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'Your Kind Ain't Welcome Here': The Boundaries of Human, Post-human and Subhuman in the *Fallout* Video Game Franchise and Television Series

Abstract. Science fiction has long grappled with the question of what it means to be human, evident in the is cross-media fascination with both establishing and deconstructing the line between what is human and what is not in worlds where technology has allowed the creation of 'posthumans'. However, as much as this question extends forward to the world of androids, cyborgs and robots, so too does it reach back to the realm of the monstrous, the degenerated human, or the 'subhuman'. The *Fallout* series (1997-present) attempts to tackle this question head on in both directions, itself now a cross-media franchise that spans both video games and television. Incorporating both the 'post-human' and the 'subhuman' in their 'synths' (technologically advanced androids) and 'ghouls' (irradiated humans that slowly turn into what are essentially zombies) respectively, *Fallout* attempts to show that the line between what is human and what is not is not so easily drawn. Drawing on critical posthumanist theory alongside US American cultural theory this article analyses the portrayal of (and discrimination against) sub- and post- human characters in the *Fallout* series and how this can have broader implication in contemporary media when deconstructing the concept of 'human'.

Keywords: posthumanism, humanism, speculative fiction, identity, United States of America

The *Fallout* franchise finds its setting in the wake of the detonation of atomic bombs after a nuclear war that rendered the entirety of the United States a wasteland, with the surviving populations split between the allegedly 'safe' underground 'vaults' and the immensely dangerous and irradiated surface. These populations, though, did not remain entirely human, resulting in new understandings of, and anxieties around, what it means to *be* human. Drawing from both the video game franchise (especially *Fallout 3*,

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Fallout: New Vegas, and *Fallout 4*) as well as the Amazon Prime television series, this essay discusses the fragility of distinctions between 'human', 'posthuman', and 'subhuman'as they are portrayed in *Fallou*, which frequently questions and complicates such distinctions. The *Fallout* franchise plays with well-known tropes to blur the boundaries between human and posthuman, and ultimately questions the possibility of retaining such distinctions in its post-apocalyptic environment. *Fallout* also utilises a satirical form of nostalgia to critique American cultural identity through its posthuman subjects, positioning both the post- and subhuman figures it creates as the 'other' ostracised by society, functioning as a critique of US cultural exclusion.

As Wilde notes, '[p]osthumanism is a term that can mean many different things to many different people' (2023, 21). This essay approaches posthumanism from a critical and cultural standpoint, focusing on how videogames imagine and construct posthuman identities and futures. In the case of *Fallout*, the franchise complicates and blurs boundaries of what constitutes the 'human'. Specifically, this essay engages with what Wilde identifies as a central theme in critical posthumanism: the interrogation of 'the liberal human subjects, and who this is/was/could ever be' (22). Through a posthuman lens, this essay examines *Fallout*'s depiction of non-human subjects to explore the series' critique of US American cultural exclusion, particularly the marginalisation of those deemed 'other' (22). *Fallout*'s posthuman subjects become key sites to question not only of who qualifies as 'human' but who is permitted to identify as 'American', a question *Fallout* engages with through satirical use of US American iconography.

Existing scholarship on *Fallout* has highlighted its nostalgia and the way it challenges notions of simulation through rules-based video game play (see McClancy 2018), explored its criticism of uncontrolled consumerism through nostalgic food and beverages (see Strang 2022), and examined the way it incorporates morality into its decision-making processes during gameplay (see Schulzke 2009). This essay seeks to enter the conversation by further analysing aspects of nostalgia and decision-making in the game, focusing specifically on how the game's nostalgia both challenges and reinforces US American cultural ideals through its posthuman subjects. Important, also, is Boulter's theories of posthumanism as it relates to gaming, where he identifies that video games situate 'the plater within a complex network of exchanges, all mediated by technology: player-console/computer, player-avatar, player-narrative' (Boulter 2015, 2). Boulter emphasises that video gaming becomes a space where, beyond simply portraying posthuman ideas, players are encouraged to enact them through various video game mechanics, including endless respawns, digital memory, and AI powered companion characters. This article focuses on another posthuman aspect of video games which Boulter explores and which is prevalent in the *Fallout* games: customisable bodies. Through the game's levelling system, players are given the active choice to participate in the transition towards posthumanism, which this essay argues challenges cultural anxieties towards posthuman subjects.

