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Environmentalism & Popular Culture

Making Every Day Earth Day
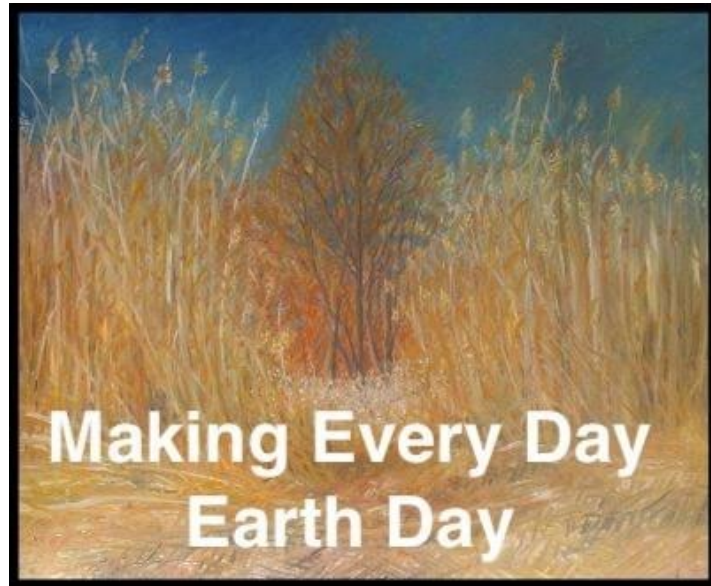
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In the previous nine editions of our *Making Every Day Earth Day* (MEDED) series, we spotlighted a range of alarming trends around the world, among them: devastating pollution, climate change, and critically endangered ecosystems. We also highlighted numerous and diverse examples of action being taken to precipitate healthy changes and how we can participate.

During these coldest and darkest days, let us take pride in and inspiration from the activism that did happen this year, despite COVID-19 social distancing and quarantine. In the coming year, we will continue to provide our members and the general public with information and tools to promote public health and natural resource stewardship improvements.

The MEDED editions we will publish in 2021 will continue to focus on environmental and human health impacts as we address militarism, nuclear weapons, and energy. Please stay tuned for these upcoming publications, in which we will discuss various ways to shift public focus and funds toward clean energy and wellbeing.

We now turn our attention to this edition's topic: the representations of environmentalism in popular culture to understand their impacts on our lives and utilize new media opportunities.

Environmentalism on Screen

Public television broadcasters committed to public responsibilities in the U.S. and U.K. have done a great deal to educate us about the environment. For decades, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) produced and globally syndicated groundbreaking nature documentaries. PBS's multi-EMMY winning program *Nature,* running weekly since 1982, is an institution in and of itself.

Planet Earth and *Blue Planet*, the BBC's flagship nature shows, presented by David Attenborough, have inspired countless budding scientists and environmental activists. These hugely popular shows feature high-definition footage of animals and nature in ways and situations never before seen on screen. *Blue Planet*'s exposure of the reality of plastic pollution in oceans was particularly impactful and helped push the issue onto the global stage. In 2017, the four most viewed shows in the UK were all episodes of *Blue Planet II*.

Video: *Planet Earth: A Celebration (2020)* - a message from Sir David Attenborough, *BBC Earth*

A recent study by the British Academy of Film and Television Arts publicly implored writers and producers to reflect our present reality more accurately by referencing environmental concerns more often. Climate change and environmentalism are fast becoming the dominant zeitgeist for younger generations, and failure to adequately produce mass media content reflecting these concerns is both a problem in itself and a sign that barriers exist, conscious or not, that inhibit or prohibit certain subjects from making it from script to screen.

One barrier is the gradual monopolization of mass media platforms, including the traditional "big five" (AT&T, Comcast, Disney, Viacom, and Fox) and the online "big tech" (Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, and Microsoft). These huge conglomerates are deeply tied to and dependent on existing structures of power within the carbon economy—both in the value of their assets and through the advertising revenue that their business models rely on.

Therefore, the media landscape is incentivized to ignore or misrepresent topics that may implicate their advertisers or threaten their business interests. So it is that climate change, mass extinction, and ecosystem loss are not the regular headline news they should be, nor is there a plethora of popular culture directly targeting the systemic root causes of environmental destruction. Where is today's Captain Planet?

Environmentalism for millennial children in the U.S., England, and elsewhere was shaped (in part) by *Captain Planet and the Planeteers,* an American cartoon produced in 1990 for 6 seasons and widely syndicated for thirty years. In the show, Gaia summons a superhero, Captain Planet, to fight evil polluters involved in a wide range of environmental and social crimes. The deforestation of sacred trees, nuclear waste, corporate greed, and greenhouse gas emissions are all worthy targets in this children's cartoon. Its legacy is significant, thanks (in no small part) to one of the show's executive producers: former CNN environmental editor and life-long environmental activist Barbara Pyle. The Captain Planet Foundation, co-founded by Pyle in 1991, continues to help fund school environment projects globally. She later formed the Barbara Pyle Foundation, focusing on using all media forms to empower young people to protect the environment.

