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Post-apocalypse as a Mirror Walking Along the Road? Religious and Social Themes in *Horizon* Series Games

Postapokalipsa jako zwierciadło przechadzające się po gościńcu? Wątki religijne i społeczne w grach z serii *Horizon*

Abstract

This article aims to analyse the games *Horizon Zero Dawn*, *Horizon Forbidden West*, along with their DLCs through the lens of the religious and social themes. The author explores how the post-apocalyptic setting portrays the collapse of old communities and the emergence of new ones, incorporating specific patterns and motifs.

Keywords

Horizon, post-apocalypse, community

Abstrakt

Celem artykułu jest omówienie serii gier *Horizon* (*Horizon Zero Dawn*, *Horizon Forbidden West* oraz DLC) w perspektywie obecnych tam wątków religijnych i społecznych. Autorka omawia, w jaki sposób konwencja postapokaliptyczna przedstawia upadek starych społeczności i początek nowych, co wiąże się z wykorzystaniem konkretnych schematów i motywów.

Słowa kluczowe

Horizon, postapokalipsa, społeczeństwo

Introduction

When Lisbeth Klastrup and Susana Tosca, in their 2004 article (and later in its 2014 expansion), discussed the specificity of so-called transmedial worlds, they identified three dimensions on which the experience of their worldliness is based. The first of these is *mythos*—the prehistory of the world, where legends, mythic stories, and the foundations of the current shape of fictional reality are hidden. The next is *topos*—the narrative space affected by events and thus characterized by constant change. Finally, the third and last dimension is *ethos*—the systems operating in the world, whether intellectual, religious, or otherwise, that influence the principles of behaviour for both communities and individuals (Klastrup & Tosca, 2004). Their approach draws attention not only to the complexity of transmedial worlds but also to treating them as constantly evolving interconnected systems.

Other researchers, particularly narratologists, think similarly about such constructs, often referring to them as *storyworlds* (Ryan & Thon, 2014), a term that has been translated into Polish as *światoopowieść* (Kubiński, 2015) or *światopowieść*. Although some argue that the typology proposed by the authors of *Transmedial Worlds* does not always work well in game studies (Maj, 2021, p. 48), its application yields satisfactory results when analysing games with complex, well-developed worlds—that is, those of a storyworld nature.

This article analyses the *Horizon* game series (Guerrilla Games, 2017-) with particular attention to its *ethos* and, to some extent, *mythos*, focusing primarily on the religious and social themes embedded within this storyworld.

The *Horizon* series currently consists of two main instalments (*Horizon Zero Dawn*, released in 2017 for PlayStation and in 2020 for PC, and *Horizon Forbidden West*, which debuted on consoles in 2022 and on personal computers in 2024), supplemented by expansions[1] and a VR spin-off, *Horizon: Call of the Mountain*. The series has also expanded into comics and a board game—making it clear that these games not only exhibit a storyworld character but also serve as the primary medium for presenting a defined transmedial world. Tosca and Klastrup (2004) define a transmedial world as „Abstract content systems from which a repertoire of fictional stories and characters can be actualized or derived across a variety of media forms" (Tosca & Klastrup, 2004, p. 409).

Although the beginning of the first game does not immediately suggest it, the entire series is set in a post-apocalyptic world. The protagonist of the two main games, Aloy, lives on an Earth that has been artificially reconstructed after humanity's downfall. However, she initially has no knowledge of this and only discovers the history of the first humans and their failure over the course of the game's

[1] *The Frozen Wilds* (Guerilla Games, 2017b) and *Burning Shores* (Guerilla Games, 2023), respectively.

narrative, as well as how the world she knows came into being. Most of this information is derived from notes, recordings, and holographic transcripts of conversations among the ancestors, which she finds while traversing the ruins of ancient structures.

