

Apocalyptic Escapism? Futuristic Imagination and Apocalyptic Media at the End of History

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This essay interrogates the politics of desire at play in the contemporary fascination with apocalyptic narratives in pop media and videogames in particular. Drawing on cultural theorists such as Fredric Jameson, Mark Fisher, and Slavoj Žižek, it opens historical, socioeconomic, and ideological perspectives on why we enjoy apocalyptic fantasies – particularly in a present that is itself marked by crises, stagnation, and decline. To this end, the evolution of the cyberpunk genre and the *Fallout* franchise are examined as symptomatic products of their time. Both reflect the crises of their respective historical conjunctures and are imbued with time-specific sets of ideology and futuristic imagination. Lastly, *Disco Elysium* is discussed as a game that, through an act of unusual self-awareness, might just point beyond the apocalyptic spectacularism commonly displayed in apocalyptic media.

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Introduction

Apocalypses are convenient. Fantasizing about how asteroids, the zombie super-virus, or madmen with nukes destroy humanity might be more comfortable than the more realistic prospect of slowly rotting away through bleak and boring decades of ever-decreasing living standards. But now that our pop culture is more saturated than ever with highly aestheticized doomsday scenarios and equally stylized post-apocalyptic hellscapes, this essay asks: Why are we drawn to the catastrophes that end 'life as we know it' at the exact time when this 'life as we know it' becomes the catastrophe? Is it due to an ironic kind of escapism? Or was Walter Benjamin right when he declared that "humanity's self-alienation has reached a point where it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure¹"?

Catastrophes and Apocalypses

The very word "apocalypse" might lead to a first answer. In Ancient Greek, "Apokalypsis" translates to a "revelation" or a great unveiling. It is used in this sense as the title of the final book of the Bible, John's Book of Revelation or Apocalypse. This biblical kind of apocalypse is supposed to appear as a revelation and great truth at the end of earthly history to elevate humanity from the End Times to something beyond: to salvation and the Kingdom of God. It has, however, turned out that this promise of the coming apocalypse is yet to be fulfilled, and that we are to remain in the End Times for the foreseeable future. While the biblical apocalypse seems to be indefinitely postponed, we have come to refer to any potentially world-ending scenario as apocalyptic. However, complementary to the dread that the word carries, there still

¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* (Harvard University Press, 2008), 42.

resonates a trace of the old hope: that destruction brings with it a historic rupture with the old order of the End Times.

In 1958, the philosopher Günther Anders reflected on this eschatological desire and proposed a distinction between an apocalypse and a mere catastrophe, referring to the latter as a “naked apocalypse”:

“The task we are confronted with today is thinking the concept of the *naked apocalypse*, that is: the apocalypse that consists of mere downfall, which doesn’t represent the opening of a new, positive state of affairs.²”

In Anders’ time, the threat of nuclear holocaust posed such a catastrophe without revelation, one that would leave behind only ashes. He goes on to say that the prospect of such a “naked apocalypse” threatens our very concept of history, which was assumed to be one of inevitable progress: first as a remnant of Judeo-Christian eschatology, then as the narrative of modernity and the promise of capitalism³. To imagine a mundane catastrophe that does not open a new door when it closes one remains to be a counter-intuitive and uncomfortable endeavour.

The End of History

The biblical concept of the End Times – a time when history has culminated but true redemption remains postponed – has enjoyed a secular revival in the notion of the “End of History⁴”. The political scientist Francis Fukuyama coined the term in the early 1990s, after the fall of the Soviet Bloc. For him, it was an optimistic term: Since Western-style liberal capitalism was now the only game in town, we can stop the utopian speculations and focus on refining what little we have. Humanity’s governmental and socioeconomic evolution has come to an endpoint and what is left is slow progress within clearly defined boundaries.⁵ To put it in the words of Margaret Thatcher: “There is no alternative.⁶”

