequently—if not always—occurs in apocalyptic video games. As said before, because of the interactive nature of the video game genre, the player is usually thrown into the role of the hero or messianic figure. In *Horizon Zero Dawn*, the player is Aloy, who singlehandedly defeats the powers of destruction. In the *Fallout* series, the player is the Lone Wanderer, the hero of the Wastelands, who sacrifices his own life for the benefit of others.

Arguably, a distinction can be drawn in apocalyptic video games between common, self-sacrificial, messianic, and christophoric game heroes. The common hero saves one or more persons—an individual, a group of individuals, or a collective—from a certain, possibly self-inflicted evil, either personal, institutional, or abstract in nature. The self-sacrificial hero does so by, as the term suggests, voluntarily sacrificing himself. The messianic hero is aesthetically and rhetorically inspired by the messianic figure of Christian tradition. The christophoric gamer, however, identifies him/herself with the messianic hero's in-game agency in the form of the voluntary death of the game protagonist—that is, the player's avatar.

Entanglement Player-avatar

As a medium, video games have a unique communicative property—the entanglement of the player with its avatar. That is to say, the player controls a character in the game. In the case of traditional media, like novels or films, individual readers can only passively witness the story unfolding before their eyes; they cannot interact with the story itself, although they can emotionally identify and/or sympathise with one or more characters inside the story. In the case of video games, individual players are necessarily involved in the unfolding of the game's story not (only) as witnesses to an already determined sequence of events,

but as characters through which the story itself is (partially) told. The player is the one to whom, by whom, and through whom the story is told.

This has consequences for the (post-)apocalyptic narratives of the genre: the player is not the mere witness of the survival of the apocalyptic events, but he/she is a part of it; the player is not just witnessing the struggle to rebuild society in some way or another, but he/she is actually a part of that effort—for better or worse. Because video games are necessarily interactive, the involvement of the player in the game's narrative is usually large, up to the point of a close identification between the two. This identification has not so much to do with physical appearances as with the control the player has over their avatar: control means responsibility which, in its turn, entails identification.

Discrepancy in Information

In all texts and media, there are discrepancies in information between the various communicative entities. These discrepancies can exist between characters but also between characters on the one hand and the reader/player on the other. One character knows something that the other character does not (yet) know, as a result of which characters act in ambiguous relationships with each other. If the reader/player knows more or less than (some of) the characters, the reader/player is confronted with a thrilling text.

These discrepancies in information are even more interesting for apocalypticism because secret information often plays an important role in apocalypticism. An easy and well-known biblical example is the writing *tekel tekel mene upharsin* on the wall in Daniel 5: no one other than Daniel is able to read and/or interpret the text.

The End of Times is full of secrets that are not accessible to everyone. The text-immanent reader is gradually introduced into the unveiling of these secrets. In many apocalyptic video games, there appears to be more to know than that which the characters, including the avatar-character, know. For example, it may turn out that the characters are not the only survivors, or that they do not, after all, live on the only piece of earth that still appears inhabitable. In video games like *Mutant Year Zero* and the *Metro* series, there is a discrepancy of information among several characters in the games' narratives and between the text-immanent player of the games and the characters. In those games, the apocalypse appears to be universal; no one seems to have been able to survive other than the hero and the people directly surrounding him. After a while, however, more parts of the world are revealed to have survived the apocalypse, an insight that dramatically sheds new light on the narrative when discovered, usually very far on in the game or the series.

Semantic Characteristics

Before, During, After

The majority of apocalyptic video games take place not before or during the apocalypse itself but more often after the climactic event, relating the (often tragic) stories of those who were fortunate (or unfortunate) enough to have survived the near ending of their world, and find themselves involuntarily tasked with the rebuilding of a new society (we will return to these 'remnants' below). In popular gaming

and gamers' vocabularies in particular, the notions of *apocalyptic* and *post-apocalyptic* are often mixed up, being used more or less as synonyms. While confusing from a more scholarly perspective, this interchangeability actually makes a lot of sense from a narrative point of view. The apocalypse is thought of as a specific moment in time when disaster strikes, leaving death and destruction in its path. It is challenging, to say the least, to construct an appealing narrative focused on this specific disaster. Rather, it is narratively easier to develop a game either leading up to the climactic events or, more commonly, to relate the stories of those who have to rebuild the society afterwards.

