MAKING SPACE IN THE ANTHROPOCENE: 17776, (UN)WORLDING, AND

SPECULATIVE FICTION

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THESIS ABSTRACT

Making Space in the Anthropocene: 17776, (Un)Worlding, and Speculative Fiction

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Ecocrticism has often prioritized the reversal or resistance of ecological collapse, often articulating a desire to return to a pre-Anthropocene moment. However, ecocriticsm does not often articulate a way of being present with ecological catastrophe. This is crucial given that climate change has already begun to reshape our world and way of life. I argue that the theoretical framework of "unworlding" provides a model of being-with catastrophe. I argue that ecocriticsm should be attuned, not to worldbuilding narratives, but the ways in which these narratives unworld our world. Speculative fiction and genre fiction contribute to the opening up of ecological possibility by acknowledging the mesh of ecology and calling attention to the objects that occupy the space of ecology. "Something is terribly wrong." This is the opening of the digital serial *17776*, a multimedia, experimental work of fiction released on sbnation.com. The initial page, a feigned sports journalism article erupts into a sprawling narrative in which humans no longer die, they are immortal. To pass the time, humans play "open-world" style football games. The use of games in the text contributes to unworlding. Specificially, the use of gaming in the narrative allegorizes the experience of reading speculative fiction, the creation of worlds that expose the mesh of ecology. The use of gaming at the level of form unworlds the world for the reader through upending traditional readerly

expectations. Gaming is a mechanic of unworlding. Speculative fiction and gaming share

a relationship in that they are worldbuilding activities and both call attention to the mesh

of ecology. Both are acts of unworlding. Ecocrticism would benefit from a broader

consideration of speculative fiction for its ability to contribute to a process of unworlding,

a necessary theoretical framework for living in and through the Anthropocene and

ecological catastrophe.

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Section I: *Something is Terribly Wrong*

Fashioned with a clickbait title, "What Football Will Look Like in the Future"

appears at first glance to be an utterly normal Internet news article. The title even

suggests what a concerned football fan might enter into Google, curious about the future

of the sport they love. However, this article is not what it appears to be. The entirety of

the article reads:

> It's clear that the sport of football needs to change. And the $64,000
> question, my friends, is simple: "how?" Something is terribly wrong. The
> writing's on the wall: youth participation in the sport is down, thanks in
> large part to their parents' concern for their health.
> In recent years, the NFL has something is terribly wrong. In response to
> numerous clinical studies regarding something is terribly wrong, the
> league has taken action — and something is terribly wrong. Oh no.
> Something is terribly wrong.[1]

As the reader scrolls down the page, the text blows up until the page disintegrates and

becomes entirely illegible. Just before the screen goes entirely black, the reader can see a

single phrase, the last line of the article, repeated over and over: *"[S]omething is terribly*

wrong."[2]

In its disintegration, the feigned sports journalism article becomes the opening of

the digital serial, or rather this is the opening up of the narrative, the first moment when

the work reveals itself to be other than what it initially appears to be. The text erupts into

a sprawling, multimedia work of speculative hypertext fiction that is told in 26 serially-

released chapters through text, video, graphics, sound, and satellite mapping. The

chapters themselves are framed in terms of varying forms of contemporary media. *17776*

explores a future world wherein football is central to American life and playing games

becomes an ontological orientation and this is reflected in *17776*'s formal disruptions which upset traditional reader expectations. In reading the story, the shifting narrative and form propel the reader through the text in response to that opening alarm: if "something is terribly wrong," the reader proceeds through the text in order to uncover what that something is. The reader is made to wonder, "[W]hat is happening?"[3] a question that Timothy Morton uses to point to the philosophical ambiguity and weirdness of ecological disaster. While the reader could understand the text's initial warning as pertaining to the undoing of the narrative and the dissolution of the text, the formal disruptions of *17776* also provide a framework for making sense of another catastrophe: the Anthropocene and the ecological crisis. As a text, *17776* presents a model for being-with ecological disaster as it unfolds rather than the traditional ecocritical model of emphasizing reversal or resistance to catastrophe. After all, it's already here. It's happening. Something is terribly wrong.

