Review: *Game: Animals, Video Games, and Humanity*, by Tom Tyler. 2022. University of Minnesota Press. 224 pp.

Elizabeth Neumann

European University Viadrina Frankfurt (Oder), Germany

Tom Tyler's anthology *Game: Animals, Video Games, and Humanity* was added to the Electronic Mediations series in 2022. *Game* is not solely dedicated to video games; rather, it is a chimerical work that takes video games in particular, but by no means exclusively, as starting points to reflect on how animals and animal experience are represented in video games, what roles animals have in them, and to what extent the "differences and similarities that are supposed to pertain between animals and human beings" are medially negotiated (p. 3). The book consists of 13 essays; some of them are about 20 pages long, some consist of only a few pages, but each essay offers thought-provoking impulses. The essays touch on various aspects of video games, such as game mechanics, visuals, design, and production history, and draw on a diverse selection of console, home computer, and mobile games. Existing game studies literature is woven in sparsely, along with Tyler's frequent use of insights from etymology, biology, history, linguistics, and literature.

The book is particularly interesting for game scholars whenever Tyler points out how one's assumptions about video games, gaming, and being a gamer are often based on sexist, racist, or speciesist premises. Throughout his book, Tyler puts his analyses in dialogue with the works of thinkers such as Val Plumwood, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, and Jacques Derrida. All essays have a non-anthroponormative impetus: They question views which claim that what is right, good, and normal is mostly or exclusively human. If one is to follow Tyler, all essays have in common the goal of productively "troubling their readers" with "vegan values" and promoting "vegan sensibility" (p. 149). However, although this is inferable from the publication's non-anthroponormative tone, it does not become apparent as a common thread, not even as this "vejan" (i.e., secretly, but unapologetically vegan) manoeuvre is

Press Start 2023 | Volume 9 | Issue 1
ISSN: 2055-8198
URL: http://press-start.gla.ac.uk

explained to readers in the tellingly titled thirteenth and last essay, "Trojan Horses."

Because of its structure, the book invites cross-reading and engaging in brief reading sessions. Although the essays themselves are not directly connected, they do offer each other added value. To begin with, Essay 2 and 12 position themselves against the deindividualisation of non-human animals, as becomes notably evident in the fact that humans ascribe collective characteristics to animals. According to Tyler, these deindividualising processes are also reflected in game design: Animals in video games are often based on a "single, generic model" that shows a "range of stereotypical" behaviour (p. 9). This makes it easier to treat animals, real and virtual alike, as objects and use them in an unempathic way. To discuss these matters, Tyler brings Derrida together with Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer in his essay "A Singular of Boars", using the boar(s) from *Titan Quest* (Iron Lore Entertainment, 2006) as an example. In "Difficulties," an extensive essay that draws on disability studies and offers a critique of formalist approaches to game analysis, Tyler discusses how "every game is, by its nature, inherently exclusionary" (p. 127) since every game presupposes a certain privileged, implicitly normative way of being, therefore excluding not only all kinds of humans from all kinds of games, but also non-human players such as cats or monkeys. They, however, do find ways to play games made for humans or to outdo humans in game-like tasks.

The desired shift from anthroponormativity to a more inclusive way of thinking and being-with-each-other is the topic of Essay 3 and 11. In "How Does Your Dog Smell?," Tyler discusses the efforts of the video game *Dog's Life* (Frontier Developments, 2003) to represent the smell and sight of the canine protagonist Jake in a first-person perspective designed according to certain scientific findings. This perspective is compared to the taken-for-granted, implicitly human third-person perspective that has no visual markers for smells. Although an interesting change of view in itself, the essay might have benefited from the famous works of Thomas Nagel, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" (1974) and "The View From Nowhere" (1986). Tyler shows in "Misanthropy Without Humanity" how *Plague Inc.* (Ndemic Creations, 2012) imagines the hatred of humanity beyond human passions and principles. In this game, players assume the role of a pathogen to wipe out humanity as effectively as possible. *Plague Inc.* allows players to view the world from a different value standpoint: the non-anthroponormative standpoint of a pathogen.

Essay 4 and 5 are dedicated to game design. In "Enumerating Rumenants," Tylers describes the design philosophy of game maker Jeff Minter. Minter's games are mostly populated by ruminating animals, who also take on the leading roles in them. The design process that guides Minter's work is itself about ruminating, as it includes revisioning,

retelling, reiterating, and reimagining previous works. The short piece "An Inkling," barely more than an ink blot at three pages long, is a brief introduction to the avatar concept in *Splatoon* (Nintendo, 2015). Where Tyler's essay ends, though, media scholar Melissa Bianchi (2017) has already made *Splatoon* more fruitful for game studies: In her article "Inklings and Tentacled Things," she illustrates how the game's chimerical avatars allow players to experience not-only-human forms of being and acting.

