

## Technological Bodies: Artificial Intelligence as Friday in *Portal* and *Halo Infinite*

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### *Abstract*

Artificial intelligence characters provide a unique perspective on the discussion of Friday figures and issues of Otherness and Othering as they relate to the body. With their technological, inherently inhuman physicality, AI Fridays shed light on the differentiation between ‘being human’ as an inner state of being, on the one hand, and as having a biologically human body, on the other. These characters thus shift some of the central questions about culture in many Robinsonades towards questions of humanity and physical identity, especially when reading the AI body as a metaphorical stand-in for the colonised body. They reflect on the question of how far our bodies determine who we are, how they relate to and are shaped by the groups we belong to, and what it means to be human.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence; game studies; videogame Robinsonades; dystopian workplaces; postcolonial criticism

There is a case to be made for reading science fiction in general as having much common ground with the Robinsonade. Straightforward sci-fi Robinsonades there are many, ranging from examples such as Rex Gordon’s novel *No Man Friday* (1956), to various productions of *Lost in Space* for TV and cinema (1965–1968, 1998, 2018), and to contemporary videogames like the *Portal* series (2007–2011) and *Halo Infinite* (2021). But even aside from the clear-cut cases of ‘proper’ sci-fi Robinsonades, there is a significant overlap of themes and motifs, and science fiction as a whole provides some very ready tropes and fertile ground for Robinsonades. This connection brings into focus one particular ‘constitutive feature of the Robinsonade as a genre[, which] is that it both imaginatively reworks Defoe’s most famous narrative and addresses itself to the present’ (Mayer 2020: xi)—or, in this case, to present-day

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imaginings of possible futures. Planet-fall narratives, as well as post-apocalyptic settings and narratives centred on space travel can be read as variations on Robinson's story, depicting a struggle for survival in a physically isolated context. (Post-)apocalyptic storyworlds show the fragmentation of society into small, insular groups, a refocusing on survival in close-knit communities amid a hostile environment; space travel inherently entails being boxed into a lonely craft, tiny and adrift in the vastness and airless cold of space; and the exploration of new planets, even when it does not involve being stranded (which is a very common plot point), shares many themes and features with Robinson's predicament, from surviving in an unfamiliar environment and learning to use the tools and resources at hand, to encounters with native inhabitants of the planet, to the imperialist undercurrents of seeing a galaxy to be 'discovered'—reflecting the features of Defoe's text that Ian Kinane calls 'Crusoe's schooling in imperialism and colonial expansion' (2018: 30) and Ann Marie Fallon, more scathingly, describes as 'didactic colonial juvenilia' (2011: 17). Overall, science fiction as a genre commonly features themes such as surviving in an unfamiliar and frequently threatening environment, overpowering natural forces, a pervasive sense of loneliness and distance from home, encounters with the unfamiliar and Other, remote human settlements, and a certain latent colonialist mindset (which may be presented naively or critically).

This essay examines two particular examples of Robinsonades in sci-fi videogames, the aforementioned *Portal* series and *Halo Infinite*. Both revolve around main characters stranded in dangerous, insular environments—a vast research facility in the *Portal* games and one of the titular halos in *Halo Infinite*—and both main characters navigate this unfamiliar landscape aided by an artificial intelligence (AI) character. These digital entities, called GLaDOS and Cortana, have a rather ambiguous relationship to the protagonist of their respective games, and unite a list of characteristics that make them quite Friday-like: They depend on the protagonist for the continued execution of their most important directives and fulfilment of their aims, share the main character's isolation, are for long stretches of time the only non-(overtly-) hostile sentient being the player encounters, and provide a foil and Other that highlights and reflects positively on the qualities of the human protagonist. Cortana and GLaDOS are also as different as they can possibly be from each other while sharing all of these commonalities,

