

Terribly Bored Lizards: Resonating with the Captive Animal in *Jurassic World: Evolution* (2019)

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The representation of the animal ‘in itself’ rather than Othered poses problems for game design (Janski, 2016; Chang, 2019) and media more broadly (Derrida, 2008; Agamben, 2003), a problematic that the growing field of Green/Eco Game Studies urges us to reckon with (Tyler, 2022; Op de Beke et al., Forthcoming). I propose, however, that constrained ‘playgrounds’ can provide indirect means of affective and speculative relation to the nonhuman which might overcome barriers posed by difference (Haraway 2008; Hayward 2012; Seller 2020). This extended abstract explores this in the context of ‘captivity’ as a mechanic and aesthetic in games and the affective space this creates for animal and player.

This planned work employs textual analysis (Mayra, 2008), Animal Studies and Affect Studies approaches to explore how videogame adaptation *Jurassic World: Evolution* (Frontier 2018) mediates *Jurassic World’s* (2015) affects of bored, anxious captivity, in an era of normalised risk and repeated crisis management (Beck 1992; Bhattacharyya 2015). In its reception, the game has been critiqued as repetitious and boring (Freeman 2018; Stapleton 2018); dinosaurs take naps more frequently than fighting; escapes are routinised and repetitious; and the player is demanded to balance a small set of parameters to meet minimum thresholds of reptile happiness and their own. In its simple and slow systems that expose us to the dinosaur *after* the moment of wonder or shock, the game realises the observation of *Jurassic World’s* protagonist concerning the saturation of culture with these once extraordinary animals: “No one’s impressed by a dinosaur anymore” (*Jurassic World*, 2015). If the cinematic dinosaur signals the growing mundanity of ‘terrible lizards,’ I argue that *Evolution* explores boredom through systems of quotidian park maintenance where the speculative animal might meet the player through shared chains of affective constraint. As W.J.T. Mitchell asks of the dinosaur’s ambivalent symbolism of power and extinction, allure and obsolescence, “Are we to scream or to yawn?” (1998:69).

The latter might well be preferable, after the distortion of monstrosity and the ‘spectacular’ flattened nature Davis identifies in the animal park (1997:8). *Zoo Tycoon*

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(Blue Fang Games 2001-2017) similarly portrays captive animals as commodity and labour to be managed, edifying “human consumption of the environment and enlist[ing] wildlife in the production process” (Opel & Smith 2004:117). As Chang argues of farming simulation, we lack naturalistic ecological entanglements and representations of independent animals (2012:251). Janski’s (2016) typology identifies the problematic conventions reducing and abstracting animals: dinosaurs functionally might constitute opponents, background assets, resources/tools (Janski 2016:91-2); visually, dinosaurs are often spectacularised, and framed as mythical, ‘extrapolations’ of fictional animals, hybrid or ‘actual’ living or extinct animals (Janski 2016:93). Yet, *Evolution’s* dinosaur transgresses these categories: both enemy and tool, both an ‘actual’ animal, and a speculative mess of temporalities: 1990s extrapolation of ancient bodies skinned and coloured with fantastical integument we have little evidence for. The captive animal’s escape from limiting categories is an ambivalence that disrupts player-animal relations, and this estranged and bored distancing of the animal is enhanced through animation and mechanics.

Spending most of their time eating/sleeping, looping mundane behaviours, repeating animation cycles, our interactions often involves moving their slumbering tranquilised forms between pens. Even during a rampage, the park’s scale and zoomable camera keeps them distant and randomised behaviours diffuse their impact. By adopting the mode of park management rather than third-person cinematic action, the dinosaur mainly exhibits quotidian behaviour and presents a form of peripheral and containable threat. The dinosaur’s limited freedom and sustained presence generates what Berger sees as the disappointing boredom of zoo’s animal encounters that shift-out-of-focus with the boring subversion of expectation (1980:23).

As Fisher argues, constant low-level digital interaction in the 21st Century signals a new mode of anxious boredom, one of endless unsatisfying stimulus (2018), trading monotony of work for precarity, what *Evolution’s* critics feel in there being both too much (in quantity) and too little (in interest) to do. Games can make history affectively perceptible, reorienting us to past and present (Anable, 2018:2), and here the playborious subject is alternately and sometimes simultaneously anxious and bored in encounters with the multivalent animal that resists its labour and spectacle both violently and passively but which, like us, is trapped in a cycle of neoliberal recapture. *Evolution’s* cultural context, is one where ‘crisis’ during routinised mass extinction and economic collapse is both the “structural signature of modernity” (Koselleck 2006:372), and a matter of management rather than solution (Bhattacharyya 2015; Beck 1992). Both player and dinosaur face boring times of neoliberal capture and climate crisis—in every enclosure and lawsuit that manages visitor deaths.

The bored player recognises the bored dinosaur response in escape or sleep, at the edge effect produced by the fragile and permeable fence. Here edge effect maps on to what Mitchell (1998) sees as the dinosaur’s ambivalences, horrifying/humorous, real/speculative, and which other scholars of the *Jurassic* franchise see as hybridity: the American ‘technosaurus’ of both our desire for self-creation and the death drive (O’Neill, 1996: 306-7), or “spectral postanimal beings” (Fuchs, 2016:2), but these overlaps and collisions are generative as well as destructive. The edges of speculative/real, asset/threat, anxiety/boredom are, I argue, what Chang would call a distillation of the messy edge effects of ecosystems (2019:14-15).

Players face the spectre of both the futility and fragility of hegemony—shared confines of the 5th and 6th great extinction—and a space of resonance through play.

Hayward argues that the human-animal relation of power is not unidirectional, and that we might frame this shifting-out-of-focus of the captive zoo animal at the edges as a 'diffraction' where human park visitor/player/managers are drawn by beautiful nonhuman allure into a space of "resonating involvement" (Hayward 2012:162). Rather than simply Davis and Bergers' optics of exploitation and alienation, for Hayward this nominally carceral space can also be a place where flows of difference are exposed and interrelated through affective interference and resonance (2012:162).

While Kunzelman focuses on speculation as a space of power relations which can discipline or open our relation to the future (2022), I argue that *Evolution's* focuses on a speculative relation of present to past which is open and ongoing even (and especially) in its disciplinary logic that allows for affinity between captive human and animal. *Evolution* I suggest, is not a break with patterns of media exploitation and manipulation of the animal, but an enactment of our ethical entanglement in loops of captivity that embraces neither human nor animal completely, but which offers a tantalising space of 'resonance'. While unable encounter the animal 'in itself,' when faced with tantalising contradictions and distances we experience a resonating aesthetic space of interaction where we instead *become-bored-with* the animal.

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