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## Becoming Cat

### Looking at Species, Environment, and Aesthetics in *Stray*

Tabea Sabrina Weber & Thomas Hawranke

One has to respect the preferences of another creature, no matter its size, and I did so gladly. – Elisabeth Tova Bailey<sup>1</sup>

This text explores how the videogame *Stray*, in which the protagonist, a stray cat, walks through a dystopian world, offers exciting perspectives moving beyond merely human perception. It is argued here that not only the story, but also the implementation of environment and further plot characters, the gameplay, and the realistic feline processes of movement, support a very specific atmosphere, adding transspecies impressions to the established spheres of cyberpunk settings. Relationships between human and nonhuman beings and sensual worlds are put into focus and traditional dichotomies in Eurocentric cultural narratives of worlds like nature/culture, animal/human, body/mind are questioned within this game. Nonhuman forms of life and consciousness are interacting and collaborating emotionally and passionately celebrating a posthuman culture, which is not limited by these former dualistic visions any longer. As such, video sequences or even short playing sessions might also be used in education of adolescents, e. g. in subjects like Philosophy (animal ethics), German (narrative perspective, emotional storytelling) or Art (digital design, dystopian visions, synaesthesia).

While in the past digital games offered to play various species in various degrees of anthropocentrism<sup>2</sup> as protagonists, *felis catus*, a cultural border-crosser, as a realistically animated protagonist is special here. Together with the environmental design it catalyses manifold feelings and a perspective, which evokes distance to a mere-human point of view looking at the (not just in-game) world. Involving cat-related haptic and acoustic features evokes an atmosphere arguably closer to post-human ideas of perceiving living spaces. This seems to be a magnetic invitation for many gamers to leave human self-positioning, both, intradiegetically (within an environment without physical human presence) and in extradiegetical reflections about cat-human companionship. *Stray* could also encourage viewers or players

1 Cf. Bailey (2010, 13). While a human real-world perspective respecting an often completely othered and very small being like a snail seems totally different to human players trying to perceive a fictional world in a more “catty” manner, this quote, in the author’s humble view, still perfectly fits the idea of indulgence and the openness towards possible surprises, learning within the attempt of consciously leaving a 100 percent anthropocentric point of view (acoustically, visually, haptically, mentally) on one’s surroundings (may they be constructed or alive).

2 Even negatively perceived species like (bull)sharks have already become protagonists in computer games (cf. Hawranke / Weber 2023).

to compare its experience to other nonhuman animal simulation examples and fictional texts about them.

The relationship with science and technology and different beings and personae of organic and non-organic background are pushing existential questions about human self-definition and future perspectives (relating to plants, nonhuman animals, artificial intelligence, global pollution etc.) to the front line through the eyes of a cat. The narrated cat-perspective also must be engaged with critically in terms of other medial contexts. Which aspects of the represented nonhuman animal could be read as truly “cat-like” and which ones rather seem to give anthropocentric credit to pictures of cats as they are successful e. g. in social media? May it be that *felis catus* in the game *Stray* is rather a chimera being which oscillates between these two sides – the subversive, disobedient cat doing “cat stuff” apart from the quests of the plot and the “cute cat” embodied by human narrations on virtually all existing on-line platforms? And, finally, which might be concrete potentials and conclusions to be drawn from all this for game studies, media pedagogy and critical animal studies?

### A cat’s world?

The game was released in 2022 as computer game and for Playstation 4 and 5. In July 2023, it was also released for the Xbox platform. The protagonist and focalizer is a stray cat. In the beginning, we as human players experience how the cat lives in intra-species group. The setting is an abandoned urban setting where the resilience of nature took its toll: Numerous plants have grown over concrete walls and there is no sign of human life anywhere. When the cat follows its companions on a walk, it falls into an abyss when balancing over what seems like a sewage pipe. Luckily, there is no serious injury and the cat from then on, will start a journey through different levels of an old inner-wall city<sup>3</sup> inhabited by robots and other forms of A.I. such as drones. Soon being accompanied by a friendly drone, B12, the cat will also have to face the Zurk<sup>4</sup> species, small rat-sized beings devouring almost everything softer than steel and a relic of human society since the Zurk are a human-made laboratory creation intended as a solution for the increase of waste within the walled city. Throughout many quests and lots of interactive situations the cat will make it to the “outside” again and destroy the city’s domed roof with the help of B12. In the end, the Zurk (unresistant to UV

3 The inspiration came from Kowloon City. The idea for a game about such a walled city originally led to the idea of having a cat protagonist for the game. We do not have space here to address criticism about this real-life inspiration, orientalism in cyberpunk and, regarding Kowloon, colonialist history, but we see the sometimes-mentioned necessity and urge to discuss this in more detail (cf. Sis 2022).

