

From Restoration to Extinction: Intersectional Pleasures in Ecological Game Reception

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ABSTRACT

This extended abstract presents a comparative reception study of *Terra Nil* (Free Lives 2023) and *Endling: Extinction is Forever* (Herobeat Studios 2022), examining how players affectively interpret ecological messages across Steam and YouTube (n = 3,478). Drawing on affect theory (Ahmed 2014), procedural rhetoric (Bogost 2007), and intersectional ecofeminism (Gaard 2011; Haraway 2016), the study finds that affective engagement does not reliably translate into ecological awareness, challenging assumptions about games as vehicles for environmental consciousness.

Keywords: eco-games, player reception, affect theory, intersectional ecofeminism, digital discourse analysis, procedural rhetoric

INTRODUCTION

Environmental crisis, climate anxiety, and multispecies vulnerability are increasingly visible in contemporary eco-game design (Chang, 2019). Yet despite growing scholarly attention to ecological representation, there is limited research on how players affectively interpret embedded environmental messages, particularly within digital publics where meaning is produced and contested. This gap is critical: understanding how ecological meaning circulates, or fails to, in gaming communities matters for assessing the cultural reach of climate change discourse (Wu and Lee 2015).

Video games are a privileged site for these processes: unlike news or social media, they place players inside environmental scenarios as active agents. Their immersion and embodied mechanics produce qualitatively distinct affective engagement (Anable 2018) yet this intensity does not guarantee ecological awareness; strong emotion may equally generate aesthetic pleasure or detachment (Ahmed 2014).

Research question: How do players affectively interpret ecological messages in eco-games?

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THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Ahmed's (2014) affective stickiness captures how emotions, grief, guilt, care, attach to ecological objects in digital publics; strong emotions may generate distance or denial as readily as awareness. Bogost's (2007) procedural rhetoric explains how mechanics frame ecological messages before conscious interpretation. Intersectional ecofeminist approaches (Gaard 2011; Haraway 2016; Plumwood 2002) foreground care ethics and multispecies vulnerability as analytical categories. Together, these frameworks examine how feelings attach, and sometimes fail to translate, into ecological awareness.

CASE SELECTION

Terra Nil and *Endling* provide a maximum contrast comparative design. *Terra Nil* (Free Lives 2023) offers systems-oriented restoration, players detoxify wastelands, build biomes, and withdraw, producing an imaginary of repair and techno-optimism. *Endling* (Herobeat Studios 2022) depicts ecocide through a mother fox's embodied experience, foregrounding care, loss, and human culpability. This contrast enables analysis of how divergent procedural structures shape affective meaning-making.

METHODOLOGY

Because *Terra Nil* and *Endling* afford structurally different play experiences, systems optimization versus narrative embodiment, they likely attract players with divergent motivational orientations (Yee 2006). Steam tagging patterns index this divergence: *Terra Nil* (puzzle, relaxing, city-builder) and *Endling* (narrative, emotional, adventure) signal distinct player self-selection. Rather than treating motivation as a confound, we operationalize it analytically through the orientation dimension (game-focused, self-focused, ecology-focused), which captures how players discursively frame their engagement. This allows us to distinguish whether ecological meaning-making varies because of procedural design, player self-selection, or their interaction.

The study analyzes 3,478 comments: *Terra Nil* Steam (n = 1,300), *Terra Nil* YouTube (n = 299), *Endling* Steam (n = 1,397), *Endling* YouTube (n = 482). Reddit was excluded due to platform-specific quality issues. Comments were coded across six dimensions: primary affect, orientation (game-focused, self-focused, ecology-focused), framing, reception position, mechanic discourse, and affective distance combining deductive and inductive coding. YouTube analysis uses a two-category schema (acceptance/negotiation), reflecting the absence of Steam's recommendation mechanism. Cohen's Kappa = 0.728 on 49 stratified *Endling* YouTube comments (strong agreement). The dataset reflects voluntary public discourse; demographic variables cannot be disaggregated, representing a methodological limitation.

