
Book Section:
Tyler, T (2017) Playing Like a Loser. In: Ohrem, D and Bartosch, R, (eds.) Beyond the Human-Animal Divide: Creaturely Lives in Literature and Culture. Palgrave Studies in Animals and Literature (PSAAL) . Palgrave Macmillan , New York, USA , pp. 141-149. ISBN 978-1-137-60309-8

https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-349-93437-9_7

Playing Like a Loser

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In February 1985, on a rainy morning early in the wet season at Kakadu National Park in northern Australia, the environmental activist and philosopher Val Plumwood set out in a borrowed canoe into the swampy wetlands, searching for an Aboriginal rock art site. Plumwood had been warned by the park rangers to keep away from the main river channel in order to avoid the many saltwater crocodiles for whom the wetlands were home, but over the course of the day she was unable to locate the route to the rock paintings in the swamp's maze of shallow channels, and found herself much closer to the river than she had intended to be. Heading home, she encountered a crocodile who attacked her canoe. She tried to leap for the relative safety of a tree on the muddy river bank, but was dragged into the water. Three times she was subjected to the crocodile's infamous death roll, as the predator attempted violently to drown her. Plumwood would write later, in her essay 'Being Prey' and elsewhere, of the absurd thoughts and feelings she experienced during and immediately after the attack: the incredulous sense that this was a dream or nightmare from which she would soon awake, a feeling of indignation that this should be happening to her, a worry that friends might think she had been killed whilst chancing a swim, the thought that she would have an unusual if rather foolish story to tell, and even relief that she now had a good excuse for being late with an overdue article. But her overriding experience as the crocodile repeatedly forced her underwater, was "beyond words of total terror" (Plumwood 1996, 35; Plumwood 2004; Plumwood 2012, 9–21).

Plumwood was released, quite unexpectedly, scrabbled up the slippery bank, and managed to get away. For several hours, severely injured and many miles from help, she walked, and finally crawled, blacking out, toward the ranger station. She was eventually found after nightfall, and began the thirteen hour journey to Darwin Hospital. She nearly lost a leg to infection, spent close to a month in intensive care,

and needed a series of skin grafts, but she survived. The ensuing media reports, Plumwood recalls, did their best, in a variety of ways, to cast the encounter in the form of a monster myth: by exaggerating the crocodile's size, by portraying the struggle as a heroic wrestling match, or by sexualizing it (Plumwood had been seized between the legs). This masculinist "master narrative" was in keeping with a hierarchical cultural framework in which humans are considered exceptional, both as individuals and as a species, but at odds with the lessons that Plumwood herself took from the incident (Plumwood 1996, 40). Ordinarily, Plumwood suggests, we tend to think of our lives as an enterprise we are running, rather like a drama we are variously writing, narrating and acting (Plumwood 2012, 19). But as she hit the water, Plumwood had glimpsed a view of the world not "from the inside," informed by a subject-centred sense of a continuing, narrative self capable of sustaining action and purpose, but "from the outside," as a bleak landscape utterly indifferent to her life or death (Plumwood 1996, 35). She was made aware, she says, of the precarious nature of human life and the vulnerability of humankind. Used to being on the "winning side" of the predatory relationship, "victors and never victims," humans have tended to adopt a "predator perspective," and the true measure of human embodiment has been concealed (Plumwood 2012, 13, 36). Humans forget, or deny, that they are also *prey*, food for others. This denial is reflected in burial practices (the impregnable coffin and protective slab, preventing anything from digging us up) and manifests in horror stories (the fear of the wormy corpse, of blood-sucking vampires, of science fictional monsters out to eat humans) (Plumwood 2012, 18–19). But humans *are* food. "Food with pretensions," to be sure, but food nonetheless: "juicy, nourishing bodies" (Plumwood 2012, 18, 10). Humans are made of meat.

