Autistic Strengths and Neurodiversity in Apocalyptic Video Games

Kevin Rebecchi

This paper explores the representation of autistic strengths and neurodiversity in apocalyptic video games, challenging conventional deficit-based models of autism. Grounded in historical perspectives from Sukhareva, Frankl, Asperger, and Kanner, the analysis demonstrates how digital narratives foreground cognitive abilities, such as technical proficiency, strategic planning, and innovative problem-solving, as vital assets in crisis settings. Through a comparative examination of characters from *Watch Dogs 2*, *Overwatch 2*, *Borderlands 2*, *Mass Effect 2*, *The Division 2*, *Apex Legends*, *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, and *Clive Barker's Jericho*, the paper shows that apocalyptic environments amplify unconventional cognitive strategies, thereby reframing autism as a source of resilience and ingenuity. It highlights recurring narrative themes and variations in character portrayals that offer both empowering and ambivalent depictions of neurodiversity. The discussion further addresses the broader implications for societal perceptions of disability and the development of inclusive game design. Finally, future research directions are proposed, including empirical reception studies and comparative analyses with other media, to further understand the impact of these alternative representations.

Keywords: autism, neurodiversity, alterity, cognitive diversity, apocalypse, video games, cognitive strengths

Paper DOI: https://doi.org/10.48341/mrpr-rr45

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Introduction

Apocalyptic video games have emerged as a significant genre within contemporary digital media (DiTommaso et al., 2024), characterized by their depiction of catastrophic scenarios and the ensuing struggle for survival. These games not only immerse players in worlds facing imminent collapse but also explore themes of revelation, transformation, and human resilience in the face of overwhelming crisis. As cultural artifacts, they provide a unique lens through which societal anxieties and aspirations are examined, reflecting broader concerns about the future, technology, and the fragility of modern life.

Parallel to the evolution of apocalyptic narratives is the increasing scholarly and public interest in the representation of neurodiversity within media (Dean & Nordahl-Hansen, 2021; Huang-Horowitz et al., 2024). Traditionally, autism and other forms of neurodiversity were predominantly understood through a medical or deficit-based framework (Pellicano & den Houting, 2021). However, recent developments in both academic discourse and media production have shifted this perspective towards a more nuanced understanding, one that recognizes neurodiversity as a valuable and natural variation of human cognition (Maw et al., 2024; Swanepoel, 2024). This renewed focus on cognitive differences challenges conventional narratives and opens up opportunities for exploring how diverse cognitive perspectives can

contribute uniquely to problem-solving and innovation, particularly in high-stakes environments.

The present paper aims to investigate how apocalyptic video games serve as platforms for highlighting and enhancing the unique strengths associated with autistic cognition. By examining a range of characters, from Josh Sauchak in *Watch Dogs 2* to Simone Cole in *Clive Barker's Jericho*, this paper will analyze how these narratives leverage crisis settings to underscore traits such as hyperlogical reasoning, strategic planning, and innovative problem-solving. In doing so, the paper seeks to contribute to a paradigm shift in the representation of neurodiversity, arguing that the skills traditionally associated with autism can be recontextualized as assets within complex and demanding environments. Ultimately, this analysis will explore the implications for both game design and broader societal perceptions of neuroatypical talent.

Understanding Apocalypse and Neurodiversity

The Dual Meaning of Apocalypse

The term "apocalypse" finds its roots in the Greek word *apokálypsis*, meaning "uncovering," "disclosure," or "revelation" (Merriam-Webster Online, n.d.; Oxford Online, n.d.). Historically, this etymology highlights the original sense of revelation, as seen in its early association with the New Testament's Book of Revelation. Oxford Online further defines apocalypse as "any revelation or disclosure" (Oxford Online, n.d.), reinforcing this notion of unveiling hidden truths.

