

Hauntecology: Arboreal Pleasures as represented in *Elden Ring* (2021)

Dr Will McKeown

Birmingham City University

4 Cardigan Street

Birmingham B4 7BD

Will.mckeown@bcu.ac.uk

Keywords

Arboreal representation, ecology, hauntology, post-apocalyptic, mythology, plants

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper will explore how arboreal imagery is represented in *Elden Ring* (FromSoft 2021). By undertaking a textual analysis of the Erdtree and its related ecology, I make a case for the complex polysemy of its representation, focusing on roots, ecosystems, its meteorology and its related item descriptions. *Elden Ring* is the selected case study because it offers such a range of types of arboreal representation. It depicts propagation, rot, hierarchy, mutation and mythology in its characterisation of flora, and does so without being a game specifically about trees and adjacent ecologies. I make this case to offer a paradigm that will allow for ecologically complex games that do not specifically have to be about ecology themselves.

The arboreal in *Elden Ring* is multifaceted in its connection to both the Erdtree and areas that immediately surround it. One way that I will unpick these associations is by employing a hauntological approach (Derrida 1994; Fisher 2014) to understand how the depiction of trees and adjacent flora are “haunted” by The Shattering (a cataclysmic war between the demi-gods caused by the shattering of the Elden Ring itself). Hauntology is defined as something that is no longer present in actuality but that persists in virtuality (Fisher 2014). Further, Fisher recognises that Hauntology is also that which has not yet happened, but which remains effective in the present (2014). In game studies, Kłosiński and Zarzycka discuss how biopolitical ideologies relate hauntologically in railway simulators (2025) and Skott and Bengton explore hauntology in gaming in relation to carceral violence and player entrapment. Ford’s (2021) analysis of ancient civilisations in games notes a hauntological nostalgia for lost, but advanced technologies. This convincingly outlines the dual momentum of hauntology I aim to interrogate, of both the persistence of the past in the present as well as the centrality of loss to futurity.

This paper will appeal to game scholars and designers who are interested in ecological representation, gaming and philosophy, ecogaming, horticulture in games and post-apocalyptic games.

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

© 2026 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

REFERENCES

- Abraham, B. 2022. *Digital Games after Climate Change*, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Abraham, B., Jayemanne, D. 2018. Where are all the climate change games? Locating digital games' response to climate change, *Transformations*, 30, 74-89.
- Chang, A. 2019. *Playing Nature*, University of Minnesota Press.
- Derrida, J. 1994. *Spectres of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. Routledge.
- Fisher, M. 2014. *Ghosts of my Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*. Zero Books.
- Ford, D. 2021. "The Haunting of Ancient Societies in the *Mass Effect Trilogy* and The *Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*" *Game Studies*, 22 (4), n.p.
- FromSoft. 2021. *Elden Ring*. Multi-console game. FromSoft.
- Kłosiński, M., & Zarzycka, A. 2025. "Trains, Stations, and Railways as Harbingers of Biopolitics in Digital Games: From Governance to Hauntology". *Games and Culture*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120251353555>
- Neville, B. 1996. 'Prometheus, the Technologist' *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 15 (2), 12–23.
- Nitzke S., & Braunbeck, H. 2021. 'Arboreal Imaginaries: An Introduction to the Shared Cultures of Trees and Humans' *Green Letters*, 25(4), 341-355, DOI: 10.1080/14688417.2021.2072633
- Porteous, A. 2002. *The Forest in Folklore and Mythology*. Dover Publications Inc.
- Sellar, M. 2024. "Hiding (in) The Tall Grass: Rethinking Background Assets in Video Game Plantscapes" In *Ecogames: A Playful Perspective on the Climate Crisis*, edited by op de Beke, L, Raessens, J., Werning, S. & Farca, G. 353-372. University of Amsterdam Press.
- Skott, S., & Skott Bengtson, K.-F. 2021. 'You've met with a terrible fate, haven't you?': A Hauntological Analysis of Carceral Violence in *Majora's Mask*. *Games and Culture*, 17(4), 593-613. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120211049575>