Far Cry 5 is an example of a game that builds up to the impending global disaster. Taking place in rural Montana, the story revolves around a fictional cult, People at Eden's Gate, headed by the self-appointed doomsday-prophet Joseph Seed and his two brothers. The player is charged to end his tyrannical rule over the county. During the game, the player can pick up pieces of information suggesting that another conflict is on the brink of breaking out in the outside world. Joseph Seed's arrest at the end of the game coincides with the appearance of a nuclear mushroom cloud, urging the player to flee together with Joseph to an underground bunker. In *Far Cry 5*'s sequel, *Far Cry New Dawn* (2019), the post-apocalyptic world of Montana is used as a background, tying up the narrative loose ends of its prequel.

An exception to this perspective is the *Darksiders* series. Its three main instalments (*Darksiders* 1, 2, and 3) and its spin-off *Darksiders Genesis* (2019) take place simultaneously—each with their own protagonist, one of the biblical Four Horsemen in Revelation 4–5—during the climactic events themselves. One of the riders, War, is unjustly charged with pre-emptively and deliberately triggering the Apocalyptic End War between Heaven and Hell. The games then follow the adventures of War, his two brothers Strife and Death, and their sister Fury, all trying to exonerate themselves by reversing the apocalyptic events.

Persistence of Evil

One of the characteristics of the majority of the discussed video games belonging to this genre is that the in-game apocalypse does not signify the end of humanity's struggles. In contrast to traditional Jewish and Christian narratives about the end of the world in which there is permanent ceasing of all suffering, war, and death, the fact that some people survive the in-game apocalypse implies the persistence of evil in the post-apocalyptic world, usually in the form of a continuation of the (pre-apocalyptic) universal battle between good and evil. Again, this has a narrative reason: many a good story relies on a dichotomy between good and evil, embodied by the narrative's protagonist and antagonist respectively.

Brink is a good example of this persistence. In our near future, a group of idealists creates a self-contained, zero-emission, floating city called the Ark, capable of harbouring 4,000 residents. However, when the water level of the world's seas and oceans rises rapidly, the Ark is overwhelmed with refugees seeking dry land. Soon, the Ark has to contain 40,000 people, urging the original 'Founders' of the project to strictly ration food, water, and medicines, while the euphemistically dubbed 'Guests' have to reside in ill-equipped slums at the edges of the artificial island. The player is tasked to side with either the Security Force, which tries to maintain order, or the Resistance, which demands a more equal share of the island's wealth.

Brink's set-up clearly shows the persistence of evil from pre- to post-apocalyptic times: if greed and struggle for power have brought an eco-apocalypse on a global scale upon the world of *Brink*, something

the game heavily implies, the same human characteristics fuel civil war aboard the Ark. In short, nothing has changed.

Anthropocentric Perspective

Many of these narratives have an anthropocentric perspective. Of course, in any apocalyptic event, the flora and fauna suffer as badly and deeply as humanity itself, but usually the focus is on the survival of the latter. In many post-apocalyptic game narratives, the flora and fauna themselves become the new enemies of the human survivors, battling for dominance in the new world. In the *Fallout* and *Metro* series, for example, nature has mutated as a result of humanity's irresponsible interference with nuclear power and is now striving to take over the post-apocalyptic wastelands. In other games, nature does not play a role at all narratively.

The game *The Talos Principle* is a prime example of this anthropocentric kind of post-apocalyptic narrative. In our relative future, the melting icecap of the North Pole released a powerful and deadly virus (note that the game was released pre-COVID-19) that would wipe out humanity in a matter of years. Before it could, however, earth's smartest scientists created a virtual simulation in which an A.I. (later to be disclosed as being the player itself) would be tested and improved upon time and time again until it would become so human-like that it was deserving of being downloaded into a physical body to repopulate the earth and to never, hopefully, suffer the same fate as its creators.