In contemporary usage, however, the term has evolved to encompass an additional, more catastrophic meaning. Merriam-Webster Online notes that "apocalypse" can refer to "a great disaster" or "a large, disastrous fire" (Merriam-Webster Online, n.d.), emphasizing scenarios that lead to irreversible damage on a global scale. This duality (one of revelation and one of catastrophic collapse) allows for a richer narrative potential.

In the context of video games, this dual meaning is particularly significant. On one hand, apocalyptic video games often immerse players in environments characterized by vast destruction and chaos, echoing the catastrophic sense of the term (Fraser, 2019). On the other hand, these games may also employ apocalyptic scenarios as a narrative device that uncovers deeper truths about society, human nature, or individual identity. Thus, the apocalypse in video games is not merely a setting of ruin but also an opportunity for revelation and transformation, engaging players in both survival and introspection.

Neurodiversity and Autism concepts

The conceptualization of autism has evolved considerably over the past century (Rebecchi, 2024). Early clinical descriptions by Kanner (1943, 1971) portrayed autism as an unusual way of relating to people and situations, as well as an anxious and obsessive desire to preserve sameness, while Asperger [1](1944) described autistic children as intelligent, rational, and possessing unique cognitive abilities. Preceding these seminal works, Sukhareva (1926) provided some of the earliest clinical descriptions of autistic traits in both boys and girls,

[1] For an in-depth discussion of the historical controversies surrounding Hans Asperger's work and its contemporary interpretation, see: Rebecchi, K. (2024). "Early childhood autism, Asperger type", by H. Asperger (1982). History of Psychiatry. *https://doi.org/10.1177/0957154x241248261*

establishing a foundation that would later be elaborated upon by subsequent researchers. Moreover, George Frankl (1957) described autism as a specific state of mind (not necessarily abnormal) that can complement the mindset used in communication with others, suggesting that one can oscillate between different modes of engagement.

A significant turning point in the understanding of autism, and one that has contributed to a shift towards a deficit-oriented framework, can be attributed to the work of Lorna Wing (1981). Wing's reinterpretation of Asperger's findings, along with her own clinical observations, not only broadened the recognition of autism but also contributed to the development of the concept of an autism "spectrum." Her work, however, is also seen by some as creating a pathologizing narrative, in which autistic traits are framed predominantly in terms of cognitive deficits. This re-framing contrasts with the original descriptions by Asperger, Kanner, Sukhareva, and Frankl, who highlighted the unique cognitive strengths associated with autism, and presented autism as a cognition with strengths and weaknesses, not just a set of deficits and deficiencies.

Historically, these early clinical observations were embedded within what we might today call a cognitive diversity model (Horn, 1989; Stich, 1988), defined as different ways of thinking, a plurality of mental processes and cognitive functioning (e.g., language, perception, information processing, creativity) (Rebecchi, 2023). Subsequently, Wing's work contributed to a shift toward medical models that view autism primarily as a disorder to be managed or remedied. This perspective is reflected in documents from the World Health Organization (World Health Organization, 1980, 2001), which articulate medical and social paradigms emphasizing impairment and dysfunction as well as difficulties and restrictions in social participation. This same approach is institutionalized in clinical diagnostic systems such as the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), where autism is categorized under the umbrella term Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), a designation that, while facilitating clinical consistency, retains a pathologizing connotation.

Thus, the evolution from the early descriptive works of Asperger, Kanner, Sukhareva, and George Frankl to the contemporary classifications found in the DSM-5 and WHO frameworks (with Wing's influential reinterpretation marking a pivotal shift toward a deficit-based model) illustrates the complex and contested intellectual history of autism (see Rebecchi, 2025a for a discussion about a redefinition of the conceptual foundations of autism, and Rebecchi 2025b for a discussion about how video games illustrate the different autism paradigms). This evolution challenges traditional medical paradigms and lays the groundwork for appreciating neurodiversity as a fundamental aspect of human variation, a perspective that resonates strongly with emerging representations in apocalyptic video game narratives.

