

The ethics of human-chicken relationships in video games: the origins of the digital chicken

B. Tyr Fothergill
School of Archaeology and Ancient
History
University of Leicester, Leicester
LE1 7RH, United Kingdom
+44 0116 223 1014
bf63@le.ac.uk

Catherine Flick
De Montfort University
The Gateway
Leicester, United Kingdom
LE1 9BH, United Kingdom
+44 116 207 8487
cflick@dmu.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we look at the historical place that chickens have held in media depictions and as entertainment, analyse several types of representations of chickens in video games, and draw out reflections on society in the light of these representations. We also look at real-life, modern historical, and archaeological evidence of chicken treatment and the evolution of social attitudes with regard to animal rights, and deconstruct the depiction of chickens in video games in this light.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.4.0 General

General Terms

Human Factors, Theory

Keywords

Chickens, Video Games, Archaeology, Human-Animal Interactions

1. INTRODUCTION

The chicken (*Gallus gallus domesticus*) is the world's most abundant bird; it is symbolic of both domesticity and high-tech food production. Globally, we consume millions of tonnes of chicken flesh and eggs; we also keep them as pets and they play roles in spiritual practices. It is no wonder, then, that the chicken features in our technological representations of fantasy worlds in video games. In fact, the chicken is a common figure in a wide range of video games, where it is chased, killed, kicked, choked, ridiculed, used as a comedy prop, eaten, and required to endure various other indignities. In some games it represents a more positive symbol of abundance and wealth, including racing, breeding, farming, and riding; chickens exact revenge on overly bloodthirsty chicken killers. The obsession with chickens (or creatures with chickenlike qualities) in video games is representative of a longer tradition of representations of chickens in media.

The complexity and contrasts of the digital chicken reflect the similarly multi-faceted past of the species, perceived as a domestic animal with many useful purposes and an imagined,

depicted being. In this paper, we explore the many and varied roles and uses of the chicken in video games and contextualize these with archaeological and historical data.

2. THE DOMESTICATION AND SPREAD OF *Gallus gallus*, THE CHICKEN

Humans have conceptually and physically shaped and re-shaped the other animal species with which we have interacted; few examples of this are more striking than the chicken. Domestication is often conceived of as an activity undertaken by humans which converts a wild plant or animal into something else, a living thing entirely under the control of or dependent upon humans to survive. The complexities of such a transformation are immense, and are more accurately framed as “an ongoing co-evolutionary process rather than an event or invention” [15].

The primary wild progenitor of the domestic chicken is the red junglefowl (probably with some genetic input from the grey junglefowl), which was domesticated by the 6th millennium BC somewhere in Southeast Asia; there were probably multiple centres of domestication [41]. From the outset, there have been multiple forms of chicken-human interactions; this is well-reflected in current relationships between people and chickens as well as in video games.

3. ROLES OF THE CHICKEN IN PAST HUMAN LIFE

Although chickens are frequently thought of as a meat source today, the chicken may not have been initially domesticated for food. It may be that the bird was kept for other reasons, including cockfighting [44]. The bounteous gifts of the chicken to past humanity are not limited to flesh and “fun”, however; chickens were sacrificed as parts of sacred and divinatory practice [18]; various parts of the chicken have been utilised for medicinal purposes [23]; hen's eggs have long been a source of sustenance and characterised as “the world's most versatile” culinary ingredient [34]; and chicken feathers have been used for bedding [28]. Chickens were entangled with ancient divinity and the afterlife, subjected to violence, commodified, associated with both women's work [3, 35] and men's play [42, 44], and linked to both bravery and cowardice. These strands are complex, interwoven and often contradictory; even in considering them below, we outline but a fraction of the ways in which chickens played a role in the past human experience.

3.1 The Sacred Chicken

Images of cocks, sometimes paired as if to fight and often with exaggerated features, are prominent in ancient funerary décor. Roman gravestones feature these depictions in numerous locations

