

The Non-Human: Agency, Play and the Anthropocene

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Introduction

For many, play is an escape from reality, allowing ourselves to exist beyond the everyday. But what if play acted as more than just an escape and rather, a tool for change, an instrument for conceptual thinking and creative expression. I believe that importance of play is often overlooked and yet is fundamental to human and non-human condition. Johan Huizinga argues the importance of play in *Homo Ludens*¹, observing that play precedes culture, as for however it is defined, culture presupposes human society² and notably, animals (amongst other non-humans) have played long before us, supposing that culture is therefore expressed through forms of play.

Through this essay I propose how experimentation in play, specifically ‘critical play’³, can reconnect us to the non-human, thus promoting interspecies justice as essential to our earthly survival. And as a way of out of the Anthropocene⁴, where we have identified ourselves as the key agents in the climate crisis; our impact on the earth will now leave a permanent scar. Utilising SF thinking: “science fiction, speculative fabulation, string figures, speculative feminism, science fact, so far”⁵ outlined by Donna Haraway in *Staying with the Trouble* and the process of worlding in demonstrating how play in “worlds, gone, here, and yet to come”⁶, can drive a social change and ontological reconfiguration of what has agency when we talk about the environment. I suggest that by building empathy for the non-human through play, we can collectively speculate as to how to induce a return to non-anthropocentric approaches when designing solutions to the climate crisis.

¹ *Homo Ludens* meaning ‘Man the Player’.

² Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: a study of the play element in culture* (London: Maurice Temple Smith Ltd, 1970).

³ Mary Flanagan, *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* (London: The MIT Press, 2009).

⁴ *Anthropocene* refers to our current geological epoch, in which humans have made geologically scaled impact on the earth’s ecosystem.

⁵ Donna J Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 2.

⁶ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 31.

Play as Worlding

Huizinga states that play “is a free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life as being not serious.”⁷ The play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith struggles to settle on a distinct definition, addressing that play is so culturally and socially specific that his attempts in defining it are an adaptive, variable, ambiguous interpretation⁸. Instead adopting a broader understanding that play “is an optimal experience, an escape, a release; it is intrinsically motivated; it is voluntary; it is an actualizing of one's potential; it brings arousal or excitement; it is conflict free pleasure; it is free choice”⁹. Play in its simplistic form, acts out within our lives often as meaningless fun, with no grander motive, but Mary Flanagan extends its capabilities by devising a framework for ‘critical play’, “the avant-garde of games as a medium.”¹⁰ Meaning “to create or occupy play environments and activities that represent one or more questions about aspects of human life”¹¹, perhaps establishing a set of rules to examine a specific issue within a game or the creation of new games whose entire worlds address a problem.

The joy we gain from the experience of play is closely tied to the detachment from the real, an extra-reality. Flanagan acknowledges that a common critique of activist game design is that games lose the value of ‘fun’. Sutton-Smith also resonates with this, suggesting that there is both a push towards and resistance to orderliness in play, and that therefore by purposefully organising critical play for change we strip play of its inherent unpredictability and fun. Flanagan deftly counters this by addressing the importance of subversion in critical play theory, expanding on ideas presented by Antonio Nigri’s work on subversion¹², “subversion has been identified by several theorists and practitioners as a powerful means for marginalized groups to have a voice.”¹³ And that the connection between the play space and the player can be greater enhanced by “subverting set interaction norms in both simple play environments and highly complex games”¹⁴ – by subverting, we encourage the player to innovate and experiment. It is through a combination of these understandings of play that I seek to demonstrate how the act of playing allows us to experiment with the non-human in addressing social and environmental issues by both building empathy for the non-human and allowing experimentation in space where failure is not detrimental to progress.

⁷ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 13.

⁸ Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

⁹ Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, 174.

¹⁰ Flanagan, *Critical Play*, 251.

¹¹ Flanagan, *Critical Play*, 9.

¹² Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

¹³ Flanagan, *Critical Play*, 11

¹⁴ Flanagan, *Critical Play*, 13

However, I believe it is critical to understand that conventional definitions of play, as supposed by theorists like Huizinga, Sutton-Smith and Flanagan are captured through the lens of the human – despite acknowledging the importance of play for both humans and non-humans, they are notably anthropocentric. As such, Haraway teaches we must address the importance of the Other¹⁵, utilising worlding to slice through the entire history of man and therefore speculating to big enough stories to encapsulate multiple species at once. We are hostages of our current historical moment, often imprisoning us within the ideologies of the principles experienced in the everyday. The proposed utopias we create through play in SF worlds provide exploration in possibilities that lie beyond our current epoch. “SF is storytelling and fact telling; it is the patterning of possible worlds and possible times, material-semiotic worlds, gone, here, and yet to come.”¹⁶

Haraway’s approaches to SF and worlding are synonymous with critical play; worlding “is an active, ontological process; it is not simply a result of our existence in or passive encounter with particular environments”¹⁷. Worlding is actively turning our attention to the materiality and context of a space, an embodied and active process. It is “a risky game of worlding and storying; it is staying with the trouble”¹⁸, highlighting why we should turn to SF practices when addressing critical human-non-human play.

