

## **Water Elevators, Slaughterhouses & Minecraft: A Look at Mechanization**

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For our project we decided to create a mob grinder built around a zombie spawner. This grinder is meant to be used for XP as well as for the various items zombies produce, mainly rotten flesh, which can be used for potions or to create leather. Some zombies carry other items such as weapons, carrots and various valuable minerals such as iron and gold ingots. The grinder is located close to the main spawn, which makes it easily accessible for all players on the server.

While doing this project, I found that it helped me better understand the Giedion reading, “Mechanization and Death”. As the associated reading for the meat packing option, it was very important that I understood how it related to the broader themes of the course and I found that it was useful in understanding why we were creating mob grinders for a class on modernity. After completing the grinder I found that understanding how the grinder worked and the construction behind it helped me gain a better grasp of the reading.

One specific part of the grinder that learning about helped me better understand the reading was the water elevator system. The water elevator system is used to propel the zombies upwards and then push them back down another hole to ground level, where they are significantly weaker and easier to kill. This system is similar to how the slaughterhouses in the 1850’s used gravity to their advantage by utilizing “the animal’s own weight to transport it downwards from floor to floor by the force of gravity” (Giedion 216). We also used this system to create a more efficient, uninterrupted production line as by the time the zombie is dropped into the holding space where it is set to be killed, it is usually weak enough that one to two hits of the sword will finish it off. This mirrors the evolution of slaughterhouses, which were modernized to streamline production. According to the “Mechanization and Death” reading “All other considerations were subordinated to the question: How to secure an uninterrupted production line?” (Giedion 216). The mechanics and construction of the grinder helped illustrate this idea of

creating a system that efficiently performs a task using mechanization. Our grinder achieved this by needing no manual work aside from the final step which is to kill the zombies.

Although I found that our mob grinder mirrored the slaughterhouses Giedion spoke about, I noticed that there were some aspects that reminded me I was playing a game. The biggest difference was that the slaughterhouses were made to butcher animals to provide meat that could then be sold for people to feed themselves and their families. Our mob grinder is meant mainly as a safe, quick and easy way to gain XP and other items. Although it is very helpful, it is not necessary compared to the slaughterhouses back in the day. One doesn't need a mob grinder to find and kill zombies when they can be found every night all over the Minecraft world. In the end, however, I am using the grinder because it is a safer and more convenient way of gaining XP compared to the slaughterhouses that are used to provide food. It is this realization that reminds me that I am playing a game.

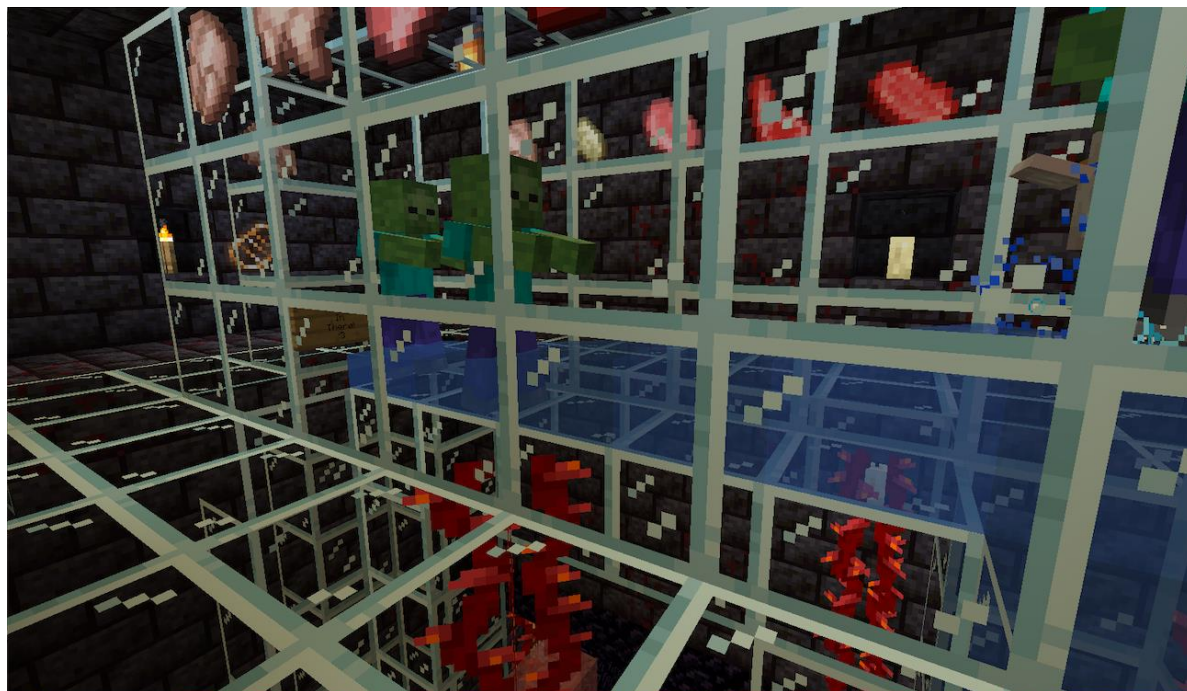
Although it takes me out of the game it does make me reflect on the idea of how creating an efficient production line has expanded to be used for other industries and how mass production can have negative effects on people and the environment. This mob grinder might be more relatable to a company that utilizes production lines such as an Amazon facility and how although it is efficient and convenient, it is not necessarily needed in the world. These thoughts take me full circle as questioning the "progress" of these assembly lines and exploitation of mass production brings me back to the main themes of the class as it helps me see how Minecraft and modernity are linked.

