

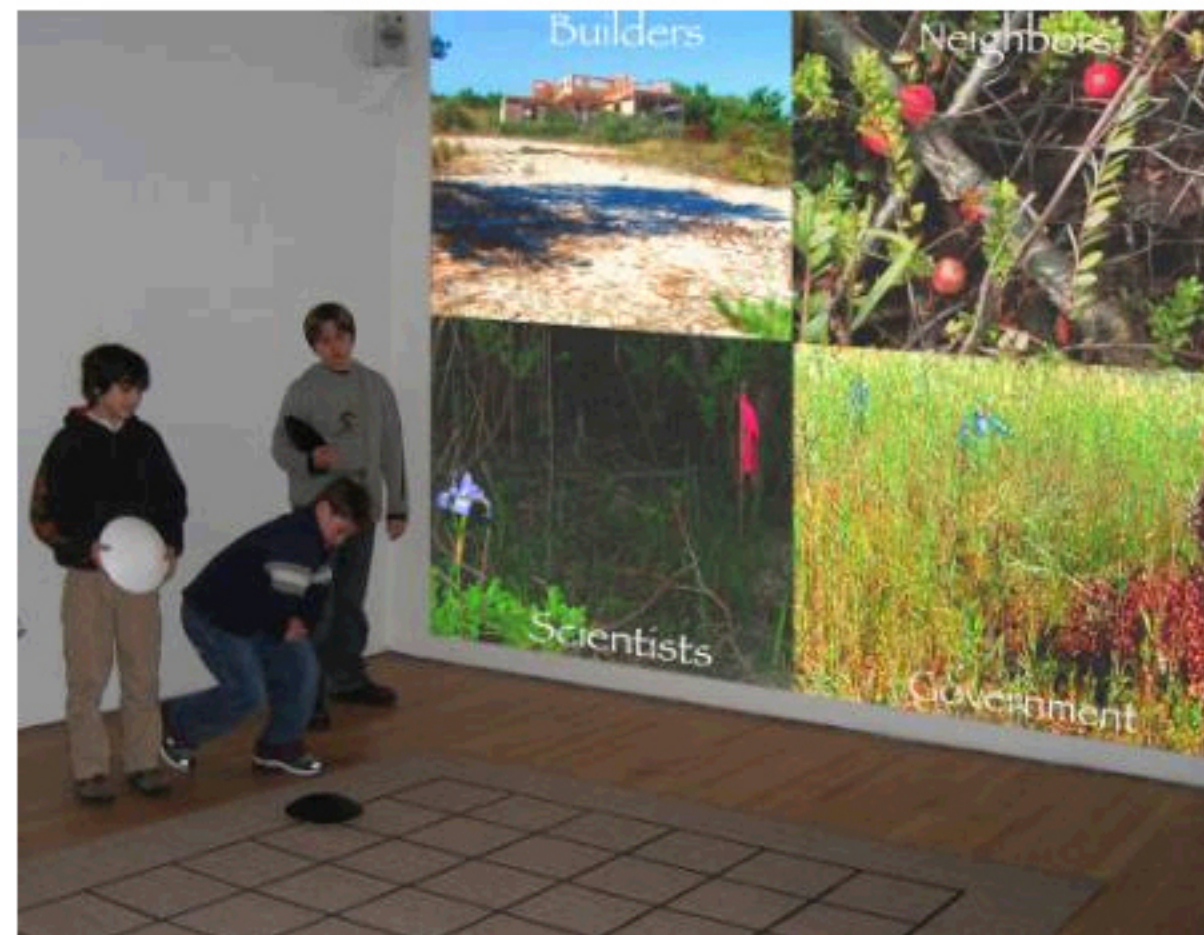
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Zen and the Art of Compromise

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"A rare wetland ecosystem is in immediate danger of development," the wall in a small, square room at the Queens Museum of Art declares. "Help prevent environmental degradation by playing until both sides capture territory." In front of the wall is a giant game board, black lines dividing it into thirty-six squares. White and black plate-sized disks are stacked beside it. Japanese visitors, math majors, and computer nerds will immediately recognize the game as a supersized version of Go.

"Go is a perfect metaphor," artist Lillian Ball says of the exhibit. "You cannot win until both sides win territory."

Go fans will immediately object that this is not true. In fact, Go is a strategic and often aggressive game in which opponents seek to surround territory by hemming in and capturing each other's stones. But Ball's installation, called GO ECO, uses a variant called Zen Go—reportedly developed by monks—in which an uneven number of players take turns playing both colors. The idea is that by cooperating both sides can capture territory and thus win together. As a metaphor for community-driven environmental preservation, Zen Go is straightforward: compromise is the name of the game.

Compromise was achieved in the Southold, New York, wetlands preservation project the installation references. Southold is on Long Island's bucolic North Fork, long neglected by developers in favor of the South Fork, home to the glitzy Hamptons. Lately, this has changed, and North Forkers have begun to fear a deluge of malls and McMansions. Ball got involved when Southold granted a developer a permit to build homes on a local cranberry bog. Convinced the bog should be preserved, she brought in a biologist, who confirmed that the bog ecosystem was not only locally significant but globally rare. Ball set out to save it.

The GO ECO installation grew directly out of Ball's experience in Southold. In community preservation, she says, "it's not helpful to say these are the good guys and these are the bad guys; it was a long process for me to learn how to be effective." Effectiveness in this case meant, not filing lawsuits, but crafting a solution acceptable to all parties. Eventually, a coalition of eighty donors purchased the property—and earned tax credits—through the Peconic Land Trust. The town of Southold contributed \$50,000 and set aside the land as a preserve after being offered a sanitary flow credit in exchange for it—in essence, a free pass to build homes somewhere else. The outcome was hailed as a win for all involved.

The Zen Go game reproduces this process: as players make their moves, they trigger video clips in one of four quadrants on an adjacent wall. Labeled GOVERNMENT, NEIGHBORS, BUILDERS, and SCIENTISTS, the quadrants alternately light up with views of the endangered ecosystem accompanied by voiceovers from each stakeholder's point of view. Through a series of gorgeous and supersaturated video clips, players learn about the wetland, its importance, and the complicated give-and-take of preserving it. They must play the game not to claim the most territory, but to ensure that both sides win some territory, no matter how small.

"What's the point of playing a game if no one wins?" a thirteen year old asked recently. It's not surprising the teenager felt a bit disappointed. In game play, what you really want is to deliver a crushing defeat. Then again, that might be nice when it comes to saving wetlands, too. Games rarely embrace compromise. Environmentalism today—for better or for worse—does.