Playing the posts: post-Anthropocene, posthuman, post-apocalypse

Lawrence May and Poppy Wilde

Introduction

Today we create and play videogames in the ruins of our own planet, as our contemporary era comes to be defined by inexorable ecological crises and collapse. Alongside planetary catastrophe, questions of who humans are, what we can (or should) do, and the ethical tensions that underly our relations with nonhuman others pervade. Further questions related to identity, society, nature, and culture persist, calling into question our pasts, presents, and futures. Through explorations of these questions (and the sometimes difficult answers they present), popular media continues to offer us an imaginative means to grapple with such existential musings. Thinking about, reading, listening to, watching, feeling and—of course—playing expressions of the post-Anthropocene, posthumanism and the post-apocalypse can expand our perspectives beyond the present scope of human sense. In this special issue, we explore the relationships between videogames, their attendant play cultures and the aforementioned 'posts'. In doing so, we aim to illustrate the distinctive aesthetic, artistic and narrative contributions of games during this unsettled era.

Our conditions of Earthly disaster see climate in disarray, industrial pollution sinking deep-

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er into our life-sustaining environments, ecosystems fracturing, and species (including our own) moving ever-closer to extinction. Many scientists describe our current era as the 'Anthropocene'—a term proposed to name a geological epoch during which Earth and its natural systems have become indelibly shaped by humankind. This label is not without its controversy and contestation, of course. In imagining a homogeneous human race in the anthropos to which it refers, 'Anthropocene' also obscures the unequal relations of class, race, gender, geography, and economy that have seen humankind's negative impact on Earth exercised—and experienced—unevenly across the globe. Nonetheless, the idea of 'Anthropocene' has spread, in Peter Sloterdijk's (2015) words, like a "synthetic-semantic virus" from the conferences and publications of science "into the general life world" (p. 327). Taking hold, perhaps in part because of the moral and political urgency it captures, the label has been popularly and vaguely deployed to refer variously to the present era, to Earth's climate crisis, and to the compounding ecological collapses surrounding us.

The Anthropocene era, charged as it is with human and humanistic hubris, carries with it a power to condition "the materiality of contemporary subjectivity" as well our very "discourses on time and history" (Yusoff, 2022, p. 21). This is a trap from which it can be difficult to shake loose. As the novelist Amitav Ghosh (2017) explains, efforts to artistically reflect upon the Anthropocene in critical ways are often hamstrung by the fact that so many of our art forms developed in tandem with, and are themselves structured by the logic of, the Anthropocene. Donna Haraway similarly reminds us that "it matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories" (2016, p. 12) and, in the case of our present era, that often means for audiences and consumers a "comfortable position outside the systems depicted" (Alaimo, 2016, p. 146) that works to inure them to the circuits of harm and human culpability powering the Anthropocene. How might we move beyond this toxic and diminished "sensorial phenomenon" of our current age and provocatively disturb the "literal sediment of human activity" (Davis and Turpin, 2015, p. 3) that coats our everyday lives? As one answer to questions such as this, attention is increasingly turning from discussions centred on lives lived during an Anthropocene defined by the ruinous impact of humankind on the planet to what must follow (or, perhaps, what already is); the post-Anthropocene.

Building upon the Anthropocene's urgent warnings about the fate of ecosystems, cultures and societies, the post-Anthropocene asks us to transcend the human-centric paradigms that have led to our environmental crises and instead envision new, often bold, futures (which may be framed in hopeful, pessimistic, idealised or simply pragmatic terms). Critical to exploring the post-Anthropocene, and embracing its imperative to undertake "speculative practices aimed at imagining a future beyond catastrophe and extinction" (Adsit-Morris and Gough, 2020), is the recognition that nonhuman entities are deeply embedded within human systems, and permeate biology, sociality and meaning. By consciously eschewing the distancing manoeuvres of Anthropocene modes of knowledge and aesthetics to work instead "from within the scene in which we are enmeshed" (Casid, 2019, p. 32), we can begin to

recognise that we are in fact "entangled in the eeriness of the knots between different living and non-living agents" (Batalla, 2022, p. 3). Post-Anthropocene thinking gives shape to what Timothy Morton (2013) has characterised as the growing "realization by humans that they are not running the show" (p. 164). Instead, we learn through the post-Anthropocene that more-than-human entanglements underly our material and socio-political surrounds. Such revelations fracture the humanist fundaments of the Anthropocene and its stories, and by embracing this "scene of our undoing" (Casid, 2019, p. 30) and "dwelling in the dissolve" (Alaimo, 2016, p. 2) of humanism's unravelling boundaries, we might find the staging ground for new insurgent praxes (Yusoff, 2018, p. 22).

