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Book Review: *Game: Animals, Video Games, and Humanity*

by Melissa Bianchi



About the Author

Melissa Bianchi, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication, Media, and the Arts at Nova Southeastern University. Her scholarship contributes to ecomedia studies by examining how video games complicate notions of environmental agency, ecological responsibility, and the posthuman. Her recent publications include essays, such as “Ecoplay: The Rhetorics of Games about Nature” in *Mediating Nature* (Routledge, 2019) and “Lost in the Woods: Procedurality and the Uncanny in *The Legend of Zelda Series*” in *Madness in the Woods* (Peter Lang, 2020), along with forthcoming chapters in *Ecogames* (Amsterdam University Press) and *Animals in Science Fiction* (Palgrave Macmillan).

Book Review

Melissa Bianchi

Tyler, Tom. 2022. *Game: Animals, Video Games, and Humanity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Assembling thirteen eclectic essays about ducks, boars, dogs, fish, squids, beetles, sheep, cows, humans, and more, Tom Tyler's *Game: Animals, Video Games, and Humanity* is best described as a conscientiously cultivated menagerie. To take a page from Tyler's book, which draws extensively on etymology (among other critical perspectives), one might turn to the definition, extended use, and history of "menagerie" to better understand this project and its value. Before doing so though, it is worth noting that "bestiary" would also be an apt descriptor for *Game*; however, this term already characterizes Tyler's previously published book, *CIFERAE: A Bestiary in Five Fingers* (2012), the predecessor to *Game* and one worth mentioning here briefly. In *CIFERAE*, Tyler looks to an assortment of both real and imaginary animals to consider and question anthropocentrism, and so too does *Game* pursue a similar goal of studying animals and their representations to decenter the human. To this end, *Game* raises questions about animals appearing in video games, investigating the characterization of supposed differences and similarities between humans and animals in these digital artifacts (2022, 3). Tyler contends that, "The pursuit of such questions about how games deal with animals prompts in turn a consideration of what those animals can tell us about games" (3). He then considers in what ways animals can help us understand various aspects of video games and their development, including conditions of play, rules, rhetoric, ideologies, and iterative design (3), which are predominantly studied from a human perspective. In answering these inquiries, the opening chapter of *Game* establishes a unique dialectic between games and animals that underscores several possibilities for challenging anthropocentrism.

Unlike the bestiary offered in *CIFERAE*, which mostly focuses on animals represented in philosophical works, *Game*, instead, tracks animals through a host of

media both old and new. Tyler gathers relevant specimens for consideration based on their depictions in or relations to specific video games. The actual and figurative animals appearing in *Game* are like those found in a menagerie, an assortment of animals especially for exhibition (“menagerie, n.” 2023). Tyler’s selections are purposefully diverse, spanning a variety of species and genres, and provocative to accurately represent the wide range of what might count as animal, game, and, in some specific cases, posthuman. The project’s investigations turn to animals, viruses, and meat-based protagonists, appearing in contemporary industry juggernauts such as Nintendo’s *Splatoon*, retro classics such as Llamasoft’s *Sheep in Space*, mobile applications such as Vlambeer’s *Ridiculous Fishing*, and critically acclaimed indie titles such as Team Meat’s *Super Meat Boy* (Tyler 2022, 207 – 214). Tyler’s examples are varied and plentiful, but they are by no means a comprehensive reflection of the game industry, nor do they try to be. Still, the variety of examples in *Game* satisfies the project’s objective to highlight some of the many ways video games encourage players to encounter and understand animals.

In a broader sense of the term, *Game* is also a menagerie in its robust collection of inspirational artifacts and perspectives for close reading video games. Tyler draws on examples from a variety of contexts to strategically contextualize video games within several long, complex narrative and discursive traditions of engaging with animals. The manuscript examines video games alongside sources and perspectives:

from children’s TV shows and Old English etymologies to be sure, but also from encyclopedias, classical mythology and medieval fables, literary fiction and film, regional newspapers, memoirs, poetry Edwardian comedy and Shakespearean tragedy, contemporary art, musical nomenclature, theological tracts, ethology, entomology, ichthyology, primatology, ecological and environmental studies, hunting and fishing manuals, sitcoms, and the works of philosophy, and, in one instance, the collected letters of the 4th Earl of Chesterfield. (6)

Unifying these several and seemingly disparate elements through meticulous and erudite close readings, Tyler effectively demonstrates how various media and fields of study have shaped animal representations in video games. At the same time, these examples, when situated alongside video games, allow Tyler to demonstrate how games perpetuate and challenge what we already know, or think we know, about animals.

Game is also a menagerie of Tyler’s new and previously published scholarship that unifies his many contributions about animals, video games, and humanity. As described in the Publication History section of the manuscript, some of the book’s chapters are adapted or reprinted works from 2013 – 2019. Notably, excerpts from chapters two and three come from Tyler’s “A Singular of Boars” (2014) in *Antennae: The Journal of Nature in*

Visual Culture and “New Tricks” (2013) in *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities*, respectively. Chapter two expands on Tyler’s application of French philosopher Jacques Derrida’s work (2008) with an etymological history of collective nouns (“a pride of lions,” “a flock of sheep,” “a singular of boars,” etc.) to examine boars in Iron Lore Entertainment’s *Titan Quest*. In this chapter, Tyler claims that virtual animals in games are not usually indistinguishable, interchangeable representations, but, rather, often appear as “individuals” that players confront, each troubling the broad, amorphous category of “the animal” through their “particular powers” (2022, 7 – 16). Chapter three, in contrast, streamlines the longer “New Tricks” article, eliminating its address of media theory concepts such as “altercasting” and “anti-environments” as well as Marshall McLuhan’s works, to explain how a video game “reminds us that a human point of view is but one subjective perspective amongst many” (Tyler 2022, 28). The chapter instead more keenly focuses on its reading of Frontier Developments’ *Dog’s Life*, specifically its representations of olfactory systems and smell, through German biologist Jakob von Uexküll’s notion of *Umwelt*, or “world” (2010). Both the expansion of “A Singular of Boars” and the abridgement of “New Tricks” in *Game* are welcome changes for those who are familiar with Tyler’s earlier scholarship as they revitalize these essays’ unique, if not foundational, arguments about how video games encourage players to (re)consider animals.

