**Games, Games and Posthumanism: Rhetorics of Posthumanism in Digital Games**

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Anthony Vidler wrote that William Gibson’s novel *Neuromancer* 'voiced a peculiarly contemporary sense of haunting: that provoked by the loss of traditional bodily and locational references by the pervasive substitution of the simulated for the real in the computer's virtual reality' (Vidler: 10). Published in 1984, *Neuromancer* provided a narrative that intensified, and gave a subcultural twist, to the buzz of possibility surrounding computing technology. Gibson’s novel rode on the entry of computer-based games into the domestic market-place, working a populist seam to create an accessible, plot-driven tech-noir fiction through which games become synonymous with virtual reality. Central to this is the fantasy of escaping the bodily and spatio-temporal confines that construct the human condition. If the TV show *Star Trek* helped to make funding for NASA palatable by creating a desire for space exploration (Penley, 1997), then *Neuromancer* contributed to the creation of a sensationalising mythos that transformed computational technology into, at once, a new frontier and a seductive means of escaping entropy and acquiring super-powers. Fuelled by the power of this mythos, science fiction, art, philosophy and critical theory have found a point of convergence, occupying a shared domain that Steve Nicholls claimed as posthuman (1988).

Drawing on the virtual reality mythos created by *Neuromancer*, digital games and the implication of playing them have become associated with the posthuman. The primary means of connection is based on the fact that digital games appear ostensibly to extend infinitely the reach of human agency, transcending our incarcerating and feeble physical and mental capabilities. In stark contrast, our game avatars can endlessly run without getting breathless, jump impossible crevasses and evade the finality of death. Through a game, a middle-aged woman can become a hulking, barbarous Orc who smashes his way to victory, while a teenaged boy can play in the guise of laconic but poised witch shooting bullets that always hit the mark from the elegant heel of her stiletto shoe. Digital games have moved on from the serried ranks of blocky space invaders lining up for the putative star-fighter to despatch, where building skills of dexterity and timing were everything. Many big-budget console and PC-based games looking for increased market share in the face of a plethora of small, highly accessible casual games now seek to reduce the sense of mediation in order to give players a heightened sense of *being there*. This aspiration is driving game interface technology to become more intuitive and invisible; screen technology is now capable of higher resolutions and more immersive means that build on 3D game engine technology. Devices like Oculus Rift for example provide a profound sense of immersion, blocking out all other visual stimuli and placing the player at the centre of a 360 degree virtual world. Creating a more intensive sense of presence bolsters our impression that a game is a tool, aiming in some cases to make us feel like gods, capable of blowing evil away with the merest press of a button. Yet games are fictions. The tools provided for us have their purchase mainly in the fiction – even if there are some real world effects. It may then be that game-based tools, confined as they are the game world, do not make us posthuman but instead prop up an imaginary status *as* posthuman – a fantasy of power and purchase that is born of our straitened, all-too-human condition. Players might feel that they have conquered planets, destroyed enemies or garnered riches, but is simply operating so masterfully in a fictional context enough to claim that games are indicative of an ascendency into the posthuman? The way that games make use of posthumanism in terms of character, theme and story is therefore our first point of analysis in this chapter. From this we can then ask in what ways the cybernetic and ludic qualities of games impact on our experience of posthuman themes and whether there are other ways in which games can be regarded as posthuman. We initially need to consider some of the principle ways in which the posthuman has been conceived, and the reasons behind those models, as precursor to understanding the relation of games to those conceptions. The purpose of this chapter is therefore to identify how the posthuman manifests in digital games and to explore what it means to claim games for the posthuman.

It is important to begin by stating that the posthuman is not a thing or an object. It is an idea or more properly a set of ideas; in many cases it is geared around the conception that technology is our route towards progress and perfection, stretching beyond ‘humanist’ education and evolving the human into its next incarnation. There is therefore an ideological agenda behind many (but not all) definitions of posthumanism. For some it is a thought experiment as with Donna Haraway’s cyborg for instance (1983), but for others it is more akin to a religion, as can be seen in the work of Ray Kurzweil (2005). In this sense the posthuman is ambiguous: it has and does not have a referent – it is at once abstract and for some concrete, for some it’s a fiction and for others it is real. While it refers concretely to that which comes after “human” or “humanism”, it also functions as a metaphor and as a group of associations. As such there is no solid agreement on what the posthuman refers to or what it means; there is not necessarily even a shared property. In addition to which the posthuman acquires diverse associations as it enters into different disciplinary and thematic spheres: biology, gender, education, geography, economics, philosophy, the arts, communication and media. It resonates in terms of both ontology and epistemology.

