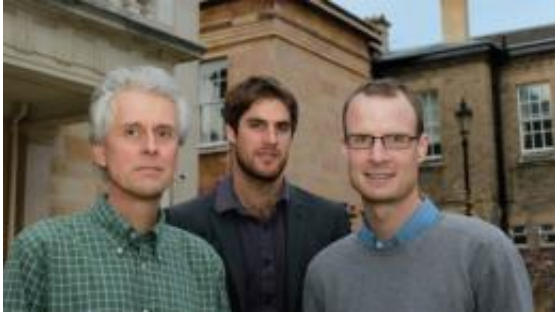


Games for nature

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From left: Bill Adams, Bruno Monteferri, Chris Sandbrook. Credit: Mark Mniszko

Can digital games and virtual worlds help us save nature? Conservation scientists Bruno Monteferri, Chris Sandbrook and Bill Adams explore whether computer gaming is a new frontier for conservation.

Deep in the rainforest, a monkey runs down a river, leaping from log to log over the mouths of the waiting crocs. So begins Congo Jones and the Loggers of Doom, a [computer game](#) that challenges players to work alongside local communities to protect the Congo rainforest from loggers. Offered free by a UK charity that supports [indigenous peoples](#), the [game](#) is just one example of a new trend in the gaming industry towards games relevant for biodiversity [conservation](#).

The emergence of such games is perhaps not surprising. Computer gaming is expanding fast. Worth \$29 billion worldwide in 2005, the

industry reached \$40 billion by 2010. The underlying technology is advancing at an unbelievable pace, stretching media to unexpected places.

However, astonishing graphics are not the main factor driving people towards playing digital games. According to Tom Chatfield (author of Fun Inc.), “the games industry has discovered that the most successful games of all are those that come closest to real life, not in terms of ever more realistic sounds and images, but in terms of social interaction and interfaces with the human world.” On both counts, conservation ticks the boxes.

Although debate has begun about the implications for the [gaming industry](#) of ‘games going green’, the risks and opportunities for [nature conservation](#) have as yet been little explored. Can games adequately explain the complex ecological, political and social basis of biodiversity loss? Will virtual nature start to outshine living nature in the eyes of a game-obsessed world? Or can games engage a generation who have already lost contact with wild nature?

For the past six months, we have been running a pilot project to address such questions, culminating in a recent workshop for conservation organisations and game development companies, and funded by the Cambridge Conservation Initiative. Our goal is to promote a platform for potential collaboration and research on the use of games for nature conservation purposes.

But why should conservation organisations care about games for nature? Video games are an increasingly important social force. In the USA, 87% of the population play video games. Globally, half a billion people play online games for at least an hour a day. Games are also not the preserve of the homework-shy schoolchild: the average age of gamers is about 30.

Is this a good thing? Many commentators say it's not, pointing in particular to the violence of games like Halo or Grand Theft Auto. Others disagree. Jane McGonigal, author of *Reality is Broken: How games make us better and how they can change the world*, argues that video games are a powerful platform to solve global problems. Another commentator, Tom Bissell, in *Extra Lives: why video games matter*, says much the same, tracing the power of gaming narratives to engage the player in ways that literature, music, film and visual art cannot.

So if video games are taking over the worlds of leisure and social interaction, and forming the world that people – particularly younger people – live in, what implications does this have for traditional areas of social concern, such as the environment? There are a number of games about human use and abuse of nature, such as Red Redemption's *Fate of the World*. These form part of a growing field of 'serious games' with a social context and purpose: the antithesis perhaps of the classic 'post-apocalypse' warring worlds of popular imagination.

Moreover, conservation organisations have started using the underlying principles of games to make conservation initiatives more engaging for audiences. For instance, a number of games are being developed that require players to carry out activities in both virtual and real worlds, creating new opportunities for nature conservation.

In the course of this pilot project and workshop, have we answered all our questions? Unsurprisingly, we have not. Did we conclude that they were important? Absolutely: gaming is a deadly serious industry whose business depends on the pleasure it gives its customers, but it also has a vital role to play in shaping the way decisions are made about human use of nature. As Bissell argues in *Extra Lives*, "we're going to change the world and entertain in a way that nothing else ever has." That's a promise no conservationist (and indeed no university) can afford to ignore.

Provided by University of Cambridge

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