

Confronting Ecological Monstrosity

Contemporary Video Game Monsters and the Climate Crisis

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Articles

Introduction

Amidst ecological collapse and environmental catastrophe, humankind is surrounded by indications that our habitat is turning against us in monstrous ways. The very environments we live within now evoke existential terror, and this state of ecological monstrosity has permeated popular media, including video games. Such cultural manifestations of planetary catastrophe are particularly evident in video game monsters. These virtual figures continue monsters' long-held role in reflecting the socio-cultural anxieties of their particular era. The horrific figures that monsters present play a culturally reflexive role, echoing the fears and anxieties of their social,

political and cultural context. Media monsters closely reflect their surrounding cultural conditions (Cohen 47), representing “a symptom of or a metaphor for something bigger and more significant than the ostensible reality of the monster itself” (Hutchings 37). Society’s deepest anxieties culminate in these figures in forms that are “threatening and impure” (Carroll 28), “unnatural, transgressive, obscene, contradictory” (Kearney 4–5), and abject (Kristeva 4).

In this article I ask how the appearance of the monstrous within contemporary video games reflects an era of climate change and ecological collapse, and how this could inform the engagement of players with discourse concerning climate change. Central to this inquiry is the literary practice of ecocriticism, which seeks to examine environmental rather than human representation in cultural artefacts, increasingly including accounts of contemporary ecological decay and disorder (Bulfin 144). I build on such perspectives to address play encounters that foreground figures of monstrosity borne of the escalating climate crisis, and summarise case studies of two recent video games undertaken as part of this project — *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo EPD) and *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog). An ecocritical approach to the monsters that populate these case studies reveals the emergence of a ludic form of ecological monstrosity tied closely to our contemporary climatic conditions and taking two significant forms: one accentuating a visceral otherness and aberrance, and the other marked by the uncanny recognition of human authorship of climate change.

Horrors from the Anthropocene

A growing climate emergency surrounds us, enveloping us in the abject and aberrant conditions of what could be described as an ecological monstrosity. Monstrous threats to our environment and human survival are experienced on a planetary scale and research evidence plainly illustrates a compounding catastrophe. The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a relatively cautious and conservative body (Parenti 5), reports that a human-made emergency has developed since the Industrial Revolution. The multitude of crises that confront us include: changes in the Earth’s atmosphere driving up global temperatures, ice sheets in retreat, sea levels rising, natural ecosystems and species in collapse, and an unprecedented frequency and magnitude of heatwaves, droughts, flooding, winter storms, hurricanes, and wildfires (United Nations Environment Programme). Further human activity, including a post-war addiction to the plastics that have now spread their way across our oceans like a “liquid smog” (Robles-Anderson and Liboiron 258), or short-sighted enthusiasm for pesticides, radiation energy, and industrial chemicals (Robles-Anderson and Liboiron 254), has ensured a damaging shift in the nature of the feedback loops that Earth’s ecosystems depend upon for stability (Parenti 6). Climatic equilibrium has been disrupted, and growing damage to the ecosystems that sustain human life suggests an inexorable, entropic path to decay.

To understand Earth’s profound crisis requires thinking beyond just *climate* and to witness the interconnected “extraordinary burdens” placed on our planet by “toxic chemistry, mining, nuclear pollution, depletion of lakes and rivers under and above ground, ecosystem simplification, vast genocides of people” which will continue to lead to the recursive collapse of interlinked major systems (Haraway 100). To speak of climate change is really to speak of the ruin of ecologies, those “living systems composed of many moving parts” that make up the tapestry of organic life on Earth (Robles-Anderson and Liboiron 251). The emergency that presents itself, as Renata Tyszczyk observes, comprises a pervasiveness, uncertainty, and interdependency that together “affect every aspect of human lives, politics and culture” (47). The emergence of the term Anthropocene (or the Age of the Humans) to describe our current geological epoch (and to

supersede the erstwhile and more stable Holocene) (Zalasiewicz et al. 1036–7; Chang 7) reflects a contemporary impossibility with talking about planet Earth without acknowledging the damaging impact of humankind on its ecosystems (Bulfin 142).

