

Digital Conquerors: *Minecraft* and the Apologetics of Neoliberalism

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Abstract

The widespread popularity of sandbox games, and *Minecraft* in particular, may be a recent phenomenon, but their appeal may be much older. Rather than representing a wholly new development in gaming, these games may participate in a larger media ecology that flatters a neoliberal worldview. This research calls for greater attention to the coercive economic assumptions encoded in game mechanics. Drawing on scholarship in ludology, postcolonial studies, and phenomenology, it suggests that sandbox games like *Minecraft* habituate players to myths of empire and capital that rationalize political and economic inequality. More than simply offering a blank slate for player creation, *Minecraft* rewards players for assuming their entitlement to the world's resources and thus their superiority over other inhabitants of the game world.

Keywords

Minecraft, labor, postcolonial, empire, economics, race, neoliberal

As its name suggests, *Minecraft* is a game about work, and as the game's phenomenal success demonstrates, work sells. Since its official release in 2011, *Minecraft* has sold over 70 million copies across all platforms, with 20 million on its native PC

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(Sarkar, 2015). Developed by Sweden's A. B. Mojang, it promises an experience in which "the player would make their own story, and interact with the game world, decide for themselves what they want to do" (Persson, 2013). And it delivers, consolidating mechanics from multiple genres into a celebration of exploration and creation. Sharing in these joys, however, requires that the player works—work freely chosen, as promised, but works nonetheless. Moreover, the genuine fun derived from this work elides the political and economic assumptions on which it rests. These assumptions find expression through game mechanics that pleasurably parallel the ongoing U.S.-led "War on Terror" that serves as backdrop to the game's release and popularity. Rather than showing the violent realities of neoliberalism, *Minecraft* promises a utopian space for players to experience labor and globalization in their idealized forms: Economic mythologies that justify exploitation and expansionism not as domination, but as development.

This narrative of development is the product of the game's eponymous mechanics. Players, beset by the literal forces of darkness, must exercise their mastery over nature to produce utopia. In this, players resemble enlightenment heroes in the mold of Robinson Crusoe, who through their industry can produce all the comforts of home. What the novel provided for the rising 18th-century bourgeoisie, the game provides for those under late capital. We see in both a utopia of individual labor that rationalizes racial, imperial mythologies as good and necessary, immune to the infelicities of actual empire. This microcosmic industry, for Fredric Jameson (2004), flatters the efforts of leisure-time builders by opening a space of economic fantasy: "Model railroads of the mind, these utopian constructions convey the spirit of non-alienated labour and of production far better than any concepts of *écriture* or *Spiel*" (pp. 40–41). Indeed, *Minecraft* players will receive direct rewards for their labor, which they can direct toward any sort of constructive activity. This freedom to work, though, comes at the expense of a freedom to question the conditions of that labor. Jameson (2004) reminds us, "utopia emerges at the moment of the suspension of the political" (p. 43). *Minecraft* in its fashion acknowledges the limitations of physics while subordinating them to developing player mastery—Jameson's utopia of the miniature—but elides questions of the historical situation, fulfilling the literal sense of More's (o)utopia.

Utopia in *Minecraft*, then, is less constructed perfection than the effacement of its contingency. Players cannot help but achieve their constructed utopias, and while they may encounter setbacks along the way, these are obstacles to be overcome rather than threats to the utopian vision. The game's mechanics recall Francis Fukuyama's end of history, in which development is necessarily teleological and which inexorably leads to a fully globalized capitalist regime. Even if the events of 2001 revealed Fukuyama's thesis as folly, it remains tenacious. Challengers to Euro-American hegemony generally appear branded as terrorists or rogue states in popular media: Not even Putin can get a break. The challengers persist, though, and often messily. The Russian and Chinese ascendancies and the failures of America's recent wars are reminders that the contest for global hegemony remains open and

contingent upon state violence. In *Minecraft*'s utopia, however, this slippage between teleological narrative and reality vanishes: The game's mechanics construct player primacy as necessary, so any challengers are illegitimate a priori. The game is an example of what Raymond Williams (2005) calls a "heuristic utopia," which shows what is possible by consummating extant social, political, and economic projects. Within game studies proper, Veli-Matti Karhulahti (2015) argues similarly that video games are teleologically evaluative in their capacity to mechanically signify what player behaviors will lead to successful play: *Minecraft* shows players an achievable world and rewards them for taking steps toward it. The resource collection, construction, and expansion that constitute the game's core activities are thus always justified and offer a vindication of the historical failures of actually existing neoliberalism. By rehearsing neoliberal policies in the utopian space of the game world, *Minecraft* assures players that these policies are viable, necessary, and personally rewarding.

These policies defend globalization as a similarly utopian project built on a rising tide of free trade and development. A technocratic elite manages the process, ensuring unrestricted access to profitable resources and dismissing its opponents as beyond rational engagement. Stuart Hall (2011) rejects these as myths: "The main purpose of global governance was to protect markets and investments and maintain the conditions for the successful pursuit of global capitalist enterprise," which

required a major commitment to a new geopolitical order, swelling military expenditure "hard power" and the construction of a ring of bases, client states and dictators (many of whom routinely used repression, violence, imprisonment and torture); and, if necessary, direct military intervention in humanitarian disguise. (p. 716)

The construction of a globalized war machine thus occurs under the cover of a utopian project: international development. Of course, as Timothy Brennan (2014) argues, that project assumes the necessity of universal capitalism, even if it must be forced upon recalcitrant peoples—usually racial others—in a contemporary extension of settler colonialism and empire. *Minecraft*'s utopia eschews the ethical untidiness of these projects and presents them in an idealized fashion, setting the player to work as both an agent of international development and its defender.

