Towards a Categorisation of Animals in Video Games

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Abstract: This article presents a brief introduction of animal studies and proposes how questions relevant to the discipline may be applicable to the study of video games. It considers video games as texts of popular culture and works of fiction which offer themselves to analysis and interpretation and may reveal socially relevant insights. The article proposes two complementing sets of categories to systematize the presence of animals in video games, based on function (enemy, background, hero, companion, tool) and ontology (actual representation, legendary, extrapolation, hybrid). Finally, the article outlines paths for researches in the field of HAS to follow in the study of video games.

Keywords: animal studies, video games, categories

1. Introduction

The animal turn[1] is already well established in universities worldwide. As more and more scholars from various disciplines raise the question of the animal in their particular research, animal studies are gaining popularity as a transdisciplinary academic movement. This paper is an attempt to introduce animal studies to game studies. The two complementary categories put forward in this paper are an effort to propose a way to systematise the recurrent functions and manners of visual representation of animals in the digital worlds of video games with the aim of further analysis and interpretation in mind. Such research may reveal in what ways video games, as texts of mass culture, render the complexities of human-animal relation and how they contribute to the discourses which shape the common perceptions of animality and humanity.

2. Animal studies

Because of their complexities and transdisciplinary nature, defining animal studies in a limited space is challenging. In *Human-Animal Studies: Growing the Field, Applying the Field*, an introductory text to the complexities of the field, Kenneth Joel Shapiro in an attempt to provide a definition writes:

> Scholars define HAS[2] through its subject matter, not by any single methodological approach. The field is primarily devoted to examining, understanding, and critically evaluating the complex and multi-dimensional relationships between human and other animals (Shapiro, 2008, p. 5).

He continues by elaborating that:

> The relationships can be real or symbolic, factual or fictional, historical or contemporary, and, most importantly in the context of policy-making, beneficial or detrimental to one or both parties (ibid., p. 5).

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[1]   For a brief overview of the specificity and major areas of interest within the animal turn refer to Kari Weil's article *A Report on the Animal Turn* (2010).

[2]   Abbreviation for human-animal studies, an alternate name for animal studies related which reflects scholars' struggle to find a suitable name for the developing field.

In other words, animal studies may be perceived as a category with fuzzy boundaries, with human-animal relations at its core and the diversity of subjects, approaches and methodologies constituting the remainder of the set.

Likewise, it is difficult to specify what the mentioned "relationships" are. Again, it appears that we are forced to settle on defining the term as a very broad, multi-faced category. In the context of animal studies, human-animal relations can denote anything ranging from actual interactions between living humans and animals (e.g. interspecies communication, training), to mental representations (rendering of various kinds of animals based on a society's beliefs, convictions and ideologies it lives by or which are recorded in texts of culture). In consequence, the animals being researched may be "actual", living organisms, as well as "virtual", social constructs.

3. Potential of studying animals in video games

This text assumes the following reductive definition of the term "animal": an animal is a living organism which is not a human and not a plant. It must be noted however, that in the context of animal studies this distinction is problematic due to its associations with the traditional, Western, clear-cut distinction between the human and the animal, which is founded on the well-established, yet discriminatory assumptions of humanism. Accordingly, animals are incomplete, inferior versions of humans. It is not the author's intention to contribute to this discourse. Animal studies attempt to redefine the division and promote a shift from seeing difference not based on superiority/inferiority but alterity and promote the improvement of animal welfare.

Nevertheless, while it should not be taken for granted how dependant on various resources of animal-origin we are, this article exclusively focuses on "virtual animals" which are mental depictions shaped by the available shreds of information that circulate in a given society (e.g. written text, audio and/or visual stimuli). In the editor's introduction to a special issue of *Society & Animals*, Steve Baker comments on the potential of studying representations. He asserts that virtual animals serve an important purpose

as "human understanding of animals is shaped by representations rather than by direct experience of them" (2001, p. 190). Baker acknowledges the potential of various media to raise issues related to animals in their specific ways (ibid., p. 191) and adds that among scholars there is a conviction "that representations do have consequences for living animals" and, therefore, "they deserve to be studied and understood" (ibid., p. 197). Following Baker's conviction, this article proposes a system of categorisation for future study of representations in video games, which are a part of popular culture.

