

## Post-Apocalyptic Nonhuman Characters in *Horizon: Zero Dawn*: Animal Machines, Posthumans, and AI-Based Deities

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**Abstract:** *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (2017) is a science fiction video game that lends itself to exploration of emergent fields of knowledge by means of a fragmentary narrative and twisted representations of animals and robots. This article aims to apply posthumanism and animal studies together to examine the extent to which representations of the nonhuman both submit to and defy human(ist) statements on the human-animal divide. Human beings are presented as constructed identities following a postmodern narrative structure which allows players to reflect on the borders of human, animal, and machine alike. A powerful feminine posthuman protagonist, born from a machine in a matriarchal society, leads this quest for knowledge and identity, regarding empathy as the key to understanding the world she inhabits.

**Keywords:** video game, science fiction, animal studies, posthumanism, ecofeminism, nonhuman

Animal studies are regarded as an emergent discipline whose purpose is to rethink many of the inherited cultural values that spring from traditional Western philosophy. Humans and animals are conceived as constructs, building on Jacques Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2002). Along with the French philosopher, other thinkers have shown an interest in this field of knowledge. To name a few of the most influential works on this subject, Donna Haraway's *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003) must be highlighted as one that joins cyborgs and companion species as they "bring together the human and the non-human." Similarly, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) previously explored the famous concept of becoming, taking the question of the animal as "a phenomenon of bordering." Giorgio Agamben (2004) prefers to call this human-animal divide a caesura, and delves into what he defines as "the suspension of the suspension." Also, Hayles (1999) locates the roots of posthumanism in the Second World War, which allows her to theorize about how the fantasy of humans as a fixed stable category starts to crumble, thus taking into consideration nonhuman life forms. Many of these works depart from the oft-stated urgency regarding the need to study the nonhuman. While some place animal studies as a sub-discipline of posthumanism, claiming that the latter offers "a larger problematic" (Wolfe,

2011), other scholars believe it is not a matter of hierarchy but observe instead an evolution from the question of the animal to the question of the nonhuman: "the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari [...] have inspired a postmodern if not posthuman project in animal studies" (Weil, 2010). Whatever relationship may be conceived between the two schools of thought, their association is never questioned. It is precisely for this reason that this paper applies both methodologies at once, as they work in tandem and lead to conclusions that would otherwise remain inaccessible.

In this sense, it is convenient to settle the grounds for what is understood as animal and posthuman. The present article, following previous research in these disciplines, holds the argument that the animal does not exist. Or, at least, it is conveyed as a terribly misleading concept. As humanity struggles to find something that differentiates itself from the rest of living beings, it seems absurd to insist on using a term whose sole purpose is to stress human power in respect to other creatures. Since humans are also animals, there rises the already famous concept of nonhuman animals. On a philosophical level, Derrida proposes "*l'animot*." Following a wordplay in French (*les animaux plus mot*), this term would refer to all living beings while making explicit the poststructur-

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alist conflict of constructs. This is but a reaction to “the all-encompassing animal,” a term which “fails in signification if used to articulate the complexities presented by the postmodern animal” (Aloi, 2012). At this point, posthumanism becomes incredibly useful since it provides animal studies with the necessary critical body to tackle the question of the animal from a more comprehensive and practical perspective. I choose the term *postmodern animal* to refer to animal representations which (1) resist classical animal representations where nonhuman animals are used as mere tools for human purposes; (2) are based on postmodernist literary techniques, as “Neither the aesthetics of modernism nor the philosophical values of humanism [...] can cope easily with hybrid forms which unsettle boundaries, most especially the boundaries of the human and the non-human” (Baker, 2000); (3) raise awareness about human-animal relations and modes of coexistence in the actual world; and (4) offer alternative or speculative relationships “between species: [such that] one that no longer privileges the rights of humans [...] over those of all other forms of life, but that recognizes the value and rights of nonhuman species along with those of humans” (Wolfe, 2003).

As to posthumanism, Pepperell describes it loosely as an idea that is preoccupied with “how we live, how we conduct our exploitation of the environment, animals, and each other.” It is extremely important not to confuse this way of thinking with transhumanism, for the transhuman subject would “have overcome the biological, neurological, and psychological constraints evolved into humans” (2003). Regarding the concept of *posthumanity*, controversy abounds when it comes to giving a specific definition that could be applied for all purposes. For this reason, I prefer the notion defined by Cary Wolfe in *Moving Forward, Kicking Back: The Animal Turn* (2011). According to this interpretation, the posthuman would refer to the human that is aware of the very emptiness of meaning behind this word. Such an appreciation causes an “intrication of the animal and the technical,” becoming “an assemblage made up of components

