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Abstract and Keywords

This article identifies key features of the comparison between video games and religion, focusing on contemporary video games based on specific ancient apocalypses including “The Book of the Watchers” in the Enoch corpus and the Book of Revelation in the Bible. Many contemporary video games function as rituals of order-making, creating spaces of play in which violence is a performative mode of metaphysical sorting, allowing for new negotiations between “good” and “evil.” Through a consideration of popular gaming elements (fragging, *fiero*, firepower, and fun), this article proposes that the strong relationship between video games and apocalyptic literature invites a closer examination of

how eschatological tensions infuse contemporary times, too often inviting an overly simplistic apocalyptic response to contemporary global challenges.

Keywords: video games, apocalypse, ritual, play, fragging, fun, apocalyptic, eschatological

Introduction

To play a game is to engage with an ordered cosmos; it requires giving oneself over to predetermined rules and processes. The affinity between games and religion is most obvious in the glorification of programming, the ritual of the regulated. Like religion, games have the uncanny ability to inspire a kind of awe in devoted players, who may not consume poppies to induce a vision inside an ancient temple but may be willing to sleep on pavement overnight to be first in line at the store when their favorite new games are released. Both religion and games propose imagined maps of order, or worlds in which predictable rules adhere. These are spaces in which we can assume the existence and intentionality of a "programmer" who has shaped our experience. Both promise temporary relief from the chaotic and confusing ideological commitments of twenty-first-century life—the never-ending "buzz of information" that creates "both confusion and a debilitating sense of vertigo."[1] Yet the more we are wired into programming, the more we are wired by others' decisions about what experiences are possible. In order to make sense of the "programming" of culture that both religion and games provide, I offer an overview of some of the ways that games can offer us what Jane McGonigal calls "purposeful escape." Then I apply these elements to a discussion of one of the most poignant intersections of the religion and gaming: the affiliation between certain kinds of violent gaming and the Judeo-Christian tradition of the apocalyptic. This comparison reveals that games can offer more than just a means of escape from reality: like rituals, they can also make promises about how to export that order back into lived reality.

Purposeful Escape

McGonigal's book *Reality Is Broken* identifies the contemporary need for order and argues that games slake this need, helping to fix a "broken reality" by inviting us into spaces that promise order and meaning. Drawing on Herodotus' analysis of Greek games, McGonigal argues that games can be viewed as a "purposeful escape" that offers a "starving population a feeling of power in a powerless situation, a sense of structure in a chaotic environment." Games, she says, offer players "a better way to live when their circumstances [a]re otherwise completely unsupportive and uninhabitable."[2]

One of the ways games create ordered experiences is through what Ian Bogost calls "procedural rhetoric." Games, and indeed any programmed experience, consists of a series of carefully designed processes that "define the way things work: the methods, techniques, and logics that drive the operation of systems."[3] Programmers write "procedurally," creating "systems" that "generate behaviors based on rule-based models."[4] Although computers are the most obvious place to observe procedural rhetoric, we can find algorithmic thinking in a host of human cultural locations as well, which manufacture the fixed "logics" that drive systems, "from mechanical systems like engines to organizational systems like

high schools to conceptual systems like religious faith."[5] Computational processes *argue* things by asking us to *do* things, even if only symbolically. Games offer us fixed choices and, in so doing, shape experience.

"Play" operates in tension with the fixed structures of a preexisting system. Eric Zimmerman uses the metaphor of a vehicle on a roadway to help us visualize the dynamics at work:

> Think about the use of the word "play" when we talk about the "free play" of a steering wheel. The free play is the amount of movement that the steering wheel can turn before it begins to affect the tires of the car. The play itself exists only because of the more utilitarian structures of the driving-system: the drive shaft, axles, wheels, etc.[6]

In video games we engage in play when we make decisions based on the game's predetermined procedural rhetoric. Similarly, we engage in play when we write a sermon or a commentary on a sacred text, taking our cues from the metaphorical "road" (the text) and any preexisting tradition about it, sussing out the "play" allowed in our new interpretations. We also engage in play when we enact a ritual and determine which gestures can be freely made and which are scripted, what items we can use or not use, and what will make the ritual successful. Liturgies, texts, rituals, games—all of these invite play. As Roger Caillois explains,

> Play is simultaneously freedom and invention, fantasy and discipline. All the important manifestations of culture are derived from it. They are indebted to the spirit of research, to the respect for rules, to the detachment that it creates and maintains. In certain respects the rules of the law, of prosody, counterpoint, and perspective, the rules for stage settings and liturgies, for military tactics and philosophical controversy, are so many rules for games.[7]

One of the most important theorists of gaming in the twentieth century, Johan Huizinga, famously proposed that play, like ritual, is a "stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own."[8] Play typically functions as an "interlude" that is "distinct from 'ordinary' life both as to locality and duration" and is "played out within certain limits of time and place."[9] Play presents us with a space where a designer's intentions can offer a seductive promise of temporary order. When we play, we agree on limitations, and the pleasure comes in giving ourselves over to this system. As Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman explain, "playing a game means interacting with and within a representational universe, a space of possibility with narrative dimensions."[10] Huizinga dubs this marked-off space the "magic circle."

This kind of cosmic mapping also happens in religious practice. Describing how religions promise a purpose to life, Peter Berger proposes that religion "implies the farthest reach of [humanity's] self-externalization, of his infusion of reality with his own meanings."[11] In other words, religion invites us to map order onto the universe writ large. Huizinga proposed that a "sacred performance" is "more than a symbolical actualization—it is a mystical one." The participants in such a ritual believe that sacred play "brings about an order of things higher than that in which they customarily live."[12] The order of ritual, then, promises the order of the universe. Speaking of the ancient Jewish apocalypse associated with the biblical figure of Enoch, biblical scholar John J. Collins uses similar language when he says that Enoch's "comprehensive tour of the cosmos is designed to show that the destiny of humanity is not left to chance but is built into the structure of the universe."[13] The extensive descriptions of the universe

and the origins of heavenly bodies in Enoch's vision are "in part a celebration of the order of the universe."[14] Structure, order, predictability, and manifestation of intentional programming are thus deeply impressive.

