

Animal ethics in digital games

Haryo Pambuko Jiwandono

Brawijaya University
Jalan Veteran, Malang, East Java, Indonesia
65145
+62-821-366-23960
hpj03@ub.ac.id

Edeliya Relanika Purwandi

Brawijaya University
Jalan Veteran, Malang, East Java, Indonesia
65145
+62-857-494-83700
edeliyarelanika@gmail.com

Keywords

Digital games, animals, ethics, animal ethics.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Through this extended abstract, we attempt to critically examine animal ethics in digital games by firstly describing the history of relationships between animal ethics and anthropocentric culture of humans. It will be continued by examination of digital games' expressive capabilities (Mayra, 2008; Bogost, 2010), followed by analysing different animals' representations in digital games, and finally making assessments.

Our motivation is rooted on prevalent issues of cultural hegemony in digital games culture (Font et al, 2007) where digital games are construed around ideologies of certain groups of society which would later be imposed on others (Winner, 1986; Bogost, 2010). Through this extended abstract, we would like to bring a discussion that cultural hegemony is an interspecies phenomenon. The overwhelming anthropocentric hegemony of culture (Holub, 1992; Molloy, 2011; Tonutti, 2011; Butcharov, 2015) has created a clear cultural divide between humans and non-human animals with arguments that humans are the only species with cultural capability (Tonutti, 2011).

Unlike intra-human subversions to the hegemony of technologies toward social minorities in digital game culture (Winner, 1986; Fron et al, 2007; Salter & Blodgett, 2012), non-human animals are not known to be capable of producing countercultural socio-technical artefacts to subvert the anthropocentric hegemony in digital games; thus the representations of animals in digital games entirely depend on humans. This creates unique situations where affirmations or subversions toward certain group's cultural subjugation on another group can only occur entirely within the group of perpetrators.

We argue this issue to be important due to indifferent attitude toward animals within discourses of culture in digital games. Unlike issues of violence, hyper sexualisation and alienation of women (Fron et al, 2007; MacCallum-Stewart, 2014; Fisher & Harvey, 2015; Kondrat, 2015), or hegemonic representations of certain racial groups

Proceedings of DiGRA 2020

© 2020 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

(Sisler, 2008) unethical treatments of animals in digital games are still largely unaddressed issues. Via this extended abstract, we would like to broaden the discourse of digital game and cultural studies to extend beyond intra-species affair.

The first discussion of this presentation will be regarding the states of animal ethics. Animal ethics can be understood as matters treatments of animals by humans (Garner, 2004) to find the common ground of morality between humans and animals (Garner, 2004). There are three moral acknowledgments toward animal ethics (Garner, 2004). The first moral acknowledgment does not acknowledge moral status of animals (Garner, 2004); perceiving animals as nothing more than non-sentient brutish creatures to be exploited for humans' needs and desires (Descartes, 1912; Singer, 1990; Garner, 2004).

The second moral acknowledgment states that animals should be treated more humanely (Garner, 2004) while also view animals as lesser than humans and are to be used; with consideration, for humans' benefits (Garner 2004). The third moral acknowledgment argues that animals are sentient creatures with cognitive and expressive capabilities which are deserving of rights based on their intrinsic values (Singer, 1990; Garner, 2004)

However, animals are still largely viewed and treated as unequal to humans today (Frey, 1980; Singer, 1990; Garner, 2004; Tonutti, 2011). One of causes of this argument is the question animals' mental complexities (Singer, 1990; Garner, 2004). The usage of 'animals' as an umbrella term for non-human animals results in vast disparities of mental complexities from species to species, creating difficulties to compare them with *Homo sapiens*' mental complexities (Garner, 2004). Secondly, Animals are known to possess very limited, if any, linguistic capability (Singer, 1990; Garner, 2004) which in turn limit animals' capability to express themselves culturally like humans do (Tonutti, 2011) and, therefore, are inferior (Frey, 1980). The perceptions of humans' vast superiority; especially intellectually and culturally, over animals is among the core ideas of anthropocentrism (Singer, 1990; Garner, 2004; Tonutti, 2011; Butcharov, 2015).

Anthropocentrism of humans' cultures are expressed intensively in videogames. Like all technologies, digital games are socio technological constellation (Winner, 1986). They enforce certain social values and norms (Winner, 1986), and obviously they are human made mechanical computational and/or digital devices (Winner, 1986). In the framework of this discussion, humans perpetuate their perceived superiority over animals by producing videogames with ludic and narrative expression (Mayra, 2008; Bogost, 2010) around their perceived exceptionalism (Singer, 1990; Garner, 2004) which often relegate animals to secondary; or even non-agent, roles.

The main inquiries of this extended abstract is how are different moral recognitions regarding of animal ethics being expressed in numerous videogames? To answer, we conduct qualitative content analyses (Bryman, 2012; Krippendorf, 2013) of selected digital games with significant animal representations which go accordingly to either of the three moral recognitions of animals. *Cabela's Big Game Hunter* 2010, *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* and *Far Cry 4* are digital games which represent animals in accordance to the first moral recognition; *Shadow of the Colossus* and *Red Dead Redemption* as digital games which represent animals according to the moral orthodoxy of second moral recognition; and *Crash Bandicoot*, *Neko Atsume: Kitty Collector* and *The Last Guardian* as digital games which express rights, ethical treatments, and intrinsic values of animals in addition to symbiosis between humans and animals.

