

You Are a Cosmic Dream: Reimagining Theory Through Interactive Narrative

Kaushiki Chowdhury

MA (Digital Humanities & Social Sciences)

Indian Institute of Technology (ISM), Dhanbad

Author Note

The author declares no conflicts of interest. This paper does not use any AI in any stage of development. The author gratefully acknowledges Dr Shanmugapriya T. for her thoughtful supervision and critical feedback throughout the preparation of this paper.

Correspondence regarding this paper should be addressed to 388, Chak Garia, Srinagar Main Road, Kolkata-700094. Email: 24ma0008@iitism.ac.in / kaushikid360@gmail.com.

Introduction

Posthumanism makes grand promises of expanded notions of subjectivity, vulnerability, and world-making; yet, it continues to broadly circulate within inaccessible academic spheres, and even the most well-meaning theorists and researchers tend to come across as didactic, or worse, incomprehensible. Here is where Digital Humanities offers much-needed help by rendering theoretical concepts playable through interactive fiction (IF). IF has already had a significant impact on new media literature, providing new ways of narrativising abstract feelings, and now it may be opportune to use it pedagogically. This project is thus born out of a hope to counter the exclusivity of the academic economy by offering new modes of remembrance that unsettle canonical archives and invite players to inhabit posthuman grief, care, and futurity.

The Twine game thus developed, *You Are a Cosmic Dream*, is designed to explore posthuman memory-making and relationality. It allows gameplay as one of three animal characters, each of whom has a storyline following similar structural rhythms—through Embodiment, Encounter, and Existence, and the ultimate goal being the finding of the ‘POSThuman,’ which itself has three different versions—‘(self),’ ‘other(),’ ‘(future.’ These are discussed in more detail in the discussion section.

Literature Review

From a systematic literature review of contemporary scholarship, mourning emerged as increasingly understood as a relational, distributed, and posthuman practice that extends beyond individual emotions and beyond the human subject.

Harju (2024), for one, conceptualises the digital afterlife as a techno-affective assemblage, arguing that data, platforms, and technological infrastructures actively participate in mourning, wherein she highlights the benefits of a posthumanist lens, which may facilitate

reconsiderations of the subjectivation of the living and the dead through the promise of “future becomings” (p. 10). Digital platforms are also seen mediating and collectivising grief in Hu and Hong’s (2025) analysis of Weibo comments, showing that strangers can form continuing bonds with the deceased through online interactions, generating digital intimacy, shared emotional labour, and community healing. However, Francesca Romeo’s (2020) theorisation of “networked testimony” expands digital mourning into the political realm, demonstrating such testimonies as forms of resistance that disrupt official state narratives, provide evidence of harm, and foster public mourning and activism. She goes on to explain how the biological corpse “falls out of view” (p. 265), but not its *image*.

While Laue (2019) shows how mourning expands ethical responsibility toward vulnerable human *and* nonhuman others from a Butlerian and posthumanist perspective, Ferrara (2021, 2023) examines the case of disappearance, grief, and female precarity as posthuman events, where objects, spaces, and material environments animate and reflect trauma. May’s (2011) creative elegiac works on animal mourning emphasise that grief is not uniquely human, revealing emotional depth and ritualisation in the natural world. Satama and Huopalainen’s (2018) autoethnography of female-canine companionship similarly shows how interspecies relationships shape experiences of care, palliative support, and loss, demonstrating that animals possess agency, subjectivity, and co-constitutive emotional presence. Perdibon and McSherry (2023), who identify “other-mothers” (p. 50) in their work, highlight interspecies mothering, kinship, and ecological care as central to navigating grief. In this vein, Radomska and Åsberg’s (2022) “low trophic theory” articulates ecological mourning within degraded marine environments, emphasising community practices of care, multispecies flourishing, and adaptable ethics. Liddiard and colleagues (2019) developed a “DisHuman” approach at the intersection of

disability studies and posthuman theory, illuminating how being human and becoming posthuman are lived together, and how blending humanist claims to rights with posthuman relationality can generate new forms of theory and activism around life, death, and disability. In Bollington's (2018) analysis of Mario Bellatin's *Salón de belleza*, she analyses how queer human bodies and dying exotic fish are jointly exposed to a politics of death, arguing that the text destabilises exceptionalist notions of valued life and points towards a posthuman continuum of un/liveability. Ferrández-Sanmiguel (2024) likewise frames posthuman death as a dissolution of humanist binaries, presenting mourning as a recognition of shared vulnerability across species and ecosystems. She mentions "an end to humanity that is not also the end of life on the planet" (p. 199).

