Spring 5-15-2022

How to Survive the Apocalypse: Using Film, Television, and Video Games As Gateways to Self-analysis

Braeden Raymer
Syracuse University

Abstract

This thesis serves as an investigation on the use of film, television, and video games as access points for personal analysis in imagined scenarios. When creating a fictional world, characters' motivations and behaviors are often based on real-life experiences. In the apocalypse genre, understanding how a character might behave in such an extreme circumstance can be difficult to predict, considering few have lived through comparable conditions. To supplement personal experiences and observations, a creator might use other stories as gateways to self-examination.

The investigation begins in film, exploring how stories provide a viewer with new experiences that they can then apply to real-life scenarios. The 'art house horror' effect is examined, exploring how the safety of a theater allows a viewer to process traumatic experiences in a controlled environment. Real-world applications of the 'art house horror' effect are considered and their effectiveness is brought into question. The analysis then moves on to interactive specials (television programs that allow for real-time user input), examining the importance of input from the user on the ability to learn from actions. Finally, the study shifts to video games as the most interactive of the three media explored. The correlation between in-game choices and real-life choices is debated, considering the reward systems offered by games that may influence behavior.

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic is examined from the same perspective—as a means to infer human behavior in extreme contexts. The author then concludes with a brief explanation on how these thought experiments and pandemic experiences were incorporated into the development of an original apocalyptic narrative and corresponding illustrations.

HOW TO SURVIVE THE APOCALYPSE:

USING FILM, TELEVISION, AND VIDEO GAMES AS GATEWAYS TO SELF-ANALYSIS

by

Braeden T. Raymer

B.F.A., Ball State University, 2019

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Illustration

Syracuse University

May 2022

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to everyone who assisted me with the development of my thesis projects. For their guidance in all aspects of my written and visual thesis projects, I'd like to thank my thesis committee: Marty Blake, Frank Cammuso, Bob Dacey, and Joe Murphy.

I'd also like to thank my fiancée, Meredith Hardy, for editing my writing and for never allowing me to give up on my visual work.

Finally, I'd like to thank my parents, Geof and Wendy Raymer, for allowing me the opportunity to further my education and pursue my passions.

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Epigraph

'Where must we go…

We who wander this Wasteland

in search of our better selves?'

The First History Man[1]

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[1] *Mad Max: Fury Road*, directed by George Miller (2015; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Pictures, 2015), Blu-Ray.

Prologue

Through the storm, I can just make out the taillights of the convoy we've been tracking for the last three days. I punch the throttle and the Argonaut's engine roars. The hover drives below hum steadily, keeping us six feet above the desert floor. I lock the accelerator and Bug leans forward from the back seat to hold the steering wheel steady. I climb from the cockpit onto the flat outer body of the car and pull my shotgun from its holster. Bug grabs my wrist.

"Don't hurt them, Jason," he pleads.

The Argonaut inches closer to the rear of the convoy and a rusty hover pickup truck fades into view, its bed stocked with supplies. I adjust my footing, then take a flying leap across the gap, landing with a *thud* on the bed of the truck. The impact sends the tail of the vehicle swinging outward. I slip but catch myself on the netting wrapped around their cargo. Bug jerks the steering wheel to avoid the swerving hover truck, clipping one of the truck's taillights and arcing the Argonaut outward into the storm. I watch as its taillights fade into the distance.

Good, I think, *better that he doesn't see this.*

I pull my knife and cut into the netting around the cargo. A rope snaps and the net unfurls, flapping wildly in the wind. I push containers around, popping their lids and shuffling through their contents. *No, no, no. Come on, it has to be here.* Finally, I spot it: a Styrofoam cooler with 'first aid' scrawled on the side. I pull it loose from the stack, sending several other crates toppling down and bouncing into the storm. I lift the lid to find exactly what we came for: insulin, enough to keep Bug alive for at least a few months.

I duck as a gunshot rings out from the cab of the truck, bursting the back windshield and spraying bits of glass into my face. I raise my shotgun to return a blast, but I'm interrupted by the Argonaut roaring in from the side, slamming up against the side of the truck. The driver is knocked back, his pistol clatters off the side of the truck and disappears into the storm. The two cars are now parallel, metal scraping and sparks flying. I scoop up the cooler and board the Argonaut, but I'm abruptly pulled backward. I turn to see the driver leaning out the window and clinging to the edge of the container.

His right arm is outstretched to hold onto the crate, the other reaches to hold the steering wheel steady against the battering of the Argonaut. I accidentally make eye contact with the driver. "Please," the driver pleads, shouting over the roar of the cars and the storm, "take whatever else you want, but my kid needs that insulin!" *Shit.* I try to convince myself we need it more, that we're the good guys.

It won't be long before the rest of his convoy notices he's fallen behind. We're almost out of time...

Introduction

For the visual portion of my thesis, I developed a narrative around two young brothers, Jason and Bug, who must find a way to survive in an apocalyptic wasteland. As the older brother, Jason takes on sole responsibility of protecting his younger sibling after the death of their parents. The younger brother, Bug, needs special medication to survive, which motivates Jason to take on morally ambiguous jobs to get what they need. Originally, I had been using Jason, the main character of Matthew Reilly's novel, *Hover Car Racer,* as reference for the motivations of my own Jason. However, as I continued developing my story, and once I had settled on the conflict of Bug's need for some sort of medication, I came to a realization that I was unconsciously modeling Jason after myself.

Figure 1: Matthew Reilly's Hover Car Racer

Just as Jason is the older brother to Bug, I am the oldest of four brothers. If something were to happen to my parents, I would feel a responsibility to provide for my younger brothers at any cost. Additionally, there is someone close to me that, like Bug, requires access to specialized medication. My fiancée suffers from juvenile diabetes and relies on synthetic insulin in combination with other, mostly single-use, medical supplies to manage blood glucose levels. Without insulin, and with no access to medical treatment, she would not survive for more than a few days. When I noticed I had been writing my own worries into the character, I realized, then,
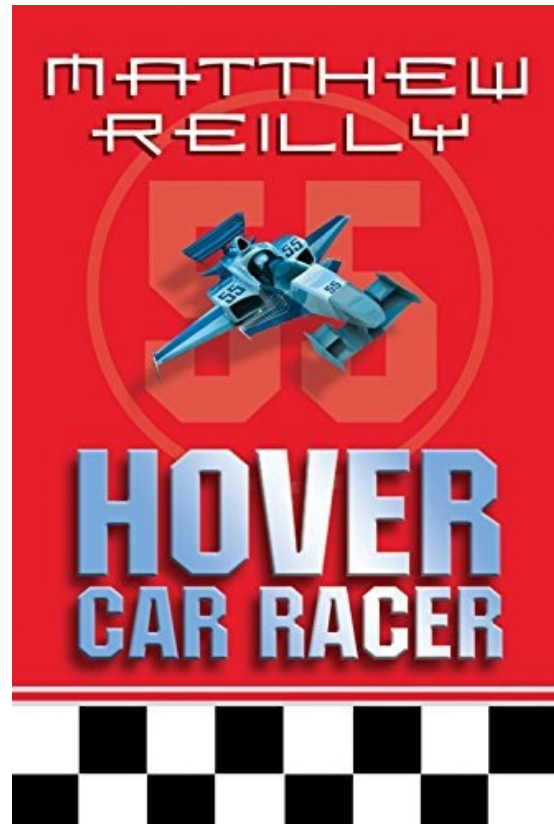
that in order to write for Jason, I first needed to come to terms with how I might navigate similar challenges in the apocalypse.

