

In the Interest of Speed, and in the Disinterest of Safety

Intro

We, as a class, have taken to regularly violating the laws of nature in order to quickly accomplish tasks on the server.

We are students. Many of us are full-time. Some of us even have jobs. We had big buildings to build and hundreds of miles to traverse on the regular, so naturally many of us were going to need to create shortcuts to deal with the need to do so much in just a few short months. With so many moving parts, our burgeoning civilization had very quickly developed the need to move faster. Faster than any vanilla-version, strictly agrarian Minecraft player could muster. And so, we collectively experienced the very modern experience of rapid technological advancement and its adoption into our everyday workflow.

According to Ben Singer's paper on the advent of modernity, one of the biggest things that characterized it was "the rapid proliferation of new technologies and transportations" (Singer, 21). Singer goes on to explain that,

"the engine of social change probably had somewhat less to do with the trickling

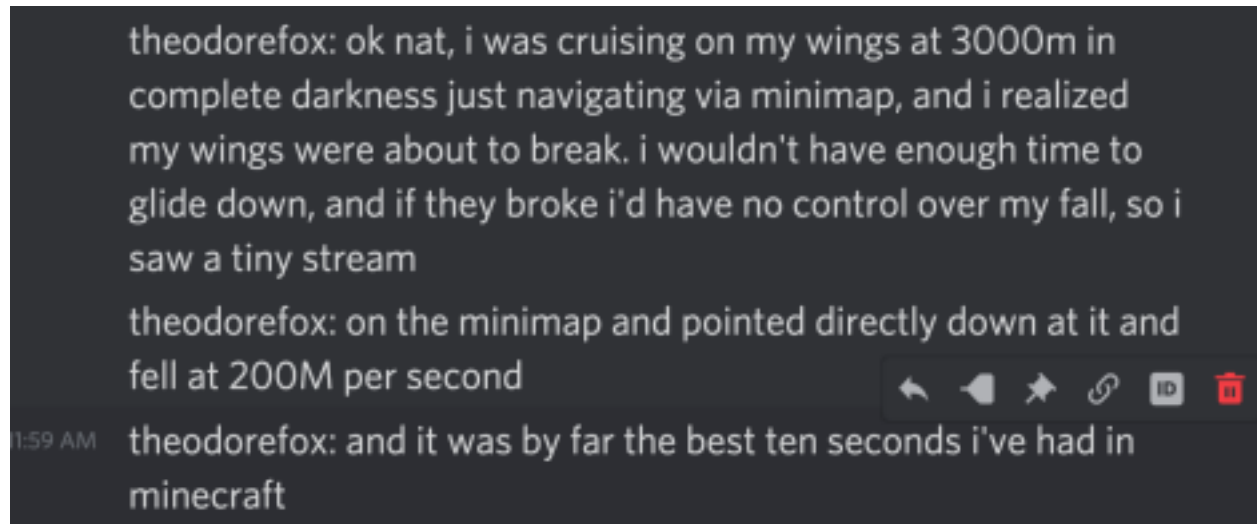
down of Big Ideas than with concrete demographic, socioeconomic and technological forces that directly influenced the everyday life of entire populations. [...] With the emergence of new technologies of communication and conveyance, every social entity – people, ideas, values, images, objects, styles, techniques, customs, etc. – could be scattered with rapid diffusion and on a great scale far beyond the very limited spheres of exposure characteristic of traditional agrarian life” (26).

I feel as though this semester could be summarized as a process of not just building establishments and exploring a bunch of locales, but also acclimating to the effects of all of the new tools and technologies that have become available by our game, and changed the way we’ve perceived the tools that we’ve used. Because this is a digital medium, and because we experience a different form of embodiment when we control a video game avatar – one that is connected to our bodies and minds but still very much separate at the same time – we begin to perceive a discrepancy between our embodiment in real life and our embodiment in the real world. And because of this fact, the movement we experience in the game tends to contrast pretty heavily with our real-world movement speed experience. And this contrast, at least for me, created a sort of existential hyper-awareness that made me reflect on my real-world movement patterns in a way that I hadn’t thought about since I stopped commuting to school at the start of lockdown.

