

Unveiled in Ashes: Hellblade and the Revelatory Collapse of the Self

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I play Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice and find myself thinking of apocalypse—not as ending but as unveiling. This paper doesn't analyse Senua's journey so much as travel alongside it, tracing paths where perception fractures into revelation. What emerges is less argument than exploration—following intuitions through territories where psychosis functions as methodology, where dissolution becomes a way of knowing rather than its failure. Through overlapping fragments examining body, voice, time, abjection, posthuman, memory, and revelation, I trace how Senua's psychology materializes across multiple registers of apocalyptic experience. What if apocalyptic being—existence constituted through continuous encounter with its own unmaking—offers not breakdown but breakthrough? What becomes visible when familiar structures collapse? I have no answers, only this strange new hunger for questions that conventional coherence in (post-)apocalyptic games cannot contain.

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Prologue: Into the Dark

The word “apocalypse” comes to us from the Greek *apokalypsis*—an uncovering, a revelation, a disclosure of knowledge. Long before it became shorthand for world-ending catastrophe, apocalypse meant simply revelation—the lifting of a veil to expose hidden truth, as proposed in one of the foundational essays of apocalyptic literature (*Towards the Morphology of a Genre*, 1979, John J. Collins). This dual nature—destruction intertwined with disclosure—still lingers in our contemporary understanding, though we've largely buried the revelatory dimension beneath spectacular imagery of societal collapse.

When I first encountered the call for papers on “gaming the apocalypse,” my mind didn't immediately jump to the usual suspects—not to *Fallout*'s irradiated wastelands, not to *The Last of Us*'s fungal pandemic, not to any of the countless digital renderings of civilization's end. Instead, I thought of Senua, wandering through the mists of Helheim, voices echoing in her head. This instinctive connection puzzled me at first. After all, *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* lacks many of the explicit markers of the (post-)apocalyptic genre: no global catastrophe threatens humanity, no disease decimates populations, no nuclear winter blankets the earth, no hordes of undead roam the streets. Yet something about Senua's journey setting out through Helheim to save her lover's soul feels more apocalyptic than any rendering of societal collapse I've encountered. This paper emerges from that intuition—my attempt to articulate why *Hellblade* resonates so intensely with apocalyptic thinking in its etymological essence rather than its contemporary spectacle.

Games typically render the (post-)apocalypse externally—through devastated landscapes, failed institutions, humanity reduced to mere survival mechanics. These narratives position apocalypse as a collective event, observable through shared material conditions: radiation

zones, zombie hordes, environmental collapse. Such (post-)apocalyptic imagery certainly appears throughout *Hellblade*—*Helheim*’s blighted shores, corpses suspended from trees, villages burned to cinders—yet these external manifestations serve primarily as materializations of something more profound: the apocalypse within.

This paper explores what I want to call “apocalyptic being” through interlocking fragments. I’m drawn to the possibility that *Senua*’s journey might illuminate something about apocalypse that conventional narratives miss entirely—something that happens not to worlds but within consciousness itself. These fragments follow intuitions rather than arguments—what Anna Tsing calls ‘arts of noticing’ (2010 and 2015)—tracing points of resonance between *Hellblade*’s shattered landscapes and the territories that open when perception itself undergoes continuous revelation; they draw breath from contemporary feminist, queer, and posthumanist thoughts that resonate with *Senua*’s journey—not to position this work within established academic genealogies, but simply to bring these writings to the readers’ attention. I reference these thoughts and their thinkers briefly rather than extensively paraphrasing their work; they serve as fellow travellers rather than authorities, offering conceptual tools for articulating experiences that resist easy categorization.

The paper unfolds in seven fragments, each a shard of the same shattered mirror: I. The body as both site of catastrophe and revelation (Flesh). II. Voices that torment and guide across impossible boundaries (Haunting). III. Time that refuses linear progression in favor of simultaneity (Time). IV. Abjection that transforms expulsion into resistance (Revolt). V. Boundaries dissolving between self, other, and environment (Posthuman). VI. Memory that preserves through its own burning (Archive). VII. Consciousness that embodies apocalypse rather than merely witnessing it (Revelation).

They need not be read in order. Their logic is one of resonance, not sequence—a chorus of collapses.

The Labyrinth of Flesh

My hands shake sometimes. After too much coffee, during anxiety, in the cold. A subtle reminder: the body I inhabit remains stubbornly beyond complete control. In the (post-)apocalyptic games, bodies rarely tremble. Consider the steady hands of *The Last of Us*’s Joel or the unwavering aim of *Metro*’s Artyom—their reliable flesh navigating wastelands while remaining curiously untouched by them. Catastrophe happens to the world, never to the perceiving body itself. Playing *Hellblade*, I watched *Senua*’s hands tremble as she gripped her blade, and something in me recognized that quiver—the way certainty can drain from flesh. What drew me wasn’t her heroism but her hesitation—moving like someone navigating two worlds simultaneously, each with its own contradictory physics. This hesitation opens questions about what bodies actually experience during catastrophe—dimensions rarely explored in games. What somatic knowledge emerges in crisis that remains inaccessible to steadier hands?

I keep returning to a moment early in the game: *Senua* approaches a ruined archway, and suddenly the stonework appears to breathe. Textures ripple; shadows pool where light should fall. The screen itself seems uncertain. I initially checked my graphics settings, assuming a technical glitch, then realized—this is the game. *Senua*’s perceptions warp the very fabric of her reality, and mine along with it. We share this unstable vision as the barrier between her experience and mine thins dangerously. Her apocalypse bleeds through the screen, and for brief moments, I inhabit a consciousness where solid things whisper and straight lines harbour secret curves. If apocalypse etymologically involves unveiling, might perceptual disruption itself

constitute revelation? Not necessarily a superior way of seeing, but a different relationship with seeing itself—one where certainty dissolves without promising clearer truth on the other side.

