No Future Like the Past: A Psychogeography of Apocalyptic Games

"…Tomorrow never happens man. It is the same fucking day, man."
Janis Joplin, *Ball and Chain* – Live at McMahon Stadium, Calgary, Canada (July 1970)

Abstract

This essay conducts a tour through the digital ruins of games like Dying Light 2. It argues these post-apocalyptic playgrounds aren't a critique of our stagnant reality, but a perfect mirror of it—trading utopian futures for retrotopian fantasies of cowboy capitalism and lone survivalists. The text unpacks how these glass-and-rubble landscapes embody capitalist realism, trapping us in a perpetual present haunted by the sound of lost futures. It's a psychogeography of our own ideological deadlock, but leaves a crack open for alternatives like Solarpunk to imagine a way out. It was first published in the magazine Making&Breaking in the first half of 2025.[1]

Permanent Raging Presence

As we pilot our glider from one of the many glass-paneled skyscrapers of Villedor to land on the rooftop of what strikes us as a loose rendition of Pei, Kung and Boada's [Bank of China tower](#) in Hong Kong, we first strike down our machete in the skull of a lone zombie, quickly salvaging whatever loot we can from the unsuspecting victim.

It makes sense that video game *Dying Light 2*[2] is staging the zombie apocalypse in an architectural landscape that epitomizes what could be described as a 'Third Modernity' or 'Postmodern Modernity.' Here, modernist shapes reappear as empty husks of stylistic building blocks, devoid of the idea of social progress that made up the core of post-World War II era architecture. Here is where "the end of history" meets the end of the world.

Making our way through this action-packed adventure game, the urban landscapes that surround us are a pastiche of European aesthetics, deliberately anonymous and as unlocatable as many city centers have become. While we start out parkouring between maisonettes with a French flair, neo-Gothic brick churches reminiscent of those in Poland, and Dutch-style canals, we soon leave the downtown area and start climbing the bordering corporate glass towers. Modernist in appearance with their indifferent glass facades and panel-cladding, it takes just one step into these structures for it to become clear that these are not architectures for human life at all. These are architectures for capital. It seems obvious why Mark Fisher picked a glass facade as the cover photo for his 21st Century

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[1] https://makingandbreaking.org/article/total-refusal/
[2] Developed and published by Techland, 2022.

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"Millennial Mao bible" *Capitalist Realism,* writing that within the cultural logic of neoliberalism, modernism returns as mere "frozen aesthetic style".

Fredric Jameson prophesied that postmodern culture "would become dominated by pastiche and revivalism"[3] due to its failure to conceptualize a future worth striving towards. The various -wave, -core, -goth and -punk subgenres that make up contemporary aesthetics suggest he was right. These oversaturated, almost mythological snapshots of the past point back to a time shortly before the permanent raging presence of Dying Light 2. Art historian Valentina Tanni reflects on Mark Fisher's concept of hauntology, wherein he observed that "nothing really changes anymore" and that we find ourselves in a certain kind of "nostalgia for past, lost, unrealized futures," haunted by a "burden of unfulfilled promises."[4] Whereas Fisher's hauntology project was essentially a search for forms of artistic expression that escape the ideological constriction of neoliberal culture, refusing to give up on the desire for a future beyond postmodernity's terminal time, we instead find ourselves in a cultural landscape characterized by an "obsession with the recent [...] past."[5] The ideological background noise of this cultural stasis was coined by Zygmunt Baumann as "retrotopia" – a regressive, conservative vision of the future. Here, our yearnings are the product of a phantasmatic, mythopoetic view of bygone days. Retrotopia doesn't promise social progress, but a return to past glory – an era before the "fall of man", whose space in time can never be grasped fully and which is loosely associated with an absence of complexity and "Ohnmacht".[6] This is crystallized in Donald Trump's slogan of "Make America Great Again", which is similarly malleable in that it doesn't really give a clear rendition of the past that it is aiming to return to. One could argue that this is precisely why it is so successful in acting as a collecting pond for the economically or culturally disenfranchised masses, produced by decades of neoliberalism.