In *The Art of Computer Game Design*, game theorist Chris Crawford emphasises that the game space is separate from typical understandings of space as they are safe, closed systems¹⁹. Flanagan expands on this by stating that “If a designer or artist can make safe spaces that allow the negotiation of real-world concepts, issues, and ideas, then a game can be successful in facilitating the exploration of innovative solutions for apparently intractable problems.”²⁰ Following a similar thread, play spaces allow us to connect to both human and non-human without the requirement for a common language or political structure. Eric Zimmerman and Katie Salem frame this as a sort of metacommunication²¹, “play not only grants distinctive meanings to actions but also communicates an attitude toward those actions. This attitude is a type of communication about how the actions associated with play should be interpreted and understood.”²² It is a method that connects the human and non-human alike.

The strength of play over traditional storytelling methods, is that play spaces incorporate a ludic²³ element and are therefore innately non-linear. Presenting ‘real options’ to the player is key to the player making a critical connection to the human and non-human beings within the world. This

¹⁵ *Other* referring to all non-human entities.

¹⁶ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 31.

¹⁷ Helen Palmer and Vicky Hunter, “Worlding,” last modified March 16, 2018, accessed January 2, 2022, <https://newmaterialism.eu/almanac/w/worlding.html>.

¹⁸ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 13.

¹⁹ Chris Crawford, *The Art of Computer Game Design* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984).

²⁰ Flanagan, *Critical Play*, 261.

²¹ *Metacommunication* is ‘communication about communication’, for more on this see (Bateson, 1967).

²² Katie Salem and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003).

²³ *Ludic* meaning being characterised by play behaviours.

process is referred to player agency, essentially the role of the player to make choices within the game space. By adding tangible choices that place real impact upon the game space, the player can make an input that is meaningful to them, personally – an important step in building empathy.

Having addressed how we might define critical play; we can begin to explore how play can be utilised “as instruments for conceptual thinking, or as tools to help examine or work through social issues.”²⁴ Adapting its formulae for interspecies empathy and collaboration, working alongside SF and worlding as a combatant to the anthropocentricity that has resulted in the Anthropocene.

²⁴ Flanagan, *Critical Play*, 1.

Worlding: In the Here and Now

The LARP is derived from an abbreviation for Live Action Role Play (LARP) and refers to a style of performative play, with individuals assuming the identities of their character as set out in the narrative. While the LARP is by no means unique as a form of play, having a multitude of more or less closely related concepts and activities with deep historical roots²⁵, it is perhaps the popularised term to address role playing in a live action setting. Unlike the virtual play space portrayed in videogames, the LARP is a form of play that very directly extends our reality. “The difference betweenLARPs and other types of role-playing lies in the relationship between the “real” (or material) world and the game world”²⁶, the player may assume a completely different outlook on the world, dressing, talking, acting differently. Worlds are reconceptualised to address a specified setting; “plastic sticks become swords, traffic signs are ignored and so on. Understood in this way, immersion within the playscape is not a change of personality, but a change of interpretative framework”²⁷. This performance allows for a more intense sympoetic collaboration between ourselves and the character we adopt within the play space, an exemplary in SF. Thus providing ample opportunity to play critically; the very nature of the LARP is incredibly community driven, devoid of corporate interest and overarching capitalist notions. As Mary Flanagan put it in *Critical Play*, this allows for activist game design created outside of commercial establishments and therefore means that we are creating games for the sake of art; “Artists using games as a medium of expression, then, manipulate elements common to games.”²⁸

Within the LARPing community, the role-playing aspect is taken very seriously, subsequently lending to a deeper level of immersion into the narrative by the players. It is a truly interactive medium “because there the creative side and the receptive side are no longer separate.”²⁹ The Turku School of Roleplaying address this in their manifesto;

“Role-playing is the best currently existing method to simulate the actions of a small society in diverse situations. This can be, for instance, used as a tool for experimenting with different social models. I myself intend to create a working Utopia and then test it with LARPs and fix it where it didn't work.”³⁰

²⁵ Jesper Donnis, Thorup Line, and Gade Morten, *Lifelike* (Copenhagen: Projektgruppen KP07, 2007).

²⁶ Donnis, Line and Morten, *Lifelike*, 26.

²⁷ Donnis, Line and Morten, *Lifelike*, 25.

²⁸ Flanagan, *Critical Play*, 4.

