

# The ENVIRONMENTAL HORROR of ELDEN RING

By Kathryn Hemmann





Many post-apocalyptic open-world games, such as *Breath of the Wild* and *Horizon Zero Dawn*, present the player with a thriving green landscape to explore. *Elden Ring*, despite the dark tone of its story, initially seems to offer similarly beautiful vistas – until the player arrives in Caelid. The environmental storytelling of Caelid, where a hellish catastrophe is still ongoing, delivers an effective message regarding the destruction of the natural world. Caelid resists the post-apocalyptic fantasy that the detrimental effects of human activity on the environment are temporary and reversible, thereby underscoring *Elden Ring*'s brutal critique of the abuse of power.

Gary Butterfield of the *Bonfireside Chat* podcast has called the world of *Elden Ring* “a postapocalyptic heaven.” When the player first steps out of an underground tomb in the ruined kingdom of Limgrave, the Lands Between certainly seem like paradise. The luminous Erdtree

rises above the distant horizon, and its golden leaves flutter delicately on the wind. At the edge of the player's vision is a forest with a luxuriant canopy. The bushes that surround your tomb are resplendent with flowers and berries. This is still a FromSoftware game, so the NPC who greets your arrival to the Lands Between is a murderous war surgeon in a bloodstained smock, but you may be able to spot a few plump and carefree bunny-squirrels hopping across the field during his cryptic monologue.

As the player progresses along the journey to gather the shards of the Elden Ring, the game presents a series of equally elysian landscapes. Mist rises from a shallow lake at the base of the postcard-perfect Academy of Raya Lucaria. Lush autumnal forests frame the windmills dotting the edges of the Altus Plateau. Ornate pavilions nestle in the boughs of the dying but still grand Haligtree. Between its bouts of intense and punishing

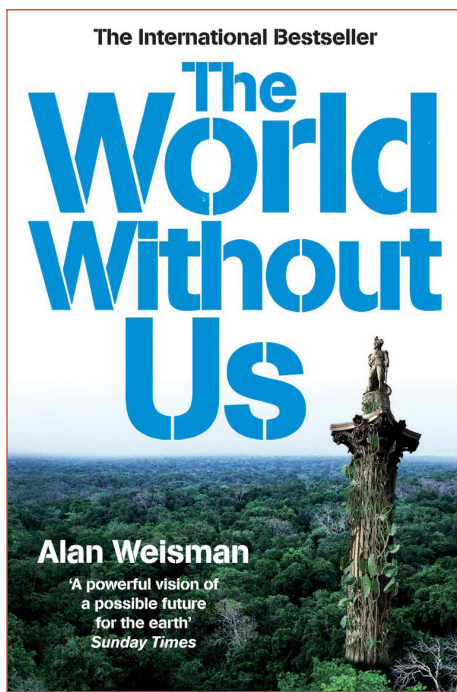
ultraviolence, *Elden Ring* is a quiet and contemplative game that allows the player ample opportunities to study the details of the environment closely. Attentive players are rewarded not only with tactical advantages, but also with hints of story hidden in the ruins.

Before an event called “the Shattering,” which involved the assassination of a prince and the wars that followed, the members of the royal family of the Lands Between were tasked with maintaining the Golden Order of their dynasty. However, the player is presented with numerous pieces of evidence that suggest their enforcement of the Golden Order was far from benevolent. Multiple categories of people were enslaved or otherwise mistreated; and, now that the Golden Order no longer prevails, these people are free to live as they wish. Many players have wondered if perhaps, now that the warlords have perished or fled, the common people might be able to govern themselves as balance is restored to nature.

During the summer following the global outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic in 2020, the tongue-in-cheek sentiment that “nature is healing” mushroomed across social media platforms. Writing in July 2020 for the online environmental activism magazine *Grist*, Kate Yoder documents how photos and videos of animals in urban spaces became a meme. This meme quickly devolved into a parody of itself as freshly-minted urban explorers affixed humorous captions to images of the garbage that accumulated while sanitation workers oper-

ated on safer pandemic schedules. One of the most widely shared variations of this meme is a photo of a flock of plastic clogs floating on the surface of an unmaintained pool bearing the caption, “Nature is healing; the Crocs are finally returning to the rivers.”

Memes aside, the concept that “nature is healing” stems from the pervasive assumption that the planet’s ecosystem is so large and complex that it will repair itself no matter how great the impact of human activity. In 2007, Alan Weisman captivated readers with his bestselling thought experiment *The World Without Us*, which describes in fascinating detail how a city like New York or London could return to nature in a matter of months. Mounting concerns over climate change during the 2000s also resulted in a mainstream interest in human extinction theory. This interest was expressed through popular-audience books such as Eliza-







both Kolbert's *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*, which won a Pulitzer Prize in 2014. The fantasy presented by these books is that, one day, all that will remain of twenty-first century human civilization is our ceramic coffee mugs.

