LAUGHING THEN THINKING

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Tom Tyler, *Game: Animals, Video Games and Humanity*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 248pp, £18.99 paperback, £88.53 hardcover.

I experienced two things as I was reading Tom Tyler's *Game: Animals, Video Games and Humanity*. My first feeling was slight disgruntlement that the book didn't engage with my own favourite animal-themed game (*Ecco the Dolphin 2: Tides of Time*). Once I overcame my disappointment, the other thing I felt was puzzlement at a slogan running through my head, which I felt crystallised so much about Tyler's work, but that I couldn't quite place: 'Research that first makes you laugh, then makes you think'. Unfortunately, when I actually looked up this phrase, I discovered it was the tagline for the Ig Nobel Prize – an annual award given to scientific research seems like a bit of a joke – and realised that placing *Game* in this lineage could sound derogatory, or at least like a backhanded compliment. However, the point of Ig Nobel prizes is that the awards are given to research that might initially seem amusing, but ultimately makes people conceive of the world differently. To say that *Game* is written in this vein, then, is most definitely not intended as an insult. Indeed, as Tyler hints at in his final chapter, the book is explicitly designed as a Trojan horse that might appear to be a playful series of essays about the role of animals in video games, but actually poses deep-rooted philosophical questions about what it means to be human.

Tyler has form in finding engaging ways to elucidate how conceptions of humanity and animality have emerged and intertwined as historical phenomena. His 2012 book, *CIFERAE*, was an illustrated bestiary that traced how animals have been mobilised in philosophical definitions of 'the human'; interrogating how human exceptionalism has emerged, become consolidated, and – crucially – been contested in western thought, from Aristotle to Carol J. Adams. *Game* is similarly creative in its approach to probing the category of humanity. The book consists of thirteen short and pithy essays, the majority of which are around ten pages long and each of which focuses on a particular video game or aspect of gaming. While the book offers similar philosophical breadth to *CIFERAE*, this time anthropocentrism is interrogated through examples that range from the dietary habits of Pac Man to 'ideal' users constructed by difficulty settings in *Half Life 2*. Though playfully framed, each chapter connects its given game(s) to a web of theoretical and socio-political reference points: from popular culture to ancient philosophy, and contemporary critical theory to ecological crisis.

In chapter three, for instance, links are forged between PlayStation 2

game *Dog's Life*, Donna Haraway's situated knowledges, and Jakob van Uexküll's *Umwelt*, alongside contemporary engagements with *Umwelten* by Giorgio Agamben, Vinciane Despret and Geoffrey Winthrop-Young. These reference points are brought to bear on *Dog's Life*, in order to explore the game's potential to defamiliarise normative sensory experience through its 'Smellovision' filter, which attempts to recreate canine olfactory worlds through rendering pungent scents in lurid colours. Another chapter centres on Ian Bogost's *Cow Clicker,* a satire that was originally designed as a parody of freemium Facebook game *FarmVille*, which attempted to be as banal as possible by awarding users points for clicking a virtual cow once an hour. Yet, although *Cow Clicker* satirises cynical game developers who create products that (in Bogost's own words) are more akin to 'behaviourist experiment with rats [that] rely on creating compulsions' (p66) to generate revenue, the parody is itself monetised and charges users real money (or 'mooney') to buy 'premium' cows. The tensions generated by *Cow Clicker* could have taken up an entire chapter in itself, and other authors might have drawn on more obvious concepts to analyse the game – such as debates surrounding the attention economy, perhaps, or the gamification of social life. Tyler, in contrast, offers a more oblique route that traces the relationship between cows used as ciphers and the lives of industrialised dairy cows (via a foray into *Aesop's Fables*).

Game's capricious approach to weaving together different examples and knowledges, is perhaps best embodied by the ninth chapter, 'Meanings of Meat'. Here Tyler outlines the story of *Super Meat Boy*, a game centring on a character (the titular boy) made entirely of meat, which provoked a strong counter-reaction from campaigning group People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PeTA) who made their own, rival, game: *Super Tofu Boy*. The makers of *Super Meat Boy* were delighted, revealing that they had deliberately posted about their game on PeTA web-forums in order to generate outrage (and publicity), and swiftly incorporated Super Tofu Boy into their own game as a playable character, but one who was notably less adept at running and jumping than Super Meat Boy (which made it impossible to finish most of the levels if playing as tofu).