Despite the multidimensional ethical approach of this extended abstract, we conclude it by arguing that inclusion of animals in digital games is an inherently anthropocentric process which serves humans interest more than those of animals (Westerlaken & Gualeni, 2014). Discourse on non-anthropocentric experience of digital game does not attract strong attention because animals are not expected to be active members of gaming cultures. However, ethical dimensions of *avant-garde* digital games (Fron et al, 2007) has been contributing in ethical inclusion of animals in digital games despite overarching anthropocentrism. Animals have been studied to exhibit playful behaviour and gaming cooperation with humans (Westerlaken & Gualeni, 2014). Digital games are humans' virtual playgrounds, with strong anthropocentric nuance. However, possibilities for non-speciesist approach in benevolently share them with non-human animals in meaningful; non-objectifying, and non-trivial manners are open (Westerlaken & Gualeni, 2014; Westerlaken, 2017).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bethesda Game Studios. 2015. *Fallout 4*. Xbox One. Bethesda Softworks.
- Bogost, I. 2010. *Persuasive Games*. Cambridge MA, USA and London, England: MIT Press.
- Bryman, A. 2012. *Social Research Methods* 4th Ed. New York City NY, USA: Oxford University Press.
- Butcharov, P. 2015. *Anthropocentrism in Philosophy: Realism, Antirealism, Semirealism*. Boston MA, USA and Berlin, Germany: de Gruyter.
- Cauldron. 2009. *Cabela's Big Game Hunter* 2010. Playstation 3. Activision.
- Descartes, R. 1912. "Of the Essence of Material Things: and again of God: That he exists". In *Rene Descartes: A Discourse on Method*, edited by John Veitch, 120-126. London, England: Dent.
- Fisher, S., Harvey, A. 2015. "'Everyone Can Make Games!': The post-feminist context of women in digital game production." *Feminist Media Studies* 15(4).
- Frey, R. 1980. *Interests and Rights: The Case Against Animals*. Oxford, England: Clarendon Press.
- Fron, J et al. 2007. "The Hegemony of Play." Paper presented at *Digital Games Research Association Conference (DIGRA 2007)*, Tokyo, Japan, 24-28 September. Digital Games Research Association (DIGRA). <http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/07312.31224.pdf>.
- Garner, R. 2004. *Animals, Politics, and Morality* 2nd Ed. Manchester, England: Manchester University Press.
- Hit-Point Co., Ltd. 2014. *Neko Atsume: Kitty Collector*. iPhone 11. Kemco.
- Holub, R. 1992. *Antonio Gramsci*. London, England: Routledge

- Kondrat, X. 2015. "Gender and video games: How is female gender generally represented in various genres of video games." *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology* 6(1).
- Krippendorff, K. 2013. *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology* 3rd Ed. Thousand Oaks CA, USA: SAGE Publications.
- Mayra, F. 2008. *An Introduction to Game Studies*. Padston, England: SAGE Publication.
- MacCallum-Stewart, E. 2014. "Take That, Bitches!" *Refiguring Lara Croft in Feminist Game Narratives*. [Online] www.gamestudies.org. Available from <http://gamestudies.org/1402/articles/maccallumstewart>.
- Molloy, C. 2011. *Popular Media and Animals*. Houndmills, England: Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Naughty Dog. 1996. *Crash Bandicoot*. Playstation. Sony Interactive Entertainment.
- Rockstar San Diego. 2010. *Red Dead Redemption*. Xbox 360. Rockstar Games.
- Salter, A., Blodgett, B. 2012. "Hypermasculinity & Dickwolves: The Contentious Role of Women in the New Gaming Public". *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 56(3).
- SCE Japan Studio. 2005. *Shadow of the Colossus*. Playstation 2. Sony Interactive Entertainment.
- SIE Japan Studio. 2016. *The Last Guardian*. Playstation 4. Sony Interactive Entertainment
- Singer, P. 1990. *Animal Liberation* 2nd Ed. London, England: Thorsons.
- Sisler, V. 2008. "Digital Arabs: representations in video games". *Cultural Studies* 11(2).
- Tonutti, S. 2011. "Anthropocentrism and the Definition of 'Culture' as a Marker of the Human/Animal Divide." In *Anthropocentrism: Humans, Animals, Environments* edited by Rob Boddice, 183-202. Leiden, The Netherlands and Boston MA, USA: Brill.
- Ubisoft Montreal. 2013. *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*. Xbox 360. Ubisoft Entertainment SA.
- Ubisoft Montreal. 2014. *Far Cry 4*. Playstation 4. Ubisoft Entertainment SA.
- Westerlaken, M., Gualeni, S. 2014. "Felino: The Philosophical Practice of Making an Interspecies Videogame". Paper presented at *The Philosophy of Computer Game Conference, Istanbul 2014*, Istanbul, Turkey, 13-15 November. The Philosophy of Computer Games (PoCG). http://muep.mau.se/bitstream/handle/2043/22423/POCG14_Westerlaken_Gualeni_Felino_Philosophical_Practice.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y
- Westerlaken, M. 2017. "Uncivilising the Future: Imagining Non-Speciesism". *Antae* 4(1).

Winner, L. 1986. *The Whale and the Reactor: A Search for Limits in an Age of High Technology*. Chicago IL, USA and London, England: The University of Chicago Press.