The remaining chapters of *Game* are a mix of Tyler’s previously published essays and his new scholarship. Specifically, chapters four, six, eight, nine, eleven, twelve, and thirteen were originally printed in refereed journals or other edited collections. These works include “Enumerating Ruminants” (2017) in *Trace: A Journal of Writing, Media, and Ecology*, “Playing Like a Loser” (2017) in *Beyond the Human-Animal Divide: Creaturely Lives in Literature and Culture*, “Cows, Clicks, Ciphers, and Satire” (2015) in *NECSUS: European Journal of Media Studies*, “Meanings of Meat in Videogames” (2019) in *Literature and Meat since 1900*, and more. In part, these chapters illustrate Tyler’s well-established history of studying video games and animals together albeit in somewhat disparate scholarly contexts. Compiled together, however, the essays illustrate several ways that notions about animals are used to question essential and ideal representations of humans and human practices.

In contrast, chapters one, five, seven, and ten are newly published essays that work to unify the collection’s arguments while also broadening the scope of Tyler’s work. For example, chapter one, “Game,” opens the collection with Nintendo’s *Duck Hunt*, “a game about game” (Tyler 2022, 2), and *Sarah & Duck*, a British animated television series about two plucky characters that are always “game” for a challenge. The examples introduce

readers to Tyler's wit and wordplay while contextualizing the project for those who might be "game" for its goals, that is "those who are willing, to encounter, understand, and engage those animals and games differently" (5). Chapter five, "An Inkling," very briefly reflects on the convergence of design and function in the creation of the Inkling avatar in *Splatoon*. Meanwhile, chapters seven and ten, "A Thing Worth Doing" and "Total BS!" respectively, adopt similar approaches to challenge readers' perspectives of specific games and ways of understanding animals. Both chapters rely on historical accounts brought together with scientific studies of living animals to critique real-world practices. After casting its net wide to connect a historical perspective of fishing, studies in ichthyology on fish and pain, and a mobile game, "A Thing Worth Doing" argues that "the only kind of fishing worth doing (and even this should be approached judiciously) is the virtual variety of *Ridiculous Fishing*" (64). Meanwhile, "Total BS!" focuses on myriad representations of "shit" and other forms of feces in games to reflect on philosophical and ecological perceptions of animal excrement and their real-world environmental impacts. Thus, while readers of *Game* may have encountered some of this collection elsewhere, this gathering of older essays interspersed with new chapters provides clarity on how broad the scope of studying animals in video games might be and how much more there may still be to investigate.

To date, Tyler's project is the most extensive rumination published on the relationship between animals, video games, and humanity, but even so, other scholars have also converged upon similar inquiries at this nexus. Notably, Alenda Chang's *Playing Nature* (2019), Marco Caracciolo's "Animal Mayhem Games and Nonhuman-Oriented Thinking" (2021) in *Game Studies*, Jason Wallin's "Game Preserves" (2022) in *Green Letters*, Melissa Bianchi's "Inklings and Tentacled Things" (2017) in *Ecozon@: European Journal of Literature, Culture and Environment*, and more, also grapple with animals and video games, pointing to the unique capacity of games to afford critical consideration for the nonhuman. Understandably, Tyler's work does not account for all these relatively recent contributions, and many new works on animals in games do not always account for some of Tyler's foundational forays into this intersection. To establish a more earnest and expansive (published) conversation about animals and video games, then, *Game* effectively works to render highly visible what were once separate and seemingly niche investigations for newcomers interested in participating in this burgeoning area of study.

Finally, another way one might understand *Game* is through a historical interpretation of "menagerie." Before English speakers in the 1600s adopted the term to indicate an exhibited collection of animals, "menagerie," in Middle French, referred to "a place where animals are tended" ("menagerie," 2023). This emphasis on the act of

“tending,” which we might interpret as practices of mindfulness and care for actual animals, also characterizes the work of *Game*. The final chapter of the book, “Trojan Horses,” specifically draws attention to this aspect of the project’s efforts to persuade readers “to change not just how they think about animals and video games, but how they act in that mythic realm beyond the game or treatise” (Tyler 2022, 6). While the chapter synthesizes stories from antiquity about the Trojan War, the handheld *Trojan Horse* game, and myriad authors’ rhetorical approaches to promoting vegan values, Tyler playfully reflects on his own ideals and authorial choices. He writes, “We could envisage, for instance, a collection of essays on video games, each of which addresses some aspect of game design or mechanics or some particular video game or franchise, but also, during the course of its exposition, reveals itself as aligning with vegan sensibility” (150). Tyler, then, suggests that his project, despite its obvious emphasis on video games, is latent with vegan values, urging readers to tend to actual animals in their thinking and actions. We perhaps see this most clearly in Tyler’s references to the behaviors and biology of real animals throughout the text, and more specifically in his attentiveness to individual, named animals cast as *players* in various research projects or entertainment products, challenging the anthropocentric ideal of the imagined player as explicitly and only human (130 – 139). Thus, *Game* concludes with a hopeful address of video games as a lens through which one might strengthen a call to reorient our thinking towards an ethical care for animals. Over the course of Tyler’s thirteen thought-provoking, engaging, and insightful essays, one might certainly be inclined to do so.

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