The Post-Apocalyptic Nature of the *Horizon* Series

The post-apocalyptic convention strongly shapes the character of the series, employing numerous tropes characteristic of this genre of speculative fiction. One of the most prominent is the depiction of catastrophe as inevitable, imminent, and unfolding with rapid consequences. As Aloy (and, by extension, the player) discovers, the apocalypse was triggered by the loss of control over combat robots developed by Ted Faro's company. A critical modification had been introduced into their systems, preventing external intervention or shutdown in the event of malfunction. Faro only realised the extent of the threat when incidents involving the robots became increasingly frequent. Seeking a solution, he turned to his former colleague, Dr Elisabet Sobeck, who, after conducting an analysis, concluded that it was already too late to avert the catastrophe—humanity's extinction was inevitable:

> **LISABET SOBECK:** This is not just "bad," Ted. This is the apocalypse. You created an army of killer robots...
> **TED FARO:** Peacekeepers!
> **ELISABET SOBECK:** …that use biomass as fuel...
> **TED FARO:** As a contingency!
> **ELISABET SOBECK:** …and you gave them the ability to self-replicate.
> **TED FARO:** Limited replication. Under control.
> **ELISABET SOBECK:** Unfortunately, no. Your failure severed the command chain. This swarm now responds only to its own directives.
> **TED FARO:** Do you think I don't know that?!
> **ELISABET SOBECK:** Everything that lives is now fuel. And they are multiplying so rapidly, Ted, that they will strip Earth to bare rock within fifteen months! This is not merely the collapse of civilization—it is total annihilation! (*Guerrilla Games, 2017a*).

This scenario aligns with a well-established trope in post-apocalyptic narratives: humanity, in its hubris and self-aggrandizement, creates a weapon that ultimately turns against its creators. The most frequently encountered variation of this motif is the nuclear apocalypse—visions of annihilation brought about by the use of atomic weaponry. As Tamara Hundorova notes:

> The mere possibility of nuclear detonation, or its impossibility, takes on the nature of an existential threat in the second half of the 20th century—an era of growing scepticism

> regarding the nature and objectives of the entire Enlightenment project of human emancipation. On one hand, nuclear weapons serve as a testament to unparalleled technological and intellectual dominance over nature. On the other, they symbolize the most sophisticated and most 'civilized' form of barbarism—total human self-annihilation" (*Hundorova, 2014, pp. 258-259*).

In the *Horizon* series, it is not nuclear weapons but self-replicating, biomass-consuming war machines that bring about humanity's downfall. However, the underlying mechanism remains the same: human dominion over the world proves to be an illusion, and the very tools devised to solve problems instead create far greater catastrophes, leading to species-wide destruction.

Another hallmark of post-apocalyptic narratives is the portrayal of mass deception and manipulation of public opinion, offering doomed societies false visions of hope to pacify unrest. Within the world of *Horizon*, the concealment of truth reaches a totalizing scale. Aware that their world could no longer be saved, Elisabet Sobeck enlisted Faro's assistance in assembling the world's foremost scientists to work alongside her on *Project Zero Dawn*—a system designed to ensure humanity's rebirth after the apocalypse. However, to prevent mass panic and enable undisturbed research, the remainder of society—including military forces and government institutions—was engaged in what was termed „Operation Enduring Victory," a futile and catastrophic military campaign against the ever-growing mechanical swarm. This mission was presented to the public as the only hope for survival, while *Zero Dawn* was framed as a secret superweapon capable of turning the tide of war. In reality, this was pure propaganda, and only a select few were privy to the truth, bound by strict confidentiality.

This theme recurs frequently in post-apocalyptic cultural texts. Robert J. Szmidt's novel *Apokalipsa według Pana Jana* (*Apocalypse According to Mr. John*, 2003), for instance, depicts Polish authorities deliberately concealing the truth about an escalating international conflict leading to nuclear war. Another example is the *Fallout* video game series (*Interplay Productions, 1997; Black Isle Studios, 1998; Bethesda Game Studios, 2008, 2015; Obsidian Entertainment, 2010*), where select segments of the American population were relocated to underground vaults before the nuclear catastrophe. Ostensibly constructed as protective shelters, these vaults were, in reality, sites for grotesque social experiments designed to study human behaviour under extreme conditions. A common thread unites these narratives: governing elites, fully aware of impending doom, choose to mislead and manipulate the populace rather than reveal the truth.