4 In terms of the representation of nonhuman animals, the Zurk could easily inspire another essay by themselves. The authors wish to express that they see the Zurk as modified beings created in the name of human science and offering various critical associations by themselves, e. g. so-called pest control contexts or the creation of nanobots, small living organisms having own metabolisms, stemming from frog DNA and A.I. calculations, able to clean up the inside of human animals and as such, raising manifold ethical questions.

light) are destroyed, sun is back in the walled city and its inhabitants would be able to enter get outside of the previously long-term-closed area again.

The level design of the game is full of platforms, ceilings, and other cat places to discover and use; everything in the dystopian walled city appears to be made for cats to be walked, climbed, and jumped through. Looking closer, it is evident, however, that the whole narrative of *Stray* takes place in an urban and human-related environment. Players can easily relate to city structures reminding of cyberpunk aesthetic concepts and the robots which the cat will meet soon look like abstract human figures. Almost all the robots and B12, the drone companion of the cat protagonist, make use of oral and/or written language and gestures which mimic human communication.<sup>5</sup> As such, there is no lack of identification possibilities in anthropocentrically framed surfaces: Familiar features of architecture and structures like orthogonally built houses, shops, laundromats, human-looking flat interiors, sewage systems, digital and analogue instruments, intradiegetic guitar music on the street and much more are elements to be encountered throughout *Stray*, which surely enables many human players to relate emotionally to familiar parts of this post-human world.

It is not to be underestimated that the human language remains a crucial mode of communication and orientation, which is shared between the cat protagonist and the artificial intelligence protagonist B12, a character spirit physically placed in a small drone body. When the two meet in the first part of the game, what happens immediately is a cyborg-like amalgamation because the cat will wear the drone's base as a backpack from then on until the final sequence of the game's narration. Both, drone, and cat, understand each other. They share the urge to leave the walled city, now benefitting from each other's physical (cat) and cognitive (artificial intelligence of B12) possibilities and developing a close relationship superior to a mere symbiosis. The robots inhabiting the walled city the cat and B12 discover and try to leave in order to reach the "outer world", also use English language in writing, computers and speech, while there are also codes or words written in computer codes and on walls reminding some players of Japanese calligraphy (cf. Arif 2022; Wirtanen 2022), but at a closer look, is "just a cipher" and, after recognizing this, much of it is easy to read thinking of Latin letters and focusing the spaces between the scripture.

Although only B12 and other A.I. personae within the game use human language, it also remains a dominant communicative instrument on the receptive side for the player as the cat understands it and reacts accordingly. Verbal and written language as a prime mode of orientation guide through the game. While this could be read as an anthropocentric framework of *Stray*, it can also be related to the correspondence of different verbal and nonverbal forms of communication between different species. B12 and different robots talk to the cat, take the cat seriously as a person, a You and no cute something: They kneel

5 By mimicking, it has to be made clear that they have not designed a human-like vocal apparatus or general outward appearance. They have simply conserved elements of the lives they once shared with human beings. Thinking of Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* from 1982 with nonhuman animals being "all but extinct" (Gunkel 2012, 61), this is an interesting shift.

down to him (without any signs of adultism or speciesism included, talking to the cat in the same way they would to their A.I. companions) in emotional moments, they share their philosophical musing, fears and memories, just like many humans would do with their companion animals, especially when no other humans could be there to ridicule this serious communication to a somebody, who does not respond in written or verbal human language, but in other forms.

### Cat control – the haptics of *Stray*

The team behind *Stray* is often mentioned as a group of cat-loving people: They work on the project while “real” cats are present in the studio; many people of the development team have their own cats at home: and with social media they address other cat loving people directly as target group for their game (cf. Madsen 2022).

Despite the lack of an ego-perspective and the persistent viewpoint from over the shoulder or the back of the cat during the playing process in *Stray*, it is possible to argue that the game-inherent realistic nonhuman animal movements, sounds, and behavioural patterns encourage players to leave a merely human perspective in different degrees and ways. Even seeing contexts of popular cat media stereotypes mirrored in some of the game’s moments (like the possibility to walk over a piano or cuddle down simply with robots instead of human beings) the least one has to acknowledge here is that, by perceiving the world with the physical abilities of a cat, the limitations and chances of movement and overall behaviour have shifted away from human perspective and done so while taking the cat as a serious protagonist.<sup>6</sup> As such, playing *Stray* could, even based only on its audiovisual aesthetics, game control and level design, extend a human perspective on the fictional spaces to that of a very different, yet familiar, mammal species.

