26. Sustainable Fandom: Responsible Consumption and Play in Game Communities

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Abstract

Sustainability is increasingly discussed in the context of games, fandom, and play. Fans critically question what they consume and create awareness around sustainability in their own practices. In this chapter, I conceptualize these practices and discourses as sustainable fandom. Sustainable fandom involves discourses of responsible consumption as well as the sustainable design of one's own fan activity. Sustainability in fandom has not been widely studied, but it is increasingly discussed by audiences themselves. I provide several examples of sustainable fan practices and interactions, such as ecomodding, "ecocosplay" (sustainable cosplay) and green board games, which show that players increasingly aim to integrate sustainability as one of the core values informing their own "green" production of fan works.

Keywords: fan studies, consumer culture, cosplay, modding, sustainability, participatory culture

Sustainability is increasingly mediated, represented, and discussed in games and game culture. Broadly speaking, ecogames are objects of interest to green media studies, which looks, among other things, at environmentalist narratives and representations in mass media, vlogs, and streaming media, asking particularly how they contribute to ecological thought (Werning and Raessens 2023). Beyond climate change representation, awareness and activism, the study of green media also considers the ecological footprint of media production and consumption, seeking to explore more sustainable

alternatives. As this chapter will argue, audiences are an integral part of the green media ecosystem, in the role of both consumers and content creators.

Increasingly, groups of consumers strive for more sustainable practices in their hobbies and subcultures, questioning the habits and aesthetics of fandom. For example, in Kristina M.'s Medium post "Environmentally Friendly Geekdom" (2017), she describes that "in geekdom, collecting emblems of our passion is part of the deal. We must admit that we are responsible for a great deal of clutter, much of it made of plastic, in a practice that is anything but environmentally friendly." Another example is the Reddit thread "Funko and the Environment," in r/funkopop where a collector asks how other users feel about buying Funko Pops (a brand of collectable figurines), considering that they are made of PVC (Chris_JF 2021). Contributors wonder how ecofriendly the collectibles are, how they are made, and what can be done to make their production more circular. Others worry less about their production, and more about their carbon footprint in terms of transport and storage. Throughout the thread, fans also reflect on the particulars of figurine collection, pointing out how collectors cherish these objects, including their packaging. This discussion is representative of how consumers increasingly reflect on sustainable consumption.

The construction of this new space of consumption is what I call "sustainable fandom." It can be defined as a growing movement and set of practices in which dedicated consumers, brands, and other stakeholders critically work towards a fairer ecosystem subtending the production of the products that they love. Not only do these different actors create awareness around sustainability issues, they also launch grassroots initiatives, new services, and products. Sustainable fandom, then, involves material practices, as well as discursive acts like engaging in critical discourse around companies, knowledge sharing around production and consumption, and exhibiting interest in the greening of one's own fan activities.

In this chapter on sustainable fandom, I want to move beyond ecocritical game design and explore how players engage with and reflect on ecocritical gameplay and sustainable products. Sustainable fandom is not discussed in fan studies literature so far but is a growing trend and topic of discussion among consumers. Gamers and players increasingly integrate sustainability into their subculture and lifestyles. They form participatory cultures that actively contribute to wider story worlds and cultures (Jenkins 2006). They also create sustainable gameplay opportunities and fan works themselves. I provide several examples of ecocritical participatory gameplay interactions, such as building, customizing, and streaming, "ecocosplay" (sustainable cosplay) and the discussion around green board games. The variety of

these cases shows that players do not only care about raising awareness of sustainability, but they also care about producing their own green media content and fan works.

Ecogames and sustainable fandom

As the other chapters in this book demonstrate, games can produce engagement with the environment in powerful ways. In the industry and in game scholarship, such ecocritical games have been conceptualized as ecogames. These include digital and analog games that reflect on nature and the climate crisis. In fact, the term "ecogames" was first used by Ulrich Holzbaur (2001) in a study on board games and sustainable development. Joost Raessens (2017) helpfully defines sustainable games as "imaginative spaces for playing and learning, expressing often contested moral and political values, raising awareness for a variety of sustainability issues, such as renewable energy transition, circular economy, sustainable mobility, and green water use and energy consumption" (7). He points to their participatory potential as well, which is crucial when investigating their fans and their practices.

