from the 2014 excavation has since been acquired by the Smithsonian Institute as a tribute to *E.T.*'s enduring legacy in gaming lore.

Similar Franchises: *Pac-Man* (1982), *Link: The Faces of Evil/Zelda: The Wand of Gamelon* (1993), *Duke Nukem Forever* (2011)

—Christopher Ball and Joseph Fordham

ECCO THE DOLPHIN

(est. 1992)
Platform: Sega Genesis
Developer: Novatrade International

In *Ecco the Dolphin*, players control a dolphin as he explores side-scrolling, underwater labyrinths while racing to find pockets of air to breathe. Along the way, he discovers an interspecies conflict involving extraterrestrial beings, the sunken city of Atlantis, and a sophisticated planetary drama that pits a heartwarming mammalian protagonist against horrific alien forces. The brainchild of designer Ed Annunziata, *Ecco* was praised for its novel approach to adventure gaming, including its lack of overt violence. The franchise spawned a sequel titled *Ecco: The Tides of Time* (1994), a series reboot for the Sega Dreamcast in 2000, and various ports to new platforms that continue today. Importantly, *Ecco* is significant for juxtaposing its cute protagonist against a horrific setting and premise, effectively developing themes of deep isolation, and using these elements to promote greater ecological awareness among its players.

After being traumatically separated from his family in the first level, main character Ecco spends most of the game in solitude, potentially doomed to wander alone forever. Exploring desolate seascapes with Ecco, players confront the possibility of a planet that is indifferent to their struggles—much like what Eugene Thacker terms a "world-without-us."[9] This sense of isolation is central to *Ecco*'s ongoing importance, and it operates on multiple scales: at an individual level, at a species-wide level, and ultimately on a cosmic scale. For the first half of the game, Ecco swims through a new aquatic environment in each level, hunting for clues about the fate of his family. Ecco's isolation grows to much greater proportions when he encounters a sentient formation of globes known as "the Asterite," which informs him that reuniting with his pod will require finding a time machine in the ruins of Atlantis, traveling 55 million years into the past, and ultimately confronting the extraterrestrial beings responsible for abducting his pod.

Along Ecco's path through these obstacles, the character's loneliness mirrors the experience of players forced to confront a world completely indifferent to humanity's presence or absence. *Ecco*'s world-without-us reduces evidence of humanity to only the vaguest traces, mobilizing supernatural horror tropes like the "forgotten, unknown, or even imaginary species" and the "creature that cannot be named."[9] Records of possible human existence in this world are present only in the ruins of Atlantis and in the various crystalline glyphs that departed Atlanteans

scattered around the ocean. In *Ecco* lore, dolphins even eschew the human-given name "dolphin," calling themselves "singers" instead. An unnamed humanity is thus reduced to haunting the periphery of *Ecco the Dolphin*, forcing players to confront individual and species-scale isolation right alongside Ecco himself.

Ecco the Dolphin's treatment of species identity and isolation is not without precedent. In many ways, the game presents a faithful dramatization of late neurophysiologist John C. Lilly's idiosyncratic theories related to dolphins, sensory deprivation, and interspecies communication. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Lilly received lucrative government contracts to work on altering brain activity in both humans and dolphins. His 1961 book *Man and Dolphin* helped to introduce now-popular notions of dolphin intelligence to American readers, and he was even thanked in the credits of the hit dolphin movie *Flipper* (1963). In 1964, Lilly began administering psychedelic drugs to both dolphin and human research subjects in efforts to facilitate enhanced interspecies communication; his government funding was discontinued the next year. After this career disruption, Lilly's experimentation with sensory deprivation and psychedelic drugs only accelerated. He drifted further from the scientific establishment, and by 1976, he claimed to have established contact with a benevolent extraterrestrial consciousness called Earth Coincidence Control Office (ECCO).[10]

The narrative arc of *Ecco*, like the arc of Lilly's intellectual career, begins with cute dolphins, takes a turn through deep isolation, and ends with extraterrestrial encounters. *Ecco* creator Ed Annunziata is certainly aware of the connection, writing on Twitter in November 2012, "No, I never took LSD, but did read a lot from John Lilly." Both *Ecco* and Lilly's writings highlight the isolating properties of underwater environments, along with the possibility of nonanthropocentric perspectives on interspecies and even extraterrestrial communication. *Ecco*'s treatment of these themes provides an opportunity for players to develop greater sympathies for nonhuman life-forms by playing through their troubles on-screen.