The last and final hurdle this A.I. has to take in order to become perfectly human is to transcend its programming, to be disobedient and free. With exception of a certain cat, whose presence is included for reasons incidental to the narrative (in other words, an 'Easter egg' from the developers—Yarwood 2016), we exclusively see the urge for the resurrection of (a new kind of) humanity, but nothing is said or shown about the fate of the natural world. This deficiency is partly caused by the fact that the nameless killer-virus seems to affect humans exclusively but is also exemplary of the anthropocentric narrative focus of (post-)apocalyptic video games. This anthropocentrism explains why mythical creatures, such as many-headed dragons and flying horses, are not typically found in apocalyptic video games despite being fixed characters in apocalyptic literature. Usually when animals occur in apocalyptic video games, they are mutated monsters only included to be a convenient adversary for the avatar-hero (as in the *Metro* series, *Rage*, *Fallout* series, as examples). In some cases, like *Mutant Year Zero*, the hero-avatars of the game are themselves mutant animals, all with their own specific capacities.

Categorisations of Narrative Variables

(Post-)apocalyptic video games tend to have certain narrative traits in common, as discussed above, but they can also be characterised by a number of variables. These can be understood as 'causality,' 'comprehensiveness,' 'order of time,' and 'remnants'.

Causality

The first narrative variable comes with the apocalypse's cause. In other words, what or who has triggered the cataclysmic events? Four possible groups of answers can be discerned: the apocalypse is triggered (1)

by one or more divine entities proclaiming, as it were, the End of Times; (2) by human actions and/or choices, either individually or collectively; (3) by natural disasters like earthquakes, floods, or meteor impact; or (4) by a mixture of the last two, usually in the form of natural disasters thought to be provoked by the irresponsible treatment of the planet by humankind.

Divine causation of the apocalypse, the conventional trigger of the End of Times in the Christian tradition, is found relatively rarely as a narrative device in video games. Again, we find the *Darksiders* series as an example of an exception. Even though the series only implicitly features a truly divine entity, a 'god' in the traditional sense of the word, the apocalypse is brought forth (prematurely) by the manipulations of certain demon-lords and certain renegade angels, both of whom cannot wait to finally decide who is the strongest party in creation. The seven seals, found in Revelation, are suddenly broken, supposedly by War, one of the Four Riders, thus plunging all of creation into an unstoppable conflict ending in the termination of humankind.

Human interferences, however, are a more common cause for the apocalypse to be triggered. As discussed earlier, in *Far Cry 5* the End of Times is triggered by an atomic bomb detonating over Montana, turning it into a radioactive wasteland. The same happens in the *Fallout* and *Metro* series: people seem to be incapable of harnessing the power of nuclear energy without withstanding the temptation to eradicate each other with it. In *Horizon Zero Dawn*, humanity is also to blame but in a slightly different way: greedy corporations create robotic super-soldiers which are designed to be unhackable and capable of using anything biological as fuel and of multiplying independently. Humanity, in a *Frankenstein*-esque way, creates the monster that will eventually destroy it.

Natural causes for the apocalypse are also found in this game genre. The *Rage* series is a good example. On 23 August 2029, the asteroid Apophis collides with Earth, destroying most of the world's infrastructure, energy production, agricultural lands, and ultimately most of humanity itself—though not all since the game takes place in a post-apocalyptic world. Virus outbreaks, with or without hints of human interference, also belong to this group. In *The Talos Principle*, it is a virus that kills all of humanity, a virus which only escaped its dormant state because of the melting of the Arctic icecap which is, in turn, thought to have been caused by human-induced global warming. The same applies to the *Dying Light* series, which also revolves around a virus outbreak, but this 'Harran virus' turns people into feral zombies. While the origin of the virus is unclear, two in-game possibilities are implied: the virus entered the city of Harran because an alien spaceship crashed in the vicinity (you can actually find the spaceship in the water of the city's bay) or because it was developed by the army. The second option is the more likely and suggests a human origin of this (very local) apocalypse.

Brink plays the same melody: the apocalypse takes the form of all-consuming floods but at the same time, by underscoring the idealistic and eco-friendly intentions of the Founders of the Ark, the game heavily suggests that these floods themselves were caused by, again, human-induced global warming. And in *Mutant Year Zero*, it turns out at the end of the game that the apocalypse was also local and human-induced. The mutants roaming through the wastelands are actually the product of (hastily abandoned) scientific experiments on animals trapped in what is nothing more than a very large open-air prison.