which brings some interesting tensions and nuances to light. The two different game franchises also treat the physicality of their AIs very differently, presenting an interesting addition to this exploration of the nuances of Friday's bodily representation. AIs generally exhibit a peculiar state of embodiment, given that their physicality is ambiguous or even debatable, since they are part hardware and part digital code. The way the games portray and expand on this basis shows two very differently embodied Fridays—one primarily digital, the other primarily hard-wired; one anthropomorphised, the other staunchly inhuman. As the 'formal adaptability of the Robinsonade to new social, historical, and cultural realities' may be considered one 'main explanation for its enduring pertinence' (Lipski 2020: 5), taking into consideration new media and developing narrative formats such as videogames provides a timely addition to notions of the genre in general, and Friday figures today in particular. Analysing Cortana and GLaDOS through the lens of the Robinsonade is helpful in better understanding how their physicality intersects with questions of gender, personhood, agency, and autonomy, and brings to light more clearly how much of Friday's role in the structure of the narrative depends on physicality specifically as a human being.

#### *Halo Infinite and Cortana*

Most of the *Halo* series includes quite a lot of travel and little being stranded, so it is not an obvious fit for a Robinsonade-centred analysis. However, the latest instalment, *Halo Infinite*, breaks the mould a little, as it features the main character Master Chief being cut off from most of their usual institutional support and spending most of the game on Zeta Halo, after being essentially space-shipwrecked at the start of the game. The titular halos are ringworlds, that is, planet-sized artificial rings floating in space, with their own atmospheres, landscapes, ecosystems, and so forth. They are also gigantic weapons built by an ancient civilisation, and much of the game series revolves around preventing the halos being fired. Cortana is already familiar to players of the series from earlier games as Master Chief's trusty companion, providing helpful information and directions as the player shoots their way through hordes of opponents. It has already been established in previous games that Cortana is facing a common problem for AIs in the *Halo* storyworld: They have an expiry date, after which they begin to experience 'rampancy' and must be deleted or reset. By the time *Halo Infinite* takes place, Cortana has gone rogue due

to her rampancy and is now following the familiar plotline of an AI aiming to assume complete control in order to save humanity from themselves. As a result, we see her as a dual or mirrored character in this game: once as an antagonist (visualised in purple), and once as a newly formatted, helpful version still aiding the Master Chief (visualised in blue). The player only learns that the blue AI is a copy of Cortana at the very end of the game; she is called simply The Weapon before that, but she is included in this analysis of Cortana, as the two present, in the end, facets of the same character.

Some of Cortana's Friday-like qualities are fairly obvious: In her non-antagonistic form in older games and as The Weapon in *Halo Infinite*, she accompanies, supports, and obeys the main character. She is instructed by him, takes his commands in a clear hierarchical structure of software and user, and her entire role (up to her rebellion) is to provide unpaid labour for the protagonist. She also acts as a foil and Other in some regards—female, digital, intellectually strong but physically dependent, occasionally in need of rescuing or containment—thus highlighting the hero's qualities in a straightforward manner. The blue and purple versions of Cortana can be read as complicating this process, showing alternative kinds of Fridays: Blue Cortana represents the 'traditional' Friday—cheerful, good-natured, happy to be of service—while purple Cortana aligns more closely with subversive re-imaginings of Friday's character as resenting their servitude, breaking free, harbouring skills underestimated by their former master, and attempting to overthrow that master's rule. Crucially, however, Cortana's transformation is incomplete: at the end of *Halo Infinite*, we learn that rogue Cortana ultimately saw the error of her ways and not only left an apology before being deleted, but also used her last seconds to damage Zeta Halo so it could not be fired, in order to protect humanity. While a cathartic moment for the character from a moral point of view, this shows a regression to the oppressive status quo when read through a postcolonial lens, as may be more fitting in the context of the Robinsonade. From this perspective, the narrative ultimately sides with the coloniser in unambiguously depicting rebellion as an immoral act and a grave mistake, for which only the ultimate narrative atonement—the character's death—can be adequate punishment, placing Cortana in the literary tradition of transgressive women and colonial Others like Charlotte Brontë's Bertha Mason, Elizabeth Gaskell's Ruth and Thomas Hardy's Tess, upholding starkly inflexible notions of justice,

sin, and atonement that highlight the nineteenth-century moral heritage of this twenty-first-century text.

