

Radical Digital Fishing: From Minigames to Bad Environmentalism

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Fishing plays and has long played an outsize role across various video game genres. The protagonist of *Hades* (Supergiant Games 2018) declares: “I’ll have you know some of us take matters of fishing very seriously, sir!” Yet game scholars have devoted limited attention to “matters of fishing,” with the important exception of Leon Xian’s work on fishing minigames (Xiao 2023). This paper starts by situating digital fishing practices within the broad category of “ecogames.” John Parham (2016) and Alenda Chang (2019) were among the first scholars to interrogate the ecological assumptions embedded in games, discussing games’ alignment with extractivist modernity or the way they give shape to anxieties of environmental collapse. Adopting a posthumanist perspective on ecogames, this paper explores the affective, ethical, and cultural tensions that traverse both fishing minigames and fishing-focused games. This investigation is conducted in dialogue with social science work on real-world fishing, a complex practice that—as research by Adrian Franklin (2001) and Jacob Bull (2011) highlights—is often caught between human vs. nature binaries and an interest in nonhuman materiality. This sociological work reveals the ambivalence of fishing as a practice that can reflect the separation between human societies and the natural world (a staple of Western modernity) but can also evoke concepts more in line with posthumanist philosophy, particularly embodiment (the angler’s and the fish’s) and materiality (flow and waterscapes).

My first suggestion is that, in AAA titles like *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Games 2018), fishing provides counterpoint to the neoliberal temporalities and pressures involved in game experiences: a pastime within a pastime, fishing allows players to reappraise their relationship with simulated landscapes (Payne and Vanderhoef 2022). However, that construal of digital fishing can easily fold into binaries between human societies and the nonhuman world: what emerges from *Red Dead Redemption 2* (and games implementing similar fishing minigames) is a highly idealized notion of nature as a source of comfort. This reflects real-world attitudes towards fishing as an escapist practice that introduces distance between the human-scale environment of the city and a romanticized natural landscape (see, e.g., Bull 2011, 2276).

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My two examples of “radical digital fishing” seek to move beyond this binary in a way that resonates more strongly with nonhuman-oriented thinking (see Grusin 2015). They are *Ridiculous Fishing* (Vlambeer 2013) and *Dredge* (Black Salt Games 2023). Here fishing is not just a minigame but a primary game mechanic that displays the contradictions of real-world fishing (*Ridiculous Fishing*) and explores, through the language of grotesque mutation, the continuities between human subjectivity and the natural world (*Dredge*). The common ground between these games is a sense of incongruity, conjugated either as irony (in the former game) or as “weirdness” in the sense of Jeff VanderMeer’s “new weird” fiction (in the latter). Irony and weirdness are affects that subvert the emotional vocabulary of sublime distance dominating Western modernity’s attitudes towards the natural world. In both games, incongruous situations defamiliarize players’ imagination of fishing in digital gameplay as well as in the real world. The games operate in profoundly different ways, though: *Ridiculous Fishing* through absurdist humor, *Dredge* by conflating human subjectivity and the nonhuman materiality of the waterscape. In this way, the paper shows how modern games can resonate with what Nicole Seymour (2018) has called “bad environmentalism”: they decenter the discourse of the environmental movement, with its earnestness and focus on easily digestible messages, and instead employ emotional strategies such as the absurd and the weird to complicate human-nonhuman relations in times of ecological crisis. By staging fishing and its contradictions, ecogames can thus become a playground for disrupting the conventional understanding of the nonhuman in Western modernity.

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