Developing an ecocentric mind-set through exploration and role-play within online virtual worlds

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Our species is increasingly disconnected from nature – such that even references to other forms of life in our popular media have diminished greatly (Kesebir and Kesebir, 2017). Put simply, one cannot conserve something about which one does not know. How, then, can an ecocentric worldview be cultivated in those isolated physically and emotionally from nature? I suggest that one way this can occur is through participation in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games (MMORPGs) – which can act as model worlds in which players, through participation in a shared planetary story, become emotionally invested.

My first encounter with the world of Azeroth in the MMORPG World of Warcraft, as a thirteen-year-old with no connection to nature, was a profoundly transformative experience. Rebirth into the Yggdrasil-inspired land of Teldrassil – a mountain-sized tree within whose branches whole villages and glistening lakes sit – brought feelings of vastness and wonderment (Fig. 1). But it was my metamorphosis into one of the ancient, nature-attuned Night Elf race which stirred in me an appreciation of the rustic, the storied and the ephemeral. This experience brought forth outward-looking and non-anthropocentric modes of thought, which I would have otherwise never accessed.

While my receptiveness and willingness to escape into the in-game world may have strengthened this effect, studies have illustrated how mental wellbeing can be increased through virtual nature emphasizing diverse aesthetic and acoustic elements (Valtchanov *et al.*, 2010; Hoppmann, 2021).



Figure 1. Teldrassil, a forest region in World of Warcraft designed to introduce Night Elf neophytes to Azeroth (see copyright statement at end of article).

Despite the low-fidelity graphics of games at that time, it was enough to explore a space seemingly more pleasant and at peace than my own, even if monsters roamed the wilds. If this sounds saccharine to you, I contend along with philosopher Roger Scruton that "Beauty speaks to us not of things that we want, but of things that we ought to want, because human nature requires them" (Scruton, 2011: 123). Scruton depicts us as a species innately desirous of harmony and freedom, and his words ring true when one considers how, once we have made a connection with nature, we often seek solace in its vastness and quietude.

It may be tempting to think I was already appreciative of nature in some way, but it was the richness and splendour of this virtual world alone that did the work. As a *tabula rasa*, I had to be shown the beauty and value of nature; World of Warcraft was what allowed me to see. Indeed, I am able to trace the following development in my early journeys. First, there was only an external awareness of play as I learned the game's controls; next came attachment to the Night Elf persona through interaction with items such as herbs and pelts, as well as with others of my race; this developed into an intrinsic drive to explore glens, groves and shrines within the local environment; later, discovering new landscapes and species gave a fuller appreciation of a grander world-picture; and, finally, a sense of the importance of Azeroth as a living world to be experienced for its own sake.

As the years went on, the fantastical environments and peoples I encountered made me strive for something more and served as a direct call to action. Having stepped out of Plato's Cave, as it were, I became aware of the existence of green spaces in the real world; the desire to explore Azeroth was transposed to my homeland of Scotland. When I started volunteering at reserves and country parks, I sought to emulate the sensibilities not only of my Night Elf counterpart, but those of a cast of non-player characters – wise elders and

principled heroes – who had in them a spark of the ecocentric. The meaning I found within the fantasy world became my meaning in the real world and the two were mutually enhanced. Instead of battling fire demons to save charring forests, I planted trees; and learning the in-game Herbalism profession turned into plant identification skills. Melded into all of this was a budding interest in heritage, which had been kindled by Night Elf lifestyles and architecture and, more broadly, the many venerable cultures, races and species to be found across Azeroth, all deserving of understanding and preservation. This applied even to creatures like sentient spiders and wolves which, though largely hostile, had their own languages and customs, and could sometimes voice their concerns about environmental catastrophe.

