

The Cute Shall Inherit the Earth

Animal Protagonists in Posthuman Game Worlds

Kevin Mercer

Recent video game titles such as *Stray* (2022) and *Another Crab's Treasure* (2024) feature animal protagonists navigating and improving built worlds in the decades following the extinction of humans. In each, the player embodies a cute, unlikely hero as they reckon with old-world technologies inherited from humans, face deadly foes, and seek to either reclaim a long-forgotten past or start anew.

Stray sees a cat, accompanied by an AI companion, ascend several architectural and societal layers of a near-lifeless city. Swarms of carnivorous *zurks* pursue the unnamed feline as it seeks respite among robotic communities. *Another Crab's Treasure* follows a hermit crab, whose shell was stolen from its back, blaze a trail across a polluted ocean to reclaim his home. Throughout gameplay, the protagonist often returns to the city of *New Carcinia* to trade microplastics for goods.

Through intertextual analysis, I will discuss the commonality and contrast of *Stray*, *Another Crab's Treasure*, and other media in their depictions of post-apocalyptic architecture, fallen economies, stratified societies, and environmental abuse. More specifically, the unique animal lens through which players engage with these themes will be investigated. In what ways may an animal player character facilitate either more or less human gameplay?

Keywords: Anthropocene, post-human, video game narrative, trash politics

Paper DOI: <https://doi.org/10.48341/jzj4-mt11>

Game Introductions

Stray

Stray was developed by BlueTwelve Studio and published by Annapurna Interactive in 2022. The game sees a cat, accompanied by an artificially intelligent companion, ascend several architectural and societal layers of a near-lifeless city. Swarms of carnivorous *zurks*, which are sentient, human-built bacteria, pursue and accost the protagonist from time-to-time as it seeks brief spots of respite among robotic communities. The primary goal of the titular character is to return to their home beyond the confines of the sealed city into which they have accidentally fallen.

The game world of *Stray* is steeped in science fiction and rendered in quite detailed realism. Near-futuristic and retro-futuristic technologies crowd each gameplay zone, and artificial light is used almost exclusively. *Stray's* gameplay loop is exploration focused, requiring puzzle-solving and fetch-questing. The game features separate sandbox zones of both linear and more open varieties. The world's inhabitants have developed a barter-based economy in which even a stray cat may participate.

Another Crab's Treasure

Another Crab's Treasure was developed and published by Aggro Crab in 2024. The game sees a hermit crab named *Kril*, whose shell was stolen from its back, journey across a dangerous and polluted ocean to reclaim his home. Throughout gameplay, the protagonist often returns to the city of *New Carcinia* to accept quests, trade for equippable items, and, generally, advance the narrative.

Another Crab's Treasure features a colorful and stylized game world while still evoking a post-apocalyptic setting. Its gameplay emphasizes melee combat and action role-playing mechanics. The game takes place in an open world with a variety of biomes and a small number of cities. *Another Crab's Treasure* offers a cash-based economy of microplastics. Players may simply spend set amounts of microplastics with in-game vendors.

Though, aesthetically and mechanically, these two titles are quite different, they share some important qualities: each game places the player in the role of an animal protagonist – a hero who has been unwittingly thrown into conflict (Skolnik, 28-9), and both animals have either been displaced from their home or have had their home displaced from them. Humans are absent, though their impact is visible. Trash is ubiquitous and even essential to the economies of both games. Non-player characters are forced to reckon with human-caused disasters which impact said characters' survival. In both games, lush, natural environments have slowly overtaken human-made spaces and, in turn, built structures have been reorganized in response to changing environments.

