

“THE WORLD OF *MINECRAFT* IS CUBIC”: LEGO BLOCKS FOR E-KIDS?¹

Abstract. *The text begins with a brief analysis of the development of cybersociology in Slovenia. It concludes that the field is particularly underdeveloped in the sphere of qualitative research of our everyday informatized lives, especially those of e-children. The author then provides a case study of player biographies of (pre)teen Minecraft players, using it as grounds to argue that the game is an important space of (pre)teen socialization and auto-creativity, limited only by the creative boundaries of this e-sandbox.*

Keywords: *Minecraft, indie video game, e-kids creativity, cybersociology, storytelling method*

Introduction

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An awareness of the transition to infotainment society, one of the many consequences of the transition to the society of technoculture, is no news to critical social theory. In his theoretical contextualization of quotidian information and communication technologies' usage within a broader process “of the global restructuring of capitalism” (Kellner, 1999: 186), Kellner speaks of an “implosion of media and computer culture, of entertainment and information in a new infotainment society.” (Kellner, 1999: 192) It is in this sphere that entertainment and information mix into an often inseparable whole that is in need of critical research. Within technocultures, transition to “technocapitalism” (see Kellner, 1999: 192-194) may easily be observed through the development of video games; moreover, it is precisely this medium that socialises contemporary generations of e-children into infotainment society. Nieborg and Hermes point out this fact in their argument that the game *Pokemon* can be understood and analysed as a new form of the *Bildungsroman* (Nieborg and Hermes, 2008: 134). These modern day *Bildungsromans* typically emerge under the auspices of the

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¹ I thank the parents for having allowed me to conduct interviews with minors without their supervision. Without the expert help on the game and access to interviewees provided by Max Trček and Maximilian Marko, this article would remain a mere sketch. I thank them sincerely for their help. I also owe thanks to the translator. The text would appear bleaker without Natalija Majsova's great translation that preserved the verbal creativity of the interviewees.

gaming industry, which is on its way to becoming infotainment's most pulsive aspect (Nieborg and Hermes, 2008: 138–140). Success of independent games, in contrast, is a matter of exception. In this text, I shall analyse *Minecraft* – one of the most popular indie video games, through the eyes of those players that might be said to perceive it as their *Bildungsroman*. Before proceeding with analysis, I shall give a brief critical overview of the development of the research of cyber(sub)cultures in Slovenia.²

Cybersociology in Slovenia: A lack of understanding of our everyday e-lives?

As everyday use of information-communication technologies (ICTs) migrated from subcultures to the mainstream, social sciences in Slovenia got acquainted with a new generation of scholars, who mostly completed their undergraduate studies in the mid- or late nineties of the past century.³ This generation pioneered in focusing the core of its scientific studies and research on theoretical conceptualisations of the information society, as well as (mostly) quantitative empirical research into everyday practices of, as the word used to go fairly often, “penetrating” the internet. Meanwhile, questions like what the fact that we are living in a society, increasingly dominated by info-urban habitats, actually means, and how ICTs are present in artistic practices of technocultures, were – in Slovene – most profoundly discussed by philosopher Janez Strehovec (see Strehovec, 1998; Strehovec, 2003). Even if we begin by acknowledging the fact that in Slovenia, the network of social scientists doing research into information society and cyber (sub)cultures is relatively small, for the most part consisting of individual researchers, dispersed among several research centers at the Institute for Social Sciences of the Faculty for Social Sciences, and half a dozen individuals in other research institutions, it is still surprising that practically no articles or monographs in Slovenia in the 20th century provide in-depth research into cyber cultures and subcultures, not to mention video games analysis or analysis of video game players and their connections to form player clans.

Quantitative research into ICTs (Vehovar et al., 1998) that first dominated the field was soon followed by more in-depth theoretical conceptualisations of information society (see Trček, 2003; Lenarčič, 2010), methodologically intricate analyses of the (under)achievements of the politics of informatisation (Dolničar, 2008), valid questions regarding privacy in the cybernetic

² As this edited volume is aimed at the international social-scientific community, I believe it is necessary to briefly describe the development of research into cyber(sub)cultures in Slovenia.