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and solitary male chickens top the stepped tombs of Carthaginian North Africa [13]. Across diverse parts of the globe including south-east Asia, Africa, and Europe, chickens were buried with humans in ways which do not suggest placement as “food offerings” [17, 40, 41]; [Sykes pers. comm.]. Chickens also played a vital role in terms of connections to the divine. At a centres for the Asiatic cult of Mithras, thousands of chicken remains were excavated, the majority of these from cocks [22]. Roman deities such as Zeus and Mercury also had links to the species, and portrayals of these gods often include cocks. Livy’s record of omens includes cocks changing into hens and hens changing into cocks [24]; this hints at how different male and female chickens are in appearance, a point to which we will return with regard to portrayals in video games. The last words of Socrates purportedly included a request for the sacrifice of a white cock to Aesculapius, the god of medicine, to whom offerings were typically given for recovery from ailments [46]. *Kapparot*, the sacrifice of a cock on the eve of Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, was intended to transfer the sins of the individual to the chicken as part of a Day of Atonement (*Shulchan Aruch Rama O.C.* 605:1). Ghanaian religious practices in the Tongo Hills still require the sacrifice of chickens, often of a specified colour, at certain shrines or in household contexts [18]. The contents of a Talensi diviner’s bag include the foot of a chicken [18]. In Christianity, the crow of the cock was a critical temporal measure of Peter’s denials of Jesus, and it would herald the return of Christ. Christ uses the idea of a hen gathering her chicks to illustrate his feelings about the people of Jerusalem (Matthew 23:27; Luke 13:34) and such a scene is the subject of a mosaic on the altar of the Church of Dominus Flevit in Jerusalem. A papal edict issued by Nicholas I in the 9th century required all churches to use only the image of a cock as their steeple weathervanes. A popular emblem of Portugal is O Galo de Barcelos, an icon derived from a legendary cock which is said to have crowed (despite having been roasted!) to prevent the hanging of an innocent man who was on pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela.

3.2 The Violence Inherent in the System

Direct archaeological evidence for violence involving chickens is rare, and palaeopathology (the study of past disease and injury) may be of little help as the chickens involved in such activities stood little chance of surviving their injuries. Historical sources clarify the details of two specific practices: cockfighting and cock-throwing.

Themistocles, an Athenian general (c. 524-460 BC), is often credited with popularising cockfighting amongst the Greeks and the Western world thereafter, but it probably originated in Southeast Asia and was perpetuated by various groups along the way. The concept of fighting cocks was used by the Greeks in theatrical scenes painted on red-figured Attic ceramics dating to the first half of the 5th century BC. In one illustrated scene from Aristophanes’s comedy *Birds* (J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu 82.AE.83, Side A), young actors are shown to be dressed as male chickens and engaged in some form of combat or argument [10], an early hint at the chicken costume’s association with humour. Fighting cocks are also a frequent subject of Roman art and mosaics, and the activity of cockfighting retained an association with men, often members of the military, nobility, and occasionally royalty. Henry VIII had a cockpit installed at Whitehall, which was (after a fire in 1697), converted to the Privy Council room [42]. As the popularity of cockfighting increased and people at most levels of society began to take part, the

association with the upper class waned and it was made illegal in the entirety of the United Kingdom in 1895. Cockfighting continues to be a popular activity in a range of communities across the globe, and remains legal in several countries.

The violent practice of “cock-throwing” was popular in England from at least 1409 [38]. Throwing at cocks, also called “cock-threshing”, “cock-stele”, and “cock-running” was associated with Shrovetide, an opportunity to engage in blood sport and other diversions in the three days before Lent [38]. Cock-throwing involved restraining a male chicken in some way, (e.g. tying it to a stake or placing it in a ceramic vessel) and then pelting it with sticks, stones and other objects until the creature died. If the cock’s leg broke as a result of a particularly brutal beating, it was often propped up so that the “game” could continue to completion [42]. It was a deeply popular pastime, as suggested by the revolt of apprentices in Bristol in 1660 when the local Quaker officers forbade them to engage in it [43]; people continued to “throw at cocks” in England until at least the 18th century [37].

The acceptability of cock-throwing began to decline toward the end of the early modern period. The English painter William Hogarth presented it as the first stage of cruelty his series of paintings *The Four Stages of Cruelty* (1751). Modern symbols such as le Coq Sportif and the logo for Tottenham Hotspur are taken directly from the culture of cockfighting and are also associated with masculinity and male activities. Of the many different roles of the chicken in the past, these acts of abuse (by current welfare standards) are clearly reflected in various digital worlds. We discuss this further in sections 5.2 and 6.2 below.

3.3 Chickens as Product

Chicken bones from many archaeological sites show evidence of culinary processing, including butchery marks and burning, but even as meat or an efficient source of protein through eggs, the chicken represented more than simple sustenance. The chicken was the essential economic unit underpinning the ancient economy of Kellis in the Dahkleh oases, and a specific group of husbandry specialists were dedicated to their upkeep [13]. There is archaeological evidence for large-scale poultry production elsewhere in Egypt including artificial egg-hatching technology [12] and cooperative networks of poultry farms [13].