The way Cortana's recordings are revealed over the course of the game, almost like journal entries, presents a minor subversion of this very clear-cut power dynamic, however. Even though the content reiterates a rather oppressive understanding of servitude and morality, the form, the fact that Cortana gets to tell her story, rather than the Master Chief or another human character, takes back a small portion of power for the AI. After all, in Defoe's novel, Robinson is the one who keeps a meticulous journal, who 'frequently keep[s] accounts as a way of imposing a sense of orderliness on his life' and giving 'an account of his life that makes it add up to something' (Ogden Birdsall 1985: 37). As a result of that narrative framework, Friday is ever only represented to the reader through Robinson's eyes and words. In *Halo Infinite*, on the other hand, Cortana is the one who gets to keep records, represent her version of events, and impose her sense of orderliness on the narrative, her meaning on her own life. Although this is a degree of agency and autonomy over the narrative that is rarely afforded to Friday figures—an injustice of form and structure which some Robinsonades actively engage and struggle with, such as J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986)—Cortana is, in the end, still shown as inherently unsuited to leadership, and completely uncritically presented as in the right place and better off under the main character's guidance, perpetually working for free and in a power structure that gives her little room for self-determination.

#### *Portal and GLaDOS*

In contrast, the *Portal* games show a very different version of an AI in Friday's role. *Portal* is a two-part series of puzzle games set inside a large research facility, Aperture Laboratories. The games embrace absurdist humour, their tone deceptively light in the face of the often rather dark and serious topics they touch and reflect on, such as the value of human life, the cost of progress, and the ethical limitations of research. Satirical reflections on the postmodern workplace as sheer dystopia arise out of the deserted office and laboratory spaces in both *Portal* games, and *Portal 2* in particular explores this theme in greater depth, delivering a satire of mid-twentieth-century American capitalism that is both casual and brutal, as the player learns more of the founder, company structures, and guiding philosophy behind the fictional corporation. This represents a comedically

exaggerated version of the ‘all-encompassing workplace cultures’ in which the individual’s ‘existence is managed and minimized to extract [... economic] value’ that Jennifer Preston Wilson has identified in a number of science fiction Robinsonades from the past two decades (2020: 136–137), situating the *Portal* games within that tradition. From the start of the game, the research facility is run by an AI named GLaDOS, whose sole task seems to be keeping the labs and their research going. There are no human researchers or employees anymore, their deserted spaces which the player traverses creating an intense impression of absence and not quite specifiable dread. They were here, the space loudly tells the player, and they clearly abandoned their work unexpectedly, computers still running, half-empty mugs still on their desks. An at first unclear calamity has obviously occurred, and now, there are only human test subjects, and only one researcher, GLaDOS.

Nevertheless, from a game-mechanical if not a narrative point of view, GLaDOS is the player’s sidekick for large segments of the game: she provides introductory notes and commentary on all the levels—each consisting of one of her scientific ‘tests’—explains new game mechanisms to the player and comments on successes or failures. At the beginning of *Portal*, GLaDOS first seems to be a fairly straightforward giver of tooltips without much personality, but the game undercuts this role from the start, as ostensibly crucial information is repeatedly conveniently inaudible (‘Most importantly, under no circumstances should you [bzzzpt]’ (*Portal*)). As the player progresses, GLaDOS’s predatory and darkly humorous personality becomes apparent. Soon, it is clear that she may be guiding the player, but she does so purely out of self-interest, and is more than willing to endanger or harm the human protagonist, Chel, as collateral damage to her research process. Still, antagonistic through she may be, GLaDOS (mostly) facilitates the player character’s survival in a hostile environment, as long as that aligns with her own interests. In this sense, she can be loosely considered a helping Friday to the stranded, trapped Robinson of the main character. The power imbalance between the two of them is marked and intact, but, unlike in Defoe’s narrative, who truly has the upper hand is slightly ambiguous. While Chel is the one who is stranded in a space she survives thanks to the (sometimes grudging) help and support of GLaDOS, the AI in turn patronises, mocks, and threatens the protagonist, who, as a test subject, is clearly a dependent and perhaps unwilling participant in her larger plans and ambitions. GLaDOS’s clear

antagonism highlights the dysfunctional nature of that interdependent relationship: ‘Maybe you’ll find someone else to help you’, she comments spitefully at the end of the first game, after she and Chel have just tried to kill each other.