Claims on the posthuman can be divided into three broad clusters, each contributing in different ways to our understanding of posthumanism in digital games and gaming. The first is what we might call the *techno-utopian* cluster, of which the magazine *Wired*, first published in 1993, was emblematic before it retuned to a more mainstream audience. In 1988, Steve Nicholls’ ‘Posthuman Manifesto’ summed up and gave a new twist to a growing trend within technological discourse towards utopian futurology. Nicholls argued that we are already posthuman because of our various forms of bodily augmentations and technological prosthetics. In Nicholls' sense we were already living in a Science Fiction future. Ray Kurzweil, currently Director of Engineering at Google, is perhaps the most prominent figure of the utopian take on posthumanism; unlike Nicholls, he looks forward and believes that we are on the verge of transcending biology, ‘The transformation underlying the singularity is not just another in a long line of steps to biological evolution. We are upending biological evolution altogether’ (2005, 374). He argues that this is on the basis that we ‘have the ability to understand our own intelligence – to access our own source code… - and then revise and expand it’ (4). Kurzweil’s approach might more usefully be thought of as transhuman rather than posthuman however; he argues against the use of the term posthumanism to describe his vision of transcending biology, ‘If we regard a human modified by technology as no longer human, where would we draw the defining line?’ (374). Kurzweil’s position leads us to one of the problems inherent in other utopian claims for posthumanism: augmentation and the extension of agency is not new and the human is regularly defined through dominant tool use. Rhetorically this positions technology as the principle way of defining the human and invests in technology teleological status. The benefits of this progressive and utopian master narrative to commercial endeavour is clear. Within this narrative formation, the posthuman becomes a pervasive and persuasive branding device, designed to grab attention and make a generation feel special. Games are therefore implicated in this seductive process of consolidating and reifying such branding. Techno-utopian investment in the posthuman actively seeks to spark imagination as a means of igniting desire for technological consumables. In this sense it is a weak philosophical take on posthumanism precisely because, particularly in Kurzweil’s case, it is a form of post-religious evangelisation of technology as a redemptive force yet aimed to stimulate enthusiasm for research and development. Digital games, and their associated technologies, as well as Science Fiction are implicated in this process of fetish-forming evangelisation: both contribute to the construction of a pre-hyped pent-up, market for new technology by creating possibility spaces for imagining what can be done by altering our code. It is however in a direct and fearful response to this ecstatic embrace of radical change through technology that the plethora of cautionary dystopian narratives emerge, wherein a counter-weight fetishisation of the *human* occurs, examples of such are found across media, from Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927) to the Multiplayer Online Shooter *Destiny* (2014).

One of the appeals of the posthuman for radical thinkers is that it provides the possibility to re-imagine life without the differences that are often used to support inequalities. Both Donna Haraway (2000) and Rosi Braidotti (2013) embrace posthumanism on this basis, yet ally it with post-structuralist and psychoanalytic-feminist thought by way of Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous’s critique of binary configurations of gender difference; forming thereby our second cluster. Haraway makes use of popular cultural images of cyborgs to imagine a state of being that doesn’t accord with the binary gender codes which govern traditional understandings of biology - much as Ursula Le Guin had done albeit in a different context in her speculative novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). Haraway draws on the spirit of technological utopianism yet uses it to launch a blistering attack on the limitations of present conceptions of difference and otherness. First published in 1991, Haraway’s visionary ‘Cyborg Manifesto’ calls forth the cyborg from the annals of popular culture as a means of unhinging established correspondences and sweeping away outmoded presumptions, ‘my cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work’ (2000: 295). Haraway’s posthuman cyborg has no truck with traditional distinctions between animals, humans and machines, or with the essentialising notion of “nature” – neither in biological nor mythic terms. Haraway’s feminism is not grounded in the collective, essentialist experience of “woman”, as was the prevailing approach within feminism, instead ‘the certainty of what counts as nature – a source of insight and promise of innocence -- is undermined, probably fatally’ (294). Barbara Kennedy has critiqued the cyborg as too easily fetishized as a phallic women who can ‘do little to change an already power/violence crazed culture’ (2000: 287). Similar critiques are made of game characters such as Lara Croft. But in game terms perhaps closest to Haraway’s concept is Samus, the initially androgynous playable character of the Metroid series.