FINDINGS

Divergent Affective Profiles and Platform Effects

The games produce starkly divergent profiles (Table 1). *Terra Nil* is dominated by joy/calm (Steam: 62.1%); players describe it as "meditative" or stress relief. In *Endling*, sadness (Steam: 29.2%; YouTube: 71.2%) and love (Steam: 28.4%) dominate: players report crying and maternal instinct "I had no idea I had the kind of motherly instinct in me that this game inspired." YouTube amplifies *Endling*'s sadness (+42.0 points) while suppressing love (-16.0 points), suggesting viewing diminishes the embodied attachment driving ecological affect; in *Terra Nil*, YouTube amplifies awe (+11.4 points).

Dataset	n	joy/calm	sadness	love	game-foc.	self-foc.	eco-foc.
TN Steam	1,300	62.1%	1.6%	20.9%	78.5%	8.8%	12.7%
TN YouTube	299	51.8%	0.0%	25.4%	66.2%	17.7%	16.1%
EN Steam	1,397	14.0%	29.2%	28.4%	54.8%	32.0%	13.2%
EN YouTube	482	9.1%	71.2%	12.4%	52.1%	41.3%	6.6%

Table 1: Primary Affect and Orientation Distribution (TN = Terra Nil, EN = Endling)

Orientation and Ecological Expression

Despite divergent affect, ecology-focused orientation converges: *Terra Nil* Steam 12.7%, *Endling* Steam 13.2% (Table 1). Both are overwhelmingly game-focused (*Terra Nil*: 78.5%; *Endling*: 54.8%). The key difference is self-focused orientation (*Terra Nil* 8.8% vs. *Endling* 32.0%): *Endling* players personalize through grief and parental instinct, consistent with Haraway's (2016) making-kin framework. YouTube affect tags confirm: *pastoral_restorative* dominates in *Terra Nil* (43.5%); *grief_loss* (45.0%) and *maternal_bond* (23.9%) dominate in *Endling*.

Contrary to concerns about self-censorship in gaming forums, the data contains explicit ecological statements across both datasets: "we are massacring nature and animals," "what we do to the natural world is not okay," "humans are destroying everything around them." Steam and YouTube do function as spaces where ecological affect is voiced publicly though bounded by the ~13% ecology-focused ceiling.

Reception Positions and Affective Distance

Acceptance dominates both games (Table 2). Rejection correlates with anger (*Terra Nil*: 80.0%; *Endling*: 77.8%), indicating mechanical dissatisfaction rather than message refusal. A distinctive *Endling* pattern emerges the "crying-but-recommending" paradox:

"I hate this game. It's disgusting. I'm uninstalling it right after beating the game."
— Player who's currently ugly crying

Emotional intensity decouples from ecological meaning making: devastation signals game quality rather than ecological engagement (Ahmed 2014). *Terra Nil*'s eco-connection is only 0.8%; *Endling*'s is 3.4% both negligible relative to emotional intensity.

Ecological_framing constitutes 2.0% and 9.7% of mechanic discourse; aesthetic_distance and mechanic_focus together account for 64.2% (*Terra Nil*) and 38.0% (*Endling*).

Dataset	n	acceptance	negotiation	rejection
TN Steam	1,300	95.0%	3.8%	1.2%
TN YouTube	299	76.3%	23.7%	—
EN Steam	1,397	89.8%	8.9%	1.3%
EN YouTube	482	83.0%	17.0%	—

Table 2: Reception Position (ANR) Distribution

CONTRIBUTION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study makes three contributions. First, it provides empirical evidence that affective engagement does not reliably generate ecological awareness. The convergence of ecology-focused orientation at ~13% across both games, despite radically different procedural strategies, suggests a structural ceiling on eco-games' consciousness-raising capacity, challenging optimistic assumptions (Chang 2019; Wu and Lee 2015).

Second, operationalizing Ahmed's affective stickiness demonstrates that *Terra Nil's* calm sticks to mechanics and *Endling's* grief sticks to characters but neither extends to real-world ecological reflection, contributing to affect theory and procedural rhetoric scholarship.

Third, for climate change communication research, the structural decoupling of emotional intensity and ecological awareness suggests that measuring affective engagement is insufficient as a proxy for behavioral change; eco-games need explicit reflective mechanisms bridging gameplay emotion and real-world implication. This study contributes to DiGRA 2026's Intersectional Pleasures theme by revealing how pleasure, affect, and multispecies ethics intersect and collide across digital platforms.

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