It is striking how much entertainment media typically portrays our future as dystopian. Here, the apocalypse rules supreme and retrotopian futures are erected on the rubble of catastrophe: Some cataclysmic event has wiped out the complexities of modern life and left us with a blank slate to start over from. The messiness of global social struggles are replaced by the simple questions of survival and heroic individualism. In that sense, the post-apocalypse pushes the "end of history" to its literal extreme: It's the reset button for a society trapped in a present haunted by its zombified past – the dreams of yesterday reappear again and again as empty pastiches. This process of zombification can be understood aesthetically as well as politically. The political narrative of past decades has similarly been dominated by the negation of democratic progress (austerity, privatization,

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[3] Mark Fisher: *Capitalist Realism – Is there no Alternative?* New Alresford 2009, p. 8

[4] Valentina Tanni: *Exit Reality – Vaporwave, Backrooms, Weirdcore and Other Landscapes Beyond the Threshold.* NERO Editions & Aksioma, 2024, p. 30

[5] Valentina Tanni: *Exit Reality – Vaporwave, Backrooms, Weirdcore and Other Landscapes Beyond the Threshold*. NERO Editions & Aksioma 2024, p. 31

[6] The German term for pervasive feeling of powerlessness and inability to act in a meaningful way.

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etc.) as well as the call for a preservation and defense of democracy (as an empty signifier). Our present is thus both futureless and, because of that, "presentless" at once. Like a zombie, democratic society is maintained in an undead state of pure formality.

In his critique of modern history-telling, Walter Benjamin argued against an understanding of history "in which people and epochs advance along the path of progress."[7] Instead, he perceived history through the eyes of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* (1920)*, incorporating it into his theory of "the angel of history", as "a melancholy view of historical process as an unceasing cycle of despair."[8] This angel, no longer capable of heralding the bright light of God, stares at the rubble of the past "wreckage upon wreckage"[9] at his feet. In *Dying Light 2*, we see no angel of history. Instead we find a rumbling avatar staring at "realms of memory", as Pierra Nora calls it,[10] or: Ruins of the future's past, of former excesses and transgressions. As the story so often goes, hubris and corporate greed have caused a global pandemic. Other games also tell this story of original sin – like *Horizon Zero Dawn*[11] or *Tom Clancy's The Division 2*[12]. Their condemnation of modern progress narratives is twisted, as it offers no utopia rather than just a wormhole to archaic fantasies: Tribalism, hunting, gathering, killing – or being killed. Indeed, these games harbor no visions of progress within their ruins. On the contrary: The digital ruins in entertainment media are the answer to our lack of vision. The medial dominance of the post-apocalypse is the product of the psychological state of "reflexive impotence"[13] that Mark Fisher diagnosed for the Millennial generation. They are well aware of how bad things are but also believe that they can't do anything about it. This certainly is a deviation from the progress narrative – though probably not one that Benjamin had in mind.

Ideology of the Post-Apocalypse

The late 1960s and 1970s saw the emergence of "critical utopias", inspired by ecological and feminist ideas that offered self-reflective visions of better but imperfect futures. Novelists such as Ursula K. LeGuin challenged traditional utopias and called for radical social change.[14] It is only when utopia, or rather, any image of an emancipatory future is no longer

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[7] Walter Benjamin: *Critiques of Theology.* SUNY Press, 2023, ch. *A Theory of Youth*
[8] The Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Paul Klee: *Angelus Novus.* http://www.imj.org.il/en/collections/199799-0 (Accessed 10 Mar. 2025.)
[9] Walter Benjamin: *Illuminations – Essays and Reflections.* Schocken Books, 1969
[10] Pierre Nora: *Realms of Memory – The Construction of the French Past. Volume I, Conflicts and Divisions.* New York 1996
[11] Developed by Guerilla Games and published by Sony, 2017.
[12] Developed by Ubisoft/Massive Entertainment and published by Ubisoft, 2019.
[13] Mark Fisher: *Capitalist Realism – Is there no Alternative?* New Alresford 2009, p. 21
[14] Cf. Raffaella Baccolini, Tom Moylan: *Dystopia and Histories.* in Raffaella Baccolini, Tom Moylan: *Dark Horizons – Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination.* New York 2003, p. 2

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available to us that we fantasize about the apocalypse as a form of liberation.

