

Hunting, Killing, Crafting: On the Use of Animals in Open World Games¹

Erik Van Ooijen, Örebro University

The article focuses on how violence against animals is represented in video games. Instead of studying the most outrageous visual representations, however, it focuses on the less conspicuous aspects of animal violence manifested in the hunting mechanics of open world games. Taking a rhetorical approach, it considers the ideological functions implied by the procedural gameplay of the hunting element. The article addresses four main topics: how games represent the relationship between hunting, killing and crafting; construct implicit distinctions between human and non-human animals; separate species into juridical and ethical categories associated with different values; and deal with the algorithmic nature of representations of wildlife and extinction. Among the games discussed are Rockstar's Red Dead Redemption (2010), and Ubisoft's Assassin's Creed III (2012) and Far Cry 3 (2012).

Keywords: Violence against animals, hunting, procedural rhetoric, Assassins Creed, Far Cry, Red Dead Redemption

The present article focuses on how violence against animals is represented in video games. I use 'violence' in the traditional sense, meaning a use of physical force so as to injure or damage. However, I also consider acts of violence as being inevitably linked to the less explicit ethical values and ideological norms that make certain such acts seem more normal or natural than others. As a theoretical framework, I use the concepts of 'objective violence' (Žižek, 2008) and 'carnism' (Joy, 2010) to denote a system of thought that allows many kinds of violence, carried out by humans

against animals, to seem commonplace and perhaps even trivial. Instead of studying the most outrageous visual representations, I focus on the more routine aspects of animal violence manifested in the hunting mechanics of open world games. Taking a rhetorical approach, I consider the ideological functions implied by the procedural gameplay of the hunting element.

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Game Studies and Animal Violence

Studies on violence against animals in games have been surprisingly scarce. In the general discourse on gaming, however, accounts can be found on the reactions of individual players when confronted with depictions of such violence. For example, vegetarian players have described the troubling experience of being forced to carry out virtual acts of slaughter while playing. In one critical essay, games writer and designer Kunzelman (2013) observes how the introduction of a 'hunger' mechanics in Mojang's open world sandbox game *Minecraft* (2009; 2011) prompted new incentives for killing in-game animals. Striving to play as a vegetarian character, Kunzelman details how he had to stop playing as the game forced him to kill a pig in order to survive. On a similar note, games writer Meer (2011) notes how his attempt at playing an animal-friendly character in Bethesda's open world RPG *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011) was interrupted when he set out to punish a poacher only to be attacked by the poacher's dog.

The growing body of empirical research on the psychological and emotional effects of playing violent video games, on the other hand, tends to focus on games where aggression is directed at human or highly

anthropomorphic individuals (Chittaro & Sioni, 2012). Studying aggression in relation to a game of the ‘Whac-A-Mole’ variant where you kill insects, Chittaro and Sioni (2012) stress how representations of violence against animals tend to cause little concern, as it is more socially accepted and sometimes even encouraged (for example in relation to cockroaches and other species designated as pests). Unlike many games where you kill humans, games such as ‘Whac-A-Mole’ thus allow players to engage in violent acts without having to face “taboo or moral stigma” (235).

If we accept that game violence functions quite differently when directed against human or non-human animals, we may suppose that it is closely connected to ethical and ideological concerns regarding the human/animal distinction. Following Sawers and Demetriou, we may consider games ideological constructs that “position the player to assume certain values around the human/non-human relationship” (2010, 245). By focusing on how games encourage or discourage violence against certain species, we may study the ideological operations related to the classification of species. One task for game studies, then, will be to map out the ways in which games regulate what acts of violence are allowed or disallowed, and presented as acceptable or unacceptable. How is violence made possible in the first place?

