

Minecraft and the Management of Utopia

I wanted to begin with this image – a screenshot of my first visit to Atlantis – because in it, I inadvertently captured the exact moment I realized that I was far outside of my comfort zone as a professor, and dealing with something else entirely.

In the winter term of 2014, I was teaching a senior undergraduate class called “Video Games and/as Theory,” which takes an allegorical approach to the relationship between games and the history of ideas. Through the process Ian Bogost calls “carpentry,” students working in teams create objects on the Technoculture Art and Games (TAG) “vanilla” Minecraft server. Making these objects is a form of practical engagement with a theoretical concept, which the students then write about in their term papers. The intent is for the students to familiarize themselves with the relevant theory at the same time as they defamiliarize the games they thought they understood.

The students self-organized into groups of 8-10. I gave them instructions for writing a project proposal and a set of research questions, and some suggestions about how they might structure their groups, including a requirement to produce a team constitution. Then I turned them loose on the Minecraft server and waited to see what would happen next. I didn’t have to wait long.

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For many reasons, when writing about video games and pedagogy, it’s tempting to skip over utopian theory altogether and move directly into the discourse of heterotopia. Not the least of these reasons is that there is a substantial literature describing the spaces of play and video games as heterotopic (at least 8 articles and theses over the last 14 years). I also suspect that most classrooms embody a tension between utopian expectations and realities that are heterotopic at best. Classes employing digital technologies are afloat in a half-digested discursive stew of flipped classrooms, game-based-learning, MOOCs, distance learning and gamification, and it’s far from certain that the institutionalization of any of these discourses will result in anything laudable. Counterintuitive as it might seem, this is precisely why there are elements in utopian theory that I think it’s important to retain.

It's worth quoting from Fredric Jameson at length here. In *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capital*, he uses a negative dialectic to describe the *impossibility* of imagining utopia:

It is thus the limits, the systemic restrictions and repressions, or empty places, in the Utopian blueprint that are the most interesting, for these alone testify to the ways a culture or a system marks the most visionary mind and contains its movement toward transcendence. But such limits, which can also be discussed in terms of ideological restriction, are concrete and articulated in the great Utopian visions: they do not become visible except in the desperate attempt to imagine something else; so that a relaxed consent to immanence – a consciousness in advance of the necessary failure of the project that leads us to renounce it – can yield no experimental information as to the shape of the system and its boundaries, the specific social and historical fashion in which an outside is unattainable and we are turned back on ourselves (208-09)

It's this focus on a necessary, constitutive failure at the heart of an equally necessary drive toward a utopian vision that interests me in terms of its applicability to pedagogy in general and my Minecraft assignment in particular.

Foucault himself maintains an articulation between utopia and heterotopia, arguing that between them "there might be a sort of mixed, joint experience." Spaces like mirrors – and I'd include video games in this category – are heterotopic in that they make the place that the subject occupies all the more real, connected with everything that surround them, but utopian in that in order to be perceived, they have to pass through a virtual point on the other side of the glass ("Of Other Spaces" 24). Though he doesn't deal with the topic of failure in his writing on heterotopia, what Foucault has to say in "Life: Experience and Science" on the subject of error, namely, that it is "the root of what produces human thought and its history", comes close to what Jameson is expressing (*Aesthetics, Epistemology and Method* 476). As such, remembering that utopia and heterotopia are part of the same assemblage and need to be held in tension is also a way of noting that failure is omnipresent.

Given that, as Svetlana Boym notes, there will be "gaps, compromises, embarrassments, and black holes in the foundations of any utopian edifice" (35), we need to make an effort to

describe these lacunae as closely, perhaps even moreso, than the positivities and visible aspects of a system, because their appearance marks the current limits of what a given discourse will allow itself to express.

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Project X was a group of 10 students enrolled in Video Games and/as Theory. Beginning from Barbara Goodwin's distinction between a critical and a constructive utopia (124), and with Plato's dialogues *Critias* and *Timaeus*, along with Ursula K. LeGuin's novel *Left Hand of Darkness* as their guides, they proposed to construct an Atlantis in the sky that would house, in their words, "a more powerful, sustainable, and united society on the foundation of virtue and peace between all citizens and players."

The build itself was the result of a combination of careful research and imaginative extrapolation. The buildings on the site are a combination of Plato's description and the team's sense of the sorts of buildings that the population would have required – Agora, Ecclesiasterion, amphitheatre, gymnasium, baths and so on. The floor plans were close copies of classical Greek architecture, with the exception of the central palace, which is modeled on the Hagia Sophia. In all cases, scale is approximately 25%, which still produced a floating city 150 blocks in the air, with a 390 block circumference, where a block is approximately 1 meter. It took the team half the semester to simply lay the project's foundation.

