



## Horizon Zero Dawn and Horizon Forbidden West

**Author:** Frank Bosman

**Author:** Archibald van Wieringen

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### Introduction

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*Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017) and *Horizon Forbidden West* (2022) are the two instalments of a video games series featuring a post-apocalyptic, ecology-centred lore and narrative. The games take place more than a millennium into our relative future: the world has been destroyed by an unknown disaster leaving some tribes, on different levels of technological and/or spiritual advancement, to roam the lands. It is only at the end of the first game that the player, through the main character-cum-player's avatar Aloy, understands the true nature of the initial destruction: hordes of self-replicating robots, designed for advanced war and capable of fueling themselves through the consumption of (eventually all available) biological matter, become out of control, ending all life on earth. Scientists tried to save the human species by constructing complex computer software able to 'reboot' the earth's ecosystem.

*Horizon Zero Dawn* is a single-player action role-playing game developed by Guerrilla Games and published by Sony Interactive Entertainment, initially exclusively for PlayStation 4 (2017) but later also released for Windows (2020). In 2017, a DLC (Downloadable Content) expansion pack was released for *Horizon Zero Dawn* called 'The Frozen Wilds' for PlayStation 4. In 2022, a sequel was published under the name *Horizon Forbidden West*, exclusively for PlayStation 4 and 5. All games follow the adventures of Aloy, a young hunter of the thirty-first century, who is trying to uncover the apocalyptic event that caused humanity to become extinct approximately a thousand years prior to the events of the game (i.e., at the beginning of the twenty-first century).

### The Story

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The story of the two games takes place in two different eras. During the greater part of the game, the player follows Aloy in the thirty-first century on her quest for knowledge about humanity's past. During some segments, however, Aloy (and thus the player) is able to witness scenes from the twenty-first century by means of recorded holograms consisting of video and audio fragments. It is through these holograms, scattered throughout Aloy's world and lying somewhere at the intersection of the American

states of Colorado, Wyoming, and Utah, that she learns the truth about humanity's fate.

To start chronologically, in the midst of the twenty-first century a robot manufacturer called Faro Automated Solutions helped to solve the universal environmental crisis of that century by developing climate-neutral robots and environmental detoxification techniques. By the end of the 2040s, however, Faro had begun to develop military applications for its robot technology, especially the 'Chariot' line of combat robots, which enabled the robots to think and act as a collective. In 2064, the Chariots—probably due to a glitch in their software—suddenly refused to obey human orders, a situation resulting in the Faro Plague. The Chariot robots had been developed to fall back on biomass should it become necessary to power themselves. Combined with the possibility of self-replicating by means of processing biomass, the Chariot collective destroyed the earth's biosphere within 15 months, despite the fact that the world's military and scientific bodies worked together tirelessly to prevent this outcome.

Confronted with the inevitable ending of human civilization on the planet, Faro's CEO, Ted Faro, procured help from his former employee Dr Elisabeth Sobeck, who was once responsible for the initially eco-friendly, peaceful green robots the company produced. As a direct result of the crisis, Dr Sobeck developed Project Zero Dawn to ensure the reboot of humanity after the total destruction of the earth's biosphere by essentially constructing a massive artificial intelligence (A.I.) system called GAIA. GAIA and 'her' nine subroutines, all named after Graeco-Roman deities with specific roles relevant to those of the subroutines in the game, were capable of rebuilding the earth. After the death of all biological life on earth, MINERVA would brute-force the Chariots' deactivation codes, shutting them down, AETHER and POSEIDON would detoxify the earth's atmosphere and water bodies, ARTEMIS, DEMETER, and ELEUTHIA would restore fauna, flora, and humanity, while HEPHAESTUS would produce the machines to make all this possible. However, two other subroutines malfunctioned. APOLLO, in charge of all of humanity's knowledge, was destroyed by Faro's CEO during his final nihilistic period, while HADES, the original reset button should GAIA's terraforming not perform well enough, eventually went rogue, destroying every version of the earth that GAIA created, regardless of its success. Eventually, GAIA self-destructed, allowing the final iteration of the terraforming process to continue. A millennium later, these complications would result in a newly created world in which human society exists on a pre-industrial level while HEPHAESTUS's robots roam the countryside as semi-independent 'animals' hunted for their spare parts.