An Approach to Game Violence and Non-human Animals

Violence is an ideological concept. What we regard as being violent is determined by implicit norms regulating what acts are considered normal or abnormal, remarkable or insignificant. Žižek (2008) distinguishes between what he calls subjective and objective violence, where the former are those acts that shock us – they are sudden, unexpected, and singular – whereas the latter rather signifies the often invisible force exercised in reproducing a state of apparent normality. The point is that acts of subjective violence only become visible against a backdrop of objective violence that is equally powerful yet remains unnoticeable simply because it

maintains our everyday conception of “how things are”; violent events interrupt a status quo that is itself violent. By only focusing on situations that appear shocking and gruesome, then, we risk losing sight of the extensive and violent forces maintaining everyday life. In relation to game studies, this means that by only focusing on the most shocking games when discussing violence – the *Postals* and the *Manhunts* – we neglect the more subtle forms of ideological work carried out by games considered as cultural objects (cf. Ooijen, 2015).

One way of illustrating the distinction between subjective and objective violence is by referencing the outrage caused by the many recurring scandals in industrial meat production. When butchering goes wrong, and a particular factory is caught, for example, with boiling a pig alive, our attention is suddenly directed towards the otherwise mundane violence inherent to the food industry at large. Even though we are all aware that the industrial production of meat requires violence, all such scandalous instances are still presented as singular and accidental, simply because they defy our often unconscious conception of what kinds of violence are normal and acceptable.

Joy has coined the term *carnism* to designate the ideological system of beliefs that allows us to consider meat eating as something “normal, natural, and necessary” (2010, 96–97). Although ten billion animals are killed each year within U.S. agribusiness, this is a kind of violence that never results in headlines; it is only when something appears out of the ordinary that we react. According to Joy, industrial violence against animals seems normal to us because of the way we establish cognitive schemas and mental classificatory systems that allow us to sort different species into various classes associated with certain values, attitudes, and forms of interaction. Cockroaches are exterminated, cows are butchered, but cats should be kept free from violence. While some species are pets, others are pests, and yet others are considered food.

Games are of interest in this context precisely because they model such classificatory schemas as part of their fundamental design. Bogost (2007) maintains that games make meaning not by fully reproducing the world but by selectively modelling certain procedures associated with specific phenomena. According to his ‘procedural rhetoric’ approach, games are understood as restricted procedural representations of particular material processes, thereby constituting a kind of argument on “how things work”. Games direct our attention to how we tend to understand how particular aspects of the world operate.

To a certain degree, then, games become tangible models of ideological aspects; the ways in which they build worlds constitute implicit arguments on how the world works. Speaking about games as models of ecology, for instance, Brown asserts that video games

... often say little that is explicit about climate change and environmental crisis, but because they often create environments (processes, spaces, worlds), they constitute an important site where models of environmental consciousness can be created, allegorized, and played. (2014, 403)

More particularly, games will have to categorize sets of objects and associate them with specific affordances and processes for interaction. Consequently, Wark has maintained that the ‘primary violence’ of the game-space “has nothing to do with brightly coloured explosions or mounting death counts but with the decision by digital fiat on where everything belongs and how it is ranked” (2007, 20).

The ideological function of games becomes apparent in the way games distinguish between classes of people based on such intersecting hierarchies as gender, ethnicity, age, sexuality, et cetera. A less explored facet concerns how games distinguish between different species, and between human and non-human animals. One point of entry for that investigation could concern how games distinguish between who and what

can or cannot be killed, and for what reasons (cf. Ooijen, 2018). By focusing on how such distinctions are being made, we may also determine what acts of violence are considered normal and justifiable in society at large.

Crafting and the Messiness of Hunting

Perhaps the most obvious area for studying violence against animals in games concerns the implementation of hunting mechanics. Brown (2014) notes how hunting has become a major feature of several big-budget (AAA) open world games during the last decade, not least because current era technology allows for lush and realistic three-dimensional models of vast and traversable areas populated by seemingly autonomous flora and fauna. For example, Johnson (2014) points out how the artificial intelligence systems of Rockstar's open world action-adventure Western game *Red Dead Redemption* (2010) allow for the simulation of a rich wildlife consisting of birds, cougars, snakes, wild horses, bears, *et cetera*, all of whom respond to hunger, thirst, and external threats. The world gains a further sense of geographical variation as different species are associated with different biotopes. A certain element of behavioral randomness further diversifies gameplay, as Johnson points out:

The wildlife AI leads to some exciting and unexpected gameplay such as the first time a cougar knocks the player off his or her horse in a strike from behind. With so much of the wildlife scampering away when the player is near or hunting, to suddenly be the hunted demonstrates the game AI's different animal reasoning systems. (Johnson, 2014, 17)

The combination of openness and randomness found in such worlds creates incentives for exploration; unexpectedly stumbling upon a pack of wild animals while running through the forest provides a sense of thrill and rhythm to an otherwise dull trek through the static environments.