The Apocalypse as a Space for Revealing Hidden Strengths

Video Games as Amplifiers of Unusual (and Valuable) Skills

Apocalyptic video game universes are crafted to push players into scenarios that demand unconventional problem-solving and adaptive thinking, abilities that, while not exclusive at all to some autistic individuals, illustrate unusual and valuable cognitive skills. In these environments, survival depends on rapid problem-solving, strategic planning, persistence, memory recall, and logical reasoning that often depart from standard approaches.

For example, in the *Fallout* series, players navigate a post-nuclear wasteland where resource scarcity and environmental hazards compel them to devise creative survival strategies (Bethesda Game Studios, 2015; Condis, 2017). Similarly, *Metro Exodus* immerses players in a world of claustrophobic underground tunnels and irradiated landscapes in post-apocalyptic Russia, where success depends on keen spatial awareness and the ability to interpret subtle environmental cues under pressure (4A Games, 2019). Another example is *The Last of Us*, set in a universe devastated by a fungal pandemic. Here, the interplay between stealth, combat, and ethical decision-making forces players to adopt perspectives that go beyond utilitarian strategies, inviting them to reconsider moral ambiguities and value unconventional problem-solving (Naughty Dog, 2013). Meanwhile, *Horizon Zero Dawn* challenges players to balance exploration and tactical combat in a world where ancient technologies coexist with reclaimed nature, thereby amplifying skills such as pattern recognition and creative reasoning (Guerrilla Games, 2017).

These apocalyptic settings thus foreground unconventional cognitive strategies, suggesting that skills which might be undervalued in more conventional contexts become critical assets in times of crisis. This observation sets the stage for the next section, where we will examine autistic characters within apocalyptic video games who explicitly embody these unusual and valuable abilities. Their portrayals, particularly of those described as autistic, challenge deficit-based models by demonstrating that non-traditional cognitive approaches can offer significant advantages when facing extreme challenges.

Case Studies of Autistic Characters in Apocalyptic Video Games

This section will analyze several characters whose portrayals challenge deficit-based models of autism by emphasizing unusual and valuable skills within apocalyptic contexts.

The identification of autistic representation in the case studies below is based on a combination of in-game content, developer commentary, and paratextual materials. In some instances, characters are explicitly identified as autistic within the game world, primarily through dialogue or cinematic sequences rather than through gameplay mechanics (e.g. Simone Cole in *Clive Barker's Jericho*, Josh Sauchak in *Watch Dogs 2*, or Patricia Tannis in *Borderlands 2*). In other cases, confirmation of a character's autism emerges from interviews or public statements by developers or writers. For instance, *Apex Legends*' Wattson was described as autistic by narrative designer Lauren Stone, while Symmetra (*Overwatch 2*) was confirmed as such by game director Jeff Kaplan. Similarly, Birdie (*The Division 2*) was framed as autistic by narrative designer Lauren Stone, and Cole (*Dragon Age: Inquisition*) was identified by writer Patrick Weekes. David Archer (*Mass Effect 2*), although not explicitly labeled as autistic, has been consistently discussed as such by players and critics, based on both narrative cues and his portrayed characteristics. These identifications are further reinforced through ancillary materials such as comics, character bios, and community discourse. Importantly, in all these cases, autism remains largely peripheral to the games' central narratives. It is rarely foregrounded, often subtly coded, and only discernible to players who attend closely to character development and external commentary. This ambiguity reflects broader tendencies in game design to gesture toward neurodiversity without making it a focal point of the player experience. Accordingly, the analysis offered here is interpretive in nature, based in close reading of narrative, representational, and paratextual elements rather than relying solely on explicit authorial statements or diagnostic labels.

In the futuristic, conflict-driven arena of *Overwatch 2*, technology and tactical positioning determine the outcome of fast-paced, team-based battles (Blizzard Entertainment, 2022a).

