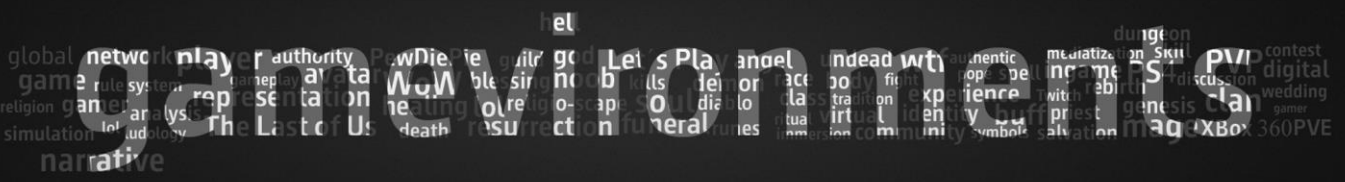
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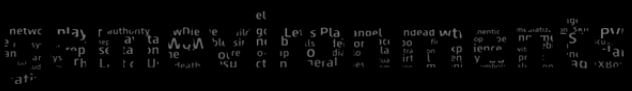

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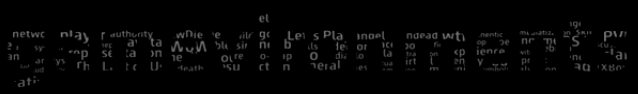

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Peer-reviewed Article

"War never changes." Gender Roles and the Transformative Potential for Role Reversal in Roleplay Games with Post-Apocalyptic Settings

Marie-Luise Meier

Abstract
This article tackles the question in which ways the apocalypse has a transformative potential for rethinking gender roles and breaking up with stereotypes in post-apocalyptic Open World Roleplay Games (RPGs). It inquires if and in what way a change in hegemonic structures can be observed on the levels of society, characters, and also in terms of the ludic possibilities provided within the game-worlds. In order to do so, two contemporary post-apocalyptic Open World RPGs are analyzed, namely *Fallout 4* (2015) and *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017). It is evident that *Fallout 4* continues a male-connotated line of motives, transpired by past media. *Horizon Zero Dawn* uses the potential of the apocalypse, the promised restart, to instead generate a new society. This society has not yet achieved a state of equality but has already reached a new baseline of strong characters of different genders without racial disparity, that is further fostered by the protagonist's journey. Hurtful gender tropes are thereby overcome, and stereotypes are being subverted.

Keywords: Role Reversal, Gender Roles, Post-Apocalyptic, Apocalypse, Fallout 4, Horizon Zero Dawn, Game Studies, gamevironments

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Never has the apocalypse been more popular than in the last twenty years. Movies like *I am Legend* (2007) with its proposal of a new (undead) society, and noteworthy pieces of Marxist philosophy like *Snowpiercer* (2013), left an impression on the

cultural consciousness of how the world might end. Games like *Days Gone* (2019) and *Death Stranding* (2019) have shown worlds at the brink of destruction – or after seemingly all life was lost. One of the most striking features of post-apocalyptic fiction, however, is the fact that the end times are always just the beginning of something new. The notion of apocalypse therefore always bears transformative potential, as the term proclaims change – in a biblical, economic and social sense. Film studies have already seen that potential. For example, Barbara Gurr and others (2015) explore the potential for role reversal and a change of hegemonic structures that post-apocalyptic settings offer, yet several close readings show that the potential remains mostly unused.

When thinking of video games with post-apocalyptic settings, most would not assume a revolutionary rethinking of society, especially in terms of gender. Even eight years later, the shadow of #GamerGate still looms over the medium and its community. Video games seemed to be unable to imagine strong female characters in narratives, in which everything else seemed possible (Williams et al. 2009, Downs and Smith 2010). Furthermore, most games with a post-apocalyptic setting belong to the action genre, which has notoriously been criticized for shallow and backward-looking depictions of race and class, and especially of gender (Nae 2022).

Nevertheless, the game industry is subject to change, which is closely tied to changes in society. Many of the often quoted articles such as Dietz (1998), who criticizes gender bias, have been dealing with games that were born from a different socio-historical and technological context. The industry is nowadays aware of the importance of diverse representation, as, for example, Manveer Heir, gameplay designer at BioWare Montreal, acknowledges (Scimeca 2014). Particularly role-playing games like *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014) advertise themselves with the possibility to

be someone else, to embody someone else, someone who might also be able to defy gendered stereotypes.

This article aims to explore the performative and transformative potential of contemporary video games with post-apocalyptic settings. By focusing on the societies and individuals presented within those worlds, their social roles, narrative and ludic stereotypes as well as their game-given space of possibility, this article will investigate how video games break with violence-focused depictions of hegemonic structures and in which way, from the pre-apocalypse to the post-apocalypse, a change in gender roles can be deduced.

After a brief introduction to the features and entanglements of post-apocalyptic fiction and gender, I want to lay out the methodological background for this analysis. It builds upon traditional tools from cultural studies, such as the notions of stereotyping by Dyer (1999) and Hall (2013), Gramsci's hegemonic structures as well as hegemonic masculinity and Othering, but will make those terms useable for ergodic (Aarseth 1997, 162) media such as video games. I will employ Bogost's (2007) concept of *procedural rhetoric* to show how rule systems and game objectives impact and structure ideological claims brought forth by the game. For the character analysis, I will strongly build upon Fernández-Vara's concept of *space of possibility* (2015, 252) to grasp the performative freedom of the player.

Fallout 4 (2015) and *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017) will be analyzed as case studies due to their massive commercial success. They serve, in many ways, as two ends of a spectrum on how Open World RPGs deal with the apocalypse by means of world

building and representation. The analysis will focus on the shift in collective values in society and settings from pre- to post-apocalypse as well as on individual characters as representatives of said society.