This recognition of human complicity in the existential crisis engulfing our planet once again connects ecological monstrosity to the socio-cultural history of the monstrous. Monsters, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen points out, “are our children” and despite our repressive efforts, “always return” in order to “ask us why we have created them” (20). Ecological monstrosity declares to us that our relegation of greenhouse gases, rising sea levels, toxic waste, species extinction, and much more, to the discursive periphery has only been temporary. Monsters, when examined closely, start to look a lot like ourselves in terms of biological origins (Perron 357), as well as other abject cultural and social markers that signal these horrific figures as residing “too close to the borders of our [own] subjectivity for comfort” (Spittle 314). Isabel Pinedo sees this uncanny nature of the horror genre’s antagonists as a postmodern condition, a ghoulish reminder of the era’s breakdown of categories, blurring of boundaries, and collapse of master narratives that combine to ensure “mastery is lost ... and the stable, unified, coherent self acquires the status of a fiction” (17–18). In standing in for anxiety, the other, and the aberrant, the figure of the monster deftly turns the mirror back on its human victims.

Ecocritical Play

The vast scale of ecological collapse has complicated effective public communication on the subject. The scope involved is unsettling, even paralysing, to its audiences: climate change might just be “too here, too there, too everywhere, too weird, too much, too big, too everything” to bring oneself to engage with (Tyszczyk 47). The detail involved has also been captured by scientific discourse, a detached communicative mode which too easily obviates the everyday human experience of the emergency (Bulfin 140; Abraham and Jayemanne 74–76). Considerable effort has been focussed upon producing higher-fidelity models of ecological catastrophe (Robles-Anderson and Liboiron 248), rather than addressing the more significant “trouble with representing largely intangible linkages” between micro-environmental actions and macro-environmental repercussions (Chang 86). Ecocriticism is, however, emerging as a cultural means by which the crisis, and restorative possibilities, may be rendered more legible to a wider audience. Representations of ecology and catastrophe not only sustain genres such as Eco-Disaster and Cli-Fi (Bulfin 140), but are also increasingly becoming a precondition for fiction centred upon human life (Tyszczyk 47). Media artefacts concerned with environment are able to illustrate the nature of the emergency alongside “a host of related environmental issues that the technocratic ‘facts and figures’ approach ... is unlikely to touch” (Abraham and Jayemanne 76) and encourage in audiences a suprapersonal understanding of the environmental impact of individual actions (Chang 70). Popular culture offers a chance to foster ‘ecological thought’ wherein it becomes “frighteningly easy ... to join the dots and see that everything is interconnected” (Morton, *Ecological Thought* 1) rather than founder before the inexplicability of the temporalities and spatialities involved in ecological collapse.

An ecocritical approach is “one of the most crucial—yet under-researched—ways of looking into the possible cultural impact of the digital entertainment industry” upon public discourse relating to the environment crisis (Felczak 185). Video games demand this closer attention because, in a mirroring of the interconnectedness of Earth’s own ecosystems, “the world has also inevitably permeated into our technical artefacts, including games” (Chang 11), and recent scholarship has worked to investigate this very relationship. Benjamin Abraham has extended Morton’s

arguments to outline a mode of ecological thought for games (*What Is an Ecological Game?*), Alenda Chang has closely examined how games model natural environments, and Benjamin Abraham and Darshana Jayemanne have outlined four modes in which games manifest players' ecological relationships. Close analysis of texts and genres has addressed the capacity of game mechanics to persuade players about matters of sustainability (Kelly and Nardi); implicated *Minecraft* players in an ecological practice of writing upon landscapes (Bohunicky); argued that *Final Fantasy VII's* plot fosters ecological responsibility (Milburn); and, identified in *ARMA III's* ambient, visual backdrops of renewable power generation the potential to reimagine cultural futures (Abraham, *Video Game Visions*).

Video games allow for a particular form of ecocriticism that has been overlooked in existing efforts to speak about ecological crisis: "a politics that includes what appears least political—laughter, the playful, even the silly" (Morton, *Dark Ecology* 113). Play is liminal, emergent, and necessarily incomplete, and this allows its various actors—players, developers, critics and texts themselves—to come together in non-authoritarian, imaginative and potentially radical ways. Through play, audiences are offered new and novel modes for envisioning ecological problems, solutions, and futures. To return, then, to encounters with ecological monstrosity, I next consider the visions of crisis that emerge through the video game monsters that draw upon the aberrant nature of ecological collapse, as well as those that foreground our own complicity as humans in the climate crisis, declaring that *we players* might ourselves be monstrous. The two case studies that follow are necessarily brief, but indicate the value of further research and textual analysis to more fully uncover the role of ecological monstrosity in contemporary video games.

