

# GREEN GAME STUDIES COURSE PACKAGE 2

**CGL**  
Cologne Game Lab

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GEFÖRDERT VOM

 **Bundesministerium  
für Bildung  
und Forschung**

**Course:** "The Futures of Media"

**Module:** Advanced Media and Game Studies (B.A. Digital Games Program, Semester 6)

**Institution:** TH Köln, Cologne Game Lab, Germany

**Timeframe:** Summer Term 2023 (April 2023-July 2023)

This course package is based on a syllabus of a course delivered in the B.A. Digital Games program within the Media & Game Studies module taught at Cologne Game Lab, TH Köln in summer term 2023. The package includes the following:

- Course description
- Learning outcomes
- Requirements and assignments
- Grading criteria
- Mandatory sources
- Course structure

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This educational material has been created within the framework of the project "Greening Games. Building Higher Education Resources for Sustainable Video Game Production, Design & Critical Game Studies" (2021-2024) funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research in Germany *within the framework of the* Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union (KA220-HED – Cooperation Partnerships in Higher Education).

More information may be found at: <https://greeningames.eu>.



## ***Course description***

This course delves into the future of diverse media trends and their potential impact on human society. It primarily focuses on three significant areas: artificial intelligence, climate crisis, and social media in the post-truth era as well as their influence on the political, social, and cultural landscape.

The course seeks to answer pivotal questions that go beyond understanding the evolution of the media landscape / industry, such as how media changes can affect human work and leisure and how humans can bear responsibility in a world where they are no longer central actors. Furthermore, the course encourages its participants to explore the implications of these prospects for human self-understanding.

Students will examine these questions via a range of teaching formats, including lectures, small group work, workshops and academic poster presentations. By the end of the course, the students will have developed their informed perspectives on what it means to be human in the posthuman, digital era.



# ***Learning outcomes***

The participants of this course will:

- explore digital media aesthetic and future media trends,
- familiarise themselves with relevant theories, concepts and discourses in order to be able to critically analyse digital media aesthetic,
- gain knowledge that they will be able to build upon in their design practice.
- reflect the question of climate crisis within the context of video games.

# Grading

## Requirements and assignments

- All students have to actively participate in the sessions.
- All students have to study and analyze the assigned reading material in a way that enables them to actively and creatively participate in the seminar discussions; i.e., developing their own thoughts and theoretical insights.
- All students have to complete the final assignment - a research poster on one aspect of the topics presented in this seminar series. The research poster has to be presented in the last session of the semester to the entire group in the format of a “research café.”

## Grading criteria

**Research poster (80% of the grade):** You will design a research poster in which you will present your own research question / hypothesis as well as related academic literature related to the theme of the seminar. Use graphic materials, graphs, tables and other supporting visuals to make the poster more engaging. Do not forget to work with academic sources. The text in the poster should not be shorter than 500 words.

You do not need to print the poster for final submission. Submit a digital copy to Spaces as a pdf.

**Research poster draft (20% of the grade):** in the last session on the 10th of May 2023 you will have the opportunity to present your research poster draft. Use this opportunity to gather feedback in order to improve the final version of the poster. You will need to print an

The following components of the poster will be graded (20% of the entire poster grade):

- Research question and related academic literature
- Structure of the poster and how the use of visual elements illustrate the research question
- The ability to present complex academic questions and topics in a concise format (this requires participation in the last session)