From a broader perspective, this motif holds profound symbolic significance: the apocalypse represents not only the end of a known world but also the disintegration of what Jacques Lacan (2017) terms the *Symbolic*—the structured frameworks

through which humans rationally process reality. The maintenance of a false narrative and the placation of societal anxieties constitute an effort to preserve a coherent, familiar order. However, this painstakingly constructed illusion ultimately collapses when disaster strikes. As Slavoj Žižek observes:

> Our usual notion of catastrophe is that it takes place when the intrusion of some brutal real — earthquake, war, etc. — ruins the symbolic fiction which is our reality" (Žižek, 2022, pp. 38-39).

A defining feature of post-apocalyptic narratives is the „post-" aspect—the vision of a new world emerging after the catastrophe. The presence of such a reborn world constitutes a fundamental element of this genre, as even dystopian portrayals of reconstruction „allow the reader to trust in a form of cosmic justice, whereby even if a particular society perishes (in accordance with the principle of reward and punishment—typically, the society that has failed to preserve values worthy of continuation), humanity itself does not" (Kłosińska, 1979, p. 69).

In the *Horizon* series, the rebuilding of the world is made possible through *Project Zero Dawn*, which aimed to create GAIA, an advanced artificial intelligence system capable of terraforming the Earth from scratch. Its role was to restore vegetation, repopulate the planet with animals, purify the water, regulate the climate, and, ultimately, reconstruct humanity from preserved genetic material.

In the *Horizon* series, the rebuilding of the world is made possible through *Project Zero Dawn*, which aimed to create GAIA, an advanced artificial intelligence system capable of terraforming the Earth from scratch.

This theoretical framework formed the basis of Dr Elisabet Sobeck's visionary concept. However, a critical divergence occurred that significantly influenced the *mythos* of the *storyworld*. Among the subsystems of GAIA, Sobeck had included *APOLLO*, a vast knowledge repository intended to provide future generations with access to the cultural and technological heritage of their ancestors. For Sobeck, this feature was an essential safeguard and an ethical imperative. As she explained in a recorded transmission to her research team:

> The next generation of humans, born in the various Cradle facilities, will inherit the *APOLLO* archives—the great repository of human knowledge and cultural achievements. Through this,

> they will learn about us, about the world, and, most importantly, how to avoid repeating our mistakes.

In contrast, Ted Faro took an entirely different stance. Viewing himself as a victim of technology, he believed that isolation from past knowledge would be beneficial to future generations. His conviction was so strong that he took drastic measures to enforce it. Just before the apocalypse, when the scientific team had already been sealed in their underground facility to continue their work until the very end, and after Sobeck had sacrificed her life to ensure the project's completion, Faro erased the *APOLLO* archives. When confronted by the other researchers, he vented the air from their chambers, ensuring their immediate death. Justifying his actions, he declared:

> I just can't stop thinking about the generations to come. The innocent, the untainted men and women. And we're supposed to give them knowledge? It's not a gift; it's a disease! They're the cure, and we're going to give them the disease? Our disease?! No. We can't. And it's not too late. If we're willing to sacrifice (Guerrilla Games, 2017a)

These two opposing perspectives reflect fundamentally different paradigms. In Sobeck's view, knowledge represents power—an instrument for progress, moral responsibility, and a means of avoiding past mistakes. This is clearly a progressive, one might even say Enlightenment-oriented, way of thinking, in which access to information and human cognitive abilities serve as guarantees of development and offer hope for prosperity. In contrast, within the framework of the second paradigm, knowledge is seen rather as an obstacle to the natural development of humanity, while civilization itself is perceived primarily as a threat—a plague that deprives humankind of its primordial innocence and deep bond with nature.

