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Burning Closets and Nights in the Woods: Queer Environments and Ecological Alliances in Video Games

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This article examines game environments wherein LGBTQ characters and players are not necessarily on the same side, and the natural world might want nothing to do with you or even to harm you. The purpose of these environments is not essentially to separate humans and the natural world. Instead, the environments point to other forms of complex, messy interrelationships that often do not have neat closures and resolutions. In other words these are not just bad relationships between queers and their environments, they are moments and opportunities for critically shifting perspectives, and, in the words of Kadji Amin, "deexceptionalizing" and "deidealizing" the relationship between queerness and nature to better account for the position of queerness in systems of power.20 Within the context of queer games and queer game studies, this means deidealizing the connection between queer characters, stories, players, and their natural environments, refusing to romanticize ourselves as suffering, exiled stewards of the natural world with special access, knowledge, or kinship with it.

Environments are foundational parts of play experiences in games, providing the spaces where we run, jump, fight, compete, collaborate, harvest, build, and much more. As Henry Jenkins (2006) establishes in his groundbreaking focus on "environmental storytelling," it is the designed environment in games that delivers an interactive narrative for players, usually by distributing objects, enemies, or events around in virtual space for the player to discover and connect together.[1] Environments further provide players with senses of place and presence, whereby the player knows they are in a particular, characterizable, virtual space and time in a game, and that environment responds to the player through mechanics like opening doors, moving obstacles, or otherwise changing the world around them.[2] Despite these essential roles of environments in games, environments are often experienced by players and discussed by game critics and scholars as being largely ambient, passive backdrops, or what Nitsche describes as "polygon-rich spectacle and 'eye-candy.'"[3]

Even games that allow players more interaction with their environments almost always default to a "simplistic environmental model" of "resource extraction," including many games from *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios 2011) to *Fortnite* (Epic Games 2017). These games encourage players to destroy objects in the surrounding environment to harvest resources and build their own homes, barricades, settlements, and cities, but they still relegate the environment to the status of a passive container for players to plunder.[4] Other games, such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard 2004) or Pokémon games allow the virtual environment to affect the player, but in limited ways. For example, in these games certain environments can damage the player (such as polluted areas or spaces filled with lava) or provide beneficial "buffs" that empower their abilities or detrimental "debuffs" that weaken them. In these instances, the environment itself becomes a boon or a hindrance to the player, but it remains a mostly passive presence, without ever being afforded any agency of its own. At most, the environment might contain computer-controlled, non-player characters (NPCs) such as animals, primal forces (wisps, elementals, etc.), or humanoid characters for players to fight in a format often tellingly referred to as Player vs. Environment. Even here, though, NPCs in the environment often follow simple scripts or wander mindlessly in small areas until players show up and choose to interact with them. In each of these configurations, the game environment is there not to act, but to be acted upon. These dominant design strategies effectively foreclose the possibility in most games of relating to the environment as anything more than a resource or an object to be used, and this renders ecological modes of kinship, alliance, or relationality impossible. Recent games, however, have started to include more living and agential environments, shifting the relationship between player, character, and environment toward more equal footing and raising the potential for coalitions between them.

Similarly, recent scholarship has argued for more varied ecological approaches to environment design in games, including critical examinations of farming, harvesting, and building games such as *Animal Crossing* (Nintendo 2001), *Harvest Moon* (Amccus 1997), or *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe 2016). For example, Laura op de Beke finds in these games examples of pastorals, counter-pastorals, and complex pastorals wherein human (and player) relationships with their environments and technology are continually renegotiated.[5] Beke argues that the various pastorals of game environments can lead players to reconsider how they experience labor, productivity, and temporality both in and out of games, particularly by embracing entropy in game environments that renders desire for wealth, accumulation, and mastery untenable.[6] Other scholars such as Alenda Chang and Souvik Mukherjee have noted how resource extraction, territorial control, and violent conflict are colonial tropes that commonly appear as core game mechanics, wherein in-game objects from trees to rocks to animals are rendered as assets or raw materials to be mastered, crafted, and consumed in order to build civilizations.[7] In these ways, most games normalize and naturalize a colonial framework for players interacting with game environments and with each other, and the most successful, skillful, and valuable players are those who best exploit their environments for a competitive advantage. As Chang recently emphasized, it is time to expand imaginings of environments and ecologies in games, and further for scholars in the environmental humanities and sciences to consider what roles games can play in environmental justice.[8]

A queer ecological approach is well positioned to guide further investigation of game environments and their challenges and implications for actual world environments. Emerging out of environmental humanities, ecocriticism, and ecofeminism on the one hand, and queer theory on the other, queer ecology emphasizes the interconnectedness, interdependence, and possible intimacy between humans and their environments.[9] Queer ecology looks to queer life relations such as how ecology "demands intimacies with other beings that queer theory also demands, in another key."[10] As Greta Gaard notes, reclaiming the possibility for desire, intimacy, and eroticism with nature poses a direct challenge to the colonial logics that seek to separate, feminize, and subjugate the natural world to masculinized culture and civilization.[11] Because these same colonial logics are often normalized in current games, a queer ecological approach can help upend the dominant design of using and exploiting the natural world in game environments, and instead offer different, queer forms of relationality that prioritize care and justice.