After completing this project I also felt that this helped me answer the question: does one learn more from reading and listening or from doing? Or are they both needed to create the most optimal learning experience? I think that having applied the knowledge in a different setting helped me gain a better understanding than just writing a test or paper on it. Being able to actually build something and apply the knowledge was also more fulfilling and enjoyable. In

addition, being able to work in a group and discuss the project helped me gain better insights as well. This method of learning, I think, is more enjoyable than sitting in a classroom and working individually as you would in most English classes.

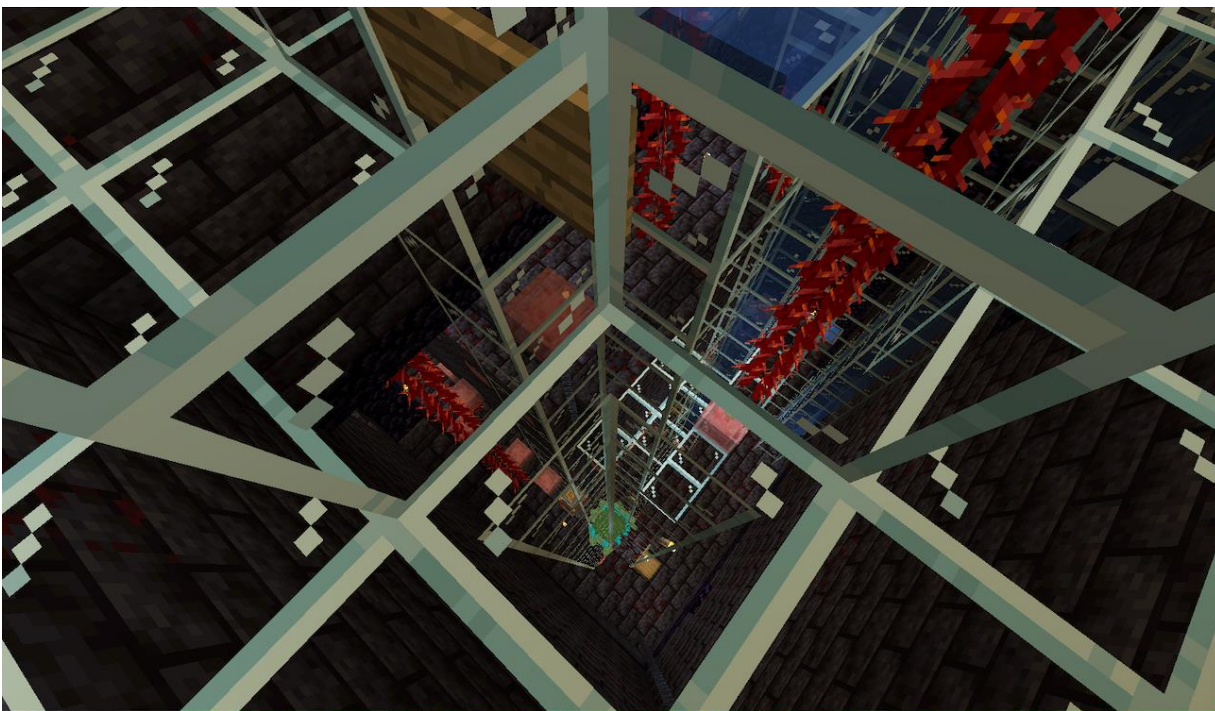


The water elevator taking the zombies to the top



Water pushing the zombies to the drop





Birds-eye view of drop



## Zombies trapped after fall

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ENGL 398C – Videogames and/as Theory