On the face of it, many videogames seem to point toward this complementary, corrective outlook which Plumwood calls the "prey perspective" (Plumwood 2012, 37): an enduring feature of countless games is that you repeatedly succumb to the predatory intentions of ravenous adversaries, animal, monstrous and otherwise. Keeping with Plumwood's own saurian example, players have been made a meal by crocodiles, many times over, in *Tomb Raider* (Core Design 1996) and several of its

sequels, *Disney's Tarzan* (Eurocom 1999) and its sequel *Disney's Tarzan: Untamed* (Ubisoft 2001), *Resident Evil 5* (Capcom, 2009), *Far Cry 3* (Ubisoft 2012), *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* (2013), and a catalogue of other games besides. But, precisely because players are consumed repeatedly, which is to say that, following their demise they respawn or restart the game and get to try a second time, and a third, and so on indefinitely, the momentary experience of becoming prey can never prevail over the "predator perspective" of those who are confident in the knowledge of their ultimate victory. It is for this reason that, reflecting on his own, extensive videogame playing experience, the novelist Hiroshi Sakurazaka has, without denying the satisfaction of winning, distanced himself from the exuberant reactions of some victorious gamers: "Even after beating dozens of games on the hardest difficulty mode, I've never experienced an emotional outburst. I've never laughed, cried, or jumped up to strike a victory pose. … After all the time I put into the game, of course I was going to beat it. … I reset the game hundreds of times until my special attack finally went off perfectly. Victory was inevitable" (Sakurazaka 2009, 199; translation modified). No matter how many times they die, players always know that, in the long run, winning remains a possibility for those willing to keep replaying the game.

This repeat-to-win mechanic has become so identified as a defining structure of videogames that it has been characterised as such even when encountered in other media. Sakurazaka's 2004 novel *All You Need is Kill* was adapted in 2014 as the film *Edge of Tomorrow* (Liman 2014). The protagonist, William Cage (Tom Cruise), is forced to join the fight against the overwhelming forces of a monstrous alien invasion. Each time he dies, however, which happens frequently, he finds himself back at the precise moment he was first cast into the war. He respawns, in other words, and, with his steadily accumulating knowledge of how to progress successfully through the combat, challenges, and interactions with other characters, is able to beat the enemy, including, at the climax of the story, the all-powerful "Omega" boss. The film's strapline--*Live. Die. Repeat.*--was often reproduced more prominently than its title, and many critics drew attention to its game-like narrative

structure (Schager 2014; Weston 2014; Hall 2014; Baker 2014); it was even described as "the best videogame you can't play" (Watercutter 2014). Sakurazaka himself, as well as the film's director, Doug Liman, were in fact both explicit about the influence of videogames on the narrative (Sakurazaka 2009, 199–200; Sakurazaka and Miyatsu 2014; Lewis 2014). Similarly, *Source Code* (Jones 2011), in which the protagonist (Jake Gyllenhaal) possesses the body of another, much like a videogame avatar, and repeatedly replays the same eight minutes on a doomed passenger train, dying each time as he steadily works through all possible permutations of the plot until he figures out how to save the day, has an undeniably game-like structure (Jones and Goldberg 2011; Kelly 2011).

This repeat-to-win mechanic is by no means characteristic of all videogames, however, and one genre in particular represents its very antithesis. Endless runner games do not make use of predefined levels, with fixed layouts, enemies and encounters, which players with sufficient time and commitment can play to completion. Rather, they comprise a procedurally generated playing area, which is to say one that is continuously created as the game goes on (Wright 2005; Hendrikx et al. 2013). So, in the side-scrolling platform game *Canabalt* (2009), players control a besuited figure who leaps over roof-top obstacles and across the gaps between the buildings of a cityscape that never ends. Similarly, the thieving explorer of *Temple Run* (2011), pursued by angry apes, dashes through a jungle environment that is constantly renewed. Theoretically at least, endless runners are, as their name implies, infinite. In practice, however, and as a direct consequence of the games' procedural generation, the precise opposite is true: given that there is no end to the playing area of an endless runner, and no way to conclude the game by winning, it is inevitable and inescapable that every game will terminate with the player's demise. The acrobatic escapee of *Canabalt* always falls to his death, whilst *Temple Run*'s light-fingered adventurer always misses his footing with fatal consequences. As play begins each time, the only certainties are that you will not win, and that you can never win in the future. No matter how many hours you put into the game, or how proficient you become, or how many times you restart it, you will always die. There

is no victorious resolution to the live-die-repeat cycle of an endless runner. Such games do not permit players to repeat-to-win, but only to repeat-and-lose.

