

Restoring Hope Through the Patchwork of Human History in the Post-apocalyptic Video-game *Horizon Forbidden West*

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Abstract

In *Horizon Forbidden West* (2022) a sequel to the post-post-apocalyptic adventure game *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017) we witness the consequences of this immeasurable loss as Aloy crosses the ruins of our civilization. Her explorations put her in contact with a tribe known as the Tenakth, fierce warriors who live for battle. This tribe built an entire mythology around fragments of information from the so-called Old Days, specifically, from a military unit called the JTF-10 which the tribe calls “The Ten” whose soldiers fell during an ancient battle against the machines responsible for the destruction of life on Earth. The member of this tribe along with Aloy and the player are engaged in a process of restoration of human history through patchwork of all the fragments scattered through the world. The player then is placed in the position of observer and quilter, observing how humanity’s loss of itself through the loss of its history while, by interacting with those fragments experiencing that loss and actively participating in the reconstruction of the past. This paper will reflect on the utopian message that emerges from the Tenakth’s engagement with the past and their ritualistic approach to the fragmented lives of their ancestors, using them to ensure their immediate survival among the ruins of a dead civilization.

Keywords: videogames, patchwork, post-apocalypse, *Horizon: Forbidden West*.

Introduction

What happens “after the end of History”? (Jameson, 2003, p. 695) or, more specifically, how do we avoid repeating past mistakes if we lack the knowledge of them? Guerrilla’s action-adventure post-post-apocalyptic¹ games *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017) and *Horizon Forbidden West* (2022) provide points of reflection on the importance of the past to inform the present and the possibility of a future. In this post-apocalyptic world humanity faces great challenges, from deadly machines, environmental collapse, constant conflict among tribes, and scarcity of resources to the difficulty in creating a better future with the lack of an easily traceable past. The Horizon series can be defined as what Lyman Tower Sargent (as cited in Moylan, 2000, p. 74) called a critical utopia for its inherent utopia potential (Farca, 2019).

¹ “We like to call [the setting] post-post-apocalyptic” (Eschler, 2017).

The *Horizon* franchise has received extensive scholarly attention from the release of the critically acclaimed *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017)², some praised it for its ecofeminist protagonist (Woolbright, 2018), other criticized it for the contradiction between its anti-capitalist, ecofeminist story and the gameplay that encourages players to accumulate resources while also naturalizing capitalism due to its meritocratic system that eliminates difference (Condis, 2020; Nae, 2020), others focused on Aloy as a character who disrupts gender norms within the media of video games (Forni, 2020; Vieira, 2018; Swain, 2023). Relevant to the topic of this paper is Falkenhayner's (2021) article on *Horizon Zero Dawn* arguing that it can be understood as enabling the "recovery of a sense of agency for a posthuman future that is based on affective experience" (p. 2). Central to this "affordance for futurity" is hope, an emotion that points towards a "re-imagining the present relation to futurity" (Falkenhayner, 2021, p. 2). I believe that this centrality of hope and its view as a catalyst against "cultural inertia" (Gatton, 2017; Wegner, 2020 as cited in Falkenhayner, 2021) is also one of the themes addressed in *Horizon Forbidden West* (2022) through the Tenakth tribe. Thus, through the metaphor of patchwork my aim in this paper is to discuss how the Tenakth found a way to rebuild a hopeful approach to the future through their willingness to learn from the scattered information they could find on those who came before and how through this process of restoration they teach us the restorative role of memory for the survival of humanity even through the harshest living conditions.

"I would have lost my mind if I had not had my quilts to do": Horizon's engagement with patchwork

Central to the act of patchwork quilting is its double function, as a necessary revitalization of old fabrics that otherwise would have been discarded, and as a specifically female art form (Mainardi, 2018, p. 558). More than practical goods the quilts were cherished, valuable objects that sometimes had a date, name of the quilter, and the person who would inherit it (Mainardi, 2018, p. 558). As a metaphor for the act of restoration through assemblage of a broken past the quilt is what Elaine Showalter (1991) describes as "an art of making do and eking out, an art of ingenuity, and conservation" (p. 149), further, it "reflects the fragmentation of women's time" (p. 149). In the *Horizon* series the fragmentation of time isn't exclusive to women but to all of humanity living in a world bereft of commodities and tangible connection to the past, so the tribes must make do with what they have available, understanding the "transient nature of all wholes" and, albeit forcibly, becoming "accustomed to living and