Humans crave visions. We hunger for order and certainty—or at least for the temporary promise of it. Apocalypses make just such kinds of promises. Indeed, the connection between ancient apocalypses and video games as apocalypses is very strong, and several contemporary video games have been based directly on ancient apocalypses. Examples are *Darksiders*, a game based loosely on a reading of the Book of Revelation in which the player takes on the role of one of the horsemen of the apocalypse; *Left Behind: Eternal Forces*, a real-time strategy (RTS) game based on the Book of Revelation as well as on the Christian novels of the same name; and *El Shaddai: Ascent of the Metatron*, based on the corpus of intertestamental writings about the biblical figure of Enoch. All of these games use digital technology to reinforce claims about the orderliness and predictability of the universe, illuminating the affinity between digital apocalypse and biblical apocalypse.

Apocalypse

In 1979 participants in the Society of Biblical Literatures Genre Project developed a definition of "apocalypse" that allows for more precise comparisons among texts and pinpoints some of the key recurring features—what Collins calls "a significant cluster of traits" across numerous ancient texts of the intertestamental period, the rough period of time between the close of the Old Testament or Tanakh (when the book of Daniel was completed, probably in the second century BCE) and the beginnings of the canonization of the New Testament. Certainly not all of the texts composed in the intertestamental time period were apocalyptic, but many were—and a good number of those fit the definition of apocalypse devised by the team of scholars with the SBL Genre Project. The definition they developed identified apocalypse as

> a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.[15]

If one uses the adjective "apocalyptic," the term has even broader applications, since the "set of ideas and motifs may also be found in other literary genres and social settings."[16] Specifically, a movement or phenomenon "might reasonably be called apocalyptic if it shared the conceptual framework of the genre, endorsing a worldview in which supernatural revelation, the heavenly world, and eschatological judgment played essential parts."[17] Because humans have always been drawn to visions of order in chaotic times, we find apocalyptic eschatology in films, video games, and popular media of all kinds throughout history.

Gaming Apocalypses

J. Talmadge Wright, David Embrick, and Andres Lukács note that video games in particular are frequent sites for the playing out of apocalyptic dreams:

> Apocalyptic fantasies appear in the smoldering landscape of a devastated Washington, D.C., in the game *Fallout 3*. And Washington, D.C., is destroyed again in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* as Russian troops occupy the U.S. Whitehouse. Utopian fantasies of an Ayn Rand–styled universe become a horrid nightmare in the game *Bioshock.* Utopian dreams of endless resources and castles in the sky appear in the online multiplayer game *World of Warcraft,* mixed with apocalyptic war imagery in a fantasy universe of endless fecundity.[18]

The three games I focus on here—*Darksiders, Left Behind*, and *El Shaddai*—all draw on apocalyptic imagery *and* fit the stricter genre definition of "apocalypse." This easy confluence of textual apocalypse and gaming apocalypse suggests that the apocalyptic worldview is prevalent in many other contemporary games as well, whether or not they evoke explicit apocalyptically symbolic influences. Indeed, key elements of the genre of apocalypse are taken for granted in the design of many video games today, especially in the "shooter" style of game and the "hack-and-slash" adventure game.

In thinking about games and genres, it is important to consider a phenomenon that is uniquely modern: the game engine. As "assemblages of common software components and tools used to make other games," game engines are the mechanical equivalent of genres.[19] When we utilize an already-created game engine in the design of a new game, we have less wiggle room because we rely on borrowed code: "Unlike cultural categories like the modern novel or film noir, game engines regulate individual videogames' artistic, cultural and narrative expression."[20] Indeed, whereas genres "structure a creative approach to narrative" in that they "describe a kind of story," game engines "construe entire gameplay behaviors, facilitating functional interactions divorced from individual games."[21] Game engines "influence the kind of discourse the works can create, the ways they create them, and the ways users interact with them."[22] Game engines create a very rigid kind of procedural rhetoric.

El Shaddai was made with the Gamebryo game engine, also used for numerous other video games like *Elder Scrolls* III and IV, *Rift, Lego Universe*, and *Fallout: New Vegas.* In *El Shaddai*, the Gamebryo engine is put to religious purposes. The game opens with a series of celestial scenes, introducing us to Enoch as a scribe with a room filled with books in heaps on the floor. He is whisked away to a training site, which is represented by an enormous mechanized hand in the heavens. The player takes on the role of Enoch and is taught by an interpreting angel, Lucifel, how to utilize the controls. Lucifel also explains what Enoch's mission on Earth will be: to defeat the "fallen angels" who have disobeyed God. The fact that the game engine easily makes room for the preexisting apocalyptic storyline suggests how natural the affinity can be between apocalypse and video game.

Left Behind: Eternal Forces uses an RTS engine developed by Big Huge Games for sequels to its original release, the engine also used for *Rise of Nations* and *Catan*. Poole suggests that "[a]rmchair generals are well catered for by the God game's sibling genre, the real-time strategy game." Acting from "a godlike position" the player is "briefed by advisers (actors in video clips)" and then must fulfill the instructed mission by enacting commands to units on the game's battlefield: "The player clicks on a certain unit and … tells it to move somewhere, to attack another unit, to defend itself or to scatter."[23] The choice of RTS for *Left Behind*—indeed, the very choice to translate faith into a game—exposes the creators' more rigid theological assumptions, as well as the dualism inherent in the RTS style of play.

