

“It’s Just a Hoax”: Climate Change Denial in *Civilization VI*’s Reddit Communities

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Ecogames are designed as tools for education and awareness-raising about environmental crises, modelling issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, or resource extraction through interactive systems (Chang 2019; op de Beke et al. 2024). At the same time, however, players do not passively accept these representations: they frequently reframe, contest, or satirise how games stage environmental problems, questioning the assumptions embedded in their mechanics and narratives (Navarro & Tapiador 2023). In this perspective, online game communities become key venues where such reinterpretations take shape, as forums, social media, and streaming platforms host extended discussions of environmental themes that emerge in and around gameplay, ranging from sustainability activism (Lamerichs 2024; Werning 2021) to sceptical and denialist positions.

Yet, despite growing scholarly attention to ecogames as tools for environmental communication, the literature has unexplored how game communities actively construct and circulate counter-narratives to the environmental messages embedded in commercial games. This gap is consequential: with hundreds of millions of players worldwide engaging in game-related discussion on social media, these communities represent large-scale, informal arenas where climate meanings are negotiated outside formal educational or news media contexts. Understanding how denial operates in these spaces is therefore essential to grasp the full social ecology of climate change misinformation.

Against this backdrop, this contribution examines *Civilization VI: Gathering Storm* (Firaxis Games 2016) as a contested site for climate change denial within its wider ecology that includes the game itself and its paratextual extensions (Consalvo 2017;

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Carter 2015) on Reddit. The analysis focuses on how alternative, conspiratorial climate narratives emerge around the game's explicit modelling of anthropogenic CO₂ emissions, their impacts, and speculative mitigation technologies. Indeed, *Gathering Storm* explicitly foregrounds environmental dynamics by requiring players to monitor atmospheric CO₂ levels that rise with fossil fuel consumption. As CO₂ accumulates, the game links increasing concentrations to more frequent and intense natural disasters – including floods, droughts, storms, and the permanent submersion of coastal tiles. Crucially, once certain CO₂ thresholds are crossed, the process becomes irreversible: players cannot restore flooded tiles or reverse warming, directly simulating real-world climate tipping points.

Methodologically, the study adopts Reddit as the main site of investigation due to its relatively weak moderation and persistent, highly politicised discussions (Massanari 2015). The analysis focused on the three most popular Civilization-related subreddits (CivVI, Civ6, and civ) and the general Civ thread. Relevant content was identified through keyword queries including “carbon emission”, “climate”, “CO₂”, “flooding”, “fossil fuel”, “global warming”, “sea level”, and “sustainability”, yielding a corpus of 32612 comments posted between 2013 and 2026. After identifying recurrent words, bigrams, and trigrams, a semantic network analysis was conducted on terms co-occurring within a five-word window of “climate”. Then, a thematic inductive analysis (Guest et al. 2011) was carried out this subset of comments to reconstruct users' dominant frames and narrative devices.

Results show a strongly polarised discourse structured around a few thematic nuclei. A first cluster frames climate change as hoax and conspiracy, linking “climate change” and “global warming” to “fake news”, “taxes”, and “agenda”, with users dismissing climate change as propaganda for new forms of taxation and control. Several comments explicitly describe climate change as “a hoax invented to make money out of ignorant idiots” or as something that “will be used propagandistically as proof that we need to pay massive taxes on all economic activities”. Others, even supporting solar panels and more efficient resource use, still consider climate change “a joke”, especially when “multinational governmental entities like the UN and Al Gore are pushing for more money and control”. In the same vein, climate science is ridiculed through caricatural arguments (“If global warming and evolution exist, why aren't polar bears fish by now? Global warming is fake news. Sad!”) and portrayed as a funding strategy for “catastrophists” who are “wrong and just playing for public money”.

A second nucleus opposes anthropogenic accounts to narratives of natural cycles. References to solar activity and past climatic shifts support claims that current warming is “nothing new” and that the game exaggerates human responsibility (“the climate has always changed, long before coal”).

A third cluster centers on distrust of expertise, mobilising scandals such as “Climategate”¹ and alleged data manipulation to undermine the epistemic authority of climate science that underpins *Gathering Storm's* design. These users position themselves as critical truth-seekers against corrupt scientists.

In contrast, a smaller but visible nucleus defends the game's representation as broadly aligned with the assessments produced by major scientific institutions on climate change, like the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). These users argue that the impacts represented on the map are actually toned down (“it's basically what

the science says, but simplified”) and use the game as a prompt to discuss mitigation and long-term consequences. However, their contributions are often reframed by others as importing “real-world politics” into a leisure space.

Overall, the analysis reveals robust currents of climate change denial articulated on multiple levels, which do not appear to be subjected to systematic censorship by the platform. Climate change, understood as the outcome of a long-term anthropogenic historical process, becomes the object of a revisionist reworking that mobilises alternative, conspiratorial knowledge often resonating with alt-right discourses (Taylor 2020). This counter-knowledge primarily contests scientific consensus and reframes environmental politics as partisan propaganda (Massanari 2024). As a result, adherence to scientific theories about global warming is reframed as a matter of belief – something one simply does or does not “believe in” – rather than as the product of a robust body of evidence (Jacques 2012). These binary positions strongly influence the framing of the problem, narrowing the range of solutions perceived as legitimate by users and flattening the complexity of the issue.

This evidence speaks directly to DiGRA’s interest in climate change and ecogames by showing how player communities contribute to the social construction of environmental pasts and imagined climate futures (op de Beke et al. 2024). The study illustrates how games that model environmental dynamics become catalysts for negotiating climate meanings, with communities acting both as vehicles for activism and as potential hubs of denialism. In this context, online platforms where user-generated game paratexts circulate – such as social media and streaming services – function as infrastructures for the production, legitimation, and diffusion of alternative climate knowledge. The research is bounded by a few delimitations: the analysis draws exclusively on Reddit, which means findings may not extend to other platforms, and the corpus is limited to four Civilization-related subreddits, so patterns observed here may not capture dynamics in communities around other ecogames. Within these boundaries, however, the study speaks to a broader concern: how will videogames engage with climate change as an increasingly contested issue, and can they help build the foundations for a shared environmental future?

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ENDNOTES

¹ In November 2009, servers at the Climatic Research Unit of the University of East Anglia were hacked, resulting in the online publication of emails and documents just weeks before the Copenhagen climate summit. Climate change denialists claimed that the leaked materials proved global warming was a scientific conspiracy and that researchers had manipulated data to silence opponents. However, eight independent investigations subsequently cleared the scientists of fraud or scientific misconduct, finding that the allegations of data manipulation were unfounded.