[Review] Tom Tyler. *Game: Animals, Video Games, and Humanity.* University of Minnesota Press, 2022. 152 pp.

Michael Swistara

michael.swistara@gmail.com

The market for interactive entertainment has swiftly taken off in recent years. Between 2015 and 2021 the global video game sales and service industry more than doubled from $95 billion to $191 billion (Morris). Despite the growing ubiquity of gaming in popular culture, there remains a relative dearth of academic literature using interactive entertainment as a lens through which to broadly critique and analyse the world. Enter *Game: Animals, Video Games, and Humanity* by Professor Tom Tyler of the University of Leeds. In this collection of essays, Tyler expertly weaves together the fields of media and animal studies to sneak references to real-world animal experiences into a delightful and quirky stroll through everything from game design to primatology and Shakespearian tragedy to the sitcom *Frasier*.

Tyler opens the book with a discussion of Nintendo's 1984 game *Duck Hunt*, an early console classic in which the developer 'offered gamers a playful emulation, at one remove or more, of the pleasures to be had shooting animals' (1). In this brief introductory essay, Tyler foreshadows much of the analysis to come in the collection. While providing an overview of how *Duck Hunt* works, he includes an aside on the Old English origins of the word 'game,' at once referring both to a specific joy or pastime as well as to the particular kind of entertainment that involved harming and killing non-human animals.

This first essay makes explicit many of the questions Tyler is attempting to ask throughout the collection, such as 'have animals' own experiences and perspectives been represented as part of video-game play'? and 'do animals help us understand the ways in which video games are to be played'? It also hints at Tyler's ultimate goal of supplementing existing vegan advocacy with a self-described Trojan Horse approach that incorporates an animal rights ethos into a conversation about games and games media. In

the process, Tyler successfully makes reference to the conditions of animals on factory farms and the ability of fish to experience pain, as well as everything from statements attributed to the 4th Earl of Chesterfield to the etymology of the word 'bullshit'.

Although Tyler makes clear he is not offering a complete taxonomy of animals in video games, there are several variations of the portrayal of animals in games throughout this book. As in *Duck Hunt*, animals may be targets existing only for gamers to shoot at. Similarly, in many open-world role-playing games, such as *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* or *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*, animals exist as adversaries to be defeated through combat. In other games, non-human animals might be the protagonist of the story. This includes anthropomorphic playable characters like Donkey Kong or Sonic the Hedgehog. But it also includes animals being their more natural animal-self, such as the playable dog character in *Dog's Life* or even the duck in a modified version of *Duck Hunt* played from the duck's perspective. Animals have also appeared in games as assets or pure commodities, most notably in simulator games like *Farmville*, and as companions to be taken care of (e.g., *Nintendogs*) or to adventure alongside (e.g., *Torchlight 2*).

Through discussing the various ways animals are represented in video games, Tyler is able to get at broader conversations about issues of animal exploitation. For example, the fact that animals in games are often seen as interchangeable and not as individuals is a mirror which Tyler holds up to society to demonstrate our failure to understand non-human individuality and sentience. One boar in the game *Titan Quest* is the exact same as any other boar in that game. Tyler uses this as a lens through which to critique a history of philosophers failing to question the monolithic category of 'the animal' as a 'single and fundamentally homogenous set' (9). Rather than seeing a nonhuman animal as an individual sentient being, humans far too often see 'animals' as a class unto themselves and indistinguishable or replaceable. One need look no further than the legal treatment of animals as property, particularly as assets in contemporary farming, to appreciate the ubiquity of 'the animal' as de-individualizing category in our world.

Along this same vein, throughout this collection Tyler uses the representation of animals in games to point out the rough edges smoothed over and sometimes blatantly false portrayal of the circumstances and conditions of animals in the real world. He often does so through the

skilful incorporation of lessons from other disciplines. In the context of a discussion on the mobile game *Ridiculous Fishing*, in which players control a fisher using a series of increasingly ludicrous and brutal tools to catch and kill the most fish possible, Tyler includes a multi-page tangent on fish behaviour and biology (57). This includes citing the work of biologists like Victoria Braithwaite who have researched fish nociception, confirming the ability of fish to feel pain, and comparative psychologists like Gordon Burghardt who have reported on the many forms of playful behaviour that fish engage in with one another (Tyler 58).

