The Post-Apocalyptic and the Ludic: An Interview with Dr. Stephen Joyce

MAHSHID MAYAR (BIELEFELD UNIVERSITY) & STEPHEN JOYCE (AARHUS UNIVERSITY)

Mahshid Mayar (M.M.): Stephen Joyce, tell us more about your forthcoming book: what are the main arguments you make in *Transmedia Storytelling and the Apocalypse* about our twenty-first-century views of the world in response to what we consume as entertainment?

Stephen Joyce (S.T.): My initial question was simply wondering about the profusion of post-apocalyptic entertainment over the past twenty-five years. The end of the Cold War reduced anxiety about a potential global nuclear war, so one might think we would see less interest in post-apocalyptic scenarios – instead, the genre exploded across all platforms, from *The Walking Dead* to *The Last of Us* to *The Road*. Many people associate the genre's popularity with current anxieties such as climate change, but in my book I try to break the Big Question into smaller questions: Why are media producers drawn to the genre? What are the attractions of the genre for fans? How do its characteristic textual features and motifs interact with modern storytelling techniques? These questions led me to consider the genre's relationship to transmedia storytelling and media franchising.

One of the distinctive qualities of modern media, with on-demand content, technological hybridity, and active fan communities, is that it enables immersive transmedia worldbuilding. At the same time, media conglomeration and franchising have created a demand for storyworlds, such as *Star Wars* or the *Harry Potter* series, that can be spread across all platforms. One key reason for the post-apocalyptic's current popularity is that it creates a portal to flexible yet coherent fantasy worlds derived from our own which can be the basis for multiple stories by different creative teams across various platforms. *The Walking Dead* is probably the premier example of this, with the award-winning comics by Robert

Kirkman, AMC's hit TV series (and now spinoff series *Fear the Walking Dead*), the successful videogames by Telltale Games, the novels by Jay Bonansinga, not to mention the online content, fan art and fan fiction, and zombie runs worldwide. This ability to create immersive transmedia worlds is a defining characteristic of modern media.

Of course, there's also a cultural dimension to the genre's popularity, but I'll say more about this a bit later. One of the main points for me was to get away from interpretive strategies that read cultural products the way Freud read dreams, as something that can be directly psychoanalyzed to reveal our society's fears and anxieties. What primarily interests me is how cultural preoccupations are processed and filtered through our media eco-system.

M.M.: What is the place of video games in the complex image you sketch of the 'trans-media eco-system'? In giving shape to and popularizing this genre across the media, what is the advantage of video games over other media?

S.J.: For me, video games have had a bigger impact than many people realize on how narratives are told across media. This is partly for aesthetic reasons and partly industrial reasons. The aesthetic influence is that videogames are the art form that is most directly concerned with active audiences. How do you tell a coherent story when the audience chooses where to go and what to look at? The key game for me is a post-apocalyptic classic: *BioShock*. What *BioShock* did so well was that to create a character-driven arc and a worldbuilding arc. The character's story ran the player through a linear sequence of events, but around that story was the question of what happened to the city of Rapture to turn it into an underwater nightmare.

This can be explored to different depths, with smaller stories embedded into the environment in audio diaries, in the décor, even in the music. The post-apocalyptic is really a perfect genre for this kind of storytelling because one of the major questions in any post-apocalyptic narrative is: what happened to turn our world into this? This kind of environmental storytelling has been really influential in developing transmedia franchising because transmedia franchises can never be sure if audiences have experienced all the extensions, so the extensions focus, as *BioShock* did, on embedding information on characters and world histories that enriches our experience if we find them. So I think part of the reason post-apocalyptic videogames are so popular is the genre is perfect for this kind of storytelling, and this kind of storytelling has also had a major influence on transmedia narratives, which helps explain why the post-apocalyptic is such a popular transmedia genre.

One broader industrial reason this gaming narrative technique has been influential across media is that the gaming industry has become significantly more powerful, leading to demands for a more flexible approach to media franchising. Typically, film and television are the dominant partners in any transmedia storyworld and can dictate terms to writers of tie-in novels and comics and other ancillary media. What has changed over the past twenty-five years is that video games now rival Hollywood in terms of revenue and blockbuster budgets. This makes them less willing to create game versions that simply follow a film's plot because if the film fails then it will take the expensive video game down with it. This is a process I call franchise entropy, which is the opposite of synergy. Because of this, games, films, and television may share the same IP, such as *Tomb Raider* or *Assassin's Creed*, but instead of copying each other they focus more on storyworld expansion, so we follow different characters or backstories in the same narrative universe. That way even if one entry in the franchise fails, it doesn't necessarily destroy the audience for other media. So, the flexible way games tell stories has now become the default way transmedia tells stories.

