Hope after the Bombs:

Apocalypse, Utopia, and Transcultural Imaginaries in Classic *Fallout* Mods from the Former Eastern Bloc

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The concept of apocalypse is a difficult and often misconstrued one. Just as the study of utopia is often associated with visions, dreams, or desires of a better time and place, the study of modern eschatology similarly favours visions that foretell a better tomorrow rather than doom and damn the future. To what extent then, are games about the apocalypse useful to the concept of utopia? How can games about the apocalypse encourage unique cultural contexts through which we may envision novel utopian forms? This paper explores the classic post nuclear role-playing games *Fallout 1* and *2* (Interplay Productions 1997; Black Isle Studios 1998) as unique transcultural experiences from the perspectives of players, designers, and modders from former Eastern Bloc countries. Utilizing Mikhail Epstein and Ellen E. Berry's (1999) transcultural interference framework, I argue that Interplay's *Fallout* games emphasize "an open system of symbolic alternatives to existing cultures and their established sign systems" (24) as demonstrated by classic *Fallout* mods such as *Fallout: Nevada* (Nevada Band Studio 2015), *Fallout: Sonora* (Nevada Band Studio 2020), and *Fallout: Resurrection* (Resurrection Team 2013). Each of these mods, produced by developers from the former Eastern Bloc, are exemplary transcultural negotiations that seek to transcend *Fallout*'s predominantly apocalyptic American cultural forms in order to produce utopic transcultural imaginaries.

Keywords: *Fallout*, mods, transculturalism, Eastern European post-apocalyptic aesthetics, utopia

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Introduction

The concept of apocalypse is a difficult and often misconstrued one. For future studies scholar Walter Warren Wagar (1982), the origins of the eschatological imaginings of apocalypse lie in the religious-historical tradition of prophetic vision and the desire for prophecy, suggesting that apocalypse should be as much about revelation as it should be about visions of a devastated future. As the study of utopia is often associated with visions, dreams, or desires of a better time and place, the study of modern eschatology similarly favours visions that foretell a better tomorrow rather than doom and damn the future. In 2010, sociologist Krishan Kumar famously claimed that utopia was a dead genre and pointed to what he saw as the erosion of enduring utopian imaginaries. Kumar argues that the desire for escapist fantasies has essentially replaced historically conscious science fiction and instead relies entirely on nostalgic longing over transformative desire. Kumar further asserts that utopia, as a concept in popular culture, has been utterly replaced by apocalyptic longing:

> Apocalyptic thought today seems singularly unhopeful of, or indifferent to, a new beginning. It proclaims endings without beginnings, apocalyptic struggles or global catastrophes without any real hope that we will survive these. Our latter-day apocalypticists wring their hands over the impending collapse, and are reluctant to speculate about what, if any, transformations

> might be wrung out of what H.G. Wells called "the cleansing disillusionment." (Kumar 2010, 561)

But scholars such as Wagar himself, along with Frank Kermode (1967), Russell Jacoby (2005), and Raymond Williams (2010), have long asserted that apocalypse and utopia are concepts that are carefully integrated into one another. In other words, despite the fact that apocalyptic and utopian narratives often present contradictory conceptions of society (i.e., catastrophic collapses versus ideal futures), apocalyptic and utopian thinking are far more symmetrical than most popular notions suggest. Scholars have explored these symmetries as future-oriented, teleological narratives that provide radical breaks from the present. For example, in his text, *The Sense of an Ending* (1967), literary critic Frank Kermode discusses the apocalyptic structure of narrative fictions and argues that both apocalyptic and utopian visions provide coherence to history by imposing narrative order (i.e., endings or conclusions) on a chaotic world. The historian Russell Jacoby argues in *Picture Imperfect: Utopian Thought for an Anti-Utopian Age* (2005) that modern apocalyptic and utopian visions have blurred, as they often coexist in utopian apocalypses or dystopian utopias. Thus, far from being opposites, apocalypse and utopia often intertwine with apocalyptic destruction clearing the ground for utopian rebirth and utopian fantasies revealing their own apocalyptic shadows. Even in some examples of apocalyptic fiction, where all inhabitants are doomed to perish, there are still fleeting utopian moments: "Even where the end-time is short and survival impossible, the terminal utopia of love and tenderness makes its appearance . . . The confrontation with death generates an intimacy of spirit among the last men and women that would otherwise never have emerged, an intimacy of wholeness and goodness unattainable in the everyday present" (Wagar 1982, 74). To suggest, as Kumar has, that utopian fiction has been dead for many decades and that apocalyptic fiction is completely unhopeful of life and transformative power would seem to be a little presumptuous, especially given the enduring power and popularity of apocalyptic narratives and experiences in video games.

To what extent then, are games about the apocalypse useful to the concept of utopia? How can games about the apocalypse encourage unique cultural contexts through which we may envision novel utopian forms? To these ends, this paper explores the classic post nuclear role-playing games *Fallout 1* and *2* (Interplay Productions 1997; Black Isle Studios 1998) as unique transcultural experiences from the perspectives of players, designers, and modders from the former Eastern Bloc. Utilizing Mikhail Epstein and Ellen E. Berry's (1999) transcultural interference framework, I argue that Interplay's *Fallout* games emphasize "an open system of symbolic alternatives to existing cultures and their established sign systems" (24) as demonstrated by classic *Fallout* mods such as *Fallout: Nevada* (Nevada Band Studio 2015), *Fallout: Sonora* (Nevada Band Studio 2020), and *Fallout: Resurrection* (Resurrection Team 2013). Each of these mods, produced by developers from the former Eastern Bloc, are exemplary transcultural negotiations that seek to transcend *Fallout*'s predominantly apocalyptic American cultural forms in order to produce utopic transcultural imaginaries.