Braidotti carves a more philosophically grounded path through this multi-faceted field in her claim for a “posthuman humanity”. Rather than Haraway’s distinctly anti-human conception of the posthuman in the image of the cold cyborg who has no time for the set of differences that comprise traditional notions of the human, Braidotti’s posthuman is the generative source of creativity. She claims this version of the posthuman as a way out of the impasses and negativity of 20th century anti-humanism. Braidotti’s work is grounded in a move away from the humanist model of the “cogito” and gender-loaded presupposition that “man” is made in the image of god, emblemised by Leonardo’s Virtruvian man, whose body is the idealised geometric and proportional measure of all things. Braidotti argues that these rhetorics are deeply woven into Western linguistic systems and epistemology which has the effect of manufacturing and othering difference, reifying hierarchisation and ossifying knowledge and meaning. While Braidotti takes a scholarly and rounded approach, she nonetheless retains that characteristic spirit of utopian imagining. Games certainly play a role in this, even if in danger of technological fetishism, as they have the potential to be speculative and creative proving grounds, furnished by their capability for reinvention and simulation. One of the features of many existing and mainstream games with female playable characters is that they de-centre man as the natural active agent. This becomes possible because games are predicated formally on player agency, but how deep is such agency? We explore this later in the chapter. The disappearance of deep agency in the world (if indeed it was ever so) under a plethora of superficial and consumer-based choices, brings us to Jean Baudrillard, who would not have characterised his work as posthuman but represents our third approach. Yet Baudrillard can help us to explore the way that agency is configured in games, how they can be considered to be simulations and their relation to consumerism. As a poststructuralist, Baudrillard also regarded language as deeply ideologically loaded, much as Braidotti and Haraway do. But if we are to read the posthuman in Baudrillardian terms, it would not be as a productive, generative strategy but instead describe our absorption into the simulation and the hyperreal. The posthuman is an agent of consumerism and not a citizen. Cue *The Matrix* (1999) or *The Stepford Wives* (1972, 2004), another level of being yes, but at the expense of a loss of the real and the loss of history, to which we might add the loss of death. Games then might be posthuman in the sense that their virtuality is so seductive that we lose sight of the real, of history, of death; caught up in a world of sensation and entertainment. What then is the relation of games to posthumanism: is it a case of creative generation or dehumanising sublimation? What is seductive about games is the ways that they bring us into their sphere, achieved through a combination of strategies of representation such as story and ludic structure; at best this blend works to create a compelling sense of both dramatic and ludic progression.

Many games deal in representations of posthuman concepts and imagery both on a surface level and as part of their core gameplay or ludic construction. We would argue though that such taking up of the trappings of posthumanism by games is all in the service of a humanist and, in fact, urgently consumerist agenda. The symbiosis which exists between posthuman philosophy and posthuman fiction, where each imagines and then attempts to construct the other, feeds out into more general Science Fiction narratives. These narratives are in turn latched onto by games to suit the purposes of interface design, story and gameplay. In all of these cases, though, what might on the surface appear to be posthuman in the radical sense of the term actually serves an agenda which is more grounded in the challenges of creating a market for games and making them work effectively as unified fictions. The version of the posthuman that is found in games is that of Baudrillard’s seduction and simulation, using the tropes conceived of by posthumanism to resubstantiate and enforce what are, in the end, Virtruvian approaches, even as we are sold a virtual escape from the confines of our bodily and agentic scope.