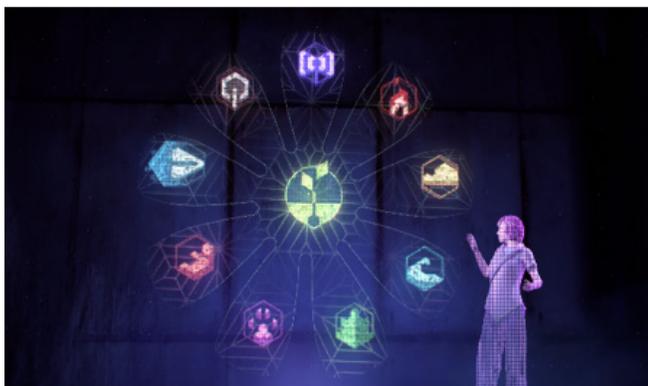
both human and non-human, living and technical.”

When engaging the posthuman and the postmodern animal in cultural representations, science fiction arises as the ideal genre. Many, if not all, of the philosophers previously mentioned point at science fiction writings, highlighting the importance of its capacity for innovation and anticipation in science, philosophy, and art. And as Vint (2008) announces in a journal issue devoted solely to animal representations, “In the late twentieth century, SF enthusiastically took up the question of cyborg identity in relation to machines; now in the twenty-first, we are ready to explore SF’s contributions to our kinship with animals” (page?). However, science fiction writings seldom take both animal studies and posthumanism into account. Video games are even more infrequently chosen as the object of study for such a methodological framework, mainly because literary works have received greater academic interest since animal studies emerged at the beginning of this century. That is why this article intends to show not only that animal studies and posthumanism can be easily applied together to a science fiction text, but also that *Horizon: Zero Dawn* is an extremely useful cultural production for understanding how the question of the animal is perceived and represented today.

**The world of Horizon**

It is most surprising that *Horizon: Zero Dawn* sold more than seven million copies in its first year (Zuylen, 2018) in a market where shooters are almost always all players’ favorite option. Despite being an AAA game,<sup>1</sup> it does not present a similar gaming experience to the vast majority of best-selling titles. *Horizon* challenges the average Millennial player insofar as it asks for patience, careful listening in dialog sequences, and strategic thinking to survive in a hostile post-apocalyptic world where humans are no longer the dominant species.

The plot is grounded on a classic sci-fi trope: humanity faces extinction because of relying on technology too heavily. Elisabet Sobeck, Ph.D.’ed genius,

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carries out the Zero Dawn project, which is nology too heavily. Elisabet Sobeck, Ph.D.'ed genius, carries out the Zero Dawn project, which is comprised of nine apps designed to make Earth habitable again. Two main apps, GAIA and HADES, control life and death respectively, locked in an eternal battle in search of balance. The first step in Sobeck's plan is to eradicate all existing human life-forms in order to start anew. Human beings have proven to be highly neglectful towards the environment, and so she believes that new humans need to populate the planet. It is imperative that they do not build on past knowledge of their species so that they do not make the same mistakes again. New humans are genetically engineered by one of the project's apps, which looks after them in several facilities around the world, behaving as their "mother" by means of highly-developed AI. No matter how well-intended Sobeck's purposes are, humans defy their AI mother and repeat the same old patterns that characterize the human species over again. It is only logical that HADES, the video game's villain, computes that humans are not beneficial for the ecosystem and so they should accordingly be erased. Its counterpart, GAIA, reacts by creating an almost exact clone of Sobeck—hence the allusion to the Egyptian god of fertility—, who is bound to help the human race due to her intelligence, survival skills, and metaphysical concerns. This clone is the protagonist of the video game and the only playable character, Aloy.

All of this information, however, is given to players only when the video game's main quest is coming to an end—that is, after approximately fifty hours. Prior to that, what players encounter is an open, wild world populated by tribal clans that function as complex micro-societies expert in warfare. Their environment is somewhat rich as far as biodiversity is concerned. Smaller animals are represented in a realistic fashion: rabbits, boars, trout, and foxes abound. Bigger animals, however, find their representation in animal-like robots. At this point, the classification of animal representations in video games proposed by Jánksi (2016) becomes very useful since they could be considered extrapolations, whose goal is to "depict alien fauna which is suitably adapted to inhabit a fictional fantastic or extraterrestrial environment." Some of them were once created to extract biomass, and behave accordingly. Others were conceived as war tools, so they challenge players' skills and strategies. Whatever their function, all are made up of hundreds of mechanical components which players can recycle and put to use by enhancing weapons, crafting traps, or selling them for metal shards, the currency in the game.

