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Tom Tyler, *Game: Animals, Video Games, and Humanity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022), 248 pp.

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Tom Tyler’s book begins with an observation on the polysemy of the word “game,” which can refer to a playful rule-based activity, to the body (or meat) of a hunted animal, and to a sense of eagerness (as in “being game for something”). But if the meanings of “game” form a triad, the meanings of animals in video games are even more numerous, as Tyler’s book shows through a series of pithy chapters. While grounded in animal studies, the book speaks to debates on the ethics of human-nonhuman relations in the environmental humanities. However, readers expecting a grand theory of animal life in video games or sustained confrontation with the existing scholarship on (for example) posthuman ethics will no doubt be disappointed: Tyler’s argumentation is essayistic, it meanders from one topic to the next with performative flair but also little patience for the technicalities of scholarly discourse. Tyler never claims otherwise; we are already warned in the introduction that the essays “investigate some of the complex and often contradictory ways in which players of video games have been invited to encounter, understand, and engage animals” (3). The formulation is broad, and the scope and variety of the chapters that follow even broader, but there is nevertheless a great deal to be learned from these readings.

Before turning to those intellectual payoffs, though, it is worth remarking on the sheer pleasure of seeing Tyler cover so much ground in such limited space, as in chapter 4, which is an extended digression on the value of enumeration and rumination (and at the same time a manifesto for Tyler’s own digressive method). The chapter starts from a twelfth-century Latin tale about a storyteller who falls asleep in mid-story, then moves on to the practice of counting sheep to fall asleep, then finally homes in on games, and particularly on the “cud-chewing creatures” encountered in games by Jeff Minter, founder of Llamasoft.

While this may sound like mere divertissement, it is anything but shallow: Tyler’s readings position video games within a long cultural history that frequently originates in etymology and takes us to present-day concerns. Chapter 5, for example, revolves around the etymology of the word “inkling” and its unrelatedness to words for juvenile animals such as “duckling”—but also discusses how the game *Splatoon* imaginatively closes this

linguistic gap by placing the player in the role of a squid-like “inkling” who moves around the game world by squirting colors. Most significantly perhaps, Tyler’s chapters confront the ethical demands of including nonhuman animals in the human practice of gaming. Chapter 7, for example, combines the science of fish pain with a reading of Vlambeer’s 2013 mobile game *Ridiculous Fishing* to conclude that “the only kind of fishing worth doing . . . is the virtual variety of *Ridiculous Fishing*” (64). Other chapters situate games within a broadly posthumanist project of undermining anthropocentric thinking, whether it is through the individuality of the boars encountered in *Titan Quest* (chapter 2) or through the unsettling nonhuman agency of pandemics, as performed by the player of *Plague Inc.* (chapter 11). Chapter 9 offers perhaps the most focused discussion of the book, with an overview of the functions of food in games, leading to an insight into the unstable cultural meanings of meat, which “can connote not just power and vitality, but also exposure and vulnerability” (83). The ethical inspiration is, again, clear when Tyler turns to *Super Tofu Boy*, a PETA-commissioned response to an earlier game titled *Super Meat Boy*. Chapter 12 enters the debate on the accessibility of game experiences and asks whether games should necessarily allow players to adjust their difficulty level. Animals drop out of the picture until Tyler, with one of his characteristic twists of argumentation, turns to the way in which nonhumans (from pets to experimental animals) have been implicated in various forms of gaming, becoming not merely an object but a *subject* of inclusive gameplay. This implication demonstrates both the opportunities of play in bridging the human-nonhuman gap and the contradictions inherent in limiting animal freedom in settings such as the zoo and the science lab.

This is an effective and enjoyable way of introducing ethical concerns without telegraphing them: the reader is drawn into Tyler’s witty style and gradually exposed to the difficulties of encountering animals in both games and real life. As the author argues in the final chapter (and at the risk of spoiling here the effect of Tyler’s indirectness) each of the book’s essays “addresses some aspect of game design or mechanics . . . but also, during the course of its exposition, reveals itself as aligning with a vegan sensibility” (150). “Vegan sensibility” is perhaps too narrow, or modest, a phrase, because it seems to me that the essays introduce a much wider range of ethical concerns—relating, for example, to the existential value of frustration in games that cannot be “beaten” (chapter 6) and how such frustration can prove generative in rethinking human-nonhuman relations. While Tyler’s work draws on sources that will be familiar to most animal studies scholars (from Jakob von Uexküll to Anat Pick), the readings offered in *Game* open up new ways of thinking about the form of games, nonhuman animals, and their complex entanglements in human practices. Through its energetic prose, this is a remarkable book that will provide inspiration to many scholars in the fields of ecocriticism and animal studies, as well as any reader who cares about how play—digital, verbal, or both—can take us out of our anthropocentric comfort zone.