² The game won a Writers Guild of America Award for Outstanding Achievement in Videogame Writing (2018)

working with fragments” (Baker & Baker, 1985 as cited in Showalter, 1991). How can the tribes work with fragments? It is my argument that they do so by “quilting” the fragments of the Old World into the fabric of their cultures, the Tenakth being the tribe who seems to have taken this practice more seriously.

Before going into exactly how the Tenakth are quilters in their approach to the past I would like to draw a comparison between the steps required to create a patchwork quilt and those performed by the historian. Showalter (1991) lists four steps in quilting:

The quilt-maker first selects her colors and fabrics, traditionally using recycled clothing or household material with emotional associations; and cuts out small, geometrically shaped pieces. These fragments are then ‘pieced’ or joined together in a particular pattern to form a larger square unit called a ‘patch’ or ‘block.’ The patches are joined together into an overall pattern, usually a traditional one with a name that indicates its regional, political, or spiritual meaning. Finally, the entire fabric is stitched to a padding and heavy backing with a variety of large-scale embroidery motifs. (p. XX)

This process is not dissimilar to what Elliot and Kapell (2013), following E. H. Carr’s definition of history as a “corpus of ascertained facts”, describe as a process of “selection, assembly, and presentation” (p. 5). In both *Horizon* games one of the main activities is the reconstruction of humanity’s past through a selection, collection, assemblage, and interpretation of heterogeneous, sometimes conflicting pieces of information. The information is mostly gathered through datapoints, which can be seen all over the map as lore or in mission-specific location providing context to it. Aloy, acting as a quilter, historian, and archivist (Lanni, 2023), slowly reconstructs the world by adding sub-functions to Gaia, the terraforming AI who then can restore the biosphere, piece by piece, a process facilitated by her freedom from “limitations of time and space: the freedom to give greater attention to some things than to others and thus to depart from strict chronology” (Gaddis, 2020, p. 20).

As Showalter (1991) explains, the shift of American identification to the melting pot, and the dangerous associations post-WWII, to the heterogeneous quilt as one that best described a contemporary view of American culture. No longer bound to the delusion of exceptionalism, Americans could embrace their diversity and multiplicity through the shift from fusion to piecing, thus acknowledging each individual contribution to the formation of a collective American identity (Showalter, 1991, p. 168). Throughout the narrative of *Horizon Forbidden West* it becomes clear that the exceptionalism mentioned by Showalter often becomes self-destructive and has led to master narratives that rather than ensure the survivability of humanity, has deprived us of our humanity altogether. In fact, while listening to the several audio recordings from the days prior to the destruction of all life on Earth we recognize the richness in

each individual's (hi)story as the people recording their final days all have something valuable to teach the future generations. Moreover, as Baccolini (2003) argue when discussing the critical dystopia, there is power in storytelling, especially one that, paired with the preservation of memory, encourages a sense of responsibility towards the past. This taking responsibility then may become subversive if paired with the preservation of memory of past events and the narration of often-neglected stories. In *Horizon Forbidden West* we help Aloy force other characters to acknowledge the importance of the past as, given that the world ended, it may teach the current generation to not follow suit. Finally, rather than the fusion of the melting pot that would see all difference forgone in favor of a homogenous worldview, the patchwork highlights the beauty in a community built from heterogenous elements, all working in their own way to tell their stories – incredibly human stories.

