

Unplayable Encounters with the Anthropocene: Rethinking Scale and Agency in Game Studies

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ABSTRACT

In this talk I will critically examine some of the dominant methodological approaches to studying videogames in relation to the Anthropocene. I will propose an alternative framework that challenges assumptions about scalability and player reception. Drawing on research collected in various articles and in my upcoming monograph, I argue that game studies must reconsider how we theorize the transformative potential of videogames in times of ecological crisis.

Current scholarship on videogames and the environment tends to coalesce around two primary approaches (see Abraham 2022; Chang 2019; Op de Beke et al. 2024). The *instrumental* approach treats videogames as educational tools capable of inspiring pro-environmental behaviour through information dissemination, exemplified by titles like *Beecarbonize* (Charles Games 2023) and *Green New Deal Simulator* (Molleindustria 2023). The *representational* approach focuses on how games depict nature, post-human worlds, and ecological relationships, as seen in works like Kara Stone's *Ritual of the Moon* (2019) and Molleindustria's *Lichenia* (2019). While both approaches offer valuable insights and have produced compelling games and research, they share a fundamental assumption: that the ecological messaging embedded in videogames will *scale up* through repeated exposure, eventually influencing player behaviour and consciousness at a population level.

This reliance on scalability presents methodological and ethical challenges. It assumes a predictable trajectory from game content to player interpretation to behavioural change, often overlooking the frictions, misinterpretations, and resistances that characterize actual player engagement. The scalability paradigm risks providing false reassurance that "something is being done" about the climate crisis through videogames, while the Anthropocene's violence and injustice demand more rigorous critical scepticism about our contributions as designers, players, and scholars.

My proposed methodology draws on Anna Tsing's concept of non-scalability (2012; 2015) and her theory of friction (2004), Timothy Morton's theories of hyperobjects

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and subsistence (2013; 2017), and Joanna Zylińska's minimal ethics of the Anthropocene (2014). Tsing's ethnographic work with matsutake mushrooms demonstrates how valuable knowledge emerges from contaminated diversity and indeterminate encounters that resist incorporation into predetermined frameworks. Similarly, I argue that videogames generate situated encounters whose meaning cannot be scaled up into coherent, unified messages. Morton's hyperobjects help us understand how the Anthropocene—too vast and distributed to be perceived directly—leaks into our entertainment media in unexpected ways. His concept of subsistence suggests that the whole can be less than the sum of its parts, meaning that individual player encounters may contain more complexity and political urgency than aggregate analyses of player populations.

Through empirical examples, I demonstrate how this methodology reveals transformative engagements with videogames that would remain invisible within scalability-focused frameworks. My analysis of player forum discussions about *AdVenture Capitalist* (Hyper Hippo Entertainment 2014) shows how sporadic, barely-visible comments reveal anxieties about endless accumulation and capitalism's ecological consequences, even though the game itself is not explicitly environmental (Ruffino 2019). Similarly, YouTube videos attempting to "cure" Arthur Morgan's tuberculosis in *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Games 2018) expose players' desires to restore anthropocentric control when confronted with the mortality and diminished agency of the archetypal White male protagonist (Ruffino 2022).

These paratextual productions and player responses do not scale up to generate movements or coherent political positions. Most receive no replies or engagement. Yet they represent molecular and situated encounters with the Anthropocene as it transpires through our entertainment practices. Following Morton, these are moments when the hyperobject of climate catastrophe leaks into our gameplay experiences, generating affects of fear, anger, disillusionment, or resistance. These non-scalable moments matter precisely because they reveal contradictions and anxieties that shape our current concerns for the ongoing global crisis of the Anthropocene, and bring to the fore the loss of control of the white anthropocentric subject on both real and simulated worlds.

This approach extends work by scholars including Hans-Joachim Backe's (2017) eco-critical readings of mainstream games, Benjamin Nicoll's (2023) psychoanalytic engagement with *Donut County*, and Lawrence May and Ben Hall's (2023; 2024) analyses of player-created paratexts around *Cities: Skylines* and *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. What unites these studies is attention to the situated, embodied, and often contradictory nature of player engagement with environmental themes.

By attending to non-scalable encounters, I acknowledge the inescapable embeddedness of videogames within the Anthropocene's "viscosity," as Morton describes it. Rather than assuming videogames can educate their way out of crisis or represent solutions, this approach embraces the medium's capacity to reveal our entanglement with ecological catastrophe. It questions the colonial logics of control and mastery embedded in game design while remaining attentive to how players resist to, reimagine, or reinforce anthropocentric worldviews. Ultimately, this talk will argue that videogames in the Anthropocene should be studied through a methodology of careful listening to contaminated diversity and situated encounters. This requires abandoning the false security of scalable solutions and embracing the partial, incomplete, and sometimes ugly revelations that emerge when players engage

with games. Such an approach offers no universal solutions but provides ethical guidance for understanding how digital play intersects with the most pressing crisis of our time.

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