Capitalocene Horizons: Producing, Exploiting and Mourning Nature in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*

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INTRODUCTION

Animal Crossing: New Horizons (Nintendo EPD 2020) draws players into the escapist fantasy of a virtual character relocating to a deserted island, where they are empowered to design and cultivate idyllic paradises. Steeped in a charming cartoonish aesthetic, and emphasising a bucolic way of life, *New Horizons* appears to immerse its players in a virtual world predicated upon wholesome and ecologically conscious engagements with the natural environment. The apparent ecocentric tranquillity of *New Horizons* is questioned, however, when the game and its play is analysed from an ecocritical perspective. We explore the game's emergent ecological dimensions by analysing paratexts shared in online play communities. By tracing experiences of play through user-generated paratexts we can substantiate otherwise ephemeral and transitory experiences of play (May 2021; Mukherjee 2015), and illustrate ecological dynamics in those moments that exceed the mere "partial analysis" of ecocriticality that textual analysis of a game object alone offers (Abraham 2018). We uncover three key themes emerging from our *New Horizons* data, which centre upon the active construction and 'othering' of idealised images of nature and environment, upon logics of systematised resource extraction and consumption, and upon the valorisation of the economic (particularly capitalist) value of engagements with the ecosystems.

The paratexts show that, driven by *New Horizons*' ludic prompts to develop idealised external natural environments, players reproduce images of 'nature' as sublime and 'othered', a tradition that Timothy Morton notes "ironically impedes a proper relationship with the earth and its life-forms" (2007, 2). In embracing their textual and terraforming capacity to undertake the *production of 'nature'* (as we label our first analytical theme), players virtually estrange themselves from apprehending the "cross-ontological alliances" of commingling and entanglement that define ecosystems at their healthiest (Cohen and Duckert 2015, 5). Instead, coursing through the potent circuits of contemporary power that technical media systems and their

software, hardware and protocols represent (Parikka 2012), the social, political and economic regime of industrial capital takes hold through the virtual idylls of *New Horizons*.

Once 'nature' has been produced on their islands, a second paratextual theme which centres on players' *engagement with nature as an economic resource* becomes evident. This analysis illustrates that even within the fiction of a game such as *New Horizons*, the environmental imagination is "captive to capitalism's either/or organization of reality" which pitches 'cheapened' nature as standing reserve to satisfy human cultural, social and material needs (Moore 2016, 5). Players are asked by the game to inure themselves to the planetary effects of the Capitalocene, our present era of ecological calamity and destruction engendered by the capitalist economic order and its unsustainable value systems (Haraway 2016; Tsing 2015). Players, the paratexts show, enact an impetus (common to many games) to "mirror the imperfect solutions capitalist economics have generated" when relating to environments (Abraham 2018). The artefacts analysed draw our attention to the unmistakably capitalocentric logics underlying the game's promises of pastoral respite, with players enlisted in the production and exploitation of nature in service of virtual forms of capitalistic accumulation and consumption.

The geophysical provenance, and impact, of videogame technologies and digital play (Parikka 2015; Abraham 2022) mean that the refraction of our lived world's capitalistic environmental relations into virtual worlds is loaded with material significance. In engagements with *New Horizons*, as is particularly evident in our third analytical theme highlighting *revelations of ecological damage*, players have the chance to see that, in the Capitalocene, "the ripples of our actions, as well as of our visions, will sooner or later reverberate right at our feet" (or our virtual feet) (Iovino 2020, 237–38). Interwoven as they are with our planet, media such as videogames cannot help but reverberate present trauma into its own representations, systems and interactions.

Player paratexts, our analysis shows, illustrate a collective imaginary rooted in the interconnections between virtual and real-world ecosystems. Play in *New Horizons* is demonstrated to be closely entangled with the material and political conditions of a contemporary era of unsustainable and destabilising engagement and ecologies, and enmeshed with the circuits of capitalocentric power. If we understand that digital media provide important forms of imaginative access to possible material and culture futures (Axel et al. 2022), player paratexts offer a warning that seemingly ecologically engaged mainstream videogames, such as in *New Horizons,* have been put to work (however unwittingly) in service of the Capitalocene and all of its destructive habits.

BIO

Lawrence May, PhD, is a lecturer at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. His research explores meaning-making in player communities, the entanglement between videogames and the climate crisis, and the role of undead monstrosity within games. Ben Hall is a doctoral candidate at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. His research primarily addresses videogames and the novel ways in which they produce and mediate space.

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