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Negotiating Anthropocentrism and Ecologies in Cozy Games

Abstract

As we sit at the precipice of this planet's sixth mass extinction event, we need to use every tool at our disposal to advocate for our ecologies. Human self-interest and anthropocentric thinking act as barriers to communicating ecocrisis. Cozy video games can create safe spaces to explore the ecological effects of human actions with the aim of prompting reflection and action on environmental issues. Drawing on ecocritical video game scholarship, the aim of this article is to explore the ways in which environments are represented and interacted with in selected cozy video games. Through an examination of the extractivist colonial processes and narratives of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, in contrast with the complex ecocritical coziness of *Terra Nil*, this article posits that cozy games have the potential to achieve effective environmental communication. Both *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and *Terra Nil* successfully empower the player to shape their environment but only *Terra Nil* affords ecological empowerment. By creating a safe space to engage with environments and even ecocrisis, cozy games allow players the agency to construct their own econarratives and may challenge or perpetuate anthropocentric ideas about the environment.

Keywords: cozy games, ecocriticism, extractivism, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, *Terra Nil*

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As we sit at the precipice of this planet's sixth mass extinction event, we need to use every tool at our disposal to advocate for our ecologies. One of the greatest barriers to achieving effective environmental communication is the dissonance created by the gradual creep of ecological catastrophe, what Rob Nixon (2011) calls the *slow violence* of climate change as it "occurs gradually and out of sight", unlike the "explosive and spectacular" violence of other catastrophes (p. 2). So, what can we do as storytellers and communicators to bridge this gap in understanding through video games?

The slow and contemplative nature of cozy video games presents an opportunity for reflection on the player's place within the ecology. Cozy games, much like the slow creep of ecological crisis, may not be "explosive and spectacular", but they often present a safe space for building relationships with in-game environments, even though some approach this in a more nuanced and considered way than others. The goal of this article is to discuss games in which the player is invited to take on a stewardship role over an environment and aims to show the different meanings and ecological implications ascribed to the player's actions.

As a mode of analysis, ecocriticism examines the ecological representation and implications of media with a "triple allegiance to the scientific study of nature, the scholarly analysis of cultural representations, and the political struggle for more sustainable ways of inhabiting the natural world" (Heise, 2006, p. 506). When applied to video games, ecocriticism often involves the analysis of narrative messages that convey the eco-ideology of a given game or selection of games. It also may examine what ideologies are reinforced by the practices and processes the player is expected to enact. To inform my ecocritical approach I will be drawing from Alenda Chang's *Playing Nature* (2019), which examines the overlap between overt and implied environmental discourse and the affordances of video games as a complex, multilayered medium.

Kyle Bohunicky (2014) posits that "nature and discourse are co-constituted through writers and writing", likening written composition to the video game player's agency to shape and interact with ecologies (p. 221). This agency allows the player to compose their own econarratives and engage in ecocritical discourse through their interactions with "the rocks, trees, dirt, water and biological matter", with Bohunicky referring to this digital symbolic rendering of materials as "discursive matter" (p. 222). The ability to manipulate the aforementioned "discursive matter" is evident in the games discussed in this article through terraforming and cultivation. To view the shaping of ecologies in cozy games as discourse allows insight into the ways in which video game discourse about ecologies, and player perception of ecologies, interact and influence each other.

In order to define cozy games and their conventions, I will be referring to the aesthetics outlined by Agata Waszkiewicz and Martyna Bakun (2020) in "Towards

the aesthetics of cozy video games”. According to them, coziness involves safety and offers the player a sense of stability which can be achieved through a transition from disorder to order, as demonstrated in the successful cozy video games *Unpacking* (Witch Beam, 2021) and *Cats Organized Neatly* (DU&I, 2020), both allowing players to create order from disorder through puzzle solving.

I turn to cozy games to observe how they deal with the tension between the aesthetics of safety and the reality of the ecologies they represent, focusing on two main examples. Through examinations of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo, 2020) and *Terra Nil* (Free Lives, 2023) I hope to identify the ecological narratives and processes that shape the player’s interactions with nature in the game space. The first game was chosen primarily for its widespread cultural impact, whereas *Terra Nil*, which has enjoyed a more modest success, was selected as a unique example that subverts the anthropocentrism of popular cozy games.

