



BOOK REVIEWS

Book Review: *Game: Animals, Video Games, and Humanity*. Tom Tyler. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022. ISBN 1517910196.

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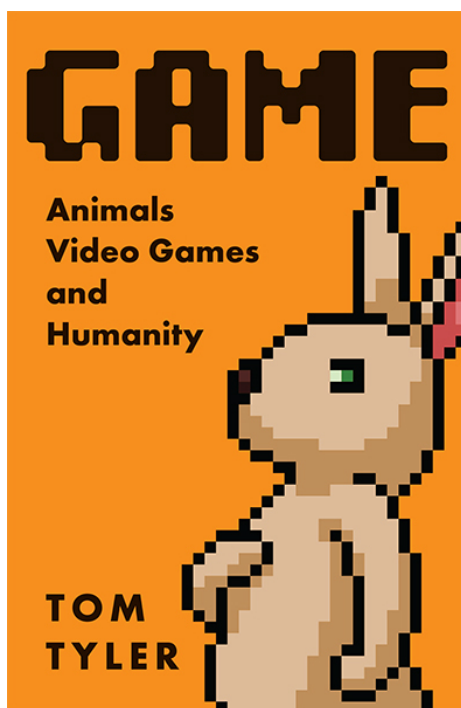
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Tom Tyler's book *Game: Animals, Video Games, and Humanity* is a book of puns and word play. You see, "game" refers to animals singled out for hunting as well as something you play, get it? Depending on how much you enjoy etymology and language association, you might like this book. But as Tyler mentions in the introduction, you also have to *be* game, that is, you have to be in possession of "the disposition, or *attitude* of those ready and willing to try something new" (5, italics in original). Tyler's book is new and challenging in the sense that it did not at all meet the expectations that I, a scholar of environmental game studies, brought to it. It did not, for example, review existing scholarship on the portrayal of animals in video games, or indeed in other media, beyond burying its mention in the endnotes. The book is hardly grounded in video game scholarship or writing on animality, preferring a more eclectic range of secondary source material that includes entries from encyclopedias and dictionaries, medieval literary history, Greek mythology, the philosophy of Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, and the writings of the fourth Earl of Chesterfield.

For some, I'm sure this is refreshing, and I also welcome the attempt to broaden the corpus of texts deemed relevant to animal studies and game studies. However, since no book exists that brings these two critical discourses into conversation, teasing out what I think would be fruitful exchanges, the omission of this kind of academic labor feels like a sorely missed opportunity. What is more, it yields awkward instances where Tyler's extreme predilection for etymology means we get a three-page chapter about the game *Splatoon* that indulgently unpacks the origins of the word 'inkling,' but features no mention, for example, of Melissa Bianchi's 2017 article "Inklings and Tentacled Things: Grasping at Kinship through Video Games," which is a much more thorough reading of the same title that actually builds an argument about its non-anthropocentric gameplay. Being generous, one could argue Tyler is showing up early to a party that is only just getting started, since a lot of scholarship on

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video games and animality is very recent (Morey and Crider 2020; Caracciolo 2021; Wallin 2022). But this does not excuse the lack of engagement with existing, and arguably more relevant bodies of work, which could very well have complemented Tyler's other source material, including obvious texts like Alenda Chang's *Playing Nature: Ecology in Video Games* (2019), also by University of Minnesota Press, which includes a whole chapter on the nonhuman.

So what does the book address? In thirteen readable chapters, Tyler explores in idiosyncratic, meandering prose how animals have been featured in video games, seeking to parse generic animals from singular ones, and the concrete from the digitally abstracted. Most of the games that make up the corpus are more than a decade old, for instance, *Titan Quest* (2006), *Dog's Life* (2003), Jeff Minter's oeuvre (featuring many games from the eighties and nineties), *Into the Dead* (2012), *Ridiculous Fishing* (2013), *Cow Clicker* (2010), *Super Meat Boy* (2010), *Dung Beetles* (1982), *Plague Inc.* (2014), and the *Half-Life* franchise (1998-2020). Some of them are singled out for close analysis, like *Super Meat Boy*. In contrast, many others are treated tokenistically, as examples of first-person shooters, endless runner games, and games featuring animal characters. Once again, although the selection is a little mystifying, the choice to feature previously undiscussed titles is laudable and certainly something to be welcomed in the field of game studies.

In addition to looking at animal representations, Tyler also looks at the beleaguered human body in plague narratives, giving us some of the most interesting interpretive moves in the book. In the chapter "Playing Like a Loser," Tyler uses Val Plumwood's well-known essay about being attacked by

a crocodile to explore how video games can evoke a similar “prey perspective” when they make players face their own vulnerability and the inevitability of death. Another valuable chapter is the one called “Difficulties” which exposes the anthropocentrism of video game culture’s toxic meritocracy as well as Espen Aarseth’s concept of the implied player. However, again, the chapter would have benefitted from more sustained and explicit engagement with the rich body of scholarship on disability and animal studies (Nocella, Bentley, and Duncan 2012; Taylor 2017; Jenkins, Montford, and Taylor 2020), not merely because it deserves to be mentioned but because it would have helped Tyler articulate more clearly and more explicitly what the book’s ethical and philosophical stakes are. As it is, its goals remain implicit until, at the very end, Tyler reveals that he has a certain environmentalist politics in mind for the book after all, specifically a vegan one.

In the concluding chapter “Trojan Horses” Tyler recounts C.S. Lewis’s proposed scheme to spread Christian values not via outright proselytizing but by producing literature that takes them for granted, thus influencing readers in a more subtle manner. Following Lewis’s example, Tyler suggests that books should exist that “further the vegan project that similarly eschew not just explicit arguments and justifications, but attempts to evangelize or mount frontal assaults or besiege the heavily defended”—and that his book is meant to be one of them, imbued with implicit, latent “vegan values” (149). As other reviewers have noted (Lewis 2022; Stein 2022), this chapter marks quite a turn in tone, as well as in the sense that it seems to address a different audience: one composed of vegans and vegetarians. Speaking as one, I initially heaved a sigh of relief—finally, the stakes had been revealed, and they were ones that were important to me—although I was also left wondering, what vegan values? Going by the amount of scholarship on veganism in philosophy, anthropology, and other fields in the social sciences and humanities, it is far from clear what “vegan values” are, and by all accounts, the ways in which they center the animal vary immensely. But while I was only left puzzled, other readers might feel hoodwinked. After all, what’s the use in calling attention to a strategy that is supposed to operate unnoticed except to antagonize the reader?

In conclusion, *Game: Animals, Video Games, and Humanity* is a book that, by virtue of its press and title, looks like it is part of a current surge in ecocritical writing about video games, but it does not engage with any of the insights that have accumulated in this field, nor is it, in my opinion, sufficiently in conversation with the environmental humanities, specifically scholarship on animality and veganism. Rather, the book’s strengths lie in the originality of its outlook and corpus, and its quirky prose style, which at times does help unstick some of the assumptions and expectations that inform the way we read academic work.



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