Rethinking Gender in Post-apocalyptic Times

Embedded in the framework of science fiction, the post-apocalypse is more a setting than a genre. It has formed its own tropes, stereotypes, clichés and patterns. Post-apocalyptic narrations have always strongly related to the societal fears of their time. In the 1950s and 60s, for example, the Cold War and the fear of nuclear weapons sparked a wave of nuclear, red-scare post-apocalyptic fiction (Booth 2015, 19, Sontag 1966, 216). In the 1960s and 70s, infections and pandemics, supernatural or SARS-like, were central, such as in *The Andromeda Strain* (1971) and *Outbreak* (1995). What counts as apocalypse or post-apocalyptic therefore also relies on the interpretation of events in the context of their time. Gurr (2015, 7) states that the definition of both terms differs from era to era. She subsequently sees the Second World War as a potential apocalyptic scenario, because the world order as well as a very real part of the world were destroyed in the process and had to be rebuilt. This renders the post-war period post-apocalyptic. Steinberg (2000) therefore concludes that the apocalypse is open to interpretation.

There are, however, structural markers of post-apocalyptic fiction. The term *post-apocalypse* implies that there are states *before* and *after* the apocalypse. In between is a kind of *reroll* of societal order, in which humankind adapts to the fearful event depicted. In this reroll, however, lies the subversive potential of post-apocalyptic settings. Bingham (2016, 44) states in regard to the zombie apocalypse that it "destabilize[s] the status quo of entrenched patriarchy […] in terms of social

organization and the reformation of microcosmic civilizations." Following Krijnen and van Bauwel's (2015, 39) statement that male characters and patriarchal structures are central in almost all genres, the post-apocalypse can be seen as a possibility for a new, equal form of society with the same set of roles available to all genders. This potential is seldom used. Within the post-apocalyptic narrative, the question of who survives and who does not is central (Gurr 2015, 1). Gurr (2015, 2) states that most post-apocalyptic narratives fail in envisioning a world in which race, gender and sexuality are treated differently than they are, for example, in contemporary Western societies. The hierarchies and values of present societies are often treated as necessary and natural for the survival of humanity, so that the old order is reestablished uncritically and without further reflection. Brittnacher (2013, 336-338) argues in accordance with Velji (2013, 251) that an unambiguous depiction of evil as well as a rigorous dualism of good and evil with no space for second thoughts are part of the post-apocalyptic genre inventory.

This is problematic for several reasons, among them the literal meaning of the apocalypse. Apocalypse means "revelation" or "uncovering" (O'Leary 1994, 5-6). Apocalypses, in particular religious ones, follow a predictable pattern, according to Brittnacher (2013, 336), in which the pre-apocalyptic world is staged as being *tainted* and the end is announced via certain signals. They lead to a godly intervention, a spectacle of great significance and the establishment of a new world order. This post-apocalyptic new world order is traditionally that which comes after the disclosure of a secret or absolute wisdom (Brittnacher 2013, 336). This means that even gender roles, sprung from that wisdom, could be seen as absolute and natural. They are implied to be exactly the way they should be, since they derive from the wisdom of a higher power.

This problematic rhetoric can be extended to more than just individual gender roles. The post-apocalyptic society is in most media dystopian, not utopian. In newer media featuring apocalyptic themes, the symbolic fear of the foreign with a rigorous dualism between *Us* and *Them* is especially prominent. Post-apocalyptic scenarios before 9/11, according to Walliss and Aston (2011, 53-64), are leaning more towards a hegemonic order which is absolute. "One common theme in these post-apocalyptic films is that without an orderly, strong, centralized authority, people are reduced to base instincts and criminal behavior. People loot, murder, rape, and cannibalize" (Booth 2015, 18). In narrations after 9/11, however, the state is considerably weaker and less prepared for attacks from the outside, which in turn sparks a more traditional patriotic agenda (Takacs 2014, 14). In conclusion, not only the gender roles of the individual are naturalized, but also the hegemonic structure in which they are embedded, either relies on a strong, oftentimes male authority or on individuals taking law into their own hands.

Another subject, closely connected to both the apocalypse and gender inequality, is technology. Science, in particular technology, is a traditionally male-connotated domain. The stereotypically male role of the scientist, engineer or developer as the person pushing technology forward, making himself the creator of a new race, is pronounced. Females are regularly shown as passively consuming technology, which results in the opposition of male/female, creator/consumer, while one is subordinate to the other (Bingham 2016, 43). "[T]echnology and engineering represent the last bastions of male domination and appear somewhat impervious to gender change" (Johnson 2006, 3). Grint and Gill (1995, 8) also see a connection between masculinity and technology. It is an integral part of the male gender identity, while masculinity is also an integral part of the view on technology. This is especially pronounced when objects such as computers, cars, and war machinery are presented as created and

used by men, while traditionally female connotated technology is oftentimes connected to housekeeping (Bingham 2016, 36). Technology and its downfall play an important part in post-apocalyptic scenarios. It is often shunned, since it took part in fostering the apocalypse (Bingham 2016, 42), but at the same time it is shown as essential for survival and the recolonization of the world. When Wajcman (1996, 6) states that "[t]echnology is a key source of men's power and a defining feature of masculinity," this raises the question whether the apocalypse marks the end of patriarchal structures, and whether it is possible to detach technology from male attribution.

Gender and Games

Analyzing gender in games vastly differs from its analysis in movies. In addition to longstanding tools of gender analysis, game-specific tools are needed in order to grasp games as a multilayered, ergodic medium. With interaction being, according to Aarseth (1997, 162), a simplification of the dynamics of user-game relations, ergodicity means that the user follows the prompts of the program and "the game plays the user just as the user plays the game." Therefore, all analysis has to include the *space of possibility* afforded to the player. Fernández-Vara (2015, 252) defines this as "[t]he potential actions and events in a game; what the player could do and the potential results of those actions, as opposed to actual specific actions that have already been carried out." Especially when talking about ideological claims, this space of possibility and the interaction of different processes within games must be perceived as a rhetoric of the game. This idea sits at the core of Bogost's (2007) concept of *procedural rhetoric*, which explains how computational systems form arguments of their own. According to Bogost (2007, 2-3),

> "*[p]rocedurality* refers to a way of creating, explaining, or understanding processes. […] Procedural rhetoric, then, is a practice of using processes persuasively. More specifically, procedural rhetoric is the practice of persuading through processes in general and computational processes in particular."

