University of Tartu
Faculty of Arts and Humanities
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**(YOU GOTTA) FIGHT FOR YOUR RITE:
THE USE OF PLAYER INVENTED RITUAL IN ONLINE COMMUNITY
CREATION**

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Acknowledgements

I don't handle serious things well, so here's a joke to start us off: *Rumors of a food shortage at this year's spoonerism conference turned out to be a complete lack of pies.*

I wish to give my deepest thanks to several of my instructors. Dr. Kristel Kivari and Dr. Marie-Luise Meier, my long-suffering supervisors, I do not deserve the patience you have shown me. Thank you for your guidance throughout this journey. Dr. Aaron Thornburg, I want to thank you for giving/forcing on me the opportunity to grow beyond what I thought I could. And a special thank you to Ms. Schuck for making sure I didn't quit way back then.

For all of my fellow Star Wars fans out there: *What's the body temperature of a Tauntaun? Luke Warm.*

I want to thank everyone from the Petrichor SMP. Cricket, spawn, and everyone else – this is just as much y'all as it is me. Thanks!

Our first date was a walk among evergreen trees. It was love at the firs site.

To my sister Rebekah, love ya! I done did that thing what with the schoolin' and all! And even more love to my niece Eva. I'm proud of you. Do what you love, Doodle! This is also where I get to say that my two puppies, Charlie and Dee Dee, are the best things in the world.

I had to throw out all my old spices. What a waste of thyme!

I absolutely must thank Vassa. This mention nets me the second easiest 5 dollars I've ever made. I'm not gonna tell you about the easiest 5. That's a story for friends.

I asked my nephew why he was playing in the wardrobe. He said, "Narnia business!"

My thanks to Klaus Nomi, Operation Ivy, Kyary Pamyu Pamyu, The Pietasters, Stiff Little Fingers, Social Distortion, and The Toy Dolls, along with dozens of other musicians and bands for carrying me through the late nights.

Never date a tennis player. Love means nothing to them.

To C - Hey, we did it.

Introduction

I'm a little too old to consider myself a digital native. But I do remember plopping quarters into video game cabinets in the early '80s. Whether it was Zaxxon, Q*bert, Star Wars, or Joust, I gladly offered up my weekly allowance, coin by shiny coin, as an offering to the electronic pantheon in the local arcade. In 1983, I learned to program in Color BASIC on a Tandy Color Computer, though those of us in the know, the nerds, called it a CoCo2. My brothers and I spent days playing games on the Nintendo Entertainment System, the NES, and its big brother the SNES. That first "S" stands for Super, which it was at the time, upping the graphics from a measly 8 bits to an earth-shattering 16 bits. We would play the longer games in shifts, hot swapping the controller from the person wrapping up a four-to-six-hour session to the next without shutting off the game.

This fascination with the terrible graphics and audio of video games and computers was something I have never outgrown. And while I could list the consoles and computers I have burned though in the nearly four decades of my digital existence, most of it would be jargon and gobbledy-gook not worth the space it took up. I am a gamer, a techie, and a nerd. Where the thrill once revolved around quick taps of the WASD keys or the speed of my mouse, it now involves puzzle-solving and games requiring greater attention to detail. Or, in the case of Minecraft, just a relaxed, lazy, pointless distraction that can be shut off without worrying about missing story clues or finding save points. In the ten years I have been a Minecraft player, the lack of pressure in the game has been its greatest feature.

Minecraft was introduced in 2011 by Swedish game developer Mojang Studios. Gameplay requires the player to gather food to survive and harvest the materials needed to create whatever buildings and machinery they can imagine. It is an open-ended game, almost entirely devoid of plot or forced action. The player is allowed to do and go as they wish. For over a decade, Mojang, now owned by Microsoft, has regularly released updates to the game, as well as adding new content. Over this time, Minecraft has sold over 600 million copies of its Java and Bedrock editions. The average daily player base of Minecraft is estimated at around 140 million unique players. A regionally specific, and completely separate, China Edition of Minecraft is free for players in China and has been downloaded over 400 million times since July 2017 (Davies 2017).

The Minecraft China Edition's daily user count is unreported and not included in the previous estimate. The software's ubiquity, popularity, and longevity extend beyond the glow of the computer screen. Numerous franchise tie-ins dot the shelves of stores, from Minecraft branded Lego sets to hats and hoodies covered in the variegated pixelated greens of the *creeper*, one of the game's signature monsters. From cereal boxes to story books to stuffed animals, there are few places that are free of some sign of the Minecraft franchise.

It is this familiarity that allows the game to reach places that others cannot. Stepping back into the game world, Reporters Without Borders (*RSF*), an international NGO that works to protect the rights of reporters and the press, commissioned a Minecraft map to be made to house The Uncensored Library. The Library hosts banned news articles from journalists in politically oppressive countries. It was updated as recently as January 2023, when the Library added articles to their Russian wing regarding the war in Ukraine and political opposition to the conflict. The advantage of the library is that it bypasses many of the restrictions on information imposed by oppressive regimes. By appearing as a custom game map in Minecraft, the Library, as its name suggests, evades governmental censorship. Through the use of blockchain technology and multiple hosts across the Internet, The Uncensored Library has some level of protection against unauthorized changes, direct denial of service attacks, hacking, or cyber terrorism ("The Uncensored Library" 2020; RSF 2020). Minecraft has been used to not just give voice to silenced journalists, but also to undervoiced communities. In October of 2021, Minecraft Live, the online Minecraft convention hosted by Mojang, a special segment featured school projects from around the world that had been done in the Education Edition (Minecraft 2021). One of these was the retelling of an indigenous Punjabi story, built scene by scene by Team SDG Warriors of Bengaluru, India. This was part of Minecraft: Education Edition's build challenge for November 2020, which asked creators to retell their native tales through Minecraft builds (Minecraft Education n.d.).

As abbreviated as this summary is of the impact Minecraft has on multiple groups across the world, and the wide variety of expressions that influence takes on, such as sociopolitical activism, cultural narrative creation, and economic power, there is a dark spot in the understanding of the game's underpinnings. Research has been done on how Minecraft affects the individual or given communities and subsets of the population. It has been examined as a tool for education and socialization, a way of bridging the gap between the neurodivergent and the neurotypical, and as a means to create international and intergenerational communication (Cadieux and Keenan, 2020;

Nishita and Terada 2019; Ringland 2019; Ringland et al. 2016). But there has been very little research into how Minecraft communities are themselves constructed. This topic has been broached regarding social media and more structured forms of multiplayer games (boyd 2002, 2008; Voulgari et al. 2014; Xanthopoulou and Papagiannidis 2012; Zhang and Kaufman 2015, 2016, 2017). But Minecraft is a different entity. It is the premise of this thesis that the unstructured nature of Minecraft as a game creates a void in which the players must be fully self-reliant in creating their community. Given the lack of external structures, Minecraft players have unknowingly created their own traditions and rites to fill this need. This thesis examines a small Minecraft server and its use of the ender dragon fight as such a community building tradition. Research was conducted using participant-observation and informal conversations over a roughly 6-month period.

I was invited to join the Petrichor survival multiplayer server (SMP) for its opening on July 2, 2022, by the server owner, CricketMC. I had previously played Minecraft with them on another SMP. I had initially intended to study how the in-game materials, that is the colors and textures of the blocks available, affected the ways in which visual stories were told by the players. This proved beyond my reach and I soon switched my focus to the dragon fight and how it functioned as a ritual on some SMPs. This had been a topic of interest for some time and was an easy transition to make. The ender dragon is the final enemy a player faces in the, albeit limited, official storyline of the Minecraft game. Though never intended by the game creators to function either as a ritual or as a community building structure, the dragon fight has evolved into both through the meaning and import imparted by the players. Minecraft's open-ended and unrestricted gameplay, in conjunction with the enormity and diversity of the game's player base, produces both the opportunity and the need for social structures on multiplayer servers. While many other MMOs supply community creation stimuli, often through forced adversarial play, Minecraft has no inherent impetus for either competition or cooperation. By understanding how the multifarious strangers of a new server, stripped of many of their identity markers, create trust and social bonds through play, we can see how individual and communal identity is built in persistent digital settings.

Over the course of nearly 600 hours of game time, I engaged the approximately two dozen other players of the Petrichor SMP in casual conversation through voice chat as we played. In this thesis, their experiences are synthesized with my own to create a composite internal and external

view of how a group of strangers created interpersonal bonds and trust within a digital landscape. Using the techniques of interpretive interactionism, as laid out by Norman K. Denzin (2001), the community's development is related in first-person narratives. Interpretive interactionism seeks to uncover the meanings, intentions, and emotions that people give to their interactions through deep descriptions of actions within their subjective context (129-130). Though the narrative accounts found in chapters one and four are written in the first-person, as if from my point of view, they incorporate the feedback and thoughts of my fellow players as related through informal conversations and unstructured interviews. As this thesis revolves around the way in which players interact within the game world, it is necessary to begin with a description of the game, what it is and how it is experienced. The first chapter offers a two-pronged introduction to the game. It contains a technical explanation of the game genre, structure, and definitions followed by a narrative section depicting gameplay from the player's point of view. This is written with the aim of bringing the reader inside Minecraft, to "make [the] culture public and readable, turning it into a text" (Lincoln and Denzin 2003, 140). The next chapter focuses on the methodology employed in the research and reasonings for their usage. As well as a deeper look at interpretive interactionism, and the specific research and analytical methods used in this thesis, the chapter explores why research was done within the Petrichor SMP community. The third chapter discusses the theoretical groundwork of this endeavor. This chapter delves into previous research made regarding relationships in social media and more heavily structured massively multiplayer online games (MMOs), as these areas are more deeply researched at the time of writing. The next chapter examines the dragon fight itself. It begins with a look at the historical purpose of the corporate dragon fight on SMPs and its unintentional evolution into rite, contrasted with an intentional ritual, the diamond burning. The chapter concludes with a narrative retelling of Petrichor's ender dragon fight and how it worked as a ritual to create stronger communal bonds.