In *Left Behind*, the player is quite literally an agent for God's will, as the *Left Behind* game guide explains: "You, as the player, control your forces from a vantage point high above the action…. You can order [your units] where to go and what to do whenever you wish." As if perched in the very heavens, the player directs the "units" on the ground to help God in the final apocalyptic battle. The "God game" style invites us to see our own Earth, in this case a ruined Manhattan, as a "map" being increasingly colonized for God with us as the active agent. Indeed, as evil is vanquished from Manhattan, the streets are illuminated. The RTS engine reinforces a read of apocalypse as a carefully orchestrated movement, fully programmable, with chosen faithful humans (the player in particular) designated to determine others' fates via a violent and privileged heavenly vantage point.

Darksiders appears to be an exception to the game engine rule, as the now-defunct Vigil Games originally developed a unique engine in-house. Nonetheless, the game relies heavily on tropes common to many fighting and adventure games, as reviewer Charles Onyett notes:

> Throughout *Darksiders* you'll see influences from other titles like *Halo 3* as War [the player-character] grabs heavy, fantastical versions of Bungie's turret guns, *Portal*, and, strangely enough, Panzer Dragoon. You get a horse named Ruin that War can ride around in larger spaces and swat at enemies with his sword, and the sprint mechanic is the same as Ocarina of Time, only it uses little energy pellets instead of carrots. You even get the equivalent of milk jars to store powerups for use in the field. The good news is that the recycled mechanics are still fun to toy around with, particularly when fused with the combat system. *Darksiders* has, after all, the benefit of including elements of some of the best games ever made … Its gameplay can't really be described as original, but the fact that the majority of its mechanics are already proven to work and implemented well means there's certainly entertainment to be had here.[24]

The Book of Revelation's symbols and narrative shape play in *Darksiders* only insofar as they can be recycled to coincide with tropes from secular video games like *Halo* and *Portal*. In other words, the game engine most powerfully shapes what can and cannot be done even if a textual apocalypse is a known influence. Game engines are different from genres in that they "abstract" the "material requirements" or behaviors of the gameplay as their "primary—perhaps their only—formal constituent."[25] And what game engines do best is lead players through order-making digital rituals with point values. The story must give way to the game engine. However, some elements translate easily across video games and apocalypses, revealing a deep affinity between these two kinds of texts. Here I consider four of these elements: otherworldly intermediaries, pseudepigraphy, views about time, and conceptions about a precipitating eschatological crisis.

Otherworldly Mediators

The word "angel" in the original Hebrew simply meant "messenger" and in an apocalypse refers to one who "interprets the vision or serves as a guide on the otherworldly journey."[26] The accompanying angel explains elements of the vision that are "not intelligible without supernatural aid."[27] As such, a mediating angel is a reassurance of the order guiding the otherworldly system to which the visionary is being exposed. Everything makes sense. God is in control.

In many video games, there is an artificial intelligence (AI)–driven non-player character who serves as the "companion or helper figure." For example, Midna in *The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess* provides knowledge of the maps of the game and offers guidance and encouragement. In *Okami*, a figure called Issun guides the player. Both, says Steven Jones, are "descendents of Navi in a previous Zelda game, *The Ocarina of Time.*"[28] In the *Halo* series, the AI entity Cortana teaches players how to navigate the space in the game and how to target enemies. Cortana not only represents the order of the digital world—she is *herself* a hologram tapped into a larger system, an AI program that comprehends the system in all its complexity. In *El Shaddai*, Lucifel teaches and guides the player. What is remarkable about these figures is that they *are* what they represent: messengers revealing the order of the digital apocalypse as they explain roles, procedures, and structures of the otherworldly space and time. Serving as a proxy for the very notion of order, such figures promise an orderly cosmos, whether that cosmos be reflected in the otherworldly visions of an ancient prophet or in the blinking lights of a digital screen.

Pseudepigraphy

Many ancient apocalypses reinforce the notion of order by attributing authorship to a famous figure from the past, a practice known as pseudepigraphy (literally a "fake epigraph"). Scholars have theorized that authors took on such roles to lend authority to their apocalyptic message—to make their "prophecies" *seem* to have been written in the past and fulfilled in the present. Martha Himmelfarb proposes that it is difficult to assess what the composers of pseudepigraphy really believed about their practice, and thus it is safest to view the writing of an apocalypse as "an act of imagination, with its specifics determined by the author's manipulation of conventions, rather than as a literary representation of the author's own experiences."[29] Michael Stone is inclined to believe that apocalypses reflect actual experiences on the part of visionaries but he admits that, apart from a generalized notion of crisis, we have little to go on: "A major limit to the understanding of the pseudepigraphic apocalypses is that there is no indication of how they actually functioned in society, although they often express the tension between their teaching and social-historical reality in eschatological terms."[30]

Interestingly, the modern phenomenon of video games offers some new clues to what might have been at stake for these ancient authors. Voorhees et al. suggest that avatars can serve as a kind of "portal through which the player's presence in the game is represented." Indeed, the word *avatar* itself comes from the root meaning "crossing over" in Sanskrit and "is suggestive of the transubstantial movement of deities." In using an avatar, "the player is imagined as … sharing substance with the avatar through the interface of the game's controls."[31] Thus in *El Shaddai* we play as Enoch; in *Darksiders* we play as War, one of the horsemen of the apocalypse; and in *Left Behind* we act as God's unnamed proxy.

