Article

A Sense of Presence: Mediating an American Apocalypse

Rachel Wagner

Department of Philosophy and Religion, Ithaca College, Ithaca, NY 14850, USA; rwagner@ithaca.edu

Abstract: Here I build upon Robert Orsi's work by arguing that we can see presence—and the longing for it—at work beyond the obvious spaces of religious practice. Presence, I propose, is alive and well in mediated apocalypticism, in the intense imagination of the future that preoccupies those who consume its narratives in film, games, and role plays. Presence is a way of bringing worlds beyond into tangible form, of touching them and letting them touch you. It is, in this sense, that Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward observe the "re-emergence" of religion with a "new visibility" that is much more than "simple re-emergence of something that has been in decline in the past but is now manifesting itself once more." I propose that the "new awareness of religion" they posit includes the mediated worlds that enchant and empower us via deeply immersive fandoms. Whereas religious institutions today may be suspicious of presence, it lives on in the thick of media fandoms and their material manifestations, especially those forms that make ultimate promises about the world to come.

Keywords: apocalypticism; Orsi; enchantment; fandom; video games; pervasive games; cowboy; larp; West

1. Introduction

Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward observe the "re-emergence" of religion today with a "new visibility" that is "far more complex and nuanced than simple re-emergence of something that has been in decline in the past but is now manifesting itself once more" (Hoelzl and Ward 2008, p. 1). Instead of positing a restoration of "lost" religion, they point to a "new awareness of religion" that includes, among other things, some manifestations of religion "that we have never encountered before" (Hoelzl and Ward 2008, p. 2). Among these, I argue, are the mediated worlds that enchant and empower us via deeply immersive fandoms, especially the American form of apocalyptic fandom that I call the cowboy apocalypse. This mode of apocalypticism draws on an idealization of the American West, melding it with post-apocalyptic expectation of a return to the frontier environment in a way that celebrates the self-proclaimed messiah who saves only those closest to him. The gun, in this apocalyptic mythology, becomes a material authentication of the desire for the predicted transformation of the world, a signal of the past and a harbinger of a future in which white male hegemony will once again be celebrated as the peak of American identity. Robert Orsi's theological look at "presence" can be invoked to make sense of the gun's almost sacramental quality in this quasi-religious apocalyptic practice of forward-looking hopefulness for a return to violent frontier ideals.

In his book *History and Presence*, Robert Orsi talks about how religious objects can be recruited to stand in the intersection between this world and a heavenly one. For Orsi, presence is a way of bringing distant worlds into tangible form, of touching them and letting them touch you. Presence is a theological concept, explaining how people distant from heaven can nonetheless engage with material objects that evoke that desired otherworldly space. Here I build upon Orsi's work by arguing that presence—and the longing for it—is at work in other places beyond the obvious spaces of religious practice like communion or pilgrimage. Presence, I propose, is also alive and well in mediated apocalypticism, in the intense imagination of the future that preoccupies those who consume violent apocalyptic narratives in film, games, and role plays—and in the guns that authenticate these imaginary

spaces as realistic imaginings of a world to come. Instead of evoking heaven, the cowboy apocalypse and its sense of presence evokes a desired future of recurring violence and celebration of the individualized manly savior figure.

As Greg Carey notes, "apocalyptic discourse refuses to acknowledge the present world of perception and experience as the ultimate reality. Instead it looks toward an alternative reality in which righteousness prospers while evil is either punished or abolished." One of the most distinctive traits of apocalyptic discourse is "its interest in [such] alternative worlds, whether in terms of time (such as the age to come) or space (as in the heavenly realms)" (Carey 2005, p. 6). As one vector of contemporary apocalyptic discourse, cowboy apocalypticism focuses on otherworldly spaces by imagining the imminent transformation of our *present* world into a new space. This future world can be accessed *now*, through the repeated mediation of its worldview in films and games, and through the materialization of its most poignant prop: the gun. It can be inhabited via role-play activities that place the gun owner at the center of a stark apocalyptic narrative with powerful political implications.