In this essay, I will show how *17776* advances a concept that I call "unworlding" at the level of form and narrative, and how this theoretical framework allows for a new relationship to ecological collapse. *17776* accomplishes this unworlding generically through its representation of games as well as its use of games and gameplay to disrupt traditional readerly expectations. In the second section of this essay, "Worlding and Unworlding," I will explore the shortcomings of worlding and worldbuilding narratives for developing an ecocritical framework and the necessity of unworlding. The third section, "Gameplay & *17776*," will show how *17776* exemplifies the theoretical framework of unworlding through the focus on the gameplay of the humans on Earth, as

well as at level of form through "gamic" experimental choices that rupture traditional expectations of text and reader. At the level of narrative, *17776* depicts a world where games have become a primary mode of being in the world. As humans have become immortal, they experience sheer boredom and an ongoing existential crisis. They play games to make sense of their condition, the catastrophe of immortality. Games are the formation of worlds.[4] Games are worldbuilding activities much like speculative literature. The characters of *17776* create worlds to make sense of their immortality and understand their experience. In doing this, they are able to expose the network of ecology thus contributing to the process of unworlding. As this is true, games in the narrative can be understood as allegorical to the experience of reading speculative fiction. At the level of form, the opening dissolution of the text and reemergence of the narrative is a kind of literalization of unworlding and the experience of reading speculative fiction. The text games the reader's expectations through the act of becoming something other than what it initially appears as. The reader is transported through time and space to a new world, highlighting the space between. Additionally, the reader is forced to sit with and experience the destruction of the text, a kind of catastrophe, and reconfigure the relationship required to read the text. This is reinforced throughout *17776* by its multimedia storytelling and experiments with the space of the screen. These choices rupture traditional readerly expectations and demand new forms of reading. Consequently, these ruptures call attention to the network of ecology and contribute to a framework of unworlding for the reader of the text. *17776*'s use of games and gameplay suggest that gaming is a mechanic of unworlding — games create the distance necessary

to expose ecology and call attention to the objects that occupy the space of ecology. The

relationship between gaming and speculative fiction further underscores the capacity for

so-called genre fiction to contribute to a process of unworlding.

In the climactic moment of *17776*, the main character, Nine (a satellite), is

interviewing a human named Nancy McGunnell. Nancy plays football and is currently in

the middle of a game, though on an off-day. Nine wants to know why humans play

football all of the time. Nancy answers Nine's question by stating this:

> The game was always all about the field, of course. The ground, the Earth.
> And it was kind of like, "here. Take this little boring flat grassy rectangle
> and prove you can really know it and understand it."And they spent
> hundreds of years getting to know the Hell out of it. And now, to me,
> football is a further exercise in getting to know and love this world, this
> planet. You know? The actual ground. It's so rich with history, it's just
> embarrassing.[5]

Nancy's quote exemplifies the way in which gameplay in *17776* contribute to unworlding

and the necessity of unworlding generally. For Nancy, games allow players to understand

the space that a game takes place in, thus revealing ecology. Football allows Nancy to

"stay with the trouble"[6] of catastrophe through unworlding. Like football for Nancy,

speculative fiction unworlds the view of the reader. Speculative fiction is valuable to

ecocriticsm because it facilitates unworlding. Unworlding would allow ecocriticsm to

"stay with the trouble" of being-with ecological catastrophe, as something is *already*

terribly wrong.

Section II: *Worlding & Unworlding*

In his book *Anthropocene Fictions*, Adam Trexler clearly articulates the case for the novel as the most appropriate form for the Anthropocene. He explores the ways in which contemporary "literary" novels, contemporary realism, are able to represent some of the consequences of living through the Anthropocene. He argues literary criticism has a responsibility to include the causes and effects of climate change.[7] However, he believes realism is limited in that it cannot speculate on new ways of being, new technology, "new political affiliations,"[8] or generally imagine a future beyond ecological collapse. For this reason, he argues "it seems likely that the most interesting fiction and criticism about the politics of climate change will dwell in the speculative future, inventing new ways of connecting diverse human beings."[9] Others have pointed out how speculative fiction can represent new ways of relating to ecological issues.[10] Trexler makes the case for literary and ecological criticism to broaden its scope beyond "literary" fiction to include so-called genre fiction, such as science-fiction or speculative fiction, for its ability to represent ecologies, climate, and ecological catastrophes.[11] Speculative fiction can represent ecological disaster and new ways of being and organizing culture which are necessary while living through the Anthropocene and on the precipice of ecological disaster. One of the primary ways that speculative genres represent ecological issues is through setting and the construction of novums,[12] alien-worlds, or through building future Earths. World-building is a necessary and significant technique for fiction to represent and discuss climate change. However, many of the existing arguments do not go far enough in detailing the significance of speculative genres in advancing an

ecocritical framework. Speculative genres are inherently ecological through their

construction and the experience they offer the reader regardless of the narrative focus.