Symmetra exhibits features such as meticulous attention to detail and mastery over complex technological constructs. By deploying turrets and energy barriers with precise timing, she transforms abstract technical skills into strategic advantages. Her role emphasizes that unconventional, ways of thinking can redefine battlefield dynamics and challenge traditional combat paradigms. Some dialogues and voice lines emphasize her preference for structure and discomfort with unpredictability, traits often associated with autistic cognition. This is reinforced in Blizzard's official short story "A Better World," where Symmetra displays a strong intolerance for disorder and imperfection: "It could be beautiful. Clean. Filled with order and light. Why don't they see that?" (Blizzard Entertainment, 2022b, p. 4). Her desire for clarity and structure aligns with common cognitive preferences within the autism spectrum. Later in the same story, Symmetra explicitly reflects on her very difference: "Sanjay has always said I was . . . different. Everyone has. Asking where I fit on the spectrum" (Blizzard Entertainment, 2022b, p. 6).

Set in a near-future dystopia dominated by pervasive surveillance and corporate overreach, *Watch Dogs 2* presents a digital battleground where information is the primary currency of power (Ubisoft Montreal, 2016). Josh Sauchak is a skilled hacktivist whose hyperlogical reasoning and technical proficiency enable him to infiltrate secure systems and subvert authoritarian regimes. In an audio clip of Horatio Carlin (another character in the game) during the game, we hear him say: "See Josh, he's high-functioning autistic—which means he's got a very specific way of talking." During the game, we see other elements referring to this, such as in a cutscene in the game, we see a dialogue stating, "It's OK. They're using hallucinogens in clinical trials for Aspies." His approach (marked by rapid data analysis and unconventional problem-solving) allows him to identify and exploit vulnerabilities in a digital environment. Sauchak's abilities illustrate how a cognitive style that departs from normative patterns can be a formidable asset in dismantling oppressive structures.

The anarchic universe of *Borderlands 2* is set on the lawless planet Pandora, a hyper-stylized post-apocalyptic landscape rife with environmental hazards and corporate exploitation (Gearbox Software, 2012). Patricia Tannis is an eccentric scientist whose in-depth research and skills are critical for survival in this volatile setting. Her unorthodox approach to scientific inquiry enables her to decode alien technologies and hazardous conditions, thereby providing her allies with vital insights. Tannis's narrative demonstrates how the application of unusual cognitive strategies can yield profound benefits even in a chaotic world.

In the expansive intergalactic universe of *Mass Effect 2*, players are confronted with political intrigue, inter-species conflict, and existential threats spanning the cosmos (BioWare, 2010). David Archer exhibits autistic and savant-like abilities, enabling him to process complex tactical information at remarkable speeds. His exceptional cognitive skills make him a formidable strategist during critical combat scenarios; however, they also tend to isolate him socially. Archer's dual-edged narrative highlights that while neurodiversity can provide vital advantages in crisis situations, they may simultaneously present challenges for interpersonal integration.

Set in a post-pandemic Washington, D.C., *The Division 2* portrays a society in disarray, with urban infrastructures in ruins and communities struggling to rebuild (Massive Entertainment, 2019). Birdie is an autistic ingenious engineer whose technical expertise is pivotal for restoring order amidst chaos. Tasked with designing and repairing critical systems, she employs creativity and collaborative innovation to drive community resilience and recovery. Birdie exemplifies how persistence and methodical thinking (traits often seen as unconventional) can serve as key assets in crisis management.

Apex Legends is built in a futuristic, war-torn arena where dynamic combat and shifting battlefields necessitate rapid strategic adjustments (Respawn Entertainment, 2019). As a defensive specialist, Wattson uses her engineering acumen to create safe zones and fortify team positions. Her gameplay centers on precision, spatial awareness, and forward-thinking defensive strategies. Wattson's abilities underscore the value of systematic and unconventional problem-solving methods in high-pressure scenarios.