As I see it, these machines are the achievement of a twisted, imaginative understanding of the Cartesian cogito. According to Descartes, only humans are able to hold metaphysical reflections, having language as the unique tool that grants such an enterprise. Other life forms, instead, lack language, and so they are incapable of reaching that degree of consciousness. Animals are to be considered, then, beings that follow a strict behavioral pattern; they are machines. As a result, *Horizon* portrays them in robotic bodies. Whether to mock or to perpetuate this logic, these representations do confront the animal question in a creative manner only possible in science fiction writing. The first early reference that comes to mind when facing animal machines is Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), in which artificial animals signify their owners' social status. Nonetheless, *Horizon* does not portray robotic animals in the fashion of Dick's masterpiece because

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they are not exact replicas of previous animal beings. Their mechanical bodies act as a reminder of their nature, engines and colorful wires all around their heads and legs. They do not intend to perform animal lives, as they are a different kind of being.

**2.1. Animal machines, robotic animals**

When interviewed, the video game's director stated that the robotic animals present in the game are "inspired by mosquitoes for function, ant-eaters, frogs, and pelicans for form, and kangaroos and emus for movement" (Wilson 2017).<sup>2</sup> This description entails a representation of an animal that is made up of bits and pieces of other animals; it could be argued that Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming-animal is very present here:

The plane of consistency of Nature is like an immense Abstract Machine, abstract yet real and individual; its pieces are the various assemblages and individuals, each of which groups together an infinity of particles entering into an infinity of more or less interconnected relations. There is therefore a unity to the plane of nature, which applies equally to the inanimate and the animate, the *artificial and the natural* (1987, my emphasis).

Surprisingly, it is the way that animal robots can be fought in the game that clearly depicts a universe where all life forms coexist in mutual respect. Whenever players are roaming around the vast map available to them, they might encounter one of these machines. Contrary to the majority of games developed for this platform, players are not pressed to fight mindlessly. Instead, one has to wonder how advisable such an action would be. Multiple factors have to be considered in a matter of seconds: player's available ammunition, type of machine, its strength and nature (i.e. whether it is pacific, violent, or reacts depending on player's approach), the resources that can be gathered from its body, etc. After considering all of these variables, players can continue their path and ignore the machine, trying to hide in tall grass and staying silent. One can also get near the robot slowly and override it by hacking its software,

thus turning it into a friendly machine that will happily take the player on its back. But if players should think it wise to consider the machine as prey, they have to put their skills to the test to take it down. When this event takes place, we hear the machine's "last cries quickly dissipating as she [Aloy] mutters a brief prayer for it" (Te, 2015). This seemingly awkward spiritual action "speaks volumes of how mechanical lifeforms are viewed in this world. All things natural and synthetic are equally respected" (Te, 2015).

**Overridden animal machine**

We might readily argue that animal machines and realistically represented animals in this video game differ in terms of biological functions. However, any player would find it rather hard to establish a clear-cut division between them since both feed, communicate, breed, and die. In this respect, postmodern animal representation goes further than other animal narratives in which the technological remains alien: "all biological life shares a literal 'family resemblance' since we are all situated on the same, enormous family tree. Machines do not share this evolution as they are devoid of biological life and functions" (Cederholm, 2014). *Horizon* makes it very explicit that animal robots also exercise these biological functions. In fact, players can explore up to five underground facilities that function as a mechanic womb. These are called "Cauldrons" (Guerilla, 2017), where GAIA and HADES order to assemble all animal robots that inhabit the video game's world. A moving sequence shows how they are created and led to the surface, simulating a live birth.

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Horizon offers a rather clear representation of a possible intermingling between the natural and the artificial, as players face robotic animals that are assigned many cultural values which animals have in our societies. They are used for fun in a coliseum, hunted for sport, and deployed for getting resources, and their parts are worn as a way of showing one's social class. By turning the concept of the animal upside down and representing them embodied in technological automated devices, players are urged to rethink their treatment towards other life forms since the boundaries between human, animal, and machine become blurry. The radical categorization of human which separates us from other life forms is questioned by contrasting it with the nonhuman. Thus, "the human is defined by what it excludes: the divine, the angelic, the animal, and the artificial" (Shakespeare, 2012). Following this reasoning, *Horizon* proves to be of high interest to the analysis of the nonhuman since representations of the animal, the technological, and the divine are associated with characters that are a composite of these three spheres and inhabit different bodies regardless.