Within the game's storyworld, this latter vision prevails as a result of Faro's actions. New generations of humans are born and raised in ignorance, devoid of any knowledge about the apocalypse itself or the world that preceded it. This shift is of great significance, as it not only shapes the entire structure of the later world but also acquires additional narrative meanings. The destruction of the APOLLO function causes the history of past civilizations, rather than being a well-documented and widely known record, to become a form of prehistory within the storyworld, shaping its *mythos*.

Two distinct narrative techniques strongly emphasize this mythic, almost Genesis-like, character. The first is the deification of Elisabet Sobeck and her collaborators, and, in some cases, other figures from the old world. They are referred to as the *Ancients* and, in some tribes, are even the objects of an almost blind cult. The artifacts of their culture—often incomprehensible and impossible

to interpret—sometimes acquire symbolic or even magical significance. The second key technique is the naming of the GAIA system's components after ancient Greek and Roman gods: MINERVA, APOLLO, HEPHAESTUS, AETHER, POSEIDON, DEMETER, ARTEMIS, ELEUTHIA, and HADES. These functions were, of course, thematically named in accordance with their intended purpose, yet their operations also assume a creative, almost divine, dimension.

Thus, the combined forces of the ancient, highly knowledgeable humanity and artificial intelligence designed to create almost *ex nihilo* establish the world that the player explores through the protagonist's eyes—a world that, for her contemporaries (and for a long time, even for her), appears as the only reality that has ever existed.

Reborn World

Ted Faro's actions, which the protagonist of *Horizon Zero Dawn* uncovers, had a profound impact on the shape of the new world: Earth became repopulated by reborn tribes who, without access to the knowledge of past generations, were forced to reclaim and master their environment. This vision reflects a belief in the cyclical nature of history—after an apocalypse, which acts as a kind of reset, humanity's development must inevitably follow a trajectory similar to its first emergence. There is no escape from this cycle; it is humanity's fate, bound by its limitations, which must be overcome through gradual progress and slow evolution. In this framework, destruction is followed by the resurgence of primitive societies—civilizations with a low level of technological advancement yet deeply connected to nature.

This motif is characteristic of post-apocalyptic fiction, appearing frequently in cultural narratives within the genre. For instance, two Polish works exemplify this vision: *Głowa Kasandry* (*Cassandra's Head*) by Marek Baraniecki (2008) and *Dwa końce świata* (*Two Ends of the World*) by Antoni Słonimski (1981), the latter of which approaches the theme with irony. Additionally, echoes of ancient religious thought can be discerned, particularly in the concept of cyclical time:

> Earthly history, when viewed as a whole within the framework delineated by the world's creation and its eventual end, constitutes a finite cycle: humanity and the world return to the Creator, and time reverts to eternity (Gurevich, 2001, pp. 101–102).

However, in the world of Aloy and her kin, nature takes centre stage. Survival depends on the ability to coexist with the environment—fighting when necessary and submitting when resistance is futile. Notably, this environment is not purely natural but rather a techno-organic hybrid. Because the *New Dawn* project failed to fully succeed, its systems began to function erratically, deviating from their original design. As a result, Earth became covered in lush vegetation, teeming with

diverse wildlife—but also populated by machines fulfilling ecological roles once occupied by animals. These machines can be harvested for resources, tamed and used as mounts, employed in agriculture, or even tasked with guarding herds. Others, however, function as predators, posing a direct threat to living creatures.

This fusion of nature and technology has created a new ecosystem, sustaining a delicate equilibrium—until the interference of old-world survivors led to distortions that disrupted this harmony, as depicted in both main instalments of the series. In this way, Žižek's (2018, pp. 70–71) assertion is reaffirmed:

> The very emergence of humanity inevitably disrupts the natural balance—the homeostasis characteristic of life processes" (*Žižek, 2018, pp. 70–71*).

