

On Inhabiting Nonhuman Bodies: Review of Research Perspectives

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This study aims at reviewing and organizing research perspectives on animal games and practices of embodying nonhuman animals in digital worlds. Although many scholars have addressed this topic, noticing various problems that arise in relation to it (Mazur 2023), this discourse remains largely unformalized, with its participants rarely recognizing themselves as contributing to a shared conceptual field, or engaging in dialogue. In my review, I focus on animal games—where “animal” is understood as “nonhuman animal” that is differentiated from “human”, as per Bekoff (2007)—placing them in the broader context of ecogame scholarship (op de Beke et al. 2024). Thus, it is an invitation to recognize and further develop the research on animal ecogames.

The ecological reflection in game studies emerges from “the growing interest in thinking in the categories of ecology and environmental protection in the humanities” (Domańska 2015, p. 190), and continues to build upon this base. Studying games as environmental and ecological media has an established tradition within game studies, with collective projects such as *Ecozon@’s* 2017 special issue (Bianchi 2020) or the anthology *Ecogames: Playful Perspectives on Climate Crisis* (op de Beke et al. 2024) serving as its foundational works. At the same time, the scholarship growing at the crossroads of animal studies and game studies provides us with analyzes of animal presence in virtual worlds (Jański 2016), in various roles: from companions to tools of labor (Morrison 2024), or subjects to player violence (Walsh 2014)—as well as studies focusing on animal games as a genre (Eggertsson 2022; Gorbina 2025). Between those scopes, several works have been published that zoom in on the presence of nonhuman animal avatars in digital games, and consequences of such representations of the nonhuman.

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Animal games, understood as digital works that position players within the embodied perspective of a nonhuman animal avatar (Eggertsson 2022), constitute a distinct genre, characterized first and foremost by species-specific modes of engagement. Although this term is not always evoked in studies of games featuring animal avatars, animal games have been analyzed in various contexts, from phenomenological philosophy (Mazur 2023) to game design and development (Emmerich et al. 2024; Pais 2024). Titles such as *Stray* (BlueTwelve Studio 2022), *Shelter* and *Shelter 2* (Might and Delight 2013 and 2015), or *Endling— Extinction Is Forever* (Herobeat Studios 2022) have gained scholars' attention across multiple disciplines. Through their mechanics and narrative structures, animal games stage mediated encounters between the human player and an animal avatar, thereby inviting reflection on interspecies relations and the epistemological limits of accessing nonhuman worlds. Such reflections are what I focus on in this review; in this, I aim to expand on the research on animal avatars by Emilia Mazur (2023), which is referenced in the title of this abstract. While Mazur's work focuses on phenomenology of avatars and transformative aspects of play, I am interested in the animal ecogame scholarship, recognizing its ongoing discourses, and drawing the lines of its conceptual field.

In the context of inhabiting nonhuman animal bodies, Stefano Gualeni (2011) would see digital games as spaces of *experimental ontology*. Games and digital technology in general present "the potential [...] for transcending human subjectivity" (Gualeni 2011, p. 1). Games then not only offer subjective representations of other beings and their internal lives but allow players to establish meaningful relationships with those representations, "allowing the emergence of worlds," as Gualeni describes it.

On the other hand, Gunnar Theodór Eggertsson (2022) sees the value in inhabiting a nonhuman body of a game avatar in experiencing the *psychological romance* of the game's story in the context of scientific truths that the game presents. By balancing the biological facts and the narrative fiction, animal games can convey the idea of what it would be like to become a nonhuman animal. In this, Eggertsson, albeit not directly, enters a discussion with Gualeni. While Eggertsson stresses that the most we can learn from the experience of play is what it *would be* like to be a nonhuman animal, Gualeni claims that the ontological spaces of digital games can convey what it *is* like to be one.

A distinct perspective is shared by Marco Caracciolo (2021). While both Gualeni and Eggertsson see the potential in animal games to convey the nature of a nonhuman animal experience at least to some degree, Caracciolo discards this notion completely. To him, the impression of understanding the nonhuman, which may come from the experience of controlling an animal avatar, is merely an illusion. Moreover, he points out the dangers such illusions may cause: the possibility that "because the player has access to and control over an avatar resembling a nonhuman animal, his or her belief in human superiority may be reinforced." Caracciolo offers a cautious perspective on inhabiting nonhuman bodies, even calling it a colonizing act of the human over the nonhuman.

In this study, I review different perspectives present in the game studies discourse regarding the topic of inhabiting nonhuman animal bodies through the lens of ecogame studies (as understood by op de Beke et al. 2023). The review serves as an exploration into the relationship between animal games and ecogames, and an invitation to further development of the field and comparative studies of animal

ecogames. The existence of numerous studies on the crossroads of animal studies, environmental humanities, and ecogame scholarship goes to show that this field already exists, but lacks an organized discourse that could support future research and invite broader context into play (from other disciplines and theories, such as posthumanism, new materialism, or animal ethics). I argue for the importance of recognizing this field for its value for research on human-nonhuman relationships and their representations in media in manifold contexts—as proven by existing studies, analyses, and other contributions, developed by scholars representing diverse disciplines and schools of thought, interested in challenging the anthropocentric practices of play.

The proposed research expands on my analysis of *Endling—Extinction is Forever* (Marinov 2026) as a representation of animal solastalgia and an example of sumbiocritical reflection in art (Albrecht 2019).

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