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Fear of the Unknown: 'Negative Presence' of Nature in the Pools Video Game

Abstract

The Finnish video game Pools (sometimes stylized as POOLS; a Tensori and UNIKAT label, 2024) is a game of the walking simulator and horror genre. It gives a first-person perspective of a labyrinth-like pool(s), with no conventional story with protagonists or antagonists. However, the sense of fear is undeniably present, which can be partly explained by the visible absence of humans and nature. We explore the so-called 'negative presence of nature,' which is defined as the absence of nature and its contribution to the sense of fear while playing. We attempt to explain how the absence of nature and the simulation of a "normal" yet visibly and obviously abnormal environment and surroundings, even the life/living/existing in the virtual world, contribute to a sense of uneasiness and dread. The main focus of the paper is on the Pools video game, but we also offer a comparison of Pools and Greenhouse (7D Games Studio, currently in development), especially the similarities in style and intended message..

Keywords: fear, unknown, Pools (video game), Greenhouse (video game), negative presence (of nature), anthropocentric vs. biocentric perspective

1. Introduction

Video games provide an excellent platform to explore new experiences within our everyday cultural practices. As a modern form of puberty initiation, games offer a functional equivalent to the moralistic educational practices found in nineteenth-century fairy tales. These tales allowed young people to navigate temptations as a means of becoming virtuous individuals within their cultural

contexts. Similarly, video game players assume the role of neophytes, undergoing simulated initiation challenges to achieve a more experienced, mature state of being.

This part of the analysis explores how maturation and life experiences unfold in an era defined by green and digital transformative experiences and temptations. Can new moral values—such as bioethics, ecohabitus, and ecocentrism as opposed to anthropocentrism—be transmitted to the public through popular video games? Or do video games primarily reflect an anthropocentric worldview in contemporary society? Alenda Y. Chang, the author of *Playing Nature*, argues that “*Playing Nature* proposes new methods and objects for environmental inquiry through ecologically minded engagement with the imaginative worlds of contemporary gaming” (*Playing Nature* 1). According to her, it prompts game researchers to widen the typical scope of their work, while at the same time inviting scholars in the environmental humanities and sciences to approach previously dismissed cultural forms in a more serious way. She also argues that this can offer a theoretical framework that can dictate new directions in game design. In an age when scientists, activists, and educators often struggle to convey the scale and urgency of global ecological crises, video games remain an underused medium. According to Chang, they have the potential to foster meaningful prospects in creating a simulation of ecological systems and lets players imagine a wide range of ecological futures (*Playing Nature* 16).

Florice does not share the same opinion and argues that “[g]ames have a long history of being used not only for entertainment but also for instrumental purposes such as education, behavior change and even psychotherapy” (126). A recent trend is using games to increase awareness regarding environmental issues, explain the complex impact of human activities on nature, foster the active involvement of citizens with these issues, and facilitate the development and implementation of sustainable alternatives.^[1] However, it is worth noting that “[a] variety of material and digital game types have been proposed as candidates for achieving these goals but they are still far from achieving any sizable impact in terms of changing awareness and behavior towards sustainability” (Florice 126). These newer approaches to video games show the medium has potential in promoting sustainability transitions, and that a part of this potential is being put into action.

This paper deals with ‘negative presence of nature’ in the video game Pools, comparing it to the video game Greenhouse (currently in development)—both of which are games of the walking simulator genre. Video games of this genre often provoke contradictory sentiments and experiences in gamers. Citing Gernot Böhme’s phenomenological concept of the atmosphere, Aller argues that games of these genres

can produce uncanny atmospheres through genre-specific traits such as: 1) the subversion of hegemonic game mechanics and player roles; 2) the use of solitary protagonists; 3) a lack of NPCs; 4) a focus on small, interior game spaces (particularly the space of the home); and, finally, 5) a preference for emergent narratives (conveyed through the material world) that entail a spatiotemporal pattern of subversion (Aller 179).

