

Post-apocalyptic Play

Representations of the End of the City in Video Games

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Introduction

This chapter considers, in part, the relationship between digital video games set in post-apocalyptic cities, and the longer history of popular imaginaries of the apocalypse – for example, in art, film, and literature. Through the theme of catastrophe and the apocalypse, the chapter also sketches a conceptual approach to the critique of video games that emphasises the importance of counter or hypothetical histories within the context of Frankfurt School theorist Walter Benjamin's work on the concept of progress, historical linearity, and the allegorical positioning of post-apocalyptic worlds in video games as sites of popular critical encounters with the ruins of cities that are recognisable to the audience. In this chapter, the video game series *Fallout* will come under particular scrutiny, linking to imaginaries of apocalypse through four key tropes that represent popular apocalyptic imaginaries (discussed in the following section).

The *Fallout* series is known for experimental historical timelines, re-imagining the contemporary present through narratives or historical events that challenge and diverge from the worlds or possibilities that we know. The eponymous 'fallout' is a citation of popular visions of nuclear apocalypse, familiar from science fiction films and novels – *Fallout 3* in particular (which will be the key case of this chapter), evokes the sorts of landscapes that audiences would recognise from the representations of the end of the world in alien invasion films from the 1950s onward, or literature about survival in a post-apocalyptic wasteland.

Fallout 3 (Bethesda Softworks, 2008) is an open world action/role playing game, with first person shooter elements, played in either first- or third-person view. *Fallout 3* disrupts historical discourse by reproducing the retro-futuristic aesthetics of an indulgent 1950s nuclear era projected into an alternative timeline and hypothetical future (Rowan, 2012). In its alternative historical format, *Fallout 3* is an intentionally political game that unambiguously (if somewhat nostalgically) depicts the apocalyptic ruins of capitalism and the end of American civilisation.

Fallout 3 has been extensively written about within the field of game studies, as it presents a particularly complex playground by manipulating the post-apocalyptic setting to set the player up as a hero making moral choices, with cascading effects on future gameplay. *Fallout 3* is also one of the few games to receive critical attention from disciplines such as history, cultural and film studies, and sociology, largely because of the way that it engages historical narratives, nostalgia, and retro aesthetics (see Kemmer, 2014; Knoblauch, 2013). As William Knoblauch (2013) describes in his analysis of games and nuclear anxiety, *Fallout 3* presents a “first person apocalypse,” bound up with the history of nuclear catastrophe, “combining Cold War kitsch with futuristic technology,” an “apocalypse born of a distant, but culturally familiar, 1950’s era” (p. 134), marking “the return of atomic explosions” (ibid., p. 136) to popular culture. The *Fallout* series (1997-present) engages this familiar post-apocalyptic imaginary of the end of the world, representing the nuclear apocalypse that has reduced the *Fallout* universe to a bleak and gritty wasteland populated with ruins.

Ruins – and associated rubble and wastelands – are key signifiers of the apocalypse through which the catastrophic end of civilisation can be immediately and tangibly expressed (Hell & Schönle, 2008, p. 7). This chapter begins from a prior understanding of contemporary ruination – ruins of a recent past, or the present reimagined in ruins – as a trope deployed as a shortcut to a historical framing of rise and fall, civilisation collapse, and urban

(and, by implication, societal) decay. As communicative and symbolic tropes, contemporary ruins have been read as indicators of the anxious history of the post 9/11 era, even as an ontological imperative, reaching back to anxieties of hyper-technological Cold War annihilation – or worse (as often portrayed in post-apocalyptic sci-fi), survival (Hell & Schönle, 2008, pp. 4-5). The symbolism is enduring, linking to the ruins of the First and Second World Wars, recorded through film and photography, and written into literature (see, for example, WG Sebald's *Air War and Literature* (2003)). Even these modern ruins are interpreted through an even longer imagination of ruin, citing the destruction and abandonment of Rome, Carthage, or Nineveh to express catastrophic mass destruction that leaves behind a field of ruins (Hell & Schönle, 2008, pp. 172-175). The fundamental function in such citation of the ruin – from the romantic sublime to contemporary pop dystopia – is to express (symbolically, metaphorically, allegorically) a degree of destruction and decay that is extreme and evocative. For example, in *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Walter Benjamin's "Angel of History" looks out across an accumulating wreckage, the catastrophic debris of history (Benjamin, 2003, p. 392), a figure which relies on the image of the ruin to communicate the horror of Benjamin's own destructive present, in exile in Paris in the early years of the Second World War. As a response to Paul Klee's oil transfer drawing *Angelus Novus* (which Benjamin purchased in 1921), the Angel is a melancholy figure with a wild gaze, whose rubble-pile offers a critique of historical progress, amassing ruin upon ruin, so fragmented that no whole can be reassembled. Such images of ruination work upon the viewer as shortcuts to meaning; basic tropes or memes that communicate complex and historically contingent themes of flux, endings, catastrophe, and the apocalyptic.

