From Cyborgs to Digital Companion Species: Reimagining Player-Game Relations

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Drawing on Donna Haraway's concepts of cyborg and companion species and extending upon the discussion of virtual companion games (Allison 2006, 2008; Galbraith 2011; Attebery 2015; Apperley & Heber 2015), this short essay suggests that computer games can be seen as a vivid example of digital companion species. In so doing, it broadens the descriptive scope of companion species from labeling particular game genres to characterizing the relations between players and games in general. Following Haraway's companion species, I propose the notion of "techno-symbiosis" as a radicalization of the idea of "techno-intimacy" (Allison 2006) implied in virtual companion games to reimagine player-game relations. The conceptual shift from cyborgs to companion species, from techno-intimacy to techno-symbiosis, can problematize the separation of computer games and players as bounded entities that underpins anthropocentric views of computer games. Thus, this essay echoes posthumanist and new materialist approaches to game studies (Janik 2018; de Petris & Falk 2017) that attend to the reconfiguration between players and games. To do so, I will first unpack Haraway's concepts of cyborg and companion species, elucidating how game scholarship has engaged with these two concepts. Then I will propose digital companion species as a valuable concept for describing the complex entanglements between players and games. I will conclude by tracing how the conceptual move from cyborgs to companion species can shed new light on the understanding of game ontologies and practices.

The term "cyborg" was first coined by two NASA scientists Manfred Clynes and Nathan Kline in 1960 to envision human enhancement in the context of space race. "Cyborg" was later popularized by Donna Haraway in her "Cyborg Manifesto" (1991[1985]). Indicating the hybrid of machine and organism, the cyborg, for Haraway, is not only an imagination, but also a material reality: it denotes a "joint kinship with animals and machines." (ibid., 154) The notion of "cyborg" has been extensively used in game studies to depict the dynamic relations between the player and the game (e.g., Aarseth 1997; Giddings 2006; Dovey & Kennedy 2006; Klevjer 2007; Albrechtslund 2007; Leino 2010; Lahti 2013; Arduini 2018). This line of thought suggests that when playing a computer game, the player enters a cyborgian relationship with the game, enacting an embodied and affective loop with the screen, the controller, the code, etc. Such cyborgian portrayal of gameplay can concretize the act of play: play is not an

activity that takes place in a fantasized game world, but it reinserts players into the technocultural circuit that conditions our day-to-day, sociotechnical practices. While the concept of cyborg is productive for depicting the hybridity of games and players, it has its own limitations. As Giddings (2006, 83) indicates, the term cyborg often implies "a discrete, bounded entity", therefore, it is "too unitary and anthropomorphic a figure to fully account for these circuits of the human and the nonhuman in everyday technoculture." (ibid., 163)

For Haraway, the trope of cyborg is no longer ideal either, as she writes: "[p]ost-cyborg, what counts as biological kind troubles previous categories of organism." (2003, 15) As a response, Haraway develops the idea of "companion species", as a bigger, queer family to which cyborgs belong (ibid., 11). It's important not to take "companion species" at face value: here, "species" concerns not only with biological kind, but with any open and living organism. Cyborgs and genetically engineered laboratory organisms are the examples Haraway used to discuss companion species, as they penetrate traditional species boundaries. In this sense, it is not too much of a stretch to think of computer games as companion species, or more accurately, as digital companion species, since the liveliness of computer games implied in their constant iterations, mutations, updates, and inter/intra-actions with players may "trouble previous categories of organism" as Haraway (ibid., 15) highlights. In this respect, the notion of companion species can better capture the dynamism of computer games than terms like 'object' or 'artifact'.

Taking companion species as its core conceptual rubric, this essay extends upon the discussion of virtual companion games (Allison 2006, 2008; Galbraith 2011; Attebery 2015; Apperley & Heber 2015). In examining early virtual pets such as *Tamagotchi* and *Pokémon*, Allison proposes the concept of "techno-intimacy" (2006) to describe the intimate bonds developed between players and their virtual pets. Embedded in the player's everyday life, digital pets become a "constant companion" and even a "built-in part" of the human body (ibid., 186). Along similar lines, Galbraith (2011) examines the techno-intimacy of interacting with virtual girls in *bishōjo* (beautiful girl) games. Drawing on the previous work, this essay seeks to reinforce and radicalize the concept of digital companion species: rather than viewing certain game genres (e.g., digital pet games, *bishōjo* games) as companion species for human players, this article uses companion species to describe the ways in which computer games reconfigure the boundaries of player's body and complicate the entanglements between players and games. Instead of describing player-game relation as "techno-intimacy", this essay draws from Haraway's companion species to propose the notion of "techno-symbiosis" to reimagine player-game relations. This techno-symbiotic relation can be clearly seen in avatar-based games (see Klevjer [2012] for more discussion on player-avatar relationship). For example, in *The Sims 4* (2014), the avatar is much more than a "cursor" (Fuller & Jenkins 1995) or "vehicle" (Carr 2002), but a space for player to inhabit and act, a techno-symbiont with the player. In action games such as *Death Stranding* (2020), the player may not necessarily "identify" with the game's protagonist, Sam, in the same way that they do with a movie character, but the player and the avatar are techno-symbionts to each other: the player's actions are expressed through the avatar Sam. And through the intermediary of the avatar Sam, the player enters a techno-symbiosis with the game. Even in games without explicit avatars, such as *Tetris*, the techno-symbiotic relationship is still noticeable: the game system might not be an Other to be fought against, especially for skilled *Tetris* players, who can cooperate with different tiles to accomplish in-game goals (i.e., high scores) or even cooperate with the game system for creative expression (see Miller 2009; Fritsch 2018) and "self-realization" (Leino 2016).

The conceptual shift from cyborgs to companion species, from techno-intimacy to techno-symbiosis, can to a certain extent destabilize conventional anthropocentric approaches to computer games that often consider games as inert objects, thus prompting us to rethink the liveliness of games and to take "relation as the smallest unit of being and of analysis" (Haraway 2008, 165) in the study of computer games. Rather than taking games as fixed entities, the emphasis on vitality and relationality of computer games may open valuable lines of inquiry for considering the multiplicity of game ontologies and gameplay practices. In this sense, what Haraway's companion species offers is not only a conceptual tool for theorizing player-game relations, but it also opens up a constellation of new vocabularies for game studies to undo its prevailing anthropocentric paradigm, thereby allowing us to explore what games can be and can do in a provocative way.

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