Part 1: A Soul in Tension that's Learning to Fly



The Planners are a very smart group. Sometimes I struggle to stay on the same page as them, and ultimately, I know in my heart that nothing I could say could hold a candle to the level of cleverness that their analysis of the game contains. Luckily, they're also a very courteous bunch, and since the day I told them that I wanted to examine the nature of speed in the game, they've been giving me many little bits of guidance, like a bunch of wise old renaissance men throwing high-grade birdseed down at a scruffy, starving pigeon. For instance, Theodore (theodorefox) supplied me with this poignant anecdote:



If you've ever read the Futurist Manifesto, this reaction of excitement at the thrill of speed and danger, whose origin point is an impressive piece of technology, will be a bit familiar. This is what the credited writer, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, had to say about his encounter with the raucous, fast cars of his time:

"We went up to the three snorting machines to caress their breasts. I lay along mine like a corpse on its bier, but I suddenly revived again beneath the steering wheel - a guillotine knife - which threatened my stomach. A great sweep of madness brought us sharply back to ourselves and drove us through the streets, steep and deep, like dried up torrents." (Marinetti, 1).

Throughout the piece, you can really feel the wonder Marinetti and his peers felt at the new technologies they encountered in the early 1900s, and Theodore, though he may not have intended it, paralleled this shock in his message. Except instead of a car, he was experiencing the elytra. On our class server, not much goes faster than an elytra.

In Minecraft, the elytra isn't really a "new" technology, technically, because it is part of the base game, and not something that comes into being after any sort of in-game passage of time. However, your average player is bound to get it very late in their playthrough due to them being only available in the End, an area that only skilled players really have a chance of navigating. Because of that, the player is likely to experience a tremendous shock the moment they start using one, since they had to acclimate themselves to the slower forms of transportation first. Imagine spending most of your life riding horses, only to step on the pedal of an automobile for the first time the day you turned forty.

Flying with an elytra while using rockets to propel oneself is a really disorienting experience at first. If you've been used to rowing boats and running around, you'll find yourself overwhelmed not just by how fast you're going, but also by how much more space you are being granted to move in. While running on the overworld or rowing across the ocean, you're more or less worrying about your X axis and Y axis, even if you do go up and down mountains every now and then. The elytra, however, forces you to be cognizant of all three dimensions at once, and as a fun bonus, you're also going really, really fast. There's a reason why most people crash the first time they try to land. It's a lot to get used to all at once.

On our server though, some people's first taste of super speed happened in the nether.

Part 2: The Passenger

Early on in the semester, a network hub was created in order to expedite the circulation of people and things around the server. In real life, railroads were a major catalyst for the eventual tight networking of modern society, as well as a major change in perception for the average citizen:

“Annihilation of space and time’ was the early-nineteenth-century characterization of the effect of railroad travel. The concept was based on the speed that the new means of transport was able to achieve. A given spatial distance, traditionally covered in a fixed amount of travel time, could suddenly be dealt with in a fraction of that time; to put it another way, the same amount of time permitted one to cover the old spatial distance many times over. In terms of transport economics, this meant a shrinking of space: ‘Distances practically diminish in the exact ratio of the speed of personal locomotion’, Lardner says in his *Railway Economy*.”
(Schivelbusch,1).

The closest analogue to a life-changing railway system was the Nether Roof Shortcut (if it even has an official name). The group responsible for the creation of it is, primarily, the Planners. Though they weren’t the only ones who contributed to its creation, they built most of the infrastructure for it.

