The Duplication Machine: Theoretical Exploits

I give you – the Atlantis project duplication machine.

[show video]

A little context – as the video explains, this machine was conceived as a solution to a problem of massive infrastructure construction for team based coursework project in Darren's undergrad class in Games and/as Literature. The conceptual ambition, to create a version of Atlantis in Minecraft, met with the practical problem of how to operate on such a scale on a shared survival mode server. That the creation of the duplication machine was an unexpected, clever and successful exploit of system lag is one thing, that the student/player Big Haircut Prime made a youtube video about it (thus participating in the broader Minecraft media culture) is another, but our focus here is on the serendipitous route the 'duping machine' might take us on in continuing to work through the collective object(s) that constitute the field of game studies.

The Atlantis duping machine helps to create some critical wedges to exploit developing fissures in the on-going saga of our, still mostly, humanistic tussle with

digital machines and systems. We might figure the duping machine as an aporia enabled by that moment in time when the system lags as it tries to render two objects in the same place at once. Gametime is suspended in this moment when the conditions of possibility of the machine (the hardware, software, players bodies and desires, cultural logics of accumulation) meet the pragmatics of the machine (to solve a problem, to accomplish a task, to deal-in-the-world) meet the imagination of the machine (as ingenious gadget, fictional instrument, labour saving device). These layers are intertwined and inseparable in making sense of making a duplication machine for making endless blocks in Minecraft which is a game about making things made by Mojang (and now owned by Microsoft).

Now, if we look in one direction we can see the classic tale of surplus value extraction that we already knew was present in the bottomless pit of our growing dependence on digital labour. The promise of the manufacture and consumption of digital goods clears a future path for capitalism that the last generation's cultural theorists could barely grasp. Surely Minecraft is part of the vanguard of this looming regime as the issue is less about consumption and the threat of the micro-monetization of ever more useless things (and the worry is that Microsoft will take Minecraft in this direction). Instead, the issue is much more about the appropriation of our cultural desire to make things; the always-already cultural counter-drive toward a condition of unalienated labour that Minecraft so splendidly

emblemizes. This is why both the political left and the right jump on the Minecraft bandwagon. The duping machine signals the radical and creative unalienated labour of common folk on the one hand, and the vast pool of entrepreneurial potential on the other. This is perhaps why Minecraft is a political no-brainer as everyone from the White House to local boards of education get in on the action.

But if we look in the other direction maybe we can see the conditions for the collapse of just such a system. The duping machine is an exploit that is arguably enabled by the cultural logics of the game but crucially it cannot be a system imperative. That is, in order for the game to work the player needs to desire blocks that they do not have

and all at once player and analyst might glimpse the layers that make up our digital material social systems. These are compositions of

1. Code/Software (or failures of code) – the rendering problem.

2. Cultural logics – Minecraft is the new Monopoly game – it is about resource extraction and rational economic action.

3. Social Ethics – the capacity to act otherwise and to measure the consequences of those actions.

4. Pragmatics – the capacity to act under material constraint at all times.

5. Imagination – the capacity to make meaning in the experience

6. Hardware/Machines -

and while we might conventionally recognize this as a glitch; a system breakdown, error or failure and as an exploit where a player takes advantage over others, cheats, deviates and otherwise acts against the expectations of both the social and material system of the game.

More importantly, a focus on the duping machine helps us to articulate the media archaeological layers

For some time we have toyed with the idea of doing big science on video games. By this I do not mean that we are working with big data so much as we have been trying to develop strategies for teams of researchers and students to focus on a single object and to develop our game studies from this approach. Early MMO researchers fell into this model by accident mostly because the worlds were so large and the experiences so wide ranging that the idea of a single ethnographer studying a culture on their own and comparing notes with others at conferences and in articles simply made no sense. Indeed, the problem

was about multiplying the senses and getting more bodies; methodological, critical and reflexive bodies into these gamespaces. There is a practical aspect to this of course (as there is in the natural sciences) with limited resources and time it makes sense to try and tightly focus our attention rather than to conduct a survey or build a collection (as with many genre based studies). I suppose our approach is a kind of close reading or close playing (as Josh Tanenbaum and Jim Bizzochi once talked about it) but it is close playing as a sustained social practice rather that a form of reflexive critique.

Why not Minecraft? Or rather the question should be, why hasn't Minecraft received attention from game studies in proportion with its popularity and impact on popular culture? It's a great mystery, what moves game scholars from one object to the next? We aren't slaves to You'd think we were trying to build on each others' work, to develop theory and/or method, or even to advance a particular agenda but there are no obvious signs of this and if you have followed the literature for some time it sometimes feel like we move around in circles. Perhaps our writing is improving