Whether an image of a material ruin (like the ruins of war or post-industrialisation) or a representation of imagined destruction and decay, ruins are always more than the literal wreck of a piece of architecture, or discarded remnant. A table may just be a table. A ruin is

never just a ruin – and a ruined city is more than an inert pile of bricks or stone. These visions are updated for every era (for example, the emergence of the nuclear threat as an apocalyptic vision represented in mushroom clouds, poisoned wastes and charred ruins). Although a simple fragment can relay a complex allegorical formation (as in Benjamin's Angel), images of ruin nevertheless rely heavily on clichéd forms and aesthetics handed down from eschatological imaginings as well as historic happenings. Ruins – and especially ruined cities – serve as some of the most dominant representations of catastrophe and apocalypse, the remnants that survive the end of the world.

The use of recognisable ruin-tropes refers back to the grand narratives of history, in which images of wrecked castles and crumbling temples function as linguistic and figurative tools, telling of the fall of great civilisations by deploying fragments and remnants to remind of eternity and transience. 'Tropes' tend to refer to metaphorical language, or the use of one thing to stand in for or symbolise another, and ruins are particularly pertinent to this interpretation of the trope. As Walter Benjamin (2008) expresses, ruination is itself a symbolic medium – writing of his study of German Romantic theatre (or *Trauerspiel*), he states "in the spirit of allegory it is conceived from the outset as a ruin, a fragment" (p. 235). Elsewhere, Benjamin links the image of the ruin to catastrophe, progress, and history, including the allegorical formation of fragments as signifiers of decay: "[i]n the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise, history does not assume the form of the process of eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay. Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things" (pp. 177-178). Benjamin here links the character of historical thought that assembles critique from fragmentary parts with the nature of the material ruin, engaging decay and destruction, symbolically, to express history as a process of decline. In the discussion of the *Trauerspiel*, Benjamin argues for the relevance of the study, suggesting that although German Romantic theatre may appear shallow, the way

that it engages with history through ruins reveals its critical capacity, despite its popular form.

For Benjamin, what is most problematic about historical progress is its link to a perceived future void, as if historical progress must focus on occupying that void, rather than an understanding of history as a consummate interrelation of different temporalities and eras. The relationship between Benjamin's work on the construction of history, and post-apocalyptic ruins in games is made evident in his two different conceptions of catastrophe: one, the shattering revolutionary fragmentation that blasts events from their contexts and attempts to destroy the dominant order altogether; the other an insistence on perpetual progress that generates catastrophic ruination, and a constant reconfiguration of the world that does not bring about any meaningful – lasting, political – change (see Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, 2003). In *Fallout 3* the events of history are blasted into fractured ruins, the dominant order has decayed, and catastrophe characterises the entire universe. Further, the game engages multiple temporalities by presenting the ruins of a long-vanished world, ruins that are simultaneously a citation of our own historical reality, but which also cite the imagined history of alternative world in which the game is set. This meshing of eras – past, present, and future time – reflects the sort of fractured and non-linear history that Benjamin deemed necessary to resist the very processes that bring such catastrophic ruin. In *Fallout 3* the 3D post-apocalypse uses the medium of the ruin to challenge traditional conceptions of historical temporality and linearity (despite also reinforcing notions of linear historical progress through narratives of rise and fall). This challenging of history is particularly effective in games like *Fallout 3*, with hypothetical or counterfactual scenarios set in imagined futures or alternative presents, where the ruined cities are recognisably contemporary sites, and where the story, gameworld, action and other

aspects present some sort of commentary on the nature of history by inverting or challenging the contemporary present.

This chapter will argue that despite being apparently non-historical games post-apocalyptic video games can be critically read in relation to historical discourses and imaginaries, which tend to take the form of visions of ruination. In some cases, the use of ruins and implied master narratives and tropes tends to reinforce notions of historical progress and development, but as counterfactual histories (Apperley, 2013, p. 191) such games also re-contextualise historical thinking by imagining the world in ruins. As Dora Apel (2015) describes when reflecting on games including *Fallout 3*, and the idea of a modern ruin imaginary “[s]uch fantasized scenarios extend the ruin imaginary into fresh media spheres and encourage the participation of a new generation in exploring the projected sensual spaces of ruination while aesthetically mediating the anxiety of decline” (p. 65).

