The Future We Consume: Figuring the Ecoconsumer in the Video Game DAS ERBE (1991)

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Abstract: This article examines DAS ERBE (1991), a German video game developed by COMAD in collaboration with the German Federal Environment Agency (*Umweltbundesamt*), as a significant early representation of green consumerism in interactive media. In DAS ERBE, the player takes on the role of a young heir who is tasked with managing a substantial inheritance, navigating environmental degradation through individual consumer choices. This game, released at the beginning of the 1990s, encapsulates a neoliberal ethos that presents environmental responsibility as a matter of personal consumption, aligning with the figuration of the ecoconsumer. By focusing on the game's mechanics, narrative, and visual design, this article argues that DAS ERBE frames the ecological crisis as one that can be mitigated through responsible consumerism, reinforcing the notion that personal lifestyle choices hold the key to planetary salvation. Ultimately, DAS ERBE reflects and reinforces the neoliberal ideology of individualized responsibility for ecological crises, prefiguring the rise of "green" consumerism in the 21st century.

Keywords: digital games, climate change, figuration, media representation, green consumerism, sustainability

Introduction

Do you want to save the planet and combat global warming? Buy "Climate Change Chocolate," a 100-grams treat that, priced at $4.95, compensates for 133 pounds of carbon dioxide emissions (Beck 08.04.2009). You may also want to try a deodorant subscription, which is, according to THE GUARDIAN, the "no-sweat way to help save the planet" (Hughes 25.03.2023).

The ubiquitous calls for individual engagement, and sustainable consumption, found in corporate advertisements, educational materials, and

the initiatives of mainstream environmental organizations, particularly in Western societies, appear as natural as the air we breathe. The fact that these calls resonate with many of us in the Global North[1] has to do with the prevailing form of modern capitalism and the economic and political neoliberal orthodoxy which has shaped society from the 1980s onwards (Ganti 2014). Since then, the neoliberal-capitalist system has profoundly impacted the societal norms and values of the Global North. Its logic promotes competition, limited state intervention, individual ownership and control over resources, production, and distribution (Harvey 2005). It also encourages a consumerist culture, where the acquisition and consumption of goods and services become central to individual identities and social status.

Since the emergence of the concept of sustainable development in the 1980s, there has been an increasing recognition of the need to address environmental concerns and integrate them into various spheres of society, including individual consumption practices, business activities, and government policy. This recognition has given rise to neoliberal environmentalism, an approach to environmental protection that emphasizes market-based solutions, privatization, and the commodification of natural resources (Ciplet and Roberts 2017). It shifts the focus from state regulation and collective efforts to individual market participation, treating environmental issues as opportunities for financial growth (Dunlap and Sullivan 2020). As Alexander M. Stoner (2021) explains, the autonomous ecoconsumer is the key figure in the neoliberal environmental discourse, embodying the belief that individuals can address environmental degradation through their consumer choices. The autonomous ecoconsumer satisfies their socioecological emancipation by superficial consumer choices that ultimately reinforce the same capitalist systems responsible for environmental harm. In this way, neoliberal environmentalism and the autonomous ecoconsumer mutually sustain each other.

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1 The terms "Global North" and "Global South" lack a single, fixed definition. Broadly, the Global South refers to economically marginalized regions, often with histories of colonization and exploitation, while the Global North includes economically dominant nations like the U.S., Canada, much of Europe, Japan, and Australia. These terms, though useful for highlighting global disparities in wealth, power, and climate impact, can oversimplify diverse realities and reinforce binary divides. Despite these limitations, I use them here to broadly indicate unequal global relations, while acknowledging the need for a more nuanced understanding.