Throughout, there is an effort made to balance the academic merit of the thesis with reader engagement. This is undertaken as gramercy to the game I have enjoyed for over a decade and to my fellow players who welcomed me to the Petrichor server. It is also a central tenet of interpretive interactionism. "The interpretation that researchers develop about their subjects' lives must be understandable to the subjects. If they are not, they are unacceptable" (Denzin 2001, 84). It is an inherent recognition that, although the thesis is my work, the data collected and used belongs to my fellow players who I see as collaborators and equals in this effort.

Chapter 1: Minecraft Explained

1.1. Technical Explanation of Minecraft

At first blush, Minecraft may seem like a simple game. It could be described almost as a world of harvestable building blocks. The player collects the blocks they need to create the structures and items they wish. But just below that layer of simplicity is a complexity that keeps the game fresh and new, even after a decade of existence. Minecraft can be described as a first-person, open world, sandbox, action-adventure, survival, resource management, construction game. If Minecraft is played online with others, it can also be classified as a massively multiplayer online game, or MMO.

The base, unmodified, or "vanilla," game, offers three modes of gameplay. These are Survival, Hardcore Survival, and Creative. For this thesis, only the Survival mode will be considered. Additionally, there are several versions of Minecraft available, with the major divisions being the "Bedrock" and "Java" editions. The Java edition is the original iteration and, as its name suggests, is written in the Java programming language. Bedrock is a rewrite of the Java game done in C++. There are minor differences in gameplay. All information in this thesis is based on the Java version.

The vanilla game takes place in a procedurally generated world with three Dimensions, the Overworld, the Nether, and The End. In addition to the standard vanilla gameplay, there are a number of other community created game types, including RPGs and minigames, available through "mods" and "datapacks." The game, both vanilla and modded, can be played as a single player or on multiplayer servers. Multiplayer servers can be open to the public at large or only to approved members.

1.2. Genre Definitions

Video game genres are loosely defined at best. For the purpose of this thesis, the following definitions will be used for the genre terms. In a first-person game, the player observes and interacts with the game world as if through the eyes of their character or avatar. The field of vision is limited to what one might expect it to be in the physical world, with a limited view of the avatar's body, much as we cannot see much of our own body unaided. This is in contrast to a third-person game, where the player observes the world from outside of the avatar's body, often from over their shoulder.

Open world describes a game in which the world map is persistent and continuous, not split into different areas requiring loading and unloading of new maps as the player enters new regions. Additionally, the entirety of the map is open to exploration from the start of the game, with areas not locked behind character level or plot progression requirements.

The term sandbox is similar to the previous term open world, except that it refers to the story line or plot events rather than the world map. In a sandbox game, gameplay is non-linear and does not require the player to complete tasks in a set order or progress through a rigidly structured storyline. Play style is also left open to the player's discretion in sandbox games. The player may choose whether they wish to be friendly or adversarial to the non-player characters (NPCs or "mobs"). If the latter is chosen, the player then decides whether they would rather meet challenges through direct aggression or stealth. The style of play is left to the player's imagination and need not be limited to one style throughout the entirety of a given playthrough.

The action-adventure genre combines, as the term suggests, elements of action games with those of adventure games. Action games are characterized by a reliance on the player's analog "twitch" skills, such as hand-eye coordination, quick thinking, and reaction speed. Adventure games highlight exploration, discovery, and puzzle-solving gameplay. They tend to emphasize more forward thinking than action games, requiring longer term planning and more involved solutions to challenges.

A survival game requires the player to secure weapons, tools, foods, medicines, and other supplies necessary to survive an unfriendly environment populated with hostile mobs. Damage avoidance or mitigation and health management are central to the genre. These games often do not

have a distinct end, with a playthrough being concluded with the character's death or the player's frustration. Success is measured by how long the player manages to remain alive in the game rather than by what plot events they have completed.

Resource management games consist of the player gathering and refining raw materials to construct more complex tools, weapons, and supplies. This often involves automating these procedures through more complex in-game technologies as the player attempts to juggle supply and demand to maintain resource harvesting and processing.

The *construction* genre involves the building of structures, monuments, and machinery, either for aesthetics or to further the game progress by opening new technologies, areas, or game features. Massive landscaping projects, sometimes referred to as terraforming, are also intrinsic to this genre.

1.3. Game Mode Definitions

Playing in Survival Mode means the player must obtain food and other raw materials, construct production systems and structures, and explore the game world while under threat of death due to falling, hunger, drowning, mob damage, and other dangers. The player has an unlimited number of lives but drops any carried items and resources at their death location.

The Hardcore Survival Mode is much the same as the survival game mode, but the player has only one life. When the player dies, they can no longer interact with any part of their world but are instead limited to *spectator mode*. In this mode, they are incorporeal entities, able only to, as the name suggest, spectate, and not affect the game world. This mode emphasizes the survival aspect of Minecraft, requiring the player to be more conscientious of hostile mobs, hunger, and environmental dangers.

While playing in Creative Mode, the player effectively enjoys immortality and invulnerability, unaffected by all sources of damage or threat. Additionally, the player has unlimited resources available to them without the need to gather, refine, or process raw materials. The player has several superhuman abilities, such as being able to defy gravity, allowing them to fly and hover around the game world at will. They are also able to destroy blocks with a single punch, neither requiring tools or multiple, successive hits to do so. This mode is often used to test ideas and prototype complex builds before attempting them in a survival game.

In addition to these three game modes which are chosen at the start of a playthrough, Minecraft has a secondary set of in-game settings also called "game modes." These four modes can be changed by the player during gameplay or set by the server or world map preset defaults. To further complicate the discussion, there is overlap in the naming of the two types of game modes. The in-game game modes are *adventure*, *creative*, *spectator*, and *survival*. When referring to these settings in this thesis, the names will be italicized to, hopefully, avoid confusion. It should be noted that the in-game modes override the general game modes, so that a player in a Hardcore Survival playthrough may set their character to *creative mode* and then enjoy the same immortality and unrestricted access to resources that a player in a Creative game would.

As explained before, *spectator mode* effectively turns the avatar into a ghost. It is non-corporeal, able to pass through solid blocks and other players without restriction. They can also inhabit mobs, seeing the game through the creature's eyes but unable to control it. In this *mode*, the player cannot physically interact with the world in any way other than text messaging in chat. They appear as the translucent, disembodied head of their avatar.

Survival and *creative modes* allow the player to be subject to the restrictions of their respective general game modes, effectively switching between the two without starting new playthroughs. In *adventure mode*, the player can interact with the game world, but is restricted in what and where blocks can be broken or placed. These restrictions are set by the map creator or through server configurations. This mode means that a player can explore a map, pressing buttons, pulling levers, and opening doors as they do so, but are unable to destroy or alter the map. This mode is often used in minigames, such as puzzles or maze maps, to limit the player's options and control their play style.

1.4. Other Relevant Gameplay Definitions

In a single-player game, the player is the only human controlled entity, or player character (PC), in the game world. All other entities are computer-controlled NPCs. When the player is not logged in to the game, the world freezes. Time does not progress and no action occurs until the player returns to the game. This is in contrast to a multiplayer game, wherein the player is one of many PCs. Time in the game world continues to progress as long as the server is still running, even if no

players are currently online. This means the world can change between visits to the world, both through the actions of other PCs or NPCs.

A server season refers to the period of time between server resets. It could be thought of as the lifespan of a given game world. Game resets occur for a variety of reasons. The release of newer versions of Minecraft, which introduce new features and materials, is a common reason for a reset. Resource scarcity due to harvesting and usage by players may also lead to a new season. Another type of resource scarcity, server memory, may also act as impetus. The complexity and number of builds on a server can create lag, slow game performance due to a lack of hardware capacity. As such, a season length could be a few months or many years.

A whitelist is a list of preapproved players who may join a server run multiplayer game. This permits the server owner to tailor the server's community to the atmosphere and members they desire. The whitelist is also used to set individual players' permissions and *game modes*. This allows the administrator to create a server with a chosen set of creators and builders. It also allows the appointment of moderators to oversee community interactions and handle disputes and disagreements.

Minecraft worlds are procedurally generated. This means that a set of algorithms are used to randomly create the terrain and features of the world within a given set of bounding rules. Procedural generation allows the game to include over 18 quintillion different worlds (Fallon 2015) without each one being individually programmed or saved on the computer's hard drive. This reduces production costs and code bloat, especially as worlds in the Java edition are approximately 18 times the size of the Earth.

An RPG, short for roleplaying game, is a type of game where the player character's abilities are limited by in-game skill progression rather than the player's own experiences, abilities, or knowledge. Players often have to determine which skills they will improve as play progresses, either through the allocation of skill points or occupational levels. Their playstyle, whether they choose to be belligerent or sympathetic to the NPCs may also affect the game play and outcome. Minigames are short-term, competitive games focusing on a single aspect of gameplay. Examples of Minecraft minigames include parkour, where the player must maneuver around increasingly difficult jumps and obstacles; murder mystery, a tag-like game where one PC is a killer and the other players attempt to avoid them until time expires; and spleef, a game where players try make each other fall to their death by destroying the blocks they are or will be standing on.

