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Born of Machines:

A Posthumanist Study of Aloy's Identity in *Horizon: Zero Dawn*

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Abstract

This study examines posthumanist dimensions of humanity and identity formation through an analysis of Aloy, the protagonist in the action role-playing game *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (2017). The aim is to investigate how Aloy's identity as a clone created by advanced AI, her integration with technology, and her interactions with her surroundings align with posthumanist theory, which challenges conventional humanist boundaries that separate humans, animals, and machines. By utilizing the three aspects of embodiment, relational identity, and self-perception – derived from posthumanist core concepts of identity formation – as a framework for analysis, Aloy's posthuman identity is highlighted. To achieve this aim, the study employs close reading of dialogues, character interactions and plot developments pertaining to Aloy and the perceptions of her identity.

The results reveal that Aloy's humanity and identity transcend conventional and fixed humanist boundaries between humanity and identity, according to which there is a distinct separation between humans and non-humans. Instead, her identity is hybrid, combining human and technological elements. These aspects align with posthuman theory in suggesting that her identity is shaped by her technological connections, social interactions and personal choices, effectively echoing the posthumanist conception of an entity whose boundaries are continuously formed and reformed through interactions with the material world. Thus, Aloy's posthuman identity redefines humanity itself. This conclusion underscores the relevance of posthumanism in re-evaluating concepts of humanity and identity in the contemporary context of rapid technological advancements.

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1. Introduction

In a world where artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly evolving, research shows that humans are prone to humanizing chatbots and generative AIs by attributing human-like qualities to them (Gibbons et al.). Being polite to or praising the AI is an example of this process, which is referred to as AI anthropomorphism. On a deeper level of AI anthropomorphism, humans have been found to feel a sense of companionship with and form meaningful relationships with AIs (Gibbons et al.). In 2017, the European Parliament even proposed granting "electronic personhood" to specific AI-generated devices, advocating that robots should be given rights akin to those of humans (Hern). These tendencies suggest that the boundaries of what is considered human are being challenged. Indeed, the boundaries of humanity have been proven to be culturally dependent and, therefore, flexible, making them susceptible to reinterpretation in response to societal change (Hańderek 18-19). Thus, what exactly does the concept of humanity entail today? Are there more dimensions to the term than what is conventionally associated with the biological being called *Homo Sapiens*? Modern-day humanist theory was born from the Enlightenment era, when rational thought and agency were elevated as determining factors of humanity (Hübner 4-6). Posthumanist theory, however, criticizes this basis upon which humankind has built its understanding of its own species. Posthumanism transcends boundaries and promotes a worldview where human identity is created and shaped through an intermingling with non-human entities (Hayles 3). Thus, posthumanism claims that humanity should be regarded as a spectrum that can extend beyond biology and include hybrid entities. Humanity is thus redefined as a relational and dynamic concept that emerges from interactions across boundaries rather than individual decisions or acts (Haraway 7).

The narrative of the open-world action role-playing game *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (2017) offers what could be deemed as a contradictory combination of highly advanced technology and primitive life: hunting autonomous animal-like machines with bows and arrows. However, the developers of the game have created a plausible story arc by utilizing themes that resonate with a contemporary understanding of technological progress. As *Horizon: Zero Dawn* is set in a post-apocalyptic world governed by advanced AI, it occupies the conceptual borderland of cyberpunk while at the same time incorporating a mythical twist whereby the protagonist Aloy's journey mirrors that of a classical hero. The game challenges the anthropocentric worldview by placing humans lower on the food chain and animal-like machines at the top, thus underscoring a key focus of posthumanist theory. Additionally, by exploring artificial intelligence and hybrid

identities, the game emphasizes the posthumanist idea of blurred distinctions between humans, animals, and machines.

The narrative of *Horizon: Zero Dawn* has been the subject of research related to posthumanist theories; however, an in-depth analysis of Aloy's posthuman identity and humanity has not yet been undertaken. This paper seeks to fill that gap by conducting an analysis through applying a posthumanist framework to Aloy's unique position as a hybrid being. Aloy, the protagonist of *Horizon: Zero Dawn*, epitomizes posthumanist thoughts of human identity by being literally "born of machines." Created by advanced artificial intelligence, yet perceiving herself as human, Aloy thus embodies the posthumanist rejection of rigid boundaries between the natural and the synthetic.

2. Background

To fully understand the claims made in this essay, context will be provided through a synopsis of the game's plot. Furthermore, the concepts of humanity and identity will be defined according to humanist and posthumanist theories, in order to enable an in-depth analysis of Aloy's humanity and identity.

2.1. Horizon: Zero Dawn

The plot of *Horizon: Zero Dawn* is partly conveyed through internal focalization, meaning that the narrative is focused through the consciousness of the protagonist, Aloy, allowing players to see the world through her eyes (Culler 10). However, the plot is also fragmented, and the detailed backstory is pieced together in a non-linear fashion through audio recordings, holographic logs, and data points. To limit the scope of the study, only the central storyline will be used for close reading and interpretation of key dialogues and character interactions pertaining to Aloy and the perceptions of her identity. This includes how NPCs (non-player characters) treat her, speak to and about her, and express their attitudes toward her through body language. As NPCs are integral to conveying the believability of the game world and the protagonist's role within it (Warpefelt 45), analyzing their interactions with Aloy offers insights into the deeper themes of the narrative. Through internal focalization, the game offers a unique vantage point to Aloy's thoughts and feelings. She often expresses her inner monologue out loud, effectively enabling cross-comparison of Aloy's self-perception and the views others impose upon her. Shifts in the plot after her origins have been revealed are also of interest.

Additionally, the physical appearance of Aloy further contributes to an understanding of whether her appearance aligns with or challenges humanist or posthumanist notions of identity and humanity.

