Non-Human Gaming: Video Games for the Post-Anthropocene

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INTRODUCTION

In this presentation, I will address the possibility of an imminent mass extinction of all living beings from planet Earth, and the implications of such a catastrophic event for games studies.

The Anthropocene, a term popularized by the end of the 20th century to refer to the geological impact of human beings on planet Earth, assumes a temporal development, a 'before' and 'after' the appearance of humankind. The 'after' period, known as the Post-Anthropocene, is repeatedly claimed by scientists to be approaching within the next few decades, as over-consumption is destroying vital resources of the planet. Allegedly, the sixth mass extinction in the history of our planet is already unfolding, and might determine the disappearance of life from Earth and, as far as we know, from the Universe and beyond (Zylinska 2014; Wark 2015; Haraway 2016; Thacker 2010).

Video games have been responding to the arrival of the Post-Anthropocene. In recent years, an increasing number of games appear to capture the fascination and creepiness of a world with no humans. This impending future is not just imagined in fictional settings (e.g. *The Legenda of Zelda: Majora's Mask*, Nintendo, 2000; *Horizon: Zero Dawn*, Guerrilla Games, 2017), but within game design. In the last decade an increasing number of video games requiring limited human intervention has been released. Idle games such as *Cookie Clicker* (Julien Thiennot, 2013) and *AdVenture Capitalist* (Hyper Hippo Productions, 2014) require an initial input from the player to start, and then keep playing themselves in the background operations of a laptop or smartphone. Virtual environments can be entirely designed by algorithms, as experimented by Hello Games for *No Man's Sky* (2016). Artificial Intelligence is also used to play games. *Screeps*, a massive-multiplayer online game, requires players to program an AI that will play the game in their place, and which will 'live within the game even while you are offline' (Screeps Team, 2014). Ghost cars in racing games replace the human actor with a representation of their performance. The same concept is further explored by the Drivatar of the *Forza Motorsport* series (Microsoft Studios, 2005-2017), which simulates the driving style of the player and competes online against other AI-controlled cars (Bittanti 2015). These are only some of the example that suggest that human beings are becoming peripheral in the

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act of playing games. The video installation *Emissaries*, at MoMA PS1, by Ian Cheng (2017), and Twitch streaming of computer-controlled avatars in *Grand Theft Auto* by Ben Watanabe (*San Andreas Deer Cam*, 2016; *San Andreas Community Cam*, 2017) are further investigations in how games could play themselves even after the disappearance of human beings.

Drawing on Sonia Fizek's analysis of the concept of interpassivity in digital games (via the work of Robert Pfaller and Slavoj Zizek), and on studies on gamification and self-tracking, I argue that Non-Human Gaming is not necessarily an exception to oppose to 'standard' video games, or a (con)temporary trend (Fizek 2018; Ruffino 2016). The non-human has always been haunting the medium, and studies on interactivity, agency, and player's skills and competences have been providing, so far, a comforting perspective that places the human at the center, or at an equal hierarchical importance than the machine (Giddings 2005; Björk and Juul 2012). Alexander Galloway imagined how machines could take the lead in the process of enacting a video game, creating 'ambience acts' where the game plays itself with no need for the human being to be present (Galloway 2006). Galloway was concerned with the allegories that computer games provide, and the ways in which games mimic the social reality in which we live in. Since 2006, fears of economic, political, social, and geological crises at global level have been prominent. Non-Human gaming can be interpreted as a response to those fears, and put in relation to the rise of self-driving cars, algorithmic trade exchange, and remote warfare, which similarly operate by replacing human beings. In fact, Non-Human Gaming is an adequate response to the disappearance of life from Earth – as it has been imagined, feared, and prophesized by scientists in recent years, and even more insistently since the time of Galloway's contribution.

In this talk I will attempt to map the broad category of Non-Human gaming. Roger Caillois, in his early work on mimicry and mythology, was already describing how living beings develop forms of dispersal and waste of energy that cannot be explained through a rationalistic view on evolution and preservation, and which bring the organism closer to its own disappearance and assimilation in the surrounding environment, but are nonetheless defining characteristics of life (Caillois 1934; 1935). My concern is to highlight the weirdness and creepiness, the irony and spoofs, the paradoxes and contradictions of video games made by no one and/or for no one. As Haraway's vision of the cyborg did with cybernetics, Non-Human gaming confuses and complicates the ontologies of digital texts, and could be used to shed light on the situatedness, temporality, and partiality of our knowledge, of both humans and games (Haraway 1991; Kember 2018). Life might be disappearing from Earth at some point, but we are not there yet. We are in-between birth and death, the beginning and the end, and we have always been. Non-Human gaming helps us articulating this space and time in-between, and has the potential to re-route gaming (and game studies) from false myths of agency, interactivity, and instrumentalism (the 'games for' health, education, self-improvement, and so on). Non-human games are companions for earthly survival.

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