

Playing Nature: Ecology in Video Games

Alenda Y. Chang

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Video gamers as environmental activists? Alenda Y. Chang doesn't think it's as counterintuitive as it sounds. In her trenchant and wide-ranging *Playing Nature*, she analyzes the potential of gaming's huge audience to become nimble and creative environmental problem-solvers.

Chang's enthusiasm and affection for games accents her theories that games are "existential experiments" that can be used to imagine a nondystopian environmental future. She notes that the scale and complexity of global issues are made more concrete through gaming and that games can impart lessons for psychologically dealing with, even avoiding, catastrophes. Instead of presenting games as a diversion from reality, Chang believes that their blend of natural and unnatural environments can be a powerful tool for engaging "in world design and management."

Beyond games that glorify violence are those with enormous potential to become platforms for ecological ideas, in which the environment is itself the game's hero. As an additional layer to the discussion, Chang also uncovers the less-than-green aspects of the tech industry, from mining, sweatshop labor, planned obsolescence of gaming equipment, and the energy demands of cloud storage data centers.

The book is peppered with descriptions and illustrations of games that are both nostalgic and edifying. It incorporates intriguing examples of artists, public health professionals, and environmental activists using games in installations and community projects to communicate their messages.

Scholarly yet accessible, imaginative yet stuffed with ideas from across humanities and the sciences, *Playing Nature* is a fascinating analysis of the transformative potential of gaming, showing how the medium could be used to address serious issues around climate change and environmental justice.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (January / February 2020)

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