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What the end reveals

Myths in post-apocalyptic videogames

A Master's Thesis for the Degree Master of Arts (Two Years) in Visual Culture

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Abstract

The focus of this thesis is the myths and ideologies inscribed into the aesthetics, narratives and gameplay of post-apocalyptic videogames. The aim is to discuss how the conditions and conventions of the game medium shape what is presented to us as a modern, secular form of apocalypticism. The case studies presented are the two well-known videogames *Fallout 4* and *The Last Of Us*. The research focuses on three elements that these games have in common 1) the representations of a post-apocalyptic landscape, 2) the representations of monstrous humans, and 3) the representations of the survivor protagonist. The method used is a variation of Barthesian semiological analysis in which a selection of screenshots from the two games are scrutinised and compared. The result of this analysis reveals deep ambiguities manifested and dealt with through these games, exemplified by the liminal, apocalyptic state of a crumbling society giving rise to curious exploration, fun and play. Monstrous, zombie-like humans are represented as dehumanised antagonists with half-naked, deformed bodies that merge the feeling of repulsion, fear and desire into a justified call for violence. The ambiguous survivor identity is reshaped into the masculine protector role, in itself protecting both the protagonists, and the players themselves, from any criminal identity.

Keywords

Apocalypse, videogames, myths, abjection, violence

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Glossary

Game mechanics: constructs of rules or methods designed for interaction with the game state, thus providing gameplay.

Core game mechanics: the basic gameplay of a game, which determine the overall characteristics of the game itself.

Introduction

The subject of this thesis is the ‘dark’ themes of post-apocalyptic videogames, being one of the most popular and recurrent settings for major game titles since the late 1980s. I will use two recent, hugely popular and critically acclaimed titles for my study *Fallout 4*¹ and *The Last Of Us*², both produced in North America. I will analyse three elements that these games have in common 1) the representations of a post-apocalyptic landscape, 2) the representations of monstrous humans, and 3) the representations of the survivor protagonist. Finally I will bring these three parts together to form an understanding of the myths and ideologies they bring forward and how these myths interplay with the game medium itself.

Background

Videogames is a relatively young medium that has grown in popularity since the 1970s. Today it is a multi-billion-dollar industry and is considered mainstream entertainment. Nevertheless videogames are still associated with a more dubious past inside dimly lit boy’s rooms, and in company with horror, romance and sensational literature they could be considered amongst the degraded arts. Fred Botting has compared the derision of videogames with that of 18th century Gothic fiction.³ Contemporary attacks on videogames for being emotionally over-stimulating, regressive and morally corrupting go right back to the mid-1970s when the game *Death Race*⁴ caused a moral outrage.⁵ Ewan Kirkland argues that ‘videogame mechanics and conventions facilitate the expression of Gothic themes, aesthetics, narratives, and anxieties, something that becomes particularly pronounced in titles explicitly located in the horror genre.’ Even the player/game relationship can be likened to the Cyborg – a Gothic creature representing the blurring boundaries between human and machine. Post-apocalyptic videogames may not be as thoroughly Gothic as the popular game series *Silent Hill*⁶ with its ‘tales of mysterious religious cults, repressed memories, uncanny

¹ *Fallout 4* [Videogame], Bethesda Game Studios, Bethesda Softworks, 2015

² *The Last of Us* [Videogame], Naughty Dog, Sony Computer Entertainment, 2013.

³ F. Botting, ‘Aftergothic: Consumption, Machines, and Black Holes’, in Jerrold E. Hogle, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004, pp. 280–1.

⁴ *Death Race* [Videogame], Exidy, 1976.

⁵ C. A. Kocurek, ‘Who hearkens to the monster’s scream? Death, violence and the veil of the monstrous in video games’, *Visual Studies*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2015, pp. 79-89.

⁶ *Silent Hill* [Videogame], Konami Digital Entertainment, 1999-2012.

doppelgangers, murder, betrayal and incest⁷ and other titles within the survival horror genre, but there is definitely a connection between the apocalypse and the Gothic. Gothic art and architecture that developed during the Middle Ages, and which later came to inspire the Gothic horror literary genre several centuries later, often returned to motives inspired by The Book of Revelation.⁸ Somehow these dark motives have found a new form of artistic expression in today's videogames, although in our secular time not openly referring to biblical scriptures. Post-apocalyptic videogames, also dealing with horror and suspense, include several of the characteristic tropes found in Gothic fiction – two of them being fearsome monsters and uncanny environments.

On top of the Gothic themes, many post-apocalyptic videogames are heavily influenced by zombie narratives – a horror sub-genre that tracks back to the early 1940s, and popularised by George A. Romero in 1968 through his film *Night of the Living Dead*.⁹ One of the games I will use for this study, *The Last of Us*, is a straightforward zombie narrative, whilst the other game used for this study, *Fallout 4*, is a hotchpotch of aesthetical references including Gothic themes, zombie horror and retro-futuristic science fiction. Why I have chosen these two games although they operate in different game genres – *The Last of Us* being survival horror and *Fallout 4* an action role-playing game – is because the key thing that unites them is the apocalypse. The end of the world as we know it – meaning the violent breakdown of human societies and urban environments – creates the possibility to tell certain stories. The apocalypse has been used for this purpose for thousands of years, as a warning about where our actions will take us, as a promise of judgement and redemption, or as way of showing how brittle our humanity is in a crisis. These are stories of violence and horrendous beauty, but what purposes do they fulfil in today's media landscape when consumed in the form of videogames by a global audience of millions of players? In this thesis I will discuss how the conditions of the game medium shape what is presented to us as a modern, secular form of apocalypticism.

⁷ E. Kirkland, 'Gothic Videogames, Survival Horror, and the Silent Hill Series', *Gothic Studies*, 2012, vol. 14, no. 2, pp.106-122.

⁸ R. K. Emmerson & Bernard McGinn, *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, ed. Richard K. Emmerson & Bernard McGinn, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1993.

⁹ V. Dima, 'You Only Die Thrice: Zombies Revisited in The Walking Dead', *International Journal of Zizek Studies*, 2014, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 1-22.

The Night of the Living Dead [Film], dir. George A. Romero, Continental Distributing, 1968.

Relevance of the work

Videogames are still to be considered a new field of study. Scholars have debated intensely, over the last 10 years or so, the best ways to analyse games. Early game studies have been heavily criticised for focusing too much on narrative and aesthetics aspects of games, based on the argument that games are their own medium and cannot be read the same way as film or literature. Most game scholars have thus moved away from these lines of study and focused instead on the game mechanics, player interactions or other aspects more specific to games.¹⁰ Recently various scholars have raised their voices against what they call a purist tendency within game studies, forwarding ideas of a more holistic approach towards studying games, in which the aesthetics still play an important part.¹¹ Considering how many people identify not only with the mechanics of games, but also with their aesthetics (and narratives), I find it most relevant to focus on this specific aspect, and to explore what games can tell us about how we relate to apocalyptic myths of destruction, violence and fear.

Research question

My research questions are: 1) What myths are inscribed into the representations of the landscape, the monstrous humans, and the survivor protagonists of the post-apocalyptic videogames *The Last of Us* and *Fallout 4*? 2) What purpose do these myths serve in the context of the game medium?

Method and theory

The method I will use for this study is based on a variant of semiological analysis as developed by Roland Barthes in his book *Mythologies*.¹² Semiology is, in short, the study of signs and as a method it can be applied to just about anything that has meaning within culture. Written or spoken words, visual signs as well as audio, even body language, can all be read as systems of meaning. What Barthes puts forward is that much of what surrounds us today –

¹⁰ S. Niedenthal ‘What We Talk About When We Talk About Game Aesthetics’, paper presented to the 2009 Digital Games Research Association Conference (DiGRA), 1–4 Nov. 2009, pp. 1-9, <http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/09287.17350.pdf>, accessed 22 Dec. 2016.

¹¹ B. Keogh, ‘Across Worlds and Bodies: Criticism in the Age of Video Games’, *The Journal of Games Criticism* [online journal], Jan 2014, <http://gamescriticism.org/articles/keogh-1-1>, accessed 22 Dec. 2016.

¹² R. Barthes, *Mythologies*, tr. A. Lavers, Paladin, London, 1972.

media, entertainment, and advertisements – form complex networks of associations in our minds, from which we gather our understanding of the world and ourselves.¹³ These are processes we take for granted in our everyday lives and they often go unnoticed. Semiology is a way to make these processes visible and to decode underlying cultural meanings and ideologies that would otherwise be more or less unconsciously received. Barthes used the term *myth* to include messages imposed on us by authorities, businesses and basically all creators with an agenda, and which have become familiar to us through everyday exposure.¹⁴

In order to understand signs a distinction has been made between *signifier* and *signified*. Signifiers are anything that can be interpreted as a sign. Each of the signifiers has different meanings (signifieds). The relation between a signifier and a signified is not inherent but conventional and can therefore be problematized.¹⁵ Important to keep in mind is that signifiers are always part of systems that influence their meaning. In a certain context a signifier means one thing and in another context it means something completely different.¹⁶ It is therefore important to understand the cultural context in which the object of analysis is embedded.

To understand the change in meaning that a sign goes through when it is put into a specific context, Barthes draws attention to two different layers of meaning: *denotation* and *connotation*. Denotation means the literal or common sense meaning of an image. What or who is represented? When you see a picture of grass, you mentally associate to real, growing grass.¹⁷ Connotation, on the other hand, is the ideas and values expressed through *what* is represented and *how* it is represented in an image. This is a level of meaning that is superimposed on top of the denotative meaning, and it is the layer I will consider in my analysis. At its foundation the connotative layer has the denotative layer of signs and by draining them of their most common sense meaning another meaning can emerge – a meaning with an intended message. This is the layer of myth, which always has a motivation behind it. Barthes saw myth not in the sense of classical fables but in the sense of the dominant ideologies of our time.¹⁸ In my case myth becomes a bit of both. The apocalypse is a very mythical concept, but religious ideas as well as ideologies shape how we imagine the

¹³ R. Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, tr. A. Lavers; Colin Smith, Jonathan Cape, London, 1967, p. 9.