Truly understanding how I might act in an apocalypse context is difficult, as I have not lived through an experience quite so extreme. Therefore, I needed to find an access point for self-analysis. For this, I turned to the films, television, and video games that inspired the creation of my visual thesis—more specifically, those that depicted some form of apocalypse. Putting myself in the shoes of the characters in these narratives allowed me to access new perspectives and consider the types of choices I might make in their situations. Coincidentally, these hypothetical analyses occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, which provided me with another layer of insight into how I might react if society were to collapse. The pandemic also brought real-world insights into human behaviors that I was able to then write into other supporting characters in the visual thesis. With all the aforementioned elements as access points for self-analysis, I was able to apply hypothetical experience to the development of Jason to create a more realistic character.

Part I: Film

In our everyday lives, we draw from past experiences to guide our actions. When we find ourselves in situations with which we have minimal experience, we supplement our own experiences with the experiences of others. One way we do this is through storytelling. George Miller, director of *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015)*,* believes stories are essential for survival. He describes the first peoples of Australia as having used stories to map out their landscape—where to find water, where to find food, etc.[2] Storytelling is not always so literal, however. Stories are often allegorical; they teach lessons that can be drawn from in related situations. *Fury Road* co-

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[2] George Miller, Brendan McCarthy, and Nico Lathouris, "Mad Max: Creating the Apocalypse - In Conversation with George Miller | Digital Season," August 7, 2020, Sydney Opera House, video, 1:31:21, https://youtu.be/iDMSa29P9j0.

writer, Nico Lathouris, thinks of stories as "packages of meaning from which we can complete or take the next step in our very own story." He elaborates, "I'm in the middle of my own story, and I have a whole number of choices about what I do in a particular situation next. What stories give me is essential information that gives me the benefit of future opportunities—of the multitude of choices I can make—and I can see what the results of them are because [stories] do have ends."[3] To paraphrase, stories allow an audience to consider the potential outcomes of their actions in situations they have not yet experienced.

Figure 2: The road ahead… (a frame from Mad Max: Fury Road)

The apocalypse genre serves as a perfect example of this idea, since this genre in particular often portrays extreme and unusual scenarios that an audience is not likely to encounter in their lifetime. Therefore, these types of scenarios—like alien invasions or zombie virus outbreaks—serve as unique opportunities to theorize one's behavior in extreme contexts. In their analysis of zombie movies as behavioral case studies, Buchanan and Hällgren suggest that "fictional narratives, by explaining how outcomes arise through a combination of factors

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[3] Miller, McCarthy, and Lathouris

interacting in a given context over time, are by definition implicit theories."[4] In other words, the writer of a zombie apocalypse story has not lived through a zombie apocalypse. They are simply drawing upon personal experiences and observed behaviors to theorize how people might behave in such a scenario. Buchanan goes so far as to argue that films can be used as primary sources for analyzing human behavior. While films do not necessarily serve as direct proxy for the real world, they make valuable access points for analysis and inspiration.[5]

Apocalypse films, specifically, ask the question, 'what would happen if institutions and authority structures were to disappear – how would people respond?'[6] A given work seeks to answer this question, but it also, in turn, asks it of its audience. In a sense, a movie invites its viewers to become active participants in the narrative. As Brigid Cherry, an author and film researcher, puts it, "the screen becomes a mirror upon which the spectator (figuratively speaking) sees their own reflection."[7] Further, a film "encourages viewers to conduct 'thought experiments,' to explore and test ideas, possibilities, consequences, and repercussions of particular decisions and actions."[8] The perspective of a story often shifts from one character to another, allowing the viewer to consider different viewpoints and experiences. Some films employ a point-of-view camera shot to show the action from the perspective of a specific character, almost literally making the viewer an active participant in the narrative. In horror films, the camera sometimes even shifts to the perspective of the killer rather than the victim.[9]

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[4] David A. Buchanan and Markus Hällgren, "Surviving a Zombie Apocalypse: Leadership Configurations in Extreme Contexts," *Management Learning* 50, no. 2 (2019): 153, accessed September 8, 2021, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1350507618801708.

[5] Buchanan and Hällgren, 156.

[6] Darren Reed and Ruth Penfold-Mounce, "Zombies and the Sociological Imagination: *The Walking Dead* as Social Science Fiction," *The Zombie Renaissance in Popular Culture* (2015), quoted in Buchanan and Hällgren, 156.

[7] Brigid Cherry, *Horror* (London: Routledge, 2009), 131, quoted in Tim Aistrope and Stephanie Fishel, "Horror, Apocalypse, and World Politics," *International Affairs* 96, no. 3 (2020): 646, accessed September 9, 2021, https://academic.oup.com/ia/article/96/3/631/5810416.

[8] Reed and Penfold-Mounce, 127.

[9] Aistrope and Fishel, 646.

Famous examples of this technique can be seen in John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978), wherein the viewer witnesses a number of murders through the eyes of the murderer. With this cinematography technique, the viewer is made complicit in the killing, making the experience all the more unsettling. The first-person perspective leaves the viewer with no choice but to consider the repercussions of what has become their own actions.

Figure 3: A point-of-view camera shot in the introduction to John Carpenter's Halloween *(1978)*

Films have the additional benefit of serving as a means for the viewer to conduct these thought experiments in a safe environment. In an examination on the horror and apocalypse genres, Aistrope and Fishel explain, "...the horror genre *moderates* [the] encounter, allowing a politically attuned audience to move closer to these traumatic experiences without being traumatized themselves. This dynamic is related to the 'art house horror' effect, where audiences realize that they are not themselves in danger and can therefore experience the fear and loathing as dramatic tension rather than existential threat."[10] People enjoy riding roller coasters or eating

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[10] Aistrope and Fishel, 637.

spicy foods for the same reasons: they serve as mediated experiences with fear and pain, wherein the individual is aware that they are not in any real danger. This is why we often find ourselves criticizing the decisions of characters in horror movies. Why does the family continue to sleep in the haunted house? Why is she going *into* the room from which the strange noise is coming? As a level-headed observer, we benefit from a clarity of decision-making that a fear-stricken character does not.