The history of humanity as presented in the *Horizon* series strongly supports the idea that a storyworld is, as Marie-Laure Ryan describes, a "dynamic model of changing situations" (*Ryan, 2014*). Events within this world lead to significant transformations, and the *mythos* exerts a profound influence on its *ethos*. The newly reborn post-apocalyptic world is populated by communities whose way of life resembles that of early societies—often hunter-gatherers or agricultural communities. Even the more developed tribes refrain from using advanced technology. Moreover, living in harmony with nature is portrayed positively. Among the noblest tribes are the Utaru, who lead peaceful lives, cultivate vast lands with the help of machines, and carry seeds from childhood, which are planted upon their death to continue the cycle of life.

A slightly different, yet still predominantly positive depiction, applies to the Banuk. While they possess an understanding of physical principles and basic geometric laws, they rarely employ more advanced technologies. Instead, they form a nomadic society, scattered into small, isolated groups, where shamans play a key role in guiding the community's spiritual development.

By contrast, the more developed tribes—especially those who have integrated remnants of the Old Ones' technology—are more frequently associated with corruption and negative tendencies. Among them are the Carja, a settled, relatively technologically advanced, and somewhat extravagant civilisation. Within their ranks emerges a splinter faction known as the Eclipse—an aggressive sect devoted to worshipping a rogue artificial intelligence, HADES. Similarly, the Quen, seafarers from beyond the ocean who scour the ruins of the Old Ones in search of lost knowledge, have given rise to the CEO, a man who sees himself as the reincarnation of Ted Faro and is obsessed with gaining access to Faro's tomb to uncover his secrets.

The Oseram seem to be the only exception. Renowned for their ingenuity and engineering prowess, they are still portrayed as loyal and honourable. However,

despite their technological skills, they are also known for their quarrelsome nature and rough manners, often perceived by other tribes as uncivilised.

At times, the game's rhetorical framework appears—perhaps unintentionally—to affirm the beliefs of the CEO of Faro Automated Systems: that civilisation, high culture, and access to knowledge and technology bring more harm than good, driving humanity toward cruelty and violence. On the other hand, it is crucial to recognise that the conflict between these two paradigms is one of the central themes of the entire series. For the most part, the narrative aligns with the perspective of Elisabet Sobeck. This is evident in the story of Aloy, the main protagonist, who was exiled by the Nora tribe due to her mysterious origins and their belief that her birth was linked to the ominous machines. In this way, Aloy becomes a victim of superstition and blind adherence to tradition.

Ultimately, the struggle between these two worldviews—the one valuing knowledge and progress, and the other upholding the ideal of the 'noble savage' (Gondor-Wiercioch, 2016, pp. 17–18)—shapes the *ethos* of the game's storyworld on multiple levels and in profound ways.

One of the most crucial elements shaping this new *ethos* is, of course, the religious systems that govern the various tribes. Notably, these belief systems closely resemble those found in early societies, and—much like in evolutionary theories of religious studies—their characteristics are closely linked to each community's level of development and way of life.

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The Banuk, a tribe of hunters and gatherers, worship the blue light that shines in the eyes of the machines they consider allies. Their religious system is rooted in shamanism—shamans, who hold a status nearly equal to that of chieftains, implant cables under their skin so they too may glow with the same blue light. During ritual trances, they listen to the 'songs' of machines in an effort to understand them. As analysed by Andrzej Szyjewski (2005):

> A hunting lifestyle necessitates collective action among men, fostering group solidarity. Hunting requires synthetic thinking, focus on rapidly changing targets, the ability to anticipate, and sustained attention to achieve results in the distant future. Concentration, the ability to maintain silence, resilience to food scarcity, high psychological tension coupled with calmness, and readiness for immediate action are skills that are challenging to acquire and must be diligently practiced. The shaman would predict the outcomes of hunts and, through the summoning ritual of *kamłanie*, sought to influence these results. Additionally, he metaphysically identified with the wild animals that provided food, clothing, and even shelter" (Szyjewski, 2005, pp. 29–31).

This is precisely the role played by the Banuk shamans—their ‚prey' consists of machines, with which they seek to communicate, identify, and even unite.

