

What's the state with birds in video games? A short summary

Abstract

During the last fifty years, a lot modifications occurs on the process to make video games. They evolved through technology, comprehension of game mechanic and adaptation to the market. But it's also the case for some minor elements like birds. Just enemies or simple animals to portray a zone, they become today more diverse and central to the game worlds or mechanics. Here some glimpses about that evolution.

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Introduction

First flights

Evolution of birds in video games is really interesting to study. If we can easily consider that birds appear in video games before, the first important and « visible » bird can be found in the 1982's Joust. This bird is assimilate to an Ostrich (or a Stork depending on the game's version and art of graphic designer (Figure 1). According to John Newcomer, the creator of the game, the aim was to establish an « emotional connection » for the player. But he needed a bird that can complete all his mechanical desires, including walking on ground.¹ These reflections are more an exception than a constant. In fact, in the eighties and early nineties, birds were essentially reduce to their primal function of « cultural representation ». For example, Crows could be found and fought in Cemetery or other dead lands (The Legend of Zelda: A Link To the Past) and Seagulls can be heard close to sea areas (Illusion of Time). However, some games include Birds in a more menaingful way, in quality of main character. It's the case for the Taito's New Zealand Story, where the player can play a Kiwi (Kind of) or in the more surprising *Kolibri*, released in 1995, where the player can control a Hummingbird in a kind of shooter (Figure 2).



Figure 1 In some art, the second player is illustrated on a stork rather than an Ostrich.

Learning to fly

Birds saw their roles and representations evolved in the late nineties and early 2000's. They became main threats (Sly Cooper series), secondary characters, like in Final Fantasy series with the Chocobo bird that gaining more reputation through the episodes until having complete series in its name (*Chocobo Mystery Dungeon*, *Chocobo Kart Racing*). Birds even became central heroes with dialogues and

personality like in Banjo-Kazooie series, where Kazooie teamed up with a Bear named Banjo to defeat an evil witch, Gruntilda (Figure 3). Moreover, it's really interesting to see how developers of the time evolved the concept of Kazooie, which appeared for the first time in a canceled game, *Dreams: Land of the giants* made by Rareware.² At the time, and if main birds protagonists kept birds traits, developers are more willing to represent them in a fantaisist way, that fit their narrative, gameplay and character support more. We need to evoked in a rapid fire the Pokemon series , which establish discret standards in the way to bring diversity in zoological representations. A precious cutting edge philosophy we will find in a future tense.



Figure 2 Kolibri is a shoot' em up shooter where the player control a Hummingbird.



Figure 3 In 1998, the English studio rare ware gratify us with one of the first real important bird in video games, Kazooie.

Flying to the moon

In the 2010's until today, this philosophy is pushed into a next level, brought by the constant quest to be more realistic. But this idea crashed with all the constraints, mainly economical, of making a video games. That's why we find some drops of ideas in a multitude of experiences. Birds can have a very large specter of morphology, biology or history according to what developers wants to do with them. If they are central to the games or not, in which places and for which roles.

Morphology

In the Naughty Dog production *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune*, a very impressive Keel-billed Toucan (*Ramphastos sulfuratus*) can be seen and approach by the player until its take off. This bird don't have a known utility of the game but he can inform of where the player could be. In the 2013's *Tomb Raider* by Crystal Dynamics, Black-tailed gulls (*Larus crassirostris*) can be spotted. This bird is only found in the pacific area, where the game took place. Some games can be really surprised as *The Last Campfire*, which portrayed some groups of Grackles (*Quiscalus sp.*), *Death's Door* with a specific Hooded Crow or close relative (*Corvus cornix*) or *Return of Monkey Island* with a fantastic Lesser or Greater Bird of Paradise (*Paradisaea minor/apoda*). If the lasts *Zelda* games didn't feature real birds, their morphologies reacted to real ones, even if multiple species are made on the same basis (same length, same behaviour). To populate their environment with birds, some developers used of that trick and apply multiple birds colors patterns in a standard model (Figure 4).



Figure 4 A keel-billed toucan in uncharted: drake's fortune (Image in game).

