

# More man vs nature mechanics? Exploring romanticized notions of solitude in online forums on survival games

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

### Keywords

survival games, online forums, masculinity, solitude, sense of belonging

## INTRODUCTION

Posts echoing ‘the apocalypse is around the corner, but you play survival games’ are present on Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok for thousands of followers. These posts contain young, presumably White men posing with axes, constructing shelters, or relaxing around a campfire. These posts place whiteness and maleness in a position of skillful mastery over nature, and their captions connect games and memetic phrases from digital culture to the end of the world. Behind such posts is the assumption that society as we know it will collapse, that knowledge of living within nature is essential for survival, that playing survival games can facilitate such knowledge, and that those players, and thereby the future survivors, are (white) men.

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While fear of an impending apocalypse is nothing new, the current global geopolitical climate has rendered it concrete once again. The 2026 Doomsday Clock Statement was clear, we are the closest we have ever been to global catastrophe with 85 seconds to midnight, based on nuclear risk, climate change, and disruptive technologies (Mecklin 27.1.2026). Despite this bleak imagined future, for some imaginaries of apocalyptic conditions create a speculative space of opportunities, as seen above. Connections between the ‘apocalyptic’ turn in masculinity (Kelly 2020) and the resurgence of hyper-masculine authoritarianism (fueled by the ‘manosphere’), suggests that anxieties around drastic social and ecological change often provoke a rise of masculinities associated with conservative and exclusionary values based on ethnicity and nationality.

This work-in-progress is based on an ethnographic exploration of a subreddit dedicated to survival game enthusiasts, a pre-study to a planned larger project on participant’s perspectives of the intersections between survival games and survivalism (for an expanded version of this abstract, see Ståhl et al, 2026). Online forums can be a useful way to get an initial understanding of a field (see e.g. Cambell et al 2019, on online prepper forums) and gaming as gendered has previously been explored through analyzing Reddit threads (Maloney et al 2019; Ruotsalainen & Meriläinen 2024). Ståhl visited the subreddit a total of ten different times in 2024-2025 and documented 80 potentially relevant threads (in accordance with Reddit’s API regulations, data was collected manually, with no automatic scraping tools utilized). Reddit is pseudonymous (to comment, sign up through username is needed) and to ensure user privacy, neither the subreddit nor any usernames are reported here. The findings presented here are presented without direct quotes to reduce searchability and if direct quotes are used, these phrasing was used across several comments by more than one user.

Previous player studies show that norms, gendered and otherwise, dictate who is welcome in certain gaming communities based on players’ intersectional identities, limiting their play (see e.g. Ståhl & Rusk, 2020; Gray 2020; TL Taylor 2015; N Taylor, 2018; Witkowski, 2018). Thereby, to develop a bottom-up understanding of survival games as perceived by the player communities, we focus on topics and titles made relevant by the players through the lens of previous research on gender norms and hegemonic masculinity, the apocalyptic turn in masculinity, and gamer masculinity.

## **PRELIMINARY RESULTS**

Multiple discussions in the material are about players’ preferences in terms of the presence of other people: players, NPCs and humanoid enemies, e.g. zombies. Players in the subreddit appear to dislike zombies, wanting more ‘realistic’ wilderness survival scenarios, focusing on managing one’s thirst and hunger at the same time as the elements. Discussing single person games that offer such in-game experiences, a player expressed wanting no monsters, ‘realistic’ survival and “more *man* vs nature mechanics” (our cursive), clearly gendering the imagined survivor. Users are addressed by gendered language, e.g. ‘my man’ and ‘bro’. This online forum correspond with previous work on how to position oneself as a ‘real gamer’ (a title primarily bestowed upon white cis-men, Consalvo and Paul, 2019): creating a knowledgeable persona by knowing the ‘canon’ games, a vast number of titles, games under development and claiming to enjoy challenging games (with ‘real’ punishments). However, there are also comments about intentionally choosing easier

options, like not dropping all gear upon death or having permadeath active, with that not being the kind of in-game experience they want. Having to re-do things (like starting over due to permadeath) was then seen as too time-consuming for adult players as they do not have as much time to play anymore.

On one hand, there is a group of players wanting gameplay experiences without any interactions with virtual humans, at most remnants from an earlier civilization now gone. Player statements preferring to be by themselves in the world with only animals as company suggest a romanticized notion of isolation and solitude. On the other hand, some players express finding certain sandbox games empty as they cannot interact with anyone, not even NPCs. Some players discussed how certain game mechanics encourage the players to share a meal or gather closely together for safety against the elements. While one player expressed that they wish engage in such activities with their friends, however if they are honest, they do not feel comfortable doing so solely for role-playing. Another player agreed and continued that game mechanics fooling the players into role-playing might be needed, highlighting wanting a sense of belonging, but admitting such might difficult.

## **CONCLUSION**

These preliminary results highlight at least two interesting points of friction within this community. First, in addition to being a community primarily for 'real' (men) gamers who enjoy 'real' punishment, there is also groups questioning such ideals. Second, there is a romanticized notion of solitude, which echoes both game narratives of isolationism, protectionism and lone heroes (Mayer 2023), as well as themes of (re)building, tinkering and "the wilderness as male proving grounds", noted by Kelly (2016, 8) to be highly prevalent among Doomsday preppers. Among survival game enthusiasts' comments, we see the presence of the 'cowboy apocalypse' which "crafts a story of America's frontier beginnings, blending it with the imagination of the world's imminent ending" (Wagner 2025, 2). However, some comments, and indeed the online forum itself can be seen as a longing for companionship through survival games. Next, we further explore both how the norms are maintained and how hegemonic views are questioned on this online forum (Ståhl et al, 2026).

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