

# Man, Man Never Changes

The Cultural Logic and Narrative Limitations of the Post-apocalyptic Fiction of *Fallout*

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From its inception, the *Fallout* franchise has featured a number of narrative elements that can easily be read as anti-capitalist. In recent years, between the prevalent themes of *Fallout 76* and the storyline of Amazon Prime's *Fallout* television show, the franchise has become rather a lot more overt in communicating this particular message. In spite of its anti-capitalist messages and themes, this chapter argues that the franchise's foundational beliefs, as well as its procedural rhetoric, tell a very different story.

Using the *Fallout* franchise as a case study, this chapter aims to highlight the foundational beliefs and the unquestioned ideological assumptions that inform many Western post-apocalyptic fictions in spite of, or perhaps even in conflict with, the creators' intentions. Relying on Barthes' concept of mythical speech, I aim to elucidate the sometimes incoherent messaging of the *Fallout* franchise.

**Keywords:** *Fallout*, mythical speech, cultural logic, human nature, capitalism

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## ... And Part of a System of Messages<sup>1</sup> – Introduction

To start, it bears mentioning that this is not the first time that I have tackled this topic. This chapter will refer to my previous article in the interest of conserving space.<sup>2</sup> Since the publication of my previous article, quite a bit has happened around the franchise, and these developments enhance my argument and justify further analysis. With that being said, this chapter promises to identify a 'cultural logic' within a substantial number of contemporary Western post-apocalyptic fictions.<sup>3</sup> This cultural logic represents more than the aesthetic commonalities or shared tropes that are often used to delineate genre. Rather, for the purposes of this chapter, 'cultural logic' is here used to describe the foundational beliefs and assumptions that inform and shape those very tropes and aesthetic sensibilities. In other words, this chapter seeks to examine the *why* of these tropes rather than the *how*, as well as the procedural rhetoric (as per Ian Bogost) informed by this *why*, and the mythical speech patters (as per Roland Barthes) that emerge from games following this underlying cultural logic.

To that end, the first part of the chapter will examine a number of ludic patterns and narrative beats found throughout the *Fallout* franchise – both to illustrate how easily the franchise, particularly in its later entries, can be read as radically anti-capitalist, and why such attempts

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter's section titles are all taken from the 1993 Sandia report on how to ward off future intrusions to a nuclear waste disposal site. (Cf. Trauth et al, 1993)

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Schönberg, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> This is not to imply *all* post-apocalyptic fiction ever produced as the scope of that research would simply be impossible in the space allotted, but this is written with confidence that the same patterns can be observed across a number of comparable fictions.

at political expression fundamentally remain at odds with the underlying beliefs that constitute the various wastelands.

The following section will explore the mechanics of how such beliefs are formed, where they originate, and how they are perpetuated throughout much of contemporary Western post-apocalyptic fiction, as well as how they measure against predictions and beliefs founded in empirical studies rather than ideology. Lastly, this chapter hopes to offer an outlook on how this mythical speech cycle might be broken, or at least disrupted.

## **We considered ourselves to be a Powerful Culture – (Anti)Capitalism in *Fallout***

While my previous article made a case for how easily the *Fallout* franchise could be read as actively, pervasively anti-capitalist, it had to rely primarily on the hermeneutics of incidental or peripheral aspects of the setting.

For instance, it is quite easy to read the usage of bottle caps as the primary currency across the franchise as a statement on the apparent arbitrariness of currency. In the same vein, the games are littered with smaller scenes that arguably question contemporary fiscal practices. For instance, *Fallout 4* features an encounter with Parker Quinn, an NPC that even the game wiki classifies as a ‘scammer’<sup>4</sup> who proposes what is essentially a credit card in a clear effort to defraud the player. Equally, the games portray pre-war corporations and the military industrial complex that fueled them, most prominently in the form of the Vault Tec corporation whose Vaults “were never meant to save anybody,” as somewhere between actively malicious and staggeringly incompetent. Whenever the *Fallout* games portray explicitly affluent social groups, such as the residents of Tenpenny Tower in *Fallout 3*, or the denizens of Vault 118 in *Fallout 4*'s DLC *Far Harbor*, these groups are painted as callous, helpless, and comically out of touch.