What makes games unique as a form of green media is that they are interactive. The effects of our actions can be played out to illustrate our impact on different ecosystems. On top of that, games allow us to embody different actors, such as the wind in *Flower* (thatgamecompany 2009), allowing us to directly identify with natural or elemental forces. Wholesome resource management games can make us more attentive to the scarcity of nature. Meanwhile, walking sims can remind us of the beauty of the natural environment that we need to preserve. In these and other ways, games can be used to foster environmentalist critique and awareness. These unique media affordances also lead to specificities in game fandom. Audiences have specific relationships with playable characters, which they, for instance, channel in their cosplay and other fan practices. Games also allow for the highly affective and immersive exploration of virtual spaces. While such interactions can occur in film and television, they are more of a given in games as interactive media (Enevold and MacCallum-Stewart 2015).

The notion of sustainable consumption involves one more dimension of engagement or interaction, one that can go beyond raising awareness and reflecting on the natural world. Consumption today is about participation, including dialogue, discussion, and content creation within dedicated communities. These social, critical, and creative aspects are crucial in contemporary fandom, where consumer affinity is high (Jenkins 2006;

Lamerichs 2018). Some consumers ask themselves critical questions about environmental responsibility. How environmentally friendly are particular products really, or are they just "green-washing"? What is the carbon footprint of buying from an online distributor like Amazon? Should we worry about trends like product hauls on TikTok? These questions matter for game studies, fan studies, and consumer studies, where the focus has often been on lifestyle and identity in favor of discourses of sustainable consumption.

Like other consumers, fans and gamers increasingly reflect on their buying behavior. Such questions have the potential to reinforce an already existing critical or subversive engagement with materiality in fandom, one that runs counter to the logic of consumer society; what is seen to be disposable by others becomes durable in fandom, Henry Jenkins points out in the introduction to *Comics and Stuff* (2020). Avid players might preserve packaging that companies deem disposable and cherish the toys and figurines that their parents consider to be trash. They might also be critical of how certain games are produced, especially regarding the longevity of their digital materiality. Such a level of awareness reveals a latent interest in sustainability and a unique cultural dynamic in fandom. Collecting is innately tied up with our emotions and can be understood as "affective hoarding" (Larsen 2018), but certain collector practices, such as preserving the packaging, can also be read as a critical move against our "throw-away society" (Cooper 2010).

Sustainable fandom has three important levels then: the first is *consumption*, where consumers focus on the purchase of sustainable products and services. The second is *discussion*, where they go a step further to discuss brands critically and raise awareness about sustainability issues. The third is *creation*, where consumers produce their own sustainable types of play and fan works. This chapter ties together these three levels by analyzing a few representative fan practices, such as building, customizing and modding, and sustainable cosplay.

Building, customizing, and modding as fan practices

Ecogaming is not only facilitated by designers, but also by communities of players. The creativity of players can make games accommodate an environmentalist play style, for instance, through critical making processes and modding. Stefan Werning (2021) has investigated climate-centric mods in *The Sims 4* (Maxis, The Sims Studio 2014) and *Sid Meier's Civilization V* (Firaxis Games 2010) as an example of ecomodding. He suggests that such ecocritical

modding practices "help offset some of (eco)games' power imbalances and contribute to sustainable collective imaginaries" (3). Simultaneously, ecomodding can be a way of performing fandom of a specific game. For example, *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios 2011) has been modded to raise awareness around climate change. Nick Porillo's *GlobalWarming* mod alters the atmosphere based on certain actions (Bayle 2018). Temperatures rise as carbon emissions increase, leading to forest fires, among other consequences. The *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt RED 2020) mod by Essenthy (2021) includes toxic fog, pollution, clouds, and other features that evoke the climate crisis in the near future. By creating these mods, players engage with their favorite games in critical and transformative ways.

However, players do not need to install plug-ins or mods to engage in sustainable play. Some go through great lengths to customize and build in-game worlds that illustrate other ways of living and organizing society that are divested from harmful, fossil-fueled practices. For instance, they might make use of specific decorations, in-game items, or mechanics in creative ways. For example, players of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo 2020) have created ecotopian islands by including more trees and water, green energy signified by windmills, recycling bins and other assets. This creative use of items leads to beautiful islands, which may inspire players that visit them to enact change in their own communities. One example is the island "Sunshine," built by Ozzie, which has ample nature, signs such as "Save the bees," and a wind farm (see Figure 26.1).