Part II: 'Art House Horror' Effect in Real World Applications
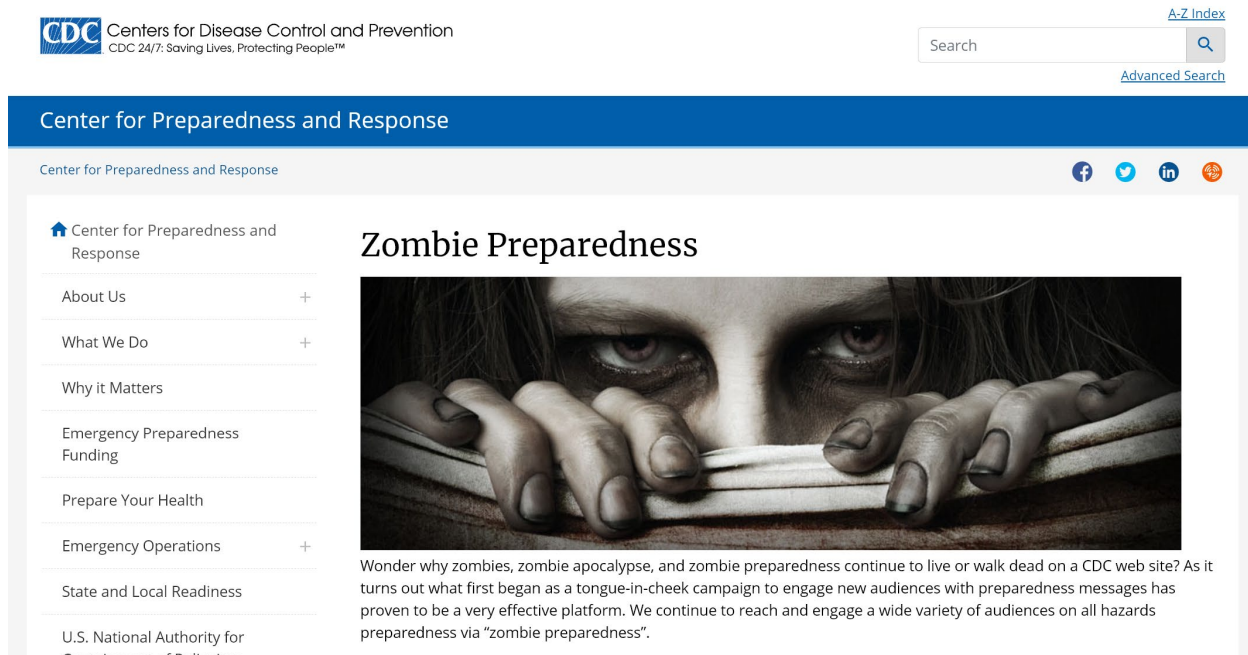
Figure 4: The CDC's Zombie Preparedness webpage

This 'art house horror' effect has also been co-opted from film into 'real world' applications. Several of the aforementioned essays point out that the Center for Disease Control (CDC) has published preparedness guidelines for the zombie apocalypse, the thought being that preparedness for fictional emergencies stimulates creative thinking in response to real ones. However, Daniel Drezner, an American political scientist and professor of international politics, suggests that we should take caution when using metaphor within the realm of emergency

preparedness. The use of metaphor can generate "fear, myths, and misperceptions that are difficult to remove from public discourse."[11] A federal agency warning of the importance of being prepared for a fictional virus outbreak may lead to unnecessary panic, rather than preparedness for more realistic threats. Still, the CDC states on its zombie webpage, "...what first began as a tongue-in-cheek campaign to engage new audiences with preparedness messages has proven to be a very effective platform."[12]

A similar argument could be made for The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists' signature "Doomsday Clock." Each year, this group of scientists and security experts consider the imminence of "civilization-ending apocalypse" given current environmental and political conditions. They then announce how close the time is to 'midnight,' a visual representation of humanity's impending annihilation. At the time of

Figure 5: Spokespeople for the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists presenting the 2021 setting of the Doomsday Clock

writing, the Doomsday Clock is set to 100 seconds to midnight, the closest it has ever been. The timer is not a literal countdown; it is simply meant to serve as motivation for the implementation of change. However, it is difficult to continue to fear 'midnight' when the clock has remained

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[11] Daniel Drezner, "Metaphors of the Living Dead: or, the Effects of the Living Dead on Public Policy Discourse," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 81, no. 4 (2014), quoted in Aistrope and Fishel, 638-639.
[12] "Zombie Preparedness," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, February 23, 2021, https://www.cdc.gov/cpr/zombie/index.htm.

dangerously close to midnight for almost 70 years.[13] Eventually, the symbol loses its shock value, and its motivating effect fades. Whether the 'art house horror' effect is appropriate in these types of real-world implementations is unclear. Perhaps it is best left in the context of film.
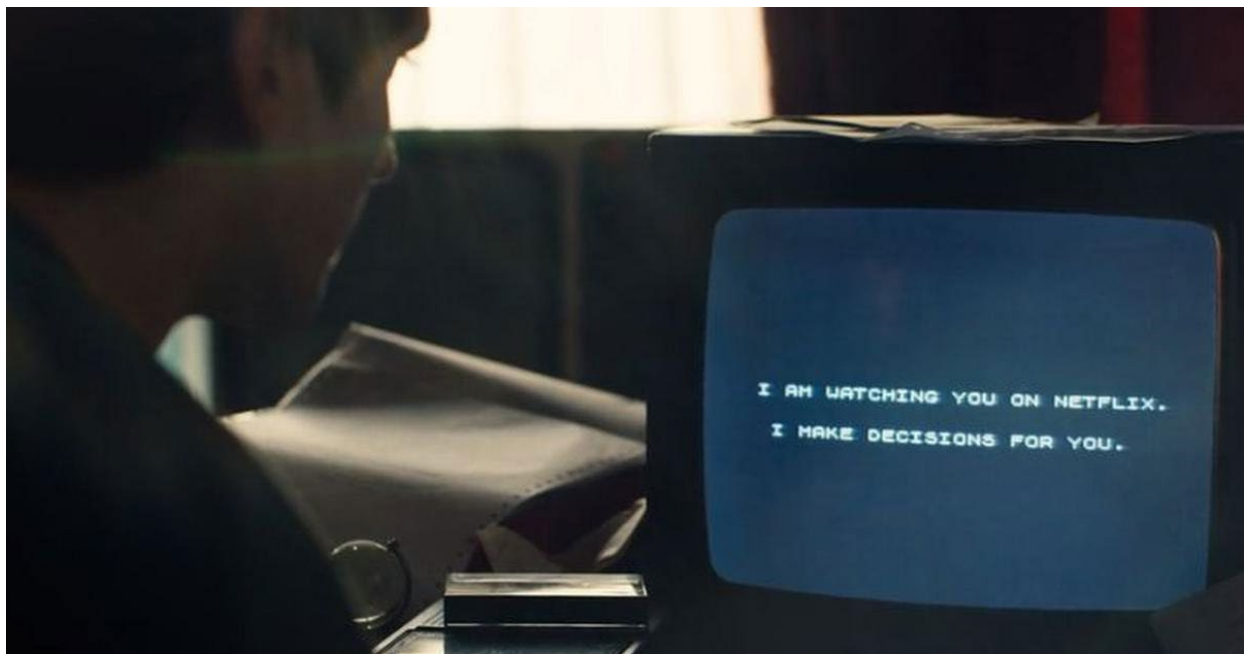
Part III: Interactive Specials