In the context of the growing popularity of ecocriticism, Mark Meister and Phyllis M. Japp in *Enviropop: Studies in Environmental Rhetoric and Popular Culture* write about the important role popular culture performs in societies, i.e. of being a mediator between reality and people's perception thereof and how it reflects and influences the natural environment. They write that "[w]hile popular culture consists of many interlocking and reinforcing genres (for example, news, advertising, entertainment, games, and recreation), one finds across these genres common underlying narratives, metaphors, and images that coalesce around a variety of cultural concerns and, of course, the environment" (2002, p. 6). The mentioned mediated narratives, metaphors and images, as Alison Anderson argues in *Media, Culture and the Environment*, all constitute and support the structure of information which serves for a large portion of the society as a basis for constructing their understanding of how the world functions (1997, p. 18).

When they are played and experienced by a player, video games which depict certain faces of animality also convey implicit and explicit messages about animals. On the one hand, as indicated above, video games support certain social narratives and conceptions about animals:

> the languages and images of popular culture situate humans in relation to natural environments, create and maintain hierarchies of importance, reinforce extant values and beliefs, justify actions or inaction, suggest heroes and villains, create past contexts and future expectations (Meister, Japp, 2002, p. 4).

On the other hand, the potential video games share with other works of fiction, i.e., to challenge the well established preconceptions and explore new vantage points, should not be overlooked.

Narrative and literary approaches have been proposed in games studies since their emergence, largely thanks to the seminal texts by Espen

Aarseth (1997) or Marie-Laure Ryan (2001) on interactive fiction. Nonetheless, narrative approaches appear to be currently in demise. In vein of the recent considerable shift from the focus on narrative qualities of video games to their fictionality, this article adopts a generalising perspective that video games are works of fiction. Furthermore, it follows the assertion Barry Atkins made in *More than a Game: The Computer Game as Fictional Form* that "as a form of fiction the game-fiction demands that it be 'read' and not simply 'experienced'" (2003, p. 154). It is noted however, that despite similarities with other, more traditional texts of fiction, games are different in a number of ways; most significantly, as Jesper Juul argues, fiction in games is incoherent (2005, p. 6) and games are bound by rules and mechanics which, unlike fiction, constitute their inseparable element (ibid., p. 121). Consequently:

> fiction in video games does not work according to the same parameters as it does in representational media; it should also be clear that we cannot just apply literary theories wholesale to the study or design of video games without considering their specific properties (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, Tosca, 2008, p. 212).

With consideration of the specificities of video games, we can find a foothold for application of the categories of animals in video games in the well-established field of literary animal studies. For instance, objectives of researching animals in fiction proposed by Shapiro and Marion W. Copeland in the article "Towards a Critical Theory of Animal Issues in Fiction" appear sufficiently universal to apply them to the study of video games. The objectives are the following (2005, p. 345):
- to "deconstruct the reductive, disrespectful ways of presenting nonhuman animals";
- to "evaluate the degree to which the author presents the animal 'in itself', both as an experiencing individual and a species-typical way of living in the world";
- to analyse "human-animal relationships in the work at hand".

In a later article, Copeland points towards one of the major sentiments in the field: that reading, interpreting and experiencing a text stimulates readers to explore the awareness of non-human animals (2012, p. 94–98), promotes sensitivity and empathy by expanding readers' imagination (ibid., p. 97–98) and may ultimately have a positive effect on

re-establishing the lost connection between the human and the animal (ibid., p. 101–102). The potential of fiction to encourage readers to imagine and assume different perspectives may be more poetic than scientific, however, undeniably is a possible way to relate to animal others. It is therefore interesting to see if, and if so how, this potential is present in video games and how it makes use of their intrinsic characteristics (chiefly interactivity and ensuing immersion).

4. Categorisation of animals in video games

In order to be able to classify and describe animals present in video games for later analytical purposes, this article presents two categorizations: one functional, one visual. The former divides digital animals according to what their role is in a virtual environment they inhabit and, consequently, how a player can interact with them. It is also suggested in which video game genres the given groups appear most frequently. The latter focuses on the ontology of a video game which also affects that the appearance of that animal. The following abbreviations are used for convenience: PC – player (controlled) character, NPC – non-player character. Moreover, the term "animal" denotes all possible manifestations of animality in video games and encompasses digital versions of living and extinct "real" animals, mythological and legendary beasts, images of creatures who potentially can inhabit fantastic worlds or beings which blur the human-animal distinction.