Post-Apocalyptic Worlds

In the Shadows of the Old World

Ruins of the Anthropocene dominate the worlds of both games. Most of *Stray* takes place within a city walled in by brutalist cast concrete. Designed to protect humans from a deadly plague, such structures effectively became mausoleums that entombed entire cities and their surrounding areas. Over the course of gameplay, the player learns that a strain of bacteria, originally designed by humans to eat trash, evolved over time into a variety of biological templates. At times, these bacteria are depicted similarly to a fungus or plant; in specific cases, bioluminescent pustules grow in the play space. At other times, the bacteria have gigantic eyes which protrude from walls and track the cat character as it navigates the space. At its most dangerous, the bacteria manifest as swarms of sentient *zurks* which chase and attack the player. The human-made disaster of aggressive, sentient bacteria looms over large swaths of the game world.

Another Crab's Treasure offers human ruins, too, but on a different scale. Traffic signs dot the seascape and, in some instances, tower high above the player. Such ruins, including construction signs and traffic cones, point to a bygone human infrastructure that would have dominated the environment. They are, of course, out of place underwater, but still standing upright, which may be a way to signal, through environmental storytelling, that sea levels have risen. *Kril* faces their own human-made disaster known by non-player characters as *the gunk*. Players may immediately recognize this substance as spilt crude oil, but within *Another Crab's Treasure*, the pollutant poses not only physical health concerns, but also an evil, maddening effect on ocean life. Several bosses are affected by *the gunk* or deploy the material as an

environmental hazard or weapon. Both games, therefore, pit their protagonists against humans' environmental impacts from the start.

Stratified Populations

The world of *Stray* is separated into zones, each with unique aesthetic and thematic qualities. As the player progresses the story, they will traverse the abandoned streets and alleys of *The Dead City*, scour *The Slums* for key items, ascend a half-finished skyscraper, meet the inhabitants of *Antvillage*, and engage in mischief in *Midtown*.

Antvillage (Figure 1) is an illustration of the stratification of the robot society, both in terms of class and geography. This area narratively and mechanically bridges early and late-game chapters as a vertically organized neighborhood. Small trees have grown near the base of a tall, industrial structure, and branches have become entwined with its pipes. The robots that live here have assembled platform housing around this biomechanical column of architecture. *Antvillage* becomes a small slice of the larger organization of *Stray*, which constantly calls the player to advance ever upward through boroughs of increasing altitude and affluence, a task which a robot themselves may not do.



Figure 1. *Antvillage* level with trees and mechanical components entwined. *Stray*, 2022.

Another Crab's Treasure similarly divides a portion of its world into two distinct components. The city of *New Carcinia*, the hub to which the player will return frequently, is split horizontally into the *Upper Crust* and *Lower Crust*. *The Upper Crust*, is brightly lit with natural light, it is home to the city's only museum, and it features colorful housing made from repurposed liquor bottles. *The Lower Crust* is dimly lit by artificial light only, has only cardboard housing with cramped and maze-like alleys, and its streets, the ocean floor, are littered with microplastics.

This stark contrast between the two halves of *New Carcinia* is made evident by a sheer abundance of trash. Periodically, a floating trash island passes over the city, casting a broad shadow and dropping a flurry of refuse in its wake. The inhabitants of *New Carcinia* quickly get to work sorting these remnants of human consumption into *upper* and *lower crust* commodities. The anthropocentric memory of humans continues to make determinations regarding the mobility of others; some sea folk live in sturdy, colorful bottles while others live

in decomposing cardboard. The wealth gap on display in *New Carcinia* is wide, and though it is executed with comedic effect, its vestiges can be found in present-day society.

Assemblage as Society

Economies

In each game, junk is everywhere. It is inescapable, and it speaks to a long-gone era of abundance and wastefulness prevalent in the Anthropocene. Gillian Whitely asserts, “Waste is, of course, an adjunct of luxury. Junk, trash, garbage, rubbish, refuse – whatever we call it – is dependent on economic wealth and excess production” (Whiteley, 4). In *Stray*, garbage blocks paths, cordoning off portions of the city. In *Another Crab’s Treasure*, piles of trash amass into makeshift architecture. It is indeed lucky for the struggling inhabitants of these games that junk can be put to work in the game’s respective economies.

