

The playing Other and what we cannot help learning from the study of animal play

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ABSTRACT

One of the many paradoxes of play lies in how it simultaneously occupies the realms of natural and cultural. It is play that reminds us of our animal ties; yet the specific forms and technologies of human play establish our advancement and development 'above' other animals. In Game Studies, the question of the animal has existed somewhat in disguise.

In the very foundational research on play, however, Huizinga's and Sutton-Smith's postulations "animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing" (Huizinga 1938, 1) and "play is a form of communication far preceding language in evolution because it is also found in animals" (1997, 6-7) form a basis for understanding our instinctive and biological needs and tendencies to play. Aarseth, meanwhile, has in various contexts used his dog as an example of how animal play helps us to distinguish play from stories given that "you don't see cats or dogs tell each other stories, but they will play" (2004, 47-48). This locates animality in the very heart of narratology-ludology debate.

Most recently, Myers finds animal play useful when he discusses the difference between social and individual play in his book 'Play Redux' (2010). For him, animals serve a point of reference since their play practices are distinctively either social or individual. And in DiGRA 2011, a session entitled 'Animal play' introduced games designed especially for animals to the game studies community. Here considerations about the challenges in designing for another set of bodily capabilities and finding common inter-species ground in play were highlighted (Wirman, Smits, Yu and Yuen 2011; Alfrink, Bracke, Copier, Driessen and van Peer 2011).

My current research in designing digital games for non-human mammals living in captivity suggests that the very unbridgeable strangeness of other species further has a potential in uncovering the underlying assumptions and preconceptions in computer game research and design. Facilitating the play of someone so different raises questions of how we learn to play, what are our bodily abilities regarding play technologies, or what is the importance of external reward in games, for instance. When considering people's opinions towards computer mediated play for non-human animals, too, there is nothing

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quite as telling as the contrast between opinions that find amusement in animals using play technologies and those that oppose the introduction of 'unnatural' technologies among non-humans.

We can thus see that the question of the animal considers a non-human both as the 'Other' (as in Beauvoir and Foucault) who is always already a player and as someone who we humans make a player through the introduction of both digital and analog play technologies. Animals' presence in Game Studies highlights its multiple disciplines that build across natural sciences, humanities, social sciences, engineering, and design. It is therefore my goal in this paper to map out the various ways in which the world of non-human animals - domesticated, wild, and institutionalized in zoos and rescue centers - remain an immense resource for game scholars across disciplines to explore. This paper argues that the study of animals *as players* (instead of approaching play *among* them) offers valuable insights to the cultural, social and technological aspects of games in general and to digital and computer-mediated gameplay in particular. The truly Other players essentially assumes a sometimes frighteningly demanding take on interdisciplinary effort.

Keywords

Animal play, Non-human animals, Species, Culture, Definitions, Technology, Design

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