BOOK REVIEWS

Book Review: *Playing Nature: Ecology in Video Games.* Alenda Y. Chang. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019. ISBN 145296226X

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Alenda Y. Chang's *Playing Nature: Ecology in Video Games* (2019) is a timely revelation for those scholars who, like myself, enjoy seeking the increasingly clearer links between new media genres and ecocritical thought. It can also be proposed as an environmentalist guideline for game designers who seek, in the author's own words, "to create meaningful interaction within artificially intelligent environments, to model ecological dynamics based on interdependence and limitation, and to allow players to explore manifold ecological futures – not all of them dystopian" (16). Chang's wide repertoire of video games that incorporate human and nonhuman interactions from an environmental perspective displays her depth of knowledge interwoven through the Introduction and the following five chapters. With the breathtaking gameography of almost seven pages, the book aptly balances the environmentally oriented products of the gaming industry and the theoretical discussions presented by well-known ecocritics in our present era. Penned diligently and delicately, *Playing Nature* indicates a mastery of bringing together "the Earth itself, its atmosphere, and our bodies," which Chang compellingly argues, "are media through which countless other things pass" (235).

Chang 'playfully' opens her Introduction, secondarily entitled "Edge Effects," with an epigraph quoted from Donna J. Haraway, underlining the unexpected power of the realm of play in making possible "worldliness and recuperation" (1). The author then turns our attention to *Walden*, a video game that derives its name and protagonist from Henry David Thoreau and his famous work. With the *Walden* example, she problematizes our relationship with nature and technology and points out the critical attitudes towards both: "Technology, particularly electronic technology, figures as the apotheosis of either human megalomania or human ingenuity, depending on your attitude toward post-industrial capitalism, while nature historically has oscillated between being that which is (terrifyingly or reassuringly) beyond human control and that which

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is subject to such control" (2). Using this observation as her springboard, she acknowledges how nature and culture are actually indivisible and sets the aim of the book by stating that it seeks to bridge the conventional divide between nature and culture through her analysis of games via an ecological perspective. The most remarkable point made in the Introduction is perhaps when the author invokes the concept of "anthromes" as a signifier moving humans from a disturbing element in otherwise perfectly balanced nature to an always already embedded system within natural ecosystems. Thus, she builds links between the naturecultures of this planet, which have narrative qualities, calling to mind the material-ecocritical approach to "storied matter," as coined by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, and the culture of gaming in all possible genres, which involves a set of interactive agencies, both human and nonhuman. The entangled relations of games, players, and play contexts, therefore, serve as Chang's template for discussing the recent academic theories in relation to ecocriticism and ecological thought.

The first chapter, "Mesocosm," starts with a boundary-blurring distinction between real and imaginary environments. Exceeding the experimental enclosures in lab environments, mesocosms are a source of inspiration for the author's characterization of gameplay and player experience as more than "virtual" reality. This chapter discusses the mesocosmic qualities of games from different decades and of various formats. In most games, the author notes, the designers often fall into traps such as leaving the environment as mere background scenery or depicting it as a tool for extraction of natural resources on whose capacities the player's game life depends. She argues that while player agency is significant, "more environmentally realistic games could enhance our understanding of real-world environmental issues (not just crises), either by implicitly or explicitly modeling different forms of our individual and collective environmental agency" (23). After discussing the game *Adventure* in terms of its ecomimetic qualities, Chang investigates thatgamecompany's *Flower* as an environmentally oriented text and analyzes the game by making additions to Lawrence Buell's criteria in *The Environmental Imagination*. She underlines that, in addition to Buell's four principles, an "ideal environmental text produces involvement" (32), turning to an analysis of several games, ranging from *World without Oil* and *Black Cloud* to *Pokémon Go* and *Play the LA River*. The chapter concludes with the rightful claim that "environmental gameplay also permeates offline, educational, and built environments" (67). As Chang proposes, such transmediatic effects of ecological thought and games on one another, I believe, exemplifies the 'intra-active relations,' to borrow Karen Barad's term, between digital, offline, natural, and built environments.