²⁹ Mike Pohjola, “The Manifesto of the Turku School, 3rd Edition,” accessed January 13, 2022, n.d. <https://mikepohjola.com/turku/manifesto.html>.

³⁰ Pohjola, “The Manifesto of the Turku School”, III.



Figure 1 The Sternenfeuer group pose as their characters (Dahmen 2012).



Figure 2 Players taking part in Bicolline La Grande Bataille (the Great Battle of Bicolline), often cited to be the largest LARP ever, (Bicolline, 2016).

One such example of LARPing that addresses both goals of playing critically and SF, is the Treaty of Finsbury Park 2025. This is a collaborative project between Furtherfield and The New Design Congress that captures the uprising of interspecies democracy, presenting itself as a set of LARPs spanning over the next 5 years³¹. Within the game space, players assume a more-than-human role to encourage and bring attention to interspecies political action within Finsbury Park, London. This includes a tree, a bee, a goose, grass, a squirrel, a stag beetle and a dog. Notably, the inclusion of trees and grass both speculate at a posthuman understanding of agency at play here. Alluding to the assemblage of distributed agency across all the humans and non-humans living in Finsbury Park and extending our conventional understanding of what can play³².

“In The Treaty of Finsbury Park 2025, we are catapulted several years into the future where all the species of the park have risen up to demand equal rights with humans. After much unrest, it has been agreed that a treaty will be drawn up, designating these rights, but first humans must learn to better relate to and understand non-humans so they can cooperate better together. Thankfully there has been a new invention – The Sentience Dial – which allows humans to tune into all the flora and fauna of Finsbury Park.”³³

The Treaty is comprised of 4 key parts, beginning in a public LARP of ‘Interspecies Assemblies’ with the intention of planning The Interspecies Festival that will take place later in 2022. This will then be followed up with a public vote to decide the location and subsequently the events of The Interspecies Festival. By 2025, the Treaty will be complete, presented as an interactive document to showcase the pledges of the local people made during the conception of the Treaty, supporting bio-diverse rights for all. “Like the park itself, it will grow and flourish down the multi-species generations.”³⁴

Here, Furtherfield are taking advantage of the LARPs ability to transport the player to an outside consciousness through role-play, shedding their former selves to adopt a new identity as a character within the game in a form of liminoid space, taking advantage of the meta-communicational framework within play to facilitate the interaction of the multiplicity of human and non-human entities involved in the LARP. In *Lifelike*, Tobias Harding suggests that this intimate experience with our character changes us, how we then interpret ourselves and our surroundings upon exit of the narrative space³⁵, identifying the LARP as a prototype to a lived reality. And the more we involve ourselves within the character, the more that we feel a tangible connection. The trouble with this approach is that the players empathy for the character is directly tied to their immersion within the play space. For if

³¹ “The Treaty of Finsbury Park 2025,” Furtherfield, accessed December 27, 2021, <https://www.furtherfield.org/the-treaty-of-finsbury-park-2025/>.

³² For further information on the posthuman understanding of what can play see “What can Play,” (Stone, 2019).

³³ Furtherfield, “The Treaty of Finsbury Park 2025.”

³⁴ Furtherfield, “The Treaty of Finsbury Park 2025.”

³⁵ Donnis, Line and Morten, *Lifelike*, 27.

the player is not interested in committing to their role, they will not be building empathy for the non-human.

This LARP also suggests that our dependency on machine and virtual environments for social interaction has led them to exclude the importance of technological non-humans in Finsbury Park. Just as much as humans posed to be relevant in this context, so should the technology and machines involved in the making of the treaty. Many posthuman theorists have noted that disregarding technology in the wake of the Anthropocene is the wrong approach (See Braidotti, 2013). For machines play a key role in quantifying and exploring the non-human through virtual games, as well as extending the possibilities of play within our own reality. Haraway speaks of the importance that “people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints.”³⁶

³⁶ Donna J Haraway and Cary Wolfe, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” In *Manifestly Haraway*, by Donna J Haraway (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 5-90.



Figure 3 An illustration of *The Treaty of Finsbury Park 2025* and the species involved (Rai, 2020).



Figure 4 *The signing of the treaty by human and non-human alike* (Rai, 2020).

To the contrary, videogames are unique in that unlike the LARP, which extends reality using an individual's imagination, they extend our reality limitlessly by encoding it through virtual space, thus allowing for the more speculative, fictitious, fabulous untying of our known reality. The videogame transports the player into a new world where a series of mediums; music, narrative, ludic interactions, performance, role-play, come together to enhance the formation of meaningful relationships between the human and non-human agents within the game space.