According to her, the protagonist of these video games is usually an ordinary person that explores a small (usually interior) space in which the material world is symbolically charged, whereby “[t]heir journey often entails a return to the home space, a confrontation with a resurfacing past, and a struggle with (both individual and collective) identity” (Aller 189).

Kagen argues that “[w]alking [s]imulators are exploratory, nonviolent video games without points, goals, or tasks, in which the undying, third-person player character (PC) wanders around a narratively rich space” (2). The term ‘walking simulator’ originally emerged as a dismissive insult, aimed at belittling games that lacked violence, traditional objectives, or great difficulty. This criticism reflected a broader frustration within gamer culture, particularly toward the critics and players who appreciated these types of games—sentiments that played a significant role in the #GamerGate controversy. However, over the past decade, the label ‘walking simulator’ has evolved. It is now widely used to describe games that explore alternative forms of expression, embodiment, environmental interaction, orientation, and community. Today, the genre sparks ongoing conversations about anti-game aesthetics, shifts in gamer demographics, and the transformative potential of spatial, poetic storytelling within video games.

Walking simulators are frequently praised for their rich visuals and immersive atmospheres, leading some commentators to argue that games of this genre are particularly well-suited for conveying horror and mystery narratives. Others have used the term ‘first-person explorer’ to

highlight what they believe is the genre's preferred mode of player-environment interaction. Even though some walking simulators have the quality of being contemplative, some of them still need a backstory to make walking interesting and/or engaging. In case the story is lacking, video game developers use different strategies to keep players engaged—with mechanisms of anticipation, engaging background music or sounds, and by keeping the player guessing what will happen next, or whether anything will happen at all.

Nowadays, video games of this genre are a form of art that allows freedom of expression, and some video games offer previously unprecedented ways of portraying an idea, a story, or even creatively presenting a world without a conventional story. Some unconventional stories challenge our understanding of contemporary challenges, like how we approach questions regarding nature, how we treat it, and whether we, as human beings, sometimes take it for granted. Video games present alternative realities where nature is not visible or present, and this challenges the player to virtually experience a possibility that might one day translate into real life. Sometimes, this kind of disappearance of something we currently, so to speak, have in abundance, makes us wonder how we would approach a life without something that seems so essential, something that is always a given, and something that constitutes life as we know it.

If we want to understand the contemporary position of human beings in their cultural environment, we need to take into consideration how video games affect players and how this has changed throughout the years. Despite the old belief that playing video games makes players asocial, nowadays, a lot of games, including board games, card games, and other forms of social gaming, can be played collectively, both in virtual spaces as well as in "real life." Stojanović believes that the problem with new media lies in eroding the previously shared social context within interactions between people, as well as in the concomitant loss of 'corporeality' as the primary reference point that forms the authenticity and identity of people during their communication (41). However, despite this, virtual spaces give players novel identities or forms of existence that exist only within these mediated spaces and under the rules exclusive to them. Even though a player was once seen as sort of Steppenwolf that needed to be reintegrated back into society, and today even into nature, nowadays, playing games is a lifestyle, a choice, sometimes even a profession. Virtual spaces with new ecological experiments could offer insight into potential future outcomes—the

state of the world, the state of nature (its preservation), and the humans' role in it. Games, gaming, and playing in general offer new challenges and new topics to think about and explore, especially in terms of how we approach questions regarding nature and the so-called 'negative presence of nature' in some video games. Video games nowadays form a distinct or unique cultural ecology in which relationships between humans and nature are being reimagined. Contemporary gaming shows that virtual environments now operate as meaningful cultural spaces where new models of social interaction, identity formation, and ecological reimagining take place. Humans as players do not need to be physically present in nature to experience it. These virtual spaces do not always merely imitate nature but offer critical models through which players can explore potential future scenarios and confront, in advance, the possibility of an actual 'negative presence of nature.' Thus, video games can be seen as sort of 'prophetic tool' that enables players not only to witness what might happen in the future, but also to plan their actions accordingly.

