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## **BOOK REVIEW: *PLAYING NATURE: ECOLOGY IN VIDEO GAME* by ALENDA Y. CHANG**

Darshana Jayemanne

It is tricky to review books published in 2019, just before the pandemic. *Playing Nature: Ecology in Videogames* is a case in point: a book about ecology and games is timely. This is particularly so for the journal “Digital Culture and Education” – when so many are moving their teaching towards digital culture in ways they had not expected. This is as true for parents logging on to YouTube to remind themselves about long division as it is for university lecturers experimenting with OBS Studio. What can we teach from this book about play and ecology in digital culture at and after this juncture?

Chang skilfully weaves together concepts across a range of academic disciplines and instructive scientific and artistic works to present new ways of thinking about ecology and digital games. The book’s chapters are each named for a concept such as ‘Scale’ (how media can range across space and time), ‘Nonhuman’ (encounters with ‘more than human subjectivity’ such as animal play), ‘Entropy’ (waste and excess), and ‘Collapse’ (the limits of both play and environments); each is teachable in a class that deals with issues of games, media and the relation to ecology. The first chapter in many ways is instructive, focusing its discussion through the idea of the ‘mesocosm’: ‘experimental enclosures intermediate in size and complexity between small, highly controlled lab experiments and large, often unpredictable real-world environments’ (p. 17). This idea of intermediation as a practice of relating size and complexity plays out across each chapter, drawing in questions endemic to thinking about games and media such as representation and simulation; play and narrative; the player-game relation and so on.

Each chapter is focused and brisk, and ranges across historical games and artworks to broaden our ideas of what constitutes playing with nature, which may be limited by arbitrary distinctions between technology and unmediated environments. Chang argues that ‘we need to find more language for more forms of environmental mediation’ (p. 144) and push past ecocritical readings of digital games that limit themselves to overtly presented ‘natural’ content. The book achieves this expanded point of view, introducing critical notions such as ‘toponymy’, ‘digital morphogenesis’ and ‘techno-pastoralism’ that help to link formal processes in games to wider ecocritical perspectives. In its theoretical engagements also, *Playing Nature*, champions the need to take a view. Critiquing the potential of approaches such as OOO to ‘potential erasure of histories of objectification’ (p. 134), the book draws on environmental humanities, literary theory, queer theory and other disciplines to situate its analyses across the chapters.

This range however does point to a weakness, insofar as the theoretical discussions and the case studies tend to be quite brief. *Playing Nature* is well suited to teaching a broad set of engagements made by each chapter rather than those with a discipline-specific interest in, say, debates internal to game studies, or the environmental costs of game technology (the references in this chapter in particular could use a refresh). Such readers may feel the lack of a Conclusion which draws together the book’s claims and framework – a moment of rebuilding to follow on from the final chapter on ‘Collapse’. However, as the phenomenon of *Animal Crossing* during the current pandemic

shows, a changed environment can unleash very different playful dynamics than may be expected or designed for, justifying *Playing Nature's* call for an expanded language. The book is a key text within a burgeoning ecology of games and media studies (often by younger scholars such as Michelle Westerlaken's work on interspecies games, or Ben Abraham's forthcoming study of 'Digital Games After Climate Change'), which will also have much to teach us about living, teaching and playing in a changing nature.