From Arthurian Narratives to MMORPGs: Towards an Ethics of Virtual Ecologies

Kral Arthur Efsanelerinden DÇOÇRYO'lara: Sanal Ekolojilere Etik Yaklaşımlar

Can Özgü[*]

Abstract

Virtual spaces in video games depict environments and nature in their most refined form. Comprising entirely of code lines, these works directly reflect the creators' vision. Thus, the development of visual realism in these spaces, under absolute control and supervision, can potentially alter players' perceptions of nature. The ultimate goal of these spaces, filled with creatures threatening the player's virtual existence, is for the player to overcome these threats and be elevated as a result. Virtual reality, created with refined nature and hierarchical elements, contrasts sharply with the legends of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, which portray nature as a chaotic, untamed environment with fantastical elements. Represented not only in literary genres like poetry and novels but also adapted into various forms such as series, films, and video games, the nature and environmental perception conveyed by these legends differ significantly from today's understanding of nature and the environment. Despite being separated by

* Dr. Öğr. Gör., Yaşar Üniversitesi İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü /Adjunct Instructor, Yaşar University English Language and Literature Department. İzmir-Türkiye. canozgu@gmail.com. ORCID ID: 0000-0003-3906-5947

centuries, Arthurian legends and contemporary digital spaces can be read within Ian Bogost's concept of "unit operations." Using eco-criticism and object-oriented ontology theories in this study, I comparatively examined King Arthur legends and Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games. The aim of the study is to demonstrate how the nature representations specific to the King Arthur legends, rejecting a human-centered approach and cultural domestication, can serve as a precedent for the construction of nature ethics in virtual spaces in video games.

Keywords: *Medieval Literature, Arthurian narratives, Video Games, MMORPGs, Eco-criticism*

Öz:

Video oyunlarının geçtiği sanal mekânlar, çevre ve doğayı en ehlileştirilmiş haliyle tasvir eder. Tamamen kod satırlarından oluşan bu eserler, yaratıcılarının vizyonunu doğrudan yansıtır. Dolayısıyla, mutlak bir kontrol ve denetim altında olan bu mekânların görsel gerçekçiliğinin gelişmesi, oyuncuların doğa algısını da değiştirebilir. Oyuncunun sanal varlığını tehdit eden yaratıklarla dolu olan bu mekânların nihaî amacı, oyuncunun bu tehditleri bertaraf etmesi ve bunun neticesinde yüceltilmesidir. Ehlileştirilmiş doğa ve hiyerarşik ögelerle yaratılan sanal gerçeklik, bu yönüyle, doğayı kaotik, ehlileştirilmemiş ve fantastik ögeler barındıran bir ortam olarak tasvir eden Kral Arthur ve Yuvarlak Masa Şövalyeleri efsaneleri ile tam bir tezat oluşturur. Şiir ve roman gibi edebî türlerle sınırlı kalmayıp dizi, film, video oyunu gibi birçok uyarlaması yapılan bu efsanelerin temsil ettiği doğa ve çevre algısı, bugünün doğa ve çevre algısından oldukça farklıdır. Zamansal olarak birbirlerinden asırlar ile ayrılmış olsalar da Arthur efsaneleri ve çağdaş dijital mekânlar Ian Bogost'un "birim işlemleri" (unit operations) konsepti bağlamında okunabilir. Bu bağlamda, Kral Arthur efsanelerinin yapıtaşları olarak değerlendirebileceğimiz Stonehenge gibi yapıtlar ile Merlin, Sir Gawain, Green Knight gibi karakterleri ve "oyuncuya karşı çevre" gibi dijital oyun mekaniklerini aynı kuramsal çerçeveye yerleştirebiliriz. Bu çalışmada ekoeleştiri ve nesne odaklı ontoloji kuramlarını kullanarak Kral Arthur efsaneleri ve Devasa Çok Oyunculu Çevrimiçi Rol Yapma Oyunlarını karşılaştırmalı olarak inceledim. Bu bağlamda, çalışmanın hedefi, insan merkezli yaklaşımı ve kültürel evcilleştirmeyi reddeden Kral Arthur efsanelerine özgü doğa temsillerinin, video oyunlarındaki sanal mekânlarda inşa edilen doğa etiği için nasıl bir emsal teşkil edebileceğini göstermektir.