The very “catty” marionette, with its realistic-looking cat animations, and the mediation of both tactile feelings and sounds from the in-game-cat via feedback on the game pad are central to the aesthetics of *Stray*. This feedback loop not only includes a soft vibration of the controller while scratching the sofa in-game, but also transforms into a soft hum when the cat is sleeping, by simultaneously giving a low-frequency purr via the speaker of the gamepad. In an interview conducted with Blue Twelve Studios’ producer Swann Martin-Raget, he reflects on this multisensorial event and the interplay of screen space and physical space as the feeling of “holding a little cat in your hands” (Madsen 2022).

These expanding moments – when screen space and the space in front of the screen merge into one aesthetic play experience – not only support the identification with the main character and with this the transformation of the human player into a cat, but also creates

<sup>6</sup> While the physical possibilities and anarchist fun of games like *Goat Simulator* are using elements of the realistic goat physics but putting it into a context which is obviously far from a serious protagonist or contextual meaning.

an understanding for a non-human being. Martin-Raget explains the satisfying moment of scratching a sofa and the awareness that such an action could bring:

"When you use your claws on the sofa, we actually have force feedback on the triggers. That really gives you a satisfying feeling of destroying an expensive piece of furniture. Now, instead of being annoyed that my cat is ruining everything at my home, I kind of felt the pleasure that this gives him[.]" (Madsen 2022)

Following Martin-Raget the communication of haptic features from the screen to the hand that holds the game controller somehow creates a deeper understanding for the being the player tries to be. And this experience can have "real word" consequences for the nonhuman animals the human players live with. The many catty things you can do in *Stray* do not help to progress to the end of the game. But they might be deeply meaningful to the animal we try to be in-game, passing on some of the feline joy haptically.

Choosing specifically a cat, a famous so-called "pet" species with the underlying ambiguity<sup>7</sup> and cultural history anthropocentrically framed as "domestication"<sup>8</sup> is loaded with contexts. The producers did not leave the cat as disnified<sup>9</sup> (cf. Baker 2001, 174) character or sidekick but made it the protagonist and focalizer of a story full of dangers and complex background stories.

Players walk and climb and sleep and scratch and more in the ways they perceive cat behaviour in their own surroundings or in other media. That is by its nature a limited viewpoint and far from the feeling or concept of being in the mind of a fictional cat as it might happen in a form of fictional text. But then again, taking the fact seriously that the game explicitly denies this is interesting and rich speaking from a critical more-than human perspective: Players see and feel a cat in third person perspective. They must get out of dangerous situations as a cat, face the advantages and disadvantages of the small cat body and they can sense a lot of emotions of the cat, positive and negative ones, yet the game does not pretend one could really look through the cat's eyes in the sense that thoughts or feelings were translated into human speech and fully revealed. There is no ego perspective and there is no direct access to the cat's actual thoughts even though players feel with the cat and sense a lot of the emotions and intentions through the reactions and voice of the feline protagonist. While this arguably leaves much space for human projections filling in this blank, it is still respectful to the real animals because humans must deal with this boundary and

7 One can think of the whole spectre between de- and reconstructing human living spheres to better fit the needs of cats and the mental and physical abuse and neglect of cats kept in closed human spaces.

8 A concept which is, as it can't be stressed enough, in a process constant transformation and discussion and should be avoided to simply used without critical reflection (cf. Cassidy 2007, 19).

9 Baker sees "Disnification" as "specifically visual thing" (Baker 2001, 174), linking it to "connotations of trivialization and belittlement which are central and intentional part of everyday adjectival use of terms like 'Disney' or 'Mickey Mouse' – quite the contrary of what Walt Disney would have wanted" (ibid.) and to "the faint echo of 'signification'" (ibid., 175). As he puts it: "A cynic might say that [Disnification] is a process not of making sense of, so much as making-nonsense-of the animal." (ibid.)

are simply kept out, culminating in a final moment of the game, where the cat would look back at the player and leave the picture. The cat is leaving the player as an outside viewer again, like a falling curtain on stage. Suddenly split from the cat perception of the world, left alone facing a digital sunny flora and fauna without the cat protagonist one has suffered, hoped, played and thought with seconds before. Just human again.