Behaviors

In *Resident Evil 4* and *Chants of Sennaar*, Corvids (a Crow (*Corvus sp.*) and a Magpie (*Pica sp.*) stole shiny objects to prevent player's progression, and he need to find these specific keys to continue further. Even if this myth was busted in a 2014's study,³ this progression pattern is redondant in video games including a fantaisist Pelican in *Jak and Daxter: The Precursor Legacy* or *Klepto*, a kind of Condor in *Super Mario Odyssey*. Apart that, specific behaviors are pretty rare in a video game for economic reasons. That's why the common act for a bird or a group of birds is to by fly and move in a certain are and with a certain pattern. However, when behaviours are more the heart of the game, that could change a lot of things. One of the most impressive one could be find in the *Capcom's Monster Hunter Tri* where the Qurupeco, a not existing bird, has a very unique feature which is imitation of other creatures.⁴ When you will fight that « bird wyvern » as named in the game, it can called others monster to help it out such as Rathalos or Deviljho. Such a unique feature that deserved to be on others games. Finally, a bird can act in an interesting way to help the player. In *Donkey Kong Country Returns* and *Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze*, the Parrot-like Sqwaks, as a special

item to use, can move on its branch and vocalize when the player is close to a puzzle pieces, one of the collectibles of the game. In an other way, the Black-naped Oriole (*Oriolus chinensis*) of *Ghost of Tsushima*, by flying in a specific direction, can guide the player into his next objective (Figure 5).

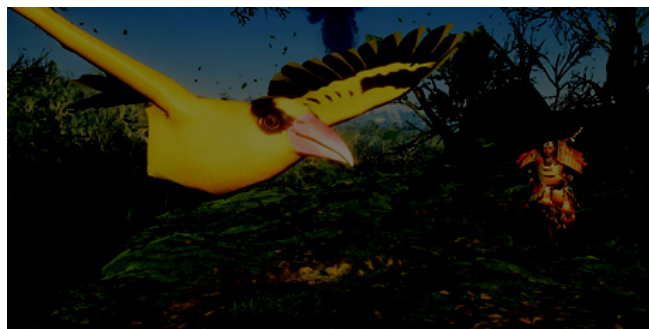


Figure 5 Black-naped oriole present in ghost in Tsushima (credits: what's the bird).

Songs

Birds song didn't follow this path of being more realistic than ever. They're primarily used with a certain idea of fonction to represent environment as evoked previously. Seagulls' mournings are established close to sea while Owls are very well heard by night, in short. Work begin to be make but it's not clearly advanced. Multiple explanations on that late can be find easily : it's very complicated to replicated song of animals (even if multiple data bases existed) or even invent ones to fit a fantasy bird. It could be very disturbing for a player to hear some noises the player isn't familiar with. That's why, even in a fantasist settings, real birds songs can be heard. In *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of The Wild* as an exemple, a Laughing Kookaburra (*Dacelo novaeguineae*) can be heard in Firone Forest. Is Also posed a certain question of evolution through the history as in the *Assassin's Creed* franchise. It's impossible to be completely right as birds habitat changed. Database of birds songs have been used as a today principe, without taken in matter the possibility of disappearances or appearances of birds of determined points. That's why the games represented oftenly short variety of species, but species sure that existed at the time.

Nesting and migration

Nesting and Migration, two more importants parts of birds biology, are also rarely present in games too. A lot games mentionned birds' nests but there the most of the time empty and serve to obtain certain objects in game (Like in *Monster Hunter*). *Alba: A Wildlife Adventure* is one of the rare game if not the only one I play to represented nestlings with a couple of Eurasian Sparrowhawks (*Accipiter nisus*). Fledglings and other emancipation's process never make the cut on a game. The exceptions could be pet simulation where you take care of your bird until is adult stage. We need to mention the quest of Eerie in *Banjo Kazooie* too. Eerie is young bird that the duo need to feed through the seasonnal level of *Click Clock Wood*. In Spring, Eerie is on its Egg and you need to explode its shell to free him. In Summer and Autumn, you must feed him with worms. He will grow until Winter where he become a brave Bald Eagle-like (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), flying through the air and rewarding you with a puzzle piece, the main collectibles of the game (Figure 6). Migration is a very dire process to implement in a video game as he requires wait from the player. In that way, games made the simple trick to isolate of a precise place birds to make them rare and give the illusion to find them is really difficult. We can mentionned two games that take a right path, still. First is *Red*

Dead Redemption 2 by showing multiple V-Sharp flying birds in a random way. That could be assimilated as birds flying on a long trip to join another region. The second game is Skies of Arcadia that explain the migration's mechanism by illustrating three cranes on its map world (that we can relate to Japanese Cranes (*Grus japonensis*) as these birds circulate on an area very reminiscent of Japan peninsula) making a triangular trip between three precise locations. It's, in my knowledge, the only representation of the migration process in a video game. Some games change their avifauna through their seasons as Stardew Valley but it's so thin to clearly say that it's migration (Figure 7).