Today many millions on the planet have access to the kind of technology, distribution, and markets only available to multi-million-dollar companies a decade ago. The revolutionary globalization of media production allows audiences anywhere to experience different forms

of popular culture, with different values and styles. For example, the films of Japanese creator Hayao Miyazaki, replete with environmentalist and anti-militarist messaging, enjoy a hungry international audience.

Video: A.O.Scott, *New York Times* review of *Princess Mononoke*

Princess Mononoke (1997)*,* produced by Studio Ghibli, is an allegorical tale exploring the conflict between industrialization and nature. Rather than presenting a simple story of good versus evil, creator Hayao Miyazaki emphasizes the deep and tragic misunderstandings and short-sightedness that underlie conflict. That's not to say that greed and avarice don't play their part, nor that such acts aren't brutally punished. It's just that they aren't the full story, and without mutual understanding, mutual destruction can be the end result.

This growing appetite is part of global, pop-cultural interest in Japanese manga (comics or graphic novels) and anime, often depicting riveting tales of transformation and natural balance in physical and spiritual realms. But, we need not look as far as Japan to popularize culture that understands our environment's complexity. Such a concept was foundational to the survival of earlier human cultures and still is for many native peoples with deep ties to land and nature.

One of the most exciting new mediums for environmentalism is through the exponentially growing power of computing. The ubiquitousness of social media, a proliferation of independent game developers and film-makers, and their "virality" have created the conditions in which diverse user-generated content can be elevated to popular culture status. This emerging media landscape can help rebalance popular culture's representation of nature and environmentalism to something that more closely resembles real life and provides the means of understanding nature as a complex system of flora, fauna, geology, chemistry, weather, water, and thousands of other details.

Environmentalism as the Hollywood villain

In Hollywood, there are no examples of heroic individuals saving the world by destroying oil infrastructure until the stock price of Exxon et al. hits zero. No team of superheroes has been assembled to tackle the military-industrial complex and stop the wanton destruction of our air and water. Where blockbusters do address environmental concerns, they are more likely to justify the beliefs and actions of the main antagonist. Their arguments may be sincere, even convincing, but ultimately, the true heroes win, and the status quo is saved. Yay?

This is the case in the *new* highest-grossing movie, *Avengers: Endgame (2019),* where the villain Thanos cites the consumption and ecological destruction caused by life throughout the universe as justification for wiping out half of it with the click of a finger. The year prior, two other comic-inspired box-office hits, *Venom (2018)* and *Aquaman (2018),* both featured bad guys motivated by environmentalist reasoning that saw humanity as irredeemable. *Kingsman: The Secret Service (2014)* portrayed a particularly persuasive villain who convinces much of the world's elite that the culling of humanity was the only way to survive as a species. This view is shared by the villain of Dan Brown's 2013 novel *Inferno,* where he successfully renders much of the world's population infertile in the name of the greater good.

If 'overpopulation' and the moral case for genocide is the *one* aspect of environmentalism that *has* managed to become a pop-culture cliche (aside from the New Age stereotypes of

old), this is very concerning. Ultimately, it is *consumption* that must be accounted for, which is rarely, if ever, referenced in popular culture. Focusing on overpopulation concerns reduces the problem to a single number, treating each individual as equivalent regardless of consumption level. It invites those who consume resources equivalent to thirty poor Africans to look at birth rates around the world and conclude that 'too many African and Asian children' is the primary threat to human survival. Devoid of systemic analysis and vulnerable to racist interpretation, overpopulation as a focus helps lay the groundwork for a potential rise of eco-fascist ideology as the impacts of climate change worsen.

Perhaps it should not surprise us that other facets of environmentalism have not become pop culture staples. Nobody really expects TV shows, movies, and video games created by billion-dollar corporations to repeatedly cast their advertising sponsors as root causes of environmental destruction. But as the climate emergency worsens, the distance between our reality and the fictional realities presented to us in popular culture will only grow wider if this trend of media monopolization continues. Therefore, it is up to us to find, celebrate, and elevate those shows, movies, and games that do push the boundaries, name names, and give voice to those ignored on issues of environmental importance.