¹⁴ R. Barthes, *Mythologies*, tr. A. Lavers, Paladin, London, 1972, pp. 107-109.

¹⁵ G. Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, 4th, Sage Publications Ltd, California, 2016, p. 74.

¹⁶ *ibid.* p. 84.

¹⁷ Supposedly the denotative layer of meaning is something that everyone would agree upon. This can of course be debated since the literal is not always that easily distinguishable from the ideological as the idea suggests. If you have no notion of grass what so ever, how can you understand the meaning of the grass-picture?

¹⁸ R. Barthes, *loc. cit.*

end of the world. Here is where my interest lies, uncovering which ideologies are communicated to us through the representation of the apocalypse and how this in turn is affected by the specific situation that a game produces in terms of playability and playfulness.

When it comes to videogames it is important to take into account the aspect of their interactivity, because this fundamentally influences both what can be expressed through them and how they are experienced. Interactivity in relation to videogames means that there is a mutual relationship set in place between the game and the person involved in playing it. Both the player and the system adjust and are influenced by each other; you play the game and the game is playing you. This requires both a certain active mind-set (or playful attitude) and just as importantly a game system designed and built in a way that gives meaningful feedback for us humans to understand. In relation to semiology this means that a player interprets signs in a specific way inside a game with a focus on their functions within the game system, and that games are most often designed in a way to facilitate this specific reading. In the book *Rules of Play*, game researchers Eric Zimmerman and Katie Salen frame games as the ‘play of meaning’. What they mean is that playing a game is the same as interacting with representations, and by trying to make sense of these representations within the context of a game, you learn to understand and manipulate their behaviour.¹⁹ To play a game is to move into a magic circle – a special place different from everyday-life with its own rules and meanings. The rules of the game are an important part of the meaning-making process that the players go through. An X in the game of *Tic-Tac-Toe* means something quite different from an X in a game of *Scrabble*.²⁰ But the rules are not everything, the context is also important when meaning is established. If you play a game of *Chess* with Death, suddenly each move carries complex layers of meaning, which is certainly not there if you would play it with your child at home. Meaning is emergent, something which becomes evident when dealing with complex systems such as videogames – or language for that matter. Representation in games emerges from the relationship between a rigid, underlying rule structure and the free play of meaning that occurs as players dive into the system and engage with it.

According to anthropologist Gregory Bateson, ‘play occurs within a delimited psychological frame, a spatial and temporal boundary of a set of interactive messages.’²¹ The term *cognitive frame* comes from the field of psychology. Cognitive frames create the contexts for how we make sense of things. Barthes’ idea of a system of signification would in

¹⁹ E. Zimmerman & K. Salen, *Rules of Play*, The MIT Press, MA Cambridge, 2003, p. 370.

²⁰ *Scrabble* [Board game], James Brunot, 1938.

²¹ E. Zimmerman & K. Salen, loc. cit.

the case of games be a layer of meaning – or a cognitive frame – that exists for the purpose of play. As Barthes notes, when we interpret signs within a certain system, other possible meanings fall to the background but they do not completely disappear.²² In the mind of a player of a post-apocalyptic videogame the myth of the apocalypse will inevitably interplay with the system of meaning relating to gameplay. What is going on in this dance of meaning as it fluctuates back and forth between different systems of signification?

As cultural objects, videogames have been a challenge for the academic world. Game scholars have for many years been mainly separated into two conflicting disciplines; *narratology* and *ludology*.²³ Within narratology the attempt is to describe structures in stories that shape a reader's understanding of what is being told. In games this is not always useful simply because not all games have a clear story. The main focus in ludology – which is the leading discipline at the moment – on the other hand, is to analyse structures of interaction between the game and its player, the rules, the relative freedom of play, and the depth of simulation given to players, largely disregarding a game's aesthetic or narrative aspects.²⁴

Although semiology is not widely used within game studies, I have chosen it as a method because it gives the possibility of focusing specifically on the aesthetics. The challenge is how to best carry out such an analysis when it comes to games. According to game scholar and semiotician Gabriele Ferri videogames are 'complex semiotic object[s] comprising different functions and different instances'.²⁵ He refers to a single instance of gameplay as a game-text and points to the fact that each time you play a game you will generate a new game-text. Some videogames adapt linear textual strategies common to cinematographic productions, while others focus on giving as much freedom to the player as possible – being dynamic systems that produce an almost infinite amount of game-text variations when played. Similar to Ferri I am asking the question: How is it possible to analyse a game semiotically when what is being analysed is constantly changing?

My approach is to analyse promotional screenshots from the two post-apocalyptic videogames I have chosen for this study. Although, I do not believe that a few screenshots represent a whole game world (which can be quite complex), I do think that just as photographs, they can point out themes that are often reproduced. These screenshots are taken

²² R. Barthes, op. cit., p. 117.

²³ D. Compagno & P. Coppock, 'Introduction', in D. Compagno & P. Coppock ed., *Computer Games between Text and Practice*, E/C, Palermo, 2009, pp. 5-11.

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ G. Ferri, 'Interpretive Cooperation and Procedurality. A Dialogue between Semiotics and Procedural Criticism', in D. Compagno & P. Coppock ed., *Computer Games between Text and Practice*, E/C, Palermo, 2009, p. 16.

to publically represent the games to the outside world – to be visually impressive and also to show what to expect from the games in terms of environments, characters and atmosphere. In this way, they carry meaning on several levels. They can be seen as pictures that have meaning in themselves, even completely separated from the games. On another level, players will see the screenshots as picturing spaces for play.

I will use a number of selected screenshots as a way to exemplify certain elements of the apocalyptic myths presented in the games. In order to interpret these myths, and to form an understanding of the interplay of meaning that happens during play, I will consider both the perspective of a more general observer and that specifically of a player. To deepen the analysis of the player perspective further (to make it more interesting), I will include basic information about the two games that I retrieve from detailed descriptions collected in fan wikis, from online game trailers, and as well from my own experience of playing the games.

Selection of source materials

The screenshots I have chosen for this study are taken from the two games *Fallout 4* and *The Last of Us*. To decide which images to use, out of the many available, I went through all the screenshots I could find from the two games, using online searches, and looked for patterns. I then chose a selection of pictures that 1) featured clear representations of any of the three elements I wished to study, and 2) shared similar perspectives and motifs from both the two games, in order to facilitate the comparison. I chose screenshots that I found representative of the games, at the same time avoiding ones that included too many characters or other game elements that was not the focus of this study.

To complement the screenshots as source material I chose the two fan wikis; *Fallout Wiki* (<http://fallout.wikia.com>) and *The Last of Us Wiki* (<http://thelastofus.wikia.com/>), as well as official game trailers published on *YouTube*.

Chapter 1: The sublime apocalypse

Short summary of chapters

In this chapter I will introduce to the theme of the apocalypse and its cultural relevance. I will then continue with a comparative semiological analysis of selected screenshots representing the apocalyptic landscape from the two games *Fallout 4* and *The Last of Us*. I will suggest two main interpretations that fall under the sub-themes of 1) *Liminality* and 2) *The Sublime*. I will go deeper into these two sub-themes before I move on to a conclusion of the chapter.

Introduction to the apocalypse

The word ‘apocalypse’ is derived from the Greek *apocalupsis*, which means to ‘uncover’ or ‘reveal’.²⁶ It refers to the prophetic vision granted to St. John of Patmos as recorded in the final chapter of the New Testament, The Book of Revelation. The meaning of the word apocalypse, however, has by now become closely associated with violent change, destruction and transformation of the physical world.

The apocalypse is a reoccurring theme in narratives and in art throughout history. The violent prophecy, rich with symbolism, described in The Book of Revelation is still debated and it has a continuing influence on our culture even today. The longing for apocalyptic closure and an escape into a new order of existence still seem to attract us, but since the horrific events of World War II the fantasies of the apocalypse have become even darker and have often lost their hope for a salvation of humankind. World War II marks the end of utopian aspirations of the modernist era, whether the dream of social transformation heralded by Russian Communists or the thousand-year Aryan empire of Third Reich.²⁷ The philosopher Walter Benjamin, who for many years owned a print of *Angelus Novus* – painted by Paul Klee in 1920 – captures this new darker view of history and progress in a description of Klee’s painting in his essay ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’. It was written in 1940 just before Benjamin’s attempt to escape from France, an escape that led to his tragic suicide

²⁶ Oxford University Press, ‘Definition of apocalypse in English’, *Oxford Dictionary of English* [online], 2015, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/apocalypse>, accessed 20 Dec. 2016.

²⁷ R. Dellamora, ‘Introduction’, in R. Dellamora ed., *Postmodern apocalypse – Theory and Cultural Practice at the End*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995, p. 2.

after the Gestapo captured him in Spain a few months later. He described the ‘Angel of History’ in the following way:

His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.²⁸

This is a quote by Benjamin that is often used because of its strikingly dark beauty. I use it to show the complete lack of hope it offers. Apocalyptic narratives up to this point had been violent and terrifying, but also filled with promises of redemption. According to historian Daniel Boyarin what emerges after World War II is the concept of apocalypse as an endtime-without-judgement.²⁹ Instead what we get is an ongoing state of emergency where something precious is constantly eternally being lost. Progress becomes disaster.