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### The Aesthetics of Death, and the Choice to Accentuate It

Aesthetic design and *Minecraft* go hand in hand. The blocks in *Minecraft* are a virtual imitation of real-world structures, and combined, they create spaces that encourage the player to draw connections to reality outside of the game. A player transitions from building a dirt house out of necessity to a wooden one because the wooden house provides a repetitive aesthetic system that the player is familiar with – a log cabin in the woods which evokes ideas of shelter and home. Our mob grinder is no different in this respect, we therefore decided to go with a conventional slaughterhouse theme in order to emphasize the act of killing present in our automated system. Sam Binkley’s article “Kitsch as a Repetitive System: A Problem for the Theory of Taste Hierarchy” explores the idea of “kitsch” beyond simply cheap imitation, but rather as a medium for “aestheticizing repetition” in order to “discover forms of embeddedness, links with repetitive conventions that ensure the exclusion of surprise [...] kitsch advances that charm as a total gesture of universal human value” (141-142). In other words, kitsch uses aesthetics that humans are already familiar with and exposes their inherent significance without catering to a taste hierarchy. With the conventional design that we chose for our mob grinder, can we call it “kitsch” in Binkley’s sense?



*Fig 1 - A player's First View of the Grinder Space*

Binkley identifies three ways in which kitsch aestheticizes repetition, however, I will only focus on two: the first is that kitsch emulates other cultural products, be it exotic signs of class status or rustic features of vanishing traditions, and the second is kitsch's manner of emphasizing the sentiments we feel from feeling emotion itself (142). When deciding on which blocks to use to decorate the interior space of our grinder, we decided to use Polished Blackstone Bricks to create a dismal atmosphere in both the space players move through, and the cube that the zombies spawn in, and Weeping Blackstone Bricks to emulate traces of blood stained to the floors and the walls akin to the packinghouses of Cincinnati detailed in Siegfried Giedion's article "Mechanization and Death: Meat." Through this emulation, we tapped into the first way that kitsch aestheticizes repetition. Viewing the world of *Minecraft* as its own virtual culture separate from reality, where daily life includes slaying zombies and skeletons, allows us to distinguish when we appropriate structures and ideas from reality in order to incorporate them into the builds we produce. Binkley elaborates that "even in [kitsch's] most ambitious moment,



[it] subordinates the significance of cultural innovation to the already familiar ‘message’ intended by its appropriation” (143) through this, we can acknowledge that our imitation of Cincinnati packinghouses is a purely aesthetic choice in order to evoke the ideas of death involved with the mob grinder. Red slime cubes imitating congealed blood and weeping vines imitating stained growth inside the space also help to elevate this design aesthetic of the grinder.



*Fig. 2 - The Glass Mob Grinder Mechanism*

Before I explore parallels with the second way kitsch aestheticizes repetition, I want to touch on Frederick L. Olmstead’s (designer for Central park and Mont Royale) experience in one of Cincinnati’s packinghouses detailed in Giedion’s article, in which Giedion notes how “[Olmstead] preferred not to witness [the slaughtering] part of the procedure” at the packinghouses (217). In this case, Olmstead refused to view the act of slaughtering, satisfied with “the river of blood that flowed from [the slaughterhouses],” as Giedion quotes from Olmstead’s book *A Journey Through Texas* (217). Through the use of Weeping Blackstone

Bricks, we imitated the traces of blood that come from the livestock of traditional slaughterhouses in order to convey the same emotions that Olmstead felt: unease and revulsion.