Horizon: Zero Dawn is set in the post-apocalyptic 31st century, where humanity has reverted to tribal societies. Autonomous animal-like machines roam the land, and remnants of an old civilization hint at a catastrophic event in the distant past ("*Horizon Zero Dawn*: The Story so Far"). During the 21st century, humans are depicted as having been technologically advanced, especially in the fields of robotics and AI. In the 2030s, scientists created robots to reduce environmental destruction and prevent further damage. However, the goals of some of the scientists eventually diverged. One of these scientists was Dr. Elisabeth Sobeck, who sought to rebuild and preserve life. Another scientist, Ted Faro, instead prioritized profit by creating and selling a line of peacekeeping war machines called "Chariot" to nations worldwide. These robots could self-replicate and were fueled by consuming biomass, effectively making them entirely self-sufficient. Faro's company, Faro Automated Solutions (FAS), is described as having been one of the largest companies in the world, which was highly successful at the time. However, an unknown error caused a swarm from the Chariot line to lose its command-and-control procedures in 2064. The killer robots, which FAS had no control over, continued reproducing, repairing, and consuming any accessible biomass. The situation, known as the Faro Plague, threatened to eradicate all life on Earth within 15 months, leaving the planet as an uninhabitable husk ("*Horizon Zero Dawn*: The Story so Far"). With financing grudgingly supplied by FAS founder Ted Faro, Dr. Elisabet Sobeck conducted Project Zero Dawn in response to the impending annihilation of not only humankind but all life on Earth. Elisabeth knew at this point that there was no way of stopping the apocalypse, so she spent the remainder of her time designing GAIA – the most powerful and advanced AI ever created. GAIA would come to be capable of sophisticated planetary engineering through its nine subfunctions and was eventually tasked with stopping the Faro Plague and restoring life on Earth. Each of GAIA's nine subfunctions, designed by experts in their fields, carried out a specific task in the Project Zero Dawn terraforming system. All but one of the subfunctions worked as intended, and the Earth was successfully terraformed. However, the subfunction responsible for knowledge about the ancient world and the education of the re-emerging humans was sabotaged by Ted Faro, as he believed that knowledge to be the source of the plague that had eradicated life on earth. As a result of this, the new generation of humans regressed into the primitive tribes that are seen in the game.

During the game, the player comes across tribes such as The Carja, Oseram, and Banuk, but the tribe that is most central to the plot is the Nora tribe, as it is Aloy's tribe of origin. The highly advanced humans of the 21st century are referred to as "The Old Ones." The world is scattered with ancient ruins from this time, but much has been overgrown and reclaimed by nature. Access to these places is forbidden by the Nora tribe, and they are often recounted as "The Metal World" or "The Old World." The Nora tribe is highly religious and worships a deity called the All-Mother – the creator of life. Their society is matriarchal and centers around the concept of motherhood. This is also reflected in the names of settlements like Mother's Cradle and Mother's Crown and in religious rituals like The Proving, where the participants' mothers create a lantern for their children to launch into the sky. Being a mother is considered sacred, and the tribe is led by High Matriarchs – great-grandmothers with three or more generations of living relatives.

The protagonist is Aloy, a young woman who was found as an infant without a known mother. She is, therefore, considered "motherless" by the tribe. As a result, Aloy grows up as an outcast, shunned by her people. She is instead raised by Rost, another outcast, on the outskirts of the sacred Nora land. As a child, Aloy discovers a piece of "Old World" tech called Focus. The Focus is a small device that attaches close to the temple, above the ear of the wearer. It allows users to interact with Old World tech and scan the surroundings. Through the Focus, Aloy can, for example, identify weak spots in machines and track their movements. Rost is initially hesitant towards it and calls it "a plaything" (*Horizon: Zero Dawn* ch. "A Gift from the Past") but later changes his mind when he sees the advantages it offers.

As Aloy grows up, she embarks on a journey to uncover her origins. She eventually discovers that she is a clone of Dr. Elisabeth Sobeck, created by GAIA. Sometime before Aloy was created, GAIA received a mysterious signal. The signal interfered with GAIA's coding, making its nine subfunctions independent AIs. HADES, which functioned as an extinction failsafe in case of a failed terraforming attempt, subsequently went rogue and activated its protocol with the intention of ending life on Earth once again. In order to stop HADES, GAIA opted for self-destruction. However, before doing so, GAIA created a clone of its inventor, Dr. Elisabeth Sobeck, as Dr. Sobeck was the only one able to use the system's master override to remove HADES and rebuild and reboot GAIA (*Horizon: Zero Dawn*).

2.2. Humanism

For centuries, scholars, scientists, and philosophers have sought to define the concepts of humanity and identity. According to John H. Evans, conventional perspectives of human identity can be divided into three different theoretical frameworks: theological, philosophical, and biological (1). According to the theological perspective, humans were made in the image of God – the Imago Dei. Essentially, from this viewpoint it is argued that humans are human on account of their relationship with God. Moreover, this relationship is claimed to make humans unique and extraordinary compared to other beings (Evans 5-6). The philosophical approach, by contrast, emphasizes the significance of certain traits or characteristics, such as autonomy, rationality, and moral agency (Evans 7). These qualities and beliefs are also central in the works of Aristotle (Deslauriers and Filotas 40). This perspective separates the human from the person, in the sense that "persons may include some nonhuman animals, and some genetic humans may not be persons" (Evans 7). The term "personhood" is often used to determine the difference between these concepts, with "personhood" being the defining element for humanity. Lastly, the biological perspective states that humans are humans because of their DNA. Our shared genetic and physical traits define us as belonging to the species *Homo Sapiens*, which is what makes us human. According to this viewpoint, humans are "nothing but another animal" (Evans 8), and human characteristics and traits are simply the result of the coding in our genes. However, scientific studies also suggest that genes do not exclusively determine human traits but are also shaped by factors such as culture, individual choice, and social environment (Evans 10). In sum, all three viewpoints hint at the interconnectedness between humanity and identity, emphasizing how internal processes and external influences collectively shape human identity.

The term identity alone has a number of different connotations, while the phrase personal identity is often used when referring to identity as something more specifically related to a person. In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, personal identity is defined as:

> Who or what a person or thing is; a distinct impression of a single person or thing presented to or perceived by others; a set of characteristics or a description that distinguishes a person or thing from others. ("Identity, N., Sense 2.b.")

