

How much apocalypse in the apocalypse?

On the revelational aspect of apocalyptic concepts in (post-)apocalyptic games

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In popular fiction, "apocalypse" is typically associated with destruction, doomsday, death, or annihilation. This notion extends to post-apocalyptic settings, which often focus on survival or rebuilding life in a devastated world. Notable examples in games include the *Fallout* or *Diablo* series.

However, to view the apocalypse solely as a destructive event and the subsequent survival phase as "post-apocalyptic" is to oversimplify the concept. Originally, the term "apocalypse" (from the Greek ἀποκάλυψις, meaning "revelation") refers to an event that reveals the true nature of something. In religious contexts, it describes a deity revealing himself to humanity, often leading to a transition to a new, perfect world, the process usually accompanied by significant trials, severe battles and suffering. The apocalyptic concept thus encompasses both destruction and revelation. However, this processual nature of the apocalyptic event, as well as its revelatory nature, is often completely ignored in games labelled as (post-)apocalyptic.

In my paper, I will explore how (post-)apocalyptic games either embrace or overlook this broader understanding of apocalypse, and where the revelatory nature of apocalypse takes a more nuanced and differentiated form.

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Introduction

There are many games that are described as "apocalyptic" or "post-apocalyptic". A search on Steam in December 2024 shows 2,074 entries for the keyword "post-apocalyptic", 4,815 entries for "postapokalyptisch" and 2,542 for "apokalyptisch", with games such as *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, *Rust*, *Left 4 Dead*, *DayZ*, *Fallout 4* or *Days Gone*. Many of these games have as a common setting that humanity, or some part of humanity, has suffered from a destructive event and has to deal with the consequences. This could be a so-called zombie apocalypse, a pandemic outbreak, nuclear war, or any number of scenarios that lead to the destruction of civilized infrastructure. But what does it mean to call such games "apocalyptic" or "post-apocalyptic"? In this paper, I will explore the history of the term "apocalyptic", looking at its religious meaning and how its meaning has shifted to the broad category we use today. In addition, I will discuss a selection of games and analyze how well they fit the original meaning, ultimately answering the question we are all scratching our heads over: Is *Fallout* an apocalyptic game at all?

There is already plenty of literature on the topic, including works that address the religious aspects of games in general (e.g., Heidbrink & Knoll 2014), the apocalyptic theme in general (e.g., DiTommaso et al. 2024), and the religious basis of apocalyptic imagery (e.g., Stübecke 2024). Not to mention, the FROG conference "Gaming the Apocalypse" was held in 2024,

where the talk that this paper is based on was presented. However, few focus on the question of the label itself and its applicability to the apocalyptic elements of games. By offering this superficial comparison, I aim to show that the label "apocalyptic" has departed from its etymological origins as a label for video games, yet it still carries religious significance.

(Post-)Apocalyptic games are not all the same, they deal with different ways in which a catastrophic event unfolds, different causes, different outcomes. In general, most titles can be divided into four different categories: (Post-)War (e.g. Fallout, Horizon, Metro, Armored Core, ...), (Post-)Pandemic (e.g. The Last of Us, A Plague Tale, Days Gone, DayZ, Bloodborne, ...), climate-related (e.g. Frostpunk, Endzone, The Long Dark, ...) or what I would simply call "other" (e.g. Blasphemous, S.T.A.L.K.E.R., Mad Max, Elex, ...), as these games either take place on another planet, in another dimension, in another timeline, feature an "apocalyptic" event that is limited to a specific area or community rather than humanity as such, or resemble apocalyptic tropes and imagery without actually describing an apocalyptic event.

Apocalypse: Etymology, Meaning, Origin

The term "apocalyptic" comes from the Greek ἀποκάλυψις with the literal meaning of "uncovering, of the head", "disclosing" or "revealing, esp. of divine mysteries"¹. This is intriguing because there is no destructive element at all in this meaning. The most important of these meanings for this case is the last one, the "revelation of divine secrets". Probably one of the best-known occurrences of the term is the Revelation of John, which in the original Greek *New Testament* begins with the phrase: "Ἀποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ"², the Apocalypse of Jesus Christ. From there it continued as a mainly religious term, close to its biblical meaning, until it was increasingly used to describe more generally the idea of the end of the world, the end times, or simply a catastrophic event. Accordingly, the use of the term increased at the beginning of the second half of the 20th century, with the addition of "post-apocalyptic", which had not previously played a significant role, at least in the German language.³

To understand the complexity of the term apocalyptic and its evolution into a synonym for a cataclysmic event in general, we need to look at the religious concept of apocalypse. Apocalyptic thought is part of eschatology, which describes the history of salvation. This is important to understand because the idea of salvation is necessary for apocalypticism to work. The concept of eschatology, salvation or apocalypse is best known in the Western world from Christianity, but it is not exclusive to Christianity or even the Abrahamic religions. While Islam and of course Judaism have their own apocalyptic narrative, there are also apocalyptic concepts in other religions, such as Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and even the ancient Norse idea of Ragnarök can be described as an apocalyptic story.⁴

A Christian Apocalypse: The *Revelation of John*

As I have written before, most of the games we call "apocalyptic" originate in societies strongly influenced by Christianity, and so we can - for this purpose - reduce our analysis of apocalypticism to the Christian understanding, which is complex enough in itself. There are

¹ See ἀπο-κάλυψις. (1940). In H. G. Liddell & R. Scott (Eds.), *A Greek-English Lexicon*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0057%3Aentry%3Da%3Dpoka%3Dluyis>. Last accessed 23 July, 2025.