A virtual island tour is provided by *YouTube* streamer Tania–Heath Horizons (2020), who enthusiastically introduces this ecoconscious island. She marvels at the fruit and bee hives: "You got to have a little bee section if you want to save them!" (27:50–28:00). Her streaming audience is introduced to the flower field full of windmills that Ozzie built. Tania excitedly says: "Wind power is good. It's good for the environment!" (30:50–30:56). By streaming such ecoconscious worlds on *YouTube*, secondary audiences are introduced to sustainability as well. These viewers might not even be playing the game but might engage with it through commentary and online discussion. In today's participatory cultures, play has a ripple effect, primarily thanks to paratextuality (Beil et al. 2021). Play spreads through different texts, through streams and memes, reaching new audiences who are introduced to sustainable play on different platforms, beyond the game itself.

The Sims 4 has stimulated ecoplay actively with its ninth expansion *Eco Lifestyle* (Maxis, The Sims Studio 2020), which emphasizes green practices by actively encouraging players to minimize the footprint of their sims. For

Figure 26.1: Wind farm in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*.

instance, streamer Chani_ZA (2020) provides tips on facilitating an optimal eco lifestyle, such as using green items and minimizing electricity. Others receive her tips well, since they struggle with getting an optimal green status in the game. One user remarks: "This video answered all my questions I wasn't finding thru google. My house is off the grid, and has enough dew collectors, wind turbines, and solar panels to power my house…. I had no idea the walls and roofs had an effect on it as well." Other *Sims 4* expansions like *Tiny Living Stuff* (Maxis, The Sims Studio 2020) challenge players to do more with less. The expansion introduces smaller lots and rewards players for building compact homes rather than the sprawling suburban McMansions that were prevalent in earlier versions of the game.

Green gameplay can be facilitated by official companies, but they often do so in response to budding interest shown by player communities online, which is arguably the case in *The Sims* franchise. Other times, players create specific mods themselves, to mimic, for instance, the effects of climate change. Players add to game worlds with their own creativity. They create statements about sustainability in games which do not necessarily have this as a theme. By building, customizing, and modding their own unique worlds, players remix existing stories with a sustainable touch.

Sustainable cosplay

One increasingly popular example of sustainable fandom is ecofriendly and sustainable cosplay, also known as "ecocosplay." This part of the cosplay

scene is best defined as a growing movement in fandom that is concerned with sustainable, responsible and durable consumer choices regarding costuming. The terms themselves come from fandom, not academia. On Instagram, for instance, the hashtags #ecocosplay and #sustainablecosplay each have reached over a hundred posts as of January 10, 2023. While the terms also yield results on TikTok and *YouTube*, I primarily analyzed Instagram for this chapter, while also drawing on a more comprehensive study of this practice (Lamerichs 2023).

Cosplay, short for "costume play," is a rich and visible part of global fan culture. It is both creative and performative, in the sense that fans create and wear costumes based on fictional characters from popular culture. Notions of immersion and play in cosplay have been studied in detail (Lamerichs 2018; Winge 2018; Mountfort, Peirson-Smith, and Geczy 2018). As Gary Crawford and David Hancock (2019) emphasize, cosplay is also a critical making process. It is related to, though independent of the fashion and textile industry, which is notorious for the social and environmental harm of, for example, fast fashion. Cosplay should not be mistaken for fast fashion, but it does have a carbon footprint. To craft different costumes for conventions, fans buy and create many items, from wigs and fabrics to makeup. However, cosplayers increasingly reflect on the environmental impact of their craft, leading to different sustainable cosplay practices.

Ecocosplay involves different making practices, such as using second-hand fashion for designs, or recycling other materials. A great overview is provided by German costume and prop designer Svetlana Quindt (@ kamuicosplay) in her *YouTube* vlog "Can Cosplay be Eco-Friendly?" (2020). Quindt provides ten tips to make the practice more sustainable. Many involve thoughtful consumption, such as taking fabric samples when shopping to avoid buying fabrics you don't need, shopping locally, exploring local conventions, and keeping air travel to an absolute minimum, in addition to other lifestyle changes. Above all, Quindt emphasizes that sustainable fan practices are part of a lifestyle and reflect a deeper commitment to the environment.