Interplay's Post Nuclear Role Playing Games

In her highly influential essay "Nuclear Holocaust as Urban Renewal," Martha A. Bartter (1986) sets out to demonstrate how the concept of "rebuilding" is necessary towards the realization of utopia: "While we would deny actually wanting our major cities destroyed, and with them our landmarks and our history, we note the popularity of movies like *Godzilla*, which show the fragility of our urban culture" (148). Bartter argues that cities, in their religious and political histories, have been seen as dens of sin since time immemorial. Since the city is inherently bad, flawed, or "sinful," and cities are always products of advanced nation-states,

how is one to look outside of deterministic pessimism and dream of an ideal city or state? Bartter (1986) believes that apocalypse, especially the nuclear apocalypse as presented in fiction, may have some answers:

> Our attitude towards nuclear holocaust appears ambivalent. Early, serious fictional descriptions of atomic weapons used in war predicted their horrifying destructive properties, mostly aimed at civilian populations in urban centers; yet these fictions usually found ways to explain the survival of a select group. This group, purified through the sacrifice of a large percentage of its members, might eventually be able to build a new, infinitely better world. Thus, atomic war has traditionally been presented both as obvious disaster and as secret salvation. This covert message is usually overlooked in fiction, even by authors, but it powerfully influences our cultural subconscious. (148)

Bartter asks: by wiping the slate clean and making room for new, idealized imaginaries, are we not practicing some form of utopian thinking? Despite utopia's ambiguous relationship to the concept of violent upheaval, many utopians have always asserted that revolution and social change are intrinsic to utopian desire. In the post-apocalypse, a desire for social change is almost always present in the aspiration to not repeat the mistakes of the past, and so Bartter and Wagar seem to agree: hope for a better society rests on the survivors. Thus, while many apocalyptic narratives typically entertain the realization of so-called "perfect" utopian communities in the post-apocalyptic new world, some fictions use this form reflexively to show how a resultant utopia can devolve into dystopian totalitarianism.

Fallout: A Post Nuclear Role Playing Game was first released in 1997 to critical acclaim from the gaming press and role-playing game communities. In the game, you assume the role of the "Vault Dweller," a fully customizable avatar who lives in the gated, underground utopian community of Vault 13. The world of *Fallout* has been devastated by nuclear weapons, and for hundreds of years a small segment of humanity, immersed in the knowledge and culture of a bygone era and isolated from the radioactive dangers of the wasteland above, has lived in underground Vaults. The Vault dwellers live in the nostalgia of 1950s American pop culture and have their every need, from food and water to medical supplies, endlessly provided for. The Vault dwellers never leave the Vault and outsiders are never permitted inside, thus the people of Vault 13 live in perpetual, utopian innocence, until their water chip breaks down. The citizens of the Vault are directed by the leader of their community, the Overseer, to draw straws, and you, the player character, suffer the unfortunate fate of drawing the shortest straw. Thus, you have 150 days to venture outside of the Vault and into the wasteland to search for a replacement water chip that will provide fresh, clean water for the people of the Vault. If you do not complete your quest in 150 days, the water supply in Vault 13 will completely run out and the people of the Vault will die. As the player character, you encounter many new and bewildering locations and characters: people fearful of raiding parties huddle together in shanty towns; food and water in the wasteland are scarce, and the technology of the past is even scarcer. The game places a large emphasis on moral decision-making, as the player character is often faced with options and choices that lie in morally grey areas: will you kill an innocent to obtain supplies for your own survival? Will you expose Vault 13's secret location to morally dubious "water merchants" to buy more time for your quest? Will you doom another group of innocents by stealing their working water chip for the benefit of your Vault? The player character, exiled from the utopian Vault to the harsh realities of the wasteland, journeys from naiveté to experience. Upon finally locating a functioning water chip and defeating a serious mutant threat, your player character returns to the Vault, their home and utopia, and faces the Overseer in one of the most controversial and celebrated video game endings of all time: The camera pans from the Vault to the wasteland, and the player watches as their avatar drags their feet across the desert sands and into the barren horizon. Your player character, the hero of this

narrative, is forever banished from Vault 13, leaving the Overseer behind and the people of the Vault with working water. Vault 13 is an exclusionary utopia that forsakes those who have obtained any kind of experience or individuality. Despite your efforts, you receive no gratitude and the Vault resumes its utopian purpose of providing material abundance for its population. The Vault's utopia is enforced through a totalitarian non-violence that banishes those who seek to know the world beyond the confines of its cold, sterile walls. Only a single question remains unanswered in *Fallout*'s narrative: What ultimately happens to your player character?