4.1. Functional division
Animal as enemy
The first functional category, **enemy**, is one of the most commonly present in video games. An **enemy** is an animal NPC which is hostile to a PC. Its purpose is to pose a challenge: to attack and damage the PC, usually in order to obstruct the player's progression. Defeating an **enemy** is often measurably rewarded, e.g. by granting a certain amount of experience points or offering loot (meat, pelts, tusks etc.). Because of its purpose, an **enemy** is commonly a creature with characteristics of a predator.

Most common in: all genres.

Animal as background

The second category is **background**. These animal NPCs inhabit a digital environment and through their presence add detail and authenticity to a video game's world, making it more believable and less empty. They roam the in-game space and mimic the behaviour of living animals. **Backgrounds** are usually neutral towards the PC and as such are animals generally perceived as "friendly": herbivores, birds, domestic and farm animals.

Most common in: all genres.

Animal as hero

The third category, **hero**, comprises NPCs and PCs who are to some extent anthropomorphized and, therefore, able to interact and behave in ways that most often mimic interactions in human (or extrapolated animal) societies. Thanks to the complexity of their abilities, not rarely including human linguistic capabilities, they perform important plot roles and pursue their particular interests. **Heroes** are usually anthropomorphic.

Most common in: adventure games, role playing games, platform games.

Animal as companion

The fourth category, **companions**, includes animal NPCs who accompany a PC. **Companions** assist the PC in the course of the gameplay and the game mechanics allow for some form of bonding interactions similar to that which people develop in relation to their pets. The connection between the digital characters also often involves an emotional response on the player's part. **Companions** are usually canines or mounts.

Most common in: role playing games, which offer the immersive potential for developing attachment to digital characters.

Animals as tools

The final, fifth category are **tools**, animal NPCs who are objectified in the Cartesian sense and solely serve a given practical function. **Tools** perform a variety of roles, such as combat and transport units or sources of raw materials.

Most common in: strategy games.

4.2. Ontological division

Actual representations

The first category comprises animals who are supposed to represent living (and extinct) animals.[3] **Actual representations** look like, or are intended to look like, members of a given species of animals in the non-digital world. As such, they bear characteristic traits of their real-world equivalents' appearance and behaviour.

Most common functions: enemy, background, companion, tool.

Legendaries

The second category includes distinguishably non-human fantastic animals originating in or inspired by myths and legends. They are not "real" in the same sense as a lion or a monitor lizard is and are confined to human imagination transmitted through various folk traditions. Examples of **legendaries** are dragons, gryphons, manticores and basilisks.

Most common functions: enemy, tool.

Extrapolations

The third category is similar to **legendaries** as it also includes distinguishably non-human fantastic animals. However, **extrapolations** are not inspired by myths or legends but depict alien fauna which is suitably adapted to inhabit a fictional fantastic or extraterrestrial environment. Thus, **extrapolations** are primarily present in sci-fi themed games.

Most common functions: enemy, tool, background.

Hybrids

The final category includes fictional animals who exhibit a blend of human and non-human features. In fictional worlds, these creatures may combine human and animal traits naturally (i.e. as evolved in the given fictional setting, e.g. the Khajiit in *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim*) or unnaturally (e.g. magically such as werewolves in *Dragon Age: Origins*). Because **hybrids** are animals who underwent anthropomorphism or humans who

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[3] The exact manner of depiction is irrelevant, as long as the graphic animal has an intended equivalent in the non-digital world. Hence, for the purpose of this categorization Red, the protagonist of *Angry Birds* franchise is considered a representation, as he is a cartoon version of a cardinal bird.

were animalised, they are most often bipedal and commonly present in fantasy or sci-fi themed productions.

Most common functions: enemy, hero, companion.

The following table demonstrates how the two complementary categories are applicable to a selection of animal video game characters. Note that belonging to individual categories of the same or similar characters may differ between video games, depending on their role in the game.

