

For the Trees: Envisioning Sustainable Futures Through Ecomodded Minecraft

Rosemary McDonald

Technoculture, Art and Games Research Centre
Concordia University
Montreal, QC
r_cdona@live.concordia.ca

Bart Simon, Maia Earl

Technoculture, Art and Games Research Centre
Concordia University
Montreal, QC
bart.simon@concordia.ca, m_earl@live.concordia.ca

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

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INTRODUCTION

“Ecomodding”—modifying games to include or strengthen eco and environmental material— can be seen as a means of transforming popular games into sites of ecological conversation and critique (Bohunicky 2017; Werning 2021). This paper explores our use of ecomodding in creating a multiplayer *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios 2011) game experience, designed to be played on our autonomous solar powered server. Reflecting on the strengths and weaknesses of the 10-week public multiplayer server we hosted in the summer of 2025; we embrace the co-creative nature ecomodding and collaborative play as we design a second phase launching in 2026.

According to Chang (2011, 2019), for a game to be truly “environmental” it must include complex ecologies and have an environment that is more than just a backdrop but is an interface to be interacted with by the player. Additionally, Abraham (2022) argues that “the truly ecological game must be, first and foremost, a carbon neutral one”. Guided by both tenets, we engage in an ecomodding practice that foregrounds *Minecraft’s* environmental themes while making visible one facet of online gaming’s ecological impact: its energy consumption. Hosting our games on a solar powered server confronts a player’s expectation to play-on-demand, and incorporating the live data from the server’s solar controller creates a diegetic breach—fluctuations in solar power manifest as non-human agencies which shape the gameworld alongside the players. Embracing the contradictory nature of digital games as ecocritical media (Bohunicky 2017), we design ecogaming experiences that *involve* sustainable energies, rather than just being *about* them.

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By modding our *Minecraft* world, we bring ecological and environmental themes to the forefront- players in our games grapple with challenges otherwise unheard of in a vanilla playthrough such as pollution, extreme temperatures, chaotic storms, and resource scarcity. In our 2025 modpack, *Gaia's Riddle*, players sheltered together in a techno-utopia of clean burning jetpacks and drone-powered lumber farms— a true ecomodernist paradise (Fremaux 2019). In our upcoming modpack *For the Trees*, players begin in a veritable wasteland and must do the diligent work of regreening to access any of the flora or fauna normally present in the game. While the packs will greatly differ in aesthetics and mechanics, the core goals are the same: make the climate crisis visible and engage with the role that online gaming plays in it.

This paper reviews three lessons learned from *Gaia's Riddle* that we are taking with us into our next adventure. First, the combination of mods that we included in our pack facilitated an ecomodernist and anthropocentric response to the climate catastrophe. Players did not see themselves as part of the natural world but were instead living in spite of it (Fremaux 2019). A quasi-antagonistic relationship between the players and the gameworld developed during our game. Players worked hard to keep the “cottage country” where they resided picturesque and clean while the surrounding biomes were devastated by storms (not to mention nuclear explosions caused by players just for the fun of it- as long as it was far enough away from home to not be a nuisance). This player versus nature stance is one we are working to complicate in future projects.

The second takeaway is that despite the questionable dynamic between the players and the world, the ecological frame of the gameworld greatly emphasized the sociality and communal nature of the server. Players on the solar server developed “collective subjectivities” (Singh 2017), organically organizing posses to defeat bosses and assembling clean-up crews to tackle the pollution unleashed by industrial accidents. Communal play even extended beyond the bounds of the gameworld as conversations continued during the rare occasions when the battery died and the server shut down. Cooperation among players and the negotiations of what they understood as shared resources—both in-game items and real-world time spent playing—led to some of the most memorable moments of the project.

The third lesson that remains prominent during our design process is a fundamental issue in all games which situate the player as the primary agency for affecting change in the gameworld. Ecogame design risks falling into the ecomodernist trap of figuring players as saviors, caretakers or stewards of the environment even when they are not cast as destroyers and colonizers of it (as Backe 2024 and others have argued). This is problematic from an ecocritical perspective and begs the question of whether productively critical ecogaming is even possible. We do not think players can have a genuine posthumanistic ecological encounter with a videogame but we are curious if games can be played against the grain to deconstruct the absolute agency of players.

In our 2025 modpack we included mods that made the gameworld more dynamic and often volatile, but as players were able to overcome those obstacles, they remained the center of the universe- complicit in our ecogame that does not challenge anthropocentricity since humanity is both the cause of and solution to the climate crisis. Our challenge going forward is to encourage player reflexivity on their relationship to the environment whilst skirting a neoliberal eco-warrior trope.

Holding the above lessons close to heart, we ask ourselves the following questions as we prepare for the next stage in our study: how can we continue to facilitate the emergence of collective subjectivities through a rich and rewarding multiplayer experience? How can we incorporate the agencies of “non-human-actants” (Fremaux 2019) and deconstruct the singular agency of players? How can we avoid the pitfalls of ecomodernist solutions and neoliberal environmentalism (and how can we make the most of it when we inevitably fail)?

We are not designing a game where players set out to uncover the correct solution to climate catastrophe; we are creating a platform where they can explore many emergent scenarios through play. By ecomodding both the software of the game and the hardware that hosts it, we discover new ways to play and new futures to imagine.

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