



The Sum of its Parts

The Hunger Games in Minecraft: A Transmedia Study

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Introduction:

This report concerns the research about Hunger Games in Minecraft conducted by a small team between the end of July to December 2015, and then resumed to a much lesser extent for the first quarter of 2016 by Tom Lecercle and Brent Calvelage. I am the latter, and this report is written from my perspective, complete with bias, miscommunications, and terrible memory. Criticisms of the project and the work involved are my own and are particularly biased, and should never be taken as being critical of the team members themselves. Nonetheless, I will try my best to be as precise as possible to glean the most information from the time spent on this project, but I do wish to emphasise once more that this is a personal account, and should be taken as such.

Part 1 – Weeklies:

Somewhere in mid-July, I was asked over email if I wanted to be part of a research project about Minecraft. Smitten by anything Minecraft and especially by anything that combined videogames and academia, I immediately said yes. Sadly, I was not in Canada at the time, and I missed the initial meeting for the project, but I did make the secondary meeting near mid-August, where I was informed once again on the focus of the study and brought up to speed. We were told that we had to keep online public research reports to be updated on a weekly basis with the goal of studying Hunger Game style matches in Minecraft. Inspired, I immediately began updating my knowledge about The Hunger Games, that besides the movies, I barely knew anything about. I read the books, watched the movies once more, and then jumped into the most popular Hunger Games' Minecraft servers. The difference was shocking. The Hunger Games has several competitors using various means to not only kill each other, but to survive the deadly arena. Minecraft HG, on the other hand, was a glorified version of a typical videogame "deathmatch" with treasure hunting elements. I noticed that many of my peers were also writing about the difference between Minecraft HG and "regular" HG and opted to focus, at least initially, on something I had a bit more experience with; Level design, thanks to my time at EA, BioWare, and Solfar. I focused on boiling down MHG maps to their variables, and in seeing how changes in these variables affected play. It was the focus of my first weekly. and it can be found [here](#). To summarise: I noticed three major variables: size, danger, and items. Size determines length of the game, danger is a minor form of balancing that reduces win satisfaction, and items; their location, importance, abundance, and strength, changes how players act in order to win.

As fascinating as these variables were to me, I changed gears and started to focus instead of various tactics allowed in MHG in contrast to the other Hunger Games, and attempted to try to emulate my favourite character: Peeta Mellark. I discovered more and more implicated rules to the game, and how, and if, it was possible to reproduce the actions of said heartthrob in MHG (and wrote a weekly report about it that can be found [here](#)) and was quickly shut down in the major large servers. My mind immediately jumped to the idea that this was a failure of transmediasation, but closer examination showed how wrong I was with my initial conclusion. Boiled down, large servers need to process many players as quickly as possible, and they simply cannot deal with long matches that hiding and alternative strategies cause. Smaller servers, with sponsors and hiding and traps and whatnot, were not so constrained.

Meanwhile, our team was failing in producing concrete results. We knew we were meant to create our own version of a Minecraft Hunger Game map at this point, but moving towards that goal was proving difficult. We disagreed on what kind of map it would be. Would it be big, small, like typical MHG, or were we challenging the norms? Would it be desolate or lush? Would crafting be enabled or not? Would there be sponsors? How would we even integrate that? No firm decisions were made, and we were directionless. In addition, we were still experimenting on a small scale, and waiting for a server of our own that would never show. Standing back, I believe it was due to lack of communication between meetings, no firm decisions, and unwillingness to dedicate hours to a map that may have to be redone if a server did show. We were also starting to feel repetitive in our weeklies. Despite how little we already wrote, we wrote even less, and our slow work pace dwindled from a trot to a crawl to... nothing really.

As depressing as it was to see a research opportunity and its fantastic team die a slow and agonising death, I was lucky enough to have a personal server already setup at home. The server was “strictly” for the amusement of the youngsters in my and significant other’s immediate social circles, and *nothing else*. Deciding that the “youngsters” could use a break from Minecraft late in the evenings, I took back my laptop hosting the server in order to conduct some experiments in MHG level design.