The colonialist extractivism of cozy games

Animal Crossing: New Horizons (ACNH) is one of the most successful and recognizable examples of a cozy game with scholarship that backs up its relevance to ecocritical discourse in video games (Coroller & Flinois, 2023; Navarro-Remesal, 2019; Smith, 2022). Through a brief ecocritical survey of academic sources, both directly addressing the game and tangentially focusing on the narrative concerns and procedural rules of the game space, it is possible to sketch out the dominant discourses of ecology in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and games with similar econarratives and processes.

As with previous installments of the *Animal Crossing* series, in *New Horizons* the player is tricked into purchasing the home, which they have just established, from Tom Nook. Although Tom Nook has been called “a condensation of the corporate bourgeoisie” (Bogost, 2008, p. 119), it is his colonial values and practices that are the primary focus of this examination. Colonialism, as examined closely by the postcolonial scholars Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2015), tethers colonial and imperial practices to narratives of domination over ecologies and people that facilitate environmental devastation. This colonialist process of controlling the politics and land of another country is exemplified in the practices of Nook Inc., Nook’s company, which appears to have complete political and economic control over the island.

Nook’s influence over the land can be read in terms of replacement of established ecologies in favor of cultivated, curated, and contained nature. In discussing the colonialist replacement of indigenous or endemic ecologies with sanctioned and familiar plants and animals Huggan and Tiffin (2015) note that “imports to the newly settled colonies – humans, animals, plants – were regarded . . . as necessary

and ‘natural’ impositions on, or substitutes for, the local bush or wilderness” (p. 7). This persistent ideology is reflected in the practices and processes undertaken in *ACNH*. Rather than coexisting with the endemic environment, the player is incentivized to alter the island through challenges, tasks, and island ratings. Certain functions of the game, such as stores with increased variety of purchasable products and homes for new villagers, are unlocked through the exploitation and alteration of the environment.

Extractivism, understood as processes and ideologies that facilitate anthropocentric and unsustainable resource extraction (Acosta, 2013), is evident in the mechanics and narrative of *ACNH*. The game tasks the player with “improving” an island, chopping down trees, mining, establishing human infrastructure, harvesting fruit, establishing new plant varieties, and even terraforming. The player must damage or destroy elements of the environment in order to gain resources for crafting and achieve the game’s goals. The removal of weeds, which are in the in-game ecology *before* the player’s arrival and which are potentially endemic, is essential to achieving many goals throughout the game.

One of the most troubling examples of exploitation and extractivism in *ACNH* is the mechanic allowing one to travel to the other islands in order to strip them of their resources. For the escapade to be the most efficient, players should ensure that they have nothing in their pockets apart from the required tools before heading to the island. On arrival players likely engage in chopping down trees, mining rocks, collecting rare species, and return to their island with full pockets, leaving the other island bare. All for the low-cost of 2000 Nook Miles, one of the forms of in-game currency. There are no repercussions for this: in fact, the practice is encouraged to compensate for the loss of biodiversity on the player’s own island due to urbanization and extractivist processes. These resource islands harken back to Huggan and Tiffin’s (2015) explanation of colonialist approaches: “Such places, after all, were apparently untamed, unowned and, above all, unused; and, accordingly, settlers set about rendering them productive and profitable” (p. 7). The islands devoid of player interference and exploitation are not being used to their full potential according to the colonialist and extractivist ideology of *ACNH*.

Another element of the colonialist approach to the environment depicted in *ACNH* is the process of curation and symbolic conservation. *ACNH* creates a hierarchy of living creatures based on their anthropocentric value. “Hierarchy” as used in this article, and in ecocritical discourse generally, refers to the human conceptualization of nature according to the identification of humans “within a broader circle of living things” (Marland, 2013, p. 850). Animals with aesthetic and sentimental value, such as the anthropomorphic animals that inhabit the islands as villagers, are given special status and treated as accessories or collectables for the player’s island. Conversely, as Eric Van Ooijen (2018) notes,

fish can be killed and consumed; “even «friendly» games, that set out to avoid violence against animals, tend to construct classes of certain animal species as open to killing” (p. 179). The relationship between the treatment and categorization of animals and anthropocentric attitudes is highlighted in the results of Manh-Toan Ho et al. (2022) examination of *ACNH*, in which “the frequency of catching fish and insects is correlated with more favorable attitudes toward human dominion” and “players behave with a sense of superiority over other animals, especially insects”, associating this with positive perceptions of anthropocentrism (p. 2304).

