

The Mechanics of Colonialism in Minecraft

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Colonialism and Games

- Colonialism seeks to both justify and valorize colonial domination, such as the ongoing domination of Native Americans by the United States of America.
- Popular culture spreads colonialist beliefs.¹
- Games can promote ideologies.²
- Besides their 2D art, text, and sound, games include rules, also known as “mechanics.”
- Rules themselves can communicate messages, including colonialist messages.



The Minecraft title screen.

Minecraft

- The best-selling game of all time (>176 million copies).
- A blocky world where any block can be mined.
 - Craft blocks into tools and other blocks.
 - Blocks can be placed to build things.
- Generated terrain includes various climates, underground caves, and “natural resources” like ore.
- Populated by passive animals, aggressive monsters, benign “villagers,” and evil “illagers.”
 - Animals include livestock, pets, and wild animals.
 - Monsters appear at night and attack on sight.
 - Villagers live in villages and can be traded with.
 - Illagers appear randomly and attack immediately.

¹ Churchill, Ward, *Fantasies of the Master Race* edited by M. Annette Jaimes. Common Courage Press, 1992.

² Bogost, Ian, *Persuasive Games*. MIT Press, 2007.

Colonialist Myths

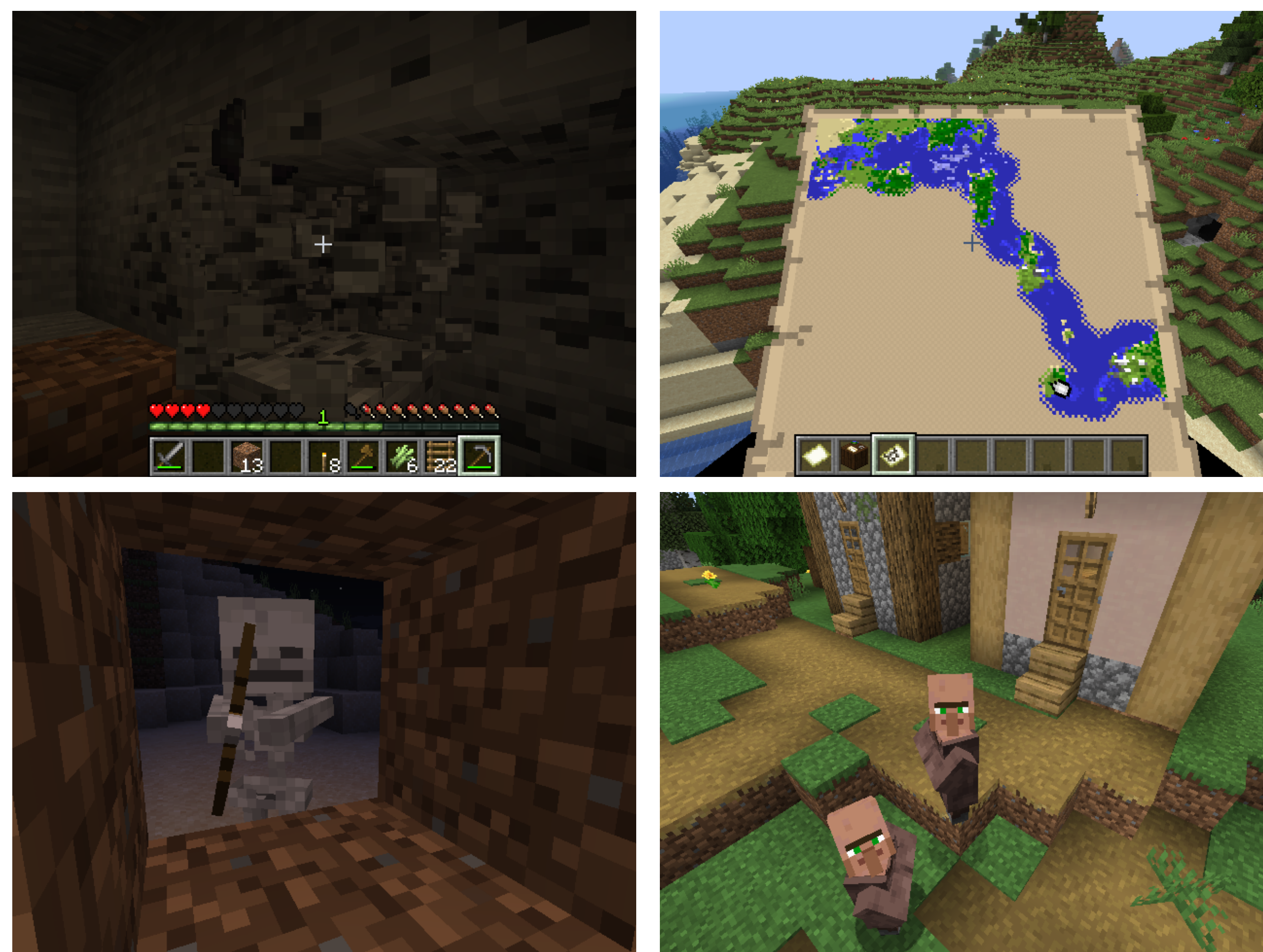
- Game mechanics dictate what is true in the game world, and imply things about the real world.
- Several Minecraft mechanics support colonialist myths which help justify past and present colonial domination.³

