Once, when my family was still living in Queens and I was still counting my age with the fingers on one hand, an older cousin gave me a stack of unwanted Sega Genesis games at a Christmas Eve party. Ten or twelve games total, but the only one that mattered was the boxless promotional copy of Sonic the Hedgehog at the top of the pile. At the time, I couldn’t get enough of Sonic, Sega’s “edgy” new mascot, their answer to Nintendo’s Mario—I read the monthly comic books, I watched both animated series, I had coloring books and pajamas and action figures, and of course, I played the video games. But there were other kids at the party that night whose parents were depending on the Sega to keep occupied, and although I didn’t understand how anyone could tire of watching me ace zone after zone of Sonic, majority rule won out and we started making our way through the other games I’d been given: Ninja Turtles was fun, but repetitive; none of us could navigate the playbook in Madden 94; making sense of Toejam & Earl required access to certain psychotropic drugs, the existence of which we were still too innocent to know.
Soon we came to a game called *Ecco the Dolphin.*

This game was weird. The eponymous hero was hardly stylized at all, as close to photorealism as the technology then allowed. Ecco was a “real” dolphin, and as far as we could tell, he seemed totally powerless in the face of all his presumed enemies. Sharks and barracudas came careening into Ecco from every direction and no button on the controller—not A, not B, not C—seemed to have any effect on anything. You were even required to come up for air every so often, or the dolphin would drown.

We were baffled. Not because we didn’t understand the biological needs of sea-dwelling mammals, but because this utter vulnerability defied video game logic. What were Ecco’s superpowers, and why wasn’t he using them to turn enemies into points? Maybe I couldn’t have articulated it then, but my deep discomfort with Ecco must have stemmed from the unconscious sense that he was, in effect, the anti-Sonic.

For those who don’t know, Sonic is a cobalt blue, anthropomorphic hedgehog with the ability to run faster than the speed of sound—i.e. at *supersonic* speeds—and playing a Sonic game well is all about maintaining continuous high-speed movement via well-timed jumps and rolls. As long as Sonic is moving fast enough, when he meets a body of water he will run right over its surface, unhindered and unfazed by the momentary shift in topography. In this light, Ecco already seemed to have failed the game—he was down beneath the surface of the water from the start, he was subject to the very forces video game heroes were supposed to flout.

And so we spent what felt like hours exploring the first level, this post–Game Over purgatory, none of us with a clue what to do, fearing we were stuck in some kind of
hellish Sisyphean torture game—or God forbid, a simulator—until someone managed to find a path forward, a tunnel in the deep.

The other kids and I swam our little dolphin farther into the tunnel, while units of oxygen disappeared from the meter at the top of the screen. After a moment, a number of killer whales torpedoed past Ecco, fleeing some invisible off-screen threat up ahead. I wonder though, if this panicked pod of orcas really felt so ominous then, or if it seemed only another pretty set-piece, another boring exhibit at the iQuarium, because in the end we paid the whales no real mind and charged ahead onto the next screen, hoping that the Video Game Stuff was about to begin.

None of us was ready for the creature lying in wait.

This octopus—The Octopus—deserves the Lovecraft treatment, to be rendered in terrifying and elaborate detail, endowed with a cosmic evil beyond the scope of any human comprehension. It deserves to debut after an unnerving two-hour introduction shot by John Carpenter, not ten-to-fifteen minutes of disinterested digital tourism. Instead I must improvise, approximate, and say that we saw a flash the color of an unripe orange dominate the display, saw rapacious tentacles stretch toward Ecco, saw a single bulging black eye staring back at us from the other side of the screen. What did Nietzsche say about the abyss? I shot up from the couch, ripped the cartridge out of the console, turned the TV off.

The vast majority of people figure out pretty early in life that it’s borderline impossible to describe a nightmare
to someone else without coming off silly. (The few who
don’t become insufferable social pariahs, or writers.) In
all likelihood, my abbreviated description of the Octopus
has only reinforced this point. But I want to make it clear
that I don’t invoke nightmares here for the sake of simile
alone. For years after this first meeting of ours, I continued
to dream horrifying dreams of the Octopus on a very
regular basis. Not long after the original incident, once my
family had left Queens and relocated to the Hudson Valley,
nightmares of the Octopus forced me to chicken out on
my first sleepover at a friend’s house. I woke up convinced
the blanket his mother had laid out for me was a roiling
sea, that the kraken was just beneath me, preparing to suck
me under. I cried and cried until my mom came to take
me home, and when she arrived, all I said to her was, “The
Octopus.” She understood.