While films serve as a valuable access point for thought experiments, they do not offer much in terms of interactivity on the part of the viewer. The story will play out the way it was written; the audience is allowed no say. The decisions a viewer would make may not be the same decisions that play out on screen. The viewer is then deprived of the learning experience of seeing the outcomes of their own choices, information that would either validate or invalidate their thought processes. Therefore, the experience of considering one's own actions via the plot of a film is only valuable to the extent that the film plays out in a way that reinforces the viewer's thinking—in other words, to the extent that the characters in the film make the same choices the viewer believes they would make themselves. To allow a viewer to contemplate other outcomes, an element of interactivity must be introduced.

With the increasing popularity of online, on-demand media streaming, some filmmakers have experimented with the concept of interactive films and series. Netflix, widely considered the foremost platform of online media streaming, hosts several of the most notable examples of 'interactive specials,' including *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2018), *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs. The Reverend* (2020), and *The Last Kids on Earth: Happy Apocalypse to You* (2021). These specials periodically present viewers with choices to make—in the form of on-screen prompts—that directly affect the narrative, in a format reminiscent of the *Choose Your Own Adventure* book series of the '80s and '90s. Choices vary in narrative significance from low

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[13] Shannon Osaka, "The Doomsday Clock has Been Ticking for 70 Years. It's Time to Let it Die," Grist, January 30, 2021, https://grist.org/climate/the-doomsday-clock-has-been-ticking-for-70-years-its-time-to-let-it-die/.

(like which cereal to eat for breakfast) to high (whether to kill another character). Once users

input their decision, the film seamlessly incorporates that choice into the narrative.[14] These

specials give the viewer the freedom of experimentation that a traditional viewing experience

lacks. Again, the viewer almost becomes a participant in the narrative, but in this application the

viewer takes a more active role than in traditional film. In the case of *Bandersnatch,* the viewer

literally becomes a character in the story, communicating directly with the protagonist through

his computer.

Figure 6: The user communicating with the main character in Black Mirror: Bandersnatch *(2018)*

Where these specials fail, however, is in their lack of true freedom in affecting the

narrative. Many of the interactive stories have only one 'correct' ending, with other narrative

branches quickly leading to 'failure' and resetting the viewer to the moment they selected the

'incorrect' prompt. The viewer quickly realizes how limited their freedom of choice truly is, and

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[14] Rebecca C. Nee, "Wild, Stressful, or Stupid: Que Es Bandersnatch? Exploring User Outcomes of Netflix's Interactive Black Mirror Episode," *Convergence* (2021): accessed October 10, 2021, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856521996557.

the experience becomes less centered around experimentation and more focused on selecting the 'correct' answers that lead to the conclusion. Specials that *do* offer multiple endings, like *Bandersnatch,* allow the viewer the opportunity to replay the experience from the beginning to witness how different choices lead to new outcomes.

While this format works well for allowing a viewer to experiment with actions, not all viewers enjoy the freedom. A 2021 case study on users of *Bandersnatch* found that some individuals experienced stress while seeking a sense of completion. Many users reported a desire for reassurance that their solution was the 'right' one, looking for a true, or 'canon,' ending to the narrative.[15] These viewers were likely expecting the closure of a more traditional viewing experience, one that simply tells the story the way it is 'meant' to be told. In a special like *Bandersnatch,* there is no definitive way the story is 'meant' to be experienced. Additionally, the *Black Mirror* anthology series is known for its dark themes and often not-so-happy endings for its characters. *Bandersnatch* is no different, and many users were unhappy when their actions led to undesirable outcomes for the protagonist. These users expressed "strong identification with the character" and "a high degree of anxiety and stress because of the dark and violent consequences of their choices."[16] This shows that a portion of users were actively seeking to make morally right decisions, or at least decisions that would positively impact the protagonist. This may be based simply on empathy, or perhaps due to the aforementioned effect of film serving as a mirror.

Part IV: Video Games

Interactive specials effectively bridge the gap between film and video games, serving as both a passive and interactive experience, as well as transforming the traditional viewing

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[15] Nee, 12-13
[16] Nee, 12

experience into a form of play. Video games, on the other hand, are a wholly interactive experience, as the narrative only progresses with input from the player. Many games are considered 'linear,' meaning the story is predetermined and plays the same each time, much like film. These types of games do not offer much in terms of player choice or experimentation. Linear games sometimes offer a small level of choice to the player, like the ability to dispatch enemies by 'non-lethal' means, but those choices do not affect the outcome of the narrative. There are other types of games, however, that give the player more control over narrative outcome. In these types of games, the player has the opportunity to consider what actions they would make in the same way they could with the previous forms of media, but with the added benefit of watching the results of those choices play out in real time.

Providing a truly flexible narrative experience can be complicated to produce—any new narrative paths require writing, visual development, animation, voice acting, sound design, etc.— so video games offer varying levels of narrative freedom. Games like *The Walking Dead* (2012), *Minecraft: Story Mode* (2015), or *Detroit: Become Human* (2018), are presented in a familiar format: a player is presented with narrative options and a cinematic evolves based on player choice. Netflix even hosts an adaptation of *Minecraft: Story Mode* due to the similarity in gameplay to their other interactive specials.