In fact, several games in the *Ecco* franchise expand on this teachable quality to provide explicit educational content. The Sega CD version of *Ecco the Dolphin* rewards players who reach the library of Atlantis with two mini-documentaries about dolphins, while *Ecco Jr.* (1995) provides a list of dolphin facts through its Parents' Menu. Yet while these features are novel and well intentioned, they are incidental to the overall *Ecco* experience. Dropping players into a world that has no particular sympathy for humanity, the game is at its most memorable when it forces us to confront the lonely possibility of belonging to a disappearing species.

In the first lines of *Man and Dolphin*, John Lilly draws a close connection between underwater and outerspace intelligence, arguing that the future of humanity will require thorough knowledge of both. He writes, "Within the next decade or two the human species will establish communication with another species: nonhuman, alien, possibly extraterrestrial, more probably marine; but definitely highly intelligent." He concludes, "If this account sparks public and private interest in time for us to make some preparation before we encounter such beings, I shall feel my time was well spent."[11] However one may feel about these assertions today, *Ecco the Dolphin* deserves to be remembered for transposing their rhetorical content into the formal structure of a video game. *Ecco* uses common narrative and design elements to create a remarkable sense of isolation

in the player. Bringing to life the possibility of a world without humanity, *Ecco* provides players with an opportunity to move beyond anthropocentric perspectives on interspecies and planetary issues.

Similar Franchises: *Deep Black* (2012), *Seaman* (1999), *Subnautica* (2014)

—James A. Hodges

THE ELDER SCROLLS

(est. 1994)
Platform: DOS
Developer: Bethesda

"Remember the old pencil-and-paper RPGs? The limits of your adventure were only defined by your own imagination. The dungeon master . . . allowed the players to explore the world he had created." This wistful appeal that begins the game manual of *The Elder Scrolls I: Arena* establishes the essential flavor of *The Elder Scrolls* (*TES*) role-playing game (RPG) series: freedom and exploration rather than linearity and narrative. An open world, and open possibilities. Indeed, *Arena* was conceived by the staff at Bethesda Softworks purely as the description of a world to be used as the setting of their own role-playing sessions for the pen-and-paper RPG *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* (*AD&D*). Turned into a game, *Arena* led to four critically acclaimed and commercially successful sequels, including *The Elder Scrolls II: Daggerfall* (1996), *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* (2002), *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (2006), and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011). The series also spawned a multitude of spin-offs across various media, most recently the massively multiplayer RPG *The Elder Scrolls Online* (2014). Over its two decades of existence, *TES* has driven the evolution of computer RPGs away from their pen-and-paper roots and toward virtual worlds with live-action-oriented mechanics.

Arena's manual evoked pen-and-paper RPGs to set out its concept of a game based on open-world freedom, but also to indicate its slavish imitation of the *AD&D* rule book. The digital form of this computer role-playing game (cRPG) superficially set it apart from its pen-and-paper roots, but RPG players could easily recognize the rules "under the hood": dice rolls, character classes, extensive statistics, and strongly delineated interaction mechanics governed by explicit rules. Even the bestiary of the game world was transposed largely from *AD&D* as an unruly mishmash of monsters from various mythologies and J. R. R. Tolkien's fantasy novels. Nonetheless, by shifting the previously overt mechanics related to dice and rule disputes into the background, cRPGs like *Arena* created a different experience, deprived of the inter-player social interaction common in tabletop games.[12]

Arena and *Daggerfall* provided extensive documentation of their mechanics through the game manuals and strategy guides, and so strong was the resemblance to tabletop RPGs that a player equipped with this documentation could easily have converted these games back to pen-and-paper. Nonetheless, the use of real-time, first-person action already predisposed the series to gradually abandon