Media researcher Óliver Pérez-Latorre writes that 'post-apocalyptic videogames reflect certain tensions and dilemmas characteristic of contemporary society, between promoting a "retro-modern" ecologist and communitarian utopia or a nostalgic urge to return to and "take refuge" in more traditional/conservative social models and lifestyles.'[15] Retrotopia has become a dream forge for post-apocalyptic games like the *Fallout* series, whose ruin-porn imagery flirts heavily with a midcentury USA vibe. Barbara Gurr writes that "the frequent reliance of post-apocalyptic science fiction on the mythohistory of the American past reveals a cultural yearning for a collective identity of American-ness that has been only incompletely realized."[16] One of the reasons for the success of today's MAGA movement is that it can feed on this yearning. Moreover, a "speculative future continues to rely on and define the very shape and function of the frontier: a vast and violent place that provides apocalyptic versions of the Marlboro Man with the freedom to determine their own destinies in an unforgiving world in which everyone is at war with everyone else. Who are these brave, indomitable men? They are, of course, the cowboys."[17] The survivors in post-apocalyptic games are often white men of means. Like cowboys, they are romantic figures or – to use Jean-Jacques Rousseau's term – "solitary walkers".[18] They are fighting and wrestling through an infested landscape. But above all, they are killing and looting from humans and zombies alike, stocking up their inventories, bartering for better weapons to kill more efficiently and eliminate more dangerous enemies, and reselling their precious spoils for higher prices.

In Dying Light 2, our avatar makes his way from safe-zone to safe-zone. Here he rests, waits out the night, trades goods, or collects quests. As zombies lurk on the streets or inside of houses, these hubs are often rooftop settlements or easily defensible buildings like churches, where the survivors form small, hierarchical societies. Rooftops, formerly reserved for the rich, are now populated by macho men in leather jackets, hoodies, and denim pants with blades dangling from their belts. Apart from three or four side characters, all inhabitants are millennials. Most of the men are bearded and look well-trained. Female residents often correspond to stereotypical 'cool girl' tropes, blending traditionally masculine traits with normative beauty standards. They lean casually against walls, beer in hand, or manspread on chairs in their role as 'badass' yet attractive set dressing for these dens of hypermasculinity. While it is fair to say that recent years have seen many female-driven stories of dystopia, many of these women adhere to the same cowboy pattern as our male

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[15] Óliver Pérez-Latorre: *Post-apocalyptic Games – Heroism and the Great Recession.* in: *Game Studies – The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, https://gamestudies.org/1903/articles/perezlatorre (Accessed 03. Jul. 2024)

[16] Barbara Gurr: *Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Post-Apocalyptic TV and Film.* New York 2015, p. 32

[17] Ibid. p.33

[18] In his last, autobiographical work *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* a more and more isolated and alienated Rousseau walks through Paris, daydreaming of plants, society and his loneliness.

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avatar. In any case, in Dying Light 2 no one steals the player's show, who sticks out as a hard-boiled warrior with his colorful outfits and flamboyant survival gear.