Video: *Avatar* (2009) official trailer, 20th Century Fox	James Cameron's Avatar is a film about the evils of colonialist extractivism, in this case by a U.S.-military backed corporation plundering the alien planet of Pandora. The film covers their attempts to commit ecocide and genocide in the pursuit of natural resource theft, up to their eventual humiliating defeat at the hands of the indigenous nature-revering Na'vi. Avatar went on to remain the highest ever grossing film for a full decade, yet remains a rare instance of a blockbuster movie featuring humanity as the villain, and its overall defeat the feel-good ending. Cameron's grasp of technology and film-making skills created a lush, vibrant, and immersive natural setting that was impossible not to root for, and the upcoming *Avatar II* promises even more wonder.

Video Gaming

Over the last two decades, the computer gaming industry has grown to mammoth proportions. As the industry grew, it also suffered from the same entry barriers as other forms of mass-media production and the same trend of mergers and buyouts, resulting in fewer but larger game developers. Historically, there hasn't been much of an overlap between gaming culture and environmentalism, mirrored in the lack of representation in games themselves. While that is quickly changing, as we will get to, that's not to say that this powerful medium hasn't already illustrated its potential for influencing hearts and minds.

Looking back, probably the most culturally significant game to feature environmentalism as a central theme is *Final Fantasy VII* (1997)*, produced by Japanese games developer Square. FFVII places players within an eco-terrorist cell fighting an ecocidal corporation with political and military hegemony across the game's world. Shinra Inc. is a mining company, energy company, army, and political authority all rolled into one, which is rapidly destroying the planet in their exploitation of a mineral called Mako. Extracted, ubiquitous, yet finite, Mako could be said to represent oil, uranium, or dozens of other precious metals and materials. Exposure to Mako causes sickness, mutations, and an eerie glow, especially in the eyes. The themes surrounding Mako in the game, such as pollution, corruption, dependency, militarism, destroyed or discarded communities, etc., can apply just as well to any of these.

FFVII incorporates the Gaia hypothesis into its story, positing the gameworld as a living organism with its own lifeforce that all forms of life are born from and die into. Shinra Inc.'s relentless exploitation of Mako energy leaves a trail of discarded reactors, broken communities, and environmental degradation. Worse, it represents an existential threat to the stability of the planet itself. This is the simple rationale emotionally connecting players to the militant group AVALANCHE as they bomb Mako reactors, fight uniformed soldiers, and try to take down the largest corporation in the world. This story is never without nuance, and with idealism comes huge costs and difficult questions. What makes this game stand out is that ultimately they are proved right—they fought against and defeated *a system*, not just a bad apple, or a corrupt department, as is the case with so many of today's shared stories.

Often regarded as the best game of the *Final Fantasy* series, the original FFVII sold almost 10 million copies. Over two decades of emotive discussion and discourse, heavily involving environmentalism and capitalism, in a subculture far from academia and activist circles, is an impressive legacy. It was such an emotive and empathic game that it also came to be known for making a generation of teenage boys cry ([as described this year on NPR](#)) as the spiritual female character connected to Gaia's lifeforce was murdered by the iconic main villain. More than any game, FFVII showed the significant potential of an immersive medium, with sympathetic characters and a great storyline, to convey a deep message and influence a generation of gamers. It was a potential that was never fully realized in an educational context, with nature represented in games as little more than slightly interactive backdrops, albeit sometimes stunningly beautiful.

Another game, *Eco* (2018), takes traditional world-building, with its legislative and economic dynamics, and adds environmental consequences and limits as players collectively attempt to balance one existential risk with another. The beauty and power of *Eco*, and the level of computing power now available in the mainstream, is its ability to allow the player to experience the process of discovery and navigation in the context of ecology, equipped with the tools to witness it from the local to the global, in a very powerful medium indeed.

".. Eco made me realize that games are actually crucial for understanding our relationship to all kinds of natural and man-made systems. The thing that gives me chills is that I think it is only in games that we can play with economic systems. And I walked away from my experience in Eco feeling like I learned so much even though we had no instructor. No one was connecting the dots for us. We simply learned through play."

— PC Gaming editor, Jeff Grubbs, when [naming Eco](#) as his best game of 2018

Even if a game does not model complex environments, the story-telling and immersive potential of computer games is unmatched. This has been recognized by a [new wave](#) of independent game developers who, thanks to the lowering of entry barriers in the sector, can now use this medium to promote particular causes or issues. One example currently in development is a game called *Endling* (coming 2021). It places the player in the role of a pregnant fox, the last fox on Earth, as she gives birth to and raises her cubs. The game presents a fierce critique of environmental degradation and mass extinction to an audience invested in the foxes' perspectives of extreme vulnerability and risk.