Passage into other worlds with which I could feel as one had been my *Ur*-passion. The Lord of the Rings Online, for example, infused Tolkien's love of nature by promoting professions such as scholarship, forestry and farming, again potentially opening one's eyes to the existence of such fields and concerns. In the case of World of Warcraft, what started as uncritical gaming to while away the hours before the next school day became a source of creativity and inspiration. It is a testament to the power of virtual spaces that, having been directed by the game to seek and care for nature in my own small way, I still devoted time to the contemplation of its landscapes. Whether the rolling plains of Mulgore or the snowy peaks of Dun Morogh, I would spend hours soaking in the ambience of these places, observing their ecological diversity, and wishing my own world could be more like Azeroth. Scruton (2018) argues similarly that the consolation of imaginary things is not nullified because they are imaginary, evoking Tolkien (2014) himself, who suggests that escape is not to be scorned as hollow fancy but seen as a tool for evaluating one's own world from the perspective of another.

Though the nature focus of World of Warcraft is present only in respect to a selection of its imagined locations and races, there has always been a focus on participatory striving in a majestic world and a sense of connectedness between players because of their shared status as inhabitants of Azeroth. This community focus is most strongly seen on those servers dedicated to role-play, wherein players act out their fabricated personas and take part in themed events (Fig. 2). Certainly, the fantasy MMORPG is especially well-placed to instil a world-aware and ecocentric mind-set since these games often exhibit massive, awe-inspiring realms much larger than (but still important to) oneself. Bainbridge (2010) suggested that they allow for meaningful contact with varied ecologies and cultures, as well as giving players the opportunity to take part in societal movements (Fig. 3). Furthermore, MMORPGs fully employ the principle of embodied experience – understanding a world from the inside – and the rhetorical-communicative nature of existence within these worlds, where player consequences matter, may help promote ecocentric thinking (England, 2015). Indeed, the upcoming MMORPG Ashes of Creation promises a highly dynamic system allowing players' choices quite literally to shape their surroundings and societies. In this sense, environments are not always mere backdrops for adventures.



Figure 2. A large-scale event held on a popular role-playing server in the Night Elf capital of Darnassus where players representing various factions gathered to discuss an impending threat to Azeroth (see copyright statement at end of article).

Having said all of this, I still remain wary of suggesting time-intensive and addictive MMORPGs as a means of instilling ecocentrism. It is telling that my own adventures in Azeroth lasted from 2006 to 2019, albeit with considerable periods of disenchantment. One reason for this is that, despite advances in technology increasing the complexity of gameplay, most MMORPGs remain wedded to a rather simplistic, even juvenile, 'frontier' ethos. Nonhuman animals, plants and minerals – made artificially prolific to accommodate thousands of players – are treated as disposable entities to be gathered or destroyed for power-advancing equipment. This gameplay loop unfortunately



Figure 3. Here the guild 'Tree and Leaf Travel', formed by the author for likeminded adventurers to study flora and fauna, discuss an expedition through the Redridge Mountains (see copyright statement at end of article).

ties advancement to resource consumption. I suggest, however, that such systems are merely hangovers from old business models and the result of unimaginative design based on faux medieval tropes. Little about the genre suggests MMORPGs always need to operate in such ways.

Less gamification and a focus on more pro-social systems which emphasize exploration and role-play between players in immersive settings would be highly beneficial. Worlds in which creatures are more wondrous because of their scarcity, and where player reputation is tied to how they treat other beings, must surely be a boon. And though still potentially affirming anthropocentrism, the nuanced acquisition of resources may yet allow players to see nature as fundamentally sustaining. In all, I would like to see MMORPGs that are more akin to experimental social simulations rather than mechanics-heavy games. Designers could even take from 'walking simulators' such as Firewatch, as well as inventive nature experiences such as Shelter, Flower and Cloud Gardens (Fig. 4). Imagine players as seedheads or songbirds, for example.