So perhaps one motivation for pseudonymity in ancient apocalypses was the very piety required if one chooses to inhabit the character of a famous entity from the past. It would have taken guts to "play" as Moses or Enoch or Noah, just as it takes guts to play as Enoch or War or God's proxy today. Poole argues that a good video-game character is one the player "likes" because it represents "a fulfilled combination of dynamic and iconic criteria." Because the character is controlled by the player, "if we like him (or her) we must also feel somehow protective, and anxious lest we cause the character harm through our own manual inadequacy … a good character, as well as being aesthetically pleasing, constitutes one very strong motivation for playing the videogame well."[32] Perhaps then a figure from the

past was chosen as a means of insuring the piety of the secondary visionary: if you are going to *play* as Enoch, you better do your best to act like Enoch, even in your daily life.

Apocalyptic Time

In the ancient apocalyptic worldview, comfort is offered by a heavenly vision revealing that "human life is bounded in the present by the supernatural world of angels and demons and in the future by the inevitability of a final judgment."[33] We can see this view of time reflected in the apocalyptic trope of the periodization of history, in which all of time is divided into preset periods, which are now winding to a close. For Collins, the certainty of time's unfolding is intrinsically related to human impotence, which paradoxically reinforces the notion of divine control: "The disposition of the seer before the revelation and his reaction to it typically emphasize human helplessness in the face of the supernatural."[34] Accordingly, one effect of periodization is the "impression of an ordered universe where everything proceeds in a predetermined manner."[35] Apocalypses present time in a way that sees all of history predetermined by God. Daniel, for example, exhibits "an elaborate review of history, presented in the form of prophecy and culminating in a time of crisis and eschatological upheaval."[36]

Many video games exhibit a similar presentation of time, whether religiously inspired or not. The first-person shooter game, in particular, "enacts a powerful technocultural desire to encounter the future in the form of anticipated, controllable contingencies."[37] Such games can be viewed as an "attempt to bring the future under control by representing it in terms of the present" in a form that offers "a technical means for addressing it."[38] Games, then, are rituals of control that allow a temporary experience of time as predictable:

> In the minimal, logistical narrative of gametime, the end state is one of prevalence, literally, one of superiority, of effective dominance over the events encountered in the game. To win the game is to prevail in this sense—that is, by discovering and perfecting the means to control the events in advance of the encounter with them.[39]

Every game has a predetermined path to victory, although there may be 100 different weapons one can use to get there. The phenomenon of a "walkthrough," which tells players exactly how to win the game as efficiently as possible, is evidence of the inevitability of a game's unfolding.

Far from being about freedom, however, today's apocalyptic video games may be more about the giving over of oneself to a larger, predetermined plan. Wark puts it in almost religious language: "Games redeem gamespace by offering a perfect unfreedom, a consistent set of constraints."[40] This is predictable imprisonment, represented by the shackles of a genre that offers a view of time—perhaps the *only* view of time—as palatable in a restless age. Alexander Galloway too describes this phenomenon in quasi-religious terms: "The [first-person shooter] genre offers a type of epistemological challenge to the audience: follow a roller coaster of reversals and revelations, and the viewer will eventually achieve informatic truth in the end."[41] Instead of relying on a transcendent deity, today's gamers are as likely to find comfort in the power of the programming machine:

> The gamer's God is a game designer. He implants in everything a hidden algorithm. Faith is having the intelligence to intuit the parameters of this geek design and score accordingly. All that is righteous wins; all that wins is righteous. To be a loser or a lamer is the mark of

> damnation…. Gamers confront one another in contests of skill that reveal who has been chosen—chosen by the game as the one who has most fully internalized the algorithm.[42]

Triumph is realized not just by defeat of enemies but by participating in the game's own view of inevitable time, as players participate in the construction of "a linear, teleological sequence of play in an illusionistic *mise en scène*."[43] Thus our investment in gaming apocalypses may be grounded in our desire to temporarily enter into controllable, consumable bytes of time.

Eschatological Crisis

Biblical scholars are faced with the troubling fact that we lack any documented sense of how apocalypses were used by real people—the *sitz im leben* (situation in life). Many scholars, however, seem convinced that apocalyptic literature is crisis literature in some form or another. David Hellholm is so convinced of this that he has suggested that the definition of apocalypse developed by the SBL Forum should be extended to include the phrase "intended for a group in crisis with the purpose of exhortation and/or consolation by means of divine authority."[44] Others are more skeptical. Collins, for example, proposes that although some apocalypses may have been written for an audience in a specific crisis, we can "scarcely" say this is true for all.[45] Daniel 7–12 was likely written under persecution; 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch, and 3 Baruch may reflect grieving about the loss of the Temple in Jerusalem. But other texts, like "The Book of the Watchers" in the Enoch corpus, have no obvious "underlying crisis" that we can identify with any precision. Furthermore, "what is perceived as a crisis by an apocalyptic author may not have been universally so perceived."[46] Apocalypses may have been motivated by particular events or, just as likely, by general discontent from living in an unfriendly Hellenistic environment. Michael Stone, one of the world's most respected authorities on apocalypse, admits that we "do not know how the apocalypses were used in society or how their teachings were realized."[47]

Nonetheless, most scholars do agree that apocalypses typically "address some underlying problem."[48] E. P. Sanders speaks of apocalypses as "literature of the oppressed," characterized by themes of "revelation" and "reversal," as seen in the image of fortunes restored and enemies vanquished.[49] Apocalypses are literature of the imagination, a means of escaping from an unfortunate reality—whatever it may be—and temporarily residing in a space that is more orderly, more predictable, and more assured. An apocalyptic revelation can "lend supernatural authority" to a message that invites listeners to see the future "from a distinctive apocalyptic perspective" that "projects a definitive resolution" to contemporary discontent.[50]

Although we cannot access the specific *sitz im leben* of ancient apocalypses, we can consider the *sitz im leben* of today's gaming apocalypses. For most Americans, the notion of "oppression" is not especially applicable. The very ability to purchase the leisure device of a gaming system and the disposable product of digital games precludes real material suffering. Indeed, gamers in general must have the time and liberty to spend on average sixty hours unraveling each and every new game they purchase and may spend even more time accessing hidden cheats and hacks, replaying a favorite game with friends, or possibly creating related media like walkthroughs, video reviews, or mods. We can, however, see the anxieties of globalization as a prominent feature of contemporary life, which

requires people to have an increased level of awareness and sophistication about political, religious, and cultural diversity.