Challenges to colonial trauma are seen in Vargas, Marambio, and Lykke (2020)'s poetic and epistolary addresses to human and more-than-human addressees propose an indigenous-centred, feminist, posthuman methodology for "decolonising mourning," thereby refusing Western humanist framings of grief and enacting pluriversal practices of mourning. Dawn and Alan (2025) study Afrofuturist meditation on postmemory, counter-memory, and collective trauma, utilising posthuman merfolk to reframe the afterlives of the Middle Passage. Cohen (2022) reads contemporary Anglophone Palestinian poetry—specifically, that of Handal and Shihab Nye—as ecofeminist and posthuman poetics, in which land, animals, and plants become central agents in mourning and resistance.

Elsewhere, Persinger, Vint, and Canavan (2024) go on to map recent ecological science fiction as a key imaginative archive for thinking the Anthropocene, climate grief, and posthuman futures. Similarly, Chemi's (2025) epistolary autoethnography, drawing on Rosi Braidotti's vitalist account of the "death/life continuum" (p. 265), studies how ecological thinking,

multispecies kinship, and material rituals influence personal and collective bereavement, particularly in disrupted contexts such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, her Harawayan focus on a companion species diffracts trauma into new forms of relationality, enabling healing, ethical reflexivity, and the crafting of alternative mourning rituals when conventional rites are disrupted or inaccessible. On the other hand,

Keller (2012), employing Derridean spectral memory and ongoing mourning, interprets ruins and abandoned landscapes as haunted archives that transform private grief into collective, political mourning. Similarly, Zaiets' (2024) autoethnography of war-shattered Kharkiv also foregrounds ruins, debris, animals, and damaged landscapes as co-participants in the process of mourning and adaptation. "Semi-death/semi-life places" (p. 200) then must be understood as part of an entangled more-than-human fields rather than as inert backdrops. He contends that "the generally accepted framework (strict boundaries between living/non-living, nature and culture, human and non-human) and the exclusivity of human death [...] must be questioned," (p. 200).

Hypertext autobiographies find their champions in Chew and Mitchell (2016), who analyse Steven Wingate's *daddylabyrinth* (2014), and Travis Megill's Twine game, *Memorial* (2013), demonstrating how multimodality, interactivity, and cybernetic feedback loops evoke empathy and immersion. They add that the works employ an interconnected, episodic reading process, which they name "synaptic reading" (p. 142), and that such hypertextual formats' technological affordances "[recall] the literary tradition of the apostrophe prevalent in pre-modern poetry and theatre (Baldick). Moreover, the visual dynamism explicit in hypertext stories, they add, dramatically enhances the immersion despite the plurality of the immaterial "you"—meaning both the deceased loved one, and the player—during gameplay.

Taken together, these studies reveal that mourning is not simply a private emotional state but a dynamic process of world-making, ethical transformation, and resistance that unfolds across human, animal, technological, and ecological domains.

Method

The game draws inspiration from a series of other original Twine games, including *A Tale of Crowns* by qeresî for its rich worldbuilding and relational choices that affect emotional tone; *Space Frog* by npckc for its gentle, reflective tone and minimalist design; *Goodbye* by barrels for its themes of closure, choice and memory; *Wayfarer* by Idrelle Games for its expansive fantasy with moral complexity.

The prototype version of the game was built on Twine, using the default Harlowe 3.3.9 story format, which forgoes extensive knowledge of HTML, JS, and CSS in favour of a familiar narrative construction and progression. This readily allows writers to become game makers “[b]y focusing on the expressive potential of hypertext, rather than the technological capabilities of the platform” (Friedhoff, 2013). *Fig. 1* in the appendix shows the simplistic conditioning and styling statements.

The game is currently under development, featuring 17 unique passages which provide the player with choices to advance through the branching paths, enabled by Twine’s conditional logic. A screenshot (*Fig. 2*) of the Twine workspace for an early version of the passage networks is included in the appendix. While the game is currently in its alpha version, the author hopes to gradually learn and implement new logic loops to support a variety of substantial story possibilities.