World-building narratives always gesture toward an ecological framework.

In this paper, "world" refers to two distinct, but ultimately connected, ideas. There

is the concept of world-building, the production of worlds, as described by science fiction

and speculative writers, the "novums" detailed by science fiction theorist Darko Suvin[13].

Secondly, there is the notion of world as discussed by Donna Haraway and Timothy

Morton via Heidegger, the world as the site of being. Regarding worlds and worlding,

Haraway and Morton have slightly divergent ideas, but both consider world and worlding

in relationship to ecology, and thus inform the overall argument of this paper. In *Staying

with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* Donna Haraway explores the ways that

s-f, (for her, an acronym that refers to science fiction, but also speculative fabulation,

speculative feminism) provides a model for understanding the ways in which humans and

nonhumans are constantly terraforming, or worlding and reworlding their environments.[14]

She claims that "critters," humans and nonhumans, are always engaged in a "material

semiotics," a "being-with" that shapes and reshapes worlds ontologically and

biologically. Companion-species participate in the construction of ways of being, but also

literally reshape the world through their material actions. She writes that these critters

exist in a space called "[T]errapolis," a space that "exists in the SF web of all-too-much

connection."[15] She writes that Terrapolis is "rich in world" and "rich in com-post."[16] For

Haraway, worlds are everywhere, emerging from "naturecultures,"[17] and are always

evolving.

Timothy Morton argues that we need to move beyond the Romantic view of Nature, as something "over-there" through which humanity defines itself. Nature, he claims, never truly existed in the way that it is often thought of, as we are always already in the environment. Morton pushes for a "dark ecology" approach, one that embraces ecology without the concept of Nature.[18] Ecology in this view is the infinite networked, interconnected space that contains all objects and matter. He refers to ecology as the "mesh," as we are perpetually enmeshed in its totality.[19] This informs his claim that the concept of world has become meaningless.[20] Across all of his writings concerned with ecology, Morton has claimed that the concept of world is no longer relevant. In *The Ecological Thought*, he wonders half-ironically if we can even use the word "world" any longer.[21] In *Dark Ecology*, he writes that the very concept of "world" as the "temporality region suffused with human destiny" emerges from a logic which has constructed Nature as elsewhere, an idea Morton previously exposed as fictive and ecologically restrictive. He continues by arguing "world" in the Heideggerian sense is normative — it is contingent upon the exclusion of some beings or objects.[22] World is rendered worthless when the various worlds of nonhumans are considered. World is a humanistic notion, it is an "over-there" for which humans can define themselves against or through, paralleling the discourse of Nature as something we are outside of and apart from. However, like Nature, this notion of the world is a fiction. The world is not waiting on humans to define it — the world is interconnected and always already here and there, even when we are not. Relatedly, for Morton, the end of the biosphere, or ecological disaster brought about by climate change, also ends world as a normative or useful concept. Ecological disaster

forces an ecological awareness, and this means "being unable to kid ourselves that there are realms that are unaffected by our existence."[23] The end of the biosphere collapses the distance between "here" and "there," between humanity and Nature, world and nonworld, and shows the connections between "here" and "there."

Both Haraway and Morton draw on Heidegger's sense of world as "being-in-the-world"[24] but push back against the inherent anthropocentrism of his philosophy. Though Morton declares world meaningless, like Haraway, he is concerned about the way in which world has excluded other beings or objects. Additionally, and most significantly for this particular argument, both Haraway and Morton assert that Heidegger's world is only in relation to the human, when ecology shows us that all beings are part of an interconnected, network. World as it has traditionally been thought of presumes the human capacity to stand outside of the mesh of ecology, but Haraway and Morton both suggest such an idea was never possible and is unethical in our contemporary ecological situation.

