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UW Game Jam harnesses games for a sustainable future

By Jayna Milan (/blog/blog/87) | Dec 4, 2017



Guest post by Sustainability Game Jam organizer Lauren Kuehne.

Three math professors who always wanted to try building a game but never had the time. A graphic designer thinking about taking a digital game design program next year. A graduate student in statistics who is passionate about sustainable river management. These are just a few of the stories of the people who participated in the UW Sustainability Game Jam on Nov. 11-12. Their mission: to design a game that engaged a wider community on a topic or concept related to sustainability – all in one weekend.

The Sustainability Game Jam was the brainchild of Lauren Kuehne and William Chen – a Research Scientist (Kuehne) and recent MS graduate (Chen) in UW's College of the Environment. Working together in the same lab, they discovered not only shared concerns about the environment, but a passion for exploring new ways – like gaming - to communicate science and research. They applied for a Campus Sustainability Fund (CSF) grant (<https://csf.uw.edu/project/709>) to look at the feasibility of using games to encourage sustainability. The Game Jam, which was patterned after national competitions, was intended to bring together the creativity across UW and the broader community to explore a range of game designs that could promote sustainability.

Most of the participants met their teammates for the first time on Saturday morning, and – over the next 30 hours (minus sleeping) – worked together to create games that were nothing short of astounding in their ability to engage people, provoke thinking, and communicate profound concepts related to sustainability.

Here are a few examples of what the teams came up with:

"*Ocean Cleanup*" is a digital game that takes about 20-30 seconds to play but nonetheless communicates a poignant reminder that so much of our plastic waste winds up in the ocean. In the tabletop game "*Survive the Wild*" players have to look out for their fellow community members and



A team from UW Tacoma shows off "EcoFriends," which won 3rd place. Creators: Ryan Card, Yajun An, and Alan Bartlett.

cooperatively manage their resources to make it through their first year in a new world. *"Sustainable Snoqualmie"* is a board game where players win by developing land along the river and making money – the catch, water rights are restricted, just as they are along the real Snoqualmie River.

Like *"Sustainable Snoqualmie"*, most of the games were informed by real world information and data. *"Year of the Wolf"*, a board game about wildlife management, incorporates actual population dynamics such as disease, competition, and predation that disrupt player's management plans. *"Salvage"* uses research data to estimate the environmental and health

impacts of electronic waste that ends up in landfills around the world. In *"AmigoSeed,"* players virtually adopt a plant or tree on the UW campus and then learn about its environmental needs over time as they care for them, just like the Tamogotchi pets of the 1990s.

Like traditional modes of teaching, games can convey information. However, games also have unique capacities to communicate process, engage people at emotional levels, and encourage problem-solving and innovation. Overall, the designs that teams created in just a weekend powerfully illustrated the potential for games to support sustainability efforts.

While prizes were awarded for 1st through 3rd place and People's Choice, it was



In "60 Second Sustainability" players have to act fast to save the world from carbon overload. Creators: Sam Dassler, Tyler Rae, and Emerson Jordan.



In "AmigoSeed," players can adopt a real plant or tree at UW and then learn it's environmental needs as they virtually care for it over time. Creators: Can Zhao, Kerry Chang, and Will Herbert.

collectively agreed that the quality and creativity of all games were truly inspiring and that it was difficult to choose a favorite. In fact, every game earned a "People's Choice" vote. So, what's next for the games? While some of the teams are continuing to develop their game prototypes for use in educational settings and others to bolster their resumes and portfolios, a handful of groups are continuing just for fun.

If you are interested in any of these games contact Lauren

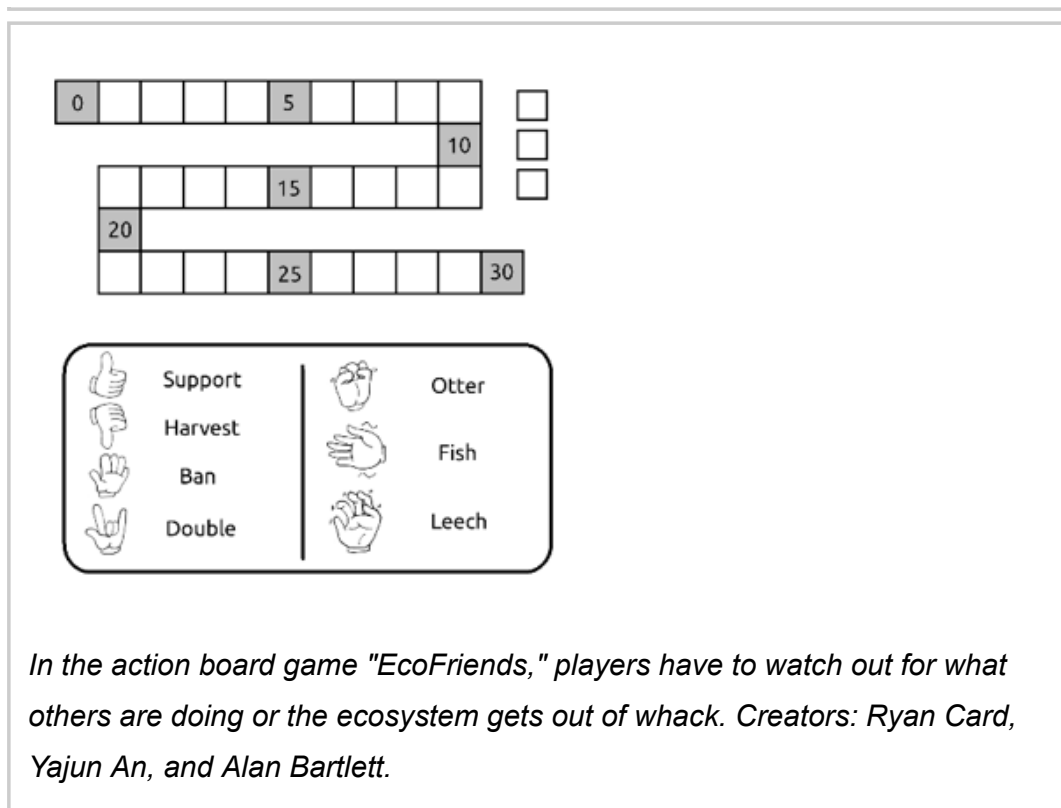
Kuehne at lkuehne@uw.edu (mailto:lkuehne@uw.edu) for more information or to inquire about connecting with the creators.

This event was made possible by the generous sponsorship of the UW Campus Sustainability Fund, Aqua Verde, The School of Aquatic & Fishery Sciences, Theo Chocolates, and an anonymous donor. UW students and members of the Seattle gaming community provided critical volunteer support by running logistics, mentoring teams, and judging final submissions.

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