Self-testing revealed some difficulties in executing the intended gameplay, but they are being readily addressed. Moreover, the game has been opened to small-scale group testing, and

the observations are being recorded for future development, which, among others, will include a more visually compelling narrative using embedded elements.

Upon completion, the project will be made available on itch.io, the primary platform for Twine games. For now, the prototype's link is accessible via GitHub. The project is also hosted on the Indian Consortium for Interactive Digital Narratives (ICIDN) platform as part of their archive of creative projects, in support of their ongoing efforts to foster digital creativity in India. Likewise, the links are included in the appendix.

Discussion

The project treats IF not as an aesthetic supplement but as a critical method for understanding theory. The 'POSThuman,' being the goal of characters' overall mission, is both a stylistic choice and an attempt at the realisation and manifestation of an actual entity named thus, albeit in different versions. This section will further delve into the in-game elements relevant to the theme of the gameplay.

Embodiment

While in posthumanist theory, embodiment is a widely discussed and contested topic, this researcher adopts the popular Haylesian line of thinking, such that embodiment refers to the distinction between information and materiality. However, the game allows the player full autonomy in selecting in both regards. This, by no means, is a new phenomenon, as video games and social media have long given players/users the power and space to decide their self-presentation. Thus, the character selection stage, as found in any other video game, becomes the embodiment stage.

In this game, players can inhabit one of three more-than-human figures—Laika the space dog, the Ayrshire two-headed calf, or the recently surfaced anglerfish. Laika, as most would

know, was the first animal in space, but with no planned return journey and no communication with the Russian base. In later cultural memory, Laika has become “the patron saint of one-way trips” (the appellation traces its origin to various social media posts on Reddit, Tumblr, Instagram, Pinterest, and Facebook). To this extent, Laika represents that desire of humankind for scientific exploration bordering on overreach. The two-headed calf does not have a singular version, but among the popular ones is the taxidermied Ayreshire cow (*Fig. 3*) by Philip Legett, and it mainly gained attention through Laura Gilpin’s eponymous poem about the animal. The two-headed calf, for the game, connotes both the accidents of life and birth beyond the control of the otherwise omnipotent scientific man, and the unforeseen mutations forced by adaptation to nuclear fallout. The anglerfish mentioned here surfaced in early 2025 and was photographed by underwater photographer David Jara Boguñá (a video link is included in the appendix). Marine scientists have cited a variety of reasons for this, including the degrading ocean conditions. (Steinhoff, 2025) While the recent sightings of deep-sea fish have inspired doomsday conspiracy theories, this specific anglerfish sighting has moved angler-dedicated artworks from antagonistic monsters to Icarus (atombombicarus, 2025).

In reference to the game, all the characters symbolise not only the fear of impending doom awaiting humanity in the light of its unchecked hubris as a species, but also the unique optimism of the indomitable human spirit, which can now be understood as not ‘human’ at all, but permeating all living creatures.

Essence

Each character will have corresponding character quirks—Connection vs. Isolation (Laika), Duality vs. Unity (Ayreshire), and Visibility vs. Obscurity (Angler). By capitalising on

Twine's conditional logic, player decisions will subtly influence variables tied to each character's aforementioned core tension, which this researcher terms "essences."

As in any other game where a certain buff could give a 'stat boost,' having more of a certain quirk—say, more Connection scores than Isolation scores in the Laika path would unlock specific branches otherwise hidden and vice versa. It is not the intention of this author to decide if a quirk is more 'important' than its counterpart, but to highlight that player choices influence both the quirks accumulated and the journey direction.

Encounter

Furthermore, the player must make these choices as their character navigates through their corresponding worlds: Outer Space, the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone (hereinafter referred to as CEZ), and Atlantis. The challenges they face in these locales are what are named "encounters."

The places each represent what this author identifies as "beyond-human-scapes" to supplement the journeys of the respective more-than-human figures appropriately. Outer space has long been a subject of human interest, and there seems to be no slowing of this momentum anytime soon, with space tourism becoming increasingly common! The CEZ has been recorded for emitting latent radiation that forces mutations in all sorts life forms—some as aversion and some as adaptation (Chaturvedi, 2024)—and while polycephaly, as in the case of the two-headed calves, can be just a result of an "abnormal development of the body due to a genetic anomaly" (Sharma et. al., 2019, p. 100), this author has taken the route of sci-fi imagination for its cause. Finally, Atlantis, while having had enough time to build a considerable body of work centring it, takes on new meaning here. Both the anglerfish (literally) and Atlantis (metaphorically) survive only in the deepest waters where light and other forms of life are nigh non-existent. To this

author, it seemed that no other site could be more fitting for this deep-sea creature's journey, and it is precisely the surfacing in 2025 that problematises this apparently natural habitat.