Our own time of socio-political turmoil, accelerated cultural transition and geopolitical crisis has brought on a cultural mood permeated with apocalyptic obsession. *Fin de millénnium* represented the ending of a violent century and the beginning of an uncertain future. Gothic metaphors dating from the 18th century *fin de siècle* are seemingly now of equal relevance.³⁰ Atrocious monsters and apocalyptic disasters are common themes in videogames, as well as in science fiction films and literature since the beginning of the 1980s. There is apparently a certain seductive attraction of the theme, an attraction which coincides with the beginning of the information era when digital culture began to spread into our living rooms in the form of personal computers and game consoles, manifesting itself in films such as *TRON*³¹, *War games*³² and *The Terminator*³³ as well as in the publication of William

²⁸ W. Benjamin, ‘Thesis on the Philosophy of History’ in Hanna Arendt ed. & Harry Zohn tr., *Illuminations*, Schocken Books, New York, 1976, pp. 257-258.

²⁹ R. Dellamora, op. cit., p. 5.

³⁰ J. P. Carstens, ‘Uncovering the Apocalypse: Narratives of Collapse and Transformation in the 21st Century Fin de Siècle’, PhD thesis, Stellenbosch University, 2013, <http://scholar.sun.ac.za/handle/10019.1/85700>, accessed 20 Dec. 2016. p. 1.

³¹ *TRON* [Film], Walt Disney Productions, 1982.

³² *War Games* [Film], MGM/UA Entertainment Company, 1983.

³³ *The Terminator* [Film], Orion Pictures, 1984.

Gibson's *Neuromancer*.³⁴ This is also the time when videogames reached mainstream popularity. Over the last forty years our lifestyles have radically changed due to advances in information technology with the rapid development of computers and mobile phones. Alvin Toffler refers to this change as the 'third wave'³⁵ or post-industrial society. He also coined the terms 'information overload'³⁶ and 'future shock'³⁷ to describe the cultural trauma caused by this transition, and in doing so he propelled an apocalyptic fantasy of technological progress leading to catastrophe.

Since the 1990s we have become aware of the devastating effects of capitalism and consumer culture in the form of climate change and species extinction. Add population growth and resource scarcity, migration crisis, the collapse of permanent employment, fear of new pandemics – even Donald Trump – and you get a gloomy picture of the state of the world today. No wonder apocalyptic fantasies are more popular than ever. At the same time, as dark as they may seem there is still some vague sense of hope lingering within these fantasies. I read it as a hope of breaking out, breaking free from commodity culture (the production lines have broken down) and finding a new way of existing in the world. The ambiguity of destruction and playfulness, grief and hope, is certainly something I see as permeating the post-apocalyptic landscape of the two games I have analysed; *The Last of Us* and *Fallout 4*.

Apocalypse or post-apocalypse – what exists after the end?

The term post-apocalypse is often used to signify a fictional world in which a great disaster has taken place, something so devastating that it can be compared to the end of the world – the apocalypse. What becomes confusing is that if the apocalypse is actually the end of the world, what can exist after it has happened? The post-apocalyptic worlds seem to be in a limbo, not yet knowing whether they belong to the end or to a beginning. The stories taking place there get their energy from the actual end looming just around the corner as a constant threat to whoever managed to survive so far. My interpretation therefore is that what is often called a post-apocalyptic world is actually not truly 'post'-apocalyptic but rather mid-apocalyptic or simply just apocalyptic – the on-going state of emergency which Boyarin was referring to. I will still use the term post-apocalyptic in this thesis, because it is the commonly

³⁴ W. Gibson, *Neuromancer*, Ace Books, New York, 1984.

³⁵ A. Toffler, *The Third Wave*, Bantam Books, New York, 1980.

³⁶ A. Toffler, *Future Shock*, Bantam Books, New York, 1970.

³⁷ *ibid.*

used term for the genre of the games I'm studying, but I see it as a term describing the period after a great catastrophe that is part of an on-going apocalypse in a world still waiting for the final resolution.

Analysis of the apocalyptic landscape

The selected material

I have chosen two pairs of images in order to compare and analyse the apocalyptic landscape represented in the two videogames *The Last of Us* and *Fallout 4*. The first picture is a screenshot taken from a trailer promoting *The Last of Us* and published by Naughty Dog on YouTube.³⁸ The second picture is a screenshot taken from the official trailer published by Bethesda Game Studios featuring environments from their game *Fallout 4*.³⁹ The third picture is taken from a series of screenshots published by Naughty Dog in an album on the website *Flickr*.⁴⁰ The fourth picture is taken from a selection of screenshots from *Fallout 4*, published by the developers in a blog post titled 'The Graphics Technology of Fallout 4'.⁴¹

One has to keep in mind that these images are not photographs but pictures taken inside 3D-generated digital worlds. They resemble photographs because in the same way they are snapshots of time inside a bigger world, but these are worlds that in themselves can be manipulated, for example through camera angles or lighting, in order for screenshots to turn out in a specific way. These game worlds are completely constructed.

Analysis of the apocalyptic landscape

I begin with the first pair of screenshots that I have chosen to represent the apocalyptic landscape. The first image come from the game *The Last of Us* and shows an urban landscape inspired by the city of Pittsburgh in the United States.⁴² We can discern a highway filled with rusty, broken-down cars and overgrown with grass and bushes. In the background we glimpse

³⁸ *The Last of Us | Joel and Ellie Truck Ambush - Cinematic trailer (2012) Sony PS3* [video], moviemanticsDE, 4 June 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ETsBuTu8Hic>, accessed 20 Dec. 2016.

³⁹ *Fallout 4 Trailer - Official Trailer 2015 (HD)* [video], Constipated Owl, 3 June 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vdm1WcFHvcw>, accessed 20 Dec. 2016.

⁴⁰ Naughty Dog, 'The Last of Us screenshots', Flickr [website], https://www.flickr.com/photos/naughty_dog/sets/72157628351324573/, accessed 20 Dec. 2016.

⁴¹ Bethesda Game Studios, 'The Graphics Technology of Fallout 4', Bethesda.net [website], 4 Nov. 2015, <https://bethesda.net/en/article/2Y37xeRPeUW0EgkgaKW8oA/the-graphics-technology-of-fallout-4>, accessed 20 Dec. 2016.

⁴² Fandom, 'Pittsburgh (chapter)', The Last of Us Wiki [website], [http://thelastofus.wikia.com/wiki/Pittsburgh_\(chapter\)](http://thelastofus.wikia.com/wiki/Pittsburgh_(chapter)), accessed 20 Dec. 2016.

the West End Bridge over the Ohio River. The sun is shining and everything seems to be still. There are no people around. The picture tells us about a city, perhaps Pittsburgh, in which some time ago there has been a sudden disaster of some sort. Nature reclaiming a place once busy with traffic and people. The sunlight together with the lack of people and movement make us think of stillness and possibly a threat. The question: ‘Where is everyone?’ lingers above everything.



Figure 1.1 Post-apocalyptic landscape from *The Last of Us*. All rights reserved to Naughty Dog.



Figure 1.2 Post-apocalyptic landscape from *Fallout 4*. All rights reserved to Bethesda Softworks.

In the next screenshot taken from *Fallout 4* we see a similar situation. Here we are in a more suburban landscape with same coloured bungalows along a street with broad sidewalks and few cars. The houses are in a bad shape. The roofs have fallen in and some of them seem to be close to collapse. The pavement in the street is severely cracked. Grass and bushes have grown through cracks, but even these are now dry and brown, possible dead or dying. The car we see on the side of the street is but a rusty shell. In the background, power lines can be seen, the towering pylons still standing. The sky is blue with a few blushing clouds and the setting or rising sun is barely hidden behind a mountain. The only living being in the picture is a large dog running away from us.

In the trailer from *Fallout 4*, from which this image is taken, we also get a flashback glimpse of the same suburban street just before the nuclear disaster.⁴³ It is then a neat-looking 1950s styled neighbourhood with new bungalows in baby blue. The surrounding trees are bright with autumn coloured leaves and the grass is still green. Men, women and children are running down the street to take shelter. This clearly serves as a contrasting image to the current post-apocalyptic landscape and gives us information about how life was before the disaster. *Fallout*, through the whole game series, plays with a bright and optimistic, retro-futuristic aesthetics inspired by the 1950s, in stark contrast to the gloomy aftermath of a nuclear catastrophe.

If we move on to compare the two images from the separate games, we find that several of the signifiers are very similar. Both images feature an empty street with a cracked surface, broken down cars and vegetation taking over a place once constructed for people. The lack of people and movement gives a poetic stillness but also communicates an underlying threat.

On the other hand, if we look for differences it is most notable that the vegetation is represented in two different ways – in the first image we have lush, bright green leaves and grass, where as in the second image nature seems dry, dead or struggling. This is telling when one knows that in the first game, *The Last of Us*, the disaster is brought on by a wildly spreading fungus disease growing inside the human body⁴⁴ but harmless to nature in itself,

⁴³ *Fallout 4 Trailer - Official Trailer 2015 (HD)* [video], Constipated Owl, 3 June 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vdm1WcFHvcw>, accessed 20 Dec. 2016.

⁴⁴ Fandom, 'Cordyceps Brain Infection', *The Last of Us Wiki* [website], http://thelastofus.wikia.com/wiki/Cordyceps_Brain_Infection, accessed 20 Dec. 2016.

while in the second game, *Fallout 4*, it is a nuclear war leading to a massive release of radiation which has killed almost everything, including the plant life.⁴⁵

Myths interpreted from different perspectives

What are the myths being presented to us through these images? First of all, I read the landscape as representing a world where humans are no longer dominant. There is no state power or society to take care of its citizens. Somehow there is both a feeling of regret and a sense of relief in this. Something great has been lost, but there is a new tranquillity – an empty space where before there would have been people going on with their lives. Hope is represented especially in the first picture, which is full of flourishing plant life. In the second picture the dog is scampering into the future. There is a way forward. I see this both as a message of doom – human society is not what this world needs – and as a message of hope. There is a beauty in the world, and in that beauty there is still a hope of finding paradise – a way back to innocence.

