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9. Dark Forests and Doomed Adventurers

An Ecocritical Reading of Horror Roleplaying Games

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Abstract

This paper explores the ecological potential of tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs) through a close reading of contemporary horror games. I argue that these games go beyond representing and mediating anxieties around ecological disaster. Instead, I propose that they offer a generative mode of collaborative worldbuilding in a time of climate crisis. I interrogate the ethics of TTRPGs through the lens of ecocriticism, identifying tensions between game texts and game play. These tensions exist between the expression of ecophobia—which tends to position nature as an antagonist—and the attribution of moral considerability and agency to the more-than-human world. Such tensions are productive and play out through collaborative storytelling techniques and ludic mechanics that invite players to reflect on the interrelationship between humans and the worlds in which they are embedded.

Keywords:

tabletop roleplaying games; horror; the gothic; environment; ecology; ethics

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Mary Flanagan (2009) has argued that games function as a means for creative expression and instruments for conceptual thinking. More recently, Alenda Chang (2019) proposes that because games straddle multiple real and imagined worlds, they offer unique insights into environmental questions. Where Flanagan and Chang focus on the affordances of video games, this paper examines table-top roleplaying games (TTRPGs) as creative and conceptual interventions with respect to pressing social and political problems. Following Nick Mizer's (2019) elaboration of how table-top roleplaying games produce rich "interworlds" replete with potential meaning, I explore TTRPGs as a generative mode for collaborative worldbuilding in a time of climate crisis. I contend that this worldbuilding is a collaboration not only between human players around the table, but

includes the more-than-human beings and agents that emerge from the interworlds generated through play.

This paper proposes that TTRPGs are conceptual resources for developing eco-ethical principles and dispositions, and as practical interventions with affective dimensions that encourage reflection and action on the climate crisis. While defining TTRPGs in detail is outside the scope of this paper, Flanagan's description of games as "situations with guidelines and procedures" and a type of "technology" (2009, 7) delineates TTRPGs from other media (such as film and literature) that also seek to represent the human interrelationship with the environment and, sometimes, to prompt attitudinal change. Flanagan's definition of games as technology supplements their status in this paper as both texts and experiences. As texts, games produce representations. As experiences, they combine aspects of the game world and the world beyond. As technologies, they demonstrate emergent properties that generate potential—new engagements between human players and the more-than-human beings that emerge in play.

I identify horror games as an important site for developing ecological awareness in TTRPG design and play. Examples of "ecohorror" games—games that represent the natural world through the story moves and aesthetics of the horror genre—are diverse, and not all explicitly engage with the climate crisis. However, even many ecohorror games in which ecology is not the thematic focus evoke what critics in other disciplines have called the "eco-gothic" (Hughes and Smith 2013) or the "eco-weird" (Onishi 2020), often through dialogue with literature and film. In the UK, *The Shivering Circle*, designed Howard David Ingham (2018), and *Solemn Vale*, designed by Mark Kelly (2021), adapt the mid-twentieth-century folk horror mode. Expressed in such films as *The Wicker Man* (1973), folk horror invites players into rural locations where something sinister lurks under the landscape. In the US, *Trophy*, designed by Jesse Ross (2020) reworks the adventure roleplaying game (RPG) through the genre of the Lovecraftian weird, as players take on the role of doomed treasure hunters entering a forest that doesn't want them there. As players progress through the "rings" of the forest that structure the gameplay, they encounter increasingly ruinous horrors. *Trophy* has inspired other games with explicit political and ecological themes, including *Oligarchy* designed by Burkett and Kurtz (2021), in which players adopt the role of greedy elites trying to make profit as environmental crises engulf the planet. These indie RPGs expand the ethical potentials of eco-horror, the eco-gothic, and the eco-weird by locating their players as active participants in the unfolding of the story, the creation of worlds, and their destruction.

Modalities

I begin by recounting my experience playing a tabletop roleplaying game called *The Court of the Radiant King*, written for *Trophy* by Monkey's Paw Games. This sets the scene for the following

discussion by blending my experience as a player with a reading of roleplaying games as narrative texts, collaborative experiences, and ludic technologies.