In the richly detailed fantasy world of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, players navigate a realm filled with political intrigue, magical phenomena, and existential threats (BioWare, 2014). Cole is distinguished by his heightened emotional sensitivity and perceptual acuity. In an interview, the writer indicated about Cole that:

> "Okay, this is a character...he's young, he's figuring himself out, he is so sensitive. He is so unversed in how people work [...] He's looking for people who can teach him what it means to be people. And while I don't identify as being part of the autism spectrum or the neuroatypical spectrum, there's elements of that that run in my family. I know what the experience of being overstimulated, emotionally overwhelmed, having to withdraw and get off into a place where I can just sort of tap the wall to reconnect with reality again."

His capacity to detect subtle shifts in both emotional and supernatural realms enables him to navigate conflicts involving human and mystical elements. Cole's empathetic perspective and non-standard approach to problem resolution challenge normative views on emotional processing and illustrate the multifaceted value of neurodiversity.

Finally, *Clive Barker's Jericho* unfolds in an apocalyptic universe steeped in cosmic horror, where the very fabric of reality is in flux (High Voltage Software, 2000). In the character presentation sheet in the game we read in particular that,

> "At the age of four, doctors diagnosed Cole with mild autism. Refusing to treat their daughter as disabled, her parents (both Silicon Valley programmers) chose to homeschool her. Like most autistics, she displayed an amazing aptitude for mathematics, logic and physics, which her parents happily nurtured. By fourteen she was accepted to MIT, by nineteen she had published a book on chaos mathematics (...)".

Simone Cole is thus a mathematical genius whose ability to manipulate space-time is central to countering the game's existential threats. By transforming abstract mathematical concepts into practical survival tools, she redefines the potential of cognitive mastery. Simone's narrative serves as a powerful metaphor for how unusual cognitive abilities can lead to transformative outcomes even amidst cosmic calamity.

Together, these autistic video game characters underline that characters portrayed with autistic traits often harness the very same unconventional strategies that apocalyptic settings demand. Their representations challenge traditional deficit-based models and advocate for a broader appreciation of neurodiversity as a reservoir of valuable skills in crisis situations.

Comparative Analysis of Characters and Their Roles

Recurring Themes and Patterns

A comparative analysis of apocalyptic video game characters explicitly characterized with autistic traits reveals several recurring themes. Many of these characters are consistently

associated with technical prowess, strategic acumen, and advanced analytical abilities. For example, Josh Sauchak in *Watch Dogs 2* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2016) and Symmetra in *Overwatch 2* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2022a) are portrayed as figures whose exceptional logical reasoning and precise technical manipulation are central to their roles. Their ability to rapidly analyze data and devise innovative solutions underscores a recurring narrative pattern in which non-normative cognitive strategies are not only valued but are essential for navigating complex, high-stakes environments. Similarly, characters such as Patricia Tannis in *Borderlands 2* (Gearbox Software, 2012) and David Archer in *Mass Effect 2* (BioWare, 2010) further illustrate this trend. Tannis's unorthodox scientific inquiry and analytical prowess, as well as Archer's savant-like tactical processing, are depicted as critical assets that empower them to overcome extreme challenges. Even when these characters face significant interpersonal or narrative challenges (as seen with Archer's dual-edged portrayal) their technical and strategic competencies remain central to the story's resolution.

These recurring portrayals highlight a common narrative framework: in apocalyptic settings, unconventional cognitive strengths are amplified and reinterpreted as vital assets. The extreme, crisis-driven circumstances of these games provide a context in which skills such as rapid information processing, meticulous technical control, and innovative problem-solving become indispensable. In doing so, the apocalyptic narrative not only validates neuroatypical ways of thinking but also stand against autism deficit-based models by presenting these traits as sources of resilience and ingenuity.

