Grade 7

The secret of Minecraft
And its challenge to the rest of us

https://medium.com/message/the-secret-of-minecraft-97dfacb05a3c 3/13/2017
It's almost inevitable: I encounter Minecraft somewhere online—it's easy to do, because there's a lot of Minecraft out there—and I end up convinced I'm doing the wrong thing with my life.

Let me explain.

Briefly, for the uninitiated: Minecraft is a video game, first released in 2009 as a buggy prototype by a solo Swedish programmer named Markus Persson. The complete game was released in 2011, and in the years since, Minecraft has matured, expanded, and sold tens of millions of copies.

Oh, and there's a documentary.

Also, T-shirts.

I am obsessed with this game and what it has achieved. If you are a writer, a cartoonist, a filmmaker, a designer—really, anyone who aspires to engage human brains, particularly young ones—I think you should be, too.

In Minecraft, the player is dropped into a freshly-generated world composed of coarse blocks that represent dirt, trees, rock, water, and more:
There are dangerous creatures lurking in this world, including but not limited to giant spiders and skeleton archers. But they only venture out at night, and they can be deterred by walls. The sun (a bright cube) sets fast, so your first task is always the same: Build a shelter.

The genius of Minecraft is that the game does not specify how this is done.

The game's core activity is the creation of new materials and objects through the arrangement of more basic substances in specific patterns on a "crafting table," represented in the game as a matrix of cells.

To me, these Minecraft "recipes" resemble nothing so much...
...as arcane runes.

To play the game, you need to know the runes, the recipes. Where do you learn them? Not in *Minecraft*. There is no senior alchemist to consult.

No help menu.

No manual.

People often compare *Minecraft* to LEGO; both support open-ended creation (once you’ve mastered the crafting table, you can build nearly anything) and, of course, they share an essential blockiness. But I think this comparison is misleading, because a LEGO set always includes instructions, and *Minecraft* comes with none.

*Minecraft* is a game about creation, yes. But it is just as much a game about secret knowledge.

It’s not that secret, of course. From that first buggy release onward, all the ins and outs of surviving and building in *Minecraft* have been documented by players, on wikis and YouTube, in ever-increasing and now mind-boggling detail. Honestly, I have no idea how you would play the game without first browsing one of those wikis or watching one of those videos. Trial and error? There would be a lot of errors.

To play, you must seek information elsewhere.

Was it a conscious decision? A strategic bit of design? I don’t know. Maybe Markus Persson always intended to create an in-game tutorial.
but never got around to it. If so: lucky him, and lucky us, because by requiring the secret knowledge to be stored, and sought, elsewhere, he laid the foundation for Minecraft’s true form.

Minecraft-the-game, maintained in Sweden by Persson’s small studio, is just the seed, or maybe the soil. The true Minecraft (no italics, for we are speaking of something larger now) is the game plus the sprawling network of tutorials, wikis, galleries, videos—seriously, search for “minecraft” on YouTube and be amazed—mods, forum threads, and more. The true Minecraft is the oral tradition: secrets and rumors shared in chat rooms, across cafeteria tables, between block-faced players inside the game itself.

The true Minecraft is the books.

Scholastic publishes these concise, child-friendly guides to the game. Two of them are among the best-selling books of 2014 so far, on a short list with titles like The Fault in Our Stars and The Goldfinch. To me, they are the most salient symbol of the game’s success.

Imagine yourself a child. Imagine yourself given one of these books: not merely a story of exploration and adventure, but a manual to such.
Imagine yourself acquiring the keys to a mutable world in which you can explore caves, fight spiders, build castles, ride pigs, blow up mountains, construct aqueducts to carry water to your summer palace... anything.

Imagine yourself a child, in possession of the secret knowledge.

This wouldn’t be enough on its own. Obscure techniques have been a part of video games from the beginning; Nintendo Power surely had a dusting of secret knowledge. What’s different here is that Minecraft connects this lure to the objective not of beating the game, but making more of the game.

“Game” doesn’t even do it justice. What we’re really talking about here is a generative, networked system laced throughout with secrets.

Five years in, Minecraft (the system) has bloomed into something bigger and more beautiful than any game studio—whether a tiny one like Markus Persson’s or a huge one like EA—could ever produce on its own. The scale of it is staggering; overwhelming. As you explore the extended Minecraft-verse online, you start to get the same oceanic feeling that huge internet systems like YouTube and Twitter often inspire: the mingling of despair (“I’ll never see it all”) with delight (“People made this”) with dizzying anthropic awe (“So... many... people.”)
Turns out you can do a lot with those blocks.

We're in a new century now, and its hallmark is humans doing things together, mostly on screens, at scales unimaginable in earlier times.

In the 2010s and beyond, it is not the case that every cultural product ought to be a generative, networked system.

It is, I believe, the case that all the really important ones will be.

To ignore the creative power of all these brains—millions and millions of them, young and old—leaves too much on the table.

I'm a writer, and don't get me wrong: To publish a plain ol' book that people actually want to read is still a solid achievement. But I think Markus Persson and his studio have staked out a new kind of achievement, a deeper kind: To make the system that calls forth the book, which is not just a story but a real magick manual that grants its reader (who consumes it avidly, endlessly, all day, at school, at
ZINC READING LABS

Student Quiz

Quiz - The Secret of Minecraft
By Robin Sloan, Medium
Level 2

Q1. The "oral tradition" of Minecraft includes
A. conversations about the game online and offline.
B. software developed by Markus Persson.
C. handbooks and guides to the game.
D. All of the above

Q2. The author believes that Minecraft's most important achievement is
A. the way knowledge of the game is created and shared by users.
B. the way it has rekindled kids' interest in reading books.
C. Markus Persson's innovative approach to game design.
D. the blueprint it offers for designing video games of the future.

