Block by Block: *Minecraft's* Worlds of Machinima Interface

The world of *Minecraft*-based video media has been at the forefront of a developing internet culture that prioritizes community, collaboration, and open exchange between creators and fans that is not seen in most other forms of entertainment such as Hollywood film. The degree of separation between the YouTubers in real life and the version of them that lives in the virtual world of *Minecraft*, embodied by their pixelated skin and their heavily contextualized words, remains blurrily undefined. In the over ten years since *Minecraft's* release, much has changed in terms of the kinds of content that is popular and circulates well, yet throughout all that change, *Minecraft* content remains consistently popular. In an age of "brain rot" and short-form content, *Minecraft* videos embody both human genuineness and calculated dopamine devices. But regardless of the form or intent, *Minecraft* plays into a willing and knowing audience's desire for more *Minecraft.*

How has this kind of practice continued to thrive for so many years? *Minecraft* content is in a league of its own. Studies on machinima practices in video games have gone a long way in deciphering what makes this mode of art stand out, but there is something to *Minecraft* specifically that makes its machinima content so compelling. The large cultural status of the game is largely at hand. *Minecraft* machinima plays upon the community's common understanding of the game's world, systems, and lore that transform it into its own medium. With this new medium comes a slew of opportunities for new kinds of tropes and other literary devices. There are many factors content creators consider specific to these, making the creation of such content a truly distinctive artistic process.

This paper serves as a deep dive into how the brilliantly expansive world of *Minecraft* machinima came to be: from the game's first conception to the gradual development of its varied

communities. I will examine the specificities of its creation and its engagement with a community that is in constant evolution and motion with itself, the game's developers, and its content creators. The ecosystem existing between the three is what gives *Minecraft* machinima its charm and what has—and will—solidified its place in internet culture for years to come.

Minecraft: From Beginning to Never-End

Minecraft is a strange case of a game. It is technically never in its "finished" state, as development is constant and major version releases serve as new seasons of content. The ever-evolving nature of the game has drawn in a player base of millions that is just as flux, reacting to and subsequently influencing each new turn of content (Curry 2025). This exchange between developer and player has lain at the core of the *Minecraft* experience from the beginning, and its resulting position in culture today is a prime example of what happens when an indie project becomes one of the best-selling games of all time.

To understand *Minecraft* and its vast cultural stance, we must return to the early stages that made it what it is now. The alpha version of *Minecraft* was created by a single person: Markus "Notch" Persson, who developed the concept in his spare time working for video game and web development companies. It was inspired by *Rubydung,* a previous (and unreleased) game of his, and Zachtronics' *Infiniminer.* After *Minecraft* picked up speed in 2010, Notch quit his day job and formed Mojang with two others, where development on *Minecraft* became their sole focus. The full Beta version released in November 2011, and from there, the game's popularity skyrocketed (Henningson 2022).

Minecraft's early success was bolstered by its presence on indie developer forum sites like TIGSource.[1] Without that community's playtesting and feedback, *Minecraft* may not have

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[1] The page where Notch published *Minecraft's* alpha can be found here: https://forums.tigsource.com/index.php?topic=6273.0. Some of these comments directly foreshadow later elements of the game, including a post on the first page asking for "half-height blocks" (called "slabs" in-game).

risen to its insane heights it sits at today. An alpha version with no more than basic world

generation, movement, and building blocks evolved to implement new blocks—as suggested by

members of the forum site—and a "survival mode," which Notch had envisioned from the

beginning (Notch). But far before those changes ever came, on the day of the alpha's release,

players were having a blast making their own creations in this bare-bones early version (Figure