Though worldbuilding helps to represent ecological issues and ideas as Trexler and other ecocritics point out, worldbuilding narratives implicitly reinforces the very concept of world, a traditional understanding of the concept of worlding and world that positions humanity outside of ecology. This reaffirms the Romantic conception of Nature as "over-there," an idea that has been rendered mythic and fictional by the prospect of ecological collapse. This understanding of world permeates all culture, including dominant environmentalist discourses, as in the common parlance among ecological thinkers and activists of the "more-than-human world" or "nonhuman world." Though

these phrasings are clearly intended to challenge anthropocentrism, an unintended

consequence of these formulations is the persistence of a human world in relation to a

nonhuman one. This perpetuates the concept of Nature-as-elsewhere, the ideology from

which anthropocentrism sprouted. After all, all worlds, human or nonhuman, stand to be

equally decimated by ecological collapse. Therefore, we need to embrace a more

ecological view, an ecology without Nature — and this means moving beyond the

concept of world. The idea of world as we have come to think of it is a concept of place

and not space. To have place is to ignore the interconnected nature of places by space.

Ecology is about space; the networked relationship of all materiality through and by

space. "World" is of the same logic as Nature in that it designates an elsewhere relative to

one's own position.[25] The worlds that are created by worldbuilding genres are not

themselves ecological, they merely gesture toward ecology. Rather, through constructing

worlds that expose the mesh, worldbuilding narratives highlight the space between the

world as is and the world that is constructed, implicitly unworking each world. It is not

the worlds, but the connection between worlds by the distance they create through their

construction that is an ecological phenomenon.

      The built-worlds of speculative fiction expose the philosophical notion of world

as antithetical to ecological thought by foregrounding the connection between worlds.

They contribute to a process of "uworlding" through exposing the "all-too-connected,"[26]

networked mesh of ecology rather than a traditional sense of world as a boundaried,

unified place. Philosopher and psychologist Louis Sass developed the concept of

unworlding as a way of describing fragmented subjectivity of schizophrenia through the

terms of Heidegger's phenomenology. Unworlding, as Sass describes it, is the absence of

felt, purposive connectedness and simultaneous loss of the experienced functionality of

things. Experience becomes strange, detached, unfamiliar, and insignificant.[27] This

description mirrors Morton's sense of the loss of world as a concept. The lack of world,

Morton writes, "is a real problem, a big problem—…When there is no world, there is no

ontology. What the hell is going on?"[28] Morton ironically points to the problem of

continuing to believe in the traditional notion of a unified world in a time when

ecological disaster and the increased relevance of nonhumans has rendered that notion

obsolete. Where Sass describes unworlding as the absence of felt connection to the world,

Morton shows us, in ecological terms, that absence is the loss of connection with a

particular view of world. Morton even compares the feeling of the loss of world to

schizophrenia, though he does not site Sass' work or the concept of "unworlding."[29] The

way forward is to embrace an ecological framework wherein things are "all-too-

connected" and enmeshed in ecology, to embrace the possibility of other worlds

previously made invisible by anthropocentrism and exceptionalist understandings of

world. Unworlding, then, provides a model for how to move beyond the notion of world,

and consequently to embrace an ecology without Nature.

Unworlding is inevitable with an ideological shift toward ecology without Nature,

away from place and toward space. Ecology exists infinitely in all directions rendering

the notion of an independent world obsolete. However, unworlding is not a total collapse

of structure and identity into a great ecological one-ness. Rather, unworlding

simultaneously calls attention to the space between worlds while recognizing the

significance of objects that occupy the mesh. To build a world is to highlight the various

objects that occupy that world. If worlding is the development of a world through the

recognition and acknowledgement of objects that occupy that space, unworlding is the

simultaneous exposure of the mesh and the awareness of the various objects situated in

the mesh. In other words, objects in space are connected by space, but they do not lose

their objectness. They are highlighted as always in relationship with everything else

through ecology and not simply an expression of some transcendent entity. Unworlding is

the simultaneous recognition that ecology is unconfined and infinite and that objects that

occupy space are perpetually in relationship to one another through the connection of

networked ecology. The concept of world or worlding suggest that objects are simply

functions or microcosms of the world itself, minimizing the significance of those objects.

Likewise, the concept of world gestures toward an independent and discrete place.

Ecological disaster highlights the ways that the concept of world is incompatible with an

ecological thought through its totality and indiscriminate decimation. Unworlding

provides a framework for being as an act of relation and consideration of the other

"vibrant matter"[30] that occupy space within the network of ecology, of "being-with"[31]

rather than simply being. Unworlding allows us to be-with catastrophe itself, to

reconfigure our relationship to ecology with the knowledge of the already-happening

event of ecological collapse. Built-words accomplish this by exposing the connection and

relation between our world and the world represented in the text, decentering our world.

