



The Climate Trail: how to survive the climate apocalypse

Interview with William D. Volk

*The Climate Trail*¹ is a new and totally free game for PC and mobiles developed by William D. Volk. The game takes place in the future, when our inaction regarding the climate crisis has rendered much of the world uninhabitable. The player leads climate refugees as they flee from ever worsening conditions, combining adventure, survival and visual novel elements. *The Climate Trail* follows the footsteps of the famous series *The Oregon Trail* (MECC, 1971–2011).

The Journal of Geek Studies interviewed William D. Volk to understand how *The Climate Trail* came to be. You can read the full interview below.

Q: Firstly, thank you for making *The Climate Trail*; the world desperately needed it. Being such a hot topic (no pun intended), it's amazing no one in the video game industry has faced it heads on yet. So how did you become the first one to step up to this task?

A: The mainstream video game industry is risk-averse because unlike film, there is no secondary markets (cable, etc.) for their games. With high budgets, they don't take big risks and rely on franchises (*i.e.*, *Call of Duty*, *Overwatch*, *Grand Theft Auto*) for most of the revenue. There's also an aversion to tackling controversial topics. There



¹ You can find it at <https://www.theclimatetrail.com/>

are some indie games that have addressed the climate issue, but *The Climate Trail* may be the first to put players into a post climate-apocalypse world.

Q: Before *The Climate Trail*, did you have any experience in communicating about climate change? Or maybe even joining up some marches and protests?

A: I have degrees in Physics, a wife who used to work for the EPA and a brother who is a meteorologist. I've done way too much online debating on the issue, which was one of the motivations for making this game. I have participated in some climate events as well.

Q: As the game's title and website make clear, it has drawn inspiration from *The Oregon Trail*. The *Oregon Trail* series is classified as 'educational games'. Do you see *The Climate Trail* equally as an educational game or more as a call to action?

A: My goal is to add more educational content into the game so it can be a resource for climate information, but I also want it to be a call to action. Both are important.

Q: Would you like to see *The Climate Trail* being used in classrooms?

A: I do. This is why there's no "roving band of cannibals" or other violence in the game. I present information about climate change in the title and expect to have the game serve as a resource for climate education.

Q: To create *The Climate Trail*, did you use models and predictions made by climate scientists? If so, which studies and reports have you used?

A: Yes, here are some studies and information about feedback loops.²

- *What Lies Beneath: The Understatement of Existential Climate Risk*;³
- *Existential Climate-Related Security Risk* [foreword by C. Barrie];⁴
- *Turn Down the Heat: Why a 4°C Warmer World Must be Avoided*;⁵
- Scientific articles by Farquharson et al. (2019)⁶ and Schneider et al. (2019);⁷
- Opinion articles by Hewett (2019)⁸ and Kristof (2019).⁹

² You can also check Wikipedia's entry on the clathrate gun hypothesis: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clathrate_gun_hypothesis

³ Spratt, D. & Dunlop, I. (2018) Available from: <https://climateextremes.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/What-Lies-Beneath-V3-LR-Blank5b15d.pdf>

⁴ Spratt, D. & Dunlop, I. (2019) Available from: https://52a87f3e-7945-4bb1-abbf-9aa66cd4e93e.filesusr.com/ugd/148cb0_90dc2a2637f348edae45943a88da04d4.pdf

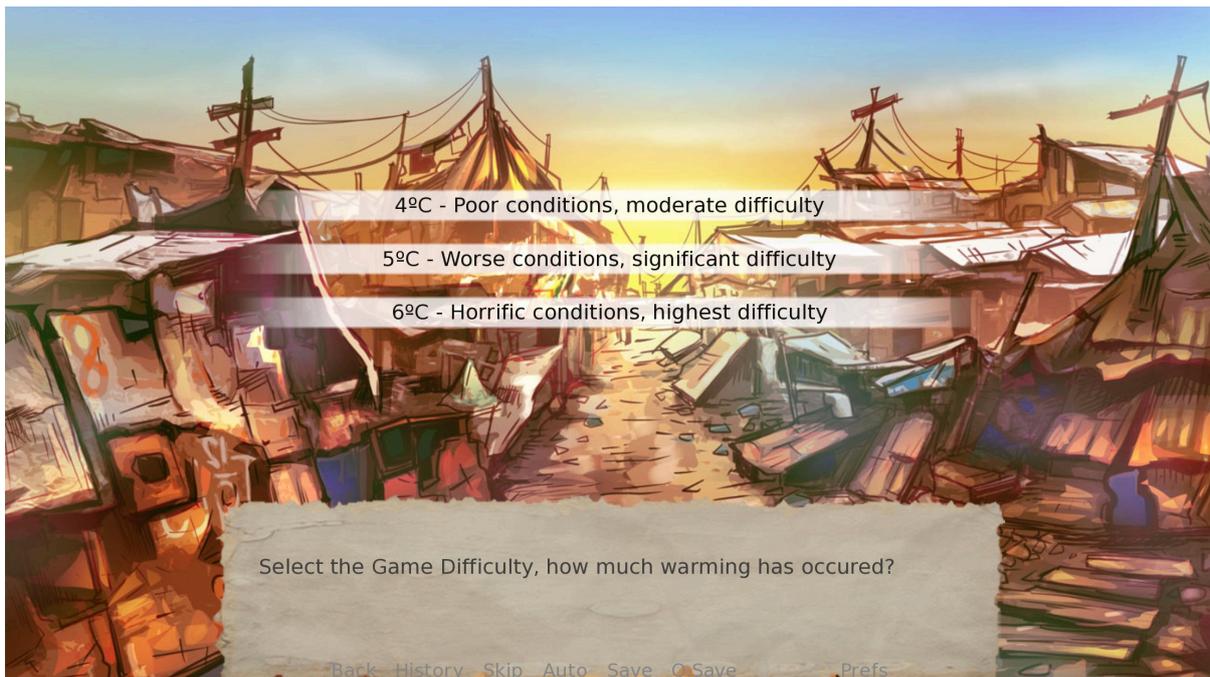
⁵ World Bank, The. (2012) Available from: <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/865571468149107611/pdf/NonAsciiFileName0.pdf>

