

Ecology and the Post Apocalypse: Regenerative Play in the *Metro* Series

Gerald Farca

Macromedia University
Munich, Germany
g.farca@macromedia.de

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ABSTRACT

Ecological science fiction imagines worlds in which contemporary pollutions and their potential magnitude are discussed in the estranged context of a fictional world. These narratives, in other words, explore alternatives to our empirical present in which ecological issues are either solved or considerably improved upon (utopia) or have plunged the world into chaos (dystopia, post-apocalypse), thereby creating a strong discomfort in the reader, viewer or player and, potentially, the urge to resist (Baccolini and Moylan; Farca 2018; Stableford 2005).

Such strict categorisations are, however, not so easy to be made, and it remains a useful correlative to recall that utopia feeds on dystopia as much as dystopia feeds on utopia. Even in such radical visions as the apocalypse, a new utopia may arise out of the ashes of a lost world, in an “original, biblical sense ... not a final ending but an unveiling: revelation ... a mode of critique, a crying out for change” (Canavan 12). *Green hope* is thus to be found many ecological tales in implicit or explicit ways, as negative as these visions may seem. It may seem “more fugitive and fleeting (Garforth 3) or, rather, function “as *disruption (Beunruhigung)* of the present, and as a radical and systematic break with even that predicted and colonized future which is simply a prolongation of our capitalist present” (Jameson, 228)—and thus hold subversive potential.

This paper aims to describe the *Metro* series (particularly *Metro 2033* and *Metro: Exodus*) from an ecological point of view and scrutinizes the development of the series from images of enclosure (the narrow tunnels of *Metro 2033* and dream-like imagery, its linear ideologies and factions, as well as the fear and mistrust of Otherness; Farca 2018, 283-316) to the conceptual openness of *Metro: Exodus*. Here, the characters are sent on a route towards a (potentially) utopian future, towards open spaces (to a degree still inhabited by linear, radical ideologies), and on a route away from militarism towards a space for families and a new beginning. The train, Aurora, thereby functions as a hub space and safe haven for the characters from the outside world, but it also illustrates a means towards emancipation, towards a new dawn and utopian future. (we

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exclude *Last Light*, not because it is unimportant but rather because *2033* and *Exodus* are sufficient to illustrate and prove our hypotheses).

To do so, we will build on Farca et. al.'s concept of "regenerative play" as a possibility of play that includes forms of interaction with the game and its world that confronts players with ecological thematics (Farca et. al. 2018). In biology, "regeneration" refers to a process of "*renewal, restoration, and growth* that makes genomes, cells, organisms, and ecosystems resilient to natural fluctuations or events that cause disturbance or damage" (Wikipedia, emphasis mine). Of course, when dealing with fictional worlds such a metaphor cannot be taken explicitly but rather, as Zapf suggests, refers to the subversive potential of art itself. "Literary texts are sites of radical strangeness, alienation, and alterity, both in terms of aesthetic procedures of defamiliarization and of existential experiences of alienation and radical difference; and they are also simultaneously sites of *reconnection, reintegration*, and, at least potentially, of *regeneration on psychic, social, and aesthetic levels*. (Zapf, 12, emphasis mine; Lehner).

This is to say that by engaging with art (fiction), participants interact with the work on several layers, which each may be (*re*)*generative* in their own manner (in that something new arises out of the old), which we will use to describe the peculiarities of *regenerative play* in both *Metro* games. The suggested layers include:

- **Affective:** basic emotions that arise out of nature/culture experiences and their juxtapositions such as terror/claustrophobia/mistrust/lust for power, but also friendship/love/tranquillity/prudence. These grasp players on a deep-layered level and connect them with the gameworld and its plot by (*re*)sensitising them to implicitly to ecological themes and personal dilemmas.
- **Aesthetic:** the sensorial interaction (audio-visual, haptic, spatial) with the gameworld that may result in sublime experiences: when players of *Exodus*, for example, experience an unruly aesthetic of unexpected beauty in the post-apocalypse (Canavan 3) and the feeling of *astonishment* arising out of this experience of delightful terror (Burke 37).
- **Ethical:** The *Metro* games work according to a meticulous moral system and allow the ethical player (Sicart 2013) routes towards Utopia: saving the Dark Ones in *2033* and a space for the family in *Exodus*, specifically Artyom's survival and possibility to create a family with Anna. The unethical player, conversely, remains caught up in the negative cycle of dystopia and a pessimistic, militaristic, selfish outline for the future (although there are more nuances in these endings than described here).
- **Communal (from ego to eco):** overcoming individualism, linearity while moving towards openness, multi-perspectivity, and the negotiation of differing perspectives. We encounter this aspect in the *Metro* games, for example, in the juxtapositions of different ideologies and cultures. Players experience these, for instance, in the differing world views of companion characters—such as Khan (altruism, prudence) and Miller (militarism and scape-goating)—and may act on them.
- **Reflective:** a contemplative, reflective level that has players scrutinize the game for (ecological) themes and interpretations. This reflective—or emancipated (Farca 2016)—involvement may continue long after the playthrough and in discussions with peers and/or in game forums.

- **Cyclical:** a natural structure of regeneration that occurs in cycles; in *Exodus* this is foregrounded, for example, by the different seasons that outline the plot and move from winter to winter, and finally spring. A strong emphasis is thereby laid on the potentiality of players to disrupt the dystopian cycle of despair through ethical actions.

Of course, these layers intertwine and often more than one covers the player's experience simultaneously, but for the sake of analysis they are worth to distinguish.

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