Cyborgs abound in science fiction themed games as ways of giving motive to the game interface (for example through heads-up displays) or making elements of a game’s system, which would otherwise seem anomalous, appear more diegetically integrated. One example is the symbiotic nano-suit worn by the protagonist in the Crysisseries (2007-) which enables different modes of combat, smoothing the path of what might have been an awkward though fun-to-play concept if phrased through a character simply aided by technology rather than augmented with it. In *Deus Ex 3 - Human Revolution* (2011), the player enhances the game’s interface through the purchase of augmentations for the cyborg protagonist, literally earning the visual architecture of an interface by upgrading cybernetics. Many iconic game characters are, if not explicitly cyborgs in a story sense, defined through cybernetic agency even in games that draw only lightly on Science Fiction tropes: *Assassin's Creed*’s Altair sacrifices a finger to have it replaced with his trademark weapon, a hidden blade. The game may be set mainly in the 1100s, but its hero is cybernetically augmented.

Augmentations or exo-suits becoming part of the player's experience allow for visually arresting approaches to user interface design, bringing elements like arbitrary amounts of health points or energy charges into the diegesis, an innovation which provides substantial feedback on play as well as paying dividends in terms of story, as Atkins notes of *Half-Life* (1998). Images of cybernetic augmentation make use of populist posthuman tropes to obscure formal and fictional dissonance. The best way to unite an awkward game mechanic with a character who does not quite align is to make that character into a cyborg, fused forcefully with the agency they need to wield in order to make the game fun. For example, *Vanquish* (2010) only makes sense because of its ridiculous cyborg protagonist’s unusual 'Augmented Reaction Suit' with rocket-boosters attached to his rear. While most are not as clearly constructed out of the demands of game mechanics as the cyborgs in *Vanquish*, game cyborgs are convenient portmanteau vehicles for meshing together gameplay and narrative. Amounts of gameplay freedom can be gained through augmentation of these characters, and players choose which paths to go down by augmenting their character in ways complementary to their desires. First person perspective adds to the intimacy and immediacy of the augmentation experience; these games gradually make more of the consequences these choices bring about for the player. In *Deus Ex 3*, the story deals with the machine vs. human paradigm explicitly, and puts forward an argument between the promise of a posthuman future sold by a cleanly branded, Apple-esque cybernetics corporation and the dangers of abandoning what already exists, argued for by agitators calling themselves, tellingly, the 'humanity front'. Finally, the game asks the player to set a course for one of these futures (or a balance between the two), insisting they engage with the debate, but the player also needs to take the human ramifications of their choice on the game's protagonist into consideration. Haraway’s objective, mercilessly rational cyborg is far from these augmented but still human cyphers, who often use the agency granted by their augmentations to pursue all-too-human desires for domination and destruction. Game players can feel closer connection to the augmentations than to the character, since it is the agency of the augmentations which they directly control and which have the most impact on the game.

Games adopt more from the posthuman philosophy/literature mix than just the figure of the cyborg or the quick fix for characters offered up by the concept of augmentation. Shape shifting and mutation occurs in many games and is often phrased, as with cyborgs, as a method of communicating agency to the player without breaking the diegesis. Gibsonian elements can also be seen in games such as *Uplink* (2001) where players are hackers traversing the pathways between computers trying to access information without leaving any trace. It's worth pointing out that games also incorporate real hackers who create software which masquerades as human and is often encountered during play. Such “bots” are the replicant scourge of many games, crossing genres and platforms, which some players will go to various lengths to oppose because they are able to alter the economies of multiplayer games. Other games such as *Hidden in Plain Sight* (2011) find fun and challenge in a mechanic which seems aligned with questions Philip K. Dick and Gibson's fiction frequently pose regarding artificial intelligences and robots, by requiring players to act like simulated characters and avoid giving away their humanity. In some games, players are represented free from the restrictions of any humanoid character's body. In *Omikron: The Nomad Soul* (2000), the game mechanic involves choosing appropriate hosts for the player's consciousness to enter, control and later cast off, echoing some of the "meat puppet" elements of Gibson's fiction and the wider, transcendental overcoming of the flesh which forms part of posthuman philosophy.