*Horizon Zero Dawn* contains an all-encompassing disaster that no human has survived (on which see our discussion of the [apocalyptic characteristics of video games](#)). The apocalypse that has occurred is not an eschatological one in the sense that time moves on after the apocalypse in this post-apocalyptic video game, and evil still exists. The protagonist in *Horizon Zero Dawn* takes action against this evil. It is a striking protagonist as it is a female figure. As a fighter against evil, she resembles a messianic figure. Rebekah Dyer (2021) compares Aloy's lonely and unequal fight against the hordes of mechanical foes to that between David and Goliath in 1 Samuel 17. The small-vs-large element is evident but otherwise there is no parallel with David and Goliath—all the more so because there is no standard happy ending to the plot of *Horizon Zero Dawn*.

## Themes and Criticisms

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When considering the literature produced by academics about the game, a few things stand out: Aloy as a female hero, the game's critical stance regarding capitalism, and its adherence to Lovelock's Gaia Theory (Lovelock 1967).

Firstly, *Horizon Zero Dawn* is praised for its depiction of its main protagonist; Aloy is not only a female character but also a "non-sexualized heroine" (Forni 2019, 100). Even though modern gaming is trying to deal with its cultural underrepresentation of women and people "of colour" (Patridge 2018) with slight but nevertheless notable success, many of the female protagonists are designed to be overtly sexually attractive rather than as characters of flesh and blood. There are notable exceptions, of course. Games like *Child of Light* (2014) or *Life is Strange* (2015) convincingly demonstrate the narrative possibilities of multi-layered female protagonists. Aloy, however, is particularly praised as "a protagonist least informed by traditional female narrative tropes" (Solska 2021, 209).

Secondly, *Horizon Zero Dawn's* primary cultural comment is targeted against capitalism and its devastating impact on social and ecological structures. The game paints a grim apocalyptic and dystopian future for humankind in which it effectually kills itself off. This human capacity to self-destruct is symbolised via the invention of the Chariot robots—military machines designed to kill as efficiently as possible, turning on their own creator, and indiscriminately murdering everything in their way while harvesting all biological life available on the planet to sustain themselves and their expansion. In this sense, the Chariots function as an anthropological mirror (Bosman 2020, 2021) defining humanity as colonial invaders who steal everything indiscriminately until they reach the point at which there is nothing more to steal and no one to steal from, marking the end of the species as a whole.

Interestingly enough, the sharp capitalist and environmental criticism voiced by the game is balanced by its core gameplay. As Megan Condis (2020) has explained, the game "does an excellent job of creating opportunities for players to reflect on ecocritical themes, [but] the disconnect that exists between its plot and its core gameplay loops somewhat blunt its effectiveness as an instrument of activism." In other words, *Horizon Zero Dawn* suffers from a decisive ludo-narrative dissonance, a situation where the narrative part of a game conflicts with the game's core gameplay mechanics (Cogburn and Silcox 2009, 76-77).

In the case of *Horizon*, the player's time is predominantly occupied by harvesting biological matter (fruits, herbs) and mechanical items in order to produce efficient weapons which are used to fight yourself through hordes of human and robotic enemies. As Andrei Nae formulates, "Despite its critique, gameplay is structured on the very principles that the game's narrative claims to reject"—namely, the military capitalism that the game's narrative criticises. *Horizon Zero Dawn* "simulates an entrepreneurial ecosystem in which the player must identify opportunities and manage resources in such a manner as to successfully beat the game" (Nae 2020, 277).

Other critics have pointed out the dependency of *Horizon's* narrative on Lovelock's Gaia Theory and its more esoteric iterations in later decennia. The theory is named after the Greek goddess of the earth, and it is no coincidence that the game's central benevolent A.I. is named GAIA and is in charge of recreating a new and hopefully improved version of humankind. The Gaia theory claims that the earth is one gigantic synergistic and self-regulating complex aimed at preserving the right conditions for life on the planet. Almost immediately following upon its scientific inception, the theory was used in esoteric circles to describe the earth as a living organism which in itself is worthy of protection and even worship (McKanan 2018, 205).