² Ἀποκάλυψις Ἰωάννου 1, 1. In: Nestle, E., Nestle, E., Aland, B., Aland, K., et al. (Eds.). (2013). *Novum Testamentum Graece*. Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft..

³ Apokalypse. In *Digitales Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*. <https://www.dwds.de/wb/Apokalypse>. Last accessed 23 July, 2025.

⁴ See Feik, C., Wieser, V., Zolles, C., & Zolles, M. (Eds.). (2013–2023). *Cultural history of apocalyptic thought / Kulturgeschichte der Apokalypse*. De Gruyter. <https://www.degruyter.com/serial/kgab/html#volumes..>

more apocalyptic books than Revelation, even in the canon, such as the visions of Ezekiel or Daniel. Beyond that, especially if we include the Gnostic offshoots of orthodox Christianity, there are even more apocalyptic books and stories. To break it down, most of these stories work in a similar way to the *Revelation*, so we can rest assured that for this purpose it is sufficient to look at John's apocalyptic "bestseller".

In Revelation, John describes the revelation (duh) of God, His angels and His court to mankind, and the way in which this sets in motion a series of events that ultimately lead to the destruction of the present world and the emergence of a new one. Here you can already see where the common pop-cultural idea of what "apocalyptic" means comes from. However, since there are indeed "truly" apocalyptic games, let us dig a little deeper and discuss the process of the apocalypse as described by John.⁵

After addressing various Christian communities, the Book of Revelation begins with a prophetic vision of the throne of God, from which come "flashes of lightning, and rumblings, and peals of thunder" (Rev. 4, 5). On this throne sits a figure of "jasper and carnelian" (Rev. 4, 3), accompanied by four beastly creatures with six wings and "full of eyes all around and within" (Rev. 4, 8). The creature on the throne holds a scroll which is unsealed by the Lamb (that is, by Jesus), and with the unsealing of seven seals various events take place. As for the first four seals, the horsemen of the Apocalypse appear, one for "conquering and to conquer" (Rev. 6, 2), one for people to "slay one another" (Rev. 6, 4), one with a scale, and the last one is death itself. The last three seals cause the martyrs to rise up and demand to be judged, the appearance of earthquakes and cosmic signs, the sealing of the tribes of Israel and, finally, the appearance of seven angels with seven trumpets.

When these angels blow their trumpets, brimstone and fire with blood will rain down on the earth, a third of the earth will be burned, a third of the sea life and a third of all ships will be destroyed. A third of the earth's drinking water will become "wormwood" (bitter, Rev. 8, 11) and people will die from it; the sun, moon and stars will lose a third of their light. This is followed by the opening of a "bottomless pit" (Rev. 9, 2) from which smoke and locusts with "the power of scorpions" (Rev. 9, 3) will rise under the guidance of an angel ("Abaddon") to torment the people not sealed by God. Meanwhile, people who want to die cannot and are doomed to suffer. A third of humanity is destroyed by fire, smoke and brimstone, but the rest still refuse to "repent of their murders, or their sorceries, or their sexual immorality, or their thefts" (Rev. 9, 21).

The next events are the rise of a dragon to fight the angel Michael in heaven, the rise of the two beasts (this is where 666 comes from as a diabolical number, the "number of the beast"), and finally the beginning of the final judgement, where seven bowls are poured over the earth, causing various plagues, the sea turning to blood, (additional) darkness, earthquakes, draughts and demonic frog spirits leading the kings to Harmageddon "to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty" (Rev. 16, 14).

After these destructive events, the angels imprison the satanic dragon for 1000 years, followed by the chiliastic reign of Jesus and another battle, culminating in the disappearance of heaven and earth to be renewed by God, who will then live among the chosen, righteous people who have survived all this.

⁵ The following quotes are taken from the English Standard Version.

So here we have the destructive element. The Apocalypse describes the chain of events leading to the renewal of the world and its cleansing from the unbelievers. And while this sounds harsh and brutal, it also points to the real function of apocalyptic writings. They were written in times of suffering and exile to reinforce group identity, to enforce morality and commitment to the group, to reinforce friend-enemy narratives, and to explain developments that might not fit into existing narratives, hopes, or beliefs. The main addressee of an apocalyptic narrative was thus the group of believers itself, rather than non-believers as a reason for missionary practice. In the case of the Revelation of John, it was intended to give hope and strength to persecuted Christians in the Roman Empire.