'Negative presence of nature' can be explained as the obvious absence of nature, which is what constitutes one of the several fear-inducing elements in some games, especially in those of the horror genre. Absence of nature is substituted with proxies of nature—inanimate objects, plants, sounds that resemble nature but are not part of nature or are not "natural" in the strict sense of the word. This strategy is implemented to create a "homely" feeling in a supposedly (and not always obviously) hostile environment. With this, fear is constantly present but takes a back seat and lingers in the background of the action that the protagonist takes while being distracted, in a controlled way (by the game's director or developers), which makes the questions or issues surrounding free choice and free will questionable. Even when a game belongs to the walking simulator genre, movement is always limited within the space designed for moving. And what is remarkable about the Pools video game is the encapsulation of the player in a world that looks endless only on the surface; in reality, this world is compressed, made believable as natural and real, made to look human, thus leaving the impression that it is less dangerous simply because it looks human. It is relatively easy to start forgetting the absence of nature in a world where anticipation takes over and in a world that presents itself as unique and simple, but is, in fact, complex in its own ways.

2. Fear and ‘Negative Presence’ of Nature in the Pools Video Game

The Finnish video game *Pools* (sometimes stylized as *POOLS*, a Tensori and UNIKAT label, 2024) is a game of the walking simulator and horror genre. It has seven chapters, and each can last from 10 to 30 minutes. It presents a VHS found footage of a first-person perspective/exploration of a labyrinth-like pool(s). There is no conventional story with protagonists or antagonists. However, the sense of fear is undeniably present, which can be partly explained by the obvious absence of humans and nature.

Inspired by liminal space imagery, *Pools* explores the ‘negative presence of nature,’ one of the main mechanisms that drives fear in this game. Fear of what is supposedly absent, except for the obvious presence of water; fear of what has caused the protagonist (a term here used loosely) to be encapsulated or imprisoned in seemingly endless arrays of pools; fear of the sensed but not entirely seen presence of someone else in the pool(s)—these things are what *Pools* is mostly about. What also feeds fear is the obvious presence of humanoid sculptures, supposed to mimic someone else’s presence in the endless world of just water. And yet, the player is somehow intuitively aware that this, or “their” presence, is simulated, made to look realistic, as if to offer a kind of comfort that not everything around the player is artificial or staged. The sense that the player is trapped is obvious in the episode where they witness a ladder being pulled inside the wall where it was previously positioned, as if to signify that the last route of exit or escape is now officially lost, and that the player has no other choice but to roam around and look for other ways or means to exit. On the other hand, if the game is considered to be a walking simulator with no obvious story, then why would an escape be needed in the first place? It is because of the sense of dread, of something ‘negative’ (or unnatural), which is constantly expected to happen, yet it never truly happens the way the player expects it, of something surprising and anticipated. And these surprising episodes do, in fact, happen, but they are very subtle on the scale of provoked or experienced fear. They are presented through the grotesque scenes of submerged toilets, sculptures of human-like faces contorted in pain and agony. There is also a scene where the player somehow miraculously exits the pool and finds themselves in a simulated town which has a

function to emulate reality, real life, and nature. However, the cartoonish way in which this “normal” town is presented, as if drawn by a child’s hands, alerts the player that something is odd, that the fear has changed, that it has evolved and has shifted from the abnormality of the pool reality, to another, different, abnormal reality (which looks and is presented on the surface as harmless)^[2]

Pools offers an inverted image or presentation of what Van As defines as games that “simulate real-world environments” (7), even though it highlights the possibility of the game itself to be seen as a sort of “experimentation” in terms of the environment the protagonist is being “put” in. The game offers a sort of apocalyptic view of what life would be like if nature was destroyed, absent, or replaced with a simulacrum. Since contemporary humans are used to the presence (and the importance of this presence) of nature, they are not used to life without nature; in this sense, Pools offers a frightening experience of what this kind of reality might look like. This scenario can be seen as experimentation with what the player would or could feel if such a scenario ever takes place.

