

The Restaurant at the End of the World

Food in Postapocalyptic Games

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Rarely any other thing is as basic yet important to humans as living beings as food. Its physical and psychological function has been discussed in scientific research and fictional media of multiple genres, from historical dramas to post-apocalypses. After all, as long as there are humans, there is a need to eat. This is true of video games that depict food in their post-apocalypse environments: in these games their presence, production, distribution, and consumption are part of the ludonarrative elements. Despite this, food in general remains a barely researched topic in game studies; even rarer is food's function in a post-apocalyptic setting. This paper tries to tackle this question by presenting how food is depicted as a ludonarrative device in selected (mostly) single-player video games with post-apocalyptic settings. Inspired by (among others) Retzinger's idea that food in the post-apocalypse reflects upon our past/present thoughts and fears, the presented in-game food and foodways would be examined under intersectional positions, exploring how they reflect our contemporary sociopolitical thoughts and fears on and through food.

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Game Studies, Food Studies and the End of the World walks into a bar...

.. and asked themselves what they could have in common. As Sarah Stang (2021) also argued in her introduction, food and beverages have been a topic of (not only) science fiction media that communicates how humans relate to their physical and social environments. The first Routledge International Handbook of Food Studies (Albala 2013) mentioned the relations between food studies and older visual media such as art, film and television – though not yet with video games. Together with westernized/generalized (Shahani 2018, Tigner and Carruth 2018) and postcolonial (Lok 2020, Roy 2020, Welsh 2018) literature, films (Baron 2015) were visual media that often incorporated food and therefore became an object of study. As for food and video games, a majority of research still concerns the real-life consumption habits of gamers. Research into the usage of food and foodways in video games started appearing at least in the 2000s. Looking under the method of procedural rhetoric, Ian Bogost's *Persuasive Games* (2007) thematized the relationship between the African American lower class community and its interconnection (even dependence) with the fast food industry in *GTA San Andreas*. This is then further expanded by looking into foodways and political instabilities (*Darfur is Dying*, *Food Force*) and capitalist markets (*The McDonald's Videogame*, *Yoshinoya*). The coming decade saw further thematization of food and foodways in video games using differing approaches: Chess (2011) and Waszkiewicz (2022) utilized a mainly feminist approach when looking into the labor and affect of video game foodways, whilst Tyler (2019) thematized meat and manliness.

As our third ingredient, the post-apocalypse brings with it both a limiter and also the possibility to look into the medium through – again – multiple lenses. And as mentioned above, literature and films are also the two that have been studied to a deeper degree. Heather J. Hicks’s book about the 21st-century post-apocalyptic novel (2016) arguably serves as an important discussion in post-apocalyptic literature, while post-apocalyptic films were studied in a multitude of articles. Two of the more interesting ones were also mentioned by Stang, both functioning as a three-way bridge between food and foodways as objects of depiction, the post-apocalypse as a setting, and film (still – not yet video games) as media: J.P. Retzinger’s “Speculative Visions and Imaginary Meals: Food and the Environment in (post-apocalyptic) Science Fiction Films“ (2008) and L. Forsters “Futuristic Foodways: The metaphorical meaning of food in science fiction film“ (2004).¹ Retzinger is especially important due to her argument of the interconnectedness between science-fiction and post-apocalypse in how food and foodways are depicted in said genre, although still referring to films as a medium. This is then expanded upon by Stang (2021) as one of the first authors that looked into this interconnectedness in *Fallout 3* and *4*.

While *Fallout* remains an important post-apocalyptic media, the last couple of decades saw an influx of multiple, differing perspectives in post-apocalyptic narratives. The international success of the first *Fallout* games has led Eastern European game enthusiasts to not only modify and rewrite the game from their perspective but also have helped spawning locally motivated new titles such as the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* and *METRO* game series and smaller indie games such as *Atom RPG*. Other popular non-nuclear narrative could be found in the plethora of zombie games – from popular story-based titles such as *The Walking Dead* to survival/base building with high(er) budget such as *State of Decay* and *7 Days to Die* down to indie (*Project Zomboid*), flash (*The Last Stand* series) and modifications² (*DayZ*). On the non-atomic and non-viral menu, we have environmental disasters (*Mad Max*, *Raft*, *Sunkenland*, *Frostpunk*) and a breadth of less-explained, less dystopic – even cute and soft – aesthetics (*Splatoon*, *I Am Future*, *My Time at Portia* and *Sandrock*, *Horizon* series). With each genre of gameplay mechanics and story settings comes varying ludonarratives representation (or absence) of food and foodways – from underground pig farms in *Metro*, nutritionist trait in *Project Zomboid*, food rationing system in *Frostpunk* to *DayZ*’s cannibalistic brain prion disease.

Unfortunately, this paper has neither the space nor the time to dig deep into the mechanics and representations of food and foodways in these games, meaning a selection of games and approaches is necessary. As for my starting approach, I will be basing my argument by quoting Sandberg and Fisher (2022) and Retzinger (2008), where all three authors agree that science fiction and, by extension, the post-apocalypse provide venues where “novel ideas with regard to food and foodways” can be served whilst still “highlight(ing) deep paradoxes and problems of human society and the human condition“ (Fisher and Sandberg, 2022). This will be my main line of thought when looking into food and foodways in the coming game. I will be attempting to look into how both in-game narratives and mechanics give rise to questions not dissimilar to real-life fears and concerns. These concerns include, but are not limited to, intersectional aspects between gender (Chess 2011, 2015; Waszkiewicz 2022), race and class (Bogost 2007) and post-colonial situations along the global north/south divide (Mukherjee and Hammar 2018, Murray 2018).

For starters, I will be looking into Stang’s article on the *Fallout* series as an example of how post-apocalyptic food in video games could be read as criticism, irony and warning,

¹ Although this paper focuses more on post-apocalyptic narratives, “any attempt to find clear-cut generic boundaries (between science fiction, dystopian and post-apocalyptic narratives) must inevitably end in aporia“ (Voigt 2015).