A key aspect of queer ecological relationality is its commitment to non-essentialist approaches to their subjects.[12] Just as queer theory emphasizes how gender identity and sexuality are dynamic, fluid, and changing beyond fixed binaries of male/female

or straight/gay, ecology challenges the dichotomy between the human and the natural world, emphasizing instead how humans are complexly, inextricably interconnected with their environments and biospheres.[13] Building on these connections, queer ecology seeks to reframe the relationship between humans and their environments with special attention to marginalized peoples who, like many environments around the world, have been most harmed by normative structures of capitalism, colonialism, and cisheterosexism, and are often most threatened with environmental disaster. Even beyond queer humans, recent queer ecology scholarship encourages modes of engaging with the inhuman or nonhuman as more than the separate, lesser, binary opposite to the human as they have often historically been perceived.[14] Queer ecology thus poses challenges to the exploitation of environments and queer peoples in the actual world, and can contribute to reimagining the design and use of game environments in virtual worlds.

Queer games and the growing field of queer game studies have sought to challenge normative trends in games, but have had limited engagement with queer ecology, or more broadly with environmental humanities, ecocriticism, or discussions of game environments. Queer game studies has begun to explore how spaces in games can be queered through movement, affect, and orientation, though this has often focused on interior domestic spaces such as homes, bedrooms, kitchens, or couches. For example, Dimitrios Pavlounis and Bonnie Ruberg have examined how players can navigate game spaces using queer, nonlinear paths; Whitney Pow has shown how interface design can lead players to queer orientations in game space; and Teddy Pozo has argued that queer affect can provide alternatives to empathy in games. Perhaps the only instance where queer game studies has directly engaged with ecology, ecocriticism, and outdoor spaces is Amanda Phillips' work with *Minecraft*, wherein Phillips posits that even mainstream games with primarily extractive models of player interaction with nature can have queer "algorithmic ecologies" that provide players with non-productive and non-reproductive ways to play with strange, simulated environments, such as simply observing and being in them.[15] Similarly, in the infrequent instances where queer games have directly addressed concepts of "nature" or environmentalism in games, they have emphasized a close bond between LGBTQ peoples, their experiences, and natural environments, portraying queer folks as lovers of nature who reject capitalistic exploitation of the earth in favor of kinship with it. Two examples are Kara Stone's games such as *Ritual of the Moon* (Ice Water Games 2019) and *UnearthU* (Ice Water Games 2021), which both turn to natural environments such as moonscapes or flower beds as sites of meditation, reparation, and healing where queer folks can escape and imagine otherwise. In a similar vein, Dietrich Squinkifer and Jess Marcotte's *rustle your leaves to*

me softly (Squinkifer & Marcotte 2017), described as "an ASMR plant dating simulator," asks players to softly caress a potted plant while receiving relaxing, romantic audio narration that represents the plant's voice. micha cárdenas' *Sin Sol* (2018) imagines a post-apocalyptic setting where the planet's environments have been destroyed, and the player is guided through the remains by Aura, a trans Latinx AI hologram, and Aura's dog, Roja, who function as the stewards of the planet's history and environmental detritus. In each of these examples, queer or trans characters assume a privileged relationship with their environments, even if it is just as the caretakers of the memories of a natural world that no longer exists.

Existing queer games that portray queer peoples in relation to their environments provide different configurations of queer ecology, but they also tend to assume a positive relationship between the two. In these games queer people are allies with their environments, and the positivity of these relationships is tied to what scholars have described as the queer pastoral in literature, film, and other media. Generally speaking, the pastoral is an aesthetic that emphasizes pattern and repetition, interconnectedness between humans, nonhumans, and the land, and rural dwellers living amidst "idyllic, harmonious landscapes."[16] The queer pastoral continues these themes with LGBTQ subjects, valorizing same-sex desire in nature, or portraying queer peoples as stewards of nature who are allied with it rather than the oppressive human civilizations they come from.[17] The assumptions of positivity in the queer pastoral can be helpful for imagining better relationships with our environments built through queer ecological justice, but there can also be potential danger and harm in claiming special access to and alliance with the natural world. If queer relationships with our environments are to be truly reciprocal, respecting the being and agency of nonhuman members of our environments, then can we really assume that all parts of our environments want to be in relationship with us, or that they consent to our presence or intimacy with them? Can LGBTQ peoples so easily disavow the violence and exploitation committed by humans against the environment, even if we are often harmed by many of the same systems?