Thus, wildlife is used to make the world feel more alive and less tedious; and the prime way to interact with the wild animals is to hunt them and kill them.

In hunting games proper, hunting is more of a ludic, or competitive and goal-driven, endeavour; while in open world games, it is rather a paideic, or playful, activity connected to roaming the land freely. Rather than being the sole purpose of the game, hunting is but one of the many diversions on offer. Still, although you rarely have to hunt for food in these games, the active pursuit of animals is often encouraged through various mechanics of crafting and trade, where you must gather the resources to construct new gear and items. According to the procedural rhetoric approach, all such mechanics will then produce meaning regarding how we are thought to relate to our environment. For example, as Brown points out with reference to the *Far Cry*-series, the implementation of a mandatory crafting mechanic will come to model the natural life of the game world within an exploitative anthropocentric framework: “Here, bear skins and plant life are always waiting to be collected into a certain amount of material for crafting and a certain quotient of XP[.]” (2014, 397). So, while hunting is but one of many distractions, the game still presents a procedural argument on the environment as a source for human exploitation. Nature, these games say, is a bountiful and unlimited source of raw materials to be harvested by the human player; and on a fundamental level, progress and personal development in these games necessitate the killing of animals.

Depending on how the actual act of hunting is represented, different games will come to associate it with different values. Once the prey is brought down in Ubisoft’s *Far Cry 3* (2012), the player must advance towards it and activate a flaying mechanism. Blood splatters across the screen as the player character removes the most valuable parts of the animal’s body (primarily the pelt, used to craft ammo pouches and such). During the act, the player character often expresses his disgust by

uttering sounds of repulsion. By emphasizing the goriness of the act in this simple manner, the game seems to make a procedural argument on the fundamental link between animal goods and bodily violence. The skinning mechanic of *Far Cry 3* may even remind the player of what Pollan once called the messiness of killing – it becomes a sudden realization that the felled prey is a living body like my own:

What disgusted me about ‘cleaning’ the animal was just how messy – in every sense of the word – the process really was, how it forced me to look at and smell and touch and even to taste the death, at my hands, of a creature my size that, on the inside at least, had all the same parts and probably looked an awful lot like I did. (2006, 358)

Viewed in this way, gore is more than mere speculative entertainment. By emphasizing the violent, corporeal origin of animal products, the skinning mechanic provides the game with a political force lacking from less violent games. In Maxis’ *The Sims 3* (2009), for example, meat is depicted as growing on bushes, like fruit or vegetables, thus obscuring any link between meat and the living animal body (cf. Ooijen, 2015). Thus, the messiness (or cleanliness) of hunting serves an ideological purpose. As pointed out for example by Menely and Ronda, carnist ideology relies on repressing the corporeal origins of animal goods, that is, “the death, the spilled blood, of the animal” (2013, 28). Industrial slaughterhouses, supermarkets, and other social institutions serve to separate the commodity “not only from the living [animal] but from the systems – ecological, political, and economic – in which the [animal] lived and died” (31). In *Far Cry 3*, on the other hand, the player is not allowed to simply buy his leather goods in the form of prefabricated items, but must partake in the messiness of their production.

The fundamental link between crafting and killing is further underlined in games like *Red Dead Redemption* and Ubisoft’s *Assassin’s Creed*

III (2012; both set in a Wild West setting), where excessive violence while hunting renders the quarry useless. Taking a shotgun to a small rabbit risks vaporizing its body, and a pelt shot to pieces will generate a lower price in the marketplace. In *Red Dead Redemption*, the effect is also strengthened by dialogue. While cutting up the prey, the player character comments upon the material composition of the body (“Tough one, ain’t ya”), its market value (“This will fetch a good price”), and the general messiness of killing (“This is dirty”). In the latter case, skinning is presented as a dirty activity, both in a literal and a moral sense.