This definition offers few to no deeper explanations of the complex factors governing human identity. The philosopher Charles Taylor provides a more nuanced account in his book *Sources of Self* (1989), where he has outlined the central ideas of humanist theory. Taylor states that the concept of identity is complex, many-tiered, and deeply intertwined with cultural context and

moral frameworks (4, 28-29). According to Taylor, identity is linked to an orientation of one's beliefs and opinions – where one stands. Societal norms, cultural contexts, and one's background provide a fundamental framework through which this orientation is determined. This framework provides a sense of what is good, valuable, or worth pursuing for an individual (Taylor 27-28). This means that identity is not developed in isolation but is shaped through one's interactions with external influences, thus ultimately highlighting the relational nature of identity and a sense of self (selfhood). Thus, identity and selfhood rely on the creation of "the other", as this defined border between the self and "the other" enables individuals to make sense of themselves and the world.

Taylor further emphasizes that personal identity involves self-interpretation (34). Individuals must reflect on and articulate their position in relation to the frameworks they inherit. Taylor's perspective on the formation of identity revolves around this internal process of introspection and self-definition (36). However, identity is not only shaped by internal reflection but also by recognition from others (15). Drawing on the concept of the dialogical self, Taylor argues that identity is formed through interaction with others (33). This emphasizes the social aspect of identity, which connects one's sense of self to how others perceive and react to the individual.

Furthermore, Taylor highlights the importance of historical and cultural inheritance in the formation of identity. Aspects such as language, gender, ethnicity and traditions provide a foundational backdrop against which individuals make sense of themselves (Taylor 32). While often unchosen, these hereditary factors provide the fundamental framework through which individuals initially navigate society. However, the concept of identity is not entirely fixed. Taylor's definition of authenticity emphasizes the importance of living in accordance with one's own sense of what is good, rather than just conforming to external expectations (33). This flexibility enables people, via conscious thought and decisions, to partially modify their respective identities according to their individual wishes (Taylor 28). According to humanist theory, this uniquely human potential for reflection, moral deliberation, and social interaction consequently means that humanity is central to identity. Identity, in turn, is a multifaceted concept combining internal reflection, external influences, inherited frameworks, and individual agency.

To summarize, from a humanist perspective, humanity and identity are not separate concepts but are intrinsically intertwined – there is no humanity without identity and no identity without humanity. Descartes's famous declaration, "Cogito ergo sum" ("I think, therefore I am"), exemplifies this interconnectedness, suggesting that the very act of self-reflection and display

of consciousness – the core of human identity – is dependent on our existence as humans (Hübner 6).

2.3. Posthumanism

As the prefix "post" suggests, posthumanism has emerged after humanism as a form of critique of humanism. Literary theorist Ihab Hassan was one of the first to introduce the term in 1977. Here, he describes a paradigm shift in how we, as humans, regard ourselves:

> We need first to understand that the human form – including human desire and all its external representations – may be changing radically, and thus must be re-visioned. We need to understand that five hundred years of humanism may be coming to an end as humanism transforms itself into something that we must helplessly call posthumanism. (843)

Hassan suggests that humans, as well as our understanding of ourselves as humans, have evolved beyond the rigid boundaries of humanity that humanism has stipulated for centuries. Additionally, posthumanist theory also dismisses the anthropocentric idea of human exceptionalism in highlighting that humans co-evolved with animals and share a common biological foundation in DNA (Wolfe 18). In his book, *The Posthuman Condition* (1995), Robert Pepperell states that the assumptions of human autonomy and exceptionalism that humanism is founded on, are undermined by the very existence of AI, as it contradicts the uniqueness of intelligence (iii). Consequently, the development of AI results in an existential questioning of humanity and the notion of "being human". Accordingly, posthumanist theory argues that the boundaries between humans, animals and machines are a construct of humanist theory (Wolfe 18-19). While humanism seeks to acknowledge the value of those outside these boundaries – for example, animals or marginalized groups – humanist theory simultaneously perpetuates the systems of exclusion and discrimination it seeks to challenge (Wolfe xvi-xvii). Posthumanism rejects these rigid boundaries between not only humans and animals, but also those between humans and machines (Wolfe 6). Consequently, these boundaries serve as both a unifying and dividing mechanism, as they position humans at the center and top of the world's hierarchical structure by emphasizing human exceptionality (Hańderek 17).

By emphasizing the "prosthetic coevolution" of tools and humans, Wolfe implies that humanity has always been influenced by its interactions with non-human entities, such as nature and technology (Wolfe 295). On account of this dependency on non-human entities, posthumanism concludes that humans have always been hybrid beings (Wolfe 19-20). Tools and their usage

are examples of non-human entities that are integral to humanity, and according to Hayles, the body is the first tool that we learn to operate (3). As such, replacing or extending the body with technology is the natural development of something that humankind has always done. Genetic modification, cloning, and other biological advancements used to alter, enhance, or replicate physical and genetic traits (biotechnology) are also included in the posthumanist perspective on the evolution of bodily modifications through technology. In turn, biotechnology is referred to as another argument that weakens the boundaries of machines and humans/animals, as it, in fact, enables the creation of life artificially (Öhman 42). Furthermore, Braidotti argues that humans need to reconsider their relation to technological artifacts as they are "our new 'milieu' and this intimacy is far more complex and generative than the prosthetic, mechanical extension that modernity had made of it" (83). Related to this is the concept of embodiment, which is a critical idea in posthumanist theory. Humanism emphasizes the ability to think logically and rationally as qualities that define humanity. However, this focus on the mind tends to marginalize the role of the physical body in shaping one's identity. In contrast, posthumanist theory asserts that material aspects that directly influence the physical body have a significant impact on identity formation. According to this perspective, the ways in which individuals connect with their physical surroundings, engage with other individuals and interact with technological equipment are central to the formation of identity. Thus, posthumanism highlights the relationship between the body, environment, and mind (Hayles 3). Similarly, Haraway states that bodies are continuously subjected to change because of their interactions with technology and the surrounding environment (11). Hence, this indicates that the very nature of identity in posthumanist theory is fluid.