⁶ Farquharson, L.M.; Romanovsky, V.E.; Cable, W.L.; Walker, D.A.; Kokelj, S.V.; Nicolsky, D. (2019) Climate change drives widespread and rapid thermokarst development in very cold permafrost in the Canadian High Arctic. *Geophysical Research Letters* 46: 6681–6689.

⁷ Schneider, T.; Kaul, C.M.; Pressel, K.G. (2019) Possible climate transitions from breakup of stratocumulus decks under greenhouse warming. *Nature Geoscience* 12: 163–167.

⁸ Hewett, F. (2019) The Scariest Thing About Climate Change: What Happens to Our Food Supply. Available from: <https://www.wbur.org/cognoscenti/2019/06/05/climate-change-food-frederick-hewett>

⁹ Kristof, N. (2019) 'Food doesn't grow here anymore. That's why I would send my son north.' Available from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/05/opinion/guatemala-migrants-climate-change.html>



Q: To many (if not most) people, science alone is not enough reason to take action. The emotional impact of a game might be more crucial, and art might play a bigger role here. *The Climate Trail* has all of that, so how did you approach the mix and balance of science and emotion?

A: I've always believed that games can have social value. Chris Crawford's 1985 classic game of geopolitical brinkmanship, *Balance of Power*, showed the futility of nuclear war. There are other examples, the 1997 PlayStation game *Oddworld: Abe's Oddysee* covered the exploration of workers in a moving way. For me the example that best represents a creative effort that moved me to tears is the 1959 film *On the Beach*.

On the Beach scared me and I'm sure many other "cold war children" (and adults). The ending scene of the film shows a deserted world with banners expressing futile hope in a dramatic image. I want to invoke the same feelings about our ever more likely

climate apocalypse as *On the Beach* did for nuclear war. As the scientist in that film says: "Who would ever have believed that human beings would be stupid enough to blow themselves off the face of the Earth?"

I simply can't believe we're stupid enough to cook ourselves off the face of the Earth. If I can achieve 1/10th of the emotional impact of *Oddworld* or *On the Beach* I will be happy with the effort.¹⁰

Q: In *The Climate Trail*, players must survive a journey from Atlanta, USA, to Canada, across a climate-wrecked landscape. Did you choose this area for any particular reason?

A: Single highway route made design easier, all the locations are far enough above sea level to still be passable even if all land ice melts. I've been to that Canadian town as well.

¹⁰ Read more at: <https://www.theclimatetrail.com/development-blog/why-am-i-giving-this-game-away-or-can-a-game-make-you-cry> and <https://www.theclimatetrail.com/development-blog/the-games-the-thing-wherein-ill-catch-the-conscience-of-my-kin->

¹¹ See also: <https://www.theclimatetrail.com/development-blog/why-am-i-giving-this-game-away-or-can-a-game-make-you-cry>

Q: The USA in *The Climate Trail* looks terrible. In what year exactly does the game take place?

A: I'm deliberately not specific. Kate (the scientist) mentions Greenland Ice Melt when she was in college (dog sled picture) so the idea is it could be anywhere from 30 to 50 years or more.

Q: We love that the game's difficulty levels are represented by greater increases in global temperature. How do the different temperature increase scenarios change the gameplay?

A: They effect heat wave and storm frequency, how many seeds you have at the start and the odds of finding supplies and capturing rain.

Q: You funded the game yourself and made it available to the public for free. Why did you opt for that approach?

A: It's easier for climate organizations to support a game if it's not a commercial venture. Also want to get it into schools.¹¹

Q: Ultimately, what is your hope for *The Climate Trail*?

A: Have it become an educational resource (as we add more climate info) and as with *On the Beach*, create emotional impact that moves people to action. I want to see millions playing it.

ABOUT THE TEAM

William D. Volk is a game developer, founder of Deep State Games, and environmental advocate. He began his career in 1979 helping to launch the computer game division of Avalon Hill. He has worked at Activision and Lightspan and produced over 100 educational adventures. **George Sanger**, also known as "The Fat Man", is a musician who has composed music for several video games, including *Wing Commander* and *SimCity 2000*.