Human Subjects and Non-human Objects

Hunting mechanics also make visible how a particular game models distinctions between different classes of living creatures: human and non-human animals; predators and prey; harmless and dangerous species; wild and tamed; killable and non-killable; edible and inedible; and so on. Perhaps the most fundamental of these is the distinction between humans and animals. Borrowing a term from biosemiotics, we could, for instance, claim that hunting games in general model the world according to the Umwelt of the human hunter. As the environment is ordered according to the subjectivity of the hunter, any animal becomes a contextual object embellished with a ‘target’ tone; it exists, first of all, as a thing to be killed.

Even at the most fundamental level, then, most open worlds constitute a kind of anthropocentric argument. In some particular cases, games seek to invert this logic by making the human the object of hunting, along the lines of hunter-inversion narratives like Connell’s short story “The Most Dangerous Game” (1924) or Woo’s movie adaptation *Hard Target* (1993). Most often, the inversed hunting trope is limited to a particular quest, like “Caught in the Hunt” in Bethesda’s *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (2006). In that case, the inversion is restricted to a kind of carnivalesque state of exception where normality temporarily is

turned on its head. In a few cases, however, the inversion is used as the very premise of a game, as in Hypnotix' *Deer Avenger*-series (1998–2001), a parody of hunting games where you as a deer hunt humans. However, since the deer is a speaking bipedal caricature of a macho hunter, using various types of guns and dressed in full camo regalia, little is changed at the level of gameplay. In *Deer Avenger*, inversion is limited to a visual re-skinning of a traditional hunting game.

Apparently, the basic human/animal subject/object distinction is hard to escape, and even in games using the trope of inversion, it is maintained at the most basic level of gameplay. A random encounter in Bethesda's post-apocalyptic *Fallout 3* (2008) involves a group of roaming hunters who sell a food stuff called 'strange meat'. Those familiar with the series recognize this as a euphemism for human flesh, the implication being that the hunters secretly hunt, kill, butcher and sell people as meat. Nevertheless, although the game implements 'human hunting' as part of its game world, its basic mechanics maintain a fundamental distinction in *why* humans and non-human animals are killed. When looting a human body, you acquire their possessions: weapon, armour, money, and so on; but when looting an animal, you acquire its meat. Even at such a basic level, the game seems to model the human as subject and the animal as object. Whereas the human is robbed of his belongings, the animal is killed for its body. Whereas the human is owner, possessor, a being of culture, the animal is food, resource, a being of nature.

A similar point can be made in relation to the mechanics of scalping in *Assassin's Creed III*. Although a game like Neversoft's open world western *Gun* (2005) allowed for the player to scalp his human enemies, a similar mechanic was planned for, but excluded from, *Assassin's Creed III*. Director Hutchinsons states the reason for this in an interview:

So we started out with some historical research that said that scalping did exist, people were offering bounties, but the more we dug, the bounties were for men, women and children with different values, and most of the scalping took place on people who were alive and there's all kinds of terrible stories of people surviving being scalped. It just starts to feel a little tasteless. It might seem funny but then we had this vision of people killing twenty guards and then one-by-one scalping each of them. When you really follow it through, it's not a tone that we wanted for the game. (GDC Interview, 2012)

By singling out the scalping of humans as tasteless and abnormal, the skinning of animals appears as tasteful and normal. As in the case of meat, animals are implicitly represented as fragmentary *bodies* of dismountable parts, whereas the human, on the other hand, is a uniform *corpse*, that is, an individual even in death. Returning to Žižek's logic, violence against humans comes to stand out as unsettling when it is placed against a backdrop where violence against animals is normal. Even when a game exempts a specific class from violence, it makes an implicit assertion on what other kinds of violence are considered normal.