Within *Minecraft*'s neoliberal utopia, skillful play results in the development of in-game technological prowess that necessitates both continuous resource extraction and the perspective necessary to see the game world unfold as uniformly available to players. Sustaining this technologically privileged position requires repetitive activity in game. However, unlike much labor sustaining neoliberalism, *Minecraft*'s work is not drudgery, but fun. Like much labor under neoliberalism, though, it is uncompensated and autotelic, blurring the boundaries between work and free time. Acknowledging the conflation of work and play, game theorists Judd Ruggill, Ken McAllister, and David Menchaca (2004) offer the concept of the gamework as a lens for engaging the labors that constitute a game, in terms of both production and

consumption. By considering games as both commodities and nexuses of economic behavior, the gamework calls attention to the development processes sedimented in the final product as well as the economic rules by which game worlds function. The gamework provides a framework for examining *Minecraft*'s long, public development as well as revealing the political consequences of player labor necessitated by the game's mechanics.

Repetitive labor as a game mechanic has emerged as a hallmark of the massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) genre, including *World of Warcraft* and *Everquest* (Yee, 2006). Similarly, many casual games offer players a discrete number of low engagement actions within a limited time frame: Zynga's Facebook games such as *Mafia Wars* and *FarmVille*. A game's work can extend beyond the game world with the MMORPG's subscription fees and the casual game's microtransactions. The ubiquity of these mechanics has engendered parodies such as *Progress Quest* and Ian Bogost's *Cow Clicker*. However, MMORPGs and casual games are not alone in setting players to work. *Minecraft*'s genre, the largely nonnarrative sandbox game, has recently exploded in popularity. In the absence of a scripted narrative, players can act as they please, limited only by the game's mechanics. Despite assertions of player freedom, these games frequently require players to engage in similarly repetitive labor. Although open-ended games¹ are not new—*Elite* and *SimCity*, for example, appear in 1984 and 1989, respectively—the genre has experienced phenomenal growth over the past 5 years. Diverse games like *Starbound*, *Terraria*, and *Kerbal Space Program* speak to the genre's vitality, and *Minecraft* is a testament to its popularity.

The stated goal of player freedom is seductive in that it flatters mythologies of bootstrapped success: The game world is available for the player to transform. The player can become a neoliberal hero. David Harvey (2005) identifies the neoliberal project of unrestricted trade with the territorial domination of marketable resources in order to guarantee the uninterrupted flow of wealth through financial centers. This freedom to profit globally rests on the limitations of the freedoms of others through technological dominance. Player relationships to the gamework are thus predicated on a sense of entitlement and guaranteed by their ability to see in-game resistance as illegitimate. The promised freedom of creative possibility may suggest a wide range of outcomes, but in the gameplay that has emerged, based on thousands of YouTube videos, forum posts, and player modifications, players do similar things. This is the freedom of free trade: Access to resources and exchange must be universal, whereas the actual products are variable.

What unites most player activities is their focus on work, specifically the work of transforming the game world to facilitate resource accumulation. Stefano De Paoli (2013) suggests that the work performed by players in games is not simply an analogue of Taylorist toil but serves to cultivate "real skills" that improve not only a player's manual dexterity in playing the game but also the development of ways of seeing in the game world. Following P. G. Schrader and Michael McCreery (2008), De Paoli argues that to reach high-level play in some genres, players need "cognitive

skills and ability in decision making” (n.p.). The employment of these cognitive skills to optimize the efficiency of play, as De Paoli concludes, changes the role of the player from laborer in the game world to manager of it. This change in a player’s relationship to the gamework reflects an ideological shift cultivated through gameplay. Ruggill et al. (2004) acknowledge the participation of players in shaping the gamework and in turn being shaped by it: “Gamers actively help create the narrative, thematic, and ideological structures that determine the artifactual experience. In so doing, gamers also reproduce or consent to ideologies embedded within games themselves. This, too, is a kind of work” (p. 301). Their discussion of *Warcraft III* focuses on how the game habituates players to the necessity of “territorial expansion”—a mechanic common to many genres—normalizing an imperial worldview.