In this example of commercially dominant cozy games, the player engages in anthropocentric coziness, which grants them a complete control over their environment and allows them to indulge in the fantasy of a world in which there is ecological safety and stability. This aligns with Waszkiewicz and Bakun’s (2020) model of cohesive relationships between cozy aesthetics and a cozy message, engaging with an outdated agrarian fantasy in which the island is untouched by the outside world and unaffected by many of the daily stressors of urban living. As Sydney Crowley notes in an analysis of *Stardew Valley* (Concerned Ape, 2016), games which indulge in simplistic fantasies of attaining real estate avoid the discourse of critical agrarianism and the reality of land acquisition (Crowley, 2023). By acquiring the island via an interest free loan from Nook Inc., the player does not have to grapple with the reality of purchasing property, instead focusing on the neoliberal agenda of constant asset improvement and profitability. This is done without corresponding ecological damage or improvement. By limiting the player’s agency in exploitation or rejuvenation, cozy games can create a “mesocosm” or an isolated representation of an ecology (Chang, 2019, p. 17) in which environmentalist rhetoric is minimized (Crowley, 2023). This, in turn, might be the very key to the coziness of *ACNH* as it reduces risk and minimizes the demands on the player’s attention. By providing the safe and secure space of the isolated island environment, *ACNH* allows the player to live out a narrative ostensibly immersed in nature and disconnected from the rat-race of capitalist modern society.

Despite the ostensive immersion in nature, firmly entrenched anthropocentric ideologies remain with priority given to the anthropomorphized island residents. All non-anthropomorphic animals can be taken from their environment and displayed as live specimens in the museum by the curator, Blathers. In the creation of his exhibitions, Blathers represents problematic behavior which prioritizes animals that are visually appealing and conform to public-friendly narratives of idyllic nature – what Ursula Heise terms (2019) “flagship species” (p. 60). If the player wants to see this in action, they need only present a less visually appealing insect to Blathers and watch him sweat due to his extreme aversion to these species. He terms these animals to be “wretched creature[s]”, rather than lauding

them as valid examples of the ecosystem, as he does with others. Heise (2019) discusses the danger of reductive and synecdochic depictions of nature, which may skew conservation efforts and resources away from important elements of the environment.

Regardless of the issues raised thus far, Víctor Navarro-Remesal (2019) identifies *ACNH* as a game that “include[s] complex ecosystems where elements are connected in a network of interdependency and relations of care” (p. 14). Furthermore, he points to “ten wide conceptual categories” of representation of nature in video games, the most pertinent of which for the purposes of an examination of *ACNH* is “care for the environment [which] predominates especially in the games that, in a more or less realistic way, simulate rural life” (p. 19). Meanwhile *Terra Nil* demonstrates the importance of the category of “videogames of ecological denunciation” (p. 21) which have the explicit goal of ecocritical discourse.

The complex coziness of *Terra Nil*

While usage of the anthropocentric model of ecological hierarchy can be harmful, other games employ categorization to facilitate an understanding of complex ecologies. By breaking down the processes of revitalizing a post-apocalyptic world into manageable steps they become more accessible, but in the process of doing so, they fail to reflect the complexity and challenges of reviving a lost ecosystem. Despite the simplification of the process of revitalization, *Terra Nil* represents ecologies with a far greater complexity than *ACNH*. As a mesocosm, *Terra Nil* provides the player with broader ecological agency than the previously examined *ACNH*. It rejects the idea that the best improvements that can be made to an ecology are human-centered, while still engaging with a fantasy of order and transformation.

Terra Nil is a god-view simulation game that presents the player with the challenge of rehabilitating a series of lifeless wastelands into thriving environments. The player must recycle the artefacts of human intervention into a vehicle to evacuate, thus leaving the planet to exist without humans. Through a process of introducing advanced technologies to purify water, reseed the land, cultivate sea biomes etc., then dismantling those technologies once they serve their regenerative purpose, the player engages in a disanthropic fantasy of returning the environment to a pre-Anthropocene state. The game starts with a book of instructions that guide the player through the navigation and rejuvenation of ecosystems with the goal of rehabilitating ecologies across the globe. At the beginning of the game, the encountered environments are barren wastelands with no signs of life, but with plenty of proof of contamination. Starting with a landscape that is bare, rather than one destroyed and exploited by humans, protects the players from

cognitive guilt and anxiety that one might experience when confronted with a post-apocalyptic setting. This deftly sidesteps one of the key barriers to climate communication highlighted by Susanne Moser (2010); the conflict between the self-interest of humanity, that is convenience and comfort, and ecological action (p. 36). The player is not asked to make choices or navigate human considerations, but to simply revive an abandoned and barren post-apocalyptic landscape, devoid of humans entirely.