Mods and datapacks are different ways in which fans can unofficially change how the game functions. Mods are modified versions of certain game files creating new or altered rules, materials, mobs, etc. These changes are created by introducing new or amended coding to the game. Datapacks consist of additional files which change certain aspects of the game. These differ from mods because they use existing game code, rather than new or altered code. As such, datapacks tend to alter the gameplay less than mods, although this is not always true. Since datapacks do not change any game code, they can be turned off and on or even swapped during a game session. Mods, however, require the game instance to be rebooted, and often require a new playthrough to be started as they may be unable to integrate their changes into an existing game world.

1.5. Solo Gameplay Narrative

The following section is written with an informal, first-person point of view. It incorporates both my own experiences during gameplay and those garnered from my fellow players through our voice chats. I have given attribution where direct quotations are used.

It has been a long day. Not having the energy to cook, I picked up two hot dogs and a soda, the dinner of champions, on the way to my apartment. I open the door, greeted by a small pile of open notebooks and my copy of *Folklore in the Digital Age*. They are judging me, knowing I am going to put off my homework for one more night. With a self-accusatory sigh, I push them aside and sit at my computer. A few mouse clicks later and I have removed myself from the outside world. I am no longer Aaron. Instead, I am *SlightlyImmortal*, a handsome looking, if somewhat blocky, fellow in a pink sweater and school shorts.

As the game begins, I am unceremoniously dropped into an unknown world. There is neither a prologue nor a tutorial stage to tell me why I am here, what I need to do, or what may kill me. I have no food, tools, or weapons, nothing but the clothes on my back. I may find myself in a desert with few options for food or shelter. I might start in a jungle, where the dense foliage makes it hard to navigate. Or I could find myself in the middle of a vast ocean with no land in sight. Welcome to Minecraft.

Since this is an open world, sandbox game, there is nothing I need to accomplish except to survive. I can attempt to beat the game's minimal, and optional, storyline. I might build a giant

castle for a base. Or a spaceship. If I am talented enough, I could make automated factories or complex computers within the game. Knowing my playstyle (and skill level), I will most likely end up farming carrots in a modest homestead. All of these are valid and acceptable ways to play Minecraft, both as a solo player or on a survival multiplayer server.

Without outside knowledge of the game, there is no way of knowing what to do or how to do it. Through trial and error, random chance, and experiencing the game world, I learn new "recipes," the in-game term for the method of assembling items. For example, if I try to swim in water, I learn how to make a boat. I just need five planks of wood placed in a "U" shape. But I still don't know how to get wood planks. I won't find that recipe until I obtain pre-made wood planks somehow or I find a wood log, often by punching a tree enough times. But how would I ever figure out that I should try that?

I am effectively a newborn, unprepared for, unaccustomed to, and ignorant of the world I find myself in. This is the first step of my in-game transformation. I have come to an almost familiar place, so like the world I know outside, yet starkly different. I am separated from friends, family, or even recognizable strangers. I must learn this world, its rules, and my place within it if I wish to survive. To do so, I must unlearn what I know from my analog existence. Punching trees in the physical world will get me a bloodied hand rather than building materials. Likewise, falling in lava, something I manage to do with alarming frequency in Minecraft, would be a vastly different experience away from the computer. I, the player, have entered a liminal space. I am an outsider. And I will become more aware of my alterity as the game progresses.

My alter ego, SlightlyImmortal, has yet to discover that he, too, is an outsider. He and I will learn this the first time we come upon a settlement. The villagers are unlike us. We are casually tolerated, our only interaction being wordless bartering. They speak a language we cannot comprehend. They are physically distinct from SlightlyImmortal. The villagers' models are taller than the player character's. Their arms do not move. Their heads and noses are noticeably different. We will never look like them. We will never be able to speak their language. We will never become part of their family.

And, as if to drive home just how alien we are to the villagers, the locals will gather at set times of day and talk among themselves, exchanging gossip about us. This is not an exaggeration or paranoia. Likewise, the gatherings are not merely cosmetic activities intended to make the computer-controlled villagers seem more lifelike. If I treat a villager poorly, like hitting them, they

will tell the other villagers and all of my trade prices will go up. If I have done something good, they will make sure their kin lower their trade prices. SlightlyImmortal now understands that he is not from here. He is an interloper, a transient visitor separated from the local community by look, custom, and language.

To follow the game's storyline. I must somehow come across several bits of hidden knowledge. First, I need to learn what the storyline is. As of yet, I have no goals except to survive. From a friend, website, or YouTube video, I discover that the Big Boss of Minecraft is the ender dragon, a fearsome beast that dwells in the aptly named End Dimension. Now I just have to figure out how to get there. A few Google searches later, and I have a plan. Leaving the game to find my next steps leads to a deeper feeling that my in-game existence has removed me not just from the analog world but also from the greater digital world.

What I learn bewilders me. There is a third dimension I knew nothing about, one that I must visit before I can travel to the End. I need to visit the Nether. To get there, I construct a portal, a magical passage to this mysterious dimension. Stepping through the shimmering doorway, I find myself in a literal hell. Fires dot the cavernous landscape and lava fills the seas. Ghasts, giant fireball shooting ghosts, float through the sky forcing me to run from cover to cover. One blast could knock me over the edge of the cliffs that make up this hellscape, plummeting into the lava lakes below.

I must also be wary of bow and arrow wielding skeletons wandering haunted deserts. Large angry boars, called hoglins, and Piglins, aggressive porcine-humanoids, chase me through the alien forests of blue and red trees. For the hundredth time since coming here, I am hunkered down in a hastily dug cave, eating food to regain health. I want to go home. I want to farm my carrots. But if I am going to beat the game, I must press on. I have to find blaze rods. They are a key component of Eyes of Ender, which will both lead me to and activate the End Portal. The rods are dropped by Blazes, magical living fire that roam the hallways of crumbling, maze-like fortresses.

Blaze rods in hand, I return to my farmstead in the Overworld, the game's home dimension. The mix of eager excitement and mounting dread makes my stomach turn as I ready and repair my weapons and armor. Once my preparations are complete, I set out on my final journey. The Eyes guide me to an open field far from where I first found myself in this world. I grab my shovel and dig, deeper and deeper, until I reach a long-forgotten stronghold. Hidden within its decaying walls

is the End Portal. I place the Eyes of Ender around the portal's empty frame. It comes to life, becoming a pool of inky black dotted with twinkling stars. I take one deep breath and jump in.

I am on a yellow island in an ocean of nothingness, hovering over the emptiness of the Void. If I fall off, I will die. To my left is a circle of colossal, black pillars. This is where I will find the ender dragon. Other than me and her, the only other living things in sight are Endermen, mysterious teleporting creatures that will attack if I stare at them. I must be careful to keep my eyes off of them as I ready myself. The battle is hard, but I eventually beat the game. At my feet is another pool of stars and blackness. With my heart still pounding from the dragon fight, I step into the nothingness.

The scene changes to a wall of dirt. The pebbled, brown texture tiled over and over to fill the screen. The Minecraft logo scrolls upward. It is followed by the End Poem, a conversation between two entities. In the game, their words color-coded in light blue and green so I know who is speaking. I have changed this to alternating lines of italic and regular font to ease my poor eyes:

> *I see the player you mean.*
>
> SlightlyImmortal? [game inserts player name]
>
> *Yes. Take care. It has reached a higher level now. It can read our thoughts.*
>
> That doesn't matter. It thinks we are part of the game.
>
> . . . .
>
> *It worked, with a million others, to sculpt a true world in a fold of*
>
> *the ***§§§???, and created a **??§§ for **??§§, in the **??§§.*
>
> It cannot read that thought.
>
> *No. It has not yet achieved the highest level. That, it must achieve in the*
>
> *long dream of life, not the short dream of a game.* (Gough 2022)

I hit the escape key as the poem leaves the screen and the credits begin to scroll. Once again, I am back in the game world as SlightlyImmortal. I stand next to the bed in my base. The game is over, but it has not ended. Nothing about the world seems different. Nothing about me does, either. What do I do after I win? Again, I must leave the game to find out that now I am free to explore the End Dimension. Far from where I fought the Dragon, I might spy an End City. Inside its strange, twisted building, I get some shulker shells. In a floating ship outside, I find an elytra. Neither of these is critical to game play. They are only available once the game has been beaten.

This, the start of the "end game," is where many players feel the game truly begins (CricketMC 2023, spawn1970 2023). The shulker shells add some utility to the game, but they do not add anything new. They improve item storage and transport. The true prize is the elytra, a cape-like piece of gear commonly known as "wings" (spawn1970 2023). With my wings equipped, I fly into the clouds. The villagers were right. I am not, will never be, one of them. Instead of becoming like them, "I've become an angel" (CricketMC 2023).

Chapter 2: Methodology

2.1. Researched Communities

This thesis relies on qualitative data collected from the Petrichor SMP, a small, whitelisted, vanilla Minecraft server. Research was conducted from July 2022 through January 2023, during which I logged 596 hours of gametime. In addition to in-game fieldwork, I also participated in the server's Discord channel and several Twitch streams, live broadcasts of gameplay via the Twitch.tv platform. The number of hours seems inflated and no claim is made that all of the time counted could be called hard fieldwork. However, it is both impractical and counterproductive to attempt separating the "play" from the "work" in this period, as data was gathered through participant observation and informal conversations with other players on the Petrichor SMP. "Interpretive interactionists attempt to live their way into the lives of those they investigate" (Denzin 2001, 65). As such, the interactions and discussions happened as organic outgrowths of the in-game activities, rarely having definitive beginnings or endings.

