

Posthuman Cuteness: Affective and agentic tensions

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper explores the use of cuteness in videogames, specifically drawing on a textual analysis of the *Turnip Boy* series, *Turnip Boy Commits Tax Evasion* (Snoozy Kazoo 2021) and its sequel *Turnip Boy Robs a Bank* (Snoozy Kazoo 2024). By exploring the affective tensions in cuteness between subordination and superordination, the paper asks how the affective qualities of cuteness trouble subject/object relations through a posthuman lens. That is, in its rejection of hierarchical binaries through instead offering an instrumentalised emotive form, cuteness, or more specifically cute “things”, also defy the subordinate position of “objects” by becoming agentic subjects.

Ngai (2012, 1) describes cuteness as

an aesthetic disclosing the surprisingly wide spectrum of feelings, ranging from tenderness to aggression, that we harbor toward ostensibly subordinate and unthreatening commodities.

It is this “ostensibly subordinate” position that opens up opportunities for debate and critique. Ngai (2012, 4) argues that “cute things evoke a desire in us not just to lovingly molest but also to aggressively protect them” and these feelings of both love and aggression demand a consideration of affects in entangled ways. The affective flow around cuteness is, as Ngai (2012, 11) states, one linked to power, where the “cute” must be seen as subordinate in some way, and yet it makes demands of us. Indeed, cute things, by virtue of the inherent (perceived) power dynamic between cute object and perceiving subject, can sometimes represent unwanted responsibility, or even threat of reduced agency as the subject would need to prioritise the cute thing’s needs over their own (Ngai 2012). Cuteness has been explored in videogames in relation to adjacency to cosy games (Project Horseshoe 2018), post-apocalyptic posthumanity (Hemmann 2023), adult/child dichomoties of play and responsibility (Reay 2021), and the role of aggression in asserting control over the cute thing (Arkenberg 2017). This paper draws on and extends these analyses.

The *Turnip Boy* games follow sentient vegetables in a post-apocalyptic world, where, playing as the titular Turnip Boy, you must solve other vegetables’ puzzling problems, defeat different (sometimes mutated) beasts, and uncover corruption. The games

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therefore already embody certain posthuman elements – they are arguably post-anthropocentric in theme, as all humans have been wiped out and vegetables dominate the narrative. The games are roguelite, with a top-down perspective and feature cute visuals as well as an original soundtrack featuring tracks such as “Super Cute Vegetable Adventure” and “Lullaby for a Sprout”. We are initially introduced to Turnip Boy in the menu screen sleeping (indicated by closed eyes and animated rhythmic breathing) on a path under the moon, with softly chiming music, highlighting his (seeming) vulnerability and lack of threat. This may seem at odds, given the threat Turnip Boy does actually pose – in *Turnip Boy Commits Tax Evasion* we see how Turnip Boy threatens economic structures such as capitalism, and in *Turnip Boy Robs a Bank* Turnip Boy not only poses a threat to economic structures, but also to fellow veggies when he “shakes them down” in the bank to extract their money. We might then suggest that cuteness helps to extend affective forgiveness – how can Turnip Boy be a threat when he is also so obviously *cute*? Here, then, a mode of affect is present that utilises cuteness to offset threat. Arguably, we can also relate this to the position Turnip Boy takes as our avatar. Ideas of the gamer mastering both the game, and the avatar, are evident in humanist accounts of player agency and control. In humanist, anthropocentric worldviews, non-human “others” present no threat to the centrality of humans who remain shaped in a “mould of species supremacy” (Braidotti 2013, 80). Turnip Boy is therefore framed as subordinate in a variety of ways – as a turnip, he is automatically positioned as “less than” human, as an avatar he might be seen as “subordinate” to the player, and as a “cute” object, he poses no threat (suggesting a lack of agentic capacity).

Exploring these positions of power through a posthumanist lens demonstrates the entanglement of avatar/gamer subjects and the much more rhizomatic, non-hierarchical, agency created between them, acknowledging the power the avatar has (see Wilde 2023). The “vacillation in power staged by cuteness [is key to] the pleasures of many forms of cute content” (Dale et al. 2017, 9) and I argue that the specific utilization of cuteness as affect enables an opportunity to explore nonhuman agency in more depth. As Dale et al. (2017, 3) state, there is often “a degree of suspicion towards the cute: a sense that the object’s ability to provoke a cute affective response may be a pretense intended to manipulate the subject”. Through textual analysis of both *Turnip Boy* games, exploring visual, aural, and narrative modes of cuteness and analysing them through a posthuman framework, I suggest that this “suspicion” about the potential for an object to manipulate a subject speaks to a wider concern about the power of objects, and a disruption of the subject’s perceived dominance. This utilises Ngai’s (2012, 78) explanation of “the aggressive desire to master and overpower the cute object”, whilst also exploring the affective potentials of “thing-power” (Bennett 2010).

The paper will be of interest to games scholars interested in the affective potentials of videogames and the negotiation of affect between avatar and gamer. For those interested in posthuman game studies, the paper offers a nuanced consideration of how cuteness-as-affect can be seen as demonstrative of the borders of collapse between self-other, subject-object, and hierarchical power dynamics. The paper specifically focuses on notions of cuteness rather than cosiness - conflating cute and cosy would be reductive as many things that are cute are not also cosy, and vice versa. However, given the utilisation of cuteness in some cosy games, and previous analyses of the *Turnip Boy* games as cosy (see Bódi 2024), the framework will have overlapping areas of exploration for cosy game scholars.

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