Table 1.1 Shared connotators and connotation in Figure 1.1 and 1.2

Connotator	Connotation
Destruction of areas and objects made for people	Societal breakdown, violence, grief, threat, uncertainty, doom
Open space without people	Emptiness, loneliness, loss and freedom
Invading nature	Nature will outlive us
Remaining landmarks and power lines	Reminder of former greatness, and that society can still be rebuilt
Sunshine	The natural world is overall unaffected by human disaster
Landscape perspective and depth of focus	This is the world spreading out before us
A road is leading into the picture	We have a road to follow

If we now take the view of a player, what do these pictures communicate? The landscape, as it is laid out in front of us, becomes an invitation. From the perspective of play, everything that is out of the ordinary is interesting. A broken down car can be climbed on top of. An empty house can be looted. The cracks and the broken lines of the post-apocalyptic landscape

⁴⁵ Fandom, 'Fallout world', Fallout Wiki [website], http://fallout.wikia.com/wiki/Fallout_world, accessed 20 Dec. 2016.

hold the promise of play. The road ahead is a mission. Anything alive is either an enemy or a possible companion. That there is nothing else alive in these pictures shows that spaces exist inside the game worlds without enemies, spaces that are there to be discovered and enjoyed for a moment without the stress of violence. You can do anything you want, because no one is there to stop you. The power lies with the individual. In that we may note, the emphasis of this reading is on freedom rather than loneliness, on curiosity rather than regret, and on play rather than death.

Table 1.2 Connotators and connotation in Figure 1.1 and 1.2 from a player perspective

Connotator	Connotation
Destruction of areas and objects made for people	Freedom, spaces to play, treasures to be found
Open space without people	Curiosity, a place to discover or somewhere to rest from fighting
Invading nature	Playfulness, climbing
Remaining landmarks and power lines	Possible resources
Sunshine	Joy, fun and play
Landscape perspective and depth of focus	The world is big and inviting
A road is leading into the picture	Quest to take on

Liminality and the liminoid

What is the link then between the disturbing and the playful, the threat and the excitement present in these images? I suggest that it lies within the notion of *liminality*. Arnold van Gennep (1873–1957) invented the term, but it was Victor Turner who further developed it and brought it to fame in the 1960s.⁴⁶ Liminality is used to describe the ambiguous in-between state that occurs in rituals when you have left one identity behind and have not yet retrieved a new one. More recently liminality has been used to describe the situation of large-scale societies that are undergoing a period of violent transition or a ‘collapse of order’.⁴⁷ This fits

⁴⁶ A. Szakolczai, ‘Liminality and Experience: Structuring transitory situations and transformative events’, *International Political Anthropology*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2009, pp. 141-172.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

well to describe a post-apocalyptic world where society is in shreds and new rules apply. In rituals there is always a master of ceremony to be the guide out of the confusing liminal state and into a new clarity. In a liminal society people look for the same kind of guidance – a saviour to lead the way – but if no one is there to take the role it will lead to anxiety and disillusion. Play and games, on the other hand, lie within what Turner termed the *liminoid* – experiences which are, like rituals, governed by different rules, but ones that are in essence optional.⁴⁸ In digital games, the rules are written into the code of the experience, which means that there is always guidance for how to act and interpret what is going on. In post-apocalyptic games the experience of the liminal and the liminoid are merging together.

Sublime light

The next two screenshots I analyse here are similar to the first two. Again we find the broken down cars, ruins, and nature taking over an urban environment. Still no animals or people can be seen. What I would like to put an extra focus on with these two images is the light. An intense sunlight is present in both of them. This is not unusual for the screenshots I have seen from the two games. It is interesting because from a player perspective the light has no particular purpose. My suggestion is that the developers use it to a) show off the details and beauty of the landscape represented by the 3D engine, and b) give an emotional contrast to the destruction displayed in the games. As a connotator intense light has strong religious and spiritual references. My thoughts go to William Turner (1775–1851) who used similar kind of light in his well-known paintings as a way to show the emanation of God's spirit.⁴⁹ In combination with the connotators of the apocalyptic landscape the intense light revive the promise of final judgement and redemption. But as a player we cannot be sure. During play the light inside the game world is not constant, some scenes emphasises light and others darkness. Still, what these screenshots show is that to some extent the longing for a spiritual purpose in all the horror can be read into the games. This goes back to a long tradition within aesthetics of representing nature as possessing an over-powering beauty and greatness as well as something dark and unpredictable. It is called the *sublime*.

⁴⁸ V. Turner, 'Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology', Rice Institute Pamphlet - Rice University Studies, vol. 60, no. 3, 1974. pp. 53-92.

⁴⁹ G. Finley, 'The Genesis of Turner's "Landscape Sublime"', *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, vol. 42, no. 2/3, Deutscher Kunstverlag, 1979, p. 141-165.



Figure 1.3. Post-apocalyptic landscape from *The Last of Us*. All rights reserved to Naughty Dog.



Figure 1.4. Post-apocalyptic landscape from *Fallout 4*. All rights reserved to Bethesda Softworks.



Figure 1.5. Pembroke Castle, South Wales, Thunder Storm Approaching by William Turner (1801)
Public domain.

Edmund Burke (1729-1797) was the first philosopher to argue that the sublime and the beautiful are mutually exclusive. The sublime for him was awe-inspiring and at the same time frightening, but just like beauty it could give the viewer a sense of pleasure.⁵⁰ In the same period as Burke, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) stated that the sublime is represented by a quality of greatness without boundaries that surpasses the mind's capability of understanding.⁵¹ Schopenhauer (1788-1860) later clarified the feeling of the sublime by describing it as the pleasure obtained from perceiving objects that threaten to hurt or destroy the observer, such as turbulent nature.⁵² Viewing objects that could not sustain the life of the observer, such as a desert or an iceberg, could according to Schopenhauer, let the observer attain a weaker feeling of the sublime. The fullest feeling of the sublime, on the other hand, would rise from the pleasure of knowing our human nothingness and oneness with nature. The French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard (1924-1998) connects the sublime and how it expresses the limit of our conceptual powers, with the uncovering of the instability permeating the postmodern world.⁵³ One of the latest contributions on the topic is Tsang Lap

⁵⁰ E. Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Simon & Brown, 2013.

⁵¹ I. Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, 2nd edn, University of California Press, 2004.

⁵² A. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation vol. 1*, Dover Publications, Mineola, 1966.

⁵³ J-F, Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, Stanford University Press, 1994.

Chuen (1943-) theory of the sublime as concerned with self-realization at the limit of our existence.⁵⁴

The reason why I have lingered on the subject of the sublime, is that I wish to show that it is a concept that has to do with residing on the limits of existence, or even past them. The apocalypse is through this perspective in essence sublime, something that is emphasised by the screenshots and their use of light. Coming back to the liminal and the liminoid – states of dissolved identities, willingly or by necessity, and a breakdown of ordinary societal rules – situations that seem to give rise to the experience of the sublime, if one is safe enough to enjoy it. Games provide a much-needed safe environment to play with boundaries and limits, especially in a postmodern world where everything else seems to be falling apart. The screenshots invite us to experience the sublime for ourselves. I can feel this calling ripple through me as I watch the images – a feeling I know I will only be able to catch a glimpse of when I'm actually playing the games, distracted as I will be by survival and practical problem-solving.

Conclusion of chapter

In this chapter I have given an introduction to the topic of the apocalypse and how it has come to be so popular in science fiction literature, horror movies and videogames today. Apocalypsim changed after World War II to an idea of a world-destruction without the original promise of redemption. What we find represented in videogames such as *The Last of Us* and *Fallout 4* is an apocalypsim that again show signs of hope for a spiritual meaning behind the horrors displayed in the fictional worlds. The ambiguity of a destruction that gives rise to play is manifested through these games. They play with the liminal state of a society in dissolution and the liminoid experience of play itself. The experience of the sublime in relation to the apocalypse is emphasised by how the light is depicted. This helps to draw us in and set into motion the longing to catch a glimpse of an answer to our own existence. This leads me to the next chapter where I will continue to examine how monstrous humans are represented in the games, and how it unveils prevailing ideas of violence and the monstrous-feminine.

⁵⁴ T. L. Chuen, *The Sublime: Groundwork towards a Theory*, University of Rochester Press, Rochester, 1998.

Chapter 2: Violence, desire and monstrous humans

Short summary of chapter

In this chapter I will give an introduction to the theme of monsters and the monstrous. Thereafter I will continue with a semiological analysis of selected screenshots representing the monstrous humans from the two games *Fallout 4* and *The Last of Us*. I will suggest two main interpretations falling under the sub-themes of 1) *Justified violence* and 2) *Desire and apocalyptic purgation*.

Introduction to monsters and the monstrous

The time of monsters is now. Vampires, werewolves, dragons, demons, giant spiders, aliens and let us not forget the ever-popular zombies – mainstream entertainment media are flooded with monsters. Why are they so popular right now? Monsters have existed since the beginning of human history in our myths and nightmares. Their role has always been to embody our fears – the fear of the unknown, of the uncontrollable. They bring to the surface what dwells in our deepest, darkest imagination. Fear of terrorism, foreigners, moral corruption, pandemics, nature disasters, nuclear war or uncontrollable scientific developments – a globalised world has a lot of fear to deal with. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen observes, ‘America, a society that has created and commodified “ambient fear” – a kind of total fear that saturates day-to-day living, prodding and silently antagonizing but never speaking its own true name.’⁵⁵ To deal with the fear of that which is hard to grasp, creating monsters becomes a strategy to understand and to domesticate our terrors. Vampires once came out of the fear of a decadent aristocracy, foreigners and more specifically the representation of Jews in the 1800s.⁵⁶ The zombie on the other hand can be linked to the fear of an uprising working class and a capitalism going haywire with over-consumption.⁵⁷ The appearance of monsters is always a sign that something is deadly wrong. The word *monstrum* means ‘that which

⁵⁵ J. J. Cohen, *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. J. J. Cohen, University of Minnesota Press, 1996. p.viii

⁵⁶ J. Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, Duke University Press Books, Durham, 2012. p. 86-106.