³ In 2000, this generation presented its work in an edited volume titled “Kiber-teorije, metodologije, prakse”/“Cyber Theories, Methodologies, Practices” in the *Teorija in Praksa Journal* (37/6). The volume was edited by Franc Trček.

space (Kovačič, 2003), facing the internet as a new medium (Oblak and Petrič, 2005), and focus recently began to shift to mobile telecommunications or cell phones as the basic device used for organizing our informatised modes of (co)existence (see Vehovar (ed.), 2007; Oblak (ed.) and Luthar (ed.), 2009). Serious research into cybercultures, however, remains an area still practically untouched by Slovene academic experts in the social sciences, except for some individuals.⁴ Of course, this does not mean that there is no research into cybercultures whatsoever. Most of it takes place on the level of B. A. and M. A. theses. Here, several high quality research papers have been produced, addressing questions of video games and the diversity of player subcultures.

The author of this text does not find this lack strikingly surprising. One could hardly expect the area in focus to be adequately developed, let alone propulsive, in a small and tightly sealed scientific community in a society and state that copy, rather than create anything original on their own, and are, on top of all that, sinking ever deeper into crisis (see Drenovec, 2013). Especially if one accounts for the fact that decisions regarding scientific research come out of an intersection of politics and gerontocracy. What follows, are terrible consequences for a whole range of (sub)disciplines within the social sciences, as well as for their development. Namely, we end up refraining from research into a broad spectrum of everyday social practices and lives, particularly those of younger generations, which are actually the first real e-generations. Generations that encountered ICTs in their early childhood.

A lack of understanding of everyday lives of e-generations is also evident from the extremely poor planning of information platforms and contents in the Slovene academic, and, alas, business environments.⁵ This results from the fact that relevant reforms and development e-strategies are decided upon by individuals without empathy or knowledge, let alone insights into users' informational biographies. The development of my affiliate faculty's new informational portal is a good case in point. Not only did it not involve the students at all; it also ignored the fact that most of them use smart phones. And that, to more than merely a small proportion of them, the iPhone is a self-evident status symbol. Consequently, the updated portal of

⁴ Among these rare exceptions, let us point out a paper on the analysis of the Quake player clan from Maribor (Naterer, 2000), a shorter text on "(cultural) battles" in the game Civilization (Vrtačič, 2012), and a monograph on lomography subculture (Trček, 2011).

⁵ During a workshop on telework in Dublin in 1999, the author of this text encountered a cybersociologist from Norwegian telecommunications operator Telenor's research center. Apart from a range of technical experts, the institute also included a transdisciplinary department, consisting of a wide range of researchers from the social sciences and humanities. The department mainly focused on qualitative research of diverse user practices, including research of (sub)cultures endorsed by ICTs. In 2013, such a setup has not even come close to realisation for our own national telco.

the faculty was not synchronised for Android or iOS device access, which proved to cause plenty discontent among the students, when they tried use their phones – their main e-tool, to obtain profane, mundane information such as exam dates, (cancelled) classes, and exam grades.

The question of tactics and strategies used in cybergames and interpersonal communication by younger generations, who are more at ease with apps than they are with Krainer sausage, thus sadly remains virgin terrain. The purpose of this text is to face the pre-teen and early teen e-generation of the Minecraft computer game players. I do not wish to make any premature and overarching generalisations in this case study. It is more of an exercise in research style, a warning that changes in research foci, methodological approaches, and the choice of populations to be researched, are now more than necessary.

Minecraft – the most popular virtual sandbox

Minecraft is a virtual sandbox, a so-called sandbox indie game, initially developed by Swedish programmer Markus Persson, also known as Notch. Minecraft is an independent video game: neither its creation nor development took place within or with financial support of any big e-game corporation. Notch's company Mojang AB is in charge of the game's development and releasing new versions. The Alfa version of *Minecraft* came out in mid-2009. It was followed by numerous improved editions, and a full version of the game for PC, iOS, and Android became available in October and November 2011. A version for Xbox 360 followed in 2012. Over 33 million copies of the game for various platforms have been sold till the beginning of September 2013. With prices ranging from USD 5,49 for Android to USD 6,99 for the iOS so-called Pocket Edition, and around USD 20 for the PC/Mac/Xbox full version, it is an affordable videogame.

