Video gamers turn to science for virtual edge

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Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

For some people, video gaming is an activity relegated to the weekends and that all too rare spare time.

For Lisa Evans, it's what her career is founded upon.

The Murdoch University PhD candidate has created a "choose your own adventure" style video game where players can create their own planet

suitable for hosting an incoming alien species.

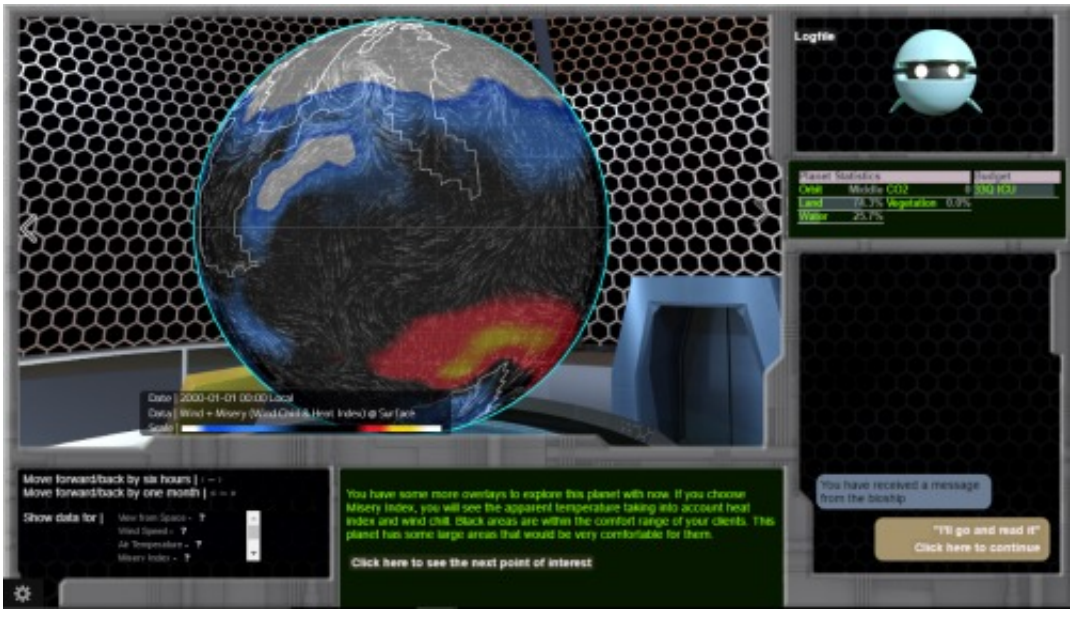
Players adjust a number of variables to perfect the planet, including distance from the sun, the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, vegetation and other earth-like environments, which influence the climate.

"The point of it was to take this piece of software and then see if I can create something where people who aren't scientists can play with it at some level and learn from it the same way a scientist could," she says.

"It's looking at each person as someone who has a contribution to make to solving problems that affect their communities."

Ms Evans hopes the "deep learning" techniques will make the game fun and engaging for players and help her to see if the game influences how people think about complex systems.

"Shallow learning is just remembering a whole bunch of facts but not really seeing how they fit together," she says.



A screen from the game. Credit: Stirfire Studios

"Whereas games can lead you to connect the facts together, and that's deep learning—where it's integrated into a mental picture of what's going on."

With the Games for Change Festival recently taking place in the US, Ms Evans says using games to communicate through science is a hot topic in the industry, but there's more to discover about what works and why.

She says there are prospects for careers in science-angled gaming, but it's niche.

"There's the potential, especially in educational games in schools, there's going to be big changes—especially in the US, not so much in Australia," she says.

"People are embracing games in the classroom now, but it's still early stages."

Ms Evans is calling for volunteers to play and participate in her study in order to gauge whether some players find it more engaging.

She will use this data to tailor different types of science engagement strategies to different audiences.

Anyone who signs up will perform a concept mapping exercise before and after playing the game, as well as filling out a questionnaire six months later, to determine whether their views on complex world issues

have changed.

More information: People can sign up via the study's website: worldofchoices.org/audience_se … entation_survey.html

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