Binkley elaborates on the enamour that kitsch has for feeling and sentiment by explaining that “kitsch reduces all the complexity, desperation, and paradox of human experience to simple sentiment, replacing the novelty of a revealed deeper meaning with a teary eye and a lump in the throat” (145). He goes on to speak to the nostalgia and joy one feels towards the aestheticization of repetition that kitsch employs, but our mob grinder instead evokes feelings of revulsion and unease through its design, the exact opposite of what Binkley explains (145-146). One decoration which exemplifies this opposition is the item frames lining the glass of the mob grinder mechanism (Fig 2). The choice to use glass for the mechanism forces players who use the grinder to view the system by which zombies are delivered to the zombie trap. Furthermore, the items lining the glass create a kind of exhibition of the thematic products related to the grinder: rotten flesh, leather, and various raw meats. Unlike with Olmstead, there is no looking away from the slaughtering. If one is dissonant of the surrounding aesthetic, they are forced to face the imitation of carcasses on meat hooks in the form of raw meat plastered on the walls of the contraption which they will soon use. This crude display pinpoints kitsch’s sentimental way of aestheticizing repetition through “the failure to be autonomous or original – a failure which defines the true stuff of common humanity” (146). Players surrounded by the imitation of slaughterhouses and confronted with the products of their own transactions with death can’t help but feel a kind of revulsion, a distaste not for the aesthetic itself, but for how it makes them feel.

There are, of course, flaws in asserting the grinder’s design as being kitsch. Our capacity for emulation in *Minecraft* is limited by the blocks available to us. As a result, while we’ve conveyed a “familiar ‘message’” of slaughter, the subtextual layer of cultural significance is somewhat lacking (143). Packinghouses are a product of their time due to the lack of modern

food packaging standards, so to emulate that style while having the resources to improve on outdated designs in the name of repetitive aesthetic undermines the genuinity that kitsch reveals in said repetition. Furthermore, while our imitation evokes the sentimental value that kitsch places on feeling, players are an extra layer removed from the reality we have tried to emulate. They bear witness to not just an imitation, but an abstraction of an imitation of reality; thus, they must search deeper in the decorations we've used to discern the kitsch aesthetic we aimed to provide. While I still assert that our design is indeed kitsch, or at the very least, as kitsch as possible with the materials provided, we haven't quite captured the essence of kitsch that Binkley celebrated.

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### **Questioning Crafts the Way**

In “The Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger analyses our understanding of technology beyond its instrumentalization and practice. Underneath the surface level of technology as an application of tools or a development of science, he argues that the essence of technology is in fact a “way of revealing” (Heidegger 12). Heidegger further argues that technology is an unconcealing that humans take part in but ultimately do not control. Rather, technology is a relation people have with the objects of the world such that they all come to be seen as resources waiting to be used. This view of the world as a standing-reserve is how technology can be seen as an enframing of reality that lines up with modernist notions of resource development.

For our group project we have been tasked with exploring what *Minecraft* can reveal about our ways of understanding modernity, so it is fitting to take up Heidegger’s conception of technology for the analogy. *Technē*, the Greek origin of the term, describes both the skills of a craftsperson as well as the “arts of the mind” (Heidegger 13). *Minecraft* can be seen as a vehicle to hone one’s skills at bringing forth whatever designs the mind can conceive, even as it remains a product of modernist technology itself. As a logical descendent of modernist tendencies to organize space and resources, the game is an ideal tool for analyzing the conceptual enframing of the world. *Minecraft* acts as a virtual standing reserve for experimentation but, as a game, can its play space offer room for *poiēsis* beyond Heidegger’s dangerous *technē*?



Our project is a ‘mob grinder’ and we have chosen to farm hostile mobs since deciding that passive mobs would not present enough of a challenge. While docile animal mobs spawn regularly in their respective biomes, we require specific mob-spawning blocks to farm skeletons, zombies, or spiders. Mob spawner blocks are some of the rarest in the game and they cannot be picked up or moved at will so it is not entirely up to us where exactly we can build. Wanting to make an experience farm first and foremost, we search near the server’s center so that our farm will be in common and accessible territory. While skeletons are preferable for offering bone meal on top of experience, we are lucky enough to find a zombie spawner amongst the sprawling and mostly picked-over dungeon beneath the world spawn.<sup>1</sup> At least the Aura mod allows us to convert the rotten flesh they drop into higher-value leather. Despite having other modded options for machine based murder devices, we replicate a simple vanilla build that is common on Youtube. The body of the farm is nothing more than a nine by nine cubed room around the box. This dark chamber encourages many zombies to spawn whenever a player is within proximity. The structure of the box is already in place in the world and it is only a matter of carving it out of the stones—a very literal bringing-forth of the machine. After the main room and shafts are in place we construct an obsidian blast wall around the lower half of the site to further protect from creepers and random explorers. At this point, with so much that has been out of our control, the site somewhat compares to the giant Chicago stockyards that were built ad hoc as they expanded to fit the changing influx of animals (Giedion 212-3). On the other end of production, our presence around the structure during construction causes so many zombies to spawn that it would be difficult and unnecessary to convert all of the rotten flesh drops into leather. This overproduction leads to the realization that we can install compost bins on site and convert the excess into the bone meal we previously sought.