Feline reactions to the environment and to interspecies communication come in forms of intentional behaviour as well as in movements and acoustic replies. The cleaning of one's fur, sleeping, meowing through pressing a specific button, excessive lounging around and discovering new spots to climb or get into throughout the whole game (like ceilings, handrails, cornices, or bookshelves) are only a few of these examples. As explained, very many of these cat reactions do not serve to reach specific game-inherent goals but support a very cat-centered atmosphere and a potential feeling of stronger self-identification as a cat while playing.

### Level design for being catty

Right in the beginning of the game a vertigo-like camera effect signals to the player that in taking over the controls of/over the cat you are also entering a more-than-human perspective. The field of view expands; the camera perspective distorts; the first interactions of the game are with your fellow cats; not language is central but rather actions. All these elements guide and establish our aesthetical transformation from human to cat. In the following sequences we explore the world by using gigantic pipes, handrails, air cons, wooden planks, window boards, trash cans, or scaffolds. We meow, run, jump, scratch, balance and observe. Soon we discover that the world of *Stray* holds the somehow dark decay of human culture by simultaneously being a funny playground for cats. The design of interaction grants the player a fluid and elegant way of being in the world. The controls of *Stray* are very forgiving in the sense that they help the player doing all kinds of astonishing things and not punishing him/her for not being precise. You can mash buttons and the cat will perform multiple jumps from pipe to pipe in a very accurate way. We are indeed more-than-human.

All these things are heavily supported by the level design of *Stray*. Christopher W. Totten argues that level design in general is the primary tool for communication between game designers and players (cf. Totten 2014, 42). While in a traditional sense the design of level architecture means to create spaces for interactions, atmospheres, narrative information and the distribution of resources, the specific approach of level design in *Stray* is rather more ambitious: It is a level design for being catty.

The architecture of the historical space of the Kowloon Walled City and its engraved spacial logic and actions are the perfect set for being a cat. Its nested alleys, its dark places, the verticality of its building structures and the vast number of things lying around create

a somehow unclear setting, where the “right” path will reveal itself by being in situ. This situatedness ensures that we as cats do not follow a plan, but rather must rely on our intuition and reactivity to survive in the city. Furthermore, the many objects that are related to the historical site form a perfect construction kit for level designers: pipes to walk on; grids to climb; rugs to scratch. These objects are no simple backdrops for an exotic setting, but rather support the idea of being a cat and doing cattish things. To progress through the city, you need to climb, dig, jump, crawl, etc. in very tight and small spaces larger species (like *homo sapiens*) could not reach: You need to be a cat.

Besides these architectural elements you can interact with a variety of things: As cat you throw down paint buckets – sometimes to open a new passage, more often to have just fun. You stomp on keyboards to create an acoustic piano sequence; you play with the TV remote to switch on the television; and you walk on bookshelves where the books are falling. All these kinds of interaction are not solely a device for traversing through the narrative arc of the game, but rather to support the idea of being a cat, being in situ and experience as a player the living world of a cat. All the objects and architectural structures are designed to support this more-than-human being in the world and *Stray* communicates this game experience via its unique level design to the players.

### **Impulses for the design of pedagogical scenarios – Focus “Level design for being catty”**

The design of the levels in the walled city can also be analysed at school or university by learners of different ages. Within the narrative, the city was originally developed by humans (who are not present there anymore when the game’s story starts), but most areas the cat is able to reach, and walk could not be discovered and entered by human persona or the A.I. protagonists of humanoid shape. One could think of guiding questions like the following for analysis:

- *What makes the setting of Stray special?*
- *Do you feel that the story was also possible with a human protagonist? Why/Why not?*
- *Do you know a novel, film, game, or another story with a similar setting with a human or another animal protagonist? Can you compare them?*
- *What are advantages and disadvantages of being a cat in this specific and dangerous game setting?*

### Counting real cats around *Stray*

Apart from the real cats of the producing team inspiring the handmade cat animations of *Stray*<sup>10</sup>, there are more real-life cat connections of *Stray*. One real cat layer is that of other digital context, cat content on social media. Cats playing, cats walking on keyboards, cats jumping, cats purring, cats meowing can frequently be seen online.<sup>11</sup> Cats seem to be everywhere where human beings are, sometimes in the way, but adored most of the time (or at least that is the narrative which private social media channels are successfully selling). Whether or not *Stray* partially deconstructs this – often problematic – imagery of cat-human-interaction, it is part of this cat age of online media, and the trap of being lured to reproduce popular social media cat pictures in a cat video game is something to be acknowledged.