Into the Dead by games developer PikPok was released for iOS in 2012 and other mobile platforms the following year. At the game's start, you find yourself stranded in a field, beside a crashed helicopter. Far off, on the horizon, thick smoke billows from the high-rise towers of a devastated city. Before you, staring in your direction, is a crowd of staggering, groaning figures: zombies. You turn, and run. *Into the Dead* is a first-person endless runner, gameplay consisting of a desperate dash, ever-forward, into the relentless mass of the undead. Your objective is to dodge between the looming, grasping members of the horde. To assist your struggle for survival, it is possible to snatch up expendable weapons, such as pistols, shotguns and chainsaws, and to equip perks at the beginning of the game, such as a head start or a canine companion. But the ravening throng with which *Into the Dead* confronts you is literally overwhelming: when you run into a zombie, as you inevitably do, the game ends in a mangle of flailing limbs, with a darkening, blood spattered screen and the grim, gristly sound of your body being dismembered and devoured. Your struggle, and pretentions to being other than food, other than a juicy, nourishing body, come to a close as you are rendered meat. You enter, finally, into the ranks of the dead. You can play the game again, of course, and you are even able to retrieve dropped weapons from the sites of your earlier deaths, but no measure of further play, or improved skill, will allow you to escape your unavoidable fate: you are destined, always, to become food not just for worms, but for corpses too. You become prey, and players of the game come quickly to adopt a prey-perspective from which they are resigned to their fundamentally vulnerable, violable status.

Fig 1. *Into the Dead* (PikPok, 2012)

In his influential book *On the Genealogy of Morals*, the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche provides at one point his own account of the perspectives of predator and prey, which functions as analogy and critique of the origins of contemporary Christian-

European conceptions of good and evil. He imagines little lambs, huddled together for mutual support in the face of a superior and lethal assailant, saying to themselves: "These birds of prey (*Raubvögel*) are evil; and whoever is as little of a bird of prey as possible, indeed, rather the opposite, a lamb—should he not be said to be good?" The great birds of prey, meanwhile, look down upon this constructed ideal derisively, and say to themselves: "*We* bear them no ill-will at all, these good lambs—indeed, we love them; there is nothing tastier than a tender lamb." Nietzsche explains: "To demand of strength that it should *not* express itself as strength, that it should *not* be a will to overpower, overthrow, dominate, a thirst for enemies and resistance and triumph, makes as little sense as to demand of weakness that it should express itself as strength" (Nietzsche 1998a, 1.13). The lambs represent the degeneration and deterioration of humanity, under the resentful pressure of compassionate Christians and socialist fools and flatheads who would diminish and bestialize humans (*Verthierung*) to the level of domesticated herd animals of equal standing. The birds of prey, those raptors who seize and take by force, meanwhile, are simply exercising their natural inclinations, and provide both an insight into humanity's primal, vital past and a model for those exceptional, amoral philosopher-leaders to come who, we must hope, will take hold of its future (Nietzsche 1998b, 203; Conway 2004; Bull 2011, 40–43).