The player characters are a motley group, barely holding on to their sense of selves. As we navigated a wooded labyrinth, we were transformed in both mind and body. Evading slathering beasts with human faces of those we had wronged, we found our way into the ruins of a forgotten kingdom in the heart of the forest. Before us lay a gleaming treasure pile, composed of items deposited by all those who had attempted the journey before and never returned. Atop the pile sat the fabled crown of the Radiant King, a prize that had tempted many a ruined adventurer in times gone by. Entranced by the crown, I took my dagger and plunged it into the back of one of my erstwhile compatriots, kicking him away from the spoils. As I lunged for the treasure, I completed a transformation that started when I stepped through the boundary of the forest, sealing my fate as the latest to be bound to the Court of the Radiant King. Only one of the party escaped with their life.

Many horror TTRPGs promise an experience like the above: a series of encounters with monstrous beings, a descent into bodily or psychological disintegration, a sojourn in an inhospitable landscape, and the peril of opening oneself to more-than-human forces. The game system of *Trophy* makes such an experience available to players, explaining in its opening pages that "the game tells the story of the treasure-hunter's physical and mental descent as they move deeper and deeper into the dangerous forest [...] This is not a hopeful story of brave and daring adventurers that slay dragons and drag bags of gold back to town. This is a horror story of entitled pillagers meeting tragic ends" (Ross et al. 2021, 4).

This mode of roleplaying draws on the genres of the dark fantastic developed in print fiction since the eighteenth-century, including the uncanny, the weird and the gothic. These terms refer to particular "affects" elicited by stories as well as certain narrative structures common to those stories, and they are interrelated rather than distinct. The uncanny is typically traced to Sigmund Freud's essay of the same name (1919), but more broadly names a modality of literature and media that centers on the turn from the intimate and familiar to the strange and unfamiliar; it names that moment when the homely becomes distinctly unhomely. The gothic has a more precise definition, provided by the literary critic Chris Baldick (1992, xix); it emerges from the combination of an inheritance in time (the past returning to haunt the present, the uncovering of old secrets) with the sense of enclosure in space (evoking feelings of being trapped or claustrophobia) leading to a "sickening descent into disintegration" (of the mind, the body, or both). The weird is often traced back to early twentieth-century pulp writers such as H. P. Lovecraft, though its roots are older. Mark Fisher (2016) links the weird to the word's archaic meaning ("fate") and its implication of twisted forms of time and causality, and of experiences that seem alien to human perception. Contemporary horror roleplaying games deploy the gothic, the weird and the uncanny to develop

emergent modes of storytelling and play that disclose intimate relationships between game worlds and players.

Such intimate relationships are not always comfortable and tend to trouble how roleplaying games construct player characters as agentic, autonomous individuals seeking to achieve feats of mastery against the backdrop of a world that provides material for their development. *Trophy*, in contrast to the typical shape of the adventure TTRPG, evokes the weird nature depicted in Algernon Blackwood's stories, in which protagonists are persecuted by, or give themselves over to, an animated landscape. Indeed, the tagline of the game, which tells us that "the forest doesn't want you there," recalls Blackwood's story *The Willows* (1907). In this story, two friends on a canoe trip down the Danube encounter sinister and divine willow trees that attempt to lure them to their deaths. The landscape becomes an antagonist in Blackwood's story, but it is also a membrane between, or point of contact with, a phenomenological experience normally foreclosed to the human. *Trophy* turns on similar dynamics, rendering its environments not only agentic and antagonistic, but also a means of disclosing different modes of accessing and being in the world. Games such as *Trophy*, then, are a mode through which we might foster more ethical relations with the more-than-human world in which we are embedded. In making this claim, I follow critics in the environmental humanities who identify modes such as the gothic and the weird as resonant for negotiating what has come to be called the Anthropocene (Estok 2018; Alder and Bavidge 2020; Tidwell and Soles 2021). Though a contested term, the Anthropocene names the present as a period in which anthropogenic climate change is transforming physical environments, habitats, societies, and politics in unpredictable and complex ways, leading to consequences at geological, temporal, and spatial scales (Stormer and Crutzen 2000).