Animals as Juridical and Ethical Categories

Most open world games present arguments on how various species should be morally evaluated, for example by distinguishing between classes of animals that should or should not be killed. One common distinction separates the aggressive animals, that will always attack you, from the passive animals, that will scurry away when you approach them. In Obsidian's post-apocalyptic open world RPG *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010), such a distinction is connected to a karma meter which congregates, in numerical form, the moral consequences of the player's actions. Whereas killing aggressive, feral or mutant animals won't affect the meter, killing passive, friendly or domesticated animals will give a negative

reading. While killing a passive animal is coded as morally bad, killing an aggressor is coded as neutral. According to the logic of the game, self defence is morally acceptable.

A complex RPG like *Fallout: New Vegas* does not expect the player to play morally good. Rather, the moral coding of various acts provides the player with options for role playing a wide range of characters. Whereas some will want to play as animal-friendly as possible, others may simply want to wreak havoc. The game's system of optional perks allows the player to further tweak how the character engages with the non-human animals of the game world. For example, whereas the 'Hunter' perk makes your attacks on animals more lethal, the 'Animal friend' perk makes aggressive animals turn friendly, and some will even come to aid you in battle. Thus, the game encourages the player to explore the different ways in which the character may relate to the animals in its environment.

However, no matter how much tweaking a game allows for, it will have to sort creatures into different classes tied to different values. In *Red Dead Redemption*, all wild animals, like elks and wolves, are fair game whereas domesticated animals, like dogs and cattle, are marked as being owned by a human individual. Whereas killing animals is no crime *per se*, killing animals that are in someone's possession is considered an offense and will result in a bounty. You may hunt and kill wild horses but not domesticated ones, lest you become the target of bounty hunters. The different bounties tied to different crimes allow us to see how the game world is organized into a hierarchy of species based on their conceived economic worth. For example, shooting a domesticated dog results in a three dollar bounty, while a domesticated horse is worth a five dollar bounty. To kill cattle is worth twenty dollars, while an innocent (that is, non-aggressive) human being is worth the double. In contrast to the moral universe of *Fallout: New Vegas* and its karma meter, the economic

universe of *Red Dead Redemption* is governed by monetary worth and the legal right to own animals.

A peculiar case is *Assassin's Creed III*, as it provides the player with a motivation for why certain species of animals should be killed and others not. Although each instalment of the series is based on similar gameplay mechanics, each one takes place in a different historical setting. However, according to the unique story of the series, what you play, within the fictional setup of the story, is not a character from that time *per se*, but rather an advanced virtual simulation of the genetically passed down memories of the protagonist character's ancestors. Thus, since in *Assassin's Creed III*, the player character Desmond runs a simulation of his Mohawk ancestor Connor's (or Ratonhnhaké:ton's) memories, all of the 'computational' aspects of the game (such as the head-up display) are naturalized by the fact that the player, according to the fictional logic, actually plays a virtual simulation running on a particular game engine using this very interface and set of controls, *et cetera*. This causes a tension between being in the world and recreating a fixed set of memories. While the open world encourages free (paideic) exploration, the goal-driven (ludic) elements of the narrative forces the player to stay on track in reproducing the memories of his ancestor. If the player diverges too far from this path, the simulation 'desynchronizes' and breaks down.

The tension between free play and control is specifically evident in the way the game handles random killings. A central element of the game is that you must hunt animals in order to expand trade and increase the industrial production of various goods. Whereas the game allows you to kill human enemies and wild animals, it is forbidden (but possible) to kill innocent bystanders and domesticated animals. Since the ancestor whose memories you recreate acted on a strict moral code, the player, too, must follow that code in order not to desynchronize the simulation. For example, when Connor fells a prey, he honours the animal's supposed

sacrifice by kneeling in front of its body, giving it thanks while also removing its skin. Hereby, the game establishes a kind of hunter's ethics.

Rather than emphasizing the messiness of the hunt, like *Red Dead Redemption*, *Assassin's Creed III* accentuates its ritual aspects; the potentially immoral act of killing is transformed into a moral act of honouring the sacrifice. Historically, ritual has, as Pollan points out, been one of the ways in which slaughter has been made socially acceptable, "to help people feel better about killing, cooking, and eating animals" (2013, 51). Derrida famously coined the word 'carnophallogocentrism' to underline how any humanist ethics rests on animal sacrifice, since the "establishment of man's privileged position requires the sacrifice and devouring of animals" (Birnbaum & Olsson, 2009). Ritual thus makes killing palatable.

