

Assignment

Play-Based Environmental Game/Activity

As the distance grows between a tiny priesthood who know small parts of nature very well and a massive population who know next to nothing about the whole and not even the names of their neighbors, a right relationship with the world seems more and more elusive. Today, when children have all too many stimuli and all too few opportunities to experience bald wonder, many seem to lack any real interest in nature. Yet I believe, along with Carson and Wilson, that wonder is innate in the very young, waiting only to be ignited before the cheap tricks of modern life damp the fuse. Nothing can light the flame of fascination in a child like another living thing. It may be the naturalists who save us in the end, by bringing us all back down to earth.

—Robert Michael Pyle, “The Rise and Fall of Natural History”

Objective

For this project, please create a piece of interactive, play-oriented media that communicates an environmental or scientific idea of your choice to a child or children. The concept you choose should be something that interests you—the goal of the project is to not simply explain an idea, but impart to your audience a sense of enchantment, or a sense of affinity or connection with the more-than-human world.

Your creation can take any form you want, but should (1) have a strong visual or tactile component, (2) include some amount of text, which is tailored to suit a child audience, and (3) invite interactive play of some kind.

Rationale

As we have discussed this semester, the work of our lifetimes will be to rethink the environment in ways that reassert our connectedness with the more-than-human world and recommit us to responsible place-making. We're going to need to know how to talk to people about the world so as to reawaken enchantment and the desire to care. This project offers a chance to practice those life skills.

Step 1: Practice Noticing Nature [due at the end of Week 1].

In brief: Compile a set of nature notes (raw and unedited).

In order to help others appreciate and care for the environment, it's important to understand what kinds of things might be appreciated. The best way to do this is to practice noticing the environment ourselves. We will do this through focused nature study.

In the United States, nature study used to be a standard element of education from childhood onward. Adults were expected to be able to identify local animals and plants with ease. We've lost that ability, and we need to get it back. Finding interest in local nature can sustain us as we do difficult climate action in years to come.

[This file is supplemental material to Eichberger, *Pixelated life: Fostering environmental enchantment through the design of children's media*, prompt 9.1 (2025), doi: 10.31719/pjaw.v9i1.210]

For this practice activity, find a spot to sit, stand, or rest for about twenty minutes. This spot can be on campus or at a location of your choosing. Depending on the spot you choose, you may want to try to be as still as possible, which will invite birds and other animals to accept you as part of the landscape. This stillness may seem tedious, but think of it as an exercise in attention:

- Start by noticing big things—weather, major landmarks, obvious sounds.
- Once you have noticed these defining features, notice more specific phenomena—the way wind moves leaves, or very distant sounds. Take time to notice variations in color, texture, light, smell, etc.
- Eventually, turn your attention to the ground and other highly specific surfaces. Notice specific blades of grass, insects, bits of soil.

As you observe, record notes, either in words or in sketches. Do not edit these things; keep your attention on what you see. When you feel you have exhausted your attention, return to the big things, and start again. At each stage, ask the question: “I wonder why...”

Step 2: Explore Ecological Connections and Project Possibilities [due at the end of Week 2].

In brief: Write a short, informal reflection (less than a page; casual, email-type voice) to begin clarifying your environmental attention and project interests.

From your notes, pick at least one thing that caught your focus. Reflect briefly on the following questions to begin shaping a vision for what interests you and for your project.

- What substances and beings does your subject interact with? List as many as possible.
- What do you not know about your subject? What parts of its environmental connectedness are mysteries to you?
- What does it feel like to think about the more-than-human world as a series of dense connections? Is this any different from how you think about the world on a daily basis?
- Is there anything here that interests you enough to become a topic for your project? Has the experience led you to think of some part of some other environment that interests you? For whom might you make a project? What form could it take?

Step 3: Define the project’s technologies and form [due at the end of Week 3].

In brief: In an extended, informal reflection, sketch out the audience in more detail, the form the project will take, and what communication choices would help foster a sense of enchantment.

First, consider audience in more detail:

- What subjects do they enjoy?
- What activities or experiences excite them?
- What motivates them to take part in an activity?
- What bores them? What do they not like?
- What environments are around them? What ecological relationships shape their life?

Then, consider the project’s form.

Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* is a common resource used by artists to think through their design process. McCloud describes art as having six stages. What would each stage look

like for your project? What would each contribute to effective communication and enchantment look like for each?

1. **Idea/Purpose:** The work's content—the emotions, philosophies, and purposes of the work, for a given audience.

What do you want your game to teach? What kind of environmental experience would you like your audience to have? Remember that your goal should be to both educate and cultivate emotional connection, so consider what you want your audience to both learn and to feel.

2. **Form:** The work's material nature—the general category of thing.

Here are some possibilities:

- a board game
- a card game
- a printable activity (a science experiment, treasure hunt, etc.)
- a read-along atlas, field guide, a fairy tale, or book with interactive elements (flaps that can be raised to reveal something, etc.)
- some other kind of media that I haven't named but you find interesting

Your creation should have a realistic context. For example, if you create an outdoor activity for family use, ensure that it is easily printable by a parent. Basically, what you design should be functional and fit for real life use.

3. **Idiom:** The school of art—the toolkit of styles and choices for expression.

To answer this, consider what kind of atmosphere you want to generate. Will you create media that is mysterious, light-hearted, comical, serious, or something else? Do you like a particular art style—collage, watercolor, etc.? Are there particular artists whose work inspires you?

Also consider writing style. Particularly if you are most used to academic writing, how will your writing need to read differently to distill complicated ideas for a child audience?

4. **Structure:** What to include in what order.

Consider the material parts of the project and the way content within them is ordered. How do you want to arrange elements? What colors will you use? How will text be organized, and how will text be integrated with visuals?

5. **Craft:** Methods of constructing the work—needed literacies, skills, problem-solving strategies, tools, etc.

Take a minute to inventory your skills. How will you be able to apply your skills to achieve a project that matches your imagination of it? What skills do you need to

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enhance? Are there things you want to achieve that you don't currently have the tools for? (Let me know what learning resources or tools you need.)

6. **Surface:** Finishing touches and superficial details.

Consider what artful touches you wish to include. What little things would excite the child you are designing for?

Step 4: Rough, complete version of project for peer review [due at the end of Week 6].

At the end of Week 6, we will peer-review our work. Plan to bring your project with you in a complete, if rough, form. Together, plan to:

- Briefly explain to a small group of classmates why you have chosen your subject, what you have created, and what questions you have about your work
- Assess each other's work according to a modified version of Norman's design heuristics:
 - Visibility: Is it easy to see what the design does and how it works?
 - Feedback: Does the design let audiences know when they have completed an action?
 - Constraints: Does the design prevent errors and mistakes?
 - Affordances: Does the design help audiences use it correctly?
 - Mapping: Does the design offer satisfying responses to audiences actions?
 - Consistency: Does the design function so that the parts work predictably and are consistently designed?
- Reflect together on what the overall audience experience was like. Identify next steps, and needed resources.

Step 5: Submit and present a complete project [due at the end of Week 7].

Please use this grading checklist to gauge the completeness of your project:

Genre:

Deliverable has a form and idiom suited to children's use and interest.
Deliverable is complete (full and thoughtfully produced).

Audience & Purpose:

- Deliverable has structure, craft, and surface that is *appropriate* for the audience.
- Deliverable has structure, craft, and surface that is *enchanting* for a young audience—that cultivates a sense of affinity with the world.
- Deliverable finds a balance between clear, accurate information and strategic simplifications suited to the audience.
- Font—typeface is handled so that it is appropriate in personality and not overly complicated (restricted to a small number of fonts, etc.)

Usability:

- The deliverable is visually easy for the target audience to understand.

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- The deliverable is textually easy for the target audience to understand.
- Deliverable is usable in a real-life context.
- Aesthetic unity—visual elements of the deliverable have overall continuity: they feel like they fit with each other aesthetically.

Integrity:

- Honesty & attribution—if Creative Commons materials are used, this is appropriately noted as an addendum to the artist’s statement.
- For all research sources used, please also include references. References do not need to be integrated into the project itself, which might feel unnatural.

Artist’s Statement:

In a short, conversational cover letter, describe your process of designing for a particular audience and what experience you wanted them to have.

Take me through the steps you took to reach the final product so I can appreciate what you did, including challenges and adjustments in your vision.