Considering the number of sold copies, and the fact that a simpler version of the game is accessible for free, it is quite possible to talk about a global *Minecraft* (sub)culture, which is also evident from the wide array of Minecraft-specific cyber-portals and numerous accessories and upgrades, developed by the players.⁶ The game itself is of explorational-creative nature, without a special, mandatory goal to be achieved in the process of playing. Its graphical image or the world that players get to explore, is notably “cubic”. When in Survival mode, the player investigates a 3D, cubically “rippled” world, looking for natural resources (wood, rocks, minerals etc.). These are the basic building blocks. By “smashing”, adequately connecting

⁶ See more results of *Minecraft* (co)creativity on <http://www.minecraftworldshare.com> and <http://www.planetminecraft.com>.

and uniting them, the player can build their own 3-dimensional *Minecraft* world. The game has a day-night rhythm, alternating between the two in 20 minute cycles. Moreover, there are animals inhabiting the world of *Minecraft*, which players can hunt for food or resources (e.g. sheep for wool), as well as villagers, and antagonist creatures that appear at night, such as zombies, skeletons, and spiders. By connecting different resources, players can manufacture their own tools and weapons. They can also create more complex infrastructure by using so-called redstone construction elements.

Photo 1 – AN EXAMPLE OF MINECRAFT CREATIVITY



Aside from Survival mode, the game also offers a Creative mode, where most of the elements needed for building are available from the very start, evidently making it easier for players to create their 3D *Minecraft* worlds. The game also offers four levels of difficulty. The least demanding (Peaceful) level, lacks most of the monsters. There is also a Hardcore mode. It operates with the most demanding player settings, and so-called “perma-death”, meaning that world the player creates gets deleted if the player dies. Moreover, *Minecraft* can also be played in Multiplayer mode from a range of online servers.⁷

In terms of graphics, *Minecraft* is a reproto game, which makes many wonder, why it is so popular at a time when the “realism” of video games is claimed to supersede the realisms of physical environment. Indeed, *Minecraft*'s seeming rudimentality, as analyzed well by Plunkett (2011),

⁷ For a detailed description of the game, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minecraft>.

reminds of times from over a decade ago, when a small team of programmers could develop and release a video game. Today, the processes of video game development, post-production, and distribution in the leading global e-game corporations are similar to those in the film industry. With high budgets, decent proportions of which get reserved for marketing before and after the release of the game.⁸ In this business environment, chances for an indie game to succeed are extremely sparse. Plunkett attributes *Minecraft*'s popularity to the fact that the game is of good quality and simple to play, while its overall philosophy enables players to materialise their stories, upgrade the game, and form a community of players "like in the old times", when the word about a good game spread from mouth to ear (Ibid). *Minecraft* may hence be understood as a counterculture, contrasting dominant popular products on the e-game market. In this respect, it can be compared to the popularity of the lomography subculture – a countercultural response to the technologically perfected dictate of digital photography (see Trček, 2011).

Case Studies – Minecraft E-kids

Since the purpose of this text is not an analysis of the global *Minecraft* subculture in all of its diversity, I shall only point out that there are several discussions on the didactic potential of the game. The world of *Minecraft*, as argued by West and Bleiber (2013: 8–10), simulates numerous bioms that exist on our planet, and their functional logics, including climatic characteristics, the rhythm of night and day, gravity, and the basic laws of chemistry and physics. This is what enables *Minecraft* to become an educational tool for constructivist learning (Ibid.). Although using games, primarily developed as a means of entertainment, for educational purposes "is likely to raise the eyebrows in academia" (Short, 2012: 55), Short provides a range of ways in which *Minecraft* is already being used to educational ends. His analysis of the game's educational potential concludes that it is particularly appropriate for teaching ecology, the basics of physics, chemistry, and geology, as well as physical geography. The openness of the platform, endorsed by Mojang AG, facilitates the formation of communities using *Minecraft* as an educational aid. Moreover, development of new learning content is no longer exclusively limited to teachers. (Short, 2012: 56–58)

⁸ The recently released fifth sequel to the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise is a good example of such a game. *GTA V*, which receives considerable support in terms of advertising and marketing, created over USD 800 million income globally on the first day of sales and hence set a new marker in the success of video games sales. Rockstar Games, part of Take-Two Interactive Software, had been developing *GTA V* for over five years, and spent over USD 270 million for production purposes. (see Hollister, 2013)

Minecraft's other important advantage is that it offers an informal alternative learning environment, which, as argued by Brand and Kinash: "often work better than formal and traditional learning environments to encourage participation and deeper engagement in learning content. They do this because they create a sense of shared purpose and identity, bridging gaps – like those that otherwise form between teachers and students – around age and technology awareness." (Brand and Kinash, 2013) This space has the potential of becoming the only learning environment, as, for example, shown by the case of Bond University "when the real-world campus was closed due to flooding in February, but the virtual campus was open for class." (Ibid.) Lee-Leuger reaches a similar conclusion: besides acknowledging the educational potential of the game, she argues that self-education also takes place during the game as players employ game tactics and strategies (see Lee-Leugner, 2013).⁹ Furthermore, the game can also be a challenge for college coursework, where students could test its "realism" (Cogle et al., 2013).