It is in these tangents that Tyler also most reveals his interest in etymology. In a chapter all about animal excrement in video games, Tyler goes back to the era in which Old English adopted a precursor to the word 'shit' from Germanic languages before whipping readers through a brief history of animal-waste-related cursing from 1950's US Air Force slang (e.g., 'apeshit') to the present. Tyler then pivots to use the quickly and easily disposed of manure in video games to contrast with the actual experience on factory farms. In Tyler's own words, 'veritable lakes and mountains of fecal matter' are generated on farms every day across the globe, to the great detriment of the environment (103). Humans growing desire for a meat and dairy heavy diet is destroying our planet ('Environmental Damage'; 'Environmental Impacts of Extreme Animal Confinement'; 'Factory Farming and the Environment'). None of this is ever represented in farming simulators. There is no video game in which players struggle with overflowing 'lagoons' of pig manure, polluting the drinking water in poorer, rural communities – exactly as happened in North Carolina after Hurricane Florence (Pierre-Louis).

These contrasts are most notable in allegedly realistic games like farming simulators, where players enjoy the virtual experience of driving a combine harvester or planning crop rotations. Gaming, of course, is a large and diverse field and not all games are intended to be completely true to life. Take *Ridiculous Fishing* as an example. Players can level up their fishing rod to include chainsaw lures and can later even use a ray gun to vaporize fish. Here, Tyler does a clever job of intersecting the flaws in representing nonhuman animals with the insidiousness of a certain kind of game design. Referencing the gaming website *Kotaku*'s review of *Ridiculous Fishing*, Tyler describes the mobile game as 'an endless cycle' of grinding 'that is hypnotizing and engrossing but ultimately empty and joyless' (62).

Professor Tyler includes an entire chapter on *Farmville* and its satirical counterpart *Cow Clicker* that delves into the troubles of predatory design that is particularly prevalent amongst mobile and online games. Such games frame everything, even your friends, as resources to be mined. They use gambling techniques to encourage small-dollar purchases for randomized 'loot boxes' or for minor character upgrades. Time is dilated and destroyed as social games like *Farmville* intrude outside of the game world – your virtual crops will wither away if you do not log back on in time to harvest them.

Yet, even a satire like *Cow Clicker*, in which players simply click on a picture of a cow, that is itself critiquing *Farmville* for these very flaws falls prey to the same tired use of animal as 'cipher'. The cow at the centre of *Cow Clicker* is not really a cow, it is merely a symbol unimportant in and of itself. Quoting Carol J. Adams' book, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, Tyler describes such representation of animals as 'absent referents' (69). Animals are physically made absent by their slaughter and processing into consumer-friendly foodstuff and linguistically concealed by terms like 'veal' or 'ham'. While *Cow Clicker* understands the trespassory nature of a game like *Farmville*, it does not critique the overly sanitized version of farm life and ignores the incredibly traumatic experiences of cows on dairy farms. Here, Tyler threads the needle between appreciating a satire while still being able to use it to further shed light on overlooked aspects of sanitized gameplay. This nuance is part of what makes the book shine; Tyler clearly appreciates and enjoys video games and is therefore unafraid to view them critically at times.

An area of contention and recent progress within the gaming media space is accessibility, particularly as it relates to difficulty settings. Mark Brown, creator of Game Maker's Toolkit, has created a series of videos on this very topic – should video games include easier settings? – and highlighting the accessibility wins in recent years across the industry (Brown, August 2018; Brown July 2018; Brown 2016). In the essay 'Difficulties', Tyler uses the difficulty in games conversation as an entry point into a broader discussion of perceived normality, ableism, and speciesism. Games like *Doom* and *Wolfenstein* are cited here as examples of 'toxic meritocratic rhetoric' for naming their respective difficulty levels in a way that may shame players who choose a difficulty below the standard defined level (117). In *Doom*, difficulty settings include names like 'Hey, not too rough' and in *Wolfenstein* the easiest setting is called 'Can I play, Daddy?'

While somewhat extreme examples, these games do demonstrate the trend in video games to organize difficulty settings by perceived low to high difficulty, with some developer-decided 'normal' level somewhere in the middle. Some developers have begun to do away with simple easy-normal-hard difficulty levels and instead instituted scaling across a variety of metrics from enemy aggressiveness to reaction times required for certain inputs. This is a step in the right direction for gaming and opens up the medium for more players.