⁵⁷ J. D. Ambrosius & J. M. Valenzano III, “”People in Hell Want Slurpees””: The Redefinition of the Zombie Genre through the Salvific Portrayal of Family on AMC’s *The Walking Dead*”, *Communication Monographs*, vol. 83, no.1, 2016, p. 71.

reveals,' or 'that which warns'.⁵⁸ Monsters are warnings of an oncoming (or ongoing) apocalypse. They reveal to us what will lead to our destruction. What makes them especially useful as objects of analysis is the fact that they are not real. They are creatures of our imagination and thus 'the monstrous body is pure culture'.⁵⁹

Another side to the role of the monstrous is to show us what happens when we are crossing the boundary of 'normal' – revealing *the Other* of the humanist subject, which traditionally is considered to be male and white. The monstrous has, among other things, been associated with women's bodies ever since Aristotle declared the female birth as the most common form of deformity.⁶⁰

In her book *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva writes about *abjection* and the *abject*, inspired by ideas from psychoanalysis.⁶¹ She defines the abject as that which resides somewhere between the subject and the object – something that was once part of ourselves but has been rejected, cast out. The food that we once eagerly put in our mouth becomes repellent as soon as it leaves our body in the form of vomit or excrements. A human body, warm and beautiful, turns into something frightening in the form of a cold, decaying corpse. We need the abject in order to define our own identity, through repelling that which we are not. Following this line of thought Kristeva explains the notion of women's bodies as monstrous with the mother becoming abject at the moment when the child rejects her for the father who represents the symbolic order.

Barbara Creed in her essay 'Horror and the monstrous-feminine: An imaginary abjection' explain Kristeva's work in the following way:

In general terms, Kristeva is attempting to explore the different ways in which abjection, as a source of horror, works within patriarchal societies, as a means of separating the human from the non-human and the fully constituted subject from the partially formed subject. Ritual becomes a means by which societies both renew their initial contact with the abject element and then exclude that element.⁶²

⁵⁸ J. J. Cohen, op. cit., p. 4.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*

⁶⁰ M. Shildrick, 'Posthumanism and the Monstrous Body', *Body and Society*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1996, p. 4.

⁶¹ J. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, tr. Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, 1982.

⁶² B. Creed, 'Horror and the monstrous-feminine: An imaginary abjection', *Screen*, vol. 27, no. 1, 1986, p. 63.

Videogames have a long history with monsters, and in no other medium are they as common. There are of course lots of cute, often furball-like, tiny monster creatures inspired by Japanese culture that we cuddle and protect, but just as common are the horrifying, bloodthirsty versions. Monsters are used in games as obstructions – something to run from, fight against and inevitably to kill. Fantasies of fear and aggression are allowed a safe expression within these game worlds.

In *Fallout 4* there is an abundance of monsters in all shapes and forms. In the following analysis, though, I have chosen to focus specifically on humans who have turned monstrous in a zombie-like way. The reason is, first of all, because they exist both in *Fallout 4* and in *The Last of Us* and secondly, because I find their in-between state of mixed humanity and monstrosity very interesting. I also want to make it clear that other human beings just as often are the antagonists in these two games. I will come back to the topic of criminals, or ‘bad guys’ in the next chapter.

Analysis of monstrous humans

The selected material

I have chosen three screenshots in order to analyse monstrous humans represented in the two videogames *The Last of Us* and *Fallout 4*. The first two pictures are a pair of screenshots taken from an image series published by Naughty Dog in an album on *Flickr*.⁶³ The second picture is a screenshot published by *Extreme Tech*, an online tech magazine in an article about *Fallout 4*.⁶⁴

Analysis of monstrous humans

In the two screenshots taken from *The Last of Us* we find a human being with a strange bloated face, a teeth-baring, wide-open mouth and arms stretched out in front of the body as if to grab or hold on to her prey. The monstrous figure seems to be a woman based on her body shape and the torn clothing she wears. If we focus on the second screenshot of the attack, where the face of the woman is visible, it is clear that something has blinded her. Her eyes are closed and blood is coming out of them. The whole left side of her face is deformed by a large

⁶³ Naughty Dog, loc. cit.

⁶⁴ J. Hruska, ‘Fallout 4 is a great game but a terrible RPG’, *ExtremeTech* [website], 16 Feb. 2016, <http://www.extremetech.com/gaming/223070-fallout-4-is-a-great-game-but-a-terrible-rpg>, accessed 20 Dec. 2016.

outgrowth. Her mouth seems unusually large and her lips are missing, baring the upper row of uneven teeth. Her chin is smeared with blood. Without any doubt she is very dangerous.

In the game this is what is called a *Clicker* – a person who has had prolonged exposure to the lethal fungus, manifesting in large uneven outgrowths deforming the face.⁶⁵ Clickers are blind but can maneuver through the use of echolocation, which produces audible clicking sounds, hence their name.

In the fan wiki dedicated to *The Last of Us* the author notes that ‘[i]nterestingly, most of the Clickers seen in the game appear to have been female humans. Whether this is intentional or due to developer oversight is unknown.’⁶⁶



Figure 2.1 Clicker attack in *The Last of Us*. All rights reserved to Naughty Dog.

⁶⁵ The different stages of infection by the fungus have produced four different variations of monstrous humans represented in the game. They are called Runners, Stalkers, Clickers and Bloaters – the further the infection, the further from being human they become.

⁶⁶ Fandom, ‘The Infected’, *The Last of Us* Wiki [website], http://thelastofus.wikia.com/wiki/The_Infected#Clickers, accessed 20 Dec. 2016.



Figure 2.2 Close up of the clicker attack. All rights reserved to Naughty Dog.

In the first screenshot the female clicker is running towards a man, a woman and a girl in a dark room, lit up by flashlights, inside a decaying house. In the second picture the same man is being attacked and is struggling to keep the deformed woman away from him using only his hands. Next to them we see a wall with several marks from gunshots, letting us know that violent things have happened here before.

In the next screenshot, coming from the game *Fallout 4*, we find a similar situation. Two strangely deformed human figures are running towards the camera with their mouths wide-open and their arms stretched out. It is harder this time to say if the figures are female or male. There is no hair or body shape that suggests any femininity, but the torn clothes being worn by at least one of them, could once have been a dress. Their eyes are closed or glow with a yellow shine.

In the game these monstrous humans are called *Feral ghouls*. They are ‘former humans who have become horribly irradiated by the radioactive fallout covering the wasteland from the Great War.’⁶⁷ The exposure to radiation, apparently, degenerated their brains, turning them into mindless, radiation-resistant cannibals.

⁶⁷ Fandom, ‘Feral Ghoul’, *Fallout Wiki* [website], [http://fallout.wikia.com/wiki/Feral_ghoul_\(Fallout_4\)](http://fallout.wikia.com/wiki/Feral_ghoul_(Fallout_4)), accessed 20 Dec. 2016.



Figure 2.3 Attack by feral ghouls in *Fallout 4*. All rights reserved to Bethesda Softworks.

If we move on to compare the screenshots from the two games we find that several of the signifiers are very similar. Both the clicker and the feral ghouls are half-naked, deformed human beings attacking with big open mouths and outstretched arms. Placed in the centre of the focus point in all the images are the wide-open mouths. This signifier thus become the most significant and is in fact the main thing that makes these figures truly disturbing. Without the open mouths they could be interpreted as severely sick human beings reaching for help. Now instead they become a dangerous threat.

The deformed bodies and ruined skin signify the monstrosity of these (former) human beings. They remind us of bloated and decaying corpses and therefore it is easy to find them disgusting. At the same time there is something very needy about them, with their torn clothes, their open mouths and outreached arms, as an expression of hunger. If it weren't for their aggression they would seem almost pitiable. On the other hand, the half-naked bodies with ripped clothes, open mouths and closed eyes could be a sign of overwhelming desire and a longing for sexual debauchery.

Myths interpreted from different perspectives

What can these pictures reveal to us about an apocalyptic world and the monsters that linger therein? One can interpret these once human creatures as warnings. They tell us of a world where it is dangerous to lose control, to succumb to overpowering emotions of hunger, anger or passion. The once human creatures are now blind to reason, tormented with a need to

consume in a monstrous, yet sexual, act of indulging in pure flesh. They have left culture behind and descended into an animalistic state where there are no morals, no mind – only body. The skin of their bodies, which symbolises the border between the inside and the outside, is disintegrating. They cross borders that should never be crossed, and they pay for this with the loss of community, with violence and death. They are repelled from society and killed whenever possible. The only way to prevent the world from ending, is to exterminate all monstrous humans and start a new world with those who kept morally sane and hygienically decent.

Table 2.1 Shared connotators and connotation in Figure 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3

Connotator	Connotation
Wide-open mouth	Hunger, consumption, vagina, womb
Unseeing or deformed eyes	Blind to reason, blinded by fury or passion
Outstretched arms	Endless wanting, desire
Torn clothes	Poverty, declining culture, becoming-animal
Naked skin	Border between the inside and the outside, natural state, sexuality
Deformed body	Unnatural, sick, monstrous, the inside becoming outside

Now considering the player perspective, what do these images tell us? The most obvious answer is that they symbolise obstruction and threat. In the game world there are creatures that wish to harm us and we need to defend ourselves. Their means of attack seems to be running and grabbing in order to bite. We can't tell how fast they move, but they are clearly very dangerous. As a player your goal is to stay alive and to have a little fun while you are doing it. In one of the pictures the man is holding a gun, which tells us there will be weapons to use as defence. We might hope for even more weapons of different sorts. In the fan wiki for *Fallout 4* it states cheerfully 'It is now possible to dismember ghouls, however they will continue to chase and bite the Sole Survivor even if they lose both of their arms.'⁶⁸

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

Table 2.2 Connotators and connotation in Figure 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3 from a player perspective

Connotator	Connotation
Wide-open mouth	Threat, method of attack, entry
Unseeing or deformed eyes	Lack of humanity, weakness
Outstretched arms	Obstruction, threat
Torn clothes	Weakness, insanity, unpredictability
Naked skin	No armour, voyeuristic invitation
Deformed body	Lack of humanity, obstruction, antagonist, danger

In the fan wiki for *The Last of Us* we find out that it is impossible to strangle a Clicker. Instead using Molotov Cocktails is the most efficient form of attack.⁶⁹ As a player your focus when encountering monstrous creatures will most often be on how to avoid, harm or kill them. The purpose is to stay alive at all costs and to get some pleasure out of the action and violence.