Dystopias and dystopian narratives are another way in which videogame stories engage with the posthuman through the mediation of Science Fiction. However, as in the *Deus* Ex example above, games shy away from deepening these themes beyond the initial, seductive surface. Games are certainly a mature and comprehensive enough media type to engage with the concept of posthumanism, yet their narratives resist making such uncomfortable material central. In post-apocalyptic game *The Last of Us* (2013) the themes emphasised through the dystopia are resolutely humanist, heterocentric and reinforcing of the status quo. This game's narrative aims to have the player invest heavily in the father-daughter relationship between the two main characters. This is done so that, when told to kill the daughter in order to save the world, players react not with calm rationality or cyborgian consideration, but rather without hesitating to destroy the person offering this choice along with their whole organisation. Even if the player’s reaction differs, the game's message is clear and unequivocal as the events unfold with no choice being offered. The "us" in the game’s title is referring not to the survivors, but rather to their values being heteronormative (and thus aligned with the player/consumer), even when faced with impending apocalypse. The same is true of the Objectivist dystopia presented in *Bioshock*, which allows two different endings. In the first ending the player-character gives up his mutations and abandons the dystopia, rescuing the vulnerable characters it created and adopting them as his family. Core moments of a solid, normative life are shown through a Game of Life-style motif of hands holding one another as they receive degrees, get married, have children, and finally holding the dying character's hand. This ending is blessed as canonical and referred to as what actually happened during the game's sequel, where it is phrased not as sacrifice but as happiness. This is the good ending while the more agentic, difficult ending, where all the ugly creatures of the dystopia come to the surface and challenge the status quo is put forward as a mythological Fall, a failure which has elements of posthuman themes in it is clearly labelled as the bad ending, even in a game which highly values choice and consequence. A reading of *Bioshock* grounded in the philosophy its dystopia directly critiques, Objectivism, would certainly see the problems in this setup, let alone a posthuman reading. This game is clearly trying to use the garb of the posthuman to reinforce decidedly human values of the society which created it and, through doing so avoiding facing some of the difficult questions embedded in posthuman thought. The commercial agenda behind the game is what drives this, both from the perspective of designers who want to avoid alienating or over-challenging their audience and publishers who want to make sequels.

Games which allow a god-like perspective or greater degrees of agency, most commonly the Strategy genre, make use of Science Fiction based posthumanism in their representative strategies. *Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri* (1999) plays out a Science Fiction story through a transition from human to posthuman. Through a selection of diverse ideologically focused characters, from communists to eco-warriors, this game explores the political landscape of its time much as Dick and Gibson’s fiction used posthuman tropes to critique American society and politics. It achieves this by looking at how these ideologies play out as technology moves from "the human genome" through "neural grafting" to "cyber-ethics" and beyond. The recently released *Civilization 5: Beyond Earth*(2014) uses Science Fiction tropes and in so doing presents three different takes on how humanity evolves in the future and an entrenched focus on the development of technology as the way to progress. This approach works well in these games because of part of the way the genre is designed. In these games, even those without an explicitly posthuman theme to their story, technology is a key way to win and its progression is speeded up to suit the pace of the game. As Kurtzweil fetishizes technology, so too do these games. The use of Science Fiction in *Civilization 5: Beyond Earth* and *Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri* enables an intensified focus upon technological progress, enhancing what is already present in the ludic components of the game.

While posthuman themes and concepts within the representational layers of games might provide a mood-board for creatively and speculatively figuring the future in different ways, there are deeper structural layers within games that lead away from a philosophical and ideologically driven conception of the posthuman and back into explicitly Vitruvian coordinates --even as they simultaneously buy into posthumanism’s teleological notions of technological progress. Unlike the Civilisation series, not all games wear their technological progress narrative explicitly on their sleeve. Instead, the majority of digital games are structurally geared around giving the player a sense of *their* becoming an agent in an arc of progress. There are nonetheless many visible symptoms of this deep structural feature of games. Humanism is predicated on the conception that “man” is the master of his destiny and his baser drives: he is capable of learning and through rationality and knowledge is increasingly capable of unlocking the patterns and properties of the universe. Most games follow in this broadly Humanist path. It might be assumed that it is because games are computational artefacts that they march in time with a clockwork universe. However, the cybernetic loops that structure digital games are, as Deleuze and Lacan cautioned, grounded in our, all-too-human, closed-circuit desire for perpetual self-affirmation, pleasure and reassurance.