As cultural artifacts, video games, their content, production, and distribution reflect and reinforce the values and ideologies associated with the changes in the economic system and the subjectivities that emerge from them (Sotamaa 2023; Baerg 2014). Many games emphasize themes such as individualism, competition, and the pursuit of personal success. However, game developers and publishers have also increasingly responded to the rising concern for environmental sustainability, incorporating these ideas into the narratives, gameplay mechanics, and audio-visual design of their games. In contemporary games, players frequently encounter eco-dystopian worlds where the consequences of environmental degradation are made evident through both visual representation and storytelling. These gameworlds often convey implicit or explicit messages about who bears responsibility for leading the world into ecological disaster and who retains the agency to save the planet and humanity – if such salvation is even still feasible. They act as "mesocosms" (Chang 2019) which, for scientists describe "experimental enclosures intermediate in size and complexity between small, highly controlled lab experiments and large, often unpredictable real-world environments" (p. 17). Mesocosms allow for the manipulation of specific variables while maintaining others in a controlled manner. Similarly, in video games, players engage in exploring and interacting with crafted environments. Within this context, players act as both experimenters and experimental subjects, navigating the depth and boundaries of the gameworld while constantly testing its rules and variables.

In 1991, as concerns about ozone depletion, acid rain, and other environmental crises began to permeate mainstream media, the German game DAS ERBE ("The Inheritance") emerged as one of the first video games to focus explicitly on ecological issues. Developed by COMAD in cooperation with the German Federal Environment Agency, DAS ERBE presents a didactic exploration of environmentalism through the lens of green consumerism. At its core, DAS ERBE articulates a figuration of the ecoconsumer.

This article situates DAS ERBE within the context of neoliberal environmentalism, exploring how it multimodally configures the ecoconsumer as a primary caretaker of a planet in crisis. Through a close playing (Chang 2010) of the game, I will analyze how DAS ERBE constructs this particular figuration, and how the representation and simulation of environmental issues intertwine with the promotion of consumerism as the primary solution to ecological degradation.

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Figuration, Close Playing, and Video Game Characters

Throughout this article, I use the concepts of figure and figuration understood as "material-semiotic nodes or knots in which diverse bodies and meanings co-shape one another" (Haraway 2008, 4). As such, figures are not just abstract concepts but are "performative images that can be inhabited" (Haraway 1997, 11), actively participating in the creation of worlds and encouraging new ways of thinking, seeing, and being. They incorporate what Claudia Castañeda (2002) calls a "double force" (p.3): They are involved in world-making and shape how we understand and experience "reality" by giving it a specific form and meaning. Thus, Castañeda speaks of the "constitutive effect" (ibid.) of figures and figuration.

Furthermore, figures are not static; they circulate within and across various contexts, generating new meanings and effects as they interact and co-shape different practices and discourses. This circulation helps to perpetuate and transform the ways in which these figures are understood. Therefore, the second "force" of figures are their "generative circulation" (Castañeda 2002, 3).

Video games are inherently multimodal texts, meaning that they communicate meaning through multiple semiotic systems, or modes (van Leeuwen and Kress 2001; Kress 2010; Hawreliak 2018). A multimodal analysis of video games takes into account various components, including the graphical elements of the game (visual mode), the game's storyline and dialogue (narrative mode), the rules and mechanics that govern gameplay (procedural mode), and the sound design, including music, voice acting, and sound effects (aural mode). Multimodal analysis requires the examination of how these modes interact and create meaning together.

Within these multimodal texts, we encounter different playable characters (PCs) and non-playable characters (NPCs). These characters are more than just passive mediators of agency – they also figure ways of behaving and responding to a climate changing planet. They give form to the otherwise abstract and complex issue of climate change, serving as potent ludic embodiments of the diverse figures populating contemporary climate change discourse – such as the girl eco-activist or the climate change denier. Games both reflect and shape climate change discourse by incorporating, reimagining, and transforming its key figures. By adopting them to the ludic medium, players can interact with these figures through gameplay mechanics, storytelling, and procedural design.

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The methodological approach used in this article to analyze these figurations is close playing (Chang 2010), a process similar to close reading in literary studies. Close playing refers to the in-depth analysis of video games, paying careful attention to the different modes through which meaning is communicated. Video games are procedural artifacts, meaning that game designers write code to enforce rules, which then generate representations within the gameworld (Bogost 2007). By engaging with these rules and navigating the procedural systems, players actively participate in generating the game's meaning. Hence, analyzing player's actions within the game is also key to understanding how these meanings are constructed and conveyed. Thus, close playing demands an awareness of how gameplay mechanics and player choices are integral to the experience and message of the game.