Imagining and Representing Ruins

The representational capacities of games are (perhaps surprisingly) much-contested within the field of game studies, where it is commonplace to dismiss the visual and symbolic content of games (sometimes even including narratives and characters) as incidental to the code, hardware and software, and ‘choice architecture’ that distinguish digital and computational media from more traditional media forms. There is some sense to this when reflecting on early titles that imagine an apocalyptic vision of the end of the world – for example, one of the first games set in a post-apocalyptic world, *Psychic City* (Hot-B, 1984), was a PC game with simplistic and flat graphics, representing the ruins of New York as a distant and blocky background. Though advanced for its time (it was also one of the earliest games to use cutscenes, for example), the representational content was highly abstract, little more than vectors and shading, in parts top-down or merely text-based. For such early games, it was

broadly true to claim that their meaning content wasn't primarily visual, but rested in the interaction between player and code, through the computer interface. Contemporarily, however, games exploit an array of multimedia functions, and as such have become sophisticated in their symbolic representations (visual and otherwise). As a consequence of ever-improving graphics and hardware capabilities, digital video games increasingly realistically represent places in the world – archetypal cities, domestic spaces like homes and hospitals, streets, forests, or roadways that are no longer pixelated and distant suggestions, but clearly recognisable worlds and situations.

In the context of game studies and related fields, the representational qualities of games – including post-apocalyptic games – are typically under-researched and dismissed as shallow or relatively meaningless (Fraser, 2016). To resist this, the symbolic weight of ruination in post-apocalyptic games is a particularly evocative site for analysis, due to the history of images of the apocalypse, and the meaning production facilitated by the figure of the ruin.

In considering representation and video games, it is important to consider play, particularly in conjunction with ruins. As play scholar Miguel Sicart (2016) says of Brian Sutton-Smith's understanding of play: it's a human mode of activity that is "appropriative, expressive, personal, and autotelic", that is, it's creative but also purposeful; it takes on existing meanings and structures and reinvents them (p. 28). Play is an end in itself, and it is this playful aspect of video games that can distinguish them from other media (for example, from film or television, or from non-game-oriented software). Sicart (2016) goes on: "play is always in precarious balance between creation and destruction – play has a compulsion for disorder that is closely related to its capacity to create order. To play is to keep a balance between the sublime creation of order and pleasurable destruction" (ibid.). Similarly, ruins – real or imagined – *do* something in their ambiguous signification, disintegration, and

modularity: they balance between the sublime and the disordered. The affinity between games, play, and ruins manifests in this mediation between creation and ruination, and the moment a post-apocalyptic ruin is placed in a digital gaming environment, it begins to do important work in setting the scene for play, deploying imaginaries, and presenting a space of pleasurable destruction.

Ruined cities frequently feature in video games, whether as aesthetic tropes, incidental scenery, symbolic representations, or – increasingly – as fully-furnished spaces in which the key action of the game is made possible. It has also become much more common for games to imagine the future ruin of existing cities – *Hellgate: London*, the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R* series (Pripyat and Chernobyl), *The Last of Us* (Boston and Pittsburgh), *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Denver), and *Fallout 4* (Boston) are all key examples. The settings, especially the imagined endings of places that exist in the player's present, are often situated within a hypothetical future society, and the ruinous worlds signify and reproduce a particular kind of contemporary historical imagining that is linked to the visioning of the apocalypse. The deployment of ruined cities is often atmospheric, and the representations – in the form of images, but also 3D models – of urban ruin rely on a shared library of ruin tropes, but also collective fears, to construct post-apocalyptic worlds for players to explore. For example, *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games, 2017) is set in a post-apocalyptic world long after the collapse of a hyper-technological society; the gameplay includes the remnants of ancient architecture that is recognisable as that of our own world. In *The Last Of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013) functional US cities are depicted as empty and abandoned following a disease outbreak, replicating existing imaginaries of urban decay and exploration through an aesthetic that also evokes the image of known American cities ruined and returning to nature in the 2007 film, *I Am Legend*. These examples reflect a notable tendency, in games that

represent real-world sites that we might know, to be preoccupied with catastrophe and apocalypse.