² From this point on shortened as “mod”.

supplementing it with how *Fallout 4*'s robots influence the game's post-apocalyptic foodways. This deep dive into her article is important since she covered a lot of both mechanical and narrative functions of food in post-apocalyptic video games in general. For the second course, I'll be looking into G.A.M.M.A. (Grok's Automated Modular Modpack for Anomaly), which is a collection of mods (a modpack) as an extension for a mod (S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Anomaly) for the current three games of the S.T.A.L.K.E.R. series, focusing on survival gameplay and masculinity and its impacts on its foodways. Bethesda studio's foray to the galaxies, *Starfield*, will be our main course, where the (post-)post-apocalypse foods and foodways continue the history of humanity, including its less savory post-colonialist and gender-oriented ideas. For dessert, I'll explore how food and coziness in *Raft* are caused by but also repeat capitalist extractionist ideals. are caused by but also repeats capitalist extractionist ideals.

Food(way)... Food(way) never changes(?) *Fallout 4* and robotic servers

With her article in *Games and Culture* (2022), Sarah Stang sets one of the first methods when looking into the three-way intersection between food, video games and the post-apocalypse. Looking into the ever popular *Fallout* series, she sets into using close reading to show “the dangerous, contradictory, and precarious state” depicted through food and foodways in *Fallout 4* whilst parallelly reading it as “critical commentary on contemporary, real-world society”. She divided her close reading into four sections, each commenting on differing fears and concerns. The first chapter concerns the cultural tendencies of the pre-apocalyptic culture that lead to the apocalypse and inevitably its post-state. By looking into select prepackaged food items, Stang explores the intersection between rampant capitalism and atomic (over-)enthusiasm through mainly product names and in-game narrative descriptions of two main products: the “Nuka-Cola” drinks and “Sugar Bombs” as “campy parodies, cautionary warnings, and critical satire”. The article's second chapter revolves less around food as consumption and more around the bodies (player characters) that consume the post-apocalypse. Citing Z. Wallin, Stang focuses on body modifications both through chemical consumption and through human-molecular mutations as side effects of the post-apocalypse: both to flush out the consumed radioactivity (through character perks such as the “lead belly” perk and through chemicals such as Rad-X and RadAway) and to face its physical problems – through the usage of chemicals that, among others, help combat abilities. Stang connects this with the science fiction narrative of a “transhumanist intertwining of nature and technology/synthetics/biochemicals” and further with the more general idea of *Fallout* as parody, satire and commentary. Referring back to her first chapter, she connects the situations in game as its pre-apocalypse result: the already destructive past in *Fallout* becomes a part of a similarly dystopic present.

Stang's third chapter opens with the mutated plants and animals as signs of the depth of damage caused by *Fallout*'s nuclear apocalypse, before Stang went into listing all the mutated animals in the game, player tendencies to harvest all kinds of meat – especially from aggressive animals – and picking especially mutated giant bugs as an example of ludonarrative and aesthetic abjection under Julia Kristeva's (1982) theory. Along a similar strain is the handling of cannibalism in the series: whilst the ludonarrative mechanics differ from game to game, the whole series seems to still see cannibalism as – Stang citing Kristeva – “the utmost of abjection”. Parallel to the consumption of the flesh is that of the blood, where Stang argues that the consumable item “blood pack” is not transfused into the player character but is literally drunk by the players, yet is not considered cannibalism. These last chapters ties back with the first two in Stang's closing argument by mirroring the highly industrialized and/or damaging

foods of the pre- and post-apocalypse with a point that she rarely mentions in the bulk of her text: vegetables and fruits. In her closing argument, she pointed out the plausibility of a vegetarian post-apocalyptic lifestyle, which, although not being the developer's intention, provides an interpretation of the series. In its surprising lack of radioactivity, Stang reads the veg(etari)an diet as a unintentional and less realized counter towards the mainstream foodways of Fallout that revolve around a foodway that is destructive towards nature and ourselves, which themselves were built on top of an already dystopic pre-apocalypse, as a critical reflection of food production and consumption in contemporary American society.

Stang's textual reading from mainly objects and descriptions in the game provides us one of the many plausible methods for looking into reflections of the real world through food as objects in post-apocalyptic video game settings. Despite this, she also recognizes that her reading is mainly based on the reflection towards contemporary American foods – less so of foodways. Merriam-Webster defined the word as “the eating habits and culinary practices of a people, region, or historical period“, whilst Cambridge defined it as “a tradition in a particular group or culture of eating particular foods, or of preparing or producing food in a particular way“. In simpler terms, it covers the socio-cultural aspects of food, which might include but are not limited to its preparation, methods of eating, aesthetic worth or presentation, normalized or tied patterns of consumption (e.g., gender-oriented, normalized times of eating), its spread across differing cultural groups across longer or shorter periods of time, etc. While Stang does refer to Kristeva for her aesthetic reading of bug meats and the (ab)norms of cannibalism in different games of the series, she barely mentions that in-game food was produced and traded before and after the apocalypse and is part of missions in the game series, making it not only an object of consumption but also an interactible object of sociocultural exchange that also contains the aforementioned parodies, warnings and satires. By looking into parts of foodways in the Fallout series – in this case in Fallout 4 – we could see which narratives are also present in the game.