3.4 Chickens and Domesticity

Historically, chickens as a species are firmly associated with the domestic sphere, the household, ideas of safety and a welcoming, secure environment. These constructs are clearly linked to the “feminine ideal” and ideas about “women’s work” [3, 35]. Yet, the group responsible for the husbandry of the chickens at Kellis included men; furthermore, the individuals taking part in poultry production networks in ancient Egypt were also men [13]. In short, any assumption about the role of gender in animal husbandry practices in the past should be interrogated.

3.5 Chickens and Cowardice; Chickens and Bravery

Like the idea of chickens as solely the domain of women, “chicken as coward” has not always been a universally-accepted concept. There are current examples of this: someone who won’t go through with something is said to “chicken out”; to “be chicken” or “chicken shit” is to be afraid, etc. From at least the mid-19th to the mid-20th century, “chicken-hearted” referred to a wretched, craven or cowardly individual [6, 26]. The French phrase “poule mouillée” (“wet hen”) translates to wuss or

weakling, whilst “wet hen” in British English is used to mean someone sad, useless and a bit of a “wet blanket” [32].

In contrast, terms and phrases related to bravery, aggression and success such as “cock-sure”, “cock of the walk”, “cocky”, “to rule the roost”, “to play chicken” (faceoff), and “live like fighting cocks” (to feast well, [4]) often relate to male chickens and are associated with masculine activities such as cockfighting.

Chickens were the subject of comedic focus and jokes as well as zoomorphic projection in the past, though little in the way of material evidence exists to prove this practice. Their appearance in humorous literature is early: in the Greek comedy *Birds* by Aristophanes, first performed in 414 BC, brave or strutting cocks were used as illustrative devices for behaviour (lines 1105-1109) and entire empires (lines 616-624)[2]. The earliest modern chicken joke was published in a New York magazine called *The Knickerbocker* [47] the progenitor of the familiar “Why did the chicken cross the road?”.

3.6 Cycles of Perception and the Chicken

The way in which humans perceive other animals impacts how we treat and raise them, which in turn leads to physical changes in some animals (e.g. increased size, rapid growth), which then perpetuate and deepen our views of that species. These human perceptions are reflected in the digital world; chickens still entertain us in video games, even if we’re not hurling sticks and stones at them. A lack of understanding of past chicken-human relationships can lead to portrayals in video games which may only serve to normalise negative ideas about the real animal.

It is from this that the current paper emerges: how are the ways in which chickens are portrayed in video games linked to perceptions of chickens in the past? What does our obsession with and representation of chickens in video games say about our society? Is it right to represent chickens (and other domestic animals) in video games as objects of brutalisation?

4. METHODOLOGY

This study takes a qualitative critical approach to answer the research questions in two stages: firstly by identifying video games with portrayals of chickens and “chicken-like” entities, and analysing the roles that these chickens play within the games, and secondly discussing the findings of the first aspect in the context of Internet forum discussion of chicken-related play in games. It uses the lenses of the five categories identified above: sacred chickens, violence and chickens, chickens as product, chickens and domesticity, and linguistic conceptual/human behaviour references to chickens.

53 video games were identified as having chicken-related aspects. These games spanned the video game timelines from the early 1980s through to recently published games (2015). Although this is not an exhaustive search for chicken representations in video games, we believe that the data collected sufficiently represents the categories we determined above. A full list of video games can be found in the Appendix.

Searches on popular video game forums were made using Google to determine any references to chickens in any video game. These are critically discussed in the light of the categories and issues raised by the initial stage of the research.

This data collection and analysis approach allowed us to critically reflect on the research questions and focus on in-depth data analysis rather than a shallower and unrepresentative quantitative approach.

The critical approach used is an ethical analysis of the representation of chickens in video games, how these are linked to historical and modern societal perceptions, uses and abuses of chickens, and discussing whether such representations are ethically acceptable in video games.

5. ANALYSIS: CHICKENS IN VIDEO GAMES

This section describes all the roles that chickens play in video games, according to the categories identified in section 3. This will then feed into section 6 which will critically discuss these roles in the context of ancient and modern societal relationships with chickens.

5.1 Chickens as Sacred, Symbolic, Divine, and Magical Beings

In many video games, there are chickens with magical, divine or supernatural qualities about them – whether it’s representations of chickens as gods, such as the god Egg-Tor in the *Fable* series, harbingers of doom or death, such as El Pollo Diablo in *Monkey Island* or El Pollo Grande in *World of Warcraft*, or possessors of other supernatural powers, such as being super-powered (*Mort the Chicken*; *Billy Hatcher and the Giant Egg*; *Far Cry 4*), magic-wielding (*Sly 3*; *Gauntlet Legends*), or undead (*Guild Wars 2*).