Osha Gray Davidson has identified contemporary gun control measures as taking on "the quality of a holy war for [some] firearms owners," who exercise "religious fervor" in the protection of their beloved objects (Davidson 1998, p. 44). The gun functions as an enchanted object bridging current reality and the world to come—a sacred object pointing now to the desired future and working as a sign of "presence" for that future world. Just as religious people have always looked to other worlds for succor in times of strain, so contemporary fans of the cowboy apocalypse look to their hoped-for future as an otherworldly space in which they see their fantasies of renewed hegemony fulfilled. Mediating this future world *now* in the form of apocalyptically themed films, video games, and live-action role plays, fans can enact a kind of ritual devotion that allows them to temporarily inhabit the desired future world while still residing in this one. The gun is the central agent in this fandom's new religious work. It is an object of religious presence: the material authentication of a dark but seductive otherworldly reality. The "new visibility" of religion here takes a dark and dangerous form.

2. Enchantment and Presence

Drawing on Max Weber, Orsi argues that before the Enlightenment, people's lives were "enchanted" by the presumption of "supernatural presences" and that people "called on these extra-human presences to witness and to intervene in the affairs of life, domestic and social." Christians saw Jesus as "literally present there on the altar" and "supernatural beings were everywhere, experienced in all the modalities of the senses" (Orsi 2016, p. 37). Orsi says that a new conceptualization of the relationship between humans and Gods began in the early sixteenth century, influenced by David Hume's skepticism about metaphysics. This "fissure" between the natural and the supernatural has since "run through the center of Western culture and through all of the modern world wherever the armies, missionaries, and merchants of Protestant and Catholic empires landed, which is to say almost everywhere" (Orsi 2016, p. 45). The presumption of "modern religion," especially Protestantism, is that we should experience religious objects as mere representation, without attributing to them a sense of otherworldly presence (Orsi 2016, p. 38).

Michael Saler refers to popular play with imagined worlds as "ironic imagination," and says that such engagement "promises a way to experience wonders and marvels while avoiding enchantment's potential to beguile" (Saler 2012, p. 139). People engaging in rich fandom activities can profess a kind of immunity to transcendence, ostensibly maintaining a distance from presence while embracing it in a new way. They have cover, claiming that the worlds they adore are "fictional" and they are just "fans." The incarnations they enact through donning costumes, crafting ritual objects, or going on pilgrimage are a bit of simple fun. The denial of belief while investing deeply in pretending to believe is in fact a central feature of fandom practices—and actually marks their characteristic longing for something beyond ordinary life.

While focusing on traditionally religious sites, Orsi takes a similar tack when he argues that despite the contemporary tendency to dilute religious experience, presence has not disappeared but merely shifted locations. He walks his readers through examples of rich Catholic presence in places like Medjugorje and Chimayo, with appearances of the otherworldly in souvenirs like handfuls of dirt, bottled water, and framed portraits. Visitors to Lourdes and other shrines to Mary visit shops with "heaps of rosaries and statues of the Blessed Mother," with wax or tin images of body parts for healing rituals, as well as holy cards, branded umbrellas, cards, toys, and even ashtrays with the image of Mary on them. The comparison to secular fandoms is obvious. Church officials are sometimes offended by such material excess and tell the pilgrims that "such tasteless messiness crowds out the real meaning of the sites." Orsi would have us notice what such religious critics miss: "that excess itself is the meaning" (Orsi 2016, p. 57). This preoccupation with sacred objects is a means of evoking presence. As I argue here, presence can function effectively in ostensibly non-religious arenas too.

Robert Pratten refers to "immersion" and "extractability" as two modes of engaging with fictional story worlds—but they apply just as well to religious worlds. Immersion is "the ability to wrap the fictional storyworld around the fan." In immersion, the person enters into a manufactured material world like a theme park or role play, and the fictional story wraps around the fan. The religious analog would be entering a sacred location which surrounds the believer with distinctive sights and sounds. Extractability is "the ability for the fan to wrap the real world around the fictional storyworld" (Pratten 2015, p. 8). In "extractability," the person recreates a special object like a prop or element of clothing and uses it in the real world as a means of feeling closer to the distanced, fictional world. Sacred objects evoking special locations or heavenly power similarly have the capacity to bring the otherworldly to the worldly, to export divine energy from a realm beyond and into our immediate experience.