Meanwhile, the Utaru, previously discussed, revere only select artificial creatures—specifically the Plowhorns, which aid in farming and are worshipped as earth goddesses. The Utaru's religious system embodies key themes characteristic of agrarian belief systems: the 'mystical solidarity between humans and plants' (Eliade, 1988, p. 29), the veneration of creatures vital to agricultural life that assume the role of deities (Szyjewski, 2016, pp. 439–440), and the practice of agrarian rituals.

The latter can be observed in *Horizon: Forbidden West*, where Aloy helps to heal the earth goddesses, allowing her to hear their song—a sacred chant performed alongside them by the agricultural tribe. This also strongly evokes matriarchal symbolism: the machines are identified as goddesses and linked to fertility, the natural cycle of life (as they appear and disappear throughout the year, marking the beginning and end of planting seasons), and maternal energy (Eliade, 1988, p. 30).

The religion of the Nora, however, is truly matriarchal—it is the first tribe of the new humans, from which other communities later emerged. The first Nora, raised in the Cradle where they were brought to life, were cared for by Omnibots—machine-holographic entities acting as parental figures. The male Omnibots were stern, resented, and feared, while the female ones were regarded with warmth and affection. This was likely one of the factors that contributed to the widespread worship of universal femininity, embodied by the Mother.

As a sign of her material presence, the tribe recognises the sealed doors of the Cradle, locked by a genetic code—doors that only Aloy is able to open, as she is a clone of Elisabet Sobeck and therefore granted access to the facility. The guardians of the Mother's faith are the matriarchs, who also serve as the leaders of the Nora. Their religious system attributes to the goddess a supreme, demiurgic, and sanctifying role, with the *mythos* of the game's world depicting a time when the Old Ones succumbed to the temptation of the Metal Devil and began using machines, thereby becoming enslaved to them and rebelling against the true faith—an act for which they were ultimately punished.

All of this clearly alludes to the hypothetical cults of the Great Goddess, whose existence has been proposed by evolutionary religious scholars. Although contemporary research has not definitively confirmed the historical existence of such belief systems (Lasoń-Kochańska, 2019; Szyjewski, 2016), what is most relevant to this article is the fact that these visions appear in cultural narratives and are widely recognised as a recurring *topos*.

What differentiates the Nora from the supposed societies that worshipped the Great Goddess is the fact that the in-game tribe follows a hunter-gatherer lifestyle—a societal structure that, according to anthropologists of religion, aligns with the prominence of women rather than men (unlike agricultural societies). Nonetheless, there is no doubt that in the *Horizon* series' storyworld, women are, in most cases, depicted as equally (or even more) capable than men, fully participating in hunting and combat on equal footing.

What unites the belief systems described above is their distinctive approach to technology—particularly that of the old world—often animistic and always reverent. As Lars de Wildt et al. (2018) observe, there are two key reasons for this perspective: first, machines are more advanced, intelligent, and powerful than humans; second, due to the loss of preserved knowledge about them, they remain mysterious and incomprehensible to these tribes. This ignorance and fear provoke their treatment as divine beings or entities worthy of special reverence.

According to historians of religion, as societies develop and transition to a more settled and stable way of life, their belief systems evolve, incorporating new themes. Similar patterns can be observed among the tribes in the *Horizon* storyworld—Carja, Oseram, Quen, and Tenakth are groups that utilise some of the technologies and conveniences of the Old Ones while simultaneously moving away from animism, shamanism, and matriarchal cults.

The Carja revere solar energy, embodied in their ruler, the Sun King—an unmistakable parallel to numerous cultures that worshipped the Sun. As Mircea Eliade (1966) notes, royal authority is frequently associated with solar cults (pp. 248–264), highlighting the *'connection between the development of urban culture and the solarisation of rulers, who were considered »sons of the Sun«'* (Szyjewski, 2016, p. 509).