Anahtar sözcükler: *Orta Çağ Edebiyatı, Kral Arthur efsaneleri, Video oyunları, DÇOÇRYO, Ekoeleştiri*

Introduction

On October 8, 2013, an online PC Mag article reported on a call from the International Committee of the Red Cross for an ethics of video game violence, stating that games have become "more realistic simulations of war" and that the rules of simulated war should be just as realistic as a real conflict. This demand for virtual consequences to virtual war crimes only applies to realistic military first person shooter games, and as Jordan Minor, writing for PC

Mag claims, games that are developed around "medieval fantasy and futuristic wars in outer space are *safe* (emphasis mine)," which he follows with the statement that "the Red Cross believes that video games, because of their interactivity, have a unique ability to teach respect for the realities of armed conflict" (Minor, 2013). While the article begins with a seemingly noble demand from the Red Cross, it eventually defeats its own purpose by stating that a sense of virtual ethics does not apply to settings of the past or the future. Can we step away from a strictly anthropocentric sense of ethics with regards to strictly human events (war and war crimes) and focus on other kinds of violence in virtual spaces? Can we dare to attempt an eco-critical reading of video game universes, or virtual spaces that are marked by the infinite qualities of their ecologies and are essentially lines of code created in a computer program? An attempt at creating an ethics of virtual ecologies would require a unified effort between eco-critical readings and object-oriented ontology.

While there is a deluge of wonderful eco-critical readings of medieval literature, the field of video game critique is one that is slowly legitimizing itself as a scholarly practice. The work of Ian Bogost and other scholars have given us processes by which video games can be read/played as text and consequently critiqued as such, but is it possible to read literature as a virtual space? Ian Bogost, in the Introduction to his book *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism* claims that "any medium-poetic, literary, cinematic, computational-can be read as a configurative system, an arrangement of discrete, interlocking units of expressive meaning" (Bogost, 2008: ix), which he calls "unit operations." Ian Bogost's concept presents us with a method by which we can see across mediums and temporalities in an object-oriented light. Bogost writes that "understanding units as objects is useful because it underscores their status as *discrete, material things* in the world" (Bogost, 2008: 5). The aforementioned "world" carries a multiplicity of meanings in this sense as it implies not only the tangible, physical world of material reality, but the many worlds of literary narrative and digital spaces among others. These "unit operations" are rendered invisible in the act of video game making, as there is a stark aesthetic difference between the lines of code in a programming tool undecipherable to untrained eyes and the final result of a fully realized, immersive, and interactive game world. In a literary text, the units are formed by the expected words, phrases, motifs, and others that operate in meaning-making practices. A video game world cannot be fully realized without the central mechanics at its core which are made up of lines of code along the direction of a central design document. This is akin to how discrete motifs operate to create the world of a literary narrative; it would be difficult, after all, to imagine a version of the Legend of King Arthur without his iconic Excalibur and the equally iconic round table. In this sense, these "units" effectively promote a way by which the relations between the Stonehenge, Excalibur, lines of code, and fundamental game mechanics come to light.

The figure of King Arthur is a timeless one, and similar to his narratives, each iteration of his appearance throughout the centuries seems to have been appropriated to a certain time period and its values by their respective authors. It was the specific mention of video games in the "medieval fantasy" setting in the PC Mag article that initially drew my attention to Arthurian narratives as it is negligent to imply that medieval fantasy games could not be

169

held to the same ethical standards as modern military ones. The temporalization of such concerns in current cultural productions presents a discursive limitation on various genres and mediums in terms of representation and ethics. Arthurian narratives present a unique perspective on this matter, as one might consider Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* to be a work of medieval fantasy, even though it carries the appellation of "history" in the title. The work marks the commencement of King Arthur's legend and portrays a vision of Britain's history that is replete with dragons, giants, and wizard-prophets unconstrained by temporal boundaries; a vision of the world that is imaginably distant from the experiential and material reality of 12th Century life. This vision, in defining the inseparable conditions of King Arthur's (the hero's) existence from the iconic objects of King Arthur (the narrative), dissociates the legendary figure from the center. Likewise, the existence of dragons, giants, wizards, and other non-human elements that define the lines of what resides in the wilderness, or beyond human (anthropocentric) control, implies a history of a civilization which was forged beyond human-centered means.