This narrative might initially foster a chuckle or at least a wry smile, but Tyler uses it to make a more serious point about the potentials that were opened up – and ultimately shut down – by the game. Initially *Super Meat Boy*'s designers suggested that the character was not intended to be made of meat at all, but to represent a 'boy without skin' (indeed, this characterisation was integral to the game, with the character leaving trails of blood wherever he went). As such, Tyler argues, *Super Meat Boy* could offer a subversive rendering of humans as meat, evoking the radical vulnerability set out in Matthew Calarco's extension of Derrida: 'recognition of this indistinction between human and animal prompts an awareness that, although we are all mere meat, we are also more than mere meat: flesh is or was part of an entire body caught up in passions, desires, and relations that far exceed its existence

as food for another' (p83). Any such potentials for unsettling anthropocentric hierarchies, however, were undercut by far narrower understanding of 'meat' evoked by designers for the purpose of irritating PeTA, which descended into normative narratives about real men eating meat (and reproduced many of the tropes associated with more regressive and exclusionary elements of gaming culture in the process).

Game, then, is a playful and eclectic book, but amidst all of this eclecticism there are still some guiding threads. Firstly, as a scholar whose work is grounded in the history of ideas, etymology serves as a key element in almost all of Tyler's chapters. A chapter on excrement in games, for instance, is interwoven with a genealogy of 'bullshit' that engages with – and complicates – Harry Frankfurt's *On Bullshit*, by articulating the phrase's relationship with actual bulls. The book's opening chapter, 'A Singular of Boars', likewise, draws connections between games that represent herds of animals using singular renderings (as with *Titan Quest's* use of the same model for all its boars); collective nouns for animals found in medieval hunting manuals; and Derrida's critique of philosophy's tendency to treat 'the animal' as a 'general singular' (p11). These parallels between medieval definitions and contemporary representations, Tyler suggests, evoke something fundamental about the way 'species' works to foreclose any sense of animals as possessing individual agency.

Tyler's decision to begin *Game* with a critique of 'species thinking' reflects another, and perhaps the most significant, guiding thread in the book: its overarching function as a Trojan horse that provides an entry point to unsettling anthropocentric ways of conceiving of the world. Tyler's ambitions are made explicit in the final chapter, which focuses on handheld game *Trojan Horse*. Despite its erroneous approach to Homer (here the horse is less of a mean of infiltrating Troy and more of a battering ram the gamer has to defend against), Tyler finds *Trojan Horse* helpful to think with. In particular, and as he traces throughout the chapter, analogies can be found between some of the ethico-political debates that have animated the field of animal studies over the past two decades. As Tyler notes, in animal studies: 'Attacks on veganism … not unlike the Achaean assault on Troy, have been vigorous and prolonged, and apologies for it, not unlike the Trojan defense, equally forceful and sustained' (p147). After tracing the contours of these debates in succinct ways, and reflecting on their productive potentials, Tyler (delicately) suggests that it might be time to move beyond patterns of attack and defense that have become increasingly difficult to disentangle. Instead, he asks, if it might be valuable to have:

> … texts designed to further the vegan project that similarly eschew not just explicit arguments and justifications, but all attempts to evangelise or mount frontal assaults, or besieged the heavily defended. Such texts would deal with subjects other than vegan practice or ethics, but vegan

values would be taken for granted – latent, not explicit. Readers embarking on a book or essay on one topic would find, to their surprise, that its implications and assumptions were other than they might have expected (p149).

On the following page, Tyler brings the point home still more forcefully: 'We could envisage, for instance, a collection of essays on video games, each of which addresses some aspect of game design and mechanics or some particular video game or franchise, but also, during the course of its exposition, reveals itself as aligning with a vegan sensibility' (p150).

Game's concluding argument speaks to the aspect of Tyler's book that I both found most productive, and yearned to be pushed a little further. One of the things that is most valuable and engaging about *Game* – the length of its chapters and pithiness of writing – mean that at times it was structurally difficult to expand upon some of its especially productive arguments. The most generative chapters were when Tyler used games to offer unexpected and nuanced accounts of animality's complex imbrications with ablism, race and gender, while drawing on reference points that are not commonly used to articulate these connections. At times, however, Tyler's arguments could be pushed further, and brought into more dialogue with recent postcolonial animal studies scholarship, which has unsettled the field's tendency to root its critique of 'the human' in continental philosophy and foregrounded the unevenness of anthropocentrism. That said, if *Game* were to make a more in-depth interjection into these debates then it would risk losing what makes it a novel and engaging reading experience. Indeed, *Game*'s situated approach – with a focus on the specific ways that anthropocentrism operates in particular contexts – side-steps many of the dangers that have been associated with early animal studies scholarship, with its tendency to universalise certain claims about human-animal relations. On its own terms, *Game* certainly succeeded in first making me laugh, before making me think. At the same time, the book also offers hope about the possibility of moving beyond attack/defence dynamics that have sometimes inhibited more meaningful conversations within animal studies.

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