If a player of *Assassin's Creed III* breaks the moral code of the ancestor by casually killing animals without honouring their gift of death – that is, by simply leaving their carcasses behind without also triggering the skinning mechanic – s/he will be disqualified and the simulation will desynchronize. The same thing happens if you kill domesticated animals, like chicken or pigs, or civilians. Thus, the living beings of the game world are fundamentally divided into the two classes of the fair game and the taboo. On the one hand, we have the bears, beavers, and soldiers, who may be killed with little consequence; and on the other hand, we have the cows, dogs, and dock workers who are considered untouchable.

By mapping out such distinctions, and by paying attention to the ways in which games make certain acts of violence seem more acceptable than others, we may get a better understanding of its implicit ethical and political framework, than if we simply were to evaluate the explicitness of its most apparently violent elements.

Abundance and extinction

Video games are of particular interest for the study of representations of violence against animals due to their digital nature. In contrast to most art forms, they must actively organize creatures into various classes associated with different values and affordances. Perhaps the most significant peculiarity of the medium when considering representations of hunting, however, regards finity. Due to the algorithmic nature of the medium, life is infinite. In contemporary games, death is seldom final; when you die, you simply respawn at the latest checkpoint. Enemies, in turn, may also respawn infinitely. No matter how many individuals you kill, the world never runs empty.

As a consequence, the natural life of game worlds tend to be modelled in accordance with a certain industrial capitalist ideology, that is, as an infinite source to be exploited. Or, as Brown notes in regards to the representation of marine life in Rockstar's *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013):

Humpbacks and orcas, kelp and coral exist in the game as infinitely bountiful objects, which are capable of a varying degree of interaction with the user and with one another, but whose numbers are essentially inexhaustible and immune to changes in the ostensible ecosystem in which they live. (2014, 383)

In *Red Dead Redemption*, the game world is constructed so that a new number of animals will be generated at random intervals within the various geographical zones associated with its species. No matter how many individuals you kill, the population will never be exhausted. Having had a successful boar hunt in a particular part of the forest, you may always return at a later time to find new prey. According to the algorithmic rhetoric of the game, wildlife is inexhaustible.

The limitless number of animals guarantees that there is always a way to earn money in the game, by heading out into the woods to hunt for

pelts, meat, and other animal resources. A few specific goal-driven activities and achievements also rely on the availability of animals. For example, in the ‘Sharpshooter’ and ‘Master Hunter’ challenges, you must kill a number of targets under specific conditions (for instance, kill five birds from a moving train; kill a bear using only your knife); and by killing at least one of each wild animal species, you earn the ‘Unnatural Selection’ achievement.

In video games, any confines on the number of specimens is a conscious design choice. In Rockstar’s *Grand Theft Auto IV* (2008), one of many side activities involves cleansing the city from sick pigeons. The number of pigeons is restricted to 200, and each one is located at a specific place, difficult to find. The game lets the player keep track of how many that have been killed or remain. Once the final pigeon is eliminated, the player is greeted with a message celebrating the very finality of the event: “All diseased pigeons killed. LC is a cleaner place.” (cf. Furze, 2014, 143)

The pigeon hunt is the very opposite of a randomly respawning wildlife. Rather than hunting the birds, you collect them – they are collectibles more than simulated fauna. Hunting games, too, may limit the number of individuals, as in the common trope of ‘legendary’ animals, that is, unique individuals that may only be killed once. In order to complete *Red Dead Redemption*’s ‘Master Hunter’ challenge, for example, you must kill two legendary animals whose unique standing is enhanced by the fact that they are given personal names: Khan the Jaguar and Lobo the Wolf. Usually, legendary animals are the most prestigious prey. In hunting games, the singularity of an animal is an incentive to kill it; the rarer the animal, the more desirable it becomes. Hunting is, after all, a blood sport.