Game designer Ralph Koster asserts that humans “crave predictability,” but we also seek unpredictability “inside the confines of predictable boxes, like games or TV shows.”[51] Drawing on their presumption of an ordered digital cosmos, video games have the ability to “mediate an anxiety about an uncertain future eventuality. In the most general sense, this anxiety is about one’s own future identity as an individual member of a collective community of practice and significance.”[52] Games make us feel competent, powerful, brave, and in control, temporarily excusing us from the anxieties of contemporary life and even creating ritual spaces of taboo activity. Gamer theorist McKenzie Wark agrees, emphasizing the order-making qualities of games such that “the game itself works as an escape from the agony of everyday life, where the stakes are real and uncertain, to the unreal stakes of a pure game.”[53] When we play games, we are offered temporary respite from the complexities of twenty-first-century life with its hyperwired, politically charged, increasingly complex global realities. Today’s crisis, then, is just as real as those faced by ancient apocalypticists, if more subtle and diffuse. When compared to the ancient apocalypses, today’s crises may seem less threatening, but in some ways they are even more vexing, because there is no escape from the things that plague us, and they remain difficult to target.

Gaming the Apocalypse

The tensions of our contemporary crisis are at work in the three gaming apocalypses examined here. In all three, we see a ritual of order-making, with the apocalyptic made over to serve the purposes of generalized algorithmic teleology. Indeed, the element of order-making is increased by making the player the most active agent in order’s very realization. God, if referred to at all, is behind the scenes: off the map, on the other end of a cell phone. We now look in more detail at the three gaming apocalypses to see how the transformations they reflect reveal their function as apocalyptic rituals of order-making, reflecting the anxieties of our twenty-first century context.

El Shaddai/“The Book of the Watchers”

“The Book of the Watchers” in the ancient Enochic corpus presents Enoch as a scribe who is overwhelmed by all he sees. Enoch is designated a reluctant messenger, sent to pronounce doom on the “Watchers,” a group of angels who “abandoned the high heaven” in order to descend to Earth and “defile” themselves with human women, thus mixing the heavenly and the mundane and producing a race of abhorrent giants in the process.[54] This extra-biblical story is read by most scholars as an expansion of the material in Genesis 6 relating to the Great Flood, offering an alternative mythic explanation for God’s decision to destroy the earth. In “The Book of the Watchers,” when Enoch explains what will happen to the fallen angels, God is always the responsible agent, even if his punishment is ultimately enacted by others. Enoch himself is a mere messenger, and God is in charge.

In *El Shaddai*, the player’s agency is ramped up by blatant transformations of Enoch’s mission. Some of the elements of the original story remain intact: Enoch is a scribe given a mission to alert the Watchers

to their ordained fate. However, in *El Shaddai*, Enoch himself becomes the agent of judgment. He is commissioned for his task by a hip, heavenly emissary named Lucifel (a “pre-Fall Lucifer”). Along the way, Enoch must fight a slew of nasty enemies while donning elaborate heavenly armor. In the game Enoch’s mission is not just to relay a message but to actually collect the fallen angels and return them to heaven for judgment. *El Shaddai* retains the vestiges of a God at work behind the scenes—on the other end of Lucifel’s cell phone. But the real action is accomplished by Enoch, who slashes bad guys for the sake of cosmic order. Rather than being terrified of his heavenly visions, *El Shaddai*’s Enoch is raring to go, more than willing to fight enemies to bring order to a riven universe.

Left Behind/The Book of Revelation

Similar transformations happen in *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* in its reliance on the Book of Revelation. In the transition from text to game, we see a dramatic increase in human agency, with the player controlling the action from above in what is called “god game” style. Troy Lyndon, president of *Left Behind* Games, says that the game is “loosely based on the first few books in the best-selling *Left Behind* book series” themselves, which are based on the authors’ interpretations of the Book of Revelation.[55] The logic of either/or, good/evil, and insider/outsider is actively reinforced by the RTS engine. Tyndale House’s president, Mark Taylor, describes the gameplay:

> The players’ objective is to find “tribulation clues,” which include Bible mysteries, codes, and fascinating clues to encourage gamers to think of matters of eternal importance. In the initial missions, there is little emphasis on physical warfare, and gamers are introduced to powers of influence that result in a battle for the hearts and minds of people. In more advanced missions, there is no objective to cause physical warfare. However, physical warfare does result when the player is required to defend himself/herself against the physical forces of evil, which are led by the Anti-Christ.[56]

Taylor’s remarks are misleading. Far from having “little emphasis on physical warfare,” *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* glorifies violence and requires it of the player throughout. In the game guide, a fictional character named Tsion Ben-Judah speaks as proxy for the game’s creators about the chaos in today’s world. Here we can detect the Christian game designers’ fears about globalization, expressed in language of a war against pluralism:

> It is with a heavy heart that I look at the world today, spiraling out of control. It is difficult to imagine what dangers lay ahead for us in the coming days. Know this: you must count the cost. There is a powerful enemy intent upon taking our lives. When things get difficult, remember the mission you’ve been given. Your efforts may mean the difference between people living for eternity or falling into the antichrist’s clutches. Truth is your main weapon. It is a truth that is more powerful than any of the enemy’s weapons. This truth can change lives and destinies forever.[57]

Indeed, the game’s rhetoric of good versus evil perfectly maps onto the literalist reading of the Book of Revelation that prompted *Left Behind*’s creators to make the game in the first place. To sort the imaginary “enemies” in the game is spiritually equivalent to the sorting of real enemies that will happen

in the approaching end times when the player will become an active agent of God's divine will, collecting believers and punishing nonbelievers.