### 2.2 Posthuman characters

Human characters in the video game live in small tribes scattered around the continent and belong to clans. Even though there is one bigger settlement, called Meridian, its inhabitants live and behave following the same social rules as the rest of the tribes. The history of these peoples<sup>3</sup> reinforces the instability inherent to any notion of human being, evidencing its flaws and thus letting players realize that to call oneself human is to accept a set of constructions. Thanks to the game's side quests, players meet several characters that need help due to their otherness. Whenever a character does not behave like an ideal human should, they face a problem. Players listen to varied explanations ranging from why said tribes feel better in the woods than in urban settings to what reasons might exist for not feeling guilty about falling in love with someone from another clan, and even to how difficult it is to make neighbors understand that your schizophrenic brother is not dangerous

if he is well-treated. Bizarre as it may seem, these parallel stories do take place in this post-apocalyptic game and add much insight on humanity's weaknesses derived from anthropocentrism. Human beings are depicted as a vain, hypocritical species that repeats the same old patterns that once were present when they thought themselves the center of knowledge. The classical binaries—city-nature, civilized-wild, and natural-artificial—are very often the morals of these side quests, as well as the trope of humanity being represented as a fragile construct.

The first human settlement that players encounter inside the game is Mother's Crown, which is fenced in and guarded over by several watchtowers. As the protagonist first steps inside, players immediately appreciate that its society is remarkably hierarchical. Each citizen is given a social role (e.g. builder, soldier, crafter, sage, buffoon, etc.) which determines their social status and rank. The tribe that inhabits this settlement is called the Nora. Thinking themselves safe, they live in a closed space away from the woods. Not to live surrounded by other members of their species inevitably entails death since nature is conceived as dangerous, something that is just not for humans. An ecocritical reading would reveal how the city is portrayed as an anti-natural place, the center of human power. Humans adopt an anthropocentric view of their environment and are thus unaware of the biodiversity present in their world.

The transhuman is chosen as the antagonist of the human, finding its representation in the game's most feared tribe, the Eclipse. They are in possession of the same electronic device that players have access to, "the focus," which allows them to go beyond the limits of human ontology. Their use of technology for evil purposes distinguishes them from the protagonist, who does not seek eternal life, invincibility, or other traits usually associated with the rapid advancements of technology pursued by transhumanists today. They are guided by HADES and follow his orders without question; the critique to transhumanism could not be more obvious: high technology is the worst of tools in the hands of those who do not question

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its philosophical implications. Apart from the usual characterization antagonists are given in video games (i.e. dark clothes, deep voices, and masked faces), it should be noted that the first time they appear, several protagonists are killed. Interestingly, no animal machine kills a character throughout the game; deaths are reserved for humans only. Again, humans are depicted as a most destructive species that does not hesitate to kill, no matter the life form.

There is a minor tribe, called the Banuk, which meets the standards of what has been previously described as posthuman. This nomadic people, made up mainly of hunters, gatherers, and shamans, are becoming more and more sedentary as they have found a place where they can live in harmony with animal machines. When players approach the Banuk settlement, probably the smallest one in the game, robotic animals that would otherwise attack stay calm while being caressed by the members of the clan. The impact that this has on players is meant to be a startling one. After hunting, overriding, and hiding from extremely dangerous animal machines for dozens of hours, one has to blink several times at the screen. This narrative effect, together with the audiovisual shock of enemies turned into pacific beings, serves as a very direct posthumanist discourse. The Banuk are representations of the posthuman inasmuch as they accept technology and animals as parts of themselves. As a matter of fact, they

worship “the blue light, the light of the machine spirits that is all around us and settles upon us.”

However, posthumanism does not escape criticism. Particularly in this game, the Banuk challenge a sudden, unpredicted chaos when all of the animal machines near their huts attack them. Several dozens die, and shamans mourn animal and human deaths alike. Players learn that there is a transistor nearby which emits the necessary signal to keep the animal machines docile. Due to their naïveté, the Banuk have relied on spiritualism too much, forgetting about nature’s number one rule: only the fittest survive. The posthuman is represented as a wise, spiritual, powerful character that has mastered the truths of existence and at the same time, as an awfully fragile being that dangerously leaves its own nature behind in the search of transcendental knowledge.

### 3. Aloy

The exact moment that players take control of the video game’s protagonist is meaningful. It is assumed that Aloy is human. She has a human body, holds conversations, sells and buys products, obeys orders from superiors, reflects on existence, makes jokes, and is capable of loving and hating. However, as players learn about the virtual world in which they are playing, a certain feeling of otherness arises. The capacity she has for instantly accessing augmented reality by means of her focus, an electronic device plugged into the right side of her head, makes players feel that she is not that human. Once it is known Aloy was genetically engineered by a machine which tried to replicate a previous human specimen (i.e. Sobeck), she is perceived as a sort of superior being, a post-human heroine whose destiny has to be fulfilled in order to reach the game’s ending sequence.

