



GAMES CONTENT

Activity 3: Side Quest Chain Design



Game Development students, B.A. or M.A. level



Intermediate to Advanced



1 - 3 hours



6-25 participants



Basic understanding of theming vs. gameplay mechanics, foundational knowledge of game design and development scope, good awareness of open-world quest design tropes (e.g. Far Cry, Fallout, Spider-Man)



A timer for activities

SUMMARY

An interactive workshop where students work to add sustainability messages to existing games by suggesting a string of small in-game quests that collectively form a narrative while using existing gameplay mechanics. Examples of where this is already done in high-budget games are provided.

TASK

Students will take existing games and create new ideas for side-quests that collectively deliver a message on the theme of sustainability. They are encouraged to reuse or 're-skin' existing gameplay mechanics.

PREPARATION

A timer for activities. No further equipment necessary, but it is highly recommended to have a shared screen (e.g. a projector connected to a computer), list making software (e.g. Microsoft Word or Excel) and for students to have access to computers for research and/or note-taking materials.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Inspiration for adding environmentally-aware narratives alongside more conventional video game storytelling.

Step 1 Introduction/Reminder (5-15 minutes)

Introduce/remind students of ways in which games can express environmentally sustainable ideas and actions.

Let students know they will be working on storytelling and gameplay related to sustainability in games. In particular, they will be asked to make a chain of side-quests with a sustainability theme.

Note: this exercise is inspired by real briefings given to freelance Narrative Designers in the video game industry.

A **'side quest'** is an activity in a game which is optional for the player. It typically reuses gameplay mechanics that are in the game's main campaign, although it may repurpose or 're-skin' the activity (e.g. make shooting mechanics into a nonviolent fairground ride).

A **'quest chain'** is two or more quests that have follow-on narrative elements, and typically share gameplay activities.

Remind them of the distinction between theming and systemic sustainability content:

- 'Theming' – where the aesthetics of the game (visual, narrative, etc.) have environmental/sustainability themes
- 'Systemic' – where a game's core systems operate in ways that relate to sustainability actions, i.e. the gameplay mechanics/activities embody sustainability
- Typically these either show/simulate good practises or act as a warning (utopian v.s dystopian)

(See Greening Games teaching materials downloads for more information.)