Justified violence

Contrary to how violence often is represented in popular media, according to micro-sociological evidence, real violence is actually very difficult.⁷⁰ Sociologist Randall Collins explains, ‘what humans have greatest trouble with is a violent confrontation with another human being when they can see each other’s eyes and face, communicating each other’s humanity’.⁷¹ By removing or distorting the appearance of the eyes and face of a person, it becomes much easier to use violence against him or her. The simple knowledge that the figure in front of you is a monster, although they appear human, will help along your appetite for violence too.

⁶⁹ Fandom, ‘The Infected’, The Last of Us Wiki [website],

http://thelastofus.wikia.com/wiki/The_Infected#Clickers, accessed 20 Dec. 2016.

⁷⁰ R. Collins, ‘Entering and leaving the tunnel of violence: Micro-sociological dynamics of emotional entrainment in violent interactions’, *Current Sociology*, SAGE Journals, vol. 61, no. 2, 2012, p. 135.

⁷¹ *ibid.*

According to Carly A. Kocurek the practice of rendering on-screen victims monstrous is a long-standing one, starting with the game *Death Race* in 1976, in which the goal is to run over pedestrians with your car. After a moral panic broke out during its release the game's publishers quickly claimed that the in-game victims (which were too pixelated to see clearly) were nothing else but dangerous monsters.⁷² The killings were thus justified. Violence in the form of combat is one of the most common gameplay features in popular videogames today. It is a very effective form of game mechanic, because the goal of the situation is clear and easily relatable, and at the same time it will give the player an adrenaline rush. When violence is the core mechanic of a game, it is the job of the designers and scriptwriters to find a way to both justify it and to make it pleasurable. In the screenshots analysed for this chapter we find that the monstrous humans have distorted bodies and faces. The mouths are in focus in the images and not the eyes, making it easier to see them as dehumanised. Kocurek argues that:

By dehumanising the victims of on-screen violence, alternative blood presents victims as monstrous; although this is a deliberate strategy on the part of game designers, it is one that invokes – purposely or otherwise – propaganda strategies that have long been used as a political strategy to justify the marginalisation, abuse and even extermination of populations marked as ‘undesirable’.⁷³

The undesirable monster, which it is justifiable to kill, is an old myth evoked by the apocalyptic theme in both *The Last of Us* and *Fallout 4*. The question is; what is it we want to rid ourselves of by destroying these monstrous humans?

Desire and apocalyptic purgation

I would now like to put focus on the ambiguity that the chosen screenshots express in the form of monstrosity, violence and sexual desire and put it in relationship to the apocalypse. Kristeva writes:

⁷² Carly A. Kocurek, ‘Who hearkens to the monster’s scream? Death, violence and the veil of the monstrous in video games’, *Visual Studies*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2015, pp. 79-89.

⁷³ *ibid*, p. 80.

[I]t is around the time of the Christian era that the apocalyptic genre is established; it is broadly inspired by Jewish prophetic literature and other Middle-Eastern ones as well, immersed in a flow of cataclysms, catastrophes, deaths, and ends of the world. An identical sacred horror for the feminine, the diabolical, and the sexual are expounded therein, by means of an incantation whose particular prosody confirms the name of the genre: a discovering, a baring of truth.⁷⁴

The sacred horror for the feminine that Kristeva describes as part of the apocalyptic myth becomes most evident in The Book of Revelation with its detailed accounts of the physical destruction and consumption of the Whore of Babylon. Mary Wilson Carpenter reads this as male sexual paranoia where the Whore of Babylon symbolises the body of the Other – the female body – which is climactically destroyed.⁷⁵ The Whore is the manifestation and embodiment of female sin and corruption. In Revelation she is described as ‘[a] woman drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus: and when I saw her, I wondered with great admiration’ (17:6). When reading this description I cannot help but see the female Clicker from *The Last of Us* in front of me. The ancient myth of the monstrous whore with her fatal, female sexuality that threatens to castrate and consume the male protagonists – in fact end the world all together – seems present in the representations of the monstrous humans displayed in the analysed screenshots. The wide-open, teeth-baring mouth, so conspicuous in these images, is according to Barbara Creed a sign of the *archaic mother*.

[T]he voracious maw, the mysterious black hole which signifies female genitalia as a monstrous sign which threatens to give birth to equally horrific offspring as well as threatening to incorporate everything in its path. This is the generative archaic mother, constructed within patriarchal ideology as the primeval 'black hole'.⁷⁶

The open mouth can be interpreted as a *Vagina dentata* – a motif found in folklore as ‘the toothed vagina’ – the vagina that castrates.⁷⁷ The black hole of the vagina/mouth according to Creed can also be seen as a womb. In this case the fear is not of castration but of being re-

⁷⁴ J. Kristeva, op. cit, p. 205.

⁷⁵ M. Wilson Carpenter, ‘Representing Apocalypse: Sexual Politics and the Violence of Revelation’ in R. Dellamora ed., *Postmodern apocalypse: Theory and Cultural Practice at the End*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995, pp. 107-135.

⁷⁶ B. Creed, op. cit., p. 63.

⁷⁷ J. Campbell, *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology*, Penguin, New York, 1969, p 73.

incorporated into what once gave birth to us – being swallowed back into the womb. In the context of the apocalyptic myth I find this interesting. Here the ambiguity between fear and desire represents the painful longing to give up life to become one with the Mother. The violence against the monstrous becomes the resistance against this urge, the fight to stay independent, to cleanse the world of all bodily corruption and finally to reach redemption and the acceptance by God/Father.

The word ‘catharsis’, which stems from the Greek word *catharsis* meaning ‘cleanse’ or ‘pure’, was a term that Aristotle used to mean the notion of ‘release’ through drama.⁷⁸ According to Kristeva, it has been the role of religion to help us purify the abject, but in a secularised, modern world the work of purification rests with ‘that catharsis par excellence called art’.⁷⁹ What she suggests is that artistic experiences and religious rituals share the same function in letting us deal with the abject. I argue that post-apocalyptic games also serve this purpose, by offering a framework that supports a form of apocalyptic purgation, where the violence itself becomes pleasurable.

Conclusion of chapter

In this chapter I have given an introduction and an analysis, of the topic of monsters and the monstrous. Monsters are manifestations of our fears and by dissecting them we may uncover the cultural myths from which they are constructed. In the videogames *The Last of Us* and *Fallout 4* we find representations of monstrous humans. In the screenshots analysed what stand out are the wide-open mouths of the attacking zombie-like beings. Their faces are deformed and there is no eye contact, rendering them dehumanised in a way that conveniently justifies the violence needed to defeat them. Their half-naked bodies with outstretched arms, and again the open mouth, also have sexual undertones. This ambiguity of fear, violence and desire is linked to the monstrous-feminine through Kristeva’s theory of abjection, and can be traced back to the Christian myth of the apocalypse described in The Book of Revelations. In the next chapter I will go on to analyse how the same games ensure that the protagonists, despite their violent behaviour, avoid becoming monstrous themselves.

⁷⁸ Oxford University Press, ‘Definition of catharsis in English’, *Oxford Dictionary of English* [online], 2015, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/catharsis>, accessed 20 Dec. 2016.

⁷⁹ J. Kristeva, op. cit., p. 17.

Chapter 3: Solving the survivor's dilemma

Short summary of chapter

In this chapter I will give an introduction to the theme of survivors of the apocalypse. Thereafter I will continue with a semiological analysis of the selected screenshots representing the protagonists from the two games *Fallout 4* and *The Last of Us*. I will suggest one main interpretation, which fall under the sub-theme of *The Protector and a play with masculinity*.

Introduction to the theme of survivors of the apocalypse

The role of the survivor is an ambiguous one, and especially so if you happen to be the survivor of the apocalypse. Are you one of the chosen ones or did you survive by pure accident? Did you have to take lives in order to keep yours? No matter how it happened there is almost certainly more than a grain of guilt in the heart of a survivor, mingled of course with other emotions such as fear, anger and hope. Survivors see the world in a new light. Psychiatrists found when studying the survivors of the Nazi concentration camps that they were like ‘a mystery for themselves, and also, they feel the mystery of human nature, mystery and the misleading character of human forms, norms and appearances.’⁸⁰ These men, women and children had been through an experience too extreme to understand. They had seen things that could not be forgotten. As psychiatrist Antoni Kępiński explains, ‘[w]hat normally was hidden in a human being became revealed, his/her criminality and his/her holiness’.⁸¹ This unveiling of a humanity, pushed beyond its limits, seems to intrigue us. In modern apocalyptic narratives it is a reoccurring theme. In the first issue of *The Walking Dead* comic, Robert Kirkman writes:

To me, the best zombie movies aren't the splatter fests of gore and violence with goofy characters and tongue in cheek antics. Good zombie movies show us how messed up we are, they make us question our station in society... and our society's station in the world.⁸²

⁸⁰ A. Kępiński, ‘KZ-syndrom’, *Archives of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy*, vol. 4, 2008, p. 77.

⁸¹ *ibid.*, p. 80.

⁸² R. Kirkman, *The Walking Dead 1*, Image Comics, CA, 2003 p. 2.