The Oseram, though less religious than other tribes, believe the world itself is a complex machine—one that the Old Ones were meant to guard but ultimately failed to control. Additionally, this tribe holds blacksmiths in particularly high esteem, a fascinating reference to early societies that venerated fire and metal (Szyjewski, 2016, pp. 513–515).

The Tenakth, meanwhile, worship the *Ten*—a military unit of the Old Ones consisting of pilots who fought in a battle over the Mojave Desert years before the apocalypse. The Tenakth capital, the Grove of Memory, is located in what was once a museum dedicated to that battle. Here, the tribe discovers artefacts and records

related to the event, leading them to venerate these ancient soldiers as heroic figures capable of flight. They also seek to emulate them—their ancestors are not only objects of worship but also role models.

A similar attitude is displayed by the Quen, who search for remnants of the Old Ones' world and make use of some of their technologies—most notably *Focus* devices, which grant access to augmented reality. However, they fail to fully understand most of these discoveries and regard the Old Ones themselves as deities, accepting all available information about them uncritically while remaining unaware of the true history of the world.

More developed tribes exhibit significantly less fear of machines, as described by de Wildt's research team (2018), and do not worship them. Instead, they seek new objects of devotion—primarily personifications of energy or heroic ancestors.

Conclusion

As evident, the game's creators have—presumably intentionally—crafted a cross-section of early religious systems, showcasing their diversity and connection to different ways of life. While these depictions are inevitably filtered through cultural simplifications, what matters most in this analysis is how these belief systems significantly shape character behaviour, forming the *ethos* of the *Horizon* storyworld. Isolationism or openness, interactions with other cultures, attitudes toward outsiders, moral boundaries, internal group dynamics, and approaches to both ancestors and machines—all these aspects are profoundly influenced by each tribe's religious framework.

The *mythos* and *ethos* of this storyworld are intricately developed and interwoven, creating a coherent system of meaning. However, before concluding, it is worth examining how these narrative elements affect gameplay—how the complexity of the storyworld influences the game as a fusion of storytelling and mechanics.

First and foremost, the structure of this world provides a logical foundation for Aloy's exceptional abilities and her role as the protagonist. As a genetic clone of one of the most brilliant figures among the Old Ones, she is inherently set apart from the rest of society, clearly positioning her as the central figure in the narrative. This also serves to justify gameplay mechanics designed to enhance player engagement. To other characters, Aloy assumes near-divine attributes: like the *Ten*, she can fly on machines, unlock passages inaccessible to others, venture into forbidden places, challenge the most formidable enemies, and emerge victorious.

From a gameplay perspective, players engage with a variety of mechanics—combat, exploration, resource gathering, puzzle-solving, and navigating labyrinthine environments—all seamlessly integrated into the narrative. Additionally, the gradual uncovering of the *mythos* aligns perfectly with the game's progression system:

as Aloy learns more about the Old Ones and her own origins, she simultaneously acquires new skills, allowing her to overcome increasingly difficult challenges.

Moreover, the first game follows the structure of Campbell's monomyth (Campbell, 2013), a familiar narrative framework that not only resonates with players but also mirrors the game's mechanical progression curve.

In closing, it is worth noting that discussions of post-apocalyptic contexts in game studies—including those relevant to the *Horizon* series—appear across various scholarly works. These discussions often intersect with aspects not explored in depth in this article, particularly the *topos* layer. Here, numerous cultural references and motifs emerge, alongside reflections—both explicit and implicit—on stereotypes related to spatial organisation, climates, and real-world locations. These elements invite interpretations of the game through frameworks such as ecocriticism (Condis, 2020) or in relation to the symbolic and structural design of specific biomes and anthromes (Maj, 2021).

Post-apocalyptic themes also resonate with broader research, including studies on the representation of ruins in video games (Fraser, 2024). This richness of meaning, combined with the previously discussed elements of *mythos* and *ethos*, suggests that the *Horizon* games are complex storyworlds that function not only as a 'dynamic model of evolving situations' but also as an open invitation for players to explore, discover, and interpret them.

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