

# Backyard Survival: Ecology of Killer Insects and Violent Nature in *Grounded* (2022)

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## INTRODUCTION

This article extends the analysis of nonhuman animal games to explore how insect non-playable characters (NPCs) and the ludonarrative of the survival genre break the nature-culture dichotomy through a dangerous and ungraspable representation of Nature. It is noted that research conducted on insect game representations belongs in my doctoral thesis, which adopts an interdisciplinary approach to investigating nonhuman game characters through critical ecological studies and affect studies. Discussions concerning nonhuman video games have attempted to address how humanity relates to nonhuman animals through “nonhuman-oriented thinking” in “animal mayhem games” (Caracciolo 2021) or “posthuman empathy” while role-playing a feline protagonist (Wilde 2024). However, existing discussion on nonhuman animal games is mostly dominated by mammal characters. Only a few studies have delineated the affordance of insect characters to demonstrate the living experience of this nonhuman group (Shelomi 2019; Campo et. al. 2020), even though an increasing number of insect-themed games have been published in the past decade. Following the previous academic discussion on how nonhuman games could be considered a “becoming-animal” process (Chang 2019; Fuchs 2020; Wilde 2024) and used as a creative means to explore nonhuman relations (Caracciolo 2021; Tyler 2022, ), this project poses the question of whether playing alongside insect NPCs would generate similar affective interactions. What role do killer insects play in demonstrating the violent image of Nature? What is the ecological significance of presenting the violence and terror from Nature, akin to Haraway’s conceptualization of “Cthulhucene” (2016, 33) and Lovecraft’s short story - *The Call of Cthulhu* (Jones, 2017, 143-145)?

The powerful yet strange image of Nature is exemplified by *Grounded* (Obsidian Entertainment 2022). In this open-world survival game, teenage protagonists are shrunk into the size of an ant withstanding a thriving ecosystem of insects and arachnids. Drawing from critical ecological theorists who take on a radical view to see the violent side of Nature (Goh 2008), rethinking the benign natureculture position (Herzogenrath 2008), and exploring the uncanny appearance of the Anthropocene (Morton 2016), the ecological implications of killer insect NPCs and a hostile natural environment are investigated based on the game’s intention to foreground insect lives on the direct influences of human activities. *Grounded* is selected to be the subject of analysis because it is argued to have adopted a comprehensive mode of relation with animals (Braidotti 2013, 68). While insect games are mostly offered in the style of simulation or strategy in a distant and

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speculative relation, such as *Bee Simulator* (Nacon 2020) and *Empire of Ants* (Tower Five 2024), *Grounded* puts human protagonists into “a fair fight” with monster-sized insects and animals. The survival form of the game effectively portrays elements of competition or coexistence among different species, which aligns with the scope of research in critical ecological studies to investigate the animal-human relationship. The violent image of Nature in *Grounded* is discovered through three main ludonarrative features of the gameplay, including the monstrosity demonstrated by the insect NPCs, the intimate natureculture (Haraway cited in Malone et. al. 2017) proximity in the backyard, and the depiction of uncontrollable disasters unlocked by humanity in the act of playing God. It is concluded that while a sense of respect towards Nature might be developed through the fear of a more powerful existence in the gameplay, the survival ludonarrative design remains anthropocentric as the goal of the game is to build up the strength of the human avatars over time to conquer the backyard. Like other nonhuman games, *Grounded* is limited by the human-centric motive to dominate nonhuman animals, despite having the affordance to affectively engage players to reflect on Nature’s nurturing image in traditional ecological studies.

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