# Mandatory sources

## Written sources

- Bogost, I. 2020. "It Doesn't Matter If Anyone Exists or Not." *The Atlantic*. February 24, 2020: <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2020/02/how-generate-infinite-fake-humans/606943/>.
- Cubitt, S. 2016. *Finite Media. Environmental Implications of Digital Technologies*. Introduction. Durham: Duke University Press: [https://www.dukeupress.edu/Assets/PubMaterials/978-0-8223-6292-0\\_601.pdf](https://www.dukeupress.edu/Assets/PubMaterials/978-0-8223-6292-0_601.pdf).
- Fizek, S. 2022. *Playing at a Distance. Borderlands of Video Game Aesthetic*. Chapter 4: Automated Play. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Forster, E. M. 1909. *The Machine Stops*. The Oxford and Cambridge Review.
- Kirsch, A. 2022. "The People Cheering for Humanity's End." *The Atlantic*. December 1, 2022. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/01/anthropocene-anti-humanism-transhumanism-apocalypse-predictions/672230/>.
- Kylie, A. 2019. Inside the intricate world of video game cartography. *Canadian Geographic*. <https://canadiangeographic.ca/articles/inside-the-intricate-world-of-video-game-cartography>.
- Jiang, S. 2023. "What People Get Wrong When They Think About Video Game AI." *Kotaku*. February 16, 2023. <https://kotaku.com/ai-game-dev-procgen-watchdogs-legion-no-mans-sky-1850120151>.
- Maniora, B. 2022. How Riders Republic mobilized its players for the first digital climate march. *Games Industry Biz*: <https://www.gamesindustry.biz/how-riders-republic-mobilized-its-players-for-the-first-digital-climate-march>.
- Mollick, E. 2023. "The Practical Guide to Using AI to Do Stuff." *Substack newsletter*. One Useful Thing. January 24, 2023. <https://oneusefulthing.substack.com/p/the-practical-guide-to-using-ai-to>.
- Silk, M., Ricardo Correia, Diogo Veríssimo, Audrey Verma, and Sarah L. Crowley. 2021. "The Implications of Digital Visual Media for Human–Nature Relationships." *People and Nature* 3 (6): 1130–37. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pan3.10284>.



# Course structure

This course has a time format attuned to the specific needs of the B.A. Digital Games Program at Cologne Game Lab, TH Köln. Each seminar session comprises two 90-minute-long blocks. This course has been conceptualized for sixteen 90-minute seminars (corresponding to eight three-hour seminars). Usually, the course is attended by up to 40 students.

***Note:** In the case of this course, ecological themes are embedded into a larger thematic structure. Three out of eight sessions are devoted to green gaming. This format demonstrates how to implement ecological topics into an already existing course.*

## Contents

**Seminar session 1:** The Future without Humans

**Seminar session 2:** AI as Co-Player: Automated Play

**Seminar session 3:** AI as Co-Creator: Chances, Constraints, Risks

**Seminar session 4:** Eco Media: Nature as Designer and Games as Spaces of Ecological Expression

**Seminar session 5:** Eco Media: Pixelating Nature

**Seminar session 6:** The Fragility of Media or the Future without Media

**Seminar session 7:** Beyond the Surface: Selfies, Deep Fakes, and the Complexity of Human Identity

**Seminar session 8:** "Research Café"



# Seminar Session 1: The Future without Humans

## Preparation

For this session, students are expected to read the following source:

Kirsch, A. 2022. "The People Cheering for Humanity's End." *The Atlantic*. December 1, 2022.



# Seminar Session 2: AI as Co-Player: Automated Play

## Preparation

For this session, students are expected to read the following source:

Fizek, S. 2022. Playing at a Distance. *Borderlands of Video Game Aesthetic*. Chapter 4: Automated Play. Cambridge: MIT Press.



# **Seminar Session 3: AI as Co-Creator: Chances, Constraints, Risks**

## *Preparation*

For this session, students are expected to read the following source:

- Jiang, S. 2023. "What People Get Wrong When They Think About Video Game AI." Kotaku. February 16, 2023.
- Mollick, E. 2023. "The Practical Guide to Using AI to Do Stuff." Substack newsletter. One Useful Thing. January 24, 2023.



# Seminar Session 4: Eco Media: Nature as Designer and Games as Spaces of Ecological Expression

## Leading questions for the session

- What are green or eco-critical games?
- How can games embed ecological themes?
- How can games empower their players to act more ecologically?
- Can nature be perceived as a designer? What would it mean to draw inspiration from nature in the context of level design?

## Preparation

For this session, students are expected to read the following sources:

- Kylie, A. 2019. Inside the intricate world of video game cartography. *Canadian Geographic*.
- Maniora, B. 2022. How Riders Republic mobilized its players for the first digital climate march. *Games Industry Biz*.

## Lecture

**Topic:** Introduction to Eco-Critical Game Studies I (45 minutes + 15 minutes for Q&A)

**Note:** see Introductory Lecture Deck 1 "Video Games and Nature. Introduction to Eco-critical Study of Games & Game Making" available in the repository of the "Greening Games" project.



## Seminar

### *Activity 1: Discussion based on the first source from the list (60 minutes)*

#### **Exemplary questions helpful in moderating the discussion:**

- Can video games contribute to the protection of the environment? If so, how?
- How effective can an in-game climate march be as a political act? Can you find any sources on the Internet, which give an account of the march by the players?
- How can video games influence their players' emotions?

**Task 1:** Divide the students into smaller groups (circa 6 students per group) and ask them to explore the UN initiative Playing for the Planet Alliance. (20 minutes + 10 minutes for sharing). Who is part of the Alliance? What mission does it have? What activities are part of it?