Both immersion and extractability are forms of media materialization in which things pass from the virtual to the physical, cultivating a sense of presence for the world beyond. Props—whether religious or secular—become a bridge between this world and another one. Props, relics, and sacred objects promise presence—a tangible link to a desirable world beyond. It is easy to see how fandom and religion similarly truck in both immersion and extractability, with special spaces that wrap around participants and hierophanic material objects that make otherworldly places feel immediately present. It is not much of a stretch to see how Orsi's observations about contemporary religious presence can then successfully be applied—in ways he did not anticipate—to the dark apocalyptic fandoms of American gun culture.

3. The Apocalyptic Impulse

Apocalypses exhibit what Joseph Dewey calls a "relentlessly end-oriented" mode of thinking that "savors the radical violence of imminent planetary alteration: the buildup and climax of the apocalyptic event itself" (Dewey 1990, p. 13). In the book of *Revelation*, for example, we find vivid predictions of violent heavenly judgement against one's enemies, followed by promise of heavenly rewards for the faithful.

The first apocalypses originated in religious contexts, but contemporary forms need not be explicitly religious. Robert Joustra and Alissa Wilkinson describe "dystopian apocalypses," which they define as melancholy meditations on ultimate violence and destruction with no sense of divine intervention, and no hope of recovery or redemption. The "artifacts of popular culture" that interest them are focused on the end of this world only, not an ethereal hereafter:

> They're stories that have the distinct sense embedded in them that this social order can't last—that we are, in fact, near the end of something...Sometimes it looks like things blowing up—a material apocalypse. Sometimes it is an impending political ruin or seismic cultural shift (like *House of Cards* or *Mad Men*). Sometimes it is an emotional and existential collapse. But taken together, we

get a frightening picture of what we, as a culture, think looms on the horizon: a destruction of our own making, with no hope for renewal. (Joustra and Wilkinson 2016, pp. 60–61)

It seems obvious to me, though, that many iterations of secular apocalyptic myth *do* offer hope for the future. The imagination of what comes *after* the end is a way of expressing one's desire for how things *ought* to be here on earth. When read this way, the post-apocalypticism of much of contemporary media can be read as inherently ideological. Even a dusty wasteland after societal collapse can seem appealing if it replaces a sense of powerlessness with the image of a strong man on the frontier.

American cowboy mythology has been radically transformed in recent years, melding in conspicuous ways with elements of the much older myth of apocalypticism to produce a new version of the end times. Its hero is a kind of individualized cowboy messiah, the brave man who knows exactly who to shoot, and who saves civilization by doing so. The cowboy messiah is not devoid of otherworldly hope: He just redefines that new world as one to be built *on earth* in the aftermath of overwhelming destruction. When the earth is destroyed, says the cowboy apocalypse, it will be the gun-toting hero who will tame the American frontier once again.

This imagination of the world to come is shaped by the dark ideals of an imagined American past of white male supremacy (I deal with this phenomenon in more detail in my nearly completed manuscript by the same name, *Cowboy Apocalypse*). Writing about the stories of the American West, Russell Martin says that such myths are "simple and familiar stories that we use to explain the complex events of human existence, stories that bridge the gap between the actual way in which things occur and the way in which we understand them" (Martin 1983, p. 43). Apocalypse is a highly rhetorical mode of engagement, since it "seeks to convince listeners of the correctness of its point of view and that their lives will turn out to have meaning, despite all the evidence to the contrary produced by the chaotic torments of history" (Daniels 2005, p. 11). To understand apocalyptic myths is to understand what the people who repeat them value—and also what they fail to grasp. America's shameful origins of white supremacy are recast as marketable ideals for the future in the violent combustion of the cowboy apocalypse.