Historian of ideas Malcolm Bull has suggested that, by repeatedly stressing that his writings are for those superior readers in possession of honesty, strength, courage, and loftiness of soul, Nietzsche flatteringly offers identification with the masters rather than with the vast herd that comprises the rest of humankind (Bull 2011, 31). The act of reading, Bull argues, always engages the emotions of readers, and the success of any text will depend to a large extent on a reader's sympathetic involvement with it. This includes identification with the goals and objectives of the text's characters or types. Those characters or types may well be very different from the reader in terms of age, or race, or gender, or class, but the goals and objectives, such as escaping death or achieving personal fulfilment, for instance, are most often ones that can be shared by every reader in that they reflect rational self-interest.

When we read, Bull suggests, we are "reading for victory." In the present case, buoyed by Nietzsche's implicitly collusive rhetoric, this is a matter of rooting for Nietzsche, and with him for his philosophers of the future, and for his beasts of prey (Bull 2011, 33–34). In the enterprise or drama with which we here engage, populated by dynamic characters fully exhibiting their capacities for action and purpose, we readers cast ourselves on the winning side, as victors rather than victims, ready and fully expectant to strike that victory pose to which we feel entitled. But there is, Bull suggests, an alternative to reading Nietzsche for victory.

We can, instead, read Nietzsche like losers. Reading like a loser is by no means a matter of accepting Nietzsche's writings and aligning ourselves with the exceptional, lofty elite he describes, of course; but neither is it a matter of rejecting his work and opposing it, which would amount to an attempt to overpower, overthrow and dominate, and betray a thirst for enemies and resistance and triumph, which is to say a deployment of the very insights and strategies Nietzsche bequeaths (Bull 2011, 31–33; Conway 1997, 256). Rather, reading like a loser entails accepting Nietzsche's pitiless, elitist arguments and turning their consequences against ourselves, interpreting the possibilities offered by his texts to our own disadvantage. It is a matter of aligning ourselves with the victims, the downtrodden, the weak, and the broken (Bull 2011, 36–38, 74–76). To read like a loser is to think of oneself, though Bull does not use the term, as the *underdog*, the one who is in a position of inferiority, subjection, and perpetual defeat. Indeed, reading like a loser is a matter of locating oneself, Bull suggests, outside the human species altogether, at least as it is ordinarily conceived, and of considering oneself subhuman. The degeneration of human beings is, as Nietzsche characterised it, a bestialization, an emasculating domestication, a diminution of humans into herd animals. To read like a loser is thus to identify not with those birds of prey, the raptors poised to snatch away tender, tasty lambs, but with the lambs, those frail, vulnerable creatures who are understandably terrified at the prospect of being eaten (Bull 2011, 40–43). To read like a loser is, as Plumwood would have it, to acknowledge the true measure of human embodiment, to allow the

prospect that one's personal, narrative enterprise may be cut brutally short, to adopt, in fact, a prey perspective.

Into the Dead, with its unremitting, remorseless repeat-and-lose format, provides the opportunity to *play* like a loser. In this endless runner, which in fact has always a definite and unavoidable termination, you run as one of the weak and frightened, as a prey animal who knows all the while that your end is at hand, that you are shortly to become someone else's meal. You run exposed and alone, unless you are lucky enough to have with you an animal companion, a faithful hound keeping pace as you flee. The term *underdog* is often used today in contexts where there is hope that, against overwhelming odds, through sheer tenacity and determination, the subordinate party might win, as William Cage, representing a beleaguered humanity, manages to do in *Edge of Tomorrow*. A certain idealistic, optimistic compassion is evidenced by rooting for the underdog. But traditionally the underdog was simply the one who was losing or had already lost in their struggle ('Underdog, N.' 1934), the one beaten or overcome or worsted ('Underdog, N.' 2013). There is, in fact, no hope of victory when we play like a loser. At the end of *Into the Dead*, when you lose, your companion is killed too, and you hear above your own screams and the rending of your flesh, a mournful howl or pitiful yelping. These are the sounds of the underdog, going down, again.

Thanks

Megumi Aoi, Yukata Aoi, Malcolm Bull, Daniel W. Conway, Philip Farnham, Seth Giddings, André Krebber, Robert McKay, Lisa Purse, Richard Tyler.

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