Pro-environmental themes



Pro-environmental systems



Both themes and systems connect with pro-environmental messages

No thematic link
Pro-environmental systems are present



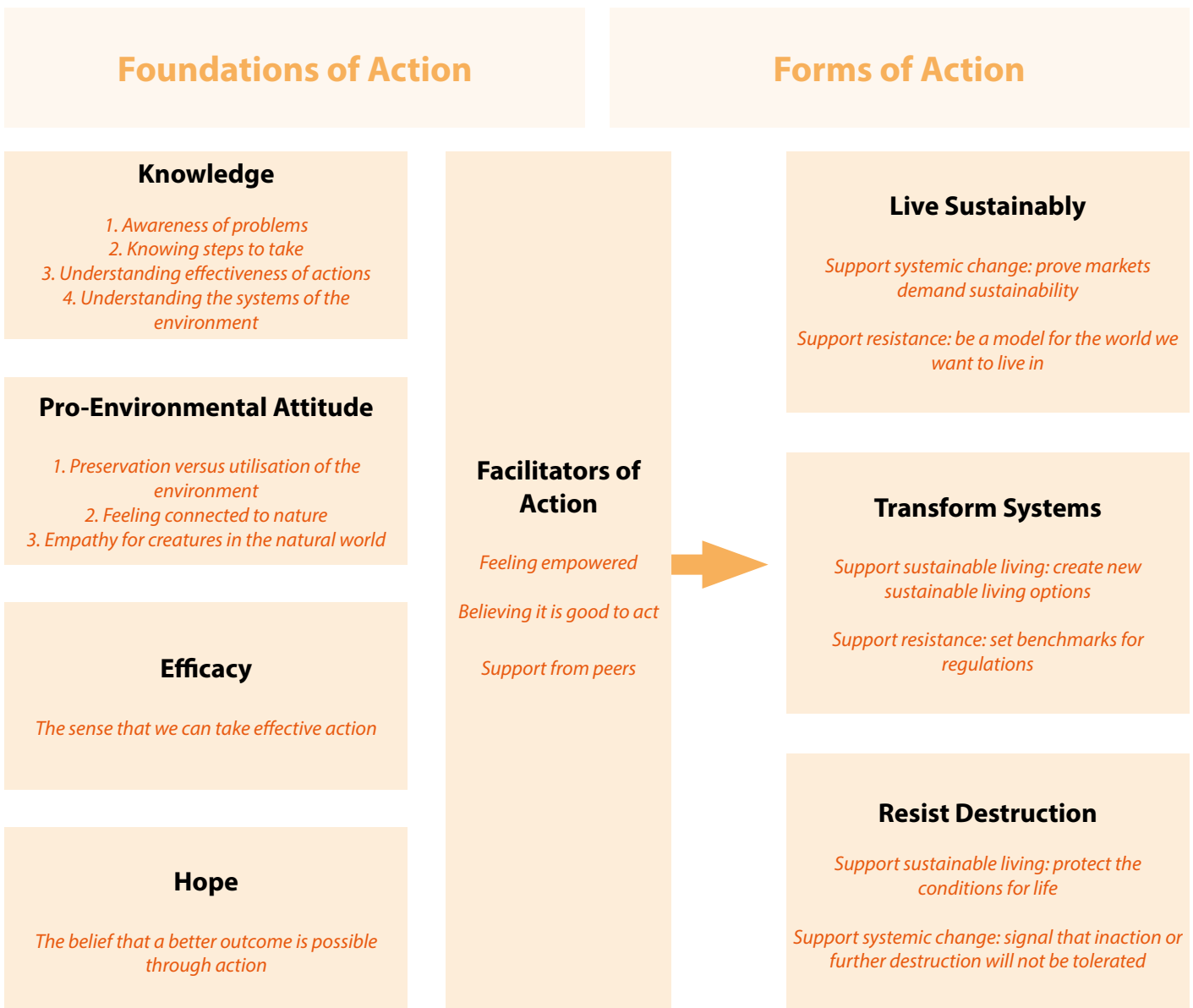
Pro-environmental themes
No systemic connection to pro-environmental messages

No significant environmental messaging

Remind/explain that gameplay systems are likely to represent forms of action, i.e. living sustainably, the transformation of unsustainable systems to green(er) alternatives, and resistance actions (e.g. defence of nature or protest).

See 'forms of action' in the diagram below.

Forms of pro-environmental messaging suitable for video games



Step 2 Choosing a game (10 minutes)

Ask students to choose any game they are familiar with that contains side quests and then note at least 3 options for adding a large side quest goal that reflects environmental awareness and/or themes.

Encourage students to explore multiple options for the game they choose to work with, not just pick the first game that comes to mind.

Examples of environmentally-themed side quests in games include:

- **God of War: Ragnarok** – the player must break three smog-belching refineries. Afterwards, minor characters comment on how the air is clearer.
- **Spider-Man** – the player is tasked with numerous research missions with challenges such as tracing the source of pollution in a river, or collecting smog samples then blocking the sources.

Tip: put a timer on a screen with a 10-minute countdown.

Students should work alone for this section of the exercise.

Remind them to take note of their 3-or-more options for the side-quest goal, otherwise they will likely forget them during later conversational steps.

This should be done individually. A little quiet conversation will likely occur closer to the time limit and can be used as an indicator of readiness to progress.

If they need further inspiration or instruction, side quests typically have the following elements:

- Locations near the main campaign's locations, or similar art assets to main campaign bases.
- Reuse of gameplay mechanics.
- Re-skinning of gameplay mechanics.
- No impact on the main storyline.
- Limited or no impact on the environmental art of the main gameplay spaces, i.e. a hut burning down would be acceptable (assuming it was not a main mission location) but making the atmosphere of the whole game permanently smoggy would not be approved.

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- They can be attempted at various points during the main campaign without being narratively disruptive.
- They have a reward – some in-game systemic advantage (e.g. gaining XP), a narrative recognition from a sub-character, and/or a unique aesthetic item.
- They often have characters whose only role is related to that side quest.

Additional notes:

- They can create positive or negative environmental goals: e.g. 1, saving an area from pollution, e.g. 2, hunting/farming something to extinction.
- They can add gameplay mechanics, but these should be very simple and preferably closely related to existing gameplay.