Catastrophe here stands as a marker for the collapse of a multitude of social and cultural norms, the end of the march of history, the cessation of the everyday. Strange, then, that (as with many popular imaginings of the apocalypse) these games set at the end of the world largely take place *after* the apocalypse has happened, within what James Berger (1999) calls a “paradoxical, oxymoronic character of post-apocalyptic discourse” (p. xv), an accepted narrative of events that take place after a world-shattering cataclysm seen to end the world as we know it – and yet the world goes on. As Berger (1999) states, “nearly every apocalyptic text presents the same paradox. The end is never the end.” (p. 5). In post-apocalyptic games the hero survives to find out what happens after an event that dramatically ruptures the usual course of the world (in most games, the hero is also the avatar used by the player to navigate and play the game). History continues to be ‘made’, and arch narratives of progress and transience, saviour and rescue dominate in violent and chaotic scenarios – a particularly American tendency in which “the insistent denial of the traumatic events of our history has brought about the need for these repeated apocalyptic purgings, both real and imaginary,” tales of conflict and bad guys, darkness and doom, ending (or, actually, starting) with Armageddon (ibid., p. 135). At the same time – also in common with other popular representations of life after the world as we know it has ended – video game worlds are strewn with banal artefacts, and the gameplay (though following a typical narrative of a hero saving the world) also demands hours of routine, even ordinary, life. In *Fallout 3* this involves trekking through the dust to find supplies, scavenging everyday objects from scattered refuse, or seeking out an unexpectedly habitable hideout to sleep in amongst the abject ruin of civilisation.

Writing on historical video games, Jeremiah McCall (2011) notes that the postmodern historical consciousness has been focused on everyday people, with video games no exception to this trend. For McCall, this gives games the potential to promote knowledge and understanding about the world around us. As history (and social and cultural studies) have moved to the daily lives of citizens, so too have end of the world narratives moved from tales of kings and empires, to survival amongst familiar ruins – a pronounced trend in many video games. The use of first- and third-person games to explore what had previously been restricted to science fiction films, comic books, and literature, can add to these tales about survival in the ruins of places that we know, torn between creativity and destruction by the mechanism of play, using game elements to present an individually-driven examination of the ruins of civilisation, with key conflict coming from zombies, vampires, aliens and robots or cyborgs (sharing many similarities with post-apocalyptic worlds in other media). Not quite the messianic day of reckoning or judgement found in religious and eschatological visions of the end of the world, the popular everyday apocalypse presents a banal, dust and bones image of the end of the world in which iconic cities fall to ruin, their identifiable landmarks collapsed, with most people dead or absent. This is a popular imaginary with a long heritage that exploits the complex nature of ruins themselves, wherein the ruined city always signifies more than its own demise, whether the tragedy of being on the wrong end of history, or the possibility for all things to collapse in ruin.

The imaginaries of the post-apocalypse that appear and reappear in such games can be studied via an archaeological analysis of the history of representations of ruination, in line with Frederic Jameson's *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005), which considers social and cultural imaginaries which operate discursively to foreground visual regularity and repetition in textual media (in Jameson's case, through science fiction narrative, utopian thinking, imagined worlds and futures, or genres, for example). Apel (2015) further relates Jameson's

critical work in terms of hypothetical ruins and the imaginary, noting that “the global ruin imaginary may be understood as a response to global zombification” (p. 152) amidst the near impossibility of imagining a coherent alternative to capitalism as a widespread economic and political system, thus linking the ruin imaginary – even in the most fantastical mode of zombies and horror – to a politics in imagining an alternative (albeit post-apocalyptic) society through ruins.

Another contemporary imaginary that appears in popular post-apocalyptic games is the “vertical sublime” of the ruins of the World Trade Centre (Huysen, 2003, p. 160), what Terry Smith (2006) terms an architecture of spectacle that has drastically redeveloped in a post 9/11 context and bears all the modern anxieties of urban terrorism, economic catastrophe, and social alienation, with a visual manifestation that moves away from visions of war-torn Europe, towards scenes of towering skyscrapers, collapsing to nothing. The vertical sublime – which appears in games like *The Last of Us* as well as *Fallout 3* – is also linked to the end of classical modernist architecture and a rupture in experience which defines a post 9/11 era (Huysen, 2003, p. 160). This spectacularisation of recognisably contemporary ruin has a fascination with the catastrophic at its heart, an apocalyptic rhetoric and social anxiety born “of human fantasy and pleasure cast within the shadow of eternal doom” (Lewis, 2012, p. ix). Video games that represent the apocalypse through ruins manifest a long tradition of sublime ruination, but with modern settings and anxieties.

In its earliest forms, this urban-focused definition of the sublime ruin, unlike the romantic ruins of abbeys or castles, also encompasses what Walter Benjamin (1999) knew of catastrophic currents of global change, witnessed in his lifetime: “A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body” (p. 732). For

Benjamin, his life influenced by two great wars, pondering ruination brought forth the ruin and catastrophe of modernity – and the destructive, not constructive, gaze of a fractured spectator, like that of Apel, Lewis, or Jameson’s anxious modern subject. The frame of the spectacular modern ruin relays, in its closer relation to a present or future moment in time, a political charge of shock that transforms the base form of clichéd ruin and decay into a vital critique of presumed historical progress, and the destructive capacities of modern societies.