To explore these questions, this article turns to the queer anti-pastoral in game environments. As theorized by Cameron Clark, the queer anti-pastoral consists of "nonegalitarian, inhospitable, and discomforting representations of queerness within the natural world that often struggle to achieve interpersonal or ecological connections."[18] Rather than assuming positivity and kinship between queer peoples and their environments, the queer anti-pastoral creates space for negativity including violence, sorrow, and grief. Crucially, this negativity does not preclude the reality of interconnectedness or the possibility of relation, but rather "opens up a new ethics of relationality and environmental politics that are not entirely founded on empathy or

care, but on what is brought forth when interdependency is a ruse or failure."[19] In this sense, the queer anti-pastoral is not opposed to queer ecology, and instead provides a different framework and structure for it that is based in moments of death, failure, and grief that can nonetheless bring queer peoples and their environments together. This article thus examines game environments wherein LGBTQ characters and players are not necessarily on the same side, and the natural world might want nothing to do with you or even to harm you. The purpose of these environments is not essentially to separate humans and the natural world. Instead, the environments point to other forms of complex, messy interrelationships that often do not have neat closures and resolutions. In other words, as Clark argues, these are not just *bad* relationships between queers and their environments, they are moments and opportunities for critically shifting perspectives, and, in the words of Kadji Amin, "deexceptionalizing" and "deidealizing" the relationship between queerness and nature to better account for the position of queerness in systems of power.[20] Within the context of queer games and queer game studies, this means deidealizing the connection between queer characters, stories, players, and their natural environments, refusing to romanticize ourselves as suffering, exiled stewards of the natural world with special access, knowledge, or kinship with it.

The Vanishing of Ethan Carter (hereafter *Vanishing*, The Astronauts 2014) and *Night in the Woods* (hereafter *Night*, Infinite Fall 2017) are two games that provide excellent case studies in the queer anti-pastoral in game environments. Both are single player, indie games made by smaller studios and collaborations, which are a game genre and production context where most queer games are currently being made, largely due to the increased freedom and precarity that come with making smaller games outside major studios.[21] Both games take place in the rural United States in what is often broadly termed "The Rust Belt," with *Vanishing* taking place in the fictional Red Creek Valley in eastern Wisconsin and *Night* taking place in the fictional Possum Springs in western Pennsylvania. The settings of both games depict juxtapositions of pastoral natural beauty and postindustrial rot, degeneration, and death. The rolling hills and mountains are dotted with abandoned factories and industrial equipment left behind when the major industries left decades ago, now providing (often dangerous) ruins for local teenagers to vandalize. These environments are "nodal spaces" that tell stories about what happens there through their architecture and design, in the same fashion of other game spaces, as McGregor describes: "stores are where you buy things, inns are where you sleep."[22] The stories of Possum Springs and Red Creek Valley are not about the shining cities of eco-friendly futures, but rather are about the forgotten places of poor and working-class people living in the aftereffects of social and environmental

exploitation. To paraphrase McGregor, the nodal spaces of *Vanishing* and *Night* tell us the Rust Belt is where you die.

Crucially, both games prominently feature queer characters living in these environments, showing them turning to the natural world for freedom and safety, but also portraying how these environments become dangerous spaces where queer characters die, haunt, and even claim revenge. The narratives of both games take queer forms by unfolding non-linearly, emphasizing everyday, repetitive actions without a singular clear climax or resolution of the challenges the characters face.[23] The gameplay is also queer, foregoing the common, colonial mechanics of combat, resource collection, and territorial control in favor of the player simply being and moving through game environments, interacting with characters, narration, and dialogue as they go. The primary mechanic in these games is movement, including jumping in *Night* and only walking in *Vanishing*, and it is a decidedly non-productive movement––the only thing the player could be completing or making is the story, all of which is pre-scripted by the game developers, though players will still have different experiences depending on which areas they explore or characters they develop relationships with. The heavy focus on narrative and de-emphasizing of player challenge or skill means some players will view these games as lesser games (or not games at all), but it also means that they exemplify the queer possibilities of games that resist normative expectations for action and instead embrace the "trivial, nonproductive wanderings" of "digital inhabitants."[24] The focus in both narrative and gameplay on the meandering, quotidian experiences of queer peoples in their decaying environments sets the stage for a form of queer "reimagined relationality" with the natural world that is not necessarily competitive or combative, nor is it necessarily positive or supportive.[25]

Beyond offering examples of queer anti-pastorals in game environments, *Vanishing* and *Night* further discourse on queer ecology by providing insights uniquely evident in games. As Alenda Chang has argued, video games are boundary objects between material and virtual worlds, and they produce "edge effects" that can affect and transform both environments through the margins between them.[26] The way players interact with play environments in games can reveal how humans think about and interact with their environments in the actual world, and changes in the actual world can change how players experience their virtual ones. Put another way, games are systems of rules, software, and hardware created by human designers and players, and this means they are encoded (consciously or unconsciously) with common, hegemonic, and normative values from the actual world, such as the colonial game mechanics mentioned earlier. In this sense, queer games and anti-pastorals like those examined here can function as a form of what Kara Keeling calls "Queer OS," revealing and challenging the normative

values encoded in game environments and instead embracing the "irrational, imaginative, and/or unpredictable relationships" that emerge as alternatives.[27] Games can thus present a crucial opportunity as experimental playgrounds for testing out relationships with our environments. Morton makes similar claims about games, and further posits that play itself can create more ecological ways of being: "Play is sub-scendence, connecting me with the Lego brick, the lichen, the activist network, the microbiome, the melting glacier. We are less than the sum of our parts; multitudes teem in us."[28]