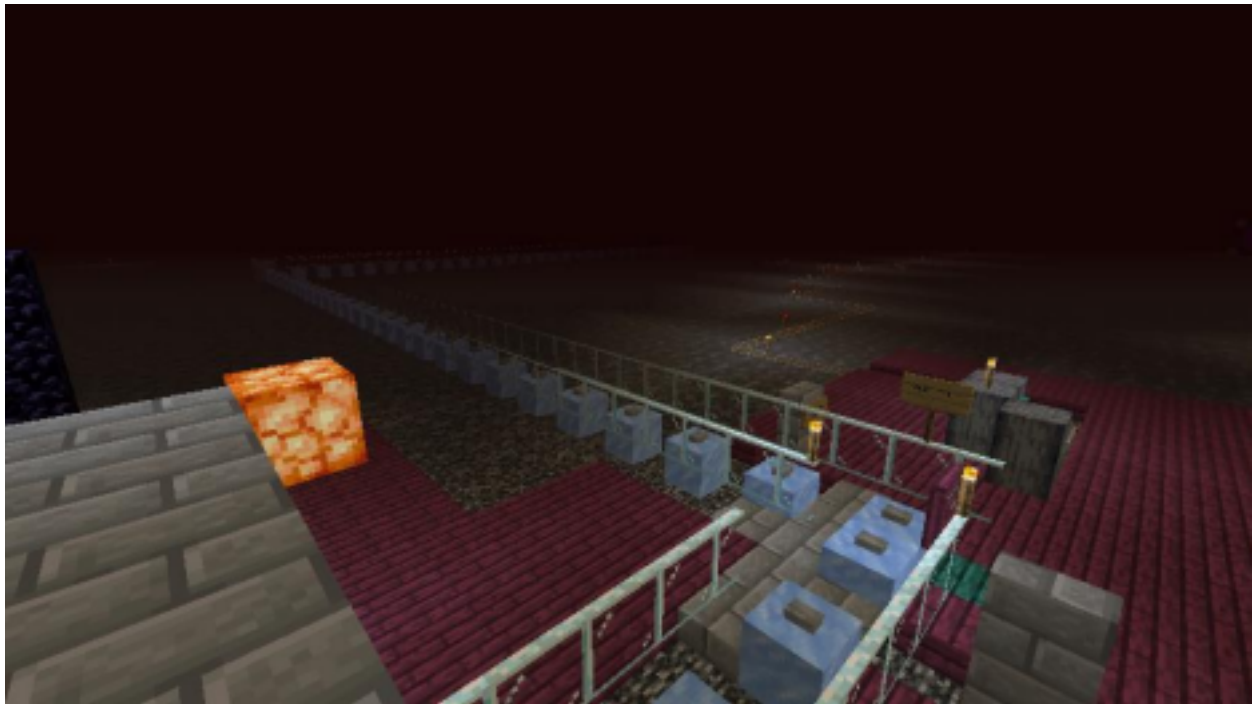
The thing about this shortcut system is that it is just too perfect, if you think about it. It