The Petrichor SMP was chosen as the primary research community because of its age, size, and accessibility. The server opened on July 2, 2022, allowing me to witness the nascent interactions of the players who would become the server community. The majority of the members had not played together before, reinforcing the primordial nature of the group dynamic. The server population never exceeded 30 members. While this does present questions about the sample size of the community, it alleviates any concerns in tracking consent or participation in the research. The server owner, CricketMC, and the server community as a whole welcomed the research openly. At no point during my time on the server was there a restriction on the research conducted.

2.2. Comparative Observation

For comparison and context, supplemental fieldwork was done on the Hypixel, Cubscriber, and Acecraft servers. Each of these servers offer a distinctly different view of play style, population size and meaningful social interactivity, and therefore a distinct community identity beyond mere

server name or IP address. On the Hypixel and Cubscriber servers, due to their size and community composition, active consent was impractical, if not impossible. Furthermore, both servers had strict rules in place forbidding the sharing of personal information such as age, making the validity of any consent suspect (Contributor A, Contributor B). There was no acceptable way to exclude non-consenting or underaged members from joining in conversations despite reminders that research was being conducted. While there are arguments to be made for the allowance of uninformed observation and data collection being performed without consent within public spaces (Bernard 2017), whether or not these spaces might be considered public. Given that these servers had clearly published rules limiting the kinds of information to be shared among its users, I felt that there was enough assumption of privacy present to make unobtrusive observation unethical (Sechrest and Phillips 1979). For this reason, all participatory conversations were discarded and all observations are drawn from informal observed conversations. Additionally, the information gleaned from my passive observations is not directly referenced within this thesis. I used the data from these servers as a control group and baseline context sample. The only exceptions to this come from two anonymous interviews with server moderators.

Hypixel is a heavily modded public server that offers a variety of minigames rather than the typical Minecraft play format. Hypixel is also a large server, boasting an average daily player population of 45,000 (Krashnz n.d.) and a total server population of over 18 million unique players (Simon 2020). The majority of player relationships are ephemeral, lasting the length of a given minigame. And while there are established long term friendships and cliques on the server, most of these were established and continue to be maintained on other SMP servers.

The Cubscriber server is a private whitelist, vanilla, Survival server with a player base of approximately 350 members (Contributor B 2022). The server is centered around Cubfan135, a professional Minecraft content creator. Cubfan is mainly known for playing on the Hermitcraft server with several other popular Minecraft content creators. Subscribers to his Patreon page or Twitch channel are whitelisted on the Cubscriber SMP. As such, the server has a robust moderation team that enforces civility and the community's gameplay guidelines. The moderation team is also responsible for organizing several server-wide events and group building projects. One such activity is a community dragon fight, allowing direct comparison with the Petrichor SMP.

The Acecraft server was a private whitelist, vanilla, Survival server that closed in the Autumn of 2022. During the time I was observing Acecraft, it had 11 total members, two of which

were regularly active. Acecraft was started by CricketMC, a content creator on Twitch and YouTube, for members of her Twitch stream chats looking for a friendly Minecraft server. The server culture included several rites of passage, including a mandatory banishment from the server's population center until the player had a complete set of diamond armor, weapons, and tools (CricketMC 2023).

2.3. Interpretive Interactionism

To collect and analyze the data, the research invokes the concepts of interpretive interactionism, a multi-pronged approach that incorporates "performance texts, autoethnography, poetry, fiction, open-ended and creative interviewing, document analysis, semiotics, life history, life story, personal experience and self-story construction, participant observation, and thick description" (Denzin 2001, xi). The variety of techniques allows for a fuller examination of the experiential aspects of Minecraft gameplay, which is itself essential to establishing context for those who do not play the game. Norman K. Denzin (2001, 38-39) designed interpretive interactionism to study rituals people construct to deal with *epiphanies*, a term he uses to describe the moments of interruption and restoration in their daily lives. Denzin, who passed away on August 6 of this year, published numerous works on qualitative methodology, including co-authoring the first edition of The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research with Yvonna Lincoln (Todd 2023).

It should be noted that interpretive interactionism was initially conceived to research the "interrelationship between private lives and public responses to personal troubles. (Denzin 2001, 2). Issues such as alcoholism and domestic abuse are common within Denzin's text. A less intense example of an epiphany centers on a 55-year-old Jack, who has brought his new girlfriend to meet his mother, Mae. Seeing that his mother's bird feeder is empty, Jack goes to fill it. Mae admonishes Jack not to overfill the feeder, making an aside to Shelly, the girlfriend, that Jack "always spills seed on the ground. He's just like a little boy" (46). This was done in front of Jack, who goes outside and proceeds to overfill the feeder and spill the excess seed. Mae ridicules Jack in front of Shelly, ridiculing him and putting the trouble in their relationship on display. Jack then responds by doing exactly what he had been told not to. Spilling the seed is his way of pushing back. It is a repeated rebellion against the derision and belittlement he has endured at the hands of his mother. The entire interaction is rote, a form of ritualized combat acted out subconsciously. Jack presents

himself to Mae for approval, creating an interruption in their power dynamic. Mae denigrates Jack. Jack responds by passive-aggressively fulfilling Mae's derogations, restoring their relationship to its previous state.

While the majority of his examples revolve around dark emotions or traumatic events, Denzin states that epiphanies may be positive, negative, or both positive and negative (34-35). Additionally, these events are structurally similar to the liminal shifts experienced when players enter their digital environment (Waskul 2005). Denzin goes on to explain that interpretive interactionism is intended to "interpret and perform symbolic and interactional expressions of meaningful, turning-point experiences" (2001, 123). There is then little logical reason to limit the use of the method to emotionally or physically traumatic events. I posit that the same reasoning which makes interpretive interactionism suited to researching the narratives surrounding negative emotions and events, that is the innate flexibility of the method and its ability to return authority to the interviewee, makes it suitable for studying video game culture (49-50).

I base this opinion on two factors. The more obvious reason is the self-denigration and disparagement the members of the Petrichor server displayed. A common refrain heard from members of the server was that Minecraft is "a silly little game" (spawn1970 2023) and that their community was unworthy of academic research. Without disputing or equating the intensity of the emotions between adult video game players and Denzin's proposed research communities, the same type of negativity exists and hampers free discussion of their experiences. In addition to this, Denzin (2001, 38-39) notes that during an epiphany, the individual goes through a liminal transition, a separation from their public reality. This is reflected in the liminal shift experienced by video game players as they transition from their analog reality to their digital existence (Proctor 2012, 176). The ubiquity and regularity of these mundane liminalities make them different from the more ritualized liminal transitions that Arnold van Gennep ([1960] 2013, 11) spoke of. The similarities between digital and trauma epiphanies, that is the need for a more balanced power dynamic between the researcher and the contributors, as well as the recognition of a softer, more pervasive liminal transition, are what make interpretive interactionism an appropriate method for this research.

2.3.1. Informal Conversations

Initially, I planned on combining participatory observation with semi-structured, formal interviews as the main method of data collection. I honestly admit that this was picked more because it felt like a reliable default tack than for any other purpose. This arrogance quickly led to a series of self-inflicted frustrations. While eagerly open to my role as a participant observer, server members were less enthusiastic about more formal research techniques. Players showed an initial reluctance to structured, one-on-one discussions, either directly refusing requests or, more often, cancelling at the last minute or missing the scheduled interview. Over time, the players began to openly admit to feelings of inadequacy about their ability or even right to speak on the topic (Contributor C 2023; spawn1970 2023). These concerns were not an issue while playing on the Petrichor server. In this more comfortable setting, and by weaving questions and discussion topics into regular conversations during play, this obstacle was overcome. The players' responses were unhindered by the perceived need to sound academically acceptable or formal. Consequently, informal conversations quickly became the most effective approach with which to gather information. This technique offers a greater opportunity for the members to relax, creating a more natural flow to the conversation (Swain and King 2022). This development mirrors the use of "open-ended and creative interviewing" (Denzin 2001, xi) inherent in interpretive interactionism and therefore fit nicely within the other techniques of the methodology.

Informal conversations are further divided into two categories. *Participatory conversations* are those in which the researcher is actively involved, whether or not they are asking questions. *Observed conversations* are those that are overheard. The researcher is eavesdropping, listening to but not joining in the discussion (Swain and King 2022). Both conversation types were used freely, but I had a tendency to actively participate more than listen in. As a passive listener, I felt like an intruder rather than a server mate. Participation, however, helped sooth both my misgivings and feelings among my server mates that they were just subjects or lab rats (Denzin 2001, 66). While playing, it is easy to lose track of who is around, revealing information to an unintended audience. I felt an obligation in my role as researcher to actively protect the safe space of the server, reminding my server mates on numerous occasions that I was conducting research as we played and that anything gleaned might be published (Bernard 2017, 345). While only a few requests were

made to censor anything observed. the informal nature of the casual conversations easily led to very frank and personal discussion. Though this is the desired outcome of any ethnographic work, it also comes with a duty to report only that which is relevant and necessary to the research. This thought was foremost and ever present throughout my fieldwork. In the end, these were not participants, informants, or interlocutors. They were, and are, friends who willingly opened themselves up for observation, interpretation, and critique. This was also a consideration for keeping the discussions in-game. It kept the players in-game. This may sound overly simplistic, but by allowing discussions about Minecraft to take place *in situ,* the players' in-game identities were preserved, allowing them to act and converse within that mindset (Bernard 2017, 334). This brought a more organic feel to the conversations, inviting others to join in whenever they desired. It also created a flow independent of the interviewer, wherein the players prompted one another to discuss or describe what they were saying in more detail. Another benefit to in-game and informal conversation as a data collection method is that it allows the players to play. Given that the gamers in questions are adults, their playtime was already limited by their responsibilities to their jobs and families. Rather than taking more time away from their Minecraft experience, these conversations ran alongside their play.