It should not be a complete surprise then that ever
since Ecco the Dolphin, ever since the Octopus, I’ve suffered
from an enervating fear of the ocean, and to be honest, of
tall bodies of water bigger than a bathtub. Every summer, I
embrace the popular wisdom and face my fear—I swim—
and yet the fear never dissipates, the terror is always there.
Only now am I beginning to understand that regardless
of how many times I wade out into the water I will get no
closer to the core of that fear, because the blanket on my
friend’s floor that threatened to swallow me up had little
to do with the bay or the beach. The ocean that I fear is
digital.

Let me explain.

After that first run-in with the Octopus, I hid the
game cartridge at an unsuspecting friend’s house, never to
be seen again. I went right back to playing Sonic, where I
could revel in skating across the surfaces of those death-trap oceans at supersonic speeds, impervious to the pull of their dark gravities. However, the longer I left helpless Ecco alone down there, the longer I clung to the cartoon physics that kept Sonic atop the water, the more I allowed the dominion of the Octopus to increase. Once my family migrated north, my direct experience of the ocean was mostly limited to an annual pilgrimage to Lido Beach on Long Island, and so over time, the “real” ocean grew less and less real, becoming a mere analogy for the digital.

While I was off racing through corkscrews and loop-the-loops with my favorite blue hedgehog, the Cyber-Cephalopod was busy taking over Flushing Bay and Jones Beach, seizing the whole of the Atlantic; the reach of its tentacles soon extended to every unguarded and unconsidered body of water I had or might ever come across, digitizing them, converting their salt and foam to pixels and code, refashioning all-things-wet in the image of its 16-bit lair. Don’t believe me? To this day I won’t even go in a swimming pool alone. I don’t know the limits of the Octopus’s power, and I don’t intend to test them.

Here’s where I run into problems. As if chronic nightmares and beach anxiety weren’t enough, this thalassophobia has kept me at a distance from environmentalism in any capacity, and now hinders my complete engagement with literary ecology. I wonder too whether allowing the ocean to function as a repository for my unconscious fears has had effects more sinister than the mere feeling of being excluded from the eco-party. By imagining the ocean as invincible, have I blinded myself to the existence of any real vulnerabilities the sea might possess? To the destructive effects of pollution, toxication, over-fishing? How can
I truly process ecological violence, knowing the Octopus is down there, biding his time, protected by all that invincible digital blue?

III

The world of video games has changed quite a bit since 1995. One of the advantages of internet-enabled consoles with large internal hard drives is that old cartridge-based games (which are miniscule by today’s standards) can be downloaded directly to your system. There’s no more need to dig through boxes in the attic if you want to wax nostalgic over a few rounds of *Punch Out!* or take a belated stab at *Shinobi III*—all it takes is a credit card and a wi-fi connection. I happen to know that *Ecco the Dolphin* is available for both the Nintendo Wii and Xbox 360 at this very moment.

The thing is, that in these almost twenty years since I first saw the Octopus, my own relationship with video games has changed as well. As a kid, I had trouble beating any game. I played for hours on end, more or less every day, but seldom was I disciplined (or talented?) enough to work my way through every level, every boss battle, all the way to the end credits—even in *Sonic the Hedgehog*. These days, I experience a legitimate sense of guilt when I abandon a game midway, and I make an honest effort not to buy games I know I won’t have the time or patience to beat.

I’m unsure whether it’s this new imperative to finish what I’ve started, or the fact that I’ve been filling my head with literary ecology—Timothy Morton’s *strange stranger* and Donna Haraway’s *companion species* come to mind—but as of late, I’ve noticed a shift in the way that I remember my first meeting with Octopus. Now I can’t
help but remember *Ecco the Dolphin* as another game I left unbeaten, and I’ve realized I have no idea who or what the Octopus represented *in the game*, to Ecco. Was it friend or foe? What did it want? Did I need to get past it, or was it moments away from bestowing upon Ecco some new ability or item when I panicked and shut down the system?

I will never forsake Sonic (even now, I’m plotting his rehabilitation as a bona fide eco-hero) but if I continue to insist on putting myself in his speedy red shoes, I run the risk of fearing the ocean forever, and any attempt I make to join the ecocritical conversation will be haunted by a fundamental hypocrisy. That’s not to say I want to default to thinking of myself as a victim, pleading for pity, a little kid traumatized by the sight of a scary monster. Only that after so many years, it may be time to start thinking of myself as Ecco, to embrace the imperiled and uncertain mantle of this 16-bit dolphin who needs to figure out how to respond to the big orange octopus if he’s going to beat the game.

The next time my family treks out to Lido Beach, I will sit among knots of seaweed and sun-fried jellyfish, and look out at the water. The ocean will be digital, and the Octopus will be out there—there’s no helping that. But this year, when I hear theme music in the distance, when the title screen flashes on the horizon, I might Press Start.