Considering technology or AI³⁷ to play is often seen to represent a tipping point, alluding to the singularity³⁸, as popularised by science fiction. However, more simple forms of designed or programmed play by AI are already present as a sort of companion species, species that coexist with humans, as described by *The Companion Species Manifesto*³⁹. For the purpose of this example, let us assume the definition of AI as per Seth Giddings, one of the first theorists to address game AI in the context of play – “autonomous agents, autonomous behaviours of the game itself, or the capacity of the game's system to respond in meaningful and complex ways to the actions of the human player.”⁴⁰

In *Staying with the Trouble*, Haraway discusses *Never Alone* (2014)⁴¹ as an example of SF in “science art worlding for living on a damaged planet”⁴². Developed in collaboration with the Alaska Native Inupiat people. “These games both remember and create worlds in dangerous times; they are worlding practices.”⁴³ Haraway borrows the term ‘world game’ from the eponymous framework surrounding the conception of the whole earth as a system, developed by Buckminster Fuller in the early 1960s⁴⁴, but instead interprets this as a type of game developed by Indigenous people, these games therefore situating themselves “inside ongoing indigenous stories”⁴⁵.

In *Never Alone*, or *Kisima Inŋitchuŋa*⁴⁶, you play as both Nuna, an Inupiat girl and her arctic fox companion, embarking on a journey to face an eternal blizzard that threatens to destroy everything they have ever known. They set out on a quest to discover the cause of the blizzard together, saving the people and the land they know. Along the way, they receive help from various non-human entities, “the presence and agency of multiple spirit helpers are absolutely central to this worlding”⁴⁷. Haraway also addresses that while playing, ontological and epistemologies must be taken lightly, as play's traditionally anthropocentric definitions require the player be more experimental in their inputs and

³⁷ *Artificial intelligence*.

³⁸ *The Singularity* A hypothetical moment in time at upon which technological growth becomes uncontrollable and irreversible.

³⁹ Donna J. Haraway, “The Companion Species Manifesto,” 93-198, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

⁴⁰ Seth Giddings, “Playing with non-humans: digital games as technocultural form,” *Changing Views: Worlds in Play*, June 1, 2005.

⁴¹ Upper One Games, “Never Alone,” E-Line Media, all Platforms, 2014.

⁴² Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 86.

⁴³ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 86.

⁴⁴ “WORLD GAME,” Buckminster Fuller Institute, accessed January 6, 2022, <https://www.bfi.org/about-fuller/big-ideas/world-game>.

⁴⁵ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 87.

⁴⁶ ‘I am not alone’ in Inupiat.

⁴⁷ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 88.

involvement in the play space when bonding with the non-human characters: “Without inhabiting sym-animagenic sensible materialism, with all its pushes, pulls, affects, and attachments, one cannot play *Never Alone*; and the resurgence of this and other worlds might depend on learning to play.”⁴⁸ This dependence on the both the non-human as both a companion in the play space as well as a means of interacting with and progressing the narrative, addresses the Inuit people’s desire to demonstrate the importance of the non-human in the everyday and as a step in overcoming climate disaster.

However, Haraway’s desire to seek out new SF stories in wake of the Anthropocene does not affect here criticality surrounding videogames as a solution to the climate crisis. When discussing *Never Alone*, she acknowledges it “is not a New Age game for universal oneness, a posthumanist solution to epistemological crises, a general model for collaboration, or a way to finesse the Anthropocene with Native Climate Wisdom”. Limitations exist as to the capabilities of individual games when worlding and of course, worlding should not be confined to Indigenous viewpoints - nor the videogame. Haraway does not allow optimism to obscure necessary criticism of these points, and critical play strategies should certainly address this when they engage with SF thinking and worlding.

⁴⁸ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 88.



Figure 5 Nuna and her arctic fox companion play together for the first time (Loydell, 2022).



Figure 6 Nuna progresses the game with help from a non-human entity (Loydell, 2022).



Figure 7 Nuna and her companion find their way back to their tribe (Loydell, 2020).

It is also important to note the videogame's unique transformative abilities, mapping the player and their abilities onto that of a non-human. Essentially, formulating a framework/world in which the player can experience play as a non-human, therefore building empathy through modes beyond companionship. Unlike the LARP where non-human roles are still performed through the human body and conscience, videogames systems and rules allow for the reconfiguration of abilities specific to a non-human entity. Play in these spaces therefore allow us to communicate with the non-human by better understanding how the character expresses itself physically, how it thinks and behaves. A critique of this is that these game spaces are still constructed anthropocentrically, as there is non-realistic way of interpreting the feedback of the non-human when catering for a specific user-experience. Haraway suggests that knowledge is always situated or localised⁴⁹, therefore when designing games, we can never truly incorporate the user's prior experience.

