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# Animal Mayhem Games and Nonhuman-Oriented Thinking

by Marco Caracciolo

## Abstract

A host of recent videogames revolve around animals that wreak havoc on human communities and the urban spaces they live in. After introducing this strand of "animal mayhem games," my paper links it to recent arguments on human-nonhuman entanglement in times of ecological crisis. Games like *Goat Simulator*, *Deeeer Simulator* and *Tokyo Jungle* ask players to engage with an animal avatar while simultaneously unsettling dichotomies between human societies and nonhuman phenomena. The destabilization of anthropocentric assumptions, I argue, is the deeper significance of animal mayhem. The subversive fun generated by these games speaks to core ideas of nonhuman-oriented thinking, particularly Timothy Morton's concept of "strange stranger." My close readings of *Goat Simulator* and *Untitled Goose Game* focus on the intersection of nonhuman agency and generic templates drawn from open world and puzzle games, respectively.

**Keywords:** Nonhuman turn, anthropocentrism, fun, strange stranger, nonhuman agency

## Introduction

In *Deeeer Simulator*, a game by Japanese developer Gibier Games (2020), the player controls a deer with superpowers that include carrying guns and joining forces with other animals to create robot-like assemblages. The only goal is to wreak havoc on a city and its human inhabitants. Reviewing this game in *Kotaku*, Ethan Gach writes: "At the rate rich people are destroying the planet, I find it cathartic to see cows, tigers, rhinos, and deeeer join together to fight back like anime heroes" (2020). This link between what Gach calls the game's "chaos on four legs" and the ecological crisis is not directly cued by the developers. Yet, in Gach's experience, fun and the subversion of a human-imposed order go hand in hand. The avatar's disruptive actions challenge the strict separation between the anthropocentric space of the city and nonhuman life. The gameplay thus reverses, and serves as imaginary retaliation against, human societies' catastrophic encroachment on wild spaces--hence Gach's comment on animals "fighting back." Of course, not all players of the game will arrive at an interpretation like Gach's, linking their cathartic fun to the adverse consequences of human activities for ecosystems; but the potential of such games for exploring environmental issues through the destabilization of the human-nonhuman divide is remarkable.

Brent Watanabe's earlier *San Andreas Streaming Deer Cam* project (2015) performs a similar cultural operation in a more arthouse vein: it uses a modified version of Rockstar North's *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013) to follow the urban wanderings of an AI-controlled deer. [1]. While the effect is subtler than Gibier Games' rowdy fun, uncoupling the world of *GTA V* from its human protagonists does evoke a sense of deep incongruity. As the boundaries between an urban environment and an animal that we would normally categorize as "wildlife" dissolve, the viewer of Watanabe's art project can meditate on the anthropocentric bias of videogame experiences.

Both *Dee eer Simulator* and *San Andreas Streaming Deer Cam* steer clear of the affective registers associated with mainstream environmental thinking in the West: the sublime and wonder of pristine landscapes, but also guilt and despair over environmental destruction. [2] Yet these games do raise important ecological questions, as Gach's commentary suggests. In *Green Media and Popular Culture* (2016), John Parham has already offered an insightful discussion of videogames' engagement with ecological themes. Parham's reading of *Journey* (Thatgamecompany, 2012) suggests that the game's rarefied atmosphere defamiliarizes human-nonhuman relations. Ultimately, however, Parham argues that *Journey* taps into the register of the sublime--again, a staple of environmentalist discourse in the West--as it moves "towards something resembling a transcendent ending" (2016, p. 229). No such transcendence is possible in *Dee eer Simulator* or *San Andreas Streaming Deer Cam*, which distance themselves from standard environmental rhetoric through their strategically playful decentring of the human.

This article focuses on a strand of contemporary videogames--"animal mayhem games," in my terminology--that resonate with Gibier Games' and Watanabe's works and deepen their subversion of anthropocentric hierarchies that put human societies in control of everything else on the planet. I read these games in dialogue with contemporary thinkers such as Jane Bennett (2010), Timothy Morton (2010) and Steven Shaviro (2012). [3] I group these commentators under the rubric of "nonhuman-oriented thinkers" while remaining aware of the profound theoretical differences between them (and between the movements they are sometimes aligned with, such as posthumanism, New Materialism, object-oriented ontology and speculative realism). What matters, from my perspective, is that these theorists converge on a critique of human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism, and particularly Western notions of strict separation between human societies and the natural world. In Shaviro's words, "Human beings and their productions are not separate from Nature: they are just as 'natural' as everything else" (2012, p. 2). Animal mayhem games question this separation. Through subversive fun and humour, they bring out the inherent weirdness of human societies' impact on the nonhuman world, an aspect on which nonhuman-oriented thinkers have also focused attention. Bennett (2010) writes about the "vibrant" nature of inanimate things, how they shape--strangely but inescapably--the human world through their materiality. Trash, for example, has a very real effect on human societies, by polluting our surroundings and causing environmental disease. It is undoubtedly strange to think of trash as possessing "material agency" (that is, agency without human-like subjectivity), but it is also a necessary step towards "the emergence of more ecological and more materially sustainable modes of production and consumption" (Bennett, 2010, p. ix). [4]