Fallout has a number of non-human populations, though this essay focuses primarily on two. First, there are the ghouls, which have been a long-standing feature in

the *Fallout* series. Ghouls are people, or were once people, who suffer from serious radiation sickness that progresses over time. It makes them look physically different, causing their skin and muscles to decay and wither and affecting even their vocal cords, but also affects their minds. At their most affected, ghouls have lost most of their sentience and become hostile and aggressive. They lose all power of language and can no longer be reasoned with. Secondly, *Fallout* includes synthetic humans known as synths, robotic creatures created by humans to mimic humanity. They, like ghouls, operate on different levels of human-like – early synths are clearly mechanical and lack consciousness, and are often positioned as a danger to be eliminated. However, it is also possible to encounter synths, frequently those designed later, that are far more human-like. They begin to have distinct personalities, have opinions and independent thoughts, and become more empathic. Some are also nearly indistinguishable from humans, and some do not even know they are synths. These two portrayals of non-human beings who exist alongside or even within human society are the primary focus of this essay, which considers concepts of humanism and posthumanism as they pertain to *Fallout*'s imagining of a post-apocalyptic society.

Humanism 'appeals (positively) to the notion of a core humanity or common essential feature in terms of which human beings can be defined and understood' (Soper 1986, 11–12). Frequently, a major distinction highlighted is the ability to reason, a skill that humanists believe to be a specifically human trait. Badmington claims that the ability of reason is a key identifier of what is and is not human, claiming '[r]eason not only grants the subject the power of judgement; it also helps 'us' to tell the difference between the human and the non-human' (2000, 3). Humanism can err on the side of essentialism, drawing a distinct line between what is human and what is not, which Schmeink explains by identifying the humanist claim 'there is a unique and absolute difference that sets humans apart from the rest of creation' (2017, 30). Humanist thought, insisting upon this unique difference, frequently positions humanity as superior to other forms of life. It is therefore worth noting that this definition – that humanity is contingent on reason, emotion and empathy – is in itself limited and insufficient considering there are human beings who do not necessarily demonstrate these traits.[1]

Posthumanism immediately complicates or even counters the humanist line of thought by querying human superiority and positing that there may be an era not only after humanism, but after humanity:

'Posthumanism, as the name of a discourse, suggests an episteme which comes 'after' humanism ('post-humanism') or even after the human itself ('post-human-ism'). Implicit in both these Articulations is a sense of the supplanting operations wrought by time, and of the obsolescence in question affecting not simply humanism as displaced

[1] We might consider, for example, that young children do not necessarily possess the capacity for reason, or that people with atypical emotional processing or neurological difference may not experience emotion or empathy in line with certain humanist definitions.

episteme but also, more radically, the notion and nature of the human as fact and idea' (Callus and Herbrechter 2003, 7)

Badmington sees the development of posthumanist thought as inevitable, regardless of humanist ideals: humanism, he claims, 'never manages to constitute itself; it forever rewrites itself as posthumanism' (2000, 9). Posthumanism can be seen as both innovation and destruction. It is simultaneously grounds for scientific exploration and the chance at attaining new heights, and a potential minefield that could lead to human obsolescence, subordination or even eradication.

While natural obsolescence may be enough to induce anxiety, Schmeink reminds us that '[i]n posthumanism lies not just the utopian dream of a new evolutionary step but also the potential for a dystopian nightmare' (2017, 35). This is a particular feature of science fiction, which frequently 'shows the transformation into the posthuman as the horrific harbinger of the long twilight and decline of the human species' (Dilenno 2005, 2). Science fiction often gives a face to posthuman anxieties through a variety of depictions of the posthuman other, which can take the form of monsters, aliens, or robots – anything that can threaten the core essence of humanity physically but also philosophically, raising existential dread in the form of a tangible enemy.

