

# Mapping eco(politics) in ecogames

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ecopolitics, ecogames, biopolitics, mapping

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The main aim of this paper is to map different political elements of ecogames in search of ecopolitical patterns, to better understand how the ecological aspect of these games is configured.

Contemporary landscape of ecomedia theories and research (Rust, Monani, & Cubitt, 2016) offers numerous points of entry into the problematic of ecogames. From researching the analogies between green utopias and digital spaces (Farca, 2024), through analysis of ecoplay rhetorics (Bianchi, 2020), to critical studies of the whole gaming ecosystem's impact on climate (Abraham, 2022). These points of entry show that whenever one touches ecology a Pandora's box opens: education (Wu & Lee, 2015), ecofeminism (Woolbright, 2018), ecology and imperialism (Mukherjee, 2024), colonization (Frelík, 2024), awareness and social impact (Schønau-Fog & Bjørner, 2024), animal studies, being with (Bianchi, 2017) and hauntology (Youngblood, 2024), not to mention tech and material infrastructures (Fizek, 2024). And that list does not even represent a grain in the whole sandbox of what ecocritical game approaches offer to contemporary game criticism (Chang, 2019). However useful and needed these approaches are, I would like to propose a different path for ecogame analysis, one that looks at the building blocks of ecology and politics as one assemblage, thus the insertion of brackets into eco(politics).

What my contribution to this sprawling landscape offers is a structural map of eco(political) game elements, a mapping tool, or an algorithm. With this approach, I would like to tackle the problem of the in-game basis for "thinking ecologically" (May & Hall, 2024), by looking at the game ontology, which differentiates between four layers projected onto any game: physical, communicational, structural and mental (Aarseth & Grabarczyk, 2018). Thus, I aim to map the building blocks of eco(politics) in games. The map then serves two purposes. First, it serves as a critical and analytical lens for game scholars looking for eco(political) cues. Second, this map can be used by

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developers or gamejammers as an easy introductory material for creative, artistic practice.

I want to maintain that this is a research tool first and foremost, as there already are certain solutions focusing on game design (Walk, Görlich, & Barrett, 2017), systemic solutions (Wearn & Back, 2017) or design as practice (Chang, 2024; Coulton & Hook, 2017).

I chose eco(politics) because of its proximity to biopolitics, which makes the aims of mapping easier to depict as a search for ecogaming assemblages in play, their power structures, dependencies, habituses they produce. The biopolitical lens already combines two critical elements for thinking ecologically: life and politics. There is no singular biopolitical method to approach eco(politics), which makes this endeavor an exploration of alternative ways to think and apply biopolitical reflection in game studies.

The four accounts of ecopolitics I reference mark significant paradigms that offer fundamental understanding of the core notions: of the eco- and of politics. I start with Verena Conley's anticipation of an ecofeminist revolution as part of a struggle within XXth century theoretical buzz and realigning of ecological vectors of humanities and sciences (Conley 1997). A decade later Blühdorn and Welsh note a fiasco of ecopolitics showing significant shift towards greenwashing, corporate deals sustaining the unsustainable economy, and simulation politics (Blühdorn and Welsh 2008). Fast forward another decade, Stoett and Mulligan propose an alternative reading of the multi-layered and decentralized ecopolitical agency, introducing a tool to evaluate it and move forward (Stoett and Mulligan 2019). Lastly, coming back to ecofeminist and object-oriented philosophies of kinship and being with the other, Kuperus redefines ecopolitics less as a legislative and more as an experiential politics of being detached from the social contract, and rooted in the non-human communities (Kuperus 2023). I use these paradigmatic shifts to map eco(politics) in ecogames and to identify which game ontology elements align with the four conceptualizations of ecopolitics.

This paper uses concept mapping according to the main aim of this method, "to outline relationships between ideas" (Davies, 2011, p. 282). Martin Davies explains that concept maps differ from mind maps because they offer a tighter and more advanced structure, introduce hierarchy and schematics for better understanding of concept relationships, thus allowing knowledge to be rigidly organized. Their limits lie in their linear nature, complexity, and abstractness (Davies, 2011, p. 286), so they are less likely to be used as educational tools and more likely as analytical supplementation of the research process (Davies, 2011, pp. 291–292). The strengths of concept maps lie in the combination of verbal and visual components, consolidation and summarization of information, avoidance of single-channel information overload, and simplification of data by reorganization of structural relationships (Schroeder, Nesbit, Anguiano, & Adesope, 2018). I advocate for the use of concept mapping in this study for two reasons. First, I want to better understand the relationships between ecology and governance in ecogames. Second, my aim is to better understand and visualize the building blocks, or elements that formulate the assemblages of eco(politics) in games.

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