Figure : Chicken as religious iconography, *Forge Quest*

In some games, chickens are associated with more passive magical or symbolic functions, such as in *Guacamelee!*, wisdom – where a large chicken offers hints and gameplay suggestions. In *Forge Quest*, the chicken is revered in religious iconography (Figure). Eggs, particularly, are considered to have healing properties (it is assumed that the eggs in these games are chicken eggs – many have references to chickens and some have explicit connections between the chickens and eggs), such as in the *Resident Evil* series, but beware eating chicks in the *Fable* series, where in *Fable II* eating “Crunchy Chicks” can summon an evil temple or weapon, and in the third of the series eating chicks will make your avatar put on in-game weight and decrease its moral standing.

The eating of chickens and eggs will be covered further in section 5.3 which describes chickens as product.

5.2 Chickens and Violence

One of the most prevalent ways that video game players interact with chickens is through violence. Sometimes the chicken will attack the player (*Zelda* franchise, *Chuckie Egg*, *Resident Evil 5*, *Monsieur Cockburn*, or in the case of the exploding hen mod for *Skyrim*, blow the player up), usually after the player has acted violently toward it. Some games allow fighting chickens to be trained and kept as pets to send into battle (*Final Fantasy* series, *Legend of Dungeon*, *World of Warcraft*, *Pokémon*). Some games

have the player playing as the violent chicken, such as in the “ninja death chicken” and “macho chicken” mods for *Skyrim*, the gun-toting chicken mod in *Grand Theft Auto V* or protagonist Mort in *Mort the Chicken* and *Monsieur Cockburn* in the titular game. However, violence directed toward chickens is the primary defining relationship between chickens and the player.



Figure 1: Chicken kicking in *Fable Anniversary*

In many games, chickens exist as an object that can be injured or killed. In the *Fable* series, a “chicken kicking” competition allows the player to win awards, including a chicken costume (see Figure 1). This is similar to the chicken punching minigame in *Guacamelee!* where the player must punch the chickens into the correct bins to progress in the puzzle. In *Besiege*, the player creates machines that, as one of their aspects, can crush objects. A notable object that is crushable is the chicken, with an over-the-top blood spatter accompaniment. In *Far Cry 4*, *Grand Theft Auto V*, *Crysis* and *Counterstrike: Global Offensive*, chickens exist to be shot at and killed, with no particular reward. As mentioned previously, many games will also allow players to attack or threaten the chickens in a similar way, but the chickens will fight back.

5.3 Chickens as Product

Chickens are regularly portrayed as a “food” item, or lay eggs that can be used as food in video games, often with the result of regaining health (*Minecraft*, *Resident Evil* series, *Puzzle Craft*, *Chuckie Egg*, *Mort the Chicken*, *Harvest Moon*, *Farming Simulator*, *Castlevania*, *Monkey Island*, *Tekken 3*). In *Guild Wars 2*, there is even a special quest-related chicken that can spawn, called “Dinner”. The entire roast chickens, located attached to the walls in *Castlevania* have become something of an in-joke in games with send-ups including *Dust: An Elysian Tail*, where health can be regained from a “mysterious wall chicken” (Figure 2). As mentioned previously, “Crunchy Chicks” can be eaten in *Fable 3* but will increase the avatar’s weight and decrease its moral standing.



Figure 2: “Mysterious Wall Chicken” *Dust: An Elysian Tail*

Chicken (or in-game equivalent) feathers are also sometimes used in crafting in some “survival” games such as *Minecraft* and *DayZ Standalone* and MMOs such as *Final Fantasy XI/XIV*. They are often used for making fletchings for arrows, making or decorating armour, quills, and other similar uses.

5.4 Chickens and Domesticity

Chickens are often represented “realistically” in domestic settings in games, i.e. within villages or farms in appropriate housing (such as *DayZ Standalone*’s chicken coops, roaming around villages in *Crysis*, *Skyrim*, *Forge Quest*, *EverQuest 2* and *Far Cry 3*, or being caged in *Resident Evil* games). In *World of Warcraft* there is a quest where the player needs to make the chickens feel comfortable enough to lay an egg. In *Guild Wars 2* there are quests that increase your renown that involve dealing with domesticated chickens, such as returning chickens to a pen. Similar “round up” quests can be found in the *Zelda* series, *Vanguard: Saga of Heroes*, *Mort the Chicken*, *Fable*, and *Guacamelee!*.