Topics that are central to video games can, with these tools, be grasped not only on the level of narration, but also on that of gameplay, which can be defined as the combination of rules and geography in a game (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith and Tosca 2008, 102). This is essential, since "some video games include a story and expend great effort to make it the most important point of the experience they offer, while others feature a very limited story (or […] no story at all)" (Arsenault 2016, 479). This makes it important to expose ideological statements on all levels of games or even see contractions in narration and gameplay. Important for the gender analysis in this article are the notions of Othering, androcentrism and the inevitable hegemonic masculinity.

Othering is the strongest element in the formation of a social and individual identity. "The argument here is that the 'Other' is fundamental to the constitution of the self to us as subjects, and to sexual identity" (Hall 2013, 227). Longstanding oppositions like civilization and barbarism, white/black, culture/nature, intellect/instinct and rule/serve (Hall 2013, 228) are still visible in modern contexts. All unwanted traits are connected to the Other in opposition to the Self, which features all wanted characteristics in this duality. The action genre in video games usually features a strong *Us* vs. *Them* mentality, showing a clear antagonistic force (for example in shape of an evil overlord). Othering is oftentimes a fixed part of this very simplified narrative frame, which then allows for a more gameplay-focused experience. Croshaw (2022), for example, demonstrates this by showing that many contemporary AAA games are built on the conflict between exactly two forces, which are, in his view, "hippies and authoritarians." One is simply the flipside of the other, thereby building

upon the same simple binary oppositions, which are then used and reinforced in other titles. This conflict comes with its own societal norms through which the characters are forced within specific social roles and gender roles, which they act upon.

In any binary opposition, one is usually central, while the other one is marginalized (Hall 2013, 225). This is the foundation of the concept of *androcentrism*, which has long been central in video games and has been criticized in numerous publications (e.g., Downs and Smith 2010). This ideology understands man and human as synonyms. The dichotomy of man and woman gave birth to the concept of heteronormativity, in which these two genders are opposites but also in close connection to and dependence on one another. Only together they are deemed complete, which gave way to the socially widely accepted model of father, mother and child as the nuclear family (Kiel 2014, 19-21). What unsettles society is "matter out of place" (Hall 2013, 226), i.e., anything that strays from this accepted norm, which is why Western cultures, in cultural theory, prefer hierarchical structures over equality. This is laid out in Gramsci's concept of hegemonial structures, which are gained by

> "[…] naturalizing power relations. For example, women are considered as naturally more caring than men. If we take caring as a natural character trait of women, it is also natural that women take care of the children. Hence, a societal structure that confines women to the private sphere of the home and men to the public sphere of work is thus naturalized." (Krijnen and van Bauwel 2015, 11-12)

Hegemonic structures in games can not only be established by the narrative. Games are predominantly rule-based media. Priorities can therefore be seen, for example, in goals. Goals and mechanics constitute how someone can interact with the game

world, which path is desirable and what ultimately drives the player, thus charging mechanics with meaning. In *Super Mario Bros.* (1985), for example, saving the princess is a victory condition (Brathwaite and Schreiber 2008), but for most parts, the player can actively avoid enemies, therefore violence is not a priority. The goals of the game in this example stress the importance of helping one another. They also, however, stress the active/passive dichotomy between Mario and the princess as foundation of the game, thereby naturalizing the *Damsel in Distress* trope as the framing of the game and the natural interplay between genders.

Male characters in video games mostly follow the contemporary male ideal of hegemonic masculinity. They are active and often aggressive, which supposedly solves problems. They are often offered as vessels for identification, while female characters, by contrast, are often fetishized. Video game characters, however, are versatile and complex due to their rule-bound nature, ranging from stand-ins and pawns such as Mario to complex personas such as Joel Miller from *The Last of Us* (2013), who feature elaborate backstories. They have to fulfill ludic needs, which are combined with narrative characteristics, therefore forming different stereotypes than, for example, filmic characters (Eder and Thon 2012, 158). They are not only fictional entities, but oftentimes representational avatars for the player within the game world and, in addition, icons of certain franchises, which form a greater context (Aldred 2016, 355). Avatars should thus be understood in a sense of "extended, prosthetic, part-of-ourselves type of character(s)" who "embod[y] empathy, in which the player experiences a kind of physical or bodily connection to the character" (Tronstad 2008, 256). Due to the growing space of possibility offered in many games, characters have become more dependent on player interaction, which makes the analysis of their appearance or treatment within the game more difficult. A character may or may not

wear a specific outfit or be part of an event, if alternative outfits are possible or certain events missable, which in turn makes their objectification partly dependent on player choice.

In video game characters, a specific ludic function is connected to a narrative function, for example, an allied fighting companion might be the hero's love interest (Sorg 2010, 355). Eder and Thon (2012, 179-180) claim that video game characters are oftentimes simplified and exaggerated. They have clear objectives and are frequently connected to action (Eder and Thon 2012, 160). There is a tendency towards stereotyping, which makes it easier for players to orient themselves inside vast game worlds. Particularly when the ludic function inside the game is foregrounded, narrative characteristics are reduced to stereotypical features (Schröter 2013, 27). Enemies are there to be defeated, merchants buy and sell items, quest givers provide tasks and rewards. With regard to gender studies, however, stereotyping is often considered problematic. It reduces the dynamic nature of gender to an essentialist thought (Krijnen and van Bauwel 2015, 33). According to Dyer, most stereotypes are used in pejorative ways. They are often emotionally charged and represent certain values within the society in which they are used (Dyer 1999, 245). Stereotypes also interact in negative ways with notions such as ethnicity, age, sexuality, and class, which is why they are often applied to minorities and repressed groups (Gilman 2013, Batinic and Appel 2008, 314). Hall mentions strategies to overturn or subvert stereotypes. Negative stereotypes can be replaced through positive ones, which often does not work, as the positive stereotypes instead simply frame the negative ones (Hall 2013, 262-263). It is instead advisable to describe the ways in which stereotypes function to engage in a meta-discourse about them (Hall 2013, 263-264).