In each title, the abundance of cast-off human stuff has given rise to new economies. One may reasonably assume that a stray cat would have no need for nor understanding of money, in-game or otherwise. Instead, *Stray* lays out a network of needs that spans a particular game level. The player must work to understand this network, then deliver key items between non-player characters. During an early quest, the player learns that a character called *Grandma* is in need of electrical cabling which she intends to knit into scarves. Once the player has sourced some cables and delivered them to *Grandma*, they may then deliver a scarf to another character who complains of being cold. This barter-based economy is more relational than transactional, and it provides the player with a keen understanding of character motivations and histories; it is not as one-dimensional as a sticker price.

Another Crab’s Treasure enables the player to swap out their disposable shells to gain new abilities and different levels of protection from threats. *Kril’s* real shell was stolen; thus, he is forced to use proxies on his journey. Many of these are simply litter; in fact, they are some of the most infamous single-use items, such as a red plastic party cup. Microplastics can be traded for a disposable plastic shell, which, in theory, will eventually become microplastic, which can be collected and sold again. This continues through the playful, recycling-turned-economy.

Superstructure & Infrastructure

From the ashes of human civilization arise new societies of humanoid robots and sea creatures, each with their own interpretations of terminated human histories. In *Stray*, some of the robots remember the times before humans disappeared while others do not. However, they all seem to continue the cultural traditions of humans. They tell stories, play music, gather in pubs and nightclubs, and they read books and watch television.

The baubles that fall from the floating trash island arrive to the citizens of *New Carcinia* as gifts of divine providence. What is simply a mass of compacted garbage garners a new mythos from those that live beneath its path. It eclipses them regularly like a celestial body and looks upon them kindly as a god. The storytelling that arises from this unexplained phenomenon indicates a nascent culture that is reconciling its mysterious past and harsh present. While *Another Crab’s Treasure* appears colorful and fantastical, and even brings a healthy dose of humor to a tragic situation, floating trash islands are undoubtedly real. *The Great Pacific Garbage Patch* is estimated to be three times the size of France (Liu, web). *The Gunk* is real as well. The crude oil transforms a Dungeness crab, *Magistra*, *Tyrant of Slacktide*, into an

enraged boss which must be defeated by the player. As do many characters in the game, *Magistra* wears bits of refuse as fashion and armor. She wields a tea diffuser as a morning star. She wears a cheap 30th birthday tiara as a crown. Her throne room is adorned with chess pieces and has stained glass windows made from sea glass. Her boss arena is an assemblage of human refuse repurposed into make-do royal trappings (Figure 2). In response to assemblage art in the mid-century, Lawrence Alloway introduced the notion of junk culture, and assemblage art would appear to the viewer as being comprised from the city itself as well as its offcuts (Whiteley, 41).



Figure 2. A Gunk Slick in a boss battle with Magistra, Tyrant of Slacktide. Another Crab's Treasure, 2024.

Magistra deploys *gunk slicks* with caustic purple bubbles rising from their surfaces (Figure 2). *Kril* is wearing an aluminum soda can shell and wields a shrimp fork as a sword. He, too, armors himself with bits of life, bits of the city. *Kril* and *Magistra* make bricolage of themselves in order to contend with the harsh world known as *The Sands Between*. Whitely discusses the beginnings to junk art as a form of assemblage:

With its deployment of the ephemeral, the discarded and filthy, it has been viewed as a disruptive, transgressive art form which engaged with narratives of social and political dissent, often in the face of modernist condemnation as worthless kitsch (Whiteley, 8)

The robots have devised a pulley system for delivering items between buildings, but for the player, this becomes a mode of transportation. In adorable *if I fits, I sits* fashion, the player may hop into a bucket and take off toward a new destination. This DIY transit system is community-built from rubbish, its existence an act of resistance as disposability becomes sustainability with a garbage aesthetic (Whiteley, 9). By simply changing the scale of the player character from that of a human to that of a small animal, the ways in which the player experiences the world shift dramatically. A bucket becomes a tram, a cardboard box becomes an apartment building. Largely, this is the challenge of both games: learn how to contend with inherited, failed human systems as a cute animal.