The most readily apparent downside of this method is that it does require the interviewer to regularly redirect the topic of discussion, an endeavor that is not always successful. This means that information gathering can take a great deal longer than formalized interviews do. Time must be allotted for in-game happenings, such as emergency runs to save the items dropped when a player dies or fighting of a surprise *Illager* raid. It should also be noted that the discussions happen in a semi-public space, which may inhibit players from voicing unpopular or contrary opinions. Efforts were made to alleviate this by making additional conversations available through one-on-one voice chats, email, and private messages. Personally, however, the biggest issue with using informal conversation as the means for data-gathering was consent. Given that these in-game dialogues were open to the server public, it was impossible to gain active consent from all participants on the larger servers. Players that were only members of a server for a few days could join in the conversation without ever agreeing to be part of the research. Others who had actively refused involvement would comment or redirect portions of the conversations. This concern was, as previously mentioned, alleviated by centering the research on a small, whitelisted server.

2.3.2. Thick Semi-autoethnography

The descriptive gameplay sections, heavily reliant on my own experiences related through thick description, are an attempt to depict not just the actions and external circumstances of a happening, but to incorporate a sketch of the internal monologue and meaning, the private context, which accompanies it (Denzin 2001, 99-100). I hope that these sections work to tackle the experiential nature of Minecraft gameplay in general as well as the ender dragon fight, the event at the center of this research, specifically. As mentioned previously, these sections are written as narrative, a "thick, multivoiced, contextual interpretation" (133) that relaxes the vocabulary and grammar usually associated with academic texts in an effort to more accurately convey the emotions and experience to the reader.

The initial dragon fight of the Petrichor SMP was a team combat that took place during a live Twitch stream. The chaos, confusion, and danger of the fight make it difficult, if not impossible, to collect the inner thoughts and reactions of other players. Talking, other than the odd expletive or cry of surprise, can be distracting to a player while they attempt to survive. The voice chat, the main line of communication, needs to remain available for important messages like calls for assistance or pertinent information. Adding to this is the deference given to any player livestreaming during the event. Content creators work to cultivate an audience that wants to watch them play. It is accepted etiquette that non-streamers should try to not overrun a streamer's commentary (CricketMC 2023). This assists the streamer in interacting with their viewers, an essential part of a content creator's livelihood. All of this works to prevent any running commentary from other players. To correct for this shortcoming, an autoethnographic account was seen as the best way to provide the missing context and personal interpretation of the dragon fight, fulfilling the requirement that "meaningful interpretations of human experience can come only from those persons who have thoroughly immersed themselves" (Denzin 2001, 46).

Chapter 3: Theory

This thesis relies on the belief that there is no distinction between the analog, or physical, reality and the digital reality of online existence. While these two are often called the "real world" and "virtual reality" respectively, I reject those terms. Without wandering too far astray on a rant, this verbiage is both misleading and harmful. Multiple psychological studies have indicated that our presence in the digital realities, that is our friendships, achievements, experiences, and so on, are just as real, even with the very limited amount of immersion current technology allows, as those of the physical (Mallen, Day, and Green 2003; Perry et al., 2017). In-game success has been shown to increase the mental and emotional well-being of players outside of the digital reality in which they achieved them, the benefits crossing over into their analog lives (Kaye et al. 2017; Gallup et al. 2016; Gallup et al. 2017). This is vital because it creates the allowance to transfer the understandings and theories of how analog communities work and interact into the digital realm. If there is no hard line drawn between these two environments, then there is no hard line between how they function, what they require of the individual members, or how the individuals interact with one another. In essence, the *virtual* is as real as the *real*.

In addition to the methods of data collection that Denzin (2001) advocates for in his interpretive interactionism, I have also employed some of his theories on the analysis of said data. As noted in the introduction, it is of key importance that the information gathered, and the points drawn from it, be accessible to the people to whom it belongs (84). Interpretive interactionism doubles down on this point with the use of native interpretation in addition to observer interpretation. Where the latter records the author's reading of a given event, the former voices the informant's perspective (127-128). It was with these twinned viewpoints in mind that the descriptive gameplay sections were written. Doing so required me to pull back the curtain on my research. At the conclusion of my fieldwork, and as a second stage of my interviews, I shared some of my thoughts and opinions with my server mates. This was done to gather their *meta*-thoughts, those formed with a full overview of my research questions and theories, as a complement to their *meso*-thoughts, those that existed within the moment and without the deeper awareness. This returns the interpretive voice to the players without voiding or overwriting my own.

This also reinforces the focus interpretive interactionism puts on idiographic research. Assuming that all events, and their accompanying meanings, are unique requires that their recording and interpretation are not to be generalized. There is, therefore, an emphasis on the emic viewpoint and voice. "Interpretation is done by interpreters, of which there are two types: (a) the people who have actually experienced what is described and (b) so-called well-informed experts, who are often ethnographers, sociologists, or anthropologists" (Denzin 2001, 123-124). This again reiterates the need for meta-analysis on the part of the informants, as well as careful consideration in the creation of the thick descriptions found in the narrative passages of this thesis. Where other methods may call for mor formalized language, interpretive interactionism demands the opposite. The "nonbiographical stance does not permit the discovery of what a particular interactional moment means to its interactants ... Although they may be able to reveal the structure of such moments, they are unable to reveal their meanings to the participants in question" (41).

3.1. Community Defined

Before exploring what creates a Minecraft community, it is essential to first define what community actually is. It would be simple enough to say a community is a group of people with a shared goal or interest. However, as digital realities continue to evolve, new intersections will emerge creating new community structures and types. Rather than delving too far into this topic, this thesis relies on an older, more concrete depiction of community borrowed from the field of social and community psychology.

> Our proposed definition has four elements. The first element is *membership.* Membership is the feeling of belonging or of sharing a sense of personal relatedness. The second element is *influence,* a sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group and of the group mattering to its members. The third element is reinforcement: *integration and fulfillment of needs.* This is the feeling that members' needs will be met by the resources received through their membership in the group. The last element is *shared emotional connection,* the commitment and belief that

members have shared and will share history, common places, time

together, and similar experiences (McMillan and Chavis 1986, 9).

Using this definition, a community must fulfill four requirements. The first of these requirements is membership, a delineation between those that belong and those that do not. The form that this border takes depends on the community itself. A religious community sets itself apart by its beliefs and practices. A friend group draws its borders through its own inside jokes, coded language and references, and history. A fandom distinguishes itself through its references, ostensive practices, and general appreciation for its specific franchise. This is to say that there cannot be membership without exclusion; in any community, there must be an *Us* and *Them* (McMillan and Chavis 1986). Additionally, one of the marks of membership is shared experiences, history, stories, or other intangibles. These create the group's zeitgeist, the emotional bond that forms the underpinning of the community identity. This means that there is more to tie an individual to the group than just a membership card. Revisiting the previous examples, the religious community has its shared litanies and hymns, festivals, holy days, and fellowships. The friends have memories they built together, shared joys and tears. The fandom celebrates and mourns the story arcs of their characters and shares a slang based around story events. The last two elements that constitute a community, influence and fulfillment, are opposite sides of the same coin. Influence is what the individual can contribute to the community while fulfillment is what the community can give to the individual. What makes a community viable is the individual's ability to rely upon the community to meet their needs. The way the community meets those needs is through the contributions of other members.

In many MMOs, community is created as a requisite to basic gameplay. It is a construct of the game developers imposed upon the players whether they wish it or not. Community creating tools are built into the game's structure, as are reward systems to encourage more active community participation (Moon et al. 2013; O'Connor et al. 2015). To explore this concept, World of Warcraft (WoW) will be used as an assumed exemplar of the genre. WoW is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), a subgenre of MMOs. The game has been live since 2004 and still maintains an estimated monthly player base of over eight million distinct accounts (World of Warcraft Live Player Count and Statistics, n.d.). It is because of WoW's longevity, sustained popularity, and well-documented history that it is being used as the model for MMOs in this research. This will be compared with the lack of both gameplay structure and built-

in community tools found in Minecraft. By contrasting these two games, the need for player created societal reinforcements will be made evident.

3.2. Imposed Community Structures in World of Warcraft

Unlike Minecraft, which offers solo play as well as multiplayer, WoW is an online only game, meaning that all gameplay is on multiplayer servers. However, in World of Warcraft, before a player can join a server, they must create a character. The first step in character creation is choosing a *faction*, the Alliance or the Horde. This creates an immediate *border*, one of the first requirements for community. It is the simple Us versus Them. This is reinforced in the game since characters from one faction cannot communicate with members of the other. Any typed text in chat we'll come across as meaningless garble, including any emojis that players may use to try to bypass this filter. This separation is once more emphasized by faction-based player versus player combat, an unavoidable feature of WoW even in non PvP servers. This means that even if players opt to avoid PvP combat, it can and will occur in designated areas of the game map. While duels between members of the same faction are purely optional, inter-factional PvP is nonconsensual. There is a further breakdown within the factions, that being player race. A Horde player can be, to give just a few choices, an orc, an undead, or a blood elf. Alliance players can be human, night elf, or gnome, to name just a few. Each race comes with its own advantages and disadvantages, strengths and weaknesses, as well as side quests and storylines. While not as hard a border as faction, these establish distinctions between characters inherent in their creation.