Minecraft’s mechanics not only encourage this kind of expansionist thinking but go further by representing the physical and cultural violence of territorial expansion as a pleasurable challenge. The skills and perspective cultivated by these mechanics rehearse economic assumptions about the world that apologize for exploitation on a global scale. These mechanics are constitutive of what Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter (2009) identify throughout contemporary gaming as part of neoliberal subject formation in that “virtual play trains flexible personalities for flexible jobs, shapes subjects for militarized markets, and makes becoming a neoliberal subject fun” (pp. xxix–xxx). Following the ludological approach suggested by Mary Fuller and Henry Jenkins (1995) and Ian Bogost’s (2007) procedural rhetoric, this research engages *Minecraft* as a utopian space for aspirational neoliberal subjects. Its mechanics encourage players to see the game world as full of resources to be consumed, without concern for ownership or equity, where technological superiority becomes a justification for action, and individual labor is always fairly rewarded. Moreover, following Tanner Higgin’s (2012) concept of displaced racialization and David Leonard’s (2003) work on the consumption of race in video games, this essay attempts to show how these mechanics reproduce the intellectual violence of representation that enables neoliberal adventurism—and profit. However, the average player is likely not from the capitalist class that can live these economic fantasies. As Raymond Williams (2005) reminds us, “Utopia, that is to say, as a singular noun, is not an emancipatory concept; indeed it is often and at its best frankly compensatory” (p. 292). Thus, *Minecraft* allows players to vicariously experience the pleasures of neoliberalism while remaining insensate to their marginality within it. More chillingly, the game forecloses the possibility of resistance by casting those who would expose the contingency of these economic conditions—disenfranchised racial others, political dissenters—as threats to its achievable, inevitable utopia.

Mechanical Teleology

The brainchild of Mojang’s founder, Markus “Notch” Persson, *Minecraft* derives inspiration from earlier resource collection and construction games like *Infiniminer* and *Dwarf Fortress* (Davies, 2012; Mojang, n.d.). Players find themselves in a

procedurally generated world from which they can mine resources in order to craft things. The game world consists of uniformly sized blocks of different materials. Deserts are made of sand blocks, oceans are made of water blocks, and plains are made of grass blocks. Underneath the surface of the world are layers of rock blocks containing caverns and lava flows as well as ore lodes for the titular mining. Players can harvest nearly every block in the game world and either rearrange them or craft them into new, deployable objects, transforming the entire world as desired.

This transformation forms the core of *Minecraft*'s "Survival" mode, from which its popularity largely derives. In it, the player appears in a world, in the morning, empty-handed. The player is not alone in the world, which is inhabited by nocturnal monsters. If the player does not harvest enough resources to construct a shelter by the time night falls (20 min), monsters will likely kill the player. Thus, the player must reshape the environment to provide protection from the local fauna. Sean C. Duncan (2011) suggests that, following Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, "The individual elements of survival and construction need one another to drive players deeper into the game and to achieve a joyous, 'flow'-like state of play" (p. 13). The game's remarkable sales record suggests that players find this tension compelling.

Its sandbox nature contributes to the pleasurable flow of gameplay, but as a sandbox, it suggests certain activities. As an open-world game, it invites players to test and extend their mastery over the world. Asaf Friedman (2015) sees *Minecraft*'s attraction as a Deleuzian "affection image" by which the game posits boundaries for players but then invites them to transgress, granting them a sense of freedom. This freedom is illusory, though. Players need not do anything and are unconstrained by overt narrative, but the game's mechanics reward and habituate some behaviors over others. The game's core functionality is that of a pleasurable struggle to bend the environment to the player's will. Despite the intention of open-ended gameplay, the game is didactic, even if unintentionally so. Success in *Minecraft* requires that players subscribe to a worldview that privileges technologically advanced outsiders over indigenous peoples in a personal Robinsonade.

The game tacitly imposes on the player a narrative of technological advancement. From humble beginnings collecting logs, savvy players will quickly learn that they can craft tools out of this wood. These wooden tools can then be employed to mine heretofore unbreakable rock, allowing access to a more efficacious tier of stone tools. Stone tools can mine iron ore, iron tools can mine diamonds, and diamond tools can mine obsidian, the most resilient building block in the game. Higher level tools are not necessary to mine the simplest resources that will keep monsters away from the player at night. However, mining operations using basic tools take longer, and the tools break more quickly. In the name of efficiency, the game compels the player to delve into the earth in search of rare ores to make stronger, faster tools.

Minecraft makes certain concessions to reality. Mined ores do not simply appear in the player's inventory, as ingots ready to be forged into whatever tool is needed; they must be smelted first. This drives players in search of fuel for their furnaces. Wood blocks harvested from relatively abundant (and renewable) trees will suffice,

but they burn quickly and inefficiently. However, the game world is filled with coal seams from which the player can mine long-burning coal.

Fictions of Labor

Central to the late imperial worldview, Mahanian naval doctrine demanded decisive technological superiority supported by a global network of coaling stations. Although coal may no longer fuel war machines, the establishment of bases to ensure resource flows remains a major part of American foreign policy. The search for fuel similarly animates player activity, and the ongoing quest for raw materials conditions the player's view of the game world. In order to avoid the tedium associated with harvesting limited resources with cheap tools, players must constantly work both to obtain the ores necessary to replace their tools and to fuel their furnaces. Later additions to the game, enchanting and potion brewing, both of which raise the player's technological level, require other consumable reagents that must be regularly harvested. With the goal of maximizing efficiency, enthusiast websites share not only strategies about the best ways to harvest various resources but also, given the workings of the game engine, statistics about exactly how much of a given resource a player can expect to find in a given region. The deep analysis of game mechanics in order to obtain an edge is not unique to *Minecraft*: "theorycrafting" dates at least to the 1998 Blizzard Entertainment release *StarCraft* and features extensively in high-end *World of Warcraft* play from the same developer (Paul, 2011). However, in a game like *Minecraft* in which no victory conditions exist and ceaseless struggle with opponents is ostensibly part of the fun, no competitive edge exists to be gained. The only benefit to this analysis is more efficient in-game work while playing.