GLaDOS provides a more explicit foil for the main character than Cortana does, the contrast here going far beyond basic divides of male/female and human/non-human. GLaDOS and Chel are both female characters, but appear as opposites in just about every other way. GLaDOS is huge and stationary, while Chel is comparatively small and mobile; GLaDOS provides a constant stream of narration, is eloquent and at times downright chatty, while Chel never speaks. GLaDOS, somewhat surprisingly, is the more emotional of the two, reacting with glee, shock, or anger to the player’s actions, while Chel remains stoic and unreadable.

*AI reflecting on humanity*

In the typical manner of Fridays, part of this foil function both Cortana and GLaDOS fulfil is to contrast and reflect on the culture and technological prowess of the main character, as the original Friday does for Robinson Crusoe. Having an Other who is not just culturally different but an AI complicates this process, however. On the one hand, the cultural difference here becomes a more essentialist difference of species and realm of existence—human versus software, organic versus digital life. While many other Robinson narratives compare cultural differences between Robinson and Friday, but ultimately also arrive at important commonalities, an understanding of their shared humanity in spite of all differences which is a key point in the narrative, AI Fridays retain an unknowable and inherently alien quality, a chasm too large to be bridged by the argument of shared humanity. Although the narratives still contain moments of understanding, alignment of shared goals, or shared emotional reactions, this can no longer culminate in a point about shared humanity when the Other is not human. In this context, what happens instead is that the narratives begin to raise implied questions on the nature and boundaries of the human experience.

In the course of the games, we learn that both Cortana and GLaDOS are based on the minds and personalities of two real human women, but the games make it very clear that this is not the same as *being* human. Although a boundary is identified, its details remain indistinct, and the audience is left to ponder the question where exactly ‘humanity’ begins

and ends, and what markers even make sense in times of trans- and post-humanism, both in reality and in the games. Master Chief and Chel both use physical enhancements that they are never seen without, and without which they very obviously could not survive their respective games (most prominently Master Chief's armour and Chel's Long Fall Boots), driving home the point that the 1980s notion of the cyborg has long since arrived in reality, the age of 'genetic engineering, wearable technologies, and the increased proliferation of cyborgs in all shapes and sizes' (McFarlane et al. 2020: 1) is now, and our intuitive understanding of humans and machines as distinct is becoming increasingly difficult to uphold. When the physical body is no longer an adequate marker to identify humanity, emotional and psychological states gain importance, arriving at a point where the differences between human and AI indeed become less essentialist and more quasi-cultural, more equivalent to the sounding out of cultural differences and underlying commonalities between Robinson and Friday. Some AI narratives explore the question where 'being human' begins in greater detail (take EDI from the *Mass Effect* series, for example), but for GLaDOS and Cortana, a definite if fuzzy sense of their immovable inhumanity remains, grounded in the basic physical difference of (mostly or originally) biological bodies on the one hand and hardware on the other. In this sense, the games continue an essentialist discourse, in which difference and Otherness is very much written on the body.

This focus on the artificial in opposition to organic life is consistent with the depiction of the insular environments in both games (and many contemporary sci-fi Robinsonades). Defoe's island leaves room for being read as a natural paradise, a place of healing and contemplation where time loses meaning, rife with opportunity and rich in everything a person could want in the context of a pastoral idyll.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, the 'islands' of these games are shown as unrelentingly hostile spaces, and the story has no claim whatsoever on being about 'how a castaway makes a desert island

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<sup>1</sup> It has been pointed out that the ostensible bucolic perfection of the island might need to be taken with a grain of salt, given that it is a notion mostly superimposed on the text by readers and critics of the Romantic period, whereas Defoe's text itself pointedly does not dwell on descriptions of the landscape, rather implying that 'the island becomes a positively evaluated space only when contrasted with the dangers elsewhere or when serving a specific narrative and ideological function' (Lipski 2019: 89). However, the crucial point is that Defoe's novel at least allows for a straightforward reading of the island as beautiful and benign.