1).
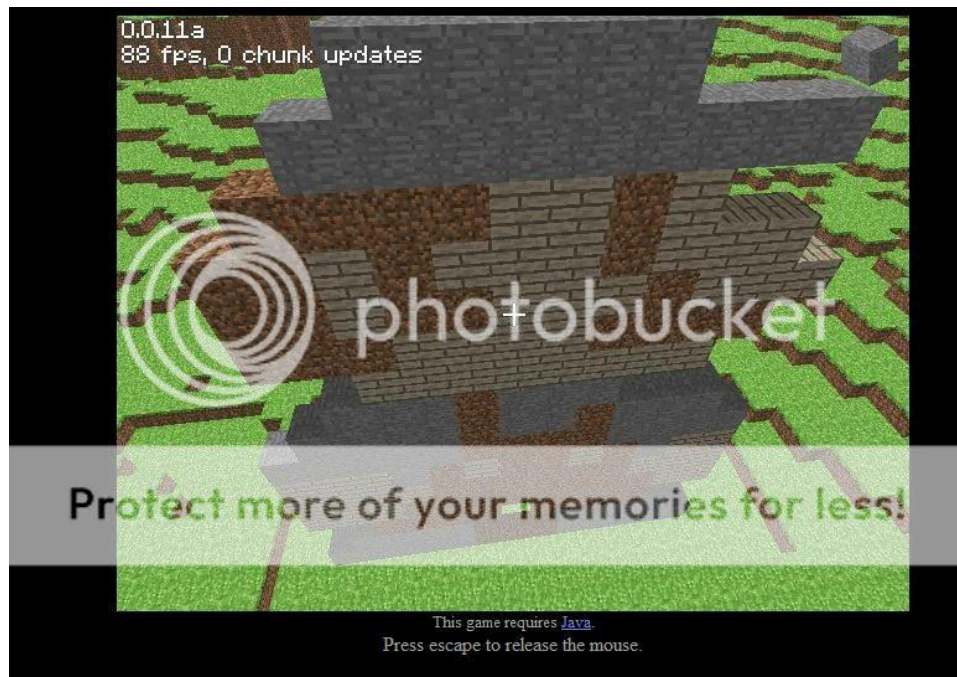
Figure 1. A screenshot of TIGSource user jwaap's pixel art rendition of Super Mario, posted about two and a half hours after the alpha's first release.

Minecraft's controls and interface are simple. In the Java version of the game (on PC),

players move with WASD, jump with the space bar, sprint by holding shift; they break blocks

and use tools with the left click button, and place and interact with blocks with the right click.

Items are stored in a 9-slot-long hot bar at the bottom of the screen, which can be navigated with

the scroll wheel or the keyboard's number keys. The "E" key opens a larger inventory where

players can drag and drop items to rearrange them. Players use an iconic block, the crafting table,

to craft tools, weapons, and blocks for building. These are the core controls behind *Minecraft.* All else is defined by game modes and whatever other customizations players make to their own play experiences. Game modes survival, creative, and hardcore offer different built-in takes on *Minecraft's* basic systems that offer alternative forms of play. Player created and downloaded mods and texture packs further enhance the experience for some, though plenty still enjoy vanilla graphics and features on their own. With procedurally generated worlds and local and online multiplayer, the possibilities are endless.

The longer *Minecraft* circulated online, the more built up these communities of players became. Local LAN multiplayer worlds turned into cross-network servers, and the larger *Minecraft's* popularity grew, the more creative outlets for the game were developed. People who had already been uploading their single player "let's plays" took to creating collaborative multiplayer content. There were *Minecraft* players, and there were people who watched other people play *Minecraft* (though there was commonly an overlap). *Minecraft* creators linked up with other *Minecraft* creators, the fanbase grew even more; and with that growth came the continued development of many dedicated sub-communities. In the world of *Minecraft* YouTube, many different forms of *Minecraft* content continued production, all culminating in a notable culture of internet creativity and fame.

Meta-meta-machinima: Media with Layers (x, y, z)!

The *Minecraft* community houses a variety of sub-communities that explore different gameplay styles and focuses. Minigames on large public servers like Mineplex and Hivemc, parkour, megabuilds, are among the popular ways people play the game. But at the center of all of them lies the vast network of *Minecraft* social content, especially those hosted on video-based web sharing sites like YouTube. Within just a year of *Minecraft's* Beta release, there were

"dozens, maybe hundreds of people making a living from *Minecraft's* secondary market" (SethBling 2012). Some creators took to making dedicated multiplayer content collectives where a variety of creators would collaborate on the same world and make videos within it, often featuring other creators on the server. One of the earliest of these is Hermitcraft, which, having taken the number one spot on Tumblr's "year in review" list for web series last year, is evidently popular to this day (fandom 2024). What is it about these series that is so alluring? What keeps people watching? To some extent, it serves a purpose akin to cinema, or perhaps reality television. Either way, these series are an entirely different art form from the standard live-action or even animated reality TV show. It is real and casual, yet there is still some performance inherent in the form: in the interfacing of the players through the systems of *Minecraft*, then through its hosting on YouTube, and then through the interpretations of their viewers.