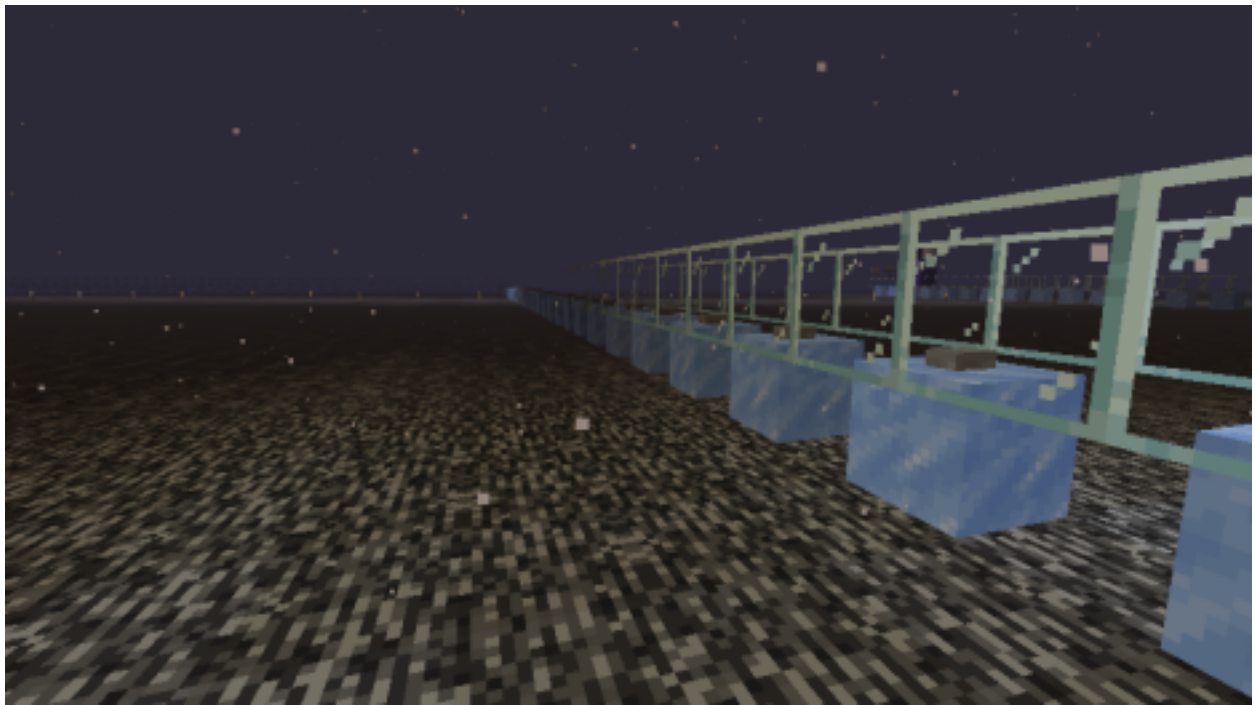
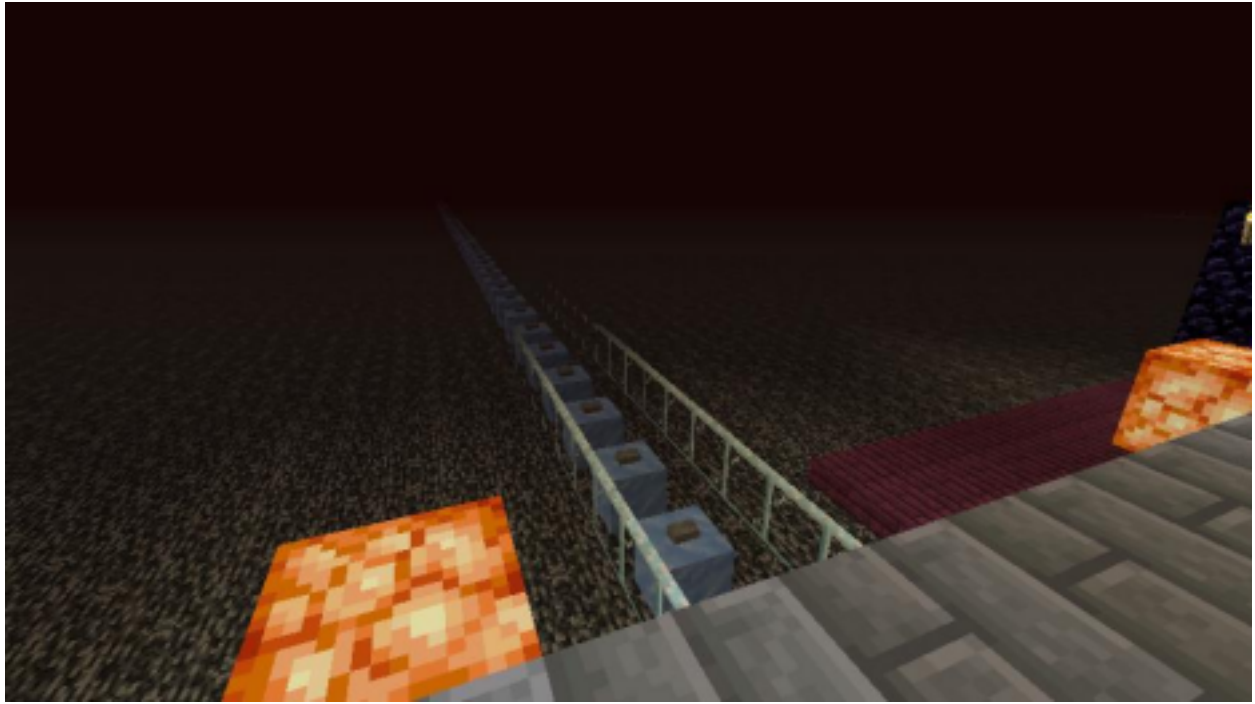
is a flat space with no obstacles to bypass in which hostile mobs can't bother you, in a zone where hostilities are usually inevitable. And because it is based in the Nether dimension, space quite literally shrinks while navigating the world there. The only way you could have made it better is if you had automated it so that the passenger didn't need to manually place and remove the boat. That, and admittedly it was not a system that everyone could connect their bases to, if only because the completion of the line wasn't an enormous priority for the Planners.