into a happy home' (Green 1990: 1), as some less critical readings of Defoe's novel would have it. Instead, the island becomes an encapsulation of everything that is wrong with that idea, stressing the impossibility of home in a space fraught with violence and a constant struggle for superiority. The islands in *Portal* and *Halo* are artificially created spaces, but perhaps ironically all the less suited to human inhabitation, and the highly ambiguous presence of the sometimes helpful, sometimes extremely dangerous Fridays, the hostile AIs exerting their influence over Aperture Laboratories and Zeta Halo, makes it impossible to turn these spaces into anything resembling a home; they are un-homely and *unheimlich* in every sense of the word. *Portal* very deliberately follows through on this idea, depicting *mise-en-scènes* of several abandoned hideouts in the liminal spaces beyond and between test chambers, places where someone clearly tried and failed to carve out a space to live. The hideouts are dark and grimy, in direct contrast to the clinical brightness of the test chambers, and disturbing thanks to the profuse scribbles on the walls in agitated red and black writing, bearing testimony to a trapped person in intense emotional distress. *Halo Infinite* shows a more purely externalised but no less vital conflict, as the setting is an active war zone, in which there is no hope of performing any of the slow introspection and patient domestication of the landscape that Defoe's Robinson is so dedicated to. While he can tend to such tasks, stating that 'my Time and Labour was little worth, and so it was as well employ'd one way as another' (1994: 51), the protagonists of these games are under more immediate duress to move fast, not remain stationary and use each minute wisely. The figure of Friday as an omnipresent digital entity and permanent threat looms large on these islands, whose artificial physicality seems to align them more closely with the AI characters than with the human protagonist—taking a strong implicit stance on who the original and natural inhabitants of that place are, in a way that runs directly counter to the approval of colonial expansion and the Christian notion of improvement and stewardship as justifying possession which Defoe's novel so sincerely extols.

In the physical embodiment of the two AI Fridays, a certain essentialism can absolutely be noted, as the differences between a biologically human body and computer hardware are shown as distinctly different states of being, perhaps so different that they alone give rise to some insurmountable Otherness. However, *Halo* and *Portal* depict the

physicality of their AIs in radically different manners, making for two very disparate digital Fridays.

Cortana is, in many ways, presented to sideline her Otherness and make her seem more human: She frequently appears as a hologram of a human woman, using gestures and facial expressions, wearing human clothing and hair. While it is also clear that she is physically located on a computer chip the protagonist carries with him, Cortana's appearance as a hologram is the lasting impression of her the game creates. Her human appearance makes her more intuitively likeable and allows her to interact with the other characters in a way that seems natural and more or less as an equal. Her face is expressive and carries much of the visual language of emotion in the games, in stark contrast to the main character, whose face is always hidden behind a visor—upsetting some superficially straightforward assumptions about which of the two *looks* more human. In dialogues, Cortana is further humanised by appearing to react physically and bodily to her digital environment, such as when she handles three-dimensional clusters of data, dodges attacks, takes audible breaths and gasps, twists in pain, or falls to the ground—the game visualises digital processes in a way that aligns Cortana's virtual existence more closely and comprehensibly with the non-digital world, and coaxes us into conveniently forgetting that Cortana does not, in fact, have a human body. Unsurprisingly, this stress on a human-like physicality also comes with a certain dose of commodification; if her hologram body exists to make the homo- and heterodiegetic human viewer more comfortable, a subjection to the male gaze of the main character and the target audience alike only represents a consistent extension of this function. Cortana is conventionally attractive, dressed in tight-fitting clothing, sometimes flirts with the main character, and her physical reactions to the environment include poses such as helplessly tumbling to the ground, visually emphasising the need for the main character to protect or rescue her.

The portrayal of Robinson's (perceived) superiority over Friday is deeply entrenched here, but shifted to focus more on the body and less on technology and culture (the way Defoe's text does), as Master Chief's solid, muscular, and heavily armoured physical form is contrasted with Cortana's lithe, unarmoured, and literally permeable, incorporeal holographic body. All of the weapons and most of the crucial tools of survival are firmly in the Master Chief's hands, and the fact that Cortana has no material body actually makes this distribution of power via access

to tools even more inflexible than in Defoe's novel, in which Robinson eventually shares his guns with Friday, once he is convinced of the other man's loyalty. When considered in the context of a novel that is so exceedingly concerned with enumerating, describing and keeping stock of tools and their usage as *Robinson Crusoe*, the question who can access those tools and weapons holds particular significance, and the fact that the weapons and inventory of the game are accessible to the player (character) but not to Cortana—both on a narrative and mechanical level—re-entrenches her dependent, subservient position. The lack of a physical body makes any leniency or gradual increase of equanimity and autonomy in this respect impossible; digital Fridays can never share the Master's physical tools.