Released precisely one year later, *Fallout 2: A Post Nuclear Role Playing Game* (1998) takes place 80 years after the ending of the original *Fallout*, and the player once again creates an avatar, this time taking on the mantle of the "Chosen One," a descendant of the Vault Dweller from the first *Fallout*. Through exploration and dialogue, the game reveals to the player that after their exile, the Vault Dweller founded a small village called Arroyo in the northern reaches of the wasteland. With the Vault Dweller long dead, the people of Arroyo have managed to carve out a living space that is safe from raiders and respectful of the arid land that provides for them. Unlike the people of Vault 13, the villagers of Arroyo live freely and with a spiritual reverence for the natural world and the wasteland surrounding them. Because of this, they are often referred to as "tribals" by other wasteland denizens. Nonetheless, the tribals interact and trade with neighbouring towns and more "developed" wasteland groups, until one day it is revealed that Arroyo cannot continue to sustain itself on the crops of the desiccated wasteland desert. In order to save the ecotopian village of Arroyo, the player must search for a fantastic device that can bring life to the wasteland: the Garden of Eden Creation Kit, or G.E.C.K. Much like the first game, the player character journeys out into the wasteland in search of a miraculous piece of technology, but it isn't until the end of their quest that the player discovers that the G.E.C.K. is in fact a much more practical piece of old-world technology than the villagers made it seem. One of *Fallout 2*'s designers, Chris Avellone (2002), explains that the G.E.C.K. is like a re-construction kit:

> It contains a fertilizer system, with a variety of food seeds, soil supplements, and chemicals that could fertilize arid wasteland into supporting farming. The G.E.C.K. is intended to be "disassembled" over the course of its use to help build communities (for example, the cold fusion power source is intended to be used for main city power production), and so on. Anything else people needed, they could simply consult the How To Books/Library of Congress/Encyclopedias in the G.E.C.K. holodisk library for more knowledge . . . The G.E.C.K. also contained some basic force field schematics as well as info on how to make adobe-type buildings from the landscape (or contain chemicals that can create "sand-crete" walls). (40)

Despite having some fantastic features, the G.E.C.K. is a device that promotes sustainability and provides aid to those who wish to learn how to live in harmony with the "natural" world of the harsh wasteland. Near the end of the game, the player character discovers that Vault 13 still exists, but its denizens have almost entirely died out as they suffered through more technological failures and attacks from various wasteland groups that lusted after their technology. Thus, the game's ending features a kind of reunification between the survivors of Vault 13 and the people of Arroyo as they rebuild and rejuvenate the land: "The refugees' technical expertise, combined with the villagers' survival skills, allowed the new settlement to grow and prosper. Two generations of the same bloodline were re-united, and their savior, the Chosen One, became Elder, presiding over the village in the years to come" (Black Isle Studios 1998). The future of Arroyo is left somewhat ambiguous, but in comparison to *Fallout*'s ending, the second game is far more hopeful and filled with a utopian spirit that is neither nostalgic nor totalitarian; the Vault Dweller/Chosen One seeks to reconnect with the land and establish a society outside of the failed utopian models of their predecessors. The narratives of

Fallout 1 and *2* both feature protagonists who venture forth from the utopian innocence of their cloistered communes and into newly established self-made utopias that are filled with the knowledge, experience, responsibility, and empathy necessary to maintain their dynamic and reciprocal natures. These village utopias are elusive enough that they are able to simultaneously provide a concrete vision of a critical and dynamic utopian society while still remaining an impossible or unachievable pastoral wish. Perhaps that is the paradox of utopian dreaming or a necessary characteristic of a "good" utopia: it endures as an idealistic vision found only in fiction and computer games.

The Eastern European Post-Apocalyptic Aesthetic

This brings us to the larger cultural discussion surrounding *Fallout 1* and *2* and a more particularistic, personal observation about their reception in Eastern European contexts. As a Romanian-Canadian, I was awestruck when I visited my cousins in Bucharest in 1999 and saw their *Fallout* save files on their family computers. Having played and enjoyed the games myself at home in Canada, I listened to them as they gleefully proclaimed that these were "the coolest games they'd ever played." *Fallout 1* and *2* were enormous hits in Eastern Europe and are widely considered cult classics for many contemporary Slavic, East European, and Eurasian game developers. From the acclaimed *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* series (GSC Game World 2007) developed and produced in Ukraine to the more obscure but well-regarded *ATOM RPG* (Atom Team 2018) developed multinationally in Ukraine, Poland, Latvia, and Cyprus, many gamers from the Eastern Bloc were undeniably influenced to enter game development due to the extraordinary influence of Interplay's classic *Fallout* games. As Jaroslav Švelch (2018) outlines in his essential text, *Gaming the Iron Curtain*, Czechoslovakia and many other Soviet states were not in political or economic positions to import video game consoles from abroad. Instead, they were eagerly making their national "microcomputers" a part of the emerging technoculture: "Microcomputers were in a power vacuum—their use was not regulated, and they were not considered ideological tools by the authorities or by citizens . . . They were left out of the state agenda and available for appropriation by prospective users. People seized the opportunity and made computers their own, bringing them into homes and computer clubs" (34). As user bases grew, so too did "existing support networks and extensive collections of pirated software" (Švelch 2018, 49) including a myriad number of British and American entertainment software.