Chickens can also be bred in many games, such as in *Final Fantasy* for riding and racing, and in *Harvest Moon*, *Puzzle Craft*, *Minecraft* and *Farming Simulator* to simulate real world farming practices. *Divinity: Original Sin* has realistic depictions of chickens in that sex ratios are relatively accurate and the graphics are true-to-life with respect to sexual dimorphism. In *Banjo-Tooie* a hen character Heggy lives in an Egg Shed and will hatch eggs brought to her by the player. Hen House Harry theoretically looks after egg production in *Chuckie Egg*. They are also kept as pets or companions, such as in *World of Warcraft*, *Skyrim*, and the *Final Fantasy* series, and you can find Egbert the chicken villager in *Animal Crossing*.

Chickens and chicken-like creatures can be ridden as mounts in *Final Fantasy* (Figure 3), *World of Warcraft*, and *Rift*.



Figure 3: Fat Chocobo mount in *Final Fantasy XIV*

Amusingly, in *Skyrim*, chickens can potentially be witnesses to the player's criminal behavior, so if a player wishes to eliminate all witnesses, they must also kill any chickens (normally seen as harmless unimportant creatures) who saw them in the act. If they do not do this, the guards in the town will stop the player and arrest them for the crime.

5.5 Chickens as Illustrations of Human Behaviour; Chickens as Jokes

In some games, the chicken is related to bravery, for example, *Billy Hatcher and the Giant Egg* where chickens are seen as courageous. The opening cinematic for *Fable III* follows a brave but ultimately doomed chicken which is battered and beaten through an industrial-revolution themed city attempting to gain its freedom. Chickens are (perhaps) brave but doomed initial experiment subjects in *Portal*. Unfortunately, the chicken is not as lucky in other games, where it, or aspects related to it, is seen as lazy and shiftless (*Animal Crossing*), cowardly and cheating (*Far Cry 3*, *Fable III*), or associated with questionable sexual tastes (*Witcher 2*).

Rubber chickens appear in games as well, with the most notable example being the rubber chicken with a pulley in the middle from the *Monkey Island* series. Originally thought to be completely useless, it transforms into a remarkably useful item. A rubber chicken mod is also available in *Skyrim*.

Other joking aspects of chickens included in games include an *Arrested Development* reference in *Rift* where players' avatars can use a /chicken emote to dance like a chicken, some variations of which are homages to the *Arrested Development* characters' humorously terrible portrayals of chickens in the show.

Chicken costumes also appear, sometimes giving bonuses to "silliness" or negatives to "attractiveness" (such as in *Fable III* and *Fable Anniversary*). In *Hitman 2: Blood Money* an elite group of assassins wear a chicken-like outfit. In *Witcher 2*, the player can win a chicken beak mask as a reward for fulfilling a rather

bizarre storyline to do with a chicken fetishist. Chicken or similar costumes also abound in *Final Fantasy* MMOs as event awards.

In *Orcs Must Die 2*, a ring of polymorph can transform an enemy into a particularly harmless creature (in a joking way) – a chicken! The chicken represented in this game also has an oversized cloaca (exit orifice), presumably part of the joke.

Additionally, in *Far Cry 3*, the harmless, easily scared chicken has an entry in the handbook "survival guide": "Chicken is chicken, you'd have to be from some backwater like Canada to not know what chicken is. And chicken is un-American. Us true patriots eat only 100% U.S.A. Kobe beef." (The other joke presumably being that Kobe beef is Japanese.)

Of course, the 19th-century joke about how the chicken crossed the road was taken literally by *Freeway* as the player must navigate the chicken through a busy freeway crossing.

Finally, in what is probably mostly unintended to be a joke, most of the chickens referred to as male in these games are actually hens. For example, the lovingly-created *Skyrim* companion chicken mod, rendered in immaculate detail, is decidedly a hen, but referred to as "he" throughout the game. Also in *Skyrim*, the "macho chicken" mod, although referring to masculine attributes, has all hen heads. The decidedly traditionally masculine-acting gun-toting chicken mod in *Grand Theft Auto V* is also a hen.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 Chickens and Masculinity

