

Posthumanist Attitude Towards Animals in Digital Games

Eleonora Imbierowicz

PhD Candidate at University of Wrocław, Poland

Mieszkańska 17/24

50-201 Wrocław

(+48)797-129-513

eleonora.imbierowicz@uwr.edu.pl

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INTRODUCTION

Krzysztof Jański recognized five functions of animals in games: heroes, enemies, companions, tools, and background (2016). Heroes are mostly anthropomorphic animals playing a major part in the story. They are often avatars, allowing the player to properly (*humanely*) experience the gameworld. Enemies are hostile NPC that are meant to be defeated and lose their agency so the player can advance in the game with enough obstruction so they can feel pleasure (Chen 2006; Csíkszentmihályi 2008; Juul 2016). Companions are meant to be liked, and a support, like pets, and they are most often dogs or horses. Tools (also: resources) are used to achieve various goals, are most popular in strategy games, and are usually non-individual, much more *zoe* than *bios* (Agamben 2013; Braidotti 2008). Finally, background is solely used for the reasons of aesthetics and immersion. All such animals, as most other elements of the game along with human characters, serve the player.

There are games, though, that employ animals that do not fall into any of these categories. Sometimes, they have traits of multiple types, which might confuse the player or cause an emotional reaction, e.g. when there is a possibility of using a companion as a tool. Sometimes, they employ animals that seem to fulfill one of the functions described by Jański, but their traits go beyond it. Such games are, e.g. games from *Shelter* series (Might and Delight AB 2013, 2015, 2021), with non-anthropomorphic animal avatars, or *The Last Guardian* (Sony Interactive Entertainment 2016) with a companion that in fact is a key character to moving through the game and is more a friend than a pet. Playing *Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo Entertainment Planning & Development 2017) requires understanding individual horses and complying with them rather than simply pushing the same buttons to be able to do the horse-riding. More and more games that involve horse riding, like *Shadow of the Colossus* (Sony Interactive Entertainment 2005), treat the horse like an animal and not just like movement mechanics, so the player has to give signals to the horse with the hope that they will be understood in time (Cielecka 2018). *Undertale* (Toby Fox 2015) employs animal/monster enemies that do not have to be fought but letting them live makes the game so much harder as it does not cause leveling up. *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red 2015) uses mostly traditional roles but sometimes plays with the possible perspective on each animal (the player has to decide whether to treat a character as an enemy or a hero); and so on. The attitude towards animals in such games (whether it is the attitude actually expressed in the game, or just the possible attitude of the player) might be called posthumanist, as in Cary Wolfe's or Donna Haraway's posthumanism, which is the movement towards decentralization of humans and including at least other animal species among beings that deserve basic rights appropriate to their needs, among others the right to life, to bodily integrity, and to have one's individuality respected. Animals in the games mentioned above, although still the elements of an entertaining and modal

reality, are not treated as beings peripheral and subservient to humans, and thus it can be said that they are represented in a posthuman way. The increasing number of researchers is now noticing the posthumanist representations of animals and nature in games and the changes in affordances they cause (Hobin 2019, Möring 2019).

In this presentation, I would like to explore the posthuman animal characters in games. I will argue that their posthuman treatment relies on granting them at least one of three traits: agency, subjectivity, and ephemerality, and I will support my argument with examples of games mentioned above as well as other titles (*Fallout*, Interplay Entertainment 1997; *Fallout 4*, Bethesda Game Studios 2015; *Can Your Pet*, scaryama; *Firewatch*, Campo Santo 2016). The very use of animals with such traits changes the whole game by changing the way it creates obstacles and allows the player to control the gameworld as their agency does not have to be taken away in the course of playing, or at least they cannot be used without consideration. Therefore, I will also explore the effects the use of posthuman animals has on the gameplay. Finally, I would like to touch on the games that allow the players to express their posthumanist attitudes towards animals, but do not require them to treat animals in a posthuman way, and answer the question whether such a situation makes animal characters posthuman. While talking about posthumanist attitude I am referring to the tripartite model of attitudes (Mądrzycki 1977 and others) that postulates the existence of three aspects of an attitude: cognitive (opinions), affective (emotional), and behavioral (behavior). Games can play with — or downplay — the player-animal relationship in each of these spheres. Moreover, the transgression in each sphere (e.g. game forcing the player to behave in a way that is not corresponding to their opinions or feelings, or provoking feelings clashing with their opinions or past behaviors) can be uncomfortable and have manifold consequences.

The research on influencing attitudes towards animals through fiction is developing. A literature-based experiment by Małecki, Sorokowski, Pawłowski, and Cieński proved that a specific kind of text employing subjective animal characters abused by humans provoked readers to exhibit more animal-friendly attitudes than those expressed by the control group who has read a piece of fiction unrelated to animals (2019). Lily Tsai and David Kaufman proved that children had higher scores on Humane Attitudes Scale after playing *Nintendogs* and noticed that relationships with virtual pets affected children's expressed attitude towards animals (2014). The first experiment was based on the exact description of a text that might change the attitudes towards animals of its readers, and the text used was written by the author Marek Krajewski on the basis of this description. In the second experiment, the game was chosen in a more intuitive way, and although this choice proved to be the right one, the conclusions lacked the literary/game studies perspective (which in no way is a flaw in the field of psychology). It would be beneficial, though, to explore what traits a game expected to affect the players' attitudes towards animals might or should have. This presentation is a short exploration of my research done to analyze and critically select games with a possible effect on attitudes towards animals as a preliminary stage in further experiments.

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