A part of Fallout's narratives is the reliance upon, skepticism over and critical views over technology, with robotics and artificial intelligence starting to get incorporated in daily life. This inevitably thematizes the labors surrounding food that were and are done by robots, which is prevalent all across the game. Directly after the character creation scene, the player character is greeted by Codsworth, the family's robot butler, who offered coffee to the player by saying, “173.5 degrees Fahrenheit. Brewed to perfection!“ whilst holding a coffee can, before storming off to take care of the player character's newborn. This scene introduces the players to the idea that in the pre-apocalypse, robots are (becoming) a part of the daily American household that is able to perform manual labor, (some) emotional labor and dangerous labor (including combat), as shown by the character's second interaction with Codsworth after centuries in cryosleep. Through exploration, players would be introduced to more robots as food or beverage servers: Bean in the unopened Slocum Joe (a coffee chain), the Wellingham in Diamond City market's Colonial Taphouse, Charlie in Whitechapel and – returning to Diamond City – Takahashi in its noodle bar. Both Diamond City robotic food vendors are of interest when looking into foodways in Fallout 4 for different reasons. Despite being parts of the city's gastronomic industry, Wellingham is coded as having a snobbish characteristic, serving higher-class citizens by, among other things, creating new food by using exotic ingredients. Takahashi, on the other hand, operates a noodle bar in the middle of the city's marketplace, where multiple NPCs can be seen sitting on its bar, enjoying a bowl of power noodles with a pair of chopsticks. The character itself serves as a reference to Japan not only through name but also by his singular tagline, “nan-ni shimasho ka?“, translated as “what would you like to have?“. Besides robotic food servers, Fallout also incorporates vending machines and food automats, most prevalent in Fallout 4, with both Port-A-Diners and Nuka-

Cola vending machines still serving edible (highly preserved) pre-war food. The Fallout wiki mentions 18 Port-A-Diners scattered through the game's map and its DLCs, all of them located in formerly public buildings, which now are mostly as rotten as the foods served inside these machines. Comparing the two, we see that foodways became more interpersonal, yet also highly advanced: the mimicry or replication of human emotions and labor by complex robots was preferable to the convenient purchase of pre-prepared food made by humans and sold by simple machines.

Returning to Stang's reading of Fallout's food as satire, irony and warning, we see here that foodways are just as imbued with meaning and complexity as food items: the actors, places, systems and norms. The distribution and servicing of food remains as important as its consumption and these, too, has been affected by the apocalypse. Referring to Adam Roberts argument "that the chief mode of science fiction is not prophesy but nostalgia" (2000 in Retzinger 2008), robotic food servers could be seen as a return to the interpersonal aspect of food service, where emotional labor is preferred to the convenience of cold mechanical interaction. Arguably, the humanization of these robots – by giving them personalities and the capability of understanding human feelings – is one of the separator between these servers and other robots that functions as NPCs or enemies. This then meant that even when food service is managed by highly technical robots, the reason they exist is because of their (percieved) humanity: we'd rather be served by robots who could serve a snide remark rather than machines which simply drops food in exchange for currency. The post-apocalyptic setting of the game adds a layer of complexity to this, since by keeping these robots 'alive' and letting the machines rot, the game unconsciously made a decision of which technology it wants to keep but also which it rejects.³

While many other aspects of foodways, not only in Fallout 4 but in the whole franchise (e.g., Fallout: New Vegas and its White Gloves society), remain untouched, the argument stands that looking into foodways is as important as looking into foods in the attempt to read the satirical, ironic and critical elements of post-apocalyptic narratives. In a way, looking into foodways stands even closer to Retzinger's reading into the roles of food in post-apocalyptic movies, where it articulates moral questions of consumption and production while acting as a reminder of a past gone by. This short discourse on food-serving robots in Fallout 4 shows that the game's main idea of the humanness of robots is also prevalent in the game's foodways. Remaining with the focus of foodways, our next entry shifts the focus from the distribution of food towards its – uncomfortable – production.

Meats, manliness, man-eaters. The economy of death in S.T.A.L.K.E.R. G.A.M.M.A.

As an important predecessor of the post-apocalyptic genre in video games, Fallout affects the imagination of game developers and gamers worldwide. It both inspires and provides mechanics copied by later games, such as the S.T.A.L.K.E.R. series. Developed by the Ukrainian GSC Game World, the series is among the first to offer not only a non-American but also a localized narrative on the post-nuclear theme. The game world revolves geographically around the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, where, after the explosion of the nuclear power plant in 1986, another catastrophe occurred in 2006, causing physical abnormalities (mutations of

³ This idea of keeping and rejecting technology is especially interesting upon the story setting of Fallout 4, where a secretive society called the institute creates an army of replicas of humans called synth in their bid to assert control upon the area. Whilst these – arguably beloved – food vendors are mostly robots of pre-apocalyptic models, the contemporary synth are seen mostly as threats due to their secrecy and human's inability to distinguish a synth from a human.

plants and animals, deadly radiation storms and psi-storms that affected human characters' mental faculty and the creation of radiated artifacts with supernatural properties) in its area. In the game story, this accident is a localized/geographical apocalypse, with its narrative elements referencing individuals who deliberately visit the affected zone (simply known as 'the zone') for multiple reasons (among others to seek the artifacts to be sold outside the zone) against the order of the ukrainian military. In between the latest release of the series in November 2024 and the last official entry in 2009 (S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Call of Pripjat), it has an active gaming and modding community, releasing both graphical tweaks and gameplay additions for its earlier three games, two of them being modpacks named Anomaly and G.A.M.M.A. (Grok's Automated Modular Modpack for Anomaly).⁴ Both modpacks modified the first three entries significantly, though most important for this paper is its foodway. While hunger is a gameplay mechanic in some of the base game (among others, Call of Pripjat), the mods add an extensive crafting mechanic that includes cooking and butchering. Another ludomechanic aspect introduced to the mod is the narrative of NPCs needing to also eat: flavor dialogues from the player's PDA sometimes mentioned two NPCs seeing an animal and hunting them for food.