***Breath of the Wild's* Corrupted Ecology**

The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild (Nintendo EPD) is a fantasy action-adventure game in which players adopt the role of the games series' long-running protagonist, Link, and explore the virtual landscapes of fictional Hyrule in unstructured and nonlinear ways. Landscape is immediately striking to players of *Breath of the Wild*, with the game using a distinctive, high-definition cel-shaded animation style to vividly render natural environments. Within the first ten minutes of play, lush green grass sways around the player's avatar, densely treed forests interrupt rolling vistas, and finely detailed mountains tower over the player's perspective. The player soon learns, however, that behind these inviting landscapes lies a catastrophic corruption of natural order, and that their virtual enemies will manifest a powerful monstrosity that seems to mirror Earth's own ecological crises.

The game's backstory centres around the *Zelda* series' persistent antagonist, Ganon, and his use of a primal form of evil to overwhelm a highly evolved and industrialised Hyrulian civilisation, in an event dubbed the Great Calamity. Hyrule's dependency on mechanical technology in its defences is misjudged, and Ganon's re-appearance causes widespread devastation. The parallel between Hyrule's fate and humankind's own unsustainable commitment to heavy industry and agriculture, and faith in technological approaches to mitigation in the face of looming catastrophe, are immediately recognisable. Visible, too, is the echo of the revenge of Earth's climate in the organic and primal force of Ganon's destructive power. Ganon leaves in his wake an array of impossible, aberrant creatures hostile to the player, including the deformed humanoid figure of the Bokoblin (bearing snouts, arrow-shaped tails, and a horn), the sand-swimming spike-covered whale known as a Molduga, and the Stone Talus, an anthropomorphic rock formation that bursts into life out of otherwise innocuous geological features. One particularly apposite monster, known simply as Malice, is a glowing black and purple substance

that oozes its way through environments in Hyrule, spreading to cover and corrupt organic material. Malice is explained by in-game introductory text as “poisonous bogs formed by water that was sullied during the Great Calamity”—an environmental element thrown out of equilibrium by pollution. Monstrosity in *Breath of the Wild* is decidedly ecological, and its presentation of unstable biologies, poisoned waters, and a collapsed natural order offer a conspicuous display of our contemporary climate crisis.

Breath of the Wild places players in a traditional position in relation to its virtual monsters: direct opposition (Taylor 31), with a clear mandate to eliminate the threat(s) and restore equilibrium (Krzywinska 12). The game communicates its collection of biological impossibilities and inexorable corruptions as clear aberrations of a once-balanced natural order, with Hyrule’s landscapes needing purification at the player’s hands. Video games are driven, according to Jaroslav Švelch, by a logic of informatic control when it comes to virtual monsters, where our previously “inscrutable and abject” antagonists can be analysed, defined and defeated as “the medium’s computational and procedural nature makes monstrosity fit into *databases* and *algorithms*” (194). In requiring Link, and players, to scrutinise and come to “know” monsters, the game suggests a particular ecocritical possibility. Ecological monstrosity becomes educative, placing the terrors of the climate crisis directly before players’ avatars, screens, and eyes and connecting, in visceral ways, mastery over these threats with pleasure and achievement. The monsters of *Breath of the Wild* offer the possibility of affectively preparing players for versions of the future by mediating such engagements with disaster and catastrophe.

Recognising the Monstrosity Within

Set in the aftermath of the outbreak of a mutant strain of the *Cordyceps* fungus (through exposure to which humans transform into aggressive, zombified ‘Infected’), *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog) is a post-apocalyptic action-adventure game. Players alternate between two playable human characters, Ellie and Abby, whose travels through the infection-ravaged states of Wyoming, Washington, and California overlap and intertwine. At first glance, *The Last of Us Part II* appears to construct similar forms of ecology and monstrosity as *Breath of the Wild*. Players are thrust into an experience of the sublime in the game’s presentation of natural environments that are vastly capacious and highly fidelitous in their detailing. Players begin the game scrambling across snowbound ranges and fleeing through thick forests, and later encounter lush grass, rushing rivers, and wild animals reclaiming once-urban environments. And, as in *Breath of the Wild*, monstrosity in this gameworld appears to embody impurity and corruption, whether through the horrific deformations of various types of zombie bodies, or the fungal masses that carpet many of the game’s abandoned buildings in a reclamation of human environments by nature.