In my recent discussions with Nikolaj Kazimirko-Kirillov (2024), a Russian YouTuber and content creator who goes by the name "Warlockracy" and covers role-playing games from Eastern Europe, he and I reminisced over the nature of computer gaming during the collapse of the Soviet Union as well as the murky revolutionary period from 1989 to 1992 and the post-revolutionary years that followed. During this time, gaming enthusiasts mostly purchased pirated software directly from specialist stores that often provided their own homebrewed translations of varying quality of games from the West. According to Nikolaj, what made *Fallout* so particularly influential were two specific factors: "[Firstly,] it was cheap: games were priced based on the amount of CD-ROMs in the package and the classic *Fallouts* were single CD games. [Secondly,] the craftsmanship. The classic *Fallouts* are simply well-made: The animations are fun. The dialogues quotable. The musical pieces have strong individual identities. The games still look good if you ignore the dated UI." But I suspect that there must have been deeper reasons for *Fallout*'s popularity, especially when one considers that the highly influential RPG *Baldur's Gate* (BioWare 1998) was released around the same time but seemingly had far less of a cultural impact on Eastern European gamers. This was perhaps due to *Fallout*'s visual style and comparative mechanical accessibility, as Nikolaj (2024) pointed out to me: "Eastern Slav audiences were RPGs-naive. We didn't have much of an RPG culture

back then. [Also,] early *Dungeons & Dragons* games can be obtuse with concepts like THAC0 and a huge list of spells you need to learn to achieve systems competence. There are no spells in *Fallout*. Instead of slowly casting a spell, you shoot them in the leg." In other words, *Fallout*'s gritty, realistic, post-apocalyptic aesthetic made the series far more approachable and attributable to Eastern European audiences than the elves and dwarves featured in *Baldur's Gate* and other fantasy role-playing games. As Nikolaj (2024) mentioned, "It's easier to get into a story when the NPCs look like real people and the inventory objects look like real items. It's easier to suspend your disbelief." The cultural impact that *Fallout 1* and *2* had on Eastern European gamers was indelible, as the aesthetics and mechanics combined with the unique window that these games provided into American culture was a winning recipe for success. That said, I would like to posit that part of *Fallout*'s acclaim and prominence was the fact that its post-apocalyptic setting was uncannily familiar to those who lived through the chaos and upheaval that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The notion of an "Eastern European post-apocalyptic aesthetic" is an unsettled and problematic one. In an article published on the gaming culture site *Kill Screen*, Bartłomiej Musajew (2016) argues against the idea of the "existence of a separate Eastern gaming culture" by asserting that the issue lies in Eastern European studios adhering to Western market standards. This is because they aim to sell their games not only in Western markets but also in regions where Western norms have been adopted, including Eastern Europe. To illustrate, he cites the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* series as being mistakenly perceived as "an expression of Eastern culture meant for the Western world" (Musajew 2016). *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.'s* otherworldly, nuclear-mystic portrayal of Chornobyl, the Zone of Alienation, and its mutated wildlife and anomalies all serve to indicate an "Eastern pessimism" (Rossignol 2011) that, according to Western game critics, is unique to the series' cultural character. Musajew (2016) rejects this notion and argues that in some ways, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*'s success comes from the formation of Eastern post-apocalyptic pessimism as a superficial theme and aesthetic that is culturally coded for marketing and sales purposes:

> *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* did not bring Chornobyl to the Western world as a part of Ukrainian culture and history. On the contrary, it *created* a Chornobyl based on narrative and aesthetic conventions that originated in the West, and this fictional Chornobyl conditions our perception of the real place. *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* is an example of Eastern Europe selling the fictional version of itself back to [both Westerners and Easterners].

To some extent, Musajew's points are useful for pushing back against the prescriptive essentialism of Eastern European games and culture, but at the same time, it is extremely difficult to ignore the historical realities wrought by the consequences of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the democratic revolutions that followed.

For many Eastern Bloc countries in the 1990s and early 2000s, the democratic revolutions resulted in uneasy transitions that led to immense social and political upheavals, with significant increases in crime and corruption alongside drastic social and cultural changes. The collapse of the Soviet Union destabilized economic systems and trade relations across Eastern Europe and utterly eroded the basic infrastructure of many countries in the Eastern Bloc. As Theodora Dragostinova (2009) explains, "There was no clear vision of the future once the elation of 'revolution' subsided. As in so many revolutions, it was much easier to tear down the old than to agree on, or even envision, the new." Indeed, one only needs to look at certain neighbourhoods and urban settlements from this particular time period in post-socialist countries and compare them to the visual style of the ruined cities and settlements in *Fallout 1* and *2* in order to begin to understand what made these particular games so immediately identifiable and relatable (Figure 1). Even *Fallout 1* and *2*'s dark humour and its pessimistic

treatment of the Vaults as utopic safe havens can be comparatively understood as a reflection of widespread post-socialist revolutionary tensions: "Despite the end of communism, the optimism and hope for a better life in 1989 gave way all too quickly to widespread cynicism and pervasive feelings of unfulfilled promises. Today, very few people in Eastern Europe talk about 'revolution,' or can muster the energy to celebrate government-sponsored festivities" (Dragostinova 2009). Thus, in addressing Musajew's concerns and criticisms, I believe the so-called "Eastern European post-apocalyptic aesthetic" has far less to do with the self-fetishization of apocalyptic pessimism and nuclear war for global markets and much more to do with the deep-seated angst and apprehension that many Eastern Europeans who lived through both the socialist and post-socialist revolutionary periods still feel to this day.

Figure 1. From Left to Right: *Fallout*'s Junktown, screenshot, & Alexander Gronsky, *Norilsk, Russia*, 2013, photograph, Polka Galerie, https://www.polkagalerie.com/en/alexander-gronsky-works-norilsk.htm.