Gender and the Post-Apocalyptic Wasteland

The following section deals with two case studies of games which belong to the roleplay genre, feature a post-apocalyptic setting and are both open world games. The games were chosen due to the fact that they are marketed as roleplaying games, therefore inherently promising the possibility to embody a character and to make decisions, which may alter the society and thereby transform the values of the world they interact in. Both games have been critically acclaimed and won several awards. Bethesda Game Studios' *Fallout 4* won, among others, the *Best PC Game* and *Best Role Playing* awards at the Game Critics Awards 2015. It is the fifth installment of the series, which was met with immense commercial success, selling more than 12 million copies (Makuch 2015). *Horizon Zero Dawn* was released in 2017 as a PlayStation 4 exclusive and received high acclaim by players and review outlets alike, with 89 and 85/100 ratings on Metacritic's (2017) outlet and user scores, respectively, and has since sold more than 10 million copies (Hulst 2019). The game received several awards, among them the 2018 BAFTA Games Award for Best Original Property. With both of these games being highly successful mainstream titles, it can be inferred that they will not only have a lasting impact on the community but also influence future games with a post-apocalyptic setting. They are therefore also highly relevant to inferring what the future of games with a post-apocalyptic setting might look like in terms of gender.

The following analysis has a strong focus on the layers of *setting and society*, *characters* and *performativity*. As introduced by gender terminology, the apocalypse setting shapes the society as well as the individual characters and both rely on each other in terms of reestablishing and reenacting gender roles. Performativity refers to the possibility to act outside of parameters enforced by society. This shall capture the spectrum for different outlooks on gender that the respective games allow for. The

respective Windows versions are taken as the foundation of the analysis and have been played by the author. The analysis will, due to the mentioned size of the game, concentrate on the main storyline, which in turn also guarantees that the quoted parts of the game will be encountered by everyone who plays through the games. For a reliable link to the source material, the games will be quoted with quests and/or locations of events. The following analysis is outcome-oriented, structured after the most important findings in the comparison of both games.

Representations of the Past. Fallout's Hegemonic Masculinity Meets Horizon's Semi-utopia

Fallout 4 strongly relates to the predominantly American media around apocalyptic narrations in literature, film and video games, most obvious in its focus on the fear of the nuclear fallout. It takes place in the year 2278, after the Resource Wars, which ended in the nuclear holocaust in 2077. The game is set in and around the destroyed Boston, now coined *The Commonwealth*. With its retro-futuristic design, it harkens back to the 1950s and 60s. "It's like the Stepford wives meets Terminator" (Cain 2015). While the series is known for its ironic subtext and intertextualities from sources like the *Mad Max* series (1979-2015) or movies like *I am Legend* (2007), many of the toxic nostalgia of the 1950s and 60s stereotypes have been taken over, which is especially visible in the prologue. Here, the player embodies the avatar, who lives with his spouse and newborn son, Shaun, in a romantic suburban area called Sanctuary Hill.

In its intro sequence, it is made clear that the world and its history is defined by its never-ending wars, from World War II to the Resource Wars. Patriotic values, which serve the protection of one's own family, are highlighted as good. Using force to protect country and values is a valid approach:

> "In the year 1945, my great-great grandfather, serving in the army, wondered when he'd get to go home to his wife and the son he'd never seen. He got his wish when the US ended World War II by dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki." (Prologue, *Fallout 4*, 2015)

Every generation of the avatar's family fights in wars for the USA, and are missed by their wives and sons, who wait for them at home. The stereotypical suburban environment with the tidy front yards and the waiting women is displayed as an ideal for freedom and home, which is a worthy cause for fighting. Active fathers fight in the war, fathering children with passively waiting wives. These children, always male, go themselves into battle when reaching adulthood, marrying passive wives to father a new generation of sons. This not only centers the ideal of the nuclear family, but also draws a cyclic picture of apocalyptic repetitions. "War never changes" (Prologue, Epilogue, Act 1, *Out Of Time*, *Fallout 4*, 2015) is uttered three times during the series, marking not only war as a recurring theme but also the stereotypes connected to this thinking, namely the active warrior fathers and their passive wives. This genealogy is further underlined through the image of footsteps in the sand as a symbol for the tradition which must be followed by future generations (Prologue). No matter which gender is chosen for the avatar, the past in *Fallout 4* is always shaped by the soldier and father as hegemonic masculine ideal and the nuclear family as an unchallenged constant in the world.

Horizon Zero Dawn's approach to the post-apocalyptic setting differs from other concepts insofar as the actual apocalypse and former cultures lie so far back – around a thousand years – that they have largely remained a mystery to the characters of the story, who inhabit a seemingly innocent and sprawling planet that only bears very few signs of past extinction and death. The developers themselves refer to this concept as "post-post-apocalyptic" (Gonzalez 2018). This is interesting in so far that the world is,

during the game, threatened to end yet again, which makes the game not only post-post-apocalyptic, but also pre-apocalyptic, establishing the same kind of cyclical nature of apocalypses that *Fallout 4* refers to.