Essay 6 and 9 have in common the change of perspective from predator to prey, from human to food. In "Playing like a Loser," the "predator perspective" familiar in video games is juxtaposed with the "prey perspective," inspired by Plumwood's (1995) haunting account of a survived crocodile attack—an existential situation that made her realise that she, too, like other animals, was an edible body. With further philosophical borrowings from Gilles Deleuze and the subversion of exceptionalist assumptions, this essay is one of the most compelling of Tyler's book. Following the observation that in video games, meat is often the primary or only true source of potency and life, Tyler explores the function of food in video games in "Meanings of Meat." Tyler first identifies its four main functions: sustenance, restoration, enhancement, and resource, and then shows how avatars like Meat Boy from *Super Meat Boy* (Team Meat, 2010) are vulnerable and mortal qua their being meat, highlighting how all living meat is similar to the other.

The tenth essay, "Total BS!," mostly consists in an etymological and historical rundown of the words "shit," "bull," and "bullshit"; only in passing is it about the contexts in which excrements appear in video games. Crap in particular, however, holds a lot of potential in post-anthropocentric, posthumanist or, following Donna J. Haraway (2016), "compostist" thought, as Tyler himself acknowledges in the essay's subtitle "Why You Should Be Passionate About Crap, and Much Else." Unfortunately, this essay's attempt to offer a different view on "crappy matters" is not as convincing as it could have been.

Lastly, the game mechanics of mobile and social games and their effect on players are the subject of Essay 7 and 8. In "A Thing Worth Doing," Tyler muses about games that require excessive torturing and killing, such as *Ridiculous Fishing* (Vlambeer, 2013), why they are fun to play, and what potential self-knowledge this fun holds. The topic of excess is also of interest in "Cows, Clicks, Ciphers, and Satire," in which the "mindlessness" and exploitation rhetoric of *FarmVille*'s (Zynga, 2009) game mechanics are critically examined. Tyler references Ian Bogost's *FarmVille* satire *Cow Clicker* (2009) while noting how the depicted cows and the meadow comment on "the painful reality of dairy cow's punishing" (p. 70). Not representing this pain is, according to Tyler, a failure of *FarmVille.* More relevant than this assessment, though, might be why the carnist culture produced a game like *FarmVille*, rather than a game called, say, *SlaughterHouse*, which would depict reality more

accurately. Tyler leaves open this cultural diagnostic trail for other researchers.

Overall, the unpretentious writing style, the varied selection of theory and games, the entertaining structure, and the many telling puns allow the reader to gain insights even without previous specialist knowledge. Tyler is very diversely read, and readers can definitely benefit from this book if they do not mind too much the sometimes lengthy digressions and contextualisations. With *Game*, Tyler presents a hybrid book that is neither fish nor fowl, but rather consists of all kinds of different species of texts. Although this tends to make it a little volatile at times, books like this are needed to underline the importance of the complex human-animal-world relations. Tyler contributes not only to game studies discourses, but also to gaming itself and the design of games. Thus, game scholars as well as media scholars, practitioners, and those interested in animals, animal studies, and ecocriticism can find value in *Game*.

References

Bianchi, M. (2017). Inklings and tentacled things: Grasping at kinship through video games. *Ecozon@, 8*(2), 136–150. https://doi.org/10.37536/ECOZONA.2017.8.2.1354

Frontier Developments. (2003). *Dog's life* [PlayStation 2]. Sony Computer Entertainment.

Haraway, D. J. (2016). *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the chthulucene*. Duke University Press.

Ian Bogost. (2009). *Cow clicker* [Facebook]. Ian Bogost.

Iron Lore Entertainment. (2006). *Titan quest* [PC]. THQ.

Nagel, T. (1974). What is it like to be a bat? *The Philosophical Review, 83*(4), 435–450. https://doi.org/10.2307/2183914

Nagel, T. (1986). *The view from nowhere*. Oxford University Press.

Ndemic Creations. (2012). *Plague inc.* [Android, iOS]. Ndemic Creations.

Nintendo. (2015). *Splatoon* [Wii U]. Nintendo.

Plumwood, V. (1995). Human vulnerability and the experience of being prey. *Quadrant*, 29(3), 29–34

Team Meat. (2010). *Super meat boy* [PC, Xbox 360]. Team Meat.

Vlambeer. (2013). *Ridiculous fishing* [Android, iOS]. Vlambeer.

Zynga. (2009). *FarmVille* [Facebook]. Zynga.