GLaDOS is written and designed as almost the complete opposite to Cortana's embodiment, a complementary counterpart. GLaDOS does not use holograms and only appears as a disembodied voice for much of the games. That voice itself is, unlike Cortana's friendly and natural-sounding vocalisation, distorted and artificial, making it impossible to forget or not notice that GLaDOS is very decidedly not human. Her voice permeates the research facility, her will rearranges rooms and opens doors throughout the vast complex—if we consider all these expressions of her physicality, then her body is gigantic, stretching over storeys and storeys of laboratory floors. The core of her existence, her mainframe, is revealed at the end of the first *Portal* game, and its design does nothing to build any illusions of humanity on her part, either. GLaDOS appears as a huge sensor on a swivel mount attached to the ceiling of a sterile white room. Her physical appearance is malignant and intimidating in its size, as is fitting for the game's final boss, and only the fact that she is physically slower and more static gives the human protagonist a chance to dismantle GLaDOS's mainframe and destroy her computational cores in an incinerator—an end that would be graphic and excruciating in its brutality if GLaDOS were an organic life form, but, as it is, this mechanical process of un-becoming further supports her alienness, even while we, the players, perhaps cannot help but draw comparisons to dismemberment.

In *Portal 2*, GLaDOS of course ends up being alive and well. This development in itself stresses her immense power by highlighting that digitality, in spite of its clear drawbacks, provides the benefit of near-immortality to GLaDOS, making the destruction of her body an inconvenience rather than a true death. Unlike Cortana, who is portrayed

as suffering from an illness, a digital equivalent to bodily frailty, GLaDOS is depicted as above physical existence, maybe even indestructible in essence. Her design has changed a little, as she now inhabits a new mainframe, but she appears as essentially the same character. Her physical state undergoes an even more significant shift when she is supplanted by a rogue AI from the facility, Wheatley. As he usurps control over Aperture Laboratories, Wheatley decides not to try to destroy GLaDOS, but to humiliate her by making her run on a potato battery. GLaDOS then teams up with the protagonist to defeat Wheatley, assuming an even more Friday-like role than in the first *Portal* game, given that she and the protagonist now share a common enemy and their interests align, while GLaDOS also becomes more vulnerable and dependent on the protagonist, as Chel now has the power to physically decide where her Friday-figure goes. The game also sees GLaDOS struggle with the behaviour of the group she formerly identified with (other AIs as well as Aperture founder Cave Johnson), whose moral behaviour is now called into question, echoing Friday's re-evaluation of his tribe's religion and diet. Furthermore, in a parallel to both *Robinson Crusoe* and *Halo*, Chel is now the one who exclusively controls access to the physical tools of their survival, including the all-important (portal) gun. Unlike Cortana, GLaDOS still has a visually present physical body, but it is stripped of the ability to interact with the physical world in an intentional manner.

Running on this new device thus significantly shrinks GLaDOS's radius of physical influence, and being confined to a specific location (rather than extending throughout the facility) brings her closer to experiencing the physical world in the way humans do—a state she considers highly unpleasant and unwelcome. Whereas Cortana is humanised by her approximation of a physical existence, GLaDOS is portrayed as struggling with this experience, rejecting it with clear disgust and redrawing (rather than blurring) the boundaries between herself and the human protagonist. She is afraid of being dropped, and when she thinks too hard or gets angry, she shuts off because the potato does not provide enough electricity to power the full extent of her complex inner life. While played for comedic effect, these moments of physical weakness also contain a grain of very traditional tragedy—a once powerful ruler brought low, stripped of their position and now desperately vulnerable is a familiar image from Shakespearean tragedy (for example, *King Lear* or *Antony and Cleopatra*).

