

Zoos as utopian enclaves in *Ark Nova*

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

My presentation aims to analyse *Ark Nova* (Wigge 2022) and its representation of zoos as utopian enclaves. *Ark Nova* is an economic board game in which players are responsible for developing and managing a successful zoo. They achieve this goal by building enclosures for animals, placing cards representing different species in those enclosures, cooperating with scientists and sponsors, and fulfilling environmental goals. In my paper, I would like to use Booth's (2021) concept of ludo-textual analysis of board games, merging textual analysis with ecocriticism and critical theory's approach to utopias.

The way digital and analogue games present zoos can be traced back to the history of this institution—from the ancient and medieval menageries to the zoos as a manifestation of colonial power which were being established in the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century (Kisling 2001). The majority of digital and analogue games about zoos present them as business ventures rooted in colonialism, where exhibiting animals is a means to achieve the highest possible revenue. The most recognizable digital game franchise of this kind is the *Zoo Tycoon* series (Blue Fang Games 2001), and its board game implementation (Dur, Luterbacher 2023) in which zoos are treated as entertainment parks, and the player's main focus is to make the most money off them.

On a surface level, *Ark Nova*'s perspective on zoos is similar. The game indeed tries to show zoos as typical capitalist enterprises in which the animals are subjected to the rules of the economy, each card having a prescribed "ticket value" influencing the revenue and allowing players to develop further. However, the game is not won by the player with the highest income. In order to win, players must balance the money earned from selling tickets with their contributions to scientific research and conservation projects. By introducing two forms of capital: ecological and economical, the game tries to represent how modern zoos operate as institutions in which forces of capitalism and environmental concerns collide.

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Another level on which *Ark Nova*'s representation of the zoos differs from the *Zoo Tycoon* series is the way animal actors have influence over the game's systems. Non-human agents are assigned their capitalist value, but at the same time, the players' influence on the mechanics of the game is facilitated by playing animal cards and using their special abilities. As the cards representing animals are shuffled with the ones representing humans (mainly scientists) in the main deck, both human and non-human subjects are treated as equal; the players have to use both in the construction of their zoos.

The spatial aspect of *Ark Nova* is very important as well; the zoos created by players have limited contact with the outside world. The game forces the players to perceive zoos as idealized institutions where economy, science, and ecology converge, and as an egalitarian place of contact between human and non-human actors. This is best described by Fredric Jameson's (2005) notion of utopian enclaves as imaginary places within the real social space. Zoos in *Ark Nova* are idealized versions of real institutions, where a lot of factors are omitted. For instance, it is implied in the game that as long as the animals are placed in an enclosure they require, all their biological needs are met, and thus, the players need not think about such minutiae as keeping them fed. Instead of focusing on the well-being of animals, the players are forced to play the game on an abstract level of balancing different interests.

Jameson proposes to think about utopias as inherently political, and the representation of zoos in *Ark Nova* can be considered as such. The discussions about zoos as institutions have been taking place in the scientific and broader media contexts since the 1970s. The controversy is best exemplified by two manifestos published in the 21st century – Ane Eline Sørensen's *Zoo Manifesto* and John Regan Associates' *Manifesto for zoos*. Some scientists and activists like Sørensen (2016) have been criticizing zoos as entertainment parks—relics of colonial times and anthropocentrism—that need to be radically reformed or even abolished. Others have been defending them, stressing the importance of zoos as places crucial to wildlife conservation and paramount to maintaining the world's biodiversity (John Regan Associates 2024). *Ark Nova* can be framed as a part of this discussion; its procedural rhetoric is based on persuading players of the importance of zoos as modern iterations of the biblical ark, capable of saving the planet from destruction.

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