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<sup>1</sup> Fig 1.

The process of finding a use for the extra meat again mimics the Chicago slaughterhouse in the way they must accommodate the influx of pigs—themselves an excess borne out of the excess production of corn (Giedion 215). On a deeper level these instances are both examples of what Heidegger describes as technology's enframing. The human relation with the objects involved is such that the excess must be put to use as a resource. As much as an overproduction of pigs might be a problem for an unprepared environment, the foremost concern is how one might take advantage of the numbers rather than accommodating them. One could hardly imagine their being left alone.

Resources in *Minecraft* appear to the player in the same way, or possibly even more so. The game has only a minimal ecology since nothing generates or degrades much—even animals spawn in at random as opposed to having any mating cycle. Apart from player interaction, most of the world is explicitly docile, in wait of discovery and whatever utilization the player has in mind. This waiting state may say something about the game's architect, or it is a reflection of my own modernist prejudices for the game world. On the other hand, a given world of *Minecraft* is so vast as to be nigh unconquerable by any single player, let alone the combined mass of all game worlds that have ever been generated. Trying to harness all the resources of every *Minecraft* world would be a Sisyphean task. From Heidegger we can see that the essence of technology predisposes players towards this revealing by mining their worlds into being. Though each played world is brought-forth by its players, the sheer inexhaustibility of the game, by virtue of its near-infinite capacity for generation, suggests that no framing could ever fully encapsulate it. Small comfort, I'm sure, for the zombies we already have at our standing reserve disposal.<sup>2</sup> There remains an apparent disjunction between the technological enframing between the worlds humans apply it to and our ability to carry out such enframing. Whether the world is

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<sup>2</sup> Fig 2.

finite and perishable or infinite and unconquerable, enframing is a process that does not precisely line up with the truth of the world. Hopefully it does not entirely capture us as well.



Fig 1: the spawner is encased in an effort to keep random players from destroying it. At this point I have ruined three other spawners thinking I could collect them with silk touch.



Fig 2: Just hang in there... until we find a way to replace technology with a new, more poetic world view.

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## Turning my team into a working class

I was often left wondering what about my work and my teams work in the game of Minecraft could be related to the ideas of modernization. Modernization at its core is progress, as Slack and Wise discuss in Culture and Technology. Progress to make our lives more comfortable, progress to make our jobs easier and even automated and progress towards efficiency. However, progress is often confused with the progression of technology, technology is only the median in which society achieves progress. When I first started in the class Minecraft server I had already had experience with the game so I knew that in order to get a good start I would need to find materials to keep myself alive, protected and fed. The best materials to do so being iron and diamond, Iron is easy enough to find, gather and process. Diamonds on the other hand are much harder to find and when they are found most people save them to use a fortune enchant to mine them to make the most out of it. An example of progression begetting progression. It was around that time, when I found my second set of diamonds, after hours of painstaking exploration and digging that I inadvertently came up with the idea of an industrial revolution and with it the birth of the working class.