This decentering and the exposure of the mesh between worlds is an implicit unworlding.

The relationship between speculative fiction and unworlding is made explicit in the digital serial *17776* through its exploration of games and gameplay.

Section III: *17776 & Gameplay*

In a distant future, the year 17776, space probe Pioneer 9 (or Nine) gains

sentience with the help of Pioneer 10 (Ten). Both probes have been floating through

space, presumed to be dead, since our time in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

These probes are currently, as I write this, floating through space.[32] Within the narrative,

Nine has been floating, unconscious of their[33] surrounding for some time — but

eventually begins to receive messages from Ten. These messages take place over the

course of years, felt by the reader through the seemingly endless scroll through calendars.

After a period wherein Nine's anxiety about suddenly becoming conscious prevents their

development, Nine eventually establishes sustained contact with Ten. Upon becoming

conscious, Ten and Jupiter Icy Moons Explorer (or Juice, a space probe currently in

development to be launched in 2022[34]) help Nine to realize they are a space probe. The

space probes develop personhood through absorbing radio waves broadcast into space

and, as Ten asserts, computers left alone for 15,000 years will gradually become people.[35]

Nine then realizes that they are in a distant future and demands to know how much time

has passed and Ten and Juice suggest watching a football game. The first chapter

concludes with a video that introduces the narrative and gives the reader some context for

what has happened during the time between the 2010s and 17776. This includes Google

Earth views of the United States, several shots of the Milky Way, including a map of the

prominent stars in our galaxy, various landscapes, suburban neighborhoods, football

stadiums, newspaper headlines about the future of football, and ending with the title

screen of the Statue of Liberty standing in water that goes up to its midsection, suggesting

significant rises in sea levels, an expected—and already felt—consequence of ecological crisis. Though the chapter unfolds in surprising and unpredictable ways, the reader finishes chapter one with an understanding that *17776* is concerned with the future of American Football, but also, and more significantly, the future of ecological space.[36]

Later on, it is revealed that the probes spend their time watching humans play significantly altered versions of American Football from space. Humans have moved beyond the field and now play "open-world" football. Humans play football, in part, to pass time as they have become immortal due to a combination of a genetic mutation in the early twenty-first century, as well as the development of a nanotechnology—referred to simply as "nanos"—that overlays the entirety of the Earth, protecting all humans from any kind of environmental harm.[37] Once they stopped dying, humans also stopped reproducing. All of the major political, social, and economic problems of civilization disappeared soon after the advent of immortality. Faced with eternity and no problems to solve, humans play variations of football that span entire states or regions of the United States. Some games last for several years, while others include unusual obstacles or mechanics.[38] As most humans have been alive for more than 15,000 years, they no longer view space and distance in the same way. Everything, or every where, has become accessible to them.

17776 intersects with concerns about world-building and unworlding through its consideration of gaming and gameplay at all levels of the text. *17776* is a text overflowing with worlds, including the world of the reader and the world of text, the world of the narrative and the worlds of the games played by characters. To be clear,

17776 is not a game in and of itself. However, it does include gamic elements that contribute to an understanding of speculative genres and unworlding. Though there are several components to games, they can most simply be described as a "framework for structured play."[39] Celia Pearce develops a theory of gaming in her essay "Towards a Game Theory of Game" that identifies experience as the commonality that unites all games — and by this she refers to the "emergent narrative that develops out of the inherent "conflict" of the game as it is played, as experienced by the players themselves."[40] As a form of "environmental storytelling," or world-driven narrative, Henry Jenkins argues there is a direct relationship between games and speculative genres in terms of the experience they offer a player or reader, their algorithmic structure, and emergent narrative results.[41] In highlighting experience and the ways in which games function as "environmental storytelling," both of these definitions signify that space is a key element of games and of how they unfold. Space is highlighted by Jesper Juul as well when he writes that "[A] game cues a player into imagining a fictional world."[42] All of these considerations of gaming point to the idea that games are concerned with the organization of space through the process of worlding inherent in play.[43] In short, games are worlds. While previous scholarship has shown how "critical play" of games, video games specifically, can be a pedagogical tool for the environmental humanities,[44] *17776* demonstrates how gaming calls attention to space and the mesh of ecology, contributing to the process of unworlding. This is accomplished through its narrative focus on a world ontologically oriented around games, as well as its formal choices that call attention to the experience of the reader in relationship to speculative genres. By embracing gaming

in the narrative and through choices in form, *17776* speaks to a reader's experience of speculative fiction and demonstrates the ecological potential of the genre as a whole.