Animal	Game	Functional division	Ontological division
centaur	*Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos*	tool	hybrid
hive tyrant	*Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War II*	tool	extrapolation
summoned dragon	*The Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth II*	tool	legendary
cattle	*Sid Meier's Civilization V*	tool	actual representation
kobold	*World of Warcraft*	enemy	hybrid
alien	*Alien: Isolation*	enemy	extrapolation
gryphon	*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*	enemy	legendary
snow leopard	*Far Cry 4*	enemy	actual representation
–	–	companion	hybrid
Grove Warden	*World of Warcraft*	companion	extrapolation
gryphon mount	*World of Warcraft*	companion	legendary
DD	*Metal Gear Solid 5: The Phantom Pain*	companion	actual representation
Pey'j	*Beyond Good & Evil*	hero	hybrid
Vortigaunts	*Half-Life 2*	hero	extrapolation
Spyro	*Spyro the Dragon*	hero	legendary
goat	*Goat Simulator*	hero	actual representation
–	–	background	hybrid
druffalo	*Dragon Age: Inquisition*	background	extrapolation
–	–	background	legendary
cow	*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*	background	actual representation

5. Application of the categories and suggested areas of research

Video games are becoming a mature medium; as such, they are a subject of scholarly enquiry, as researchers recognize their value. The study of video games and gamers' involvement with a focus on animals may reveal societies' preconceptions about animals and humans, as well as, ultimately, might contribute to more ecocritical modes of thinking.[4] Although this article departed from the principles of literary animal studies, it must be noted that looking into games appear to be promising, especially with consideration of traits inherent to games as an audiovisual, interactive and intertextual medium.[5] With arguably similar capacity to create fictional spaces and narratives, yet, unlike other available mass media, video games offer great potential to develop deep and engaging narratives in a rendered secondary world, which thanks to the interaction between players and programmes facilitate players' immersion[6] and through this experience make the interactions with in-game animals more convincing and, to some extent, profound.

At initial stages of research may reveal on a solely quantitative basis the predominant portrayals of animals. It appears that animals, especially in the so-called mainstream productions, are most commonly and notably presented as enemies or tools and as such they are subjected to violence and exploitation. This observation mirrors the still prevalent attitude towards animals in Western culture, one of masculine attempt to exert dominance over nature and its resources, not rarely out of fear of the bestial and untamed. It appears that the study of violence is a key aspect of analysis. Erik Sandalin (2014) observes that in the current state of our

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[4] What is implied here, in general terms, is a reconceptualisation of ideas of societies by incorporating a more respectful and equal treatment of non-humans in our systems of values, such as Cary Wolfe's (2010) idea of posthumanism.

[5] See Wolf, 2012, p. 245–268 for a discussion of games' application in creating palpable fictional worlds.

[6] The phenomenon of player's immersion is one of the key concepts to video games studies. Due to limitations, it is assumed here that immersion is the feeling of becoming engaged in a game (through its narrative, interactivity and audio-visual feedback), while becoming increasingly detached from outside factors. For an in-depth study of immersion see Calleja 2011.

civilization, the difference between virtual space and reality is often blurred. He also indicates an important trait of fiction, i.e. to raise important moral or legal issues. Sandalin writes:

Immersed in violent computer games, our characters commit horrible atrocities. What are the moral boundaries in our relation to fictional entities? What can we learn from the emotions raised from apparent atrocities against a fictional character? (ibid., p. 52–53).

Nonetheless, the purpose of researching video games from the perspectives of HAS should not excoriate video games for their violence, but rather reflect on its significance and implications.

In the study of violence and ethics in relation to the functions of virtual animals and our attitudes towards them, we could turn to Miguel Sicart's (2009) framework for ethics in video games. The author argues that games, defined both as object and experiences, have embedded ethical values and players who are moral agents, while playing, learn to become ethical. It is interesting to discover what standards of morality may be found in games and how players interpret and adapt them for their own purposes. For instance, the recent instalments in Ubisoft's *Far Cry* offer extremely detailed attention to the environment: the games create believable animals, chiefly **backgrounds**, living in their specific habitats, exhibiting idiosyncratic behaviours. Through a system of challenges and objectives, the games encourage players to hunt animals, including rare species. It is interesting to survey the players' approach to encounters with animals and their relation to violence towards human and non-human NPCs.