The notion of the capable gunslinger was born in the hardships endured as new Americans proclaimed their right over the Native American lands. As this hostile theft was romanticized, the cowboy became a central figure in stories of order maintenance on the chaotic frontier. The cowboy was known for his independence and resilience. He helped spread American influence westward—carving out, like the Israelites, a new civilization in the "wilderness," destroying native dwellers in the process. In the doctrine of manifest destiny, the cowboy fought for "good" as he spread the authority of the new "American way." He used his prowess with the gun to eradicate any "bad guys" who impeded his progress. The idea of "law and order" was enabled by the gun itself, a material justice wielded by the heroic cowboy.

As a roots-up expression of white masculine nostalgia, the cowboy apocalypse is fraught with the fractures of America's infatuation with racism and imperialism. The myth appears today as a repeatedly mediated performance of desire for a simpler time when white men defined American values and others knew their place. By positing an imagined "world" in the future, the cowboy apocalypse is at once a religious expression, a form of fan devotion, and an ideological platform with the potential for violent expression. Here I consider the cowboy apocalypse myth in America, providing examples of increasing embodiment as the myth moves from more passively consumed media like film to volatile, embodied media with role-play components.

4. Film

One of the favorite films of gun enthusiasts is *Red Dawn* (1984). Identified by *American Rifleman* as one of the "top ten coolest gun movies," *Red Dawn* plays out the barebones of the cowboy apocalypse story, presenting young heroes who defeat foreign foes through their

wits, preparation, and prodigious skill with firearms. The cowboy apocalypse narrative also shows up in post-apocalyptic films like *Zombieland* (2009), *Young Ones* (2014) and *A Quiet Place* (2018), even if some films replace human enemies with supernatural ones like aliens and zombies. The plot in such films is highly predictable; the good guys will teach their enemies a violent lesson even if outnumbered—and guns will play a key role in success.

The filmic mode of the cowboy apocalypse is arguably the least dangerous, since the viewer has no real power to change the narrative or participate in it beyond a voyeuristic status. One may identify closely with a character onscreen but have no power to change that character's actions. Filmed objects also cannot be touched by viewers, unless one purchases an expensive prop like the gun used in *Blade Runner* (1982) or a weapon from *The Matrix* (1999) (for more on my interpretation of this phenomenon, see Wagner 2020). Brent Plate has described how elements of film can seem to step offscreen through themed *bar mitzvahs* or weddings, or through material rituals like those associated with *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (see especially Plate 2008). In the cowboy apocalypse, replica props could offer a similar form of intimate connection, especially for viewers deeply invested with those objects through role play or fan-oriented display. But it is also possible (and quite common) to watch a film without material props handy and with no power to change the plot.

5. Video Games

The cowboy apocalypse also appears in video games like *Wasteland Angel* (2011), *MotorStorm Apocalypse* (2011), and *Survarium* (2015). Talmadge Wright, David Embrick, and Andrés Lukács see video games as a common site for the expression of apocalyptic violence:

> Apocalyptic fantasies appear in the smoldering landscape of a devastated Washington, D.C., in the game *Fallout 3*. And Washington, D.C. is destroyed again in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* as Russian troops occupy the U.S. Whitehouse. Utopian fantasies of an Ayn Rand–styled universe become a horrid nightmare in the game *Bioshock*. Utopian dreams of endless resources and castles in the sky appear in the online multiplayer game *World of Warcraft*, mixed with apocalyptic war imagery in a fantasy universe of endless fecundity. (Lukács et al. 2010, p. 3)

Unlike biblical apocalypses, which represent God as punishing his enemies, these interactive texts present independent, rugged messiah figures who take the task of judgment onto themselves. God is nowhere to be found.

Whereas video games invite greater interactivity than films, the player's physical body is still distanced from the screened world. No matter how immersed players become, they cannot enter a digital game in bodily form. Instead, players engage via avatars and experience the "surprising, often counterintuitive articulation between their manipulation of the interface and the avatar's obedient responses." The difference between appearance and reality is an "alterity enabling players both to embrace the avatar as an ideal and to reject it as an inferior other" (Rehak 2003, p. 107). The visible distinction between the player's body and the avatar is a constant reminder of the distinction between the material world and the screened world of the game. One can never fully become one's virtual representation and one can never be completely integrated into the digital world.