Figure 7: Dialogue prompts in Minecraft: Story Mode *(2015)*

Unlike the Netflix specials, multiple endings and narrative threads are standard for this style of game, encouraging players to replay the game and discover new narrative branches. Games like these often provide the player with a flowchart of all possible narrative branches (effectively a checklist) displaying what outcomes the player has yet to unlock. This tool makes it easier for players to track their progress toward unlocking all possible endings. Perhaps the aforementioned 'completionist' users of *Bandersnatch* would have benefitted from a flowchart of possible outcomes, rather than selecting new choices at random. These games often display statistics after the completion of each chapter, comparing the choices of the player with the choices of players worldwide. This data may serve to validate a player's choices as 'correct,' or to show that the player's choices were uncommon among all the game's players.
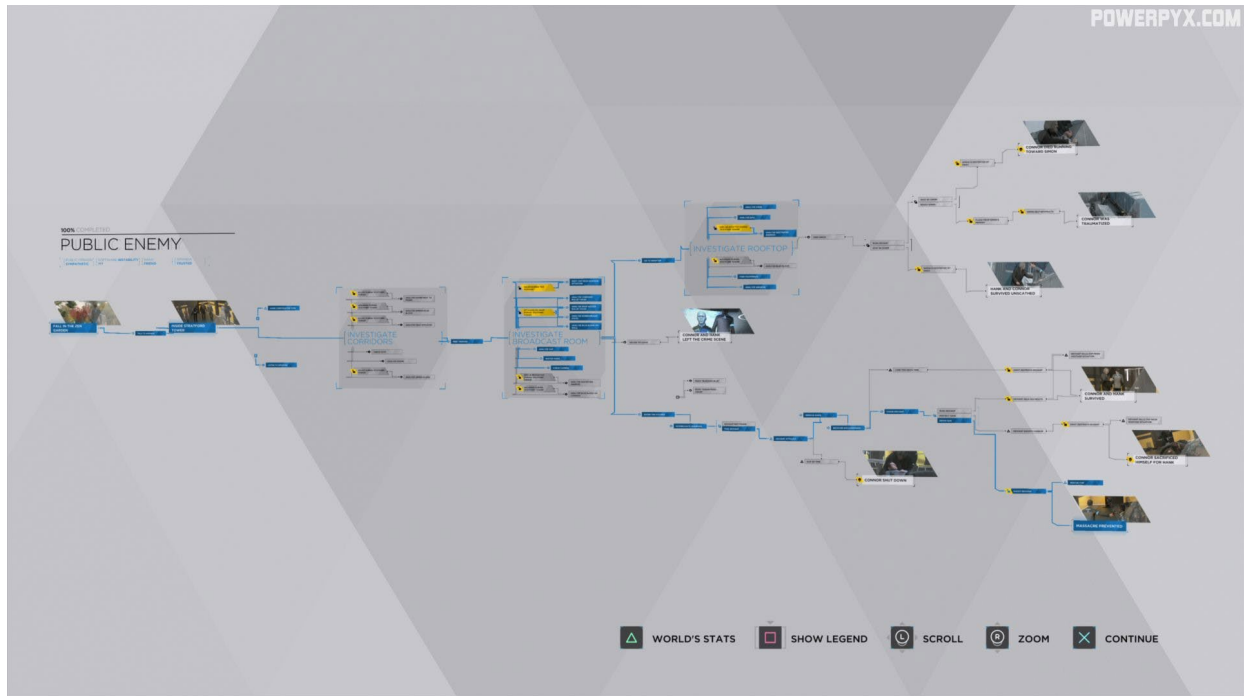
Figure 8: Narrative flowchart in Detroit: Become Human *(2018)*

Other games integrate player choice into a more traditional style of gameplay. In the

Dishonored series, for example, the player takes on the role of an assassin tasked with

eliminating a series of targets. The player can kill these targets in any way they see fit, but they

are also given the option to find alternate, 'non-lethal' methods of dealing with the targets. For

example, the player can choose to assassinate the corrupt leader of the empire, or they can

choose to broadcast evidence of his corruption across the city and have him arrested for treason.

These choices impact other characters' impression of the player character—deeming them

morally good, evil, cowardly, etc.—but they also impact the state of the environment. The

atmosphere adapts to match a given playstyle. A more pacifist playstyle leads to a calmer, less

vigilant city while a more lethal playstyle leads to a darker, more violent one. The player can feel

the effects of their choices reflected in the world and characters around them as the narrative

progresses even before they reach a conclusion to the narrative.

Just as films offer a safe space to experience extreme contexts and consider different outcomes, video games serve as a 'sandbox' of sorts to explore outcomes and ethical issues with no real-world consequences. Because of this ability to experiment, a player's actions in the context of a video game do not necessarily directly represent morality or choices they would make in real life. Choices that players make can also simply be based on a game's scoring or rewards system. In an analysis of values in games, Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum discuss this type of motivation: "The [*Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*] games present intriguing moral choices, but players do not necessarily make their decisions using moral criteria. One player might act ruthlessly to acquire dark-side powers because doing so introduces entertaining mechanics. Another player might act virtuously to unlock the lightside powers."[17] In the *inFAMOUS* series, evil 'Karma' actions are often rewarded with explosive 'area of effect' powers (attacks affecting opponents within a certain radius) while morally good actions are rewarded with more precision, 'sniper' abilities. Therefore, a player may make karmic decisions solely to benefit a preferred playstyle. Alternatively, regardless of a preferred playstyle, a player may simply find it more efficient to unlock evil powers, since evil karma can be quickly gained from random destruction and violence against civilians while good karma can only be gained through specified opportunities in the narrative.

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[17] Mary Flanagan and Helen Fay Nissenbaum, *Values at Play in Digital Games* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2014). doi:10.7551/mitpress/9016.001.0001.

Figure 9: A 'Karmic Moment' in inFAMOUS: Second Son *(2014)*

As a final example of player motivation, some games, like *Fallout 4* (2015), allow the

player to form romantic relationships with traveling companions after a certain level of affinity

with the player is reached. Affinity can be gained by making decisions that please the

sensibilities of a given companion character. Some characters appreciate friendly and peaceful

behavior while others are more impressed by selfishness and violence. A player may choose to

act in a manner that pleases their companion, even if the necessary actions serve against a

preferred playstyle. Successfully romancing a companion often also rewards players with

perks—traits a player can add to their character that grant special abilities. Therefore, the

decision to romance a specific companion may be based simply on the reward it brings, not an

attraction to the character.

Figure 10: A 'romance' dialogue prompt in Fallout 4 *(2015)*

Some players may still choose to make moral decisions regardless of the rewards or benefit to gameplay. Returning to the *Dishonored* series, the player character carries the Heart, a talisman that allows one to communicate with a supernatural entity held within. The Heart is given to the player as a guide to collectibles hidden throughout the environment, but it also whispers secrets about the city and its inhabitants. As Harvey Smith and Raphael Colantonio, co-creative directors of *Dishonored* (2012), put it, "[the Heart] also plays a part related to informing [the player's] decisions about when to apply violence or not, making it a really interesting, more subtle part of the power fantasy."[18] When summoned, the Heart might reveal to the player that an innocent looking man on the street is an alcoholic and abuses his wife. An enemy guard blocking the player's path may have taken that job in an effort to provide for a dying family member. While these secrets do not have a direct impact on the narrative, they offer another layer of

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[18] Paul Walker, "The Gaming Pulse: Dissecting Dishonored's Heart," Rock Paper Shotgun, December 19, 2012, https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/the-gaming-pulse-on-dishonoreds-heart.

information to guide a player's decision making. A given player might choose to go out of their way to punish the abusive husband, or spare the guard instead of gunning him down. Any action in response to these secrets is completely optional and provides no additional reward—a player can even opt to never request secrets from the Heart—they simply allow the player more agency in their decision making. The Heart gives the player the sense that the space they are in is real. It humanizes the virtual characters, making them seem less expendable. It gives weight to the player's actions, perhaps leading them to make more realistic decisions based on morality, rather than simply seeking the most beneficial reward.