Since the 1990s, the faith in this credo has eventually taken more than a few hits. Between cyclical global financial crises, an exacerbating ecological crisis, ever-growing global wealth disparity, forever-wars, a renaissance of expansionism in high-income countries, and world leaders with their fingers back on the red button, it has become evident that the current status quo fails to put a reassuring end to history. Quite on the contrary, it threatens us not only with stagnation, but with a garden variety of potentially world-ending catastrophes. It seems, however, that our awareness of them does not challenge the direction in which our world is heading. It is in this historical gridlock, this essay argues, that apocalyptic fantasies become escapist ones to the extent that they fantasize about breaking up this impasse. Because unlike the catastrophes that our real world threatens us with, an apocalypse in the secularized biblical sense of the word would mean a true rupture with the powers and structures of the End Times, or: the End of History. It evokes the possibility of breaking back open a history that seems to have closed off in all directions but the bleakest.

However, even if we argued against Fukuyama that human history has in fact not culminated in liberal capitalism, and that apocalyptic media reflects a desire to imagine alternatives to our current gridlock, one will notice that the apocalypses of our pop media usually fail at their attempt to imagine these alternatives.

² Günther Anders, *Apocalypse without Kingdom*, trans. Hunter Bolin, e-flux (2019), Accessed February 1, 2025, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/97/251199/apocalypse-without-kingdom/>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Free Press, 1992), 1.

⁵ Ibid., 39.

⁶ John Campbell, *Margaret Thatcher: The Iron Lady* (Random House, 2003), 78.

Capitalist Realism

This deficit of imagination is what Mark Fisher termed “Capitalist Realism”: a persistent continuation of our current socio-economic and political hegemony on the level of the social unconscious and cultural production⁷. It is most notable in the sphere of science fiction, a genre whose appeal is to think ‘outside the box’ of the present and to widen our conception of what is technologically and socially possible. Yet its current popular forms struggle to envision substantive alternatives. Contemporary popular sci-fi media typically does not pursue the speculative and sometimes utopian impetus of the likes of *Star Trek* or the novels of Ursula K. Le Guin – works that let us encounter true otherness, not just anthropologically and technologically, but also socio-economically. In them, readers and viewers were met with radically different designs of social organization, such as the post-scarcity, post-monetary worlds of *Star Trek*.

Fisher argues that today, our futuristic imagination has become increasingly constrained by the boundaries of what, within the framework of today’s capitalism, seems realistic. Hence the term “Capitalist Realism”. This ongoing phase of cultural production, however, is not only indicated by a lack of utopian imagination. Rather, even its sci-fi dystopias rarely offer a substantive critique of our present but are instead just cynical reflections of it, or, in the case of today’s highly popular cyberpunk setting, merely a forward-projection of our current historical trajectory into the future. It is best summarized by the classic mantra that “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism⁸”. We have dystopian and apocalyptic games and shows depicting, sometimes even critically interrogating, complete social collapse, but without the political imagination to follow it up with anything else. Instead, the apocalypses of our pop media typically default to moralistic truisms in the veins of “mankind should be less greedy” or “don’t pollute the earth”, without delving any deeper into why the pre-apocalyptic times might have engaged in these practices in the first place. Without a more mature social critique of the pre-apocalyptic world, apocalyptic fantasies can only regress into reiterations of the world they rightly sought to depict as doomed. What are the wastelands of *Fallout* games but the futile repetition of the practices that condemned its world to begin with? The franchise’s very motto, “war never changes⁹”, might be the most explicit version of this defeatism, reducing self-destruction to an anthropological constant and transforming the future into reiterations of its past.

It seems that it is not only easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, but that we cannot even imagine a good apocalypse anymore – one that would make us admit the defeat of our core ideological assumptions about the historical path that led to the fictional apocalypse in the first place.

Fallout - The Eternal Apocalypse

Dismissing contemporary sci-fi as unimaginative or demanding it to simply do better would be an analytically meaningless endeavour. A more insightful approach would highlight what today’s historically specific forms of apocalyptic imagination – or lack thereof – signify about the state of our present. In his essay on *Progress versus Utopia; Or, Can We Imagine the Future?*, Fredric Jameson suggests a symptomatic reading of fiction, focussing not on its explicit messages, but on what historical conditions it implicitly reflects:

⁷ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (Zero Books, 2009), 2.