And it is work. Even with theorycrafting, advanced tools, and community-made modifications that automate resource collection, players must mine before crafting. This is not new in video games, as many require players to engage in repetitive actions that enhance or enrich their avatars until they are capable of taking on a greater challenge. Nick Yee (2006), based on analyses of MMORPGs, observes, "video games are inherently work platforms that train us to become better workers" (p. 70). *Minecraft*'s utopian world habituates workers not only to repetitive labor but also to productive beliefs: Hard work will be justly rewarded, since labor in *Minecraft* will generally produce the desired outcome. If players work in the virtual coal mine for a given period, they will end up with a predictable amount of coal. The more labor players invest, the greater the rewards will be. Players have the luxury of not only selecting their labors and being confident in the ultimate success of their endeavors but also that work will be available: The entire game world is open for transformation. Admittedly, *Minecraft* does include some element of risk. Clumsy or unlucky gameplay can send players with their newly mined ore into a lava pit or monster den, negating recent efforts. However, the consequences of such failures are minimal, because players can always do more work to make up for them.

The game espouses no political agenda, yet its mechanics position players in an economic world that demands labor. Although this labor corresponds to backbreaking work in the real world, the investment here is time. However, players can expect a good return: Labor directly correlates with its rewards, a player is both the producer and consumer of labor in the game world, and the player can always be saved by labor. This is idealized capitalism, in which labor is never alienated. Without a single word of narrative, *Minecraft* fashions an apologetics for capital by inviting players to live out Horatio Alger fantasies. This freedom to work, however, becomes an end in itself, authorizing the perpetual accumulation of neoliberalism.

That the real world is somewhat more fickle when rewarding labor would seem to be obvious. Against overwhelming evidence on the disparity in economic outcomes for different groups (Piketty, 2014), though, the myth of hardwork paying off persists and thrives. *Minecraft* allows its players to try out such a perfect economic world. Ruggill et al. (2004) note that labor as play in a gameworld is conducive to the production of economic fantasies: “As gamers ‘relax’ by mining ore, laying track, or planting and harvesting crops, they are continually coerced to cement labor and play together, and are increasingly blinded to the real social relations that inform and determine those real tasks” (p. 305). These mechanics, which aestheticize and elide the realities of labor—especially the inequalities of race and class inherent to the types of work central to *Minecraft*—are the conditions of possibility for everything else in the game.

One cannot play *Minecraft* without tacitly making those economic assumptions. Given the general absence of representation of racial or gender diversity in video games (D. Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory, 2009; Wohn, 2011), *Minecraft*’s elision of the social complexity of labor belongs to a broader trend of games asserting the supremacy of an already-privileged player-agent. In this case, the default character appears as a White man. Mirroring real inequality, the mechanics enabling player development confirm this supremacy through the exclusive access to technology and the racialized marginalization of other creatures in the game world.

Accumulation and Technological Superiority

Player labor enables not only the accumulation of resources but also the means to better exploit those resources. Moreover, the more resources players have, the easier collecting them becomes. Despite some similarities to capital in the ability to invest resources to gain more, *Minecraft* has no markets—emergent behavior in multiplayer games notwithstanding—so the player remains the prime mover of all in-game labor. Players can acquire capital for their crafting projects but cannot become capitalists: No surplus value can be extracted from this crafting. Products such as tools and shelters have only whatever value their creator—the player—puts on them, being both their producer and consumer.

Again, this points to an ideal economic world, as labor cannot be exploited. On the contrary, the player can take steps to maximize efficiency in the game and thus

minimize the amount of work required for a given task. The narrative of development inherent to the game's mechanics, wherein some resources can make more efficient tools, orients player labor toward the collection of those resources. Resources like coal, iron, and diamond are valuable because they enable players to do more while working less. Technological development will enable the low-labor utopia envisioned by Keynes (1963, p. 369).

However, just as Keynes' utopia has failed to materialize, so too must players keep working—albeit more efficiently—in *Minecraft* to get more of what will make them more efficient. Accumulation and technological development become ends in themselves, rather than the means to reach them. As the tension of resource collection in the hostile environment is central to the game's appeal, this would be unsurprising if that development did not mitigate the challenge. A possible explanation for the persistence of play in spite of becoming maximally powerful lies in the way the game makes the world available to the player. *Minecraft*'s mechanics ask that the player see the world as resources to be collected, at the expense of other possibilities.

Each *Minecraft* game generates a random world according to a few rules. The entire game world cannot be created or displayed at once due to hardware limitations. Instead, the game loads a number of volumes sized 16×16 blocks \times 256 blocks, called chunks, around the player's location. Since chunks are the basic units of world generation and are statistically similar under the surface, players can determine on average how much of each resource they can expect to find in each area. For example, a theorycrafting player in search of diamonds can look up the statistics on diamond ore's frequency and location to construct mines that expose the greatest volume of diamond-bearing rock with the minimum amount of digging (Tutorials/Diamonds, n.d.).