Part 2 – Experimenting:

In the final parts of the group project, building up towards an actual playtest with actual testsubjects, I decided to throw myself into level design and learning how to do it in Minecraft. It took a few hours of prototyping, watching tutorials online, and

tweaking, but I eventually got to grips with two programs that would be my bread and butter: WorldEdit and MCEdit. Using what I learned during my initial research with map variables, I created two maps I would continue to tweak. Both were medium sized maps, mirrored in terms of difficulty, but they diverged in one aspect that was my primary focus; Scarcity. Prior to my own experimentation, all I saw in maps was hunger disabled with weapons available at every turn. I wanted to try introducing hunger, and seeing if an abundance or scarcity of weapons or food would influence gameplay. Knowing that I was behind in my weeklies and feeling rather guilty about it, I wrote a lengthier than usual report about the experiments (which can be found [here](#)). It would be my last.

After some further experimentation, I decided on the design of my map. It would be of medium size, to allow hiding, with hidden chests containing some loot to encourage exploration, food would be scarce, to encourage tactical long-term thought, and lastly, it would be weapon heavy, to make fighting appealing. In the final days of mapmaking, I started focusing on a spawn area and thinking of if mobs should be immediately enabled and what starting equipment players should have. I considered using treasure chest randomisers and a compass to track other players down, but the idea was stashed temporarily in favour of having a map that was accessible to vanilla players.

I do not know exactly how it happened, but about two days before the playtest, my map files were corrupted. I nearly beat myself half to death for not having the foresight of backing them up on a cloud. What was done was done, and I immediately started recreating my “Eden” map from memory. I managed to rebuild the terrain and trees that gave it its iconic look, but there was to be no custom chests, no traps, no hidden bases to find, no detailed foliage, nor a starting spawn location. It was incredibly frustrating, but I felt that if I brought nothing at all, the opportunity would be wasted. An echo of what I wanted to present would have to do, and hopefully Nic could salvage something from the information gleaned.

Part 3 – The Playtest:

The playtest proved to be a multitude of things, including embarrassing and messy, but it still proved educational, and I was happy to have participated as much as I did.

When I arrived, slightly late, people were setting up their accounts. I had brought a croot-enabled chromebook to that effect and leant it to one of the participants that did not have a laptop or MC account. As quickly as possible, I informed Nic of the issue I had with my map and he immediately took it upon himself to improve it, adding chests with loot all over to make it more of a Hunger Games map than a custom regular map.

In the meantime, Nic had the participants play HG maps on popular MC servers to get the idea of what is expected of players, and how to properly play Hunger Games in Minecraft. This was great for me in particular, who had not yet realised that many of the playtesters would be playing MC for the very first time that day, and that had maps that banked on the players having a lot of MC experience. I had chosen to enable crafting and mobs, because as regular players, myself and the friends I had tested the maps with would almost never die to mobs, and it added some adrenaline along with the divergent behaviours that comes with crafting. For people playing MC for the very first time, this was not good.

Initial contact had the players extremely surprised at the presence of mobs, and little to no chests, or a starting “cornucopia” for that matter. Many of them died within seconds, not having acquired the skills needed to dodge creepers and skeletons, and it was a very short time, a few minutes at most, when the winner was declared. Then another unfortunate thing happened; I had not realised that I had set the default game mode to “Hardcore”. It made sense with my friends, since I did not want them to be able to sign into the map again once they had died. In this case, it meant that all the hard work that Nic had done to make the map more in line with The Hunger Games was gone after the first playthrough.

Since the small but significant changes were gone, my map had become a small custom map, not a HG map whatsoever, and both the players and their professor were confused. I noticed that the players with more experience still attempted to find weapons and kill others, but after it became clear that weapons were not anywhere near, many of them started to teach the other less experienced players how to play vanilla Minecraft, such as how to build shelters from mobs and craft. I mentioned to Nic that I

wanted to see if they would cooperate to not starve, and, unfortunately, Bart Simon, their professor, overheard me and announced to the class that they were supposed to cooperate. Technically, he was right, but I wanted to see how the situation would evolve without explicit instructions or goals.

After the experiments, since at this point we had run out of time, Nic, Bart Simon, and myself discussed implicit and explicit rules, emergent gameplay, and about the transmedia potential between videogames and other forms of art. It was absolutely riveting to speak to Bart Simon, who is both a great conversationalist and incredibly knowledgeable in the aforementioned subject matters.

