

The Environment at Play: Confronting Nature in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* and the “Frostfall” Ecomod

Dennis Jansen

Utrecht University – RMA Media, Art, and Performance Studies

Abstract

In this paper, I argue that the natural environment in the base game of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* is devoid of agency and power in the face of the player’s colonialist endeavours to explore, conquer and master that environment. Weaving together insights about spatiality in digital games from (ecocritical and postcolonial) game studies, as well as performance studies, the paper problematizes some of the most basic elements of digital games in general: navigation and movement. It then moves to a discussion of the “Frostfall” mod as one possible option to counteract the destructive and oppositional relationship between the player and nature in *Skyrim*. “Frostfall” is an ecomod that adds weather survival elements to the game, by which the player can freeze and die from hypothermia if they do not take the appropriate measures to cope with *Skyrim*’s harsh climate. In this way, the power fantasy set up in the base game becomes somewhat limited, as the player’s agency encounters nature’s newfound agency and must find ways to negotiate the gameworld while taking seriously the environment as an agent in and of that gameworld.

Keywords

agency; ecocriticism; ecomods; Frostfall; gameworld; nature; *Skyrim*

Press Start 2019 | Volume 5 | Issue 1

ISSN: 2055-8198

URL: <http://press-start.gla.ac.uk>



Press Start is an open access student journal that publishes the best undergraduate and postgraduate research, essays and dissertations from across the multidisciplinary subject of game studies. Press Start is published by HATII at the University of Glasgow.

Introduction

I have been summoned by the Greybeards to travel to the fortress High Hrothgar, close to the peak of the Throat of the World, which is the highest mountain in Tamriel (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011). The snow-covered summit towers over the imperial province of Skyrim, its shadow bearing down on the Empire's citizens with the combined weight of solid rock and ancient history. From the bustling trade hub of Whiterun, where I first heard the Greybeards' Voices call to me, I travel to Ivarstead. There, in that small village at the foot of the mountain, begin the Seven Thousand Steps up to High Hrothgar. The man who delivers supplies to the Greybeards once per week does not seem as impressed with the ostensibly arduous task ahead as I am, but that does nothing to calm my nerves. I expect the mountain to resist, to encounter fierce predators and deadly snowstorms. I expect to lose my way for a while, to stray from the Steps momentarily or not-so-momentarily, perhaps to get lost in the magnificent view from up high and be overtaken by frostbite or frost trolls.

Some of this actually happens. By the time I reach the fortress, I have indeed slain several white wolves, a bear, and a frost troll; I have indeed looked over the plains of Skyrim lying beneath me and stared in awe at the sheer beauty that modern-day graphics cards can render onto my monitor. The Throat of the World itself, however, proves to be far more impressive from a distance than when I am actually on it. I have not almost been crushed by a sudden avalanche or blinded and blown away by a heavy snowstorm. In fact, I have climbed hundreds of meters up a mountain in a continental climate and did not even catch the common cold, let alone hypothermia. Surely enough, the graphics and sound effects are telling me I am on the Throat of the World. The journey itself may as well have been a virtual walk in the park, with the addition of a surprisingly representative number of canines trying to bite my hands off.

The essay that follows is an examination of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim's* refusal to give its natural environments any power to limit the player in their movement or actions, due to its emphasis on player expression and power fantasy. Nature is presented as dangerous, but those dangers are not followed through in any significant way, causing the depicted environment and nature to become nothing but as-good-as-empty virtual space for the player to appropriate and conquer. I argue that one possible way to address and shift this implicitly colonial attitude towards nature are so-called "ecomods" (Bohunicky, 2017, p. 80). I specifically discuss the fan-created modification pack "Frostfall" (Chesko, 2016), which implements survival elements and necessitates a constant awareness of and negotiation with one's natural surroundings in the game. Finally, I offer some reflections upon the ecocritical effects of these additions and briefly explore the further potentials of this genre of game modification.