But what can we learn from this for our analysis of “apocalyptic” games? First, we should highlight the rich imagery of apocalypticism and its influence on popular culture. This is true not only of the main themes of Revelation, but also in other contexts, such as the visions of Ezekiel, who sees God’s throne accompanied by wheel-like creatures, again with many eyes, the Ophanim. As we can see in the Abrahamic apocalyptic writings, God and his creatures are far from being nice, beautiful beings who are there to help and support humanity. They resemble nightmarish creatures straight out of a Lovecraftian horror novel. However, there is probably some influence of apocalyptic writings on the horror genre in general.

Second, in addition to the rich horror imagery, we can distill from the Revelation of John a basic pattern that can be applied to “apocalyptic” settings to see how far they are committed to the idea of apocalyptic thought itself.

1. A civilization loses its moral ground, forgets its deity and its rules, develops a general ignorance of human or religious values, in general the civilization experiences a downfall of humanity, e.g. by ignoring the limits set by a deity of divine rule or simply by human megalomania.
2. This culminates in a catastrophic event, e.g. an extreme war between (specific) civilizations, internal or external factions defined as enemies, or even war among humans in general as a sign of the decline of civilizations.
3. The deity reveals itself, destroys (almost) everything with plagues, battles, climatic or cosmic events, and only the true believers are kept alive.
4. The deity then sets up an often-autocratic interim regime to reset civilization and lay the foundations for a complete renewal of humanity, purified and composed of only the purest.
5. In the post-apocalyptic era, the remaining remnants of humanity are allowed and able to rebuild their world (under the governance of their deity). How this unfolds depends on the apocalyptic path. As we have seen, the Apocalypse of John describes a chiastic reign of the Messiah, before another battle leads to the complete annihilation and re-emergence of a new world, which is then truly the homestead of pious humanity and God itself.

Let’s take these five points and distil them into a score that we can apply to various games to see how far they adhere to the religious concept of the apocalypse. Each of the five steps in the apocalyptic script is worth one point. Since most of the games I mentioned above do not have a religious context, it is not necessary for the development to take place in the order of the revelation. The imagery is worth an additional three points.

6. If the game features horror-like monstrosities, it is worth one point;
7. Religious entities or deities are worth one point.
8. An extra point is given to games that include a substantial form of revelatory narrative.

In the end, a maximum of eight points can be granted with our apocalypse score. In a final step, I will provide a percental score as part of an overview table to gain a single number for scoring.⁶

The selection of games to review is almost entirely arbitrary, and includes games that I feel are related to the broader apocalyptic theme without necessarily falling into the top tier of (post-)apocalyptic games. I chose *Fallout* because it is probably one of the most famous games labelled “post-apocalyptic”, *Frostpunk* because it takes a different approach to “post-apocalypticism” with its focus on climate, *A Plague Tale* because of its way of telling an apocalyptic story with religiosity as a central theme, *Blasphemous* because it is probably the apocalyptic Metroidvania par excellence, and finally *Diablo* because it is probably one of the bluntest ways of implementing an apocalyptic storyline (besides maybe *Doom*).

Case Study 1: Fallout

If you type “apocalypse video game” into a search engine, you are likely to find the *Fallout* series in at least one of the top spots, if not the first, on numerous “Top X Apocalyptic Games” lists. The first *Fallout* game was released in 1997 and featured a parallel perspective, a heavy focus on role-playing mechanics, and a turn-based combat system. The second *Fallout* game followed in 1998 with 7 main game titles released up until the last official release of *Fallout 76* in 2018 and a well-received show airing in 2024. *Fallout* is set in the negative utopia of a post-nuclear world in the year 2077. Humanity has survived largely thanks to the “Vaults”, bunkers that protect people from the devastated world outside. The typical storyline of a *Fallout* game begins in one of these shelters, with a problem occurring that forces the player character (PC) to leave the vault in search of a solution to a problem, a person to find, and/or generally to follow their chosen path in an increasingly open-world sandbox.

In this world, the PC will find several factions to join and a wide variety of enemy types. The level design typically features vast, empty and devastated landscapes that clearly bear witness to the destruction of nuclear war. In contrast, or in addition to this, the map features remnants of civilization in the form of partially destroyed villages, cottages, industries, but also larger cities or abandoned amusement parks to add to the gloomy atmosphere. As well as *Fallout*’s signature DIY architecture, interiors may feature contrasting images such as lush greenhouses or clean, modern interiors.

NPCs and enemies are designed accordingly: The player can encounter various states of fallout-affected humans and animals, including normal humans, but also mutations in the form of super mutants or zombies. The wildlife also ranges from healthy to severely mutated. As you make your way through the world, you will also have to be careful not to be ambushed or run into areas that are still highly radioactive, making exploration a difficult endeavor.

⁶ One could provide a sophisticated explanation of how and why a certain scoring system is preferred. However, since this essay is more of a superficial discussion than a quantitative analysis, I will refrain from overemphasizing the theoretical basis of this scoring system, which could serve as a foundation for future work.

Let's get down to business: Does the pre-apocalyptic development show human megalomania or the downfall of a civilization? Yes, it does. The devastated world of Fallout is the result of a nuclear war between the US and China. The idea of controlling the means of total annihilation and the dangers of doing so is a recurring theme in 20th-century popular culture, and has been featured in numerous films, books and shows. It can be seen as human megalomania to develop a weapon so destructive that a war with these weapons would ultimately destroy not only the enemy, but civilization or ultimately life on Earth as a whole.