Aloy, the protagonist, learns that she is a clone of a woman called Elisabet Sobeck, whose story can be seen as a window into the pre-apocalypse world of *Horizon Zero Dawn*. Information about the pre-apocalypse is communicated via holograms, letters and audio recordings that Aloy finds in the ruins of the Old Ones. In contrast to *Fallout 4*, *Horizon Zero Dawn*'s pre-apocalyptic gender representation has already overcome some traditional race- and gender-disparities. The research team around head researcher Sobeck, consisting of, among others, a female Iranian researcher, another female researcher of Asian heritage, and a French speaking male scientist. The life-giving AI has been labelled Gaia and is represented through the image of a woman of color, wearing green, surrounded by fluttering yellow lights. There is also a clear connection between male identity and antagonism. Destruction has been given a male name in form of the AI Hades, who has no human representation, but is referred to as *he* by characters such as Sylens (Quest: *Maker's End*) and has a deep, robotic, but clearly masculine voice.

The one responsible for the apocalypse is inventor Ted Faro, the head of the largest corporation in the world, whose robot army went rogue (Quest: *Maker's End*). He is male and head of a tech company. In his depiction, Faro is reminiscent of male CEOs and inventors of our time. With his ideals, he challenges the opinion of the predominantly female research crew around him and kills them to prevent them from interfering with his vision of stripping new generations of humans off their knowledge of past times (Quest: *The Mountain That Fell*). Sobeck perishes in a suicide mission to save the project and the future of humanity. Masculinity is thus

connotated with egomania, hubris, hierarchy, and death, while femininity presents altruism, moderation, equality, and life. This representation maintains traditional gender traits but subverts some of their readings. The most essential traits this does not apply to are pragmatism, rationality, and agency, which are typically considered masculine. They are now represented in Sobeck, while Faro indulges in drama and self-absorption, often seen passively brooding over his failure while Sobeck takes matters into her own hands. Thus, as a man, representing typically feminine attributes such as hysteria, whimsy, and passivity.

The past in *Horizon Zero Dawn* is therefore in some aspects already close to gender equality. It does however draw a clear connection between power and destruction as male attributes and knowledge as a female attribute. It must be noted, however, that due to the narrow scope of the cutscenes available, which mainly revolve around Project Zero Dawn, information is only given on a small number of people who seem well-educated and well-situated and therefore do not represent an intersection of the depicted pre-apocalyptic society.

Queering the Frontier. Fallout's Male Present and Horizon's Take on Re-signifying the Cowboy

Fallout 4 is a game set in an alternate history, where even home devices are fueled by nuclear energy. It is a dystopia that refers to US-American history as well as subjects often discussed in US-American media such as patriotism, US-American myths and colonization (here: recolonization) of America. The notion of the frontier is central to all these subjects – as well as to the Western genre, which clearly inspired the world of *Fallout 4*, in which every generation faces its own frontier. Matt (1995, 8-9) states that the frontier is the space in which America creates and recreates itself, not only

spatially, but metaphorically. Both genres are strongly phallocentric, with a strong heteronormative approach to storytelling. War is never condemned and even another nuclear strike is justified in the eyes of Preston, the Minuteman who is established as one of the good characters. He tells the avatar: "They left us no choice. It was war" (Act 3, *Inside Job*, *Fallout 4*, 2015).

The frontier and its never-ending war spark a very particular set of characters and stereotypes, which are strongly divided by gender. The always male-intended soldier and the cowboy are active and central, the always female-intended spouses and barmaids are passive and usually side-characters. The soldier embodies the archetype of the warrior (Campbell 2011, 353-360), a traditionally male stereotype (Moss 2011, 5). *Fallout 4* gives the player the choice to choose between the female and the male avatar of the game. The one not chosen dies during the prologue in the past, becoming a reason for revenge for the surviving avatar. Although they are almost interchangeable most of the time, the female avatar is a trained lawyer, whereas the male avatar states that he is a soldier and it is therefore his duty to protect the inhabitants of the Commonwealth (Act 2, *Hunter/Hunted*, *Fallout 4*, 2015). He is thus native to this space of constant war, which marks the post-apocalyptic world of *Fallout 4*. The game's rhetoric repeatedly stresses the importance of the military which is synonymous with the hegemonic masculine ideal. Most of the outfits the avatar is offered remind one of military outfits, although no military exists in the post-apocalyptic future. The *Army fatigues* provide buffs to particularly important attributes, such as Strength and Agility, for example. Since most of the game revolves around fighting and since without fighting, the player is unable to meet the victory conditions of the game, these armor parts are most likely preferred by players. *Fallout 4* shows a derivation of the frontier myth with its male ideals of self-realization in its lonely hero, who defends the weak from potential oppressors.

During their first mission in the wasteland (Act 1, *Out of Time*), the avatar must support the exclusively male Minutemen by saving their predominantly female victims, who then become the first settlers. It is made clear that in the post-apocalyptic world of *Fallout 4*, violence and the capability to defend oneself is male-connotated, while women have supportive roles or are displayed as victims. The assumption that females are less prone to violence and less able to defend themselves is also underlined by the game's human factions. The Brotherhood of Steel carries the sex of most of their members in their name. The Institute is led by the avatar's son, Shaun, who bears the title *Father*. That violence is male is also reiterated by the design of the creatures that roam the wasteland. Raiders can be male and female, but Super Mutants are exclusively male.

The vast majority of the game takes place in the wasteland. Big cities like Diamond City are however an exception, forming a different kind of frontier. The roles that women can inhabit in these cities are severely limited. In Goodneighbor, the avatar is confronted with the self-nominated, exclusively male guardians of the city (Act 2, *Dangerous Minds/The Glowing Sea*). Most of the female characters in this district can be found in the brothel. Its owner Irma displays herself in a short, red dress with high heels, lingering on a divan.

