

‘Changing the Game Forever’: *MapleStory’s Big Bang* as a Climate Change Event

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

To celebrate 20 years of *MapleStory’s* global version in 2025, the massively multiplayer online role-playing game’s (MMORPG) developer Nexon announced *MapleStory Classic World (MCW)*, a rendition of the game situated in the ‘pre-*Big Bang*’ world of *MapleStory*, albeit with modern conveniences (D’Onofrio 2025). *MapleStory* thus responded to a commonplace sentiment of players lamenting the disappearance of the original game’s sensibility since the release of the *Big Bang* update in 2010 (Yang 2025).

This paper argues that *MapleStory’s* player-inhabited videogame world stages a scenario that rehearses how climate change is experienced by their inhabitants. The premise entails that *MapleStory’s* history, with the emphasis on the *Big Bang* update’s epochal transition, can be divided into pre- and post-climate change sensibilities, thus reflecting the spatiotemporal division experienced through Earth’s climate crisis.

To this end, this paper considers both a historically conscious autoethnography of *MapleStory* (Chakrabarty 2009; Webber and Wilde 2025) and popular discourse documenting the history of the game. As evidenced by the *Big Bang* trailer (MapleStory 2010), which calls upon players to forget everything they know about *MapleStory*, YouTube vlogs from players mentioning how it changed everything for them (coppersan 2021; wiji 2025), or game journalism reporting on the game’s complete overhaul (Games Industry.biz 2010; IGN Staff 2010), 2010’s *Big Bang* patch made considerable changes to *MapleStory*. Chiefly, these changes consisted of an altered map with far quicker possibilities for traversal, an overhaul to the ‘experience’ system which significantly reduced the requirements for leveling up, and a major refocus of the game’s narrative, which now revolved around an industrial entity’s revival of the ‘Black Mage’, a corrupted being that seeks the destruction of Maple World, and whose renewed offensive causes the *Big Bang* in the first place.

The changes were severe enough to have communication henceforth alluding to pre- and post-*Big Bang* versions of *MapleStory*, with the former being a relatively peaceful, slowly paced and communal experience in which cooperative play was centralized, and the latter an increasingly individualized, fast-paced and power-centered reality where players mostly leveled up alone. Furthermore, many of the commercial aspects of *MapleStory*, including Nexon’s increasingly exploitative pay-to-win and aggressive cosmetics marketing elements – which have since led to multiple instances of player

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

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resistance (Valentine 2023; Lee and Park 2025) – have been associated with the update’s changes, even if the *Big Bang* did not introduce any of them itself.

To consider the *Big Bang* and its lasting perception as a climate change event means evaluating the phenomenon through an ecocritical lens. Alenda Chang (2019) provides a straightforward angle for such an analysis with her concept of *mesocosm*, which refers to how games are mini-ecosystems, worlds at once fictional and real. She has likewise preceded the present analysis by focusing on *World of Warcraft’s Cataclysm* update, which altered its virtual world to such an extent that many players lamented the loss of their favorite areas and were consequently at odds with their game (Chang 2019, 195-199). Considering that others have reflected on the phenomenon of lost habitats in virtual worlds, such as Thomas Byers (2025), who relates it to *ludo-solastalgia* – the idea that play environments can change to the extent that their inhabitants feel estranged from it – it is naturally pertinent to analyze the ecocritical implications of this phenomenon. Adapting these frameworks to *MapleStory’s Big Bang*, then, this paper considers the following findings:

1. The perceived divergence between pre- and post-*Big Bang* epochs suggests a change in spatiotemporal perception which rhymes with those rupture marks corresponding with the geological age of human-made climate change known as the Anthropocene, ruptures which have included agricultural and industrial revolutions (Yusoff 2018). The case of *MapleStory* shows a similar rupture between a ‘slow’ (Rauch 2018) and community-centered experience, and an accelerated life of post-industrial capitalism (Wajcman 2014) revolving around individual pursuits.
2. The apparent sense of loss experienced by players is likewise true in the material sense that they increasingly distrust Nexon and its commercial practices. This echoes the fold of ecological and economic concerns, or those of the Anthropocene and Capitalocene (Haraway 2015; Tsing 2015; Moore 2016; Cubitt 2023), as attesting to virtual worlds as well, where the source of ecological disorder is partly attributed to the exploitative material practices of those embodying the nexus of power. Furthermore, it signifies how interrelated consequences of the climate crisis are often reduced to a single event (i.e. the *Big Bang*) instead of addressing their complex interplay.
3. The announcement of *MCW* with its promise of a pre-*Big Bang* world yet addition of several ‘modern’ post-*Big Bang* conveniences signifies the irreconcilability that is characteristic of the yearning for pre-modern society in the context of the climate crisis, and emphasizes that a wholesale renunciation of modernity in favor of a return to a pre-modern, traditional world cannot realistically be sustained (Cubitt 2014).

Taken together, these findings attest to the idea of the *Big Bang* being experienced as a climate change event. As such, this angle and analysis contribute to new directions in ecocritical games research, which can follow ecocritical (Cubitt 2020; Tsing et al. 2024) imperatives to study situated encounters with the planetary scale of the climate crisis, such as in (auto)ethnographic and personalized close reading practices (Jennings 2015; Carr 2019; Wilde 2023).

Furthermore, the angle can be situated in historical ecocriticism, deemed vital in the proliferation of the environmental humanities (Bergthaller et al. 2014) and a challenge taken up by Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) in his formulation of the climate crisis as

probing the universal understandings of species and economic histories. Whereas this reading of *MapleStory's Big Bang* is not formally historiographical, its examination of transforming virtual worlds as a climate crisis rehearsal attests to both the necessarily historical angle of ecocriticism and history's ecocritical implications (Wood 2008; Parikka 2015). To analyze thus is then a possibility for both the ecocritic and the historian to further understandings of the pervasiveness of the climate crisis, and especially how it is mediated by games and in situated play.

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