Observant Play and Modding: The Postcolonial, Environmentalist Playthrough of *Minecraft*

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ABSTRACT

This extended abstract, in the vein of autoethnography, reflexively analyzes an organic approach to play in *Minecraft* that resists extractive, colonial tendencies common to sandbox crafting games. In primary theoretical use are Melissa Kagen's *postapocalyptic pastoral* to assist in my reading of the game, and Rachael Hutchinson's *observant play* to dissect the playstyle and what it means to modify a game to better match or explore one's reading of it.

Keywords

Minecraft, postcolonialism, environmentalism, observant play, modding, autoethnography

INTRODUCTION

The community-edited *Minecraft* Wiki has a tutorial dedicated to mining strategies (*Minecraft* Wiki contributors 2023). Much of its language is reminiscent of industrialized thought, particularly "efficiency" (Dooghan 2019, 75). A glaring— possibly familiar to players—image sits under the "Quarry mining" section: a massive, square-shaped hole going straight down. It is clear a common approach is, "How can I pull as many valuable materials out of the ground as quickly as possible?"

This is not how I approach the game, however; such wanton destruction demeans the gameworld. Although prior understood as artificially implemented difficulty, I began to reflect on this playstyle during the curation and play of a collection of game modifications (a "modpack").[1] Melissa Kagen's notion of the "postapocalyptic pastoral" helped frame my reading of the setting (2022, 123–4), while Rachael Hutchinson's "observant play" provided explanatory power in linking this reading to my play of the game.

Similarities between observant play and ethnographic reflection, such as Kiri Miller's investigation of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Miller 2008; Rockstar North 2005), quickly became apparent. Specifically autoethnography, "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze . . . personal experience . . . in order to understand cultural experience . . . us[ing] tenets of *autobiography* and *ethnography* to *do* and *write*" (Ellis et al. 2011). These connections heavily informed this project and mirror Michelle Westerlaken's reporting of her vegan run of *The*

Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild (2017; Nintendo EPD 2017). Also highlighted is the centrality of game modifications ("mods") to facilitating this playstyle, akin to Anne Betz's discussion of how "the usage of mods by women . . . enables them to create their own identities" (Betz 2020, 36).

DIFFERENTLY INTERPRETING THE GAMEWORLD

In *Minecraft*, your character takes the place of the last of their kind.[2] The Overworld (primary gameworld resembling a pseudo-Earth) is mostly empty in the sense of belonging to nature, but occasionally features scars and ruins of past civilization. The only other apparent sapient life are humanoid "Villagers" not of your kind, who share likeness with the hostile "Pillagers." Other present humanoid entities are the undead, nonsapient but resembling your kind.

It is hard for me not to read this gameworld as postapocalyptic. It appears a group—mine?—once performed unspeakable damage to the land, since restored to nature. The undead associate this damage's spirit with a literal haunting; your ancestors wiped themselves out and now their animate remains remind all of their sins. The indigenous Villagers, sophisticated socially but not technologically, occupy the role of inheritors, possibly unaware of your kind's actions as observed in their nonchalance.

Kagen speaks of the "postapocalyptic pastoral," a "[juxtaposition of] modern civilization with nature's powerful, victorious reclamation of the places once controlled by human technology" (2022, 123). She further identifies an established link between resource exploitation and colonialism present in Walking Simulators and action-adventure games (Kagen 2022, 100), and I see this same tendency in *Minecraft* if not other sandbox crafting games. I am not the first (Dooghan 2019; Olson 2019).[3] We have fallen into the old trap of powerful Western narratives, making *Minecraft* yet another case of a new frontier for conquering.

A major-yet-overlooked counter was the introduction of charcoal in version Beta 1.2 (Mojang Studios 2011). While it cannot be formed into a more efficient block like traditional coal, it is readily renewable via sustainable tree farming. Curiously, the bones of the undead work as accessible fertilizer. Recalling Hutchinson's observant play—"discover[ing] what the game [tells] the attentive player" (2021)—I began interpreting alternative directions of play. This was the first occasion I questioned the need to tear up the land when I could grow fuel, which I have done since. Resisting the game's supposed extractive ideology is a method of preserving the gameworld, informed by and maybe translating to real-world practice.[4] It means taking only what is required, avoiding mistakes of my character's ancestors, and not exploiting other inhabitants.

The modpack allowed further exploration of this playstyle along Kyle Bohunicky's observations of "ecomods" (2017). It was inspired by a mod titled *Alchemistry* that introduces the ability to break materials down into base elements, molecules, and compounds (Dark_Arcana 2022). These may then be built back up into other materials. *Alchemistry* created renewable sources of the typically nonrenewable, including necessary iron. It presents its own challenges (like powering machinery, another area of sustainable negotiations), as well as changes that might appear to make the game easier. The latter face potential "self-[limitation]," however, as Hutchinson highlights as a feature of observant play (2022); players will determine their own engagement with these.[5]

CONCLUSION

While modding (installation *and* development) is limited by one's technical knowledge, it remains a popular option for those seeking to vary or enhance play. Here it prompted development of a playstyle in *Minecraft* going beyond observant play, into reshaping the game itself to align more with my reading of it. This highlights an interesting area of "negotiating meaning-making" between player and game (Hutchinson 2021). Further work will more deeply explore this research methodology, playstyle, and what it means to manipulate a game's structure to this end, especially with political intentions.

ENDNOTES

1 For technical specificity, I used *Minecraft: Java Edition* version 1.18.2 (Mojang Studios 2022), with the *Minecraft Forge* modification platform version 40.1.84 (Forge Development LLC 2022). The only players were my romantic partner and me.

2 "Kind" is used in place of terms like "race" or "species" because it is unclear what is appropriate. Players can change their character's representation ("skin"), but all are understood as of the same kind.

3 It is worth noting I read the undead differently than Dooghan (2019). The possibility of variant readings is one source of emergent outcomes, including total avoidance of a game.

4 As also Westerlaken suggests (2017, 7 ff.).

5 Again recalling Westerlaken, she mentions veganism's "general and interpretable" nature, allowing similar "exploration and . . . reinvent[ion]" of issues like "What is considered a living creature?" (2017, 5).

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