Belatedly realizing the educational potential of gaming for environmentalism, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), with support from GRID-Arendal and Playmob, last year launched the game, [Playing for the Planet Alliance](#), an initiative aimed at promoting environmentalism and climate change action within the gaming sector. Games developers in the alliance make commitments to incorporate more green elements into their games, reduce their own emissions, and support environmental causes. Thus far, the alliance has reached nearly 1 billion gamers globally and involves some of the biggest names in the market. Whether the impact is significant or seen mainly as a public relations exercise is yet to be seen. Still, the UNEP does appear to recognize the growing importance and potential

of gaming technology to educate and inform, even using virtual reality to allow people to explore their carbon footprint.

But, as incredible as the latest technology is for engaging with people on a deep level about environmentalism, it takes *a lot* of power: an estimated 34 terawatt-hours per year, equivalent to the energy burned by about 5 million cars. Worse is the considerable social and environmental damage caused by using the plastics and metals required to build millions of computer hardware units. To aid in developing this extractivism-dependent industry, Microsoft, a signee to UNEP's Players for the Planet Alliance, sponsored the International Petroleum Technology Conference, which, ironically, in part, focused on developing new technology to aid in fossil-fuel extraction.

Beyond the potentially beneficial focus, it's important to note that environmentalism isn't the first or only interest to appreciate the capacity of games to inform and persuade. The Pentagon, also quick to recognize the medium's recruitment and propaganda potential, has been funding video game development since the early 2000s. The U.S. Army recently began using a platform for live-streaming video games to a mass audience for recruitment. Predictably, this initiative was beset by woes—namely, when the roll-out was disrupted by viewers repeatedly asking about U.S. war crimes in the chat section.

As with every form of media, gaming is a vehicle of communication, a tool for educating, persuading, and critiquing, as well as simply entertainment. But who owns and produces these tools makes all the difference between whether they are used for good or ill. Gaming, as with other forms of media, has seen a revolution in terms of accessibility and democratization. Yet as with other media, the trend toward powerful monopolies means much of its most innovative work is left to compete and struggle for attention. Hopefully, what revolution we *have* seen will be enough to act as a counterweight to the power of multinational corporations' grip on popular culture, as people increasingly search out content that truthfully reflects their feelings, concerns, and desire for a deeper understanding of and connection to nature.

Steps We Can Take

Validate and boost independent content creators, and advocate against the censorship of environmentalism.

New Year's Resolutions:

- Boycott products made without eco-safe certifications. Perhaps start with non-essential treats, such as chocolates that contain uncertified palm tree oil. Look for these logos:

- Cancel Christmas tree cultivation for cutting. It is an unsustainable ecological practice. Visiting, decorating, and planting more conifers/evergreens in our communities and wooded areas are healthier ways to celebrate the season.

- Make edible tree decorations for wildlife, including vitamin-rich fruit slices and protein-rich seeds. These are particularly vital for saving threatened bird species. Here are some ideas:
  - Pine cone feeders covered with peanut butter and birdseed

- Small suet balls or suet cakes in holiday shapes, or small mesh bags of suet
- Strings of fruits fresh or dry fruit, such as apples, pears, oranges, raisins, or cranberries
- Dried sunflower heads, stalks of dried millet, and other grains

Shows to Watch:

This American Land. This PBS conservation news series reports on engaging stories about America's landscapes, water, and wildlife—taking viewers to the front lines of conservation, science, and outdoor adventure with stories that inform and entertain. Through a partnership with the Captain America Fund (CAF), full episodes (seasons one and two) can be viewed on the CAF website.

Social Media:

Stay updated and engage in conversations and campaigns for green COVID-19 recovery planning using: #GreenNewDeal #GreenRecovery #SustainableRecovery #RebuildBetter #RecoverBetter #BuildBackBetter

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Learn More

"Facebook Follows Up Vow to Fight Climate Change With 'Mass Censorship' of Climate Activists" (September 22, 2020) by Dharna Noor, *Gizmodo*

"Green teen memes: How TikTok could save the planet" (August 28, 2020) by Yasemin Craggs Mersinoglu, *The Guardian*

"How the Military Uses Call of Duty as a Recruitment Tool" (August 7, 2020) by Joshua Goodpastor, *Game Rant*

"U.S. Army Esports Team May Have Violated the First Amendment on Twitch" (July 16, 2020) by Matthew Gault, *VICE*

"'Overwhelming and terrifying': the rise of climate anxiety" (February 10, 2020) by Matthew Taylor and Jessica Murray, *The Guardian*

"Save the Girl" (July 12, 2019) *This American Life*, Episode 679

"Climate change: Bafta calls for more environment plotlines on TV" (May 25, 2019) *BBC*

"The Ecofeminist Evolution of Sokka in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*" by Carrie Bindschadler, *The Tunnels Magazine*

Playing for the Planet Alliance [website] UNEP and GRID-Arendal

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Physicians for Social Responsibility - Iowa Chapter

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