Brenda Laurel's *Computers as Theatre* explores creative use of computers as a form of performance, with collaboration at the forefront. This collaboration refers not just to collaboration between players/actors, but players and designers: "Designers and interactors co-create the whole action in intricate ways, even though they are not literally co-present. The final form—the element of plot—cannot be exclusively controlled by the designer; it will also be shaped by the choices and actions of interactors" (Laurel 110). While in these *Minecraft* series, the players are often at the forefront, the interface and system of the game itself plays a key role in these series' functioning and visual communication. This performance dips into the concept of "machinima," a practice centered around the making of interactive art, often compared to cinema, within video games. In "Superplay, sequence breaking and speedrunning," James Newman elaborates as such: "By eschewing the narrative and gameplay demands of the game, Machinima makers embrace the game's potential for play and performance to serve their artistic

ends. The performative repertoire of controllable characters, the variety of actions they can be coaxed into performing on-screen, the extent of their available animation, are wholly disconnected from gameplay imperatives and are repositioned as part the character's 'range'" (Newman 145). While the players in non-scripted *Minecraft* series are often playing only as themselves, not roleplaying another character, Newman's description still evokes these players' use of the medium. The limited variety of character animations players can use in *Minecraft*—jumping about, crouching, punching their fist in the air—all fit into the natural ways these players have fallen into communicating with each other through the game (Figure 2). Viewers, in turn, take these interactions and interpret them in their own ways: most infamously through dramatic animations, comics, fanfiction, and illustration emulating the events of the server. In the case of Hermitcraft and similar real-time, non-scripted *Minecraft* series, there is no roleplay involved, yet the content is read as some kind of performance, nonetheless. It's a fascinating cross-section between reality and fiction, the likes of which is difficult to find elsewhere.

Figure 2. A group of Hermitcraft members "pose" (some crouching with shift) for the "photo" (an in-game screenshot).

Non-scripted *Minecraft* content has some loose structure, but is largely ad-libbed, and sometimes straight-up roleplayed. Hermitcraft and the Life Series are good examples of this. The Life Series features a few variations of games modded into *Minecraft* with creative usage of players' health and number of lives. This structure keeps play varied, and the gaps within this structure allow players to converse and bond organically without a script. Much fan content has risen that dramatizes some of the events that have taken place in these videos. Endless freedom lies within the opportunity for creative interpretation born from these unscripted roleplay scenarios, where players become deeply enveloped in the story they've wound up telling: forming alliances, staging betrayals, and playing along with the community's investment in the series.

There are also instructional *Minecraft* videos and other types that are dubiously scripted or unscripted. Some may have a loose script, but feature a lot of ad-lib. This can be found in

videos like Mumbo Jumbo's[2] redstone tutorials or DanTDM's[3] old *Minecraft* series. Notably, once one or more extra players are involved, these types of *Minecraft* content tend to veer more clearly into the unscripted category, as the players like to riff off one another, regardless of any intended trajectory for the video.

And finally, at the furthest end of this "*Minecraft* machinima" spectrum lies scripted *Minecraft* content. These are more deliberately blocked out and often framed as cinema-adjacent, sometimes with special additional effects applied.[4] The ones with effects emulate traditional film more directly: these effects exist and are applied only outside the world of *Minecraft* itself (this does not include things like texture packs and shaders which, while they alter the appearance of *Minecraft,* still exist directly in the game). Other machinimas embrace *Minecraft's* lack of explicit movie making tools and twist it into a strength of their own presentation and storytelling. *Parkour Civilization*[5] is one such example that I find particularly illuminating.