Posthumanist theory emphasizes relationality, hybridity, and the interdependence of the natural and the synthetic. In this view, humanity is not defined by intrinsic traits or an exceptional essence unique to humans; rather, it is fluid and constructed through interactions with the material world. Similarly, in *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985), Donna Haraway highlights the breakdown of the binary division between human/animal and natural/synthetic (Haraway 7-9). Here, the cyborg serves as a metaphor for the blurred boundaries that characterize the idea of the posthuman, according to which identity is not fixed but rather hybrid and relational. This viewpoint is further supported by N. Katherine Hayle's argument that, in a posthumanist setting, identity is constantly reshaped and rebuilt through interactions with ecological and technological factors (2-4). Hayles states that "[t]he posthuman subject is an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries

undergo continuous construction and reconstruction" (3). Again, this accentuates the fact that the posthuman identity is constantly renegotiated through interaction with external influences. Rosi Braidotti refers to this notion as the "nature-culture continuum" (2). Braidotti argues that the distinction between the given (nature) and the constructed (culture) is blurred, due to scientific and technological advances (3). Regarding identity formation in posthumanist theory, Pepperell states, "[i]n fact, the self and the environment are more accurately conceived as one continuous whole rather than as being divorced or disconnected" (48). In addition to emphasizing the fluidity of identity formation, this statement highlights the posthumanist rejection of anthropocentrism, instead focusing on the interconnectedness of all entities.

Jesús Fernández-Caro examines *Horizon: Zero Dawn* as a narrative that challenges humanist boundaries through the posthumanist themes of hybridity and relationality (44). Fernández-Caro states that Aloy is a character that looks human but has a posthuman identity, on account of her origins as an AI-created clone and her use of the Focus (48). He highlights the Banuk tribe as an appropriate example of a posthuman tribe that has accepted the interconnectedness between machines and humans (48). Moreover, Fernández-Caro points out that the way in which the game is played is an ode to posthumanism (49). In other words, the player must tread carefully, as it is highly evident that the world of *Horizon: Zero Dawn* does not operate in a way that reflects anthropocentrism. Humans are not at the top of the ecosystem, and this, in turn, affects the player's actions. The animal-like machines are often too powerful to defeat on a whim; rather, the player is often forced to use the Focus to walk around dangerous foes instead of just barging on and killing them relentlessly. Fernández-Caro states that this underscores the posthuman idea of living in a world where all entities are equally important and live in interconnected symbioses (49-50). While Fernández-Caro identifies posthumanist themes in the game and, specifically, in Aloy's embodiment of posthumanist ideals, the study does not delve into an in-depth analysis of her identity formation or relational dynamics. Hence, it is highly relevant to analyze *Horizon: Zero Dawn* and, particularly, the multifaceted identity of its protagonist, Aloy, from a posthumanist perspective.

3. Analysis

The analysis of Aloy's humanity and identity, as evidenced through dialogue, the attitudes of NPC's and Aloy's physical appearance, will be executed according to a framework derived from the definitions of human identity introduced in the previous sections. The posthumanist

perspective will serve as the primary theoretical framework, while the humanist perspective will be used for comparison and contrast. The framework has also been created in relation to the plot and narrative of *Horizon: Zero Dawn*, to enable an accurate and comprehensive analysis. The three aspects of the formation of Aloy's identity that will be utilized as a framework are:

- Embodiment – How does Aloy's physical appearance contribute to her identity?
- Relational identity – How is Aloy perceived by NPCs, and how is her identity constructed through social recognition and interactions?
- Self-perception – How does Aloy perceive herself? What characteristics does she prioritize in defining her identity? How is this process shaped by the former two aspects of relational identity and embodiment?

3.1. Embodiment

By being a clone created by a machine (AI), Aloy embodies the posthumanist idea of blurred boundaries between the natural and the synthetic. Öhman mentions that cloning is considered part of the posthumanist idea of technological body modification (42). Thus, Aloy becomes the literal embodiment of this concept. The fact that the cloning process was executed through, and by, advanced AI means that the otherwise biological process of pregnancy and birth has been replaced by technology. This further validates Pepperell's statement regarding the existence of AI as a disqualifying prerequisite for human exceptionalism (iii). When the truth behind Aloy's origins is revealed, she is referred to as "the creation of a machine" (*Horizon: Zero Dawn* ch. "Deep Secrets of the Earth"), and at one point, she refers to herself as "manufactured by a machine" (*Horizon: Zero Dawn* ch. "The Heart of the Nora"). The very notion that she was "created" or "manufactured", rather than born emphasizes her posthuman identity. She is the product of bioengineering, created artificially, and thus reflects the posthumanist concept of identity as a construct shaped by technological and biological hybridity (Haraway 8). This hybridity is also made evident by the fact that Aloy was created as a bridge, not only between humanity and technology but also between the Old World and the present time. By being a bridge, Aloy exists at an intersection of aspects that are traditionally viewed as incompatible. This aligns with Braidotti's concept of the "nature-culture continuum", which states that the boundaries between nature and culture become ineffective on account of scientific and/or technological progress (3). Here, the scientific progress represented by GAIA dissolves these boundaries, with Aloy embodying their merging through her role as a "bridge". Furthermore,

GAIA's intent when creating Aloy as a genetic clone of Dr. Sobeck was allegedly to access Old World facilities, which further illustrates how Aloy's identity is entangled with technological purpose, thus solidifying her posthuman identity.