One example of a videogame that extends the players character to the non-human is the *Untitled Goose Game*, a form of "animal mayhem game"⁵⁰ which employs critical gameplay that takes advantage of subversive fun in play to speak to core ideas surrounding human-non-human empathy. In the game, the player takes control of a goose, setting out to wreak havoc upon a quiet English townscape. Performing collaborative puzzles between the human player, the non-human avatar, the anthropomorphic NPCs⁵¹ and the physical characteristics of the play space. By subverting the typical lifestyle characteristics of goose, we lose the anthropocentric sense of control over the non-human, that might be expressed in non-human games like *Shelter*, where you act out the lifestyle of a family of badgers⁵² and while *Untitled Goose Game* surrounds a similar sense of "human-non-human entanglement"⁵³, by subverting our preconceptions of what it means to inhabit this non-human character. "The non-human takeover doesn't evoke a relapse into a mythical state of nature⁵⁴. On the contrary, it reveals a non-human agency that was present within urban spaces all along and is now capable of subverting their anthropocentric set-up."⁵⁵ I believe these humorous and critical strategies employed in the play space with non-humans in videogames hold eco-critical value, demonstrating the value of fun in critiquing the anthropocentric approach to both the built and natural environment.

As such, I must also address that the importance of creating a sense of play in the existing the built environment to accommodate and address the non-human is also a fundamental part of the toolkit. While posthuman architecture does attempt expand the subject beyond the human user, addressing the non-human through an assemblage of the organic and inorganic, it often fails to directly approach the

⁴⁹ Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 5-90.

⁵⁰ Macro Caracciolo. "Animal Mayhem Games and Nonhuman-Oriented Thinking." *The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 21, no. 1 (2021).

⁵¹ Non-player characters

⁵² Might and Delight AB, "Shelter," Might and Delight AB, PC/Mac, 2013.

⁵³ Caracciolo. "Animal Mayhem Games and Nonhuman-Oriented Thinking."

⁵⁴ Like that of the world of *Tokyo Jungle*. See (Japan Studio, 2012).

⁵⁵ Caracciolo. "Animal Mayhem Games and Nonhuman-Oriented Thinking."

use of playful space to allow for the interaction and appreciation of the human-non-human relationship. I would argue that the specificity of the architectural program is partly to blame for this – by designating a specific role to a space, we increase the efficiency of the task performed within said space, however, consequently reducing the scope for play. It's important to note that this isn't necessarily a problem, spatially efficient structures within nature, such as ant colonies, are very ant-centric, addressing the specific needs of the ant colony. Instead, play space for ants is created in the space between their colonies. The open, unsculptured environment lends space for playfulness – ants have been documented to host mock inter-colony wars within this space. There is an importance to this in-between space within the built environment.

One way in which this has been addressed, is through the late 20th century Avante-Garde Situationist movements, which approaches play within architecture on a larger, urban scale. The initial journal issue of *Internationale Situationniste* in 1959, defined the situationist practice as “having to do with the theory or practical activity of constructing situations”⁵⁶ – sort of journey encouraging the exploration of the urban environment. Their incorporation of play within the urban environment has created a movement that has brought forth a unique appreciation of the world through playful interaction that navigates between the web of the program driven spaces. Ideas of the Situationist transcribe into the explorational qualities of the *Untitled Goose Game*, subverting and reimagining the townscape with playful practices between the human and non-human.

⁵⁶ Flangan, *Critical Play*, 195.

Worlding: In Times to Come

One form of SF through videogames is notably the use of worlding to imagine times to come in conjunction with the here and now. Allowing us in a sense, to learn from the apocalypse without having to experience it as a lived reality⁵⁷. The apocalyptic form of the post-Anthropocene tend to play on typical existential threats to humanity; nuclear war, viruses, the singularity. Exploration in these worlds through the videogame can therefore allow us to experience non-anthropocentric spaces and power-dynamic shift. An obvious problem with many of these explorations in the post-anthropocentric is that these games space often advocate for humanities return to control over the now non-human environment which they left behind, a critique of post-apocalyptic game worlds like that of *Horizon Zero Dawn*⁵⁸. One example that subverts this experience, is *Tokyo Jungle*⁵⁹, where you take the role of a non-human, fighting for survival in an open-world, post-apocalyptic Shibuya, Japan. Typical to post-apocalyptic games, the cold grey palette of post-human Shibuya is now retaken by lush, colourful fauna and flora. Striking similarities to the post-anthropic Manhattan explored by Alan Weisman in *The World Without Us*⁶⁰.



Figure 8 A gazelle runs from a pack of hyenas in the apocalyptic Shibuya landscape (Deltapheonix08, 2012).

⁵⁷ Paolo Ruffino, "Nonhuman Games: Playing in the Post-Anthropocene," *Death, Culture & Leisure: Playing Dead* (2020): 11-25.

⁵⁸ Guerilla Games, "Horizon Zero Dawn," Sony Interactive Entertainment, Playstation 4, PC, 2017.

⁵⁹ Japan Studio. *Tokyo Jungle*. Sony Interactive Entertainment, Playstation 3, 2012.