In terms of educational purposes, *Minecraft* is particularly useful for learning to understand architectural-urbanist transformations and patterns, which has recently often been a subject of research papers. Currently, Mojang AG is developing a project titled "Block by Block" in collaboration with the UN-Habitat development program. The pilot project running in Nairobi's slum Kibera focuses on using *Minecraft* to get youngsters to engage in urban planning of public spaces. Furthermore, there is the MinecraftEdu portal, connecting programmers and teachers from the USA and Finland. The portal offers a special MinecraftEdu Custom Mod, which facilitates using the game for educational purposes. For instance, it allows teachers to integrate texts into the *Minecraft* space, and offers information on students' location in this space. A *Minecraft* teaching wiki has developed within the portal, comprising a collection of lesson and research plans, as well as a forum and a chat room.¹⁰

The emerging society of technocultures triggered a shift in social scientific academic communities, which needed to rethink and re-discover their research niches. Unsurprisingly, ethnographers (see Hine, 2000; Miller and Slater, 2001), with a rich tradition of mostly fieldwork based methodological approaches, were among the pioneers. Their shift from "traditional topics" to a new environment can also be understood as a reaction to the quickly decreasing number of informers that they needed for their classical research interests in premodern societies. Recently, more and more anthropologists

⁹ Prensky reaches similar conclusions in his popular work "Don't Bother Me Mom – I'm Learning" (Prensky, 2006).

¹⁰ See <http://blockbyblock.org> and <http://minecrafteu.com/page/>

have been joining ethnographers in researching info-habitats (e.g. Postill, 2011). It is a strong tradition of qualitative approaches and fieldwork that allowed these scientific communities among others to successfully occupy research niches in the vast field of cybernetic (sub)cultures. The Slovene socio-scientific, and especially sociological scientific community, has however, apart from theoretical conceptualisations of social transformations, long been dominated by quantitatively empiricist, mostly public opinion based research. It is hence no coincidence that research of our e-lives also tilted more in the direction of counting rather than studying qualitative transformations, innovations, and differences. Hence the (at least) ten year setback in qualitative research of our e-biographies.

It is accounting for this setback that I set out to analyze (pre)teenager *Minecraft* player biographies in this case study. Upon prior parental consent, I conducted conversations with the players in the form of non-standardised directed interviews. The players' parents were absent during our conversations, as I wanted to eliminate their influence on the responses. I explained the aims of the study to the parents and children before the start of the actual interview. The interviews lasted for up to half an hour. In my investigation of their *Minecraft* biographies, I specifically focused on: information on how they got to know about the game; their history and ways of playing it; their awareness on the upgrades to the game and the use of these upgrades; their evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of the game, and their opinion on the future development of the game and their own *Minecraft* biography. Aside from the focus on *Minecraft*, I was also interested in whether they – and if they ever had in the past – played with LEGO cubes.¹¹ In what follows, I first present an overview of individual player biographies of the interviewed players. A comprehensive analysis of the *Minecraft* biographies of the interviewed (pre)teens follows in the conclusion, as well as a few thoughts on future research foci.

Player A, boy aged 10

He found out about the game “from my brother about a year, maybe two years ago,” and has been playing it “from half a year to a year.” He plays it on the PC in all modes, except for the Hardcore mode, “for an hour every day, maybe a minute longer.” When playing in Multiplayer mode, he plays with his

¹¹ Over a decade ago, the LEGO corporation found itself in red numbers. This took both the company and (ex) LEGO cube addicts by surprise. What was the reason? New generations with different playing experiences and needs. In consequence, LEGO altered its range of playing sets. If we skim through the LEGO catalogues of the past decade, we shall notice that the space taken up by Creator sets has decreased to merely a few pages. What prevails are sets building on the newest hits among American animated feature films and video games, and a “Barbie” line, probably still designed for girls. The stories behind the sets naturally condition the creativity of play itself.