The racial differences also dictate whether or not a player may choose a given character class. Whether or not a character can be a priest, a class known for its ability to heal and buff players, or a rogue, infamous for their ability to dole out large bursts of damage in short amount of time, is dependent on that character's race. This affects the character's *influence* within the group. It also creates the character's *integration* in the group. The healer is a weak combatant and needs assistance in offense and defense. The rogue, with its high DPS, damage per second, has little ability to sustain itself on the battlefield and requires with the healing and buffing that the priest provides. Other classes may provide defense or crowd control, the ability to manage multiple enemies at once. Game developers work diligently to balance class strengths and weaknesses so

that no one class is independent or superior to the others. This is an intrinsic part of the game, a built-in reliance on other players.

Another fundamental part of community is the *shared emotional connection*. In the World of Warcraft this goes beyond the basic shared game experience. WoW incorporates raids and dungeons, called instances, which are segregated, multi-staged combat scenarios with vastly increased difficulty over the normal game. Instances require and minimum number of players to initiate. All players must come from the same faction and, if the party wishes to survive, a balanced mix of character classes. Once the party has met the minimum member requirement, They may enter the instance. This is a locked area where no other players may enter. The party must rely only upon its members. The shared experience creates war stories, inside jokes, and collective sorrow and joy. These create connections between the party members, be they positive or negative. Players know who they enjoy playing with and who they wish to avoid through these experiences.

3.3. The Structureless Nature of Minecraft

Minecraft on the other hand has no such structures. There is no true character creation as seen in the World of Warcraft. Avatar customization is limited to player name and the choice of skin design, or what the character looks like. There is no border between players except those constructed by players. The only Us versus Them that is built into Minecraft is player versus the environment, or PvE. This is distinct from PvP since in PvE the player struggles against non-player characters, or NPCs. While PvP is optional it is not requisite. The only threats the player must face are those of the game itself, the hostile mobs and environmental dangers. Likewise, there are no differentiations in character ability or potential. The distinctions come down to player ability and desire. If a player wishes to farm and not adventure into the unknown, they're welcome to set up a farm and live a pacifist game life. I played this way on a multiplayer server for two years. I neither interacted with other players unless they happened upon my farm, nor did I seek out NPC mobs. I farmed carrots. With this style of play, there was no integration into the server community, no reliance upon other players. And, as can be expected, I had no influence upon the community. I lived an entirely separate existence from the other 200 plus players. This also means that there was no shared emotional connection. I knew little of what went on elsewhere except for the brief messages in chat. With the exception of the obligatory greetings, often shown as "'o" or "o7" when

I logged on, and those few explorers who wandered onto my farm, I had no presence or interaction with others.

This lack of structure is one of the hallmarks of Minecraft and often credited for its longevity (outsidexbox 2023). At its core, Minecraft is less of a video game than a digital toy, a setting in which the player may express themselves with almost no limitations. This is due to it being both an open world and sandbox game. There is no intrinsic point to playing Minecraft. Players are welcome to play in whatever way, and with whatever goals, they deem best. Speedrunners attempt to beat the story of the game as quickly as possible, with the current world record sitting around 8 minutes. Redstoners are players that specialize in creating automated machinery and complex circuitry using in-game resources. Several players have built fully functional computers within Minecraft, thereby making a physical machine in a digital world run on a physical machine in the analog world. There is nothing that requires the player to be or do anything except for a simple hunger mechanic. There is no limit to what a player can accomplish except their own skill level and creativity. Unlike the World of Warcraft where character creation choices dictate the player's experiences and relative success, in Minecraft, the player is their own limitation.

3.4. Context Collapse: Collisions and Collusions

When a person ventures online, they experience what boyd (2002, 2008) calls *context collapse*. This is when portions, or facets, of a person's identity are masked or hidden. Facets can include gender, age, nationality, or any other of the multitude of identity markers we carry with us, willingly or not, knowingly or not. The erasing of facets can be voluntary, done as a way of presenting the most favorable version of the self to a given group. Collapse can be an involuntary effect of the internet architecture. A person that finds themselves in a new group may discover that certain facets of their identity have been assigned to them through the assumptions of the other members. *Context collusion* and *context collision* are further granulations of the concept. Context collusion is collapse as originally described by boyd. It is the conscious and willing expunging of identity markers by the individual. Context collision, however, is unavoidable, an inherent part of the technological structure of the internet (Davis and Jurgenson 2014; Duguay, 2016; Loh and Walsh 2021; Marwick and boyd 2010; Vitak 2012).

Whether the loss occurs through collision or collusion, the lost facets must be accounted for; what has collapsed must be rebuilt. The reconstruction of identity is a collaborative, performative process, involving the individual and their community (boyd 2002; Rodney 2020). The missing pieces are often filled in to reflect the expectations of the audience, either by the individual themselves or by their community (Davis 2016; Silfverberg et al., 2011; Uski and Lampinen 2016). This is to say that the individual's identity is built to fit with that group. In the realms of massive multiplayer online games (MMOs), the game creators incorporate multiple identity structures within which the player may construct their game identity. Playstyle becomes a substitute for occupation or class. In the analog world, I might introduce myself as a programmer, a student, or a store clerk. In World of Warcraft, that role would be replaced by *healer* or *hunter*. In Minecraft, however, there are none of these classifications. There are no accountants or janitor, no paladins or rogues. Each character has the same abilities and opportunities as another. The differences are created by external skill, knowledge, and preference. A redstoner is a redstoner because they enjoy creating electro-mechanical devices in game using redstone. A PvPer is a PvPer because that is the part of the game they embrace most. Identity creation is returned to the player with the removal of the identity structures of other MMOs.

Context collapse, however, extends beyond the individual to the community. Just as a specific person's facets may disappear online, so do facets of the community (boyd 2002; 2008). This is understandable given that a community is a complex structure consisting of its individual members. It could be likened to a Lego house, wherein all of the individual blocks are the members and the total structure, the community. In this scenario, if the colors of all the blocks were changed to grey, then the house would also become a flat grey. The green door, the red roof, and the blue and white striped walls would lose a dimension of their individuality. The house, still recognizable as a house, would likewise suffer this loss. And, if seen in a neighborhood of similarly monotone houses, would be near indistinguishable from its neighbors without deeper inspection. Once this occurs, it is up to the members of the community to reassert its individuality and character (Crenshaw and Nardi 2016; McMillan and Chavis 1986; Shih and Huang 2012). Just as Minecraft lacks inherent tools to build personal identity within the game, it also has no intrinsic structures for community creation. If identity creation is returned to the player, then community creation is likewise returned to the community.

Chapter 4: The Ender Dragon Fight

It would be easy to characterize the ender dragon as just another video game boss, that big, bad you have to fight to beat the game. And while it is, it has a number of distinct characteristics the distinguish her from her peers in other games. Unlike them, the ender dragon is not the toughest opponent a player will face. Both the wither and the warden are harder to kill and more dangerous to the player. But she is a singular entity. Multiple withers and wardens can exist simultaneously. The ender dragon cannot. Additionally, defeating the ender dragon completes the game. Once she is beaten, the End Poem is displayed, as are the credits. The game, in its official form, is over, but it does not end. Instead, a new part of the game opens up. This is the rest of the End Dimension, an empty void dotted with yellow floating islands and inhabited by physics defying, almost mystical creatures. Native to the End Dimension are the shulker and the enderman. While enderman can be found throughout the end islands, as well as visiting both the Overworld and the Nether, the shulker can only be found in end cities and end ships, structures which can be found on the outer end islands. Shulkers, strange yellow monsters that live in hard, purple boxes, may be harvested for their shells. The shells can then be used to create shulker boxes, greatly increasing a player's carrying capacity. Also found in the end ships is the elytra, a cape that allows the wearer to glide or fly. While neither the shulker box nor the elytra are necessary for any part of the game, they do enhance it allowing players more freedom to explore, build, farm, and so forth.

And though it is possible to respawn the ender dragon over and over again, this change in game play only comes with the first defeat of the dragon on a server. This makes the initial dragon fight an important and unique event for the server. "That first fight on a server, the first time you kill the dragon is special. There will never be another one of those again" (CricketMC 2023). This is one of the reasons why server moderators began to lock the dragon fight, making it impossible to undertake until the software locks were removed. Speaking with moderators of a larger SMP server, they mentioned that speed runners would join on the first day of a server's season. As is part of their preferred play style, the speed runners would defeat the ender dragon within 15 minutes of the server's start. The moderators noted that if this happened on a server, the active number of players on a server would quickly drop. As a way of preventing player disillusionment

and disenfranchisement, the initial dragon fight was turned into a server event. Before the server launched, the end dimension and with it the ender dragon would be locked, preventing any fight before a predetermined date. The date and time were made public, allowing players that wanted to take part time to prepare (Contributor B 2022; Contributor C 2022).

The intended outcome of the organized dragon fight was player retention, to create a deeper interest for players to remain on a server. And it did this. While it was noted that the speed run players rarely joined servers that used this tactic, the overall populations stayed longer and were more active during their time on the server (Contributor B 2022; Contributor C 2022). For the first few seasons that the dragon fight was held as a server-wide event, it was no more than the dragon fight. Players showed up at the appointed time and left when it was over. Over time, this began to change. Players began to organize preparation activities, divvying up the various responsibilities and learning to rely on one another. The fight itself became a part of the event, not just the event itself. As it evolved, the dragon fight began to create small communities, player groups that interacted more often and more efficiently. The player populations of larger servers, sometimes in the hundreds of players, could host numerous smaller groups. On smaller servers, like Petrichor, the entire player base became one such group.