Jesper Juul discusses how video games utilize graphics, sound, texts, visual cues, haptics, and rules to encourage a sense of immersion. Players interact with onscreen images by using a controller that can "signify actions in the game world." Various finger gestures signify shooting, and others can be used to move the character through the digital landscape (Juul 2005, p. 134). The physical body in the digital world is represented by a digital double: a hand, a gun, even a proxy body. But no avatar is a perfect reflection, and a virtual gun cannot really shoot. Virtual reality headsets like the *Oculus Rift* or the *HTC Vive* can enhance a sense of bodily immersion, but still the player is barred from material entry and must use virtual extensions of the self to act in the game. Presence is thwarted as

game controllers, typically based on a predictable system of buttons and joysticks, cannot materially evoke the things to which they point.

The distanced nature of virtual weapons can inspire some fans to try to bridge the gap. Ian Peters considers the example of the "mounted, battle-scarred batarang" that comes in the collector's edition for *Batman: Arkham Asylum*. Peters suggests that a replica weapon can acquire a "pseudo-authentic layer," seeming *more* real than its virtual model because it has manifested in material form. The player can actually hold the replica, thereby partially bridging the gulf between material and screened reality. Replicas are "power objects" that offer a "tangible link" to the game and also make those who possess them feel special (Peters 2014). Here, a sense of presence is more likely.

Plate writes of religious objects that have been "put to use in highly symbolic, sacred ways," and explains how they "link us with a world beyond our own skin" (Plate 2014, p. 4). Such objects have the means to "act upon the world and change it in some significant way" as they "cure and bless and kill" (Plate 2014, p. 11). Scholars of fandom sometimes talk about props in ways that seem to draw on Plate's approach, and also resemble Orsi's take on presence: "Mimetic fandom," says Matt Hills, "performs a desired bridging of text and reality," that is, it links the world we inhabit and another world beyond. Hills talks about props as "framing immateriality," while they "convey a sense of boundary crossing, of moving from textuality to reality." Props "move across" the lines of the fictional and the material producing an "ontological bridging" between the story world and everyday life (Hills 2014). In this sense, replica props based on films offer an incarnational aesthetic. They bring to life elements of a non-material space.

Props, like religious objects, unite this world with another and, in so doing, perform a sense of presence. Bob Rehak considers replicas that serve as "transubstantiated fictions," blurring the "ontological distinction between screen texts and solid objects" (Rehak 2013, p. 29). Lincoln Geraghty similarly says that fan merchandise can provide "physical connections" to "fantasy worlds," thus linking the two (Geraghty 2014, p. 6). For Geraghty, the dominance of digital culture can actually feed into the desire to materialize screened culture, making it seem less ephemeral (Geraghty 2014, p. 2).

6. Larp (Live-Action Role Play)

Whereas films and video games depend on screened environments to depict other-worldly spaces, larps build on the raw stuff of life for the material of play. For example, in the post-apocalyptic larp *After the End*, players must engage in violent battles in a harsh future environment. The overview of *After the End* describes a scene that tightly matches the cowboy apocalypse pattern:

> The world *After the End* is not quite like anything that came before it. Civilization is a paltry candle flame compared to the mighty globe-spanning empires that once were. A great deal of technology has been lost. People band together for survival in a mostly lawless wilderness long gone to seed . . . Survival in the world is a precarious thing, taking no small amount of skill, luck, and determination. The year is 2319, almost 100 years *After the End*, and the world is not a pretty place. But it is a place where damn near anything can happen. Keep your powder dry, and you just might live to see the sunrise. (After the End n.d.)

The future in *After the End* has a Wild West aesthetic that celebrates survival through rank violence. The overview says: "The last breaths of the old world gasped out across a broken, brown world ravaged beyond measure. And yet, in caves and bunkers and basements, there were yet a handful of people who survived." The designers want combat to be "gritty, hard, and high-stakes" so that it "means something when someone draws their gun." Indeed, guns are "the primary mechanism for resolving conflicts." Because shooting guns is meant to be "fun" in the game and they do not want players to be killed off too quickly, the designers include a supernatural mechanism that makes people harder to kill (After the End n.d.).