Morton captures a similar sense of weirdness through the concept of the "strange stranger," which is central to my discussion of animal mayhem games. Think about the abstract, delocalized nature of climate change, for example: climate change is everywhere, it is deeply ingrained in our oil-centric, corporate, capitalist societies, and yet our inability to experience it directly is at the root of our ecological predicament. The invisible pervasiveness of climate change turns it into a "strange stranger," in Morton's terminology: a disruptive element that defies human categorization and conceptualization. The more we learn about a strange stranger, the stranger it becomes (Morton, 2010, p. 17). In *Dee eer Simulator* and in other animal mayhem games, players are afforded a chance to experience the strangeness of material agency directly, by joining forces with the nonhuman--where the "nonhuman" refers to both the computational device players are interacting with and the nonhuman animals that are being represented on the screen. Indeed, as I will show, animal mayhem games are not driven by scientific realism or plausibility, and their main aim is not to produce identification with a particular animal species, but rather to destabilize and defamiliarize the player's assumptions about the passivity of the nonhuman. Videogame scholar James Newman has argued that in the thick of gameplay the "player may not see themselves as any one particular character on the screen, but rather as the sum of every force and influence that

comprises the game" (2002). Animal mayhem games deploy this blending of the player's identity and game design strategically: they create an assemblage, in Bruno Latour's (2005) terminology, that blurs boundaries between the human player, computer simulation and the representation of nonhuman animals. [5] As a result of the "mayhem," the player-avatar assemblage turns into a strange stranger--an uncategorizable, boundary-crossing entity. As we play these games, a sense of nonhuman vitality emerges that is fundamentally subversive, overturning anthropocentric notions and questioning the fixed ontology of Western thinking. These games embody what Nicole Seymour has called "bad environmentalism": a set of ironic practices that employ "dissident, often-denigrated affects and sensibilities to reflect critically on both our current moment and mainstream environmental art, activism, and discourse" (2018, p. 6). The environmental movement, as Seymour argues, has historically framed its arguments from a position of moral earnestness that can border on a self-righteous, holier-than-thou attitude. Animal mayhem games prompt a renegotiation of human-nonhuman divides that is not based on an external moral system, but on bottom-up, philosophically engaged fun.

In the first part of this article, I contextualize animal mayhem games vis-à-vis debates in game studies and criticism on the medium's affordances for probing nonhuman ways of being in the world. This involves discussing the affective possibilities of "becoming-animal" (in Deleuze and Guattari's terminology) through gameplay, as well as the distinctive form of defamiliarization proffered by animal mayhem games. In the final sections of the article, I offer a reading of *Goat Simulator* (Coffee Stain Studios, 2014) and *Untitled Goose Game* (House House, 2019), which typify two subcategories of animal mayhem games respectively: open world games (*Deer Simulator* falls into this group) and puzzle games. I examine the different pathways through which these games enact a subversion of anthropocentric assumptions: in *Goat Simulator*, the player's experience is aligned with a sense of free-floating, undifferentiated embodiment, reflecting the highly unstable nature of the avatar; in *Untitled Goose Game*, by contrast, solving puzzles calls for a dance that brings together the nonhuman avatar, the human player, the anthropomorphic non-player characters (NPCs) and the physical affordances of the gameworld. Even though I occasionally draw inspiration from online reviews and commentary, this discussion is primarily based on my own game experiences. My goal is to illustrate a particular way in which animal mayhem games can be read and played in light of today's environmental crisis and the challenges it raises for Western notions of human mastery. I do not claim that players of animal mayhem games will necessarily share my conclusions, but I wish to illustrate an interpretive strategy that can be cultivated both through ad-hoc game design and in teaching videogames in various educational contexts.

### **From Becoming-Animal to Becoming a Strange Stranger: Introducing Animal Mayhem Games**

The field of game studies has started to interrogate the value of technologically mediated play as a means of examining and deepening human-animal interactions (Westerlaken, 2016). Recent discussions have explored the significance of videogames that cater to a fantasy of inhabiting an animal's body (Cremin, 2016; Fuchs, 2021). This fantasy is not unproblematic, however, because it can suggest that the human vs. animal divide can be completely closed by way of gameplay, potentially reinforcing a sense of human mastery or control over the nonhuman. That illusion is precisely what animal mayhem games, as I theorize them in this article, seek to undercut.

*Shelter* (Might and Delight, 2013) is, for instance, a game that can speak to an illusion of human control. The player impersonates a badger and is asked to protect the avatar's offspring from multiple threats, including birds of prey and a wildfire. The game's main attraction is its convincing evocation of the perceptual and sensorimotor skills of a badger, the feeling it creates of sharing an animal's body. The heavily aestheticized landscape is central to that experience: the game's stylized forest serves as a stand-in for the

difference between human and animal perception (Figure 1). Put otherwise, the cartoonish quality of the surrounding landscape reminds players that they are not controlling a human body (which would have called for a more naturalistic game space), but a nonhuman one.