We can locate several objects that are central to almost every Arthurian narrative. The Stonehenge, the sword in the stone, and the round table resonate through each iteration as they seem to possess a certain agency over the narrative itself. These objects can be noticed within Bogost's framework of "unit operations," or seemingly fundamental mechanics by which they are repeated throughout each iteration of Arthur's story and have a certain agentive draw that seems to call for other writers to adapt, or players to experience. There is a parallel between the agency of these Arthurian objects, and the fundamental mechanics by which Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) have operated over the past decades. These elements, while drawing a parallel, do not function in similar meaning making practices, as the ethical anthropo-decentering effects of early Arthurian narratives are not matched by the mechanics of player domination over the virtual world of video games. Games, however, have the potential to generate situations in which the "power to effect change […] affords the player the opportunity to take ethically relevant action" (Simkins & Steinkuehler, 2008: 349). The deployment of "units" in Arthurian narratives that de-center the human perspective and the status of their heroes and the possibility of deploying these "units" in video games to create a similar thematic effect draws the point of comparison between the two dramatically (and temporally) distinct works of art. While I will not be focusing on a singularly specific Arthurian narrative, I would like to analyze this parallel between two seemingly different, yet essentially similar mediums. By looking at moments of "natural" events and beings that cohabit biospheres (both "organic" and "inorganic") in Arthurian narratives, I would like to motion towards the possibility of creating an ethics of virtual ecologies.

Domestication vis-à-vis Consumerization
Several eco-critical works have critiqued the various forms of nature that appear not only throughout narratives within text as representations, but through a perspective of science that aims to naturalize events within their terminologies which in turn disrupts affective connections and partake in a certain distancing of the human from the natural. Both textual representation and scientific perspectives partake in an act of "domesticating" the ecology and the things that exist within it. In the introduction to his work *Elemental Philosophy: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water as*

170

Environmental Ideas, David Macauley writes that "the elements often appear dimmed down or diminished as they enter the human *domus*. Although physically near, they nevertheless remain existentially remote, covered over, or concealed" (Macauley, 2001: 2). This act of concealment or covering can be essentialized into the grander schema by which the cultural and political forces at large have commercialized and turned the elements from the necessities of all basic life into consumer goods taken for granted. While Macauley turns his focus on a "domestication of elements" his thoughts that frame the argument behind a "domestication of nature" are quite pertinent. This domestication is not only a political process as Mick Smith highlighted in *Against Ecological Sovereignty*, but a representational process within which we can implicate artists, writers, film directors, and game designers. Arthurian narratives, seemingly centered around the figures of Arthur, his progenitors, and his courtly knights, work in subtle ways that seem to de-center the human from a position of sovereignty, a de-centering that often seems to occur around Stonehenge, also known as the Giants' Ring, or the Giants' Dance. Unfortunately, this potential "de-centering" and consequent formation of an ethics is not seen in the *intended* contemporary virtual space of the MMORPG. I say *intended* due to the fact that, as many Marxist critiques recognize as the alienation of the worker, the virtual space of a video game renders invisible the efforts of the hundreds of designers, animation experts, and creative artists who work on it. While we eventually obtain the product that is the collaboration of their effort, the artifice of their work (programming, lines of code) is invisible to the consumers and seems to lose its meaning as "discrete, material things." The program, however, can break from the *intended* and defy the sovereignty of the designers in surprising ways. Akin to narratives of robotic uprisings against humanity (*2001: A Space Odyssey*), the code can present its own agency through what is humanly marked as "errors, bugs, and glitches." While this phenomenon occurs in various kinds of virtual spaces, my focus will be on the multiplayer space of the MMORPG.