In his analysis of *Frozen May* (2017), a film by the Hungarian filmmaker Péter Lichter, Bence Kránicz (2019) describes the themes and narrative of the film as attempting to portray "the post-socialist present [as] defined by nonhuman or post-human entities" (266). The trauma and uncertainty of Hungary's regime change from the authoritarian socialist past to the anarchic present is allegorized through the film's inhuman antagonists who "fundamentally change the economic possibilities of the country [and] deform the mental capabilities of the people" (Kránicz 2019, 267). Their cultural imaginations are reformed so that the only logical method of reaching catharsis is through apocalypse. Viewed through the lens of allegorical fiction and political commentary, Kránicz (2019) argues that the "theme of apocalypse sets up a world where old and known forms and gestures of humanity are lost [i.e. the socialist past], but new ways of human life have not developed yet, or never will [i.e. the post-socialist present/future]" (268). Thus, Kránicz (2019) posits that there are indeed distinctly Eastern European post-apocalyptic aesthetics that offer "new interpretations of the conditions" (257) of post-socialist states in the Eastern Bloc. But while many post-socialist films and novels provide linear narratives composed by authors with apocalyptic visions, there has been surprisingly little analysis directed towards the emanant history and culture of video game development in post-socialist Eastern Europe. What if games could further push this distinct apocalyptic theme and aesthetic into more playful, interpretive experiences? Perhaps these experiences may allow larger thematic explorations beyond the so-called "Eastern pessimism" of the post-socialist condition, and in doing so, they may transculturalize gaming experiences and game worlds in order to provide, new utopic imaginaries.

The Theory of Transculturalism

Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar. Ortiz defines transculturation as encompassing the diverse cultural changes and exchanges that occurred in Cuba due to its complex sociocultural transformations throughout history. He argues that without understanding these processes, one cannot fully grasp the evolution of Cuban society across various dimensions, including economic, legal, ethical, religious, artistic, linguistic, psychological, and more (Ortiz 1995, 113). Ortiz advocates for using transculturation as a lens for understanding culture by emphasizing the need for a deeper understanding of cultural formation. He rejects other frameworks, such as acculturation, which he sees as overly focused on the transition from one culture to another (Ortiz 1995, 114). Instead, Ortiz highlights Cuba's historical cultural evolution as being marked by such diversity and complexity that it surpasses all other historical phenomena in importance (Ortiz 1995, 115). Through his analysis of the Cuban tobacco and sugar industries, Ortiz shows how transculturalism emphasizes cultural production as a key to understanding colonization and economic globalization, underscoring the dynamic nature of culture and the "role of migration and media in shaping trans-regional and trans-national identities" (Abu-Er-Rub et al. 2019, xxv). Transculturalism can thus be understood as both "transgressive and translational," as it recognizes culture as multifaceted, interconnected, and essential to the ongoing development and definition of modern societies (Abu-Er-Rub et al. 2019, xxvi).

Building on Fernando Ortiz's concept of transculturation, German philosopher and cultural theorist Wolfgang Welsch (1999) was the first to explicitly use the terms "transculturality" and "transculturalism" to critique the shortcomings of globalization and nationalism as uniform cultural identities. Welsch (1999) argues that the old idea of cultures as homogenous and separate has been surpassed by the interconnectedness of cultures today: "Cultures today are extremely interconnected and entangled with each other. Lifestyles no longer end at the borders of national cultures, but go beyond these" (197). In this way, Welsch (1999) critiques multiculturalism and interculturalism as outdated concepts that create divisions and promote regressive biases that potentially lead to "cultural fundamentalism" by appealing to exclusive cultural identities (196). His warnings anticipate many of the cultural conflicts seen in recent decades which is why he advocates for transculturalism as a framework that fosters genuine cultural diversity. He notes that "We are cultural hybrids" (Welsch 1999, 198) and that today's writers are shaped by multiple cultural influences, from Russian to German, South American to Japanese literature, and beyond. This transcultural formation, Welsch asserts, is even more pronounced in the work of literary authors like V. S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie and will continue to grow in future generations. With the foundations laid by Ortiz and Welsch, we can better explore Epstein and Berry's model of transcultural interference and their notion of the transcultural imaginary.

Co-written between Russian cultural theorist Mikhail Epstein and American literary scholar Ellen E. Berry (1999), *Transcultural Experiments: Russian and American Models of Creative Communication* seeks to critique post-Cold War Eastern and Western cultural dichotomies by "dislodging our visions of culture as unitary and monolithic" (3). Influenced by Donna Haraway's (1991) notion of post-human collectivity, Berry and Epstein (1999) point to transcultural practices as capable of "offering strategies for the invention of positive alternatives to the legacies of cultural antagonism and domination that have pervaded both Western and second world cultures" (3). In this manner, Berry and Epstein (1999) construct their text as a series of essays and conversations, or "cultural interferences and estrangements" (9), that respond to one another for the explicit purpose of creating new transcultural dialogues that "allow us to investigate our own culture in order to distance ourselves from it and to

investigate a foreign culture in order to inscribe ourselves into it" (10). The broader purpose of these dialogues is to arrive at a new cultural formation that Berry and Epstein (1999) term "transcultural imaginaries":

> Within this framework, transcultural consciousness inhabits a border zone outside of yet equally accessible to all cultures. This is an imaginary space of exchange and excess to all others, encompassing yet exceeding the productions of any single culture, where many cultural modes of belonging converge, become entangled, and thereby produce ever new belongings. Thus we might say that we posit a global culture of a different sort—figured as a free multidimensional and non-totalitarian totality of cultural possibilities—culture as the totality of alternatives rooted in human freedom. (132)