But reading explicit anti-capitalist communicative intent from pieces of background lore remains somewhat contentious. Fortunately, the *Fallout* franchise has become much more direct in its messaging across its most recent entries. The picture that *Fallout 76* paints of pre-war Appalachia is explicit; labor relations in particular are at the forefront of a number of the environmental stories that characterize an America rife with economic injustice and constant labor struggles. These stories are far more explicit than the general humorous tone of the series and are difficult to read as anything but anti-capitalist. The enormous area surrounding the towns of Grafton and Clarksburg on the northern edge of the map is exceptionally irradiated and toxic, even by the standards of a post-nuclear apocalypse. As the player discovers throughout the quest “Cold Case,”<sup>5</sup> the pivotal quest line of the area, this ecological devastation is the direct result of corporate negligence. The quest line slowly reveals one man’s pushback, from discovering the gross and intentional safety violations and reporting them, to eventually resorting to crime once all legal ways of recourse have been exhausted. The authorities of the explicitly fascist *Fallout* pre-war America turned a blind eye to corporate abuse and indeed endorsed it by mobilizing the army to break up the protests of locals whose children had been poisoned. Some areas of the Appalachian wasteland bear pre-war scars that eerily resemble contemporary concerns. Throughout the south-western part of *Fallout 76*'s map, the environment tells of a bitter struggle of workers fighting back against the Atomic Mining

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<sup>4</sup>[https://fallout.fandom.com/wiki/Parker\\_Quinn](https://fallout.fandom.com/wiki/Parker_Quinn)

<sup>5</sup>Cf. [https://fallout.fandom.com/wiki/Cold\\_Case](https://fallout.fandom.com/wiki/Cold_Case)

Services and the Hornwright Industrial Mining Company which were in the process of replacing their entire human workforce with robots.

The town of Welch<sup>6</sup> in particular was devastated by these efforts and, in response to a catastrophic unemployment rate, Atomic Mining Services began evicting newly unemployed miners to seize their meager dwellings for another mining operation. The workers, rightfully disgruntled but well organized, made their stand in the nearby town of Beckley.<sup>7</sup> Here too, corporations called for the National Guard, and the military gladly answered.<sup>8</sup> The barricades of the workers now lie in ruins, but strike breaker robots, explicitly labeled as such by the game, still wander the shattered streets, frozen in time by the nuclear apocalypse.

This same theme of workers struggling against corporate mandated automation continues through another nearby location, the Garrahan Mining Headquarters. It tells of how Garrahan Mining, ostensibly rivals to the Hornwright Company, made a desperate bid to prove the value of human labor. An effort that ultimately fell prey to corporate sabotage. Meanwhile, all of these locations lie in the shadow of two enormous futuristic sky mansions that tower above these conflicts. The Garrahan and Hornwright Estates stand in all of their splendor as the two mine-owning dynasties that, despite their ostensible rivalry on the free market, were evidently happy to share both postal code and architect.

While the symbolism here isn't exactly subtle, the most recent entry in the franchise, Amazon's *Fallout* television show, goes a step further and is even more explicit. One of the major additions that the show contributed to the greater *Fallout*'s lore is the revelation (or at least, a very strong implication) that the nuclear Armageddon that is foundational to the setting was not the product of nations struggling to claim the last of the world's resources. Rather, *Fallout* suggests that the nuclear exchange that burned the world to ash was sparked by corporate interests in a bid to "win the great game of capitalism."<sup>9</sup> The viewer is presented with a shadowy cabal of titans of industry, sitting in a room more than a little inspired by the iconic sets of *Dr. Strangelove*. These venture capitalists discuss what they are about to do with dispassionate hubris – to quote Gregory House (who previously appeared as one of the pivotal characters of *Fallout: New Vegas*<sup>10</sup>): "It's a fun idea. There's a lot of earning potential with the end of the world."<sup>11</sup> Certainly, the holdovers of this conspiracy are revealed throughout the season to be the primary antagonists, responsible for immense suffering and callous cruelty, even after the end of the world.

And yet in spite of these examples, I am about to argue that the ideology underlying the *Fallout* franchise, the foundational assumptions of its narratives and gameplay systems, remain anything but anti-capitalist.