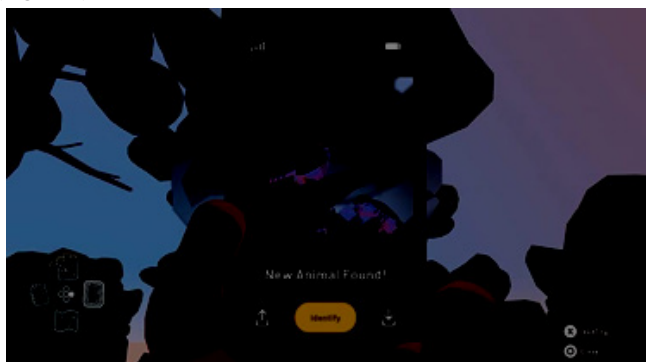


Figure 6 A couple of sparrow hawks on nest in the game Alba: a wildlife adventure (credit: Laura Speller).

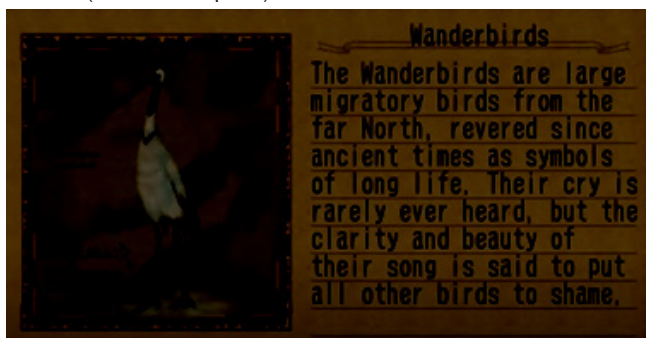


Figure 7 Wander birds are illustrated in Skies of Arcadia by cranes-like birds. In their migration route and in their mythology on the game (Image in game).

Two games doing things right

In 2019 Ustwo Games' small studio gratify us with Alba: A Wildlife Adventure. The aim is simple: You are Alba, a young girl that is in holidays with her grand parents when an hotel promotor decide to transform the island where they lived into a grand complex. The only thing to do to avoid that, is to show how the island is so important for the fauna. And so, with your smartphone and your will, you can walk across the island to encounter and help divers species of animals, notably birds as European Greenfinch (*Chloris chloris*), European Bee-eater (*Merops apiaster*) or European Hoopoe (*Upupa epops*). Also, this is one of the first game when you really incarnate an ornithologist. In 2018, Rockstar released its well attended big budget game set in a 19th century wild west called Red Dead Redemption II. A game where the player is Arthur Morgan, an outlaw in a clan of baddies. Even if the plot is pretty classic, players can, if they want, discovered a more naturally game full of birds and animals. Red Dead Redemption II is so well made that some ornithologists took binoculars to deviate from the main quest to see animals at the point that some studies have been realised on the subject, questioning relevance of birds' presence related to their environment, even if linking some plot parts to mythical representations (Figure 8).^{5,6}



Figure 8 Behind its look of a classic blockbuster adventure, Red Redemption offer an unique experience: become an ornithologist in the wild west.

Discussion

Across this short communication, I express a part of evolution of birds in video games. We could be more deeper in details. Some games, some series bring a better birds' presence than others. All the skyloft's habitant in The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword have a name in reference of birds. The number of main characters which are birds is increasing on the last couple of years including Owlboy, Death's Door or A Short Hike, with share of fantastic and more realistic game animals. The 2017's Untitled Goose Game even became a politic symbol in United Kingdom, part of the brexit campaign. Exemples of such a thing are more important than ever and the next generation of birds in video games show up new ways to consider them. New birds came into life, new mythology came in count like in Tales of Kenzera: Zau with the Impundulu myth of 30 Birds, in a more persian way. This is just the beginning of another path to study birds, with, like principal aim, to make people with a better understanding of them, by playing them, by learning them, by studying them, as Crowley and all discussed it in 2021,⁷ as we will do in further studies.

Acknowledgments

None.

Conflicts of interest

The author declared that there are no conflicts of interest.

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