Heidi Hopeametsä explains that in larps, the player is materially present in the fictional world of larp and thus "participates in constructing the fiction." The player helps to maintain the "illusion of reality by constantly imagining and thus creating the subjective diegesis" (Hopeametsä 2008, p. 197). The player's body itself becomes a mediator between the imagined world, which is enacted upon the platform of material reality itself. There is often "no physical division between player, character, and narrative, or between the real world and the game world." Larp spaces are "believable, tangible, seductive" and create "immersion and engagement" (Falk and Davenport 2004, p. 135). A larp offers a tangible interface that "touches you back" (Falk and Davenport 2004, p. 136). As in the Eucharist, disparate things become one, and the beyond is bound up with immediate reality. But in this game, the transcendent is made immediate as violent desire is acted out upon material reality itself. In this sense, fandom is much more than appreciation; it is about the ways we sacralize our play, about the ways that a sense of dangerous presence is evoked.

Ground Zero is a post-apocalyptic Nordic larp from 2010, set in the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis and imagining our world decimated by nuclear blast. For Hopeametsä, the game is "real and fictitious at the same time." Players are ensconced in a makeshift bunker, complete with sound effects and fake radio broadcasts, but they play as themselves. As a result, says Hopeametsä, "it is hard to draw a line between the player and the character, especially with regard to emotional reactions and sensory impressions." There is no audience, and the gamemaster sits amongst the players as the story unfolds. In a larp like this, the players are "physically, concretely present in the situation and have influenced the way things have happened, by interacting with the game world and the other players" (Hopeametsä 2008, p. 195). The bridge between this world and the next *is* the material environment of the fake bunker, as well as the bodies of the players themselves. Presence is experienced through the players' investment in the imaginary future space that is evoked by the present material forms around them and by their own embodied selves.

Another post-apocalyptic larp called *The Journey* is loosely based on Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* (2006). Four players and a gamemaster role play the environment of *The Road*, following instructions for scenes that involve grisly accounts of murder, cannibalism, sexual manipulation, and abandonment (Montola 2010). The designer says he "wanted people to feel a little bit dirty, like have a bad feeling in their stomachs . . . I wanted the potential for some really raw, really rough, really scary role-playing which could essentially take you anywhere" (cited in Montola 2010). The game pushes players to act within an imagined future presented as inevitable—and to act according to the presumptively violent rules of this cruel arena.

Larps like these explicitly engage in what is called "bleed." A Nordic collective of game designers describes bleed this way:

> Bleed is experienced by the player when her thoughts and feelings are influenced by those of her character, or vice versa. With increasing bleed, the border between player and character becomes more and more transparent . . . A classic example of bleed is when a player's affection for another player carries over into the game or influences her character's perception of the other's character. (cited in Montola 2010)

Bleed involves a "double consciousness" that allows players to "both acknowledge and deny the nature of play" (Montola 2010). Players are "simultaneously both themselves and the characters they portrait [sic]" (Montola and Holopainen 2012, p. 21). If players engage in taboo or violent behaviors, play itself can become an alibi providing a "protective frame" that shields them from consequences for in-game actions. Bleed activity is enjoyed precisely *because* it places people in "threatening, dangerous and painful situations" that are nonetheless ostensibly safe (Montola and Holopainen 2012, p. 25).

Salen and Zimmerman use the term "forbidden play" for this kind of encounter and note that games can create social contexts in which "behaviors take place that would be strictly forbidden in society at large." In such games, players "plot treachery" against friends or "backstab them when they least expect it." Players can even engage in "criminal behavior" or "try to knock another person unconscious" (Salen and Zimmerman 2003,

p. 478). Despite the play involved, some actions are not purely symbolic. For example, a player might kiss someone while playing *Spin the Bottle*, or punch someone in a boxing match.