A second real cat layer is the level human association of real-world cat experience. When reading into online forums, scrolling through YouTube comments, or reading articles about *Stray*, it appears in high frequency that connections to real cat companions or real stray cats are made. People from zoology refer to *Stray* while filming themselves for game walk-throughs to be shared on YouTube (e. g. Gamology 2022) or start musing about their allergy to cats (cf. Reinke 2022). Youtubers upload a real cat's reaction to the game (e. g. Tok Plugg 2022). The producers also mention the possibility that players might think about adopting a stray cat after playing the game (cf. Martin-Raget qtd. in McClure 2022) and last, but not least, among the several mods<sup>12</sup> for *Stray*, there is also a very popular one enabling players to integrate real cat companions into the game (cf. Lee 2022). So, next to other nonhuman animals like red pandas and puppies, integrated into this game's world through modding since 2022, very many real cats have entered *Stray*. Finally, throughout the various comments about *Stray* online it is also easy to find many dealing with emotional involvement, especially about the loss of real cat companions<sup>13</sup>.

### Impulses for the design of pedagogical scenarios – Focus “Counting real cats around *Stray*”

This layer of the game can also be explored by adolescent or adult learners after seeing sequences of the game (as videos or in actual playing if possible). In close-reading processes they might have a look at focus questions like:

10 Motion picture was not used for this game, so potential trouble from animal ethics or animal rights perspective related to motion picture (cf. Dreyer / Hawranke 2020) is also not present.

11 In the work of the artist collective NEOZOON you can see the absurdity of human-animal relationships, for example in MY BBY 8L3W (2014).

12 In general, the term “mod” refers to the practice of creating extension to existing games in order to alter the designed game experience. These modifications are produced by player communities and shared for free via webspace with other players. For a definition see for example Christiansen (2012, 30).

13 See comments to YouTube like *Stray's true ending (meow) discovered...* (sdk 2022).

- Does *Stray* remind you of on-line cat content like videos of real cats? Where do you see differences or similarities between the way the cat appears in this game?
- Please do some research on the reception of *Stray* online. How is the game related to real cats in discussions or reactions? What do you think about it?

### Capitalist cat cuteness?

The idea of selling cute response effects related to a medially omnipresent species like *felis catus* must be addressed when looking at cat representation in *Stray*. There is no empirical research about this so far, but it would surely be an interesting question. When used in public media, cuteness is often used to accuse pictures or narratives of kitsch and simplification about animal pictures and as such, for example putting negative labels on nonhuman animal photography (cf. Baker 2001, 193).

As mentioned before, *Stray* includes various moments where players can do catty things without any purpose. These actions would sometimes include cat moments which could be linked to similar YouTube content, like throwing down objects, walking a piano or cuddling with robots (like they would previously be seen with humans).

The cats in *Stray* and especially the cat protagonist in focus never interact with human beings (as human beings have probably died out, at least in the region where the game is set), but they do interact with A.I., the antagonistic Zurk species, and other cats. Without any question, *Stray* creates scenes and pictures showing a relaxed atmosphere including purring, sleeping or physical closeness of the cat with other beings. Many online cat-videos show actions like throwing cups or sleeping in shelves and walking on computer keyboards appear as well. This might easily lead to the accusation or repeated strong anthropocentrism. However, looking closer, there is more ambiguity to it: Since human framing through metadata so crucial for social media (human comments, clicks etc.) are missing in *Stray*, the actions of the cat protagonist are intradiegetically cut from any humanoid world context.

Of course, the A.I. personae in *Stray* resemble human protagonists in many ways but they almost never bother with the cat's anarchistic behaviour in their flats. The typical verbal and nonverbal reactions of humans are missing here, no catchy title, no voiceover, no clicks, the catty behaviour does just happen on the run. This cat behaviour fulfils specific functions in *Stray* which do not only transport ideas of the cute and familiar; they also encourage to act playfully regardless of the inner-game missions at many times. It is not about fulfilling the mission, but just about enjoying being a cat (or trying to).

This seems to be one basic message of the narrative: Cats do what they do. Without listening to human worries about expensive musical instruments, computers, or other material objects dear to human beings. To a cat, these objects only make limited sense: In *Stray*, some of them inherit information (paper pages, computer screens, walls) but in the end of the day, the cat is done with them once their purpose is fulfilled.

Material objects remain objects and often meaningless. Ironically, especially the computers in this computer and video game are scratched, hacked, and destroyed even as missions to progress in the game. While sheets of music make a difference (they are meaningful to a guitar playing A.I. protagonist, who helps the cat), most of the game setting and beautifully decorated flats remain exactly this for the cat: decoration, meaning perfect scratching spots. Especially this destructive cat behaviour is constantly repeated, and it seems to form a subversive counter-narrative to human domestic spheres of human capitalist cat-design, where so-called domestic cats usually have limited approach to specific scratching furniture matching the current trend colours of the season.

