

“I Burnt His Whole House Down!”: Describing Aggressive Play in Minecraft

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ABSTRACT

A longstanding theme in children’s media literature is the relationship between ‘violent videogames’ and real-world acts of violence or aggression (Messenger Davies, 2010). However, such work is directed at finding links between play and behavioral outcomes and is concerned with games that prescribe violence (Coulson & Ferguson, 2016). There is little research looking at children’s self-directed play in digital open world spaces that do not inherently involve violence but may facilitate child-initiated violence. Such spaces have much in common with sites inhabited for free-play by children in non-digital spaces such as playgrounds, school yards and homes. This paper contributes to understanding of children’s digital play by describing instances of violence or aggression by 6-8-year-old children in Minecraft.

Keywords

Minecraft, children, violence, play

INTRODUCTION

Minecraft makes for an interesting case study in ‘videogame violence’, as it does not inherently involve any violence at all. When played in ‘Creative’ mode, player characters cannot die. They can be pursued by hostile mobs and can kill mobs (depending on the game setting), but there is no threat of in-game death. However, even in “Creative” mode, the game provides a setting that certainly can facilitate violent or aggressive play directed by the player. Though the game does not necessarily prescribe or encourage violence, it is clear from the data we describe here, that some children choose to play in ways that involve varying kinds of harm to players and NPCs. Indeed, this ambivalence around violence in Minecraft is reflected in parent perceptions of the game, where some note a perceived lack of violence and others report the presence of violence in the game as a key concern (Mavoa, Carter, & Gibbs, 2017).

This paper will contribute to scholarly understanding of children’s play in digital spaces using aggressive play in Minecraft as an example. It is important to note that this is descriptive work only and does not seek to place any value judgements on the types of play observed or to draw any relation to consequences of this play. The point is to document children’s play in digital spaces. Such research has been called for recently, to counter the dominance of screen time effects research that does not adequately account for the content and context of children’s interactions with digital technologies (Holloway,

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Green, & Livingstone, 2013; Schott & Vught, 2013; Stephen & Plowman, 2014; Willett, 2016)

Data described here come from a qualitative study of 10 families with at least one child aged 6-8 years. The work takes a contextualist approach to the study of children's digital play by situating instances of 'everyday' play within layers of context (Tudge, 2008). Children and parents were interviewed, and Minecraft play sessions were recorded. Children also took the researcher on a 'Play Tour' of their house where settings and props for play were noted. In this paper, a preliminary content analysis of instances of violent/aggressive play in the Minecraft recordings is presented.

Our data demonstrate that there is a vast range of play actions occurring in children's everyday Minecraft play that can be described as violent or aggressive. If we look at this range on a spectrum from 'less' to 'more' violent/aggressive, we see on one end an 8-year-old female player 'hitting' a villager while saying 'get out of my way' as she tries to build.

On the other end of the spectrum, we see instances, in two separate families, of what is perhaps best described as the playful massacre of innocent NPCs. In these cases, a variety of methods are used to cause death and destruction, including: spawning villagers in order to kill them with swords or fire; setting villagers' homes on fire (using one of several methods); shutting the doors in burning buildings so villagers cannot get out; and destroying villagers' crops with fire. In one of these massacres an ad-hoc backstory was described during play, where these villagers were labelled 'enemies' who had previously attacked the players' base. In the other, no backstory or justification was described.

Other types of violent or aggressive play that were observed include: building mob killing machines; killing hostile mobs as they are encountered in-game (whether posing an immediate threat to player or not); killing non-hostile mobs such as cows; damage to other players' property; and damage to other players' characters.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to ascribe antecedents or consequences to these kinds of play. But what we have done is provide descriptions of one genre or type of play that occurs when young children are free to direct their own play in digital space. Most of the play observed for this study was not violent or aggressive. But, such play did occur, and needs to be included when representing the reality of what children get up to in contemporary playworlds. Future work in this project will add the children's insights on these instances of play, as well as descriptions of other kinds of Minecraft play.

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