The Mechanics of Colonialism in Minecraft

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Colonialism is an integral part of modern Western culture, in part because it helps dominant societies uphold the myth that their hegemonies are fundamentally just. As an ideology, colonialism maintains that colonization is not only acceptable, but is in fact heroic; it justifies and valorizes colonization through the perpetuation of specific myths about the colonial past and present. These myths are perpetuated in part through popular media, including new media such as video games.

We focus on the game Minecraft as an exemplary site of colonialist messaging, both because of the range of messages that it embeds and how those messages are present at the mechanical level, not just at the narrative or surface representation levels. The fact that the mechanics of the game convey these messages is important: It implies that other games which share similar mechanics might convey similar messages, and Minecraft's mechanics are shared by many other games (both games that inspired it and games that it has inspired). We use the ideas of procedural rhetoric and operational logics to unpack the rhetorical content of Minecraft's mechanics, and identify five ways in which it perpetuates colonialist myths:

1. The mechanics of hostile monsters support the myth that some intelligent beings are inherently evil, and the related myth that acts of aggression against Indigenous peoples are actually acts of self-defense.
2. The mechanics of the "villager" NPCs support the myths that Indigenous people are helpless or "uncivilized" and therefore ultimately benefit from colonization.
3. The mechanics of inventory and acquisition support the myth that the natural world is rightly seen as composed of "resources," the extraction of which is beneficial.
4. The mechanics of terrain generation and exploration support the myth that most territory was uninhabited prior to colonization, and therefore colonialist land claims are not in conflict with Indigenous territories.
5. The achievements system of the game, which rewards a certain in-game actions, amplifies the effects of these other mechanics, because it encourages a specific way of interacting with the game world.

Taken together, these mechanics present a spectrum of myths about colonization that can also be seen in other colonialist media. Many of these mechanics are also at some level present throughout entire game genres, and although the details of implementation and presentation can certainly impact procedural rhetorics, the same colonialist myths are likely present in other games that include similar dynamics. Accordingly, although our investigation is focused entirely on Minecraft, we expect that similar patterns could be found in a range of other games.