A tangible enemy in literature, film, or video games often takes the form of a 'monster', a term that Švelch notes is 'loaded with meaning', encompassing everything from fantastical beasts to 'humans whose physiognomy was considered abnormal' (2023, 3). Švelch emphasises that the label 'monster' has historically 'been abused to oppress and exclude groups of people who do not conform to normative definitions of humanity' (3). This is particularly relevant in the context of video games, where monsters frequently become 'targets of player agency' as 'enemies and playthings that need to be figured out and destroyed' (141). *Fallout*'s ghouls and synths complicate this paradigm, occupying the role of the traditional in-game enemy while simultaneously existing outside of combat scenarios, often reflecting on the nature of humanity itself. Švelch identifies this reflective quality as generally absent from video game monsters, who rarely 'hold up a mirror to humanity' (142). *Fallout* therefore accomplishes something many video games do not by resisting reducing its posthuman figures to what Švelch calls an 'outdated perception of otherness as something that can be predicted, destroyed, and turned into in-game capital' (142). Though the player still gains their expected 'points, achievements, and rewards' for killing such figures, they must concurrently acknowledge them as sentient posthuman others, creating a subtle, disquieting tension. *Fallout* therefore confronts the player with unsettling questions of who or what qualifies as 'human', and who holds the power to define the conditions of that recognition.

One depiction of the 'monster' is those considered 'subhuman'. In reality, the idea of the 'subhuman' in this paper only serves to redirect our thinking back towards the 'posthuman'. Subhuman, by definition, refers to creatures that are a lower order of being than humans, yet in the realm of *Fallout*, 'subhuman' is a term used as a derogatory term to refer to creatures that are actually more accurately defined as 'posthuman', in different ways. However, the derogatory term 'subhuman' frequently comes to mind in regard to

Fallout's ghouls. One *Fallout 3* character, Gustavo, labels all ghouls as '[a] goddamn disaster waiting to happen [...] The radiation slowly eats away their brain, then they go zombie on you. It's better for everyone to kill them before all that, if you ask me' (Bethesda 2008). It is significant that *Fallout* references the culturally significant horror trope, the zombie. Zombies are a shuffling, groaning reminder of our own mortality, using a combination of existential dread and body horror to generate a violent, gory and deeply unsettling 'graphic reminder of the corporeality of death' (Abbott 2016, 94). Zombies mindlessly pursue the living, seeking to feed on, infect, or otherwise destroy them; they are 'largely devoid of individual identity and purpose but are driven by a physical need that propels them forward and drives their actions. They do not think but simply act and are fuelled by the need to enact violence against the uninfected (Abbott 2016, 93). As Wilson states, '[i]n the postmodern era, the zombie has often served as a vehicle for expressing social and political anxieties' (2009, 95). Sometimes, zombies have reflected cultural clashes and misrepresented practises from cultures considered 'other', such as voodoo zombies borne of magic and raised from the dead. In more recent years, zombies have reflected deep fears over infection and disease brought about by pandemics. The ghouls in *Fallout* have an obvious cultural source in that of nuclear war. The label 'zombie' is most similar to the feral ghouls that players become unnervingly familiar with as they travel the wasteland – it is these ghouls that attack on sight, clubbing with decaying arms and biting with rotting teeth – but this kind of ghoul is one of many. In fact, many ghouls are still largely human, yet they frequently receive the same responses as their violent counterparts – fear, distrust, and hatred.

Ghouls are the most obvious receiver of the label 'subhuman'. Frequently reduced to creatures rather than human beings, described as resembling rotten flesh, burn victims or walking corpses, ghouls are often treated as subhuman, and that is where this term is important. Generally considered a separate species despite once being human, they vary between 'feral' ghouls who have become violent and aggressive and those who still possess most aspects of their 'humanity'. Humans frequently treat ghouls as lesser beings, something to be feared or at the very least derided, but rarely are they considered equals. In the games some ghoul characters are even surprised if the player decides to treat them with respect, with one, known as Gob, asking the player: 'Wait... you're not going to hit me? Yell at me? Not even berate me a little bit?' (Bethesda 2008). Attitudes towards ghouls, and other non-human characters, are summed up by the companion character John Hancock, himself a ghoul, who tells the player '[g]houls, synths, super mutants [...] they'd put us all down' (Bethesda 2015). However, despite their treatment as subhuman, ghouls are posthuman in the most literal sense. Their existence is predicated on humanity, they come from humanity, they are humans who have adapted to the wasteland. While it's true that some lose their capacity to reason, many ghouls have retained their human minds. They also have an increased lifespan and a resistance to radiation, the main threat in the environment, so in some ways are better adapted to the new state of the world. Some, such as the ghoul NPC

Doctor Barrows, express the preference for the term 'necrotic post-humans' (Bethesda 2008).