Others commit to using sustainable materials. Cardboard, paper, wood, and other materials can be sustainable alternatives for props and costume creation. For example, Jillian (2020) writes on Instagram: "One of my goals for 2020 is to incorporate more recyclable materials in my cosplay! I love working with #EVA foam I dont love that it's not super great for the environment lol." This is a good example of a cosplayer who reflects on materials that are common in cosplay (e.g., foam rubber), and consciously sets out to explore sustainable alternatives.

Figure 26.2: Olivia Mears in her Taco Belle dress.

Furthermore, ecocosplayers can make use of secondhand fashion or acces-
sories. Through "upcycling," or the repurposing of existing garments and
accessories, cosplayers reuse existing materials. A large part of the cosplay
posts studied for this chapter (circa 80 percent) dealt with repurposing,
upcycling, or recycling products, sourced through thrifting, sharing, or
gifting by peers or via other networks. Cosplayers recycle full outfits and
wigs, but also raw materials, such as plastics, paper, and other materials.
What others consider junk or waste can be a valuable resource for sustainable
designers. The influential cosplayer Olivia Mears (2017) uses products such
as napkins and wrappings to create fantastic outfits, like a Disney's Belle
dress made from Taco Bell wrappers (see Figure 26.2).

Cosplayers are often proud of their pieces and their resourceful designs.
The Eco Cosplayer (2020) says the following about her designs: "All of my cos-
plays are made from 80–100 percent recycled/secondhand materials!" She is
one example of a creator who uses sustainability in her self-presentation and
branding. Sustainability can be a unique selling point in these communities,
but cosplayers also emphasize it to raise awareness in the community about
waste, circularity, and recycling. Through inspirational posts, cosplayers
educate each other on reusing materials in their cosplays. In their own
creative practices and design, they embody existing characters in new ways.
This is not only a form of reenactment, but a sustainable design practice
and form of play.

Merchandise, collectibles, and board games

Within fan studies, we have explored the importance of material culture in fandom, also conceptualized as object-oriented fandom (Rehak 2014). Merchandise, fabrics, and sculpting materials are not just the backbone of cosplay, but of many other fan activities as well. In his seminal chapter "The Cultural Economy of Fandom," John Fiske (1992) writes that collections matter in fandom, but he argues that the focus is on quantity rather than quality: "The individual objects are therefore often cheap, devalued by the official culture, and mass-produced. The distinctiveness lies in the extent of the collection rather than in their uniqueness or authenticity as cultural objects" (44).

Consumption, which is associated with mass production, is also closely connected to fan identity, but it is limited by what is offered by licensed producers. Fan scholar Victoria Godwin (2016) argues that merchandise often needs to live up to standards of accuracy and faithfulness. When accurate or authentic products are not available (or prohibitively expensive) fans may purchase locally produced products, created by fellow-fans instead. This unlicensed merchandise, found on Etsy or elsewhere, such as handcrafted or knitted Pokémon, is often more sustainable than what companies produce (Cherry 2016).

In many fan communities, for instance, those that care about collectibles or board games, there is increased attention to how things are made, and how much goes to waste, for example, in the previously mentioned Reddit thread on Funko pops. A critical Board Game Geek blog post called "Sustainable Gaming" (Santos 2021), shared by Reddit user Laxar2 (2021), also leads to discussion. The article focuses specifically on the production of green board games, for instance, through minimizing plastics. Some users are positive about such changes. One user comments: "A number of games I own only have a single plastic component, which could be easily replaced. For example, in [the game] *Istanbul* [(Rüdiger Dorn 2014)] the only plastic components are the gem stones and these could easily be wood instead."

The thread leads to a long discussion of ninety-two posts (November 26, 2022) on what sustainability in board games looks like, beyond the production of sustainable components. One user comments, for instance, that traveling should be taking into account: "While I'm for sustainability, what really struck me was that a single board game night with people driving more than four miles roundtrip already outweighs the entire production footprint." Another points to the replayability of board games: "Something I don't see mentioned here is the replay/pass-on value of a board game. It does not

reduce the footprint per se, but does add value to its existence." A game can then be regifted or used more than once. Users are critical of games such as *Pandemic Legacy: Season 1* (Rob Daviau and Matt Leacock 2015) where items are basically destroyed or used after playing it the first time. Blister packs, miniatures and other aspects of the hobby that involve the consumption of a lot of small items are criticized throughout the thread as well.