While the dawn of multiplayer video games can be tracked to the 70s, the expansive reach of multiplayer participation wouldn't be established until the coining of the term "Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game" (MMORPG) by Richard Garriott in 1997 with the publishing of his game *Ultima Online* on the same year. The genre caught on quite rapidly with the gaming public, but it wouldn't be a modern pop culture phenomenon on a global scale until Blizzard Entertainment's *World of Warcraft* (2004). *World of Warcraft* peaked at around twelve million subscribers worldwide, and it is that massive scale which makes it my focus with regards to the genre. An eco-critical perspective would enlighten us to how the virtual space subverts the mechanics of reality which, in turn, leads to the ideological "domestication" of nature, or alternatively, to the kind of "nihilism" Tim Morton mentions throughout his work. In his article titled "Queer Ecology," Morton claims:

> we are losing touch with a fantasy Nature that never really existed (I capitalize Nature to make it look less natural), while we actively and passively destroy life-forms inhabiting and constituting the biosphere, in Earth's sixth mass extinction event. Giving up a fantasy is even harder than giving up a reality. (Morton, 2010: 273)

Virtual spaces have a significant ideological and representational impact on the settings they utilize, specifically due to the kind of "interactivity" that caused the Red Cross to call for a sense of virtual ethics applied to virtual wars. Morton's "fantasy Nature" can be seen

within the representations virtual spaces promote, as it ideologically buttresses the notions of extraction and the contraction of nonhuman entities for basic aesthetic consumption. The nature represented in the virtual space goes beyond a sense of "aesthetic appearance," and becomes a part of aesthetic existence due to their interactivity. A deconstruction of the fundamental mechanics that are a part of this aesthetic existence would enlighten us to the nature of how the MMORPG genre can lead to an ethical distancing from the nonhuman world but has the potential to establish that sense of ethics.

The main setting of *World of Warcraft* is titled Azeroth, a world that contains four continents upon which players are spread between two factions. The continents are divided into territories that are either divided between the two factions or are contested neutral zones upon which members of the two factions engage in combat. The particular combat between the human players (human as in human being, not as a playable "race" which consists of Orcs, Elves, Dwarves, etc.) is called Player versus Player (PvP), one of the two fundamental game-play mechanics of MMORPGs. The second category of combat, and the focus of this paper, is the battle between players and the computer-controlled enemies, called Player versus Environment (PvE) or Player versus Monster (PvM). These two mechanics are repeated through almost every iteration of the genre regardless of setting/space; figuratively speaking, a kind of Stonehenge that seems to have an inescapable draw to developers of the genre. PvE/ PvM are concepts that essentially involve the combat or violence that occurs between the human player and the nonhuman Non-Player Character (NPC), which can include anything from wolves and bears, to ghosts and goblins, and other humans as well. PvM on the other hand, while it is an alternative way of defining the violence between the human and the nonhuman in a virtual space, seems to create a space of hostility as it brings together each representation of the nonhuman (NPC) under the threatening conventional implication of "monster" as something to be defeated, even as it includes humans within its blanket. The existence of "monsters" as hostile presences can be questioned further, but I wonder how "Environment" and "Monster" can become interchangeable terms or "unit operations" for the violence that occurs between the human and the nonhuman.

Journey to the Wilderness

The birth of the human character (as the playable race) casts the players to an outpost in a forest area, where the initial quest one obtains from an armor-clad NPC is to slay wild wolves in the surrounding area followed by some text that explains the mission. The quest is completely non-essential to the overarching narrative of *World of Warcraft* and serves to create a sense of hostility between the player character and the surrounding wildlife in a journey to reach the maximum level by translating this violence to experience points. What ensues is a seemingly endless process of violence in a journey to increase these point values, and while it is important to note the fact that experience can be obtained through gathering herbs and minerals (and there was a reported case of a player who chose to reach the maximum level only by gathering), the *intended* world is designed to make that journey convenient through combat. This form of intentional design is as conventional as it is ubiquitous across

the dozens of representatives of the genre, where the world is meant to "be overcome by combinations of skill, resources, and assets, these components are mostly-and often purely-there to enable or prohibit further progress" (Heijmen & Vervoort, 2023: 2).