Darksiders/The Book of Revelation

Darksiders represents a more metaphorical take on the Book of Revelation, as the player takes on the role of War, one of the horsemen of the apocalypse. Drawing on the Book of Revelation but not wishing to risk full-on performative blasphemy by making the player *into* God, the creators chose the figure of the horseman as the agent of judgment. *Darksiders* recycles the symbolism and some of the characters from the Book of Revelation, but these are repurposed in ways that reduce matters to a player-controlled system of kill or be killed. In *Darksiders*, the ultimate goal is not to defeat evil but rather to promote "balance" between heaven and hell. In scenes excruciatingly reminiscent of 9/11, we see a city invaded by hostile forces bent on producing "imbalance" in the cosmos. Each "side"—heaven and hell—wants to defeat the other, and Earth is caught in the fray. Although the angels descending as meteors to Earth's surface may be read as symbolic ciphers for the terrorists piloting planes into buildings on 9/11, the game does not linger on terrorism as a theme and does not invite any symbolic identification of entities with any specific, real-life religious tradition. The forces at work here are simply symbols of chaos in need of sorting, reconciliation, and "balance."

This approach differs markedly from the ancient apocalypse on which the game is modeled. For example, in the Book of Revelation, the "Whore of Babylon" is identified with the city of Rome, which in turn represents the oppression that early Christians experienced under a series of ruthless Roman emperors. "Rome" becomes "Babylon" to evoke the Jewish Exile, a symbolic echo of an even earlier real time of oppression. The richly symbolic language of the biblical text is meant to obscure, for readers not in the know, the real purpose of the text: to imagine the violent end of a historical "villain" and to imagine a future in which Christians will be free to worship as they please. In *Revelation*, the symbols have real referents. The crisis is historical, with distinctive political and metaphysical realities.

The crisis lying behind *Darksiders* is more diffuse and reflects ambivalence about the affordances of technological engagement in today's world and anxiety about the very notion of good and evil in a postmodern context. Playing as War, the player's job is just to shoot and kill as many enemies as possible: "Atop a heavenly steed you'll be able to fire at the enemies around you and beneath you. You can hold the fire button to lock on to multiple targets or just target enemies in your crosshairs with and shoot them with single shots … After circling through the city a bit, you'll dive into a lava-filled cavern."[58] In *Darksiders,* the Book of Revelation's imagery is merely a backdrop for gameplay, with props that reinforce a symbolic procedural rhetoric engineered to resolve "imbalance." This is a ritual of order-making inspired by a postmodern crisis.

Darksiders borrows liberally from religious mythology within and beyond the Book of Revelation, placing these entities in league with heaven or hell but never clearly identifying one side as purely "good" and the other as "evil." For example, the game presents a character named Lilith, an entity from medieval Jewish legends about Adam's disgruntled first wife, who left him for independence but in the process became a demon who kills children. In the game, Lilith is a "demon," described as "a cold, calculating temptress with an unrivaled lust for power."[59] In another level in *Darksiders*, feminists may be equally alarmed to see a flawless symbolic reproduction of Marduk's violent defeat of Tiamat in the *Enuma*

Elish, with the player in the role of War destroying her by throwing bombs at her "ugly face" and slashing her head.[60] The battle takes place in the dismal ruins of a cathedral, visually suggesting the failure of contemporary organized religion. The game ends with a dramatic battle here against "The Destroyer," an amalgam of two millennia of Satan-related visual imagery.[61] The game draws heavily from symbols and characters in the Book of Revelation, casting these symbolic elements within a world where the goal is not defeat of evil but mere restoration of an uneasy "balance" between them. The allusions in *Darksiders* to Michael wrestling the dragon in Revelation are unmistakable; what is changed, however, is the performance on the part of the player, who acts in Michael's stead as the one responsible for defeating Satan, the "great dragon"—here a symbol of disorder and imbalance.[62] The player acts with no divine aid, relying on individual savvy and skill to restore order to a chaotic world.

Some of the most distinctive differences between ancient apocalyptic texts and contemporary video games also reinforce the claim that today's video games function as rituals that address the anxieties of our time. To make better sense of the dissonance between ancient apocalypses and gaming apocalypse, I consider four related video game phenomena: fragging, *fiero*, fun, and firepower.

Fragging, *Fiero*, Fun, and Firepower

"Fragging" originally referred to the murder of a military superior via covert means.[63] The term first appeared in the Vietnam War when disgruntled soldiers began killing their own superiors by using "fragmentation grenades," which "were tossed into an officer's tent as an effectively anonymous way of eliminating a hated commander."[64] Between 1970 and 1973, increasing reports of fragging revealed the desperation of the war's toll on the soldiers. The idea began to appear in video games in the early 1990s. For example, the Nintendo system game *Mission: Impossible* (1990) included a "frag grenade" as one of several explosive devices; a set of FAQs for *Doom* (1993) explain that the term is used "to represent a confirmed kill in a deathmatch game"[65]; and the description for *Duke Nukem* (1998) promises a "frag-fest that gives you more of what you crave," including "hardcore action" and "shooter mayhem."[66] Finally, a review of *Quake II* (1999) reassures "fans of fragging" that the game "is still all about running, shooting, and killing."[67] No longer a means of describing the horrors of real warfare, "fragging" could now refer to any "kill" in a video game. Indeed, fragging is implicated in the very order-making properties that these video games promise.