The abandoned cities and urban spaces are *not* introduced until the final stages of *Terra Nil*. These spaces come with their own specific challenges such as radiation, ground instability and buildings that take up space which on other maps would be available to restore biomes. In response to this, *Terra Nil* offers some innovative solutions; sunflowers can be planted on nuclear waste sites, skyscrapers make excellent structures for bamboo forests, and radiation fans are used to minimize radioactive contamination. It is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve a 0 CPM (counts per minute) radioactivity, but it is nonetheless a comforting idea that technology may be used to deal with the aftermath of ecocrisis. The idealized notion that technology can solve environmental destruction is problematized by Megan Condis, who deems solutions through “techno-fixes” as “impossible” due to the demand for continued growth driven by capitalism and consumerism. As such, these “techno-fixes” in games represent a reassuring vision of a world that runs contrary to observed patterns of human societal organization (Condis, 2020).

The omission of explicit evidence of human contamination in the early parts of the game appears to be a necessary concession to the coziness of the game, allowing *Terra Nil* to address heavy environmental issues without encountering reflexive resistance from players who may find the environmental consequences stemming from human exploitation confronting. This goes with Waszkiewicz and Bakun’s ideas about dissonant relationships between aesthetics and the content of the game: “where cozy aesthetics are employed in order to introduce difficult themes” (2020, p. 233). Waszkiewicz and Bakun discuss this dissonance in terms of mental health struggles and marginalized communities, and I would extend this dissonance to games that deal with ecocrisis. Not only are these issues intersecting – see the prevalence of eco-anxiety in “specific vulnerable groups, including young people, Indigenous groups, and those connected to the natural world” (Coffey et al., 2021, p. 4) – but environmental crisis presents its own uncomfortable communication challenges, as it lacks the “certainty and immediacy” of “other, more familiar problems” (Moser, 2010, pp. 31–32).

Whereas *ACNH* adheres to conventions of coherent coziness, *Terra Nil* brings in elements of dissonance through the imagery of the wasteland or contamination, more akin to the post-apocalyptic than cozy utopian narratives and aesthetics.

Through this, *Terra Nil* is able to make the devastating specter of ecological crisis less existentially threatening to the player. The complexity of the ecological issues that are presented to the player does not, of course, reflect the complexity of ecologies and the impact of human actions, but it does offer a more complex depiction of ecologies than simple representations of contamination and hotter climates; the extremities of the barren wasteland maps have different properties, climates, and humidity levels. The player must rejuvenate such environments as river valleys and desolate fjords that have different attributes, potential biomes, and fauna. Thus, the player must adapt their strategies when approaching specific environments.

The comfort and security afforded by familiar-looking human technologies used to kickstart the rejuvenation process in *Terra Nil* offers hope that scientific endeavors and human progress will eventually become a force for ecological healing rather than harm. Despite this reliance on human technology, in *Terra Nil* the goal is to utilize the engineering feats of the late Anthropocene to make a self-sustaining ecology that no longer needs human intervention to thrive. In fact, in the “winning state” of this game there is little to no evidence of humans whatsoever, with the aim to prioritize the welfare of the planet ahead of anthropocentric concerns. But where is the comfort and coziness in a game where we are burning the safety of anthropocentrism to the ground and destabilizing human exceptionalism?

This is where I have to adjust the definition of coziness discussed by Waszkiewicz and Bakun (2020). In a report published by Tanya X. Short and others (2018), coziness is defined by safety, abundance, and security, all of which are denied to the generations facing ecological disaster. So, in this instance, safety means granting the planet a future. Rather than an abundance of resources the player is given tools to address one of the key sources of stress and anxiety in this time of ecological uncertainty: the player can turn back the clock and enact the change that is needed to combat the looming ecocrisis. By presenting a way to fight that ecological anxiety, *Terra Nil* offers a security that other simulation games do not.