This concept of Player versus Environment can be observed in several medieval texts, as we can locate representations of violence in hunting and questing. Gillian Rudd's book chapter titled Wilds, Wastes and Wilderness presents an excellent analysis of the differentiations between a medieval "forest" and the medieval "wilderness," describing the concept of wilderness as being more suggestive than the notion of a forest. The former contains within it a series of connotations of spaces that are impossible to domesticate. These spaces could be entirely devoid of signs of life, or they could contain patches of vegetation that allows for the flourishing of multitudinous animals. Most significantly, however, the wilderness is a location that is either entirely devoid of human life or only temporarily allows the encroachment of human presence (Rudd, 2007: 91). While Rudd focuses more on the figure of the Green Knight in her reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, I would like to highlight one of Gawain's travels in his quest. Rudd's study of the difference between "forest" and "wilderness" is applicable to the moments of violence that occur within the text. Gawain's journey, fraught with toil and conflict becomes evident as he attempts to traverse the wilderness:

> So many were the wonders he wandered among
> That to tell but the tenth part would tax my wits.
> Now with serpents he wars, now with savage wolves,
> Now with wild men of the woods, that watched from the rocks,
> Both with bulls and with bears, and with boars besides,
> And giants that came gibbering from the jagged steeps. (Gawain Poet, 2011: 718-723)

In a moment that closely mirrors the definition of PvE, Gawain finds himself in battle with many beings that occupy the wilderness, and it becomes a threatening space of conflict and violence. Similar to the mechanics by which PvE destroys a hierarchy of being, where battles with wolves, bears, humans, and dragons are all blanketed by one term, Gawain fights serpents, wolves, wild men, bears, and giants, with no specific hierarchical priority or significance given to any of them. They are presented as threats to overcome on the journey to fulfill the quest, with minimal context and a complete lack of empathy. There is a significant contrast between these moments of violence and the hunting scenes that are followed by the very visceral butchering of animals. It is specifically that visceral connection that creates a certain consequence for the hunts as opposed to the inconsequential slaughter of the "serpents, wolves, wild men, and giants." This connection also creates a certain narrative irony in which the danger-fraught journey which would expectedly be more significant in a heroic narrative is brushed over in a few lines yet the hunts and interactions between Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and his wife form the bulk of the poem. When a medium that is both critiqued and praised for its "interactivity" lacks the visceral qualities of real violence, the consequences are lost, and everything is isolated in a cyclical conflict between lines of code, sometimes not violent at all in appearance (*World of Warcraft*), and sometimes hyper-violent (several games in the first-person shooter genre). In order to constructively represent an ethical mode of action in a video game "players must have the emotional valence of their choices mirrored back to them

in some way" (Simkins & Steinkuehler, 2008: 349). The cyclical nature of this violent contact similarly revolves around the figure of Merlin and his moment of prophetic speech.

Geoffrey of Monmouth's *The History of the Kings of Britain* acts in similar ways to Richard Garriott and his *Ultima Online* in the establishment of certain codes or "unit operations" for Arthurian narratives. I have mentioned how the Arthurian narratives revolve around the nonhuman, and how the nonhuman elements of the Stonehenge and Excalibur become inseparable from the human Arthur and his ancestors. Merlin is as central to the Arthurian narrative as these other objects, since he occupies an interesting space between the human and nonhuman. Merlin is peerless "in the foretelling of the future or in mechanical contrivances" (Monmouth, 1966: 195), which seems to imply a certain command of poetry and technology. He is a figure who exists beyond his own individual temporality and space, a centrifugal force by which the readers and participants of the narrative are drawn away from their own time and space, allowing them a peek into the unimaginable before vanishing from the narrative without a trace. *Mystery* is a key term that is embedded into the figure of Merlin and his hybrid human-nonhuman position. Tim Morton, in his book *Realist Magic*, writes:

> *Mystery* thus suggests a rich and ambiguous range of terms: secret, enclosed, withdrawn, unspeakable. This study regards the realness of things as bound up with a certain mystery, in these multiple senses: unpeakability, enclosure, withdrawal, secrecy...Things are *encrypted*. But the difference between standard encryption and the encryption of objects is that this is an unbreakable encryption. (Morton, 2013: 17)

Merlin's prophecy is an interesting example of his ability to navigate through temporalities, and even though it seems to be an allegorical story on the cyclical nature of the violence and conflict that occurs throughout the archipelago, it subtly de-centers the human from its position of sovereignty due to the scale of the events. This subtlety is the encryption through which Merlin removes the humans from their essentialist positions of political and military power play.

The battle between the White Dragon and the Red Dragon is what sends Merlin into his prophetic trance, and even from the beginning we are exposed to the inclusion of the natural landscape of Britain into this cyclical conflict as the "mountains and valleys shall be leveled, and the streams in its valleys shall run with blood" (Monmouth, 1966: 171). What follows is a sequence of conquests with interspersed moments of reproduction. The ecology of the Earth is cyclical with variations, considering the fact that the Anthropocene is the blink of an eye when embedded into the 4.54-billion-year age of our planet, and all of our conflicts seem pathetic when confronted with that scale. The Earth, after all, doesn't end with the sixth mass extinction event that we are currently undergoing, and the Anthropocene will be followed by many other "-cenes" until the inevitably apocalyptic death of the Sun. It is precisely that notion of scale that Merlin's prophecy presents to Vortigern. The text directly points out that the Dragons are symbols for the Saxons and the Britons respectively, yet if we allow the ecology to be the key player in the dream-like nebula of the imagination within that prophecy, the human is de-centered, and the hierarchical chain of being is subverted, or completely removed under a co-existence of suffering. During the mass conflict between the Lion, Boar, Dragons, Wolf, and other animals, the humans are pointed out to be the sufferers, and "wild animals shall enjoy peace, but mankind will bewail the way in which it is being punished" (Monmouth, 1966: 174).

Merlin's prophecy, as Geoffrey of Monmouth presents it, seems to be a journey into the unknowable "mystery" of the wilderness. The idea of a co-existence of suffering also mirrors how the birds and Gawain are united in a sympathetic moment in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. What Geoffrey of Monmouth states matter-of-factly in Merlin's prophetic trance, Wace brushes over, in his *Roman de Brut*. Wace mentions the conflict between the two Dragons, yet consequently states that "I fear to translate Merlin's Prophecies, when I cannot be sure of the interpretation thereof. It is good to keep my lips from speech, since the issue of events may make my gloss a lie" (Wace, 2003: 60). This lack of certainty on the interpretation of the narrative seems to resemble the Gawain poet's inability to present the totality of Sir Gawain's journey through the wilderness as it would "tax" his "wits" in light of Rudd's reading of the wilderness. Is this lack of certainty a result of a fear of scholarly imitation, or is it potentially due to the de-centering notions posited by Merlin that casts human beings as the NPCs in the grand narrative of violence that is the history of the archipelago? Merlin seems to reveal the lines of code that are overwritten and rendered invisible by the grandiosity of the heroic narratives that surround the figure of Arthur.