The Symbiotic Real

If TTRPGs as experiences engage in psychological work, as is often claimed, I want to explore how this work relates to how we negotiate our troubled sense of belonging to the planet in a time of climate crisis. Bruno Latour (2017) claims that ecology is driving us crazy, diagnosing denial, hubris, and depression as pathological responses to the climate crisis. There is, however, "no cure for the condition of belonging to the world. But, by taking care, we can cure ourselves of believing that we do not belong to it, that the essential question lies elsewhere, that what happens to the world does not concern us" (Latour 2017, 13). Playing horror roleplaying games is one strategy for dealing with that condition of belonging to the world that the climate crisis has brought to the fore. It confronts human interdependence with a natural world from which we have never been separate, despite centuries of denial, particularly in the West or the Global North—though we might better think of it as the "Minority World," following Shahidul Alam's (2008) challenge to the West's rhetoric of democracy. In engaging players through imaginative encounters with damaged ecosystems and

hosts of ecological others, *Trophy* gestures to what the philosopher Timothy Morton (2017, 17) calls the "symbiotic real"—a realm of ecological belonging that has been thoroughly "walled off" by the philosophy, science and politics of this Minority World for at least 250 years:

> The symbiotic real is a weird "implosive whole" in which entities are related in a non-total, ragged way... In symbiosis, it's unclear which is the top symbiont, and the relationship between the beings is jagged, incomplete. Am I simply a vehicle for the numerous bacteria that inhabit my microbiome? Or are they hosting me? Who is the host and who is the parasite? The term "host" stems from the Latin *hostis*, a word that can mean both "friend" and "enemy."

The ragged modes of interdependence Morton describes here play out in horror roleplaying games as characters engage in imaginative acts of worlding, creating and encountering hosts of more-than-human beings, perhaps even adopting the role of one such being. In *Trophy*, for example, you can play as "fae-born," while in *Mörk Borg*, a Swedish roleplaying game set in a dying world, character options include the animal-human hybrid "fanged deserter." In their morphic variability, these character roles approach what Kelly Hurley (1996) calls the *abhuman*, since they are always on the verge of becoming something other than themselves. They point to the permeability of the human subject, and its kinship with other-than-human animals. Such kinship is the material of the symbiotic real, though as horror TTRPGs suggest, it is not always an easy affair. Morton's description of the symbiotic real through the undecidable word "host"—meaning both friend and enemy—is echoed in the ambivalence of *Trophy*, which uses a ludic system called "Ruin" to explore such interdependencies between environment and player. In *Trophy*, "Ruin" is a way of managing psychological disintegration. When characters reach a score of 6 "Ruin," they lose their minds, as it were, and are wholly given over to the host landscape and act in its interest. This means the player gives up control of the character. However, the rules allow characters to choose to reduce their "Ruin" score before this outcome, though this means sabotaging their companions' efforts to navigate the terrain and reach their goal. "Ruin" is a ludic and narrative device, then, through which players negotiate their situatedness within the symbiotic real of the imagined worlds they have entered. Accruing ruin means accepting conditions, one of which is to be "haunted." Being haunted is, according to Morton, a state conducive to developing relationships of care with the hosts of ecological others with whom we are connected through the symbiotic real.

Beyond Ecophobia

So far, my explanation of TTRPGs emphasizes aesthetic properties, such as haunting and the uncanny, which risk inscribing eco-phobic responses to "Nature." Ecophobia is a disposition that

pervades the cultures of the Minority World, and is driven by something more than just the fear of environmental disaster. As eco-critic Simon Estok (2016, 132) suggests, "[e]cophobia is what allows humanity to do bad things to the natural world… The epic frustrations of not being able to hold and control nature are at core ecophobic and have variously found their way into production of film and literature and have been very important and influential in how some genres have developed." Ecophobia is a human condition of antipathy towards nature, a maladaptive evolutionary strategy stemming from a need to control. It is no wonder, then, that ecophobia proliferates in the face of the complexity and scale of the climate crisis, which is a reminder that our control of nature was only ever illusory. Horror media is shot through with eco-phobic representations of nature. As a result, it is often a less than ideal storytelling vehicle for negotiating the climate crisis.

That said, while casting nature as a vengeful antagonist or a monster to be defeated is hardly conducive to climate action, a dose of the weird, the uncanny and/or the gothic can foster intimacy rather than separation and antagonism. The modes in the TTRPGs I identify here show what Morton (2016) has called a "dark ecology." To Morton, ecology is dark because to encounter the symbiotic real we need to be "sufficiently creeped out." Other eco-critics have also identified the gothic, the uncanny and the weird as productive for moving beyond what Sarah Dillon (2018) calls the dead end "horror of the Anthropocene" and towards narratives that advocate for more intimate dispositions towards nature. Such intimacy means first grasping the human as one of the more-than-human ecological others that comprise the symbiotic real. Morton (2016, 100) describes ecological awareness as glimpsing the "monster in the dark mirror, and you are a cone in one of its eyes." This means accepting the non-separation of nature, but also becoming "creeped out" by humans and their planet-destroying actions. Here, what was once familiar (human being) has become and is encountered as strange, while what seems familiar (modes of human production and consumption) are reconfigured as monstrous. This is the ecological uncanny.