According to Van As,

The room for experimentation results in two affordances of video games that further emphasizes the utility of video games in thinking about complex problems like climate change. On the one hand the room for experimentation makes video games very active: players must actively participate and become part of the action; therefore, they can influence the scenario in the video game ... On the other hand, the interactivity encourages players to be both creative and strategic in coming up with solutions to problems. (17)

Spors et al. share a similar opinion and believe that the interactive capabilities and affective affordances of games can set the frame for portraying nature in them and that these representations can take on very different forms, all with their own implications.

Nature can be used as a prop for environmental storytelling, it can [be] featured as an aesthetic backdrop to signpost the edges of the game world, or it can be a core tenet of the game’s theme ... Games can also allow us to experience and relate to scenarios, situations and characters that may not be possible or accessible for us in real-life— including flora, fauna and other non-humans, that escape an easy, binary categorisation ...” (11)

However, can we even discuss interactivity in Pools? The challenge with Pools is that there is no place for real action. If there is no story to begin with, then all action is unneeded and redundant. It seems that a “catastrophe” had already happened (i.e., the end of nature as we know it), and the player is simply experiencing a possible aftermath of what life might look like after such an event had taken place. There is no space for correcting past mistakes, no space to become better and more aware of what humans can do to stop such an event from happening; there is just the feeling of absence and how this absence shapes this new life that continuously feels forced, unnatural, like an involuntary and yet mandatory existence without the possibility of change (for the better). And, in fact, the player does get a sense of relief when they approach what is considered a seeming exit from the pool nightmare, only to discover a plot twist in which it is revealed that the whole gameplay was a story which a second party, an unknown spectator, has been watching this whole time (the found VHS subgenre of the horror genre):^[3] Such ending makes the game even more bizarre because it removes all previous possibilities for something better to happen—an escape to a better life, or a more logical one, where the protagonist is not constantly “caged” in catacomb-like pools.

The world of Pools is simultaneously picture-perfect but also odd, abnormal, too technical, and too clean. The absence of nature—which often gives a sense of peace and calm in video games that offer open world exploration—is missing here, and its absence is changed by the constant feeling of dread and expectation—for something unknown to happen, for the exit to present itself, for the fear to resolve. Nature is not only almost completely absent from the scenery, but it seems as if everything else relating to nature, including animals, is extracted or “taken out,” for the purpose of creating a completely “safe” (or rather too clinical) environment for the protagonist, an environment where they can freely roam around with no external dangers in sight. The sense of danger or the unknown lurking behind the corners can be a projection of the player’s own insecurity or expectation that something needs to happen—players of horror games are used to the so-called “jump scares,” or plot twists, or unexpected endings (and we find all of these in Greenhouse), so Pools only surprises with a disappointing ending which nullifies all previous hypotheses of what might have been going on in the whole playing process. But real “jump scares” or plot twists (there is no plot in the first place) are absent.

Citing Kellert and Willson (1993), Truong et al. mention the 'biophilia hypothesis,' according to which "people have an inherent inclination to affiliate with nature which can improve physical and mental health, productivity, and well-being" (2). In their thorough study of the landscapes in the video game *World of Warcraft*, they conclude that "the preference of players for a virtual green environment was not related to any individual characteristics, notably his or her connectedness with nature. This general attractiveness for green regions is also consistent with the biophilia hypothesis [Kellert and Wilson, 1993; Wilson, 1984], which argues that human beings inherently tend to have an affiliation with nature, which may be nearly universal" (Truong et al. 10). Precisely in this may lie the answer to why Pools can be an anxiety-inducing experience—there is seemingly nothing "normal" in the player's surroundings, and yet everything is normal at the same time. The duration of the game is what contributes to the experience of the bizarre—if the game was shorter, we could approach it as a simple walk around the corridors of a swimming pool. However, the walk seems endless (even though this is just a feeling and everything is still controlled), with no objective or exit in sight, so it seems as if the protagonist is purposefully captured and put in a closed space so the hypothetical spectators could examine how one would act and react in such an environment and what kind of behaviour such imprisonment would provoke. The player seems as if captured and forced to witness peculiar happenings, such as the random painting that seemingly portrays nothing specifically yet is found in the middle of the never-ending corridors of pools.