Aloy's physical appearance is altered, and her capabilities are enhanced by a piece of technology – the Focus. Because of this, it could be argued that Aloy utilizes the Focus as a bodily enhancement. This integration of technology with a biological body reflects the posthumanist concept of technological modifications or enhancements as a natural development of humankind's "prosthetic coevolution" (Wolfe 295). Aloy's bodily integration with technology also makes her an authentic example of Haraway's cyborg metaphor, as she is a human who has enhanced and extended her biological body with mechanical components (11). As Fernández-Caro points out, Aloy looks and acts human, but as the plot progresses, "a certain feeling of otherness arises" (48). In a world where humankind has reverted to tribal societies, Aloy's Focus makes her stand out in most contexts. Aloy's "otherness" is not only expressed by the connection to technology through her literal physical attachment to the Focus but also in how she utilizes her Focus. By scanning her surroundings and the autonomous animal-like machines, she unlocks potential that others cannot, which indicates that the Focus has become a vital part of her identity.

Aloy's mental and physical attachment to the Focus shows that it is integrated into her embodied experience, which underscores the posthumanist idea of the interconnectedness of body, mind and environment (Hayles 3). The Focus is not permanently attached and can be removed, but throughout the game, it becomes evident that Aloy regards it as important. When Aloy wakes up after having nearly been killed, she immediately realizes that her Focus is missing. "I need my Focus" is one of the first things she utters, clearly implying that the Focus is more important than any of her other belongings (*Horizon: Zero Dawn* ch. "The Womb of the Mountain"). Ultimately, the Focus serves as more than just a tool. It becomes a symbol of the merging of the biological and the synthetic. For Aloy, it seems to be more than merely a device in the sense that it is depicted as a vital extension of herself, shaping her abilities, actions and self-perception. Hence, Aloy's physical body is an important part of her identity, which aligns with posthumanist thoughts on embodiment (Hayles 3). Furthermore, this integration exemplifies the posthumanist idea that humanity is not defined by inherent traits but by relational and adaptive processes that evolve through interactions with the surrounding world (Hayles 2).

Through her Focus, Aloy enables a new type of relationship between machines and humans where the machines can function as allies, such as mounts for faster travel or combat support.

This technological symbiosis becomes a distinct example of posthuman theory, which highlights the breakdown of boundaries between humans and machines (Wolfe 19-20). When scanning the animal-like machines, she discovers a way to override them and make them docile. According to Pepperell, the world should be regarded as a continuous whole where no entity or being is at the center but where, rather, everything is interconnected (48). Aloy's relationship with the animal-like machines becomes a literal and visual representation of this viewpoint where both entities coexist and depend upon each other. Braidotti's concept of the nature-culture continuum further supports this interpretation, as Aloy exists within a world where the natural and the technological are inseparable, as seen in the game's juxtaposition of lush landscapes with machine-dominated ecosystems (2). Furthermore, Fernández-Caro suggests that the gameplay of *Horizon: Zero Dawn* mirrors these aspects by forcing its players to show respect, be tactical and cooperate with the ecosystem of the Earth (49). However, it can be argued that this notion is dependent on Aloy and her capabilities and actions as a posthuman character. Without Aloy's unique position and hybrid identity, it would not be possible to traverse the landscapes in the manner that Fernández-Caro mentions. This further supports the argument that Aloy's identity falls within posthuman theory.

Additionally, Aloy's immediate acceptance of the Focus suggests that she has accepted technological artifacts as part of the "new 'milieu'" that Braidotti refers to (83). When Aloy finds the Focus as a child, it almost seems familiar and the use of it intuitive, as shown by her immediate ability to operate it without instruction, which further emphasizes Aloy's close relationship with technology. In addition, her acceptance is also unusual in the context of humans of the 31st century, as it directly contradicts the Nora tribe's fear of Old World technology. This contrast becomes even more apparent when Aloy encounters Olin, a Focus-bearer from another tribe, who exclaims in disbelief, "What?! A Nora, wearing one of these?! That's impossible! Your tribe fears the old places, forbids them!" (*Horizon: Zero Dawn* ch. "Mother's Heart"). This statement could indicate that even though Aloy has grown up in the context of the Nora tribe, she does not necessarily conform to their cultural values and traditional beliefs. This difference signifies Aloy's posthuman identity as her natural affinity for technology sets her apart from the Nora tribe. In conclusion, Aloy's embodied experience highlights her posthuman identity as it is deeply intertwined with technology in various ways.

3.2. Relational Identity

Firstly, the way in which NPCs treat Aloy differs depending on which tribe the NPC belongs to. Secondly, in many NPCs and tribes, there is a significant shift in attitude towards Aloy after her origins have been revealed. The tribes' different societal structures and belief systems affect how they view Aloy. Furthermore, to understand Aloy's identity, it is sometimes necessary to highlight what she does not conform to or fit within; therefore, humanist theory will be utilized frequently in this part of the analysis.

The Nora tribe adopts a theological humanist perspective and regards Aloy as something other than human, as their framework cannot accommodate her hybrid origins and technological connections, which align more closely with posthumanist ideas. This becomes evident during the opening sequence of the game, where one of the high matriarchs shouts towards Rost and Aloy, "You call that curse a child?" and continuously refers to Aloy as "it" during the encounter (Horizon: Zero Dawn ch. Prologue sequence). The fact that Aloy is being stripped of her animate pronouns and referred to as "it" and a "curse" indicates that the high matriarch views Aloy as something other than human. This also sets the tone for how most of the Nora tribe members address Aloy later in the game. Aloy's name is rarely used; she is instead called things such as "no-mother," "motherless chuff," "thing," or simply "outcast" (Horizon: Zero Dawn ch. "Lessons of the Wild", ch. "Mother's Heart", ch. "The Proving", ch. "The Womb of the Mountain"). Regarding the religion of the Nora tribe, in particular its focus on motherhood and subsequent shunning of Aloy, parallels can be drawn with the theological approach to humanity within humanism (Evans 5-6). The Nora tribe's "God," the All-mother, paired with the fact that motherhood is considered sacred, implies that the Nora tribe members are considered her "Imago Dei." As Aloy is motherless, she lacks divine connection to the All-mother, leading the Nora to deem her as less than human. This, in turn, starkly contrasts with posthumanist perspectives, which reject such rigid boundaries of humanity (Wolfe 6). Thus, Aloy aligns more with posthumanist theory, as it promotes hybridity and interconnectedness over exclusionary categorizations.

