

Dungeons, dragons and environmental justice: Games teach kids climate action

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An illustration from the Gaming for Justice Program. Credit: Niki Waters

Lil Milagro Henriquez recognizes the power of using imagination to create change. As the executive director and founder of the Mycelium Youth Network (MYN), a climate resilience organization in Oakland, California, Henriquez has found a unique way to teach youth about the environment and climate justice through gameplay.

The Mycelium Youth Network offers a variety of opportunities for low-income youth across California's Bay Area, with programming in science, technology, engineering, mathematics and the arts, in service of fostering [climate](#) resilience in the next generation—a crucial tool in the fight against rising [climate doomism](#). To achieve this, Henriquez has created an innovative program: [Gaming for Justice: A Virtual Gaming Experience Through Oakland's Time and Space](#).

This interactive role-playing adventure program, rooted in the history of Oakland, California, leads youth through a world where they can solve real-life environmental justice issues ranging from the local deforestation of oak trees to groundwater pollution, police brutality and gentrification.

Gaming for Justice mimics [Dungeons & Dragons](#) (D&D), a popular tabletop game. Once thought of as a nerdy and male-dominated pastime in the 1980s, D&D has grown into an inclusive pop-culture phenomenon.

Armed with a set of dice, a pencil and a character sheet, [players](#) step into a universe characterized by collective storytelling and open, dynamic gameplay.

Without the help of typical visual aids like a computer screen or gameboard, the game director, aka the Dungeon Master, offers vibrant narration and expressive language to transport players into the world of their game.

While D&D is not expressly about climate issues per se—the game often assembles climate-adjacent themes through the environment and plot that animate each story. A Dungeon Master may draw inspiration from real-world events or experiences, such as having their players in a world surrounded by water with legends of the glaciers that melted millions of years ago.

In pre-written adventures like [Icewind Dale](#), players encounter quests through frigid, everlasting storms and across glacial crevasses, forcing them to interact with the environment and engage in discussions about climate change.

"The players are making decisions that have weight and emphasis," said Susan Haarman, the associate director for the Center for Engaged Learning, Teaching, and Scholarship at Loyola University, Chicago. "Then the game master will take those decisions and give them consequences, and the world will respond."

When players are forced to navigate through these environments, it often gives a sense of agency over issues that feel so much larger than themselves. By developing an understanding of the impact of their choices, they can connect with the possibility of bringing their own contributions to solve our environmental problems.

Henriquez is part of a cohort of educators who are revamping traditional curricula for students through game-ified lessons that engage their critical thinking, problem-solving and empathy.

In Gaming for Justice, youth are not only learning about issues related to climate justice but are also exploring the power of imagination and their potential impact on the world. It allows [young people](#) to explore things that might be very difficult in real life through the point of view of heroes or adventurers, [according to Henriquez](#).

Unlike thought experiments or simulations, Haarman said, role-play games like D&D encourage players to fully engage with their character and with other people, identify how emotions and relationships interact with players' choices, and consider the consequences of all actions—just as they should in the real world. Haarman emphasized the need to recognize that young people are already playing these games, and if

designed right, they can boast numerous educational benefits for a classroom.

With rising [climate change anxiety](#), it is crucial to find innovative ways to instill resilience in youth. When creating a character, players can transform themselves into anything they want to be. Becoming an ice-wielding elf or centuries-old wizard isn't just about acquiring magical powers, but also about discovering your inner powers.

Role-playing enables players to explore themselves and their own ideas or motivations too. For Generation Z (sometimes referred to as the [climate generation](#)), born into a world marked by rising temperatures and shrinkage of mountain glaciers, this presents an optimistic opportunity.

"Gaming allows us to remove the barriers of the world as it is and imagine the world that we want it to be," Henriquez said. "The line between let's imagine the world we want to build, and let's take active action in the world you want to build, is actually a very, very, very thin line."

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