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# POKÉMON'S FIRST ECOGOTHIC NARRATIVE

Review by Liam J. L. Knight

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***Pokémon Legends: Arceus. Version 1.0.1, Game Freak, 2022, Nintendo Switch, 2022.***

Since the 1996 release of *Pocket Monsters Red* and *Green* in Japan, Game Freak has produced over thirty core *Pokémon* video games. These role-playing games (RPGs) follow a similar formula: players catch, train, and battle with Pokémon in their quest to become each game's ultimate trainer. Game Freak's 2022 offering, *Pokémon Legends: Arceus*, borrows elements from the action-adventure and action role-playing game (ARPG) genres to deviate from this formula. A pseudo-open game world, stealth mechanics, and players' use of an on-screen crosshair to take aim and throw Poké Balls are among the innovations offered by *Arceus*. This first deviation is a particular strength, for the game world's nonlinearity affords players a sense of autonomy, empowering them to freely discover the charm and whimsy of *Arceus'* diverse biomes. Moreover, Jordan Middler praised the game's reimaged catching mechanics in *Nintendo Life*, calling them "the best part of the game by far," an evaluation that is by no means an overstatement (2022, n.p). Such praise for *Arceus* is commonplace, suggesting that it constitutes a successful reinvigoration of the *Pokémon* series.

Uniquely, *Arceus* reconfigures the series' preoccupation with ecological matters. The *Pokémon* franchise has always harboured ecological concerns, thanks to creator Satoshi Tajiri's desire to share his childhood pastime of collecting insects and other wildlife with urban children. Ecological barriers, however, are often presented as minor obstacles for players to overcome in their quest to become Pokémon masters. For instance, the devastating implications of summoning Kyogre – a Pokémon with the ability to raise sea levels – are understated in *Pokémon Sapphire* (2002) and overt ecological statements tend to be hidden in Pokédex entries or other optional flavour text. Conversely, ecological matters lie at the heart of *Arceus*, culminating in an EcoGothic narrative. The interaction between humans, Pokémon and their surrounding environment reflects Andrew Smith and William Hughes' observation in *Ecogothic* (2013) that the genre "illustrates how nature becomes constituted [...] as a space of crisis which conceptually creates a point of contact with the ecological" (3). Subsequently, *Arceus* is exciting because it offers a more mature, thought-provoking narrative that sets it apart from other *Pokémon* games.

*Arceus'* EcoGothic qualities quickly become apparent to the player. After falling through a space-time rift in the present day, they awake in a pre-modern, pre-colonised version of *Pokémon Diamond's* and *Pearl's* (2006) Sinnoh region, now named 'Hisui.' Players are taken to Jubilife Village, the game's hub world and only town and soon learn that most of its residents fear Hisui's wild Pokémon. For many Non-Player Characters (NPCs), Pokémon are monstrous entities from which the village's walled perimeter provides protection. Following Simon C. Estok's article "Theorising the

EcoGothic” (2019), such foregrounded ecophobia suggests that *Arceus* is an EcoGothic narrative, especially given that such fears are born out of the villagers’ ignorance. This orients players to what Dawn Keetley and Matthew Sivils call “the more disturbing and unsettling aspects of [humans’] interactions with nonhuman ecologies,” inviting them to question how and why people find the natural world unnerving, thus providing a more stimulating gameplay experience (1). The game begins in earnest once Jubilife Village’s Galaxy Expedition Team recruits and assigns the player to its Survey Corps. They order players to record information about Hisui’s Pokémon by compiling the region’s first Pokédex, teaching the villagers about the monsters to allay their fears. As such, the mission to complete the region’s Pokédex does not just possess a scientific purpose but an affective one. This reframing of one of the *Pokémon* series’ core objectives is one of *Arceus*’s highlights, for players are motivated to complete what could be considered an arduous task – catching more than 200 different species of Pokémon – by the knowledge that their actions have meaning within the game world.

