Ecocritical Gamescapes for Sustainable Ecological Futures: *Endling: Extinction is Forever* and *In Other Waters*

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Abstract

This paper examines how digital games may model alternative relationships to the environment, climate, and multispecies life through the processes they enable players to inhabit. Through close hermeneutic readings of *Endling: Extinction is Forever* (Herobeat Studios, 2022) and *In Other Waters* (Jump Over The Age, 2020), the analysis explores how these games frame climate imaginaries as sites of critical unlearning, subverting existing discourses on human-environment relations. It focuses on both an affective analysis of ludic design elements, such as failure and asymmetrical agency within the games' narrative, aesthetics, and mechanics, as well as an overview of player engagement through their online discourse.

Keywords: ecocriticism, digital games, climate, ocean

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Introduction

Digital games increasingly serve as transformative, cultural sites for negotiating planetary crises, existential exploration, and ecologic imaginaries (Backe, 2024; Chang, 2019). For example, Sezer (2025) examines abyssal ecologies and nonhuman agency in oceanic games; Op de Beke (2025) analyses how games represent climate change-induced shifts in seasonality; while Morton's (2016) account of dark ecology features ecological entanglement, destabilising anthropocentric frameworks that traditionally shape environmental discourse. Collectively, these approaches, among others, demonstrate how games can remodel climate imaginaries in ways that transcend mere representation. This paper intends to contribute to such emerging conversations within ecocritical game studies by examining how recent independent games model forms of unlearning that subvert dominant anthropocentric assumptions.

Conceptual Background

Open-world role-playing games such as *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* (Ubisoft, 2013) often reward conquest and resource accumulation in colonial settings. Cozy life simulators, like *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo, 2020), present softer aesthetics but also rely on cycles of harvesting and management. Both these games, as well as other similar mainstream games, encode anthropocentric assumptions: land as resource, nature as passive, and the player as the one who imposes a human-centered order.

Against this landscape, I compare two games: *Endling: Extinction is Forever* (Herobeat Studios, 2022) and *In Other Waters* (Jump Over the Age, 2020), reading both as case studies that reframe anthropocentric worldviews through their interfaces, narratives, and affective structures. So, how do these games subvert some of the dominant, anthropocentric, and technocratic ideological tropes often found in games, especially regarding terrestrial and marine territories, life, and survival?

Rather than treating games as platforms for didactic climate messaging, this analysis examines the medium as participatory media, in which narrative, systems, and player action are combined to illustrate how the world operates (Aarseth, 1997; Juul, 2005; Murray, 1997). Drawing on scholarship that views meaning as co-created by players and systems (Newman, 2002; Treanor & Mateas, 2013), this analysis investigates how games might challenge and reimagine dominant anthropocentric and technocratic perspectives on the environment.

Understanding the need to reframe climate change as a crisis of meaning and imagination, not only scientifically, demands us to scrutinise the underlying capitalist logics that inform nature and subjectivity across media (Guattari, 2014; Heise, 2009; Jordan, 2014; Moore, 2015). In this context, digital games serve as critical, artistic sites for intervention, challenging and reshaping our understanding of the human-nature relationship amid the Anthropocene (Abraham & Jayemanne, 2017). Upon reviewing existing literature, games can be understood as expressive platforms where aesthetics and rhetorics intertwine to model alternative understandings and experiences of climate, or, broadly speaking, reconfigure exploitative, unsustainable structures.

Brief Look at Common Tropes

Firstly, environmentally oriented games, namely, those that explore land or sea, expand territory, or confront natural threats (Abraham & Jayemanne, 2017), usually depend on the

player as the primary enactor of change or action. This can be seen as a saviour or hero complex (Ford, 2025), in which the player is positioned as the singular agent capable of restoring balance or averting collapse. This is especially evident in city-building or restoration simulation games such as *SimCity* (Maxis, 2013) or *Terra Nil* (Free Lives, 2023), which orchestrate change through a single, human manager.

Secondly, in those games often centered on exploration, settlement, or development, territories usually start out empty, void of political history or indigenous presence, and awaiting the player's presence. This is apparent in games like *Civilization VI* (Firaxis Games, 2016) or *Minecraft* (Mojang, 2011), where "terra nullius" landscapes are reduced to extractable metrics of progress and conquest (Frelik, 2024; Mukherjee, 2017). There, meaning begins only with the player's arrival.

Thirdly, such games also often aestheticise nature as serene or awe-inspiring. Cozy-life or farming simulation games, such as *Animal Crossing* or *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe, 2016), regularly present nature as aesthetically pleasing, domesticated, and controlled into stable, safe loops (Pinder, 2024). This parallels survival games, such as *The Long Dark* (Hinterland Studio, 2017), where, even though nature is presented in threatening ways, it is nevertheless highly stylised and rendered as sublime or majestic (Backe, 2024; Navarro-Remesal & Terrasa Torres, 2024).

Finally, another element found in many ecological or resource management-based games is care. Namely, care operating as a systemic function, where caring for animals, populations, or environments is implemented as a managerial mechanic, quantifying lives and feelings into optimisable metrics, such as in *Herdling* (Okomotive, 2025) or *Frostpunk* (11bit studios, 2018).