As Slovenian cultural critic Slavoj Žižek bluntly states, zombie tales reveals that we are all zombies inside; the difference lies in how good we are at hiding it.⁸³ Inside the moral grey zone of a life-and-death crisis our humanity is defined, but what exactly makes us human, or rather, what is outside of that fragile boundary? When we do not follow the rules – socially, morally or juridically – we become unacceptable in the eyes of society, but as Kristeva notes, in some situations the rebel becomes a hero:

Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility. He who denies morality is not abject; there can be grandeur in amorality and even in crime that flaunts its disrespect for the law—rebellious, liberating, and suicidal crime.⁸⁴

It is the liars, traitors, rapists and murderers who enjoy their crimes that we are repelled by. These behaviours cause abjection because they disturb our identity, the social contract we uphold in respect of each other and the whole order of society.⁸⁵ As a survivor you may have been forced to use violence to stay alive or you simple couldn't save all the ones you wished to save. Does this make you a monster? Not necessarily. Being a survivor of the apocalypse, though, is a state heavy with responsibility. You are the last hope before everything falls into darkness – how else is the world going to be redeemed? In post-apocalyptic world the order has been broken, it is a world in chaos. There is hardly any law or even social rules left to support the ones left standing. How is it then possible to navigate the ambiguous role of the survivor – to stay among 'the good guys'?

In most post-apocalyptic videogames violence is part of the core game mechanic. The game protagonists need to use violence to stay alive, and the players are expected to enjoy it.⁸⁶ This becomes a dilemma both in portraying the protagonist as something other than a criminal (in contrast to other more dubious characters showing up in the two games), and in

⁸³ S. Žižek, *Organs without bodies: Deleuze and consequences*, Routledge, New York, 2003.

⁸⁴ J. Kristeva, op. cit., p. 4.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*

⁸⁶ On the official website of *Fallout 4* a new game feature is advertised with the words: 'Intense first or third person combat can also be slowed down [...] that lets you choose your attacks and enjoy cinematic carnage'. Bethesda Softworks, 'VIOLENCE AND V.A.T.S.!', *Fallout 4* [website], <https://www.fallout4.com/games/fallout-4>, accessed 20 Dec. 2016.

placing the player (who is the active part in carrying out the violence and taking pleasure from it) in the safe identity as non-monstrous.⁸⁷

Analysis of the protagonists

The selected material

I have chosen two images in order to analyse the protagonists represented in the two videogames *The Last of Us* and *Fallout 4*. The first picture is a screenshot published online by Venture Beat.⁸⁸ It is worth noting that there exist several versions of the same motif, often reoccurring to illustrate the game for different purposes. In some versions of this image the man is exchanged for a woman, to show that players can choose the sex of the protagonist. Most common, though, is the version with a male protagonist and that is why I have chosen it. The second screenshot being analysed is from a series of screenshots published by Naughty Dog Games, in an album on *Flickr*.⁸⁹

Analysis of the protagonists

In the first screenshot from *Fallout 4* we are looking up at a man with his back towards us. He is casually walking under a wide, clouded sky in what could once have been a suburban area. He has a rifle on his back. Next to the man walks a German shepherd dog. There is a lot of junk on the ground and the houses visible in the image are falling apart. We also glimpse the front lights of a rusty car, which the man and his dog are walking past.

In the game the man is called Sole Survivor and he is the protagonist character controlled by the player. The dog is called Dogmeat and is one of the companions that the players can choose from in the game.⁹⁰ The producers of *Fallout 4* treat the dog as an important (although optional) companion, as it is featured in the official trailer of the game.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Worth noting that *Fallout 4* is a roleplaying game, which gives the players greater freedom in building the protagonist character, choosing between 'good' or 'evil' behaviour.

⁸⁸ J. Grubb, 'Here's how *Fallout 4*'s latest update affects Xbox One and PlayStation 4', Venture Beat [website], <http://venturebeat.com/2016/03/11/fallout-4s-latest-update-is-live-on-xbox-one-playstation-4-heres-whats-different/>, accessed 20 Dec. 2016.

⁸⁹ Naughty Dog, loc. cit.

⁹⁰ Fandom, 'Dogmeat', *Fallout* Wiki [website], [http://fallout.wikia.com/wiki/Dogmeat_\(Fallout_4\)](http://fallout.wikia.com/wiki/Dogmeat_(Fallout_4)), accessed 20 Dec. 2016.

⁹¹ *Fallout 4 Trailer - Official Trailer 2015 (HD)* [video], Constipated Owl, 3 June 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vdm1WcFHvcw>, accessed 20 Dec. 2016.

Sole Survivor himself has made a vow to avenge his wife's death and locate his kidnapped son. His actions will greatly affect the future of the shred of society that still remains.⁹²



Figure 3.1 Sole Survivor and his dog in *Fallout 4*. All rights reserved to Bethesda Softworks.

In the next screenshot from *The Last of Us* we again have a view from slightly underneath and behind the protagonists, a man and a girl, who are riding together on a horse. Above them we see a clouded sky, and in front of them is a rusty, broken-down car and a brick wall around a large building. The girl has a backpack and the man is carrying a rifle on his back. The bright leaves on a tree indicate that it is autumn.

In the game the man is called Joel and he is the protagonist character that the player is most often controlling. The girl is called Ellie and she is fourteen years old. In the game narrative Joel has taken upon himself to smuggle and protect Ellie, because she is possibly the key to mankind's survival.⁹³ This is an important part of the game's narrative that players cannot choose to ignore. Joel and Ellie are together for the large part of the game.

⁹² Fandom, 'Sole Survivor', *Fallout Wiki* [website], http://fallout.wikia.com/wiki/Sole_Survivor, accessed 20 Dec. 2016.

⁹³ Fandom, 'Joel', *The Last of Us Wiki* [website], <http://thelastofus.wikia.com/wiki/Joel>, accessed 20 Dec. 2016.



Figure 3.2 Joel and Ellie riding in *The Last of Us*. All rights reserved to Naughty Dog.

If we compare the two screenshots we find that there are several similarities. There is a man with a rifle, and together with him we find a dog, or a horse and a child. In the landscape we can recognise several apocalyptic signifiers such as broken-down cars and dilapidated houses. The persons in the picture are facing away from us and the camera angle is placed rather low to the ground making us look up at them. This gives a feeling that we are small and the world is large. The sky also becomes prominent in this view from below, and with the clouds in nuances from light to dark it gives the impression of instability, and again of the sublime. The armed protagonists are facing the big (and unstable) world while we stand behind and watch them. By being accompanied by loyal animals or a child they show to us that they are trustworthy and able to care for someone weaker than themselves. Altogether this gives an impression of safety – and of being protected.

Myths interpreted from different perspectives

What can these images reveal to us about the survivors in an apocalyptic world and the threat of abjection that lies there within? In a post-apocalyptic world the end is still near.

Humankind has brought upon itself a punishment and there is barely a thread of hope of pulling through. Only the ones that can show themselves worthy will survive. In the pictures there are signs of the decline of human society and culture. The world is troubled and unsafe. What still remains is a strong man with his weapon, like the Lone Warrior, the Adventurer or the Resourceful Hero. To emphasize his strength, but also this humanity, he has a weaker

companion by his side who is in need of his protection and care. Is he the guide or saviour (or master of ceremonies) we long for in the ambiguous in-between state that the world is experiencing?

Table 3.1 Shared connotators and connotation in Figure 3.1 and 3.2

Connotator	Connotation
Sky with dark clouds and sun shining	The sublime, divine presence
Broken-down cars and houses	Human society is falling apart
Armed man on a journey	Lone Warrior, Adventurer, Resourceful Hero
Weak companions	The Innocent in need of protection, responsibility
Low camera angle from behind the protagonists	A big world ahead, adventure awaits the hero

If we now turn our attention to the player perspective, the screenshots tell us that we are in for an adventure. The game world, as we see from the landscape, is full of obstacles as well as possibilities. We are in charge of an able, resourceful man armed with a rifle, and therefore we might conclude that there is a chance of staying alive.

Table 3.2 Connotators and connotation in Figure 3.1 and 3.2 from a player perspective

Connotator	Connotation
Sky with dark clouds and sun shining	Instability, danger, possibility
Broken-down cars and houses	Playground
Armed man on a journey	Resources, protection, danger ahead
Weak companions	Quest to solve, good purpose
Low camera angle from behind the protagonists	Invitation to explore the world

The companions are interesting from a player perspective. They often come with a quest or a mission of some sort, giving a purpose to the play. In this case, where the companion is clearly weaker than the player character, it lets us know that we can (choose to) play as a ‘good guy’. Generally, as a player you are simultaneously one with the character and his/her

companion. In this way we are both the resourceful hero and the one being protected by him/her.

The protector and the play with masculinity

The basic idea here is that by letting the protagonists becoming protectors of a more defenceless being – such as a young girl or a dog – the two games effectively construct a shield against the player character becoming monstrous (losing their humanity) no matter how violent their behaviour.⁹⁴ The protector is a masculine role often associated with the father figure, the sovereign or the head of state. As the state collapses during the apocalypse, the monopoly on violence is lost and the individual is free to take its role on a small scale.⁹⁵ Naturally, in order to enter into the protector identity one needs both a situation that can be perceived as threatening (thus the apocalyptic setting) and someone in need of protection. The game protagonists can only show their inner goodness in contrast to an outside evil, or as political theorist and feminist Iris Marion Young writes:

Good men can only appear in their goodness if we assume that lurking outside the warm familial walls are aggressors who wish to attack them. The dominative masculinity in this way constitutes protective masculinity as its other. The world out there is heartless and uncivilized, and the movements and motives of the men in it are unpredictable and difficult to discern. The protector must therefore take all precautions against these threats, remain watchful and suspicious, and be ready to fight and sacrifice for the sake of his loved ones.⁹⁶

The contradiction existing within the scope of masculinity is that men, on one hand, have the possibility to be selfish, dominative aggressors (against women) and, on the other hand, they are the ones who should protect women and children against such aggressors. In apocalyptic narratives these two masculine roles are often amplified. A good example is Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*.⁹⁷ When the whole world is collapsing, men reveal their true identity

⁹⁴ In the end of *The Last of Us* it can be argued that the developers deliberately push the role of the protector too far in order to get players out of their comfort zone, by letting Joel save Ellie rather than the human race.