## **This Place is Not a Place of Honor – The Neo-Liberal Wasteland**

Parts of the *Fallout* franchise's fanbase took this more overtly political stance, particularly from a female led TV show, with the sensibility and calm that entrenched gaming fandoms

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. <https://fallout.fandom.com/wiki/Welch>

<sup>7</sup> Cf. <https://fallout.fandom.com/wiki/Beckley>

<sup>8</sup> These stories are taken from history. It did not take the *Fallout* series' brand of comically over-tuned cruelty for American mining companies to deploy both their own private militaries and the National Guard against striking miners. Cf. Gitelman (2016) or Shogan (2006) for chronicle of two of the more prominent examples of events that likely served as inspiration for the stories that *Fallout 76* tells. (Even the rock formation that is being mined, Mount Blair, evokes one of the most well-known aspects of these events.)

<sup>9</sup> *Fallout*, S01E08: The Beginning.

<sup>10</sup> [https://fallout.fandom.com/wiki/Robert\\_House](https://fallout.fandom.com/wiki/Robert_House)

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

have become known for in recent years. And while their griping is easily dismissed,<sup>12</sup> this backlash has prompted a number of key figures that were instrumental to the franchise's conception and early development to comment and clarify their original intentions.

One might argue that the recurring gameplay of the franchise speaks for itself and reveals a considerable amount of ideological charge – after all, “the logics that drive our games make claims about who we are, how our world functions, and what we want it to become”.<sup>13</sup> For instance, in my previous article written on this subject, I spent considerable time exploring the Karma system present in *Fallout 3* and *Fallout: New Vegas*. Ostensibly one of many such systems common to games of this era, it is difficult not to find some meaning in the fact that *Fallout: New Vegas* presents the three faction leaders – a violent and oppressive technocrat, a brutal, slave driving dictator, and the elected president of a potentially somewhat corrupt democracy – as NPCs with neutral karma. Subsequently, killing them, in the context of the morality mechanics of the game, is a neutral act. Except the player character loses karma if they kill the venture capitalist Mr. House (and him alone, among the faction leaders), along with a pop-up message that reads “a tragedy has befallen all mankind.”<sup>14</sup>

But there is also a much broader argument to be made: violence is a constant in the wastelands of *Fallout*, and inevitably, most of the gameplay will involve violence, whether explicitly committed by the player, or implicitly through stealth or skill checks meant to mitigate or avoid impending violence. At the same time, when interrogating the various systems that surround this violence (on one hand, inflicting violence permits opportunities to gain items, experience points, or bottle caps; on the other hand; on the other, it requires the expenditure of time, ammunition, health packs, and, in some entries, fuel or power cores), “it becomes apparent that every interaction the player is encouraged to take possesses an economic dimension. The logic of risk equations and cost/benefit analysis [...] permeates the whole of the games.”<sup>15</sup>

One might argue that the *Fallout* games present a wasteland where violence is common and frequently the only recourse for conflict resolution, where the majority of other humans that the player character will interact with are hostile and beyond reason. One might also argue that within the systems that the *Fallout*'s gameplay presents to guide the interactions of players in the wasteland, violence is rational, so that the player character commits acts of violence within a framework of Randian ‘rational selfishness.’<sup>16</sup> Indeed, as far as the gameplay loops teach the player, the constant calculation that weighs the pursuit of long-term goals against the cost and benefit of exploration, violence remains the only ‘efficient’ way of navigating the post-apocalypse.<sup>17</sup>

But for the sake of my argument, rather than exercising gameplay hermeneutics, let's extrapolate the underlying beliefs that informed and shaped so many of those systems, straight from the creators' statements:

Was *Fallout*, as envisioned in *Fallout*, intended to be a powerful political statement about the evils of capitalism? Nope. [...] to say its roots are anti-capitalist and *Fallout* was originally envisioned as anti-capitalist or an anti-capitalist statement is 100% wrong.<sup>18</sup>

Critique of capitalism was never the point of *Fallout*. In fact, the game went out of its way to mention that other countries like China were also behaving terribly. If anything, *Fallout* is

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. For example, Trajkovic, 2024.