Like the first game, *Portal 2* culminates in a boss fight centred not on hacking, overwriting or deleting the malignant AI—which is a central point in Cortana’s story—but a fight that once again interacts with physical hardware. Thus, we see the game tread a fine line: On the one hand, the body is shown as the all-important physical determinant of success or failure, presence or absence, even for AIs, but on the other hand, as GLaDOS’s relocation onto different physical devices has highlighted, the true locus of existence for these AI characters is transient. The body may be interchangeable, but it still confines them, especially when they are deprived of the opportunity to leave it, presumably by being taken offline. Consistent with that logic, the ending of this game rejects physical destruction as a solution to any of the problems caused by the AI characters; instead, the rebellious Wheatley is rendered harmless through isolation (literally ending up in space), whereas GLaDOS reluctantly comes around to a degree of minimal cooperation. Her character trajectory, in the end, might also be surprisingly at home in a Shakespearean play: once she is reinstated as the ruler of Aperture Laboratories, there is a moment of doubt as to whether she will keep her word, or continue to abuse her position, a moment of truth for her to show her character growth. She ultimately does let the player character go, allowing this Robinson to escape their island as Chel leaves the facility for good.

#### *Blurred boundaries*

This ending is one of many data points that add up to the roles of Chel and GLaDOS, when considered in depth, not lining up fully and neatly with Robinson and Friday respectively. Instead, traits of two other familiar figures from the Robinsonade are observable in GLaDOS’s character. First, if her consciousness and physical self extend throughout the facility in which Chel is trapped, that makes GLaDOS not just Friday, but in a sense it also ascribes the role of the island to her. This type of personal union between companion and environment is something we much more commonly see in ecofiction, in which nature appears as a quasi-character or almost-friend/enemy. Seeing this relationship mirrored in the artificial realm is interesting because it is rare and counter-intuitive—after all, industrial and highly artificial spaces, computers, and technology are more commonly conceptualised as the opposite of nature than its equivalent. Second, although we are used to considering the human user as superior

to and naturally in charge of any software, and the player character as the protagonist, *Portal* significantly subverts both of these expectations. While seeing the AI as the player's sidekick makes sense from a game-mechanical point of view, one might also argue that expecting GLaDOS to be the Friday to Chel's Robinson is unreasonably anthropocentric. A closer analysis of GLaDOS's position reveals that she, more than Chel, is the one who is (1) trapped in an isolated but also malleable environment, which she (2) promptly begins to shape and even populate to better serve her needs and wishes, and who (3) instructs, guides and uses the labour provided by her Other (the human player character) to her own ends. In short, you might also invert this reading to find that the game has the player step into Friday's shoes, serving an AI Robinson. Both make sense, as Chel and GLaDOS complement and mirror each other, each trapped, each dependent, each hostile and at times paternalistic to the other. Not unlike in Ballard's *Concrete Island*, the role of Friday becomes somewhat dynamic, as it is passed back and forth between characters.

What is observable here is ultimately a dissolution of the master-servant relationship between Robinson and Friday, humanity and AI; at the end of *Portal 2*, Chel and GLaDOS part ways, Chel leaving the facility while GLaDOS stays behind, leaving them both free. While this is superficially a positive ending, the implications for the Robinsonade might be rather bleak: as long as they remain in each other's company, neither can be free. The power imbalance is too great, their needs are too different, the dynamic between them too fraught. Ultimately, *Portal 2* seems to signal that, like Friday visiting Europe towards the end of Defoe's novel, AIs, too, always remain clearly marked and treated as Other, rendering a truly peaceful and egalitarian co-existence impossible within the present larger structures.

