Virtual Burden: Representations of Animal Disabilities in Video Games and Their Posthuman Contexts

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In her already canonical, though harrowing, book *Beasts of Burden. Animal and Disability Liberation* (2017) Sunaura Taylor points out the many linkages between animal and human disabilities from social, political, and cultural perspectives. These intersectional relationships are also worth examining from the perspective of disability representation in video games. Although research on this topic in relation to the representation of human disability is increasing (Carr 2013, 2014, 2020, , Ellis et. al. 2021; Ledder 2018, 2023, Stasienko et al. 2021; Madej, 2024), the topic of animal disability in games is not yet well studied. Hence, this presentation aims to analyze what place characters of this type occupy in-game plots and gameplay structure and how narratives about disability are constructed within the virtual environments in question.

Digital representations of animals with disabilities in video games occupy a complex and ambiguous position. This complexity stems, first, from their dual ontological status as both computational constructs and narrative agents that mediate players' subjectivity; and second, from the ways in which game environments function as dynamic hybrid systems. These systems integrate affective responses, human and non-human forms of causality, and automated procedures, creating a context in which such representations do not simply reflect disability but participate in the ongoing reconfiguration of agency, embodiment, and relationality within gameplay. Accordingly, we would like to set the argument in posthuman optics that can deal with the interpretation of these specificities in the best way and, on the other hand, allow

us to look for common ground for problems related to disabilities of both human and animal.

The article will, therefore, indicate to what extent virtual representations of "human" disabilities differ from those of animals and whether this distinction has the same meaning in video games where protagonists are often animal-human hybrids or animals subjected to strong anthropomorphization. Additionally, we will explore whether the relationships between animals with disabilities and human characters in games reproduce the nature of external relationships and to what extent questions about animal norms, as understood by Garland-Thomson, make sense in a gaming environment.

In the presentation, we will discuss the theoretical relationship between critical posthumanism (Braidotti 1994, Barad 2003, 2007), disability studies (Garland-Thomson 2017; Mitchell & Snyder 2001; Goodley et al 2014; Murray 2022), and animal studies (Jammaers, 2021; Bentley et al., 2015) before analyzing several examples of strategies for using animals with disabilities in video games. The first one will involve an analysis of the place of several selected animal characters with disabilities in the gameplay structure and storyline. We would like to point out different models of designing such characters for the purposes of different game genres, which refer to:

- building sympathy for "cute animals with dysfunctions" (*Ovecooked* 2016, *Moving-Out* 2020; *Moss* 2018),

- "transhuman camouflage" (full compensation of body dysfunctions through implants and exoskeletons – Bentley in *Sly Cooper – Band of Thieves*),

- monstrosity (*Biomutant,* 2021; *Zoochosis,* 2024), and "war-resource" (animal "amigos" in *Far Cry 6,* 2021).

The second strategy, on the other hand, is a model of institutional construction of so-called brand heroes – characters that can support disability-related social campaigns (series of games for Leonard Cheshire Foundation in the campaign *Creature Discomforts*).

The third strategy, in turn, is related to the issue of activist efforts around commercial game titles that consciously avoid the topic of disability (i.e. disability modes in *The Sims* series).

What animal characters with disabilities will look like, what function will they play in game plots, and what mechanics will represent them is a product of many different conditions – the mostly agonistic gameplay system, the general underrepresentation of disabilities in games, the instrumental approach to animals (animals as a resource in RTS games, animals as fake humans – in the perspective of various forms of anthropomorphization, companion animals as part of genre conventions), which stems from more general social and cultural stereotypes, etc.

In the area of game studies, the presentation will refer, in particular, to the expanding field of research on representations of disability in games that were mentioned above, as well as game animal studies (Consalvo, Begy, 2015; Jański, 2016 Tyler, 2022) and posthuman game studies (Fizek, 2022; Janik, 2021; Stasieńko, 2021; Lyons & Jaloza, 2016).

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