The following pages will now closely examine how DAS ERBE (1991) constructs the figuration of the ecoconsumer, illustrating how video games can serve as ideological tools that shape perceptions of climate change and sustainability. This analysis will explore how the game encourages individual action as the primary solution to global warming, often at the expense of advocating for collective or systemic change.

Figuring the Ecoconsumer in DAS ERBE (1991)

DAS ERBE was released in 1991 by COMAD and the German Federal Environment Agency (*Umweltbundesamt*). The game was available for purchase in stores but was also distributed free of charge to schools across Germany to educate students about climate-friendly actions in everyday life.

Set in 1990s Germany, the player takes on the role of a young, white man who inherits a dilapidated villa and a substantial sum of money from a deceased relative. However, as we learn at the beginning of the game, there is a condition: to receive the full inheritance, the PC must renovate the villa in accordance with strict climate and ozone protection regulations.

At the start, the player journeys to Stuttgart, where the villa is located, only to discover a scene of disarray: the villa's paint is peeling, dirty dishes clutter the space, furniture is in disrepair, and even the bicycle is no longer usable. The player must gradually restore order while also familiarizing themselves with the game's mechanics.

Figure 1. The player can choose a new chair, bed, and table from a range of options, including both sustainable and conventional furniture. However, opting for the latter results in an immediate and unexpected game over.

Much like other so-called point-and-click adventures, the screen is split into two sections: the upper portion displays the game world, while the lower half contains icons for actions such as examining objects, reading, or closing windows. However, the core mechanic centers on purchasing eco-friendly products for the renovation, such as paint and furniture. To advance, the player must consult a phone book to contact service providers, including heating technicians, painters, and waste disposal experts, who assist with the renovation. A significant portion of gameplay involves shopping for items at various stores, further reinforcing the theme of eco-conscious consumerism (see fig. 1). Therefore, players are constantly tasked with making purchasing decisions – such as choosing energy-efficient appliances or environmentally friendly modes of transportation – while adhering to environmental regulations that reflect the game's broader ecological concerns. The game suggests that the path to sustainability is through informed consumption, and that individual consumer choices can

have profound consequences on the environment. Every decision made by the player directly impacts the in-game world.

This is particularly evident in the game's visual and procedural feedback: If the player buys unsustainable products such as a bed made of tropical rainforest wood, paints containing CFCs, using a car instead of public transportation, or improper disposal of waste, a game over sequence plays, which is visually represented by an animation of expanding desertification of Europe or the destruction of the ozone layer. The game's visual, narrative and procedural mode suggest that one "wrong" choice can have fatal consequences for the entire planet, reflecting a pervasive narrative in our environmental discourse that emphasizes individual culpability. For example, one of the game's failure states shows a desolate, desertified Europe alongside the message, "Wer im Keller heizt, ist selbst schuld!" ("Whoever heats the basement has only themselves to blame!") (see fig. 2). This message encapsulates the sense of ecological guilt that the game fosters, reinforcing the idea that individual consumption choices are solely responsible for global environmental crises.

Figure 2. The desertification of Europe is one of two potential outcomes in the game DAS ERBE that result in a game over. The phrase "Wer im Keller heizt, ist selbst schuld!" translates to "Anyone who heats in the basement has only themselves to blame!" in English.

While DAS ERBE positions the ecoconsumer as an empowered figure capable of saving the planet through eco-friendly consumption, it simulta-

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neously places the burden of environmental responsibility on individuals, downplaying the role of structural forces in contributing to ecological degradation. The game's reliance on individual choice as the mechanism for change overlooks the systemic drivers of environmental crises, such as corporate pollution, industrial emissions, and global trade. This is emblematic of the figuration of the ecoconsumer in broader media and mainstream environmentalism, where environmental responsibility is often framed as a personal issue rather than a collective, political one.

