

Mutual Incorporation: On Eating and Being Eaten in *Bugsnax* (2020)

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This extended abstract contributes to the growing sub-fields of Game Food Studies (Westerlaken, 2017; Stang, 2021; Waszkiewicz, 2022) and Eco/Green Game Studies (Tyler, 2022; Chang, 2019), building on Waszkiewicz's landmark food game survey text. In doing so it implements Annemarie Mol's approach of phenomenological analysis 'as' and 'from' the position of eating in *Eating in Theory* (2021) for what it can reveal not only about eating in games and how games both move us (Isbister, 2016) and move 'through' us. Employing phenomenological and affect theory driven analysis (Keogh, 2018; Anable, 2018) alongside close textual reading of *Bugsnax* (Young Horses, 2020) as its case study, I aim to complicate Calleja's model of incorporation with a game that takes 'incorporation' as its literal object. A comedic body-horror game set on an exotic fictional island and based around the sourcing and feeding of hybridized bugs/snacks to NPCs, its players play with an exaggerated model of how food becomes the body by recomposing limbs as foodstuffs. A captured Charmallo bugsnack might turn a nose into a marshmallow; a Cinnasnail can coil a leg into a pastry. Here I argue the game enacts a critique of traditional ideas of corporeality, and complicates the conventional role of the player as dominant consumer of the environment in sympathy with Mol's critique of traditional white-hetero-patriarchal models of the body in phenomenology as a unitary, unchanging subject moving through the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1958; Ingold, 2010). As she argues, eating is the, often elided, messy precondition of relating to the world and demands we attend to how the world moves *through us* (Mol, 2021).

While Chess has argued that eating in games lacks many sensory pleasures (2017), *Bugsnax*, like other food-oriented games, prioritizes the synesthetic articulation of proximal senses over the visual in a departure from normative ocularcentric 'video' games. Through its cute food aesthetics, animated eating, and crunchy sound design we feel food. We shrink bodies with preservatives, sling sauces to manipulate livestock, and toy with presentation in a character creator interface for NPCs where we can make sure (for example) that some 'snax' really do go straight to the thighs. While players do not consume bugsnax themselves, we prepare, feed and recompose bodies, as well as experience the feel of food when frozen or burned by bugsnax (through haptic feedback and mechanical loss of control), and are part of the biosphere as a vector in what we learn is an enveloping parasitic relationship. *Bugsnax* here forces us to unpack the power-dynamics and process of eating which

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is usually cursorily glossed or managed off-screen in games (Waszkiewicz, 2022: 22): bugsnax secretly desire to be consumed, and by doing so convert their predators into themselves. This complex of relationships forces us to reckon with our relationship to food that Mol notes, in the mode of Kristeva (1982), problematizes what is/isn't the body as we incorporate and expel chemistries that take from and give to the biosphere (Mol, 2021), resulting in a disorientation game critics surfaced as affects of humour and horror they find hard to reconcile (Avard, 2020; Watts, 2020).

Indeed, reviewer responses to the game highlighted its comedic body horror narrative (Watts, 2020) and inclusion of queer character representation (Henley, 2020), but its focus on taxonomic zoology intervening in the little-understood ecology of a 'foreign' land reminds us that adventure games are often colonially coded (Hall, 1995), and our personal narratives "are intertwined with and constructed out of colonialist logics" of exploitation (Mukherjee, 2017). Colonialist themes also exist subtextually in the expansionist and extractivist logics of *Bugsnax*, converted into "pleasurable challenge" as Doogan has argued of Minecraft (2016). However, while we play with ingredients in this exotic culinary land of Frankenstein humanoids and food-insects, in its inter-species conflict and hybridisation we also encounter a variation of 'the third space' - a space of cultural collision which generates renegotiated meanings and novelty (Bhabha, 2006).

Early modern Spanish colonists of the West Indies considered diet a precondition of 'race', that one might lose European identity/physiognomy through eating local foods (Mol, 2021: 40). Fantastical reports of alien bodies were incorporated into an understanding of a humanity shaped and 'speciated' by consumption. Here *Bugsnax* embodies this (more so than fixed post-enlightenment racial hierarchies) by building towards central NPCs becoming part of a bugsnax superorganism. The colonizer is incorporated into the colonized. Moreover, *Bugsnax* inverts the patriarchal privileging of meat-eating over veganism as a mode of consumption that articulates the colonial domination of nature/savagery/femininity (Adams, 1990) and converts bodies into assemblages of carrots and burgers reminiscent of Adam's figure of Frankenstein's monster that breaks "through concentric circles of us and them" (1990: 98). Consuming strange insectoid meats entangles us with the world: eaters are eaten by what they eat.

In this game, players embody and enact the process of eating. This is spatialized and proceduralized through the pursuit and capture of animal-foods with traps and condiment lures, mixing them in their environment to metabolize them in mechanics such as neutralising hot bugsnax with cold bugsnax, and tailoring their effects by targeting them at bodily transformations through its NPC body editor. In the resultant body horror we feel the play of bodies (Keogh, 2018). By 'being' eating, rather than ourselves eating, *Bugsnax* avoids the reductive conventional modelling of eating in games as mere sustenance, restoration, enhancement or resource as Tyler identifies (2022), and pushes us instead to consider eating, and play, as mutual-incorporation.

I argue this game fundamentally offers an insightful articulation of what Haraway would call the messy ecological 'trouble' of being-with the nonhuman in decomposition and recomposition (2016), where players explore how affects cut both ways between body and world (Anable, 2018). Unlike the horror trope of abject rotten food that repulses, here the body rots with and through food (and vice versa). Digesting and being digested, we have here the suggestion that Calleja's model of incorporating games through our involvement (2011) might entail more of a mutual

metabolism. To consume a game's content is also to be changed by it, to mutually incorporate traces in body and game, and to let the experience move through us as much as we move through it in a play of messy memories, movements, processes and sensations. As final food for thought, a morsel I that might change us as it moves through us, I offer the idea of playing-as-eating. A process where we can't assume that we're at the top of the food chain.

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