The group dragon fight created more than a steady player base, it created collective memories, the shared emotional connection that is a cornerstone of community. Individual exploits and tales of heroism began to flourish. Stories of a lucky arrow strike stood hand in hand with the woes from an accidental and avoidable death. Players that lacked PvE skills contributed by preparing armor, weapons, potions, and other gear. Adventurous players dove into the dangerous Nether Dimension, facing lava and ghostly fires to retrieve the blaze rods necessary for the upcoming journey. Farmers stockpiled food and miners gathered raw materials for the crafters. Any player, no matter how new or unskilled, was able to contribute, embodying the twinned communal pillars of integration and fulfillment (Contributor D 2023; CricketMC 2023; spawn1970 2023). And, when the day of the dragon fight came, there were those who participated and those who did not, the clear dividing line between Us and Them. The dragon fight, when made collective, had all the markers of a community building event (McMillan and Chavis 1986).

4.1. The Ritual Structure of Diamonds and Dragons

Additionally, there is the structure of the corporate dragon fight. A rite of passage "may be subdivided into *rites of separation, transition rites,* and *rites of incorporation*" (van Gennep [1960] 2013, 11). There are multiple layers of this pattern that can be found in the group ender dragon fight, an examination of which would require an entirely new thesis. For now, I will stick with the outermost layer of this onion. To fight the dragon, we must find the dragon. This is not as easy as it may sound. The ender dragon lives in another dimension, The End. To get there, players must locate and activate an end portal. Both of these actions require blaze powder, which can only be obtained from the nether, yet another dimension. We must, therefore, leave their homes and journey to a dangerous and exotic locale to find this fiery resource, an almost too obvious stand-in for the light of wisdom we need to guide us on our next steps. We have been separated.

We craft the blaze powder into Eyes of Ender, which guide us to a long-buried fortress. Within its labyrinthine walls is an incomplete end portal. Again, the Eyes of Ender are needed to finish the structure and open the portal to The End. This journey, seeking our doorway and stepping through it are the first steps of our transition. We, again a little too obviously, must step through the portal. The dragon fight begins immediately. It is not until the combat has concluded that we may complete our liminal stage. The End is our chrysalis and we are mid-metamorphosis.

Once the fight is over, the celebrations begin. Armor and weapons are returned to their original owners. War stories are swapped, exaggerated, and swapped again. Two new portals open. One leads deeper into the dark, unexplored expanse of The End, to new dangers and new treasures. The other returns us home to our beds. Whether we return to the Overworld directly or if we spend some time in the inky blackness of the void, we all come home. We are reunited, remade, and reincorporated.

This contrasts with the purposefully created ritual of burning your first diamond. Diamonds are a finite resource in a Minecraft world and are necessary for creating and enchanting the best gear. As such, they are often used as currency on multiplayer servers. At some point, a trend began where it was customary to sacrifice the first diamond a player found by burning it in fire. There are limitations to this as a community building ritual. Since diamonds are obtainable by players of any skill level, there is no integration or influence to be found in this experience.

Neither the group nor the individual gains anything from the other through the burning of a diamond, removing any of the player's influence or integration within the community. And since the vast majority of servers that hold to this ritual place the responsibility upon the individual, without supplying a designated area, time, or detailed method for the act, there is no shared emotional connection. With this last caveat in mind, it should be noted that there is also no accountability and therefore no true and distinct border. There is no way of verifying who is a member and who is not, who has burned their diamond and has not (spawn1970 2023).

4.2. The Petrichor SMP Dragon Fight Narrative

The following section is written with an informal, first-person point of view. It incorporates both my own experiences during gameplay and those garnered from my fellow players through our voice chats. It is a creative, non-fictional retelling of life on the Petrichor SMP taken from my field notes collected from July 2022 until January 2023.

When the Petrichor SMP launched only a few of the players knew each other. It was part of what attracted me to the server. The chance to observe a group of new players on a brand-new server, while not unique, was vital to the research. Additionally, the players were welcoming to me both as a player and a researcher. Though they downplayed the importance of Minecraft and their community as a research subject, they were willing to oblige me. I was invited to join the Petrichor SMP for its opening day, July 2, 2021. When I logged into the brand-new server, I stood in a group with eight other strangers. The only person I knew was the server owner, CricketMC. We had previously played together on the Cubscriber SMP, a server with a population of around 250 regular players. That server was run by Cubfan135, a YouTube content creator and member of the Hermitcraft SMP. A few of the players had been members of CricketMC's previous SMP, Acecraft, and knew each other from there. But most of us were playing together for the first time. We stood together for a group screenshot on a tiny island, barely big enough for all of us to crowd on. Night began to fall over the game world as we prepared to set out.

Almost immediately there were cries for help. One of the players, spawn1970, was new to the Java Edition of Minecraft, having solely played on Bedrock before that day. The game controller they had always played on before was replaced by a computer keyboard and mouse. "How do you swim? How do you swim?" came blaring out across the voice chat. At first, we all

laughed, thinking this was just a joke. That kind of humor is common on a server, long time players asking newbie questions pretending not to know how to play. But as the cries persisted, players began to shout back, "Spacebar! Hit the spacebar!" Luckily, spawn1970 was able to make it to the surface before they drowned. It was only then that the rest of us realized that one of us was not an experienced Java player. It makes for a funny story, but illustrates just how much we were assuming about each other and how much we had to learn.

Once our heart rates slowed back down, we set off for the mainland in the distance. We had been told there was a village on the shore where we could set up a capital city. But night had fallen and if you have never played Minecraft, then you would not know that this is when the world gets dangerous. Hostile mobs, NPCs that actively attack and try to kill you spawn in the darkness. Since we were new to this world, we were unarmed and unarmored. We also had no food to help us recover health. And, sure enough, as we approached land we could see zombies, skeletons, in spiders waiting for us. Zombies are easy enough to avoid. They are slow and relatively easy to kill, but much like the zombie tropes, their dangerous in their numbers and their relentlessness. Skeletons in Minecraft are nimble archers, deadly from a distance and accurate. Spiders are fast, leaping the final few spaces for the attack. It may sound silly to say that this kind of danger can make the heart race come on but it does. Even though I take no damage, am in no danger, SlightlyImmortal can and is. And I am not alone in these feelings. The fear and adrenaline rush and the voices of my server mates tells me I am not alone. We can sense the danger; we internalize it.

We died multiple times that night. We died trying to run. We died trying to fight. We died trying to save each other. We died again and again and again. But slowly, the sun rose. The zombies and skeletons burnt in the purifying rays of the sun. The spiders turned docile. No more enemies spawned while the sun warms the land. Some of us used this reprieve to build shelters and farms. Others dug deep into the earth, mining for coal, iron, and stone. One or two built boats and go exploring. For the next few weeks, we worked alongside each other, but independently. I built a potato farm that feeds the server for several months to come. CricketMC and spawn1970 brought back iron for weapons, tools, and armor. Small buildings popped up around Petrichor City, our newly christened capital. And though there is a group storage system where anyone can take supplies as needed, we do not really function as a group. We are collective, sharing our goods but not our experiences.

That is until the date of the dragon fight is announced. It seems as if a fever takes over the server. Even though the Nether terrifies me, it is my least favorite part of the game by a large margin, I end up helping to build a blaze farm. We need the blaze rods to make potions and Eyes of Ender. The potions will help us fight the ender dragon. The Eyes will help us find and open the portal to her. Since I am a terrifically incompetent Minecraft player, my Discord tagline is "I'm no good at this game and I'm okay with that," I distract the hostile mobs while others do the actual construction of the farm. Dying I can do. Building? Not so much. But eventually the farm is done and the blaze rods are collected. During this time, one of the players, a Minecrafter with amazing redstone and technical skills, has built a potion brewing machine. Things are slowly coming together as the group talks back and forth, making plans and discussing what we still need to get done.

As a group, we go in search of a stronghold, a hidden dungeon that holds a magical portal to the End Dimension. We travel for several game days, building dirt huts along the way to hide from the dangers of the night. We even find a lost sheep along the way. Betsy, as she comes to be known, is then brought with us, as a mascot and friend. Eventually, we find the stronghold. Or, more accurately, we locate its position. It lies deep underground and we must dig our way to it. Again, if you do not play Minecraft, then you will not know that there are two generally agreed upon rules in Minecraft. First, never dig straight down. The second is never dig straight up. Doing either of these are good ways to die in lava. But, as CricketMC is quick to demonstrate, rules are made to be broken. Following her lead, several of us begin digging straight down. Luckily none of us meet a fiery red fate. What we do meet are the hostile denizens of the stronghold, more zombies, skeletons, and spiders. We put down torches as we explore, their light preventing anymore from spawning. After a few deaths and quite a bit of swearing, we find the portal room.

At the moment, the End Dimension is still locked away. This was just an exploratory mission, a quest to find the next step. There is still much preparation needed, and some new items were just added to that list. The stronghold needs to be made safe. It also needs to be made pretty. This is one of the requirements that CricketMC has before the End Dimension will be opened. It is another step, another box to be ticked. But by turning the stronghold from a sterile base camp of plain stone brick walls into a more comfortable respite, a sense of ownership and pride takes hold. When we die during the dragon fight, we will respawn here. There will be extra armor and weapons to re-gear the fallen. There will be food and potions ready for the player before they re-

enter the fray. The little bits of decoration and personalization take some of the sting out of each death. Signs with inside jokes lighten the mood and a jacuzzi sits in the corner just in case you need to unwind.