Similar to *Fallout 4*, the world of *Horizon Zero Dawn* is divided into settlements and wilderness. The frontier is the land between settlements, inhabited by mechanical animals, where it is rare to encounter any humans. The aspect of survival is especially pronounced in the first part of the game, where her surrogate father and mentor, Rost, teaches Aloy how to gather herbs to heal herself, how to stalk prey, how to avoid combat and how to fight the machines (Quest: *Lessons of the Wild*).

Horizon Zero Dawn's open world is inhabited by a vast amount of characters, who are, however, diverse. The frontier is a place for everyone who is willing to protect the settlements. People of all shapes and colors are in leading and subordinate positions, examples being Jezza as a woman of color and one of the High Matriarchs, Sona as a woman of color and war chief of the Nora, Talanah Khane Padish as an Asian woman and leader of the Hunter's Lodge. No differentiation is made between people of different skin colors, as a result of which *Horizon Zero Dawn* serves more as a utopia than a dystopia. Warbands of men and women undermine the myth of the heterosexual white cowboy as the only one trespassing the wilderness, and women like Marea, who chose dangerous outposts over the comfort of a safe settlement participate in queering the role of the soldier by challenging the male connotation.

Reshaping Family. The Tale of Fathers versus the Revaluation of Motherhood

As already laid out, *Fallout 4* puts a strong emphasis on the heritage of the avatar through the deeds of his fathers. Acts of glory are always connected to the patrial lineage. This lineage is closely tied to the heterosexual relationships of the avatar's ancestors. These, at first glance, seem to have been overcome for a more open system. The relationship system has been praised because the avatar can have a relationship with every companion, no matter the gender of the avatar or the companion. It is also possible to have several relationships at the same time, which is seen as "great advance for both bisexual and polyamorous relationships" (Lo 2016). At the same time, Lo criticizes that the system is hollow und without any reflection of living in a non-heteronormative polygamous relationship. No NPC is in a gay or polygamous relationship, and every character that one can meet over the course of the main story is single. In addition, the heteronormative monogamous relationship is

foregrounded by the avatar's pre-apocalyptic relationship status. Furthermore, the main story quest is called *Nuclear Family*, pointing to a concept of father, mother and child as the only representative family. Even with a female avatar, this story of fatherhood cannot be overcome in the post-apocalypse. The fact that the hero is anticipated as male is apparent in narrative framing that supports fatherhood and deems it more important than motherhood. Even if one disregards the framing narrative, individual parts of the game's rhetoric always hint towards this understanding. When Preston Garvey as the leader of the Minutemen leads the exclusively male Minutemen into battle to save the Commonwealth, this is another instance of men fighting for the greater good. Stories of fatherhood are interwoven into the game. Kellogg, one of the main antagonists, is disappointed by his father and becomes a father himself, who then disappoints his son, who consequently dies. He takes in the avatar's son as a second chance, whom he also loses (Act 2, *Dangerous Minds*). Kellogg's life ends when the second son is taken from him – his identity as a father is the only thing that kept him alive. Kellogg's existence is the antithesis to the melancholic yet successful story of the prologue, in which responsibility is passed down to the male avatar. Son Shaun himself is a *Father* to his people, who passes down his spiritual, intellectual and genetic material to future generations. While it would be possible to argue, in the case of a female avatar, that breaking with traditions of fatherhood could lead to a new narration, having an undiscussed and mostly unmentioned mother within a line of fathers feels out of place. Hall's (2013, 263) understanding that stereotypes and tropes have to be discussed to be subverted, is not fulfilled.

While *Fallout 4*'s post-apocalyptic present still revolves around the idea of heroic fatherhood, *Horizon Zero Dawn*'s present-day societies offer differing conceptions of what gender is considered dominant, argued for through differing interpretations of

history. This divide is mainly seen between the tribe of the matriarchal Nora and patriarchal Carja, but it is only apparent in the ruling class. Both tribes do have empowered male and female characters. The Nora tribe, still infatuated by the distant thought of the female-coded Mother AI that raised the first post-apocalyptic humans, revere motherhood and have thus formed a matriarchal society headed by female priests. The Nora live in a valley called All-Mother's-Embrace with the capital Mother's Heart. The worst insult they have is calling someone *motherless* or *No-Mother* (Quest: *Lessons of the Wild*). While Aloy, as a clone, is not strictly the child of Elisabet Sobeck, she can be seen as her descendant, born to save the world as her ancestor did before her (Quest: *The Face of Extinction*).

The respect regarding female Nora ancestors is pronounced repeatedly in different side and main quests. It is especially relevant that the Nora do not honor motherly qualities alone, but the characteristics that lie beyond the act of birth or raising children. Just as with the trope of the father, who is not honored for fathering a child, but, for example, his role as a soldier and breadwinner, the women in *Horizon Zero Dawn*are revered for being exceptional humans. Varl says of his war chief and mother, Sona: "If anyone could survive out there, it would be her [our war chief]. Sona's prowess is legend. An unbending spear to measure ourselves against." When Aloy states that Sona "sets a high standard," Varl continues: "You have no idea. She is my mother" (*Horizon Zero Dawn* 2017). This example shows how Varl first compliments his mother as an exceptional warrior and later reveals that they are related, therefore stressing her accomplishments.

While the Nora's matriarchal structure does subvert stereotypical gender tropes, it is also attributed to the technologically least advanced and therefore least powerful of the tribes, passing on their traditions orally. The matriarchal Nora stand in opposition

to the patriarchal Carja, led by their always male Sun-King, who look back on a rigorously written documentation of their history. They, however, are hated by other tribes due to the enslavements and sacrifices done by past Sun-Kings, which colors them as warmongers. They are also connected to the human enemy types, the Shadow-Carja and their radical cult called Eclipse, who are subsequently all male. The latter are uniquely familiar with old technology, which the Nora forbid. Thereby technology is indeed male-connotated with the Carja and the head of a technological company, Ted Faro, who is responsible for the apocalypse. The story of the original sin is normally connected to Eve and the apple – in this case, the apocalypse was the fault of a man.