Many games certainly seem to be mostly about the thrill of fragging, since for some, "the purest, most elemental videogame pleasure is the heathen joy of destruction."[68] Nonetheless, the pleasure of such games is not just about violence—at the root these games function as rituals about the control of chaos in a postmodern, globalizing environment. As Wark observes, game violence "has nothing to do with brightly colored explosions or mounting death counts but with the decision by digital fiat on where everything belongs and how it is ranked … the real violence of gamespace is its dicing of everything analog into the digital, cutting continuums into bits."[69] The enjoyment of such gaming is in the metaphysical sorting—the slotting of everyone and everything into friend or foe (are you with me or against me?) and the transformation of the world into point tallies and final scores. Whether shooting aliens or terrorists, says Poole, "relax into your task and revel in the challenge, for the blissfully simple

rules are still the same. Kill them all."[70] Crogan dubs this phenomenon the "ontology of the enemy," and, visually violent as it is, it reflects a very clear message of a cosmos demanding order.[71]

Fiero is the Italian word for "pride" and has been appropriated by gamers to describe "an emotional high we don't have a good word for in English."[72] Fencott et al. define *fiero* as "pride in achievement," the experience of "hard fun" in a game achieved through "overcoming obstacles, achieving goals, testing a player's skills."[73] *Fiero* is what we feel "after we triumph over adversity."[74] If we are playing a shooter or hack-and-slash game, then *fiero* is also what we feel after we slaughter a host of enemies. Games are appealing precisely *because* they give us a "sense of purpose," a "good chance of success," and a sense of accomplishment. [75] *Fiero*, says Koster, is "the expression of triumph when you have achieved a significant task" and "the gloating feeling you get when a rival fails at something."[76] If gaming apocalypses function also as rituals of order, then *fiero* is closely related to the sense of accomplishment that comes with the successful digital sorting of friends and foes.

So could ancient Jewish and Christian authors have experienced *fiero* when composing their apocalypses? Because their visions were less interactive and more passive, the ancient visionaries could rather only imagine a kind of *fiero* as they pictured their real-life oppressors being punished in an eschatological future engineered solely by God. There was no performative thrill of a skill well executed or a series of digital moves smoothly engaged, because the authors had no means to actually fulfill the tasks set before them. In playing a contemporary gaming apocalypse one might say, "I successfully ordered the cosmos!" whereas in composing a Jewish or Christian apocalypse, the authors could only say, "I believe that very soon now, God will successfully order the cosmos!" In such a system, only God could possibly experience *fiero*. It is hard to imagine that writing their texts offered the ancient apocalypticists any sense of fun accomplishment—or that they would even think in such terms.

Indeed, when comparing gaming apocalypses and ancient apocalypses, the importance of fun for one and the absolute absence of fun should command our attention. What makes something pleasurable, or "fun," says McGonigal, is a person's active engagement in the face of manageable stressful circumstances. She calls the kind of fun one can have when playing video games "hard fun" and describes it in terms that would hardly apply to ancient Jews or Christians living under Roman oppression:

> Hard fun is what happens when we experience positive stress, or *eustress* (a combination of the Greek *eu*, for well being, and stress). From a physiological and neurological standpoint, eustress is virtually identical to negative stress: we produce adrenaline, our reward circuitry is activated, and blood flow increases to the attention control centers of the brain. What's fundamentally different is our frame of mind. When we're afraid of failure or danger, or when the pressure is coming from an external source, extreme neurochemical activation doesn't make us happy. It makes us angry and combative, or it makes us want to escape and shut down emotionally … But during *eustress*, we aren't experiencing fear or pessimism. We've generated the stressful situation on purpose.[77]

This distinction makes obvious what we already suspected: gaming apocalypses are "fun" because they have no obvious material stakes in the real world. We have *chosen* to play games, and the stakes are largely symbolic, or at least they may seem that way at first blush. Accordingly, when we play video games, we typically experience what McGonigal calls *eustress*. For the duration of the game, we

engage in a ritual that merely changes our “frame of mind” but has no obvious external ramifications in our lives. For the authors and audiences of ancient apocalypses, however, external stressors were very obvious, evident in daily anxiety about when or how new persecutions might erupt. Apocalyptic literature is a product of a very difficult time in Jewish and Christian early history and reflects real experiences, even if these are addressed with richly symbolic language. There was nothing “fun” about being immediately afraid for one’s life.

The game theorist Brian Sutton-Smith functionally equates “fun” with “play” and describes these in terms that similarly mark them as chosen recreational activities. According to Sutton-Smith, play is, among other things, “intrinsically motivated;” “non-productive,” and without “serious consequences.” In play, he says, “freedom from externally imposed rules is necessary.”[78] McAllister and Ruggill similarly claim that digital play is fun and “meaningful” *because* it is “meaningless”—“because there is nothing perceptibly at stake other than pleasure, exploration, and experimentation.”[79] Fun can do real work, however. In his classic work on play, Huizinga observes that “Nature” could “just as easily have given her children all those useful functions of discharging superabundant energy, of relaxing after exertion, of training for the demands of life, of compensating for unfulfilled longings, etc., in the form of purely mechanical exercises and reactions.” Instead, “she gave us play, with its tension, its mirth, and its fun.”[80] Fun helps us to lose ourselves in the flow of experience; it helps us escape when we need it; and it offers us a salve for “unfulfilled longings.” Fun, then, has the ability to present us, at least temporarily, with a safe mode of being that reassures us that life is worth living. Fun is a luxury afforded those whose apocalypses reflect a kind of practical comfort in daily life that allows performative rituals of play with few obvious material consequences. This does not mean, however, that today’s gaming apocalypses have no material ramifications in real life—just that these are harder for us to see, because they are more diffuse and cloaked under the more immediate experience of fun.