The ability to see the world in its statistical veracity, enabled by the mathematics that undergird world creation, militates against the spirit of exploration novice players may experience prior to their initiation into the technoscientific regime of theorycrafting. Wandering a *Minecraft* world can be an exciting activity, as the generation formulae produce a variety of blocky landforms that are frequently interesting if not beautiful. This romantic aspect of the game gives way, though, to the sterile knowledge that a given tree will yield so many logs or that an efficiently constructed mine will yield so many diamonds per hour when operated with the best tools. As almost everything in the game world can be harvested by the player and conceivably put to use, each block can be seen as a potential resource. With a modicum of theorycrafting, for example, using the Minecraft Wiki, players can know how much of each resource is available. *Minecraft* subordinates its worlds to a regime of utility.

The virgin earth of *Minecraft* has no utility—at first—and its art style invites reflection on the world: The *Minecraft* mountain is not a mountain at all, but an obvious stack of cubes. If acknowledged as a mountain, though, it serves “to transport our accustomed ties to world and to earth and henceforth to restrain all usual doing and prizing, knowing and looking, in order to stay within the truth that is happening in the work” (Heidegger, 1971, p. 66). The *Minecraft* naïf can see a world in what Martin Heidegger (1971, p. 52) calls its “unconcealedness,”

uncontaminated by the demands of utility. The aesthetic style calls attention to things as they are, as beings rather than being for something. *Minecraft*'s aesthetics, part of a broader nostalgic trend in game design, seemingly place it in Johan Huizinga's (1955) magic circle, visibly removed from the demands of the real world.

The existence of the game world is perhaps different from the magic circle because it appears on a multipurpose screen. The space in which a traditional game takes place is delineated from the world around it by taking place on a special field or board. The game screen, though, whether computer, television, or phone, is not reserved for play. Instead, it has increasingly become the means by which we interact with the world. Thus, the game worlds that appear on our screens do not occur in a ritual space reserved for play but are coextensive with our normal interface with the world. One needs to only walk through a tourist attraction to see how many people mediate all experiences through the screens of their devices. The game world substitutes for the real on these screens, and its mechanics are thus not only the rules of play but also the conditions of possibility for that world.

Moreover, screens serve as frames to the worlds they mediate. As the computer is perhaps the technological device that most dramatically represents "the conquest of the world as picture" in its capacity to enable man to "be that particular being who gives measure and draws up the guidelines for everything that is," it flatters the player as a privileged agent in the economy of the gameworld (Heidegger, 1977, p. 134). Indeed, the computer's ability to annihilate distance and flatten experience into a literal picture makes Heidegger's apprehensions about the age of technoscience seem prescient if tame. *Minecraft*'s work is explicitly technoscientific, as its mechanics enframe the game world. They produce a specific metaphysics of presencing within the game world and not just in its on-screen appearance. The *Minecraft* world, thanks to the player's ability to manipulate it, is "enframed" following Heidegger's (1977) definition: "In Enframing, that unconcealment comes to pass in conformity with which the work of modern technology reveals the real as standing-reserve" (p. 21). As the player's technological level increases, almost every block in the game world comes to presence as resource, just as neoliberalism's technological dominance justifies and necessitates its global reach.

So totalizing is this mechanic that even the monsters in game can be subordinated to the regime of utility. Certain items cannot be crafted without loot collected from dead monsters. This is a common mechanic in many games to slow player progress and ensure that would-be heroes actually slay some dragons. In *Minecraft*, however, knowledge of monster spawn mechanics gleaned from theorycrafting enables players to construct automated monster slaughterhouses, stripping monsters of their monstrosity and allowing them to appear only as resource. In an extreme example, players can build structures that allow monsters to spawn in a lightless, inaccessible area and then funnel them toward a long drop that kills them (TheSmokingKoala, 2013). As the game does not show corpses, the player experiences these would-be threats only as the resources they leave behind at the impact site. At this point, the monster appears as—*is*—a only resource. This literal black site is not the political

and ethical boondoggle of its nonutopian counterparts, but an uncomplicated and celebrated site of production.

By rendering the violence of production invisible, such resource farms parallel the racialized, neocolonial inequalities of contemporary global supply chains and prison industry. Sedimented in what appears as a monument to technological ingenuity—for example, a smartphone—are often appalling labor practices. The monadic quality of the end product places its construction under erasure. That *Minecraft*'s monsters and the global south constitute the beginnings of these supply chains, yet whose presence is absent from the end product is a testament to the power of technological enframing, as racialized violence vanishes before the privileged regime of utility. Moreover, this consumption of a monstrous other participates in what David Leonard (2003) identifies as a long tradition of video games “giving consent to racial inequality and the unequal distribution of resources and privileges” (p. 2). *Minecraft*'s neoliberal utopia affirms the supremacy of technological achievement and privileges a White, first world subject.

The game flatters this subject by justifying its supremacy through fictions of primacy. Its world exists to be reshaped according to players' imaginations, with all of its resources at their disposal. A player can be the sole subject of history in *Minecraft*, rendering impossible the contesting of that history. From its initial generation to its expansion as players travel, the game world mechanically centers on them. All things that appear in the game world are contingent on a player encountering them. They have no history prior to a player's arrival. However, players also have no history: They are thrown into the world upon its generation. The mechanical novelty of the apparent artifice in the world constitutes an epistemological limitation for players, since their ability to perceive the world is contingent upon their arrival in it. They can be Crusoe on the island, with all its resources existing for their benefit and theirs alone: an economic utopia.