Accumulating Blocks

- Ore is finite, but can always find more by moving on.
 - Reinforces myth that ‘natural resources’ are plentiful and extracting them is harmless.
- No large-scale consequences of extraction.
 - Reinforces myth that Natives had no technology.
- Mass extraction is made easy due to enormous inventory.

Terrain and Exploration

- Most generated terrain is uninhabited.
 - Reinforces myth of the ‘wild/empty frontier.’
- Villagers don’t use land outside of their small villages.
 - Reinforces myth that Natives were helpless and therefore benefited from colonialism.
- Maps position player as discoverer.
 - Reinforces myth of Western ‘discovery’ of Indigenous territories as creation of new knowledge.



Clockwise from top left: 1. Mining coal; 2. A map being filled in; 3. A pair of villagers; 4. A skeleton monster.

³ Dooghan, Daniel, *Digital Conquerors: Minecraft and the Apologetics of Neoliberalism*. In *Games and Culture* v. 14, 2016.

Monsters and Illagers

- Intelligent, but unconditionally attack player on sight.
- Implies some creatures are inherently/irredeemably evil.
 - Reinforces myth that morality/behavior is biologically determined, and justifies aggression as self-defense.

Villagers

- No combat, building, or crafting ability (despite living in constructed dwellings).
- Not shown as builders of advanced ruins like shipwrecks.
 - Reinforces myth that Natives had no technology.
- Depend on player for defense against monsters.
 - Ironically, monsters are only attracted by player.
 - Sets up player as “savior,” villagers as beneficiaries.
 - Reinforces myth that Natives were helpless and therefore benefited from colonialism.

Advancements

- Tutorial & achievement system rewards certain actions.
 - Incentivizes colonialist activities (even killing villagers).
- Provides an overarching narrative of progress.

Impacts

- Explicitly colonialist fantasies (“...who doesn’t want to be all barbarian and destroy every village[?]” from [the Minecraft Wiki tutorial on Colonizing](#)).
- Colonialist myths in education (for example, a “[British Colonisation](#)” lesson to teach about “what the settlers went through” in Australia on the [Minecraft Education Edition site](#)).
- In addition to obscuring and distorting colonialist histories, these myths cause direct psychological harm.⁴
- Similar mechanics exist in many game genres, because mechanics are often uncritically copied between games.

⁴ Stegman, Erik and Phillips, Victoria F., *Missing the Point: The Real Impact of Native Mascots and Team Names on American Indian and Alaska Native Youth*. Center for American Progress, July 2014.