

# Games Biting Back: *ANATOMY* and Ecofeminism

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## INTRODUCTION

Videogames are often analyzed and praised for their capacity to present narrative through the structure of their environments, a concept that finds its most famous articulation in Henry Jenkins 2004 piece “Game Design as Narrative Architecture.” In the section concerning “embedded narratives,” Jenkins shows how game worlds are constructed as repositories, containing information that is waiting to be discovered and assembled into a narrative by the player. This helps to explain how games are still able to create compelling narratives despite the presence of the player as an active agent in the space. However, while the idea of embedded narratives is an effective tool for understanding videogames, it also positions the player as an agent acting on an environment that exists in order supply them with information.

This understanding of the environment as a passive container of information has been linked to Enlightenment thought by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Far from being harmless, they argue that this concept enables and justifies the domination of natural spaces by humans, establishing the environment as having value only in so far as it can serve the needs and desires of human subjects. Ecofeminist theorist Val Plumwood extends this line of thinking, revealing a conceptual dichotomy that aligns passivity, nature, women, and colonized subjects, all of which are hierarchically inferior to their active, civilized, male, and European counterparts.

The game *ANATOMY* by Kitty Horrorshow initially appears to present its world in a way that fits with the concept of embedded narrative. The player explores a dark, abandoned, suburban home. Rooms unlock as the player collects and listens to cassette tapes describing the anatomy of homes. While there are indications that this environment and the game itself may not be as inert as they seem—from the doors that unlock themselves to the grainy scan lines disrupting the screen—at this point the gameplay loop is conventional. The (active) player explores a (passive) space, discovering new items, learning about the space, and unlocking more areas to explore.

As the game progresses, however, it complicates issues of agency and passivity both in terms of in-game actions and how the player relates to the game itself. On the level of in-game fiction, the house begins to assert its own agency, becoming a character and even getting a voice of its own. It begins to reconfigure itself, becoming a jumble of impossible arrangements, locking the player in rooms, growing sinews and flesh, and finally becoming a giant mouth that swallows the player’s avatar. Mirroring this shift of the house from passive environment to active agent, the game itself subverts the player’s agency. The cassette tapes become incomprehensible as the scan lines

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worsen. The avatar's position shifts around the space without the player performing actions. The game closes itself suddenly, forcing the player to reopen it. The actions available to the player are gradually stripped away, reducing their freedom of navigation until none of their inputs have an effect on the state of the game, and they are able only to look and listen. Thus in terms both of the in-game avatar and the player, who or what has agency is contested, destabilizing the conventional characterization of subject and environment and inverting the hierarchical dichotomy between them.

The importance of this inversion extends beyond environmental concerns in *ANATOMY*, as gender is implicated in this dichotomy. The game space of *ANATOMY*, in being a suburban home, is a site of domesticity, hinting already at the gendered nature of the division between player and space. The house is also characterized as a body, both by the tapes and by its growth of sinew and organs. Finally, the house, when it gains a voice, is gendered female and recounts a dream it has of a young man entering and defiling it, alluding to the actions of the player. All of these things—femininity, domesticity, and the body—are aligned by Plumwood with the environment and its subordination. The game therefore establishes a traditional dichotomous hierarchy only to invert and deconstruct it. In doing so, it presents a challenge to paradigms that seek to understand spaces, game or otherwise, as passive, as being a repository of information and resources, as existing for a (male, European) subject. Or, in other words, as lacking teeth of its own.

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