Another of the game’s EcoGothic characteristics manifests in the player’s second mission to investigate a series of mysterious lightning strikes that originate from the same space-time rift through which they fell. These atmospheric disturbances enrage Hisui’s five ‘noble Pokémon’ (powerful guardians that oversee the game’s main areas) and thus threaten the region’s ecological harmony, for they influence both their fellow Pokémon’s behaviours and their environment’s climates. Such disruption recalls Smith’s and Hughes’s definition of the EcoGothic, in which *Arceus* constitutes nature as a space for ecological crises. This effect is heightened as the player progresses through the game. Although they quell the five noble Pokémon’s rages, the atmospheric disturbances caused by the space-time rift worsen. Several NPCs suspect the player, as the atmospheric disturbances have only worsened since they arrived in Hisui, so the player’s presence in the region must be to blame. Consequently, the player is banished from Jubilife Village and must explore Hisui again to identify the cause of the space-time rift. Here, *Arceus*’s narrative allegorises anthropocentric climate change precisely because it is a human – a modern human, no less – that is suspected of causing environmental catastrophe. Navigating tensions around climate change and environmental damage are central to the EcoGothic, and so by locating the origins of environmental catastrophe within human actors instead of the nonhuman, *Arceus*’s narrative makes a timely political statement that invites players to consider how they may likewise be imperilling the natural world.

As the player undertakes their two missions, *Arceus*’s last significant EcoGothic quality emerges to question the anthroponotic nature of the franchise. The EcoGothic, writes David Del Principe, takes a “nonanthropocentric approach to reconsider the role that the environment, species, and nonhumans play in the construction of monstrosity and fear” (1). Principe’s argument reflects how players are forced to confront – perhaps for the first time in the *Pokémon* franchise – the monstrous potential inherent in Pokémon. As players explore Hisui, Pokémon in the overworld react to them. Some flee, others show curiosity, and others directly attack the player. Similarly, players are attacked by the noble Pokémon when investigating the region’s atmospheric disturbances. Such a monstrous presentation of Pokémon legitimises the villagers’ fear, creating a level of tension that has so far been absent in the series’ video games. This tension urges players to make use of the stealth mechanics available in the game so that they may avoid sustaining damage, blacking out,

and losing a portion of their progress. Indeed, as I explored the game's first area, I found myself anxiously tiptoeing around an Alpha Luxio – an especially large, aggressive, and strong variant of the Pokémon species – as I explored the first area, which resulted in a much more captivating and exciting play experience precisely because the threat levels felt higher. Furthermore, this monstrous presentation of Pokémon is characteristically Gothic insofar as it estranges the creatures for players, which are much more threatening than in previous *Pokémon* titles. This disconnect may disturb players, who are invited to question why Hisui's monsters are presented differently: do they appear monstrous only because the villagers are ignorant about them, or is this aggressive, wild, pre-modern depiction of Pokémon simply them in their natural state? Subsequently, is their non-threatening presentation in other *Pokémon* games because they have been tamed, domesticated, and their wildness conquered by man? Ultimately, *Arceus*'s narrative does not completely answer these questions. Still, the fact that it raises them demonstrates that Game Freak has created a more thematically mature and analytically rich game than its previous efforts.

Despite its depiction of ecophobia, environmental crisis, nonhuman monstrosity, and the questions raised, *Arceus* does not satisfy its EcoGothic potential. The villagers' fear of Pokémon subsides when they learn to domesticate and enslave them. The game's EcoGothic allegory for anthropocentric climate change falls short because nonhuman actors are shown to cause the ecological disaster that permeates the Hisui region. Last, the monstrosity of Pokémon is diminished because players can defeat or capture even the game's most threatening creatures. Instead, *Arceus* reverts to the anthropocentrism that characterises a multimedia franchise in which nonhuman entities are routinely depicted as tools for humans to use, human settlements are prioritised, and human autonomy is privileged above all else.

While its anthropocentrism offers a potential shortfall, *Arceus* remains a notable contribution to games with Gothic potential. For returning fans of the *Pokémon* series, *Arceus* is a must-play title. By adapting the tried and tested *Pokémon* formula by reimagining its thematic concerns and core gameplay mechanics, Game Freak has created a simultaneously familiar and exciting game that may frequently surprise and delight players. Likewise, *Arceus* should be recommended to newcomers to the series because by blending elements from the RPG, action-adventure, and ARPG genres, Game Freak has created a game that will likely appeal to fans of popular games such as *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017), the *Dark Souls* series (2011-2016), and the *Monster Hunter* franchise (2004-present). Ultimately, *Arceus* is great fun to play; it is captivating and charming, and the gameplay loop that reinforces the "Gotta Catch' Em All" mantra is, perhaps more than ever, compelling.

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**BIONOTE**

**Liam J. L. Knight** is a doctoral researcher in English Literature at the University of Birmingham, UK. His thesis examines the manifestation of what would today be recognised as post-truth anxieties in the 'endotexts' of twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary dystopias. A passionate educator, Liam publishes GCSE English revision content and video essays related to his research on his YouTube channel, 'DystopiaJunkie.'