While butchered animals are – like in Fallout – irradiated, S.T.A.L.K.E.R. and G.A.M.M.A.'s survival mechanism is its main distinction. According to the S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Wiki, "hunger has two effects in [S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl and S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Call of Pripjat]: letting it slowly develop into severe malnutrition for too long will slowly cause damage and severely decrease the player's stamina." While the mechanics of hunger (and subsequently cooking) are not only limited to survival games, Waszkiewicz (2022) drew a line differing its function in survival and non-survival games. They argued that in survival situations, food is required to be more nutritious than satisfying, with its primary role being the bare upkeep of life rather than its plausible enjoyment. Under this perspective, hunger is coded as an antagonist, as a constant drawback that the player has to face. Another theoretical base to look into this can be read through Brandon Rogers's (2020) "Objectification of Health through Masculine Rationality", where he argued that the construction of the controllable body through visualization by hitpoints, health bars, etc. comes from a masculine rationale of objectivity/objectification. Using Fallout 76's health, hunger and hydration bars and its disease-check mechanism, Rogers showed how biological functions were measured and put into objects "which allows [players] to rationalize, monitor, and manage their character's health and hit points." This also extends to S.T.A.L.K.E.R.'s and G.A.M.M.A.'s hunger system. Although in both games hunger is only shown as a symbol that reminds players to feed their character, in G.A.M.M.A. this is expanded by the calorie amount and characteristics of edible items, giving players information needed to control and rationalize how to feed their character, depending on their situation: from retreating to friendly territory to get healthy food after consequently eating radiated meat and healing them or to 'rough it out' by hunting mutants for meat and human enemies for cooking gear.

This upkeep of one's character's hunger is also expanded from the base game not only by hunting and cooking, but also by the addition of food items, including foods read as vegetarian and vegan. The methods of gathering these items (cooked mutant meats, cooking utensils and fuels, pre-packaged food) are only slightly modified from the base game: they can be purchased, found in stashes or dead enemies or – as a part of the mod – found lying around in the map. Completely new are, as mentioned, butchering and cooking mechanics. Butchering allows players to gain different objects from all mutated enemies depending on their origins:

⁴ Due to the modpacks still being developed, I am basing my observation on the version 1.5.2 of Anomaly and version 9.2. of G.A.M.M.A.. Since G.A.M.M.A. is dependent on whilst at the same time modifies some aspects from Anomaly, I will be referring to G.A.M.M.A. as my research object. Do note that a modpack itself is a conglomeration of multiple modifications, meaning that another research avenue consisting of looking the singular mods that adds specific mechanics (e.g. butchering mod) whilst plausible, is not the object of this paper.

mutated animals will give meat and body parts, while mutated humans give body parts and miscellaneous items found on non-mutated humans with notable exceptions. Snorks, mutated soldiers that show animal tendencies (GSC Game World, 2006) and its cookable hands are one of these exceptions. Eating these meats raw, however, causes high radioactive poisoning. To avoid this, players can either outright trade them for safe food from select vendors or use found/purchased/looted cooking gear, fuel, or on-map fireplaces and firestarters and either water or vodka – with the latter being more effective at removing radioactivity from the meats. Interestingly, drinking alcohol and smoking, despite being listed in the game as unhealthy, are also some of the ways to eliminate radioactivity from the player's character. Another method to upkeep health is through the in-game economy: either from looting and selling, especially highly profitable, anomalous artifacts located in dangerous, similarly anomalous environments, or by completing missions given by NPCs, which might involve killing targets or traversing the map.

This last mention is a core idea of both the original trilogy and the modpack: survival is represented as a dangerous situation that players have to overcome to progress. The requirements to upkeep one's own life and progress in the game are always connected with risk and pain – be it through human or non-human adversaries, corrupted nature that forbids local plants as meal sources, or even time. Merely logging into a game session is an act of resource waste – hunger becomes an omnipresent challenge that requires the player's constant attention, rewarding activity and punishing inactivity. Here I'd propose – for the lack of better terms and research time – the interconnection between violence and economy as an economy of pain. It consists of avoidance through meticulous planning against multiple sources of damage, the giving of pain towards others who block the player's objective and the almost absence of safe and peaceful resource gathering. This resonates again with Waszkiewicz, who sees food in survival games as antagonists. Food is attached not to the satisfaction gained from eating, but to the constant vigilance and willingness to use violence for the purpose of prolonging gameplay. This then could be understood as a strain of masculinities conceptualized by Waszkiewicz: although masculinity could emerge from different directions (Taylor and Voorhees, 2018), one of these is specific to shooter and survival games where the act of prolonging a singular character's existence necessitates the interconnection between violent elimination of dangers and – in the case of S.T.A.L.K.E.R. - the turning of these dangers into usable resources: living beings (both humans and animals) are then seen as resources the players might need to survive.

Another smaller role of food besides oppressive gameplay mechanics is a narrative one – especially cannibalism. The description of the aforementioned snork hands – an item added by the mods – mentions it being avoided by most stalkers, citing cannibalism as the reason, while members of the bandit, mercenary and other factions “include it in their meals to show superiority over other groups“. While the breadth and depth of cannibalism is neither explored nor shown in the base games nor in the modpack, this description shows that narratively it exists and is being practiced by some groups for a specific in-game narrative purpose. This writing, however, might affect the reading of these groups by the players: the strengthening of identity by shared practice – despite the game mechanic not showing it directly – or distancing by painting these factions in a more negative light – cannibalism as the border-breaking exploitation of humans.

As a survival game, S.T.A.L.K.E.R. and G.A.M.M.A. take food and foodways into a antagonistic direction where the gathering and eating of food are always connected with risk and violence. Eating becomes a chore regulated by numerized concepts coming from masculine hegemonies intertwined with the economics of survival, making each decision more or less

directly connected with others. This seems to counter Waszkiewicz's idea of coziness through food, as shown in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, where a cooking mechanism exists as a cozy side action. Its function is then read as rewarding: its gathering, cooking and eating directly affect the well-being of the player character and its aesthetic execution becomes a point of enjoyment for players. Returning to *G.A.M.M.A.*, beside its ludic consequences, a small portion relating to cannibalism fleshes out the narrative of the game even further by becoming a method of identity building and othering. This idea of identification through food we've seen from both *Fallout* and now *G.A.M.M.A.*, however small, plays a larger role in the next game I'll discuss.