The advertising trailer for the game's release on the Xbox platform in summer 2023 refers to exactly this behaviour, again celebrating it as charming and cat-typical (cf. Xbox 2023). However, in this trailer the A.I. robot confusingly reacts like a human when showing panic in his facial expression once the cat starts to gently kick the Xbox gamepad on the table, so there presumably is a clear reference to the human-cat relation here, which might also be read ironically (as throughout the game itself, nothing like this would happen). To put it into a nutshell, the cat represented in *Stray* cannot be viewed without at least thinking about other medial cat pictures but is far from being limited to human concepts of cuteness.

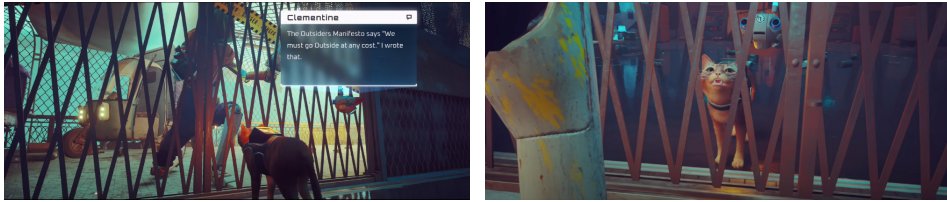
### **Impulses for the design of pedagogical scenarios – Focus “Capitalist cat cuteness?”**

Questions for analysing these phenomena of representation might look like these:

- *The cat of Stray meows and communicates with the nonhuman surrounding of the game all the time. Do you think the feelings of playing the cat protagonists would have been similar with another nonhuman animal species like a domestic dog or a wild small animal like a squirrel, a rat, or others? Give reasons for your answer.*
- *The cat often brings a little chaos into the flats and places it discovers. It scratches objects, throws objects down and sometimes even destroys things. At times, this has to do with a mission, but mostly, it is just fun for the cat and the player. How do you feel about it? Does this help to develop a really cat-like atmosphere for you as a player / viewer, or is it rather selling cute content like on platforms like YouTube?*

### **A.I. altruism and drone despair**

When discussing both real-life and fictional friendships or relationships with nonhuman animals, the risk of being ridiculed or not taken seriously (e. g. often embedded in the adultistic idea that nonhuman animal characters would be linked to fiction for young audiences) often seems immanent (cf. Baker 2001, 174 f.). Hannah Monroe criticizes underlying concepts of such kinds of human stigmatization as intersectional:



Panel 1. The robot Clementine's sacrifice for the greater good – the cat and B12 may continue their way towards the outside (Screenshots by the authors)

"The devaluation of people's friendship with nonhuman animals, in comparison to those with humans, is rooted in the belief that we cannot have equally meaningful interactions with nonhuman animals, because they are regarded as socially less important. We need to think critically about both the speciesism and the ableism embedded in narratives around human and non-human animal friendships." (Monroe 2019, 67)

Human players find several cross-species entanglements and emotional intersections of *Stray's* posthuman world. Nonhuman animals and A.I. cannot be read as dichotomic to human beings with just few exceptions (like simpler A.I. or the Zurk, while both could still be critically addressed in this regard as well). A.I. and the cat are acting intentionally and fulfilling complex missions together, they show complex emotional relationships and manifold feelings, they have dreams, traumata, family bonds, fears and goals and they are living in a cosmos without the physical presence of any humans. Marvin Madeheim understands the link between different species and A.I. personae as "clever decision [...] to let cat and drone act as a tandem. Thanks to the drone companion the cat can be wholly animal. There is no need (or only a bit) for anthropomorphization to make the animal an attractive gaming figure." (Madeheim 2022; translation SW, TH) He goes on describing how the cat could act in an "animal way" because the drone becomes a figure guiding the narrative, collecting memories and, as one might add, explaining the world in which the cat is trapped. The empathy between cat and drone as well as the cat's ability to deal with the human and robot language, translations by the drone etc. and the cat's "readiness for helping" (ibid.). It is well possible to disagree with Madeheim here, especially about what could be read as cross-species empathy-related behaviour, since cross species assisting and caring, even adopting actions have been documented in many cases. But understanding Madeheim in the sense of being astounded how the cat can receive abstract communication patterns and focalize (with or through B12) complex content, makes anthropomorphism seem nearby.