The events of 23 October 2077, when the nuclear war began and ended, can be seen as the destructive event. Given that Fallout is told from the US perspective, China can be understood as the invading foreign power that accumulates in the battle of Armageddon, in this case the exchange of nuclear bombs.

As for the third point, Fallout will have to skip it. There is no deity in Fallout, nor is there any religious narrative, nor is this deity responsible for any destruction. It doesn't completely avoid religious imagery and vocabulary, such as the (introduced as secular) "Followers of the Apocalypse", who have a fleur-de-lis cross as their heraldic emblem, or the "Brotherhood of Steel", but a religious deity is never introduced as the cause or responsibility for nuclear devastation. The fallout is basically human self-mutilation, pure and simple.

One could argue that the idea of a chosen people is present in Fallout, and thus it would get a point for point four. However, these chosen ones are not chosen because they belong to a people chosen by God. The company that built and maintained the Vaults, Vault-Tec, did so as part of their business model. People could buy their place in a Vault. So the "chosen people" has to be read as a capitalist privilege enjoyed mainly by those with enough wealth to buy into a Vault. This may still be true if people were able to get into Vaults by sheer luck or chance, since the only sure way to survive nuclear war would be to make sure you were one of the chosen few who bought into a Vault. I would argue that Fallout has a point here, as the lore narrative does include the idea of being chosen, though again not linked to a deity but due to capitalist reasons.

The post-apocalyptic era described in Revelation, however, does not take place. Fallout remains in a state of humanity's self-discovery, there is no positive utopia growing out of the negative utopia depicted in the lore. While the player does explore a world in which humanity is rebuilding itself, the visible state of affairs can hardly be described as a post-chiastic world in which humanity finally comes to a peaceful rest. This is where Fallout fails.

The creatures of Fallout are obviously horrors. Not necessarily evil, but especially the more severely mutated enemies or creatures like the Deathclaw are reminiscent of demonic imagery. I would also argue that zombies sometimes resemble an anonymous mass of enemies, which could be understood as the pop-cultural imagination of a foreign enemy trying to destroy the chosen people. The same goes for hostile human enemies, such as the raiders that regularly attack villages in Fallout 4. So, apocalyptic and horror imagery yes, but since the Deathclaw, like all mutated hostile enemies, are established as part of the local fauna, there is no religious component involved. The reason for their existence is simply nuclear fallout and radiation causing mutations: Fallout still gets one point.

There is also no substantial revelation narrative in Fallout lore. One could argue that there are several smaller parts of the lore that involve themes of revelation, such as the world revealing itself to the people who lived in the Vault for a century or more, or revelatory plot twists, but these hardly count against the idea of revelation in an apocalyptic religious context. So I'll pass on giving Fallout this one.

In conclusion, Fallout gets 4 out of 8 points. It is a game that touches on several apocalyptic themes, but falls short in the revelatory and God-oriented nature that is embedded in apocalyptic thought. Fallout is certainly one of the most popular (post-)apocalyptic games, but it is obviously not the most apocalyptic.

Case Study 2: Frostpunk

Frostpunk is a strategy survival game that released its first title in 2018 and the second in 2024. It offers an alternate history scenario in which the world's temperature has suddenly plummeted, leading to global chaos and the colonization of the Arctic to exploit its resources. In this setting, the PC is responsible for establishing a colony in an ice-cold environment, and must not only manage the heat and supply the colonists with building and living resources, but also take care of the colonists' health, welfare, moral and political actions. The game has been described as difficult, "dark and challenging" (Gameplanet)⁷ and more of a "crisis management simulator" (The Digital Fix)⁸.

Six of the reviews on its metacritic page for the PC version⁹ contain the term "apocalyptic" or "post-apocalyptic", such as the Darkstation review, which mentions its "icy apocalyptic wasteland"¹⁰. Thus, Frostpunk can easily be seen as a typical example of a game that features something that could be called a "climate-related apocalypse". But to what extent does Frostpunk perpetuate the apocalyptic narrative we have discussed here?

First, the question of humanity or civilization being the cause of the downfall or apocalyptic event: It is not clear what caused the ice storms and the drop in temperature, but it is most likely caused by humanity (alone), as this would probably have been much more prominent in the lore. It could be argued that in an alternate history, there may have been a human-caused climate change that led to another ice age, but again, this is not explicitly stated, but rather an uneducated guess at a possible human involvement. As there is no basis for this claim, Frostpunk doesn't score any points here.

Although there is a catastrophic event, but it is not caused by mankind, as far as we can tell. A possible human influence, such as climate change, is not explicitly mentioned. So Frostpunk gets no points here either.

There is also no revelation. Although we see a significant change in climate as the basis of its lore, there is nothing supernatural or spiritual in Frostpunk. The only religious element in the game is the potential rise of sectarian or religious movements in your colony, depending on the political choices the PC makes. I don't think this is relevant enough to mention here, as Frostpunk is a game set in a climate catastrophe of unknown origin, but certainly without divine intervention.