M.M.: In the introduction to your book, Stephen, you mention the by-and-large unknown roots of the post-apocalyptic literature in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* in 1826. How does the genre's timeline look like?

S.J.: Although people often lump the apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic together, they are actually really different genres that share a similar event: a civilization-destroying catastrophe. In the religious apocalyptic narrative, it makes no sense to talk about a group of survivors after the Last Judgment. God isn't going to forget anyone and leave a few random people wandering around on Earth afterwards. It's only with the emergence of industrial civilization that we get the post-apocalyptic and I think that's because industrial civilization is so complex it makes people wonder if it's possible to survive anymore in its absence. There's a quote from Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) that I think helps explain the attraction:

If we examine, I say, all these things, and consider what a variety of labour is employed about each of them, we shall be sensible that without the assistance and co-operation of many thousands, the very meanest person in a civilized country could not be provided, even according to what we very falsely imagine, the easy and simple manner in which he is commonly accommodated. (1.11)

So, instead of seeing it alongside the apocalyptic, the genre's closest relation may be the Robinsonade, stories of castaways on desert islands who must also survive without modern civilisation. However, Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* didn't spawn any real successors. There are some scattered works throughout the nineteenth century, but there's no real recognition of anything like a post-apocalyptic genre. It really only comes into being after 1945.

M.M.: I am particularly interested in your opinion about the post-WWII allure of the genre. What is so remarkably 'contemporary' about the post-apocalyptic?

S.J.: Obviously, the A-bomb and the threat of nuclear war made the possibility of a global holocaust more real. But I think the bomb also provided concrete expression of a general fear about the pace of technological and industrial

change. The more power technology gives us over nature, the more we worry about technology's power over us, because we are also a part of nature. Hence, a key motif in the post-apocalyptic genre is ambivalence about technology, with characters desperately seeking the remains of our industrial civilization (searching for bullets, tinned food, scanning radio channels, etc.) even as the causes of disaster are often things like AI or genetic engineering.

The other aspect that feels contemporary is how the post-apocalyptic offers a chance to rewrite the social contract. Although many people see the genre as an expression of fear, I think it's most positive attraction is that it offers what Richard G. Mitchell calls culture crafting, the chance to imagine a new culture from scratch. How would it be governed? What would be a standard unit of trade? What tools would be useful and what would become redundant? One chapter in my book looks at doomsday preppers and survivalists as a growing subculture. Although many see them as lunatic conspiracy theorists, I think when you examine their practices you see that they are really trying to immerse themselves in their own storyworld and most of them value the experiences the genre provides. Preppers really value things like sustainable living, healthy eating, and personal fitness (to outrun the zombies), so a lot of their activities dovetail well with contemporary trends in personal maximization. On the other hand, their desire to rip down society and start anew also articulates a disaffection with contemporary society and politics, and a sense of powerlessness to change their direction other than by tearing it all down. This is also very contemporary, I think.

M.M.: How American is the genre? How global is it?

S.J.: Today, the genre is global, but the USA still exerts the strongest influence on its development, simply because it is the most dominant media producer. But the USA isn't monolithic. One cultural aspect I look at in the book is how the post-apocalyptic transformed into a counterpoint to the apocalyptic rhetoric used by the Bush administration to frame 9/11 and the War on Terror. In his speeches from that period, Bush tended to frame 9/11 as a defining historical moment that had revealed America's mission and clearly divided the world into good and evil, paving the way for the final battle. In contrast, post-apocalyptic narratives such as *Battlestar Galactica* (2003-2009) began strongly emphasizing moral ambiguity, the blurring of boundaries between right and wrong, and the absence of any clear plan or strategy in confusing times. So, elements that are now characteristic of the genre gained prominence as a cultural response within the USA to the dominant political narratives of their time.

The post-apocalyptic is one of the only sci-fi and fantasy genres that can be done on a low budget, so it's popular across the globe, and it's flexible enough to adapt to local environments. The videogame *Metro: Last Light*, for example, is set in the Moscow Metro following an apocalyptic event and was made by the Ukraine-based 4A Games with Russian author Dmitri Glukhovsky. What I love about it is that it has a distinctively Russian feel, even though it draws on many of the genre's characteristic tropes. One example of how the post-apocalyptic genre is different in other countries compared to the USA is that, in the American post-apocalyptic, the end of the USA = the end of the world. This type of equivalence isn't true of other places. In the British film *28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle, 2002), for example, there's a crucial moment when the protagonist is about to give up and then he looks up and sees an airplane. Suddenly, he realizes that the apocalypse is localized to Great Britain and the rest of the world has simply quarantined the island and is going on as normal. Such moments don't happen in American movies. Japan has its own post-apocalyptic genre culture, which has been highly influential (e.g. *Godzilla*, the cyberpunk anime *Akira*). So it's a genre which has many regional inflections, even if the dominant tropes are still often determined by American media productions.