This process of code revealing often occurs in virtual spaces in the form of glitches, errors, or bugs, when the program deviates from the intended and enlightens players to the deeper mechanisms of the space. The fantasy of the virtual space breaks, as fragments of these "unit operations" work in distinct ways that can occasionally cause errors in the program while allowing for its existence or cause the space to break completely. The Corrupted Blood Plague incident in *World of Warcraft* is one of the most memorable events in the nineteen-year history of the virtual space. It happened upon the release of a new dungeon (areas that players attempt to conquer in the quest for finding weapons and armor) called Zul'Gurub. While fighting the final boss of the dungeon, players received the status de-buff "Corrupted Blood Plague" which slowly decreased their health during the fight. While this was an intended mechanic, what the designers couldn't predict was that the plague transferred between player characters through proximity, and mimicking hypothetical pandemic event situations, spread throughout major cities, killing off characters who happened to catch it. While these spaces are essentially caught in a cycle of violence that oversees the murder and consequent resurrection of code, this plague was unavoidable, since the characters who resurrected after death would eventually receive the plague again, as the MMORPG space is a social one. Only in the event of an accident, a kind of "natural" disaster, did the human players come to realize the reality of the stakes in the virtual space. Julian Yates posits the term "cascade" as:

> A way of reading events derived from cybernetics that eludes the usual agentive protocols
> of philosophy and social theory in an attempt to describe an open or dissipative system
> in which momentary deployments of force produce systemic orderings, local eddies or
> drifts, monopolizing the ability to act, to occupy, and so to own events. (Yates, 2002: 50)

The moment when the nonhuman code acts independently of human intent, is the moment when fantasies of human agency is cast adrift into a sea of unpredictable circumstances, and the illusion of "domestication" is revealed. The worlds that contain millions of player characters were shut down upon the event, the codes were patched, and the

fantasy was restored by the developers, yet the memory of the events lingered in the players who experienced it. Virtual spaces should allow for the existence of the cascade, the random, independent actions of the code to allow for an understanding of the things that are at stake, yet it is a difficult step to take considering the play between the maintenance of these worlds and the profit that game developers and publishers seek.

The Stonehenge is another object, a "unit operation" that seems to resist the wills and demands of the sovereign intentions of the individual human due to its very scale. "The Giants' Ring" or the "Giants' Dance" as the phenomenon is referred to by Geoffrey of Monmouth and Gerald of Wales respectively, are surrounded by a sense of mystery from the eve of their introduction into the texts. Aurelius wishes to "contrive some novel building which would stand for ever in memory of such distinguished men" (Cambrensis, 1978: 195) to which Merlin suggests the Giants' Ring, massive stones that seems to occupy a trans-continental as well as trans-temporal space. Only when Aurelius is made aware of the curative properties of the stones attached to the religious rites of the giants does he make the move to acquire them, yet the stones exist beyond the pragmatic human associations brought to them. While it is impossible to ignore the human event of the massacring of the Irish to obtain the stones, it is the stones' legacy that remains alive throughout the generations to our present. While Merlin's prophecy is ignored in Wace's reiteration of the Arthurian narrative, the agentive draw of Stonehenge enables their presence within Gerald of Wales' text, even though he expresses open antagonism towards Geoffrey of Monmouth. While the movement of these stones from Ireland can conform to notions of "domesticating" the elements, the prime mover of these objects is the hybrid human-nonhuman Merlin, through whom a certain ethical schema is presented that de-centers the human and inserts notions of coexistence.

Arthurian narratives, along with other medieval texts, inform certain aspects of our contemporary lives of the things that have been veiled or rendered invisible throughout the past few centuries of science and capitalist outgrowth. These very human political events inform representations of the world around us in ways that can lead to the kind of nihilism Tim Morton mentions in his work-representations which the videogame industry is deeply involved and invested in. Taking the potential examples provided by the figure of the human-nonhuman Merlin, and other objects in Arthurian narratives, the video game industry could be involved in more organic representations of the varying biospheres they deal with. We should be mindful of the representations of our present by allowing the past to inform us in these contemporary cultural products, or as Merlin tells Aurelius in *Roman de Brut*, "let the future take care of itself. Consider rather the concerns of to-day" (Wace, 2003: 73). Merlin's "to-day" is quite different than Aurelius' however, as he exists in a multiplicity of temporality, seeing the past through the present to the future.