Some players, however, are skeptical of the impact or importance of sustainability in board games altogether. They mention that of all their consumption practices, buying and playing board games is probably among the most sustainable already. One user argues: "The more I think about this the more I think how green boardgaming already is. My Amazon prime subscription I argue is more damaging to the environment than my annual spend[ing] and time spent with board games."

These discussions around sustainability and materiality also show how much users value materiality in fan practices. For instance, in board games, which are transmedia products, items play a part in telling a story, painting a world, and acting as props to make that world come alive (Booth 2015). Items contribute to paratextuality and world-building. Fans care a great deal about these objects and handle them, their packaging, and material with care. Some customize them and paint them, others make great effort to preserve them as they are. Some avid players care about how these components are produced, while others think the discussion is not worthwhile because their impact is so negligible. Others stress we should focus on other unsustainable practices in board game culture.

Discussion on ecocosplay and sustainability in board games and merchandise raise similar questions: How can the material impact of fan activities be improved? How can the infrastructure and production of games that subtends play become more sustainable? Players discuss this actively in the community, and it is clear that there is not one answer to these complex questions. However, the fact that players increasingly address how things are made, and reflect on their purchasing behavior, is indicative of a turn towards responsible consumption.

Sustainable consumption can be motivated by green media content, but audiences and fans can also initiate such practices themselves. Climate TikTok videos, rousing or informative Instagram posts, and locally produced fan merchandise are just a few examples of green practices facilitated by consumers. These practices should not be underestimated; they have a huge impact. The creator economy is growing, partly due to the popularity of digital platforms, and it has been estimated to be worth more than $100 billion as of 2020 (Florida 2022, 2).

Sustainable consumption is not just a matter for companies to consider, then, but it also affects consumers themselves, who are key stakeholders in these value chains (Thompson and Norris 2021). In fact, Sustainable Production and Consumption is the twelfth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of the United Nations, which emphasizes the urgency of revising supply chains as well as modifying consumer behavior: "Innovation and design solutions can both enable and inspire individuals to lead more sustainable lifestyles, reducing impacts and improving well-being" (United Nations n.d., 2). Consumers are increasingly aware of this responsibility, especially fans and gamers, who are highly engaged consumers of particular brands and products. Their practices—both digital and offline—have a carbon footprint. For example, fans might collect merchandise of varying quality, fly to global events, and spend energy on their software and hardware. In other words, fandom intersects with and is connected to sustainable consumption, a practice closely connected to individual consumer values as well as collective solutions (Middlemiss 2018).

Sustainable consumption, however, can never fully be separated from corporate social responsibility. Companies increasingly engage in sustainable innovation and use this as a staple for their brand and even a possibility to draw new customers. For instance, toy brand LEGO positions itself as a circular economy of play and has committed to using sustainable materials by 2030 (LEGO Group 2022). Such messaging marks a clear turn for the company, which has had copromotion deals with Shell since 1960s, a partnership that they only divested from in 2014 after being pressured by a Greenpeace campaign (Starr 2014).

Conclusion and future trends

These discourses show that sustainability is increasingly considered in game fandom by different designers and consumers globally. It is something that consumers increasingly expect in the products that they buy and expect companies to provide insights around. What these cases show is that fans care about making their own practices and play more sustainable, but they also hold companies accountable when their production does not meet their standards. Sustainable fandom is not just a collector or consumer issue, but one tied up with brands and corporate social responsibility. Through different cases, this chapter has shown that sustainable fandom is not just about consumer behavior, but about systemic interactions with brands

and other stakeholders. Through their own mods and builds, players hope to educate others around the environment as well as the social aspects of sustainability.

Fandom centers around materiality, and this especially pertains to games. Players often consume them digitally, invest in collectibles and unique components, and create their own art and cultures based on these source texts. The increased awareness around sustainability in fandom is a development that is worth documenting and sharing, even though, broadly speaking, sustainability awareness is not the norm. These discussions center specific hashtags, communities, and threads, and make up a small part of huge platforms such as Instagram and Reddit. However, they are indicative of a growing conversation. I hope that in the coming years, we can green our fandom in unique ways to contribute to sustainable development.

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