Bodies should contain us, shouldn't they? Mine usually does, with occasional lapses—moments of dissociation where I float slightly above myself, watching my hands type words as if they belong to someone else. Senua's containment "fails" more catastrophically. Her senses betray her with visions, with voices that crowd the air around her like invisible birds. I wonder what it feels like when perception itself becomes unreliable—when you can no longer trust the messages your own nerves deliver. The body's ultimate betrayal: to become a labyrinth where meanings shift corridor by corridor, where you might turn a corner and find yourself suddenly in memory, in dream, in terror. The boundaries we depend upon—between self and world, past and present, real and imagined—collapse not through external disaster but through internal reconfiguration. What interests me isn't classifying Senua's experience as either pathology or gift, but considering how her embodied reality might speak to apocalyptic consciousness—that moment when the world as we've known it no longer coheres, when the body must navigate a terrain for which it has no reliable map.

Embodying the Monster (2001, Margrit Shildrick) speaks about monstrous bodies exceeding categorization, living at borders where binaries dissolve. I see this excess in Senua—her body existing simultaneously as weapon and wound, as vessel for both destruction and revelation. The same hallucinations that torment her reveal hidden runes in Helheim's landscape. Her fractured sight perceives patterns others would miss, forcing me to align my perspective with hers to see coherent symbols from seemingly random elements. The game taught me to value her vision precisely because it diverged from the expected, to seek truth in fracture rather than wholeness. This carries complex implications: Does appreciating Senua's distinctive perception risk romanticizing suffering? Or does refusing to recognize insights arising from non-normative experience simply reinforce perceptual hierarchies? These puzzles invite inhabiting the question rather than resolving it—experiencing tension between different ways of seeing without privileging either.

Have you ever watched someone you love fight their own body? I have. The particular grace that emerges when movement requires negotiation rather than assumption. Senua fights with this grace—each swing of her blade carrying dual awareness: the need to strike and the knowledge that perception might waver mid-motion. Her combat lacks the choreographed perfection of most game protagonists. Instead, she dodges with desperate energy, parries with determined uncertainty. The designers wove her psychological reality into movement mechanics—her flinching at unseen threats, hypervigilant stance, and raw improvisation. Her body tells a story of apocalypse through muscle and bone, where survival demands acknowledging vulnerability rather than transcending it. While gaming typically frames combat as mastery and control, Senua's battles offer adaptation within uncertainty, raising questions about what bodies actually do amid catastrophe—do they become more controlled or less? More certain or more improvisational?

The Sea of Corpses sequence haunts me with its visceral assault on bodily integrity. Senua's flesh becomes porous as she wades through thickening blood. Limbs reach and grasp, pulling at her body, creating points of contact where boundaries between her skin and dismembered others blur. Movement becomes struggle, muscles tensing against the invasive touch of the dead. The boundary between flesh and world dissolves—everything becomes body, everything becomes wound. Playing this section, my own skin felt suddenly too tight, too permeable. The game's environments mirror Senua's inner dissolution: rotting corpses hang from trees, structures pulse with unnatural life, bone bridges span impossible chasms. Helheim exists as both landscape and psyche made visible. The horror emerges not from spectacular violence but from categorical collapse—the dissolution of borders that typically provide bodily coherence.

Is this what apocalypse feels like at its most intimate level? Not watching destruction from a distance but feeling one's own boundaries dissolve?

I keep thinking about how Senua sees differently, and how this difference becomes crucial rather than incidental. Light fragmenting into impossible angles reveals hidden runes; shadows deepening beyond natural physics expose concealed pathways. Her psychosis functions as a form of literacy—reading the world through its breaks rather than continuities. There's something both heartbreaking and hopeful in these moments where “disability” transforms into specialized adaptation. The game whispers a heresy: perhaps understanding sometimes requires unlearning perceptual habits we mistake for reality itself. Perhaps apocalypse burns away comfortable illusions, leaving truths we never wanted to acknowledge. I remain ambivalent about this approach. While valuing how the game resists treating Senua's perception as purely debilitating, I worry about potential appropriation—turning psychosis into metaphor while obscuring lived experience. Does framing fractured perception as potentially revelatory elide genuine suffering? I have no clean answers, only the recognition that apocalypse might arrive not as clear devastation but as perceptual paradox.

Senua reminds me that apocalypse happens in the body—revelation inscribed in muscle and bone. Her trembling hands signal distress yet allow her to perceive vibrations others might miss. Her eyes fracture reality while revealing patterns hidden within those very fractures. Where (post-)apocalyptic heroes maintain the fiction of intact perception amid ruined worlds, Senua's journey suggests that revelation demands the dissolution of the perceiving body itself. She doesn't overcome her fractured vision; she follows it deeper, discovering how certain truths emerge only when coherence fails. This is what apocalypse always promised etymologically: not a world's end but the unveiling that comes when the body is the site of both catastrophe and disclosure. In Senua's flesh, apocalypse fulfills its original meaning—lifting veils between categories we assumed separate, revealing what wholeness had concealed. What might we discover if we allowed our own bodies to register catastrophe rather than maintaining the fiction of perceptual stability amid ruin?

Haunting Voices

It's the silence of (post-)apocalyptic heroes that disturbs me most in retrospect. Not physical silence—their worlds overflow with moaning zombies, crackling radios, and environmental collapse. It's their inner silence that now seems impossible. When Joel in *The Last of Us* loses his daughter, his grief becomes backstory rather than haunting presence; the *Walking Dead*'s Lee faces no spectre of his past mistakes beyond occasional dialogue options; Artyom in *Metro* explores Moscow's remains without the voices of millions of dead interrupting his thoughts; despite witnessing reality-shattering horrors, *Dead Space*'s Isaac Clarke maintains cognitive coherence—his hallucinations serve narrative rather than dismantle subjectivity. Even in *I Am Alive*, the protagonist's camera becomes shield rather than mirror—organizing experience instead of being undone by it. Their minds remain eerily sovereign amid worlds where all boundaries have collapsed. In *Hellblade*, however, when one of those voices that Senua hears hissed “Behind you!” through my headphones, I physically turned, heart racing. The Furies, as they're called, refused containment, colonising the space between my ears—creating an apocalyptic breach not between civilization and its end, but between the fiction of unified consciousness and the reality of its multiplicity.