Q3. Which sentence from the text best reflects the idea the author refers to in the last line of the article?
A. "It's almost inevitable: I encounter Minecraft somewhere online—it's easy to do, because there's a lot of Minecraft out there—and I end up convinced I'm doing the wrong thing with my life."
B. "What happens when we take the secret of Minecraft and apply it elsewhere, in new ways?"
C. "I am eight years old again. I feel afresh all the impulses that led me towards books and writing, toward the fantastic and science-fictional... except now, there is this other door."
D. "In the 2010s and beyond, it is not the case that every cultural product ought to be a generative, networked system."

Writing Prompt

Robin Sloan is looking at Minecraft from the point of view of an author of "plain ol' books." In paragraph 22 ("The true..."), he claims that "the true Minecraft is in the books." In your own words, describe the connection he makes between books and games like Minecraft. Why does he bring up the Harry Potter series? Use his examples and any others that you think apply to help illustrate your explanation.

Want Help? Have a Suggestion?

https://games.zinclearninglabs.com/articles/242/print-quiz-student

3/13/2017
Quiz - Teacher Version
The Secret of Minecraft
By Robin Sloan, Medium
Level 2

Q1. The "oral tradition" of Minecraft includes

A. conversations about the game online and offline.
   ✔️ right: According to paragraph 21 ("Minecraft-the-game..."), "The true Minecraft is the oral tradition: secrets and rumors shared in chat rooms, across cafeteria tables, between block-faced players inside the game itself."

B. software developed by Markus Persson.
   wrong: According to paragraph 21 ("Minecraft-the-game..."), Minecraft, the game maintained in Sweden by Persson's small studio, is just the seed of something larger.

C. handbooks and guides to the game.
   wrong: Books are by definition not part of an oral tradition. An oral tradition is when something about a culture is passed along through speech, not writing.

D. All of the above
   wrong: Handbooks, guides, documentaries, and T-shirts are not part of an oral tradition.

Q2. The author believes that Minecraft's most important achievement is

A. the way knowledge of the game is created and shared by users.
   ✔️ right: As the author puts it, the "genius" of the game lies in not specifying how things are done. He considers the true Minecraft a "generative, networked system laced throughout with secrets" (paragraph 28, "Game doesn't...").

B. the way it has rekindled kids' interest in reading books.
   wrong: The author discusses the important way books on Minecraft reflect the game's success, but he doesn't say it has played an important part in getting kids to read more.

C. Markus Persson's innovative approach to game design.
   wrong: While the author thinks the game is wildly innovative, he focuses on the role of players, not on Persson's achievement.

D. the blueprint it offers for designing video games of the future.
   wrong: The author is excited by possible applications of the game, but his main focus is on the way the game itself works.

Q3. Which sentence from the text best reflects the idea the author refers to in the last line of the article?
A. "It's almost inevitable: I encounter *Minecraft* somewhere online—it's easy to do, because there's a lot of *Minecraft* out there—and I end up convinced I'm doing the wrong thing with my life."
 wrong: The last paragraph is not that dramatic in its outlook.

B. "What happens when we take the secret of *Minecraft* and apply it elsewhere, in new ways?"
 right: This indicates his interest in finding new relations between writing and networked systems.

C. "I am eight years old again. I feel afresh all the impulses that led me towards books and writing, toward the fantastic and science-fictional... except now, there is this other door."
 wrong: This indicates his interest in *Minecraft* as a model, but not the idea of applying it elsewhere.

D. "In the 2010s and beyond, it is not the case that every cultural product ought to be a generative, networked system."
 wrong: In the last paragraph, it sounds like he wants to explore these possibilities.
Writing Prompt

Robin Sloan is looking at Minecraft from the point of view of an author of "plain ol' books." In paragraph 22 ("The true..."), he claims that "the true Minecraft is in the books." In your own words, describe the connection he makes between books and games like Minecraft. Why does he bring up the Harry Potter series? Use his examples and any others that you think apply to help illustrate your explanation.
night, under the covers, studying, *studying*) new and exciting powers
in a vivid, malleable world.

I'm not a huge *Minecraft* player myself—my shelter never grew
beyond the rough-hewn Robinson Crusoe stage—but I look at those
books and, I tell you: I am eight years old again. I feel afresh all the
impulses that led me towards books and writing, toward the fantastic
and science-fictional... except now, there is this other door.

It's made of blocks, I suppose.

"A generative, networked system laced throughout with secrets."

When you write it that way, you realize it doesn't have to be
software. This is a stretch, but you could apply that description to the
greater Star Wars universe—not just the movies, but all that
followed: the books, the video games, the spit-spraying backyard
lightsaber battles. And, based on all the fan fiction and wizard rock
they inspired, I'd say the Harry Potter books managed to boot up a
generative, networked system of some sort.

But now, in the 2010s, *Minecraft* improves upon those examples,
because it does not merely allow this co-creation but *requires* it. And
so the burning question in my brain right now is this: What happens
when we take the secret of *Minecraft* and apply it elsewhere, in new
ways?

My next book is going to be a plain ol' book; a good one, I hope, but
definitely not a generative, networked system, etc.

My next next book, though... well, I don't yet know what shape it will
take. But I have my eye on *Minecraft*. 