To these possibilities I would add that games, as play spaces, are sites of contestation, and the challenges and competitions they offer point to modes of relationality with the environment that are neither idealized positivity nor antagonistic negativity. Amanda Phillips has recently called for a recuperation of the "agon" in games, the field of contest where conflicts are addressed rather than silenced, and where participants are not always or necessarily allies or enemies.[29] The agon demands equality for its participants (and becomes something quite different without it), and respects their agencies, wills, and voices. If we view nonhuman members and actors in our environments as participants in the agon, it reframes our relationality with them, requiring that we divest ourselves of assumptions of superiority, mastery, or access, or of inherent alliance or enmity between us. *Vanishing* and *Night* are particularly useful examples of a queer ecological agon because, in contrast to many mainstream games that emphasize the powerful actions of players against the passive backgrounds of digital environments, they force players into the disempowered position of Rust Belt queer characters whose environments have as much (or more) power than they do in terms of both gameplay and narrative. In other words, these games dare to put humans/players and nature/environments on more even footing in order to tell their stories, and in doing so they present unique opportunities to realize the potentials of queer ecology. By weaving the threads of game environments, queer and trans game studies, and queer ecology together, we can arrive at new ways of thinking about environments in and beyond video games—ways that recognize and respect the agency of both humans and environments. Most immediately, these games remind us that if environments are active and agential, then one cannot assume that this agency is aligned with or supportive of LGBTQ peoples.

Nights in the Woods: Playing in Queer Pastorals

In many ways, the virtual environments of *Vanishing* and *Night* are as active in crafting their stories and play experiences as the player is. Red Creek Valley and Possum Springs are sites of rot, decay, and even terror, and they are also surrounded by stunningly

beautiful natural environments, suggesting they contain elements of both the queer pastoral and anti-pastoral. Beyond just providing the spaces where the gameplay happens, Red Creek Valley and Possum Springs shape where the player and the story will go by guiding or impeding the player and responding to their actions. For example, in some scenes the characters of both games are led to the queer pastoral by both the possibility of peace in the woods and countryside and their desire to escape the social limitations of their homes—the prying eyes of a small town in Possum Springs, and the harassment and abuse of a homophobic family in Red Creek Valley. The feelings of freedom and acceptance in the woods help the queer characters to imagine otherwise with and through their natural environments.

Figure 1: Mae (left) and Gregg (right) chat by a pond in the woods after "doing crimes." An abandoned factory sits in the background, and two unidentified birds stand in the pond.

In *Night*, Possum Springs is surrounded by the rolling hills and mountains of western Pennsylvania. Mae (who is pansexual, and the player character) and her best friend Gregg (who is gay) go to the woods not necessarily to escape homophobia, but to avoid the judgments of parents, neighbors, and the town cop (who is Mae's aunt). Mae and Gregg enjoy "doing crimes" in the woods together, which can include anything from knife fighting each other, to destroying an old rusted out car, to shooting crossbow bolts at "the Forest God," an effigy Gregg made in the woods (See **Figure 1**). While they do crimes, Gregg and Mae open up to each other about their struggles, worries, and feelings. Gregg tells Mae that he is "parking lot trash" and worries that he will never escape Possum Springs, or that he will ruin his relationship with his boyfriend Angus. Mae shares parts of her struggles with depression and dissociation, and they work

through her feelings while pretending to be punks and revolutionaries. Importantly, none of these problems are solved in the woods or the game generally, either in terms of narrative or gameplay. There is no way for players to "win" these situations through skill or clever choices. Instead, the woods create a place where the characters can be honest with each other, where they can play with their thoughts, feelings, and imagined futures with more freedom and support than they feel in town. This relationship with the woods is textbook pastoral, while the addition of the element of play in *Night in the Woods* allows players to effectively customize their pastoral (within pre-designed limits) by choosing particular characters with whom to build relationships or areas of the woods to explore at different points in the game, such as a bonfire party where Mae can get drunk with her friends. The players' choices in these scenes do not significantly alter their queer pastoral aesthetics or feeling, but they do give the player some agency in picking which type of pastoral they want to play with/in. Mae and her queer friends are finding refuge in the woods in those scenes that other characters aren't necessarily pursuing. Overall their relationships with their environment are generally positive and seem to be a Rust Belt version of the queer pastoral, though they are not stewards of nature and are not motivated by environmental justice in any sense.