friends. He plays *Minecraft* in English and follows releases of new skins and modes, which he sometimes installs by himself. To the question about what he plays/builds, he replies: "I mostly build redstone stuff, it has to do with electricity, because it is interesting." He does not experience major problems while playing. If he does not know how to do something, he "looks it up on Youtube." He considers the game "fine, because it's interesting." He also likes it because he "can learn English." He finds the blocky graphics "fun." Among the disadvantages of the game, he mentions that it has "very weird things ... that the flower is all black" and the problem of shadows. He feels the game is going to keep developing for a long time, and does not believe it will lose popularity and fail any time soon. He would be happy to see more new modes come out, but "cannot think of anything else" at the moment. He is "going to keep playing *Minecraft* for a while." He also says he has "a lot of LEGO blocks, but does not play with them anymore." To the question why, he replies that "they aren't that interesting to me anymore."

Player B, boy aged 10

He first heard about the game from a classmate in his third year of primary school. He has been playing it for two years. Other boys in his class play it too, whereas girls do not. He first used to play it on an iPod touch, and later, his relative, two years his senior, "loaded" it onto an iMac, where "there's plenty more stuff, blocks, all sorts of material," so he likes it "better playing on the computer." On the computer, he plays the game in German,¹² because he "understands it best." At this point, he explains that the settings in Slovene are strange, because they are in "small letters, they're not pretty ... slim." On the iPod, he plays the game in Survival and Creative modes, whereas he only uses Creative mode on the computer. "I build houses, I explore," he says. He plays it both alone and with friends. Most often, he plays it with a boy from his class at school, and a girl, his friend in Austria. During the game, he uses "*Minecraft* messages" to communicate. He plays it every other day on the iPod, and not so often on the computer. He created "houses, a hotel, a castle." He watches or "looks around a bit on the internet and on Youtube, to see what others have built, and tries to do similar things." This is how he ended up creating e.g. a McDonald's, "because my (girl) friend built one, too." He finds the graphics interesting, because "they are so different from other games." Although "some say it sucks," he likes it. He explains how he collects material to create his own tools. He does not find having to kill a sheep in the game terrible. The commands are not complicated, he thinks. He also informs me that, on a server in Multiplayer mode, there can be "if it's a good one, 100 of them in a game" and "you have to find

¹² *The interviewee is Slovene-German bilingual.*

your own space for building.” He would love it if one was “able to drive cars and tricks like that.” He also lets me know that “there are already horses in the new update.” He “has plenty LEGO blocks” and used to play with them when he was “six, seven, eight” years old. He “still plays with some of them, but not really that much.” He thinks *Minecraft* is similar to LEGO cubes and could be “used in school in certain subjects.”

Photo 2 – THE MINECRAFT WORLD OF ONE OF THE INTERVIEWEES



Player C, boy aged 8

“No one told” the youngest of the interviewees about the game. “Lots of them played ... so I started to play a bit, too ... not at school, at the seaside, when I went to the seaside.” He has already been playing *Minecraft* for a year and a half on two iPads, and a computer. He says he “has three lil worlds on each of the iPads.” He doesn’t play as much on the computer, because he “isn’t as good” on it. On the iPad, on the other hand, he plays it with friends, and they are together, “connected, if we’re on the same internet,” in the sense that “one starts playing one lil world and the other two watch, and a lil world appears, about what the other is playing.” He also tells me he can connect to strangers. Once, he “was waiting for someone to show up, and a lil world of some Luke appeared ... so he wanted to kill me, but then we made friends with each other and made a house together.” He has many lil worlds, because he built “a home for mom, for dad, and for my brother, and for myself, too.” He created “lil soldiers” for his younger brother, because he knows he likes them. He built “a hotel, a castle, a lookout, another house ... I have a whole city, I’ve filled up a whole planet ... an underwater house, a big building like a castle, a bridge.” He plays in both Creative and Survival

