

Beyond the Ruins: A Heideggerian Analysis of Videogames, Technology and the End of the World

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INTRODUCTION

This abstract brings forward a theorisation of different articulations of the apocalypse, and what follows, as found within videogames. The "end of the world" is a frequently employed narrative trope in videogames that has been researched by several scholars from a variety of perspectives. Ben Abraham (2014), Alenda Chang (2019), Cameron Kunzelman (2022), Shawna Kelly and Bonnie Nardi (2014), Lawrence May and Ben Hall (2024) have all reflected on the ludic representations of the post-apocalypse as opportunities for ecological reflection and sites of speculation for "how things might turn out". Mercé Oliva, Óliver Pérez-Latorre and Reinald Besalú (2018), Pérez-Latorre (2019), and Steven Poole (2017), have instead approached the post-apocalypse as an ideological playground, where the institutional guardrails of contemporary life are removed and what remains is a neoliberal fantasy of a stateless condition. Matthew Spokes (2018) has written about videogames set in the post-apocalypse as a site for the encounter with, and the contemplation of, death by part of the player. That the end of the world has been so extensively and deeply researched, then, confirms Hyong-Jun Moon's (2014) suggestion that narrative media, videogames included, find themselves within a post-apocalyptic turn.

While this research makes important observations and advances our understanding on the topic, questions about the precise meaning of "end" and "world" are not addressed by previous scholarship. Despite the apocalypse, the presence of vibrant environments, culturally rich communities, and functional economies and markets, suggests that the concepts of "end" and "world" take on specific declinations within the videogame medium, which this paper explores. A phenomenological framework is adopted, wherein the term "world" is not merely understood in its physical sense, but rather signifies contexts in which phenomena acquire distinct meanings (Christensen 2012; Jacobs 2018). From this perspective, the "end of the world" can be seen as the "end of meaning". Drawing insights from Martin Heidegger's ([1954]1968; [1954]1971; [1927]2008; [1944/45]2010) writings, this paper delves into the interpretation of the "end of the world" and its intricate relationship with technology, understood here not as 'tools', but as a mode of revealing the world defined by instrumentality, calculation and efficiency. Technology as such is not a discrete mode of 'things' to be found within their physical properties, or their causes, but rather is a 'mindset', 'attitude', or 'comportment'.

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Three distinct articulations of this relationship in videogames are identified: videogames of *destruction*, videogames of *devastation*, and videogames of *releasement*. Videogames of destruction, epitomized by the *Fallout* series, depict the "end of the world" in ontic terms, often characterized by extensive death, adversity, and ruin caused by technology. These games present a significant shift in worldly conditions, yet some crucial elements of the pre-apocalypse world remain preserved, allowing for an intensification of neoliberal market logics through a perpetuation of a techno-instrumental attitude. Videogames of devastation, on the other hand, present the apocalypse ontologically, offering no prospects for anything at all to arise following the collapse brought about by techno-instrumentality, as seen in *End of the World* (LevTrix 3 2023). Videogames of releasement, exemplified by *After Worlds Ends* (StickTrix n.d.) reflect Heidegger's (2010) concept of *Gelassenheit*, or "letting-be". This comportment diverges from the techno-instrumental attitude, emphasizing instead an openness to Being. Far from being a passive acceptance, *Gelassenheit* facilitates the end of one type of world while fostering receptiveness to another. Through releasement, videogames can facilitate a unique engagement with the concept of the world's end. This interpretation aligns with Heidegger's perspective, which sees an end not as a terminus but as a prelude to different beginnings, allowing players to navigate and find meaning in the aftermath of a world's conceptual end.

BIO

Andrea Andiloro is a lecturer in the program of Games and Interactivity at Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne. He teaches game studies, narrative design and user-centred design. His research involves philosophical approaches to the study of videogames, media, and technology, including phenomenology, aesthetics, and ontology.

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