The Gameworlds of *The Elder Scrolls*

If there is anything the *Elder Scrolls* games are known for, it is the vastly rich worlds they provide to their players. For twenty years, *The Elder Scrolls II: Daggerfall* (Bethesda Softworks, 1996) boasted the largest gameworld of all time: procedural generation allowed a virtual space of over 160.000 square kilometres to fit onto a single CD-ROM.¹ This massive scale and the method of producing it also led to swaths of empty land between in-game points of interest where nothing of note would happen, and so after *Daggerfall* the franchise returned to a more restrained form of open world design. *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2002), *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2006), and *Skyrim* drastically reduced their surface area in favour of a world with more frequent instances of narrative content and systems interactions, such as short quests provided by non-player characters (NPCs) and (semi-)random encounters with highwaymen or aggressive nonhuman animals. Though the rhetoric of 'bigger is better' remains ever-present in the discourse surrounding open-world digital roleplaying games like *The Elder Scrolls*, this evolution within the franchise is also reflective of a broader tendency to measure the size of a gameworld not in square footage, but in the number of things to do for the player. This context is important to the argument I am advancing here, because my problematization and ecocritical suspicion of *Skyrim's* constructed relationship between the player and its gameworld stands in rather stark contrast with most mainstream coverage of this game, which often showers the impressively dense world with praise (e.g. Fahey, 2011) and promotes the idea that "*Skyrim* is very happy to let you wander" (Evans-Thirlwell, 2017) without reflecting on the implications of this wandering.

Michael Nitsche approaches a gameworld as "a spatially defined condition for interaction" (2008, p. 157); next to the user interface, the game world is the primary environment through which the player can engage with the content of the digital game as a whole. One of the primary ways in which to behave in virtual spaces like gameworlds and encounter their content is to move through them, to *navigate* them. Regarding how games tend to deliver their narratives and how players tend to interact with the world, I would agree with Lev Manovich's proposition that "narrative action and exploration are closely linked together" (2001, p. 247). In the case of *Skyrim*, movement allows the player to add to their knowledge and comprehension of the gameworld, for example by adding markers on their map, to encounter and trigger certain interactions with friends or enemies, to enhance several available skills, and to progress through the fabulae of some storylines.

¹ To be more precise, it is 314 by 530 kilometres, as determined by one particularly thorough fan: <https://www.imperial-library.info/content/distance-measurements-daggerfall>.

That said, there is more to the exploration and navigation of digital games than sheer movement: the player can forage from *Skyrim's* abundant flora, hold conversations with the NPCs they come across, attempt to hunt or fight the many (hostile) creatures that menace the fields and roads, among many other things.

On Player Performance and Gamescape

From the above, it follows that the affective power of *Skyrim's* gameworld lies in its ability to simultaneously provide "performance space" and to be "performative place" (Bealer, 2012, p. 28). That is, *Skyrim* as presented in-game is not merely a fixed visual representation of a fictional place which the player navigates and interacts with in the same way one might navigate Google Street View, moving from one image to the next like in a virtual museum. Instead, Adele Bealer argues, its "[s]patial outlines serve as performance scripts, directing certain kinds of social behaviour (and certain types of social actors) while rendering other performances impractical or impossible" (ibid., p. 30). Bealer bases her ecocritical analysis of the performative aspects of game space on Shoshana Magnet's (2006) concept of "gamescape, [which is] the multidimensional space within and against which the process of video-gameplay evolves" (Bealer, 2012, p. 28).² The term was initially coined as a conceptual tool that serves to highlight how a gameworld can "shape a player's particular understanding of a larger set of spatial ideologies inherent to the game" (Magnet, 2006, p. 143). However, I would rather follow Bealer and view the gamescape/gameworld as an agent in itself, a material, consequential manifestation of those spatial ideologies to be navigated and negotiated by the player. In other words, the gameworld and its environment have the ability to act upon and around the player just as much as the other way around.³

² Interestingly, Bealer connects the theoretical origins of gamescape to Arjun Appadurai's (1996, pp. 33–37) five "scapes" as spatial categories through which power and information flow (e.g. "financescape" and "mediascape"), whereas Magnet draws from James Corner's architectural landscape theory, which sees landscape as "revealing explorations of the interface between culture and nature" (Corner, 1999, p. x). Furthermore, Magnet was not the first to use the term gamescape: Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska use the term prolifically in "Gamescapes: Exploration and Virtual Presence in Game-worlds" (2003) but leave the concept itself untheorized.

³ Given my current focus on the gameworld, I leave the relationship between player and avatar undiscussed here. Simply put, my own idea of the player-avatar connection assumes that the player's primary experience is *as* the avatar, while they are at the same time fully aware

I find such recent attention to performance and performativity important, because it moves the discussion of how gameworlds generate meaning away from the tendency to compare digital games to (passive) screen-based media like cinema (cf. Manovich, 2001; Nitsche, 2008) and towards attempts to understand how the sheer embodied interactions between player and environment contribute to the overall sense-making process activated during play (e.g. Keogh, 2018; Shibolet, 2018). However, as I discuss in the next section, the ability of game space to actively participate in this process often leads to games framing their worlds—more specifically, their natural environments—as passive, even *submissive* virtual landscapes that exist solely for the player to gain mastery over as soon as possible.