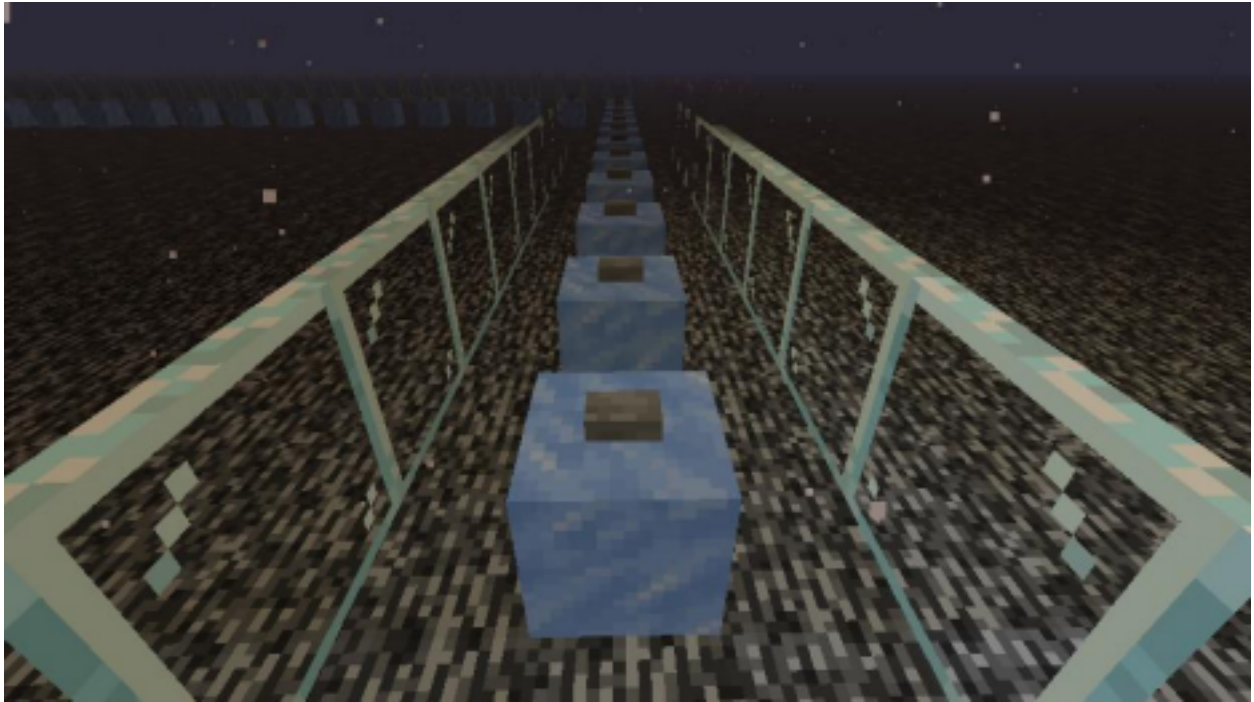


The Planners originally built a conventional, redstone-powered railroad up on the nether roof, and it looked like the above. It wasn't very fast, and at the time accessing their city meant a long and arduous trek, even at its quickest. Even at 1/8th the length of its

