

## Enemy Mine Hidden Goals in the *Minecraft* World

First released in 2009 by Notch, a.k.a. Markus Persson, and currently under development by his company Mojang, *Minecraft* is a computer game in which the player takes the role of a lone human in a procedurally generated game world. While the game appears to present no objective, elements of its design create implicit goals that direct the player's actions.

The lonely world of *Minecraft*, which expands by creating new regions as the player explores it, is composed of cubical blocks, with bedrock at the bottom beneath layers of stone and dirt containing extensive cave systems. The surface is divided into biomes ranging from ocean to desert to tundra, and filled with randomly generated terrain features including trees, lakes, and mountains. In the main game mode, Survival, the player is the only human in the world, though it is also inhabited by animals, which spawn randomly, and enemy monsters, which also spawn randomly but only in the dark; these are collectively called mobs. The player can destroy blocks by mining them; most types of block drop items when mined. Mining a tree trunk, for example, yields wood items that may be held in the inventory. These may later be placed in the world, creating a wood block identical to the original, or used in crafting, in which certain sets of items are combined to create a new item; for instance, torches are made from wooden sticks and coal. Crafted tools are necessary to obtain many items: diamond ore blocks only drop diamonds when mined with an iron pickaxe or better, and shears are required to obtain leaves from trees or wool from sheep without killing the sheep. Eventually the player amasses the resources to construct large artificial structures in the game world, as well as to delve deep into the ground and reach the impenetrable bedrock.

*Minecraft* differs from many subjects of media and game analysis in that it is not a single conceptual whole. Rather, its properties derive from the interaction of the numerous algorithms that comprise the world of the game, controlling the generation of biomes and terrain, the behavior of animals and monsters, the spread of water and lava, the growth of plants and mushrooms, and many other aspects. Also, since *Minecraft* is both an independent game and still in beta, many of the design choices may have been motivated more by expedience or ease of implementation than any higher consideration. Nevertheless, as we shall see, the nature of the game world reflects various cultural conceptions of the relationship between humans and the world, which lead ultimately to the implicit goals that *Minecraft* itself suggests – goals that influence players, but do not arise from them.

On the surface, *Minecraft* appears to be the quintessential sandbox game, with simple controls, an open world, and few rules. Even the laws of physics are less restrictive than one might expect – the vast majority of blocks do not fall under gravity, staying suspended in the air if supporting blocks are removed, and the behavior of water is quirky and highly unrealistic. The player is, seemingly, free to go anywhere and do anything. Moreover, Barr describes *Minecraft* as built out of atoms (1708) – the various pieces of the game are given as they are to the player, who can combine them in many different ways. The gameplay is founded more on the interactions of the player with these components than on any overarching designs on the part of the game’s architects. Notch relates his realization while watching a wolf chasing a sheep that their behavior came from the wolf’s programming to seek out prey, and the sheep’s programming to flee from attackers (Notch). Many video games present the player with a

sequence of scenarios to play through as a plot unfolds, with a world structured around the development of the player's character(s); *Minecraft* does not. Its world is "just there" (Barr 1731); it is not designed for a purpose, and it is not designed for the player.

This lack of overt design reflects a fairly postmodern worldview. The universe is not designed and controlled for an ultimate purpose by a benevolent God. It is mechanical, emergent, indifferent, oblivious to the player's needs and desires. The player's actions within *Minecraft* are only significant to the extent that the player makes them so. Meanwhile, the game quietly continues simulating far-off regions of the world that remain untouched and unchanged; the sun and moon continue revolving every twenty minutes. Just as there is no grand cosmic judgment of souls, there is no winning or losing the game. No cosmic arbiter tallies up the player's actions and passes judgment with a better ending or a place on the high-score list; death merely results in respawning.

In the absence of externally imposed values, players are free to construct their own. The player has a privileged position as the "most powerful person in the world" (Barr 1731; Davidson 26:30) – the force that disrupts stasis with change. In fact, the world is meaningless without the player there to grant it significance. In *Minecraft*, unlike many parts of life in the real world, one has the power to change the world and define oneself, if only one applies oneself with dedication and perseverance (Barr 2033; Davidson 11:30 calls this "sweat equity"). In the context of a decades-old disillusionment with the dehumanizing institutions, blatant injustices, and deferred promises of modern industrial society, the idea of becoming the lord of a new domain, free to do as one wishes and determine one's own path, is very appealing. And

in contrast to the miniaturized inscrutability of modern technological gadgetry, the mechanics of *Minecraft* are macroscopic and visible; one can peer inside the machinery and tinker with the workings of the world, much more easily than one can, say, take apart an iPod and reprogram it. The new world of *Minecraft* represents something of an idealized blank slate, a natural environment uncorrupted by humanity, unshackled by the unfair and incomprehensible trappings of modernity, to which it might befit each of us to return for a fresh start. And the player, alone in the midst of virgin potential, is free to do almost anything.