Comprehensiveness

Comprehensiveness is also a narrative variable in the genre. By it, we refer to the scale of the apocalyptic destruction. Even though in Christian tradition the End of Times is thought to be an all-encompassing, even cosmic event, in many (post-)apocalyptic video games this is not the case. We distinguish four different levels of apocalyptic scale: local (only in a part of the world), global (the whole earth), universal (a galaxy-wide catastrophe), and cosmic (including the transcendental realm).

An example of a very localised apocalypse would be that of the *Dying Light* series in which only a major city and its surrounding areas are infected by a zombie-virus, leading to the quarantining of the area from the outside world. In the city of Harran, the world has more or less ceased to exist, at least in any shape or form resembling the old one, while every character in the series is perfectly aware that, outside the parameters, life seems to be carrying on just as it always did.

Examples of global catastrophes are more readily available: the majority of (post-)apocalyptic video games take place within the context of a global collapse of humanity. In *The Talos Principle*, all of humankind has been wiped out by the virus. In both the *Fallout* and *Rage* series, humanity as a whole has fallen back to a prior state of technological development. In *Horizon Zero Dawn*, the remnants of a global catastrophe fight against the machines that were once programmed to aid them in their reconquering of Earth.

A complicating factor is that it is not uncommon for video games in this genre to initially suggest a global apocalypse, while later on in the game it is revealed that the destruction is actually only very regional. It is a matter of perspective: the survivors of the apocalypse live under the impression they are the last ones alive on Earth, while only gradually or suddenly learning about other settlements that have survived the cataclysmic events or that only their location was targeted for the disaster.

In the first two instalments of the *Metro* series, the Moscow survivors believe the whole world has been contaminated by radiation and that no other human beings have lived through the falling of the bombs. In the third instalment, however, not insignificantly called *Exodus*, they find out that eastwards other pockets of survivors can be found. In *Mutant Year Zero*, the animal-human hybrids are given evidence, but only at the very end of the game, that the wastelands in which they have to live are only confined to an area in Scandinavia while the rest of the world is still very much alive. The same happens in *Brink*. The overall majority of Founders and Guests live under the impression that the Ark is the only place that has not been swallowed up by the rising waters, an idea that is strengthened by the fact that the influx of refugees suddenly stopped some months previously. However, in the end, the player finds out that the leaders of the Founders have betrayed their initial ideology by installing a nuclear-powered engine on the island. These leaders have used this engine in secret to move the Ark away from its known position to prevent any more refugees weighing in on the already rapidly dwindling supplies.

The next level on the scale of apocalyptic comprehensiveness is the universal one: the destruction is not limited to (parts of) Earth, but is felt well outside its planetary limits. A key example of such an apocalypse is found in the *Mass Effect* series. In its three instalments, the player is confronted with a mysterious, artificial army of unconquerable killer-robots known as the Reapers. These Reapers remain dormant for periods of approximately 10,000 years in the interstellar space between the Milky Way and Andromeda. They quickly find and destroy all artificial and biological life capable of leaving its own home planet.

The last and most comprehensive scale any apocalypse is capable of reaching is a cosmic one. The similarity between universal and cosmic cataclysmic events is the idea that the whole or at least a considerable part of the known universe is affected by the apocalypse. The difference between the last two kinds is that a universal apocalypse remains immanent to our reality while the cosmic apocalypse also affects the transcendental realm. Again, the *Darksiders* series provides a good example: when War seems to have inadvertently triggered the end of the world, the player is confronted not only with the devastation of the earth and humanity, but also with the destruction of Heaven and Hell, and even the cosmic balance itself becomes disturbed. The transcendent realm is the place from where the apocalypse is triggered but is also, ultimately, very much affected by it.

Order of Time

Another narrative variable in this genre is the order of time. Sometimes the apocalypse is described in terms of a unique, one-time event, while in other cases the cataclysmic disaster is recurrent in nature, sometimes even repeating itself in a more or less regular rhythm throughout the ages. This recurrence is, of course, at odds with the traditional idea of the apocalypse which is thought of as a unique event in history, even ending history itself.