At the level of narrative, *17776* considers games and gameplay through the focus on football. Football, like all games, requires rules, processes, and structure. Games counteract the infinity faced by the immortal humans in *17776* as games provide the structure, as Pearce suggests, that eternity and infinity lack. Games also provide problems to solve. In the world of *17776* there are no social or political problems — the only problem, seemingly, is that the world has ended and humans have gained immortality. The scarcity of problems position games as the necessary form of experience and expression, as a total, anarchic freeplay would only reinforce the shapelessness and totality of an infinity. As Nine says in chapter seven, humans and the satellites have one thing in common: they "perpetually hang out."[45] Nine is disturbed by a particular set of humans, who have been playing the same game of football for 13,000 years. The entire game, and all of its players, is stuck in a gorge and attempting to climb up a cliff. This has been happening for thousands of years and the humans involved never quit to do something else. When Nine expresses their disgust with the uncanny quality of this game, Ten responds by saying "[R]ecreation and play sustain them. Football sustains them. And if you find yourself in a football game that's such a gargantuan task, that seems undefeatable, that will claim eons of you time and your passion? I think that makes you one of the lucky ones."[46]

There are several variations of football played in the narrative, including a game of 500[47] played across the entire United States that involves launching a football by

canon to a random destination. Another game had participants attempting to find and collect all of the known football signed by Koy Detmer, a football player from the 1990s. Beyond football, there are some other examples of gaming in the text that are significant. In chapter 20 entitled "Louisville, Kentucky" it is revealed that there is a group of people called "No Rock Unturned" who have taken on the project to walk all across America in search of stories about the people that live there and the land that compromises it. They walk a longitudinal line straight across the land until they have collected all the stories that exist on their given line. Separately, another person hides in a cave with no oxygen in Louisville, Kentucky — trying to be unknown. The nanos prevent him from dying through constantly removing the carbon dioxide and supplying the man with oxygen.[48] Though these examples are less explicitly a game-like, they are both ways of gaming in the world of *17776*. The one is a game to collect stories, to learn about the world. The other is a game to be unknown and unseen in a world with a scarcity of uncertainty. The man in the cave is attempting to push the boundaries of the immortality and infinity of humans by competing with himself, and the world around him, to be unseen and always on the edge of an impossible death. To call attention to the impossibility of his existing in the cave or at all.

Football and games serve as ways of making sense of the infinity, the totality that humans gained access to through immortality. The totality of immortality is an inversion of the totality of ecological disaster — both are catastrophic totalities. Immortality has ended the world of *17776* as the entire world is knowable and accessible. The undying state of humanity has ended the world. Much like Morton's claim that ecological disaster

has already ended the concept of world,[49] the immortality of humans has ended the concept of world for the characters in *17776*. Rather than attempting to reassert a unified, anthropocentric notion of world, humans "unworld" by participating in the built-worlds of gaming, much like the infinite worlds of nonhumans that Morton and Haraway both identified. Immortality and gaming open up the possibility of infinite connection of unworlding. Football in *17776* contributes to the process of unworlding as it resists the temptation to reassert a traditional understanding of world and through calling attention to the mesh of ecology. The worlds of the games provide the structure, framework, and proper distance to glance sidelong at the mesh of ecology. Like Nancy says of football, "The game was always all about the field, of course. The ground, the Earth"[50] these games are about understanding space and the objects in that space. Unworlding requires both the ability to glance at the mesh and to recognize the relational significance of the objects that are situated in the mesh. This is most obvious in the "No Rock Unturned" project and, to a lesser extent, the scavenger hunt for Koy Detmer footballs, but present in all the games as they all involve structured play with objects in space. These games require the characters in *17776* to develop a unique attention and presence with ecological space, objects, and their relationship to those objects. Football in the text provides a framework for "being-with" like Haraway calls for in *Staying with the Trouble*.[51]