In the case of *Horizon*, the Gaia theory is pushed to also include mechanical lifeforms. As Lauren Woolbright (2018) argues, "the game pits nature against technology at the same time that it figures the two as deeply intertwined and presents players with another female figure to consider in relation to ecological themes." On the one hand, the game contrasts nature with technology, as has been done in Western philosophy and culture since Romanticism, even though Romanticism is itself a technological construct (Cantor 1993, 118); on the other hand, it seems to suggest that on a higher level a synthetical position would be possible. The machines of *Horizon* were equally responsible, together with their human creators, for the total destruction of humankind, its reboot, and the endangerment of that reboot.

## Religious World in the Game

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In the postapocalyptic world of *Horizon*, a number of religions have prospered, each tribe having their own divine world or pantheon (Elsaesser 2022). The Nora's religion is matriarchic and monotheistic, worshipping an A.I. at the base of the 'rebirthing bunker' as their 'All-Mother,' a name related to the aforementioned A.I., GAIA. Since Aloy was found in their sanctum before the events of the first game, biologically produced by the A.I. based on Sobeck's DNA, this effectively makes her—if implicitly—the only daughter of the one God, comparable with the Christian concept of Jesus Christ, albeit female. The Nora are regarded as spiritually adept. They perform a number of important rituals, of which 'the Proving' receives the most attention, a naming ritual allowing the devotee to enter the community as an adult.

Like the Nora, the Carja are also monotheistic, but their religion and society are patriarchal. They are technologically and culturally the most advanced tribe in the land of the original *Horizon* and worship the sun as the source of all life. The Carja view history as cyclical; society will rise and fall only to give way to the next, like the phases of the sun. The Sun-King functions both as a secular ruler and as High Priest. In contrast, the nomadic Banuk, made up of fearless hunters and mysterious shamans, adhere to a kind of animalism. They worship the blue light that emanates from the machines' eyes, considered by them to be the essence of life and harmony. Shamans thread blue cables through their skin in the hope of better reception of the blue light.

The Oseram are the atheists of *Horizon's* world, having a mechanical-deterministic view on life. On the one hand, they greatly value individual expression and independence, but on the other they regard women as mere property. The Utaru are an agrarian tribe and worship the cycle of life and death. The Tenakth are

materialistic warriors whose tribes have suffered greatly because of continuous inter-tribal conflict, only having recently achieved peace. In *Forbidden West*, a new tribe was introduced, the Quen, who sailed the Pacific Ocean to discover their origins, making them the most advanced civilization in the series. Information is regarded by them as sacred; sharing it without approval is a crime and a sin.

## The Biblical Theme of Egypt

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The game also features a number of religious themes and images that have not yet received many criticisms. Dyer's research (2021) is one of the notable exceptions. She identifies three biblical themes in *Horizon*. Firstly, she connects Aloy to David in his fight with Goliath (which is not very convincing); secondly, for the human apocalypse, she points at the ten plagues of Egypt in Exodus 7:1-10:20; and finally, she compares the figure of Aloy with the biblical Miriam, sister of Moses and Aaron and "prophetess" (as described in Exodus 15:20; the term is not used in Numbers 12). With this latter theme, Dyer connects the exceptional female position of Miriam with Aloy's female, but non-sexual, performance.

Dyer's study rightly points out that biblical Egypt provides a theological background to the game. This backdrop is even more prominent than Dyer demonstrates in her research. The predicament of the suddenly malfunctioning Chariots, the rogue combat robots responsible for the destruction of the old Earth in the game, is referred to as Faro Plague, evoking the plagues in Egypt. In Exodus, the plagues are the divine response to Pharaoh's stubborn oppression of the Israelites. Pharaoh is abusing them by having them perform all kinds of slave work, and the plagues intervene. In the game, the Chariots are designed to do their dirty work obediently. *Horizon's* Faro therefore takes on the traits of Pharaoh in Exodus. A play on the same pronunciation of Pharaoh and Faro is plausible.

In the Bible, the chariot is characteristic of Egypt (van Wieringen, forthcoming). The horse-drawn chariots made the army of Egypt much more mobile than armies on foot. The speed of displacement and, therefore, the possibility of a surprise attack gave Egypt a significant military advantage over the Israelites fleeing the slave house of Egypt. Yet Egypt is unable to catch up to them. When the Egyptian army also tries to cross over the seabed, a path that is, of course, muddy and soggy, the wheels of its chariots jam. The weight of the chariots causes them to sink into the mud and get stuck. In fact, it is Egypt's military lead that is destroying Egypt. When the sea flows back, recovering the path over the seabed, the panic that erupts results in the army becoming even more trapped in the mud. Egypt perishes. Egypt is essentially self-destructive. And the Chariots are no less self-destructive.