But other aspects of the game render some choices more natural than others. *Minecraft* is still under active development, with new features continually being added, and each update introduces aspects of more traditional games – a hunger bar, leveling up, an achievements system – that create goals for the player in straightforward ways: gather food and consume it regularly, defeat enemies to gain experience, and accomplish tasks like crafting a cake or catching a fish. Even though Notch intended achievements as “things that you can try, rather than [...] things you have to do”, they still produce objectives for the player to strive for, and there is an overarching motive of introducing “a kind of narrative” into *Minecraft*, using traditional game mechanics such as boss battles (Rose). Additionally, the *Minecraft* website contains a video depicting a player character passing through the pristine landscape of a new world, exploring a cave and placing torches, and finally building a house out of stone and wooden planks (Vareide). The prominent placement of this video suggests that a similar progression should be followed in one’s own game.

Even without these new features and metatextual signals, however, certain goals are inherent in the very nature of Survival mode. On starting a new game, the player spawns alone somewhere on the surface, with a vast<sup>1</sup> world stretching out in all directions. In just over ten minutes, night will fall, and monsters will begin to appear whose only goal is to kill the player. Thus the player is discouraged from wandering around in the dark, and encouraged to mine blocks in order to construct a shelter; at the same time, the glimpses of far-off landscapes and mysterious tunnels beckon to the player to explore them. But while the world itself may be indifferent to the player's actions, it conceals risks ranging from falling off high cliffs to being buried by collapsing gravel to burning to death in lava. Exploration is a dangerous business.

And so, the *Minecraft* world is a reflection of the association of good and evil, and knowledge and ignorance, with light and dark. Light brings order; light brings understanding. Monsters only spawn in darkness; caves beg to be explored and filled with torches, making them known places safe from evil (Barr 1722). By this process, the dangers of the dark are mapped out, lit up, and therefore neutralized. But always more darkness encroaches, from below and on all sides of the light, and the player is continually led to colonize the unknown, blanketing more and more of the world with light. Barr recalls the appeal of exploring the long cave systems that the game randomly generates, of journeying deep underground and conquering the darkness, but notes that it requires extensive preparation – not only shelter for surviving nights above ground, but also materials for crafting tools, weapons, torches, a compass, and so on (1719; 1722). The goal of exploration entails a whole tree of

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<sup>1</sup> Your graphics settings may vary.

interdependent subgoals, because the player must collect the resources to construct the items necessary for the journey. The process of gathering these resources is a process of reclaiming them from the darkness, of discovering them and bringing them into the light. Minecraft “is hugely a game about lighting up the darkness” (Barr 1725) – both the literal darkness of night and cave, and the metaphorical darkness of the unknown and mysterious. And the need to illuminate it is created by the design of the game world.

That world, then, is treated as a resource to be owned and consumed, in line with the historical capitalist worldviews of Western society. To investigate the unknown is to appropriate it, to claim it as explored territory. When one mines, crafts, and builds, one extracts resources from the world and transforms them to remake it in one’s own image. As Barr says, upon starting a *Minecraft* game and discovering a new world, “you change it, establish order because that’s what it’s there for” (2130). The need for defense from monsters leads to the construction of walls, fences, and doors to demarcate boundaries and keep the intruders out. The result is that one takes ownership of parts of the landscape and uses them as one pleases to build a bubble of order, peace, and light. Even though there is no formal system of trade or money, the concept of land as something that can be owned is by no means universal among human cultures; in *Minecraft* it is simply taken to an extreme, in that a piece of territory can actually be mined into its constituent blocks for transportation, storage, or reconstruction. And since structures do not deteriorate, once one has molded the world in one’s own image, the fruits of that labor will never be unfairly snatched away by forces outside one’s control. The (capitalist) American dream has always been to start with nothing but make and keep a fortune,

and that is borne out in *Minecraft*. The act of mining turns the entire world into a resource waiting for the player to discover and use it. In the absence of externally imposed values, players create their own by consuming that resource.

*Minecraft* appears at first to be a game without a goal, but the literal and metaphorical darkness in its world drives the player to explore and consume. The world seeks to mimic the real world, and the choices made in the adaptation reflect many of the historical views of our own society, only in less ambiguous ways: the animal mobs do little other than drop items when attacked or killed; the enemies over the next hill are actually hostile monsters, not just a different tribe; nearly every part of the world can be directly owned and used. Whether or not Notch had these parallels in mind when designing the game, their influence is present, and leads to a conclusion that the world must be explored and thus appropriated, that the darkness must be pushed back. The same drive led for our ancestors to the founding of empires, the claiming of colonies, and the progress of science. In *Minecraft*, it leads to feats of architecture, the exploration of deep caverns, and the spread of torchlight across the land. And it is what lends interest to a game with no obvious goal.

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