Figure 1. A screenshot from *Shelter* (Might and Delight, 2013), in which the player controls a badger

Game scholar Colin Cremin (2016) invokes Deleuze and Guattari's (2007) concept of "becoming-animal" to discuss the affect of sharing a nonhuman body in the digital medium of videogames. [6] In Cremin's words:

[Becoming-animals] consist of a conjunction of at least two bodies, and there are conjunctions of two or more bodies in video games. The human (player) imposes her will on the animal (avatar or diegetic object) while, at the same time, in a never-ending apprenticeship, the avatar, or object in a general sense, indicates ways to proceed, to exceed, in other words, what the player was until then capable of. (2016, pp. 451-452)

Ben Davis expresses this feeling when reviewing *Depth* (Digital Confectioners, 2014), a game that casts the player in a shark's body: playing "as a shark in *Depth* is my new favorite thing. Controlling the sharks feels incredible; they move and behave exactly the way I feel a real-life shark might, darting swiftly through the water, stalking their prey, and thrashing about in the heat of battle" (2015). Fun derives from the sensorimotor flow of inhabiting an animal body that differs radically from our day-to-day embodiment--a form of technologically mediated play that brings the reviewer closer, imaginatively, to nonhuman ways of experiencing the world. In games like *Shelter* or *Depth*, the player's becoming-animal involves "apprenticeship" (to use again Cremin's metaphor) with a recognizably nonhuman avatar, one whose qualities and sensations come to steer gameplay away from ordinary human embodiment. The player's interaction with the animal avatar decentres them from the human-scale world for the duration of gameplay.

Michael Fuchs (2021) focuses on this decentring in a discussion of a videogame titled *Bear Simulator* (Farjay Studios, 2016). Fuchs notes that many players expressed frustration at the game's lack of traditional game mechanics and objectives. This frustration, Fuchs argues, is symptomatic of how becoming-animal through gameplay can challenge the anthropocentric conventions that underlie not just videogames, but Western culture at large: "*Bear Simulator* exposes a limitation on the part of humans, thereby undermining the notion of humankind's undisputed superiority to other life forms on the planet" (Fuchs, 2021, pp. 268-269). Thus, the experience of taking on an animal's body through gameplay can be inebriating (as Davis's review suggests), but it can also raise unsettling questions about the human desire to control and master nonhuman ways of being. By becoming animal (imaginatively, through videogame experience), players are confronted with the limitations of their own anthropocentric perspective on the world--an important realization, as Fuchs argues, in times of ecological crisis.

Indeed, one begins to wonder if the feeling expressed by a reviewer like Davis (simulated sharks "move and behave exactly the way I feel a real-life shark might") doesn't display a form of anthropocentric

complacency--an illusion that, through videogame simulation, players may really be able to understand and appropriate animal ways of life, instead of understanding the *limitations* of human knowledge of the nonhuman (as Fuchs suggests). For instance, the aestheticized visual language of *Shelter* can foster a sense that human players effectively experience the world from a badger's perspective. [7] However, the seeming ease with which a badger's life can be recreated within a technological medium can lead to reaffirmation of human mastery: put bluntly, because the player has access to and control over an avatar resembling a nonhuman animal, his or her belief in human superiority may be reinforced. Videogames that flaunt the possibility of "becoming animal" are thus fundamentally ambivalent: depending on both game design choices and the interpreter's predispositions, they can perform a critique of anthropocentric assumptions or evoke an ethically problematic sense of control over the nonhuman.

By contrast, animal mayhem games strategically undercut any claim to mastery. That process unfolds in several steps. First, the player is positioned within an avatar body that looks and feels nonhuman. Whether it is the body of a goat, a deer or a goose, animal mayhem games foreground the distinctiveness of nonhuman bodies vis-à-vis human modes of embodiment, even though this distinctiveness typically makes no claim to realism (unlike games such as *Shelter* or *Bear Simulator*, where the avatar's movements are constrained by species-specific plausibility). In *Goat Simulator*, for instance, the goat is able to perform incredible aerial stunts without any threat of bodily harm: this device elicits sensations of flow-like, unimpeded movement, which feed into the player's enjoyment of this open world. In *Untitled Goose Game*, by contrast, the main source of kinaesthetic reward for the player is the quasi-choreographic precision of the animal's movements as it disrupts human activities. [8] At the same time, gameplay penalties are eliminated or greatly reduced, so that the player is encouraged to experiment with animal embodiment without fearing consequences: the goat is immortal, the goose may fail a particular puzzle but can always reattempt it. The low stakes of this embodied triangulation between the player, the animal avatar and the gameworld fuel the illusion of a human-nonhuman assemblage as the player takes on a nonhuman body.

Yet, while this illusion is ostensibly a goal in itself in games like *Shelter* or *Depth*, animal mayhem games do not stop there. Engaging affectively with a nonhuman animal is here a step in a conceptual dynamic that leads to the defamiliarization of human-nonhuman relations. [9] As players leave human embodiment behind in animal mayhem games, their illusion of sharing an animal body is disrupted by other factors, which complicate significantly the ideological takeaways of gameplay. This form of embodied apprenticeship leaves no room for anthropocentric complacency, because such games overtly and self-consciously undermine the usual logic of human-animal interactions. *Shelter* takes place against the backdrop of a pristine forest where human beings are all but absent, so that the game is based on a binary separation between human society and a nonhuman landscape--a separation that, as I explained in the introduction, has been seen with growing suspicion in nonhuman-oriented thinking. The upshot of the climate crisis we are experiencing is that no ecosystem or landscape on Earth is protected from the devastating consequences of industrialization and global capitalism. Yet the sublime wilderness resonates so strongly with the Western imagination because it affords imaginative escape from modernity's relentless shaping of the nonhuman world. While a game like *Shelter* gives in to that fantasy, animal mayhem games resist it forcefully by foregrounding human-nonhuman coexistence within urban landscapes, such as the modern cities of *Goat* and *Deepeer Simulator* and the small-town setting of *Untitled Goose Game*.

