

Chesapeake Project: Integrating Sustainability Across the Curriculum

Dr. Kent L. Norman

Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, College of Behavioral and Social Science

The Psychology of Video Games and Entertainment, PSYC445, Fall 2014

Introduction

The Psychology of Video Games and Entertainment covers many different topics from the psychology of play to the effects that video games have on our day-to-day lives. We talk about what attracts players to games, what keeps them playing and paying, and what transfers from the game space to the real world for good (education) or for bad (violence). This semester, I will be introducing a new perspective, the issue of sustainability and how the virtual worlds of video games can have an impact on our real world. Students will be introduced to the concept of sustainability through a brief lecture presentation and an outside reading. The relationship of video games and sustainability will be explored through three assignments. In addition, the issue of sustainability will be advanced throughout the course in various contexts pertaining to particular games discussed (e.g., Civilization) and game mechanics pertaining to use of scarce resources.

Learning Objectives and Assignments:

1. To gain an understanding of sustainability issues in the real world and how video games either incorporate these principles in the game or defy them and either sensitize us to them or desensitize us.

A presentation will be given in class by a student from the Office of Sustainability. We will then break into small groups to discuss how virtual worlds and video games relate to sustainability. How do video game mechanics (e.g., breaking pots to get coins and slashing trees to pass through in Zelda games) and virtual environments (e.g., post-apocalyptic world as in Fallout: New Vegas) affect our view of sustainability? This will be followed up by an online discussion over the following 10 days.

2. To gain an appreciation of how video games and virtual environments themselves generate a minimal impact on the real environment.

In a video game one may kill hundreds of enemy combatants, but waste no lead, metal shells, or gunpowder. In a NASCAR Racing game no fuel is spent; whereas in an actual NASCAR race, over 60,000 gallons of fuel are burned. As an assignment, teams of students will include an assessment of the sustainability aspects of a game that they choose to present to the class.

3. To be able to evaluate the effectiveness of “serious” or “persuasive” video games that encourage the player to experience and interact with sustainability issues in the game.

A list of 10 video games will be provided (two examples are listed below).

MySustHouse games: <http://www.mysusthouse.org/game.html> There are two games here. The first lets you explore ways to create a more sustainable environment. The second challenges you to build a sustainable house. This site also has an introduction to sustainability.

Electrocity ElectroCity: <http://www.electrocity.co.nz> was developed to increase public awareness – particularly among students – of the basic "common knowledge" needed to discuss energy topics such as: How is energy generated? How much does it cost? How does it affect the environment?

Students will be required to play the game for at least 30 minutes and write an evaluation. What was the point of the game? What did you learn? What was good about the game? What was bad? How could it be improved?

Then they will be asked to think of a new serious game that teaches some aspect of sustainability. What would it be about? Describe the game. How would it work? What would be the incentive to play it?

Students will be graded on each of these three assignments.