The biblical story of the Exodus in which the Israelites are liberated raises the question of who is to be classed as the liberated in *Horizon*. However, the game does not have a happy ending like the Exodus story does; it has a bleak worldview in which humans disappear. Reading from Exodus, however, Aloy could be considered as the one liberated. This ties in with Dyer's vision to see in Aloy a Miriam, the female figure in the immediate vicinity of Moses, who leads the Israelites away from Egypt.

The story about Egypt in Exodus already starts in the preceding book, Genesis. The Israelite, Joseph, a

slave snatched away from Canaan, is put in charge of confronting the impending famine. He builds large grain silos from which grain will be sold during the famine. However, when the Egyptians can no longer pay Pharaoh for the grain, they pay with their possessions and goods. All of the land thus becomes Pharaoh's property (Genesis 47:19–20). The origin of debt-slavery, a phenomenon that was common in the Ancient Near East, is thus linked to Egypt (van Wieringen 2019). The biblical critique of debt-slavery, as well as the biblical self-criticism of debt-slavery as a phenomenon that also occurs in the biblical land, ties in with the game's critique of a derailed capitalism. Debt-slavery also becomes an important theme in prophetic literature, especially in the book of the prophet Amos. In Christian theology, the critique of degenerate economic systems and the prophetic words of Amos have often been linked.

A final association with Egypt can be found in the monotheistic religion of the Carja, who worship the sun. During Pharaoh Akhenaten's politico-religious revolution, the Egyptian sun deity became the main god to the extent that he was basically the only god.

## The 'Hail Mary'

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Yet another reference to Christianity is found at the beginning of the game, when a young Aloy walks among some ruins from the period before the apocalypse filled with fragmented film and audio fragments that she can access through her implant. One of these fragmented audio files is from Jackson Frye's final moments. Frye was a scientist working at Project Zero Dawn. When the Chariots were about to overrun the last bunkers and facilities, the human occupants faced two options: trying to escape on foot—a rather pointless endeavour—or they could choose medical euthanasia delivered by the facility's medical officer. Jackson's last words were recorded as follows (in text and audio):

*...and pray for us, sinners, now and at the hour of our debt, I mean, death. Sorry, it's been a while and hoo, these meds Chana gave us are really something. So. Okay. From the top, kids. Hail Mary, full of grace...*

In Jackson's words, parts of the 'Hail Mary' are clearly recognisable. The 'Hail Mary' is a traditional Roman Catholic prayer which addresses Mary as the Mother of Jesus Christ and ends in a plea for her to intercede on behalf of the sinful devotee, especially when death is approaching. Jackson, however, seems to make a mistake in his prayer, a fact he promptly first corrects and then attributes to a combination of his distant memory of the prayer and the effect of the deadly drugs he has been given. His slip of the tongue, however, seems to have larger implications than just that, even more so given that nothing is present in a video game by chance alone. The original conclusion of the prayer reads: "pray for us, sinners, now and at the hour of our *death*" [authors' italics]. Jackson swaps 'death' for 'debt,' a theologically interesting error, which again makes the link with debt-slavery.

The concepts of death and debt are interconnected in the Christian tradition. In the doctrine of original sin, Christian theologians claim that sin has entered the world through Adam's disobedience in the garden of Eden (Genesis 3) *and* through the confirmation of that sinfulness by each generation and each individual

(Coleman 2021).

The original *Horizon* generation, who created the Chariots, did nothing more than continue on the path that had been laid out by their own ancestors, the path which led to more sophisticated weapons and the slow destruction of planet Earth; in short, which led to death. This sin, in the form of a debt, is passed along to the next generation, that of Aloy. This generation is suffering because of their ancestors' earth-shattering crimes against humanity. The sin continues, with the same problems continuing amongst the latest generation. The breaking of that loop may be Aloy's implicit or ultimate goal, but in the end she is not able to do so because—and here is the ludo-narrative dissonance again—Aloy ends up on the same capitalist treadmill that led to the first apocalypse, stalling the coming of a new apocalypse but ultimately unable to prevent it.

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