In his review of the game, Boyd writes that "[e]ven just the simplicity of the white tiled texture that covers the walls and floors becomes hypnotic after staring at it for an extended period of time to the point that you can almost smell the chlorine. The mundanity of the environment brings an equal sense of both nostalgic familiarity and a palpable cold loneliness simultaneously" (Boyd, par. 6). According to Chang, "nature and technology are for most people mutually exclusive realms" ("Games" 57). Quoting Richard Louv, she writes that that generations born since the 1970s are increasingly victims to what he calls "nature-deficit disorder" ("Games" 57). She poses the hypothesis that all computer and console games are environments but that not all games are environmental, since: "Most games commit at least one if not all of the following missteps in their realization of in-game environments: relegating environment to background scenery, relying on

stereotyped landscapes, and predicating player success on extraction and use of natural resources” (“Games” 58). Pools is an obvious exception to this because the player not only cannot interact with anything around them, but there is no real “natural” environment to begin with. The only actions they can partake in is sliding on waterslides which are located all over the game, and this action can only add to the absurdity of the gameplay and our experience of this virtual world—being trapped in a world from which there is no escape, a world that makes no sense, a world which is silent and yet screams constant danger. Perhaps part of the feeling of danger consists in the “task” (the neediness) of the player to squeeze through narrow spaces and this is where the game, as Boyd suggests, “capitalizes on the common fears of claustrophobia and agoraphobia, presenting both vast, wide open rooms and impossibly tight spaces that the player has to squeeze through; sometimes these are even thrown at the player one after the other” (Boyd par. 10). The photorealistic quality of Pools, except for the ending, also contributes to the sense of fear—the player can actually imagine themselves being trapped in such a space where there is no air to breathe, no sky above them or greenery to offer comfort. The visual rhetoric is polysemic—it can mean everything and nothing at the same time; it can point both to the absurdity of the absence of nature, the absurdity of a quest that seemingly does not have a clear beginning, middle, or end, and it can portray escaping as a survival mechanism in a situation or setting that invokes sense of being in danger.

In comparison to Pools, where the player is not faced with imminent danger, the setting in the video game Greenhouse is somewhat different, and the elements of horror are unmistakable, not just in the atmosphere but also in the storyline. The game starts in a seemingly innocent way, with an unknown protagonist who claims he is being drawn to the newly open place which the player learns is built as or at least has parts of a greenhouse. The protagonist takes on the role to investigate why the newly opened place has been shut down and why its caretaker seemingly disappeared. The player is allowed to explore abandoned corridors, “clean” looking spaces where everything seems tidy and untouched, modern-looking galleries that only steadily unravel the horrors that lie ahead. Unlike in Pools, in Greenhouse, the serene, walking-sim style of exploration of the endless rooms and spaces is being interrupted either by entities such as the zombie-like Groundkeeper or by insects (spiders) from which the protagonist must shield themselves by using

a spray. So, this space, unlike Pools, is rich with nature but also interactive—there are trees almost everywhere, and the weather can be interactively changed by using different objects (touching sunglasses changes or evokes summer weather; touching an umbrella causes rain; but also, random flashbacks occur, usually of crimes, when a pipe or something else connected to a possible, suspected crime is randomly touched). Greenhouse is defined as a psychological and atmospheric horror adventure game but both games offer a so-called ‘liminal horror experience’ because they combine elements of atmospheric tension and psychological unease. However, in Greenhouse, there is a reason for fear—the protagonist can be captured and seemingly “eaten” by the Groundkeeper, which marks the end of the game, while this is not the case with Pools. In the latter, the anticipation of something happening is constantly present, and this is the main driver of fear. Similarly to Pools, albeit more realistically and less theatrically, human figures are being drawn on the floor, as if to depict a crime scene. These scenes of analepsis could point to the tragic ending of the game, in which the player learns that the protagonist has died in the greenhouse and that the whole exploration has been something like a feverish dream. This sort of realism pierces the evidently calm, serene, and picture-perfect atmosphere in the greenhouse, representing how human presence and human actions disturb nature.