Of course, Aloy ignores her origins, and so her main life goal is to find her mother. Precisely because she is motherless, she is an outcast from the Nora, the matriarchal society to which she belongs, and lives with Rost, her foster father, who nourish



**Banuk shamans pierce their bodies with machine parts so as to commune with them**

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es her as well as he teaches her how to survive in the wilderness. It is very likely that these two characters' names are based on the words *alloy* and *rust*, thus referring to the close relationship that they share. After all, a clear reference is made to metals, a word that can be found in the video game script countless times (e.g. vestiges of human buildings are called "the Metal World"). There is a clearer allusion, however, to H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895), in which the Aloi, a civilization that has evolved from the *homo sapiens*, inhabit the Earth. Aloy's search for her mother reminds players of the reflections carried out by the protagonist in Wells' novel since both Aloy and the Time Traveler contrast two human-like civilizations and speculate on the reasons there might be for them to have evolved in such a way.

#### 3.1. Stay focused

Even though there are some contemporary video games whose narrative structure is impregnated by postmodern literary techniques, *Horizon* is one of the few titles that integrates such literary devices successfully in a medium like a video game console.<sup>4</sup> Players are expected to stay focused not only thanks to all the information they can gather from Aloy's focus device, but also on the fragility of Aloy's health bar. Gamers today know that it is not easy to find a video game which presents coherence when piecing together narrative frame, playable setting, and available weapons. The game under analysis demands survival skills in a wild environment, and so players never find it easy to stay alive. As an example, one has to look for twigs in order to craft shafts, the most used weapon. Also, progress is only saved when resting at a campfire, a feature that is considered old-fashioned in contemporary gaming but that still makes sense in the immersive experience. Whenever Aloy needs machine parts for bettering her equipment, she has to hunt animal robots and extract their useful parts. In all, the fact that players experience wilderness by surviving "brings to light how fragile humans are. [...] We're not invincible. This title joyfully mocks that mentality, often killing you in two or three unavoidable strikes from foes much more pow-

erful than your frail human frame" (Buchholtz, 2017).

While we might argue about whether it is necessary for (post)human characters in the game to hunt animal machines, there is no denying that hunting is represented as "an engagement [that] allows both sets of animals to reveal and display their particular qualities and create a performance" (Marvin, 2007). Players do not become protagonists responsible for massive killings. Instead, they are forced to plan their steps very carefully. All of the elements described in a hunter novel can be found in Aloy's approach to wildlife: she spots the beast, hides in tall grass, finds a pattern in its movement, considers how the weather might give her the upper hand, chooses the best location to strike, aims and releases a piercing shaft, hopefully damaging the animal machine using the least ammunition. The robotic animal, on the other hand, does not give up easily. It will hold on to life by fleeing at top speed, alerting others, and even fighting back. This performance takes players back in time to prehistory since Aloy behaves as a "proper" human being who hunts to survive. No player would ever use the focus in the middle of this performance. It not only looks extravagant and out of place, but is also useless given that machines' movements are unpredictable.

Ethics are, of course, another consideration whenever a video game reproduces violence. Sicart (2009) takes video games as serious cultural agents in which players exercise their own ethics and whose moral values are reflected on the virtual world. I would not like to consider video games as catalysts for violence, a way out for players to exercise everything illegal in the society they belong to, but instead as a site for ethical projections. Following this train of thought, *Horizon*, which allows players to make their own choices, would not portray a pre-established set of ethics but an array of them. Players would then project their ethical evaluations on Aloy, making her a ruthless killer or a compassionate posthuman being.<sup>5</sup> The ultimate instrument that reveals someone's playing style is the focus, as those who restrict its use to battle omit half of the game.

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The incident in which Aloy, at six years old, discovers the focus in an abandoned laboratory, now underground, constitutes the video game's first playable sequence. In contrast to previous panoramic views of a wild setting in which life flourishes everywhere and green is the dominant color, Aloy is suddenly surrounded by darkness and has to move on in a closed space where some litting artificial lights let her advance more or less safely. As soon as she finds this most useful tool, everything changes. Players only need to press a button to access all



**Blue lights signal two synchronized focuses**

kinds of information about the protagonist's surroundings. The control settings for the focus are fascinating since players activate it by pressing the right joystick. It is a convention to use the right joystick for controlling perspective and camera angle so that by clicking it, players get the impression of going into the depths of visual stimuli. One comes to depend so much on the focus that playing without it would result in a constant game-over screen: "All I have to do is take this thing off your head, and you'll be deaf, blind and dumb." Naturally, the focus is a complement for Aloy's senses, the physical device that symbolizes posthumanism and acts as a constant reminder of the main character's otherness.