The label "animal mayhem" only makes sense in an urban context, in which nonhuman animals tend to be culturally regimented into three categories: companion animals, food, or unwanted pests. In the cultural imagination of the West, wildlife is considered to be virtually absent from the city or to inhabit its margins (and when it does enter the city, it is easily absorbed into the pest category). [10] The physical boundary between urban and nonurban spaces is mapped

onto the conceptual binary between human and nonhuman, so that policing human-animal relations within urban space also means adopting a hierarchical and anthropocentric way of thinking about nonhumans. As an illustration of this culturally ingrained link, during the COVID-19 pandemic footage of wild animals making forays into deserted cities started circulating on social and news media (Macdonald, 2020). These images are so emotionally resonant because they violate basic cultural assumptions about the place of wildlife, signalling the magnitude of the disruption experienced by societies in the Global North. Such emotional reactions, while understandable, can reinforce anthropocentric dichotomies and ignore the long-standing coexistence of human communities and a wide spectrum of animal species within cities. [11] In fact, these videos do not show that nature is “healing” (although they are often framed that way in the media), but only reveal the inadequacy of cultural constructions of nonhuman life. [12]

Animal mayhem games perform a similar cultural operation by focusing on animals that deliberately hinder human activities. Here the nonhuman takeover doesn’t evoke a relapse into a mythical state of nature. [13] On the contrary, it reveals a nonhuman agency that was present within urban spaces all along and is now capable of subverting their anthropocentric set-up. Bennett influentially discusses the “vitality” of matter as an antidote to “human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption” (2010, p. ix). Animal mayhem games hold a mirror up to this vitality by enlisting and defamiliarizing the player’s embodied involvement. As the goat of *Goat Simulator* grabs vehicles and people with its phenomenally prehensile tongue, it affirms the “sticky” continuity between animal and human life and, concurrently, it drives home the idea that nonhuman agency eludes human grasp. As the goose of *Untitled Goose Game* executes a carefully planned prank, it exposes the naiveté of the human characters’ belief that *they* are in control of the world. In probing these forms of nonhuman vitality, animal mayhem games translate the insights offered by nonhuman-oriented theorists like Bennett into a hands-on experience of subversive fun and humour.

Thus, the experience afforded by these games does not lead to an uncritical embrace of animal life of the kind *Shelter* can foster. Rather, the player shares an animal body in order to rewrite the rigid cultural structures that underlie our very understanding of animality. Enjoyment aligns with an ideologically sophisticated operation of distancing the player from cultural categories that dichotomize the human and the nonhuman. The self-conscious artificiality of animal mayhem games and their satirical use of generic conventions (particularly pronounced in *Goat Simulator*, as we will see) contribute to this defamiliarizing project by fostering a critical mode of engagement, one in which players are unlikely to take the depiction of animal experience at face value. Instead, sharing an animal’s body (becoming-animal) is integrated into a cultural dialectic that works towards the humorous subversion of anthropocentrism. The ecological potential that Fuchs (2021) identifies in a game like *Bear Simulator* is intensified as animal mayhem games give up any pretension to realism and instead embrace the strangeness of human-animal entanglement. This is the weird, unsettling quality of what Morton calls, elusively, “strange stranger”:

Instead of “animal,” I use strange stranger. This stranger isn’t just strange. She, or he, or it--can we tell? how?--is strangely strange. Their strangeness itself is strange. We can never absolutely figure them out. If we could, then all we would have is a ready-made box to put them in, and we would just be looking at the box, not at the strange strangers. (2010, p. 41)

A strange stranger is a reminder of the permeability of ontological boundaries that Western culture has taught us to see as rigid. [14] In animal mayhem games, instead of “merely” becoming animal in a way that can still tip over into anthropocentric complacency, players are afforded an opportunity of becoming a strange stranger: a more-than-human creature that disrupts the ontological workings of Western thinking, and particularly its strict categorization of the world into humans, animals and inanimate things. This distinction is challenged

as soon as the avatar, in a recognizably nonhuman form (but of course being controlled by a human player via a computational system), enters the space of the city and disrupts the orderly course of human activities.

Formulating one of the basic principles of his videogame criticism, Ian Bogost argues that “games create complex relations between the player, the work, and the world via unit operations that simultaneously embed material, functional, and discursive modes of representation” (2006, p. 105). Animal mayhem games showcase the complexity of these relations in full. They establish linkage between the real-world materiality of animals’ bodies, the cultural discourse surrounding animals and the functional integration of nonhuman avatars within a game system. This linkage takes significantly different forms in *Goat Simulator* and *Untitled Goose Game*, the two games on which I focus my close readings in the following sections. While the former is situated at the intersection of animal mayhem and open world action games, the latter represents a unique crossover with puzzle games.

