Video Games and the Cheerful Apocalypse

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Players are bored of catastrophe. Video games have presented worlds ruined by climate change, nuclear winter, world wars, viral outbreaks, natural disasters, meteors, man-made plagues, gray goo scenarios, artificial intelligence networks, robots, aliens, vampires, mutants, and hordes upon hordes of zombies—to the point that post-apocalyptic settings are often considered overdone and clichéd. For game developers, barren wastelands and ravaged cities are tempting gameplay settings, for both technical and aesthetic reasons, but creating novel experiences in post-apocalyptic worlds is a challenge. In short, the apocalypse has become banal.

Regardless, there is no shortage of post-apocalyptic games.[1] Many of the longest-running and most critically acclaimed games and game series take place during or shortly after a global apocalyptic event, including *Fallout, Metro, S.T.A.L.K.E.R., The Last of Us, Horizon Zero Dawn, Days Gone, Left 4 Dead, Death Stranding, Nier: Automata, Frostpunk, Telltale's The Walking Dead*, and any number of games in which zombies, mutants, or plague-ridden creatures serve as the main antagonists. Recently, however, a surprisingly gentle trend has begun appearing in post-apocalyptic games. Rather than focusing on the player character as a hardened survivor wandering a crumbling and hostile wasteland, some games present a world in which the survivors are doing just fine: communities are thriving, the natural world is flourishing, and kind and helpful people are continually improving their circumstances. This trend isn't limited to smaller indie titles like *I Am Future* (2024), *Wildmender* (2022), and *My Time At Sandrock* (2023): one of the clearest examples is *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017), a triple-A mainline title in one of Nintendo's two flagship series and the launch title for the Nintendo Switch.

This recent prevalence of cheerful post-apocalyptic games is driven not only by a desire to innovate on a popular gameplay setting, but also by developers reflecting on and reacting to a world in crisis, and in many ways in decline. The progression-focused mechanics of open world games, advantages of isolated wilderness settings in game spaces, and desire to make games that speak to our present moment result in game worlds in which the apocalypse is not only survivable, but also the catalyst for positive change and a sustainable way of life.

A great deal of current media, including video games, is concerned with the end times. One can argue that apocalyptic thinking informs not only our art and entertainment,

1 Tamayo, Paul. "Why are videogames obsessed with the post-apocalypse?" *Kotaku.com*, March 18, 2019.

but much of modern life, a shift that began in the 1960s and continues to the current day.[2] The modern conception of the apocalypse, rather than a religious or divinely ordained calamity, can be described as a "world-altering catastrophe" stemming either from random chance or "the tragic outcome of human failure," without the redemptive hopefulness of its Biblical counterpart.[3] Much of our interest in apocalyptic media results from a dissatisfaction with current society, as well as yearning for experiences that will uncover our heroic potential, whether through physical prowess, intelligence, or forethought and preparation. As such, many postapocalyptic narratives focus on survival through battle or other tests against a "tangible enemy… be it alien, monster, machine, or forces of nature that require conquering, such as the sudden coming of an Ice Age,"[4] a structure that maps well onto the action and strategy-oriented mechanics of many games.

While digital games can tell a wide variety of stories, they are particularly adept at heroic fantasies, particularly those in which the main character is a lone hyper-competent savior, which meshes well with many post-apocalyptic narratives. From a practical standpoint, destroyed worlds are appealing to games developers as well. Ruined cities deliver spectacle: games that present the apocalypse through future ruins of recognizable buildings "manifest a long tradition of sublime ruination" in order to emphasize "the destructive capacities of modern societies."[5] Rubble and interestingly ruined structures also afford platforming and movement challenges that would feel out of place in undestroyed structures. Additionally, empty environments are less resource-intensive and easier to create than those with numerous non-player characters, in that creating beautiful static structures is technologically simpler than designing, programming, animating, and writing and recording lines of dialogue for high-fidelity digital humans. Given that the themes and narratives of post-apocalyptic fiction also fit well with multiple popular game genres—particularly the mechanics and systems of open world games, survival games, and games focused on crafting and base management—it is unsurprising that the post-apocalyptic game remains popular and pervasive.

For the purposes of this article, the post-apocalyptic game can be defined as follows: the majority of the game takes place in the aftermath of an environmental, systemic, or other large-scale crisis event that is not preventable by the player, substantially reshapes the world, and must be survived, weathered, and potentially recovered from by the characters in the game. This definition separates the post-apocalyptic from more widely defined dystopian settings that are also common in digital games, although the two are by no means mutually exclusive. Additionally, while the player character must be operating at some point in the crisis event's aftermath, post-apocalyptic games can take place over a variety of time-scales: from *The Last of Us* (2013), in which the player experiences the inciting incidents of a zombie apocalypse in the game's opening minutes but spends the bulk of gameplay about twenty years later; to *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017), in which the player, controlling main character Aloy, discovers that her pre-industrial world exists on Earth approximately 900 years after a grey goo scenario that eradicated all organic

2 DiTommaso, Lorenzo. "Apocalypticism in the contemporary world." In Colin McAllister, Ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Apocalyptic Literature*. Cambridge University Press, 2020: 316-341.

3 Renner, Karen J. "The appeal of the apocalypse." *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* 23, no. 3, 2012: 203-211.

4 Renner, 2012.

5 Fraser, Emma. "Post-apocalyptic play: Representations of the end of the city in video games." In *Broken Mirrors*, Routledge, 2019: 121-137.

material on the planet's surface.