Sandwiches à la Terra and galaxy Chow Mein: *Starfield's* gastronomical intersections

Exploring a different idea of apocalypse, *Starfield* (Bethesda 2023) depicts a humanity where humans started colonizing space in the 21st century, leading to the discovery of a technology called the grav drive in the middle of the 22nd century. Known but kept secret by the scientist who discovered it, the research and usage of the grav drive ultimately led to the collapse of Earth's magnetosphere in 2203 A.D., leaving the planet uninhabitable and exterminating billions unlucky enough to not be able to flee Earth. Up to the start of the game in 2330, humans have rebuilt its existence in galaxies across the universe both under the influence of two political factions – the United Colonies (UC) and Freestar Collective (FC) – alongside a mysterious theocratic faction (House Va'Ruun, explored in its first DLC released in 2024) and many other smaller, independent settlers. This background story then places the game far from the apocalyptic happening and arguably turns it into another genre of the apocalypse also discussed during the conference – the post-post apocalypse – whilst also providing the main setting of the game: the existence of humans in the reaches of the universe along with its physical, socio-political and historical questions – among others related to its previous existence on earth. The player was put into the role of one of the next generations of survivors who then came into contact with strange artifacts, ultimately allowing them to move between universes.

By placing the story in a place and time far from our own, the game taps more into its science-fiction ideas without setting aside its apocalyptic roots. Discussions and depictions of life on earth are a main point that permeates a lot of the game's cultural aspects. Its loss, reference, imagination and study coincide with the contemporary situations of humanity across the universe – the continuation of the old and familiar in a place (or places) that is new and strange. These dualities could be found as objects (and their descriptions or connections) and activities, including the foods and foodways of the game.

Food as items shows this breadth of old and new most directly. Although the game simplifies the categories of food and drink items under the category of consumables/healing items, mechanically these items are separable under multiple categories. Following this old-new duality, players could find familiar food items originating from Earth in their fresh, packaged, synthesized, or cooked forms and ingredients gathered from alien life forms. These alien ingredients, despite their multitude of sources, are usually boiled down to their base functionality: either as nutrients, spices, or aromatics. These alien and earthen ingredients could be used by the players to cook a select few recipes. More of these recipes are hidden behind unlockable skills and research prerequisites. The resulting foods themselves reflect both separation and mixture of alien and earthen ingredients: simpler food items such as alien kebabs or grilled cheese sandwiches require either only alien or earthen ingredients, while more

complex foods require both alien and earthen ingredients in different amounts. This combination is less obvious in uncraftable cooked foods, although some do mention its alien origin, such as the “drinkable meal substitute” called trawl, which is “made from processed Chasmbass scraps” (Bethesda 2023), a sea animal found on the planet Volii Alpha.

This mention of the specific origin of Trawl is an anomaly in the game since all other foods are modeled after familiar earthly foods. While cooking methods represent the limit of how an ingredient can be processed (e.g., turned into sandwiches, dried, grilled, or stewed), no other alien species (except for the pieces of alien crustacean in Trilo Bites) takes the center place of a food item and is mentioned directly as such. Whilst this might be related to the game mechanic and the attempt to minimize the amount of unique items by categorizing alien species after their function, this also impacts the narrative of the game. Due to this system, native flora and fauna can only be used under a strict categorization or function, with experimentation to use these new species as themselves being unavailable to players. This is reflected in the cooking mechanic, where the adjective ‘alien’ is used when referring to standardized food items made from mostly non-earthly fauna and flora. Taking alien jerky as an example, players can create the food item by combining any membrane and nutrient from different alien body/plant parts to achieve a standardized end product. More ludonarratively dissonant is the categorization of items harvested from aliens as aromatics and spices – categories that in reality reflect a breadth of differing chemical compounds that create different sensations when consumed – as interchangeable when cooking a recipe. On the other side, some rarer cookable ingredients, such as gastronomic delights and quark-degenerate tissues, are unable to be used as replacements for nutrients/spices/aromatics, meaning that their usage is strictly limited to food items that actually require them. This paradoxical lack of flexibility and at the same time over-generalization leads to alien foods – recalling Waszkiewicz’s – to be functional and not enjoyable. This functionality however also belies the idea of diversity and discovery of the game. Instead of becoming objects of interest whose function and usage can be further explored by experimentation, alien foodstuffs simply become resources that are there for the players’ survival. In a sense, despite coming from planets unfamiliar to humans, alien foods reflect not a culinary exploration from the last frontiers of the earth, but the shoehorning of diversity into older, preconceived ideas.

If Trawl represents the integration (instead of experimentation) of alien food into earthen food ideas, earthen food themselves and the way they are represented show us which parts of human cultures survive and in what forms. The limited amount of available cooked food options in the game shows that a majority of ingredients and, consequently, food items and cooking methods were either unavailable or even extinct. The redditor Neanderthal_In_Space thematized this in his post titled “We didn’t save bananas” (2024) in Reddit’s Starfield forum, where they find out that bananas are non-existent in game, more importantly pointing to the real-life threat of banana extinction in the same post. The game itself admits to events of extinction, ironically through a cereal called chocolate labs, which were shaped in the form of the extinct Labrador retriever dog breed. This is compounded by the aforementioned synthesized meats (and the lack of ‘real’ meat) although the existence of eggs and dairy products asks if some animals did survive. Returning to plants, beside bananas, surviving plants exist only in mono-cultural forms. Grains, tubers and fruits such as rice, wheat, potatoes, grapes and tomatoes can be found as raw or processed items such as bread or wines. And whilst Chandra winery provides a broad selection of French based wines, the lack of graphical models on the food items pinpoints to the lack of diversity of the species of plants being grown, fortifying the idea that not only a select few species survives, but even from those which survives, only a few of them are discoverable by the players.