Video games can actually do some very serious work. By ramping up the role of the player as a creator of order in the imagined cosmos, gaming apocalypses reveal a desire for increased “firepower,” or violent control, which has some meaningful real-life implications if we look carefully enough. Whereas “[t]he great majority of Jewish apocalypses are quietist in the sense that the world will be changed by divine intervention rather than by human action,” gaming apocalypses rely on violent performativity to change the world—and place no stock in divine intervention.[81] In ancient Israel, humans had to simply wait, hope, and pray for God to help them. In most of today’s first-person shooter, hack-and-slash, and RTS god games, the player alone fights off the hordes of disorder. As Voorhees et al. put it, the first-person shooter game “has a history rooted in a kind of ‘one-person army.’”[82] A kind of built-in anxiety about performance in today’s gaming apocalypses is produced by the increase in agency itself: a game’s algorithmic predictability is most comforting once it is mastered, but because every game is slightly different, the player must master these patterns anew again and again. Fragging, *fiero*, fun, and firepower reveal that although gaming apocalypses may perform similarly as rituals of order-making, they create a very different context for today’s gamers, who suffer from a generalized theological absence that invites gaming as a ritually ordered replacement for providence.

The case of *Doom* offers a model of a contemporary gaming apocalypse that does not rely on religious imagery at all but functions as a fully formed apocalypse nonetheless—revealing anxieties of our time and exhibiting elements of fragging, *fiero*, firepower and fun in some of the most troubling of ways. Utilizing structural tropes like otherworldly journeys, visions of cosmic order-making, and eschatological

views of time, *Doom* borrows elements of the ancient apocalypse game engine but offers a model of what can happen when apocalypses spill out of the "magic circle" of play, forcing a metaphysics of dualism onto real life. The original version of *Doom* casts the player as a Marine on Mars, "tramping around an invaded base from the hero's point of view and, with the aid of a comically powerful arsenal, blasting demons back into the bloody hell from which they have erupted."[83] In the mid-1990s, the US Marines licensed *Doom* from Id Software and, using the game engine, built their own version for soldiers. *Doom*'s world "was stripped down and streamlined" with new elements digitally pasted over preexisting ones. Martian dungeons became "sparse, dust-colored plain punctuated by small brick bunkers, foxholes, and barbed-wired barriers." Aliens and demons, "otherworldly" entities in original *Doom*, were replaced by "very human-looking opposing forces, clad in simple khaki military uniforms of a vaguely Communist/Nazi cut." *Marine Doom*'s soldiers were modeled on scans of GI Joe action figures.[84]

Indeed, Simon Penny says that "what separates the first person shooter from the high-end battle simulator is the location of one in an adolescent bedroom and the other in a military base."[85] This is certainly the case with *Doom.* Fragging, *fiero*, firepower and fun are integrated with an apocalyptic procedural rhetoric that invites soldiers to temporarily enter into ordered, otherworldly spaces in which they can dispose of their enemies—and thereby bring order to the cosmos. But soldiers who played *Marine Doom* were responsible for enacting order in game space *as well as in reality*, according to an algorithm of kill or be killed. The apocalyptic vision of the otherworldly space is thus exporte*d* from *Doom*'s sci-fi vision of Mars to the real-life battlefields of US engagements. Not quite a game engine but definitely a set of genre expectations, the otherworldly apocalyptic game of *Doom* became the *this*-worldly apocalyptic training module of *Marine Doom*. Over the following years, game producers used numerous additional game engines to create military simulations as training modules for soldiers, and the sharing of game engines across military and civilian lines is now commonplace.[86] Gaming algorithm has become realized eschatology or, at least, an eschatology being realized here and now. The apocalypse is no longer merely imagined or expected. It has arrived.

Conclusion

Ian Bogost has proposed that we focus on the "expressive capacity of games" to better understand "how videogames reveal what it means to be human."[87] The startling ease with which apocalypses can be transformed into contemporary video games like *Darksiders, El Shaddai*, and *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* shows the enduring appeal of the apocalyptic vision. Clearly, these digital texts serve an important function in our society, akin to the imagined journeys of ancient apocalyptic visionaries who similarly imagined glimpses of a more orderly cosmos. Some of these contemporary remediations of apocalypse are simply "fun" activities meant to give people a break from the stifling flow of confusing information overwhelming their daily lives. Yet the apocalyptic mindset has a seductive appeal that makes it difficult to keep within imaginary quarters. The dualism of friend or foe, the wish for an interpreter to tell us what to do, and the desire for manageable views of time all make the digital algorithm of gaming apocalypses an alluring model for viewing real-life experiences too—and herein lies the danger.

Part of the solution may be to resist the reification of all texts and to constantly and self-consciously view all of our cultural stories with an eye to transformation. Wark challenges us to intentionally "trifle" with games and their forms: "You trifle with the game to understand the nature of gamespace as a world—as *the* world. You trifle with the game to discover in what way gamespace falls short of its self-proclaimed perfection."[88] By considering the ways that apocalypses are remediated and "played" in text, story, and game, we are more likely to be aware of the many different kinds of work they are doing for us, from fragging to *fiero*, from firepower to fun, sorting friend and foe or simply offering a ritual of order in a very disordered world. We are more likely to imagine more sophisticated stories with more nuanced qualities. We live in a time of chaotic uncertainty as we learn to grapple with the reality of our shared global identities. It is no surprise that we seek rituals of escape that promise us easy solutions, at least within these temporary realms. The challenge before us is to prevent apocalyptic violence from spilling over into real life. Apocalypse has always been a dangerous and simplistic imaginative solution to anxiety, fear, and adversity. The real-life responsibilities we face in our globalizing world require much more care.

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