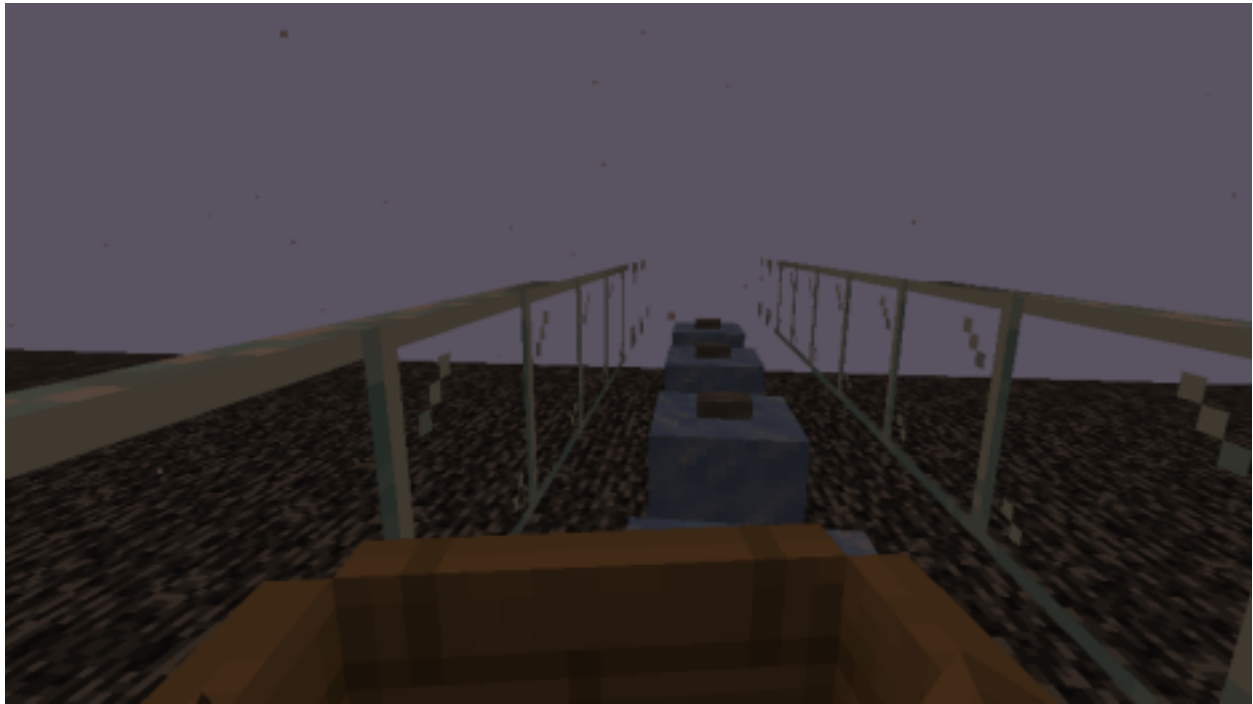
distance in the overworld, it still took a long time. When I spoke to the group at the time, they lamented this fact. David (Amelioratorj), a member of the Planners, said that the choice of the city's location was made out of sentiment rather than out of convenience. They simply wanted to use the location, even if it was wildly inconvenient to connect it to spawn. It was definitely a labor of love. The Herculean nature of the task is what led to an absurd solution. Eventually, while I wasn't looking, they replaced the railroad with its more famous incarnation, pictured here:







This is a track made out of ice blocks, each one separated on the north and south ends by one block of air, complete with a glass fence placed around it in order to prevent people from falling off of the track. Andrew (WonderAnchor) told me that he had adapted the design from an existing model created by the Minecraft community. He discovered that you could go up to 144 kilometers per hour using this method, and if one Minecraft block is equal to one meter, then that means that one could potentially traverse a distance of up to 40 blocks a second. His only alteration was adding stone buttons on top of each block of ice in order to ensure that Endermen would not spawn on top of the track while the player was whizzing by. The design is essentially created to exploit the physics of the world to achieve absurd speeds with as little interruption as possible. The track has been described as "crazy fast", among other things, but "crazy fast" is an obscene understatement.