Parkour Civilization swept the internet in late 2024, spawning a myriad of memes (see Figure 3). Its absurdity, born of its interaction with the medium of *Minecraft* and the specific metagame of *Minecraft* parkour,[6] was alluring to people within and beyond the *Minecraft* community. The countless memes surrounding the notion of "would you jump for the chicken or the beef?" are unintelligible without context, but *Parkour Civilization* produces these stakes naturally: the conflict of "chicken or beef" makes its first appearance less than a minute into the video, hooking viewers almost immediately. At its core, the "chicken-or-beef" dilemma is an

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[2] Mumbo Jumbo's channel: https://www.youtube.com/@ThatMumboJumbo
[3] DanTDM's channel: https://www.youtube.com/@DanTDM
[4] See channels like ARG for examples (the following link leads to one of the most famous *Minecraft* machinimas, with nearly 2 million views: https://youtu.be/BM6Bgax-A1M?si=v2K8iUjoxQ9u4pcE).
[5] The first *Parkour Civilization* movie can be found here: youtu.be/2pFwQiwRbcg?si=Bj15UKDTj9NWiG6V
[6] *Minecraft* parkour involves jumping from one block to another. Slipping or missing your intended target means failure. The challenge comes in the distance between blocks and the types of blocks being used, which can serve as their own hazards.

early indication of the deeper implications of *Parkour Civilization's* virtual society. This story's world is one of unimaginable stakes, where everything is measured in terms of parkour, and a single missed jump sends one plunging into the unknown abyss stretching endlessly underfoot.

Figure 3. A Parkour Civilization meme made by Reddit user adventurekid12. This meme plays not only upon the larger themes of the work, but the process of discovering it; being "indoctrinated" by it.

The "chicken-or-beef" dilemma is the audience's first introduction to the way the world of *Parkour Civilization* functions. The main character, Evbo, is disturbed by a knock at his door and offered his two food choices for the day: chicken and beef. The area surrounding his home consists of grass blocks with a 1-block gap between them all, meaning people must jump one block between blocks to traverse. For food, people can either jump one block normally for chicken, or jump one block *vertically* for beef, which provides more hearts. This introduces the idea that parkour moves can have different value based on their difficulty, and parkour is in fact

used as a currency in many other aspects of life in *Parkour Civilization.* It all spirals from there, with increasing levels of convoluted explorations into how this parkour-based society functions.

Massive implications aside, *Parkour Civilization* is a prime example of a core aspect of *Minecraft* machinima: usage of the game's basic mechanics, as well as the particular ways players have come to use them. When Evbo reaches the "master" layer, where the best parkour masters live, he is provided with a water bucket. The water bucket can serve as a tricky way to save oneself in case they slip while making a parkour jump. If a bucket full of water is placed on the ground immediately before the player would hit it, then the player instead falls into the water, negating any potential fall damage. This utilizes not only *Minecraft's* built-in physics engine, but the community context that invented this method of using the water bucket to begin with. To a viewer unfamiliar with this technique, the water bucket is still introduced in a way that makes sense. But for those already familiar with the method, its reference serves as a satisfying nod to the *Minecraft* parkour metagame and methods of play first spread through popular usage online.

Parkour Civilization also bends the rules of *Minecraft,* sometimes. There is a scene towards the end of the second *ParkCiv* movie where Evbo crouches on a chest, and his inventory transfers into the chest against his will. This is not currently a feature in *Minecraft. ParkCiv* respects the bounds of the game in most regards, but is unafraid to betray them for the sake of narrative excitement. This bastardizing of the game's mechanics in the lead-up to the major climax makes that moment in the story all the more exciting. While it is not narratively framed as such, Evbo losing his inventory to the chest completely confuses the known laws of the game, and raises new questions about the nature of this parkour world the audience has been privy to. In this way, *Parkour Civilization* makes its own world just as much as it uses an edited *Minecraft* world to tell a particular story.

In *ParkCiv's* case, breaking the rules may be forgiven: it is only done for the love of the game, for the sake of telling a specific story. Even when the rules are being broken, those choices are defined by their tension against the known mechanics of the game. The core mechanics of *Minecraft* remain fundamental all throughout. This is the phenomenon I am most interested in examining.

The Experiment in Motion!