Eco-critics Gan, Tsing, Swanson, and Bubandt also write in a gothic register in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, emphasizing the "monsters" and "ghosts" that inhabit "haunted" Anthropocene landscapes (2017, 2). Elsewhere, Brian Onishi (2020) explores the eco-weird apparent in climate change fiction as a mode that uproots our feelings of homeliness in the face of epistemic limits. He writes that "The very laws of nature are broken, leaving us in a newly realized foreign world, and we ourselves are left untrustworthy narrators of our own experience" (159). Again, he draws on the apparatus of the uncanny to think through troubled relationships of belonging in a damaged world.

Horror TTRPGs such as *Trophy* stage just such an eco-weird experience in their complex interplay between greedy and ruinous human adventurers (who are very unreliable narrators) and a sentient landscape that seeks to reclaim those that intend to consume and exploit it. By engaging the affective properties of the dark fantastic, these games reveal the damaged and haunted landscapes

of the Anthropocene, engaging players in acts of worlding that makes explicit their complicity in the degradation of the land. These acts of worlding further evoke uncanny intimacy with more-than-human agents, rupturing fantasies of human control and custodianship. Indeed, the environments of TTRPGs continually reveal human epistemic and phenomenological limits. The games "unhome" players from a disposition toward nature that would hold it as separate and, in their explorations of collapse, perturb the notion of ecology as composed of stable systems, and racist anthropocentric assignations of value based on holism (that is, on everything having its "natural" place in the system). Dark ecologies are dynamic and changing, whose members are not subservient to an idealized whole. I turn now to two short case studies to explore these claims in further detail.

Example 1: *Solemn Vale*

In the British RPG *Solemn Vale*, player characters return to an isolated rural village populated by unfriendly locals who refer obliquely to eldritch superstitions and violent rituals. The game riffs on the folk horror genre, though without the reactionary disavowals that tend to play out in the climax of such films as *The Wicker Man* and *Blood on Satan's Claw*, which often reinscribe the values of patriarchal capitalism by casting the countercultural characters as wholly monstrous, or bring about their defeat. However, instead of asking players to defeat the monsters, and by providing them with diminishing opportunities for escape, *Solemn Vale* engages the player in a series of ambivalent choices through which their interaction with the land becomes ever more intimate and their complicity in systems of exploitation is revealed. In the scenario "Family Matters," run by game master (GM) Matthew Dawkins for the Red Moon Roleplaying podcast, the player characters enter Solemn Vale intending to claim an inheritance. Increasingly strange revelations about the family's heretofore hidden history puncture the characters' fantasies of abandoning successful careers in London for a quiet life in the country. During the climax of the game, the player character stands over an abandoned mineshaft on her newly acquired property, deciding whether to "feed" an antagonistic local to the entity that lurks below. In so doing, she will rekindle the pact her family once had with the inhuman powers living under the landscape of the Vale. Here, a romanticized and implicitly racist vision of Britain's supposed rural past founded on whiteness, exploitation, and exclusion, is exposed as always already bound up in the excavationary logic of capitalism.

The family's wealth comes from mining and maintaining its status, which requires feeding the hungry thing that still occupies the shafts they dug into the land. Humans and more-than-humans—including the land itself—are intimately bound in relationships of exploitation as well as custodianship, and to face this is to give over the fantasy of control and separation that pervades modernist thought. The game manages this unraveling of modernist rationality through "weird"

dice, which are accrued through interactions with strange aspects of Solemn Vale. Weird dice can be added to tests that help players progress through obstacles in the game. However, adding weird dice also means allowing for the possibility of unexpected effects. Here the ludic system supports the narrative trajectory, with mechanical randomness eroding the autonomy and agency with which players begin the game, and each roll of the dice further enfolds them in the landscape of Solemn Vale.