<sup>13</sup> Bogost 2007, 340.

<sup>14</sup> [https://fallout.fandom.com/wiki/A\\_tragedy\\_has\\_befallen\\_all\\_mankind](https://fallout.fandom.com/wiki/A_tragedy_has_befallen_all_mankind)

<sup>15</sup> Scuderi, 2024, p. 18, in a chapter where they define the player of a *Fallout* game as a *Homo Ludens et Economicus*.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. (begrudgingly) Rand 1964.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Scuderi 2024 for a much more in depth inquiry into this particular line of thought.

<sup>18</sup> Avellone, 2024.

a comment that war is inevitable given basic human nature.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, we are presented with the *Fallout* franchise's pervasive 'cultural logic', the foundational belief behind its narrative and aesthetic sensibilities: *War, war never changes*<sup>20</sup> – and neither do the men and women who wage it, apocalypse or not. This is one of the core assumption that permeates much popular (Western) post-apocalyptic fiction, and certainly the *Fallout* franchise throughout its multitude of entries.

Civilization is a thin blanket, woven from the implicit threat of state violence and control. The very moment these enforcement mechanisms fail, out come the hockey masks. It follows naturally then, that once these mechanisms have disappeared in nuclear fire, the apocalypse is a free-for-all where the drastically diminished population viciously compete for the scraps necessary to survive. The people of the wasteland(s) will, if not compelled otherwise by (the player's) force, devour each other – figuratively, and quite literally.

The *Fallout* franchise is utterly permeated by a fundamental distrust in human nature that Tim Cain expresses in the quote above. Each game features countless people and factions who cling to the world before the apocalypse – from the Enclave and Brotherhood of Steel across most of the games (both holdovers of the US Government and Military respectively) to *Fallout: New Vegas*' Khans or Legion, effectively cosplaying as conquerors of the world that was. And in every game, on a macro level, these factions blatantly repeat the mistakes of the previous world, locked in bitter conflict with each other, fighting for supremacy and resources (water in *Fallout 3*, energy in *Fallout: New Vegas*).

But even on a micro scale, the player must never be too trusting of their fellow NPC man. The games contain countless examples of those who have decided that robbing, enslaving or eating their neighbors is an easier and safer path to survival than farming or animal husbandry (which exist in every *Fallout* game). Indeed, raiders and slavers of various flavors<sup>21</sup> are easily one of the most common enemy types. As far as who the player actually encounters, no matter where in post-nuclear America they may be, cannibals and hockey-masked junkies outnumber farmers and merchants by an order of magnitude. For war, war never changes, and neither does humanity.

Even the aforementioned, more overtly anti-capitalist entries in the franchise cannot shake this Hobbesian pessimism about people and their reactions to the apocalypse. As altruistic as *Fallout 76*s Responders<sup>22</sup> might be, they are also explicitly painted as gullible and naive,<sup>23</sup> and ultimately their first foray into Appalachia ended in disaster because the various factions of survivors could not unite against a common threat in time. Even before they were driven out by the scorched plague<sup>24</sup>, the Responders had already lost the biggest city on the entire map to raider cruelty and were unable to truly stem the tide of psychotic murderers,<sup>25</sup> let alone able to cooperate or coexist with them.

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<sup>19</sup> Cain, 2024. (The exact quote can be found in a highlighted reply rather than the linked video, though the video expresses the same sentiment somewhat less succinctly).

<sup>20</sup> And indeed, those are the Arc words of the franchise, cited in many introductory cut-scenes.

<sup>21</sup> This includes a number of factions, be they the Khans, Powder Gangers, or the Gunners. Aside from the cosmetic differences, in this context they all fulfill the same narrative purpose, and a player who approaches these individuals outside one of the major settlements is more likely to get shot at than greeted.