Differences and Variations

While the recurring themes point to a common valorization of neuroatypical cognitive strengths, there is notable variation in how these traits are depicted across different narratives. Some characters are portrayed in a largely positive light (exemplified by the proactive problem-solving of Josh Sauchak and the precise tactical contributions of Symmetra) thereby empowering the narrative and positioning these individuals as key protagonists in their respective stories. Conversely, other characters, such as David Archer, are depicted with a more ambivalent tone. Archer's extraordinary cognitive abilities, while offering significant strategic advantages in high-stakes scenarios, are also linked to social isolation and personal vulnerability. This duality illustrates how the same neuroatypical traits can be framed either as extraordinary strengths or as sources of challenge, depending on narrative emphasis and character development. Another important aspect is the role of the player in shaping these portrayals. In games where characters with neuroatypical traits are central to the narrative, players are invited to engage more deeply with their unique problem-solving approaches and emotional complexities. In contrast, when such characters are relegated to secondary roles or used primarily as plot devices, the opportunity to appreciate the full range of their abilities is diminished, and their neurodiversity risks being reduced to a set of stereotypical traits. In sum, while a consistent theme across these apocalyptic narratives is the valorization of technical, strategic, and analytical skills commonly associated with neurodiversity, the nuances in portrayal, from empowering and multifaceted to ambivalent or stereotyped, underscore the complex interplay between character design, narrative context, and player engagement.

Perspectives, Limitations and Reflections

Rethinking Autism and Redefining Neurodiversity Representation

Contemporary representations of autistic characters in apocalyptic video games invite a fundamental rethinking of disability, neurodiversity and autism that align with the historical perspectives of Sukhareva (1926), Frankl (1957), Asperger (1944), and Kanner (1943, 1971). Whereas traditional narratives have frequently depicted autism through a deficit lens, emphasizing impairments and limitations, this alternative view foregrounds neuroatypical traits as valuable cognitive assets. In crisis settings, abilities associated with autism (such as heightened technical proficiency, analytical reasoning, and unconventional problem-solving) emerge as critical strengths that not only support survival but also enable innovative responses to extreme challenges.

This alternative vision resonates with apocalyptic narratives beyond video games and autism. For instance, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and the film *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Miller, 2015) present dystopian landscapes where the collapse of societal norms catalyzes a revaluation of human capacities. Similarly, television series like *The Walking Dead* (The Walking Dead, 2010) explore how individuals adapt and even thrive by harnessing unconventional strengths in environments marked by relentless adversity. In the context of interactive media, such narratives serve as a dynamic platform for highlighting neurodiatypical cognition, thereby challenging entrenched deficit-based models of autism and offering a more nuanced, historically grounded alternative.

A comparative perspective with non-apocalyptic or awareness-focused games offers further insight into the narrative framing of autistic-coded traits. As discussed in Rebecchi (2025b), games such as *Auti-Sim* (Kadayifcioglu, 2013) and *An Aspie Life* (EnderLost Studios, 2018) adopt a more didactic approach, aligned with the social model of disability (World Health Organization, 2001). These titles aim to foster empathy by simulating sensory overload and social difficulties from a first-person perspective. However, while they may promote understanding, they also risk reducing autism to a series of impairments, thus reinforcing deficit-based models. In contrast, the apocalyptic games analyzed here tend to emphasize functionality, adaptability, and cognitive advantage, positioning autistic-coded traits as valuable in contexts of crisis. This contrast suggests that genre plays a significant role in shaping the cultural narrative around neurodiversity, highlighting the potential of speculative and dystopian settings to reimagine autism beyond the paradigm of suffering or social dysfunction.