M.M.: In the 'game-over era' we live in— this post-imperial, post-colonial moment in contemporary history—how do video games grapple with the ideological, the historical, and the individual while still remaining highly entertaining?

S.J.: I think videogames are only beginning to grasp how to conjoin serious issues with gameplay mechanics and narrative. For me, a landmark in this development is *BioShock*, which juxtaposes a critique of libertarianism with the player's desire for greater control over gameplay, all experienced through a shocking twist when we expect to have the power to act but cannot. *The Last of Us* contains a similarly thought-provoking loss of player choice near the end, which has provoked a lot of insightful discussion, as it only has an effect within a medium predicated on player choice and agency. The ability to create storyworlds and give players freedom to explore and decisively change the environment is something games increasingly do very well. The *Assassin's Creed* series as a whole does a good job of recreating different cities and time periods that players can explore, even if games have a harder time with dialogue, characterization, and non-stereotypical programming of NPCs. *Assassin's Creed III* surprised a lot of people by incorporating a critical reflection on the American War of Independence into the gameplay, which sparked a lot of discussions about the actual history behind the game. In many ways, the content of games isn't as important as the conversations they enable.

Because of what the medium can do, I think videogames are ideally suited to experiment (as the post-apocalyptic genre does) with alternate histories and alternate worlds, where players explore the paths not taken. I'd love to see certain genres critically reflect more on their own premises. For example, a lot of strategy games still depend on conquering enemy territories and imperial expansion and game mechanics reward players for seizing new territories and resources – I'd like to see game developers think about ways to complicate that premise and make gamers reflect on the violence they are unleashing, the way *BioShock* did in the famous cutscene with Andrew Ryan. If there's a strategy game out there that does this, then I'm not familiar with it. Something like a reverse strategy game, in which players desperately attempt to hang onto their land and culture in the face of an unstoppable European invasion, might be interesting. I think building up these discussions about how gameplay can be conjoined with narrative and theme are vital for the development of games, more so than any technological development.

M.M.: What in your view are some of the ways the post-apocalyptic and the post-colonial meet in video games? And, how comparably rendered are these themes in movies and video games?

S.J.: I think at a basic level both are united by the desire to rebuild after a catastrophic event and to imagine an alternate world in which things turned out differently or in which we have more agency than many feel they currently possess. Post-apocalyptic worlds offer a chance to wipe the slate clean of colonial legacies. For example, in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*, it is only late in the novel that we discover the main character is black, because in a zombie apocalypse, race becomes meaningless and the only meaningful distinction is living/undead.

I think videogames would benefit from taking on more of a postcolonial perspective, and not just from a public service perspective. I would like to see strategy games in which the player is not the conqueror but the invaded, or possibly a first-person game where race is a key theme but you don't know the race of your own avatar until late in the game, as in *Zone One*. The race of your character in the fantasy game *Morrowind* actually conditions how NPCs interact with you, but I'm not familiar with any non-fantasy applications of this idea. It's also a question of framing these ideas persuasively for the gaming community. I suspect demanding such changes out of political correctness would lead to a vitriolic backlash, a la Gamergate, when instead they can be seen as ways of invigorating clichéd genres with new perspectives. I don't think it's a good medium for teaching didactic lessons, but it does excel at creating challenging worlds to explore, after which gamers have to determine their own view on events, as in e.g. *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, with its internal debates on human enhancement technologies. Illustrating how postcolonial perspectives can enrich the gaming experience may be one role of critical debate during the game-over era.

M.M.: Thank you so much for this interview!

Author's biography

Mahshid Mayar is an assistant professor of North American Literature and Culture at Bielefeld University, Germany. She holds a Ph.D. in history from the Bielefeld Graduate School in History and Sociology (BGHS). While her doctoral project (under review for publication as her first book) examined the cultural geographical formations of the U.S. Empire at the turn of the 20th century, her postdoctoral/Habiliation project focuses on U.S. history through the lens of video games. Her research interests include childhood studies, history of globalization, American studies, 19th century U/S. history, cultural geography, and critical game studies.

Stephen Joyce is an Associate Professor in media, literature and culture at Aarhus University, Denmark. His newest book is Transmedia Storytelling and the Apocalypse (Palgrave Macmillan 2018), which examines the coevolution of transmedia storytelling, media franchising, and the post-apocalyptic genre. He has published numerous articles on film, television, video games, and literature. He is also the author of A River of Han: Eastern Tragedy in a Western Land (Heidelberg: Winter Verlag 2015), which explores Asian American literature, postcolonialism, trauma, and tragedy in a transnational context. His current research interests include the influence of transmedia on journalism and politics.