modes, although he admits that he didn't like the zombies at first. But he realised that they appear in the darkest spots of the game, so he "misled the zombies and cornered them" into a shaft he built "with a mirror window", and now "zombies have been there for 100 years and they cannot kill through the glass." He does not really look at what his friends are building that much. He likes *Minecraft* "because you can build anything." He says he simply imagines a house and tries to build it. He is not at all bothered by the "cubic" graphics. He admits that "sometimes it gets a little difficult," and that he does not know how to make electricity yet. This signifies that he is trying to grasp the logic/algorithm of *Minecraft* through playing the game. He explains that he "took the chicken's egg, made a farm and put a farmer lady into it ... she makes money with food and that is where I go to get it" and that "in a lot of places, I go digging, make shafts ... go get gold." He uses different skins. His avatars have "military clothes, and the best soldier has a prince's outfit." He warns me that "with portals, it is sometimes not O. K. to use them, because if you go there, you can come into the lil devil's town." He also says he made "heaven" and in cases "if lil people die, I make heavenly lil people ... and sometimes, souls even go up there by themselves." He also has "lots of LEGO blocks" and plays with them.

Photo 3: CREATING A NEW SKIN IN SKINEDITOR



Player D, girl aged 10

She learnt about *Minecraft* during the summer holidays, and has been playing it three to four times a week since. She plays in Creative and Survival modes. Mostly, she plays in Creative mode, because she "is not that good

in Survival mode.” She has the game installed onto an iPod Touch and a computer. On the computer, she plays in German.¹³ Because the computer is old, the game is too slow on it, so she “mostly plays on the iPod.” She is interested in skins and modes, but has never installed them by herself so far. She prefers building “houses and cities, because I think it is beautiful if I build an interesting landscape.” “It is great that you can build the way you like, according to your own taste,” she reveals what she likes about the game. In Creative mode, everything is easy for her, but it is quite more difficult in Survival mode. However, she does not really like the graphics, which she finds a little “funny.” Otherwise, she finds the game O. K. She would like there to be more different animals in the game. She also says it would be easier to play in Survival mode, if “there were instructions in the game, on how to do things.” She does not know, how long she is going to keep on playing the game, but feels that “probably for quite some time.” She also has a few LEGO blocks, but she plays *Minecraft* more often than she does with her LEGOs. She hopes the game gets better graphics in the future.

Player E, boy aged 13

The eldest among the interviewees first informed me about the emergence and development of the game. He knew that it was developed by Notch “based on an older game, *Stranded*.” He defines *Minecraft* as “the sort of game where you do whatever you like, whatever you can think of, you can make anything.” In great detail, he describes the ways of playing it, and the whole array of nocturnal monsters that was developed “so it is a little more difficult to survive at night.” He also explains that “you can play with anyone in the world” in Multiplayer mode. He first heard about the game from his best friend in 2009, and has been playing it since 2010 in English, because one could not choose other languages at first, and he “got used to it in English.” He prefers playing in Survival mode, and minigames. Mostly, he plays “at night with friends” and classmates in Multiplayer mode, because “it’s more fun.” Occasionally, when they get together, they play in LAN mode. He only plays in Singleplayer mode if “there’s a new mode.” Usually, he builds castles and villas in Survival mode, because “it’s more complicated.” He explains that minigames are made using *Minecraft*, and are thematically often based on popular films and TV shows. Personally, he plays the minigame based on the film *The Hunger Games*. He keeps track of the newest modes. If he likes them, he installs them, which “is not that simple.” He explains the rationale behind getting teleported to hell: it is necessary if one wishes to get the ingredients needed for magic potions. He follows what other players are doing, because “it’s cool to see what others

¹³ The player is from Austria.

are building, they give you an idea that you can copy or you can change something, and it looks good.”

He finds *Minecraft* is a good game. “If you have a lot of imagination, you really like it, because you can make a lot of things.” The disadvantages he sees in the game are occasional server-related problems and the fact that the game can “freeze or get errors” in Singleplayer mode. He does not think it fair that there are special servers for Premium accounts that one has to pay for, meaning that an ordinary player can get thrown out of the game if a Premium player appears. He finds the game is similar to LEGO blocks, but “it offers a lot more stuff than LEGO blocks.” He owns quite a few sets of LEGOs, but “doesn’t play with them that much anymore, because he has grown too old for them.” He also finds *Minecraft* to be “more fun,” the main advantages in comparison to LEGO blocks being that “you can also work together with friends, each from their own home” and “besides, you do not lose pieces.” He thinks the game is popular, because it is “fun and quick.” He says the girls in his class do not play it, but there are also “girls who play *Minecraft*,” although he is not sure if “they play it a lot in Slovenia.” He thinks the game is going to keep developing, because lots of people play it and there are more and more accessories. Personally, he says he “now plays a little less.”

