

Dinosaurs in Your Playgrounds: Remediating the Anthropocene and Othering in *Jurassic World: Evolution*

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INTRODUCTION

Dinosaurs roaming the world are part of an experience that has thrilled people ever since the first public display of dinosaur sculptures in the Victorian Great Exhibition of 1851. Even as they claimed to present the scientific truth, museums like the American Natural History Museum could not resist the charm of the dinosaur as spectacle: 'At the center of the hall was the 70-foot long, 15-foot high Brontosaurus, [...] When the display opened, it invited around 500 special guests, including the mayor and major business leaders, to get a first look. Women served tea beneath the skeleton' (Gershon). It has been a long journey from the part-bone and part plaster of Paris displays to the CGI-generated flesh and blood dinosaurs of *Jurassic Park* and its successors, but the premise remains the same: the dinosaur is an essential part of the open-air playground or theme-park. In videogames, too, the dinosaur-playground is a trope well repeated: in *Ark: Survival Evolved*, the player has to struggle for survival in a world inhabited by dinosaurs and in the early-access game, *The Isle* takes it even further by letting the player play as a dinosaur. A very different game, but one arguably with a similar premise is the *Jurassic World Evolution* series, which literally has the player managing a dinosaur theme park or zoo. Of course, *Jurassic World Evolution* is not a unique example but rather it has been preceded and followed by similar dinosaur park management games such as *Dino Island* (2002), *Dino Tycoon* (2021) and *Prehistoric Kingdom* (2022). In many of these examples, there is a steer towards scientific accuracy in that the dinosaur names are meticulously listed and dinosaur behaviour modelled according to scientific research. From the early dinosaur skeletons to their videogame counterparts, however, the science notwithstanding, the major focus has been on the spectacle and this perpetuated in the various remediations of the dinosaur park - even in videogames. It is often tempting to view the dinosaurs as monsters and Jaroslav Svelch's comment that 'the computational and procedural nature makes monstrosity fit into databases and algorithms' (Svelch 2013: 194) would be a useful lens with which to view the scenario; however, although Svelch's comment about databases and algorithms is much relevant to the management of the dinosaur

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theme-park and the dinosaur characteristics themselves, somehow the *Jurassic World Evolution* game is ambiguous about the monstrosity of dinosaurs.

Instead, as Megan Stern observes, the game remediates the film *Jurassic Park* which 'reveals science as a moveable feast, constantly being produced and reproduced at different points of cultural exchange' (Stern 353). While on the one hand, 'Science' is deployed to give the experience a feeling of authenticity, there is simultaneously a feeling of foreboding embodied in the dinosaur-figure that accompanies the science and the spectacle: 'The dinosaur is never natural or innocent. Its potential to play the 'other' [...] It is through a process of anthropomorphic reflection that we envisage a dinosaur that is 'fact', a dinosaur that is 'truth' and a dinosaur that is 'history' (Richards 69). The dinosaur theme-park is always already doomed to be a site of disaster (Lukas 2008). The dinosaur may or may not become a monster but the algorithmic aspect remains ever relevant. In the videogame *Jurassic World: Evolution*, too, the challenge is to keep the park running by preventing dinosaurs from escaping and eating humans while also generating revenue from burger stands and soda machines. Simultaneously, the player deploys 'science' to create new dinosaurs. Then again, what Newsome and Hughes observe for the film *Jurassic World* is also true for the videogame *Jurassic World: Evolution* 'although the movie attempts to portray the 'wildlife as living beings deserving respect' it actually succeeds in portraying the idea of "wildlife as tourism assets" requiring a return on investment that is strongly connected with a 'wow' factor' (Newsome and Hughes 6). The game's appeal statistic for dinosaurs is a clear illustration. This paper looks at how the dinosaur, when it enters the world of play through a populist and often inaccurate claim to authentic science and through the creation of a spectacle, ultimately serves to perpetuate an anthropocene perspective where it is othered again and again in the Jurassic playgrounds, both physical and digital. Ultimately, in a case of what Stern calls 'saying one thing and meaning another' the mighty T-Rex becomes a theme park ride (it can literally be ridden in *ARK*) and a commodity in the videogame's playgrounds. In this, it goes on to connect with other scenarios where the Other is made a spectacle and also looks the dino-theme park as a Foucauldian heterotopia wherein multiple layers emerge to expose hope bias, othering and commodification actually play out (literally) in a locale that advertises the opposite - namely, preservation, authenticity and representation.

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