⁷ From Frostpunk - PC Critic Reviews. Metacritic. <https://www.metacritic.com/game/frostpunk/critic-reviews/?platform=pc>. Last accessed 23 July, 2025.

⁸ See Coombes, L. (2019). Frostpunk Review. The Digital Fix Gaming. <https://web.archive.org/web/20190528164501/https://www.thedigitalfix.com/gaming/content/13066/frostpunk/>. Last accessed 23 July, 2025.

⁹ See Frostpunk - PC Critic Reviews. Metacritic. <https://www.metacritic.com/game/frostpunk/critic-reviews/?platform=pc>. Last accessed 23 July, 2025.

¹⁰ See Steighner, M. (2018, May 17). Frostpunk Review. Darkstation. <https://web.archive.org/web/20190528164516/https://www.darkstation.com/reviews/frostpunk-review#expand>. Last accessed 23 July, 2025..

Related to this is a fourth point worth discussing: There is no deity choosing a messiah for some kind of chiastic rule, but the game does contain the idea of reinventing humanity. Since the player has to build and run his own colony in an extremely hostile environment, civilization has to find new ways to survive. Therefore, with a small question mark, I would give Frostpunk this point.

As for Frostpunk's "bleak" atmosphere, its difficulty and its strong focus on survival, it doesn't get a point for the ultimate apocalyptic goal in point 5. There is no divine empire, no civilized paradise rising from the "cold dead hands" of extinct humanity. It is very likely that the PCs will fail in their attempt to provide a safe haven for the colonists, and the colony will suffer from plagues, famine, frost and riots. It is a dark game, with no intention of presenting a happy ending or an uplifting experience, as the Anno titles do, for example.

There are also no apocalyptic images in Frostpunk, no creatures, no angels, no demons, not even zombies or secular forms of monsters. Apart from the political imagery of religious sectarianism, Frostpunk is a very worldly, very secular and very realistic game. As such, there is no revelation, although one could argue that revelation could include the idea of humanity revealing its true side in the face of an existential crisis, which would also apply to Fallout, but I would refrain from loosening that category too much.

As a result, Frostpunk, a "climate-apocalyptic" strategy game, scores only 1 out of 8, and remains comparatively un-apocalyptic from this essay's perspective.

Case Study 3: A Plague Tale

A Plague Tale is an action-adventure game, the first part of which, Innocence, was released in 2019, and the second part, Requiem, in 2022. It takes place in an alternate reality of late medieval Europe, specifically France and the Mediterranean. The story revolves around the siblings Hugo and Amicia, who are trying to escape and/or face their fate, which is linked to a mysterious plague, the Prima Macula, and a huge invasion of rats. Throughout the game, the player will mainly have to navigate Amicia through a hostile medieval world, pursued not only by bandits and raiding soldiers, but also by the immensely powerful Church, who want to use Hugo's powers for their own ends.

Hugo is not only afflicted with the Prima Macula, which develops in stages and will eventually kill him, but it also gives him the power to control the rats. In many parts of the game, the PC and/or their surroundings are attacked by huge masses of rats that flow like beastly rivers. These rats kill instantly and can only be avoided by light. The rats are the main non-human enemies in the game. However, Hugo's powers allow him to control the rats and use them to kill enemies.

Both games feature a rich and vibrant world and relatively linear level design, alternating between bright, colorful, hopeful passages where the characters can find solidarity and peace, and dark passages with extremely brutal environments and a hopeless perspective on the characters' future.

The setting in medieval Europe, the strong focus on the plague and religious themes, the oscillating nature of the narrative, and especially the LaCuna episode in the second game are heavily influenced by apocalyptic thought. Although we will have to discuss the specific assessment, it is worth mentioning that messianism and the idea of a "rat apocalypse" is a

central theme. While we have to look for apocalyptic features in games like Frostpunk or Fallout, in A Plague Tale they are right out in the open. This is interesting in that the apocalypticism is rather subtle compared to games that have “post-apocalyptic” written all over them, but remain comparatively superficial (see Fallout).

Let’s try our scoring system on A Plague Tale and see if it holds up. The world of A Plague Tale features a strong Church and the Inquisition as the religious antagonists. The historical Inquisition had the goal of fighting “heresy”¹¹, and they persecute NPCs in the game for this reason (e.g. the alchemists), while at the same time having their own worldly interest in increasing the power of the Grand Inquisitor¹². This is a very obvious example of the classic apocalyptic trope of a civilization losing its moral ground, selfishly turning away from the “true” wishes of God. And an Inquisition wouldn’t be necessary anyway if the Church didn’t think people were in danger of turning away from what the Church considers to be true. So I’d give A Plague Tale this point.

There is no obvious event that can be seen as a man-made cataclysm, nor does A Plague Tale contain any lore about the downfall of mankind. It can be argued that most of the antagonists are characterized as more or less evil in the sense that they are greedy, power-obsessed, ruthless and scheming. However, this doesn’t culminate in any kind of war, so I’ll refrain from giving A Plague Tale a point here.