The woods in *Night* also become an explicitly queer place of sexual connection, experimentation, and discovery. As Ewan Kirkland describes the woods around Possum Springs, they are a wild, haunted, "primal" space for "hidden pornography, teenage break-ups, procreative and recreational sex."[30] One of the clearest scenes for this is a party that Mae and her friends attend in the woods, during which Mae gets progressively more and more drunk and embarrasses herself in front of a former lover. The woods are a place for Mae to process old feelings and desires, even if she does so ineptly and to disastrous (and funny) consequences. As sites of social gathering and sexual exploration, the natural environments around Possum Springs provide opportunities for local LGBTQ youth and their allies to test their "tenuous access to each other and public spaces," and in doing so they "rework the boundaries of public recognition and local belonging."[31] In these scenes the woods, the countryside, and their inhabitants become allies to the queer characters in their struggles and the agon, together opposed to the judgmental and exploitative relationships they have with the town, their parents, and social expectations. This alliance is not specific to *Night* or *Vanishing* either, but rather represents a common experience of rural LGBTQ youth who find contact, community, and sexual exploration in the woods.[32]

Vanishing contains a similar story that is inflected by Ethan's experiences of his family's homophobia. The Carter family lives alone in Red Creek Valley as its caretakers, and the family members turn to different means for coping with their isolation and lack

of opportunities: Ethan's grandpa is an alcoholic, his brother is a bully, his father is a failed inventor, and his mother grows increasingly desperate and verbally abusive as the game's events unfold. Ethan is a quiet and imaginative adolescent boy who enjoys reading and writing stories, and his family perceives this as effeminate and mocks him for it using homophobic slurs. To escape his family's harassment, Ethan often runs away to the woods, hills, and river of Red Creek Valley in order to write his stories, and he often includes these natural environments as elements and characters in his narratives. For example, one of Ethan's stories tells of a witch who lives alone in the woods and has the powers to predict childbirth and reverse aging. After searching through the woods and magical illusions and encountering a small, makeshift tent in the woods, the player realizes that Ethan based this story on his own hideaway in the woods and his experience with his increasingly abusive mother. In another story, the player chases an astronaut through the woods, being guided and at times blocked by the environment using trees and boulders, until they find a spaceship and blast off into space. In both stories, the environment actively shapes where the player and the stories go by revealing or concealing information and opening or closing paths, all with the apparent purpose of shielding Ethan from antagonistic family (and perhaps the player).

Unlike *Night*, where the woods provided connection and intimacy for Mae and her friends, the environments of *Vanishing* provide Ethan with opportunities to disconnect and find distance and relative safety. These opportunities allow Ethan to create what Katherine Schweighofer has called "pockets of privacy, or at least opportunities for making private moments."[33] The woods effectively become Ethan's ally and give him a respite from the agon and his restrictive social context, and they further become spaces of imagining for him—spaces where his stories and his dreams can take the forms of witches, trips to outer space, alchemy labs, or booby-trapped treasures. Most of these stories are portrayed positively, taking place during the day when the surrounding woods and hills are brightly lit, safe, and peaceful. This contrasts notably with the other series of events in the game, which consists of several murders the player solves in dark, blue-tinted night scenes that evoke senses of danger, anger, and sorrow. The difference between Ethan's stories and the murders highlights how Ethan's personal relationship with his environment is a nourishing and hopeful one, but this is shattered by his relationship with his family and the awakening of The Sleeper that turns the valley against him.

These scenes in *Night* and *Vanishing* paint two pictures of possible queer pastorals in Rust Belt settings: one that emphasizes connection and community, and the other that emphasizes privacy, safety, and imagination. What both have in common is that they depict positive alliances between LGBTQ characters and their environments, continuing the queer pastoral's focus on the natural world as a space where it is safe to

be queer. While this is a common experience captured in both games, the other events taking place in Possum Springs and Red Creek Valley remind players that the natural environments are not always or necessarily on Mae's or Ethan's sides.

Burning Closets: Playing in Queer Anti-Pastorals

The old wounds of rot and rust in the environments of *Night* and *Vanishing* take on forms of animacy and animosity as primordial, malevolent entities. In *Night*, the player (and Mae) eventually discovers that a secret cult of older townspeople has been sacrificing "drifters, drunks, and delinquents" to a dark entity known as the "Black Goat." The Black Goat lives at the heart of the environmental harm in Possum Springs: in a bottomless pit in the abandoned mine, which was dug too close to the town's water and eventually "that water was poison." The Black Goat demands sacrifices, and if it does not receive them then it visits natural disasters on the town, such as "the flood a few years back" or "the blizzard of 2010." In *Vanishing*, Ethan Carter and his family are similarly threatened by a dark, deathless entity known as "The Sleeper," which lay dormant in Red Creek Valley until it was awoken by humans. The Sleeper proceeds to warp the minds of Ethan's family, driving them to attack him and eliminate humans from the valley once more. Crucially, The Black Goat and The Sleeper are not merely dark powers that have taken up residence in their game environments, rather they are directly tied to the natural worlds of their respective games and come to embody the vengeance of wounded nature. As The Black Goat and The Sleeper emerge through character dialogue, narration, and references, the natural environments become just as foreboding, threatening, and dangerous as they are welcoming and supportive in other, earlier scenes. Scenes and elements of the queer pastoral become intermixed with those of the queer anti-pastoral as Mae and Ethan navigate their uncertain relationships with themselves, other people, and their environments.