### **Ragdoll Vitality: *Goat Simulator***

A disclaimer on the *Goat Simulator* website offers an early indication of the game’s aggressively tongue-in-cheek rhetoric: “*Goat Simulator* is a small, broken and stupid game. It was made in a couple of weeks so don’t expect a game in the size and scope of *GTA* with goats.” The game, as noted by many reviewers and players, does feel unpolished and half-baked. Yet the developers’ conceit has attracted a great deal of attention since the first alpha gameplay videos surfaced in 2014. While some of these critical responses dismissed the game as little more than a short-lived YouTube sensation (e.g., Stanton, 2014), *Goat Simulator* has shown remarkable persistence in gaming circles and has seen a number of expansions over the years. The lead developer, Armin Ibrisagic, compared the game to *Tony Hawk’s Pro Skater* in a pre-release announcement (Lien, 2014). The reference seems apt: at its core, this is a physics-based game that invites the player to perform various kinds of stunts with the titular goat, such as a triple backflip or a high jump from a trampoline. The game features a score meter that rewards particularly impressive tricks through a system of achievements. After introducing the player to the basic controls, *Goat Simulator* lays out no explicit goals: it is up to the player to find out how to obtain the game’s achievements, either through trial-and-error or by resorting to the extensive information made available by the fan community. The *Grand Theft Auto* series, mentioned in the disclaimer, is an obvious reference point for the game at the level of both setting and gameplay, with the player being free to engage in the kind of urban rampage *GTA* games are infamous for. Instead of guns, the goat wields a telescopic tongue that is able to grab objects and people and fling them around the map, with slapstick effect. These malicious activities also earn the player points.

After the original release in 2014, the developers added a series of expansions parodying a variety of established and emerging genres, from massively multiplayer online games (the *World of Warcraft*-inspired *Goat MMO Simulator*) to postapocalyptic survival (*GoatZ*) and science fiction à la *Mass Effect* (*Goat Simulator: Waste of Space*). These references augment the open-world inspiration of the baseline game, offering a self-referential commentary on today’s gaming landscape. This dimension of the game has not been lost on reviewers: writing in *The Verge*, Adi Robertson characterizes *Goat Simulator* as “a single-serving, self-awarely broken playground with a lot of loose objects, an arbitrary score counter, and a clever outlay of pop culture Easter eggs. The developers themselves seem mildly bemused at the fact that people want to buy it. Central to the gimmick, though, is an invitation to look closer at how games are made” (2014). The metaludic inspiration calls for a sophisticated mode of gameplay, one where the physics-based fun of the goat meets awareness of the game’s engagement with the latest gaming fads (including alpha titles that are as buggy as *Goat Simulator*, but in a far less self-conscious way, or the forensic search for hidden achievements). However, this parody proves surprisingly deep when approached from a nonhuman-oriented perspective.

The goat avatar functions as a strange stranger: a nonhuman wildcard within an otherwise conventional gameworld in which human activities (driving to work, attending an art exhibit, playing sports, etc.) are both recognizable and orderly. The familiarity of this urban setting is compounded by the satirical barbs aimed at the repetitive and unimaginative "grind" that characterizes genres such as MMORPGs and survival games. If the game's set-up is deeply conventional and clichéd, the goat disrupts it through its unpredictable physicality, which stems from both the physics-based gameplay and the trouble the goat can create within the gameworld.

*Goat Simulator* enables the player to cycle between two regimes of embodiment, one marked by extreme passivity (the so-called "ragdoll" mode), the other by deliberate agency. Together, these modes give rise to a goat-player assemblage in which the human player's choices and the nonhuman animal's powers become difficult to differentiate. The game's ragdoll button turns the goat into a free-flying object, allowing the player to rotate and twist the goat's seemingly dead body--with the tongue comically sticking out--while on the ground or in the air (Figure 2). This mode foregrounds the inert materiality of the goat, which serves as a disruptive object thrown into the game's anonymous city. Ontological distinctions between architectural elements, vehicles and people are collapsed as the gameworld becomes an undifferentiated playground, with the goat's docile body at its centre. [15] If the ragdoll physics seems to shift the agency from the goat to the player who controls it, the other regime of embodiment foregrounds the animal's telescopic tongue as an expression of its ungovernable animacy and vitality. Much of the game's kinaesthetic fun has to do with the fact that it is hard to predict how a particular interaction with the gameworld will unfold--hence the goat's exuberant physicality, which transcends the player's control. [16] Through what the game describes as "licking" (and a number of similarly transgressive actions), the goat reshapes the world at its will, toppling structures and smashing pedestrians into moving vehicles. The provided "slow-motion" mode heightens the spectacle of these slapstick sequences, turning the goat (or more accurately the goat-player assemblage) into a director of premeditated, and of course highly mischievous, exploits. Through the combination of ragdoll and more deliberate gameplay, *Goat Simulator* thus highlights the supernatural adaptability of the player-goat's hybrid embodiment, which can make itself passive and object-like but also wonderfully efficacious in rewriting this familiar urban space.