A friend once described anxiety attacks as “being occupied by thoughts that feel both alien and familiar.” I didn't really understand until I heard the Furies whispering, arguing, and shouting from all impossible angles around my head. These voices don't simply surround Senua; they inhabit her, and by extension, me. “Idiot! You're so stupid!” they jeer, then sometimes shift

mid-thought: “She did it! She didn’t do it! It’s not done yet.” Their autonomy startles me—speaking about Senua rather than to her, positioning her as object one moment and addressing her directly the next. A notion from *Ghostly Matters* (1997, Avery Gordon) of haunting as “that moment when things are not in their assigned places, when the cracks and rigging are exposed (p. xvi) keeps returning to me as I play. These voices refuse proper distance. They blend commentary with command, doubt with direction, creating a disorienting chorus that both torments and occasionally guides (“There’s a way in. Look up! She’s so clever! Go up into the mountain. Just up there”). Unlike the tidy interior monologues most game protagonists deliver, Senua’s voices contradict, interrupt, and question their own authority, creating a subjectivity distributed across multiple perspectives—a consciousness already apocalyptic in its refusal of singular coherence.

During Valrav’n’s trial, I noticed something shifting in their pattern. As reality folded into illusions, the voices began to function differently: “The song. Valrav’n. Valrav’n’s song. It’s here. No it’s there! There’s two of them! Focus!” Their contradictions suddenly formed a kind of distributed attention, noticing what neither Senua nor I could grasp alone, at once. I wonder sometimes if this is how an inner apocalyptic unmaking works—it’s not just breakdown but an alternative form of perception, one where fragmentation becomes feature rather than flaw. In the context of the idea of depression as a public feeling (2012, Ann Cvetkovich) there’s this idea about feeling bad as potentially transformative, and I see this in how Senua’s torment occasionally transforms into unexpected clarity. The voices don’t just paralyze; they sometimes notice paths and patterns hidden in plain sight. Their discord becomes a strange kind of compass.

The voices manifest with distinct physical effects on me that transcend mere audio design. Senua’s father’s condemnations arrive like compression: “There is no one here but me. [...] You can’t get rid of me. I am your shadow.” “Look at you. A warrior? Worthless. Weak. Pathetic.”—words that tighten my shoulders and shallow my breathing. Druth’s mythological narrations that Senua hears through interacting with lorestones, conversely, expand the space: “I will tell you my stories of Hel, if I may walk with you?” “I will tell you my stories of Hel, if I may walk with you?” These aren’t just different characters but embodied experiences, each restructuring my physical relationship to the game. The Narrator—another of the voices that the game singles out—addresses this complexity directly: “Another voice joins us. She once tried to make them go away... pretend they weren’t real but what good is that, when we are always?” I keep coming back to that last phrase – “when we are always?” It implies something unsettling about consciousness itself, that plurality might be original condition rather than deviation.

I’ve never experienced a game that so deliberately implicates me in its protagonist’s dissolution. The binaural audio does more than just simulating psychosis; it transfers it, temporarily restructuring my own perception. Voices skitter across stone floors, circle overhead like carrion birds, coil around my neck like a scarf made of static. I find myself physically responding to sounds existing nowhere in my actual environment—tensing, turning, scanning. This is so unlike how the (post-)apocalypse typically functions in games—as spectacle to be witnessed rather than condition to be experienced. Senua’s external journey matters primarily as manifestation of internal collapse, and somehow, I’m implicated in both. This creates a rare moment where I don’t simply play a character experiencing psychological apocalypse—I temporarily share in that state, the collapse happening simultaneously within the game world and within my own perceptual field.

Everything changes when the Furies, after tormenting Senua throughout her journey, suddenly cry out: “We don’t want to die!” Their fear marks their transformation from persecutors to participants in vulnerability. Senua’s response—“leave me alone”—isn’t victory or surrender

but negotiation; but in fact, the voices remain silent for Senua's final confrontation with Hela. It is only after that they return altered: "We're still here. She's still here" and "It feels... different. It's okay. Is it okay?" The shift from imperatives to questions, from cruel certainty to tentative possibility, suggests that psychological apocalypse might not just imply destruction but reconfiguration. The voices' evolution from antagonists to companions mirrors Senua's evolving relationship with her own multiplicity. Most striking is their grammatical transformation from referring to Senua as "she" to including themselves as "we"—collapsing the presumed boundary between self and other. Those voices, initially presenting as foreign invaders, reveal themselves as displaced aspects of a more complex subjectivity than games typically allow. What do we make of apocalypse when it doesn't culminate in either triumph or annihilation but this strange middle territory of reluctant coexistence?

I keep questioning what makes Senua's journey so distinctively apocalyptic when it lacks all standard signifiers—no mushroom zombies, no wastelands, no civilizational collapse. Usually, (post-)apocalyptic games comfort us with their externality; their heroes' psyches remain the last uncontaminated territories despite surrounding devastation. Yet *Hellblade's* inner cataclysm feels more destabilizing than any irradiated landscape. The voices' transformation from tormentors to tentative companions unsettles precisely because it unmakes not just reality but the fantasy of an indivisible self—Western consciousness's most cherished illusion. When boundaries dissolve between Senua and her voices, between torment and insight, the game challenges our most fundamental assumption: that we are singular rather than multiple. That's the apocalypse other games avoid—one where consciousness itself undergoes radical reimagining, where selfhood emerges not as sovereign kingdom but as parliament of competing perspectives, held in uneasy but necessary alliance.

Queer Time in Ruins

I've been thinking about how strangely reliable time remains in most post-apocalyptic games. Despite their ruined worlds, they offer oddly comforting temporalities: clear objectives, steady progression, the reassuring linearity of beginning-middle-end. Even as environments collapse, timelines stand firm. *Days Gone* marks passing days; *The Last of Us* divides catastrophe into seasons; *Fallout* counts years since destruction. These games may destroy civilization, but they preserve time's forward march. In Senua's world, time doesn't politely segment—it splinters completely. During Surtr's trial, one moment I'm escaping a burning village; the next, without warning, Senua kneels in the shadow talking with her lover Dillion, who gently asks: "Are you sure you want to do this by yourself? We can fight it together. Side by side, as always." No fade to black announced this as flashback. No convenient UI marked it as memory. Just lighting changes, and suddenly I'm back fighting Surtr. Past and present occupy identical space, refusing to separate like oil and water.