In its essence, the post-apocalyptic avatar is a cowboy-entrepreneur, hoarding wealth to expand his arsenal of extraction tools. Sociologists Craig Jenkins and Teri Shumate studied ultraconservative post-war entrepreneurs in the US Sunbelt who proclaimed themselves "frontiersmen and self-made conquerors." They called these figures "cowboy capitalists."[19]

Accumulating wealth in various industries like tourism, technology, and agriculture, they stuck to a get-your-hands-dirty approach, cowboying up and ridin' them horses across the wide-open prairie. Often excluded from elite networks at first, cowboy entrepreneurs strongly identify with the myth of the frontier – a space devoid of strong regulatory social powers and free for the taking. They see government intervention as a threat to personal freedom rooted in 'self-made' success. Similarly, as Pérez-Latorre points out in their analysis of games like Fallout 4 (2015), The Last of Us (2013), and Infamous (2009), cowboy characters of the post-apocalypse "are forged into heroes by their acquisition or accentuation of certain neoliberal and patriarchal characteristics, including leadership skills, an extraordinary adaptability to changes and to the ceaseless emergence of new risks, a dominant personality and a conquering spirit, as well as the expression of power through strength and aggressiveness."[20] All of these traits hold true for most game avatars, which epitomize the notion of the lone hyper-individualist actor in a world waiting to be dominated. Particularly in the post-apocalypse, where the halls of government are no more, it's time for the self-made cowboy capitalist and their retrotopian order.

Solarpunk

On an idyllic overgrown terrace in one of the makeshift human settlements in *Dying Light 2,* people are cultivating vegetables. Large pumpkins are reminiscent of the prototypical Puritan colonies of the 17th century. We hear birds singing and the sounds of other animals too – but the game doesn't render any fauna at all. Solar panels and windmills supply the local power grid. Were it not for the infested land reaching as far as the eye can see, the settlement would almost have a utopian feel to it. *Dying Light 2* creates a sort of fractured Solarpunk scenario here, foiled by the retrotopian motifs of a conservative and war-driven society.

Solarpunk sticks out as the only significant punk pastiche that doesn't dwell in fractured, speculative pasts or dystopian futures. On the [Solarpunk subreddit,](#) where most information

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[19] Craig Jenkins, Teri Shumate: *Cowboy Capitalists and the Rise of the "New Right" – An Analysis of Contributors to Conservative Policy Formation Organizations.* In: *Social Problems 33/2* (1985),

[20] Óliver Pérez-Latorre: *Post-apocalyptic Games – Heroism and the Great Recession.* In: *Game Studies. The International Journal of Computer Game Research.* https://gamestudies.org/1903/articles/perezlatorre (Accessed 03 Jul. 2024)

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about this genre is currently collected, it is described as an ecological and joyful narrative of the future: "Solarpunk is a genre and aesthetic that envisions collective futures that are vibrant with life, as well as all the actions, policies, and technologies that make them real: Science fiction, social movements, engineering, style, and anything else that inspires a future society that's just and in complement with its ecology."[21]

Solarpunk rejects capitalism, eco-fascism, and greenwashing, in imagining new futures in art and literature. Nurtured by Afrofuturism and indigenous, anti-imperial, and feminist literature, it challenges conventional science fiction by placing decolonization and ecology at its core. Solarpunk views nature as a category outside of the capitalist matrix. It's an emancipatory concept in that it doesn't just challenge capitalism on the level of critique but dares to envision an alternative.

Alienate or Alternate?

All the post-apocalyptic retrotopian games with their hyper-individualist, heavily armed cowboy-entrepreneurs totally make sense when economic and political structures fail to equip society with agency, meaning, and a future. But we would be wrong to read these dystopian stories as critiques of capitalism. They provide a simulation of criticism at best, promoting a return to frontier-thinking, transposed into the brutal scapes of the "unavoidable" post-apocalypse. They alienate us from visions of alternative futures that are better for the many, not the few, and do nothing towards a collective engagement in the messy task of imagining such alternatives. What these games do achieve is a perfect articulation of what Mark Fisher called "the aesthetic poverty that is so much a feature of late capitalist life." Yet, for the world to live, capitalism needs to die[22].

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[21] Reddit s/solarpunk. Sub Description: "Solarpunk - hope for the future." https://www.reddit.com/r/solarpunk/ (Accessed 29 Aug. 2024)
[22] Along the lines of "For Indigenous nations to live, capitalism must die." in Glen Coulthard: *Red Skin, White Masks – Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (University of Minnesota Press, summer 2014).