I was greatly disappointed in my own stupidity that caused me to lose so much progress and forced me to come forward with only a hollow shell of what I had intended for the playtest, which I made clear to Nic, but I was also greatly saddened that I was the only one in our team to even bring a map, which had been emphasised as a very important moment in our project. I was especially looking forward to see the work of Tom Lecercle, whose artificial maps were in direct contrast to my naturalistic style. Overall, the playtest was a success in the sense that we still learned much from it, but it was a failure on our part as a team to deliver something workable for the experiment group at a moment that we had an incredible level of access to them. We squandered a moment that, while fruitful, could have been phenomenal in helping us understand The Hunger Games in Minecraft.

Part 4 – Aftermath and a False Start:

With the oncoming storm that was exams, and an almost complete radio silence in regards to the project after the playtest, what remained of the project died an unceremonious death. A few of us wrote concluding statements about what was learned during the duration of the project in the form of a weekly; I was not one of them.

I can only guess at what my fellow researchers were thinking, but if they were experiencing anything similar to my own thoughts and feelings, I would not be surprised if they were feeling incredibly disappointed at the sum of our parts. I know this team; I've worked with at least half of them prior to the project, in Minecraft, and seen them create incredible, well-thought, beautiful things. Yet, we failed. We only tested a single map created by a single researcher at the playtest, and afterwards,

nothing additional was made, not even individually. We failed our primary goal of making a Hunger Games map, and felt ashamed.

To my surprise, this story was not over yet. Nic contacted me in early 2016 about resuming the study, but this time with only myself, him, and Tom Lecercle on the team. I happily agreed, seeing an opportunity to take this further and perhaps get some solid mapmaking done. Tom Lecercle agreed as well. Unfortunately, as Nic warned us, we had not gotten an official “go-ahead” from the higher ups, but he had decided to tell us nonetheless so we could potentially get a head start.

And get a head start we did. Tom and I met quite often at the TAG lab at Concordia in order to plan out exactly what we would create. Playing on our individual strengths, we planned to create a map in which the centre would resemble a traditional Hunger Games map, created by Tom, with an outer surrounding ring of wilderness with mobs, created by yours truly. High up in the sky, where it would be hard to reach without tempting death, there would be a “sun” of sorts. If multiple players would reach it cooperatively, they would trigger an alternative win, such as the one seen in the movie and book versions of The Hunger Games. Additionally, this would be kept a complete secret in order to see how long it would take players to realise the possibility of a pacifist win. In reference to the Greek myth, we decided to name our map “Icarus”.

Although very excited at the prospect of our map and ideas coming to fruition, we still decided to wait for an official “yes” from the higher ups before starting construction... And we waited, and waited, and waited some more. Frustrated, we decided to just start working on it anyway. We would be more prepared when we got our green light, or, depending on how quickly we worked, we would have something to show to perhaps convince them to give us a green light. Time passed, and Tom had made his central arena and I puzzled over how to squeeze into my half properly when the sad news came in. Our yellow light had just turned red. We would no longer be going forward with the project, even at our reduced size.

Shortly thereafter, Nic and I met at Concordia to discuss the project, and he asked me to write this report.

Conclusion:

I would be lying if I said that the entire project doesn't fill me with sadness. We had so much potential, so much enthusiasm, on the way into this thing, and we ended

up with nothing much to show for it. We failed in making a Hunger Games map, we failed to playtest appropriately, we failed even in reporting our failures.

We were a team that rarely acted as one and our disagreements on potential design paralysed us into inaction. I hold no illusions about Tom and I being “better” than the rest of the team, we were just independent and stubborn, working on our own on the side, something that was not expected from any of us. Given the chance of working in a smaller team, I believe that *all* of the researchers would have done better. It is far easier to cooperate or convince a single other teammate.

Yet, I would also be lying if I said that the project was not a learning experience that I value greatly. I learned much about explicit and implicit rules associated with game level design, as well as the problems that comes with transmediasation and challenging game status norms. I even learned a few things about conducting a good playtest! No, I certainly learned a tremendous amount when working on this project, and I am sure I am not the only one, but I really wish we had a little more to show for it. Our biggest shortcoming was not in failing learning, but in not making something that could teach others what we learned here.