⁸ Unknown origin. Its first iteration, however, can be found in Fredric Jameson, “The Future City”, in *New Left Review* no. 21, May-June (New Left Review Ltd, 2003), 76.

⁹ Interplay Productions, *Fallout* (Interplay Productions, 1997), PC.

“The task of such analysis would be to detect and to reveal behind the written traces of the political unconscious [...] the outlines of some deeper and vaster narrative movement in which the groups of a given collectivity at a certain historical conjuncture anxiously interrogate their fate, and explore it with hope or dread.”¹⁰

Jameson analyses fiction by uncovering the broader historical narratives that are embedded in its texts and inscribed with both the crises of their times and their expectations for the future. From this perspective, the ways in which fictions can or cannot imagine specific futures indicate how our shared, hegemonic notion of history has changed over time. Works of science fiction in particular, Jameson adds, represent a “symptom of a mutation in our relationship to historical time itself”¹¹, seismographically extrapolating the historical momentum of its own context of production.

For Jameson, one such “mutation in our relationship to historical time” was the transition from modernism into postmodernism – the latter being characterized by a loss of faith in modernity’s narrative of steady progress¹². The *Fallout* franchise might best exemplify the transition – or mutation – between the two cultural logics.

The *Fallout* games are set in a post-apocalyptic world devastated by nuclear war, in which survivors navigate a wasteland filled with warring factions and remnants of pre-war technology. What separates the franchise from other post-apocalyptic worlds is its retrofuturistic setting that combines the culture and aesthetics of 1950s Americana with futuristic technology. *Fallout*’s pre-apocalyptic world was the idealized forward projection of the American Dream of the mid-20th century. It was a thoroughly modern utopia, saturated with a sense of historical optimism. Through the lens of retrofuturism, the game renders us nostalgic for this lost future that did not come to be; one that today’s historical imagination ceased to project.

In the world of *Fallout*, this modern dream is then shattered in a nuclear holocaust and gives way to the game’s playground: the post-nuclear wasteland. Jameson remarks that the postmodern cultural production is trapped in loops of nostalgia and cultural recycling¹³. We find this recycled pastiche in the post-apocalyptic landscapes of the *Fallout* franchise itself, which feature a garden variety of possible wastelands that all borrow from the old world. The parties competing for the wastes are instantly familiar. They range from fascist revivalism to libertarianism, militarism, tribalism, and already-corrupted attempts at liberal democracy. Suffice to say, none of them point beyond the eternal post-apocalypse. Instead, the *Fallout* games offer different aesthetics for the same stagnant ruins, without a serious attempt to leave the wastelands behind. Even the settlements of *Fallout 2*¹⁴, once bastions of hope and novelty, were ditched for the ever-same timeless and futureless wastelands of the franchise’s later instalments, only to be officially declared as annihilated by a nuclear strike in the most recent Amazon TV adaptation¹⁵. This post-apocalyptic and post-modern timelessness might be best captured by how, curiously, many of the residents of the *Fallout* universe choose to live with the skeletons left behind by the original nuclear war, instead of maybe getting their house in order and moving on after some 200 years.

If science fiction really is, as Jameson describes it, a “symptom of a mutation in our relationship to historical time itself”, then *Fallout*’s apocalyptic transition from the suburban optimism of the American Dream to a futureless wasteland perfectly traces the transition from modernism

¹⁰ Fredric Jameson, “Utopia, Or, Can We Imagine the Future?”, in *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2 (University of California Press, 1982), 148.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 149.

¹² Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 1991), xi

¹³ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁴ Black Isle Studios, *Fallout 2* (Interplay Productions, 1998), PC.

¹⁵ *Fallout*, directed by Jonathan Nolan et al. (Amazon MGM Studios, 2024).

to postmodernism itself, culminating in its very own End of History as endless variations of an ever-stagnant wasteland.