In recognising the entanglement and interdependency of humans and nonhuman entities in shaping the world, scholars are often drawn to another 'post': posthumanism, and the challenges this concept makes to the traditional boundaries and exceptionalism of human identity. Where humanism privileges a particular 'type' of human—one who is apparently autonomous, self-reflexive and self-determining, independent and ontologically separate from its surroundings—critical posthumanism views humans as intrinsically intertwined with other elements such as technologies, environments, and materialities. This perspective challenges anthropocentrism and emphasises a complex understanding of humans' place in the world. In doing so, posthumanism brings into question strict binaries—and hierarchies—of self/other, human/machine, subject/object, and more, and therefore offers alternative ways of understanding relations in more rhizomatic, postdualistic ways. As Herbrechter et al. (2022) state, critical posthumanism "characterizes an ethical and political stance that promises to take seriously the problem of anthropocentrism and its deconstruction" (p. 5). Such stances can allow for alternative conceptions of agency, looking to nonhuman capacities, and considering new materialist approaches to understanding the importance of matter. Critical posthumanism also critiques the implicit hierarchies placed between different categories of the 'human', arguing against oppressive "isms"—sexism, racism, ageism, ableism, classism, cisheterosexism, and beyond—and as such can offer an affirmative politics of activism and hope.

A third 'post' is also evoked by the post-Anthropocene: the post-apocalypse. Post-apocalyptic depictions of worlds or societies in the aftermath of catastrophic events substantiate the notional consequences of environmental, technological, or societal collapses. Such accounts of cataclysm offer critical reflections on contemporary Earthly ailments and often provide imaginative, affectively rich spaces for exploring the consequences and potential futures (whether marked by renewal or grinding terror) resulting from environmental crises. Post-apocalyptic narratives and themes can allow for creative responses to seeing humans separated from the current, pervasive, capitalist and neoliberal attitudes upheld in many societies. As societies are seen in collapse, these explorations of alternative modes of being often bring humans' relation to 'others' into sharp relief – whether these others be environmental, animal, technological or beyond. Often, however, we see the post-apocalypse from a human-centric perspective. As Karen Barad (2020) states, "[t]o place the apocalypse before us, to think that

it lies only in our imagination, that we are haunted by its possibility still unrealized, is to reiterate not only a very particular telling of time and history, but a particularly privileged 'we,' complicit in regimes of erasure" (p. 103). Such a provocation calls into question the capacities of our imagination to move beyond such privilege.

Each of these posts has been considered to some extent across game studies. Ecocriticism is a rapidly growing area of the field, drawing attention in different ways to the interconnection of games with the conditions of the Anthropocene era, and of their relationship to our natural world more generally. Scholars have considered videogames and the complexity of their relationships to, and representations of, ecologies and nature (e.g. Abraham, 2018; Abraham & Jayemanne, 2017; Bianchi, 2014; Chang, 2019; op de Beke et al., 2024), as well as the influence of the broader cultural logic of the Anthropocene upon play (e.g. op de Beke, 2020; Abraham, 2022; Nicoll, 2023, May, 2024).

As Paolo Ruffino (2020) argues, "ludic texts force us to rethink the boundaries of our self and how we participate in our surroundings" (p. 13). Critical posthumanist accounts in videogames have moved from exploring cyborg representations and the relationship between the avatar and player as an extension of the gamer's subjectivity into a technological avatar form (Boulter, 2015) to viewing the avatar-gamer as an entangled form of posthuman subjectivity with shared affective and agentic capacities and intra-actions (Wilde, 2023a). Meanwhile, other accounts question the primacy of the player, considering instead games that do not even need human players at all (Fizek, 2018). Scholars also often discuss videogames in relation to their potential capacity for identity play. Yet, this suggestion can be problematic when it leads to/can be equated with identity tourism, a form of appropriation where White players "indulge in a dream of crossing over racial boundaries temporarily and recreationally" (Nakamura, 1995, p. 185; see also Mukherjee, 2018; Phillips, 2022). Yet beyond these unethical designs and practices we see alternative avenues that look beyond the human, to utilise the story space of videogames to inhabit different characters and embody different modes of being to consider how they make space for "for productively thinking about humans' relations to nonhuman species" (Bianchi, 2017, p. 136). This can be captured through games that allow us to occupy nonhuman avatars, those that draw attention to nonhuman relationships, and those that disrupt the primacy of human agency (see for example Ruberg, 2022; Seller, 2022; Gallagher, 2022; Fizek, 2022; Wilde, 2023b).

Moving away from the entangled realities of human–ecological relations, and instead to the pleasures and horrors cultivated by fantasy, game studies has also addressed the function of post-apocalyptic, monstrous, and inhuman imaginaries in play (e.g. Perron, 2018; May, 2021; Švelch, 2023). Set alongside scholarship that addresses the relationship of games to futures and futures thinking (e.g. Atkins, 2006; Fordyce, 2021), ecocritical and post-apocalyptic game studies have both, in their own ways, made compelling cases for paying close attention to the allegorical overlaps between games and our lived world (whether ecological, monstrous, nonhuman or inhuman). Together, these traditions within game studies illus-

trate that more-than-human play encounters are a means to imagine and explore alterity in our relations with the world, beings and matter around us.