Outcome from this step: each student has picked one game, and has a minimum of three options to add a new side quest storyline.

Step 3 *As a class, go around the room and collect the names of the games chosen (max. 5 minutes)*

Only get the names – don't ask for the side-quest goals yet. There will likely be some fun or thought-provoking choices already, which helps maintain energy levels.

Step 4 *Presenting the game and system (gameplay mechanic) in groups of two to three students (10-20 minutes)*

Using the notes they've made, students get between 5-8 minutes to talk about their game and their choices. Ask them to collectively and quickly agree their favourite side-quest goal per game.

Break *Drink, exercise, snack (10 minutes)*

Step 5 Ask students to break the side-quest into two or more small missions, i.e. sub-goals (max. 20 minutes)

Tell students they should take the larger side-quest goal and break it into smaller missions, with a minimum of 2 and maximum of 5 missions.

Example 1:

In a stealth/combat game, if the large quest was 'stop a nuclear power station pumping radioactive waste into the ocean' there could be:

- Mission 1: break into the station to block the pipes – but then the player discovers that a crucial scientist has been kidnapped and they are needed to fix an issue – if the pipes are blocked it would cause a meltdown and much worse problem.
- Mission 2: Locate the gang that kidnapped the scientist – get information on the scientist's location. The player discovers she's been sold to a rival country and forced to develop nuclear weapons for them.
- Mission 3: Infiltrate and rescue the scientist so they can return to the power station and stop the pipes dumping waste into the ocean.

Example 2:

In an urban zombie apocalypse game:

- Mission 1: Food insecurity is a problem for a friendly group, so they want to start a small urban farm. They have located an ideal location on a city rooftop, but the building is filled with zombies. Clear out the building and secure the front doors.
- Mission 2: The group needs access to clean soil. A garden centre is nearby, but they will need cover while they load their truck with the necessary supplies. Protect the vehicle.
- Mission 3: They were going to use plastic sheeting to protect their crops during extreme weather, but it's degrading. They want to build glass shelters. There's an abandoned lorry from a glass manufacturer on the other side of the city, but it will need to be driven carefully through dangerous territory. Clear out gang bases along the route.

Again, judge by the students' noise level and body language, when will be a good time to wrap-up and move onto the next step if 20 minutes is too long.

Step 6 *Short verbal presentations (5-10 minutes)*

Tell students they will need to give:

- A very quick explanation of the game for people unfamiliar with it (genre, basic gameplay, typical target audience).
- The overall side-quest chain's goal.
- A clear description of the proposed missions in the chain.

They will have a maximum of 5 minutes per presentation.

Step 7 *Every group presents their game and side-quest chain in strictly 5 minutes (30-60 minutes)*

Students present the game and the side-quest chain to add a message about sustainability.

Use a timer (on a phone is fine, just turn the sound on, or on a screen).

Keep a track of the changes on a whiteboard or spreadsheet visible to the students – you can track game name, genre, and main side-chain goal, and any other factors to see if trends appear.

Optional: depending on the number of students, you may want to include a mid-step break.

Step 8 *Closing reflections (5-20 minutes)*

Encourage the students to pick their favourite suggestions:

- Which was the most entertaining?
- Which would be most impactful?
- What criteria are they applying to judge 'impact', and what does this say about their own priorities?
- Which would be the easiest to implement?
- Would it change the game's target audience?

Ask if they would include similar side-quest chains if they were/are working on a game – why would or wouldn't they do this?

Identify any themes in the changes the students suggested, e.g. were they mostly positive or negative?

Final thought: do they think they feel more inspired about the range of options available to include environmentally aware side-quest chains in games?

Credits & Acknowledgements

The creation of these resources has been (partially) funded by the ERASMUS+ grant program of the European Union under grant no. 2021-1-DE01-KA220-HED-000029501. Neither the European Commission nor the project's national funding agency DAAD are responsible for the content or liable for any losses or damage resulting of the use of these resources.

The project "Greening Games. Building Higher Education Resources for Sustainable Video Game Production, Design & Critical Game Studies" (2021-2024) supports educators in addressing the interdisciplinary nature of green digital gaming.

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

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Co-funded by
the European Union