The team had a major advantage in the person of Minecraft player BigHaircutPrime (Christian Leroux), who was already working professionally on commercial Minecraft servers building structures for their players. By March 3, Big had shifted over 110,000 dirt blocks for this project and was producing another 100,000 blocks of quartz for the buildings. He logged hundreds of hours, designed systems and wrote tutorials for the other players, made instructional videos explaining the machines he had constructed, helped build railways and portals to connect Project X to the other teams in the class, assisted the other teams with their own designs, and so on to the point where the other students started to refer to him as "Minecraft Jesus" and erected a temple in his honour. One night, he built the Big Fried Chicken Company (BFC), a fully operational free fried chicken franchise right next to the server commons. Shortly afterward, the BFC was partly destroyed by griefers, and Big ultimately never finished

the class for personal reasons, even after repeated attempts to contact him.

The Project X team also included the only student in the class who flat-out refused to participate in this assignment – a self-described “Minecraft idiot” who disengaged from his group and the larger class early, but wrote an eloquent and carefully reasoned defense of his refusal to be involved. His passive resistance was a major source of consternation to the other students, who had to be constantly reassured that his behaviour would not affect their collective marks, that their individual term-paper reflections on the project were worth as much as the collective component of the assignment, and that how I graded his activities was not their concern.

The logistics of project management immediately immersed the students in the thornier problems of governmentality. Though the final version of Atlantis was extremely impressive, several group members became profoundly disenchanted with the menial tasks they had been assigned by their classmates in order to complete it. The group quickly devolved into a two-tier class structure within the “builders” (the most experienced and most active student game players) on top and the students who were less experienced players as subalterns. This hierarchy was implicit in the ground plans of the floating city itself, which, in the words of its builders, had a large outer ring for the poor, a middle zone for the middle class, and a centre area for “the elite.”

Though I had pointed out that there was plenty of team work to do outside of the game in the form of research, project management, and preparation of the project for presentation to the class, there was still a sense among the builders that such roles required less work. As a result, when the students who occupied them were on the server, they were typically handed a shovel or pick and told to start digging. (One result was that Julian Kücklich’s concept of “playbour” became a major axis of analysis in the reflection papers at the end of term). I was surprised to discover at the end of the term that when I looked at the statistics for the students who had complained the most vocally about the menial nature of their in-game experience that they had spent around 10 hours on the server in total – less time than it takes to prepare *and* attend one week of a typical class in my department.

Moreover, as team member lseuss (Laura Susel) describes in “Atlantis Transcends,” her postmortem on the project for the TAG

website, the process of resource-gathering stripped the neighbouring landscape bare. Worse, the vast bulk of Atlantis blocked all sunlight from the world's surface. In Minecraft, that is a Very Bad Thing, as it allows "mobs" (monsters) to breed, making the recovery of assets dropped by players who had fallen off the structure to their death particularly difficult [another section of our book concerns the management of light and the ideological implications thereof].

The pressing need for materials led to the only real exploit in the game: the construction of a block duplication machine in the Nether, the Minecraft equivalent of Hell. The white blocks that comprise the majority of Atlantis's structures can only be constructed out of crystals found in the Nether, which then have to be combined in groups of 9 to form a block – a dangerous and laborious process. As a workaround, Big and another student, Dizolve (Myles Sachin), found a number of YouTube videos describing a common exploit which inadvertently duplicates blocks in _Minecraft_ machines called "Hoppers." When two Hoppers are connected to each other across the "chunks" of the virtual world, items and blocks placed inside them sometimes duplicate as the chunks reload when players or items enter them. After weeks where Big spent hours of his time moving his avatar in and out of a Nether portal to activate the duplicator, he and Dizolve managed to automate and massively upscale this process, creating a flood of quartz and lapis lazuli blocks, enchanted diamond armour and tools and other goodies for the project X team, allowing Atlantis to be constructed from some of the most rare substances in the game.

This is another point where ethics enter the picture – not because of the exploit itself, as Minecraft proper has no rules or instructions. However, the intense concentration of game assets in Atlantis, and the continual loading and unloading of chunks by the block duplicator, affected other students' attempts to finish their own projects by slowing gameplay in the world to a crawl. Project X's Atlantis was perfect but uninhabitable, constructed at considerable cost to themselves as a team, to the neighbouring virtual environment, and to the ability of their classmates to complete their own assignments.

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Heterotopia at best, then, because the student experience of the project was incredibly uneven. The biggest problem was a lack of time – for me, to do the necessary work to keep it all running,

and for the students, to reflect on the experience. Laura writes that the value of the experience was in a kind of conviviality that led to an unusual openness and frankness between group members both online and in the classroom (as she also notes, this is, of course, in addition to the benefits of being involved in a classroom exercise that could not possibly be completed the night before the due date). For me, the value is in her blog post, and in what came after.

During the summer, I hired a few interested students from the class to build a second BFC location, this time on the heavily modded Minecraft server hosted by Mia Consalvo's mLab. Having the students on the research team produce weeknotes during the construction phase helped with the critical reflection, but even with the much more modest scale of this project, there have been trials and tribulations (including a demonstration in support of the chickens). But what is emerging, slowly, along with co-publications, references for students, and a significant amount of fun, is a model for collaborative humanities work that blurs the distinction between teaching and research. Collectively, those bits and pieces might actually turn out to be worth something.