Nature, Conquest, and Civilization

Digital games and nature have a complicated relationship. Their physical production and distribution amount to a not-insignificant percentage of our total industrial carbon footprint (Mayers et al., 2015), thereby contributing noticeably to the human-made acceleration of climate change and the destruction of local and global ecosystems. Robert Mejia (2016) offers an excellent critique of game studies' ignorance of the ecological consequences of computer hardware production, wherein he describes the digital game industry's complicity in water pollution in California and its reliance on the neo-colonialist extraction of conflict minerals from the Democratic Republic of Congo. This domination of culture over nature is almost always considered 'only natural'; in other words, as ecofeminist Val Plumwood describes it:

To be defined as 'nature' [...] is to be defined as passive, as non-agent and non-subject, as the 'environment' or invisible background conditions against which the 'foreground' achievements of reason or culture (provided typically by the white, western, male expert or entrepreneur) take place. It is to be defined as a *terra nullius*, a resource empty of its own purposes or meanings, and hence available to be annexed for the purposes of those supposedly identified with reason or intellect, and to be conceived and moulded in relation to these purposes. It means being seen as part of a sharply separate, even alien lower realm, whose domination is simply 'natural', flowing from nature itself and the nature(s) of things. (Plumwood, 1993, p. 4)

Plumwood continues to argue that the tendency towards dualism and binary oppositions in Western thought—culture versus nature, colonizer versus colonized, man versus woman, and so on—serves the "logic of colonisation" (ibid., p. 41) by which the submission and oppression of subjects considered less-than is justified and rationalized. Nature's

of the mediated distance between them (cf. Crick, 2011; Keogh, 2018; Waggoner, 2009).

common position as a lower realm is thus far from innocent, even beyond humanity's constructed supremacy over the natural environment itself. Indeed, ecocriticism has proven itself quite apt at discerning how "the concept of the natural is traditionally called upon by authoritarian discourses of race, gender, and sexuality to legitimize their views" (Hoving, 2017, p. 3), but also at finding strategies of resisting those discourses. As Isabel Hoving shows, for instance, some postcolonial literature uses radically embodied and transgressive depictions of nature to not only expose the "material violence that [colonialism] causes, in the environment and in human or animal bodies" (ibid., pp. 220–21; original emphasis), but also to work through the trauma resulting from that still-ongoing violence.⁴ In other words, the domination of nature cannot be seen separately from the marginalisation of particular groups in society through the propagation of dualistic discourses about what is 'natural'. That same nature, however, may well become a site of confrontation and resistance too.

Navigating Nature in *Skyrim*

In digital games, the logic of colonization is never far away. One of the earliest texts on spatiality and movement in digital games, by Mary Fuller and Henry Jenkins (1995), quite brilliantly demonstrates the parallels between the 16th- and 17th-century New World travel writings of European 'explorers' like Christopher Columbus and the adventures of Nintendo's Super Mario Brothers. Fuller and Jenkins note the emphasis of New World narratives on the *journey towards* conquest rather than on conquest itself, positioning them as "locodescriptive project[s]" that "provided at once both an alternate, more diffuse kind of justification for the discovery and motives and informational resources for a repeat performance" (ibid., p. 63). To describe the lands-to-be-colonized is to gather knowledge about them, and this gathering of knowledge, importantly, is itself already a form of exerting dominance, of colonization. In the Nintendo games discussed by Fuller and Jenkins, the connection between spatial navigation and mastery is further concretized:

The games [...] often create a series of goalposts that not only marks our progress through the game space but also determines our dominance over it. Once you've mastered a particular space, moved past its goalpost, you can reassume play at that point no

⁴ Moreover, Hoving calls for ecocriticism to starting looking beyond literature for different, perhaps even more incisive insights into the effects of colonialism and globalization. She states: "The growing relevance of the new, often digital media for the way in which worldwide audiences imagine the human relation to the environment suggests that the questions what *kind* of knowledge art produces and what its relation to social action can be are in continuous need of rephrasing" (2017, p. 221; original emphasis).

matter the outcome of a particular round. These mechanisms help us to map our growing mastery over the game world, our conquest of its virtual real estate. Even in the absence of such a mechanism, increased understanding of the geography, biology, and physics of the different worlds makes it easy to return quickly to the same spot and move further into the frontier. (1995, p. 67)