Ghouls are largely deemed 'subhuman' not because of what they are, which is evidently posthuman, but because they represent a threat: the erasure of humanity as it is currently understood. This threat is made literal through the player character's repeated encounters with feral ghouls, whose violent attacks enact a physical and symbolic obliteration of the human. However, it is the non-feral ghouls who introduce greater complexity to this posthuman condition. Some live essentially human lives, carefully managing their descent into mindlessness, though the ever-present risk of losing their grip on consciousness marks them as precarious beings. This represents a more subtle and unsettling form of erasure: an inescapable slide into posthumanism that cannot be halted through violence or containment. After all, ghouls are neither born nor resurrected; they are former humans transformed by radiation, a ubiquitous element in *Fallout*'s irradiated wastelands. Anyone could begin the process of becoming a ghoul at any time. The true threat of the non-feral ghoul is not what they are, but what they represent: a visible reminder of the fragility of human identity when the progression towards posthumanism lies beyond individual control.

Synths operate in a space that initially seems opposite to ghouls as creatures that are explicitly posthuman. Described as 'beings' but not human, also known as synthetic humanoids or artificial humans, synths are robotic and biomechanical, created by scientists seeking to advance the world and often employed as weapons. Unlike the horror icon of the ghoul/zombie, the synth is an example of 'technophobic science fiction' which 'serves as a warning for the future, countering cyber-hype and reflecting the real world of weaponized, religiously rationalized, and profit-fuelled technology' (Dilenno 2005, 2). Though still frequently seen as soulless, synths represent a different sort of death than the gory, violent end provided by ghouls – becoming obsolete. This obsolescence can take many forms – sometimes humanity is slowly replaced, our jobs taken over, our purpose reduced, until we become unnecessary. The idea that technology will surpass human capability is one heavily laden down with anxiety that humanity will become not just obsolete, but dispensable. There is even an associated risk that the technology we ourselves created will eventually deem us actively undesirable and decide to remove us by force; Cox and Paul imagine robots will be created that will be capable of establishing 'their own agendas' which have 'no use for mortals' (Dilenno 2005, 27). These anxieties are further fuelled by capitalistic and militaristic concerns, in which 'scientific, corporate, and military interests have become inseparable' and money and displays of power become more important than human lives (3). Early synths are clearly robotic, while later versions are almost indistinguishable from humans. However, they are still used as servants to humanity. Synths fit the most basic concept of posthuman in that they are AI, created to overcome human limitation, and can survive things a human cannot. However, despite being symbolic of a different set of anxieties, synths are not actually as far removed from ghouls as they may initially seem.

Synths also find themselves subject to the label of 'subhuman' in that it is unclear if they have true sentience, and many societies exclude them. The player will overhear NPC characters rejecting synths from their communities and businesses, such as the anti-synth human NPC Myrna, who outright tells a synth character 'Oh no. You're not allowed to shop here. No synths' (Bethesda 2015). Some later generations are unaware that they themselves are synths, such as the young boy Shaun, who ironically observes '[s]ynths are weird, aren't they? They're almost just like people' (Bethesda 2015). It seems many human characters in the *Fallout* franchise believe that synths cannot be considered human and respond even to the most humanoid synths with fear and distrust. Despite ghouls and synths being aesthetically different and seemingly operating in two different spaces in terms of human anxiety (the ghoul being seemingly subhuman while the synths are obviously posthuman), both are received by humans in much the same way, because they are actually operating in the same posthuman space. Just like people believe individuals can suddenly 'go ghoul' and succumb to radiation sickness, becoming violent and dangerous, they also believe it possible to suddenly be 'replaced' by a synth: the character Moe Cronin tells the player '[o]ne day someone's human, next day they're a synth. And no one can tell the difference. Not until they kill someone for no reason' (Bethesda 2015). Ghouls and synths appear different, and represent different existential fears, but the response to them is largely the same.

However, there is an ongoing hypocrisy at play in *Fallout* that the franchise does not shy away from. As the player in the main series *Fallout* games, you play as a human, but not *just* a human. Throughout the game you earn special perks to strengthen your character. Some are given as quest rewards, others are freely chosen as you level up (see table 1).