The wounds and injustices extend beyond the land and affect LGBTQ peoples living in these environments. The contemporary, dominant narrative of queer life emerges from and centers on the city, regarding rural spaces as perhaps quaint and naturally beautiful (pastoral), but dangerous for LGBTQ folks and incapable of supporting queer life and community.[34] This is not necessarily an incorrect assumption, as many queer folks growing up in rural spaces have encountered abuse and violence, but this common narrative renders places like Red Creek Valley or Possum Springs as "America's perennial, tacitly taken-for-granted closet," the places of shame and hurt that are to be avoided, escaped, and forgotten.[35] *Vanishing*'s narrative fits this view to a certain extent—Ethan's family assumes he is gay because of his imaginative nature and love of stories, and under the influence of The Sleeper they increasingly bully and attack him.

Thus LGBTQ characters and their environments in *Vanishing* and *Night* are connected by common experiences of danger, death, and loss. In Possum Springs and Red Creek Valley, the environment is rotting, and queer folks are dying. This is not coincidental——the "improper affiliation" between queers and their environments that marks them both for death is forged by a normative "ecology of pureness" that seeks to separate humans from dehumanized, different, queer Others.[36] In these games death becomes a way that queer characters, bodies, and their natural environments are disciplined and destroyed, but it is not necessarily an end for any of them. Their wounds, stories, and affects continue to haunt the game environments, usually in the form of objects, documents, ghosts, or body parts. As the player navigates these spaces and solves the mystery of what happened to Ethan Carter or why people are disappearing from Possum Springs, they encounter and feel the loss, the "present absence" of LGBTQ characters and other nonhuman parts of the environment.[37]

The Black Goat and The Sleeper reveal how environments can take on affect, animacy, and agency in human imagining and become players in the games' agons. Neither character ever appears in physical form in the games, yet their presence is felt throughout the game environments through the very real effects they have on the people and spaces of Possum Springs and Red Creek Valley. They lurk in and around the game environments as the dangers present there from pollution and illness to fires and flooding to falls and broken bones. Their anger, hostility, and malice pervade the games, making them "affective and material constructs" of the environment that are "nonneutral in relation to animals, humans, and living and dead things."[38] They influence and control people in the environments including cultists (The Black Goat) and family members (The Sleeper). Ultimately, they also kill, as Mae's friend Casey is sacrificed to the Black Goat and Ethan is killed by The Sleeper through his family members. In each of these actions, directly or indirectly, the Black Goat and The Sleeper are represented in the narrative as active players in the agon. They are effectively making moves in the games by manipulating other characters and objects, and as players navigate the games' environments they must work with or against other characters to find out who these entities are and try and stop them. Significantly, the moments in the games where the queer characters and the player are either safe or in danger in the natural environments——the moments where they are working with or against each other——are interspersed throughout the games. It is not that they start the game as allies and end as enemies. Instead, their relationships to each other are continually shifting, and the characters and the player have to navigate and respond to that uncertainty.

The intentions and politics of The Black Goat and The Sleeper as players in the agon are not immediately apparent in either game, and indeed in both games their existences,

identities, and powers remain a mystery for most of the narrative. Nevertheless, they are always there, lurking even in many of the scenes that are otherwise examples of the queer pastoral. In *Night*, there are several scenes where Mae is exploring the woods with a friend and notices at some point that they are being watched and followed, and in *Vanishing* Ethan slowly notices that his family members are becoming increasingly agitated and aggressive towards him. At this point both entities are queer presences in their game environments that make the characters and the player feel a sense of strangeness, unease, and foreboding.

By the end of both games, the hostility of the natural environments toward the queer characters becomes fully apparent, and it becomes clear that these are not stories of regeneration, empathy, or care. *Night* ends with Mae and her friends confronting The Black Goat and its cult in the bowels of the mine, but this confrontation does not lead to any resolution for Mae, the town, or the environment. After a conversation in which the cult leader explains their motivations for saving the town's economy and future via The Black Goat, Mae and her friends simply leave the mine. They are attacked by a cult member on the way out, causing the lift to crash and presumably trap the cult members in the mine with The Black Goat, but it is never confirmed if the cult escapes or not. The ending is filled with death that does not appear to mean or solve anything—Mae is still depressed and dissociating, The Black Goat still seeks vengeance and sacrifice, and the town and its surrounding environments continue to slowly decline and rot. The message and politics of the game do not fit neatly into more positive and hopeful versions of queer ecology, and instead suggest that the wounds inflicted on the natural environment and onto the queer characters are not easily or quickly healed. If there is a hope to be found at the end of the game, it is in Mae and her friends sealing up the industrial wound of the mines and moving forward together into an uncertain future and relationship with their environment.

