

Playful Animals: An Invitation to Participate

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

We have always been playing with the animals that surround us and they have always been playing with us. The growing range of available technologically mediated playful experiences include applications like tablet games for cats or orang-utans, and projects that propose to connect humans with pigs, hamsters, or chickens (Pons et al. 2015). However, the interdisciplinary nature of the related research carried out over the last five years has resulted in fragmented contributions in a number of different disciplines including design research, humanities, human-computer interaction, and games studies (Driessen et al. 2014; Mancini 2011; Westerlaken et al. 2014; Wirman 2015). These contributions introduce a shared interest in investigating topics related to play/games that fits within the interdisciplinary nature of games studies. Next to this, given the current aim for diversity in games, an invitation for animals to enter games research seems timely, could benefit the field of games studies, and investigate the boundaries of play. In this exploratory research I will identify and discuss the three main **theoretical themes** that emerged in publications related to playful technologies that include animals. By identifying relevant knowledge contributions I aim to contribute to establish a viable sub-field within games studies and invite researchers to explore these topics further.

Regarding **play and playfulness**, several authors have emphasized that the voluntary and shared nature of play makes it suitable to explore interaction design with animals (Westerlaken et al. 2014; Wirman 2014). This suggestion calls for specialized game designers and researchers to think about the possibilities to design meaningful player experiences for animals, which requires a different focus compared to designing for humans. Yet, even though the animal sciences have investigated play in different species for decades (Fagen 1981), and a visit to any local pet shop reveals the booming market in pet-toys, the idea of actually taking game design for animals seriously as a research or design field has only emerged recently. In his 2014 book *Play Matters*, Miguel Sicart argues for a space in which we can discuss forms of play besides games such as toys, playgrounds, and playful design. Despite Sicart's initial doubts on the possibility for animals to be playful ("Play, human and animal" 2015), I argue that a playful design approach is applicable to the artefacts we currently design for animals. As designers, we aim to encourage animals to show us new interaction possibilities, and allow them to interpret and complete playful interactions in their own ways. If this means that, for example, an orang-utan spends a considerable amount of time smearing the tablet screen with food and body fluids rather than pressing buttons with fingers (Wirman 2014), this

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approach can help us to discover new interaction modalities that we, limited by our human mind and body, never thought of before in the context of game/toy design.

Next to the meaningful ways in which we could entertain our pets, zoo animals, or potential food through playful interactions, there is a deeper post-modern value at stake, in which alternative ways to investigate philosophical ideas can be explored. This type of **multispecies philosophy** could be a way to foreground the experiential nature of what it means to be an moral person (Driessen et al. 2014). In my future work I aim to outline posthumanistic theories that can be identified in publications related to playful technology that includes animals. The current search for conceptual and practical tools can help to re-articulate the dominant anthropocentric world-view and introduce a foray into new areas that places humans and nonhumans on a more equal ontological footing.

On a more practical level, the last five years of research into playful artefacts for, and with, animals have led to some valuable insights into studying animal players through ethnographic observations, interface design, applying research from animal sciences to game design, and using participatory design methods. However, since we do not have any validated design principles for each specific animal, user-centred design practices bring up challenges that may still lie beyond our human capabilities (Wirman 2014). Instead, **approaching differences between humans and animals through design practice**, using subjective understandings, qualitative data, and exploring play together in a meaningful way, allows researchers to start developing an eye for the individual player and the complexity of encounters (Driessen et al. 2014). Therefore, I wish to illustrate that discovering the true potential for this field calls for explorative design studies in which meaning-making takes shape through iterative processes.

Bringing these topics together within the field of games studies is crucial to obtain a better understanding of the larger potential of including animals in games research and to strengthen the field in terms of its diversity and interdisciplinarity.

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