In turn, we have to score the next point. In both games, both the plagues and the rats lead to destroyed neighborhoods, crops, countless people removed by death and even more dead livestock. In their most extreme extent, the invading rats are by sheer mass also able to literally destroy cities and fortifications, so those who didn’t die by the plague won’t survive the rats anyway. Plagues and the mass invasion of a certain species are an obvious apocalyptic topic that is taken straight out of the *revelation*. There is no further talk about a revelation of god, but the topic of a revelation is present in the La Cuna episode, where Hugo is revealed to be regarded as a messianic figure for the local cult (which itself is a creation by an antagonist).

In addition, there is no chiastic episode. Even if we regard Hugo to be a messianic figure, causing the world to vanish by a god-sent rat invasion, there is no “victory”, nor is there a chosen people besides maybe his very family and especially Amicia as his protector. Hugo dies and as such is rather comparable to the pre-chiastic idea of atonement than to the victorious messianic return. A Plague Tale is heavily laden with messianic topoi, but it does not build a consistent apocalyptic framework upon it.

I would, however, give A Plague Tale credit for the idea of rebuilding. In the end, Hugo dies and with that, the rat invasion and prima macula seems to vanish from the region. Although the second part ends with Amicia departing on a quest to find the next carrier of the Prima Macula, indicating that it has only been a partial victory, at least the region of southern France (more or less) can rebuild itself. One could argue against this point, as this rebuilding process is not connected to the idea of a cleansing or that people have drawn a lesson from the destruction, much less the idea of the deity living among the people, but I’d give A Plague Tale this point, again, with a little question mark.

¹¹ See heresy. (2024, December 31). Encyclopaedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/heresy>. Last accessed 23 July, 2025.

¹² See Vitalis Bénévent. A Plague Tale Wiki. https://aplaguetale.fandom.com/wiki/Vitalis_B%C3%A9n%C3%A9vent. Last accessed 23 July, 2025..

But there is no apocalyptic finale. God is not present in the world, there is no heavenly creature, no deity to reign over a purified society of believers. As apocalyptic as *A Plague Tale* is told, it is not a consistently apocalyptic story.

A Plague Tale does feature an apocalyptic monstrosity in the form of the rats, but there is no deity, despite its religious narratives. I give *A Plague Tale* the bonus point for apocalyptic references to the idea of a Revelation: The LaCuna episode is a clear example of how a religious cult provides an appropriate framework for seeing Hugo, or carriers in general, as messianic figures, in that they are seen as a deity called “Child of Embers” who is revealed as part of an apocalyptic belief.

In the end, *A Plague Tale* scores 5 out of 8, clearly more on the apocalyptic side of things.

Case Study 4: Blasphemous

Blasphemous is a pixel art Metroidvania with a first title to be released in 2019 and a second in 2023. It features a dark fantasy setting in the fictional world cynically named *Cvstodia*, which has been struck by the Miracle, a form of a deity called the “Higher Will”. The protagonist is a “penitent”, an unnamed male figure with an iron capirote, on a quest to fight a corrupt church, the monstrosities and curiosities scattered throughout the world, and in the second game, to prevent the arrival of the “last son of the Miracle”. The game’s setting, architecture and overall design are strongly reminiscent of medieval Spain, particularly Andalusia, and its story is influenced by medieval Catholic mysticism, with a strong emphasis on themes such as penance, piety, sinful behaviour and religious totalitarianism.¹³

In terms of gameplay mechanics, *Blasphemous* has been described as a Metroidvania Soulslike¹⁴, with high difficulty and a focus on tactical melee combat mechanics combined with ranged or AoE magic. The game features several character-building mechanics that revolve around the theme of penance or religiosity in general: for example, to improve certain aspects, the player can upgrade a rosary with special buffs. Weapons will have names such as “Mea Culpa” or “Veredicto”, adding to the religious and penitential setting.

Blasphemous is also quite brutal and gory, with explicit execution animations that can be performed after enough damage has been done to an enemy. It is also explicit in its depiction of self-mutilation, flagellation, and the mutation and torment of people under the influence of the miracle. The main twist in the lore is the fact that the Miracle is actually understood to be the revealed deity who came to save humanity, despite the fact that the Miracle brings pain and suffering to the world by causing random mutations, demanding painful penance and self-mutilation, and generally doing the exact opposite of saving believers from evil.

As such, it is an interesting example of an apocalyptic game to review in this article. Let’s start with the first point, which is difficult to discuss because the game’s lore does not feature a narrative of human downfall. There is mention of a corrupted church (similar to *A Plague Tale*),

¹³ See Trivi, M. (2019, October 21). La Andalucía macabra de *Blasphemous*, explicada por sus creadores. *El País*. https://verne.elpais.com/verne/2019/10/21/articulo/1571670244_293452.html. Last accessed 23 July, 2025.

¹⁴ See e.g. Hilla, D. (2023, August 17). *Blasphemous 2* – Das biblische 2D-Souls-like bittet zur zweiten Messe. *Gameswelt*. <https://www.gameswelt.de/blasphemous-2/test/das-biblische-2d-souls-like-bittet-zur-zweiten-messe-321708>. Last accessed 23 July, 2025.

but there is no major human influence that could have caused the deity to reveal himself in the form of the miracle. So I wouldn't grant Blasphemous this point.