<sup>22</sup> <https://fallout.fandom.com/wiki/Responders>

<sup>23</sup> Particularly during the "Into the Fire" quest, when the player is following the steps of Responder initiation, it is made repeatedly clear for comedic effect that the Responders are willfully naive toward the dangers of the wasteland, and their ineptitude was costing recruit lives. Cf. [https://fallout.fandom.com/wiki/Into\\_the\\_Fire](https://fallout.fandom.com/wiki/Into_the_Fire)

<sup>24</sup> [https://fallout.fandom.com/wiki/Scorched\\_Plague](https://fallout.fandom.com/wiki/Scorched_Plague)

<sup>25</sup> It bears mention that this is in no way hyperbole; the performative cruelty of the raiders is repeatedly evoked for comedy and in multiple places (prominently the Pleasant Valley Ski Resort). The player can find logs that detail how becoming raiders was pretty much a deliberate decision that was made as soon as the bombs fell.

This narrative motif equally permeates many of the franchise’s smaller storylines. Even a group like the vigilantes of the ‘Mistress of Mystery’ quest line, who realize that the raider threat must be opposed by force, are ultimately betrayed and massacred due to personal greed and jealousy.<sup>26</sup> The people that wander the wasteland of Appalachia are prone to violence, cooperation is the rare exception, rather than the rule.<sup>27</sup>

The television show does not escape this pessimism either. At the core of its narrative stands, once again, a vicious and bloody fight over resources (in this case, the perpetual power source developed by pre-war scientist, part time messiah figure and season one antagonist Moldaver). But even on a micro level, removed from corporate conspiracies and large-scale power struggles, the show hardly displays much faith in humanity to solve conflicts. Lucy, the protagonist of the show, enters the Wasteland with bright-eyed optimism, but at every turn, this optimism isn’t just, it endangers her life on more than one occasion and is often played for laughs. Wherever she goes, Lucy is the odd woman out, punished and mocked for her willingness to do right by others. The denizens of the Wasteland cannot be trusted, and even small acts of kindness or mercy (like Titus, a Brotherhood of Steel squire, saving the life of his knight, or sparing his fellow squire’s life) are immediately punished.

The only community that is different is hidden away from the Wasteland, and the fact that the denizens of Vault 4 aren’t duplicitous is played as a humorous twist, so far removed from the default cruelty and treachery that the audience is meant to expect.

Conversely, the Vault-dwelling society that instilled Lucy with optimism, is every bit as sinister and cruel. Their apparent ‘goodness’ is not at all born from genuine altruism, but rather it functions as a thin coat of paint over the personal doll-house attached to a corporate doomsday bunker – a smiling facsimile of idealized pre-war Americana that exists for the benefit and comfort of the very people who made the choice to end the world for profit.

Time and again, it is made clear that only an exceptional few people are even remotely trustworthy, as most are out to rob, cheat or murder the protagonists. Human nature, according to *Fallout* is selfish, violent and cruel, and even the end of the world cannot change it.

## **No Great Deed is Commemorated Here – Mythical Speech and Naturalized Belief**

Two things need to be said, and though this paper is limited by its scope, apply far beyond the constraints of the *Fallout* franchise:

The first is that the belief that human nature is rotten to the core is by no means free of ideological underpinnings. There exists a relatively clear line from Thomas Hobbes, who regarded humanity’s natural condition as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short”<sup>28</sup> and the individual locked in a “war of all against all” (ibid.) to Ayn Rand who sang the praises of “rational selfishness”<sup>29</sup> to the political climate of the current day, where ever declining crime statistics cannot assuage the growing fear of fellow humans.<sup>30</sup> This entire genealogy of thought relies on the idea of humanity as capable of profound, violent, and impulsive selfishness that

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. [https://fallout.fandom.com/wiki/The\\_Mistress\\_of\\_Mystery](https://fallout.fandom.com/wiki/The_Mistress_of_Mystery)

<sup>27</sup> Several years worth of patches introducing new quest-givers and factions have, in typical MMO fashion, altered this somewhat, but hostiles of one description or another remain vastly more numerous than friendlies, even if *Fallout 76* has shifted the balance of enemies somewhat in favor of mindless ghouls or scorched.

<sup>28</sup> Hobbes 1651, 186.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. (if absolutely necessary) Rand 1964.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Roman 2023.

requires extensive policing to be contained or harnessed in a way that is not threatening to coexistence.

The second critical notion to mention here is that, at least as far as empirical studies would suggest, this belief does not necessarily stand up to scrutiny.