Fallout 3

Fallout 3 is one of the most successful titles of the *Fallout* franchise, (though it is not the most recent - *Fallout 4* was released in 2015, with a number of spin-off games since), a post-apocalyptic series set in an alternative imaginary of the future in which several key technological developments never take place (leaving the *Fallout* universe perpetually playing out a retro past, stranded in the early 1950s). *Fallout 3* takes place after the hypothetical Sino-American war between China and the USA, a conflict that has resulted in a nuclear exchange which has obliterated major American cities, leaving little more than a radioactive landscape of desolation and ruin. The game is largely set in a broken-down post-apocalyptic world marred by chaos and catastrophe, a world that is consciously cited in-game as a kind of fulfilment of the dreams of 1950s capitalism, “yesterday’s world of tomorrow” (Rowan, 2012), structuring a meta-level experience of historical disintegration throughout (mostly taking place in and around the “Capital Wasteland” of Washington D.C.).

Developed by team at Bethesda Studios (who acquired the rights from the previous developer Black Isle Studios), the play of *Fallout 3* mostly takes place in the retro-futuristic ruins of Washington D.C., where the abandoned suburbs, towns, and city centre are open for exploration. In an open world game such as this, the gameplay involves seeking out encounters in the open space – usually by travelling between locations which are more

enclosed than the rest of the drab and grey open world. A major proportion of the gameplay in *Fallout 3* consists of travelling the ruins of Washington D.C., scavenging the wasteland around the Washington Monument and National Mall, or looking out across the ruins of nearby towns. As an open world game, progression from one stage to the next isn't clearly linked to following a specific path, but instead is focused on meandering explorations of empty and ruined zones, in between a few settlements that have sprung up amongst the wasteland – perhaps a citation of films like *Mad Max* (1979) or *Waterworld* (1995). In *Fallout 3*, exploration means wandering a city and encountering rubble-filled streets, collapsing architecture and wrecked landmarks, which are often designed to have some significance to the overarching narrative of the game. *Fallout 3* presents a kind of curated space of exhibition amidst the turmoil – quests and side quests, for example, demand the exploration of ruined monuments, many of which are discernible as particular landmarks that exist in the 'real' D.C., identified by plaques posted in front of the buildings, or inside the doorways. This includes references to sites like the Air and Space Museum, or the National Archives, looted and decaying but still full of labelled exhibits that tell the alter-history of the city of Washington in the *Fallout* universe.

The representation of ruins in *Fallout 3* extends beyond distant visual spectacles to encompass close up details of a multitude of remnants and places, encounters with mutants and others who have also managed to survive in the post-apocalyptic world, and storylines linked to the alternative histories of different sites. As a citation of imaginaries of the apocalypse, the ruins in *Fallout 3* offer a kind of counter-spectacle of urban modernity – a conscious development decision to render the National Mall and the Capitol, and the modernist D.C. Metro stations, in a state of decay and dereliction, as a kind of reversal of the usual state of Washington as the capital city of the USA (usually crowded with tourists, government workers, and press). This active reversal (or subversion) can be linked to Walter

Benjamin's own dialectics of reversal, manifested in urban encounters that sought the unusual, hidden, decaying, and disordered parts of the city (Calderbank, 2003).

Rather than revisit familiar representations of the apocalypse that have been cited elsewhere in this chapter (and in this volume), and working from ideas around reversal and imaginaries of post-apocalyptic worlds, the following four examples describe key apocalyptic tropes as they appear in *Fallout 3*. In this context, as described above, tropes are modular, often taking the form of images that refer to widely circulated ideas or concepts using familiar signs and signifiers (in the sense of Barthes' semiotics, but also in the sense of science fiction films, comic books, and repeated popular culture and conceptual formations, such as the end of the city (Lewis, 2012)). Though these present a somewhat limited initial assessment of the way in which post-apocalyptic ruins appear in games, they demonstrate a shared notion of the modern, nuclear apocalypse, and the significance of the figure of the ruin (in many forms and guises) to the expression of the post-apocalyptic, especially in popular culture.