 17776 also embraces gaming and gameplay at the level of form and through some experimental choices. Most notably, the text games the expectations of the reader through its place on the Internet. The disruption of the text in the opening of the narrative, the

dissolution of the sports article and the emergence of the text, plays on the rules and network of the Internet. This dystopian and experimental narrative exists in a place on the Internet where one would least expect to encounter art or fiction — a sports blog. This is a gamic choice in that it still depends on the existence of a structured, logical system of which there is a particular goal — to read and be read. This is more than a rupture of the text, or of Internet practices, but of the relationship between reader and text. Through revealing itself, the texts asks the reader to adjust and discover the new reading and hermeneutic practices necessary to comprehend the text. Beyond gaming the rules of the Internet, the text games the rules of reading and demands the reader move into the text to figure out what exactly the text is and what exactly the rules are for the text, if not the traditional rules of sports journalism. The reader is transported to another world through a kind-of literal unworlding in the form of the dissolution of the original page. For a moment, the text has the effect of detaching the reader from their world by upsetting their expectations. When this happens, the reader is made viscerally aware of space.

The text plays with the space of the screen at several points, including the opening chapter, "Please answer me." where the reader scrolls through a seemingly endless chain of calendars, creating the feeling that the bottom of the screen has dropped out and the text will continue on toward infinity. A similar moment happens in chapter 13, "Intermission, Part 3." but rather than endless scrolling to the bottom of the page, the screen scrolls left-to-right. The text on the screen is positioned so as to necessitate nonnormative reading patterns — the reader reads text that goes from traditional, left-to-right and top-to-bottom, to bottom-to-top, and back again.[52] The text pulls the reader

across the screen in this chapter, despite every other chapter, and most websites, requiring

the reader to scroll from top-to-bottom. Additionally, the mutlimedia nature of the text

constantly demands new and unexpected skills of the reader. Of course, in the

contemporary moment, none of the media used in *17776* is unfamiliar to the reader.

Rather, the experiments with screen-space and the varying media consistently upend the

readers expectations of a text. Like the opening rupture, these experimental choices game

the relationship between the reader and text.

Where the narrative focus on games highlights the ecological awareness within

the text, the experimental, gamic choices in form exposes the mesh of ecology to and for

the reader. The formal elements of *17776*, like the games in the narrative, are spatial

disruptions, which allow for the opportunity to glance sidelong at the mesh, reinforcing

that we are always amid ecology. Through disguising the text as a sports article and then

dissolving into its true form, *17776* breaks the patterns and expectations of the

interconnected network of the Internet. This disruption allows the reader to see the

network through the upsetting of expectations. By breaking free of the expectations of

sbnation.com as a sports site, online space is emphasized. Further, through the use of

multiple different forms of media within a single text, *17776* points to the an ecology of

media. Embedded videos, animations, text, as well the newspapers, ads, and other images

are gathered together in a single space. By putting these media forms in direct

relationship together, *17776* gives the reader an opportunity to see, again, the

interconnectedness of the Internet, but also of media itself. By exposing the relationship

between media, or a media ecology as Matthew Fuller argues, *17776* highlights the

interconnected network of media in space, providing an opportunity to glance sidelong at

the mesh and develop an ecology without nature.[53] This ecological awareness contributes

to unworlding for the reader. The formal disruptions all call attention to space, exposing

the mesh of ecology, and thus force the reader to consider the space between worlds,

while also demanding the reader to develop new ways of relating to the text as an object.

Just as the narrative focus on games develops worlds that allow the characters to

unworld, the formal elements of *17776* unworlds the world of the reader.

As a text about worlds, *17776* speaks directly to a reader's experience of

speculative fiction generally, and the relationship between the genre and unworlding. The

narrative focus on games has an allegorical relationship to the experience of reading

speculative genres. Like the games played by the humans, speculative genres construct

worlds and provide the structure, framework, and distance necessary to glance, sidelong

at the mesh. Through the built-worlds of the games in *17776*, the humans are able to

unworld their world. The built-worlds of speculative fiction implicitly unworld the world

of the reader by exposing the mesh between and around each world. Unworlding requires

a critical relationship to speculative fiction that prioritizes the experience of reading over

traditional interpretive models, such as speculative fiction as allegory for our culture.