Perhaps because I was less familiar with the concepts, games, and names in "Scale," I found this second chapter the most difficult to read and follow, although it evidently contributed no less than the other chapters to Chang's overall argument. In this chapter, Chang notes that there are strong links between "environmental thinking" and "scalar understanding" in the sense

that the former is "an exercise" in the latter (70). She argues that "games are tailor-made to develop scalar environmental consciousness" as they close the gap between the local and the global, approximating the macro and micro domains, concluding in this chapter that games may serve a "pedagogical function" in showing us the links between the human and the nonhuman spheres (105).

That said, Chang brings us to her third chapter, "Nonhuman," which opens with a reference to Jacques Derrida's famous lecture where he narrates his experience of shyness over his naked body in the gaze of his cat. From this point, Chang links her argument to games that present the player with a chance to have or grasp animals' perspective. She discusses the attempts to design games that try to break away from the long tradition of anthropocentrism, with "animal- and plant-based nonhuman representation" (124), after which she dedicates the rest of the chapter to "nonliving stuff" or "bit narratives" which "typically either feature computers or digital objects as protagonists or meditate on themselves as digital creations" (124). Since the author builds this chapter on her entangled discussions of the 'it-narratives' and the 'bit-narratives,' that is, she incorporates literary scholarship into game studies within an array of ecological perspectives, I found "Nonhuman" the most intriguing chapter of the book. The concluding words of the chapter are brilliant in supporting Chang's material-feminist-ecocritical viewpoint. "Humans," she writes, "are not distinctive but are rather assemblages of human and nonhuman elements, exemplified by the trillions of bacteria cells that compose our gut microbiomes" (144). This posthumanist perspective is outlined best when the author notes that "humans are also not simply thinking 'interiors' opposed to environments 'out there' or outside ourselves" (144), hinting at a "viscous porosity," as Nancy Tuana would call it, of human and nonhuman bodily environments.

From thermodynamics to electronic waste, the fourth chapter entitled "Entropy" touches upon many critical issues that are inherently ecocritical, and therefore, proposes a more posthumanist sense of entanglement, which might, aside from quantum physics, also fall into the scope of cybernetics, computing and machine intelligence, and overall, systems theories. Chang strongly displays this posthumanist tendency without using the word 'posthuman' when she writes: "To focus on environmental matter is not to exclude the human, but to decenter it, to reverse the figure/ground relationship that typically holds between individuals and worlds" (147). She also asserts her purpose as follows: "to demonstrate that economic and environmental concerns are always intertwined" (147). She discusses these issues via the lens of farm games such as *FarmVille*, *Farm Craft*, and *Farm Craft 2: Global Vegetable Crisis*, while invoking a blend of various ecocritical concepts such as environmental degradation, limitation, Latourian ecological economics, and Timothy Morton's dark ecology.

The final chapter, "Collapse," like all the other chapters, has a telling title and it deals with games that have dystopic, catastrophic, postapocalyptic, or worst-case scenarios. In this chapter, the author discusses, again, several games from an ecocritical perspective with a possible pedagogical value. She proposes that instead of simply critiquing such games for anthropocentric representation and crude violence, one might view them as opportunities for "education," "disaster preparedness," "emotional catharsis", and "pleasurable amoral aggression" (194). She exemplifies this and supports her stance by referring to especially *World of Warcraft*'s 2010 expansion *Cataclysm* and *SimCity*, while she also touches upon several other examples like *Super Mario Bros.* and *Prince of Persia*. The concluding lines of this chapter also display an overall closure for the book as the author notes: "We cannot afford to ignore the ecology of games" – and "games of all kinds" in a time of climate change. Chang's powerful words can only describe how I felt after reading this book; we cannot take games for granted. "This may be our one chance to live, and play, deliberately" (235).

REFERENCES

Chang, Alenda Y. 2019. *Playing Nature: Ecology in Video Games*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.