Environmental storytelling is one of the key aspects shared by both, and the liminal spaces they portray are presented as a combination of both beauty and dread, tension and expectation/anticipation, the familiar and the uncanny.

3. Conclusion

The “controlled” presence of nature in the video games Pools and Greenhouse—in the sense that nature seems to be an installation, an add-on to the surrounding environment as a way to make the player feel that they are in a “natural” as opposed to an artificial setting, and as a way to trick them that beautiful looking nature equals safety— could indicate the intrinsic need of human beings to be surrounded by substitutes for nature, in the eventual inability to be in direct touch with natural things or to be physically present in nature. It could indicate new dynamic lifestyles of contemporary humans that are often too busy to spend time in nature, but could also indicate being safe and shielded in closed spaces (nature being seen as a dangerous chronotope). Both games—

Pools more than Greenhouse—emphasize testing how human beings would act and feel in a habitat that imitates nature but one that is man-made and too carefully planned to look and feel genuine or “natural.”

This interpretation of Pools is not flawless, and a great deal of its flaws lie in the predominant anthropocentric perspective of interpreting the plot (or the lack thereof). This can be surpassed by applying a ‘biocentric viewpoint,’ a term that Jayaraman explains as “something that respectfully assigns all life forms equal value” (3). As players, we have no clue who or what is being “trapped” inside the pool, or if it really is trapped in the first place. We do not see our extension of the ego in the virtual world, which might as well be an animal, a robot, or a member of another species (that we might not even be familiar with). The sense of danger and fear is something that we, as humans, project onto the virtual landscape, and not something that is objectively there, present and visible. Does a monster really know that it is a monster, or is it one because it poses a danger to others? Writing about the video game Kholat, Dimovska poses this question in relation to the protagonist of the mentioned video game which is also unknown to the player and could well be the monster said to have killed the mountaineers of the Dyatlov group (168). In a similar fashion, the protagonist of Pools could be someone or something that does not feel threatened or endangered in the environment in which it finds itself, or dwells in. For it, the exploration of the pools might as well be an enlightening, freeing experience.

The examples of the video games Pools and Greenhouse complicate the visibility or the importance of the negative presence of nature, rather than negating it. In both games, the player’s primary focus is oriented toward uncertainty, survival, and the search for an exit. The emphasis is on movement through space, but this movement, even though seemingly linear, is driven by disorientation rather than ecological awareness. What can be called “nature” or “natural” in both games, although present, remains largely peripheral—its threatening or unsettling qualities recede into the background as the urgency of (supposedly human) life takes precedence. In this sense, the negative presence of nature is not absent but strategically displaced, and functions as a subdued backdrop against which the player’s struggle for survival unfolds. This kind of focus shift puts human life, or other humanoid lives—rather than nature’s agency—at the core of movement,

plot, and ending, thereby showing that negative presence can operate precisely through its partial obscurity.

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[1] For a recent review see Stanitsas, Kirypoulos and Vareilles 2019.

[2] This is not new and has been previously done in the game *Escape the Backrooms* (Fancy Games, 2022), and probably in other games of the same or similar genre as well.

[3] The motif of a found VHS, most often accidentally, is present both in films and video games. It is characterized by the discovery of recorded material that drives the narrative of the film or the game and, most importantly, shapes or influences the viewer's or player's perspective and understanding of the plot or its ending.



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