Still, seeing B12 and the cat as a "true tandem" since they were also physically connected through the drone pad on a backpack the cat wears until the separation of the two protagonists during the end sequence, enables us to understand them in a symbiotic way. B12 helps the cat with many interactions with the droids and making sense of the world while the cat is physically superior and much stronger than the drone. Since they have quickly realized that their shared purpose is to get out, a pragmatic situation is the base of their

relationship. Different to parts of Madeheim's reading, the authors would see the cat as intentional agent first in this context.

B12 and the cat share an interwoven life from then on. Although B12 is the communicative base, the cat is the one to finally decide and control where to go, what to do and when. In contradiction to B12 (basically collecting memories of previous human history around the city closed to the outside world), many other A.I. like the robots living in the slums or the upper city parts move and decide more freely and have their own ideas and thoughts about their world. They can build up their own philosophies and some are dreaming of the outside, a world full of green, water and plants like they have seen on, possibly human, photographs hanging around in many robot flats. Some of the robots have written an "outsider's manifesto" longing for sunlight and nature outside the walled city.

Problems of pollution (huge masses of trash and pollution degrees of the fictional walled city) and criticism at science or bioengineered "solutions" of humans are a major part of the narrative of *Stray*. The failed laboratory approaches of human science led to the mutation and increase of the Zurk population as destructive force. But science is not ultimately the bad thing here because the robots also use it. Their scientific attempts using UV light as defence against the Zurk in fusion with interspecies cooperation between A.I. beings and the cat eventually leads to the way out so many agents within the story of *Stray* were longing for.

By these means, in *Stray*, we find narrative links between many different beings, including the cat, A.I. entities and plants playing a role. The plants in the walled city are taken care of by the robots despite the absence of humans, who initially had brought them there. Science has different connotations, potentially leading to fatality, yet also solutions.

While plants (said to be developed as independent from sunlight even though UV lights seem to be at some places without being addressed) are to be found in almost all places of the game, whenever social and positively connotated interaction happens (in the outside world, where the cats live together as in the robot communities of the slums and city), the Zurk live in the canal system and between different stages of the city where no plants or other living exist. Around their nests, slimy organic structures reminiscent of fungal webs are to be discovered while the collective behaviour of the Zurk like one organism leads to strong connotations of infection.

It is also interesting that plants are almost completely absent in the city parts next to the command station close to the city's sealed roof, where many guardian robots patrol. On this level, drones and guardian robots are in control of the rest of the robot society, still obeying to the historical human command to not open the gates. It is well possible, that the plants in the game are also indications of A.I. dreams (about the outside world) in a symbolic sense for freedom, self-reflectivity and philosophy, contrasting to the upper level where some robots have never stopped cleaning the glass wall of the watch tower in the control station for ages since this had been their last command.



Panel 2. The second sacrifice: The player can decide how long this moment of grief lasts (Screenshots by the authors)

As the cat mainly interacts with the personae showing high levels of A.I., emotional bonds are developed from both parts. There are many situations stressing this, but there are two moments of A.I. self-sacrifice during the final period of the narrative which can serve as examples of this interspecies connection: The first one happens when Clementine, a robot and part of the “outsider” group, helps the cat and B12 to leave by distracting violent other A.I. and thus separating from them. Clementine realizes that all the three of them cannot escape and she quotes from the *Outsiders Manifesto*: “The Outsiders Manifesto says ‘We must go Outside at any cost’ [sic!] I wrote that.” While explaining this to B12 and the cat, Clementine is kneeling to share eye contact. As a reaction, like most of the time, B12 does not react, but the cat does by meowing and looking at Clementine for several seconds, so the player receives the emotion without any further human words translating it. Clementine runs off to distract the hunters while the cat and B12 escape and proceed.

The second A.I. sacrifice is the most emotional moment of the game and close to its end. The cat and B12 are hacking and partially destroying the computer system of the command station. The drone body is not strong enough to stand through this without fatal damage and B12 knew this before starting the process. When B12 is already weakened, he tells the cat how sad it was that they could not see the Outside together and that the cat was the “best friend” B12 “could have asked for”. B12 explains the realization of its fate opening the city and thus, sacrifices the drone body and the incorporated personality and memories for both, the cat and a greater good.

The moment of grief after the loss of B12 is remarkable: Players experience a strong moment of sadness of the cat, running to the broken drone body, cuddling with it and curling up around it for a video sequence plus extra time (decided by the player) sleeping or resting next to the passed away A.I. character’s body. Although one might count a human spirit as part of B12’s memory and data system as a limited presence of homo sapiens in *Stray*, what players experience is not grief over or by human beings, but grief of a cat over an A.I. friend with whom he faced puzzles, music, sadness, stress, adventure, and death itself. This is something truly unique and special so far and offers lots of food for thought.