Navigation, in the previous section presented as a primary concept to understand the functioning of digital games, becomes as suspect as nature in this context. What, then, does it mean to *navigate nature* in a digital game? Here, it is first of all important to note that principally everything in a game exists in service of the play experience as envisioned by its designers and developers. A digital game gives its players goals to attain and/or actions to perform, and many possible aspects of any given game can make those performances feel simpler or more difficult to different players (cf. Jagoda 2018; Juul 2013). In many games, and more broadly, in many game genres the natural environment is one of the aspects that hardly ever interferes with the player's goals. In line with the quote from Plumwood offered above, whenever nature plays a tangible role beyond providing a colourful background (which is not nearly as often the case as one might expect), it is frequently presented as a resource, available to be annexed, to be conceived and moulded in relation to the purposes of the player. One might see the ever-popular *Minecraft* (Mojang, 2011) as an example of a game in which such an unequal relationship is formed by requiring the player to appropriate or destroy natural resources in order to survive and advance through the world, leading them to relate to its natural environments with a "utilitarian" perspective (Bohunicky, 2017, p. 81). Moreover, many of the most popular strategy game franchises, such as Ensemble Studios' *Age of Empires* and Sid Meier's *Civilization* series, emphasize the environment as a collection of resources to be gathered or harvested in the service of more overt colonial and imperialist endeavours (cf. Euteneuer, 2018; Lammes, 2003, 2010; Mukherjee, 2015).

Compared to these examples, *Skyrim* appears at first sight a less egregious perpetuator of the nature-conquest dynamic, but looks can be deceptive. In a short essay, Alex Duncan (2018) takes note of the game's "spatial conflict between civilization and nature." He argues that a variety of elements in the game actively encourage the dualistic view of culture/nature that Plumwood criticizes. His examples range from loading screen descriptions of wolves and trolls, to the "functional separation" of the gameworld into urban centres and wilderness, to the markers on the player's map that "indicate the player's gradual understanding of the space. These same markers also functionally allow for a mechanic called 'fast travelling'", which is essentially the same goalpost mechanic that Fuller and Jenkins describe. Subsequently,

Duncan shows that this dualism indeed leads to “progression as domination”: the player can take from the wilderness whatever they want with impunity and without regard for the local ecosystem or species endangerment, and areas such as caves and barrows gain an additional map marker when they have been “cleared”—meaning, they are marked as safe to return to because its original inhabitants have been killed by the player. For Duncan, *Skyrim*’s nature-as-wilderness, nature-as-negative-space, exists in an unequal opposition to the ‘positive space’ of human civilization and thus exists solely to be conquered.

Writing about the previous instalment in the *Elder Scrolls* series in a lengthy essay, Paul Martin claims that

[*Oblivion*’s] fantasy theme of a battle in a pastoral paradise motivated into action by the encroachment of an industrial hell is not merely played out *on* the landscape. It is played out *by* the landscape. And this happens by imaginatively embodying the player in the landscape. (2011; original emphases)

Over the course of the game, Martin argues, the initial presentation of the gameworld as “sublime” is undermined by “[t]he centrality of action to games.” After a few hours of play, the fragile sublime moment evoked by the game’s opening cinematic is undone by the realization that “the player is also equipped with the means of encountering the landscape in such a way as to make it familiar and banal.” As other authors have also noted (Bohunicky, 2017; Duncan, 2018), this visual framing of the gameworld as aesthetically sublime and the subsequent elimination of that moment through the sheer act of playing the game is a dynamic that is also visible in *Skyrim*. Compare, for instance, the opening shots of the landscape in *Oblivion* (Figure 1) with one of the earliest vistas that the player can encounter in any normal playthrough of *Skyrim* (Figure 2). These are the very few moments when the (natural) environment is made into something to be taken seriously, something to be impressed by, something to approach with caution and care. Even later in the game, the player might stumble upon scenes that leave them in awe, mostly impressed at the prowess of the gameworld’s designers. However, what follows those sublime moments is not play with caution and care; it is familiarization, knowledge-gathering, mastery, and conquest.



Figure 1. The already-impressive Imperial City and White-Gold Tower, dwarfed by the sublime mountain ranges and forests lying beyond (Bethesda Game Studios, 2006)



The Confrontational Nature of “Frostfall”

If action and player performance are central to games, as Martin argues (and as I have argued here too, to some extent), and if the natural environments in digital gameworlds like *Skyrim*'s are thus quickly stripped of their ability to stop us in our tracks in sublime awe, how can nature become an active agent in the gameplay process? Is it not practically unavoidable that the player will try to learn the game, to master its systems, and thereby mostly unwittingly partake in the colonialist dynamics described above? Like other recent Bethesda titles, *Skyrim* emphasizes player expression and empowerment (cf. Errant Signal, 2015) and therefore relies on providing the player with a sense of freedom and continuous advancement. When this “narrative [...] of

self-improvement" (Manovich, 2001, p. 248) is combined with colonialist navigation, it seems that what has been created constitutes a typically masculinist power fantasy wherein the player subjugates and diminishes the agency of their environs for their own gain. This progression-as-dominance, which I mention above, is the key to any such power fantasy. The player is taught and encouraged to perform a "confident, masculine 'thrust outwards'" (Fuller & Jenkins, 1995, p. 70) into the apparently hostile natural world, implicitly told to desire and pursue control over and possession of all they encounter.

