The Mechanics of Colonialism in Minecraft

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Colonialism—the idea that colonization is not only justified but actually heroic—is an important part of modern cultures with colonial histories, because it justifies and minimizes past atrocities. It is also useful for these cultures because they continue to benefit from the ill-gotten gains of colonization. Accordingly, one expects to find colonialist messages in all forms of popular media, and in order to potentially combat such messages, it is important to understand them.

As a medium of increasing cultural significance, video games also contain colonialist messaging. But to understand games and other interactive experiences, it is not enough to discuss the images, videos, sound, and text that are displayed by the game. There is an additional interactive element which differentiates them from other media. One way of understanding this element is the idea of "game mechanics:" rules about how the game state changes when certain actions are taken. For example: "When the player presses the 'x' button, the character jumps." Besides the visual, auditory, and textual elements of a game, the mechanics themselves send messages; they define what is true in the game world and what might, therefore, be true in the real world. So our project is this: to investigate how colonialism manifests in games at the mechanical level.

We focus on the game Minecraft, in part because of its wide popularity, and also because colonialism manifests in this game in interesting ways. Minecraft puts the player into a virtual world composed of large blocks of material. The player can manipulate these blocks to extract resources and build structures. Sharing the world with the player are a range of non-player characters (NPCs) that include livestock, hostile enemies that attack at night, and the benign "villagers." We examine five major ways in which Minecraft's mechanics uphold colonialist mentalities:

1. The mechanics of hostile monsters support the myth that some intelligent beings are inherently evil, which helps cast acts of aggression against Indigenous peoples as acts of self-defense.
2. The mechanics of the "villager" NPCs support the myth 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 myths that most territory is uninhabited prior to colonization, which implies that colonial land claims are not in conflict with Indigenous territories.
5. The achievements system of the game, which rewards a very specific set of in-game actions, amplifies the effects of these other mechanics, because it encourages a specific way of interacting with the game world.