Cyberpunk – The Non-Apocalypse

There is another arguably retrofuturistic setting that has risen to the forefront of our pop-cultural mainstream of the last decade: the genre of cyberpunk. Its worlds usually depict high-tech, dystopian futures where megacorporations rule over a world that is marked by social and ecological decay and populated by increasingly cybernetic humans. While cyberpunk is usually not discussed as a retrofuturistic genre, the sheer age of its futuristic vision might qualify it as such. Its core setting and tropes have not changed much in the last 50 years – it is, in this respect, an old future. It is this longevity, paired with slight changes in its premises throughout the years, that makes it a rich subject for a symptomatic reading of its futuristic imaginations with regard to the historical conditions of its creation.

When Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*¹⁶ envisioned the prototypical cyberpunk future in the 1960s, it was a post-apocalyptic one: a nuclear war served as a historical rupture that gave rise to a dystopian future. In retrospect, this represents a comparatively optimistic narrative use of an apocalypse. In it, the apocalypse functions as a narrative juncture that introduces a sharp discontinuity from our own real-world timeline to depict an alternative world for us to experience in all its wonders, but mostly horrors.

Since the 1980s, this alternative cyberpunk world seemed to have stopped being so alternative, because the cyberpunk genre largely moved beyond its need for apocalypses as a world-dividing narrative device. The worlds of William Gibson's *Neuromancer*¹⁷ and even Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*¹⁸ – the movie adaptation of Dick's book – managed to portray their dystopias without relying on a nuclear war – or any hard historical break – as its catalyst. Instead, it became the fashion to assume a transitional crisis period that led into a dystopia of unfettered corporate power, technological alienation and ecological collapse. The resulting worlds still feature all the attributes of the old post-apocalyptic dystopia, but without an apocalypse separating our timeline from theirs. This second stage of cyberpunk was often comprised of cautionary dystopias about the power of technology and capital let loose, but its narratives still presupposed a transitional historic juncture that introduced its world as a “what-if” future scenario.

Today, however, our cyberpunk mock-futures seem to be within grasping range and not so alien anymore. The most recent cyberpunk games and movies usually confront us with a mere forward projection of our present, with a focus on its most alienating tendencies. The world of *Cyberpunk 2077*¹⁹, for example, is introduced through a direct continuation of today's socio-economic trajectory, and positions itself at the endpoint of crises that are already unfolding before our eyes. There is no historic moment of disaster and no decisive wrong choice to be made that separates us from its world: only a short span of time, shortly to be traversed by the self-propulsion of capital. Having replaced its speculative core with an anticipatory one, the average cyberpunk setting is now a neon-lit extrapolation of the excesses of neoliberalism – maybe with a bit more tech.

That said, it is apparent how cyberpunk is not just a genre of grimy doomerism. Granted, its setting is de facto one of rampant poverty, extreme inequality, and environmental devastation. But it is very rare for a game or movie to present us with a dystopian hellscape that is not still

¹⁶ Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (Doubleday, 1968).

¹⁷ William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (Ace Books, 1984).

¹⁸ *Blade Runner*, directed by Ridley Scott (Warner Bros., 1982).

¹⁹ CD Project Red, *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Project, 2020), PC.

stylish and somewhat appealing, with badass characters who have not only adapted to their environment but find enjoyment in it. Rosa Janis reflected on the desire presented in this cyberpunk aesthetic: “It would be cool to have cyber augmentations to balance out the horrific poverty and ecological catastrophe that we are actually facing, instead of just rotting away in the mediocrity of capitalism.”²⁰ The cyberpunk genre, and especially its contemporary iterations, offer this kind of aestheticization, and they are far from being politically neutral in doing so. They create worlds that are qualitatively not much different from ours anymore – mostly just the same but worse – and coat them in an appealing aesthetic that trivializes their horrors and depict them as just another playground for us to enjoy. And in the midst of this aestheticized mass impoverishment, they show us a new configuration of desire and enjoyment – a new subjectivity – that is well-adjusted to the dystopia of endless precarity. This new kind of survival is often comprised of hyper-individualistic acts of pulling yourself up by your bootstraps to live a life slightly elevated over the filth of the earth. But if you accept this ideological premise and learn to appreciate the beauty of the dirty neon lights, you can enjoy the dystopic spectacle. Then, its horrors don’t seem that bad after all. And if you survive 2077, then you can rest assured to also survive 2027.