The world is given for players to own, but that ownership is not itself given. Only by delimiting enclosures and illuminating them can players ensure that their ownership is total and safe from external threats. This ownership enables players to safely extract resources from the enclosed area on the surface and securely store those resources. While digging underground, players may encounter hostiles, but the same procedure of fortification and illumination applies. The hostility of the world, though, suggests that player structures are not just shelters but forts with which players tame the game world, just as neocolonial powers like the United States and China establish bases worldwide to guarantee resource flows.

Green Zones

Conquest is thus central to *Minecraft*'s mechanics. It enables the extraction of resources, which justifies further conquest. The game's emphasis on survival implies that the player has a right to be in the world, and any violence is merely an expression of that right. Still, as with real expansionist regimes, physical violence is only

part of conquest. This conquest is necessary: A player's harvesting operations will eventually extract all of the available resources in an area. Some resources are renewable, but the ores that guarantee the player's technological supremacy exist in fixed amounts. Players must at some point venture beyond their initial shelters to secure additional resources. While prospecting, though, the player is exposed to the hostile game world. When a promising location for a new strike has been found, the process of building a shelter from which to work must be repeated. Continued play of a *Minecraft* world will result in the landscape becoming dotted with player fortifications. These outposts enable the safe and efficient extraction of resources, which in turn fuel the construction of additional fortifications.

As the game's mechanics dictate that below a certain light level monsters will spawn, players need only to illuminate their world in order to ensure their safety. Incumbent upon players building their first shelters is to secure a light source, which most often takes the form of a torch. Players can craft torches out of harvested wood and coal, both of which are accessible with the basic tools initially available. When placed, the torch both provides light to the player and prevents monsters from spawning. However, to be completely safe from monsters, players must place physical barriers between their illuminated spaces and the darkness. Otherwise monsters that spawn in darkness can simply walk into the lighted areas. So players build walls: usually those of small houses first, frantically, in anticipation of the first in-game night. Then, as their technological prowess increases and they harvest more resources, those of increasingly elaborate fortresses. Through the process of building walls and thus dividing the game world between light and dark zones, players are able to define their realm of exclusivity, confirming ownership in the game.

Establishing ownership claims is central to the game's appeal. Christopher Goetz (2012) explains the appeal of conquest while sharpening the contrast between the civilized world of the player's home and the dangerous world beyond through his concept of the tether fantasy, "which stages encounters with boundaries separating a series of meaningful binaries: the known and the unknown, the safe and the unsafe, the friendly and the hostile, the light and the dark, and life and death" (p. 422). The construction of player shelters enables the tether fantasy by delimiting walls and illumination (p. 425). This necessary, pleasurable activity results in the binary positioning of all other inhabitants of *Minecraft*'s world as other from the player. In this, the mechanics of the game provide justification for both the economic and intellectual projects of neoliberalism.

The assertion of ownership is the denial of the other, the right to exist *qua* other. Exclusion from player spaces does not merely consist of a barrier to entry, rather a radical denial of possibility: Monsters cannot come into being in a lighted area. Building these lighted fortifications not only partitions the world into segregated enclaves but also eliminates the possibility of access to those enclaves. As those excluded appear as hostile in the game, these actions are akin to the so-called pacification campaigns of empire. The resulting spaces are homogeneously utopian.

As the player moves through the game world collecting resources, more and more space becomes foreclosed to the indigenous creatures.

The illumination–darkness dichotomy of the *Minecraft* makes real what is metaphorical in much conquest, both historical and contemporary. The benighted indigenes not only cease to be hostile after the player brings light to the world, but simply cease to be. Hostile creatures in the game are irredeemably so—they cannot be enlightened. Their absence is not the result of explicit violence but the subtle violence of cultural shift. Just as Chinua Achebe (2010) notes of the Africans in *Heart of Darkness*, so too are *Minecraft*’s others voiceless (pp. 1616–1617). We cannot know what if any culture they had, only that it is incompatible with that of conqueror. Where the player brings technology and illumination, what came before can no longer exist. The construction of extraterritorial enclaves by neoliberal war machines regularly effaces the local: McDonald’s is in Guantánamo.

And things did come before. Although in single-player mode, the player is the only significant agent, as nothing else has the power to do the eponymous activities, this was apparently not always the case. Players traveling through the world will encounter empty temples, abandoned mineshafts, and sprawling dungeons. The presence of these structures and their relatively ruined states suggest that they are the remnants of bygone civilizations, as nothing besides the player in the game is capable of building. Whatever the origin of these structures, their existence indicates that players are not venturing into *terra nullius*, but a world already divided and whose divisions, by dint of mechanics, remain essentially unknowable.

Paradoxically, these mechanics create the game world around the player while giving that world the appearance of history. These generated structures usually spawn with desirable treasure and in one case contain the portal to fight an optional boss. The mechanics thus subtly encourage the player to find and secure these structures. Exploiting them requires ignoring the possibility of prior claims and assuming that the game world exists for the player’s benefit. The latter is easy enough—it is the player’s game, after all—and makes the rejection of potential histories easy. Like the conquistador’s or the contractor’s, the player’s discoveries render local histories irrelevant in the face of universalizing narratives of development and expansion.