Example 2: *Hollows of Desolation*

My second example is Gordie Murphy's *Hollows of Desolation* (2021), a game built on the mechanics of *Trophy* in which players invent and explore a collapsing ecosystem to discover and bring back treasure. A ravaged and animated landscape emerges in play through the interactions of the GM, the players, and the imagined world itself, which is not pre-designed but created through play. Magic is important in the game and functions as a metaphor for the "magical" thinking of extractive capitalism. If player characters use magic to progress through the landscape (which often they must) they accelerate the collapse of the hollow, leading to dangerous "dredge" effects, which might include the appearance of monstrous creatures or toxic extrusions from the land itself. Such "dredge" effects emphasize the interdependence of human and more-than-human worlds, as human magic draws on and affects the damaged landscape, making the journey ever more perilous and the need to use magic more urgent. Again, rather than being determined in advance by the scenario, dredge effects are explored in play and determined by players in the conversations that occur around play. Through such collaborative storytelling mechanics, the game presents ecosystems not as stable wholes, but as unstable, open systems. This ecosystemic move towards openness punctures a notion of ecology rooted in teleology and cybernetic fantasies of human control. This loss of control is given imaginative force through the dark fantastic aesthetics favored in the game. In one game we ran, a player decided that the collapsing hollow had partially swallowed his former ancestral home. They began their exploration in the degraded and decaying grounds of the house, concretizing the uncanny and unhoming aspects of the eco-weird.

Metagames

The TTRPGs I describe here draw on collaborative storytelling techniques as well as the mechanics of classic roleplaying games by incorporating randomness through dice rolls. Immersion is frequently punctured as players move in and out of the story to discuss potential consequences of

dice rolls and collaborate to decide on outcomes of decisions. In these moments, players engage in reflective discussion, revealing that TTRPGs are not only stories and games, but also metagames. Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux (2017) describe metagaming as a critical practice of playing, making, and thinking—a mode of intervention in the political and cultural economies in which we as players are situated. *Hollows* is exemplary of how contemporary TTRPGs invite players to metagame. The playbook explains that "players will work together to create the particular environment that their game takes place in" (2021, 6). The book poses questions about the hollow and asks players to draw a rough map and mark important natural features. All this occurs before gameplay begins.

The ecological ethics of the game *Hollows of Desolation*, particularly its mechanics of magic and dredge, further suggest a connection between metagames and what Karen Barad (2007) calls the "ethics of worlding." She suggests that "the very nature of materiality is an entanglement" and that seemingly separate "'parts' of phenomena are co-constituted" (Barad 2007, 393). Thus, "[e]thics is therefore not about the right response to a radically exterior/ized other, but about responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are a part" (Barad 2007, 393). The ethical principles of entanglement, intra-action, and worlding emerge intuitively when we play games like *Hollows* and *Trophy*. We are not creating an environment that is a passive background for adventurers to explore. This isn't about mapping a dungeon, fighting the bad guys, and escaping with the loot. This is an exchange between the game master and the players, and once that exchange has begun, the world of the game itself becomes intimately entangled with the players and their characters.

In *Trophy*, *Hollows*, and *Solemn Vale*, the imagined environment discloses its subjectivity in play. The environment that players build in *Hollows*, for example, in turn also builds itself as we describe new encounters, discuss potential dredge effects, and understand the consequences of our explorations of the space. Nick Mizer's ethnographic investigation on dwelling in tabletop RPGs emphasizes that the agency and concreteness TTRPGs confer upon imagined worlds is a potential affordance of the hobby. He writes that, "The element of the unknown depends on cultivating and respecting the concreteness of the imagined world, rather than bending it to meet other goals the players might have" (2019, 152). I think this concreteness of the imagined world, and the respect it engenders in players for more-than-human beings, is readily apparent in games such as *Hollows*, where it takes on an eco-ethical dimension.

Conclusion

As Anna Tsing (2015) suggests, we are living in a world in ruins, and precarity is a condition that pervades all modes of life. Our culture, politics, and daily lives have yet to adapt to these

new conditions. We continue to be mired in modernist modes of thought and beliefs about our relationship to the Earth, imagining we might still treat it as a resource to consume or manage. Latour (2017, 10) reminds us that "[a]n alteration of the relation to the world" is the scholarly term for madness. In a time of climate crisis such madness is upon us whether we would wish it or not. An alteration of relationships between humans and more-than-humans—along with a transformation of human dispositions to the environments in which they are embedded—is the only way through the crisis. TTRPGs explicitly invite alteration and madness, negotiating the horror of the Anthropocene to foster new dispositions towards the more-than-human world for the players who enter or build worlds as part of the game. The games discussed in this paper recognize the precarity of the worlds they construct, and the complex interdependence and intimacies that comprise it. These are endgames for the endgame and, if ecology is driving us mad, we might all benefit from gathering around the table and rolling some dice.

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Bio

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