There remains, however, another serious argument against my case: the risk of players valuing the virtual over the real world (Layfield, 2017). Though these games may only be suitable for, and liable to work upon, those already of a conscientious disposition (as hinted at by Glennon, 2016), avenues exist whereby instant-gratification mechanisms and power fantasies can be tempered, perhaps even turned outward to an appreciation of our world. Since the pull of surrogate nature can only extend so far, lack of sensory feedback may eventually instil the desire for a genuine connection with real spaces. Furthermore, the inescapable knowledge of game-playing must impart an understanding that the unreal world has been modelled on something greater, another incentive to know our planet more fully. This could be as simple as an enthusiast realizing that their chosen game's art and design has – indeed, can only have – Earth-inspired sources. And although I maintain that otherworldly

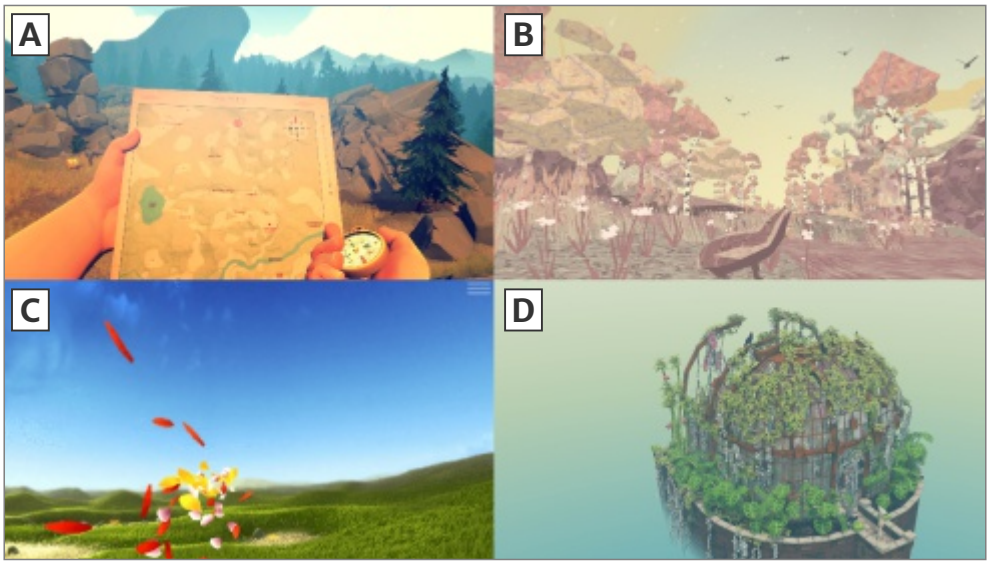


Figure 4. [A] Firewatch, [B] Shelter, [C] Flower, and [D] Cloud Gardens.

depictions of natural beauty can provide a heightened sense of wonder, I wish to clarify that real nature is superlative since virtual nature, however fantastic, cannot by definition exist.

I therefore concede that an MMORPG need not necessarily be set within a secondary world to instil an ecocentric mind-set. Through comparison with a version of Earth shown to have flourishing ecosystems and human communities living in tune with their surroundings, knowledge of Earth's marred state can be delivered more directly, initiating a process of awakening. Similarly, one's adventurous avatar itself could grow into an aspirational image and emulated by a player's becoming fit and active out of doors. Finally, lasting digital relationships do often materialize in the real world, for example at meetups and conventions.

Though I no longer play other genres of video games, MMORPGs and the idea of virtual worlds still fascinate me because of their benefits, and I credit my time in Azeroth with helping me on the path toward becoming an ecologist and imbued with a broad conservation ethic. I certainly do not mean to diminish the value of real-world forms of engagement such as forest schools and wilderness skills courses, but sometimes the virtual is all that one has. At the very least, exposure to beautiful representations of nature, even if unreal, might help another young person, if they ever find themselves in a lightless plantation or beside a polluted stream, ask why it must be this way and how can they help.

Copyright statement for Figures 1, 2 and 3

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