This lack of diversity is further complicated by these foods' highly capitalized system of production. In their raw form, plants could be found beside anonymous cardboard boxes in buildings on space bodies without atmosphere, suggesting they were planted off-world and shipped to these places (a fact supported by the presence of a spaceship builder that specializes in cargo hauls) without players ever knowing who, where, or how they were grown. This works similarly with packaged and processed foods. Most of the companies providing them concentrated on specific products, such as Red Harvest for grain products (bread and alcohol), Chandra for wines, Boom Pop! for flavored drinks, Can-Uck for canadian food and Oishii for Japanese food and the aforementioned Bostaurus. The similarity of all these companies is that their interactions are limited to knowing the existence and consuming their product. Some exceptions to these industry giants apply only when it concerns missions. Players can interact with representatives of Terrabrew (coffee company) and go inside Filburn Breweries' brewery and Tranquillitea's headquarter since they are part of side missions. Localized food sources and foodways, on the other hand, are few and far between, with most linked to the territories belonging to the Freestar Collective, such as the local backyard farm in Akila City, the farms players visit in the Freestar ranger side story, or the food stand owned by Xenofresh where players can buy Trawl. These examples not only mirrors the ideology of the Freestar Collective of self-reliance whilst also providing an interesting counter narrative to the industrialized galactic foodway.

Although local production is rare to find, local food distribution and consumption is omnipresent and reflects further narratives of life in the post-(post-)apocalypse of earth. Whilst Terrabrew and Tranquillitea has been mentioned as companies, I've yet to read them as two of the three companies that sold both packaged and cooked foods, with the third one being Chunks. Albeit different in products offered, all three are similar in their service of convenient, fast consumables. Beside showing the impact and technological achievement of intergalactic production and distribution (including how chunks packaged their food, even liquids, in cubed forms), these fast food chains – especially chunks – again repeats the lack of transparency when it comes to food production and distribution in general. Its presence, on the other hand, provides an option to local food vendors for tourists visiting other planets. These local vendors, in turn, reflect both general and also local ideas and traditions surrounding food. Despite numerous examples, I will be focusing on two colonies: New Homestead on Jupiter's moon Titan and New Atlantis on Jemison in the Alpha Centaurii system. The colony of New Homestead follows the narrative of information: built as a pre-apocalyptic research center, it now becomes a historical site, including its former mess hall turned family-run tavern called Brown Horse, also becoming the longest-running food establishment after the apocalypse. In the game, both the tavern and the local Chunks franchise are owned by a couple: the non-white, male read Luthor Atlanta enthusiastically running the local Chunks and his white, female read partner Anja Seattle inheriting Brown Horse from her mother. Reading the interconnection between restaurant ownership, race and gender the case of New Homestead shows the complex interrelationship between said aspects. On the one hand the male gender is connected with having a career, whilst his non-whiteness connects it with the globalized yet questionable fast food industry. The white woman then depicts its opposite: its role in the food industry might be connected with tradition, but this is also framed under the idea of service – the continuation of tradition (and traditional domesticated values) lying in the hands of females. Whilst this reading of gender and food has been a long topic of research (Chess 2012, 2015, Waszkiewicz 2024), the interplay of class and race is often pushed aside. Ian Bogost (2007), on the other hand, commented shortly on the implication of “social condition inherent to the fast food and packaged food industries” when reading GTA III's main character from a social (and arguably racial) lens. This connection of class, race and fast food is disturbing when applied to Luthor and New Homestead's setting as a historical site: though food doesn't only come from fast food joints, the black male figure still remains trapped in its confinements whilst also providing

a mirror towards the white female domesticity. With Kay's House in New Atlantis, this domesticity of the female exists in a further mixture of classist and – although not directly racial – orientalist tones. Serving food in the underbelly of the otherwise rich city, Kay and Theresa – a pair of mother and daughter – serves cooked regional foods (e.g., pierogis and kiffles) paired with a serving aesthetic that is inspired by American diners – tin messware and gingham patterned napkins – in an establishment decorated with orientalist aesthetic. Whilst the national origin of both servers are moot points, these aesthetical choices again paint an idea of othering served along the lines of class and regionalities.

Whilst these intersectional readings happen more on the personal level, the postcolonial reading arguably happens within the narrative of the game and without the game – the decisions developers take when constructing the foodways of the game. Earlier I talked about the extinction of flora and fauna, but following these extinctions, we've yet to discuss the extinction of knowledge that goes side by side with the death of humans and regional cultures. Again, the mechanical argument provides a reason for the lack of diversity: fewer foodstuffs and a slimmed-down cooking mechanic equal a compressed game size whilst still having sufficient representation. On the other hand, this meant that narratively, representations of global food cultures are done on the bare minimum and are filtered through a rather narrow perspective on food. Beginning with coffee, Terrabrew's overarching dominance in the crop's culture already reflected the rise of the brand Starbucks as a global coffee company and with it, the globalized introduction of Italian styles of coffee. Whilst local competitions are present – e.g., the coffee shop in Paradiso – other coffee cultures are either nonexistent or are parodied with little to no attention to their context. The side mission Terror Brew, where players are tasked to harvest coffee beans from a dangerous alien species, was commented on by IGN as “a clear riff on real-life Kopi Luwak, Indonesian coffee made from beans partially digested by a cat-like civet” (IGN 2023). Whilst its story – a coffee snob tasking an adventurer to feed dangerous aliens coffee berries and to harvest the pooped-out beans – is a satirical reflection of the contemporary industrialization of Kopi Luwak in Indonesia, it completely misses its historical root in colonialism that brought the crop in the first place to the archipelago and the same colonialism that led Javanese people to discover that pooped-out coffee beans are drinkable. Conjoined again by its contemporary plastic (now reusable) cup aesthetic, coffee is coded more with its consumption and reading by a mainly Western perspective rather than its contemporary problems or localized contexts. This can also be seen when looking into the mainstreamed Japanese food marketed by the company Oishii. Besides its problematic marketing that relies on the equation between exoticized female servitude and convenience, the products offered themselves reflected only a very specific part of Japanese cuisine – those already familiar to Western audiences, such as miso soup, sushi rolls, or ramen. Besides repeating popularized ideas of Japanese food, this generalization of food also meant the absence of further historical cultural contexts in favor of a popularized reading on globalized food trends. This can be seen in the depiction of the food item chapaguri, which is described as “a savory noodle dish served with steak, often enjoyed as a snack, and considered a comfort food” (Bethesda 2023). While contemporary audiences familiar with globalized popular culture might recognize this food item as an Easter egg originating from South Korea as a mixture of two local instant noodle brands, “Chapagetti” and “Neoguri”, its depicted version as having the addition of steak is popularized through the movie “Parasite”, despite an older, meatless version being popularized much earlier (in 2013 instead of 2019) by a Korean live TV show. This history is – again – untraceable in the game and could be considered lost: the item description refers neither to its origin, its rise to popularity, nor its context towards the player character – the knowledge of and about it is mostly extinct and is only known through selection into mainstream culture.

