

Becoming-animal in *Everything*: Posthuman Affect in Computer Gameplay

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Abstract

This paper examines the posthuman affect in computer gameplay by drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's idea of "becoming-animal." It does so by looking specifically at *Everything* (2017), an art game developed by artist David O'Reilly which lets the player transform into different species and objects in the universe, and comparing it with *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (2020), another videogame famous for its use of animal imagery. Foregrounding the posthuman affect in becoming-animal, this paper provides an example of how to undo anthropocentrism and engage posthuman subjectivity in digital play. This research does not simply look for correspondences between the practice of animal metaphors in computer games and Deleuze and Guattari's becoming-animal, but attempts to see how they might illuminate each other.

Becoming-Animal and Posthuman Affect

This paper explores how computer gameplay can enable a process of "becoming" for the player by engaging with Deleuze and Guattari's idea of "becoming-animal." In the tenth plateau of *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 237) point out that "[a] becoming is not a correspondence between relations. But neither is it a resemblance, an imitation, or, at the limit, an identification." In other words, becoming-animal is not to imitate an animal or to identify the characteristics of an animal. It should be understood in relation to another key concept of Deleuze and Guattari, the concept of affect. "[A]ffect is not a personal feeling, nor is it a characteristic; it is the effectuation of a power of the pack that throws the self into upheaval and

makes it reel" (1987, 240). Becoming-animal, for Deleuze and Guattari, is "the capacity to affect and be affected" (1987, 261), to enter "a zone of proximity" (1987, 273) or "modes of relation" (Braidotti 2013, 170) with the animal. Such becoming-animal can be seen, according to Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 243), in Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick* in which Captain Ahab has an irresistible tendency to become-whale.

Irving Goh (2009, 42) further interprets becoming-animal as a question "of opening oneself to the sensation of animal affects and responding to them affirmatively, rather than allowing any anthropomorphism or anthropocentrism to block those responses." In resisting the central position of human and humanism and engaging with things outside the humanist and textualist tradition, such as bodies, affects, and animals, Deleuze and Guattari's idea of becoming-animal can be seen as an instance of posthuman affect that seeks to undo human subjectivity and anthropocentrism.

The Turn to Affect in Game Studies

In line with the affective turn in critical theory and cultural criticism, here I will review several strands of research into affect in game studies. Eugénie Shinkle, for example, distinguishes affect and emotion, and posits affect as "a way of describing the 'feel' or intensity of a game" (2005, 22). Shinkle follows Brian Massumi (2002) to conceptualize affect as the intensity of precognitive bodily response. Such affect can be best manifested in videogames that privilege intensity over content such as Sega's musical game *Rez* (2001). As Patricia Clough (2008, 3) mentions, "for Massumi the turn to affect is

about opening the body to its indeterminacy, for example the indeterminacy of autonomic responses.” Similarly, for Shinkle, the parallel turn in game studies concerns the opening of the player’s body to the intensity and sensation of the game world.

Another example of the discussion of affect in game studies is Aubrey Anable’s work *Playing with Feelings* (2018). In this book, Anable takes up American psychologist Silvan Tomkins’s theory of affects as a counterpoint to Deleuzian versions of affect theory. According to Anable the Deleuzian versions (i.e., Massumi) understand affect as “what gets bodies out of the grids of signification” (2018 55), whereas Tomkins’s theory recognizes the mutual interdependence of affect and cognition, which, in a sense, puts affect back into the signifying structure. In attempting to arrive at an affective account of video games, Anable analyses a specific case of touch in videogame play, namely, the touchscreen. For Anable, screen is “a site of contact between representation and computation” (2018 55): touching the screen is a way of “feeling” the code. This interpretation seems to indicate that the player’s affective charge from the game relies on the signification of in-game representation.

These two examples above demonstrate different ways of understanding affect in computer gameplay: the former locates affect in the player’s bodily production, the latter in the realm of signification and representation. This paper, however, does not regard the two as opposites, rather it engages the idea of becoming-animal as an example to demonstrate the mutual entailment of the player’s bodily response and the process of meaning-making. The animal here should be understood as both the figurative signifier the player is directly engaging with on-screen and the categorical indicator of the nonhuman and posthuman dimension that characterizes digital play.

Becoming-animal in computer gameplay

What does it mean to become-animal in the case of computer games? What kind of posthuman affect does becoming-animal in computer gameplay open up to? How should posthuman

affect be understood in relation to the specificity and materiality of computer games? This paper will respond to these questions by looking specifically at *Everything* (2017), an art game developed by artist David O’Reilly which lets the player transform into different objects in the universe and explore the procedurally generated game world from the perspective of various objects and species. By analyzing the mechanism of this game, unfolding the experience of playing it, and comparing it with *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (2020), another videogame famous for its use of animal imagery, this paper explores the conditions and possibilities of posthuman affect in digital games and play.

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Biography

Yu Hao is a PhD Candidate at the School of Creative Media, City University of Hong Kong. She is researching the intersections of computer games studies, media art, and media philosophy.