What unsettled me wasn't just this temporal shift but how it physically disoriented me, compromising my own sense of continuity. I've experienced plenty of flashbacks in games—those safely contained windows into backstory. But Senua's memories aren't cordoned off; they bleed through, staining the present. Her mother's face materializes in waterfalls and between corpses; her father's voice crashes through cave walls; Dillion speaks from shores he never visited. These disruptions remind me of "queer temporalities" (Time Binds, 2010, Elizabeth Freeman)—time that resists orderly progression. As I navigate Helheim's strange chrono-geography, moments from Senua's life refuse their assigned places. They overlap, intrude, recur. Time functions not as river flowing one direction but as disturbed pool where movements create ripples crossing in patterns too complex to track, challenging the notion that experience must follow comprehensible sequence.

Hellblade rejects gaming's typical progress narratives entirely. Most games structure time around accumulation—better weapons, new abilities, expanding skill trees—each hour bringing you closer to mastery. But Senua doesn't "level up." She doesn't grow stronger or faster or more skilled. There are no ability upgrades, no statistical improvements, no convenient markers of advancement (except for collectible lorestones which all are entirely missable). This brings to my mind the idea of a "queer art of failure" (2011, Judith/Jack Halberstam)—resistance against frameworks measuring worth through constant growth. Instead of progressing, Senua simply persists. Her journey isn't about becoming more powerful but continuing despite unchanged limitations. I find this oddly moving, particularly with the game's permadeath threat through the spreading rot. "The dark rot will grow each time you fail," the game warns. "If the rot reaches Senua's head, her quest is over, and all progress will be lost."

Though this ultimatum proves to be a bluff—there's not permadeath in Hellblade—, its psychological impact remains intense. It transforms time from a reliable resource to a precarious medium, making each moment potentially the one that erases all others. Death in most games represents a minor inconvenience; here, it carries the weight of a true ending. This mirrors how psychological crisis transforms temporal experience—from something you move through to something that moves through you, threatening at any moment to implode entirely. I've never played a game that made me feel so acutely the fragility of continuation itself. Each narrow survival doesn't strengthen Senua but simply allows her to remain—a victory so basic it's rarely counted as such in gaming's economy of constant improvement.

Lorestones scattered throughout Helheim further fracture any linear temporal reading. When Senua focuses on these markers, the past doesn't unfold through orderly exposition—it erupts. Druth speaks Norse myths with remarkably raw urgency, as someone either living these stories or deeply invested in Senua's journey. His descriptions of Surtr's flaming sword or Valravn's trickery arise not as legends but present dangers. His accounts arrive with the same immediacy as Dillion's voice or Senua's mother's appearances, accompanied by conflicting voices: "Druth! He's here! He's not really here." These stones don't preserve history; they disintegrate its distance. What clinical perspectives might classify as dissociation, the game frames as temporal communion—consciousness expanding to hold simultaneously what linear time would separate. Each stone represents not knowledge acquired but boundaries dissolved between what was, what is, and what might be.

I keep returning to the game's ending: Hela takes Dillion's head after stabbing Senua and releases it into the abyss. In conventional narrative, this would mark resolution—the moment of letting go. Yet what follows refuses such neat closure. The perspective shifts to reveal Senua herself kneeling where Hela stood, whispering "Goodbye, my love." Hela was always an aspect of Senua. Then something extraordinary happens: Senua stands, looks directly at me, and says, "Follow us. We have another story to tell." This moment collapses multiple timeframes—Senua's story, my experience as player, and future narratives awaiting us both. A burnt body remains while Senua walks away—past and future occupying the same frame. This image rejects the fiction of "moving on" that structures conventional loss narratives. Instead, Senua exists in something like "temporal drag" (Time Binds, 2010, Elizabeth Freeman)—the productive friction of multiple temporalities coexisting within a single present. She doesn't conclude grief but transforms her relationship to it.

(Post)-apocalyptic games typically present time as threatened resource—something disappearing to be outrun or conquered through timers, time-sensitive quests, and countdowns that preserve linear urgency amid collapse. Hellblade proposes something more radical. When Senua's chronology shatters, time doesn't dissolve but multiplies. Past trauma, present action, and possible futures coexist simultaneously, refusing orderly sequence. Memory materializes

directly in landscape; ancient myths become contemporaneous with present struggle. While (post-)apocalypse narratives often cling to the comforting progression of “before crisis” and “after crisis,” Senua’s inner apocalypse reveals linear temporality itself as perhaps our most persistent fiction. What other games actually fear most isn’t death but temporal incoherence—the loss of “meanwhile” and “afterwards” that structures experience. Senua’s journey suggests that when conventional temporality collapses, different revelatory modes of being-in-time might emerge from the ruins.

Revolting Subjects

(Post-)Apocalyptic games have a sanitization problem. For all their gore and grime, they cling desperately to tidy boundaries between categories. Why? What’s so terrifying about truly blurring lines? The infected in *Left 4 Dead* or the mutants in *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Call of Pripyat* remain conveniently “other”—things to shoot, not states to contemplate. *Fallout*’s ghouls exist as stable categories—changed but clearly demarcated from “normal” humans. This sanitization extends to basic human concerns like hygiene. Even amid collapsed civilization, characters maintain inexplicable cleanliness; games like *Surviving The Aftermath* incorporate waste management as a gameplay mechanic, but rarely explore the messy realities of (post-)apocalyptic living. But what happens when boundaries fail completely? *Hellblade*’s *Sea of Corpses* submerged me in a revelation far beyond death-as-scenery—an insurgency of the expelled where those banished beyond social recognition actively revolted against their prescribed nonexistence. Bodies deemed disposable reasserted presence, reached upward through bloody waters, almost grasped at my ankles. The dead here wouldn’t stay properly dead; the discarded refused neat disposal. They demanded acknowledgment in their very decomposition, challenging the fundamental categories that organized their expulsion.