I wouldn't award the second point either: There is no catastrophic event, no man-made war, nothing of extreme impact that could have triggered the coming of the Miracle.

From here on, however, things get better: The deity reveals itself, and with it comes pain and suffering. This is playbook apocalypticism. Although it is not clear to either the believer or the penitent why the miracle has revealed itself in this setting and how it all came about, this lack of a valid reason is another facet of the arbitrariness of the miracle. From the perspective of cosmic horror, one could argue that the miracle is too inhuman to be understood by humans. In any case, this point is well taken; no other game discussed in this paper, with the possible exception of Diablo, comes with such a catastrophic effect associated with the revelation of the deity.

The coming of the miracle is accompanied by a kind of chiasmic rule. There is no proper chiasmic setup, with the penitent somehow being the messianic figure in the first game, challenging the rule of a corrupt church that has turned away from the miracle, but the second game at least has a possible beginning of a chiasmic setup in that it foreshadows the coming of the "Last Son", a clear messianic attribution. I'd concede this point, because in addition to the messianic setting, it requires the believers in the world of Cvstodia to reinvent themselves in order to survive under the arbitrary effects of the Miracle.

The same applies to the next: The Deity(s?) behind the miracle, the "Higher Wills", live among humanity in the form of the miracle and intervene in its actions and daily life. Although this is rather a perversion of what the historical biblical apocalyptic writers probably imagined, it is a world in which the deity is already present and the believers can interact with it. There is no chronological timeline that requires the chiasmic rule to take place before the coming of the deity, Blasphemous more or less features both apocalyptic themes at the same time.

As for the three additional points: Yes, there are apocalyptic creatures formed by the effects of the miracle in the world, and yes, they also strongly reflect religious topoi: be it tormented humans tied to statues used as heavy weapons or flagellants, be it angel-like creatures, mutilated living beings or corpses in catholic casulas, the various enemies and NPCs in the worlds are strongly involved in evoking the religious topoi of Blasphemous.

I'd also give Blasphemous a bonus point for being a story of revelation par excellence: Not only do both games feature the idea of a higher deity revealing itself to humanity, but the second part in particular emphasizes the idea of a messianic coming, which, as the "last" one, is once again apocalyptic.

All in all, Blasphemous scores 6 out of 8 and is one of the two most apocalyptic games discussed in this essay. But what would an essay on apocalypticism in games be without one of the all-time classics of hack'n'slay: Let's talk about Diablo.

Case Study 5: Diablo

Diablo is a classic. Its first game was released in 1997 with a fourth title to be released as a live service since 2023. Although there have been questionable decisions and scandals in its

publishing history¹⁵, Diablo remains an important example of an isometric hack'n'slay game set in a dark fantasy world, with a strong focus on character progression, rich loot and a dark and sinister story. Players can choose from several archetypes of fantasy characters at the start of the game, and can choose between different difficulties, the highest being a notorious hardcore mode with permadeath.

The story revolves around a battle between Heaven and Hell that has been going on since the beginning of the world. Throughout the game, the player character is confronted with yet another assault of evil forces on the human world and the forces of Heaven, typically requiring the player character to kill millions of hellish minions and defeat some of Hell's best demons. Sounds like Doom? Well, Diablo could be described as Doom's RPG-style medieval cousin.

In terms of references to religious topoi or figures, Diablo is the game that does not even try to add a middle layer: It offers a straightforward good versus evil story, with tales of betrayal, lust for power, intrigue, black magic, demonic rituals, everything you might expect from a world that has the eternal battle between Heaven and Hell at its core.

Since we are talking about demons and angels, and there are plenty of demons and angels in Diablo, you might think that Diablo could easily score a full 8 out of 8 on our scale. Well, let's see.

I would argue that we cannot give Diablo the first point. Although humanity is involved in the events of all the Diablo games, and is responsible for unleashing more than one of the great evils, there is no underlying story of humanity's downfall. The battle between Heaven and Hell predates any possible human cardinal sin, it originates in the battle between primordial deities, and humanity is more like a playball between the two main factions. So no point here.

However, I have already hinted at the reason why I would give Diablo the second point: In every game, Humans are stupid enough to think that they can control or benefit from the powers of Hell. There are several episodes in the story where people think that if they help one of the demons, they will be able to use their powers. Usually things go wrong, but this does not stop others from trying. Since the release of these demons often leads to an increase in demonic activity on Earth, these efforts could be seen as cataclysmic events leading to apocalyptic events. This may be a little far-fetched, but it is a valid point.

As with the deities, things are a bit more complicated: Diablo has a pantheon of deities¹⁶ who are not necessarily directly involved in events. However, some lesser deities do reveal themselves: Lilith and Inarius, for example, are the main deities in Diablo IV and are present in the human world; in general, if the major demons such as Lilith, Duriel, Diablo, et al. are understood as deities, then there is no question that their revelation - that is, their presence - in the world leads to destruction (literally visible in the Diablo 2 DLC on Baal, titled "Lord of Destruction"), even if only to open the pathways between Hell and the human world. Ultimately, I'd grant Diablo this point, as there are several divine creatures that come to earth with destructive powers.