Epstein and Berry's text forms an experimental work through which transculturalism serves as the bridging methodology between two seemingly disparate cultures. Furthermore, transcultural interference is an inherently dialogic process that allows one to transcend their given culture through active attempts at cultural blending and hybridization. While Epstein and Berry stage their interferences through a series of experimental dialogues and narratives, I believe that their model is well-suited to the creative, aesthetic, and dialogic possibilities offered by games and mods. The construction of American post-apocalyptic narratives through the cultural lens of Eastern European modders and developers provides space for unique transcultural imaginaries that engage, blend, and hybridize Eastern and Western notions of apocalypse. In this manner, classic *Fallout* mods from Eastern Europe are intrinsically transcultural experiences that seek to "build new identities in these zones of fuzziness" (Epstein and Berry 1999, 24) and take the next steps towards what Epstein and Berry (1999) call "the ongoing human quest for freedom, in this case liberation from the 'prison house of language' and the variety of artificial, self-imposed, and self-deified cultural identities" (24–25).

Eastern European *Fallout* Fan Mods

In his field-defining text, Erik Champion (2012) defines mods, or game modifications, as "artwork, skins, tools, total game transformations, new code, or, perhaps less clearly, games ported to other platforms by fans. They can also be homage games, which link back to earlier separate, but thematically-linked game worlds" (12). But why does one bother to design a mod? And why do players bother to play mods? These questions have far deeper implications based around both the history and culture of the game being modded and the modding community formed around the game. Part of the cultural value of mods are evidenced through the development of cultural dialogues centred on how mods reflect or critique social, political, or cultural issues (e.g., mods that include specific cultural/political satires or historical reinterpretations). Furthermore, mods that are maintained for years become significant cultural landmarks as evidenced by *Skyrim*'s (Bethesda Game Studios 2011) massive modding ecosystem. But Champion (2012) hones in on the fact that "Mods can extend the life of the original game, and inspire the professional game designers and owners of the original franchise" (13). For Champion, it is important to understand that video game modding is a form of cultural production that allows players and amateur developers to become co-creators. Mods reshape, expand, critique, and preserve games in ways that can carry substantial artistic, technical, and cultural value. The cultural impact of mods can be seen in how they reflect culturally-specific values and potentially influence commercial development. Indeed, many Eastern European developers who worked on *Fallout* mods have found jobs in the game industry or have gone on to form companies of their own. At the same time, several modders continue to work on classic *Fallout* total conversions (i.e., mods that convert the engine, sprites, mechanics, and world building of *Fallout 1* and *2* while creating wholly new characters, art

assets, music, narratives, and quests) well into the 2020s thereby lengthening the lifespan and impact of *Fallout 1* and *2* by over twenty years. Each of the games or mods discussed in this paper are free to download and featured on Nikolaj's "Warlockracy" YouTube channel which provides humorous and detailed overviews and reviews of the mods for English speaking audiences. Alexander Poshelyuzhin, a modder from Barnaul, Siberia, is almost solely responsible for two of the most well-known classic *Fallout* total conversions: *Fallout: Nevada* released in 2015 and *Fallout: Sonora* released in 2020. Both mods were originally released in Russian, and English translations have become more recently available.

Fallout: Nevada (Nevada Band Studio 2015) takes place 20 years before the events of *Fallout 1* and features an amnesiac protagonist who wakes up in the transitional settlement of Vault City, a large urban location featured in *Fallout 2*. Similar to the classic *Fallout*s, *Nevada* features quests and narratives that heavily involve interplay between the various wasteland factions while offering players difficult moral choices that influence the outcomes of both the conclusions of these quests and the game's ending. Fascinatingly however, is the fact that Poshelyuzhin has attempted to recreate the state of Nevada envisioned through the gritty aesthetic of *Fallout*'s post-apocalyptic landscape. Warlockracy (2022) points to Poshelyuzhin's detailed recreation of real-life locations like the town of Lovelock and the Hawthorne military base (11:01; 11:50) while also marveling over the extent of new sprites, graphics, and "talking heads" (classic *Fallout*'s digitized and animated clay models which are used for important NPCs). In one instance, *Nevada* has the player solve a quest for a mostly abandoned mining town in which they must hunt down what is essentially the worm-like monster from the American film *Tremors* (Underwood 1990). But in one of the most fascinating displays of transcultural interference and interpretation, *Fallout: Nevada* provides players with the ability to travel to Las Vegas and the Hoover Dam. For those versed in the lore and worldbuilding of the *Fallout* series, they will know that these locations are featured prominently in the official mainline game *Fallout: New Vegas* (Obsidian Entertainment 2010). But rather than paying homage to that title, *Nevada* attempts to envision Las Vegas as a realistic location based on the actual city located in Nevada. To that end, Poshelyuzhin utilizes real world casinos and landmarks, like the Hard Rock Café (Warlockracy 2022, 27:10), as in-game locations and cultural touchstones to interact with over the completely fictionalized locations in *New Vegas*. *Nevada* even utilizes American dollars as in-game currency as opposed to bottle caps (*Fallout*'s trademark currency since the first game). In this way, an individual playing *Fallout: Nevada* engages in a unique cultural construction: an American cultural landscape interpreted through a distinctly Russian cultural lens. This particular lens provides cultural context for the understandings and misunderstandings that Epstein and Berry's interference model suggests leads to transcultural dialogue.