As said, some apocalypses in video games seem to be—or at least seem to suggest—a one-time event, even though very few humans remain afterwards. Games like *Brink* and *The Talos Principle,* and series like *Fallout* and *Metro,* describe a global catastrophe as seriously and definitely changing the face of the earth and its inhabitants forever more.

The *Mass Effect* series, however, suggests a recurrent and even cyclic apocalypse in the form of the aforementioned Reapers overrunning the Milky Way every 10,000 years or so to wipe out every space-faring civilization, either biological or artificial in nature. Again, every one of these individual apocalypses does not signify the end of all life in the galaxy, since less developed civilizations, let alone non-intelligent forms of life, are not attacked and left alone, allowing them to become the next generation of 'galaxians' who will perish at the hands of the next Reaper invasion.

The fact that these apocalypses usually leave some survivors to begin civilization anew implicitly suggests that these kinds of cataclysmic events can and perhaps even will re-occur in the (far) future. In the cases of *Brink* and *The Talos Principle*, the cause of the apocalypse is ecological (human-created) in nature, either in the form of the rising of the oceans' waters or a virus released from its Arctic reservoir. These things could easily happen again in the future. The same applies to the natural cause of the *Rage* series' apocalypse: a meteor hitting Earth. No one can claim with any degree of certainty that this will not happen again.

The human-caused apocalypses of *Far Cry 5* and the *Metro* and *Fallout* series (nuclear conflicts) *and* the disasters connected to human *hubris* in *Horizon Zero Dawn* and the *Dying Light* series not only suggest a possible re-occurrence of said global disasters in-game, but also signal the possibility of such cataclysmic events outside the confines of the games' narratives. Indeed, the overall majority of the apocalypses used in video games, again with the exception of the *Darksiders* series, are real-life possibilities. Ecological disasters caused by humankind's disregard for the earth, its obsession with nuclear warfare, its tinkering with deadly pathogens, and the potential dangers of over-technologized societies are so convincing

narratologically precisely because we know they could occur in our world during our lifetimes.

Remnants

As we have discussed above, the fact that nearly all apocalyptic video games feature one or more groups of survivors results in these remnants becoming one of the key narrative features of these game stories. These remnants are usually on a much lower civil, societal, and technological level than those from before the cataclysmic events. Usually, they still have the possession of, or knowledge about, former technology (as in the *Fallout* series), but sometimes they have forgotten everything connected to their former existence (as in *Horizon Zero Dawn*) except for some mythological narratives as a distorted version of their collective past.

Frequently, these remnants are depicted and/or spoken about in a rather negative light: tribals who forgot what their ancestors used to be and who are fighting amongst themselves for dominance over food, other possessions, or strategic locations (*Horizon Zero Dawn*, the *Fallout s*eries, and in a certain sense also the *Mass Effect* series); zombies and mutants who manifest a clearly negative development in humanity's history (*Dying Light* and *Mutant Year Zero*); demoralized and barbaric survivors of the apocalypse for whom every shred of morality, human dignity, and civilization has eroded away, leaving the animal dimension of humanity with free rein (*Metro* series and, in a sense, *Brink*).

The exception to this rule is *The Talos Principle*. In the end, the A.I.-cum-player's avatar has developed itself to such an extent—that is, it has proved that it can be disobedient (the implied apogee of human characteristics)—that it is not only downloaded into a physical body but is also given the Milton Library, an online database containing everything humanity ever developed: philosophy, history, literature, science, technology, and so forth. This New Adam, as the game seems to suggest by invoking the vocabulary of the biblical Genesis narrative, is thought of as being superior to the old humanity: it is specifically constructed not to make the same error again.

Most apocalypse-survivors in video games are, however, not an upgraded, better version of humanity (humanity 2.0), but a degeneration of it (humanity 0.5). This almost automatically criticizes human civilization as a concept, also outside of the boundaries of the games' narratives. Civilization, morality, and human dignity are all concepts that are left behind very quickly after the apocalypse. The mutants and zombies are not so much sub-human as they are humans turned inside-out. These remnants show what presumably truly lies at the core of humanity as soon as the going gets tough: self-interest, egotism, viciousness, segregation, discrimination, misogyny, and racism all too readily manifest themselves in these remnants.

Further Reading

Monographs on video games, their analysis, and theology

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