

Queering Game Environments

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Queer game studies has grown considerably in recent years, including studies of queer play (Shaw, 2014; Chang, 2017), temporality (Lo, 2017), and form (Chess, 2016; Ruberg, 2019), yet the majority of work in the field remains focused on queer characters and their narratives, despite the existence of explicitly queer spaces and locations in games since the 1980s (Shaw, 2016). This paper argues that closer attention to game environments and their connections to ecocriticism and environmental studies would yield new possibilities for finding and cultivating queerness in games, particularly given the medium's reliance on virtual space and heavy carbon footprint in actual space (Schatz, 2018). To demonstrate this, the paper focuses on two popular indie video games, *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* (The Astronauts 2014) and *Night in the Woods* (Infinite Fall 2017), that illustrate how natural environments in games can become sites of threatening and even violent queerness that resists both heteronormative family structures and romanticized notions of nature.

Both games are set in declining or abandoned rust belt towns where working class families are struggling to survive and nature is reclaiming many of the buildings. In both games the queer protagonists find the environment increasingly oppressive and suffocating, with heteronormative family expectations making home toxic on the one hand and a foreboding, supernatural presence in the surrounding nature threatening to kill them on the other. The environment becomes more and more dangerous at the same time that the games' queer characters are increasingly forced to reckon with their genders, sexualities, families, and identities, suggesting that the queerness of the natural environment is directly related to the queerness of the protagonists in their families and towns. The games thus point to nature (especially the woods and wilderness) as a source of queerness that is both dangerous

and potentially liberatory--a place where what is hidden is revealed and where heteronormative family structures are upended, but often through violence and death.

The Vanishing of Ethan Carter and *Night in the Woods* exemplify how games can create queer natural environments in virtual spaces that highlight both potential and danger. Such environments can provide space for playing with (and queering!) identities, social relations, and cultural values, even as they continue to present both fictional and actual threats for queer players.

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