Queering Campbell's Hero. Overcoming Male Mayhem and Female Diplomacy

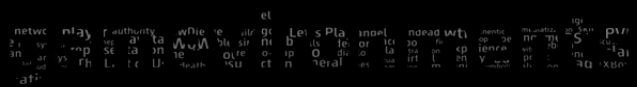
In both *Fallout 4* and *Horizon Zero Dawn*, the main character also follows the archetype of the hero. *Fallout 4* seemingly offers a high amount of possibility space when it comes to avatar creation. This, however, is strictly binary. The character editor in *Fallout 4* is intradiegetic, showing husband and wife in front of the bathroom mirror. Both can be adjusted only in the framework of what the 1960s might have allowed. The game actively tries to prevent gender trouble by sticking to a strictly cisnormative set of options. "Character creation makes it clear that FALLOUT 4 has a very binary understanding of gender, and it is difficult to create characters who blur the lines" (Cole 2016). Husband and wife have distinct hairstyles that underline their gender. Furthermore, the wife can be customized with make-up, a category that is not offered to the husband. Since the makeup category provides 21 additional options to alter the character, its absence is noteworthy. Body shapes can be "muscular," "thin" and "large," but it is impossible to alter, for example, hip and breast

individually (*Fallout 4*, 2015). That way, a stereotypical gendered shape is guaranteed by the game to prevent non-binary configurations. The name of the male hairstyles underline strength, such as "Boot Camp," "Tough Enough" or "Rebel" (*Fallout 4*, 2015). The female hairstyles underline intelligence as in "The Sophisticate" or "Summa Cum Laude" or serve to highlight a noir-like beauty such as in "Miss Noir," "Femme Fatale" or "Rough Nite" (*Fallout 4*, 2015). As a result, the character creation makes it abundantly clear that a binary code must be preserved.

When it comes to ludic attributes, however, the game makes no gendered difference. Points can be spent freely on attributes, allowing for the ludic – and subsequently partially narrative – shaping of character roles like sharpshooter, cowboy, or thief. The gender of the avatar is rarely mentioned. In the rigid conversations, the avatar is not marked as a gendered subject. Only when Codsworth calls the avatar *Sir* for the male avatar and *Mum* for the female one, their gender is marked, referring to a male protagonist by an honorary title, while female avatars are reduced to the fact that they gave birth.

Nevertheless, the avatar is always empowered in a stereotypically male way. "[I]n the past, killing has been defined as the ultimate power, a power generally attributed to men" (Herbst 2004, 40). Fighting is central to the game, which is why the avatar always occupies the role of the warrior, most likely that of the cowboy due to the greater variety of ranged weapons, which comes much more natural to the male avatar, since he is introduced as a soldier in the prologue. The focus on violence lies at the heart of most action games, as Nae (2022, 35) argues, in which the white cisgender heterosexual masculinity of the hero

> "must be constantly reaffirmed through violence as a form of gender performance. The illusion of freedom of action fostered by mainstream games



> is, in fact, a freedom of violence against other white heterosexual males, the gender/racial/sexual other, and the white heterosexual male self."

Although this open up a chance to re-signify violence in games as equally empowering to all genders, the female avatar was a lawyer in the past, and the sudden change to a cowboy seems contrived to the point of ludo-narrative dissonance. Both characters have distinctive backgrounds in the military and law, respectively. As a result, after over 200 years of stasis, the female protagonist is still completely untrained in combat, in addition to just having given birth, which is not mentioned once. Many players felt that when choosing the female avatar, the game is not actually her story due to the framing and the overall structure of the game.

> "Fallout 4 begins with the narration of a white man. You can choose to play as him, or change his race and gender in the character creation scene, but regardless of how you alter the character, the story continues to belong to this man: it is his story, his family, and his apocalypse. You can play for hours […] but you are reminded of him when you complete the main narrative." (Cole 2016)

Aloy's story, on the other hand, is filled with attempts to re-signify traditionally male domains. Due to the fact that the game offers only one character, it can only be her story. Although Aloy does achieve some of her goals through diplomacy, which, as a peaceful approach, is traditionally more likely to be attributed to females, she is presented as an introvert due to her outcast upbringing. As a huntress, her main skills lie in combat, and most quests and storylines revolve around how these male-coded skills are used to overcome adversity, usually in the form of aggressors that must be put down. Violence therefore is an essential part of *Horizon Zero Dawn*'s gameplay. One of Aloy's greatest achievements during her journey, however, is that she unites the world's communities under a common goal. She thereby also brings differently gendered cultures closer together.

While Aloy has the option to cause bloodshed, she and subsequently the player are also regularly given the option to refrain from killing. In the intro, for example, Aloy is hit with a stone by a boy named Bast, causing a bloody face-wound. She then has the opportunity to throw the stone at him, to avenge violence with violence. The option of not doing so, however, is clearly marked as preferred as it is the only option on the right of the screen, while the more violent options are on the left.

Aloy wanders both the machine world and the natural world. She uses technology for her own sake and explores the machine. She also teaches the people around her to use technology to protect rather than to hurt, for example as a tool in a detective quest to prove to a friend of hers, Erend, that his sister Ersa is still alive (Quest: *The City of the Sun*). Aloy therefore strives to first and foremost connect spheres and people. By succeeding in the proving, she is again admitted into the Nora tribe, connecting the sphere of the outsiders with that of the tribe, blurring the borders between what is outside and inside. She makes the tribes, who are normally not cooperating, work together, encourages the Nora to leave their protected valley to open up to the world and lets the Carja think more highly of women in empowered positions. Aloy's story is not only a story of a woman who becomes a hero, but also one who overcomes post-apocalyptic gender divisions. She queers male-connotated domains and makes them available for all genders.