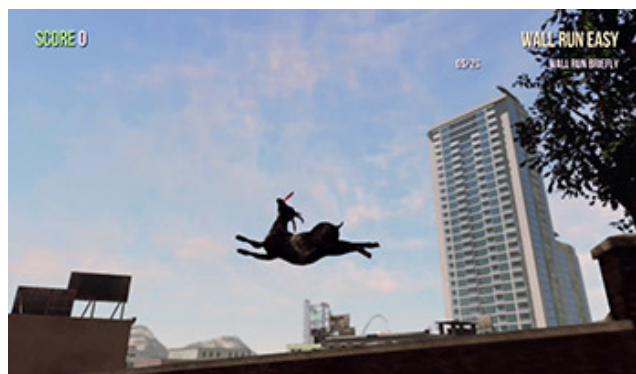


Figure 2. The goat flying in "ragdoll" mode in *Goat Simulator* (Coffee Stain Studios, 2014)

The contrast between the goat's incredibly supple body and the awkward, mannequin-like physicality of the gameworld's human inhabitants helps to align the player imaginatively with the goat. Players can certainly experience becoming-animal as they immerse themselves in the goat's complementary regimes of physicality. However, that relationship with a nonhuman animal is complicated by the inherent weirdness and overt self-referentiality of the game's set-up. There is far more strangeness to the game than the premise of a goat wrecking things. The animal's disruptive agency is not subject to the most basic constraint on animacy--namely, mortality: the goat cannot die in *Goat Simulator*, not even when jetpacking into a speeding truck. We are free to experiment with embodiment without



consequences, turning “ragdoll” (that is, inert) and then going back to the goat’s intentional licking and ramming.

If the goat embodies nonhuman agency, it is an agency as pliable and shapeless as its body. In fact, the game features a system of “mutators” that morph the goat’s appearance into entities as diverse as a giraffe, a shopping cart, or a microwave with legs. Rather than becoming a specific animal--goat or otherwise--players are thus given the chance to experience a strange stranger, to use again Morton’s term, a shape-shifting creature that appears to structurally blur the line between the human and the animal, the object-like and the sentient. The player’s interactions with the game reveal, then, a background of material vitality that undercuts the ontological distinctions of Western modernity. This vitality is as unpredictable as the goat’s moves, as disorienting as the seamless shifts from ragdoll inertness to intentional mayhem. The game’s mundane setting only throws the goat’s nonhuman vivaciousness into sharper relief. We are far from the pristine landscapes so cherished by the environmental movement, whose rhetoric of wonder and sublimity runs the risk of reifying nature and reaffirming binary thinking. Instead, we are confronted with a recognizably human space that mutates, like the goat, into a deeply perplexing landscape as the player explores the possibilities of human-nonhuman assemblage.

*Goat Simulator* fosters a creative mode of gameplay that embraces the weirdness of the game’s systems, with their destabilization of distinctions between the human player, the animal body we are controlling and the things it can freely morph into. The subversive fun afforded by *Goat Simulator* reveals the inadequacy of an anthropocentric understanding of agency and animacy, because these phenomena--like the goat’s tongue--stretch well beyond human-scale reality. This strange goat, to borrow Bennett’s (2010, pp. 2-3) felicitous phrase, is a material manifestation of “thing-power.”

### **Commander in Mischief: *Untitled Goose Game***

If *Goat Simulator* is all about unleashing an unstable body that is at the same time animal and thing-like, *Untitled Goose Game* calls for a more focused and strategic sharing of a nonhuman body. Developed by Australian studio House House, *Untitled Goose Game* has a reassuringly familiar setting. Unlike the generic city of *Goat Simulator*, this idealized version of small-town England has plenty of cartoonish charm, with its well-tended lawns, spacious houses and picturesque high street. The game’s progression is also far more linear than in *Goat Simulator*. A short tutorial introduces the player to the goose’s moves and abilities (spreading its wings, bending forward in order to grab objects and of course the bird’s honking, which is at the same time comical and disruptive). After that, the player is presented with a to-do list that includes items such as “get into the garden,” “steal the groundskeeper’s keys” and “have a picnic.” Once these tasks are completed, a new area becomes available, along with a new set of objectives. In essence, *Untitled Goose Game* is a puzzle game with stealth elements: in order to complete the tasks, the player is asked to perform a number of actions in the right sequence and time them according to the position of the game’s non-player characters. To get into the garden, for instance, the player has to open the faucet outside the fence, which activates a sprinkler on the other side; when the groundkeeper unlocks the gate in order to turn off the faucet, the goose can sneak in (Figure 3). As the game progresses the sequence of actions becomes longer and more convoluted.



Figure 3. Sneaking into the garden in *Untitled Goose Game* (House House, 2019)

Solving these puzzles is, inevitably, a trial-and-error process, particularly when the wording of the tasks remains vague (e.g., “get on TV” or “make someone buy back their own stuff”). The player’s problem-solving attempts also contribute to the characterization of the goose as a scheming strange stranger whose main goal is the destabilization of everyday human life. As in *Goat Simulator*, a human-nonhuman assemblage is created as the player comes to share the goose’s embodiment. The game’s score, based on Claude Debussy’s *Préludes*, adapts dynamically to the player-geese’s actions. This adaptive music underlines the animal’s cunning by integrating its actions within an emotional trajectory reminiscent of a slapstick film, with a slow build-up and a comic punchline. A reviewer describes this effect as follow:

The playful piano music almost provides a kind of insight into the goose’s mind--the melody plays in quiet, short bursts when it’s up to no good, creeping up on its next victim. When the goose is in full chaos mode, waddling away from the gardener who just wants his keys back, the piano tune plays out in full, encouraging the player to keep up the shenanigans. (Lee, 2019)

The reviewer highlights the link between the affective qualities of the music and the “insight into the goose’s mind” they experienced: it is as though the game’s dynamic score functioned as a feedback mechanism for the player’s engagement with avatar. More specifically, the score creates an affective arc that reinforces the player-geese coupling at the level of both physical action within the gameworld and awareness of the goose’s machinations. Rather than a unidirectional experience in which we leave the human behind to adopt a bird body, this is a collaborative process that criss-crosses the human-animal divide: the game provides us with objectives in human language, the goose enables us to complete these tasks with its unique embodiment--and with obviously humorous effects. [17]

