GAMES CULTURES

Activity 4: *Lego for a Green Analysis*

University students, B.A. and M.A. levels

★ ★ ☆ Intermediate

2,5 hours

10-20 participants, divided into 3-4 teams

Foundational knowledge of eco-critical theories and traditional narratives of nature representation in the (audio-) visual arts

one well-filled Medium Creative Brick Lego Box per team or equivalent; the box should offer a variety of bricks – from the standard Lego bricks to wheels or characters.

This activity was first implemented in the course Media Studies III - Green Media in the MA3D Animation for Film & Games at Cologne Game Lab and Internationale Filmschule Köln in the winter semester 2022/23. In the session prior, students were introduced to the traditional narratives of the representation of human-nature relationship as well as the counter-positions in eco-critical theories.

This activity is inspired by the Lego Serious Play method, which was, however, adjusted for a shorter time-frame to match the teaching slots at Cologne Game Lab. With more time, this method can also be applied to different contexts in the field of green games or green game production, e.g., the envisioning of a greener game production studio incl. the current blocking points.

PREPARATION

Prior to this session, arrange with the students to choose media artifacts from a set to analyze during the live session. Alternatively, the lecturer can choose the work for them*. The students are then supposed to engage meaningfully with the chosen piece; i.e., play the game or watch the movie, etc.. In this particular case, the group decided in favor of Hayao Miyazaki's Princess Mononoke. Due to the movie's complexity and the group size, we opted for it to be the only source to work on**.

Ask students to pay attention to the representation of the human-nature relationship and to the reasons why they find the particular approach interesting. How does the approach in representation diverge from more standardized ways of nature representations? What is the appeal to the audience and how is the appeal created?

This activity can be used for the analysis of various media. So every lecturer can feel free in their choice of sources as suggestions to the students. The list of choices for this group contained the following options: Never Alone by Upper One Games, Alba: A Wildlife Adventure by Ustwo Games, Princess Mononoke by Hayao Miyazaki, Don't look up by Adam McKay.

**In the case of smaller groups of around 10-12 students, it makes sense to work with just one source material to achieve a complementary and more detailed analysis in two groups foregrounding different aspects. Larger groups of about 20 can benefit from the analysis of two sources with two teams working on the same piece but different aspects. The overall group would not only achieve a complementary analysis of two works but also more novel approaches to representing nature for their personal tool box.*

LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Students will develop the ability to identify and evaluate underlying themes and messages about the environment within the chosen source.
- Students will collaboratively develop a tool set consisting of good examples extracted from analyzed cultural artifacts, showcasing non-standard ways to depict the human-nature relationship.
- Students will learn to communicate abstract ideas effectively through both visual representation and verbal explanation.

Step 1 *Introduction to Building Principles (15 minutes building time plus 30 minutes joint presentation)*

Distribute Lego boxes to students and ask them to individually build something that represents a concept requiring abstraction (e.g., "What is your greatest joy?").

Following the building period, ask all students to comment on their creation in a plenary setting. Make sure to establish that a) the students understand that they can abstract complex procedures / issues / feelings etc. via the Lego blocks, b) they realize that they are the ones imbuing their creations with meaning via their words, c) they display an appreciating discussion culture when talking about each other's creations.

Step 2 *Team Formation, Game Analysis and Construction (30 minutes)*

Instruct students to form teams and assign each team a particular part of the game / movie / TV series to analyze; in the case of Princess Monoke, the students of group 1 were tasked with the analysis of the forest community, while group 2 were asked to analyze the town community. Similar arrangements can be made for all media artifacts.

Each team should focus on analyzing the representation of the human-nature relationship in their assigned community and build a holistic model of this part of the story world with Lego bricks, incorporating key aspects identified during analysis.

To facilitate the construction period, ask students to think about the following aspects and their impact on the representation of the human-nature relationship:

- Cultures, subcultures, languages, traditions, philosophy, position of women / queer people / migrants etc.
- Geography, vegetation, climate, active nature vs. passive nature etc.
- What does the political system look like? How are community-wide decisions reached? How does trade work?
- Specific environmental problems? How relevant for story / experience?
- Hero character? Other advocates? Antagonists?
- Conflict and resolution?
- Which actions are taken by which group? What are their consequences? How are these actions represented?

Step 3 *Presentation and Discussion (45 minutes)*

Each team presents their findings and Lego models to the class, highlighting key themes and messages related to the human-nature relationship.

Facilitate a discussion comparing and contrasting the findings of the teams, focusing on anthropocentric or anti-anthropocentric tendencies and their implications for gameplay, mechanics, story, or aesthetics. Make sure to also integrate eco-critical theories in the discussion. In the case of Princess Mononoke, eco-feminism, eco-Marxism, and Deep Ecology were especially fruitful for the discussion of the models.

Ask the students which aspect of the novel representation of the human-nature relationship especially appealed to them. Encourage them to state their reasons and how they want to move forward in their own creative practice.

Collect and summarize findings on a whiteboard for reference.

Credits & Acknowledgements