For example, *Nevada*'s depiction of Salt Lake City features little to no Mormons despite Poshelyuzhin's plans to feature a unique Mormon district along with the famous Salt Lake Temple. Instead, "the devs ended up rejecting them because the faction they made ended up being inauthentic to real-life Mormonism" (Warlockracy 2022, 33:05), as Poshelyuzhin and company seemed to struggle with the cultural particularities and time required to implement them. In another example, *Nevada* features a quest and location "inspired by an audio recording of an Indigenous American fairy tale performed by a musician from Siberia" (Warlockracy 2022, 10:08–10:37). What Warlockracy uncovers though, is that this particular tale was written by Hyemeyohsts Storm, also known as Charles Storm, a Caucasian individual who fraudulently made a career for himself by claiming to be Cheyenne. Warlockracy rightly criticizes *Nevada*'s erroneous and problematic portrayal of Cheyenne culture but also notes that the team had brought in a guest writer, as they struggled to authentically depict Indigenous Americans despite their best efforts. None of the mainline *Fallout* games have ever really attempted to

visibly feature Indigenous cultures or characters in their narratives or setting, and so *Nevada*'s unsuccessful attempt can nonetheless be seen as a positive effort at transcultural navigation towards providing more holistic understandings and interactions with cultures that are not their own. *Nevada*'s narrative culminates at a point in which the player discovers that the pre-war Untied States government has been hiding deep beneath Vault City and has been utilizing cloning technology to maintain the population of the city as inhabitable bodies for the sake of despotic immortality. The actions of the United States government are presented as clearly immoral, as the President is depicted as an evil, gruesome, zombie-like figure preserved in a hydro-pod. The player is given the chance to dispose of the government and grant the clones of Vault City autonomy and freedom, which provides an unprecedented depth to Vault City that was absent from *Fallout 2*'s narrative. In this manner, Vault City is given new context and re-presented as a city that thrives in the wasteland despite the odds against it. Thus, the reason it thrives into such a prosperous location in *Fallout 2* is due to the actions of the player in this little-known fan mod, presenting a utopic vision for a city that is recontextualized from its original presentation.

Poshelyuzhin's narrative and design ambitions would find its apex in *Fallout: Sonora* (Nevada Band Studio 2020), a total conversion that features even more original sprites, talking heads, music tracks, and quests. This time, Poshelyuzhin specifically seeks to explore questions of ethnic and racial tension in the context of the Sonoran desert. As such, the game explores the post-apocalyptic landscape of Northern Mexico alongside the familiar American wasteland and features a large cast of Mexican and Spanish-speaking characters who in fact speak and use the language in-game. This is significant, as it is the first and thus far only *Fallout* game to feature Mexico as an integral part of its narrative and world building. That said, Warlockracy (2021) criticizes the game for "not doing enough with its Mexican cultural theming" (57:30), but in turn, the game depicts the Brotherhood of Steel, *Fallout*'s popularly depicted "good guy" faction, known for its militaristic nature, advanced technology, and strict beliefs about the use of technology in post-apocalyptic society, as colonizers. In *Sonora*, "the Brotherhood of Steel use their technological superiority and knowledge of the old world to pursue the agenda of cynical predatory imperialism" (Warlockracy 2021, 1:06:01) and enact a grand conspiracy that is unfurled throughout the game's narrative. Led by a paladin who is very deliberately named Ulysses S. Grant, the Brotherhood attempt to colonize the Sonoran desert and put a stop to both the Mexican military and the Desert Rangers (a pre-war paramilitary group dedicated to law and order in the post-apocalyptic world). However, because of the game's focus on player choice and consequence, one can ally with the Brotherhood to see this imperialist quest to its end only to be confronted with what can be understood as the "bad ending." And while the player is unable to ally with the Mexican army, the ending in which the player allies with the Desert Rangers permits a more utopian ideal to flourish in which there is mutual agreement and protection between the factions of the Sonoran desert. Again, through a broader transcultural lens, when one plays *Fallout: Sonora*, one actively engages in a kind of cultural dialogue between the United States and Mexico, as players are presented with complex ideas that reflect the themes of imperialism, colonialism, and sociocultural representation through a distinctly Russian cultural lens.

Released in 2013 and translated into English in 2016, *Fallout: Resurrection* (Resurrection Team 2013) is a total conversion mod from the Czech Republic that took ten years to make. Taking place largely in New Mexico and chronologically placed between the events of *Fallout 1* and *2*, the game begins in the grand RPG tradition of featuring an amnesiac hero who wakes up in a cave and possesses a strange talisman. The game's narrative revolves around a cult of ghouls, *Fallout*'s mutated humanoids who have been exposed to extreme levels of radiation over time. Instead of dying from radiation poisoning, ghouls undergo a transformation that