As soon as players turn the focus on for the first time, they become aware of several corpses around them, their focuses still plugged in. Wells' Time Traveler acts as a clear reference once

again, for Aloy starts to inhabit both eras at the same time—in a way, her focus allows her to time travel back and forth. Players are urged to make assumptions about what might have happened to the Metal World due to audio data points that can be transferred from other dead bodies' focuses. This is where the game excels at developing a fragmentary postmodern narrative. There are more than two hundred documents from the Metal World scattered all around the continent. They consist of holograms, audio files, and written documents that are almost always out of context, for there is no knowing what happened to the owner—who is usually a corpse—whose focus has survived a thousand years. Players are not expected to find them all but to link whatever information they can discover. Each gameplay is different since players experience a different narrative sequence.

**3.2. What a waste**

Aloy's ascendant, Elisabet Sobeck, believes so much in her project to make Earth habitable again that she sacrifices herself when a seal of her team's underground base malfunctions. In order to keep it going, she leaves, knowing she cannot survive. Her colleagues mourn her death while at the same time, they understand the reasons for her choice: "They [future humans] have to understand what you did for them. How you loved the whole world, so much. With an intensity that was dazzling. Bruising. And in the end, it killed you. Or you died for it." Love, empathy, and compassion are features given to female characters. As a consequence, only Aloy marvels at the poems inscribed on metal flowers Sobeck left all around before dying, while male merchants can only think of them as most rare indecipherable collectibles. There are three sets of metal flowers, each of them corresponding to poetry written in a specific geographical location. These poems were, then, originally written in Japanese, English, Arabic, and Hindi. A poem by Ottoman poet Hayâlî must be especially remarked upon, as I believe that it is the inspiration for the video game's title. In its full version, the poet professes his admiration for a wom-

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an whose beauty, intelligence, and aura make him feel raptured. This feminine figure is transformed in *Horizon* by showing only the first stanza, in which the very words horizon and dawn can be read:

///

[function: true]

{{When dawn hennas her hands with the blood}}

{{of the horizon}}

{{Let the new bride of the golden veil uncover}}

{{her shining face}}

///

(Guerrilla, 2017)

The use of square and curly brackets, as well as the insertion of technological jargon is justified as the poem is inscribed in a metallic mechanism, not written on a conventional piece of paper. The figure of the woman alludes to both Sobek and Aloy, and the former is the one that watches life on Earth disappear while the latter is the descendant whose mission is to restore life balance. Dawn is to be understood as the end of human civilization, while the new bride is ready to connect humankind to nature once more. They are two similar beings from different ages who finally meet on the water's surface in the video game's last sequence, just like in the original poem's second-to-last stanza: "Let me take that glass in hand and gaze / Until the desired one is mirrored in the magic of the glass" (Andrews et al., 2006). A special emphasis should be placed on the use of light in the selected stanza given that sunlight is considered a spiritual factor among the tribes in the game, and animal machines make use of it for all their basic functions. Aloy's face is described as shining, thus placing her on a higher plane of existence as a transcendental being.

Nevertheless, poetry is not the only factor that defines *Horizon* as a cultural product that could easily be analyzed from an postmodern ecofeminist perspective. The title for this section, "What a waste,"

is one of Aloy's most frequently repeated remarks delivered aloud as she spots dead bodies—whether artificial or natural—, emptying out resources because her pouch is full,<sup>6</sup> and killing more animal machines than necessary for the fulfillment of her mission. Her ecological concerns are significant since she inhabits an endangered environment which has been damaged because of past human action. This does not only resonate with any player today but also depicts the consequences of the Anthropocene, as the story is set in a future Earth that is still trying to heal. It is no wonder that Ashly Burch, the actress in charge of giving Aloy voice, declared: "Playing her made me a braver and stronger woman and I hope for any of the women that have played the game that you feel the same" (Prell, 2017). *Horizon* then belongs to a solid generation of video games whose main character is a powerful woman. What is very uncommon for a video game, however, is to raise ecological awareness by making use of the tools available in the science fiction genre.

Empathy stands as the key feature that defines Aloy. It enables human beings to place ourselves everywhere in the "continuum" for the sake of "sharing the being of another" (Coetzee, 1999). Aloy mostly demonstrates her sympathetic and empathetic capacities when she interacts with other characters. To begin with, she spends more time listening than talking. This is an extremely interesting characteristic to find in a video game, a cultural product which very often seeks to provide quick entertainment relying on dizzying sequences full of action. After listening to a rather long conversation, players must decide what Aloy has to say about people's conflicts. Depending on which option is chosen, secondary characters' fates change, either solving their problems or ending up in disgrace. Players' ethical values are made more evident than ever, receiving audiovisual stimuli that are the product of their own decisions.<sup>7</sup>

Most of these secondary characters are women who "examine womanhood in a way the hero cannot" (Hetfeld, 2018). While Aloy functions as the heroine that is naturally capable of discerning between right

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from wrong and who acts accordingly, other women show an innate ability for leadership, administration, and resource management. Without them, settlements would be bound for destruction. This is not to say that men are depicted as brainless warriors. In fact, the Nora do not look down upon female warriors or male tailors. While they are a matriarchal society, they exercise gender equality unconsciously, thus making up a society freed from social constraints that would otherwise restrict citizens' choices about education, occupation, family affairs, and the like: "The Nora are all the more remarkable for their embrace of the feminine as they are for the toughness of their female warriors. It's not just the women who are unbothered by gender norms in Nora lands" (Williams, 2017).