Aloy's non-human status is further strengthened by the fact that members of the Nora tribe are forbidden to interact with or talk to an outcast. As a result, many of the Nora tribe members Aloy comes across completely ignore her, turn their backs on her, or look at her with disgust or even fear (*Horizon: Zero Dawn* ch. "The Point of the Spear"). Treating Aloy like this is dehumanizing, as she is not given the same dignity or recognition afforded to others within the

tribe. This treatment emphasizes how the religion of the Nora tribe not only defines humanity in terms of divine connection but also enforces strict social boundaries that dehumanize those who fall outside of these religious and cultural beliefs. Nevertheless, there are members of the Nora tribe that instead regard Aloy as a blessing from the All-Mother, which is also a type of dehumanizing attitude, as it elevates Aloy beyond humanity and into the sacred realm. This behavior and attitude will prove to be persistent as, after the truth about Aloy's origins has been revealed, most of the Nora tribe members' attitudes shift from rejection to reverence. This further solidifies that Aloy is regarded as something other than human within the humanist framework that the Nora tribe relies on. In this context, the formation of "the other" and the significance of this construction are prevalent in humanist theory. This concept also proves to be central to the Nora tribe's culture, further establishing the Nora tribe as a humanist society and firmly positioning Aloy outside of the humanist theoretical framework. A distinct example of this reverence is encountered during the quest "The Heart of the Nora" when Aloy enters the mountain where the All-Mother resides and learns about the purpose of her existence (*Horizon: Zero Dawn).* When she exits the door that has been regarded as the literal representation of the All-Mother, she says, "I was born to lift a curse. To kill a Metal Demon" (*Horizon: Zero Dawn*). At this revelation, the high matriarchs and members of the Nora tribe fall to their knees and worship Aloy, chanting, "All praise Aloy, anointed of the Nora!" (*Horizon: Zero Dawn*). Subsequent to this revelation, most Nora tribe members adopt a worshipping attitude towards Aloy. Some members of the tribe audibly gasp and bow when Aloy is in their presence, and she is often referred to as "anointed" from this point forward (*Horizon: Zero Dawn* ch. "The Looming Shadow").

Aloy's posthuman identity also becomes evident in her interaction with the Carja and Oseram tribes, as her Focus and its functions position her as fundamentally different from their humanist cultures. The Carja and Oseram tribes adopt a more pragmatic and secular culture than the Nora tribe. Because of this, neither tribe attaches any particular significance to Aloy's origins; rather, they focus on her actions and accomplishments. This implies that these tribes subscribe to a philosophical humanist definition of humanity (Evans 7). They see an individual who looks human and is capable of rational thought and moral agency and, thus, generally treat her with respect, as they would with any other member of the Nora tribe. One example of this can be seen when Aloy meets Erend, a mercenary from the Oseram tribe. He says, "Yeah. Look, maybe I shouldn't say this, but it's obvious that you don't belong in this…backwater. I mean, you're smart, you're obviously capable, and well, I mean, look at you…" (*Horizon: Zero Dawn* ch.

"Mother's Heart"). This statement clearly indicates his recognition of Aloy's competence and worth, contrasting sharply with the Nora tribe members' dismissive treatment of her. This difference in attitude is further strengthened when Erend exclaims, "I've heard the Nora do that. Seems cruel if you ask me" when finding out about Aloy's status as an outcast (*Horizon: Zero Dawn* ch. "Mother's Heart"). However, it remains unclear whether members of the Carja and Oseram tribes are aware that Aloy is motherless and whether this knowledge, without the context of her origins, would have affected their attitude towards her. Before her purpose and origins have been revealed, being motherless might have led to a similar rejection to the one she faced from the Nora tribe. Nevertheless, after Aloy's origins have been revealed, her status is elevated in both the Carja and Oseram tribes. She is regarded as unique, powerful and valuable. This suggests that while the Carja and Oseram tribes operate within a humanist framework, their recognition of Aloy's unique abilities and technological connection hints at a subtle alignment with posthumanist theory, further solidifying her posthuman identity.

Although Aloy does not encounter the Banuk tribe in the central storyline more than through second-hand information and interactions, Aloy's posthuman identity is particularly evident in relation to the Banuk tribe's culture. The Banuk tribe is a posthuman tribe whose spiritual beliefs center on a deep connection with the natural world and machines (Fernández-Caro 48). Unlike the other humanist tribes, the Banuk view machines as sacred and emphasize harmonious coexistence with them, hence blurring the boundaries between the human and the technological. The character Sylens also points out similarities between Aloy's use of her Focus and the culture of the Banuk tribe, by saying that the "underlying logic of the technique isn't so different from rites practiced by Banuk shamans" (*Horizon: Zero Dawn* ch. "The Terror of the Sun"), which further validates Aloy's posthuman identity. During side quests, it becomes evident that the Banuk interpret Aloy as an extraordinary being who embodies the unity of humans and machines, reinforcing their belief in technology's sacredness (*Horizon: Zero Dawn*). This perception additionally highlights Aloy's alignment with posthumanist principles.

In conclusion, Aloy is consistently given the status of "the other" by the tribes that adopt a culture or religion reliant on humanist theory. However, her special bond with the animal-like machines aligns with the posthumanist Banuk tribe's ideals, which elevate her position rather than alienate her. Because she does not fit into humanist narratives but rather blends into a posthuman worldview, Aloy's posthuman status is emphasized through these findings.