Perk Name	Description	Game
Nuclear Anomaly	When your health is low, you erupt in a nuclear explosion	*Fallout 3*
Cyborg	Boosts Energy Weapons, Radiation Resistance, Poison Resistance and Damage Resistance	*Fallout 3*
Ghoulish	Radiation heals you rather than damaging you	*Fallout 4*
Solar Powered	Sunlight heals your radiation damage	*Fallout 4*
Rad Child	Regenerate HP when irradiated	*Fallout: New Vegas*
Adamantium Skeleton	Damage to limbs reduced	*Fallout: New Vegas*
Hypertrophy accelerator*	Increases strength	*Fallout: New Vegas*
Optics enhancer*	Increases perception	*Fallout: New Vegas*
Empathy synthesizer*	Increases charisma	*Fallout: New Vegas*

Table 1: examples of the perks available in the *Fallout* games that the player can unlock to improve their character's stats. Perks with * indicate 'implants', which are explicitly technological improvements.

Many of these 'perks' are notably similar to the enhancements that both ghouls and synths have, and some make direct reference to being more ghoul-like or cyborg-like.

Others include implants, making the player character quite literally a cyborg, while others reference mutations. By the time the player character has maxed out their level, there is a high chance they have taken a few modifications along the way that mean their once-human character is now significantly more posthuman. This is a realisation of the idea that 'technological innovations blur the definitions of a natural body' (Dilenno 2005, 115), but rather than this being portrayed on perceived enemies, it is a choice the player actively makes to give themselves more in-game advantages. If, as Švelch says, monsters in video games are usually simply 'opponents that can be dispatched for player satisfaction', *Fallout* complicates this by encouraging the player to take on the attributes seen as monstrous (2023, 141). The goal is therefore not just to destroy the monster, but to *become* the monster – in turn leading to further questions of whether or not these creatures are 'monsters' at all. This returns us to Boulter, who notes that video games, especially ones with character creation and levelling systems, encourage players 'to create a self – a version of the self, a version that carries with it an extended version of the self in the real world – as fluid and open to the possibility of prosthetic and cyborgian extension' (2015, 2). Boulter calls attention to these posthuman enhancements as 'structural necessity' in the game, wherein the game becomes a 'fantasy site' where the player's avatar 'plays out the central posthuman fantasy of extending the human subject beyond itself' (Boulter, 2–3). In the *Fallout* games, players are often presented with the choice to adopt perks that blur the boundaries of what is considered human. Choosing not to accept these enhancements can place the player at a significant disadvantage, effectively encouraging a transition toward the posthuman. This gameplay dynamic is at seemingly odds with the narrative framing of the obviously posthuman subjects as marginalised or abject 'others'. At first glance, this might suggest a transhumanist logic, in which technological or biological enhancements serve to maintain human dominance in a hostile future. However, by allowing the player to incorporate skills and traits associated with these 'others' (see the Ghoulish and Cyborg perks in table 1), *Fallout* subtly undermines anthropocentric assumptions. It suggests that "humanity" is not a fixed essence but a constructed category, entangled with nonhuman life, mutations, and technologies, ultimately reflecting a more critical posthumanist sensibility.

Fallout's exploration of the posthuman carries an interesting link with both past and future, something the franchise champions in its retrofuturist aesthetics. Existing scholarship has already noted that *Fallout* is 'characterized, if not defined, from its inception by its Atomic Age stylings' which is 'set in the future of an historical timeline that diverged from our history in the mid-1940s and that saw the realization of the futurist predictions of the 1950s' (McClancy 2008). The nuclear war which sets the scene for *Fallout* took place in 2077, yet Fallout frequently shows images more associated with the 1950s, a time often associated with US American prosperity and wholesomeness. Prodi and Gatt explain retrofuturism as an aesthetic which prioritises 'romantic visions of hope, those that had accompanied the past, dominated by a strong moral imprint and fed by a positive view of technology' (2019, 138). Retrofuturism 'appears to be critical, disenchanted, even nostalgically ironic', all things which *Fall-*

out captures effectively in its landscapes (137). Corroding billboards advertise shining new technologies to make home life easier, sultry pin up girls in astronaut-themed skimpy clothing offer bottles of Nuka Cola (the franchise's far from subtle version of Coca-cola), and images of new-yet-old cars tower over the player as they walk through the desolate wasteland in which none of these things come easy, if they are present at all.[2] While in-game artefacts from a lost era are a recognised method of 'grounding the game in its apparent historical context', *Fallout*'s retrofuturism also serves to satirise the ideals and anxieties of an age long past, juxtaposing colourful images of family, peace and prosperity with the irradiated, destroyed wasteland (Wright 2016). The future promised in the past turned out to be a lie, and the actual future is total destruction. The pop culture images which still survive only serve as a reminder of an ideal that never came to pass, an effective parody of 'nostalgia for the technological optimism of the simulated Fifties' (McClancy 2008).