What about the visual softness? While the colors are increasingly vibrant and pleasing as the world recovers, one could say that the isometric, god-like viewpoint and semi-realistic maps work against the aforementioned definition of coziness. This is where the transformative nature of *Terra Nil* shines through, with the rejuvenating effects of player intervention creating the softness in style and beauty that we associate with coziness. It starts from the reality of the colonial and capitalist improvements of other games and shows an alternative, a way of being with nature that is so often neglected by anthropocentric video games. A notable point of differentiation from *ACNH* is the lack of individual avatar, which could be interpreted as the need for collective action, indicating that the work that needs to be done is on such a scale that a single human could not achieve it. This disembodied

perspective may be the means of affording the player the god-like agency they need to effect change and see the cause and effect of their actions. However, with specific reference to simulation games, Chang (2019) notes that this god-view and supreme agency generally have the effect of minimizing the collective action to achieve change and amplify the human ability to manipulate the biosphere providing the freedom to conduct “benign alteration and malicious destruction” (p. 203).

Terra Nil also represents ecologies with far greater complexity than *ACNH*. This is where hierarchy, categorization, and synecdoche come into play through symbolic representations of ecologies that translate their complexity into an understandable network of ecological cause and effect. For example, in order to introduce fauna, the player must first create appropriate biomes, which in turn can only be developed by rehabilitating and terraforming the wasteland. As the world gradually begins to heal, the focus shifts from simple greenery to complex climates capable of fostering diverse flora and fauna. While the representation of nature is necessarily reductive in order to make it manageable for the player, it still provides the narrative and practice to support environmentalist rhetoric. Bohunicky (2014) notes that the player does not disappear when entering the digital world, just as their actions in the digital space are not immaterial or irrelevant. While *Terra Nil* foregoes many of the challenges of production and the impact of labor, it does highlight some elements of waste and resource management. For example, in order to leave the area that the player has been working on, they need to dismantle the equipment they have used to restore and reinvigorate the ecosystem to build a vehicle, performing the familiar actions of reusing and recycling that are one of the foundations of grass roots environmentalism.

Perhaps the most potent and hopeful example of *Terra Nil*'s ecocritical potential comes after the player has achieved the goals posed at each level. By then, they have restored biomes, repopulated the environment with animals, and removed as much evidence as possible of human interference. It is at this point, after the player's reconstituted ship takes flight to leave the ecosystem, that the player is presented with two options. They can either choose “continue” to move on to the next environmental puzzle, or they can select “appreciate”, which gives them time and space for reflection in this revitalized ecological space, no longer able to intervene, interfere, or control any elements within. The “appreciate” option triggers an animation in which the camera pans across the biomes the player has restored, zooming in to observe smaller details such as a turtle shuffling across a sandy beach or a polar bear rubbing its back happily on an ice flow. These small moments to observe and reflect on the aesthetic pleasure that is the result of the player's strategic puzzle solving are crucial, not just to *Terra Nil*'s status as a cozy game, but also as a game that promotes ecological responsibility and interconnectedness. It allows the player to meditate on the cause and effect of

environmental factors, partially addressing one of Moser's hurdles to climate change communication: "delayed or absent gratification for taking action" (2010, p. 34) by rewarding the player with an aesthetically pleasing and cerebrally gratifying reward for their efforts and applying their problem-solving skills within the rules of the game space.

Conclusion

This article does not exhaust the problem of ecocriticism in cozy video games, particularly the implications of non-human player-characters for the depiction of ecologies. Here, I have limited my discussion to games that focus on human relationships with environments when a human plays a role of caretaker. The level of agency and linearity varies here, as *ACNH* offers extractivist approaches to ecologies, and *Terra Nil* provides a complex strategic toolbox for rehabilitating and rewilding the ecology. Both games successfully empower the player to shape their environment but only one affords ecological empowerment.

While cozy video games have the ability to transport us to alternate realities, distant from the ecological concerns of our time, it does not have to be that way. *Terra Nil* is by no means the perfect implementation of coziness as a means of environmentalist rhetoric, but it demonstrates the potential of ecological awareness and agency in cozy video games. Rather than denying the realities of the Anthropocene it engages with the concerns of a society that faces uncertainty and change.

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