The recent years of accelerating climate change have absolutely seen a number of localized but no less existentially threatening catastrophes that seem sufficient to extrapolate at least some inkling of how humans behave in the face of a crisis. What is found amid that devastation is not an immediate descent into hockey masks and cannibalism. Rather, while we see some select acts of withdrawal or ostracization motivated by fear of contamination,<sup>31</sup> actual violence in the aftermath of such a disaster is most frequently the purview of those who have been enabled and emboldened by their sanctioned monopoly on violence.<sup>32</sup>

Outside of those fringe cases, we see an outpouring of solidarity:<sup>33</sup> People shelter their neighbors or pull them out from floods. People self-organize and travel great distances to help, volunteering even at great personal expense or personal risk.<sup>34</sup> Even in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, calls for and outpourings of solidarity, both on an individual and international level, were a frequent sight,<sup>35</sup> and in many places around the world, “civil society, sometimes as the kindness of neighbors and other individuals or casual networks, [...] did work to limit the impact of the virus and meet the needs of people in this crisis.”<sup>36</sup>

To illustrate this notion in the context of *Fallout*, when *Fallout 76* launched, one of the game’s key features was the player’s ability to fire additional nuclear warheads and drop them onto settlements that other players had lovingly assembled. The game explicitly encourages this – mechanically, the best endgame loot can be found at ground zero in the wake of fresh craters. Even narratively, it becomes clear from the pre-written notes left behind by the Overseer<sup>37</sup> that the developers clearly expected players to viciously compete for the game’s resources and to aim these missiles at each other.

But that is not what happened. The game’s starting area is instead filled with player-built discount storefronts, and the donation crates are perpetually filled with useful items. In my entire time playing the game, I’ve only ever seen players on a server coordinate to drop a missile adjacent to, rather than on top of, each other’s camps to then cooperatively farm ground zero together in jolly cooperation.

It would appear that a vast majority of people, when faced with apocalyptic adversity (whether material or simulated,) do not descend into hockey masks, cannibalism, or a “war of all against all.”<sup>38</sup> And when they do, it is the descent into violence that is unnatural, born out of external hierarchies or systemic narratives, including the notion that they must fear their neighbors and commit acts of preemptive violence, often against minority groups or the perceived ‘other.’<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. Akiba & Chi (2017).

<sup>32</sup> Cf. For example, Shankman et. al. (2012) and Solnit (2009, pp. 247 – 266) chronicle the rampant police violence in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, with Solnit explicitly describing the police, National Guard, and mercenary forces brought in after the initial storm as “Hobbesian man in uniform” (p. 259).

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Castellanos (2010).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Jaffe (2017).

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Ignác & Langenkamp (2021) or Kieslich et. al. (2023).

<sup>36</sup> Rebecca Solnit in Sitrin (2020), XII.

<sup>37</sup> [https://fallout.fandom.com/wiki/Vault\\_76\\_overseer](https://fallout.fandom.com/wiki/Vault_76_overseer)

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Sitrin (2020) for a global collection and chronicle of such mutual aid efforts related specifically to the COVID-19 pandemic, and Solnit (2009) for a chronicle of a number of grassroots mutual aid efforts in the wake of natural disasters across North- and Central America.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Solnit (2009), particularly chapter V.II (aptly titled “Murderers”) for a harrowing recapitulation of how misinformation and external narratives, and subsequently the fear of looters (along racial lines) caused far more bloodshed in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina than actual looting did.

At this point, there can be little question that the ‘cultural logic’ of *the genre*<sup>40</sup> is sometimes dominated by a deeply pessimistic and deeply ideological view of humanity. But rather than speculate about the creator’s beliefs or intentions, I mean to suggest that post-apocalyptic fictions like the *Fallout* franchise and many of its contemporaries and competitors as are some of the clearest, most visible expressions of a different phenomenon.

In 2006, Mark Fisher succinctly paraphrased Fredric Jameson with the quote “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.”<sup>41</sup> In his book *Capitalist Realism*, Fisher describes the pervasive limitations that capitalism imposes onto not just the tangible world, but onto imagination itself. He asserts:

Capitalist realism as I understand it cannot be confined to art or to the quasi-propagandistic way in which advertising functions. It is more like a pervasive atmosphere, conditioning not only on the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action.<sup>42</sup>

And it is in this exact phenomenon that we observe in the *Fallout* franchise. *Fallout*’s original creators could not – and its current creators cannot – conceive of a world where humans are not in fierce, deadly competition for supremacy any more than they could conceive of a world without hierarchical power structures, or a world without currency driven commerce. Because it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalist beliefs and systems.