Whilst *Starfield* still allows a plethora of reading on themes of food (including the released DLC *Shattered Space* that includes a culture with strong ties to animal husbandry, including the creation of food from said animal), it presents a unique take on a post-post-apocalypse scenario where science fiction narratives of change and continuation are put into a globalized context. Similar to my analysis of *Fallout*, foodways belong to an aspect that is continued from earthen cultures, with capitalist market structures (the prominence of companies producing synthesized foods), gender, race and class being connected with what food items are being served and in which manners. Yet unlike *Fallout*, the alien in *Starfield* has been conquered – at least scientifically. The ability to extract categories of resources instead of specific items from a specific source meant that players are at the luxury of bending the universe to fit the prescribed human palate at the cost of discovering differences between native species. This is made doubly unfortunate when we look into how limited both the system of cooking and the cookable foods are. Most flora, fauna and cooked food originating from Earth are not available in the game, with extinction being mentioned as a reason for at least one animal species. In terms of cookable foods, this further means that the surviving knowledge is narratively being filtered through the lenses of characters who survived the in-game catastrophe. From outside the game, this perspective tends to depict a westernized one, with food items from non-western places being exoticized and imbued with meaning outside their local contexts.

5. Sea-grown fruit smoothies: plentiful apocalypse in *Raft*

Like some of the earlier post-apocalyptic video games, the *Fallout* and *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* series both portrayed the apocalypse as dystopic environments with pollution, scarcity and violence abounding. In more recent times, however, this narrative of dystopic apocalypses started being challenged by games that portrayed the end of the world as a brilliant chance to rethink and reshape humans' connections with their destructive past(s) and their current situation with nature. Whilst there are still very few studies that connect the apocalypse with coziness, some fall under Waszkiewicz's ideas of coziness whilst still maintaining a narrative that happened after a great calamity, with examples including *My Time at Portia* and *Sandrock*, the self-appointed cozy apocalypse *I Am Future*, *Caravan Sandwich* and *Raft* – the last of which being the focus of this last chapter.

Taking place in a waterworld, players are put into the role of forward scouts – persons tasked with finding habitable land. To progress in its narrative, players have to explore the world to gather and process its resources according to the player character's needs. This ranges from the creation of better gears (tools and weapons) to the expansion of the game's namesake raft as the player's main domicile and to – most importantly – the fulfillment of the player's hunger and thirst. To achieve these goals, both nonrenewable resources (plastic, metal, clay, rocks) and renewable ones (trees, fruits, goat milk, water) have to be continually harvested from different places. While moving around on the sea on their raft, players can gather trashed plastics, planks and boxes filled with randomized items. When anchored near smaller islands uninhabited by humans, players are free to exploit the flora and fauna growing on the island and the mineable resources in its surrounding water. In the case of island faunas, hostile ones (e.g., feral rats and hyenas) are killable for meat, whilst non-hostile ones (goats, cluckers and llamas) can be captured as part of an on-raft animal husbandry. They in turn produce resources if they can access grass plots, which players have to build and maintain on their raft. Similar to these grass plots, players can build farming plots to grow mostly fruits and root vegetables. Fruit seeds are gained from island fruit plants or after eating them, whilst root vegetables spawn inside trashed crates that float around the sea. These growable plants, including grass, require watering with fresh water – a resource also necessary to quench the player character's thirst. Some plants that players can't grow on their own include mushrooms, flowers (for dyes) and

seaweed. Another food-gathering activity viable from land and raft is fishing, for which a craftable fishing rod is necessary. Eating these food items raw gives players a small hunger return, whilst processing them gives a higher benefit mirroring their complexity: a raw beet gives players 10 hunger points, a simple grilled beet 15 hunger points and a vegetable soup (made out of 4 of either beets and/or potatoes) 40 hunger points and 35 bonus hunger points. Parallel to its benefits, complex cooked food requires cooking tools (grills, cooking stations), fuel (wood) and in cases of complex dishes (in contrast to simple grilled foodstuffs), multiple ingredients.

Unlike the aforementioned games in earlier chapters, Raft's mostly empty world meant that human interaction in the game is limited to passive contacts up to the later stages of the game. This meant that trade is unavailable for most of the early game and extraction of resources becomes the main method to progress, including to satiate hunger and thirst. While remains of human cultures are discoverable in the game, in terms of food, no pre-apocalyptic foodstuffs are available, only tools – both for cooking and eating – and recipes. Whilst tools are researchable and craftable, recipes have to be known by the player – not the player character – to be created. Player characters can find or trade (with unmanned booths) for written-down recipes as items in the randomly generated world, or players can look up online guides to cook advanced food. This insistence on nature being a primary source not only meant that – in comparison especially to G.A.M.M.A. – human NPCs are not a resource, but also meant that player characters are forced to take on multiple roles. Whilst Waszkiewicz connects earlier survival games with violent archetypes (soldiers or fighters), in Raft's single-player game players have to cover a broad function as harvester, crafter and fighter.