In the field of game studies, there has been growing interest in understanding how videogames and their players engage with and respond to our era's urgent ecological and ethical concerns. Games allow us to explore alternative approaches to climate change, our entanglement with nonhuman others, and how we can, could, or should live more ethical lives. Taking the above discussions as starting points, we seek in this collection to look beyond the present catastrophe(s) to the futures offered through play. As Fordyce (2021) argues, the "problem with the present moment is that it not only suffuses material politics but has also infected our imagination of the future" (p. 297), but that games offer powerful opportunities for experimentation that critique and think beyond our contemporary conditions. This special issue therefore invites scholars to explore the complexities and implications of the post-Anthropocene, the posthuman, and the post-apocalypse in order to expand our understanding of how digital games can engage with and respond to the challenges we now face, as well as the anxieties and opportunities presented by our uncertain futures. If, as Curtis (2015) argues, "[p]ost-apocalyptic fiction captures our collective fears and reworks imaginatively how we might live together" (p. 4) we must assume that many of our fears are therefore based in the failure of humanist hierarchies, with humans toppled from their (assumed) position of power, and humbled by machines and/or nature—including animals. We suggest that games offer a ripe space for us to respond to the current critical moment, as Fizek (2018) demonstrates the applicability of postdualistic and posthumanist theories to this space, as "[d]igital games by their very nature break down the subject-object, organic-inorganic, and player-game dichotomies" (p. 207).

"[C]omputer games have to be considered designed objects with embedded ethical values that affect the ways players can interact with them" (Sicart, 2009, p. 223) and this collection questions these ethical values that are designed, played, and interpreted across different agentic structures, performances, relationships, and representations. Further, this collection illustrates the entanglement of posthumanist perspectives, visions of the post-apocalypse, and the post-Anthropocene within videogames, and their combined capacity to provoke us to reimagine our social, economic, ecological and political conditions.

In the first article in this collection, 'Beyond barren wastelands: The greening of the post-apocalypse in video games', Melissa Bianchi considers what happens when players interact with plants and gardens in otherwise ruined and devastated post-apocalyptic worlds. Drawing critical plant studies together with videogame ecocriticism, the author analyses two games in which plants thrive in the post-Anthropocene (as carefully arranged displays, and as undead monsters, respectively): *Cloud Gardens* (2020) and *Plants vs. Zombies* (2009). Bianchi argues that such vegetation plays a distinct role in such dystopian settings, supporting players (whether through their own acts of cultivation or destruction) to critique human environmental agency, uncover ecological interconnectedness, and speculate about post-

human possibilities. In this analysis, loss and decay give way to recovery and recuperation, and the post-apocalypse becomes a venue for the imagination of nonhuman ontologies and ecological entanglement.

Kaitlin Moore similarly locates opportunities for hopefulness within the fractured ruins of humankind's long reign over Earth, in 'Eternal sunshine and the "Gestaltized" mind: the broken promise of the posthuman in *NieR Replicant ver.1.22474487139*'. In a close reading of *NieR Replicant* (2021), Moore explores how events and characters in the game work to simultaneously (and paradoxically) instantiate and deny the fantasies of a posthumanist futurism. Against the sun-drenched and post-apocalyptic backdrop of an Earth where the sun never sets and the human race has collapsed, Moore argues that the logic of humanism manages to persist, and that it is only through further cataclysm—the collapse of an apparently brave new posthuman future—that tangible opportunities for radical and more-than-human kinship might be realised.

In 'Of cyborgs and cats: Nonhuman companionship and the specter of humanity in *NieR: Automata* and *Stray*', Caighlan Smith analyses two videogames that purport to decentre the role of the human. Playing as an android (*NieR: Automata*, 2017) or an animal (*Stray*, 2022), these games offer the potential for fruitful exploration of nonhuman life in a post-apocalyptic world. However, as Smith demonstrates, humanity pervades in these worlds, through the focus on neoliberal capitalist ethics and a form of human-centric individualism. Accordingly, Smith argues that despite taking place in post-human worlds, both games fail to move beyond humanistic ideologies, and as such fail to deliver on the real potential of exploring such post- futures and the affordances of nonhuman others.

Continuing this focus on what it means to play as nonhuman others, Yaochong Joe Yang's article 'Playing nonhumanity: Simulating the animal apocalypse in *Tokyo Jungle*' considers a world after humanity, and a game that is played through nonhuman subjects. Yang argues that *Toyko Jungle* (2012) employs anthropocentric dramas and semiotics that draws and affective, anthropomorphic corollaries between nonhuman subjects and human players. Yet, through scenarios in which certain animals thrive, the game rejects a simplistic reading of being post-apocalyptic. In doing so, Yang suggests the game offers an alternative way to look at human/nonhuman relations, to question both the primacy of humans in these relations, and the separation between these categories.