When the day of the dragon fight finally arrives, the mood is anxious but positive. There is a tense excitement that fills the chat. Some players chatter on about the quality of their gear and enchantments. Others are telling dad jokes or singing pop songs from the early 80s. That last one is me. Over the voice chat you can my offkey cover of Katrina and the Waves ... *I'm walking on sunshine* ... No matter what we are doing, we are doing it together, waiting nervously for those among us that stream to Twitch and YouTube to get ready ... *Woooah* ... Just before it is time for the fight to start, we take another group picture, this time of us in the hot tub ... *and don't it feel good!* Then it begins. We jump into the portal, waiting for the new dimension to render on our PCs. The emptiness of the Void surrounds us. A wrong step will drop us into its inky blackness to certain death. The dragon screeches out above us and the frivolity of a few seconds earlier turns to icy nervousness. The first death in the dragon fight is ignominious. Your name is plastered in chat for everyone to see, your failure laid bare before your friends. It does not help that this is being watched by who knows how many others live and how many more in later replays. I make a quick wave and get everyone's attention before casually stepping off the edge of the island. The first death is mine. The gasp of shock is broken by raucous laughter and giggles of disbelief. This is what I can contribute to the group. I am, as previously established, no good at combat. But dying, again, is my forte. Before I can respawn and get back to the End Dimension, my server mates have begun the battle.

Some of the players are good archers, able to hit the dragon as she flies so far overhead. Others block climb, jumping while placing blocks under your feet to climb to otherwise unreachable heights, to the top of the obsidian towers with the aim of destroying the dragon-healing end crystals that sit atop them. As the fight goes on, the dragon will land for a short time, allowing the brave and fool-hardy among us to charge up to her and attack. She will throw some of us high into the air, the hard impact of the fall killing us immediately if we do not have the proper potions. Her breath is a mess of magenta sparkles that injure you if it hits or if you walk through the pools of it that linger on the ground. While those that can fight, I run to and fro picking up the dropped belongings of those that have died. I put their gear in chests we have hidden in a crude and hastily

built room for them to recover when they return. I splash others with healing potions if I can get to them in time. All of us contribute in the ways we can.

When the dragon finally dies, she lets out a loud scream and a blinding light. We dance among the glowing balls of experience her death litters the ground with, whooping and cheering. Choruses of "Did you see …" and "That was crazy when …" fill the voice chat. Jokes return and congratulations are tossed around. After a few minutes, the excitement begins to die down and some members leave the server. The streamers say goodbye to their audiences and the dragon fight comes to an end. It might, however, be better to say the fight concludes. The memories keep the event alive, with parts of it being stretched into legend. A mythology builds around it, and, despite the testimony of our own eyes and the recordings on YouTube, the inflated versions hold fast, the emotions becoming more real than the facts.

Conclusion

I moved often as a child. I was always the new kid in town. This meant that I constantly had to reestablish my place within my community. I encountered this online as well. Every forum and social media site have their own set of mores and expectations. So, too, does every online gaming community. This thesis endeavors to explore what makes one such community by attempting to live within the world of the Petrichor SMP. Information was gathered through participant-observation and persistent informal conversations that occurred over many hours of play. Supplemental interviews were used when available to gather deeper and more reflexive insights into the players' thoughts regarding the dragon fight and its meaning to the Petrichor community. Utilizing Denzin's interpretive interactionism as my core methodology dictated that the players, those whose collaborations and relationships were being considered, act as interpreters alongside myself (2001, 123-124). The meaning of the corporate dragon fight comes from the players and their interactions with one another in the preparation for and undertaking of the event. This generates a meta-emic analysis of the event, presented through composite narratives, thick descriptions which blend the voices and views of multiple server members.

Using the definition of community proposed by McMillan and Chavis (1986), the dragon fight functions as a catalyst, compelling the players to meet the four obligations they set out. As compared with the developer created community constructs found in World of Warcraft, the emptiness of purpose found in Minecraft put the onus on the players to create their own tools with which to build *communitas*. And, whereas WoW relies on inter-faction competition to create belonging, Minecraft relies on cooperation and group goodwill to create greater social capital and greater shared experiences. The shared emotional connection of the dragon fight lingers long past the actual event (Contributor D 2023; spawn1970 2023). The story of the dragon fight was told in whole to new players as they joined the server and shared over and over again in bits and pieces between older players. It will be carried outside of the game, as well.

> Doing it as a group is something you will never forget. To know that you
> were part of that, even though it's not in real life, you'll be telling your
> grandkids, 'Oh yeah there was this dragon fight.' It's that meaningful
> (CricketMC 2023).

During the preparation for the fight, as well as during the actual combat, the group filled in for each individual's weaknesses through the strengths of another member, the influences walking hand in hand with the integrations. This created another layer of *communitas*, particularly for those players who were uncomfortable with their PvE skills. "That moment, when everyone's gearing up and relying on each other for different things … [t]hat might be the only thing that gives them a sense of belonging" (CricketMC 2023).

Beyond this quick overview, it is important to note that the corporate dragon fight was not intended to fill this role. It was created to combat a very specific issue, the disenfranchisement of players that occurred when speed running players defeated the ender dragon within the opening minutes of a new server. The underlying reason for this effect, that players were made to feel unskilled as compared to the speed runners, was not considered. It was handled as a simple cause and effect (Contributor B 2022; Contributor C 2022; CricketMC 2023; Fieldnotes). As the concept of the group dragon fight spread from server to server, it began to take on deeper meanings. Players that had never fought the dragon began to participate as the increased size of the team created freedom for individualized play styles. In an unwitting reflection of the character classes imposed on the players in games like World of Warcraft, Minecraft players taking part in the dragon fight began to create their own roles in the combat. Those that were skilled with a bow and arrow became archers. Melee fighters took up the sword and shield. Others became support players, acting like healers or crowd control (spawn1970 2023). In contrast to the World of Warcraft, these were voluntary and not requisite. But the roles extended beyond the combat itself, into the lead up and preparation for the fight. Players with absolutely no interest in combat were able to contribute through resource gathering, manufacturing, and other support roles (Castillo 2019).

All meaning and importance attached to the ender dragon fight comes, therefore, from within the players. If it is only another step in the game or a fun little combat, then it is merely that. But if it is seen as something more, it becomes more because the individual says it is. Just as the imposed roles in World of Warcraft subvert the need for the community to make itself, imposed meaning, such as that found in the burning of diamonds, robs the community of self-identity and

self-creation. What makes the ender dragon fight function effectively as a community ritual? It is the players themselves. The self-determination, independence, and purposelessness that is the core of Minecraft gameplay acts as a blank slate for the players to create whatever they wish. Within this vacuum, the players will naturally gravitate toward their own interests and strengths. Their community, then, must be built on more than just shared digital space. The dragon fight creates shared experiences. It births the stories that the players tell long after they have shut down their computers. The corporate dragon fight is unnecessary and purely voluntary, and therefore meaningful and enduring.

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Resümee

Võitle oma riituse eest: veebikogukonna loomine Minecrafti rituaalis

Magistritöös vaadeldakse seda, kuidas Minecrafti videomängus kujuneb võitlus ender-draakoniga mängijatele ühiseks üleminekuriituseks ühest mängumaailmast teise. Uurimismaterjal koguti osalusvaatluse teel Petrichori ellujäämisversiooni mitme mängijaga serveris ning see sisaldab peamiselt osalejate emotsioone ja kommentaare, mis saatsid mängu video- ja häälsõnumite voos. Lisaks intervjueeris töö autor mängijaid, et täiendada arusaamu draakonivõitluse tähenduse kohta mängu tervikus.

Kasutades Norman K. Denzini poolt kasutusse võetud interpretatiivse interaktsionismi mõistet, kujundas töö autor uurimismaterjali: talletas mängu protsessi, pilte, kommentaare, lisaks YouTube'is ja Discordi serverites jagatud mängijakultuuri mitmesuguseid väljendusi. Lähtudes seisukohast, et tähendust loovad protsessis osalevad mängijad, analüüsitakse võitlust draakoniga kui „tähendust, mis saab lugejast lähtuvaks elatud kogemuseks" (Denzin 2001, 1).

Töö koosneb neljast peatükist, sissejuhatusest ja kokkuvõttest. Esimeses peatükis antakse ülevaade Minecrafti mänguloogikat puudutavatest ja tehnilistest üksikasjadest. Teine peatükk tutvustab vaatluse all olevat Petrichor SMP serveri kogukonda ja sellega seotud uurimismeetodeid. Kolmas peatükk käsitleb sotsiaalmeedias ja mitme mängijaga veebimängudes (multiplayer online games, MMOs) esile kerkivat online-identiteetide ja -kogukondade loomist. Neljas peatükk analüüsib võitlust ender-draakoniga ja mängijate loodud rituaali selle läbimiseks.

Töös võrreldakse Minecrafti teise pikaaegse mitme osalejaga arvutimängu World of Warcraftiga. Võrdluses kerkib esile, et just viimase mängu puhul puudub Minecraftile omane kogukonnaidentiteet ja -tunnetus. Selle puudumine loob nii võimaluse kui ka kohustuse Minecrafti mängijatel oma kogukondlik struktuur luua. Ehkki otseselt teadvustamata, kujuneb draakonivõitlusest ühtlasi tugev kogukonnaloomise vahend serveriväliselt võõraste inimeste vahel.

Märksõnad: Minecraft, grupidünaamika, rituaal, videomängud, *ender*-draakon