When I first rode it, it allowed me to traverse so quickly that the game's chunk generation could not keep up with my speed. I was rowing across the void and nothing

could stop me from utterly violating every reasonable law of physics, of demanding that the world I live in give me much more than it could reasonably provide. At some point the boat I was riding on decomposed into wood planks and sticks in a bizarre display of subatomic obliteration. I keep thinking about the implications of this; about how the need for speed and convenience in a society can become so enormous and unreasonable that nothing could be off limits anymore, that one could feel comfortable with exploiting even the intangible void for the sake of convenience and productivity. Imagine getting fired from your job because your boss told you that you weren't fast enough to keep up with the speed of light.

I was also eventually surprised at how fast this experience became benign to me. I've logged onto the server almost every day since this beautiful crime against nature was erected, and every day I played I made use of it to go back and forth between spawn, the Planners' city and the Flâneur monument. Eventually, it didn't even register to me how obscenely fast it was anymore until I brought someone up there with me.

Angelica, who had been busy building the Habitat 67 replica for most of the semester, had never ridden the ice railroad before and her reaction to it made it evident just how acclimated to the madness I was. And here's where we need to acknowledge the ultimate consequence of speed – it doesn't stay the same to you forever. Similar to how people in real life experienced a change in perception of time and space as they acclimated to the speed of the railroad, so did the average denizen of the class server

once the railway track was upgraded from redstone power to ice power. Pretty soon, going from spawn to the Planners' city felt like nothing, and yet it also felt like everything. I knew on some level that it was far away because I had tried going there on the old railway and it took forever, yet it felt very, very close at the same time, because back when I was looking for places to explore in the hopes of finding a badlands, the fact that I knew I could easily get there meant that I also knew I had plentiful access to locations in the world.

I remember Evan of the Polymaths 2 telling the rest of his group that once he got his hands on the elytra, the entire map changed for him. Almost word-for-word, that's what he said. Honestly, the comparison makes itself. What applies to the railroad can also apply to the elytra, in that when you don't need to walk or row your boat everywhere traveling feels like nothing. It's no wonder Evan chooses to be airborne every waking moment of his time in the game.

I believe it's not all positives, though. The acclimation process to these technologies can be so benign that you didn't even notice it's been putting you in danger.

Part 3: Elevation, Don't Go to my Head

I've died in the game while trying to land with the elytra. It was one of the most jarring deaths I had experienced in the game up until that point. But that's also why I find it interesting. I had gotten used to being able to make clumsy landings with the elytra

because I had a pair of sky shoes with the Feather Falling III enchantment on it. One day, I had forgotten that I had swapped them out for a pair that did not have that enchantment on them, and flew down from my monument to my natural altar, an act that I had performed many times prior. Boom. Dead. All because I had forgotten that I was going at a speed that was potentially dangerous for me.

I bring this up because acknowledging the excitement of new speeds and new technologies would be incomplete without talking about the danger that often comes with adopting a high-speed lifestyle – you can easily crash. This isn't necessarily a problem in of itself if you're careful, but there are real consequences to normalizing extremely high rates of speed and efficiency, especially when it comes to labor. The advantage of being a denizen of Minecraft is that your body doesn't have to experience burnout and the damage from high-speed collisions. Can you imagine if Moloch was a real boss, and all of his outlandish, body breaking tasks needed to be completed by real employees? And that it was treated as normal, even though it destroyed said employees' healths?

Moloch, can you tell me where you came from? Are you aware that you are not a God, but an image on the screen, and that you are created and destroyed in the span of a few seconds every time someone logs in and out of the server?

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