Reading that somewhat pessimistic observation, one might wonder why *Skyrim* is the subject of this essay to begin with. If the ambition is to show that the player's relationship to nature in gameworlds can potentially be other than one of dominance and subjugation, it might have addressed a game wherein these colonial and patriarchal tendencies are subverted or avoided altogether, rather than one which exemplifies them poignantly. However, the boundaries of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* stretch well beyond what I have been describing here thus far, beyond the piece of entertainment software published by Bethesda Softworks in late 2011. Like the other *Elder Scrolls* games, *Skyrim* is famously surrounded by a large community of fan-creators who craft 'mods' (short for 'modifications'), a type of add-on software defined by writer Greg Finch as

user-made edits made to [...] videogames, the game equivalent of fan fiction. Traditionally free, they range from minor code changes to fix bugs or smoothen gameplay to 'total conversions'—complete overhauls of art assets to form an entirely new experience. (2011)

While there are indeed thousands of different *Skyrim* mods to be found, for the purposes of this paper I am most interested in those 'total conversions' which can alter the game system and play experience drastically.⁵ My interest is specifically in those mods that affect how the player encounters and interacts with the natural environment, a genre that Matthew Bohunicky calls "ecomods" (2017, p. 80). Bohunicky, who also takes *Skyrim* as his case study, discusses a variety of ecomods, ranging from changes to the game's weather system to the addition of

⁵ Though my aim here is to solely address the creative and cultural aspects of mods, I would not wish to pretend that there are no serious issues with the exploitation of fan labour by companies like Bethesda Softworks. For instance, mods can "help to sustain various game worlds through player labour well after designers and publishers have moved on" (Bohunicky, 2017, p. 77), a type of labour Julian Kücklich has termed "playbour" (2005). For a specific discussion of the modding community of *The Elder Scrolls*, see also the work of Rob Gallagher, Carolyn Jong, and Kalervo A. Sinervo (2017).

ducks and swans to Skyrim's bodies of water, and clearly addresses the ecocritical possibilities that these mods afford. However, when he arrives at mods which provide "opportunities for presenting the environment as agent" (ibid., p. 83), he looks no further than mods which offer player companions (known in-game as followers) who will obey their every command. One of the two examples Bohunicky mentions is a mod where the follower is planted as a seed and then "harvested" naked from the soil, whereupon he will trail behind the player obediently (ibid., pp. 83–84). This way, the environment indeed becomes an agent—but not one with much agency of its own.

"Frostfall", or The Pros and Cons of Hypothermia

It has been said that Skyrim itself is more dangerous than any man, mer, giant, or sabre cat within her borders. Any who have felt the biting chill of The Pale or seen the frozen corpses upon the steps of High Hrothgar can attest to this. It takes the souls of the foolhardy, brave, astute, and unprepared with equal, enthusiastic swiftness. ("Survivor's Guide to Skyrim," n.d.)

Immediately, "Frostfall", for which the above-cited book serves as an in-game introduction, presents a radical idea: the landscape *itself* is now dangerous to the player.⁶ Suddenly, nature offers resistance to the player's previously complete freedom of movement. Most importantly, the mod adds climate and temperature systems to the game, and the player-character is suddenly able to die of hypothermia if they are exposed to the freezing cold long enough. Snowy and mountainous areas are colder than green valleys; nights are colder than days; blizzards and rainstorms are colder than sunny periods. When the player-character gets wet, either because of rain or because they have been submerged in water, their rate of exposure increases significantly; diving into freezing-cold water is even lethal within a matter of seconds. If the player activates the most realistic settings, their character's exposure rate continues to increase during combat situations and character dialogue.⁷ Traversing the wilderness is thus no longer a virtual walk in the park but has become precarious business.

⁶ Note that Skyrim and its landscape are addressed as "her" in the book, in a curious mix of nature-as-feminine and nature-as-dangerous.