Aloy can perform her gender to a certain extent through different clothing that does, however, also grant different ludic benefits. The typical connection between female empowerment and objectification, which is common in the action genre, is not made (Herbst 2004, 22). Nearly all of the 18 available outfits feature bare arms, some of them bare knees. Only one outfit, the Carja Blazon, shows a mild cleavage and a bare

waist. Since its specific fire protection is only important during very few segments of the game, however, it is unfit for permanent use, thereby making the most revealing outfit also one of the least useful ones.

Aloy's skill tree can be used to shape her already male-coded combat skills into an even more masculine form, as for example with skills that favor her use of open melee combat or heavy machine guns, or to emphasize more feminine tactics, such as stealth, enemy conversion, and ranged combat. However, a full playthrough grants enough skill points to max out the entire tree, which is why this field is only ever a temporary avenue for gender performance. There are practically no impactful decisions that would permanently shape Aloy's identity and gender performance. The game's ludic genre conventions ultimately enforce gameplay dominated by violent masculine strategies that are thus subverted by virtue of female embodiment. The same can be said for the roles she has to occupy. Her role as the warrior of the frontier against the robot uprising thus resembles the hypermasculine trope of the cowboy undermining the rise of outlaws and anarchy, subverting gender tropes in the process. Next to the warrior, Aloy inhabits the role of the hunter, stalking prey and slaying machines for their resources. Lastly, she repeatedly takes on the role of a detective, using her Focus multiple times to solve crimes or other mysteries, such as the vanishing of the war chief (Quest: *The War Chief's Trail*) or Erend's sister Ersa (Quest: *The City of the Sun*).

Conclusion

This article tackled the question of how the apocalypse transforms gender roles and breaks up with stereotypes in post-apocalyptic open world RPGs. It inquired whether

a change in hegemonic structures can be observed on the levels of society and individual characters as ambassadors of their respective cultures.

The outcome-oriented analysis shows that *Fallout 4* indeed has a hegemonic masculine structure as its base conception for the pre-apocalyptic world. It is shaped by nostalgic, androcentric ideals of soldiers as the active and aggressive fathers of the nation and mothers as the Other, passive and peaceful. *Horizon Zero Dawn*'s pre-apocalyptic conception, on the other hand, has already partly overcome race- and gender-disparities. The male entities in power are closely tied to financial power and technology and threaten humankind, nearly causing extinction. *Horizon Zero Dawn* therefore problematizes gender structures and builds its post-apocalyptic world onto that premise. The present-day in *Fallout 4* is a clearly American post-apocalypse, referencing patriotism and the recolonization of New England. The Western myth with the frontier and its lone hero is ubiquitous. The frontier is shaped by male-intended soldiers and military violence, even without a working military and the past rhetoric of fighting men and passive women is continued, without any form of transformation or role reversal. Apocalyptic dichotomies of good/evil and right/wrong, as well as gendered ones such as active/passive, male/female, fighting/supporting, fatherhood/motherhood are not only prevalent, but also form hierarchical relationships. In *Horizon Zero Dawn*, on the other hand, a diverse cast of empowered men and women fight together and undermine the androcentric outlook on the frontier myth. Similarly, while *Fallout 4* sets its focus on an exclusively male lineage, tied to heterosexual relationships, *Horizon Zero Dawn* reshapes its values in reaction to the male-dominated past, by honoring motherhood as well as individual achievements more than male values. This goes hand in hand with reclaiming technology as one potential domain of females in the shape of heroine Aloy. While the avatar of *Fallout 4*, due to the fact that the gender can be chosen, seems to be a

perfect vessel to queer the male connotated notion of heroism, offering room for a female reading, the narration is unmistakably that of a male hero. Aloy also uses the traditionally male domain of violence to reach narrative and ludic goals within the game, but it is presented as justified only when used to foster relations between individuals and clans. While the game still revolves around an action-heavy gameplay loop, it tries to foster an understanding for diplomatic approaches and respect for nature. *Fallout 4*'s apocalypse reveals that the world is ultimately unchanging, while *Horizon Zero Dawn* creates a world that explicitly forgot about the past instead of clinging to it, thereby making a new variety of gender roles possible.

If the apocalypse is, in its literal sense, a revelation of a new, true world order, the world of *Fallout 4* tells us that the natural best outcome has already been achieved in the past and has to be reclaimed for the present world. In *Horizon Zero Dawn*, the past results in a gender divide, which is then mended through the heroine, who reclaims traditionally male domains to queer them. *Fallout 4* and *Horizon Zero Dawn* thereby represent two opposing approaches, whereby one indeed uses the transformative potential of the apocalypse while the other does not. Due to the commercial success of both games, it will be interesting to see which one will inspire future generations of games with post-apocalyptic settings. With a medium that has so long been dominated by male heroes, providing almost exclusively male characters for identification, more games along the lines of *Horizon Zero Dawn* could lead to a more diverse range of games that subvert longstanding gender tropes and binary oppositions.

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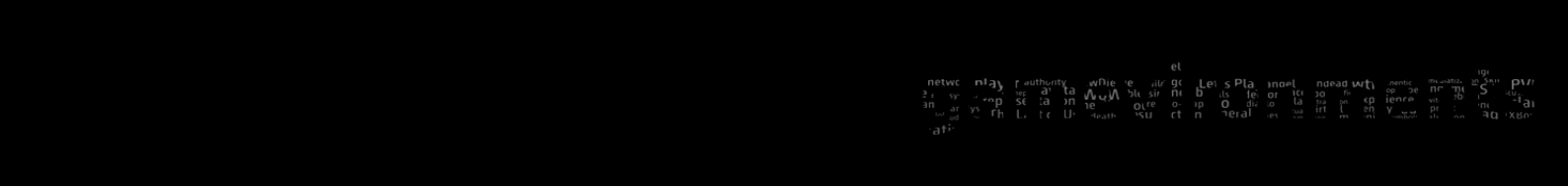

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