Tyler expands on this conversation by discussing nonhuman animals as gamers themselves. He discusses animals playing games designed for humans, including a lizard playing *Ant Smasher*, games designed for animals for leisure, such as cat games on touch screen devices, and games designed for animals as test subjects in laboratories and zoos such as chimpanzees playing limited-hold memory games (131-39). Through the context of accessibility in interactive media, Tyler is able to question the perceived normalcy of human-centric play in way that winks at wider issues of speciesism while inviting his readers to imagine a broader range of 'implied players' when designing options of how to play or whether to play at all.

Although Tyler never explains much of his own personal history with video games to readers directly, his approach to each of the essays in this collection demonstrates a curiosity and love for animals as well as for forms of play both virtual and tangible. The most positive and aspirational segments of the book come when Tyler covers the likely benefits and potential promises of games media with respect to a changing approach to nonhuman animals. In *How Does Your Dog Smell?*, Tyler touches on the unique ability of interactive media to allow players to experience the *umwelt* of another being. While reporters and scientists have published wonderfully amazing books about the diversity and daily life of animals' experiences, from Alexandra Horowitz's *Inside of a Dog* to Ed Yong's *An Immense World*, there is something special about being able to inhabit that experience and perspective through a game.

Here, Tyler uses the video game *Dog's Life* and its 'smellovision' mode as an example. In the game, players control a companion dog through activities like eating to finding their dog-napped friend Daisy. Players can turn on 'smellovision' to see visual cues that lead them to see the smells that a dog would experience the world through. In Tyler's own words, 'no combination of text and image could be so engaging' or do more to capture the entirely different *umwelt* of experiencing the world primarily through sense rather than sight (21). More

recent developments in gaming, particularly in the indie developer space, have brought us games that invite players to experience the world as foxes or wolves in their natural habitat, pugs navigating the social dynamics of dog parks, and even as a goose bothering a small English village (Swistara).

As a long-time ethical vegan and avid gamer myself, what intrigued me most about Tyler's book is the way he weaves a vegan ethos into the background of virtually every chapter in this collection. The intersection of style and subject present here may narrow this collection's readership to those already interested in either video games or animal studies, which is a shame as this collection is well worth a read. Here, Tyler has created a terrific example of how to interweave anti-speciesist logics into other areas of academic study. He reveals these intentions in the final essay, in which he describes the vegan perspective of his text sneaking in 'under cover, before emerging, impenitent and assured' like the Achaean soldiers from the wooden horse ready to fell Troy from within (150). In his final video game analogy, Tyler ends with the hopeful note that like the inevitable fall of Troy, the current speciesist regime will one day be toppled.

Works Cited

Brown, Mark. 'Making Games Better for Gamers with Colourblindness & Low Vision.'
    YouTube, uploaded by Game Maker's Toolkit, 22 Aug. 2018,
    https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xrqdU4cZaLw.

---. 'Making Games Better for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing.' *YouTube*, uploaded by Game
    Maker's Toolkit, 16 Jul. 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4NGe4dzlukc.

---. 'Should *Dark Souls* Have an Easy Mode?' *YouTube*, uploaded by Game Maker's Toolkit, 25
    Apr. 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K5tPJDZv_VE&t=221s.

'Environmental Damage.' *Compassion in World Farming*, https://www.ciwf.org.uk/factory-
    farming/environmental-damage/. Accessed 20 Aug. 2022.

'Environmental Impacts of Extreme Animal Confinement.' *Center for Biological Diversity*,
    https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/takeextinctionoffyourplate/factory_farms/index.
    html. Accessed 20 Aug. 2022.

'Factory Farming and the Environment: Impacts on the Planet.' *Humane League*, 3 Mar. 2021,
    https://thehumaneleague.org/article/factory-farming-and-the-environment.

Morris, Chris. 'Global Video Games Market Expected to Fall for First Time Since 2015.'
    Fortune, 5 Jul. 2022, https://fortune.com/2022/07/05/global-video-games-market-
    decline/.

Pierre-Louis, Kendra. 'Lagoons of Pig Waste Are Overflowing After Florence. Yes, That's as
    Nasty as It Sounds.' *N.Y. Times*, 19 Sep. 2018,
    https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/19/climate/florence-hog-farms.html.

Swistara, Michael. 'How Animals are Portrayed in Video Games.' *Medium*, 20 May 2021,
    https://michaelswistara.medium.com/how-animals-are-portrayed-in-video-games-
    89f433526161.