As Payne (2020) argues in his book on post-apocalyptic fiction, the genre is ultimately about adaptability and survival, one that becomes necessary and is thus revealed after the apocalypse. In *Horizon Forbidden West* the focus on adaptability and survival are central to the narrative as the threat of a second apocalypse is imminent and those who refuse to adapt are doomed to die. The tribe that best follow the genre's focus on survivability are thus the Tenakth since they had to adapt to the harsh environmental conditions of the West as well as the constant threat of the machines. As a game that, among other things, deal with the tragedy of the loss of a collective memory while we follow Aloy through the ruins of our civilization, there is a pull towards the reconstruction of the events that shaped that world. This pull is informed by what Tobeck and Jellerson (2018), call an "aesthetic of care". From the very beginning of *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017) we are encouraged to feel connected to the young protagonist and share with her the sadness over what has been "irretrievably lost" (Tobeck & Jellerson, 2018, p. 17). Although we know what caused the apocalypse, there is still much to know of what we that humanity who created it was like before their extinction. In the post-apocalyptic vision provided by *Horizon Forbidden West*, one in which the past is tangible enough to be seen and sometimes heard, but intangible in the lack of historical records, lies a desire of "worldmaking" (Dietrich, 2022), meaning a world remade out of the remains of the previous one as an urgent strategy to prevent (Dietrich, 2022, p. 330). Therefore, as have been anticipated, the tribe that takes this desire literally is the Tenakth with their settlements made from ruins of fallen airplanes and abandoned museums.

The Tenakth – sewing together the Visions

The Tenakth tribe lives in the Western side of North America, in what they call the Clan Lands, their history is, "heavy with blood and death. But also,

with honorable deeds” (*Horizon Forbidden West*, 2022). The Tenakth’s practice of patchwork begins with their choice of their main stronghold, the Memorial Grove, previously known as the Mojave Battlefield Memorial Museum, which contained holographic exhibits of militaristic propaganda and it’s the main source from which the tribe inferred information from the past. Upon arriving there, the first Tenakth found glitched holograms narrating the feats of the JTF-10 squad. Because of their damaged state, the sentences came off incomplete. Thus, in a hologram called “Military Life”, meant to glorify the JTF-Ten, what is heard by the first Tenakth to find them is “ten...acth” rather than “the jtf-ten acted...” (*Horizon Forbidden West*, 2022) and from this corrupted file the tribe got its name and its purpose. However, while the initial glitched part was harmless, giving them their name, the final part of the message informed their misguided obsession with war:

NARRATOR: Come---- ----- --- soldier ---of --- THE [DATA CORRUPTED]
 Ten.
 NARRATOR: ----- join ----- force Ten act-TTTTTTHHH --- [DATA CORRUPTED]
 ---led by ---war [DATA CORRUPTED]. ---
 Bodies ---- were---weapons ---for battle. [DATA CORRUPTED] ---- Dared --- ----
 it all.

This corrupted hologram did more than simply give them their name, it gave them their identity and shaped their history into one made of/for constant war. The Grove then became a contested place, cause of constant fight among the three clans but nobody managed to retain control of the Grove for too long. This time of inner conflict is remembered as the Clan Wars, such was its brutality that by the time Aloy meets the Tenakth there are very few elderly among the tribe since a long life was not possible for a Tenakth. Therefore, a small, corrupted glimpse of the past nearly annihilated a tribe, such is the danger of the manipulation of the past in the *Horizon* games. The time of blood and death only ended when by a series of fortunate events, one fierce warrior, an AI, and a Vision from the past. In the precise moment Hekarro was in the now throne room Gaia activated her auto destruction function thus sending her sub-functions to seek refuge across the globe. One of them, Aether, found its way to the Grove and the power surge made activated a holographic message “addressed to a nation *in need of hope*”, from the peacekeeping effort’s leader, Anne Faraday:

If we look into the future through the lens of the recent past, our fears loom: wars raged against machines, scarcity of food and water. Storms that drive us from our homes, but true courage means facing those fears with conviction instead of cynicism. Leading the peacekeeping effort with these brave men and women, these ‘Marshalls’ of the new southwest... has strengthened my conviction that when we are united, we can overcome any threat. Join me – join us – in that conviction as we strive for a nation and *a world without want or war*.

Chief Hekarro embodies the utopian longing discussed by Farca (2019) in his study of utopia in digital games. Despite not being able to understand the context nor why it was playing to him, but through “the act of imagination” (Sargisson, 2003 as cited in Farca, 2019, p. 6) managed to fill in the gaps inferring that the previous civilization also had endured hardship, had also fought wars, but in their strength had found a way to live a better life, one based on peace rather than war, on union rather than division. Because of this echo from the past Hekarro rebuilt the Tenakth in its hopeful image, thus entering the Grove as a conqueror and remaining in it as a leader. The fact that the entire tribe embraced his vision and abandoned their destructive ways demonstrate the value the Tenakth place in their ancestors, as the Vision would only appear again when Aloy activates the sub-function before taking it with her.