Limitations

This paper focuses on the analysis of autistic-coded characters from a production and representational standpoint, based primarily on narrative structure, game mechanics, paratextual materials, and developer commentary. It does not engage with audience reception, player forums, or community discourse, areas that, while undoubtedly relevant, fall outside the scope of this work. Previous work (including Rebecchi, 2025c) has shown that such responses are often highly polarized, with some players embracing these representations as empowering, while others critique them as stereotypical or inauthentic. However, these discussions tend to hinge on personal identification ("Does this character represent me?") or clinical accuracy ("Does this match the DSM criteria for autism spectrum disorder?"), rather than offering new conceptual paradigms for understanding neurodiversity. By contrast, the present analysis adopts a broader, non-pathologizing conception of autism, as a form of cognitive diversity,

aligned with speculative approaches to difference in media. This approach deliberately emphasizes creative representation over clinical realism. In that sense, it participates in the broader tension between authenticity and creativity in cultural production, particularly in relation to neurodiversity, psychiatry and mental health. As discussed in Rebecchi & Vial (2025), this tension raises important questions about the goals and responsibilities of representational practices: whether they should primarily aim for psychological fidelity or instead open up imaginative, pluralistic ways of portraying minds that diverge from normative models. Reception-focused inquiries are essential for other lines of investigation (such as accessibility, identification, or community engagement), but they are methodologically distinct from the representational and formal concerns addressed here, and are therefore developed in separate works.

Moreover, while this paper focuses on positive or strategically valued representations of autistic-coded traits in apocalyptic game settings, it does not include explicit counterexamples where autistic traits are portrayed negatively. This is due in part to the limited number of clearly autistic characters in such narrative and genre-specific contexts, apocalyptic video games that both feature and frame autism as pathological or dangerous remain scarce. Nonetheless, exploring such representations, where they exist, would be a valuable direction for future research, particularly to interrogate how dystopian imaginaries may also reinforce ableist tropes or medicalized framings of difference (see Rebecchi, 2025b for a discussion about how awareness-focused games about autism may reinforce these tropes and stereotypes).

Implications and Future Directions

Building on these insights, future research should examine how players interpret and internalize these alternative portrayals of neurodiversity in apocalyptic settings. Empirical reception studies could explore whether exposure to nuanced representations of autistic characters fosters greater empathy and helps to dismantle prevailing stereotypes. Moreover, deeper comparative analyses with other media, such as film and literature, could illuminate the unique affordances of interactive media in reshaping public understandings of disability and neurodiversity. Based on the present analysis, game developers might also reconsider the dominant reliance on social and medical models of disability (particularly those narrowly aligned with diagnostic frameworks such as the DSM) in favor of a broader cognitive diversity and alterity models. Such an approach would foreground differences in perception, reasoning, emotion, and sensory processing as alternative ways of engaging with the world, rather than deficits to be overcome. Finally, there is considerable potential for these narrative trends to influence game design itself by inspiring the development of more accessible and inclusive interfaces that recognize neuroatypical talents. Such innovations may not only improve player experiences but also contribute to a broader societal shift toward valuing and respecting cognitive diversity. Moreover, unlike film or literature, video games allow players to actively inhabit characters and interact with the world through their perspective (Ryan, 2015). This embodied and participatory engagement can create a deeper cognitive and affective connection to autistic logics, challenging normative assumptions about perception, behavior, and reasoning. Future game design could further leverage this experiential dimension not just to simulate difference, but to invite players to think critically about how difference is constructed. Although apocalyptic settings offer useful narrative and symbolic space to explore non-normative cognition, this paper does not argue for their strategic expansion within the industry. Rather, their value lies in how they allow alternative paradigms to emerge, particularly within speculative fiction more broadly, including science-fiction and fantasy. Such settings can serve as productive heterotopias; yet over-reliance on them risks further marginalizing cognitive diversity by confining it to unreal or extraordinary contexts. A more meaningful shift would

involve normalizing cognitive diversity across genres and narrative forms, beyond dystopian or crisis-driven frameworks.

About the Author

Kevin Rebecchi is a researcher and lecturer in communication, psychology, and education. His research focuses on neurodiversity, autism, otherness, creativity, video games, and alternative education.

Social: https://www.linkedin.com/in/kevin-rebecchi/?locale=en_US
Website: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6948-1584

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