That *Fallout* uses a notably 1950s aesthetic is itself of importance not just in terms of technology, but also of social and cultural ideals. The 1950s is an era frequently promoted as one of US America's most successful, and is certainly one of its most glorified. However, the 1950s was rife with social issues that often go ignored. The 1950s 'normalized and affirmed the nuclear family predicated on heterosexual marriage and male authority', re-establishing and reinforcing traditional gender roles that encouraged the subordination of women and their relegation to the home and excluding or demonising homosexual relationships (Helgren 2022, 166). While the 1950s is often associated with economic prosperity, Coontz notes that 'forty to fifty million people were poor in the mid-1950s' and many lived in severe poverty (1993, 29). African Americans faced 'legally sanctioned segregation', 'restrictive covenants', and 'pervasive brutality' prevented them from accessing any of the benefits of the society they were contributing to (Coontz 1993, 30). The 1950s era may be idealised in the modern day, yet there were a number of societal and political issues that are largely ignored when looking back, many of which resulted in exclusion and discrimination. This is pertinent because it shows that *Fallout*'s depiction of the posthuman is as much about the past as it is the future. The issue of the posthuman raises questions about what it is to be human, and certainly there is a quality of existential uncertainty that *Fallout* dabbles with in its portrayal of both ghouls and synths as posthuman beings that show two potential routes humanity may take. However, there is an underlying critique that looks not forward, but backward. The ghouls and synths of the *Fallout* universe are not just symbols of what we may be, but reflect an ongoing issue weaved throughout American culture and history that excludes and discriminates against anything that stands outside of the glorified norm: Wilde points out

[2] Arguably, it is relatively easy for the player to find Nuka Cola, abandoned in glass bottles in various containers in the wasteland. This, though, seems to be more of a subtle commentary of the endless presence of mega-corporations even when the world has ended than of any surviving 1950s idealism. Strang notes that *Fallout* uses satirically nostalgic food and beverages to make critical commentary on 'real-world atomic culture, commercial food production, unhealthy consumption, and unchecked consumerism' (2022, 355).

that historically, discussions of what can and cannot be considered 'human' are 'already flawed if you consider that, historically, only a particular kind of human has had full access to rights', while '[w]omen, people of colour, disabled people, people considered of lower class, and anyone belonging to the LGBTQIA+ communities have historically been treated as lesser subjects' (2023, 22). It is therefore telling that ghouls and synths can take any form (they can be both white and non-white, male or female, heterosexual or homosexual, high class or low class, etc), yet they face discrimination regardless – they are different, and that is what excludes them from society.

In the *Fallout* games, both posthuman subjects can be considered enemies – the player does frequently have to fight and kill both ghouls and synths who are immediately hostile upon encountering them. However, we are also shown sympathetic characters who only want to be considered people alongside humans. In *Fallout 4* the player has the opportunity to meet and recruit companions, NPCs who aid them on their journey by providing combat support and other benefits, as well as their own questlines. One such potential companion is the ghoul John Hancock, the civic-minded mayor of Goodneighbour, a settlement that he is leading with the intention of it being 'of the people, for the people' where '[e]veryone's welcome' (Bethesda 2015). John Hancock is named after the American Founding Father and has a local accent. He dresses like a pioneer and his clothing, while significant in its style, is tattered, marking him as 'one of the people'. He is a representative of the working class man who has worked his way up to leadership while maintaining his ideals of community. He is a morally good character whose relationship with the player is actively affected by their actions: if they choose to be generous, pursue justice, and help people, Hancock will like the player and grant them more perks, and can even become a romantic prospect. However, if the player is greedy, steals or is cruel, Hancock will dislike the player. If they kill innocent people, Hancock will rebuke the player, telling them 'I know my hands ain't exactly clean, but what you've done [...] I ain't gonna be a part of it anymore', resulting in him leaving altogether (Bethesda 2015). Hancock is shown to be an upstanding character with a deep sense of morality, even though, as a ghoul, he has been subjected to abuse and discrimination from others in the wasteland.