The final scene of *Vanishing* carries a similar negativity, but further points to other possibilities for transformation that emerge beyond assumed alliances or antagonisms. The end reveals that The Sleeper is Ethan's latest story, and the player has been playing as a character in that story. The Sleeper represents the vengeance of the valley against the humans who harmed and still occupy it, but also how the valley was becoming an increasingly hostile and dangerous place for Ethan because of his family's homophobia. As this is revealed, The Sleeper finally catches up with Ethan, and his family finds him writing stories in his last hideout—a closet in the basement of an abandoned mansion at the top the valley. An argument ensues, and in the scuffle a lantern is dropped that starts a fire, quickly engulfing the room. Ethan retreats into his closet and spends his final moments reliving his stories. At first glance, Ethan's

death is just another retelling of the dangers of the "country-as-closet construct," how rural environments are hostile and inhospitable for LGBTQ people.[39] Yet Ethan's stories suggest otherwise. Because of and through his stories, Ethan is neither fully in nor out of the closet, rather he transforms the closet into a space of play where he can represent and address injustices against both him and the natural world around him. He does not get to transcend or resolve his circumstances, but he lights the closet on fire, enacting an "ongoing reconfiguring of spacetimemattering" that uses narrative to imagine other, better possible worlds for himself and his environment.[40] The final moments of the game take control away from the player, and the camera pans out from the mansion to show Red Creek Valley one last time—neither Ethan's ally nor his enemy, but a fellow wounded soul finally reclaiming its agency.

Conclusion: "At the end of everything, hold onto anything." —Night in the Woods prologue

Night and *Vanishing* refuse to offer any neat or easy closures, or untroubled visions of kind and caring relationships between LGBTQ peoples and their natural environments. Such narratives are comforting fantasies—ones that are useful for spurring action and imaging different, better futures, but also ones that can become harmful when they sweep over injustices or deny nonhuman animacy and agency. There are no happy endings for Possum Springs or for Red Creek Valley because there are no quick or direct paths to justice for these environments or the queers that live in them. Reaching queer ecological justice requires radical dismantling and reimagining of imbricated systems of economic and environmental exploitation, cisheterosexism, and death and decay, but these collective projects are incredibly difficult to even begin in places long saturated with myths of neoliberalism and rugged individualism. In the meantime, these games show how the dehumanization of queers and the subjugation of nature can be violently resisted, but not in ways that recuperate, reclaim, or regenerate them. When justice and reparation remain out of reach, then one can make do with vengeance, violence, and retribution. These may ultimately be fantasies of a different sort, ones that are uninterested in empathy, recognition, or the "humanness of queers or the queerness of nonhumans."[41] Nevertheless, such stories play with negativity and queer anti-pastorals to transform our imaginings of and relationships with natural environments.

Entities like The Sleeper and The Black Goat are prominent examples of game environments taking on agency and becoming players in the agons of their respective games, and they represent a form of queer ecological relationality that can reframe environments in games and beyond. Attributing agency to game environments means recognizing that the environment and the entities within, such as animals, plants,

bodies of water, and much more, are potentially active participants in play with their own interests, abilities, and motivations for interacting with the world around them――ones that may or may not be intelligible to humans. This claim can easily be misconstrued as anthropomorphizing or idealizing the natural in games, but games like *Vanishing* and *Night* show us how to relate to natural agents in other ways. In-game natural agents like The Sleeper or The Black Goat are instantiated in the narrative as their own characters that can support or oppose other agents in a game's agon (including the player), and their shifting relationships with humans destabilize attempts both to other and subjugate the nonhuman natural world and to assume intimacy and kinship with it. Beyond the narrative, natural agents are rendered in the play space of a game as their own entities with bodies, textures, assets, internal logics, and scripts for interacting with the world, on similar footing in the agon as the player character, which is an in-game object that the player controls and moves around. Viewed through the lens of queer ecological relationality, nonhuman players are neither above nor below the human, and neither essentially allied nor opposed to us in the agon.

Of course, there are limits to what game objects can reveal to us about actual world relations between humans and our environments. As much as natural agents in games have their own assets and abilities, they are still controlled by a game engine made by humans and encoded with human values that establishes what is allowed or disallowed in a game. While they can become active, such as when trees and boulders move themselves or lights and illusions appear to shield Ethan from the player in *Vanishing*, this activity remains almost entirely determined and pre-scripted by the game's developers. This inherently limits the forms that non-human agency can take in a game. Further, natural agents in games beyond these examples are still most frequently used as enemies and/or resources for the player character, and this contributes to colonial logics for human-environment interactions as the hegemonic norm in games. Yet there are increasingly games that resist and queer that norm, such as *Vanishing* and *Night*, and even in mainstream games like *Minecraft* there always remain queer possibilities found in the strange and excessive outcomes of digital simulations (like all cows being non-sexed and reproducing and producing milk) or the nonproductive ways players can choose to play.[42] Queer ecologies and queer game studies can help guide the creation of more games that realize these and other potential relationships.