Aggro Crab has made a decidedly disruptive and political maneuver in building much of its game world from trash. In a late-game level known as *The Old Ocean*, the player encounters the bones of a coral reef and soap bottle platforming challenges. The seascape is washed-out, almost devoid of color, and in this space, the visual languages of the clean and dirty are brought into close conversation. This sterility – this bleaching effect evident in *The Bleached City* – results from humans' harsh detergents and refuse; life has likewise been scrubbed clean from

the world. A benefit to gameplay, however, is that by embodying a resilient hermit crab, the player is afforded new ways of engaging with space. *Kril* can bounce along the bubbles that rise from the cast-off detergent bottles, facilitating new physical engagement and ability progression (Swink, 58). The game world offers *Kril* new experiences which emerge from interrelations among agents and processes of large-scale garbage assemblages (Taylor, 332).

Inheritance

The unnamed *Stray* and *Kril* begin their journeys as small, powerless characters thrust headlong into the ruins of failed human civilizations. They venture across dangerous, polluted worlds, and they witness the emergence of new cultures in the aftermath of human extinction. Lea Vergine writes in *When Trash Becomes Art*:

To preserve garbage and repropose it (whether elaborated or not) as a possible way of understanding past experiences, experiences that have been revisited – memories and not just recollections, therefore – beyond the imprint, beyond the trace, a preservation of sensation and not a reminiscence, is to create culture (Vergine, 12)

Stray and *Kril* have inherited worlds of great possibility – worlds so vast and imposing that, early on, they appear indomitable. Indeed, they are, though one may reason that domination is not the point of either game. Each title requires the player to successfully engage with gameplay systems that instead empower movement through and collaboration with their respective worlds. In ways both subtle and explicit, these worlds are permitted to begin anew. In his musings on miniatures in *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard writes, “The poet does not repeat old wives’ tales. He has no past, but lives in a world that is new. As regards the past and the affairs of this world, he has realized absolute sublimation” (Bachelard, 186).

Furthermore, they have inherited a new sublime, one defined not solely by a Kantian relationship with nature (Snake-Beings, web), but instead with recontextualized accumulations of rubbish on unfathomable scales. Once displaced from the infrastructure of the human world, technological trash is freed; it is no longer a component within human systems or structures of representation (Snake-Beings, web).

Antvillage illustrates this new sublime as its inhabitants find themselves living within a tall, steel cylinder of unknown origin. Its function within a larger technological structure is lost, and it simply rests in the landscape as an ancient form. As it was slowly reclaimed by nature, the silo-like chasm transcended obsolescence and was cast to the vastness of a new, post-human sublime (Snake-Beings, web), ready to be populated with robotic denizens.

Kril reaches the end of their story in a final standoff atop the floating garbage island of mythical origin and power. The battle ends in the utter destruction of the island and casts its component parts far and wide. One may look upon this result as a pattern borrowed from humanity; resolution may only come with altercation. One may alternatively acknowledge the destruction of the near-divine commodity distribution system as a resistive act. The sea floor is now transformed. Light now reaches the *Lower Crust* portion of *New Carcinia* and abundant riches of trash are strewn about, thus scarcity is likely diminished.

As is the case in *Stray* and *Another Crab’s Treasure*, the cute have indeed inherited the earth. They have inherited environmental disasters, refuse, collapsed infrastructure, and archaic languages. But they have inherited so much more: the unknowable memory of humanity,

which, in the paws and claws of cute critters becomes the sublime stuff of new beginnings, new cultures, and new ways of inhabiting a fragile world.

About the Author

Kevin Mercer holds a BFA degree from Western Illinois University and an MFA degree from The Pennsylvania State University. Mercer is an artist and game developer. His work focuses on interactive installation, experimental narrative, rurality, and the environment. Mercer currently serves as Assistant Professor of Digital Media Arts & Animation at Southern Illinois University, USA.

BlueSky: @professorspacegames

Website: <https://www.kevinrmercerc.com>

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