The ending also contributes to the long tradition of Robinsonades' preoccupation with alternative versions of events. These are most often expressed as 'counterfactuals, or, in more general terms, realities intradiegetically marked as imaginary' (Gill 2020: 23), as characters muse on possible developments past, present, and future. *Portal 2* expands on and subverts this tradition, providing very tangible (non-imaginary) alternative resolutions to a question that many Robinsonades circle back to: whether it is preferable to choose seclusion and be 'Prince and Lord of the whole island', 'absolutely lord and lawgiver' (Defoe 1994: 108, 174), or to return to the larger society of one's fellow creatures and be subject

to their rules. Instead of committing to one of these paths and leaving the other to the realm of imagination, *Portal 2* gives a final outlook on the parallel development of both of these possibilities. The game gives an at first glance stable, intradiegetically factual resolution—Chel leaves, GLaDOS stays—only to subvert that sense of definitive storytelling immediately, as the game cuts away and ends just after Chel finally leaves the facility and reaches the surface, emerging into the only glimpse of outdoor scenery in the game. It is depicted as a waving sea of golden wheat under a blue sky, a positive and hopeful image, but if the player has access to the extradiegetic information that *Portal* is set in the same world as the *Half-Life* games, they know that the surface is a fairly dystopian place, too. In this light, Chel leaving the laboratory might be interpreted either as freedom and a chance to rejoin human society, or as returning her to the initial predicament of being stranded in a dangerous environment.

The game leaves us with an ambiguous resolution, in which all of the major characters—Chel, GLaDOS, and Wheatley—are stranded and isolated. GLaDOS is the only one who actively chooses her seclusion and has a high level of control over the environment she is marooned in, while Chel's position on the surface, now without weapons, experience, or help, is more tenuous than ever. Thus, the seemingly straightforward ending really undermines the notion of escaping the island altogether; if Robinson is lucky, they may choose what kind of island they have to contend with, but whether they can ever truly leave is doubtful.

### *Conclusion*

AI Fridays add productively to the discussion of Friday's body because their physicality is so unusual: they possess both a hardware body that is extremely inhuman and not always useful for interacting with the physical world, and a software body that can appear more human, but is extremely and inherently Other, located in another realm of existence altogether. We can observe a continuation and intensifying of colonial reasoning as the cultural differences between human Robinson and Friday are transferred onto this new dynamic, turning them into immovable, physical differences between human and AI, written on the body in unambiguous ways, differences that cannot be diminished so much as to arrive at an uncomplicated understanding of shared humanity. If the original Friday and Robinson prompt reflections on nature versus nurture, on how far humans are shaped by culture and can be reshaped through education (in

benign and problematic ways), narratives about AI Fridays instead reflect on the question what being human even means. Can there be a sense of shared humanity with a non-human Other? Both Cortana and GLaDOS seem to imply a tentative but uneasy ‘yes’, leaving us to re-evaluate what truly designates humanity, and how physical bodies, sentience, and emotion factor into it.

In their usual capacity, GLaDOS and Cortana are Fridays that aid and serve the stranded main character and provide a foil which highlights the protagonist’s heroic qualities and helps clarify the protagonist’s moral standpoint as the ‘correct’ one. The AIs being subject to the wishes and needs of human users can also be read as a relatively straightforward metaphor for colonial subjugation. While the physical bodies of both of these AI Fridays play a crucial part, they are represented very differently. Cortana is shown centred in a digital, holographic, and very anthropomorphic body that reacts to her environment much as an organic body might. Her existence on physical hardware becomes barely an afterthought, which brings her conceptually closer to the human characters and gives her acts of violence and cruelty, but also her suffering and death an air of general humanity. GLaDOS, on the other hand, represents a stark rejection of human physicality. Between her distorted voice and her physical representation as hardware through-and-through, *Portal* never lets us forget that GLaDOS is not human, and everything from her using the entire laboratory as extensions of her body, to her being literally torn apart at the end of the first game, to her being transferred into new bodies in the second instalment of the series underlines her absolute Otherness and cements her status as decidedly not human.

Following in the footsteps of other subversive Fridays, Cortana and GLaDOS rebel against their masters, at least temporarily, and try to assume the position of ruler for themselves. In the case of *Halo Infinite*, this rebellion is eventually subdued and the previous hierarchical order restored, while *Portal* shows a more complex process, in which the roles of Friday, Robinson, and even the island begin to bleed into each other, becoming more and more indistinguishable and arriving at a statement about shared positions and similar qualities that is stronger than the usual ‘shared humanity’ argument specifically because these alignments occur in spite of inherent differences between the characters in terms of physicality, power, and even mortality.



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