Thematically, post-apocalyptic games can be considered as critical dystopias, which are marked by three discourses of heroism: "(1) the post-apocalyptic cowboy model, which stresses individualism and family; (2) the 'back to nature' discourse; and (3) discourses geared towards community leaders and the value of empathy." [6] While the "cowboy" savior is present in many post-apocalyptic games, all three discourses appear in the cheerful post-apocalyptic game, each supporting the optimistic view that the world is both recovering from catastrophe and is potentially better for it. Cheerful postapocalyptic games also take place in pleasant environments. Most post-apocalyptic games are bleak in their worldbuilding and in the narratives they support: often "unflinchingly cruel," they depict the player and other humans as "selfish entities seeking only self-survival" in destructively violent, oppressively lonely environments.[7] Games in *The Last of Us* and *Fallout* series are particularly known for their shocking plot points and heartbreaking environmental storytelling. Cheerful post-apocalyptic games, on the other hand, emphasize the beauty and idyllic nature of the unpopulated natural world, rather than its isolating loneliness; as well as the strong, supportive nature of survivors' communities. This is particularly clear in open world games, in which players can spend hundreds of hours simply abiding in the digital world, which means that the world itself must be an enjoyable place to spend time.[8] Both *Horizon Zero Dawn* and *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* are exemplars here, in that they both focus on the exploration of large-scale natural landscapes while interacting with various small communities and cultures that are by and large thriving in the remains of the previous civilization.

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While this positivity may seem unusual for a post-apocalyptic setting, it is encouraged by the structure of digital games themselves. Previously, I have written on the tension between bleakness and positivity in games. Even in the most hopeless and horrific circumstances, [9] or in narratives explicitly focused on death and grief, [10] digital games have a core of optimism inherent in their mechanics:

6 Pérez-Latorre, Óliver. "Post-apocalyptic games, heroism and the Great Recession." *Game Studies* 19, no. 3, 2019: 415-437.

7 Wintle, Phil. "Mutants and Zombies Everywhere! Or Villains, Violence, and Selfishness: Questions of Humanity in the Post-apocalyptic (Pandemic) Video Game." *Games and Culture* 19, no. 8, 2024: 959-980.

8 Muncy, Julie. "Open-world games are changing the way we play." *Wired.com*, December 3, 2015.

9 Evans, Monica. "'Should my best prove insufficient, we will find another way': time loop mechanics as expressions of hope in digital games." In *International Conference on Human-Computer Interaction*, pp. 198-209. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2023.

10 Evans, Monica. "'I Hope There Are Beasties in the Next One': Positivity Through Interaction in Death-Themed Digital Games." In *International Conference on Human-Computer Interaction*, pp. 177-190. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024.

to move through a game, players must explore, gain resources and knowledge, improve their skills and abilities, and overcome challenges. From this standpoint, the cheerful post-apocalyptic game is a natural progression: to build out from the individual character and extend the mechanics of betterment to their community, environment, and world. Additionally, digital games are built to be as frictionless an experience as possible, in order to keep players intuitively focused on strategic challenges rather than remembering which buttons to press—meaning that even the most unrelentingly hostile game environments are intended to be comfortable for the player, at the very least in terms of control scheme and graphical UI. Regardless of content, digital games are built around mechanics and systems that emphasize skill acquisition, improvement, and solving problems that are designed to be solvable. Inevitably, his turns the play experience towards positivity and optimism. For developers that increasingly want to react, reflect on, or respond to the crises of our real world, the inherent positivity of game mechanics proves useful: it provides a way to consider major global catastrophes as things that are, if not fixable, then at least comfortably survivable.

One potential concern with the cheerful post-apocalyptic game is that it makes players too comfortable, in that experiencing a world that is thriving after a calamity might encourage players to downplay or ignore the real world's rising crises. As deterministic technological systems, digital games generally reinforce their own status quo, particularly in heroic or survival narratives, and rarely allow for radical change, particularly within the traditional mechanical structures that players expect. *Horizon Zero Dawn*, for example, does an excellent job of encouraging players to consider ecocritical themes, but its action-heavy mechanics and focus on combat ultimately place it closer to a heroic power fantasy, despite its emphasis on the economic, systemic, and corporate factors that led to Earth's original ecological downfall. [11] As a side note, a number of recent "cozy" games have used an apocalyptic event as a precursor and backdrop to glossy pastoral happiness; and while games with a cozy aesthetic are narrowly focused on player comfort, more than perhaps any other aesthetic or genre, their disconnect from the terror and suffering of a world-ending apocalyptic event is telling.

Rather than a cheerful apocalypse or a bleak one, other models might serve more useful for inspiring activism and action—for example, games such as *Citizen Sleeper* (2022), which keeps the player on an explicitly uncomfortable precarious edge in order to survive a post-capitalist wasteland. Similarly, *Outer Wilds* (2019) famously presents players with the potential end of the universe, but subverts expectations to create, essentially, an existential crisis in a box. But not all postapocalyptic games need to present solutions to the crises of our current world. It is encouraging to see that, rather than continuing to focus on cycles of violence and survival at any cost, more and more digital games are creating play experiences centered on empathy, community, and the best parts of humanity in response to widespread calamity and crisis. ▲

11 Condis, Megan. "Sorry, wrong apocalypse: Horizon Zero Dawn, Heaven's Vault, and the ecocritical videogame." *Game Studies* 20, no. 3, 2020.