

Rhetorics of Puppy Love and Death in *The Pale Beyond* (2023)

Eleonora Imbierowicz

University of Wrocław

Plac Uniwersytecki 1

50-137

eleonora.imbierowicz@uwr.edu.pl

Keywords

animals, animality, dog, posthumanism, materialism, powerlessness, ephemerality

The word “game,” as Tom Tyler (2022, p. 8) rightly pointed out, has a dual meaning. On the one hand, there are games that we play – digital, video, board, interpersonal, political, and so on. On the other, there is the game we hunt – ducks, turkeys, foxes, and deer. It is not a surprise that a relationship between the act of playing and those being played is mirrored in the etymology of their English names.

While this tension has been widely discussed in posthumanities (Singer, 2015; Wolfe, 2010; Haraway, 2008; others), the game medium is bound to be the sphere where such power play is explicit. In games, the line between partnership and objectification blurs. We have various relationships with avatars (Papale, 2014) and other characters; all in-game characters, however, are also objects, and the whole game is a resistant object created for the players’ pleasure (Janik, 2022). Non-human animals are usually used to please players and therefore play subservient roles, whether it is enemies to fight, companions to enjoy, or tools to use (Jański, 2016).

There are games, however, that actively undermine the traditional anthropocentrism of the medium. *The Last Guardian* (2016) features a cooperative, interspecies relationship (Doyle-Myerscough, 2021); *Stray* (2022) points to the limitations of human agency and perception (Wilde, 2024), although at times fails to avoid human cognition being imposed on its cat avatar. Imbierowicz (2022) argues that in-game animals represented in a respectful way are *individual* (characterized by more than their species), *powerful* (allowed to choose their own path), and *ephemeral* (possible to lose). Such representation plays out both on the narrative and on the procedural level and is shaped by the value that the game attributes to animals’ wellbeing, decisions, relationships, or life.

It must be said, however, that while employing such respectful representation often makes for a less anthropocentric game, these traits can sometimes work against each other as well. *The Pale Beyond* (2023), a survival game featuring a polar expedition, is

Proceedings of DiGRA 2025

© 2025 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

an interesting example. Through the game, the player, embodying a captain of the ship, enters a friendly relationship with various crew members; among others, there is Ingrid Cordell, a sled master, and her pack of dogs. As a captain of the ship, we must decide whom to support in various conflicts and with much-needed resources. Towards the end of the game, unsurprisingly, there are some tough decisions to make; people can be lost or even sacrificed. The dogs, however, unlike human characters, must die.

The dogs in *The Pale Beyond* are ephemeral – they are lost, and their lives are represented as a thing of value, also emotional, like in so many other texts of culture, from *Lassie Come Home* (1943) to *Fallout* (1997). However, the fact that the game does not grant the player the option to try to save them, even if it proves impossible, makes both them and the player powerless. The game lures the player into a positive human-non-human relationship and then forces an anthropocentric lens on them, possibly aiming for emotional impact, but achieving something quite different. The players note “abruptly disassociat[ing]” and feeling “alienated” (missingno, 2023); the plot of the game has been called “lousy” (vaxquis, 2023) because of the dog issue. It is interesting to see such dissatisfaction not only as a result of abusing what many players love (dogs) but also as a result of the hypocrisy embedded in the game. At first, *The Pale Beyond* makes the player believe that the dogs might be regarded quite highly if they so decide; then, however, does not allow them to protect the dogs no matter the result, effectively taking away their choice. It is interesting whether the feelings of frustration and disengagement are caused by the dogs’ deaths or the harsh limitation of the player’s power.

This presentation is a close reading of *The Pale Beyond* (2023), with a focus on how it treats the non-human animals portrayed in the game. I will be using a materialist and posthumanist perspective to show that even though the game does not disregard players’ feelings towards dogs, it still uses them to evoke emotional reactions that many players right now see as too manipulative to evoke pleasure from playing. The game is an example of how newer games treat the animal issue: the respectful and satisfactory ways animals can be represented in games are still being developed. Because with the growing sensibilities around animals, games are at a crossroads: what has worked before might not now, and where we are going now might turn out to be the controversial path in just a few years.

REFERENCES

- Bellular Studios. 2023. *The Pale Beyond*. PC. Fellow Traveller.
- Black Isle Studios. 1997. *Fallout*. PC. Interplay Entertainment.
- BlueTwelve Studio. 2022. *Stray*. PC. Annapurna Interactive.
- Doyle-Myerscough, K. 2021. "The Monster Has Kind Eyes: Intimacy and Frustration in The Last Guardian." *Invisible Culture*.
<https://www.invisibleculturejournal.com/pub/the-monster-has-kind-eyes/release/1?readingCollection=c4fd9bb5>
- Haraway, D. 2008. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis, MN, USA: University of Minnesota Press.

- Imbierowicz, E. "Posthumanist Attitude Towards Animals in Digital Games." Paper presented at *Digital Games Research Association Conference (DIGRA 2022)*, Kraków, Poland, 7-11 July. Digital Games Research Association (DIGRA).
- Janik, J. 2022. *Gra jako obiekt oporny. Performatywność w relacji gracza i gry cyfrowej*. Kraków, Poland: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego.
- Jański, K. 2016. "Towards a Categorisation of Animals in Video Games." *Homo Ludens*, 1(9).
- missingno, 2023, March 3. Because of this forced outcome, I can never recommend this game to friends. [Comment on the online forum post *dogs*]. Steam Community.
<https://steamcommunity.com/app/1266030/discussions/0/3772365358794850988/?ctp=2>
- Papale, L. 2014. "Beyond Identification: Defining the Relationships between Player and Avatar." *Journal of Games Criticism*, 1 (2).
- Singer, P. 2015. *Animal Liberation*. New York, NY, USA: Open Road Media.
- Tyler, T. 2022. *Game, Animals, Video Games, and Humanity*. Minneapolis, MN, USA: University of Minnesota Press.
- Ueda F. 2016. *The Last Guardian*. PS4. Team ICO.
- vaxquis, 2023, March 4. *no, I just think it's lousy and forced writing and gameplay*. [Comment on the online forum post *dogs*]. Steam Community.
<https://steamcommunity.com/app/1266030/discussions/0/3772365358794850988/?ctp=2>
- Wilcox, F. M. (Director). 1943. *Lassie Come Home* [Film].
- Wilde, P. 2024. "A Stray Autoethnography: Becoming-animal, or Anthropomorphic Humanism?" at the *Digital Games Research Association Conference (DIGRA 2024)*, Guadalajara, Mexico, 1-5 July. Digital Games Research Association (DIGRA).
- Wolfe, C. 2010. *What is Posthumanism?* Minneapolis, MN, USA: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.