Cindy Poremba prefers the term "brink games," and sees these as "games that embrace the contested space at the boundary of games and life—pairing 'it's just a game' with a knowing wink" (Poremba 2007, p. 772). Poremba points out that games like these "protect" players by creating a situation in which otherwise unacceptable actions are "contained and sanitized, allowing for the expression of impulses but at the same time safeguarding the players by limiting this expression" (Poremba 2007, p. 774). By offering a play-based alibi, such games allow players to engage in forbidden activity and also to claim that they are not really doing so. Brink games depend upon the notion of an "edge," with action that can spill over beyond the game frame. In boxing, people *really do* get punched. In *Spin the Bottle*, someone *really* gets kissed.

Live-action role play (larp) can also present as brink games; indeed, it is often engineered to do so. The Nordic freeform style of larp is a "flexible form of role-playing, mixing and matching expressive techniques of tabletop role-playing games and larp" (Montola and Holopainen 2012, p. 14). The Nordic freeform larp "aims to influence not only the character, but also the player" (Montola 2010). *Gang Rape* is a Nordic larp in the freeform style and involves a great deal of bleed by design. In improvisational form, players act out the events leading up to a rape. Then they sit down and narrate, in excruciating detail, the rape itself. Players must look directly into one another's eyes while describing the violence and listen to the victim narrate her own experience of harm. Then they narrate the aftermath, with the option of more larping about the rape's imagined long-term effects (Montola and Holopainen 2012, p. 15).

Gang Rape is "intentionally repulsive" in that it involves the partially acted-out assault of a participating character. The game's intense bleed means that the characters are "paper-thin" and players are forced to fill out character personalities from their own experience. *Gang Rape* drives players into behavior considered "disgusting, strange or unnatural," purposefully prompting cognitive dissonance as an apparent means of encouraging ethical introspection (Montola 2010). Roger Caillois uses the language of "contamination" and "breach" to describe what happens when games like this spill into the real world. Such games can create harmful "residue" that "infects" both game and life (cited in Poremba 2007, p. 776).

Such spillover prompts the question: at what point does play become the real thing? In Orsi's terms, we can ask: when does representation become presence? And what does it mean to say that it does? We can read the cowboy apocalypse as a brink-style larp that bleeds, crossing the brink and leaving "residue" on the real world in its effects on actual bodies. Real-life shooting by self-designated "good guy" vigilantes can be read as a form of larping with real weapons at work and real bodies struck (I deal with this progression in much more detail in the manuscript *Cowboy Apocalypse*). The religious sense of presence is similarly dangerous at times, evoking not just the heavenly world above, but violent origins of religious objects like relics that are body parts, or religious cloths believed to have soaked up sacred blood. The cowboy apocalypse then seems less like an anomaly of game play, and elements of religious presence can look more like larp.

Apocalyptically-inspired gun owners see the world as a dangerous place with "bad guys" lurking around every corner. One gun owner's guide says that being "aware" is having a "generalized consciousness" of things in one's vicinity that "could be threats" (Boatman 2012, p. 30). Guns owners are advised to aggressively watch bushes, corners, and alleys that may "conceal a violent assailant" or a "potential threat lurking in the darkness" (Boatman 2012, p. 31). For them, the world is profoundly dangerous. They are to live with their "eyes wide open" and understand "how vulnerable we all are to becoming another tidbit-of-opportunity in the relentless food chain . . . of this unpredictable world" (Boatman 2012, p. 17). This frightening worldview is thick with the logic of experiences like larp and pervasive gaming, both of which use the real world as the platform for play.

7. Pervasive Games

Pervasive games are designed by gamemasters who orchestrate a live gaming experience for a group of players, using the stuff of life but spreading the experience out across the world itself. Pervasive games use restaurants, cemeteries, streets and parks as their locations. They also invite players to peruse fabricated websites, interact with actors, cooperate with strangers and complete tasks as part of story-based problem solving. Part of the appeal of pervasive gaming is that players do not know who or what is included in the game—so nothing is excluded. Jane McGonigal describes how players are tempted to see anything in their environment as part of the game: "When encountering a person, a team must assume he or she is a plant; when finding an object, a team must assume it is a prop to be deployed creatively." Players should "act as if the game is everywhere and everything at all times" (McGonigal 2003). Pervasive games can overlap with everyday life at work, school, or be accessed via entertainment. A pervasive game can even expand "socially" by involving outsiders who do not know they are playing.