The formal and desire circuitry of digital games are composed of arrays of diverse feedback mechanisms, which observably monitor to players their progress through a game. Every element of a game works in this way. Players get feedback on their progress through the visual, aural and graphical elements of a game as well as through their interaction with input devices. When playing *Orcs Must Die* (2011) – a tower defence game that draws in a cartoonish way on fantasy tropes – for example, a constant stream of numeric and graphical information that notifies players about their performance. At any one time a player knows how many Orcs are in the area from the minimap, how far into a session they are, how many “combo” scores they’ve achieved, all accompanied by various goads and grunts from the Orcs and the playable characters. Progress too is monitored and fed back on throughout the game. Progress bars demonstrate graphically, typical of many games and aptly named, what resources remain available to the player-character. In other games such devices are built upon in an extra structural layer demonstrating player-characters' relative power. The design of clothes too act as trophies in many games, semiotically demonstrating progress made. The more battles that are fought and won, leads to the acquisition of objects and traps that help defeat more Orcs; small variations in the trajectory of the loop provide novelty but it’s the numbers that provide the illusion of progress. So, if all Orcs are cleared within a limited time-frame, the playable characters change their victory dance to something more energised. If the game is played through the interface provided by Steam, achievements are gained and progress broadcast out to friends.

Progress bars and feedback arrays are ostensibly and in formal terms designed to help a player manage and prevail over the situation presented by the game. In concert with this is the way that a game allows a player to predict events, if they are sufficiently game literate to read the signs. Most games fairly carefully create a learning curve to enable this to happen providing an analogue of Humanist pedagogy. In *Orcs Must Die*, each type of enemy Orc (there are about 20) is assigned certain characteristic behaviours and pathways, so that players can predict what they will do and how best to contain them. In addition, certain combinations of trap types combine to best effect, so that, when correctly placed and working in unison, the marauding Orcs are economically consigned to the "done and dusted" column. It is a tacit agreement that any situation that a player might confront is containable, given the right gear, dexterity and management. As with so many things in games, this makes predictability and steady-state, potentially discoverable, rules central to the endeavour. Unlike real life, unpredictability is demarcated as programmed-in percentage equations – for example a 2% chance of a particular item “dropping” from a boss in *World of Warcraft* (2004-), or the combination of “frost” floor tiles and “meat grinder” defence in *Orcs Must Die 2* (2012) working together to ‘kill’ more Orcs than one of those tile types alone. This level of predictability is found across game genres and platforms. Even where procedural generation or intricate artificial intelligence is used to create more complex patterns, it is the case that games work most profoundly on a basis of predictability and progress. Being able to predict and contain the threat posed, is highly pleasurable, particularly if some effort has been invested to work out the optimum strategy through trial and error. Successful containment gives a further level of feedback that reassures a player about their competency and helps create a sense of social well-being if that containment was a joint effort between players. Games therefore do not simply gift fun; game designers actively want to convince players that they’ve achieved something: this endeavour was not time wasted but yielded achievement and progress, confirming therefore a sense of existence. In this Althusserian sense players are interpellated through regimes of progress and predictability into a Humanist rather than a posthumanist position. Games are then designed precisely, like Vitruvian man, to fit exactly the dimensions of the player as consumer; the posthuman bridled by that very Humanist goal.

There are some games that do not play into this, ludic anomalies that we might term “Weird” because they are not predictable or which resist classic heroic overcoming. These oddities are as diverse as the Lovecraftian *Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth* (2005), where one can simply run away or go mad, or the politically motivated games *September 12th* (2003) and *The Best Amendment* (2012), where the only available action simply produces more terrorists. These are, however games that we might term "anti-human" rather than truly posthuman. Such games are rarely commercially successful, but instead remain as anti-illusionist idiosyncrasies that push at the conventions. The posthuman is then present in many Science Fiction-based games but most commonly employed to shore-up dominant notions of the human and the structures that support it, such as heterosexual romance, conventionalised otherness, biology, nature, binary notions of sex and gender, man and machine. So, when the Head of Google Engineering adopts the rhetorics of posthumanism then it is clear that it is no longer in the domain of radical politics but instead co-opted to entice the perpetual purchase of technological consumables.

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