Moreover, the game's depiction of the ecoconsumer as a wealthy, white male reinforces the exclusionary aspects of this figuration. By positioning the player character as a privileged, male individual who has the financial means to make sustainable choices, DAS ERBE suggests to its mostly young players that environmental responsibility is a luxury afforded only to those with economic power. Consequently, the responsibility for "saving" the (digital) world from environmental collapse in DAS ERBE falls on a select group of privileged white men, who are redefined as responsible consumers and granted sustainable citizenship. By excluding women and other marginalized groups from this role, the game perpetuates an exclusionary vision of environmental stewardship, where access to ecological agency is restricted to those with wealth, privilege, and social standing, reinforcing existing power and gender imbalances in environmental discourse. Moreover, by figuring white men as the saviors of the planet, DAS ERBE distorts the reality that it is predominantly white men from the Global North who are responsible for most greenhouse gas emissions due to their higher rates of full-time employment, higher incomes, meat-heavy diets, and lifestyle choices that lead to greater energy consumption (Rippin et al. 2021; Carlsson-Kanyama et al. 2010; Cohen 2015; Carlsson-Kanyama et al. 2021). By portraying the white male character as a benevolent steward of the environment, the game rewrites this historical responsibility, allowing those most responsible for ecological harm to be reimagined as the primary agents of its repair.[2] This perversion of accountability not only reinforces a neoliberal

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2 To be sure, in the 1980s and 1990s, the discourse surrounding the culpability of the white man from the Global North in driving climate change was not as prominent or widely debated as it is today. It is only more recently, with movements such as #OkBoomer, that generational and racial critiques of environmental degradation have gained mainstream attention, pointing to the disproportionate role of predominantly white male elites in causing and perpetuating ecological damage while younger generations and the Global South inherit the consequences. These debates are often conducted in a charged manner and reflect the deep tensions between those who

focus on individual action but also obscures the systemic inequalities that underlie the climate crisis, where the Global South bears the brunt of the damage caused by the Global North's environmental exploitation.

Conclusion

Developed in the early 1990s, the German point-and-click adventure game DAS ERBE (1991) embodies the broader shift in environmental discourse of the 1980s, when mainstream environmentalism transitioned from advocating for "limits to growth" – which recognized the necessity of curbing industrial expansion – to endorsing "sustainability through growth" (Stoner 2021). This ideological shift marked a fusion of environmental objectives with capitalist imperatives, aligning closely with the neoliberal ethos that began to dominate during this time. As neoliberalism gained traction, environmentalism was reframed as a market-oriented ideology, redirecting its focus from challenging the very foundations of capitalist growth to endorsing "eco-conscious" consumerism and market-based solutions.

Within DAS ERBE, this transformation is mirrored in the game's central figuration of the ecoconsumer. Through its multimodal design, the game positions the individual as the primary agent of environmental change, tasked with solving ecological crises not through collective action or systemic overhaul, but through their personal consumption choices. The game's emphasis on sustainable purchasing decisions – whether in the form of energy-efficient renovations or eco-friendly products – reinforces the neoliberal notion that consumer behavior, rather than policy or political reform, is the most effective path to environmental sustainability. By placing the burden of responsibility on a wealthy, white male protagonist and only playable character, DAS ERBE privileges the figure of the autonomous, white, male, ecoconsumer as the savior of a world in crisis.

This figuration of the ecoconsumer not only reinforces exclusionary socio-economic structures, suggesting that only the financially privileged can participate in environmental responsibility, but also obscures the need for broader structural changes. By presenting environmental solutions as matters of individual choice within the consumer market, the game overlooks collective political action and sidesteps critiques of the very capitalist

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are seen as responsible for environmental harm and those who bear the brunt of its impacts.

growth model that contributed to environmental degradation in the first place. Thus, DAS ERBE perpetuates the notion that personal consumption, when performed by the privileged few, can "save" the environment while leaving the underlying systems of production and exploitation intact. As video games increasingly partake in environmental discourse (Backe 2017) and engage with environmental issues, the importance of analyzing how these games construct and perpetuate specific figurations of responsibility and agency cannot be overstated. As "symbolic meaning making and socially constructed technologies" (Sotamaa 2023, 6), games provide access to the shared understandings, practices, and symbols of sustainability, consumerism, and the future of the planet.

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