Yelling at clouds: *Battlefield 2042* players' encounters with the climate crisis

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INTRODUCTION

A growing climate emergency surrounds us: human influence has warmed the atmosphere, ocean and land, and this has led to unprecedented changes across the climate system that now drive extreme weather events and affect every inhabited area of the globe. In this Anthropocentric era of decay and collapse, the planet's ailments have begun to permeate technical artefacts, including games (Chang 2019, 11). A growing body of recent scholarship has investigated the representation of the climate crisis within digital games (including, for example, Abraham 2018a; 2018b; Bohunicky 2014; Chang 2019; Milburn 2016) and, significantly, has established that such texts are able to illustrate for players 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 2017, 76). Popular culture increasingly offers audiences the chance to foster 'ecological thought' wherein it becomes "frighteningly easy … to join the dots and see that everything is interconnected" (Morton 2010, 1) rather than founder before the inexplicability of ecological collapse.

The 2021 multiplayer first-person shooter *Battlefield 2042* (DICE 2021), the twelfth entry in the long-running *Battlefield* series, is one such game that represents the climate crisis centrally in its gameplay, virtual environments and narrative. The game stages its multiplayer battles in an imagined future, the year 2042, that follows a decade of extreme climate change events and resultant massive global upheaval, including the collapse of governments and global powers, resource shortages and the displacement of over one billion climate refugees. Virtual landscapes within the game depict a ravaged and decaying planet, gameplay is periodically interrupted by disastrous weather events including tornados and sandstorms, and players are invited to choose to play as different types of combatants whose traits are primarily shaped by their experiences surviving climate devastation.

The centrality of the climate crisis to *Battlefield 2042*, a mainstream blockbuster videogame, offers an opportunity for insight into how players in the popular first-person shooter genre engage with ecological thought through climate-conscious

popular culture. We report from an ongoing project studying online player communities in order to address the potential for user-generated paratexts to capture and demonstrate players' engagement with modes of ecological thought during gameplay, and the revelation of the "great chains of interactions and coexistences" that make up life and death in the Anthropocene (Abraham 2018a). In this paper, we present findings from the analysis of a small dataset (approximately 100 artefacts) of player-generated paratexts systematically gathered from three popular online communities associated with *Battlefield 2042* and its players. Through textual analysis of these paratexts, we demonstrate the polarising effect of the game's entanglement with contemporary climate anxieties on *Battlefield 2042's* online communities, as well as the nature of players' encounters with different forms of ecological thought.

BIO
Lawrence May, PhD, is a lecturer at the University of Auckland, and researches the relationships between users, stories and spaces within videogames and new media. Ben Hall is a doctoral candidate at the University of Auckland, and his research addresses videogames and the novel ways in which they produce and mediate space.

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