Another optional companion is the synth Nick Valentine. He is modelled after a mid-20th century noire detective, a culturally significant icon, and he even has a gravelly northeastern US (possibly New York or Boston) accent – bearing in mind, as a robot, this would have had to have been programmed in. Nick was implanted with an artificial personality based on the recorded memories of humans from before the war that created the wasteland in an experiment to see if synths were capable of independent thought, which has resulted in his ongoing existential crisis throughout the game. As his personality is intertwined with both the world before the war and the one after, he must constantly grapple with a lack of belonging exacerbated by the constant distrust, fear and hate directed towards him for what he is. However, he has retained a strong sense of justice, protecting the weak against violence and exploitation. He also believes synths are capable of humanity. In a memorable exchange, a (human)

Brotherhood squire challenges Nick, saying 'No machine should have free will', to which he responds 'Why? You jealous you had to turn yours in?' (Bethesda 2015). The Brotherhood, in *Fallout 4*, are known for their militaristic and exclusionary practises that can certainly be seen as outright discriminatory. By having Nick be the one to so explicitly point out that Brotherhood members are essentially brainwashed beyond being able to exercise their free will, the player is faced with the prospect that this robot may be more human than the people in Brotherhood armour.

These characters are prominent examples of the posthuman 'other', yet they are also clear depictions of American cultural iconography. This functions as an interesting nostalgic satire, this time not of a particular era, but of identity. Hancock and Valentine are discriminated against for what they are, but they embody US American identity, forcing people to recognise them within the boundaries of US American culture. Further, these characters refuse to subordinate themselves. They are strong, capable, willing to stand up for themselves, and frequently unapologetic towards those who would discriminate against them. If 'American citizenship as a historical matter has been a vehicle of exclusion', these characters make players contend with the social complexities of these exclusions, ultimately pointing not to any specific groups as problematic, but to American culture itself (Spiro 2008, 111). The matter of who is allowed to call themselves truly American has been contested for most of the country's history, and social and political factors such as immigration, place of birth, heritage, and many others have 'further [fogged] a national identity that is already elusive' (Spiro 2008, 32). That elusiveness has only been exacerbated by those who, in a desire to have a solid foundation for their own identity, have placed multiple restrictions on the identity of others, oftentimes resulting in exclusion and discrimination. *Fallout* removes some of the more emotionally and politically charged elements of identity – Hancock and Valentine are never challenged on the grounds of their race, gender or sexuality – but the series still forces players to confront the insidiously exclusionary nature of American culture through its posthuman subjects.

There is another notable example of this complication of the posthuman in combination with identity in the Amazon Prime series, which was one of relatively few video game adaptations to the screen that has been considered hugely successful, largely owing to its 'meticulous attention to detail of the game world' as it remains 'extraordinarily faithful' to its source material (Tassi 2024). The series approaches the franchise's exploration of posthumanism themes through the Ghoul (Walton Goggins), who is quite obviously modelled on another US American cultural icon – the cowboy. He has a Southern American accent, wears a Stetson and is a famous gunslinger. Much like Hancock and Valentine, he is purposely modelled on an idealised facet of American historical identity, but the Ghoul takes this further in that we see him struggle with various different identities throughout his evolution. The Ghoul was once a man named Cooper Howard, an actor famous for starring in Western movies as the cowboy hero. Prior to this, he served in the US military. Already, Howard embodies three culturally significant identities: the marine, the cowboy, and the Hollywood star, and all of this

prior to the events of the war. Just prior to the war, Howard was living a comfortable suburban life with his wife and child, which is again significant: he became the middle-class family man that the 1950s era proudly promotes. Then, after the bombs fell, Howard eventually succumbed to the radiation sickness and became a ghoul, but also chose to reprise his cowboy role – this time in real life – after losing his family. As a character, the Ghoul is a satirical perversion of US American identity five times over, having played most of the stereotypical and idealised roles that could be assigned to an average American man. After the war, he fell back into the only one that remained available to him in the new, post-apocalyptic world: the rugged individualism of the frontier anti-hero.