Video games are not a neutral form of entertainment. Traditional gender roles are often developed and reinforced in video games, and socialize young people in expectations for their gender; gendered play spaces are the new norm, with "boy culture" moving into virtual play spaces instead of remaining outdoors as in previous centuries [7]. Indeed, male play space is intensified in video games with the player's "physically active role in controlling the central protagonist" [20], many of whom are male characters with high levels of machismo. Masculinity is a complex concept, and video games tend to fall into the trap of portraying masculinity (and male characters) as part of the hegemonic masculinity of macho, domineering, rigidly "manly" men. In one study, male video game characters were found to be far more aggressively depicted than female characters [11], and depictions of such hyper-masculine traits can directly influence young men's beliefs in acceptability of such traits as ideally masculine [36]. This hegemonic masculinity is largely criticized in the literature, as it is not the reality of men and male behavior, and can in fact be detrimental to men [9]. Instead, Connell and Messerschmidt argue for a usage of "masculinity" to encompass more than just a set of toxic, rigid traits, and to look at contextual and positive depictions of masculinity. Here, we examine how depictions of chickens in video games and male associations with chickens can potentially contribute to the detrimental, hegemonic theory of masculinity.

Thus, incursions into the video game space by the joke of a chicken may be more serious than they initially seem. In the gun-toting chicken mod for *Grand Theft Auto V* the protagonist is changed into a hen. It can perform all of the actions that the usual human (male) protagonist can perform, such as stealing cars, shooting people, etc. It tucks the gun behind its wings and can be seen holding up shops and running people over in the video released by the mod's developer [16]. This is a humorous mod because it takes a usually benign and seemingly harmless animal and puts it into a heavily violent situation (running over pedestrians, shooting at police, etc.). However, it could be seen as

a natural extension of traditional cockfighting, cock-stele and other historical situations of violence and machismo that chickens have found themselves in (see more in section 6.2). In this game, the chicken finds itself in the stereotypically traditional male protagonist role; perhaps allowing the players of the game a humorous way to reclaim some of their perceived hegemonic masculinity by controlling a less macho version of the protagonist.

In *Mort the Chicken*, the hero's chicken-dominated world is invaded by sentient cubes which steal chicks. Mort the rooster has to use his super powers (and comb-whip) to reclaim the chicks. A "ruthless commando" (according to the leader of the cubes), Mort pecks eggs for power-ups and collects the chicks which flock around him as he flaps through the level. Once again, as in *Grand Theft Auto V*, the chicken takes the place of the human male protagonist, with Mort taking on the role of humorously macho non-man. Moreover, it is obvious that this is done in a joking fashion, perhaps with the same intent as *GTAV*.

A lack of understanding with regard to chicken sexual dimorphism (differing appearance between sexes) adds another layer of interpretive complexity. For example, the *Skyrim* chicken companion mod, despite being carefully crafted, provides a hen for what is intended to be a male chicken. Many games in which chickens are visual indicators of safety feature only hens. An exception to this is *Monsieur Cockburn*, a *Doom* clone evocative of a cockfight, in which the player controls a cock who kills other continuously-respawning cocks in a pit.

The "macho man" chicken mod for *Skyrim* [25], allowing the protagonist to play as a half-chicken, half-man avatar, with sounds replaced by a "Macho Man" Randy Savage voiceover, reaffirms Kirkland's concern for a masculinity that is stereotyped by muscular machismo. However, in some ways it is turned on its head (literally) through the graphic of a hen's head. Although chickens can exhibit bilateral gynandromorphy (the condition of having one half of the body biologically male and the other female), this parallel is probably unintended. The obviously amusing bent to this is the juxtaposition of a "macho" type image and sounds with a seemingly ridiculous animal head. This combination could either conjure up a masculinity-related link with cock-fighting and other violent chicken-related diversions, or an appeal to a more traditionally feminine domesticity. The fact that "Macho Man" Randy Savage, a famous wrestler, is the inspiration for the mod, makes the juxtaposition all the more bizarre. Indeed, comments on the mod's homepage indicate that this mod is considered to be quite disturbing: "Those preview pics [sic] are going to give me nightmares. Great yet disturbing mod"; "what is this i [sic] am scared"; "if it were not so creepy i [sic] would use it for real" [25]. Although this mod is clearly made as a joke, it retains some stereotypically hegemonic masculine approaches that reinforce traditional, rigid male roles (obvious musculature, wrestler voiceover).



Figure 4: "Macho Man Chicken" mod, *Skyrim* [25]

The masculinities depicted in video games tend to mirror those of traditional male-chicken relationships, however jokingly – rigid traits of machismo, aggression, and dominance over the environment and negative reinforcement of the desirability of such traits in male players. The humour of the scenarios adds to the negative reinforcement by drawing on the more modern understanding of "being chicken" and the association of chickens with cowardice as discussed in section 3.5.

These concepts are extremely well summarized by the upcoming *Metal Gear Solid V* in which there is an item, a "chicken hat" which grizzled veteran Solid Snake can wear if the player is finding a particular mission too difficult – with the hat on, enemies see Snake as a chicken (an insignificant object to ignore); it is implied that the player is a coward for needing to wear the hat.