Figure 11: The Heart in Dishonored *(2012)*

Of the three forms of storytelling media discussed, video games offer the greatest level of freedom and experimentation. Therefore, a conclusion could be drawn that video games serve as the best access point for testing new ideas. However, as previously discussed, video games offer various types of reward systems that may influence a player's actions. Even still, the opportunity

to see the effect of one's actions play out in real time serves as an invaluable learning experience that linear forms of storytelling cannot offer.

Part V: The COVID-19 Pandemic

As predicted, using the aforementioned forms of storytelling media as access points for self-analysis proved to be effective in developing my visual thesis. However, during the same developmental period, I additionally found myself, along with the rest of the world, navigating the COVID-19 pandemic. While not quite on the same 'doomsday' scale as the apocalypse-ushering viruses seen in the likes of *The Last of Us* (2013) or *World War Z* (2013), I found the pandemic to provide additional interesting, often disappointing, insights into how different types of people act when their normal way of life is threatened.

For the sake of context, the COVID-19 pandemic, or the coronavirus pandemic, was an outbreak of a highly transmissive airborne virus. First identified in December 2019, the virus quickly spread across the world. As of February 2022, more than 430 million cases and nearly 6 million deaths had been confirmed worldwide,[19] labeling it one of the deadliest pandemics in history. In an attempt to stop the spread of the virus, preventative measures were put into place by governmental agencies, such as lockdowns, social distancing, and face mask mandates. These restrictions, along with the fear of the impending potential for the pandemic to affect everyday life, led to widespread social and economic disruption. This disruption took the form of widespread food and supply shortages made worse by panic buying as well as debates surrounding discrimination and the rights of the individual.

At the start of the pandemic, when information surrounding the disease was still unclear, many individuals began to stockpile food and supplies with the fear that the supply chain could

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[19] "WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard," World Health Organization, accessed February 28, 2022, https://covid19.who.int/.

be disrupted and access to these products may become limited. Media reporting on shoppers clearing out store shelves led to more panic buying, leaving grocery and retail stores struggling to keep shelves stocked. Hand sanitizer and toilet paper were notoriously difficult to obtain during this period. The experience served as an interesting case study of the different types of responses to extreme scenarios. Some simply purchased what they needed, if they needed it. Others attempted to hoard as much as possible. People were occasionally seen engaged in violent altercations in stores, fighting with other shoppers over the remaining food and supplies. Some saw the panic as a chance to make a profit. These opportunists stocked high-demand products with the intent to resell to desperate buyers at a steep markup. E-commerce sites, such as Amazon and eBay, quickly made the decision to ban the reselling of certain products on their platforms, hand sanitizer in particular, to prevent the exploitation of panicking buyers.[20] One man had infamously purchased over 17,000 bottles of hand sanitizer and was left with no platform to resell them. The product shortages eventually came to a more manageable level after panic settled but their effect, a disheartening perspective of human behavior, remains.

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[20] Jack Nicas, "He Has 17,700 Bottles of Hand Sanitizer and Nowhere to Sell Them," The New York Times, last modified March 15, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/14/technology/coronavirus-purell-wipes-amazon-sellers.html.

Figure 12: Photo of a man with an overflow stock of cleaning and sanitizing supplies, taken by Doug Strickland for The New York Times

Throughout the majority of the pandemic, health officials recommended the use of face masks in public to help prevent the spread of the virus. Many businesses simply made the mask recommendation a requirement of their employees and customers, and some states enacted state-wide mask mandates. However, there were groups of people opposed to wearing masks. Defiance of the mask was defended for various reasons. Some chose not to wear masks because they doubted their reported efficacy, some even falsely warning of negative health effects caused by mask wearing. Others saw masks as a violation of their individual rights and a symbol of subservience to the government. Some went to great lengths to protest the use of masks. For most, the mask was only a minor inconvenience that could help save countless lives. What many were not able to understand was that the mask was not meant to protect the wearer from others but rather to protect *others* from the *wearer*. The mask is not meant to block incoming droplets, it is meant to keep them from leaving the wearer in the first place. The mask serves as a perfect

example of the ability for people to take on small inconveniences for the benefit of others, but also for the unavoidable reality of the selfishness of some individuals. For all these reasons, I viewed the pandemic as an insight into how people would behave if a true apocalyptic scenario became a reality, and in turn, applied my findings to the development of my visual thesis.

Part VI: Development of the Visual Thesis

Set in the distant future, *The Carrier* follows the journey of two young brothers fighting to survive in a post-apocalyptic wasteland. The younger of the two is diabetic and is insulin-dependent, which forces the older to take on morally ambiguous jobs in exchange for the supplies they need. When the leader of a wasteland gang hires the boys to track down a missing crew, the older must decide if protecting his younger brother is worth putting others in danger. This series was inspired by anxieties brought on by the pandemic in regard to my own younger brothers and diabetic fiancée.

The inspiration for this project originally came to me at the start of my graduate program. For a class project, I had illustrated Matthew Reilly's *Hover Car Racer* as if I were assembling an 'art of' book of visual development for a film or game based on the novel. I designed characters, vehicles, and environments directly from their descriptions in the novel. After completing that project, I felt disappointed that I had not adapted the source material further and created a world with more of my own voice. Two years later, I still had a desire to revisit those ideas and characters. To develop a new world, I combined and recontextualized iconography from my previous work (like the pigeons and telephone poles) drawing additional inspiration from some of my favorite stories and fictional worlds.

At the core of the story, the two brothers and the hover car come directly from Reilly's book. In the novel, the boys come from a poor family and can only afford to drive a hover car

constructed from second-hand parts. I pictured the car as having a 'kitbash' look similar to the vehicles in *Mad Max,* which is why I set the story in a *Fury Road* inspired wasteland. Because the vehicles hover above the ground, I imagined there was some reason people could no longer touch the ground—perhaps due to weather conditions, radiation, predators, "the floor is lava," etc. Therefore, everyone would live in these vehicles and have a culture similar to the one shared by the characters in *Mad Max: Fury Road.* One cannot survive in the wasteland without one of these vehicles.