## A cat blinking – learning from and with *Stray*

As Cary Wolfe writes, “[t]he work of art, to put it succinctly, is radically contingent and, at the same time, constituted by internal necessity” (Wolfe 2010, 276). For the authors, *Stray* is a piece of art in its story and design, enabling players to move beyond human perspective and perception. Through lenses of various disciplines including media pedagogy, it enables human players to reflect on human-nonhuman relationships in manifold ways.

In institutional learning context like schools or universities, taking over an “other’s” perspective of nonhuman protagonists within *Stray* as stepping in one’s shoes could be also used creatively, narratively, but also from ethological or ethical perspectives. Possible subjects could involve (not only) informatics, biology, language learning or philosophy.

The authors have already used *Stray* as an example in their own seminar and education contexts with adults, but it would surely be possible to include at least video sequences of it in school lessons for teenagers and young adults as well. One could think of narrative strategies and points of view (e. g. in language classes), contexts like (dystopian) future visions, or animal ethics in art and philosophy to name just a few. Also, the representation of the cat features, sounds, and movements could be analyzed in subjects like biology and compared to cat appearances (real and fictional) in other areas like social media, films, or novels.

### Impulses for the design of pedagogical scenarios – Focus “Learning from and with *Stray*”

Questions to discuss with learners facing exemplary scenes of the game linked to Human Animal Studies could be involve:

- *Where and how is the human in Stray? What does “human” or “animal” mean?*
- *Where are connections between A.I., nonhuman animals and humans/human animals?*
- *Do you think that clear distinctions are possible? (Why/Why not?)*
- *Why do you think humans are absent in Stray?*
- *How do you understand this in the plot of the game vs. what could have been the producers’ reason to choose nonhuman protagonists?*
- *How do you imagine a world where there are no humans left?*

### Fine

Despite the choice of casting a cat, as a globally famous species linked to human living scopes of and often emotional companionship with *Anthropos*, a light-hearted cat story remaining with human ideas of cuteness alone is surely not what *Stray* grants its human players. Being forced to take over a catty perspective in physics and worldview and thrown out of this in the end of the game does something which is so far unusual for games to



Panel 3. Blink and bye – narrative and focalisation levels splitting just before the end (Screenshots by the authors)

players. The seemingly familiar and close animal, often labelled as companion or beloved family member, now just previously guided through all the puzzles, quests and dangers, does *not* allow us to have further insight here: The story is over for the human gaze, no more looking at the animal, no purring re-union of the cat group we encountered at the beginning of the game. The Disney-socialized authors of this small human text assume were not the only ones who might, without expecting it, have hoped for such a kind of longer happy ending sequence of this cat-centred narrative:

Experiencing detailed views of the green, sunny, vivid “Outside” only to be seen briefly in the beginning should be the reward for the efforts.<sup>14</sup> Maybe even getting together as cat group again (surely, they all have waited for the lost son to return, haven’t they?!), purring and gently cleaning each other in the green sunny outside space again, before curling up in a safe space seeing the sun go down – but it is not what players get.<sup>15</sup>

14 As one YouTuber says: “You better show me the [...] world!” (jacksepticeye 2022) Eventually, he sees positive how it really ends and, while the credits are playing, muses about global warming, approaches from science to deal with plastic waste and human-made apocalypse.

15 See sdk (2022): The YouTuber calculates a map of the walled city of the game in order to ensure viewers that “home is only a 20 seconds run to the right and in the closing shot, this is exactly the direction Stray heads off to” and many comments react happy and emotionally to this.

This is a key moment, in which *Stray* does exactly what YouTube cat videos do not – neglecting the human stalking, leaving part of a cat’s world a secret, letting the cat go wherever the cat wants and ensuring us, the players that it was none of our business any longer. One blinking of the cat’s eyes, at least, is a sweet farewell players might like to read as indication of trust or affection. At the same time, this beautiful eye signal and most intense extreme-close-up of the cat’s face to be encountered throughout the game, is also clearly marking something else: “I was never you. I am aware of you, your gaze, and here your participation in *my story* ends.” Afterwards, the cat is off to the green, walks out of the screen as if it was a theatrical stage and thus, from a human point of view, behaving as catty as a real cat could.

While crediting the beauty, elegance and complex Science Fiction of the game, *Stray* should especially not be underestimated from perspectives of Critical Animal Studies and media pedagogy. The line between human animal and cat, that is for sure, continues to exist. But this is, at least on an intradiegetic level, chosen by one person: the cat. (End. And no “meow”.)

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