3.3. Self-perception

Aloy's identity is fluid and constantly renegotiated through her interactions with the world around her, which underscores posthumanist ideas of identity formation. This becomes evident through Aloy's reactions to and subsequent actions following the main events in her life. The pattern displayed is often that of initial doubt or rejection to later acceptance and embracement. One of the first displays of this is seen when Aloy must come to terms with being motherless and shunned by the Nora tribe. This prompts a strong desire in her to find answers. In the beginning, when Aloy is still a child, she asks Rost, "Why am I an outcast? … Who was my mother? … So how do I make them tell me?" (*Horizon: Zero Dawn* ch. "Lessons of the Wild"), referring to the high matriarchs of the Nora. Rost states that if Aloy wins a ritual called the Proving, she can be granted a boon, and Aloy then says, "Then I'll do it. Whatever it takes. I'll win the Proving" (*Horizon: Zero Dawn* ch. "Lessons of the Wild"). Aloy shows great determination to win the Proving; however, this does not necessarily mean that she wants to be an accepted part of the Nora tribe. Rather, she wants answers about her origins and thus her determination stems from selfish reasons. The sole reason for her to take part in the Nora tribe's rituals is to get answers. This is seen through her interaction with Rost right before the proving when he says, "For years you've trained to win the Proving only for yourself. As a brave, it will be your duty to fight for your tribe" (*Horizon: Zero Dawn* ch. "The Point of the Spear").

The Nora tribe is the only societal and cultural context Aloy has access to when growing up; despite this, she consistently defies and disproves the Nora tribe's culture and religion, implying that she does not fit the humanist narrative of identity formation. Thus, on account of her actions and resolve, Aloy both conforms to and opposes the foundational backdrop of identity formation that humanism relies on (Taylor 32). This, in turn, implies that Aloy's identity is rather shaped through an interplay between several factors, in this instance, the culture of the Nora tribe and her own personal goals and opinions, effectively echoing the posthumanist idea of identity formation (Pepperell 48). Similarly, when Aloy much later discovers the truth about her origins, she first appears to be disappointed and unhappy as she states, "I'm not a person. I'm an instrument" (*Horizon: Zero Dawn* ch. "The Heart of the Nora"). However, she comes to accept this part of her identity and vows to fulfill her quest to save the world and "kill a Metal Demon" (*Horizon: Zero Dawn* ch. "The Heart of the Nora"). This indicates that through this information and interaction, she has integrated her origins and destiny into her identity, once again supporting the posthumanist idea of identities "undergo[ing] continuous construction and reconstruction" (Hayles 3). Effectively, she has accepted that she is an instrument and "a key in

human form" (*Horizon: Zero Dawn* ch. "The Mountain that Fell"), and thus fully embraces the hybrid cyborg identity that Haraway references (7-8).

Aloy's posthuman identity is further emphasized by the tension between how others perceive her and how she views herself, reflecting the posthumanist concept of relational and fluid identity. Aloy is consistently regarded as "the other" by the tribes, either like something inferior to or superior to humans, which mirrors the humanist tendency to exclude those who do not conform to established boundaries of humanity (Hańderek 17). In the previously mentioned scene where the high matriarchs and members of the Nora tribe bow to Aloy and call her anointed, Aloy answers:

> No! NO! Stop this! Up! UP! First you shun me, now this?! I will NOT be worshiped! I'm not your "anointed"! I don't belong to you! There's a whole world beyond your borders. Whole tribes of people just as good as you, and it is all in danger! It's a world worth fighting for. Not just here. Everywhere. (*Horizon: Zero Dawn* ch. "The Heart of the Nora")

In this scene, Aloy rejects the views that the others impose upon her. She is once again set out to be "the other," but this time in the shape of a deity or demigod. Aloy consistently opposes this continuous tendency to single her out as "the other," both before and after the revelation of her origins and purpose. This is evident not only through the assertation of her individuality in lines like, "Who says I'm like other Nora?" (*Horizon: Zero Dawn* ch. "Mother's Heart), "I don't belong to you!" (*Horizon: Zero Dawn* ch. "The Heart of the Nora"), and "My tribe?! You said I wouldn't need them." (*Horizon: Zero Dawn* ch. "The Point of the Spear"), but also from her humility when interacting with her surroundings. She frequently downplays her own significance during important events by uttering things such as, "I wasn't the only one to fight." (*Horizon: Zero Dawn* ch. "The Womb of the Mountain") and "One of them maybe. I didn't fight alone." (*Horizon: Zero Dawn* ch. "A Seeker at the Gates"). This, in turn, implies a wish not to be put on a pedestal, mirroring her resistance towards both rejection and reverence in relation to her place in the Nora tribe. This apparent conflict between relational identity and Aloy's self-perception indicates that Aloy's identity is shaped through her interactions with the world around her and reflects Braidotti's emphasis on the interplay between self-perception and external recognition in identity formation (83). Aloy's refusal to conform to the identities imposed upon her by the Nora tribe further illustrates the fluidity and relationality of identity in posthumanist theory, as her self-perception defies the rigid boundaries of humanist frameworks.

These instances support the notion that Aloy is her own individual, who is shaped by her own choices and wishes. This apparent free will and agency could suggest that she fits the narrative of the philosophical humanist framework that Aristotle advocated for, where free will is considered an essential part of what it means to be human (Deslauriers and Filotas 40). However, the fact that Aloy is a clone raises questions regarding the true nature of her free will or whether her actions are pre-determined by the legacy of her genetic origins. Does Aloy possess individual free will, or does the clone of Dr. Elisabeth Sobeck merely mirror the free will of the original Dr. Sobeck? This question is further validated as GAIA continuously refers to Aloy as "Elisabeth" throughout the holographic logs where Aloy's origins and purpose are revealed (*Horizon: Zero Dawn* ch. "The Heart of the Nora"). Referring to Aloy as Elisabeth could indicate that GAIA regards Aloy as a reborn Elisabeth Sobeck, which in turn could undermine Aloy's individuality and free will. However, through Aloy's actions, it becomes evident that Aloy is more than merely Elisabeth Sobeck reborn. As previously stated, according to posthumanism, identity is constantly reshaped and reformed in relation to everything that affects the individual in any way (Hayles 3). This accounts for both internal and external processes. According to the evidence put forward thus far, Aloy is a posthuman character and her specific context shapes her identity. Thus, she cannot possibly mirror the identity of Elisabeth Sobeck, as they are both products of their personal conditions and unique contexts. The fact that Aloy's genetic makeup is identical to that of Elisabeth is part of her identity but not the solely defining aspect of it, as can be seen through Aloy's interactions with her surroundings, where many aspects interplay in her identity formation.