6.2 Chickens and Abuse

Violence against chickens is currently unacceptable by recent welfare standards. This expectation extends not only to special breeds of chicken or pets; even broiler chickens are expected to live free from overt violence. A spectacular public furore resulting from the release of a video documenting routine stomping and kicking of chickens at a US supplier for Kentucky Fried Chicken [19] is one example of the acceptability gap between chicken treatment in reality and in video games.

In video games where violent acts against chickens are presented as a fun competition or form of diversion, e.g. chicken kicking in the *Fable* series, it could be argued that the inherent welfare perceptions reflected therein more closely resemble those of 17th-

century Bristolian apprentices rioting for their Shrovetide cock-throwing than modern, presumably enlightened heroes.

Although the archaeological and historical evidence supports the reality of the chicken (especially the cock) as an aggressive, strutting, fighting powerhouse, players do not expect a chicken to “strike back”, perhaps due to overriding preconceptions about the cowardly, unimportant, disposable nature of chickens. Chickens in games which are very powerful or respond in kind to violence (section 5.2) are therefore intended to be unexpected, which further entrenches the conceptualization of the chicken as a simple object which a player can attack “to see what happens” or because it is perceived as humorous. In response to a query on the presence of chickens in video games, forum user “Soghog” on videogamesawesome.com (2012) replied: “Because chickens are funny. Abusing chickens is funnier”.

6.3 The Societal Importance of Chickens

The ubiquity of chickens in video games reflects the ubiquity of the chicken globally. The chicken is a vital source of nutrition on a global scale. In 2013 alone, 21.7 billion chickens were produced for human consumption and 68 million tonnes of chicken eggs (FAOSTAT).

Chickens have been bred for desirable traits (certain colourations, comb shapes, numbers of toes and feathered crests) for thousands of years. Archaeological chicken crania with a pathological condition called a cerebral hernia (present in some breeds presenting feathered crests) have been excavated from a range of sites dating to the Roman period onward in Europe [5, 14]. Chicken breeding became widespread in the 19th century and showing continues to be a popular pastime.

A project called Hen Power, designed to combat loneliness and isolation amongst the elderly, encourages pensioners to rear and care for chickens on a daily basis and has met with great success [8]. The inclusion of complete, individual chickens in human burials (discussed in section 3.1) suggests that chickens have been our companions in life and in death for thousands of years. Indeed, Honorius, the Western Roman Emperor (AD 393-423) had a pet chicken named Roma, whom he reportedly doted upon [33].

Chickens retain great symbolic importance with regard to a range of spiritual practices (section 3.1). It is difficult to detect whether deific, supernatural, and sacred manifestations of chickens in video games are somehow connected to this ancient association or are presented in these ways as an ironic joke by designers who sought out what they perceived to be an unremarkable creature.

All of the aspects (food, special breeds, companionship, spiritual practice) present in video games are reflected archaeologically. The cycles of perception mentioned in section 3.6 have shaped real chickens and video game chickens in turn; like a broiler, video game chickens are often short-lived and viewed as completely disposable. This is not always the case, and we present a number of instances in which chickens are heroic, wise and worthy of admiration (section 5.1).

6.4 Ethical Representations of Chickens?

In considering the more negative representations of chickens in games as discussed above, it is important now to discuss the ways that video game developers could depict chickens responsibly, in order to build a more ethical relationship between humans and chickens. While some of these ideas may not be particularly interesting as the subject of games, or might be considered a little

far-fetched, the purpose of this section is to provide some foci of reflection for developers including chickens in their games.

Most of the farming simulator genre of games (e.g. *Farming Simulator*, *Harvest Moon*, *Puzzle Craft*) have chickens as a farmable item, and many games (as mentioned in section 3.3) include chicken as a food item. On the one hand, it is important to emphasise sustainable, ethical practices as a normative expectation for farming, such as free range eggs, ethically treated animals, quality feed, etc. However, on the other hand, there could be the opportunity to highlight issue with unethical farming, such as battery hen farms, factory farms, or high density barn farmed chickens [1, 39]. It could suggest more sustainable methods for farming, such as a reduction in meat consumption, or more stringent regulation of treatment of chickens in farms. This, in turn, could also improve understanding of the risks that lead to the emergence and transmission of chicken-human diseases such as A(H5N1) and A(H7N9) avian influenzas.