grants them near-immortality and a drastically slowed aging process at the cost of severe physical disfigurement. However, *Resurrection*'s main conceit is that the ghouls of New Mexico discover a special machine in an abandoned underground Vault that allows them to be transfigured into "normal" looking humans. The player character discovers that they are in fact one of the individuals who have been successfully transformed or "resurrected." The trade-off is that if a ghoul is transformed into a healthy human, they suffer from a form of accelerated aging and will die after a year or so. The game grapples with questions of discrimination, as ghouls in the universe of *Fallout* are largely seen as monstrous or less than human, and so *Resurrection*'s Cult of Rebirth seeks to rectify this issue by waging rebellion against humankind in order to establish rights and freedoms for ghouls. As is tradition in *Fallout* games, the player is given the choice to rejoin the cult or destroy it by allying with the Brotherhood of Steel, but the choice is morally grey, as the ghouls are in fact kidnapping humans and sacrificing them in order to power their rebirth machine. As Warlockracy (2021) puts it: the player is given the choice to side with either "genocidal fascists or deluded radioactive cannibals" (31:08). Nonetheless, in pursuing the ending that involves rejoining the cult, the player character, alongside their ghoul compatriots, manages to push the Brotherhood of Steel back and take the city of Albuquerque as a home base of operations. The player character perishes in the battle, and the game's final ending slides indicate that the cult has overtaken New Mexico and now awaits confrontation with the human factions that lie westward. While it is difficult to classify *Fallout: Resurrection*'s vision as utopian, it is still recognizable as a significant transcultural negotiation of the ethnic and social tensions surrounding Czechoslovakia's ultimately peaceful dissolution into the Czech Republic and Slovakia. As such, the game presents a fantastic vision of an American post-apocalyptic conflict marred by racism and discrimination and mediated through a Czech cultural context.

Conclusion

The games discussed in this paper are a small sample of the many *Fallout* mods that have been officially released and are still in development in Eastern Europe. In recent years, classic *Fallout* mods have also been developed and released in other countries outside of the Eastern Bloc with one of the most notable ones coming from Canada. *The Sum*, or *Nous Aurons* (GRATUIT PRODUIT 2019), is a total conversion mod developed by Québécois artist Hugo Nadeau and funded by the Canada Art Council and the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec, making it the first state-funded *Fallout* mod in the world. Even more significant is the fact that the explicit purpose of *The Sum* is to explore anarchist cultures and to bring to life an anarchist utopia in the post-apocalyptic wasteland. Even *Fallout: Sonora* received a significant expansion titled *Dayglow* (Nevada Band Studio 2023) that focuses on events and quests in post-apocalyptic San Diego. Epstein and Berry's concepts of transcultural interference and the transcultural imaginary provide a useful framework for understanding the freedom that modders and developers possess in their ability to explore themes, narratives, cultures, and mechanics that exist outside the scope of officially sanctioned releases. Indeed, if Epstein and Berry suggest that transculturalism is a process of negotiation towards the realization of diverse cultural freedom, then mods are in many ways the perfect medium to stage such interferences and dialogues. By situating modding as a transcultural practice, mods become capable of transcending individual expression and becoming sites of cross-cultural negotiation, reinvention, and recontextualization. This has broader value in understanding how culture itself is hybridized, as the mods discussed in this paper fuse disparate aesthetic, cultural, and narrative elements across national and genre boundaries. Epstein and Berry's transcultural framework enables us to analyze mods as spaces where multiple cultural logics coexist, clash, and blend in ways that official, commercially constrained games cannot or do not permit. As such, modders and players become cultural agents by actively reinterpreting dominant media

forms rather than passively consuming them. Furthermore, Epstein and Berry's transcultural concepts add theoretical depth to game studies by offering a framework to study non-Western, non-commercial, or hybrid forms of game expression by moving beyond binaries of East/West, producer/consumer, or centre/periphery in order to explore fluid, interstitial cultural spaces. The mods discussed in this paper explicitly use American settings and American cultures for modders and players to negotiate their own utopic reflections over the chaos and corruption that still persists and affects their own particular sociopolitical contexts. Defeating the imperialistic Brotherhood of Steel in order to establish peace and cultural diversity in the wasteland can be read as a utopian hope for peace and stability in one's own society, and the transcultural negotiation of Eastern and Western cultural ideals regarding what this peace exactly entails remains a constant dialogue that has yet to achieve actualization.

In the final chapter of his text, Wagar contemplates the use of apocalyptic fiction in the real world: "The world is always in a process of coming to an end . . . and one of the most important roles in the world today, is the role of a prophet alerting people to the coming crisis" (Wagar 1982, 194–195). The problem that Wagar posits is that people are unable to heed these warnings because they are comfortable with the world-as-it-is. But just as the world is always in a process of ending, the modern world order is always in a process of falling apart or "destructuring itself from within" (Wagar 1982, 195). This is not to suggest that we are heading towards oblivion but instead that civilization, whether we like it or not, will fall and be replaced by something new. In Wagar's view, the subtext of an apocalyptic vision must be reviewed carefully; apocalyptic works that are hopeful of future transformation suggest that there will always be survivors, one way or another, that will inherit "a new heaven and earth" as the Judeo-Christian biblical Book of Revelation predicts. The apocalypse is always meant to entail a radically different order of "things that may or may not be good" but that will always be "absolutely distinct from the old order of things now sentenced to destruction" (Wagar 1982, 196). Perhaps waiting to emerge after the apocalypse is a new utopian epoch. If we create and envision utopias in response to our fear of death and pain and suffering, then we also envision apocalypses as both a release from our fears and as possible roads towards utopia. Just as the term "utopia" may not always indicate a truly "good place," the term "apocalypse" should not always indicate a realm of human suffering and extinction. As long as humanity is capable of dreaming of utopia, they will always dream of apocalypse.

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