Manufacturing Illegitimacy

If *Minecraft* is a game of neoliberal expansion, who are the dispossessed? None of the nonplayer characters can match the player’s technological capacity, though some may be innately powerful. Similarly, though some of these creatures reside in structures, none of them constructs new buildings or expands its range. None appears to be responsible for the elaborate pregenerated structures in the game. They are thus other than the player—technologically inferior—and can be conquered with impunity. Friendly “villagers” are humanoid, but racially distinct from the player. They live in small agricultural communities in simple houses. Players can perform basic

trades with villagers for desirable goods, or they can raze the village and slaughter the villagers for resources. A hostile variant of the villager, the witch, may be found in solitary huts around the game world and drops useful items when killed. Both the villagers and the witch are the player's inferior others. The latter is to be killed for both safety and profit, whereas the former offer the player the opportunity for exploitative exchange.

Quotidian video game monsters also inhabit the game world. Zombies, skeletons, and spiders will harass the player at night, and in this, *Minecraft* is no different from many other games. It also offers a number of unique variants on common video game foes: pyroclastic slimes, fireball spewing ghosts, and sentient flames. Some of these creatures drop valuable resources on death, which can be farmed with the previously mentioned monster black sites. Even the toughest monsters in the game reward victorious players with new resources to integrate into their constructions. The ability to harvest resources from these ostensibly terminal enemies undermines any narrative teleology of the game. What many games cast as eschatological is just another opportunity for player advancement.

The game provides no narrative to account for the hostility of these creatures. Not even the usual sop of generic evil makes an appearance, as the game's monsters have not absconded with any princesses or plan to release any lurking horrors. They exist in number, whereas the players are alone—interlopers. Although motivations are opaque, the monsters' targeting of players signifies resistance to these incursions.

Minecraft's signature enemy, the creeper, is resistance embodied. However, its portrayal in the game trivializes that resistance. The creeper is a vaguely humanoid creature that, upon sighting a player, will approach and explode, damaging the player and any nearby player structures: a suicide bomber. As with the other monsters, players receive no information about its motivations. The only indication of the creeper's agenda is its permanent scowl, which became iconic and was incorporated into the *Minecraft* logo as a stylized A. Whether the creepers are unhappy about the player's encroachment is unknowable, but their violent self-immolations against players suggest a causal connection, following worldwide resistance practices.

The tropes of video games undermine the potential of the creepers as virtual martyrs for an unknown cause. Games regularly pit players against hostile forces with little explanation, and narrative progress in those games requires that enemies be defeated. By contrast, *Minecraft* has no narrative that positions creepers as an obstacle. Its mechanics impel players toward technological advancement and resource-driven expansion, which will place the player in frequent contact with creepers. Although this contact will likely result in an adversarial fight for survival, the game offers no justification for the righteousness of the player's violence over that of the creeper. But none is necessary, since the creeper's violent opposition to the technological regime of the player casts it as the paradigmatic enemy of neoliberalism: the terrorist. The production of the creeper as other, as does the production of the terrorist, serves to delegitimize its resistance to neoliberal reterritorialization.

Following Ghassan Hage, Jasbir Puar (2007) reminds us that “Self-annihilation is the ultimate form of resistance, and ironically, it acts as self-preservation, the preservation of symbolic self enabled through the ‘highest cultural capital’ of martyrdom, a giving of life to the future of political struggles” (p. 216). However, the game denies legitimacy to creeper: It is grotesquely subhuman. Although it has an expressive face, its torso lacks arms and terminates in four stubby legs. Whatever the creeper’s grievance may be vanishes in the face of its hostile otherness. Like the presentation of terrorists in metropolitan media, creepers appear as always already beyond the reach of civilized communication and thus lacking legitimate claim to their resources.

Minecraft’s monsters not only embody delegitimized opposition but also suggest an often concomitant racialized difference. Following Tanner Higgin’s (2012) concept of displaced racialization, the oppositional otherness of *Minecraft*’s monsters inscribes real racisms in an ostensibly nonracial game world. This apparent absence of race is problematic; Higgin (2009) points out with regard to such absence in MMORPGs,

... they reinforce dominant notions of Blacks as incapable of being functional members of society. These games, although masquerading as progressively engaged through a strategy of colorblindness, function as hegemonic fantasy by filtering the racial imagery that threatens the safety and political coherence of White dominance. (p. 6)

The player character is a technologically empowered conqueror, which in the neoliberal context—as elsewhere—usually positions the player as a White, male subject. Calling attention to the default player skin being a White man may be a cheap shot given its modifiability, but as the default, it conforms to hegemonic representations of race. Monsters in the game thus are other than White, and their comparative inferiority to the player positions them as racial others, despite the absence of realistic race representation.

The absence of non-White subjectivity in similarly popular and multiplatform games, such as the casual genre, further contributes to the discourse that casts *Minecraft*’s monsters as uncritically disempowered racial others. Donghee Wohn’s (2011) survey of representation in games finds “that the few depictions of women and racial minorities are stereotypical” (p. 200). Although Wohn’s research into casual games reveals that gender sees much better representation in that genre—77.1% female primary characters—her survey revealed “only 8 (6%) games out of the 130 games with human characters had non-White primary characters” (p. 201). If White subjectivity is essentially assumed in these games, those lacking meaningful comparable agency are analogously non-White. *Minecraft*, then, by both delegitimizing and racially othering its monsters while casting them as obstacles to economic production renders normal, pleasurable, and invisible the injustices of race relations intranationally and internationally. Through this antagonistic presentation of monsters as terroristic others, *Minecraft* hails players as what Puar (2007)

calls “bodies that constitute the opposition to the terrorist: free patriot-citizen-soldiers” (p. 157). The in-game imperative to eliminate indigenous resistance thus intimates that racial heterogeneity is an obstacle for neoliberal utopia.