Nonhuman figures again play a central role in our issue's next article: Poppy Wilde's 'Post-humanist, post-apocalyptic, and post-anthropocentric possibilities: Kantian morals and posthuman ethics in *My Friend is a Raven*'. Wilde's analysis of the post-apocalyptic point-and-click game *My Friend is a Raven* (2019) considers how different player pathways through the game engender different types of relationships between the player's own character and the titular raven. These different relationships are shown to shift the game between humanistic and posthumanistic expressions of morality and ethics, and lead Wilde to demonstrate how

intra-actions between player and game might allow different material configurations of the world—including ones steeped in posthumanist, post-anthropocentric ethical dynamics—to emerge.

This question of how the post-Anthropocene might be evoked within games occupies Lawrence May and Ben Hall's analysis of a blockbuster first-person shooter, in 'Dark entanglement and visions of the post-Anthropocene in *Battlefield 2042*'. May and Hall explore the concepts of entanglement that underly posthumanist thought and introduce the contrapuntal concept of 'dark entanglement' to account for the ways that capital, geotechnic systems, and military-industrial imperatives can co-opt humankind's enmeshment with Earth to fuel further crisis and collapse. *Battlefield 2042* (2021), the authors argue, reflects and crystallises these dark entanglements, and draws players into apocalyptic visions of the post-Anthropocene future that must surely follow today's planetary violence.

The issue of agency plays a large role in game studies, where traditional conversations around player agency are now being challenged by more open structures of viewing agency as affordances created by game spaces (see Bódi 2023). Agency is further complicated through posthumanist understandings of agency, such as Barad's (2007) conception of agency as "ongoing reconfigurings of the world" (p. 141). Henry Zhou's article, 'Infrastructure of agency: An anti-essentialist and post-humanist framework for video game agency' enters into this conversation and draws on the work of Barad and Deleuze to characterise agency as the relationship between the power and accountabilities of entities within causal structures. Through an intriguing analysis of agency through an infrastructure of suggestion(s), intention(s), and transformation(s), Zhou presents a case study of *Rhythm Doctor* (2021) to explore the dynamic interaction of bodily and social agency to emphasise the always fluctuating agencies at play.

Closing out the special issue, Paolo Ruffino questions the potential limitations of the current tendencies in how videogames and the Anthropocene are currently analysed and brought into conversation, suggesting a need to go beyond "instrumental" and "representational" approaches. His article, 'Videogames, the Anthropocene, and other problems of scale: Methodological notes for the study of digital games in times of ecological crisis' argues that fears and anxieties about the Anthropocene are not only made evident through player practices relating to specifically post-Anthropocenic games. Instead, Ruffino suggests that videogames can produce transformative effects and understandings about environmental relations, but that these can be unexpected, situational revelations. Rather than creating one homogenous message or interpretation, Ruffino argues that these ideas, thoughts, and provocations appear in a multitude of different assemblages that resist scalability yet shed light on our understanding of the relation between the medium of the videogame and the Anthropocene.

Across this collection, our special issue shows both the potentials and the limitations of videogames in attending to the 'posts', our present and our possible futures. The (post)

Anthropocene can be conceptualised in affirmative, hopeful ways where nonhuman others acclimatise and thrive despite the ravages humanity has played upon the earth. Whilst some games offer us possibilities for play beyond the human, others reinscribe humanistic tendencies. Where the post-apocalypse can signify a restructuring of agentic capacities and more rhizomatic relations, it can also suggest a depressing return to human(istic) failings. Despite these sometimes oscillating viewpoints, each of these analyses allows us to consider something beyond the habitual, moving beyond merely recognising and acknowledging our communal plight, but offering spaces to negotiate alternative understandings and ethics. Videogames, our authors together demonstrate, offer compelling spaces within which to explore, experiment with, destabilise, and even redefine our present conditions, and our relationship with the circuits of culture, power and ideology that structure this moment in time.

Exploring a world after the Anthropocene, after humanism, and after apocalypse can allow a collective consideration of ethical ways forward from a backdrop of exploitation and denigration, yet this is a hard legacy to overcome. Further, how do we meaningfully displace the primacy of the human when we are entangled with all that the human has done? We also see how the prefix of "post" meaning "after" is called into question, as in many of these conceptions the "post" is allowing us to also consider a position of "before"—whether that is "before it is too late" (the time for which has already, potentially, passed) or "before we are gone". We believe that the conversations we have started here offer an opportunity to think about profound questions as these through play, not as an opportunity to strip games of their fun, but as a platform to bring more critical considerations to thought experiments that have already begun.

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