There is another form of human-nonhuman collaboration at the heart of the game, though, and it involves the non-player characters. Many of the tasks the player-geese is asked to perform simply cannot be completed by them alone. Instead, they require enlisting the human characters’ unwitting “help.” Take, for example, one of the goose’s most elaborate feats (“Get dressed up with a ribbon”): to complete this mission, the goose needs to enter a private garden and swap places with a bowtie-sporting goose statute. A woman is watching, though. The goose needs to distract her before it can drag away the statue and take its place. The bowtie also has to be removed and placed where the woman can see it when she returns, so that she mistakes the real goose for the statue and puts the bowtie on.

Achieving this objective (and indeed most other objectives in the game) thus calls for an elaborate “dance” that encompasses the animal avatar, the human non-player characters, the gameworld (the statue, the ribbon), as well as the computer system. Bennett, one of the nonhuman-oriented theorists I mentioned in the introduction, describes human-nonhuman relations as a dance: “Humanity and nonhumanity have always performed an intricate dance with each other. There was never a time when human agency was anything other than an interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity; today this mingling has become harder to ignore” (2010, p. 31). In

*Untitled Goose Game*, the choreographic quality of the player's interactions derives from the fact that timing and position are paramount. Just as the music underscores the humorous trajectory of the goose's mischievous feats, many of the goose's actions need to be timed correctly: waiting a second too long before taking the statue's position in the bowtie sequence, for example, inevitably results in the woman noticing that the goose isn't a statue. This is also a human-nonhuman collaboration of sorts, like the player-avatar coupling I discussed above. But this collaboration is asymmetric, in that the player-geese is in complete command, while the human characters are mere puppets under our control. Their apparent mindlessness is heightened by the fact that getting the puzzles right involves, in most instances and for most players, a fairly large number of failed attempts. Yet after each attempt the characters appear unfazed and return to whatever they were doing, without realizing or paying much attention the goose's scheming. [18] Of course, this is fairly common device in this kind of puzzle games, reflecting constraints in game design and the need to limit the player's frustration, but here the non-player characters' seeming forgetfulness is recuperated as a commentary on human-nonhuman relations, at two levels. First, the human characters' behaviour reveals their foolishness and gullibility. Second, and less trivially, it emphasizes their blindness to nonhuman agency and intentionality; their dismissing animal minds as merely capable of short-term or instinctual thinking. In their coupling with the nonhuman avatar, players are in a privileged position: they have access to the bird's devious mind *and* they can see through the human characters' indifference to it.

In sum, the unsuspecting help the goose receives from the human characters ends up reinforcing the intelligence and deliberateness of the animal's mischief. The becoming-animal of *Untitled Goose Game* thus works differently from *Goat Simulator*, even if it is also geared towards a similar sense of human-nonhuman entanglement. *Goat Simulator* foregrounds gameplay in which human-nonhuman binaries are erased as players enjoy the affordances of a shape-shifting body that eludes categorization. *Untitled Goose Game*, by contrast, favours sequential gameplay within a more orderly world: distinctions between the human and the nonhuman are at first maintained but mischievously turned inside out as players engage with the nonhuman avatar. This engagement involves sharing cognitive resources and sensorimotor skills with a nonhuman and using them to sabotage regular human activities--a set-up that aligns players with animal life without giving in to the illusion that they can fully understand what it is like to be a goose. Instead, the creative possibilities of interspecies collaboration are highlighted, and more specifically the comedic possibilities of transgressing anthropocentric hierarchies via the strange partnership between the oblivious human characters and a strategically minded goose.

## Conclusion

It may seem far-fetched to link a game as whimsical as *Goat Simulator* to the ideological and philosophical issues that surround humanity's position vis-à-vis the nonhuman world. Certainly, *Goat Simulator* is not a "serious" game, whether in the loose sense of the word or in the more specialized sense of a game with a didactic agenda. [19] While discussions in game studies have tended to oppose fun to seriousness of engagement, my reading of animal mayhem games shows that fun can serve as an important tool of ideological questioning: it can disrupt an anthropocentric mindset and channel insight into nonhuman vitality, material agency and thing-power. In that respect, animal mayhem games are profoundly different from games that foreground forms of "becoming-animal," because animal mayhem undercuts the illusion that gameplay can completely bridge the gap between human and animal ways of being; instead, animal mayhem games encourage players to interrogate the limits of human knowledge and mastery--including the forms of mastery provided by more conventional games. Not all players will arrive at an explicitly nonhuman-oriented reading of these games, of course. However, by foregrounding the breakdown of human activities at the hands of nonhuman creatures both *Goat Simulator* and *Untitled Goose Game* speak to contemporary nonhuman-oriented philosophy in

ways that can be productively deepened through game criticism and education.