Gaddis (2002) claims that the past is already outside of our grasp, thus we can neither retrieve nor relive, only represent it. This representation is performed ritualistically by the Tenakth as they reenact the deeds of the Ten, thus engaging in the socially constructed notion of collective memory not as a natural phenomenon but as socially constructed through ritual and repetition (Caselli, 2021). As each clan took a preference to one hologram, each tribe have built their rituals around the environment in which they live and in which the Ten fought. There is one ritual that seems slightly different from the others, highlighting this clan’s complex and perhaps hopeful nature; in the Sky-Clan, which is in the snowy mountains, the young are required to climb the mountain in duos – as the “Ten” presumably did – to the top and descend with a flower that only grows there. Once they manage to descend carrying the flower, they are declared warriors and receive their “warrior markings”. It seems almost anachronistic that a rare flower is the token of strength required by this war-mongering clan, signifying their respect to the land as much as to the Ten and each other.

One highlight of the restorative approach the Tenakth have to the past is the mission that sees Aloy recover ten black boxes from the ruins of airplanes belonging to the JTF-10 squad. Those audio recordings are the only remaining trace of the humans who lived and died on that land and restore their lost voices to the present. Other than giving us and the Tenakth something real of some of those legendary warriors of old, the brief audio logs are small, fragmented narratives of humanity’s last days; on a smaller scale, they serve as a bridge between the past and the present. At the end of the mission, if we stay close enough to her, we can see and hear the NPC who collects them listening to the recordings while offering a commentary to each one. The following summarizes the tribe’s respect towards the past: “we can never truly know those soldiers but if you [Aloy] find their voices we can honor them” (Guerrilla, 2022). For us, as observers and participants, narrators and audience (Chapman, 2016), it is a powerful moment when the first recording starts to play because it is as if we could see echoes of their existence resonating with this tribe that worships

them as gods while they died in such a human way.

The transmission of knowledge is addressed by Lanni (2023) who argues that Aloy and her allies, including the Tenakth, are “quasi-inheritors of the idealized principles of the APOLLO archive” (p. 7) due to their openness to sharing knowledge with each other and with their tribes. This openness is exemplified by the Chaplains, the people tasked with the role of memory-keepers for the Tenakth. They are important to the tribe for that reason, to preserve as much as they can before all the holograms (the Visions) turn dark forever. The transmission of the information they gather through the holograms is performed both orally, through the reenactments of the Ten’s feats, and through body painting. Thus, like the women artists who made beautiful patchwork quilts to the next generations, the Chaplain ensure the transmission of knowledge to their descendants. Furthermore, the Tenakth uses a form of patchwork, in its original meaning, by mixing colors, machine parts, fabric and leather to create impressive armor which serve a double function, first it camouflages them as they are mostly compatible with the environment, the desert wear red and yellow, the jungle, green and blue, the snowy mountains, white and light blue; the second is probably to intimidate their adversaries, as a Tenakth in full armor looks like a hybrid of barbarian warrior and machine.

Finally, despite their flaws the Tenakth show a great sense of honor and respect for the memory of those who came before them and what they had to endure in their tragic predicament as well as a willingness to understand that utopia, in its fragile state as it is in a post-apocalyptic world, can only be achievable if it is a process. Although mostly misguided in their militaristic ideology, this warrior tribe understands the importance of collecting, honoring, and learning from the fragmented traces of a not-yet forgotten past. Moreover, through their own version of patchwork of human (hi)stories, they offer an alternative vision to the future, one that is neither too arrogant to learn from past mistakes, nor too passive to fully commit to an outdated ideology. If, as Baccolini (2003) claims, utopia is both reachable and a process, tied to memory and storytelling, it appears that even in their strange ways the Tenakth may be closer to utopia than those who called them bloodthirsty savages.

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