

Nature games

Description

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Can you learn about nature from computer games? According to one commentator, video games â??remind us of how we create, and have always created, â??nature.â?? They signpost the virtuality of the real. They show our seemingly endemic proclivities to make over the naturalâ?• (411).

Thatâ??s from cultural theorist John Wills writing about video gaming in 2002: â??a desire to explore multiple relationships with the natural remains part of human natureâ?• (411). Games have moved on since 2002, but the following contact points between games and nature still hold.

Nature in video games

According to Wills, nature in games provides â??a synonym for **danger**â?• (397), with â??nature cast as savage and predatoryâ?• (398). He refers to Thomas Hobbesâ?? account of human kind bereft of the trappings of civilized society, where we are at the mercy of our natural impulse, which is for war: â??every man against every manâ?• (88). To the political philosopher we are under â??continuall feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and shortâ?• (89). So Lara Croft has to contend with crocodiles, waterfalls, lightening, cliffs and treacherous currents.

But sometimes nature serves as a benevolent **guide**, â??Assuming a folkloric kinship between human and animal creaturesâ?• (399). Wills thinks that in video games â??nature thus translates as good counselâ?• (399).

Accurate or plausible representations of natural settings in games can add an aura of **authenticity**: â??Programmers frequently employ nature as a sign of authenticity in video games. Designers recreate flora and fauna in digital guise to grant legitimacy and coherence to their artificial worldsâ?• (400). This is common enough in representations in other media, but unlike a Romantic painting or a film, games involve interactions, and prescribed causal mechanisms. He suggests that games programmers â??resemble Enlightenment philosophers in their treatment of nature as a machineâ?• (401).

Video games also draw on nature as a source of the **unknown**. Natureâ??s mysteries provide cause for curiosity, but some games also present nature as something to be conquered as gamers follow the

â??Colonial impulseâ?• (403).

Nature in games provides a cache of **resources**: a place to find minerals, hunt game, and overcome obstacles to win credits. Some of these challenges are modelled on outdoor pursuits, such as rock climbing, paragliding, and survival training. Nature is also a **playground**. Not only do players frolic and fight within nature spaces, but they also play with putative natural elements, directing the course of evolution, in so called â??god-gamesâ?• for example.



Then thereâ??s the realisation of **artificial life** in video games, where natural elements grow and evolve and exhibit animal and plant-like characteristics, individually or as populations. A kind of **techno-nature** also develops, with the presentation of animal and machine hybrids.

As well as natureâ??s dangers, its exploitation and decline, some games portray a **utopian** return to Eden: â??Virtual nature becomes synonymous with romantic sentiment and primordial innocence, its creation a form of digital nostalgia for paradise lostâ?• (409). Wills notes how the â??technological sublime and natural sublime meld togetherâ?• (410).

Games now and always

In 2002 people thought of programmers as the main agents in the creation of video games. Now we know more about the role of designers and artists who bring various talents to the enterprise, not least an understanding of cultural context, the relationships between media, and a *ludic* and ironic sense to play.

The independently produced game also enters the scene. Thereâ??s now less imperative to reap huge sales to cover development costs. So thereâ??s scope for experimentation. We now have games with more sophisticated approaches to environment, place and nature. See Mary Flanaganâ??s book on critical play for examples.

Some games have moved from the desktop and are to be played while on the move, out in the field â?? in nature as it were. Other games claim to afford benefits similar to those claimed of the wild. They are designed to be relaxing, fascinating, and/or therapeutic. One of our students, Hannah Drummond, has been studying the game Journey by thatgamecompany as a therapeutic game. Itâ??s set in an atmospheric desert world, and is non-combative and affirming. See the Youtube playthrough.

Keeping some myths alive

Digital games also serve other roles in relation to nature. Like fantasy and science fiction film and other media forms, they keep alive the technological dreams of artificial intelligence, artificial life, autonomous robots, and posthuman hybridity. Wills says something that hints of this.

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> â??Prolonged exposure to virtual worlds full of digital dinosaurs and artificial life will most likely lead to new ways of seeing, and understanding, nature, especially if so much game play leaves little time for genuine experiences of the great outdoors. Players whiling away their days in the Mario universe may expect from nature a hyper-reality to match the clear colors and textures of Yoshiâ??s Island. Videogames may yet encourage a tacit acceptance of biomechanical life forms, virtual nature servicing the continual collapsing of boundaries between the artificial and the natural, and the rise of amorphous identitiesâ?• (412).

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Note

- Image is of paragliders at Stanage Edge, Derbyshire, England.
- John Willsâ?? article provides numerous examples of video games to illustrate the nature themes.
- Visit Mary Flanaganâ??s web site for information about her books and projects. See Hannah Drummond at LinkedIn.

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