Stacy Alaimo, perhaps, best elaborates the specific interest in such creatures, saying that “people [are] interested in them because we're all interested in novelty and weirdness and the surreal [...]” (Alaimo cited in Arasu, 2025). Thus, these characters felt the most compelling in a game dedicated to posthumanist theory and feeling.

Existence

Here, “existence” follows the previous mention of “essence” to recall the Sartrean theory of existentialism, but again, it is not this author's intent to state a position on existentialism, but to make these concepts, so closely related to posthumanism, legible to the ordinary reader, rather, player. This, in the case of the game, is achieved through finishing the game, i.e., the goal of the gameplay: find the “POSThuman” that exists in one of three versions—“(self),” or “other(),” or “(future.”

While Rosi Braidotti, in *The Posthuman*, articulates a “Post-Humanism: Life beyond the Self,” the “(self),” here, refers to a type of posthumanism that is both self-contained and self-expanding. The “other(),” here, follows from that, insofar as it ideates posthumanism as existing “out there.” It is immaterial, just as the diesmodied posthuman identity, yet it is also observable as an entity external to the character selected. Lastly, “(future,” refers to the idea that posthumanism is the ‘post-’ of everything—of liberal humanism, of humanity, of the world.

It is upon the players to decide if they subscribe to this belief, and more so in the message of the game, given the artistic intent and manipulation implicit in the game's experience; it is nonetheless an attempt at making dense theory manageable and accessible to the many.

Conclusion

This project aimed to explore whether posthumanist theory—often criticised for its density and limited accessibility—can be meaningfully reimaged through interactive narrative. By developing the Twine game *You Are a Cosmic Dream*, the research demonstrates that IF has veritable pedagogical possibilities through gameplay structured around abstract posthumanist concepts, now translated into experiential processes, allowing players to inhabit relationality, vulnerability, and becoming rather than simply reading about them.

Ultimately, this research argues that posthumanism's ethical and political promise lies not only in what it theorises, but in how it is communicated. By rendering theory playable, *You Are a Cosmic Dream* proposes interactive narrative as a methodological bridge between academic discourse and broader publics. Further, in inviting players to discover that they are already POSThuman—whether as (*self*), (*other*), or (*future*)—the project affirms posthumanism not as an abstract endpoint, but as an ongoing, relational practice of living, mourning, and imagining otherwise.

Appendix

```
go further deep
Undo Redo Tags Size Rename Test From Here
B/S [Icons] (Macro: [Icons])
(align:"=><=")[(b4r:"none","none","groove","inset")+ (b4r-size:1,1,1.6,1.6)+(b4r-
colour:white)[What is this new place?]
(after: 2s)[these ruins...they seem familiar, don't they?]]

(after: 5s)[(text-style:"tall","shudder")[(align:"=>>")+ (box:"=XXX=")[who goes there?]]]
(live:9s)[
(stop:)

(align:"=><=")+(box:"=XXXXXXXX=")
[
|=
[[swim away!]]
|=
[[answer]]
|=|
]
]
```