¹⁵ See Byrd, M. (2022). Why Diablo Immortal Does (and Doesn't) Deserve All the Hate. DenofGeek. <https://www.denofgeek.com/games/diablo-immortal-controversies-review-bombs-explained> (Last accessed 23 July, 2025) and Bavendiek, A. (2023). Activision Blizzard: Sexuelle Belästigung, Einschüchterung & Co. – So steht es um den Skandal. Gamepro. <https://www.gamepro.de/artikel/activision-belaestigung-skandal,3395232.html>. Last accessed 23 July, 2025.

¹⁶ See Deities. Diablo Wiki. <https://diablo.fandom.com/wiki/Deities>. Last accessed 23 July, 2025.

Furthermore, one of these deities, Inarius, can be seen as a reference to a chiastic rule. Inarius, a selfish and corrupt deity who attempted to negotiate peace with Hell and was banished from Heaven as a result, establishes a de facto theocracy in Sanctuary, with a martial and inquisitorial church to support his claims.¹⁷ It's arguable to what extent this rule affects humanity in any attempt to reinvent itself, but since the Diablo fandom features various topoi of a deity's rule on Earth, I'd grant it this point as well.

The same goes for the next point: although Diablo (at least the main games) does not necessarily feature a final episode of an apocalyptic process, and the battle between Heaven and Hell continues to be fought for every new Diablo release, especially since the Endgame content and live service do not allow for a finite end, there is always some divine entity living among humans. Be it Inarius, Baal, Diablo in his human form, there are more than enough examples of a deity being present in the human world with a certain number of chosen people around them. Again, not in the sense that anything else has disappeared, but still enough that I would count this point.

As for the last three points: Yes, there are monsters, and yes, there are monsters that resemble religious imagery, with countless forms of demons and angels among enemies and NPCs. Diablo probably has the highest number of religiously themed enemies of any other "apocalyptic" game.

Last but not least, revelation is also a major theme in Diablo. Although the general situation is always clear, with Heaven and Hell fighting their eternal battle, there are countless instances of revelatory topoi. All in all, Diablo scores 7 out of 8 and is the clear winner in our quest to reveal the 'true' apocalypticism in apocalyptic games.

Conclusion

That said, it is obvious that there is no such thing as "true" apocalypticism. First, I only discussed apocalypticism on the basis of the *Revelation of John*. There are numerous other apocalyptic writings, not only in Christian literature, but also in other religions: One could very well discuss the influence of Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu or Zoroastrian apocalyptic thought. Secondly, the concept has evolved and secularized over time. With the emergence of horror, science fiction and fantasy literature, "apocalyptic" or "post-apocalyptic" took on a new meaning that abandoned its religious origins and defined new boundaries and markers for what could be called "apocalyptic". Without this religious background, three points could be distilled that are important for games of this genre:

1. An event, often but not necessarily caused by humanity itself, that leads or can lead to the destruction of humanity¹⁸.
2. Parts of humanity survive this event and face a completely changed world.
3. The survivors have to reinvent themselves and rebuild civilization.

This definition allows for a very broad categorization, and explains why there are far more games described as "apocalyptic" (1 or 2) or "post-apocalyptic" (3) than games that actually

¹⁷ See Inarius. Diablo Wiki. <https://diablo.fandom.com/wiki/Inarius>. Last accessed 23 July, 2025.

¹⁸ Humanity can of course be exchanged with any form of life.

deal with revelational themes. Although this secular form of apocalypticism does not necessarily have an obvious reference to the literal meaning of the word apocalypse, the core idea of something new emerging from total destruction is present in all of these games in one form or another.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Score
<i>Fallout</i>	x	x		x		x			50
<i>Frostpunk</i>					x				12,5
<i>A Plague Tale</i>	x		x		x	x		x	62,5
<i>Blasphemous</i>			x	x	x	x	x	x	75
<i>Diablo</i>		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	87,5

Table 1: Overview over the results. 1: Humanities Downfall, 2: Catastrophic Event, 3: Revelation of a deity and Destruction, 4: Interim Regime, 5: Post-apocalyptic Reawakening, 6: Monstrosities, 7: Religious entities, 8: Revelatory narrative

I have only discussed five games in this article, which could be seen as an arbitrary collection, and there is no deeper meaning in my choice. You could, of course, discuss the *Doom* series, the eldritch apocalypticism of *Bloodborne*, the huge amount of post-WWII/post-nuclear war games that exist alongside *Fallout*, survival games like *The Long Dark* or even *The Forest*, any zombie game, or any of the thousands of games that are labelled as such. It would be possible to go much deeper, as most of the games discussed here have extremely elaborate fandoms and lore. But as an introduction, I hope to have given an idea of the complexity of the term, and how apocalypse in its original Christian sense carries more weight than just the three points I have listed at the end. There is much more to analyze, especially outside the confines of Christian apocalypticism, but that is an exercise for another time.

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