⁶⁰ Alan Weisman, *The World Without Us* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin's Press, 2007).

Through the game's narrative, you unlock and follow the narratives of a series of non-human playable characters, finally ending on the story of a robotic dog, ERC-003 (its design a play on Shibuya's iconic 'loyal dog' Hachiko). As ERC-003 you are presented with two alternative ways of ending the game; either returning the humans to the world, or alternatively following the 'true' or 'good' ending, where ERC-003 condemns any hope of humanity's survival to oblivion. The post-credits scene of the game then goes on to present a final image, a warmly lit depiction of ERC-003 overgrown by moss and flowers, as the non-human entities continue to exist and flourish in this new non-human Japan.



Figure 9 ERC-003 passes, overgrown with flora as the non-human reclaims the city (Patrickklepek, 2012).

However, I must critique that the trivialisation of the apocalypse through worlding and play space can also act to counter the productive efforts we make in the here and now. By playing within these spaces, we may find that we desensitise ourselves to the abhorrent reality of the damage caused by the humans that results in these apocalyptic scenarios.

Videogames studies also allow us to begin to look at not just the worlds we create through the videogame space, but also our means of connection to those worlds as an instrument of play. This human-non-human relationships formed between ourselves and the controller acts as a foundation of interaction, connecting us the virtual space. Technological actants are just as much an agent of the biological, as outlined in Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto*. We are already cyborgs, within our daily lifestyles our dependence on technology has loosened the ontological understanding of what it means to be human or non-human⁶¹. Technology now manifests itself through human and non-human

⁶¹ Donna J Haraway and Cary Wolfe, "A Cyborg Manifesto," In *Manifestly Haraway*, by Donna J Haraway (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 5-90.

ludic entanglements or as explored in *How We Think*, the ‘*technogenesis*’, the idea that humans coevolved with technology or tools⁶². Which also closely ties to Huizinga conception of *Homo Ludens*, taking inspiration from *Homo Faber* or ‘Man the Maker’; an understanding that we control our environment through tools. This is perhaps one way of understanding the posthuman player; an assemblage of circuitry, semiconductors, buttons, bacteria, cells. “Videogame controllers can be seen as a way of cyborging ourselves. In this sense, the technologically mediated portion of ourselves actually enables further play.”⁶³ Although, this approach does begin to become fairly unproductive in supposing play as a solution to the climate crisis. Perhaps instead addressing that extending the human and non-human’s capacity of play through technology as part of an array of tools in furthering the possibilities of play spaces when considering the climate crisis.

Alvar Aalto was keen to address how important play is as a tool in the process of design itself, not just the resulting play space. Addressing experimentation with form needn’t always produce a practical result, often the knowledge and relationship built with the materials he used in his sculptures, namely birch plywood, resulted in a more rewarding experience.

“It is my firm belief that this preliminary laboratory phase should be as free as possible, often actually totally free from utilitarian ends, for the desired results to be attained. [Some of my designs] never led to any practically viable architectural details, remaining on the level of mere play.”⁶⁴

This approach is synonymous with how Sutton-Smith imagines play, as failure is critical to innovation and change, addressing this in play space allows for failure to take place and enables us to learn from this without the repercussion of failure within a built reality. Aalto has addressed his approach to ‘design as play’ stemmed from Yrjö Hirn, a Finnish aesthetician. In *The Origin’s of Art*, Hirn explained that play and art share many similarities, neither wielding immediate practical functionality, but both in a way serve a more fundamental need of existence. “All art, therefore, can in a certain sense be called play”⁶⁵.

⁶² Katherine N Hayles, *How We Think* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 10.

⁶³ Stone, “What Can Play,” 87.

⁶⁴ Alvar Aalto and Schildt Göran, *Alvar Aalto in his own words* (New York: Rizzoli, 1998), 258.

⁶⁵ Hirn, Yrjo. *The origins of Art. A psychological and sociological inquiry* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1900), 28.