Fall – this is a classical historical framing, citing visions of the ruins of antiquity, sublime aesthetics, and romantic discourses of decay. The trope of the fall replicates prior 'end of civilisation' discourses (many of them religious in origin), in which society suddenly ends, leaving little more than ruins to show it ever existed. This vision is often the source of critique for post-apocalyptic and ruin-centric narratives, dismissed as a melancholic revelling in the end of empires and visions of a subsequent return to nature which is built on colonial era ruin lust (Apel, 2015, p. 12). In *Fallout 3* the melancholic fall is clearly represented by the image of the United States Capitol Building, not just an iconic site, but the seat of the national government. This image features prominently in marketing materials – in cover and concept art, and in cutscenes – marking it out as a compelling image of the end of America, shown with the dome of the building half collapsed, affected by visible organic decay and

destruction (including war fortifications), with a grey sky framing piles of rubble amidst dirt, puddles, and dust.

Reversal – in this post-apocalyptic framing, recognised icons become ruined, iconic objects destroyed, and populated places abandoned. This trope relies on standardised depictions (for example, showing known monuments damaged and overgrown), and has been cited as a key trope of modernity (Hell & Schönle, 2008). In reversal, nothing solid exists anymore. For Frederic Jameson (2005), the imagined future ruins of our present – like those in H.G. Wells’ *Time Machine* – are “a prophetic archaeology” a “time paradox [of] reversal”, in which the shock of encounter is brought about through an imagined confrontation with the “sorry history of cyclical catastrophe and resurrection” (p. 100), not unlike Benjamin’s interpretation of the German *Trauerspiel*. In *Fallout 3* reversal is particularly palpable not in the ruins of the Capitol Building (which only feature in a small way within the game itself), but in the relentlessly grim wastelands around the National Mall and major monuments – a headless Lincoln Memorial, a foetid reflecting pool, the vertical sublime of the Washington Monument with missing panels allowing light to pass through the skeletal remains.

Dead city – the city, as a centre of cosmopolitan culture, becomes, in fall and reversal, the subversion of the urban norm. The framing here relies upon the figure of the ruined city. Not just a ruined landmark, but the mass destruction of vast areas of places we know in the present, wherein everyday life has ended, and the populated city lies dormant.

“Representations of the dead city can be related more generally to the apocalyptic imagination” but they are sometimes criticised for the way that they generate fear and stymie political action by making catastrophe seem inevitable or unavoidable (Dobraszczyk, 2017, p. 4). Conversely – as this chapter argues – “dead cities can be a powerfully imaginative tool” for critical reflection by presenting counter possibilities to the present (ibid., p. 5). In *Fallout 3*, the use of the rubble-strewn Washington Metro as a key site of play particularly

communicates the sense of an empty and dead city, and the scale of the ruination of Washington D.C. is especially compelling when one of the most crowded and busy locations of the modern city appears more like a mausoleum. The critical point here is in death or mourning – bearing witness to the slow, corpse-like decay of an iconic city, a symbol of American power, immobilised and defenceless.

Global apocalypse – ideas of fall, reversal, and the end of the city are imagined and communicated largely through formulaic and ruin-centred images – for example, the vision of a derelict Golden Gate Bridge that has appeared in *The Earth Abides* (1947), *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* (2011) and other popular texts functions to communicate the impact of global collapse by displaying an iconic landmark in ruins as a sign of a wider apocalyptic scenario. This vision also often cites a kind of sacking or intentional attack on important sites that populations have a symbolic attachment to – locations that are embedded in local and national histories. Similarly, key tropes like return to nature, the deserted or flooded city, and mass decay signify major societal collapse on a scale beyond that of one city alone. Jeff Lewis (2012), in the title of his book on global media, terms these *Cultural Imaginings of Doom*, interlinked collections of end of the world tropes, from super volcanoes, to marauding looters; from environmental disasters to invading fleets, or giant tidal waves. After these events, the world is represented by pastiches of rubble, repeated scenes of ruined monuments from around the globe, a variety of discarded objects or empty places, all in familiar locations or settings that work to replicate and proliferate an easily recognisable apocalypse from even the smallest cultural units and images. All of these feature in *Fallout 3*, as described above – the city of Washington D.C. is a particularly widely-shared trope of apocalyptic catastrophe, its demise a signifier of a collapse of US society. In promotional material, *Fallout 3* layers image upon image of symbolically loaded remnants, all discarded amongst the ruins; a doll, a

bus, a radio, drink cans – alongside the wrecks of suburban homes, and the decaying monuments of downtown Washington D.C..

Through these tropes, video games like *Fallout 3* make use of ruin aesthetics to render a post-apocalyptic playground cobbled together from powerfully signifying (and sometimes centuries-old) imaginings. These interlinked frames are deployed again and again, relying heavily on ruins to do the critical work of imagining the end of the world through contrast, disintegration, destruction and epic visions that mirror the Baroque or Romantic sensibilities for ruin and chaos, created from what Benjamin (2008) called “the highly significant fragment,” which, as each trope repeats in a slight variation, moves from clichéd and empty stereotype to a kind of intensification of decay, a form of critique through fragmentation:

That which lies here in ruins, the highly significant fragment, the remnant, is, in fact, the finest material in baroque creation. For it is common practice in the literature of the baroque to pile up fragments ceaselessly, without any strict idea of a goal, and, in the unremitting expectation of a miracle, to take the repetition of stereotypes for a process of intensification.

