

# Making Games Sustainable – One Short Story at the Time

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper discusses and exemplifies how short stories can be used to communicate the need for and possibility of systemic change in the way we industrially produce games. It first explains, based on previous work, (Prax, 2025a) why we need systemic change, and then offers several short stories that aim to share this perspective. These short stories are modelled after a concept called “What is the problem represented to be” (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016), or WPR. WPR’s function is to make it possible to critically interrogate the discursive framing of a problem in order to make that framing visible. The presented short stories are in this way meant to allow people who make games to approach sustainability action within the frame of systemic change, and possibly even to share this framing with their peers. The aim of this presentation at the conference is to both share this approach and some of stories for feedback and to invite others to share similar stories and perspectives so that we can present them together and reach further to support sustainability in games. An earlier version of this article has been published in a recent book chapter (Prax, 2025b).

Digital games are located right at the intersection of the material and economic structure of digital technology that destroys the environment and the hegemonic culture that supports it. Already Games of Empire (Dyer-Witheford & De Peuter, 2009) described, as an example, how digital games at the same time require resources like coltan that is mined in racist and colonialist structures from Democratic Republic of the Congo to be produced and consumed in the first place to then turn support the economy and culture of militarized oppression that enabled the extraction of the resources (Ayres, 2012; Mantz, 2008). Games and new console cycles drive the acceleration of the production of faster hardware and in turn the growth of e-waste landscapes (Lenoir & Lowood, 2005). The technology and content of games is part of a military entertainment complex that goes beyond the normalization of war and

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colonialism (Prax, 2022) to even include military recruitment (Andersen & Kurti, 2011; Huntemann & Payne, 2009).

While this dynamic has been studied by critical media researcher for nearly 20 years, it is not well understood by the public or even many members of the games industry. This is understandable. Reflecting on issues as abstract as the normalization of colonialist resource extraction is a privilege and beyond the scope of most game makers. That said, there is a growing movement of researchers and professionals in the game industry that are working with questions of sustainability, most prominently in the Climate Special Interest Group (SIG) of the International Game Developer Association (IGDA) (Chang, 2023). Hallmarks here are the production of the Environmental Game Design Playbook by members of the SIG (Whittle et al., 2022) and the first book, based on a PhD thesis, on the climate impact of gaming (Abraham, 2022). The ignorance of the public and the game industry is also largely a consequence of the greenwashing of the games- and tech-industries that frame sustainability questions typically as an individual responsibility and carbon footprint, champion notions of a clean digital economy in the cloud, or point to possible technological innovations like AI and the potential positive impact of games instead of addressing its concrete material consequences. However, a framing of sustainable games that considers the complexities and global-scale problems presented above is also just hard to understand and even harder to base one's actions on. Even a dismantling of greenwashing by asking "What is the problem represented to be" following the method of WPR (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016) is difficult. It is real challenge to even conceptualize how to impact the infrastructure of the production of digital games and media. This is where this paper suggests the use of human stories to explain the need for systemic change.

## Story examples

This extended abstract can share one story and the explanation of what its point is. The stories are personal experiences and use first-person voice at times.

*During a Nordic sustainability game jam I helped organize last summer, a participant introduced herself as the founder of an indie studio. Her studio had been working on games with a sustainability focus and she was excited to deepen her knowledge on the topic. I kicked off the jam with a lecture about the need for systemic approaches to sustainability instead of greenwashing, and in response, this indie founder explained that her studio had gotten funding from Meta. Her mood shifted from excitement about her studio and the jam to something more somber as she explained that yes, her team was aware that their game was part of the broader greenwashing practices of Meta. The social media corporation, she explained, was funding smaller European game studios to fake a commitment to different areas of sustainability, mostly in order to avoid sustainability legislation from the European Union.*

The story is in line with reports and research about the practices of big tech which has regrettably been combating EU regulation for a long time (Doctorow, 2024) and instead favours a self-regulation approach. However, "a critical approach is essential when evaluating Big Tech's often deceptive sustainability narratives and underscores the need for more rigorous regulatory frameworks" (Vrikki, 2024:1) in all areas, but specifically around sustainability. Here Bit Tech uses instead "disclosure legislation, international soft law and private actors' corporate sustainability codes of conduct. Despite an abundance of norms, egregious human and environmental rights violations

[...] continue” (Zumbansen, 2024:1; about sustainability regulations in global value chains).

This was tough to see, and it left me wondering how many more game makers feel the same way: standing behind their game and its pro-environmental message in isolation but also realizing that in its systemic context the game studio is even contributing to the greenwashing of a big corporation. The point of the story is that meaningful sustainability through games needs to also consider the political economy and context of games or risk that games are being used as greenwashing. It changes how the problem of sustainability in games is presented from the typical consideration of the content of the individual game to include its logics of production. It also shows that meaningful sustainability requires collective action and systemic change because a single game maker or studio alone can be powerless. There is just no good solution here in navigating this situation: Not taking money from Meta to make a game they believe in is not good either. This is a rock and a hard place for even the studio head and requires organization.

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