Conclusion

The nascent rise of new media propagates new methods of reading and interpretation. These methods, however, are not constricted by their temporal attachment to the media that conjured them into being, and can be applied to the cultural productions of a seemingly distant past. Humanity's history and artistic efforts are but a fraction of the blink of an eye in terms

of the geological age of the planet. Though the cultures and the modes of existence that lead to the creation of art is vastly different throughout the ages, the temporal distance is merely superficial as they are all inextricably linked to the ecologies of the world they reside in. It is through a revelation of this seeming difference that we can see not only how these new methodologies of interpreting new artistic forms can be applied to the works of the past, but also how the works of the past can inform the creations of the future. In this sense, the ecological perspectives ensconced by the many worlds of Arthurian narratives can highlight how the current representations of nature in virtual worlds are not only insufficient in conveying the existential imbrication of humanity in nature, but potentially damaging in their current forms.

With each passing year and each generational leap in technology, video games are becoming more and more aesthetically realistic as well as experientially complex with the subtle shifts, improvements, and sometimes regressions in game mechanics. Though a textual narrative and a video game are both controlled spaces at the hands of their respective composers and hundreds of coders, the unit operations of video games, by virtue of their design as a collaborative effort are more prone to cause breaks in the world they're operating to form. Geoffrey of Monmouth's composition portrayed a 12th Century view of the world in which humans were acted upon by greater forces than themselves and the legendary, everlasting figure of King Arthur was inseparable from the non-human presences throughout the text, whether it is the objects around him or the supernatural figures driving him. The Gawain Poet (also called Pearl Poet) carefully composed a narrative in which the central human hero of Sir Gawain and his exploits through the early modern vision of wilderness were sidelined by the grander, supernatural presence of the Green Knight as well as the visceral interactions with the nature surrounding the Knight's domain. While de-centering the human (player) perspective might seem antithetical to the nature of video games, it is nonetheless necessary in the current age of the Anthropocene and imminent ecological collapse. The Corrupted Blood Plague incident was a symptom of a breakdown in the unit operations of *World of Warcraft*, and yet that mistake led to an event that would be sociologically relevant throughout the years as it created a new venue for experiential interactions between the players and the world of the game. This symptom is but a fragment of what Heijmen and Vervoort call "ecological entanglement, […] an experiential understanding that everything, including the subject, is fundamentally entangled with everything else" (Heijmen & Vervoort, 2023: 3). To disentangle the player from the wish-fulfillment fantasies propagated by a virtual domestication of the environment, games must entangle them in the grander themes of the world they represent.

References

Activision Blizzard. (2004). *World of Warcraft*. Blizzard Entertainment. PC/Mac.

Borroff, M. (2011). Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. *The Gawain Poet Complete Works*. W. W. Norton & Company.

Bogost, I. (2008). Unit operations: An approach to videogame criticism. MIT Press.

Cambrensis, G. (1978). *The journey through wales and the description of wales*. Penguin Books.

Geoffrey of Monmouth. (1966). The history of the kings of Britain. Penguin Books.

Heijmen, N. & Vervoort, J. (2023). It's not always about you: The subject and ecological

entanglement in video games. *Games and Culture*, *18*(1), 1-18. https://doi org/10.1177/15554120231179261

Macauley, D. (2011). *Elemental philosophy*. Suny Press.

Morton, T. (2013). *Realist magic: Objects, ontology, causality*. London: Open Humanities Press.

Morton, T. (2010). Queer Ecology. *PMLA 125*(2), 273-282. https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2010.125.2.273

Rudd, G. (2007). *Greenery: Ecocritical Readings of Late Medieval English Literature*. Manchester University Press.

Simkins, D. W., & Steinkuehler, C. (2008). Critical ethical reasoning and role-play. *Games and Culture*, *3*(3-4), 333-355. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412008317313

Smith, M. (2011). *Against ecological sovereignty: Ethics, biopolitics, and saving the natural world*. University of Minnesota Press.

Wace. (2003). *Roman de Brut*. Project Gutenberg.

Yates, J. (2002). Towards a theory of agentive drift; or, a particular fondness for oranges circa 1597. *Parallax 8*(1), 47-58.