McGonigal says that the best pervasive games "make you more suspicious, more inquisitive, of your everyday surroundings." A good game will "show you game patterns in non-game places: these patterns reveal opportunities for interaction and intervention." The more invested a player is in choosing to believe in the game's premise, "the more (and more interesting) opportunities are revealed" (McGonigal 2003). Bryan Alexander says that pervasive play teaches us to "heighten our ability to winnow patterns out of the otherwise seemingly random and meaningless data in the wider world" (Alexander 2006, p. 10). In pervasive games, anything can become "a potential clue or plot point" (McGonigal 2003). Markus Stenros and Jaakko Montola explain that such games "blur the line between larp and life as the game spills into the streets. The whole world becomes a playground, something to be enjoyed through a ludic gaze." Pervasive games differ from larps in that they can integrate bystanders into the game by "making them unaware participants" (Montola and Stenros 2008, p. 5). While frequently harmless, it is easy to see how pervasive games might invite players to export troubling ideas and disruptive actions onto the platform of the real world.

A "player" of the cowboy apocalypse is encouraged to view all of life as a contest between good versus evil—and his gun as the means to win. After the 2016 massacre at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando Florida, Wayne LaPierre appeared on *Face the Nation* and gave a version of the repeated NRA trope, that without guns, Americans would be overwhelmed by "terrorists" who would attack churches and malls. He said: "They're coming and they're going to try to kill us, and we need to be prepared" (Face the Nation 2016). The gun becomes an effective prop in this apocalyptic construct, sizzling with presence that evokes the world of the imagined Wild West as well as a post-apocalyptic future filled with guns. Poremba asks "how real [the] not-real needs to be to result in the collapse of the game into its other" (Poremba 2007, p. 776). We could similarly ask how realistic the *not-real* game of the "good guy with a gun" needs to be before it collapses the gun into a prop and real life into a pervasive game.

8. Conclusions

As Jamel Velji notes, apocalyptic movements illustrate a tendency "to divide the world and its contents into absolute good and absolute evil." Apocalypticists cope by predicting an imminent battle, expecting that evil will be "destroyed, or condemned to hell or, at best to non-existence" (Velji 2013, p. 251). As Montola notes, pervasive games run the risk of "drawing truly unwilling persons into the game" (Montola 2005). The presumptive identification of Muslims as "terrorists" and black men as "thugs" or "brutes" fits into the same dualistic pattern as LaPierre's call to cowboy action and invites violent judgment by self-appointed cowboy messiahs. Thinly-veiled apocalyptic reasoning is used to justify racially-motivated killings like the murders of Trayvon Martin and Ahmaud Arbery, as well as the brutal attacks against George Floyd and Jacob Blake. Presumptively identifying innocent men as "evil" because of the color of their skin or their religious identity is an ugly

American habit stretching back to the country's settler origins, and the similarly justified brutalization of Native Americans then and now.

When considered within the context of the cowboy apocalypse, it is easy to view certain strands of gun rights rhetoric as inviting players into a very serious game with both metaphorical and literal bleed. Guns *are* presence in this form of mediated devotion, in that they unite this world and an imagined world beyond, turning desire into anticipation in much the same way that religious objects can do. In the cowboy apocalypse, guns authenticate a presentation of reality that is distilled into self-determined notions of good and evil, demanding the player "win" to prove his moral superiority.

Orsi surely did not have such a troubling portrait in mind when he argued for presence's continuing enchantment. But of course, religion has always thrived on representations of both light and darkness. Presence itself is not inherently good nor evil. Instead, it is a form of mediation that fuses something close by with something desired that is further away—and in so doing, can reveal the ideological motivations of the person identifying it. Presence is a means of authenticating desire through reverence of evocative material objects. Because guns can be so readily identified with a desired future space of white male hegemony shaped by apocalyptic desire, they can function as the material *proof* of that world to come. For the cowboy apocalypse, performance is authentication. To shoot is to believe.

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