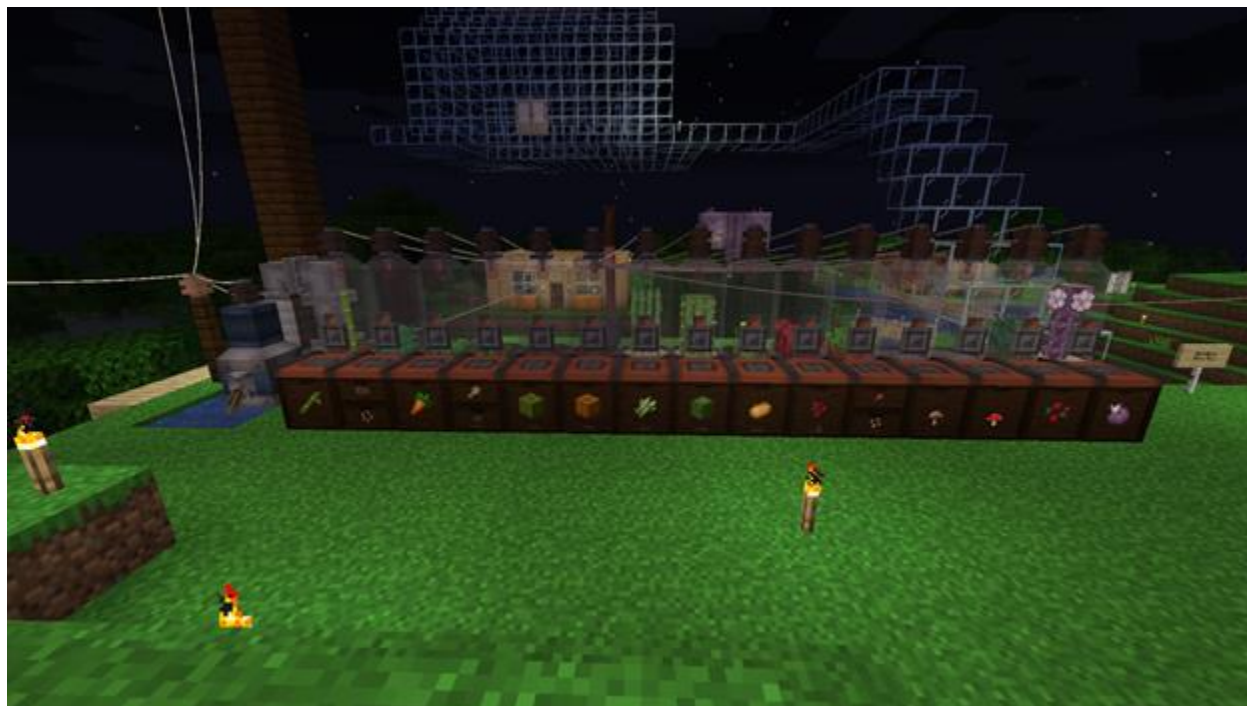


What could be more modern than an industrial revolution, combining hard labour and machinery to make the time-consuming process of resource gathering, nothing more than standing by and watching it be done for you by machines and a workforce. To quote O'Brien and Szeman, Industrialism "Describes the transition from an agricultural and small-scale commercial society to one based on organized mechanical production" (pg.41). At the beginning my group and I were a small-scale community with small farms of wheat, cows, pigs, chickens and sheep. All of which were used for our survival and demanded a lot of our time to produce anything from them. This coupled with the gathering of raw materials took up most of my team's time, which in the beginning isn't that big of a problem but when we started to think about the amount of resources we'd need to build our future projects I was worried we'd spend too much time gathering and not enough time on the construction itself. Naturally my first thought was to turn to the Immersive engineering mod for machinery and automation and implement the idea of Fordism to create an assembly line of basic items. This worked for our plants as we grew more than we needed in garden cloches (See Figure 1) and it collected and replanted the product free of oversight. However, for minerals and metals ironically machines were not good enough as there was only a certain amount of resources the machinery could extract before needing to be moved by a player and that would be a constant time-consuming task. In the spirit of industrialization and combining a work force and machinery to create an efficient industry of resource production, I turned to productivity bees. As O'Brien and Szeman state when talking about industry "They also require a large and disciplined workforce, trained in the performance of repetitive, specialized tasks." (pg.41) which describes bees perfectly, especially the mod in productivity bees in game. With nearly 400 bees (figures 2 & 3) and counting the resource production is limitless, sustainable, requires no hands on interaction once installed and needs minimal electricity to run the assembly line of converting Iron/Gold/Copper etc.combs into the

corresponding dust and smelted into ingots which are then transported via Conveyor belt to our storage warehouse (See figures 4 & 5).

With endless resources at our disposal, and the bees conducting the medial repetitive task of collection and an assembly line producing the basic items, our team was still part of the working class as it were. Even though the physical assembly line ends at our warehouse, once we take those items out of their storage and create another product with it, even though more complex and many times requiring many different blocks to assemble, we still fit the description of O'Brien and Szeman definition of producing a working class "a society devoted not to the goal of working hard enough to live, to put food on the table but to the goal of feeding itself to work harder, to produce profits" (pg.43). In this quote we could look at the feeding of the player as feeding resource so we can focus our energy and work harder on our build to get a profit of a good grade. In addition something else caught my eye while reading Capitalism and the Industrial Revolution, on page 43 it is mentioned that one of the "mythologies in contemporary society is the idea that individual effort is always ultimately rewarded with economic and social success". This caught my eye because I believe throughout the course, I have proven this mythology to be true. Through my efforts in my industry of resource production and with the surplus of materials, as is the goal of industrialization, I have made a name for myself in our fictional world and because of that more opportunities have presented itself to me for trade with various groups on top of being well known in the social groups for my work. I believe the gift box in figure 6, all the surplus materials we had, contributed greatly to this success.