The argument I have developed doesn't position animal mayhem games as a mere mechanism for delivering an ecological message, but rather as a springboard for critically engaging tensions and shortcomings in today's thinking about environmental issues, including climate change. Recent contributions by scholars such as Shavero, Morton and Bennett critique a monolithic conception of "nature" as intrinsically separate from the human world, advancing instead a vision of fundamental human-nonhuman entanglement or "enmeshment" (to use Morton's metaphor; see Morton, 2010, p. 15). Further, this entanglement is seen as radically disruptive of binaries that are deeply entrenched in Western modernity, such as body vs. mind, nature vs. culture and animal vs. human. Reshuffling these conceptual categories is a profoundly destabilizing act, as expressed by another concept introduced by Morton, the strange stranger. The weirdness of climate change and its catastrophic consequences may lead to anxiety but also--and I think more productively--creates favourable conditions for imaginative transgression, for a playful rewriting of the conceptual landscape of Western modernity. It is the latter route that animal mayhem games privilege by positioning the player within a human-nonhuman assemblage. Transformed into a strange stranger, the player explores the nonhuman vitality of an unstable body (*Goat Simulator*) or the possibilities of strategic plotting across the human-nonhuman divide (*Untitled Goose Game*).

Subversive humour and irony are perhaps not the most obvious tones to strike in addressing the ecological crisis and the profound rethinking of human-nonhuman relations it calls for. But, as Seymour's discussion in *Bad Environmentalism* (2018) shows in relation to irony, we need to experiment with affective registers that recast ecological issues in less polarizing ways than bleak or catastrophic messages. While the "gloom and doom" frequently favoured by the environmental movement tends to generate resistance and denial, humorous and ironic strategies hold significant ecocritical value, because they "are capable of articulating complex and contradictory sensibilities, and they are self-aware and open to critique" (Seymour, 2018, p. 13; cf. also Becker & Anderson, 2019). This is an important lesson not only for the study of videogames, but also for game designers and developers seeking to address the imaginative challenges of the climate crisis. Through their playful self-awareness, animal mayhem games demonstrate the environmental relevance of fun by asking players to share nonhuman bodies and by steering their engagement towards a critique of an anthropocentric worldview.

## Endnotes

[1] More information on *San Andreas Streaming Deer Cam* can be found here: [http://bwatanabe.com/GTA\\_V\\_WanderingDeer.html](http://bwatanabe.com/GTA_V_WanderingDeer.html). I would like to thank one of the journal's anonymous reviewers for bringing this project to my attention.

[2] See Bladow and Ladino's (2018) edited collection for more on affective responses to the ecological crisis. Seymour (2018) offers an excellent critique of standard environmentalist rhetoric, which ties in closely with my interest in subversive fun in this article.

[3] See also a collection edited by Richard Grusin (2015) for an overview of nonhuman-oriented thinking in the humanities.

[4] For more on material agency, see Iovino and Oppermann's (2014) "material ecocriticism."

[5] See also Taylor (2009) for discussion of Latour's concept of assemblage in relation to videogame experiences. Giddings (2009) develops a similar framework, focusing on interactions between human and nonhuman participants in videogames.

[6] It is beyond the scope of this article to consider the intricacies of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming-animal. I build on

Cremin's discussion to how explain how the experience of sharing an animal's body through the videogame medium can result in different ideological stances vis-à-vis the nonhuman world, depending on the specific framing of that experience.

[7] See Caracciolo (2016, Chapter 4) for a more sustained discussion of this illusion.

[8] See Gregersen and Grodal (2009) on how game interfaces can create a strong kinesthetic link with the player.

[9] For more on the dialectic of defamiliarization and affective engagement (more specifically, empathetic perspective-taking) in relating to animal characters, see Bernaerts et al. (2014). Mitchell et al. (2020) offer a discussion of defamiliarization in relation to videogames specifically.

[10] For discussion from the perspective of human geography, see Philo (1998).

[11] See Ursula Heise's (2016, Chapters 4 and 5) discussion of the complex cultural status of wildlife in an urban context.

[12] "Nature is healing" was the slogan of a satirical meme circulating during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. The meme critiqued the shortcomings of the argument that COVID-19 could benefit the nonhuman environment, as news stories were implying at the time. See Felton (2020).

[13] *Tokyo Jungle* (Sony Interactive Entertainment Japan Studio, 2012) may be seen as an exception: it is an animal-centric action game set after the vanishing of humanity, when Tokyo becomes contested territory for multiple animal "gangs." But while human beings are absent throughout the game, the ending asks the player to choose whether the animals should bring humanity back or not--a nod at the fact that humanity's fate is closely intertwined with the nonhuman.

[14] Hanna Wirman's study of captive orangutans' interaction with screen technologies also brings out the irreducible strangeness of nonhuman animals: Wirman acknowledges the "urge to accept orangutans as strangers in their difference" (2014, 113). I would like to thank one of the journal's anonymous reviewers for referring me to Wirman's work.

[15] Within the nonhuman turn, object-oriented ontology has focused on the challenge raised by objects to Western philosophical categories. See Harman (2002) for general discussion and Bogost (2012) for an application to videogames that resonates, in part, with my reading of *Goat Simulator*.

[16] Seth Giddings and Helen Kennedy (2008) discuss "kinesthetic pleasure" in a way that converges with this reading of *Goat Simulator*.

[17] For more on character engagement as a collaborative activity based on the imaginary sharing of resources, see Caracciolo (2020).

[18] There are some exceptions--for instance, a "no goose" sign is put up by one of the non-player characters--but these only occur in the transition from one scene to another, not within the puzzles.

[19] For further discussion of serious games, see Rockwell and Kee (2011).

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