The 'homers' (named in reference to homing pigeons, but also as a subtle nod to the Homer of Greek mythology, as the names 'Jason' and the 'Argonaut' also come from Greek mythology) came about through research and world building. In Reilly's novel, Earth's magnetic field is what keeps hover cars afloat: "Every moment of every day, upwardly-moving magnetic waves radiate outward from the Earth's core…So long as the world kept turning, hover cars could retain their lift. And so the public's greatest fear about hover technology—cars dropping out of the sky—had been assuaged."[21] The same planetary magnetic field that keeps the fictional hover cars afloat is also used by some real-life animal species to assist in long-distance navigation; certain breeds of pigeon, for example, were once bred and trained to deliver paper messages. Carrier pigeons, as they were called, always returned home because of their ability to orient themselves using Earth's magnetic field. Through additional research, I learned that this ability is believed to be made possible by magnetite-based magnetoreceptors in the bird's beak.[22] Some researchers have theorized that human brains may also contain grains of magnetite.[23]

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[21] Matthew Reilly, *Hover Car Racer* (New York: Pan MacMillan, 2004).

[22] R. Wiltschko and W. Wiltschko "The Magnetite-Based Receptors in the Beak of Birds and Their Role in Avian Navigation," *Journal of Comparative Physiology* A 199 (2013): 89-98, https://doi.org/10.1007/s00359-012-0769-3.

[23] R. Mark Wilson. "Mapping Magnetite in the Human Brain," *Physics Today* (2018), https://physicstoday.scitation.org/do/10.1063/PT.6.1.20180830a/full/.

Inspired by 'Bridge Babies' in the video game *Death Stranding* (2019) (a device built around an unborn fetus that grants the user the ability to sense souls trapped between life and death), I wanted the pigeons to serve as a similar piece of organic technology. The idea was that a homer would augment a user's own natural magnetite and give them the same orientational abilities as the bird. However, only some people possess the genetic requirements to use homers, and these individuals are called 'carriers' (named in reference to carrier pigeons and the term in genetics, referring to an individual who possesses a genetic trait, typically does not display that trait, but is able to pass it to offspring).

Figure 13: The protagonist of Death Stranding *(2019) connecting to a 'Bridge Baby' pod*

As I mentioned previously, the relationship between the brothers is inspired by my own younger brothers, but it is also partially inspired by the relationship between the unnamed father and son in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road.* In the novel, the father has lost all faith in humanity but the young boy clings to the hope that there is still good left in the world. In my story, the

boys' parents had this same hope and would help others as often as they were able. After they were killed by raiders, Jason believed that helping and trusting others is what got his parents killed and decides to isolate himself and his brother in order to protect themselves.

Part VII: The Carrier

The world was changed forever with the invention of the hover car. Overland travel became faster—New York to Los Angeles now took 90 minutes by hover car. Hover cargo freighters could cross the world's oceans in hours rather than days. The world became smaller.

The newfound convenience of relocating led to wastefulness, and humanity consumed the world at a faster rate than ever. As habitable land became scarce, war broke out over the remaining territories. Nuclear attacks devastated what remained, leaving only the survivors that had managed to escape the blasts in their hover vehicles. Humanity was reduced to a nomadic way of life in order to survive the wasteland and its savage inhabitants.

To navigate the wasteland, some individuals possess the ability to connect themselves to carrier pigeons—nicknamed 'homers'—to gain the ability to sense the Earth's magnetic fields. These individuals are referred to as 'carriers.'

Among the wasteland's inhabitants are Jason and Bug, two young brothers left orphaned after an attack by raiders. Bug suffers from juvenile diabetes and requires insulin, forcing Jason to work as a pirate, raiding convoys for resources to use for barter. There is no job he won't accept if it means keeping his little brother alive.

Jason has made a name for himself as one of the most skilled pirates in the wasteland, though having a carrier for a brother makes the job much easier. Jason chooses to keep Bug's abilities secret in order to avoid any unwanted attention.

Figure 14: Wired In

For the last several days, Jason has been tracking a shipment of medical supplies. By tapping into the old telephone lines, he was able to intercept communications from a convoy that he believes will be carrying insulin. Bug takes the rare moment of quiet to tend to his homers, knowing he and Jason will soon be back on the move.
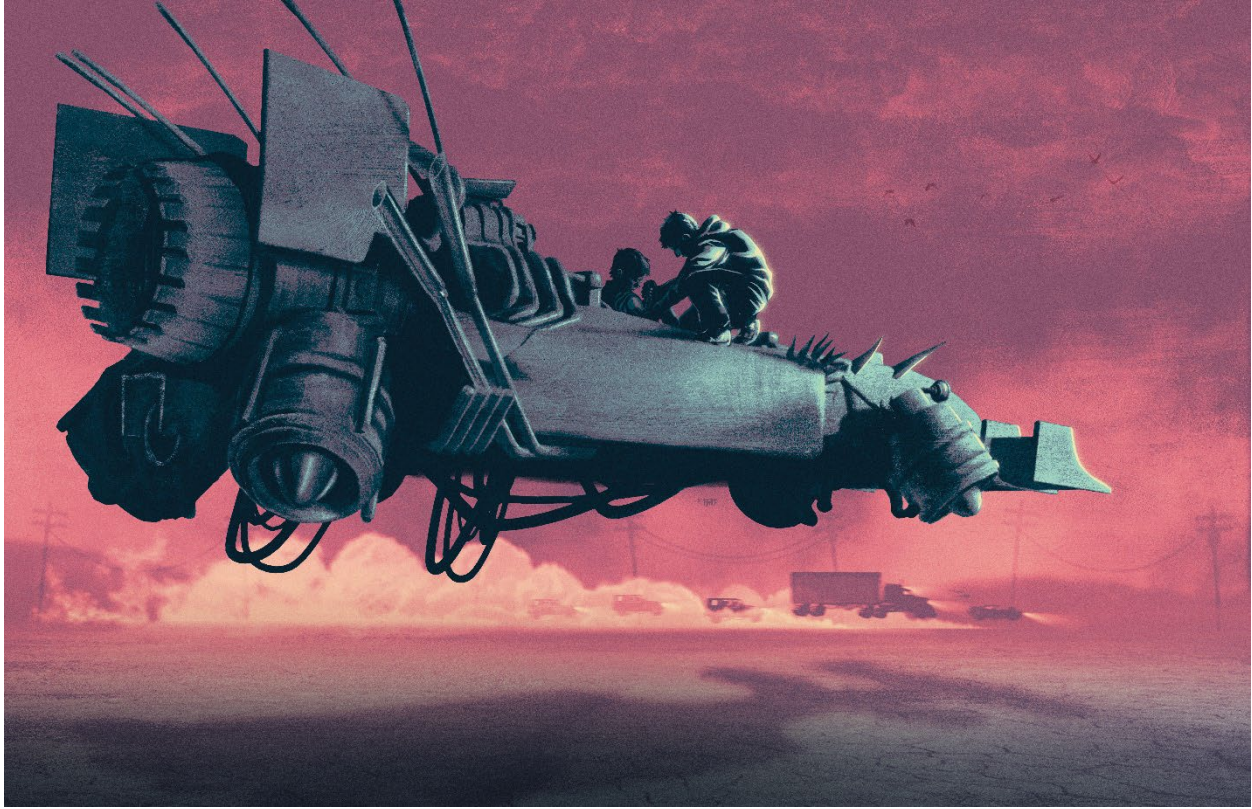
Figure 15: The Convoy Approaches