⁷ I use the term 'realistic' here, fully aware of its fraught history and meaning in mainstream games discourse and game studies. Alexander Galloway argues that "because games are an active medium [...] realism in gaming requires a special congruence between the social reality depicted in the game and the social reality known and lived by the player" (2006, p. 83). In ecocritical game studies, the term "environmental realism" has been coined by Alenda Chang to describe a game's ability to model complex ecologies as unstable and changing systems (2011, p. 78). I would argue that this type of realism is what

There are, of course, several methods for coping with these increased natural forces, although "Frostfall" itself provides only a few of those. What I am addressing here as "Frostfall" is, in fact, a curated collection of mods that one can install separately from each other but which intersect with each other in multiple significant ways. This includes, to name a few, the "Campfire" mod which entails an intricate camping and fire-crafting system, and mods that add wearable cloaks and hoods to the game. The player can use leather or fur to craft tents which will provide shelter from the elements and gather firewood for campfires that provide extra warmth for a limited duration of time. While this camping system has an overtly aesthetic purpose—the process has a certain peaceful quality—it also presents a significant but necessary interruption in long journeys through the colder areas of Skyrim. Setting up a campsite is a lengthy process and getting warm enough to safely carry on one's travels can take quite some time. The player can also use natural materials—leather, fur, wood, and a variety of metals—to craft clothing and equipment like backpacks, which have 'coverage' and 'warmth' properties and thereby allow the player-character to withstand exposure to the elements for longer. Because these properties are extended to all types of clothing, including armour, an interesting dynamic arises whereby the player's choice of armour is not only influenced by how much damage protection and stat buffs any given armour item provides, but also by how well it protects the player-character against rain and cold. After all, one is no longer only fighting monsters and bandits; nature itself is now a force to be reckoned with.

Simply put, installing the "Frostfall" mod provokes a critical shift in the way the player comes into contact with the natural environment of *Skyrim's* gameworld. Before leaving the relative safety of the city and during their time outside, the player is forced to pay attention to the environmental conditions of the area they are travelling towards. Nature is able to actively work against the player in ways they cannot control, only alleviate; for example, diving into a shipwreck for treasure in the icy sea is no longer a trivial affair, but one that could prove deadly. The environment is not solely an enemy, however: the landscape offers several ways in which to counteract the cold and rain (e.g. rocks and caves serving as natural shelters, and volcanic fissures providing warmth in the same way that campfires do), and Skyrim's flora and fauna provide resources that the player can use to craft items and cook hot meals which also help to battle hypothermia. As a consequence, the player may even come to feel more present in the world *because the environment is more present in the world*.

"Frostfall" strives for, rather than Galloway's "social realism" (2006, p. 72).

Nature as the Enemy?

At the same time, it is worth questioning whether or not this radically altered relationship between player and nature still perpetuates the oppositional framework that Plumwood (1993) and Duncan (2018) critique as fuel for colonial attitudes and practices. After all, the picture painted above of the consequences of installing “Frostfall” surely implies that nature has become not only a force, but an *inimical* force. It might even be said that “Frostfall” encourages the exploitation of nature for resources more strongly than the base game, because it makes the use of natural resources virtually necessary to ensure survival. To illustrate, while the player can also simply buy leather from the general store, it is far cheaper to slaughter an elk or a bear and tan their hides at the nearest tanning station. One could say that the player, at the very least, continues at the same level of natural exploitation, unabated. In a culture where nature is constructed as the opposite of human and technological progress, would it not be more valuable to offer narratives in which natural and human agencies are interconnected and entangled?⁸

There is certainly an argument to be made in favour of discouraging the radical othering of the natural and encouraging the acceptance of humanity’s place *within* nature, rather than ‘above’ it. However, I believe there is still much to be said for those instances in which the player is forced to change their course or strategic approach because of environmental conditions, such as with the shipwreck-diving example. The player is no longer the sole actant in this ludic performance—the gamescape responds. It strains the power fantasy by limiting access to its most uninhabitable places and forces the player to recognise that there is something else, something greater at work than them, something beyond their control and possession. Of course, one might argue that using the coping measures as effectively as possible might constitute a similar kind of mastery over nature, but the key difference here is that nature’s power over the player *never diminishes*. Rather than beating nature into submission without difficulty, rather than overcoming it entirely in an inimical way, the play experience shifts towards *coping with* and *accounting for* nature’s agency. The “Frostfall” mod may not simulate a complex and unstable ecosystem like Chang (2011) is looking for, but it does grant *Skryim*’s environment a way of offering a subversive “counterdiscourse” (cf. Hoving, 2017, pp. 4–6), a notable resistance to the taken-for-granted human domination that is so pervasive in the base game. In this sense, “Frostfall” exists somewhere on the border of opposition and interconnectedness: it invokes a distrust

⁸ Some examples of thinking about this entanglement can be found in the analyses of Hoving (2017), as well as in the work of Donna Haraway (2016).

of nature while simultaneously enforcing an acceptance of nature's being-beyond the player's power.