Furthermore, other human-animal relations and emotions are rendered in video games as well, their significance boosted by the experience of player's immersion. For instance, the presence of **companions** offers an outlook on our relations to pets. A study may add insights to the open question in HAS, one that is discussed by Kari Weil (2012) in *Thinking Animals*: whether the human-pet relation is based on abuse or caring, or show whether gamer-**companion** relations have impact on actual animals. On a related note, there comes the subject of death of virtual animals and the question if there is grief involved or a suggestion how to respond to mourning. What is more, video games as a unique medium (which is not necessarily verbal/textual) may potentially offer access to other's

subjectivity by means of audiovisual stimuli and immersion. Research may also discover how games contribute the much debated matter of consciousness. Being intertextual and transmedial, video games incorporate and transform content of other genres and media and reflect on the theme of alterity[7]: the fiction of games may challenge or subvert the notions of animal subjectivity and the related human-animal boundary. To these ends the proposed ontological division should prove to be useful, for instance, in tracing developers' non-gaming inspirations for portraying human-animal relations, which then were transplanted to games.

Finally, there is the potential of video games to shape people's moral stances which might affect animals' wellbeing and contribute to the spread of posthumanistic assumptions. One of HAS' goals is to raise people's awareness and this goal might be achieved by incorporating attitudes respectful to non-humans in game design which would create space for promotion of animal care and satisfaction. The search for such capacities of games appears particularly promising in light of the recently growing popularity of gaming literacy (Zimmerman, 2009) and application of video games in education (Powell, 2013), as well as in light of Sicart's (2014) recent argument about the importance of playing in the process of conceptualising the world.

6. Conclusions

All in all, by organising virtual animals present in video games into categories, it is possible to unearth certain patterns related to their functions, origins and conceptions maintained by players and developers. Moreover, such an organisation may serve as an entry point to further in-depth analysis of how and why animals are implemented into video games and what the consequences of their presence are. The indicated topics for enquiry are only the top of an iceberg in the yet unexplored analysis

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[7]   For instance, Giorgio Agamben in *The Open* (2004) introduced the notion of the "anthropological machine" that produces the concepts of man and animal, which may be applicable to video games, especially those with a fantasy or science fiction setting because they often become engaged in matters of otherness, prejudice and exclusion, involving complex, interspecies relations.

of games from a HAS perspective; moreover, one needs empirical research in form of surveys in order to verify the impact of animals in video games, on gamers' conceptual frameworks and behaviours. It appears that most games, similarly to other products of mass culture, fail to give due consideration to the virtual animal and in consequence reinforce the general conceptions of animals as the untamed, hostile other or the objectified resource for human use. By contrast, similarly to other works of fiction, some video games may present a more complex network of human-animal relations and allow to stimulate us to rethink our ethical stances and challenge our standards of humanity. In turn, if this potential is recognized, we may attempt to capitalize on it and search for ways of employing video games in helping us understand the complexities of human-animal relations and alleviate the damaging effects of speciecism.[8]

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[8] A term popularised by Peter Singer in *Animal Liberation* (1990); it denotes discrimination based on species membership. In contemporary cultures, humans still occupy a privileged position and, hence, are subjected to a different set of moral values than members of other species.

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Ku kategoryzacji zwierząt w grach wideo

Abstrakt: Artykuł pokrótce przedstawia *animal studies* jako dyscyplinę badawczą oraz sugeruje, w jaki sposób rozpatrywane w jej obrębie zagadnienia mogą odnaleźć zastosowanie w studiach nad grami wideo, w tym tekście są pojmowanymi jako fikcja oraz tekst kultury masowej. Ich analiza i interpretacja mają potencjał, by wykazać szereg istotnych społecznie kwestii. W pracy zaproponowano dwie kategorie pozwalające usystematyzować występujące w grach wideo zwierzęta na podstawie ich funkcji (przeciwnik, tło, bohater, towarzysz, narzędzie) oraz ontologii (reprezentacja, zwierzę legendarne, ekstrapolacja, hybryda). Ostatnia część sugeruje, jakie elementy tematyki poruszanej w grach mogą stanowić obszary zainteresowania badaczy zajmujących się studiami nad zwierzętami.

Słowa kluczowe: *animal studies*, gry wideo, kategorie

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