Meanwhile, the concomitant rise of image-based social media in the mid-2010s created accessible platforms for urban exploration photography, which depicted subjects ranging from abandoned malls in the suburbs of Ohio to abandoned amusement parks in Japan's depopulated northern Tōhoku region. Photographers in London prowled the streets after dark to document the city's feral fox population, while photographers in Ukraine hopped barbed-wire fences to document feral hogs and chickens in Chernobyl.

This digital fantasy of a posthuman world has been modeled in numerous videogames, from the overgrown parking lots of Boston in *The Last of Us* to the

ruins of a futuristic city in *Nier Automata*. Because these environments are mostly devoid of human life, the player can enjoy the scenery with a minimum of distractions. Indie art games have embraced the posthuman aesthetic as well, allowing the player to swim through healthy coral reefs growing over rusted metal in *Abzû* (2016) or to stroll through a deserted yet still bucolic English village in *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* (2015).

*Elden Ring* seems as though it offers a similarly stunning walk through a post-apocalyptic nature park – until you get to Caelid. When the player arrives in the region, it's clear that something is very wrong. The sky is red. The earth is black. Frantic soldiers burn piles of bodies. Fleshy pink fungus has overtaken the buildings, the trees and even a few roaming dragons. Caelid's ruins suggest that it was once a thriving kingdom, but now it's little more than a barely-contained disaster. Something bad has happened here.

That “something bad” was a woman named Malenia, a member of the royal family who fought her half-brother Radahn to a standstill. She won the battle by means of the magical equivalent of setting off a nuclear bomb, blasting most of the continent to dust and sand in the process. The forests of Caelid will likely never return, nor will the people and animals who once lived there. In its striking visual ugliness and extreme hostility to the player, Caelid is a viscerally upsetting reminder that the ability of nature to heal itself should not be taken for granted.

The idea that human activity has no long-term consequences is a comforting fantasy, especially when presented in an unthreatening digital format. Moreover, the effect of many types of pollution on the environment is largely invisible, which is perhaps why Chernobyl has become something of a poster child of the posthuman fantasy. The same might be said of Fukushima, where photographers

such as Manabu Sekine, Toru Anzai and Kim Kyung-Hoon have documented the cats, monkeys and other animals who now occupy the abandoned houses. Documentaries such as Anne Bogart and Holly Morris’s *The Babushkas of Chernobyl* (2015) and Mayu Nakamura’s *Alone in Fukushima* (2015) are forthright about the challenges of living in a nuclear disaster zone, yet it’s difficult not to be entranced by serene images of humans peacefully interacting with animals against a gorgeous backdrop of healthy trees and plants.

Other types of human activity have resulted in markedly less photogenic changes to the natural environment, however. Subtropical regions of Brazil and Indonesia have lost vast percentages of their forests since the 1990s, permanently reducing global biodiversity. Throughout the Middle East and Central Asia, desertification caused by climate change and industrial agribusiness has irreversibly drained the rivers and






marshes that once sustained the cradles of human civilization. Densely populated coastal areas from Bangladesh to Florida have already been disrupted by rising sea levels, with humans leaving behind unsightly tangles of ruins in the wake of rapid migration.

These real-life environmental horrors are evoked in the blasted landscape of Caelid, where the last remaining soldiers struggle to contain the Scarlet Rot, a deadly fungal infection that metastasizes across the body's cells like cancer. Great warriors like Malenia may have been able to wield the Scarlet Rot like a weapon, but most people in Caelid died horrible and painful deaths because of this biochemical attack. The toxic aftermath of the battle leached into the earth, and the fungal towers that subsequently rose from the sandy soil are utterly alien to the forests that once covered the region.

It is easy for the player to admire the charismatic Malenia and the other larger-than-life members of the royal family, especially while exploring the monumental castles and golden cities they've left behind. At the fringes of the Lands

Between, however, Caelid reminds the player that the elite's abuse of power has resulted in real and lasting consequences. To paraphrase the infamous nuclear waste warning message, no highly esteemed deed is commemorated in Caelid. This place is not a place of honor.

As a kingdom fallen from glory, the Lands Between are tarnished. The forests and wildlife may have returned to some areas, but the damage done to Caelid cannot be healed. The consequences of human activity were disastrous to the Lands Between and the people who lived there, just as the new Anthropocene geologic era will visit large-scale environmental changes to our own earth.

As an atmospheric work of digital storytelling, *Elden Ring* is fundamentally about change and the passing of an old order. The anxieties expressed by *Elden Ring* are not merely contained within the game's spectacles of violence and bloodshed. Rather, the true horror of *Elden Ring* lies in the quiet dread of its ruins, which attest that we will all be forgotten in the future if we fail in our stewardship of the present. 



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