Jameson writes that, in dystopias, these kinds of pre-emptive “future shocks” take on a cathartic form: “such narratives have the social function of accustoming their readers to rapid innovation, of preparing our consciousness and our habits for the otherwise demoralizing impact of change.”²¹ In the case of cyberpunk, much of its demoralizing impact is already here, to the point that it is barely still sci-fi anymore. Thus, getting accustomed to its future means reconciling with our present. It is in this sense that the genre’s newfound popularity over the last decade might be connected to our current struggle to find ways to cope and live a meaningful life amid looming catastrophes and already deteriorating living standards. Conversely, the popularity of this cyberpunk does not exactly flatter a time from whose historical conditions it symptomatically arose as its mainstay science-fiction setting. A time when cyberpunk still served as a critical, cautionary tale whose future was to be avoided instead of enjoyed, was arguably one with more optimism and futuristic imagination.

The reason why cyberpunk does not feel like a retrofuturistic genre is that its future aged too well to become “retro”. While the pre-apocalyptic world of *Fallout* might be a nostalgic lost future that did not come to be, cyberpunk’s future seems to slowly enter our present. The biggest change in the genre, however, is a sobering one, if seen as a symptom of our current historical conjuncture: It seems that we no longer need to imagine an apocalypse to conceive of post-apocalyptic conditions emerging on earth. Unlike 50 years ago, our biggest threat might not be the apocalypse anymore, but transitioning into the post-apocalypse without even noticing.

***Disco Elysium* – The Pre-Apocalypse**

Both the *Fallout* franchise and the cyberpunk genre can be understood as symptomatic products of the End of History and Capitalist Realism: both are socioeconomically confined re-imaginings of our past’s futures that fail to point beyond the historical gridlock that they express.

There might, however, be no game that is more explicitly and purposefully set at the End of History than *Disco Elysium*²². Revachol, the stage of the game, is a city where, to quote our in-

²⁰ Rosa Janis, “The Future is the past: The Failure of Accelerationism”, *Cosmonaut*, 2018, accessed February 1, 2025, <https://cosmonautmag.com/2018/09/the-future-is-the-past-the-failure-of-accelerationism/>.

²¹ Jameson, *Progress versus Utopia*, 151.

²² ZA/UM, *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2019), PC.

game companion, “every school of thought and government has failed²³”. After an international coalition cracked down on its communist uprising, Revachol effectively underwent a post-Soviet shock therapy that left it in a privatized laissez-faire state at the mercy of financial colonists²⁴. What followed is a city where poverty is rampant, children are doing crack behind the hostel cafeteria, and corporate-hired death squads are shooting unionists in the town square. At the same time, the world of Elysium is slowly rendered uninhabitable by the “Pale”, a mysterious force reminiscent of our world’s global warming. The result is a setting that is both post- and pre-apocalyptic at the same time. The past disaster of the failed revolution left the city a ruin, while the end of the world draws closer every day.

It is in this setting that *Disco Elysium*’s protagonist, a late-stage alcoholic police detective, wakes up from a botched suicide attempt. Subjected to the multiple crises of both the world and his life, he can declare himself the “Cop of the Apocalypse” and spread his message of the coming end among the townsfolk. He may even decorate the town’s monument with a banner reading “Pale Swallows All”²⁵. But no matter how much the harbinger of doom doubles down on his apocalyptic prophecies, the game still takes him down a notch by telling him that “it’s totally a coping mechanism”. This may seem strange at first – after all, why would an escapist coping fantasy be an apocalyptic one, instead of that of a better world?