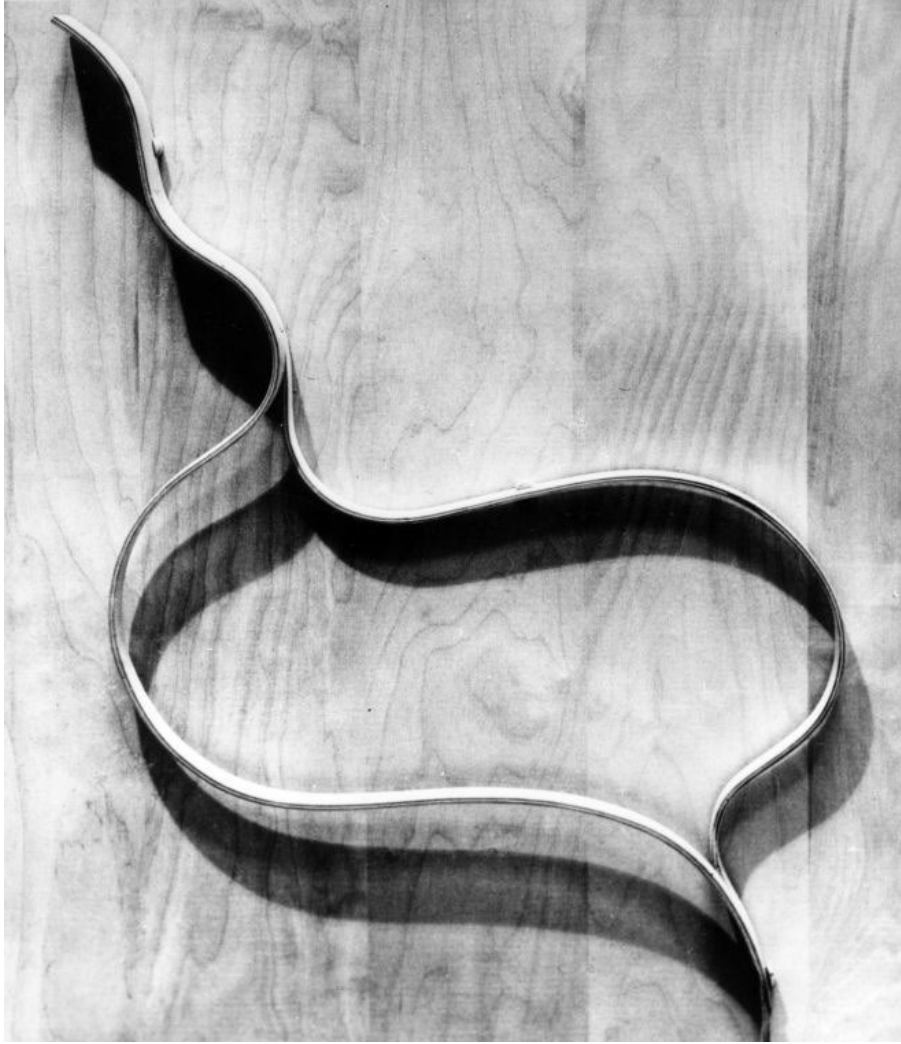


Figure 10 Experimental wood relief in birch plywood (Aalto n.d.).

The utility of playful design processes can begin to extend to speculative design for the incorporation and collaboration with the non-human. Architecture for Dogs is a group of architects and designers with the goal to make both humans and dogs happy through design. One such project is *Architecture for Long-Bodied-Short-Legged Dogs*⁶⁶, which addresses the inability for dachshunds to meet their companions eyes due to their short legs.



Figure 11 A play structure design to allow the dachshund to meet its owners' eyes (Yoda, n.d.).

While playful practice within the process of design is fundamental to progress and change, requiring the creation of new architecture for the purpose of play isn't always necessary and can be counterintuitive to our desire to reduce consumption behaviours. Sara Kaiser, notes that architecture is very 'human-shaped'⁶⁷, as our designs are still approach through an anthropocentric lens. Hanna Wirman, a researcher in non-human participatory play, expands on these notions, citing participatory

⁶⁶ Atelier Bow-Wow. "Architecture for Long-bodied-short-legged Dog." Architecture for Dogs. Accessed January 2, 2022. https://architecturefordogs.com/site/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/05_bowwow_en.pdf.

⁶⁷ Sara Kaiser, "From human-centred to interspecies design," last modified May 23, 2021, accessed January 3, 2022, <https://www.unbore.org/stories/human-centred-to-interspecies-design>.

design and play as a more productive technique for innovation in play with the non-human as “this gap between designer and user is even further widened and becomes a serious obstacle when the user does not belong to the same species.”⁶⁸

Our anthropocentric preconceptions of urban space are deeply engrained within us. As an example of this culturally embedded link, we can look to the photographs of wild animals making forays into deserted cities during the COVID-19 pandemic, which circulated through social media and news outlets⁶⁹. The photographs resonate with us emotionally because it defies our basic cultural preconceptions of wildlife’s place within urban built environments – revealing the inadequacy of cultural constructions of non-human life within the built environment and our ignorance toward to agency of the Other.

⁶⁸ Hanna Wirman and Ida Kathrine Hammeleff Jørgensen, “Multispecies methods, technologies for play,” *Digital Creativity* (2016): 37-51.

⁶⁹ H MacDonald, “Animals Are Rewilding Our Cities. On YouTube, at Least,” last modified April 15, 2020, accessed January 15, 2022, <https://www.unbore.org/stories/human-centred-to-interspecies-design>.