To borrow a phrase from Roland Barthes, these deeply ideologically informed assumptions of capitalism have coagulated into natural belief. The *Fallout* franchise, and the many games, movies, and stories that it draws upon – or that draw upon it – are a part of this cycle. The myth at the heart of the cultural logic of the post-apocalyptic genre – and it is a myth, both in the colloquial and the Barthesian sense – of the Hobbesian man, barely contained by the shackles of civilization, does not stand up to scrutiny. But it exists within a cycle of mythical speech<sup>43</sup> – one where the signified has increasingly been pushed out in favor of signifiers borne from ideology, aided and reaffirmed by both fiction and reporting,<sup>44</sup> until these signifiers have fully supplanted the sign itself and coagulated into natural belief.

The *Fallout* franchise is a product of this naturalized belief. Tim Caine and Chris Avellone state so more or less openly. They simply created what seemed like a “realistic” (fraud as this term has become) vision of life after the end of society, a logical conclusion drawn from beliefs they never felt any reason to interrogate, as surely did many others who contributed to the genre.

But “stories serve important epistemological and political functions by making the world intelligible,”<sup>45</sup> and the *Fallout* franchise, pop culture juggernaut spanning decades, console generations and multiple forms of media, is not merely a product born from the beliefs naturalized by mythical speech. As the previous pages have illustrated, despite active efforts to oppose the ideology of the underlying beliefs, the *Fallout* franchise is also an active speaker, reaffirming the signifiers of a deeply pessimistic and ideologically driven world view with every raider ambush and every lovingly detailed camp of wasteland cannibals.

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<sup>40</sup> Of course, this work only highlights this cultural logic within the more recent entries of a single franchise as a concession to the space allotted, but these same patterns can be found across any number of representatives of the genre (so long as they are western productions aimed at the commercial mass market). As evidence for this claim it might be noted that Eugen Pfister is making a very similar observation around Zombie post-apocalyptic games in this very same monograph).

<sup>41</sup> Fisher (2009), p. 1.

<sup>42</sup> Fisher (2009), p. 16.

<sup>43</sup> The concept is here used as per Barthes (1973).

<sup>44</sup> Cf. For instance, Mawson et. al. (2008), who lament that in the aftermath of natural disasters, an undue importance is placed on reporting “isolated cases of antisocial behavior, which tend to be highlighted by the media.”

<sup>45</sup> Metcalf (2008), p. 100.

## The Danger is still present, in your time as it was in ours – Conclusion

The belief that a world after nuclear war would be a violent dog-eat-dog, man-eat-man society stands as the core conceit of the Fallout franchise. This is not due to any direct ideological intent, but because the underlying beliefs of the series, expressed through the narrative and mechanical implications, are naturalized. In turn, these beliefs come natural in part because, on top of the actual ideological actors advocating them, there are hundreds of stories that share the aesthetic imagination of the scenario. That is how the deeply neoliberal cultural logic of the post-apocalyptic genre coagulates.

Beliefs like these, especially as they are prone to intersect with other ideologically driven myths, do more than shift and skew discourse. Rebecca Solnit, once again speaking about the police and vigilante violence in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, reminds us that:

Like elites when they panic, racists imagine again and again that without them utter savagery would break out, so that their own homicidal violence is in defense of civilization and the preservation of order. [...] That force, driven by hurricane winds of fear and rumor and a flood of old stories, turned deadly.<sup>46</sup>

The stories we tell, and how we tell them, matter. And as writers, and as creators of games, these are the kind of biases that we would do well to look out for, so that the stories we write, and the ideologies we spread, are shaped solely by intent rather than naturalized belief.

## About the Author

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Website: [https://linktr.ee/oh\\_the\\_humanities](https://linktr.ee/oh_the_humanities)

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<sup>46</sup> Solnit (2009), p. 259.

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