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v1

## # The Allegorical Build: Minecraft as the Undergraduate Classroom

### ## Intro

On January 14, 2021, we began teaching a fully flipped undergraduate class staged entirely inside a dedicated Minecraft server, using a custom-modified ("modded") version of the game.

We have been teaching undergraduate classes using Minecraft since 2014, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic and a growing sense of "Zoom fatigue," this semester is the first time the class has operated with all class time spent on the server, lectures recorded as audio podcasts, and contact time between students and faculty mediated through the game and the Discord chat app. As part of ongoing funded research into Minecraft, while the class is running, our research team has been studying questions relating to student engagement in networked online classes, the role of material experience in understanding theoretical concepts, and the possibility of semi-automating such a class.

The subject of study in this class is not video games in general or Minecraft in particular, but the theory and history of modernity. All readings for the course concern core concepts from cultural studies, communication studies and history about the modern epoch. We use our Minecraft server as a virtual laboratory in which students work in teams on projects designed to help them understand both the procedures that structure actions in the game, and the core concepts in the readings. Because Minecraft players typically refer to their in-game creations as "builds," we call the process of using Minecraft's game procedures to help explain readings from the theory and

history of modernity (instead of vice versa) as "the allegorical build."

What we want to talk about today is the role of material experience in our pedagogy, and how our specific course design creates the conditions under which learning occurs.

### **## Concepts: Infrastructural Reflexivity and Refamiliarization**

- we demonstrated we can establish extremely high levels of engagement via our competent use of platforms familiar to and beloved of students (Minecraft, Discord), which in turn created the conditions of possibility for learning
- elements of our pedagogy includes both material and allegorical practices; material practice in the game becomes the occasion for thinking about something else *\*in addition to\** the game
- concept => infrastructural reflexivity: we do not make the platform for learning invisible, nor do we desire it to be so by design -- we *\*want\** bugs and glitches because they foreground the material conditions of learning and action
- we are very concerned, for instance, to allow for multiple pathways for thought, play and collaboration, but we also want to hedge those in with a particular set of concepts and ideas conveyed in the reading and lectures.
- These form the conditions of possibility for learning outcomes. Importantly, we accept and even encourage failure to learn as an option
- what matters is the qualitative experience of learning that some students had
- allegorical matching of readings to game mechanics is the core of the design element of the course
- importantly, we never tell the students to stop playing. Some students only ever played; they never developed much

allegorical capacity

- but without risking that some students would just think they played Minecraft for a term, we wouldn't get the allegorical build
- In their work on community and affinity, Gee and Hayes emphasize the importance of "well-designed spaces that resource and mentor learners, old and new, beginners and masters alike, they are the 'learning system' built around a popular culture practice" (Nurturing Affinity Spaces and Game-Based Learning," 188, 2012)
- We pay an enormous amount of attention to the design and infrastructure of that space
- concept => refamiliarization (Johanna Drucker, "Making Space: Image Events In An Extreme State," *\_Cultural Politics\_* 4.1 [2008]: 25-46). The modern concept of defamiliarization was based on the premise that shock or "making things strange" might have the power to transform habitual thought into awareness. But Johanna Drucker points out that, in an era when everything is already made strange, de-contextualized, thrown out of relation to the system of which it is an expression" (29), there is little if anything to be gained from further estrangement and denunciatory critique. What she suggests instead is *\*re\**familiarization:

Unlike the shock tactics of making strange, in which an object is wrenched from its habitual use to create awareness, the act of refamiliarization suggests that we recover the networks and circumstances of production - of meaning, value, work, ideology. Forcing and forging these networks of association brings them to the fore (41).

- As in de-familiarization, the goal of refamiliarization is to undo the articulations of perception and cognition that use

surface effects and simulacra to blind us, but as Drucker points out, surfaces and simulacra are material, and we need to understand how they work as well rather than simply denounce them. The point is to reconnect people with "what we already know" (31) -- that we are always embedded in systems of power relations where all manner of forces and agents continually enact their interests (30) and produce us as subjects (41).

- We like the concept of refamiliarization because Drucker emphasizes that it "is always flawed, unfinished, and partial" (33) -- both like our objects and the modes of analysis we habitually use. So the question might be, what do we already know that we can connect to games in order to break out of "Minecraft is a game for kids/autistics/architects" or arguments about gamification and educational technology or retro aesthetics and the exhaustion of culture?
- In practical terms, refamiliarization is a very material practice of "making un-strange" (20) [NOT the same as returning to normal, because normal is gone] that reveals static objects as events (30) by focusing on their process of becoming. For Drucker, this literally introduces "room for play in a bureaucratically managed universe" (42) -- a possibility space where before there had been no alternative. The affordances of this approach for teaching a class during a global pandemic should be immediately obvious

### **## Refamiliarization in the Game**

- playing minecraft in our class is not playing minecraft as most students know it; modded play itself is defamiliarizing
- challenged by the necessarily broken aspects of the technology WHICH ARE PART OF THE POINT FOR US (unlike most edtech)
- it was clear that the milieu of the game set their expectations pretty high - they had a strong consumer desire

- for the game to NOT be broken
- the refamiliarization process = the move away from the expectation of seamlessness
- the play frame for learning this way reduces the stress that comes with brokenness; its okay to glitch when you just come back to life again
- if we are throwing resources at this at all it is about providing the resources for dealing with brokenness rather than running away from it

### **## Refamiliarization in the Classroom**

- so many students were like "i cant believe we are playing a game for class"
- the open conspiracy thing when I use Pierre Bayard's How To Talk About Books You Haven't Read -- students' sense of getting away with something is just the beginning of them doing work that's actually harder than regular classroom work
- tools defamiliarizing their expectations: Moloch and the ampitheatre
- examples: the ampitheatre and Moloch
- if they knew their grade depended on doing Moloch quests it all would have been different; this is why gamification is evil
- Moloch ends up being a great allegory for ideology because it can be ignored though the temptation to infer "what Moloch wants" is huge
- the ampitheatre is just another version of Moloch
- and only because it was voluntary does it make sense
- whereas another pedagogy might have forced the students to engage Moloch to make a didactic point and missed the point entirely
- our pedagogy also leans heavily on the agency of learners btw but our scaffolding then is about refamiliarization in the sense that we need students to realize the agency they have but i would also say that the fact of playing a real videogame

seriously is enough to do much of the refamiliarization work

## **## The Planners**

- most teachers don't use games properly in classrooms because they assume they are about moments that are more fun than the actual work
- that dichotomy kills the potential in using games for learning (Gee reference)

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## **## Conclusions**

- probably the most important finding is that students were highly engaged relative to other kinds of classrooms... even with the readings
- we had the pandemic working for us which was part of the point
- can it be repeated outside of pandemic conditions? not sure, but we are running it again this fall
- brokenness is the condition for learning