“They blame me for the plague,” Senua whispers, her voice trembling between confession and accusation. “Say that I am cursed and brought the darkness to this clan.” In these words lies the ancient ritual of community purification—the transformation of members into contaminants, the creation of necessary monsters. Yet what haunts me isn’t this predictable expulsion but what follows: the stubborn persistence of those designated as pollution, these “revolting subjects” (2013, Imogen Tyler), the “disposable dregs and refuse of social life” (p. 21) that somehow endure despite erasure. I see this throughout *Hellblade*’s landscapes—not merely in corpses hanging from wooden poles, but in how rejection itself becomes material. Senua’s father burned her mother alive, enacting purification at its most literal, yet something survived those flames. Her face materializes mysteriously in rocks, water, and light—not comforting haunting but abjection made manifest, what was cast out returning in forms that challenge the very system of expulsion.

What conventional (post-)apocalypse narratives consistently miss—perhaps deliberately—is how contamination transforms the contaminated from within. These games present the infected as simply other, with no internal experience of their transformation, no subjectivity within their supposed monstrosity. *Hellblade* imagines contamination as lived experience, as embodied knowledge. The rot spreading along Senua’s arm with each failure isn’t merely punishment but materialization of her stigma. I found myself developing an unexpected relationship with these darkening veins—no longer viewing them as enemy but as chronicle of survival, a kind of “willfulness,” the deliberate persistence of bodies deemed problematic (*Living a Feminist Life*, 2017, Sara Ahmed). The combat mechanics embody this phenomenology perfectly: when knocked down, I had to frantically press the dodge button to force Senua upright before enemies delivered fatal blows. This wasn’t heroic resurrection but desperate continuation—the embodied labour of maintaining presence when everything around you demands elimination.

The landscape itself dissolves into revolt against categorization, becoming an accomplice in Senua's blurred reality. Wandering through the trickster Valrav'n's domain, I watched solid paths vanish beneath my feet, portals beckoning toward impossible geometries, reality folding like origami into shapes that shouldn't exist. The environment doesn't merely symbolize confusion—it actively participates in category collapse, becoming a conspirator against certainty. When Senua's father's face materializes from darkness, hissing accusations about "voices of the underworld," his words aren't memories but features of the terrain—as tangible as rock, as present as water. Inner trauma exteriorizes; outer world internalizes. The distinction between psychological wound and material reality evaporates completely. Memory colonises landscape; landscape absorbs memory. Hellblade thus shatters the quarantine logic underlying typical apocalyptic tales where survival demands maintaining pristine boundaries between clean and contaminated, inside and outside, self and other.

The Hela confrontation unveils the paradox at the heart of all purification systems—how they necessarily create the very monsters they claim to expel. When Senua discovers herself in the goddess's place, we witness no mere plot twist but profound ontological revelation: those marked as contaminants embody precisely the power systems of categorisation feared most. Is this not the ultimate terror that drives societies to designate certain bodies as "revolting"—the recognition that established boundaries are fundamentally permeable? What Senua's father sought to burn away in her mother and hide away in Senua—this supposed darkness, this contamination—transforms before our eyes from weakness to sight, from curse to necessary knowledge. Through this alchemical reversal, the creeping rot along her arm transmutes into testament—not foreign invasion requiring eradication but embodied record of persistence through conditions designed to be unsurvivable. The stigmatized body becomes not site of shame but archive of resistance.

(Post-)Apocalyptic narratives seduce us with their border logic—promising that despite temporary disorder, fundamental categories will eventually reassert themselves. Their destroyed worlds offer perverse comfort by reaffirming rather than dismantling the very distinctions that structured pre-apocalyptic society. Even supposedly radical transformations ultimately perform conservative functions: Horizon Zero Dawn may obliterate civilisation but reinstates tribal structures; The Last of Us reinforces traditional family bonds amid collapse; Fallout resurrects frontier individualism from institutional ruins; Wasteland 3 revives factional politics and moral dichotomies; Metro annihilates the surface world but preserves cultural nostalgia underground. These narratives position contamination as wholly external threat to be contained rather than internal condition to be recognised. What's remarkable isn't their apocalyptic imagination but its conspicuous limitations—how desperately they maintain the fiction that some essential purity survives untouched by surrounding corruption. The truly apocalyptic dimension these games systematically avoid is precisely what abjection theory has long suggested: that boundaries between pure and impure were always already compromised, that contamination emerges from within rather than invading from without, that the abject is not foreign but intimately familiar—the expelled part of ourselves that returns to haunt every system of order.

Posthuman Survivals

My hand on the controller stopped being just my hand somewhere during Senua's battle with the shadow warriors. A circuit formed between us—my movements becoming hers, her perceptions flooding back into mine. The shadows anticipated intentions I hadn't fully formed yet. Most games treat this flow-state as happy accident; Hellblade makes it foundation. I'm struck by the contrast with other (post-)apocalyptic worlds: Horizon's Aloy remains distinctly

separate from the machine ecology she navigates, her humanity defined precisely by this separation. Days Gone's Deacon moves through infection while maintaining categorical immunity. These protagonists encounter apocalypse as backdrop—never as ontological condition altering what it means for them to be human. Senua's journey offers no such comfort. The boundaries between her consciousness and Helheim's environment blur until I find myself hesitating to even ask which visions are “real”—the game itself rejecting the premise that such distinctions exist at all.

The rune puzzles provoke an embodiment that transcends the screen. I find myself physically tilting, contorting in my chair—my actual body becoming implicated in virtual space. Unlike the clever perspective tricks in other games, these puzzles pose epistemological questions: What if truth itself emerges only through specific embodied positions? What if knowledge can't be separated from where we stand, how we look? Playing these segments, the concept of “intra-action” (Meeting the Universe Halfway, 2007, Karen Barad) suddenly materializes—the abstract theory that entities don't precede their relationships but emerge through them. As scattered elements align into coherent symbols only from precise vantage points, I experience firsthand how meaning isn't discovered but created through specific configurations of body and environment. The puzzle doesn't exist to be solved; it exists only in the solving. These moments suggest how reality itself perhaps depends on relationship rather than objective existence.

The rot spreading along Senua's arm traces a boundary that isn't one. What begins as invader gradually becomes inhabitant, then native. The rot marks her as both cursed and gifted with perception beyond ordinary limits—neither completely foreign nor entirely self but growing at the threshold between. Helheim inscribes itself upon her flesh, rendering her body as contested territory where human and nonhuman interpenetrate like roots and soil. Where does world end and self begin? The question itself presupposes separation where perhaps none exists. Most (post-)apocalyptic narratives position bodily corruption as enemy—transformation as threat to be overcome, purity to be maintained. Hellblade reveals a more tangled relationship with change—one where clear boundaries between self and other prove neither sustainable nor necessarily desirable.

