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How video games are joining the fight to save the planet

ROVIO

As bush fires were raging across Australia in December 2019, players of Space Ape video games reached out to the company and asked what they could do to help. The London-based firm quickly put an in-game purchase into several of its mobile titles, with all proceeds going to either a wildlife or humanitarian charity working in the area.

In just four days the company raised \$120,000.

“That just speaks to how much people want to do good,” said Deborah Mensah-Bonsu, former Head of Content at Space Ape Games, who now runs her own consultancy focused on using games for social impact.

Now, the video game industry is poised to roll up its sleeves and do even more for the planet. In August 2020, some of the biggest names in mobile gaming unveiled a series of environmentally themed missions and messages that will be integrated into popular titles, such as Angry Birds 2, Golf Clash and Subway Surfers. The additions will encourage players to do things like combat climate change or protect endangered wolves. The initiative is part of a push by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to work with game developers to raise awareness about pressing environmental issues.

“Video gaming is one of the biggest communication mediums on the planet,” says Sam Barratt, Chief of Education and Advocacy with UNEP. “We aim to support the industry to encourage gamers to be educated, inspired and activated around the wider environmental agenda, and so far it seems to be working.”

Globally, 2.6 billion people play video games and a growing number are taking an interest in the environment and conservation. A 2019 UNEP report, *Playing for the Planet*, found that video games could engage billions to contribute to solutions to social and environmental challenges.

The video game industry has yearly revenues of \$140 billion—more than Hollywood, Bollywood and recorded music sales combined. In 2017, 666 million people watched other people play games on YouTube and Twitch – more than the combined audience of HBO, ESPN and Netflix. According to the UNEP report, channelling even a small portion of that attention and the industry’s revenues towards the planet would create tremendous impact in the real world.

Playing for the Planet

Space Ape is one of 25 members of UNEP's Playing for the Planet Alliance, an initiative that aims to harness the power of gaming to encourage action on climate change. The project, which launched in 2019, has reached more than 970 million players. In joining the alliance, game companies make commitments, ranging from integrating green activations into games to reducing their emissions to supporting the global environmental agenda.

The alliance held a Green Game Jam earlier this year which saw 11 mobile game companies compete to add a sustainability element to one of their existing games, a so-called "green nudge." The objectives included asking players to make personal commitments, like skipping meat on Mondays or biking to work, or designing green environments, solar panels or electric cars into games.

Space Ape, whose game *Transformers: Earth Wars* contains environmental themes in the original storyline, picked renewable energy. For the updated release, it brought both good and evil Transformers together to find a new technology to harvest Earth's energy resources more sustainably.

Mensah-Bonsu says that the company also wanted to give players a call to action, so it asked them to take a pledge to switch their lightbulbs from incandescents to LEDs.

"If we all do our part, we can make a change in the world."

Deborah Mensah-Bonsu, content manager at Space Ape Games

California-based Pixelberry Studios focused on climate change in its title *"Choices."* The game centres on a young woman who returns to her coastal hometown where there has been a large fish die-off. The girl's younger sister is convinced the die-off is connected to climate change, despite skepticism from local politicians and business owners. The player's role is to help their young sister rally others and raise awareness about climate change.

Saran Walker, one of the writers at Pixelberry, said the team had read dozens of articles about younger generations experiencing anxiety around climate change. (A recent survey of millennials — 30,000 individuals under the age of 30 from 186 countries confirmed this — finding that climate change and destruction of nature were the most critical issues for them.)

"We were all really inspired by Greta Thunberg's story," Walker said, referring to the young Swedish environmental activist. "Anyone at the company who has kids is thinking about what kind of world are they going to leave to their children. We wanted to show people that they can actually do a lot as an individual."

A shift in the industry



Subway Surfers, which has been downloaded more than 3 billion times, is one of several popular video games urging players to safeguard the planet. Illustration by Sybo

The gaming industry is also considering how it can become carbon neutral, or in some cases carbon positive – a welcome move for a sector that has been scrutinized for its environmental footprint. Currently, 50 million tons of electronic waste is generated annually, with that number projected to reach 120 million tons by 2050.

Supercell, which makes mobile titles, recently committed to going entirely carbon neutral and offsetting the carbon dioxide used by players when playing their games. Rovio and Space Ape aim to take similar action.

The Playing for the Planet Alliance will share guidance with its members on how to decarbonize, with Sony leading a working group that includes other console makers. The alliance will help devise a new carbon calculator for the industry, develop fresh guidance on offsetting and forge new collective commitments around the restoration of forest landscapes, which help absorb carbon emissions.

“When we set out on this journey we wanted to help others in the industry too,” said Mensah-Bonsu. “If we all do our part, we can make a change in the world.”



The game Choices, from Pixelberry Studios, centres on a young woman who returns to her coastal hometown following a large fish die-off. Photo by Space Ape

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