Closer analysis, however, demonstrates that the monstrosity that defines the play experience of *The Last of Us Part II* uncannily reflects the more uncomfortable truths of the Anthropocentric era. A key reason why zombies are traditionally frightening is because they *are us*. The semblance of human faces and bodies that remain etched into these monsters’ decaying forms act as portents for our own fates when faced with staggering hordes and overwhelmingly poor odds of survival. Impure biologies are presented to players in these zombies, but rather than represent a distant ‘other’ they stand as more-than-likely futures for the game’s avatars, just as Earth’s climate crisis is intimately bound up in human origins and inexorable futures. *The Last of Us Part II* further pursues its line of anthropocentric critique, as both Ellie and Abby interact during the game with different groupings of human survivors, including hubristic militia and

violent religious cultists. The player comes to understand through these encounters that it is the distrust, dogmatism, and depravity of their fellow humans that pose immediate threats to avatariar survival, rather than the scrutible, reliable, and predictable horrors of the mindless zombies. In keeping with the appearance of monsters in both interactive and cinematic texts, monsters' most important lessons emerge when the boundaries between reality and fiction, human and nonhuman, and normality and abnormality become blurred.

The Last of Us Part II utilises this underlying ambiguity in monstrosity to suggest a confronting ecological claim: that monstrous culpability belongs to us—the inhabitants of Earth. For video game users in particular, this is a doubly pointed accusation. As Thomas Apperley and Darshana Jayemanne observe of digital games, “however much their digital virtuality is celebrated they are enacted and produced in strikingly visceral—ontologically virtual—ways”, and such a materialist consideration “demands that they are also understood as objects in the world” (15). The ecological consequences of the production of such digital objects are too often taken for granted, despite critical work examining the damaging impact of resource extraction, electronic waste, energy transfer, telecommunications transfer, and the logics of obsolescence involved (Dyer-Witford and de Peuter; Newman; Chang 152). By foregrounding humanity’s own monstrosity, *The Last of Us Part II* illustrates what Timothy Morton describes as the “weirdly weird” consequences of human actions during the Anthropocene; those uncanny, unexpected, and planetarily destructive outcomes of the post-industrial myth of progress (Morton, *Dark Ecology* 7). The ecocritical work of video games could remind players that so many of our worst contemporary nightmares result from human hubris (Weinstock 286), a realisation played out in first-person perspective by Morton: “I am the criminal. And I discover this via scientific forensics ... I’m the detective *and* the criminal!” (*Dark Ecology* 9).

Playing with Ecological Monstrosity

The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild and *The Last of Us Part II* confront players with an ecological form of monstrosity, which is deeply recursive in its nature. Players encounter monsters that stand in for socio-political anxieties about ecological disaster as well as those that reflect humanity’s own monstrously destructive hubris. Attention is further drawn to the player’s own, lived role as a contributor to climate crisis, a consequence of not only the material characteristics of digital games, but also their broader participation in the unsustainable economics of the post-industrial age. To begin to make the connections between these recursive monsters and analogies is to engage in the type of ecological thought that lets us see the very interconnectedness that defines the ecosystems we have damaged so fatally. In understanding that video games are the “point of convergence for a whole array of technical, cultural, and promotional dynamics of which [players] are, at best, only partially aware” (Kline, Dyer-Witford, and de Peuter 19), we see that the nested layering of anxieties, fears, fictions, and realities is fundamental to the very fabric of digital games. Recursion, Donna Haraway observes in relation to the interlinked failure of ecosystems, “can be a drag” (100), but I want to suggest that playing with ecological monstrosity instead turns recursion into opportunity.

An ecocritical approach to the examination of contemporary videogame monsters demonstrates that these horrific figures, through their primordial aesthetic and affective impacts, are adept at foregrounding the ecosystemic nature of the relationship between games and our own world. Videogames play a role in representing both desirable and objectionable versions of the world, and such “utopian and dystopian projections of the future can shape our acts in the present” (Fordyce 295). By confronting players with viscerally accessible encounters with the horror of an

aberrant and abjected near future (so near that it is, in fact, already the present), games such as *Breath of the Wild* and *The Last of Us Part II* can critically position players in relation to discourse and wider public debate about ecological issues and climate change (and further research could more closely examine players' engagements with ecological monstrosity). Drawing attention to the symmetry between monstrosity and ecological catastrophe is a crucial way that contemporary games might encourage players to untangle the recursive environmental consequences of our anthropocentric era. Morton argues that beneath the abjectness that has come to define our human co-existence with other ecological actors there lies a perverse form of pleasure, a "delicious guilt, delicious shame, delicious melancholy, delicious horror [and] delicious sadness" (*Dark Ecology* 129). This bitter form of "pleasure" aptly describes an ecocritical encounter with ecological monstrosity: the pleasure of battling and defeating virtual monsters, complemented by desolate (and possibly motivating) reflections of the ongoing ruination of our planet provided through the development of ecological thought on the part of players.

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