Queer game environments and queer ecologies enhance the feedback loop between games and the actual world by showing us the limits and failures of our current interactions with environments in ways that other mainstream, normative games often do not, and they point to how those relationships might be different. What *Night* and *Vanishing* give us instead, then, are new ways of thinking about queer relationality that

complicate common narratives of antinormativity, care, and kinship between queer peoples and their environments. The stories of these game environments are ones that dwell in complicated in-betweens, in alliances made and broken in the play between LGBTQ peoples and their surroundings, where queer life doesn't just burst out of closets but lights them on fire, refusing either to stay hidden or to be compelled into speaking. By reimagining queer ecologies as possible "heterotopic alliances" within particular environmental agons, several conceptual tools for queer ecological justice emerge.[43] First and foremost, heterotopic alliances require us to give up assumed privilege and access to natural environments and nonhuman players. LGBTQ humans are just as capable of harming our environments as cisheterosexual people and normative systems are, and it is misguided at best and actively harmful at worst to assume that nonhuman members of our environments want alliances with us. Such a perspective does not justify or encourage assuming antagonism either, rather it demands we take seriously the possibilities for both care and injury, positivity and negativity. This leads to the second tool, which is the need for both queer pastorals and anti-pastorals, including all of their complicated interminglings and permutations. Queer ecological alliances involve complex systems of relationships, interpenetrations, and positionalities in systems of power, and these are all uncertain and changing over time. The queer anti-pastoral reminds us not to romanticize or idealize our alliances, while the pastoral prevents us from wallowing in a negativity that at its worst can disavow possibilities for care, nurture, and community. Finally, queer ecological alliances encourage us to be careful about "picking your battles," being strategic and practical about which moves and alliances will be most effective in different environments.[44] This does not mean compromising or minimizing the radical potential for queer peoples and our approaches to transform our environments. Rather, it means queer identities, ecologies, and heterotopic alliances are constantly shifting, and how we play in the agon should adapt to new realities as well.

Notes

1 Henry Jenkins 2006. "Game Design as Narrative Architexture," 4.

2 Michael Nitsche, *Video Game Spaces*, 208; Carrie Heeter, "*Being* There: The Subjective Experience of Presence," 2.

3 Nitsche, 6.

4 Alenda Y. Chang. *Playing Nature: Ecology in Video Games*, location 138.

5 Laura op de Beke, "Pastoral Videogames: Industry, Entropy, Elegy," 178–182.

6 Beke, 190.

7 Chang, location 216; Souvik Mukherjee, "Age of Empires: Postcolonialism," 158.

8 (Chang, location 316).

9 Timothy Morton, "Guest Column: Queer Ecology," 274.

10 Morton, "Guest Column," 273.

11 Greta Gaard, "Toward a Queer Ecofeminism," 132.

12 Morton, "Guest Column," 274.

13 Nicole Seymour, *Strange Natures*, 184.

14 (Haritaworn 2015, 210) NOTE: MISSING REFERENCE.

15 Amanda Phillips, "(Queer) Algorithmic Ecology," 115–116.

16 Cameron Clark, "Grief, Ecocritical Negativity, and the Queer Anti-Pastoral," 215.

17 Clark, 216–217.

18 Clark, 212.

19 Clark, 212.

20 Kadji Amin, *Disturbing Attachments*, 10–11.

21 Bonnie Ruberg, *The Queer Games Avant-Garde*, 13; Cody Mejeur, "The Hunt for Queer Spaces," 180.

22 Mia Consalvo and Andrew Phelps, "Getting through a Tough Day (Again)," 338; McGregor, "Situations of Play," 537.

23 Shira Chess, "The Queer Case of Video Games," 84.

24 Phillips, "(Queer) Algorithmic Ecology," 106.

25 Tyler Bradway, "Queer Narrative Theory and the Relationality of Form," 712.

26 Chang, location 239; 273.

27 Kara Keeling, "Queer OS," 154.

28 Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*, 116.

29 Amanda Phillips, *Gamer Trouble: Feminist Confrontations in Digital Culture*, 171.

30 Ewan Kirkland, *Videogames and the Gothic*, 111.

31 Mary L. Gray, *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America*, 4.

32 Peter Hobbs, "Epistemology of the Bunkhouse: Lusty Lumberjacks and the Sexual Pedagogy of the Woods," 205.

33 Katherine Schweighofer, "Rethinking the Closet: Queer Life in Rural Geographies," 230.

34 Gray, 6.

35 Gray, 4.

36 Tara Mehrabi, "Queer Ecologies of Death in the Lab: Rethinking Waste, Decomposition and Death through a Queerfeminist Lens," 145.

37 Mejeur, 171.

38 Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, 5.

39 Schweighofer, 223.

40   Karen Barad, "Transmaterialities: Trans*/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings," 411.

41 Clark, 230.

42 Amanda Phillips, "(Queer) Algorithmic Ecology," 114–115.

43 Matthew Gandy, "Queer Ecology: Nature, Sexuality, and Heterotopic Alliances," 741.

44 Gray, 166.

Competing Interests

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