Hellblade's combat system inverts every convention of (post-)apocalyptic survival. Most ruined worlds structure combat around dominance—skill trees to climb, weapons to upgrade, power curves to ascend. Players inevitably grow stronger; enemies become trivial. God of War's Kratos grows even more godlike amid Ragnarök's brewing chaos; Dying Light's Kyle Crane evolves from vulnerable survivor to parkour-enhanced zombie slayer; Rage 2 offers nanotrite abilities that transform players into superhuman mutant-killers; Mad Max grants increasingly powerful vehicle upgrades to dominate wasteland warfare. These mechanics aren't neutral; they reinforce human exceptionalism as narrative foundation—the protagonist rising above catastrophe through superior force. Senua's capabilities, conversely, remain consistent from beginning to end—no new abilities acquired, no statistical improvements unlocked. Instead, survival emerges through attunement—to rhythm, to pattern, to subtle bodily cues from opponents, to voices warning of flanking attacks, to environmental shifts. Combat becomes not domination but conversation—a deadly dialogue requiring presence rather than power. I find myself listening more than striking, responding more than initiating. How strange to encounter in combat—traditionally the most domination-oriented aspect of games—this invitation to participate rather than overcome. What kind of survival emerges when apocalypse demands relationship rather than supremacy?

The voices follow me everywhere, whispering from impossible angles. Sometimes directly behind my ear, sometimes from distant corners, sometimes from within my own skull. A normative reading would categorise them as hallucinations--symptoms of pathology

reinforcing mind/world separation. Yet their knowledge repeatedly exceeds what could plausibly originate within Senua's consciousness. They warn of dangers not yet visible, notice patterns she overlooks, create an expanded field of awareness extending beyond individual perception. Through binaural audio, the Furies materialise not merely as psychological phenomena but as environmental presences—emerging from stones, trees, the ground itself. The environment actively participates in consciousness rather than serving as passive backdrop. Where other (post-)apocalyptic narratives maintain clear boundaries between internal thought and external information—for example Horizon's Aloy accesses information through her Focus—, Senua's voices inhabit liminal space—neither fully self nor fully other, challenging the very boundary they supposedly cross. They manifest a distributed awareness dissolving conventional definitions of selfhood, positioning cognition as a phenomenon that flows between mind and world. The voices become not symptoms to overcome but necessary expansions of perception—posthuman consciousness emerging through catastrophe.

The Blindness Shard Trial plunged me into sensory void, stripping away visual orientation completely. Blackness. Not cinematic darkness with convenient outlines and subtle cues. Absolute, impenetrable blackness. Stumbling forward, I became suddenly, desperately dependent on sounds previously relegated to background—whispers, footsteps, breathing patterns. A lifetime of visual literacy rendered useless in seconds. I found myself vulnerable not through weakness but through the sudden absence of a sensory framework I'd never questioned. Other (post-)apocalyptic worlds treat darkness as temporary inconvenience through stronger enemies (Dying Light or Days Gone), brief challenge quickly overcome through night vision or convenient light sources (Fallout 3's Pip-Boy lights). Hellblade's darkness is discomfiting—no adaptation, no gradual adjustment, just sustained disorientation. Minutes stretched into what felt like hours as I developed acoustic orientation—sensing space through sound's texture, distance through its resonance, threat through its rhythm. Druth's words echoed: "In blindness there can be wisdom; only by giving, can you receive in return." Posthuman subjectivity represents consciousness distributed across multiple modes of awareness rather than centred in singular perspective (Posthuman Knowledge, 2019, Rosi Braidotti). What happens when catastrophe doesn't just destroy what we perceive but transforms how we perceive? When apocalypse unravels not just civilization but the sensory hierarchies through which we've organized existence?

The Sea of Corpses transforms environment from setting to participant with terrible agency. Cold water. Resistance against movement. Then something brushes past—a current that shouldn't exist. Wading through this necrotic soup where flesh and water become indistinguishable, I experience landscape not as backdrop but as material extension of consciousness itself. The boundary between Senua and this macabre terrain dissolves—blood mingles with her skin, her movements adopt the surrounding viscosity, whispers emanate from neither within nor without but some indeterminate between-space. Each step deeper collapses conventional categories—subject/object, living/dead, self/environment merge into unsettling continuity. This culminates in Hellblade's final revelation: what appeared as ultimate external adversary—the mythical giantess Hela looming beyond mortal comprehension—existing within Senua's own being all along. This moment captivates me not for symbolic meaning but material reality—how it renders tangible an entanglement we typically deny. Having waded through these waters, other (post-)apocalyptic landscapes suddenly seem sanitized, their boundaries artificially maintained. I find myself wondering what might emerge if we allowed catastrophe to transform not just landscapes but the very categories we use to separate ourselves from them.

The Archive of Fire

I remember setting fire to my old journals. Watching pages curl and blacken, words I'd written disappearing into ash. Strange how destroying them felt like preservation—those words becoming smoke, becoming air, becoming something I couldn't lose or have stolen. This feeling consumed me in Surtr's domain—that realm of perpetual transmutation. Touching the stone slab with Surtr's emblem doesn't just reveal fire; it lets entire worlds oscillate between states of being. Structures flicker between charred remnants and active conflagration. I found myself racing through suddenly blazing doorways, discovering passages revealed only through destruction, navigating pathways that existed exclusively in either burning or burnt states. Surtr's realm doesn't just represent memory; it performs its unstable architecture. "An archive of feelings" (2003, Ann Cvetkovich)—emotional experiences that resist documentation while demanding expression—emerges here not as metaphor but as environment. Each morphing of the landscape enacts remembering itself—not as retrieval but as metamorphosis, where what persists does so through change rather than stasis.