Fig. 1

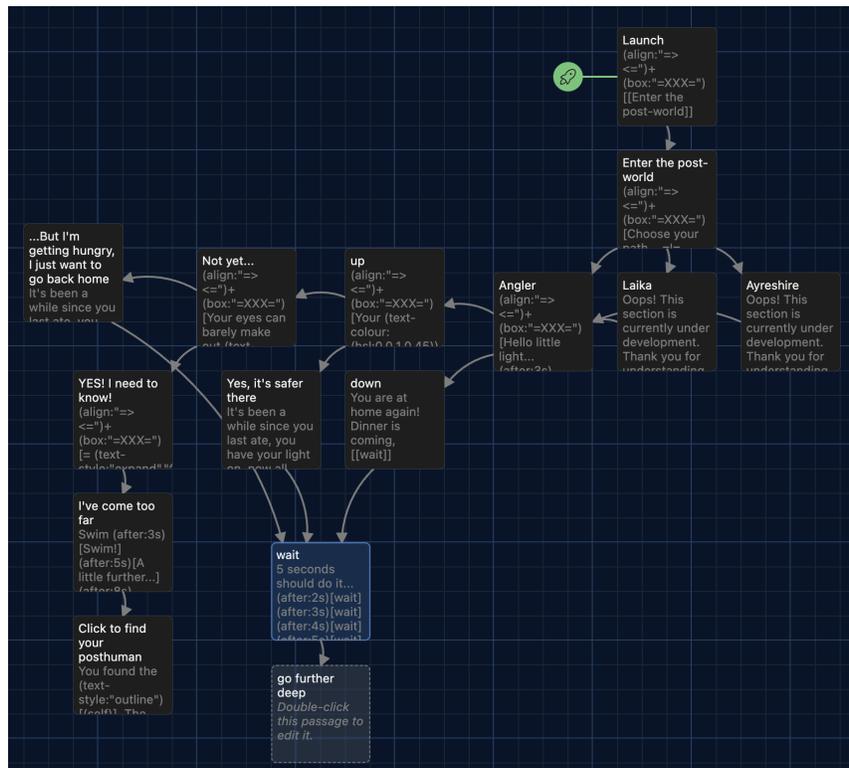


Fig. 2



Fig. 3

GitHub link: <https://github.com/kaushikichowdhury/You-Are-a-Cosmic-Dream-Twine/tree/main>

ICIDN link: <https://icidn.github.io/website/archive/creative.html>

Angler fish video: <https://vimeo.com/1055248754?fl=pl&fe=sh>

References

- Arasu, P. (2025, March 7). *Icarus of the deep: How a dying anglerfish became a social media sensation*. *The Conversation*.
<https://theconversation.com/icarus-of-the-deep-how-a-dying-anglerfish-became-a-social-media-sensation-251603>
- atombombicarus. (2025, February 10). *Icarus Is the Anglerfish* [Reel]. *Instagram*.
<https://www.instagram.com/reel/DF5T1BBx0nH/>
- Bollington, L. (2018). Animality, sexuality and the politics of death in Mario Bellatin's *Salón de belleza*. *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 37(4), 479–492.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/blar.12670>
- Braidotti, R. (2013). *The posthuman*. Polity Press.
- Chaturvedi, A. (2024, February 20). *The mutants of Chernobyl: How radiation exposure forced animals to evolve to survive*. *NDTV*.
<https://www.ndtv.com/science/the-mutants-of-chernobyl-how-radiation-exposure-forced-animals-to-evolve-to-survive-5092547>
- Chemi, T. (2025). The vitalistic ecology of death: An autoethnographic journey through bereavement and loss. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 31(2), 265–273.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/10778004241282300>
- Chew, E., & Mitchell, A. (2016). How is empathy evoked in interactive multimodal life stories? *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies*, 42(2), 125–149.
<https://doi.org/10.6240/concentric.lit.2016.42.2.08>
- Cohen, H. B. (2022). Poetry, Palestine and posthumanism. *Postcolonial Studies*, 25(3), 361–379.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2021.1979742>

- Dawn, A., & Green, A. (2025). Posthuman interventions in submerged histories: Reconstructing history through memory in Rivers Solomon's *The Deep*. *Frontiers in Sociology*, 10, 1612388. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2025.1612388>
- Ferrández-Sanmiguel, M. (2024). Mourning the human? Posthuman death and ontological vulnerability in Jeff VanderMeer's *The Southern Reach Trilogy*. *International Journal of English Studies*, 24(2), 195–216. <https://doi.org/10.6018/ijes.582731>
- Ferrara, E. M. (2021). Grief and posthuman identity in Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan novels: The precarious life of women and the right to disappear. *MLN*, 136(1), 96–117. <https://doi.org/10.1353/mln.2021.0006>
- Ferrara, E. M. (2023). Posthumanism and trauma: The non-anthropocentric world of grief and objects in Elena Ferrante and Catherine Dunne. *Romance Studies*, 41(4), 267–282. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02639904.2024.2311512>
- Friedhoff, J. (2014). *Untangling Twine: A platform study*. In Proceedings of the DiGRA 2013 Conference. DiGRA. <https://doi.org/10.26503/dl.v2013i1.693>
- Gilpin, L. (1977). *The two-headed calf*. Poetry Foundation. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/1626022/the-two-headed-calf>
- Harju, A. A. (2024). Theorising digital afterlife as techno-affective assemblage: On relationality, materiality, and the affective potential of data. *Social Sciences*, 13(4), 227. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13040227>
- Hayles, N. K. (1999). *How we became posthuman: Virtual bodies in cybernetics, literature, and informatics*. University of Chicago Press.
- Hempel, S. (2020). *Conducting your literature review*. American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0000155-000>