Aloy, however, is not a Nora, and does not hesitate to remind players of her hometown—the woods. When anointed seeker by this clan,<sup>8</sup> she travels from place to place running errands without forgetting her main quest. In an exquisite sequence of dialogue, she declares: "My whole life I lived as an outcast from the Nora. They would have been the first to say I wasn't one of them. Yet, as soon as I leave the Sacred Lands, everyone calls me 'Aloy of the Nora'. It should be 'Aloy despite the Nora.'" If something makes her human, it certainly is not her having been raised in a city full of them. This facilitates her capacity for putting compassion to use.

Realistically represented animals can also be hunted and killed in the game, though something marvelous happens when players choose to do it. Aloy sighs, "tough, but I'm used to it," showing that she also feels aggravated by such an action. This video game is played on a platform that rewards players with digital trophies anytime they make significant advances in the story or achieve major tasks. When, for example, players defeat a number of enemies or make a lot of money, a trophy icon pops up. In the case of realistically represented animals in *Horizon*, it must be stressed that no trophy is ever given for killing them. In fact, players can achieve a hundred per cent of the game completion without having to kill a single animal. For all of these reasons,

Aloy is to be considered an empathetic posthuman character that is able to connect, both physically and spiritually, with animals, machines, and humans.

**4. Deities**

The spiritual world of *Horizon* is populated by many gods and goddesses, of which three merit close analysis. Although Aloy could also be considered a Christian-like Messiah figure, this article does not take into consideration any religious viewpoint. Instead, I approach these characters as one more element of the nonhuman, paying special attention to how its representation reflects ecofeminist values. The most eminent spiritual figure in the video game is the Sun. It is worshipped as long as all tribes understand that life would be impossible without it. Thus, light becomes a religious symbol to be experienced by any living being. The fact that all machines emit light hints at the consideration of all life forms as sacred. Those who wear a focus can perceive lights from machines used by the Old Ones, and regard them with a sort of awe: "Lights—everywhere!" The Sun is creator, provider, and judge, as citizens of Sunfall expose criminals to it for long periods of time so as to seek its verdict. Players also seek light insofar as it is much easier to play during the day. Final battles take place at midnight, and when the last boss is defeated, the sun shines. The message is most clear: sun equals life.

GAIA, one of the apps that make up the Zero Dawn project, is referred to as "Mother" by southern tribes, and so their settlements are located upon GAIA's base: their social structure is a matriarchy, and motherhood is associated with nature, life, sacrifice, and bravery. GAIA, when represented as a hologram, is actually shown as a female in green colors, with a sweet human-like voice which is full of emotion. If she were not sentient, all of her AI would prove insufficient to look after planet Earth: "it wasn't enough for GAIA to think. She [Sobeck] taught GAIA to feel. To care. To sacrifice. To believe in life. [...] If it wasn't for that 'sentimentality,' life would have ended."

While GAIA adopts a human form, HADES remains bodiless. It is called a "Demon," represented in red

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and possessing a deep voice to which Aloy does not have access. HADES' AI is purely logical so that it communicates to other life forms, showing no capacity for empathy. It is assigned the role of villain only because its sole purpose is to destroy all life. However, its presence is thought necessary by Sobeck since GAIA would not be able to monitor overpopulation without it. The two god-like systems are codependent to such an extent that the non-existence of either one of them would mean destabilizing Nature itself. GAIA's death and its hopes in making Aloy are exactly what start up the plot. Players have to destroy HADES in order to show them that the existing life forms on Earth are already independent and do not need divine action. Deities in *Horizon* can die, and so all living beings share a common, natural, spiritual experience by rejecting divine figures. Players face death multiple times in a hostile environment, animals get killed, whether realistically represented or robotic-like, and humans are portrayed as a most fragile species that worships almost unknown deities that are also mortal. In all, mortality is used as a "most radical means of thinking the finitude that we share with animals, [...] to the experience of compassion, to the possibility of sharing this nonpower" (Derrida & Willis, 2002).