While John Hancock and Nick Valentine are resolutely on the side of good and justice, the Ghoul is a more morally questionable character that may seem more like a villain than a hero in the opening of the television series, engaging in 'morally reprehensible behaviour' as a mercenary and bounty hunter as well as having a life-sustaining addiction to the drugs that prevent him from going feral (Lyons 2021, 227). As an anti-hero, the Ghoul is the result of the 'villainous system that governs society', complicating the 'thin line that separates lawfulness and crime' similar to other anti-hero figures in popular contemporary television in the 21st century (Lyons 2021, 227). The Ghoul is the product of Vault-Tec's capitalism run wild, and not only has he suffered physically and emotionally, but the dehumanisation he has faced at the hands of those who see people as little more than means towards profit is evident in his irradiated, decaying visage. Lyons points to the anti-hero as the result of 'societal pressure' which 'preaches acceptance' while actively and 'aggressively subduing dissenters' (2021, 227), a concept which *Fallout* epitomises through Vault-Tec – for all of its brightly coloured branding and idealistic promises of a safer future secured for everyone, it is frequently exploitative, exclusionary and, in the series, actively responsible for the very war it claimed to be protecting against. The Ghoul is emblematic of a hyper-capitalistic society's failure to deliver on any of its promises, prioritising profit while guaranteeing destruction.

The Amazon Prime series *Fallout* uses the Ghoul's posthumanism to show both obsolescence and adaptation simultaneously. The anti-hero as a concept is frequently about rejecting the constraints of society and questioning the status quo, yet this can be arguably surface-level considering the anti-hero is frequently also a cisgendered, white, straight male who is also often middle-class (consider, for example, *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White (Bryan Cranston), *The Sopranos*' Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini), and *Better Call Saul*'s Saul Goodman (Bob Odenkirk), who are analysed in depth in Lyon's work), *Fallout* both is and is not an exception to that rule. Cooper Howard would stereotypically fit the role of anti-hero in his original form, yet he does not actually become an anti-hero until he's shucked even the chains of that stereotype and becomes the Ghoul. Furthermore, the heroes of the series also don't fit the stereotypical idea of the hero (also white, cisgendered, male and frequently middle-class): Lucy MacLean (Ella Purnell) is female, while Maximus (Aaron Moten) is non-white. That it

is these characters who are representing the new future of the *Fallout* series is not incidental; *Fallout* is highlighting that the world has changed, and therefore the societal ideals of the old world must change as well. The Ghoul's posthumanism is what most explicitly exemplifies this: he has literally changed from the ideal of the old world into the reality of the new one. Vault-Tec's false promise to preserve the past have fallen away, and that past was never real to begin with; it was a shiny façade hiding a multitude of societal and political failures. The reality is three characters pursuing their own justice in the wasteland: the Vault escapee Lucy who is leaving behind the faux-utopia to embrace the harsh realities of the wasteland; the Brotherhood reject Maximus who is grappling with the misalignment of what is right and what is the law; and the posthuman Ghoul, who has experienced both the evolution and devolution of American society in times of crisis. It remains the Ghoul's position as posthuman, though, who makes readers truly contend with the complexities of US American identity: he epitomises what it is to be American, yet he has arguably suffered the most at the hands of the US American system.

In both the video game franchise and the television series, *Fallout*'s characters and designs complicate notions of humanity and identity by employing a complex blend of cultural and posthuman ideas. While *Fallout* employs its posthuman characters in the typical science fiction fashion to generate feelings of anxiety associated with the end of humanity, it goes beyond this to ask more grounded questions about identity and highlights the hypocrisy and exclusions of American culture. Posthuman figures are frequently present, though are rarely central to the narrative – they, like the corroding remnants of the old world, serve as frequent reminders of the promises and failures of the world that has been lost as the player undertakes their adventure, or the viewer watches the story unfold. At its core a satirical piece of media, *Fallout* is nonetheless able to depict its posthuman subjects with a sensitivity to real cultural experiences of those who have historically been othered, demonstrating that *Fallout*'s cultural evaluation goes beyond mere futuristic speculation, simultaneously acting as a commentary and critique of US American history and culture.

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