Concluding Remarks, Looking Forward

As an ecomod, "Frostfall" offers mixed results. On one hand, it most definitely presents a departure from the way the player relates to the natural environment in *Skyrim's* base game. On the other hand, it can be argued that there is much potential for even more radical modifications to the game's construction of its ecology—which would also go much further than Bohunicky's examples of other ecomods for *Skyrim* (2017). Specifically for this game, modelling a more complex ecosystem, in which an imbalance between various animal species and the player's destructive and exploitative acts within that ecosystem may have tangibly disastrous consequences upon the gameworld, may be a good way to provoke thought about the effects of such actions in the physical world.⁹ Adding more such elements along with chances to aid in the restoration and empowerment of nature—which might include anything from radiant quests wherein the player is tasked with protecting the environment from violent industrial endeavours (deforestation and excessive poaching, for example) to randomly encountered opportunities to provide wounded animals with medical aid—would theoretically serve to shift the emphasis of the player-nature relationship from opposition to interconnectedness. What if there were more instances in which the intertwinement of nature and culture is celebrated rather than ignored, more instances which allowed for the performance of restorative acts rather than destructive ones (both within *Skyrim* and in digital games in general)? If the act of playing digital games itself is already a pleasurable entanglement of the human and the nonhuman (cf. Swalwell, 2008), why not encourage a similar human/nonhuman perversion in-game? In so doing, we might become able to think differently about nature: not, in Hoving's words, as "completely other" (2017, p. 21), but "as transgressive interrelatedness [...] in which impurity is the norm" (ibid., p. 45). As the always-already blurred lines between human and technology are increasingly clarified through digital play, so too might those vague boundaries between nature and culture be made more obvious to us by the same means.

Acknowledgements

Academic writing is not and should never be a solitary endeavour, and so thanks must be given to those who deserve it. To Andrea Di Pastena, for his critical and supportive proofreading of the first draft. To Stephan van Es, for graciously and swiftly providing the in-game screenshots at the last minute. To my editor and peer reviewers for their incisive

⁹ Although previous experiments in this direction were not considered so successful, as exemplified by the failures of one of the early versions of *Ultima Online* (Hutchinson, 2017).

feedback. Finally, to Isabel Hoving, who had nothing to do with me writing this piece—and also, strangely, never talked to me about ecocriticism while she was my professor—but whose classes on game analysis and *The Elder Scrolls* have proven rather influential in the creation of this text nonetheless.

References

- Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: cultural dimensions of globalization*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bealer, A. H. (2012). Eco-Performance in the Digital RPG Landscape. In G. Voorhees, J. Call, & K. Whitlock (Eds.), *Dungeons, dragons, and digital denizens: the digital role-playing game* (pp. 27–47). New York, NY: Continuum.
- Bethesda Game Studios. (2002). *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* [PC]. Bethesda Softworks.
- Bethesda Game Studios. (2006). *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* [PC]. Bethesda Softworks.
- Bethesda Game Studios. (2011). *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* [PC]. Bethesda Softworks.
- Bethesda Softworks. (1996). *The Elder Scrolls II: Daggerfall* [PC]. Bethesda Softworks.
- Bohunicky, K. M. (2017). Ecomods: An ecocritical approach to game modification. *Ecozon@*, 8(2), 72–87.
- Chang, A. Y. (2011). Games as Environmental Texts. *Qui Parle*, 19(2), 56–84. <https://doi.org/10.5250/quiparle.19.2.0057>
- Chesko. (2016). Frostfall. Retrieved November 13, 2018, from <http://skyrimsurvival.com/home/frostfall/>
- Corner, J. (Ed.). (1999). *Recovering landscape: essays in contemporary landscape architecture*. New York, NY: Princeton Architectural Press.
- Crick, T. (2011). The Game Body: Toward a Phenomenology of Contemporary Video Gaming. *Games and Culture*, 6(3), 259–269. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412010364980>
- Duncan, A. (2018, February 14). Savage Beasts: The Spatial Conflict between Civilization and Nature in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. Retrieved September 7, 2018, from <http://www.firstpersonscholar.com/savage-beasts/>
- Errant Signal. (2015). *Errant Signal - (Spoilers) Fallout 4 and Role Playing*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WqkZXNZwZq4>