As the convoy fades into view on the horizon, the boys start up the Argonaut, one of the toughest and fastest hover cars in the wasteland. Before they strike, Jason takes a moment to give Bug one of the few doses of insulin they have left.
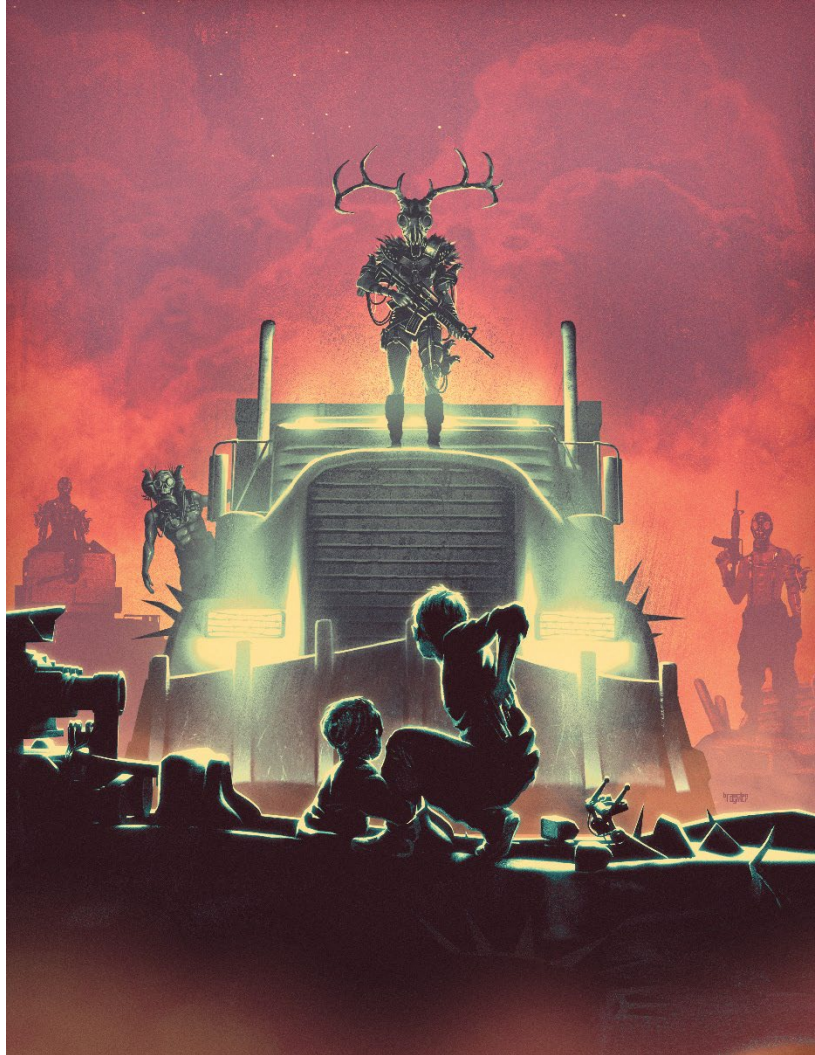
Figure 16: Ambush

To Jason's surprise, the convoy belongs to the Reapers—an infamous gang of wasteland cultists—and the boys are quickly overwhelmed by reinforcements. Scythe, the leader of the Reapers, offers the boys a deal. In exchange for their lives and the insulin they attempted to steal, the boys would need to assist in tracking down some missing cargo. Days prior, a small crew had gone on a supply run, but only their injured homer had returned. Without another carrier in the crew, the supplies were lost. Bug, being a carrier, would have to connect to the injured homer in order to navigate to the crew's last known location.

Figure 17: The Rescue

Along their journey, the boys cross paths with a woman under attack by raiders. They defeat the raiders and rescue the woman just as her hover car erupts in a fiery explosion. The woman recognizes the injured bird as her own homer. She, like Bug, is a carrier. There was no missing cargo all along. Scythe needed a carrier to track down the woman—a traitor to the Reapers. Her own homer had led them right to her. It wouldn't be long before the Reapers caught up with them and attacked.

Figure 18: Face-off

After rescuing the woman, the homer finally succumbs to its wounds, and Bug, still connected to the dying bird, falls into a coma. While the woman tends to Bug, Jason faces Scythe to seek revenge for putting his brother in harm's way.

Conclusion

Previously, I mentioned that the mirroring of my own worries in Jason's main conflicts was not initially intentional, but that I only later noticed the similarities. After completing this project, it has become clear to me that the COVID-19 pandemic was likely a main catalyst for the visual thesis, just as it likely was for many of my peers. It was difficult *not* to be influenced in some way by the pandemic. It clearly raised new fears within myself that I had never fully examined. Developing the visual thesis—using film, television, and video games as access points for self-analysis—brought these subconscious worries to the surface and gave me new tools to explore, process, and come to

Figure 19: Photo of a woman protesting mandated mask wearing, taken by Angela Major for WPR

terms with them. The character of Jason serves as a reminder of challenges I had been mentally preparing myself to deal with during that period of my life. I hope that he can also serve as inspiration for bravery in the face of uncertainty.

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Vita

NAME OF AUTHOR: Braeden Timothy Raymer

PLACE OF BIRTH: Fort Wayne, Indiana, USA

DATE OF BIRTH: October 26, 1996

GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED
    Syracuse University
    Ball State University

DEGREES AWARDED
    Master of Fine Arts in Illustration, Syracuse University, 2022
    Bachelor of Fine Arts in Drawing, Ball State University, 2019

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE
    Risograph Print Lab Supervisor, Syracuse University, 2019-2023
    Part-Time Instructor of Art, Syracuse University, 2021
    Freelance Illustrator & Graphic Designer, 2014-present
        Clients include Seattle Seahawks, Terakeet, and Indiana State Fair

CONTACT
    braedenraymer@gmail.com