A *Stray* autoethnography: Becoming-animal, or anthropomorphic humanism?

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper extends, and critiques, the notion of "posthuman empathy" in videogames to question what happens when the non-human other is not only non-humanoid, but is based on a companion species (Haraway 2003)? This project will therefore extend research into posthumanism and animal-avatar relations in videogames.

In the videogame *Stray* (BlueTwelve Studio), the player takes the avatar's form as a cat, navigating a postapocalyptic landscape filled with a variety of antagonists including drones and bacteria. Within the first ten minutes of gameplay, you, a stray cat, get separated from your fellow cats. As a player, I was immediately distressed by this loss and was concerned for "Stray"'s welfare. Braidotti (2013, 190) argues that "an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others" can remove "the obstacle of self-centred individualism". Videogames offer contemporary playgrounds for exploring this inter-connection. However, what is the significance of the anthropomorphising of animals in our empathy for them from a posthuman perspective? Is anthropomorphism – imbuing human-like qualities on non-human others – actually a humanist endeavour? Does a game really challenge anthropocentrism if we are looking at a cat-avatar as ourselves, or as human-like?

So called "empathy games" have been critiqued in recent years for their claims that playing a videogame can allow one to "experience the feelings of others—with a focus on those who are seen as diverse or disadvantaged" (Ruberg 2020, 2). As Ruberg states, the problem with "the rhetoric of empathy is that it promotes the appropriation of affect". Hammar (2020) highlights the problems inherent between promoting empathy on the one hand, yet turning it into a commodified encounter with the "exotic" other in situations involving race, on the other. Elsewhere, Pozo (2018) has raised doubts about the effectiveness of "empathy games" in shedding light on the experiences of individuals within the queer community. Rather than engaging with the problematic rhetoric around empathy as commodification of affect between "self" and "other" from a human to human perspective, this paper will instead draw on "posthuman empathy" – a form of empathy that occurs across

biological and technological divides, and where neither entity takes prominence (Wilde and Evans 2019, Wilde 2023). Posthuman empathy emerges from the intra-action (per Barad 2007) between two (or more) components, and where goals and affects are shared. This is both cognitive and embodied and includes visceral feelings wherein the gamer's body reacts to perceived threats, or touches to the avatar. Previously, I have explored this phenomenon through a humanoid avatar, whilst claiming that posthuman empathy is still possible across non-humanoid "others" (Wilde 2023).

Arguably, through anthropomorphism we value "others" only through identifying or projecting humanity onto them in order to make them worthy of care. As Braidotti (2013, 79) states, anthropomorphising animals "confirms the binary distinction human/animal by benevolently extending the hegemonic category, the human, towards the others" and also "denies the specificity of animals altogether". What, then, are the limits of "posthuman empathy"? This research employs an autoethnographic approach, building off my previous use of posthuman autoethnographies that trouble the self-other divide and write about the experiences of the "I" from a multiple and entangled perspective (Wilde 2020, Wilde 2022, Wilde 2023) as well as previous autoethnographic and reflexive work in game studies (Giddings and Kennedy 2008; Sundén 2012; Borchard 2015). Delving into the world of *Stray* I explore the avatar-gamer through animal-human hybridity, and consider how the game draws on Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) ideas of "becoming-animal". Here I draw on previous studies that have considered becoming-animal in videogames, through, for example, becoming-werewolf (Bianchi 2016), becoming-octopus (Bianchi 2017), and even becoming-Mario (Cremin 2016). I question how posthuman a becoming-animal experience can be if it relies on the primacy of the human and human emotions for affective exploitation. Ultimately, my findings demonstrate the tensions and power dynamics that are always at play within posthumanism and posthuman relations, even in videogames that disrupt both human-machine and human-animal entanglements.

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