- Hu, A., & Jiang, H. (2025). From mourning to healing: Continuing bonds with strangers in Chinese social media. *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00302228251319834>
- Keller, P. (2012). Place and the politics of loss in Mercedes Álvarez's *El cielo gira* (2004). *Hispanic Research Journal*, 13(4), 361–381. <https://doi.org/10.1179/1468273712Z.000000000021>
- Laue, K. A. (2019). “Like relatives consoling each other after a tragedy”: Mourning, vulnerability, and hospitality in Justin Cartwright's *White Lightning*. *English Studies in Africa*, 62(2), 42–52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00138398.2019.1685205>
- Leggett, P. (n.d.). *Two-headed calf*. Taxidermy UK. <https://www.taxidermyuk.net/portfolio/gallery/two-headed-calf/>
- Liddiard, K., Whitney, S., Evans, K., Watts, L., Vogelmann, E., Spurr, R., Aimes, C., Runswick-Cole, K., & Goodley, D. (2019). Working the edges of posthuman disability studies: Theorising with disabled young people with life-limiting impairments. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 41(8), 1473–1487. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.12962>
- May, J. (2011). The reddened flower, the erotic bird, and: Natural grief. *New England Review*, 32(3), 97–98. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ner.2011.0078>
- Molina Vargas, H., Marambio, C., & Lykke, N. (2020). Decolonising mourning: World-making with the Selk'nam people of Karokynka/Tierra del Fuego. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 35(104), 186–201. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2020.1774865>
- Oceanographic Magazine. (2025, February 10). *Rare deep-sea anglerfish seen for first time in broad daylight* [Video]. *Vimeo*. <https://vimeo.com/1055248754>

- Perdibon, A., & McSherry, A. (2023). The Mother Herb: Plant Storywork, Grief, and More-than-Human Care in Compromised Times. *Journal of Ecohumanism*, 2(1), 39–53. <https://doi.org/10.33182/joe.v2i1.2903>
- Persinger, K., Vint, S., & Canavan, G. (2023). Science fiction in the Anthropocene. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 48, 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-environ-032823-054233>
- Radomska, M., & Åsberg, C. (2022). Fathoming postnatural oceans: Towards a low trophic theory in the practices of feminist posthumanities. *EPE: Nature and Space*, 5(3), 1428–1445. <https://doi.org/10.1177/25148486211028542>
- Romeo, F. (2020). Networked testimony as necroresistance. *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 30(3), 264–283. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2020.1907684>
- Sartre, J.-P. (2007). *Existentialism is a humanism* (C. Macomber, Trans.; J. Kulka, Ed.; A. Elkaïm-Sartre, Pref.). Yale University Press. (Original work published 1946)
- Satama, S., & Huopainen, A. (2019). “Please tell me when you are in pain”: A heartbreaking story of care, grief and female–canine companionship. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 26(12), 1835–1852. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12294>
- Siffrinn, N., & Coda, J. (2024). A literature review of posthumanist and new materialist research in applied linguistics. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, 22(3), 190–201. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15427587.2024.2415619>
- Sharma, K., Sharma, M., Dinani, O. P., & Bhagat, V. (2019). A two-headed calf – Case report. *International Journal of Current Microbiology and Applied Sciences*, 8(1), xx–xx. <https://doi.org/10.20546/ijcmas.2019.801.012>

Steinhoff, N. (2025, February 10). *Rare deep-sea anglerfish seen for first time in broad daylight*.

Oceanographic Magazine.

<https://oceanographicmagazine.com/news/rare-deep-sea-anglerfish-seen-for-first-time-in-broad-daylight/>

Zaiets, D. (2024). Kharkiv's shattered landscapes: Observations from the front line of the war in Ukraine. *European Societies*, 26(2), 178–202.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2023.2180152>