⁹⁵ M. Weber, *Weber's Rationalism and Modern Society*, tr. & ed. Tony Waters & Dagmar Waters, Palgrave Books, London, 2015, p. 136.

⁹⁶ I. M. Young, 'The Logic of Masculinist Protection: Reflections on the Current Security State', *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2003, p. 4.

⁹⁷ C. McCarthy, *The Road*, Vintage Books, New York, 2006.

by becoming criminals or (pastoral) protectors – both through the use of violence. According to this logic the woman, child or animal submits willingly and lovingly for the promise of security.⁹⁸ In the *Fallout 4* fan wiki we learn that: ‘Dogmeat loves the Sole Survivor unconditionally, and thus is neither negatively nor positively influenced by their [sic] actions’.⁹⁹ The dog will keep being the loyal companion as long as the player wishes to keep it. Equally, Ellie in *The Last of Us* will of course stay with Joel.

Post-apocalyptic games set up frameworks, which let players become a survivor of an almost unimaginable disaster – in reality an ambiguous role heavy with guilt. In fairness one might ask what the appeal might be in going into such a tragic role? I suggest that it is the safe play with masculinity that is behind the fascination, and something both female and male players may enjoy. As a player you are able to step into the shoes of a skilful, male protagonist who doesn’t need to consider any moral issues, since he is fighting to survive. Play can here become the pleasure of being on an adventure, using physical skills, solving problems and mastering fighting techniques – all traditional masculine traits. On top of this the player may safely explore the sliding scale between an ultra-violent, criminal identity and the fatherly protector, without the threat of ever ending up on the wrong side.

Conclusion of chapter

In this chapter I have given an introduction to the topic of survivors. It is an ambiguous identity often associated with strong emotions of guilt. Survivors of the apocalypse become an extreme version of this role where one’s humanity is put to the test. Under such pressure one can either become a criminal or a saint, and thus something of our true nature is revealed. This is a reoccurring topic in zombie narratives as well as in other forms of apocalyptic fiction.

In the analysed screenshots from the games *The Last of Us* and *Fallout 4* we find the male protagonists portrayed as an able man travelling with a rifle on his back. Travelling together with him is a weaker companion; in one case a German shepherd dog and in the other a 14-year-old girl. Brutal violence is in both these games a core mechanic. In this way the player character/protagonist of the games is put into the masculine role of the protector as a way to make sure that he (as well as the player controlling him) will not be perceived as a

⁹⁸ I. M. Young, op. cit., p. 5.

⁹⁹ Fandom, ‘Dogmeat’, *Fallout Wiki* [website], [http://fallout.wikia.com/wiki/Dogmeat_\(Fallout_4\)](http://fallout.wikia.com/wiki/Dogmeat_(Fallout_4)), accessed 20 Dec. 2016.

criminal (or monstrous in any way) no matter how much violence he uses in the game. This enables a safe play with masculine traits within the game framework.

Conclusion

Videogames have often been accused of being a degraded form of art. Considering just how popular gothic and other dark themes are among game developers and players alike, perhaps this is not surprising. Some game researchers suggest that videogame mechanics and conventions actually facilitate the expression of specifically gothic themes (especially when it comes to horror game titles). This idea caught my interest. I was intrigued by how the dark theme of the apocalypse seemed to come back over and over again in videogame titles over the years. The word ‘apocalypse’ (meaning ‘uncover’) suggests that something is revealed as the world comes to an end. My question was what these games could reveal, not just about modern interpretations of the ancient myths about the world ending, but also about the game medium itself.

My objective with this thesis has been to discuss the apocalyptic myths presented to us in popular, blockbuster videogames, using the two well-known videogames *Fallout 4* and *The Last of Us* as case studies. I have chosen to study and compare screenshots from the two games, snapshots of in-game situations, as a way to pinpoint myths the two games have in common. In this process I have sought to not see the aesthetics of these games just as a surface, but to go deeper into what the representations signify in the situation of play. To do so I have taken a holistic approach to the Barthesian method of semiological analysis, including both a general perspective (without play in mind), and that specifically of a player. By comparing these two perspectives I have tried to distinguish how certain signifiers shift in meaning from one perspective to the other. This has helped me understand how the rule system interplays with the aesthetics (as well as the narrative), and how the apocalyptic myths presented in the games serve as justification for certain aspects of the game mechanics.

The close relationship between games and rituals has become apparent to me during my work with this thesis. Considering the important role that rituals have played since the early days of human society, it is not surprising that people find new ways to meet the same needs. Post-apocalyptic worlds are filled with deep ambiguities. *I believe that generally speaking, games offer players a chance to deal with ambiguities in a simplified, ritualistic way.* As an example, let us consider the representation of the post-apocalyptic landscape, which I discuss in chapter 1, where we find disturbing signs of culture and society in decay – a desolate world where people and animals are mysteriously gone. The threat of the end is looming over us, yet there are signs of hope. The intense sunlight that renders a sublime beauty to the scene is a sign of

divine presence. Is this the final, horrific end, or is it a beginning of a new life? We are left unsure. This ambiguity between fear and fascination and the disorientation it brings, resembles what occurs in the middle stage of a ritual. The main difference between games and rituals is that play is always voluntary. *When entering the apocalypse voluntarily, as one enters a game world, the apocalyptic signifiers take on new meanings.* Loneliness turns to freedom, despair into curiosity, and destruction into opportunities for play. Here lies the joy of breaking free from boring routines and oppressive societal structures. The absence of law and order sends the message that you can do what you want. This could be a source of anxiety, but with the proper guidance, instead, becomes a situation of safe exploration. Players often internalise rule systems in order to play a videogame. *I argue that the rule systems become the guidance the players need to get them through the ritual.*

Understanding the role that violence play in these games, has been another important objective during my work on this thesis. Violence is not only inscribed into the rule systems of *Fallout 4* and *The Last of Us*, but is constructed as a core part of the gameplay. This means it is almost impossible to play the games without the use of it.¹⁰⁰ I believe that placing the game narratives in an apocalyptic setting is an efficient way of normalising the use of violence. How is this done?

First of all, monsters and monstrous humans are part of the apocalyptic myth, which undoubtedly comes handy when obstacles are needed in a game. By fighting off monsters (and criminals), players save in-game lives, but on a deeper level the act of killing these antagonists is a way to protect the identity of the protagonists (and of the players themselves) from the threat of becoming Other. Traditionally it has been through rituals that societies come into contact with the abject and the monstrous, and work to exclude it. Again, in this sense, the games take on a ritualistic function. The ambiguous representations of monstrous humans presented in the screenshots discussed in chapter 2 tell us not only of the existence of human beings turned into monsters, but also of a deeper fear of being consumed – both physically and sexually. With a psychoanalytical perspective, the wide-open mouths of the once human creatures can be interpreted as monstrous signs of the female genitalia – even the womb of the archaic mother. The apocalyptic myth has a long history of violence against the monstrous-feminine as represented in The Book of Revelation in the destruction of the Whore

¹⁰⁰ With great difficulty one player seems to have managed to play through *Fallout 4* without murdering anyone. P. Hernandez, 'Guy Beats Fallout 4 Without Killing Anyone, Nearly Breaks The Game', *Kotaku* [website], 28 Dec. 2015, <http://kotaku.com/guy-beats-fallout-4-without-killing-anyone-nearly-brea-1749882569>, accessed 20 Dec. 2016.

of Babylon. *The process of being confronted with the monstrous-feminine and fighting to exterminate it, I argue, can be seen as a ritual of purgation associated with the apocalypse. It is a way to violently quell the perceived dangers of the Other.*

Another way, in which the games normalise violence, as I discuss in chapter 3, is through the representation of the protagonists and the role they are given. The male protagonists are survivors of the apocalypse. The survivor role is in itself a guilt-ridden, ambiguous identity through which a person's level of humanity is exposed. Whether you are a 'bad guy' or a 'good guy', deep down, will be revealed during the ordeal of the apocalypse. By offering the male protagonists a weaker companion – in *Fallout 4* a dog and in *The Last of Us* a young girl – the games allow for the protagonists to take on the masculine role of the protector. *I argue that this role's function is to ensure that, no matter how much in-game violence the players indulge in and how much they flirt with the aggressive side of masculinity, they will be able to keep within the boundaries of normality.* The protector role is normally associated with the father, the sovereign or the state itself. In a post-apocalyptic world, human society is destroyed and there is no state to protect its citizens. The monopoly on violence is broken. *The role of the protector has now been shifted from the collapsed state, onto the individual, male protagonist, giving players the power to use violence for a 'good' purpose.*

There are many possibilities regarding future research into the relationship between game mechanics and narrative/aesthetic themes. Studying the player experience and the process of identification that players go through when playing a videogame could give new, interesting perspectives on gamer culture. Another interesting angle would be to look at game developers and the creative decision-making process that happens as games are developed. My own interest lies specifically in the darker themes of the gothic, horror and apocalypticism, and how these themes relate to the ritualistic quality that games have. This could be related to the studies on the 'positive negative experiences' of players in freeform role-playing games.¹⁰¹ Interdisciplinary research on the topic of videogames as tools for players to practise dealing with ambiguity and abjection, encompassing game studies, visual arts, anthropology, art history, sociology and psychology, could help develop a better understanding of the game medium as a cultural phenomenon and an artistic expression.

¹⁰¹ M. Montola, 'The Positive Negative Experience in Extreme Role-Playing', paper presented to the 2010 Nordic Digital Games Research Association Conference (Nordic DiGRA), 16–17 Aug. 2010, pp. 1-8, <http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/10343.56524.pdf>, accessed 22 Dec. 2016.

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