Through Elisabeth Sobeck's final recording, Aloy's posthuman identity becomes solidified and strengthened, as it sheds light on Aloy's individual identity. In the last scene of the game, Aloy visits Elisabeth's grave while listening to the last recording that Elisabeth ever made. Elisabeth speaks to GAIA about her life and reflects on the fact that she did not have time to have any children of her own. When describing an imaginary child, Elisabeth says, "I guess...I would have wanted her to be...curious. And willful – unstoppable, even...but with enough compassion to heal the world...just a little bit" (*Horizon: Zero Dawn* ch. "The Face of Extinction"). This utterance resonates deeply as it directly reflects the journey that Aloy has just undertaken, making it easy to argue that Aloy is more akin to the daughter of Elisabeth than her clone. Additionally, this scene serves as a visual representation of Aloy's final acceptance of her origins and the ultimate recognition of one of Sylen's earlier remarks: "You had two [mothers]. A dead woman and a machine" (*Horizon: Zero Dawn* ch. "The Heart of the Nora"). This final

resignation, in turn, could symbolize the hybridity in identity that posthumanist theory describes. Thus, by embracing her dual heritage, Aloy symbolizes a fluid and interconnected posthuman identity. Finally, the scene also signifies Aloy's ultimate realization of what Hassan describes as the inevitable: the evolution of humanity and the transcendence of its former definitions (843).

4. Conclusion

Aloy embodies the central ideas of posthumanist theory, which challenge the rigid boundaries of humanist frameworks of identity and humanity. Aloy negotiates her identity through her interactions with the world around her. Thus, she reflects the hybridity, fluidity, and relationality of identity emphasized in posthumanist theory. Through the analysis, it becomes evident that Aloy's identity is context-dependent – that her identity is a product of all the different elements in her life. Her embodied identity can be summarized as a cloned human, born of a machine with a body that has been altered by technology. Her relational identity is affected by the cultural, societal, and religious beliefs of her surroundings, especially the Nora tribe. And lastly, her self-perceived identity is affected by all of these factors. It is shaped and created through her relationship with the Nora tribe and the other humans, her relationship with technology through her Focus on the animal-like machines, her origin as a clone created by an AI, and, ultimately, her own wishes and beliefs. All these aspects are part of her identity and do not exist in isolation but rather in relation to each other, mirroring one of the core beliefs of posthumanism. Through her journey, Aloy evolves beyond the role of a clone, an instrument for GAIA's mission, or a key in human form, embodying a hybrid identity that integrates her human and technological origins.

Her status as a clone created by AI blurs the boundaries between the natural and the synthetic, reflecting the posthumanist rejection of the defining borders of humanity that humanism subscribes to. This is further supported by her symbiotic relationship with technology, exemplified through her reliance on the Focus and her interactions with the animal-like machines. These factors highlight the posthumanist view that identity is not static but continuously shaped through interactions with the body, environment, and mind. Furthermore, Aloy's attitude and the way in which she interacts with and views the world around her echoes the posthuman critique of anthropocentrism. She is humble and shows respect towards her surroundings, and she acknowledges the fact that all entities on earth are dependent upon each

other in some way, which effectively underscores the posthumanist idea of an interconnected whole rather than a center inhabited by humans.

The analysis demonstrates how Aloy's posthuman identity challenges the humanist frameworks upheld by most tribes of the 31st century. The Nora tribe, adopting a theological humanist perspective, regards Aloy as an outcast, defining humanity through a divine connection to the All-Mother. In contrast, the Carja and Oseram tribes, which seemingly subscribe to a philosophical humanist perspective, emphasize rationality and moral agency and treat her with respect based on her actions rather than her origins. However, these humanist frameworks fall short of fully encompassing Aloy's hybrid identity, which integrates both biological and technological elements. Aloy's interactions with the Banuk tribe, a posthumanist tribe, highlight this contrast further. Unlike the humanist tribes, the Banuk tribe views her technological connection as natural and sacred, thus reinforcing their belief in the interconnectedness of humans and machines. This acceptance of hybridity positions Aloy as a posthuman character.

Furthermore, Aloy's self-perception plays a crucial role in solidifying her posthuman identity. Her continuous rejection of labels imposed on her and her emphasis on her humanity and individuality aligns with the posthumanist idea that identity is relational, fluid, and continuously reconstructed. Additionally, her acceptance of her origins as a clone and her use of technology reveals her connection to posthuman identity. Her self-discovery and subsequent self-perception illustrate how identity is not merely a product of internal reflection but also shaped by external societal and cultural influences.

The implications of this analysis go beyond the fictional setting of *Horizon: Zero Dawn* and encapsulate more general discourses about identity and humanity in an era of rapid technological advancement. The phenomenon of AI anthropomorphism, coupled with debates surrounding the rights and personhood of AI, signals a shift in how humanity is defined. Additionally, the fast-paced evolution of anthropomorphized AI-driven tools, paired with our limited understanding and knowledge of the possible ramifications of such a development, further signifies the importance of broadening our understanding of the relationship between human and non-human entities. Here, Aloy's identity could serve as a lens through which we can explore the evolving boundaries of humanity. Through her posthuman identity, the player is invited to question traditional humanist boundaries of humanity and consider how biological and technological hybridity might reshape our understanding of what it means to be human.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that Aloy's identity encapsulates the core principles of posthumanism by challenging humanist theory and offering a reimagined view of humanity. Her story reveals how identity is shaped by the interaction of multiple elements, including technology, the environment, and individual agency, rather than being limited by biological or cultural frameworks. This suggests that the idea of human identity will continue to be flexible and subject to reinterpretation as technology develops, which calls for a reevaluation of humanity itself. Thus, Aloy's journey highlights the applicability of posthumanist theory in comprehending identity in a society that is becoming increasingly technologically advanced and interconnected.

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