- Euteneuer, J. (2018). Settler Colonialism in the Digital Age: *Clash of Clans*, Territoriality, and the Erasure of the Native. *Open Library of Humanities*, 4(1). <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.212>
- Evans-Thirlwell, E. (2017, November 17). On the secret smallness of Skyrim. Retrieved November 12, 2018, from <https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2017-11-15-playing-skyrim-after-breath-of-the-wild>
- Fahey, M. (2011, November 17). The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim: The Kotaku Review. Retrieved November 12, 2018, from <https://kotaku.com/5860518/the-elder-scrolls-v-skyrim-the-kotaku-review>
- Finch, G. (2011, July 20). The Top 10 Game Mods of All Time. *VICE*. Retrieved November 8, 2018, from https://creators.vice.com/en_uk/article/4x45mp/the-top-10-game-mods-of-all-time
- Fuller, M., & Jenkins, H. (1995). Nintendo and New World Travel Writing: A Dialogue. In S. Jones (Ed.), *CyberSociety: computer-mediated communication and community* (pp. 57–72). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Retrieved from https://web.stanford.edu/class/history34q/readings/Cyberspace/FullerJenkins_Nintendo.html
- Gallagher, R., Jong, C., & Sinervo, K. A. (2017). Who wrote the Elder Scrolls? Modders, developers, and the mythology of Bethesda Softworks. *Loading... The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association*, 10(16), 32–52.
- Galloway, A. R. (2006). Social realism. In *Gaming: essays on algorithmic culture* (pp. 70–84). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Haraway, D. J. (2016). *Staying with the trouble: making kin in the Chthulucene*. London: Duke University Press.
- Hoving, I. (2017). *Writing the earth, darkly: globalization, ecocriticism, and desire*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Hutchinson, L. (2017, December 21). War Stories: Lord British created an ecology for Ultima Online, but no one saw it. Retrieved November 12, 2018, from <https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2017/12/an-afternoon-with-lord-british-creating-ultima-onlines-unknown-virtual-ecology/>
- Jagoda, P. (2018). On Difficulty in Video Games: Mechanics, Interpretation, Affect. *Critical Inquiry*, 45(1), 199–233. <https://doi.org/10.1086/699585>

Juul, J. (2013). *The art of failure: an essay on the pain of playing video games*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Keogh, B. (2018). *A play of bodies: how we perceive videogames*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

King, G., & Krzywinska, T. (2003). Gamescapes: exploration and virtual presence in game-worlds. In M. Copier & J. Raessens (Eds.), *Level Up: Digital Games Research Conference* (pp. 108–119). Utrecht: Universiteit Utrecht.

Kücklich, J. (2005). Precarious playbour: Modders and the digital games industry. *The Fibreculture Journal*, 25(5). Retrieved from <http://five.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-025-precarious-playbour-modders-and-the-digital-games-industry/>

Lammes, S. (2003). On the border: Pleasures of exploration and colonial mastery in *Civilization III Play the World*. In M. Copier & J. Raessens (Eds.), *Level Up: Digital Games Research Conference* (pp. 120–129). Utrecht: Utrecht University.

Lammes, S. (2010). Postcolonial playgrounds: Games as postcolonial cultures. *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture*, 4(1), 1–6.

Magnet, S. (2006). Playing at Colonization: Interpreting Imaginary Landscapes in the Video Game *Tropico*. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 30(2), 142–162. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0196859905285320>

Manovich, L. (2001). *The language of new media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Martin, P. (2011). The Pastoral and the Sublime in *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*. *Game Studies*, 11(3). Retrieved from <http://gamestudies.org/1103/articles/martin>

Mayers, K., Koomey, J., Hall, R., Bauer, M., France, C., & Webb, A. (2015). The Carbon Footprint of Games Distribution: The Carbon Footprint of Games Distribution. *Journal of Industrial Ecology*, 19(3), 402–415. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jiec.12181>

Mejia, R. (2016). Ecological matters: Rethinking the “magic” of the magic circle. In M. Kapell (Ed.), *The play versus story divide in game studies: critical essays* (pp. 171–186). Jefferson, NC: McFarland.

Mojang. (2011). *Minecraft* [PC]. Mojang.

Mukherjee, S. (2015). The playing fields of Empire: Empire and spatiality in video games. *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*, 7(3), 299–315. https://doi.org/10.1386/jqvw.7.3.299_1

Nitsche, M. (2008). *Video game spaces: image, play, and structure in 3D game worlds*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Plumwood, V. (1993). *Feminism and the mastery of nature*. London and New York, NY: Routledge.

Shibolet, Y. (2018). Game Movement as Enactive Focalization. *Press Start*, 4(2), 51–71.

Survivor's Guide to Skyrim. (n.d.). Retrieved November 8, 2018, from http://tes-mods.wikia.com/wiki/Survivor%27s_Guide_to_Skyrim

Swalwell, M. (2008). Movement and Kinaesthetic Responsiveness: A Neglected Pleasure. In M. Swalwell & J. Wilson (Eds.), *The pleasures of computer gaming: essays on cultural history, theory and aesthetics* (pp. 72–93). Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Co.

Waggoner, Z. (2009). *My avatar, my self: identity in video role-playing games*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.