***Minecraft* – from an e-sandbox to a didactically (un)exploited space?**

Although five player biography studies are not solid ground for overarching generalisations, I can still say that *Minecraft* is an important space of pre-teen and early teen socialisation and auto-creativity. It is also interesting that the interviewees’ parents have an extremely positive opinion of *Minecraft*, mostly seeing it as a creative workshop. Furthermore, in their descriptions of the game, all interviewees highlight the fact that you “can create whatever you wish” or “if you have loads of imagination, you really like it, because you can make a lot of stuff.” The youngest player’s (Player C) biography is a good example of creative thinking. The limits of their imagination are creative limits in this cubic e-sandbox. Furthermore, players develop their logical thinking skills through the game, as is evident from most of the players’ biographies (e.g. how to mislead zombies, how to gain access to magic potion ingredients), as well as their English skills. The game first seems slightly difficult to some at first. But intragenerational tacit knowledge exchange plays its role in informal learning on the way to game mastery.

It is also necessary to point out that its servers make *Minecraft* a social platform/space, both in LAN and Multiplayer modes. Therefore, if we cast

aside rash pejorative judgments that “kids today lock themselves up in their rooms and are glued to computers and to the internet all day long,” we shall see, as the biographies from this text clearly show, that this seeming reclusiveness is in fact often a mode of very intensive peer socialisation. Moreover, such connections also lead to self-education that results in solving minor program/machine-related issues. And when in doubt, issues are usually “googled” or “looked up on Youtube.” All players also always act as critical observers, sensitive about incoherencies and bugs in the game, and their own inequality in comparison to so-called Premium players on certain servers. They are also aware of the possibilities of cheating. What is also interesting is that their expectations regarding the future development of the game are quite similar: they are hoping for even more “building” elements for creative construction.

Quite a few players mentioned they also learn English while playing. Moreover, they feel the game or the cubical 3D *Minecraft* environment has potential for being used “in school ... in certain subjects.” To my mind, it is this comment that reveals the key, critical bottleneck of the lack of qualitative research of e-children’s activities in cyberspace in Slovene social sciences and humanities. We persist to conceive of *Minecraft* as a simple e-sandbox, and a space of (pre)teen leisurely socialisation, whereas it actually has great potential in terms of a currently unexploited didactic space, an educational tool. The bottleneck, preventing *Minecraft* from getting introduced to the educational process, stems from the lack in our research work, and from the fact that teachers are unprepared for such challenges. *Minecraft* is currently merely a didactic tool for self-education, while it could well serve as a tool for group creative learning.

Conclusion: Towards in-depth analysis of storytelling

In terms of methodology, I can place my analysis of *Minecraft* (pre)teen player biographies, obtained through non-standardised directed interviews, into the category of storytelling. The method of storytelling, brought into the social and human sciences from psychotherapeutic practice where it was first developed, is well established in the sphere of narrative analysis (see Antonino, 1991; Nash (ed.), 1990). The method’s primary focus is better comprehension of social dynamics,¹⁴ and not abstract generalisations.

Our case study allowed us to acquire information from informatised (pre)teenagers on how they spend a part of their free time. They presented

¹⁴ Barber and his colleagues (Barber et al.: 2007) e.g. use the method for interpreting the population’s response to the Katrina hurricane; Miller and Zachary (2007) in their studies of the problematic of contemporary rural life; Polletta (2006) takes it as a point of departure for his analyses of political protests.

their views on video games, *Minecraft* in our case: an important space of their creative activity and socialisation. In our ever more interwoven info-urban habitats, it is analysis of everyday (co)operation, particularly of generations, informatised from their early childhood on, that is strikingly lacking. This lack should be overcome if we wish to prevent the intergenerational gap from gaping too widely, and if we are to try to reduce the losses in translation, generally common in attempts of parental and pedagogical communication with (pre)teenagers. We are therefore in for listening to their stories and even deeper analysis: LEGO blocks have, as our study shows, to a great extent been replaced by (*Minecraft*) e-blocks.

In addition, it is necessary to point out that *Minecraft* is a model of an “alternative economy”, which can successfully compete and replace predominant corporative models in the video games industry. The openness of the indie video game platform, coprogramming, and cooperation between programmers, teachers, and creative users could prove to be the future learning environment network of constructivist learning. This is another reason for more in-depth research into such platforms.

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