**5. Conclusions**

Animal representation in 21st century science fiction cannot escape concerns of the nonhuman studied by animal studies and posthumanism. In a digital era in which images abound, it is mandatory to carefully examine how animals find their way into being represented in different media. This article has chosen a video game as a cultural agent suitable for analysis, applying animal studies and posthumanism together, and consequently, showing how these two disciplines hold a relationship of "reciprocal influence that [leads], in a sense, to the 'coming of age' of both schools of thought" (Salzani, 2017). In so doing, nonhuman characters have proved to be greatly useful because they allow a deeper understanding of the human and animal constructions by looking closely at how their boundaries are blurred. More specifically, the video game explores

the nonhuman by means of postmodern animal representation, posthuman characters that are directly opposed to transhumanist villains, and AI-based deities whose role is technological as much as natural.

Thus, nonhuman characters in *Horizon* can be taken as "intervention, transformation, and projection" (Blake *et al.*, 2012) of ourselves into a fictional world, so that the nonhuman is to be connected to "formal and contextual considerations" (McHugh, 2006). This means that players who unwillingly cast their own appreciations of the nonhuman onto the game itself become moral agents. Immediately, the game gives players back audiovisual stimulation based on their decisions, allowing them to easily reflect on their preconceived ideas. This is a gaming experience that constantly urges players to recognize the philosophical conception of a life continuum, based on the protagonist's interactions with her environment. In all, *Horizon: Zero Dawn* has proven its utility for representing nonhuman characters from a contemporary perspective that lends itself to further study in conversation with emergent fields of knowledge such as posthumanism and animal studies. Its characters function as amalgams whose representation is directed towards breaking the barrier between species while placing all of them on the same level, no matter their bodies, communication systems, or spiritual beliefs.

I believe it is precisely by showing a diverse number of representations of the nonhuman that the video game achieves a posthumanist discourse, relying on characters who do not possess exclusive features. Instead, they share many characteristics with others, whether they belong to the same species or not, thus displaying a continuum of life forms. Animal machines, posthuman characters, and AI-based deities all dwell in the same environment, and so they are forced to cohabit, remaining aware of the consequences that their decisions place on other species. Only when they understand that all living beings are equally important and necessary for planet Earth can they realize that bodies are but the carcasses that enable them to perform their roles in their shared surroundings. Spirituality arises as the main factor for a

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sustainable cohabitation of all life forms, being carried out by a posthuman female character that regards compassion as the best tool for so ambitious a project.

**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> According to Fernández-Vara (2015), AAA games are “commercial digital games with a very large budget, developed by large teams that are usually supported by large publishers.”

<sup>2</sup> The very word choice to speak about the animals represented in the video game is significant. It is evident that neither animal nor machine alone seem referential enough. As the present characters are a conjunction of both, several terms could be applied. I use animal machine, animal robot, and robotic animal indistinctively, though I am aware of the shades of meaning. What is at stake here is the labeling of a representation, in this case an audiovisual one, of the postmodern animal, which many critics agree is “philosophically unthinkable, and visually unrepresentable” (Baker, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> A tyrant king committed unspeakable crimes that ended up in a genocide that could very well be read as an allusion to the Second World War. A never-ending war hits the continent, which results in the mad king’s assassination. His heir tries to reconcile the multiple clans, which are still hurt by the recent battles. As a result, clans segregate and become inevitably isolated. Only trading and economic benefits make some clans find mutual bonds.

<sup>4</sup> I would personally highlight two other titles that lend themselves to postmodern readings, especially because of their use of non-linear fragmentary narrative, unreliability, *mise en abyme*, and intertextuality: *République* (2013) and *BioShock: Infinite* (2013).

<sup>5</sup> It is most interesting to observe how Badiou (2000) uses the term human animal to describe that part of the human that remains “outside the event” in which the subject acts as “a moral subject, a subject to and for ethics.”

<sup>6</sup> Players have a very limited carry capacity and so they are constantly forced to make decisions about the best use they can give to items they have collected. Health is restored by gathering medicinal plants and herbs that are not always easy to find. At the same time, this avoids a common gaming strategy called gearing up, by means of which players defeat as many easy enemies as they can in order to make less effort in future boss battles.

<sup>7</sup> The toughest decision that players are asked to make takes place in the middle of the gameplay. After having been tricked by Ollin, Aloy has to decide whether to kill the traitor or not. Showing compassion at this moment—understanding the lives of his wife and daughter had been threatened—is rewarded by his helping Aloy in a difficult mission. Choosing to kill him only leaves Aloy feeling bitter and remorseful about making Ollin’s child fatherless, a burden that she herself carries throughout the remainder of the game.

<sup>8</sup> Aloy’s behavior regarding her clan resembles that of a philosopher. By leaving the Sacred Lands, the first territory in the game that warms up the gaming experience, she takes on a quest for her identity but also for Nora’s. When she comes back, she shares all of the knowledge she has obtained and urges the Nora not to depend on false myths but to comprehend the natural laws that govern the Earth.

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