(p. 178)

Catastrophic Images

What is interesting about studying video games as a medium, therefore, is that they are fractured and fragmentary in nature, with the possible action of the game (and especially RPG games) typically structured by multiple and dislocated possibilities. In all games, ruinous or otherwise, the fracturing of timelines and narratives facilitated by the fundamental architecture of game software and design is already embedded in the form. The creative/destructive nature of play itself also lends the digital media form to the exploration of alternative historical possibilities; multiple timelines; and ruinous or apocalyptic scenarios.

Moreover, the design of assets in games – individual models; skins and polygons; landscapes and digital art, all jumbled together – replicates the baroque practice of ceaselessly piling up fragments, and means that a ruined city makes more sense for a setting than a pristine urban space. Browns and greys, random dead ends, dim lighting, and incomplete structures or glitching textures seem less out of place at the end of the world than they would in a simulation of an ostensibly habited and functioning contemporary city. That is to say: it is not simply a sign of the times that the end of the world is an increasingly common trope in video games; the post-apocalypse shares an affinity with video games because the virtual gameworld is inherently chaotic and fragmented (Fraser, 2016). While games themselves – in terms of what is possible in play and what is required to make successful games – already tend to rely on narratives of fractured time (for example speeding up, skipping, or replaying), titles which represent through ruins tend to exploit this fragmentary form even further, becoming ruinous in both form and content (like Benjamin's *Trauerspiel*, plays about death and transience, featuring symbols of decay and catastrophe, delivered in fractured and incomplete forms [Benjamin, 2008]).

In part, this is because a ruined city immediately presents a field of action – catastrophe (conceptually, but also symbolically) is a productive site for play and exploration amongst ruins, affording crisis storylines, monstrous characters (human and otherwise), and searching meta-narratives of societal collapse. What is perhaps most interesting about the post-apocalypse that is delivered largely through ruinous tropes in *Fallout 3* is the explicit engagement with non-linear histories in the context of catastrophe. What *Fallout 3* plays upon is the dialectical contrast between the image of a living and active – and symbolically powerful, widely imagined – city of modernity, and the imagined moment when “it too will decay” (Frisby, 1985, p. 235) – replicating, broadly, the key tropes set out above.

Again, to some extent this is as a result of an affinity between digital video games and ruination itself. As Julian Stallabrass explains, games not only revel in destruction because of common scenarios of the apocalypse; digital simulations offer a particular insight into death and destruction, between utopian imaginings and absolute endings:

in these games there is a tenebrous dance of the utopian and the apocalyptic, an ambiguity which it is tempting to resolve by saying that it presents the apocalypse as a utopian scenario. If this is so, it is because the absolutes of destruction and death are sought as an escape from the virtuality and artificiality of everyday life. Ironically, this can only be achieved in a digital simulation, though its effects may spill back into the real world.

(Stallabrass, 1993, p. 105)

What *Fallout 3* and its tropes of apocalypse represent in visions of ruin is simultaneously the dialectic of the new and antiquated, the modern and the apocalyptic, through the reversal of a famed and iconic city, reviving tropes of civilisation ending, cities crumbling, and familiar apocalyptic ruins in a virtual simulation (that is, more than a fiction). It does this partly through the repeated foregrounding of the space of play as the end of the American capitol city, partly through the visual representation of the ruination of known monuments, and partly through the constant kitschy and nostalgic referencing of a lost past (through objects, artefacts, posters, and so on). In relation to Adorno and Benjamin's disagreement over the redundancy of popular forms of culture, Julian Stallabrass (1993) notes that "[b]oth these contrasts [the new and the antiquated] are very evident in the computer game, and they are presented in the manner of frozen, dialectical, allegorical images" (p. 105).

This frozen allegorical image is the ruinous vision of the apocalypse that Benjamin studied throughout his writings, appearing in the moment of contrast between progress and

ruination – a moment captured by the retro-futuristic ruins of Washington in *Fallout 3*. In Benjamin's work, progress, catastrophe and history are related by the constant pursuit of order and newness, which in fact generate perpetual destruction, the allegorical image is one that shatters the illusion of wholeness through intentional destruction, leaving telling piles of rubble to construct an open field of possibility, much like the allegorist who builds critique from the ad-nauseum repetition of the significant fragment. As Naomi Stead explains:

For Benjamin, it is the rubble left in the aftermath of destruction that unmasks the present and provides a field of possibilities to the allegorist. It is only through an examination of these melancholy traces, the detritus left after the 'catastrophes' of history, that the allegorist or historian can critically approach the present. In his conception, the act of destruction places everything in new juxtapositions, shatters old relationships, and opens history up for examination.