**Figure 1**



**Figure 2**





**Figure 3**



**Figure 4**



**Figure 5**



**Figure 6**





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### Colonization in Minecraft: Slaughterhouses

As Slack and Wise state when speaking about the term progress, “Civilization strode across the continent, taming nature, the landscape, and the inhabitants,” (Slack and Wise 19). Minecraft is a game that relies on progress, and this progress is only obtained through using the natural resources of the world. Through colonizing the primitive world of Minecraft, a player is able to feel a sense of moving forward. One such device which can be built through this process is the mob grinder, a mechanism that spawns a type of monster over and over and keeps it in a controlled environment to be harvested for either items or experience: similar to what we call a slaughterhouse in the real world.

For the level one project, our group decided to build a mob grinder. To be able to do this, we had to take from nature and create an entire structure dedicated to this device. Just as an American slaughterhouse is, “Rooted in the very structure and dimensions of the land,” (Giedion 213), so too is the mob grinder in Minecraft. For both these mechanisms to become plausible, the land had to first be colonized. For the American slaughterhouses, they first had to take the land away from the indigenous and build upon that land using its own resources. In Minecraft, we had to first find a mob spawner in one of the natural caves and then take the land away from anyone who may have been using it, like the monsters indigenous to the game, as well as any players who may have wanted to use it.

The device itself is a killing mechanism for the monsters of the Minecraft world, just as a slaughterhouse is a killing mechanism for animals in real life. In both cases, the many deaths that these devices commit go unnoticed, “The greater the degree of mechanization, the further does contact with death become banished from life. Death is merely viewed as an unavoidable accident at the end,” (Giedion 242). With the implementation of both these devices, the mob grinder in Minecraft and the slaughterhouse in our world, comes the death of the natural world. The machines allow humans to kill without thinking, especially since the creatures being killed are deemed to be inferior to us. They lack any use to us except for what they can provide through their death. All we want from them is the materials they are able to give us. For our mob grinder, the zombies give us experience so we can further progress in the game, and for the slaughterhouses, the animals give us meat for us to survive.

Both the mob grinder and the slaughterhouse which is it modelled after can both be likened to the colonization of indigenous peoples. In both cases, the animals or monsters being slaughtered are treated just the same as the indigenous people were treated, as things to be used, without a care if they were treated humanely: “What is truly startling in this mass transition from life to death is the complete neutrality of the act,” (Giedion 246). When we decided to make the mob grinder, no one in our group batted an eye at the idea of the mass murder of the zombies that would have to happen for the grinder to work. No one thought twice about capturing these zombies and putting them into a cage to be used for their experience. Since these creatures were considered lesser than us, even though they are the native inhabitants of the land, there remains no emotions towards the pain and torture we put them through simply to gain more experience from them. It is the same way the indigenous people were treated when the Europeans colonized land. They were viewed as lesser humans and so were treated with no respect and no care to their well-being. They were taken advantage of and used to increase the productivity of the

Europeans' settlements. Their deaths did not matter. There were so many of them and they were viewed as animals that no one batted an eye at their deaths, just as no one would bat an eye at the death of a pig in a slaughterhouse or the death of a zombie in our mob grinder: "Neither can the eye quite take in what it sees. On one side of the sticker are the living; on the other side, the slaughtered.... In twenty seconds, on the average, a hog is supposed to have bled to death. It happens so quickly, and is so smooth a part of the production process, that emotion is barely stirred," (Giedion 246).

The mob grinder we created in Minecraft can be likened to a slaughterhouse in the real world. Both these mechanisms use a series of processes to create, kill and harvest a being to gain material goods. Both these devices require colonizing the land and killing off nature. In this aspect they are both similar to the colonization of indigenous people, in so far that the destruction of the land and the indigenous creatures inherent to it did nothing to cause any emotional discomfort. With both the mob grinder and the colonization of the indigenous, there remains no thought towards the harm that anyone has to come to for the gain of material items. In this way it can be said that the mob grinder in Minecraft is a representation of the horrors of colonization.

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