



Earth Island co-creator Eric Thiermann demonstrates the graphical interface of Earth Island, and its neon hummingbird guide, to an audience in Santa Cruz on Friday.

TECH

Welcome to 'Earth Island': How two Santa Cruz artists aim to fight climate change with a video game



BY WALLACE BAINE

Source: [Lookout Santa Cruz](#)



Can a video game save the planet? Eric Thiermann and Ethan Summers might not claim that lofty ambition, but the Santa Cruz entrepreneurs are hoping to harness the popularity of video games to find solutions to climate change. Their vision is Earth Island, a simulation game in which players can learn about real-world efforts to mitigate climate change and apply those tools to a wide variety of environments and ecosystems.

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Can a video game save the world?

Those who are not gamers might scoff at such an absurdity. But consider that the most current estimates of the number of people around the world who regularly play video games have passed 3 billion and rising — on a planet of 8 billion. And consider the massive and unprecedented effort it's going to require to turn around the trends toward catastrophic climate change. Is any other mass-media industry up to the job of mobilizing that effort?

In that light, maybe the idea isn't so laughable.

Santa Cruz entrepreneurs and technologists Eric Thiermann and Ethan Summers are not about to claim that they're out to save the world. Grandiosity isn't part of their make-up. But from the tiny acorn they're intent on planting, one day a mighty oak could grow. Maybe — just maybe — their latest project could contribute in some small or not-so-small way to a historic change in the history of humankind.

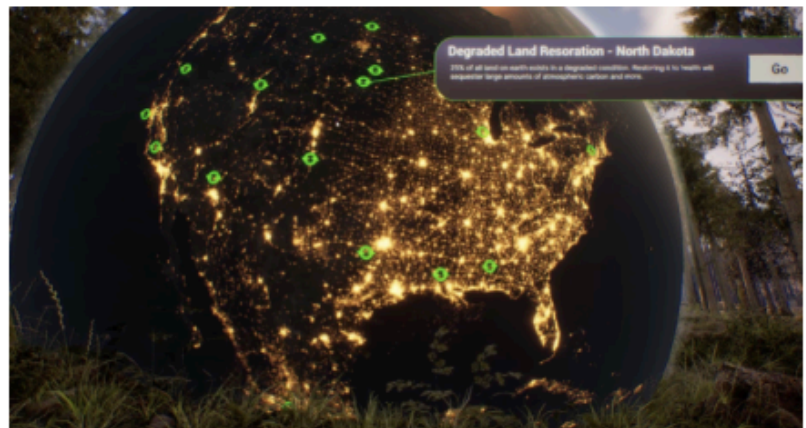


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Earth Island is still in the earliest stages of development. Thiermann and Summers are spending 2023 pursuing both funding and technological know-how, hoping to attract a dozen or more designers and collaborators and raising about \$1.5 million in capital, mostly to pay for that expertise. In a year or so, they hope to have a beta version of the game ready and soon after that, to release it in the world.

“What we have now is basically a visual walk-through of the idea,” said Summers, an award-winning veteran digital artist who runs the local visual-effects shop Almost Human Media. “The beta is going to involve quite a bit of work. But we feel like the idea is really compelling.

“The basic structure of the project is super simple and repeatable. You have an island, which is in pretty bad shape in a lot of ways. And then you’re able to go off the island and learn any number of different skills or trades that have to do with green technology and different ways to combat climate change. Then, when you go back to the island, you can see the improvements because you applied these tools,” Summers said. “And what we really want to do is get this in front of students in high school or college as a way of showing them to some really cool climate-oriented career paths.”



In the Earth Island video game, players will be able to choose among many different environmental challenges, learning and applying restoration efforts at turning around climate change.

For decades now, the raising-awareness model of environmental science has been a one-way street, to the frustration of a couple of generations of would-be concerned citizens. The news or entertainment media explains or illustrates specific or generalized climate-change problems and essentially plops them in the laps of the consumer, often leading to a sense of helplessness and uncertainty. In this case, players can interact with a simulated world and learn specifically about, say, wind turbines, green architecture, re-wilding animals, or marine life restoration. They can then learn what kinds of effects follow the application of specific technologies.

“One of the models we use is drawdown.org, which is the world’s largest collection of climate mitigation strategies and technologies,” said Summers. “And if you can imagine taking every one of those subjects – and there’s some 250 of them – and then turn each of them into a miniature kind of game, that would be a good way to think about what we’re doing.”

In its fully built-out stage, Earth Island will feature any number of rabbit holes designed for many kinds of learning styles, from TED talks to podcasts to puzzles to graphical illustrations, all based on something known as Bloom’s Taxonomy, a widely recognized methodical approach to effective learning.

A good comparison, say the game’s co-creators, might be the widely popular Sims games, a franchise of simulation games that gives players the ability to control people or systems in a kind of “playing God” manner.

“Sims is a really good model to think about,” said Summers. “People get it really quickly when you mention the Sims. What we’re doing is basically a much more sumptuous, cinematic climate-based system that directs students toward climate-based careers.”



Eric Thiermann (left) and Ethan Summers are the Santa Cruz entrepreneurs currently looking for the staffing and the funding to make their co-creation Earth Island a reality

Last Friday, Thiermann and Summers were on hand to demonstrate Earth Island to a handful of interested invited guests. The site was at the offices of Impact Creative, a video-production company Thiermann founded four decades ago. A few years ago, Thiermann met Summers, whose Almost Human Media inhabited a neighboring office space.

“I walked into Ethan’s office,” said Thiermann, a veteran filmmaker and producer, “which was in the same building. They were running a motion-graphics company. And he said, ‘Hey, take a look at this.’ It was this kind of immersive education model that I found fascinating. So, this was just before COVID. And I said, ‘Hey, I want to do that.’ So, I sold my company and just moved across the hallway.”

It was last summer when Thiermann and Summers sparked the idea that set Earth Island into motion. Since then, they’ve been working with a small core of designers to map out the idea and to create the demo on display last Friday.

“We just put this in today,” said Thiermann while showcasing the demo of Earth Island. He was referring to a neon-colored hummingbird that serves as the game’s Tinkerbell, a playful spirit that acts as a guide to the game’s simulated world.

“It’s a really interesting time right now in the software world,” said Summers. “What [game designer] Will Wright and [developer] Maxis [Studios] did with The Sims was incredible, at the time. But the opportunity is right now for being able to create an environment that is so sumptuous and so intricate that you can almost have that level of discovery that real scientists experience when they go out in the natural world. And that’s exactly what we’re trying to capture here. With the aid of experts, you’re sort of rediscovering a lot of things having to do with climate change mitigation and – who knows? – perhaps even developing new ideas.

For more information about Earth Island or information on how to contribute, go to the game’s [new website](#).



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Wallace Baine is Lookout’s City Life Correspondent, covering arts, music and culture, as well as the people who make Santa Cruz and neighboring communities tick. He also writes “The Here & Now,” a periodic column that offers his take on the news of the day – and the news you’d otherwise miss.