(Stead, 2000, p. 11)

Thus, it is only on the point of destruction that we can begin to understand our world, and only through opposition (fall, reversal, the dead city, the apocalypse itself) that we can see beyond the currents of the present age into the origin of an era, revealing totality as the illusion of wholeness, which in turn enables a more genuine conception of the truth of history, in fragments. *Fallout 3*, in many ways, replicates linear narratives of progress, heroism, and historical authority, and yet it is through the politics of reversal – of juxtaposition and shattering reorientation – that the game is able to reimagine both history and the post-apocalypse, in ruins.

In this form, the destruction of modernity through ruin is also a reversal – akin to the Surrealist technique of reversal in which banal or trivial elements become significant through play (Flanagan, 2009), and the monumental becomes banal or is diminished. The “contours of the banal” presented through Surrealist (and related) approaches reveal the world as a kind

of puzzle or “rebus” to be solved (Chisolm, 2001, p. 241): much like the presentation of the space and landscape of Washington from the very beginning of *Fallout 3*, in which a key aspect of the gameplay is to locate the hero within a disorientating landscape. The wastelands and ruins are banal puzzles to be solved by the exploration of everyday spaces, reversed in ruin. Such a puzzle is often, in Benjamin’s work, directly related to a representation of a lived history – what is different here from Benjamin’s (or Jameson’s) archaeological excavation of banal history in the present moment is that the game doesn’t offer a photograph, postcard, or piece of film footage, but rather a spatial and interactive reimagining, using the visual representation to launch a complex world, narrative, and site for play. This is a reworking of the imagination of the apocalypse, visited on the cities of modernity, a revisioning of the future of the present as a counterfactual history, but also melancholic nostalgia for a past that never was.

Fallout 3’s nostalgic post-apocalypse takes the fall of a great civilisation and turns it into a critical re-interpretation of the present – as Dianne Chisolm (2001) suggests in relation to Benjamin’s allegorical method, nostalgia can be a way of imagining, through the assembly of historically loaded fragments, alternative histories and futures. Svetlana Boym’s (2017) retrospective nostalgia for something that never came to be is directly linked to the political capacity of “ruinophilia” (p. 43), which – rather than presenting catastrophe and ruination as inevitable violence – instead links ruin (including the end of the city) to freedom and possibility. “A tour of ruins leads you into a labyrinth of ambivalent temporal[itie...] that play tricks with causality. Ruins make us think of the past that could have been and the future that never took place” (ibid.). This is precisely the effect of *Fallout 3*, a critical nostalgia through a future that never took place, a post-apocalyptic scene in ruins, haunted by the collective (now failed) ambitions of progress-driven 1950s capitalism, and populated with

images gathered up from a canon of ruin tropes and imaginaries, wreaking destruction not only on the imagined city, but the history that it represents.

The destruction sought by Benjamin is deeply critical, as Anson Rabinbach (1997) suggests, identifying the concept of “apocalypse” – real and imagined – as a useful tool for reimagining both past and present, and intercepting alternative histories and historical formations (pp. 27-65). Benjamin’s famed Angel of History, gazing upon an ever renewing pile of debris is a symbolic manifestation of this apocalyptic thinking as a critical tool for unravelling the false presumption of linear time: “[w]here a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet” (2003, p. 392). In this vision, modernity is a shattering and fracturing force in terms of the speed of change and development, leaving literal and figurative ruin in its wake. History, then, is a process of relegating the past to the rubble heap, rather than arch narratives of victory and progress – at its worst, the march of progress brings catastrophic ruination. Rabinbach (1997) likens Benjamin’s catastrophic vision to the apocalypse: “[i]n his allegory of the angel of history, Benjamin conceived of modernity as an apocalyptic tempest roaring toward the present” (p. 10). In *Fallout 3*, this tempest has arrived, and Benjamin’s apocalypse is no longer presided over by the Angel of History alone – through the nuclear catastrophe, the player walks amidst the very wreckage that the Angel could not make whole, and (like the Angel) the hero is powerless to put a stop to inevitable catastrophe, and is left instead to gaze upon the ruins that, as tropes of the post-apocalyptic, tell of dead cities, civilisational collapse, and the reversal of the everyday. The message, in both cases, is that the aggressive pursuit of technologically-driven progress begets inevitable ruin.

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