Whilst the lowering of violence alone does not make a cozy game, the focus on peaceful gathering and crafting, combined with aesthetic choices, amplifies the coziness of the game. In their book, Waszkiewicz mentioned “three tenets of cozy cooking”: abundance, safety and softness. As an aspect related to aesthetics, softness in Raft is expressed through objects, sounds and animations. Objects are depicted in bright colors and in a idealized manner: in a twist of Kristeva's reading, raw meats are depicted in a soft, sterile manner with the absence of blood despite still causing negative effects when consumed raw. Smoke, fire and sliding cooking pot cover animations and bubbling sounds signify the process of cooking, whilst the emptying of said pot into the bowl and the slurping animation and sound when eating – by moving the food-filled bowl into the player's screen – shows the appreciation and connection between the player character, player and the act of eating as a nourishing of the body and not just a simple fulfillment of needs. Abundance and safety – both ludic and emotional – mainly take part outside of the realm of food and cooking, but some are co-related with it. As I've mentioned, cooking is an integral part of the crafting-heavy mechanic of the game and so is the gathering of materials needed to create cooking and eating utensils. An expansion of this idea is having enough materials to make sure renewable resources – plants and animals – can also live and thrive on the player's raft, securing their need for water, food and fuel. This security of resources comes with security in combat. Ludic danger from enemies can be tweaked via game settings such as disabling Bruce the shark's activity or disabling loot drop upon character death, making sure that players have as much possibility to play the game at their own pace. When referring to Waszkiewicz and Bakun's earlier work “Towards the Aesthetics of Cozy Video Games” (2020), this ability to change the game's difficulty drifts between a coherent and dissonant coziness of the game: it could both be a place for relaxation through peaceful exploration or by having a safe-ish haven in the daily struggle of a – lest we forget – post-apocalyptic survival.

Although coziness, according to Waszkiewicz, involves the fulfillment of the player's emotional needs, very recent scholarship started reviewing the genre critically as not-yet-checked expressions of contemporary post-colonial (Murthy 2022), anthropocentric (Pinder 2024) and neoliberalist (Bódi 2024) ideas – in contrast to the 4X genres. Whilst many reference the economic exploitation of nature in the Animal Crossing series (Bódi, Pinder 2024), Raft's post-apocalyptic setting and story put an ironic twist in the capitalist logics of extraction: the extractionist logic of the game is allowed through the narrative of a civilizational downfall among class lines. This is reflected in the narrative of the game, where players can unfold the story of a selfish investor who causes discord, including starvation, towards the communities he visited. The ironic twist in the game is then caused by the intertwining of extractive and self-improvement game mechanics necessary to survive, follow and defeat said investor – in the attempt to defeat a failed capitalist, the players turn themselves into a 'successful' one by exploiting the remnants of failed (capitalist) societies, presented through a world where resources are plentiful and concurrence is absent, meaning that players need only to take care of their own character's well-being.

Whilst food in Raft only plays a tiny role in its ludonarrative setting, its strong interconnection with its crafting and resource-extraction-based gameplay meant that it reflects both the tenets of cozy games as established by Waszkiewicz and Bakun and also its critics, including Bódi and Pinder. Food, whilst providing moments of coziness for the player, is still based on the extractionist, self-centered idea of the game. This self-centeredness, however, would most likely change when playing Raft in an online manner, where multiple players have to share a raft. Whilst the multiplayer experience doesn't change the extractionist logic of the game, it allows for a setting where differing needs and wants give rise to either cooperation or conflict.

Conclusion

A global nuclear war or a local nuclear plant meltdown, earth as a habitable waterworld or an uninhabitable planet – no matter the setting, ludic imaginations of the apocalypse still include the very natural element of food and the foodways growing from survivors' need to eat. They both in turn reflect the change inflicted by these events and the traditions humans try to keep alive from their past. Parallel with this temporal reading, these games' geocultural settings and their resulting foods and foodways also speak about real-world cultures and themes and their concerns. And even when some of these games have highly contrasting approaches, some red lines and twists build connections between each other.

Ideas of safe consumption are shown through both post-apocalyptic irradiated produce and pre-apocalyptic highly preserved food, forcing survivors to adapt to the changed environment. This too could result in either rarity or overabundance, either forcing an idea of survival of the fittest or allowing unchecked exploitation of nature. It also asks us to consider our relationship to new edible food in which both exploration of what is unknown and its forced assimilation to old traditions are viable approaches. Returning to the idea of survivors – plural – the presence of other non-playable characters, humans or humanoids, also changes how post-apocalyptic societies define themselves: is food something that is purely necessary for life, served by emotionally capable robots, or are they part of a class-and gender-identity modeled after the world we've lost? Speaking of lost worlds, what else, then, did we lose in this change? Which food survives the catastrophe and how, and which doesn't? Which recipes – and with them, knowledges – are still known, and which are turned to ash and dust?

And expanding on Reddit user Neanderthal_In_Space's comment: would we, researchers and players, like to live in a banana-less future? At this anthropocentric time of writing, marked

among others by manmade extinctions, this fear is not completely bananas. After all, as Stang has already predicted in her text, aspects of foods and foodways present in post-apocalyptic game settings are based on and therefore reflect parts and problems of our real world. And whilst Stang's reading asks questions from more generalized modern scientific perspectives (posthumanism, irradiated food, cannibalism), reading these games through postcolonialist and intersectional lenses established by Bogost, Pinder, Bódi and other unmentioned authors helps ask questions from demographics not considered mainstream, further opening these games into discussions from multiple perspectives, especially those from social, cultural and political studies. It helps breaking the mold of the apocalypse as a provincial event that only affects a certain part of the earth into a world-encompassing tragedy and eventually realizing that the end of the world is the end of us all – the hundreds and thousands of cultures included in it. Ultimately, this overarching, multi-perspectivist look allows us to ask questions and further research the narratives of foods and foodways in the post-apocalypse.

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