Though *17776* functions as an allegory, it functions as an allegory of the experience of

reading speculative fiction. While the narrative or story of a speculative work may have

ecological significance, the experience of reading speculative fiction is always already

ecological as it calls attention to space and the mesh. In the case of *17776*, the experience

of the reader is foregrounded by the formal elements of the text. Most significantly, the

dissolution of the journalism article and the emergence of *17776* is a kind of literalization of the experience of reading speculative fiction. It highlights the reader's experience of being transported to another world, traversing time and space to the world of a text. *17776* demonstrates at the levels of narrative and form that speculative fiction contributes to the process of unworlding.

Section IV: *Conclusion: Being-With Ecology & Catastrophe*

Unworlding is a model for being-with ecology, even as catastrophe unfolds. This

can be seen in Nancy's quote about why she and other humans play football:

> The game was always all about the field, of course. The ground, the Earth.
> And it was kind of like, "here. Take this little boring flat grassy rectangle
> and prove you can really know it and understand it."And they spent
> hundreds of years getting to know the Hell out of it. And now, to me,
> football is a further exercise in getting to know and love this world, this
> planet. You know? The actual ground. It's so rich with history, it's just
> embarrassing.[54]

Football is a way of knowing the field, of knowing space, and revealing the

significance of space to the players of the game. For Nancy and other humans, football is

a way of being-with the catastrophe of immortality and with ecology. Speculative fiction

allows the reader to unworld, and unworlding allows our culture to be-with ecology, even

as catastrophe continues to unfold. When we unworld, we can begin to truly know the

space of ecology in a way that was previously inaccessible.

17776 demonstrates how speculative fiction, regardless of narrative focus, is

always already ecological for the ways in which it contributes to a process of unworlding.

Specifically, as an experience that calls attention to the distance between worlds. As

speculative fiction tends to be divorced from the reality of the world we live in, the

distance is always implied. Though it is certainly true that all literary works, speculative

or not, implicitly contain space between the world from which a text is read and the

world represented in literature, speculative fiction is unique because it foregrounds this

effect. In the case of science-fiction narratives, this distance can be literal through a

discussion of time and space. Several scholars of speculative fiction and ecology have

described the phenomenon of the distance between worlds in different ways.[555657]

Implicitly, the distance between worlds, whether time or space, gestures toward the mesh

of ecology. Speculative fiction is a rupture that opens up the possibility of seeing ecology

as it always is — an infinite, interconnected network that all objects, including worlds,

are always immersed in. This acknowledgement of the mesh facilitates the process of

unworlding. Unworlding is necessary in the Anthropocene and in the face of ecological

catastrophe as it challenges the traditional concept of world and worlding, which is

directly connected to the conception of Nature as elsewhere. The distance between worlds

is often taken for granted or ignored because of the existing ideas about worlding as a

concept through discourses of Nature as over-there, or a world as a unified reflection of

subjectivity as in Heidegger. Speculative works can be dismissed or thought of as isolated

because of the perceived impossibility of the worlds and the assumption that worlds in

speculative texts function primarily as a means to comment on the world of the author or

reader. When one moves beyond the limited scope of this traditional interpretive model,

and instead prioritizes the experience of reading a speculative narrative, then the space

between worlds becomes more visible. In other words, rather than thinking of speculative

narratives as always functioning as a microcosm of our world, designed to comment on

some element of our world, ecocriticsm should embrace the formal elements of the genre

for the experience it offers the reader. Unworlding is an acceptance of ecology as

something we are always already in and a recognition of objects situated in the mesh.

Ecocritics and environmental humanities scholars would benefit from moving

beyond the study of worlds within worldbuilding narratives — beyond the narrative focus

on those worlds' capacity to represent ecological and biological disasters. The environmental humanities would benefit from embracing a broader conception of speculative fiction through the theoretical framework of unworlding. The work of unworlding is a key contribution of speculative fiction to the environmental humanities. Steven Shaviro has shown that speculative fiction is more equipped discursively than any other literary or critical form to make sense of our contemporary, networked culture.[58] It is no different in the case of the Anthropocene and ecological catastrophe as speculative fiction creates the distance necessary for our culture to glance, sidelong at the mesh of ecology and begin to embrace a truly ecological thought. Unworlding is an urgent task as it directly challenges anthropocentrism through unworking the philosophical concepts of world and worlding. Unworlding moves us toward a "being-with" and embracing the "all-too-connected"[59] network of ecology. Unworlding provides a framework for reconfiguring our relationship to other beings, objects, and ecological space that will be necessary as we move further into the end of the world. Unworlding lets us confront the awareness that "something is terribly wrong." [60]

Endnotes

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