Analysis of *Endling: Extinction is Forever* and *In Other Waters*

An alternative model is presented in *Endling: Extinction is Forever.* In this ecocritical game, the player assumes the role of the last mother fox on a devastated Earth. At night, she scavenges, avoids dangers, and keeps four cubs alive. Shortly after the game begins, one cub is kidnapped, prompting a broader search through landscapes impacted by deforestation and pollution. Though the game employs painterly visuals, it resists romanticised nature: the beauty of the world lingers residually, with landscapes deteriorated by past extraction. In this way, *Endling: Extinction is Forever* inverts the tropes of an empty land full of resources. Unlike many other survival games that start in untouched wilderness, *Endling: Extinction is Forever* starts after extraction, where the world is already contaminated and finite.

This inversion extends to care as a systemic function and to the human saviour trope. The player does not embody an omnipotent manager or redeemer, but a vulnerable nonhuman caregiver. The player's agency is radically constrained as the fox as there is no rebuilding, terraforming, or fighting, only hiding, scavenging, and nurturing. Moreover, the game's permadeath feature makes loss irreversible. These mechanic and narrative elements configure a playable perspective that can be read as ecological grief. It does so by distributing the experience and process of struggle, vulnerability, and care through a nonhuman perspective, destabilising human exceptionalism and mastery as default player positions.

In comparison, *In Other Waters* offers a distinct form of ecological awareness and criticism focused on perception and interpretation. The player inhabits an artificial intelligence system embedded in xenobiologist Ellery Vallis's diving suit, guiding her through the ocean of the

exoplanet Gliese 667Cc in search of missing researcher Minae Nomura. The game interface is highly abstracted with the world represented through stylised maps, icons, and sonar traces, and the narrative driven by text-based dialogue and logs. This design erodes the romanticised nature trope, common in mainstream oceanic and exploration games, as there are no panoramic vistas or anthropomorphic bodies on screen, denying the player a pleasurable, scenic-consumption gaze. This also extends to the gaining of knowledge about the environment and story throughout the game, which is only partial and inferred by data collection instruments.

This game initially appears to reproduce empty territories and colonial epistemologies: the player scans and names species and zones, enacting a "coloniality of knowledge" impulse in which to know is to possess (Mignolo, 2011; Quijano, 2002). However, as you reach a region called "the Bloom," this illusion collapses. Upon closer inspection of the abandoned laboratories, you find out that a corporation used native organisms capable of simulating ecosystems and editing DNA to conduct experiments that ultimately led to ecological collapse. Therefore, the oceanic environment is revealed not to be empty but, in fact, deeply historicised and already damaged by prior interventions. In this area, the interface transitions from the constant restrained blue-yellow palette to heavy greens and reds, also visually signaling contamination and opacity.

This narrative and aesthetic turn directly subverts the colonial, resource logics of an empty land or sea, and the assumption that technological mastery constitutes the solution. The previous sense of scientific exploration becomes an awareness of ecological responsibility when Ellery decides to remain on the planet and withhold her findings from Earth. Here, care does not seem to be a discrete system but rather emerges as a relational responsibility, grounded in the recognition of ecological entanglement and blame.

Online Player Discussions

To extend these close readings beyond purely textual analysis, this analysis incorporates a small-scale look at player discourse. A thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2019) of 146 online comments, 53 about *Endling: Extinction is Forever* and 93 about *In Other Waters*, indicated distinct modes of engagement.

Discussions of *In Other Waters* are dominated by references to gameplay systems and mechanics, as well as comparisons with other exploration or management titles. Both emotional and ethical reflections appear but are typically secondary, frequently framed as aesthetic appreciation or curiosity.

In contrast, discussions of *Endling: Extinction is Forever* are highly affective, with players foregrounding grief and empathy, narrating specific scenes and outcomes as emotionally overwhelming. Comments especially cluster around the mother-cub relationship and loss, and frequently broaden into reflections on real-world environmental destruction.

These divergent discursive patterns suggest that, while both ecocritical, the two games mobilise different engagement modes that also arguably reflect, to a certain extent, their different environmental settings. *In Other Waters* restructures how players perceive and map the environment through epistemic and technical abstraction, whereas *Endling: Extinction is Forever* foregrounds vulnerability, linking ecological reflection to embodied, nonhuman care. Overall, these two games present suitable approaches within a spectrum of possibilities for

configuring alternative design processes to resist mainstream logics and model post-anthropocentric climate imaginaries.

Conclusion

In conclusion, both *Endling: Extinction is Forever* and *In Other Waters* subvert dominant modes of representing the human-nature relationship in games by reconfiguring how players exert agency, care, and survival. They replace mastery with vulnerability and interrelation and propose new ways of knowing and feeling through ecosystems that acknowledge interdependence. This brief look at these two examples highlights and argues that changing how we situate and challenge the player can shape how we imagine and critically relate to ecological systems.

Although not directly addressed in this paper, I note a gap that merits closer consideration: marine environments are comparatively under-theorised within ecocritical game studies, which often focus on terrestrial spaces. *In Other Waters* serves not only as an illustrative case of ecological reconfiguration but also as a case in point for a broader inquiry into oceanic game spaces. Future work could examine in greater depth how marine settings differ from their terrestrial counterparts and how these differences might inform eco-conscious design practices, critical frameworks, and player engagement.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing software, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The author further declares that, apart from Grammarly, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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