The philosopher Slavoj Žižek provides a possible explanation for this phenomenon:

“It is easy to see how rational optimists and prophets of doom are two sides of the same coin. The first are telling us that we can relax, there is no cause for alarm, things are not so bad at all; the others are telling us that everything is already lost and we can just relax and perversely enjoy the spectacle. They both prevent us from thinking and acting, and from making a choice.”²⁶

Being devoted to the end of the world functions just like naïve optimism in how it allows one to avoid a sober encounter with an increasingly unpleasant reality. Pre-emptively assuming an apocalypse that is neither quite here yet nor fully unpreventable relieves the feelings of anxiety and powerlessness about what is actually coming, and about what parts of it are already here today. This might explain the detective’s coping mechanism, as well as our own cathartic experience with apocalyptic media.

Disco Elysium, however, subverts this all-too convenient way of consuming apocalyptic media by deliberately placing its events in a pre-apocalyptic world whose horrors are uncomfortably close to our own world, and by poking fun at a protagonist who is equally obsessed with apocalypses as we and our current pop culture are. *Disco Elysium* manages to be an anti-escapist game in how it interrogates this desire instead of gratifying it in apocalyptic spectacularism.

Final Remarks

Apocalypses are convenient – at least in the way they are most commonly portrayed and consumed in our 21st-century pop media. This is because they are secretly optimistic: in practice, we will not get off so lightly with a big, abstract flash. Instead, we are far more likely to face a slow decay of living standards on an increasingly uninhabitable planet – a tendency

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Teemu T. Rantanen, “The EU and *Disco Elysium* – second-order representations as vessels of criticism”, in *The World Politics of Disco Elysium* (Routledge, 2025), 115.

²⁵ ZA/UM, *Disco Elysium*.

²⁶ Slavoj Žižek, “From catastrophe to apocalypse... and back”, in *Apocalyptica*, vol. 1 (Heidelberg University Publishing, 2022), 48.

that we have arguably already entered and to which our apocalyptic media owes much of its recent popularity. After all, the apocalyptic fantasy, to return to Günther Anders' dualism, is one where only the apocalypse that ends 'life as we know it' can stop the catastrophe that has become 'life as we know it'. In reality, of course, not everything is lost yet, and apocalyptic fantasies are called fantasies for a reason. But these fantasies gain in popularity when meaningful systemic change without a radical disruption seems increasingly futile, and when it is easier to imagine an apocalypse than an end to apocalyptic conditions. Within that belief, apocalyptic fictions become escapist ones when the very notion of a break, even as a collapse, is deemed emancipatory.

That, however, also means that one can appreciate the speculative potential of apocalyptic fictions to serve as catalysts for futuristic imagination – maybe more so than any other genre of science fiction. After all, much of the appeal of apocalypses is that they create a clean slate and blank screen to project one's political desires on. It is all the sadder that this potential remains largely untapped. Instead, our current social ability for futuristic speculation seems mostly restricted to socio-economically confined reiterations of the same gridlock that the apocalyptic desire wants to break out from. If our mainstay apocalyptic fictions serve as a coal mine's canary bird for the condition of our futuristic imagination, then ours is not having a good time.

What is possible to imagine though is a kind of media and game in particular that is self-aware of the desires that apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fictions accommodate. We have seen a version of that in *Disco Elysium*, a game that gives players the freedom to devote themselves to the coming apocalypse while also critically interrogating their enjoyment in doing so. Instead of aestheticizing the apocalyptic spectacle, it de-mythologizes it down to the fantasy that it is. Because at the end of the day, *Disco Elysium*'s protagonist has to face the very real catastrophe that is Revachol; just like the player will notice how the pre-apocalyptic city is not a place that lends itself to an escapist consumption but is deliberately modelled to be an uncomfortably ugly caricature of our own reality.

When a game demonstrates this Brechtian kind of self-awareness, it allows us to recognize the apocalyptic fantasy as not just a symptomatic by-product of the catastrophe but, from a functional perspective, as perfectly complicit in it. After all, the apocalyptic spectacle is not an ideologically innocent fantasy but, as Žižek argues, prevents us from seriously engaging with its underlying catastrophe. And while games might not be able to substantially alter the state of the world and the historically specific desires it creates, they can be aware of how they, as games, will be enjoyed. Because only then can they make a meaningful and potentially subversive decision on how they choose to accommodate – or challenge – that desire.

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