Another way that chickens could be portrayed more ethically is to remove them as objects of abuse. Certainly, it might be funny for players to be able to kick, shoot, grind, and mash chickens in games, but is it really necessary? In the real world, animal abuse is a complex subject with some groups (notably animal rights groups) claiming it is a predictive factor for future violence, and others claiming that it has no effect on future violence [21]. Also important to mention is that violent video games are not linked with real-world violence [27]. However, this does not mean that cruelty to animals should be normalized – or even glorified – within games. For many gamers, it can be quite a distasteful experience where killing or maiming animals is part of the game (see [31]). PETA has campaigned against glorifying animal cruelty in video games [29, 30]. Although some of these complaints may seem far-fetched, as digital animals are not “real”, Hochscharter rightly points out that uncritical portrayals of violence toward animals could lead to normalization of violence against animals, and video games’ increasing market share in media means that they should be criticized [45].

Finally, disassociation of the chicken from negative aspects of masculinity in video games would be another general improvement. We have already explained the problems associated with this, and more positive, productive, and ethically acceptable representations of masculinity in video games would benefit men as well as women. In video games, this would mean critically assessing the use of “chicken as joke” aspects – particularly regarding masculine traits, and reassessing traditional macho roles for men in video games. Perhaps it is time to bring back “cock-sure” and “cocky” associations rather than “being chicken”? After all, as we saw in *Fable III*, and to a lesser extent in *Mort the Chicken*, as well as in the fighting companion/pet depictions, chickens can certainly be extremely brave in video games.

7. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we have shown how complex relationships between chickens and humans have been recreated and perpetuated in video games. We have shown how the representation of chickens in video games can reinforce a negative concept of masculinity, with depictions of machismo, aggression, and dominance over the environment, and with jokes about chickens in games adding a negative reinforcement of the desirability of such traits in male players. We have also provided evidence for the close resemblance of attitudes towards chickens in video games to historical attitudes now considered inhumane. There is a spectrum of human-chicken relationships which is well-represented in video games, but some aspects have been distorted or lost in translation,

e.g. a lack of understanding and accurate representation of chicken sex despite the fact that the birds are sexually dimorphic. In other cases, video games reflect outdated and cruel attitudes to chickens in situations which are not far removed from cock-throwing, and certainly are not in line with modern views on chicken welfare.

As we have seen, chickens *can* be represented ethically in video games – either through a holistic approach that depicts them in a reflective context (such as the vengeful chickens in *Zelda* that show surprising realism in their ferociousness, the simulated farming in *Minecraft* or *Farming Simulator*), or through explicitly *not* depicting them as objects of unnecessary violence (for example in *Divinity: Original Sin* where killing chickens upsets villagers around you) and thus not contributing to a normalization of cruelty to animals.

This paper contributes to the understanding and analysis of video games by looking at them from a holistic perspective incorporating historical and archaeological understandings of chickens, and discussing the relationships these representations of chickens have with a modern, video-game-playing society.

8. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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10. APPENDIX: Video Games Reviewed

Game	Year	Game	Year	Game	Year
Freeway	1981	Fable: Anniversary	2004	Gears of War 3	2011
Chuckie Egg	1983	Grand Theft Auto series	2004	Orcs Must Die	2011
Legend of Zelda	1986+	Sly 3: Honour Among Thieves	2005	Guild Wars 2	2012
Castlevania Series	1986+	Resident Evil 4	2005	Puzzle Craft	2012
Final Fantasy Series	1987+	Fable: The Lost Chapters	2005	Farming Simulator	2012
Monkey Island	1990	Hit Man: Blood Money	2006	Resident Evil 6	2012
Pokemon	1996	Vanguard: Saga of Heroes	2007	Dust: An Elysian Tail	2012
Harvest Moon	1996+	Crysis	2007	Diablo 3	2012
Tekken 3	1997	Portal	2007	Counterstrike: Global Offensive	2012
Gauntlet Legends	1998	Lord of the Rings Online	2007	Far Cry 3	2012
Mort the Chicken	2000	Fable 2	2008	Guacamelee	2013
Banjo-tooie	2000	Minecraft	2009	Legend of Dungeon	2013
Animal Crossing	2001+	Resident Evil 5	2009	Far Cry 4	2014
EverQuest 2	2002	Monsieur Cockburn (Doom clone)	2009	Forge Quest	2014
Billy Hatcher and the Giant Egg	2003	Fable 3	2010	DayZ Standalone	2014
World of Warcraft	2004	Rift	2011	Besiege	2015
Fable	2004	Skyrim	2011	Metal Gear Solid V	2015
		Witcher 2	2011	Divinity: Original Sin	2015