The Tower Shard trial constructs memory as physical navigation through collapsed time. I stand before a structure simultaneously intact and ruined—two realities occupying one space. Peering through masks exposes temporal layers; what appears as impassable rubble in one moment becomes navigable staircase in another. Neither version holds greater claim to "reality"—both exist in temporal suspension, requiring my attention to materialise. Memory here functions not as recollection but reconstruction—the ability to perceive what isn't visibly present but persists nonetheless. This architecture of remembering departs radically from apocalyptic conventions: no terminal logs like in *Fallout*, no data points like in *Horizon Zero Dawn*, no audio diaries like in *Metro Exodus*. Those games position memory as content to acquire—information packets left behind. *Hellblade's* tower embodies memory as practice—the active labour of seeing past and present simultaneously, creating meaning through their collision. I navigate not through space alone but through temporal contradiction, where remembering becomes not simply knowing what was but perceiving what still is beneath what appears to be.

"She went to the wilds a long time ago. Why did she go to the wilds? She wanted to fight her own darkness." The voices accompanying Senua don't simply narrate memory—they perform its internal conflicts, its multi-perspectives. They argue, interrupt, contradict: "The darkness is stealing your memories. It's not her! Yes it is!" These aren't flashbacks or expositions. They're memory's living negotiation, constantly reinterpreting the past through competing lenses. Most striking is their directness: "Do you remember that darkness, Senua? The beast is bringing it back," her father's voice intrudes in the Fenrir's Lair, shattering temporal boundaries. This chorus creates an architecture of remembering unlike anything in (post-)apocalyptic narratives. Where other games neatly separate "then" from "now" through flashback sequences or collectible artifacts, *Hellblade's* voices disintegrates such distinctions. The past doesn't wait politely behind narrative triggers—it erupts uninvited, mutating whatever landscape Senua currently occupies. Memory here exists as relationship to navigate, not as content but as perceptual framework, constantly reshaping how Senua experiences her present reality.

The lorestones summon memory through voice, not text. I approach these markers hidden in ruins, focus my attention, and something extraordinary happens—Druth speaks. Not as disembodied exposition but as presence, sometimes accompanied by his ghostly visage, invoking Norse mythology through the repeated incantation: "The Northmen say..." He relates his knowledge directly to Senua: "You remind me of a story that the Northmen tell about a young woman warrior," he offers during the Labyrinth Shard Trial. "Do not forget my stories," he implores at our first encounter. While *Hellblade* in fact treats these lorestones as collectibles,

they are also invocations requiring participation, ritual focus. The stones preserve nothing themselves—they activate preservation through Senua’s engagement, through conversation across time. This oral archive breathes with emotional texture, urgency, personality that written documentation could never capture. Where archives usually conserve through isolation and fixity, these stones maintain memory through connection and voice—knowledge persisting not despite but because of its embodied transmission, its living utterance between speaker and listener across the boundaries of death itself.

The game’s warning about the black tendrils of darkness crawling up Senua’s arm haunts every encounter: too many deaths and everything vanishes—all progress erased, forcing complete restart. I feel this threat in my hands, in quickened breathing, in hesitation before each encounter. Every near-miss carries weight; every recovery feels genuinely salvaged from oblivion. That this mechanic ultimately proves false—the game never actually deletes save files—doesn’t diminish its psychological impact. The possibility of erasure transforms my relationship to survival, intensifying attachment to what persists precisely because it might not. When facing psychological collapse, we discover how the mere possibility of absolute forgetting shapes consciousness more powerfully than actual forgetting ever could. This looming threat organizes consciousness around preservation—what fragments must be protected, what experiences cannot be surrendered, what remnants might survive when everything else burns away. The game’s deception thus creates truth: we value most what disaster threatens to consume.

Consider how differently memory operates in (post-)apocalyptic narratives: *Fallout 4*’s Memory Den offers remembering as consumer service—characters paying to access clearly delineated past experiences, safely contained behind technological barriers. *The Last of Us Part II*’s flashbacks function as narrative pockets, discretely separated from present action through obvious cinematic transitions. In these worlds, remembering serves explanation—providing context while maintaining comfortable temporal boundaries. The past explains the present without threatening to become it. *Hellblade* shatters such conventions. When Senua glimpses her mother’s face in swamp water, when her father’s voice emerges from shadows, no interface announces “MEMORY SEQUENCE INITIATED.” Past and present bleed into one another without warning or separation. Memory for Senua isn’t something accessed but something navigated, not discrete content but perceptual reality itself. Her apocalypse—her psychosis—doesn’t erase the archive of experience but fundamentally reconfigures her relationship to it. What emerges isn’t absence of memory but its haunting omnipresence, a landscape where remembering becomes not retrospective action but the primary mode through which present reality manifests. This is memory not as what was but as what continues to be, inseparable from perception itself.

Embodied Revelation

What does it mean to embody apocalypse rather than merely witness it? This question reverberates as Senua turns toward me in *Hellblade*’s final moments, saying “Follow us.” Her journey manifests apocalypse beyond the shattered landscapes she traverses. Apocalypse means uncovering or revelation, yet gaming has largely reduced this concept to aesthetic destruction: zombie hordes, nuclear wastelands, collapsed cities. In *The Last of Us*, *Metro*, and *Fallout*, protagonists maintain curious psychological distance from catastrophe—they observe devastation while remaining perceptually intact. Joel carries trauma in his backstory, but his fundamental way of seeing remains unchanged amid collapse. Artyom traverses irradiated tunnels with the same perceptual framework he always possessed. These characters witness apocalypse without embodying it. What would it mean to experience devastation not just

externally but through consciousness itself—to have apocalypse reshape not just what we see but how we see?

Gaming narratives rarely explore how perception might evolve when reality fractures. Protagonists serve primarily as viewpoints through which players observe destruction while standing by—psychological vessels somehow impervious to the perceptual collapse surrounding them. Surviving catastrophe seemingly requires maintaining rigid psychological coherence above all else. The concept of “*la facultad*” (Borderlands/La Frontera, 1987, Gloria Anzaldúa) offers a compelling alternative perspective—a heightened awareness arising specifically from marginalised perspectives, an ability to perceive beneath surface appearances developed by those who cannot assume safety in the world. I wonder how Senua embodies this alternative epistemology. Her fractured sight reveals dimensions of her world—tribal violence, Northmen brutality, ritualistic cruelty—that normative perception might easily rationalise away. Her voices notice dangers before they manifest; her visions expose patterns others miss. What insights become accessible when conventional reality no longer provides stable ground? What meanings emerge when perception itself undergoes apocalypse?