Figure 12 A herd of fallow deer graze on the lawns in front of a housing estate in Harold Hill, London (Stansell 2020).



Figure 13 Dogs rest on the deserted Man Singh road during lockdown in New Delhi, India (Yadav 2020)



Figure 14 A deer walks across a pedestrian crossing in Nara, Japan (Hong 2020)

Worlding: As Utopia

Only in understanding a balanced distribution of agency between the human and non-human, can we begin our transition into the post-Anthropocene. Notably, this will not be the popularised post-apocalyptic understanding of the post-Anthropocene, rather a post-anthropocentric epoch. Whereby building empathy for the non-human through critical play, we can gradually transition into a world where our approach to the built environment addresses the needs for all. I must note that I believe it important to address that any critique of anthropocentrism is often flawed, as it fails to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate human interest. It is for this same reason that Donna Haraway prefers to refer to the current epoch as the ‘Capitalocene’, rather than the ‘Anthropocene’⁷⁰ – addressing that not all humans exploit the non-human to the same extent. This doesn’t necessarily imply that addressing human injustice is a prerequisite to interspecies justice, rather that it need be acknowledged. Human self-love acts as an important biological step in then redistributing this to the Other, both human and non-human⁷¹.

Play is the inescapable force, “It is experimentation, improvisation, failure, trying again”⁷² and essential to our earthly survival. The speculative interpretations of utopian play-space allow us to make mistakes without the repercussions, to learn from our failure without damaging the non-human, the planet. I believe there exists something beautiful about play that lends to the process of conceptualising and worlding for the human-non-human assemblage – play deserves our attention to its possibilities. These utopias should reflect a sympoetic nature, and through play we may create this, become-with, stay with the trouble, “It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.”⁷³

⁷⁰ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 47.

⁷¹ H Kopnina, H Washington, B Taylor et al, “Anthropocentrism: More than Just a Misunderstood Problem,” *J Agric Environ Ethics*, no. 31 (2018): 109-127.

⁷² Stone, “What Can Play,” 97.

⁷³ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 12.

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Figures

Figure 1 Verena Dahmen. LARP: Sternenfeuer group from Germany. Photograph. Wikimedia. March 26, 2005.
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/4/46/LARP_Sternenfeuer_Treffen.JPG/640px-LARP_Sternenfeuer_Treffen.JPG

Figure 2 Bicolline. Players taking part in Bicolline La Grande Bataille (the Great Battle of Bicolline) in Quebec in 2005, a fantasy live action role-playing battle with 2000 participants using foam weapons. Photograph. Wikimedia. 2016.

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Figure 3 Rai, Sajan. *The Treaty of Finsbury Park 2025*. Illustration. Furtherfield. 2020. <https://www.furtherfield.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Larp.jpeg>

Figure 4 Rai, Sajan. *The Treaty of Finsbury Park 2025*. Illustration. Furtherfield. 2020. <https://www.furtherfield.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Larp.jpeg>

Figure 5-7 Loydell, Hugo. *Luna and her Arctic Fox Companion*. Screen Capture. 2022. Never Alone.

Figure 8 DeltaPheonix08. *A gazelle runs from a pack of hyenas*. Screen Capture. Stevior. 2012. <https://608111-1969675-raikfcquaxqncofqfm.stackpathdns.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Tokyo-Jungle-2.jpg>

Figure 9 Patrickklepek. *ERC-003 overgrown with flora*. Screen Capture. Giantbomb. 2012. https://www.giantbomb.com/a/uploads/original/9/93998/2356641-screen_shot_2012_10_31_at_11.46.16_am.png

Figure 10 Alvar Aalto. *Experimental wood relief*. Photograph. Artek. n.d. https://res.cloudinary.com/artek/image/upload/w_658/v1538500517/general/alvar-aalto-experimental-wood-relief.jpg

Figure 11 Hiroshi Yoda. *Architecture for Long-bodied-short-legged Dog*. Photograph. Atelier Bow-Wow. n.d. <https://architecturefordogs.com/site/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/atelier-bowwow.jpg>

Figure 12 Stansell, Ben. *A herd of fallow deer graze on the lawns in front of a housing estate in Harold Hill in east London*. Photograph. The Guardian via Getty Images. March 19, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2020/apr/22/animals-roaming-streets-coronavirus-lockdown-photos#img-7>

Figure 13 Yadav, Arvind. *Dogs rest on the deserted Man Singh road during lockdown in New Delhi, India*. Photograph. The Guardian via Getty Images. April 19, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2020/apr/22/animals-roaming-streets-coronavirus-lockdown-photos#img-13>

Figure 14 Hong, Jae C. *A deer walks across a pedestrian crossing in Nara, Japan*. Photograph. The Guardian. March 19, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2020/apr/22/animals-roaming-streets-coronavirus-lockdown-photos#img-5>