Conclusion

My purpose here is not to demonize *Minecraft*; on the contrary, I am an enthusiast. I don’t single the game out because it is somehow a more egregious apology for political mythologies than anything else in the medium. The *Civilization* and *Europa Universalis* series invite players to try their hands at world domination, and the latter is unapologetically an imperialism simulator—fun too. Furthermore, moral panics are unproductive: My generation did not run amok because of video games (Ferguson, 2015). Instead, *Minecraft*’s wild popularity suggests that its gameplay resonates in its cultural moment and is therefore an attractive object for analysis. That this moment features aestheticized neoimperial violence as a media staple grants some urgency to the analysis.

Of course, *Minecraft* cannot be accused of inventing neoliberalism. The demonization of violent resistance, the cult of technological consumption, and the need to guide the development of the less enlightened parts of the world are staples of mainstream news; the redemptive and ameliorative capacities of labor remain staples of right-populist political discourse. Moreover, that the game is fun is likely not the result of devious intentions on the part of the developers, as they are not insulated from the enticements of neoliberalism for the Euro-American subject. Indeed, the stated intention of the game was to create a space in which fantasies of freedom were possible. The resulting neoliberal utopia reflects the conflation of economic domination with personal freedom engendered by the broader neoliberal project. In his seminal study of play, Johan Huizinga (1955) stresses that games are not an escape or relief from the stresses of political life, but a rehearsal of them: Religion, law, art, and war all find their foundations in agonistic play (p. 173). Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) remind us that Huizinga’s research on play emphasizes its practice for war (p. xxxv). *Minecraft* succeeds because it allows players a space in which to practice political and economic activities under the highly simplified rules by which they mythically work. The attraction is clear: who wouldn’t want one’s labor to directly correspond with not only modest success but also the consumer fantasies we were promised if we kept our noses to the grindstone.

In neoliberalism’s moment of crisis following the great recession and America’s neoimperial failures, those fantasies look ever more illusory. The resurgence of a protectionist far right combined with the emergence, however fragile, of an American left-populism reveals the contingency of neoliberal hegemony. Stuart Hall (2011) reminds us, “No project achieves a position of permanent ‘hegemony’. It is a process, not a state of being. No victories are final. Hegemony has constantly to be ‘worked on’, maintained, renewed and revised” (p. 727). *Minecraft* offers solace to workers whose real-life outcomes are incommensurable with the promised

consumer fantasies by illustrating a utopian future anterior when those promises will have been fulfilled by delegitimizing any supposed obstacles to an efficient economy. In a more optimistic context, Ian Bogost (2011) notes the preparatory possibilities of video games by likening them to drills: “by trying the task in the game, one gets a preliminary sense of what it involves, how to approach success, and how to avoid failure” (p. 146). Following Bogost and Huizinga, then, we must ask what does *Minecraft* have players practice?

In a likely perversion of Bogost’s vision for virtual pedagogical spaces, *Minecraft* has in fact entered the classroom. Software giant Microsoft acquired the game in 2014 and is now selling it to elementary schools (Wingfield & Singer, 2016). This is not altruism: Microsoft’s monopolistic practices are well known, and the related Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation embraces neoliberal logics in its promotion of technocracy as a means of international development (Hursh & Henderson, 2011). *Minecraft*, whatever its other educational merits may be, teaches the necessity of the economic and political conditions favorable to globalized business.

More darkly, *Minecraft* teaches the futility of resistance. The game affirms an apologetics of neoliberalism that trains players to be docile, fungible workers. Moreover, it presents as foundational a worldview that employs racial discrimination as a means of rationalizing economic dispossession. The delegitimization of racially constructed others and elision of their possible grievances affirms the triumphalist narratives of neoliberal *Machtpolitik*. Violence is acceptable when used against those who would resist subsumption into a regime of enforced economic freedom. The game positions players in not just a reproduction of actually existing neoliberalism, but its idealized simulacrum. Technological might always makes right; terrorists are never freedom fighters; prisons are ethically uncomplicated, productive spaces; labor is always fairly rewarded, because accumulation and consumption are autotelic. Though new games like *Factorio* extend *Minecraft*’s politics to chillingly Foucauldian extremes, the horizon is hardly bleak. *Minecraft*’s popularity has brought together collaborative communities that belie the mythological individualism privileged in-game. Other new games subvert mechanics of mastery and dominance: games like *Undertale* and *The Last of Us* have used their mechanics to challenge political expectations as well as those of player agency. *Minecraft* pleasurably shows players that the conditions of possibility for a neoliberal utopia are necessary, because legitimate resistance is impossible.

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Note

1. I would provisionally distinguish between open-ended games and open-world games, though they are not mutually exclusive. The former are nonteleological; the latter are nonlinear. *Minecraft* is both, which contributes to its neoliberal simulation: accumulation has no end (or is an end in itself), and it makes the entire world available for accumulation. In this, it goes beyond most other resource collection or world conquest games, though as a limit case rather than exception. The widespread, multigenre adoption of crafting mechanics, for example, makes resource collection a major part of contemporary gaming.

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