At one point, however, *Red Dead Redemption* breaks with its logic of respawnability in a more significant way. Whereas killing the last pigeon in *Grand Theft Auto IV* is a satisfying and greatly anticipated experience,

a similar situation in *Red Dead Redemption* comes as a bit of a surprise. As the player gains access to the Great Plains area, s/he stumbles upon a new species, the American Buffalo. Since the player has been accustomed to killing any wildlife you happen to come across, chances are that you will start hunting the buffalo, too. However, unbeknownst to the (first-time) player, these never respawn; the population is strictly limited to the twenty individuals grazing the plains. Once you kill the last buffalo, a hidden achievement is unlocked, titled 'Manifest Destiny'. Unlike the pigeon hunt, the achievement is not a quest or a challenge given in advance. While killing off buffalos, you are unaware that you are slowly wiping out an entire species. Once the achievement unlocks, it becomes significant precisely because it breaks with the game's previously established mechanics.

As a studio, Rockstar is known for a penchant for both controversy and social critique. 'Manifest Destiny', of course, is the established term for the ideology of westward colonization and violent exploitation in the name of progress in 19th Century America. It was based on the conviction of the virtue of the American people and the belief in a God-given mission to civilize the 'savage continent'. In the process, the American buffalo was cleared out to pave way for the expanding railroad and to weaken the Native American population who relied on the species. Towards the end of the century, the buffalo population had dwindled to about a thousand animals, making the species close to extinct (cf. Marchand *et al.*, 2014, 50).

Manifest destiny symbolizes the idea of modern progress and the conquering of nature, that is, the very ideology modelled by most open world games using wildlife as an infinite resource. By breaking with its own established logic of respawnability, *Red Dead Redemption* also breaks with the implicit norms of the open world genre. Writing on the ethics of video games, Hayse stresses that through "careful design, even the most suspect elements within video game play can foster ethical

reflection and mediate moral meaning” (2014, 472). This is precisely what happens when the game uses its established logic of respawnability and its associated imperative to kill in order to address the topic of extinction.

As expressed by ecologist Stanley, the killing of the last buffalo would leave “a lasting impact on the player’s game, and for many it was a shock when they finally realized their bison were never going to respawn” (2014). This is not the shock or horror caused by gruesome depictions of violence, but rather a shock against ideology; that is, of suddenly having to face the force of all those hidden processes you have taken for granted as a state of normality. In *Red Dead Redemption*, the effect is achieved by establishing a certain way of playing, only to suddenly defamiliarize it.

Conclusion

In the present article, I have tried to demonstrate how discussions of violence in games may focus less on explicit depictions of violence in order to rather study how acts of violence are made possible and rendered acceptable in the first place. Taking the hunting element of open world games as my point of departure, I have tried to demonstrate how various games construct procedural arguments on the ethical and political aspects of violence against animals.

My initial focus was the representation of skinning as related to different crafting mechanisms, and I argued that the depiction of gore in relation to acts of killing may serve a political function simply by making visible the ‘messiness’ of producing animal goods. Then, I considered how games distinguish between humans and non-human animals, and, more significantly, how open world games tend to model a world where the human is subject and the animal object. I also observed how games construct classes of species associated with different values and affordances, such as the wildlife fair game and the domesticated taboo. Importantly, I considered how the exemption of certain classes from violence

constructs an implicit argument on what other acts of violence should be considered normal and natural. Finally, I focused on how open world games tend to represent animals as an infinite resource to be exploited. Looking at the representation of extinction in *Red Dead Redemption*, I showed how a game may make a rhetorical point simply by breaking with this logic once it has been established.

Rhetorical analysis of games helps us to make visible the implied norms making up the very foundation of a game world. Thus, it may also help us discern our own societal norms by considering games as tangible models of ideology.

Erik Van Ooijen is Associate Professor in Comparative Literature at the School of Humanities, Education and Social Sciences, Örebro University, Sweden.

Contact: Erik.VanOoijen@oru.se

Notes

1. A previous draft of the article has been published 2018 as “On the Brink of Virtual Extinction: Hunting and Killing Animals in Open World Video Games.” *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture* 9:1, 33–45. This, however, is the final version.

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