Senua navigates a multi-dimensional collapse—the external destruction of her village interwoven with her ongoing perceptual unveiling. When Druth’s final lorestone warns her to prepare for Ragnarök, this apocalyptic imagery resonates across levels: cosmic destruction, the conclusion of a physical journey, and imminent psychological revelation converge. I experience this layering most intensely when Senua traverses the burning village during Surtr’s trial. Here, past trauma doesn’t simply inform present reality—it materialises directly within the landscape. Memory becomes environment, not separate reflection. This experience diverges sharply from other (post-)apocalyptic narratives where protagonists maintain barriers between inner coherence and outer chaos. Senua’s fractured consciousness doesn’t obscure reality but illuminates it differently, revealing connections invisible to intact perception. Through her, we witness how inner apocalypse—the breaking down of conventional cognitive boundaries—creates moments where past and present, internal and external dissolve into something simultaneously more chaotic and more revealing.

I envision a spectrum of apocalyptic being—Senua at one end, maybe Fallout’s Vault Dweller at the other. Between Senua’s permeable boundaries and conventional (post-)apocalyptic protagonists’ rigid self-containment lie gradations worth exploring. Joel from The Last of Us occasionally approaches transformation—when nearly drowning or during vulnerable moments with Ellie—before retreating to emotional fortification. Metro’s Artyom sometimes writes journal entries that glimpse beyond survival logic before returning to military pragmatism. These momentary apertures suggest possibilities rarely fully explored. Applying the idea of “neurotypical choreography” (Always More Than One, 2013, Erin Manning) may illuminate how post-apocalyptic narratives privilege certain modes of being—decisive action, emotional containment, individualistic survival—while marginalising alternatives. Senua’s hesitations aren’t character flaws but engagement with complexity. Her dialogue with voices represents relationship rather than symptom. Her movements—focusing on objects others ignore, retracing steps, seeking patterns—embody different priorities than efficient progression. I can only think of The Long Dark, despite its solitary survival focus, as a (post-)apocalyptic game that occasionally invites similar attentiveness. Standing on frozen lakes at dawn, I pause not for tactical advantage but in recognition of beauty amid devastation. Both games create moments where catastrophe alters not just surroundings but temporal experience itself—inviting us to dwell where conventional survival narratives rush forward.

Most (post-)apocalyptic games display visual spectacle while impoverishing sensory imagination. Worlds overflow with aesthetic ruination—buildings artfully crumble, nature reclaims civilisation in meticulous patterns—yet characters navigate these spaces with

perceptual systems strangely untouched by collapse. The concept of “crip time” (Feminist, Queer, Crip, 2013, Alison Kafer) helps me understand what’s missing: how bodies experience temporality differently—stretching, compressing, circling back according to unique rhythms rather than external expectations. *Hellblade* suggests a parallel “apocalyptic perception” where disaster reconfigures the very experience of reality. Standing with Senua at Helheim’s threshold, I witness boundaries dissolving between memory, hallucination, and physical reality. Faces emerge from tree bark; whispers guide me through impossible architecture; patterns in light reveal pathways invisible to conventional sight. During the trials of illusion, I find myself perceiving alongside Senua—seeing as she sees, where darkness becomes substance and symbol simultaneously. The game invites me into perceptual experience where apocalypse functions as epistemology—a way of knowing available only when established perception falters. What patterns might we discern in our own unfolding catastrophes if we allowed our perceptual boundaries to become more porous amid collapse?

Senua turns to me in the game’s final moments and says, “Follow us.” This invitation carries profound weight—the voices once tormenting her have somehow become companions. I’ve replayed this scene repeatedly, searching for the moment when her relationship with multiplicity shifted. Perhaps it wasn’t a single moment but gradual realisation throughout her trials—voices occasionally guiding her, warning of dangers, offering insights. She stops fighting against her plurality and begins moving within it. Her final words acknowledge this multiplicity seemingly without shame or resistance. This stands alone among games that frame psychological coherence as the only path through disaster. I recall my initial discomfort hearing those voices through headphones—how instinctively I wanted them silenced, explained away, conquered. Yet by the journey’s end, I found myself listening differently—wondering what they might reveal if I stopped resisting them. When Senua invites me to follow a plural “us” rather than a singular “me,” I glimpse a way of experiencing that embraces fragmentation without surrendering to incoherence—a middle path between rigid unity and complete dissolution I hadn’t considered before walking alongside her.

Epilogue: Veils in Motion

I’ve been adrift in Senua’s consciousness for weeks now, her fractured perception bleeding into my own. At night, shadows gather differently in corners of my room; in daylight, I catch myself listening for voices between conversations. What began as critical analysis has become a haunting—not of terror but possibility.

Walking home yesterday, rain-slick streets reflected fragments of sky, buildings, faces. I paused, watching these pieces shift with each ripple, creating fleeting collages of reality. Was this how Senua saw?

What might it mean to be apocalyptic? To exist not merely amid catastrophe but as continuous revelation? I imagine consciousness as archipelago rather than mainland— islands of awareness connected by waters that join without unifying. Perhaps we’ve always been multiple, always been fractured, but learned to perceive ourselves as mainland. What epistemologies might open if we allowed ourselves to experience the porosity of boundaries we’ve taken as solid?

This paper offers no conclusions about such territory of apocalyptic being, only openings—momentary clearings amid ongoing questions. I write from shorelines where conceptualisation falters, watching as tide pulls away familiar ground. What remains is wonder: perhaps we’ve always been multiple, always been fragmented, but learned to perceive ourselves as whole.

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About the Author

Victoria Mummelthei's academic journey has been one of defying conventions. After a PhD in Arabic Studies, they pivoted away from philology into what they call "explorative humanities". In both teaching and research, they seek approaches that transcend academic habitus: syndicating science, reader-centric writing, environmental humanities, game studies, data visualization, and virtual photography—all constitute spaces of creative inquiry for them. Rather than confining their work to traditional publication venues, they share their explorations openly via their "No Discipline" blog (for matters of teaching) or Zenodo, including abstracts of conference papers, applications for unapproved third-party funded projects, slides, and video essays.

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