### *Activity 2: Discussion based on the first source from the list (60 minutes)*

#### **Exemplary points helpful in moderating the discussion:**

- The reconstruction of real-world places that later become game levels within a fictitious world
- Techniques of level design in the case where the game world stays close to its real counterpart
- How to map out existing natural settings to video games
- Digital tourism

**Task 1:** Watching the short documentary film and continuing the discussion on nature as a level designer.

Ubisoft. 2022. Riders Republic: *Inspired by Nature*:



# Seminar session 5: Eco Media: Pixelating Nature

## Leading questions for the session

- How do representations of nature shape our understanding of it and vice versa?
- What are the ethical implications for creative practice because of the existing cultural patterns of nature representation?
- In what ways can immersive digital environments challenge or reinforce anthropocentric views of nature?

## Preparation

For this session, students are expected to read the following source:

Silk, Matthew, Ricardo Correia, Diogo Veríssimo, Audrey Verma, and Sarah L. Crowley. 2021. "The Implications of Digital Visual Media for Human–Nature Relationships." *People and Nature* 3 (6): 1130–37.



## Seminar

### *Activity 1: Warm-up discussion based on the preparatory reading (20 minutes)*

with a particular focus on ethical concerns in the production of (audio-)visual media when it comes to the representation of the human-nature relationship

### *Activity 2: Looking at Nature (70 minutes)*

**Task 1:** Divide the students into smaller groups (circa 4-6 persons per group). Each group selects from a collection of in-game photographs: one that best conveys their interpretation of “nature’s essence” and another that most accurately depicts the relation between humans and nature. Each group should share its choices with the plenum.

**Input:** Introduce recognized patterns of nature’s representation in Western visual culture, e.g., Christian tradition, Romantic turn.

**Task 2:** Instruct the groups to reassess their selections from Task 1, identifying influences of traditional visual representations of nature in their choices. Compile and debate these insights collectively in the seminar.

### *Activity 3: Playing a Pixelated Version of Nature (90 min.)*

**Task 1:** Divide the students into smaller groups (circa 4-6 persons per group), assign them a video game that offers a unique portrayal of nature (e.g., In Other Waters, Never Alone, Terra Nil) and ask each group to play the game. After the playtime, gather all groups and discuss the different play experiences, how they differ from standardized nature representations and their potential impact.



# Seminar session 6: The Fragility of Media or the Future without Media

## Leading questions for the session

- Why are digital media finite?
- What natural resources are necessary for the existence of digital media?
- What are the ethical implications of digitality?
- Can you imagine a world without digital media and the Internet?

## Preparation

For this session, students are expected to read the following sources:

- Cubitt, Sean. 2016. *Finite Media. Environmental Implications of Digital Technologies*. Introduction. Durham: Duke University Press.
- E. M. Forster. 1909. *The Machine Stops*. The Oxford and Cambridge Review.



## Seminar

**Activity 1:** *Warm-up discussion based on the first source from the list (45 minutes)*

**Activity 2:** *Speculative fiction – imagining a world without the Internet based on the short story *The Machine Stops* (120 minutes)*

**Task 1:** Divide the students into smaller groups (circa 6 persons per group) and ask each group to focus on one aspect of the internet that is closely connected to natural resource extraction or nature depletion. How could the natural world potentially benefit from the “machine stopping”? (e.g., data centers – if a group chooses to focus on data centers, they need to look into specific aspects of this infrastructure). (60 minutes reserved for research, 20 minutes for putting up short presentations and 40 for group presentations and discussions).





# ***Seminar session 7: Beyond the Surface: Selfies, Deep Fakes, and the Complexity of Human Identity***

## *Preparation*

For this session, students are expected to read the following source:

Bogost, Ian. 2020. "It Doesn't Matter If Anyone Exists or Not." *The Atlantic*. February 24, 2020.



## ***Seminar session 8: “Research Café”***

In this three-hour-long session, all students are presenting their poster drafts. This course was delivered by two lecturers, so the student group was divided into two sub-groups, which presented in two separate rooms (circa 20 students per room). Each of the posters was printed ahead of the session and placed onto a wall. Three students were presenting simultaneously for 15 minutes, including Q&A from their peers.

The formative feedback collected from the lecturers and peers allowed the students to rework their poster drafts for final submission.



# Credits & Acknowledgements

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More information may be found at: <https://greeninggames.eu>.

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