

Humanist Delusion in Games

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The term *humanism* is three-fold: it can either mean “a devotion to humanities,” benevolence, or anthropocentrism (Merriam-Webster “humanism”). Historically, these three attitudes worked in accordance with each other; Renaissance *umanisti*, for example, aimed to teach benevolence through the humanities, and anthropocentrism was for them a way to fight against the oppressive social hierarchy. However, it has long ceased to work as means of necessary empowerment and turned abusive, especially to those excluded from the unstable definition of “human,” which is especially striking in Anthropocene.

The humanist delusion was explored by Friedrich Nietzsche, for whom humanism, or its anthropocentric component in particular, was rooted in false beliefs. He listed multiple errors in judgment that lead to the creation of the concept of timeless and universal *humanity*. Among the errors, he listed the lack of self-knowledge, attributing one’s traits to the abstract notion of humanity, and the false perception of hierarchy between humans and other animal species (Nietzsche 1878, Davies 2008). Here, I will use the term humanist delusion to name all unscientific and discriminatory convictions on non-human animals and the natural world that support anthropocentrism.

Games seem to contain about as much humanist delusion as other media. However, the way it is employed is often medium-specific, and in games it correlates with agency and pleasure of playing. In order to strive to win (Juul 2016) one has to overcome the resistance of the game (Janik 2022), which affects the representations of characters and objects serving as resistant elements, animals and nature in particular (Chang 2019, Herman 2018). As Tomasz Majkowski (2016) argued, the pleasure of playing the open-world games is of the colonial kind. Therefore, the deanthropocentrization of games would not just involve changing the representation, but often the whole game systems — its “authoritarian modalities” (Jennings), and even the scope of species enabled to play (Westerlaken). Whether it must be done is a whole different discussion that I will just signal to; games are, after all, a space of unrestricted play, and fictional acts harm no one. Yet, on the other hand, players’ agency has been restricted around other situations where the powerlessness of one party is involved (e.g. child abuse, sexual violence, genocide).

This presentation aims to track the signs of humanist delusion in games: from the design of the human avatar, through the explanations on why the worlds are forced to yield to the human player, to the presentation of animals and nature: imperishable, powerless, and generic. I am going to show examples of all of the above and focus on the question of the function of such an anthropocentric outlook of the game: is the

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goal pleasure? comfort? control? or is it just a cliché? a theme we are used to? The purpose of the analysis is to decide whether humanist delusion can be avoided in all games meant to entertain. There are games that avoided it successfully, like *Shelter* or *The Last Guardian*; they are, however, rare, and their mechanics are quite unusual. Therefore, the question of whether humanist delusion can be eradicated from digital games is the question of its importance in the pleasure of playing and its — possible — location at the very root of the current digital games market.

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