The decision to participate in *Minecraft* machinima myself has generated a heady task. There is much that goes into producing something like this, even at the simplest scale: although my goal was to keep things as simple as possible and not worry too much about quality, this process got out of hand quicker than expected.

First: script and story. I wanted to take this opportunity to explore *Minecraft* machinima's relationship with *Minecraft's* mechanics and systems in more depth. *Parkour Civilization* explores the parkour metagame in its parkour-based society, the laws of which are governed by *Minecraft's* mechanics. My own piece, *my epic minecraft movie,*[7] does so more explicitly, discussing Minecraft's difficulty modes in a meta-aware sense. Our protagonist—through whose eyes the story unfolds—has played for years on a single *Minecraft* world. They have been playing in peaceful mode, which eliminates all hostile enemies from the game: the only possible causes of death are from the environment. The story kicks off when they die for the first time and encounter the survival god, who vows to teach them the appeal of playing on normal difficulty.

The story is purposefully vague about what "peaceful" and "normal" mean for these characters. The player exists between the game world and the "real" world. They discuss the matter like a real-life *Minecraft* player would discuss their own habits and preferences of play,

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[7] Watch my self-produced amateur *Minecraft* movie here:
youtu.be/gBsH8ygP9XE?si=Uk03Ynu97mt5GCOO

but the scale of the wider implication—one that alludes to questions of life and mortality itself—exaggerate their position into disbelief. The acting of the characters is also incredibly amateur, a quality that is more neutral than expressly negative for a production like this. Over ten years beyond *Minecraft's* initial release, this kind of acting brings a nostalgic charm specific to this form of *Minecraft* content (and one that may be generational).

Production was an engaging part of this process in ways I had not anticipated. Many content creators build their own "sets," or hire others to build them for them. I am a director on a budget, so two out of three of the worlds I used came from the Planet Minecraft website.[8] Like any real-world director, preparing for filming involved exploring these downloaded worlds to find the right places to film. I had to figure out how to make these spaces work with the script, especially since I wound up needing to play both characters by myself. My previous ideas of what the film might look like were challenged based on the spaces I wound up using. *Minecraft,* by nature, is open-ended and not always predictable. Parts of the script had to be rewritten, or partially ad-libbed, to accommodate for this. There were also some technical challenges, such as unexpected frame rate drops in the recording. While these variabilities caused some frustration at first, the more I filmed, the more I came to embrace the amateur quality and focus on having fun with a project that was always supposed to be low-pressure! The fun in *Minecraft* machinima, after all, lies within its accessibility. I decided to embrace the chaos of the process and overlook any slip-ups, choosing to frame them as irony.

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[8] Explore this (ad-ridden) haven of pure *Minecraft* creativity here: https://www.planetminecraft.com/

Figure 4. A screenshot from <u>my epic minecraft movie</u> demonstrating a hack attempt to cover up a filming error (I accidentally left some items in my inventory that shouldn't have been there). I decided to embrace the inanity of this slip-up, being cheeky in my censorship of the mistake.

After filming was done, I edited the clips (recorded in OBS) together in the browser version of Microsoft Clipchamp (free software, of course) and tied it all together with some credits over royalty-free music. Then, without further ado, I uploaded the video to YouTube.

As of March 23rd, 2025, the video has over a thousand views. Not all of this is wholly natural, as I sent the link to some friends once it was posted. All seven comments came from people I know. However, their interaction will continue to push the video out to other people on the platform. The reach of the video continues to grow.

The commenting audience has also taken the comedic, slightly ironic amateurism and run with it. "Proving we don't need Jack Black for a good minecraft movie," says AStainOnAShirt. ava_does_everything commented "Masterful use of the hero's journey. The hero has learned the epic highs and lows of minecraft survival mode." And, my personal favorite, "i bet he could've double jumped if he ate that pork raw" (OliveWeizen). These comments demonstrate the deep cut context inherent in these kinds of *Minecraft* creations, with AStainOnAShirt's comment

likening it to the official *Minecraft* movie (releasing 4 April 2025) and ava_does_everything's drawing connections to the popular storytelling structure "the hero's journey." In this way, *my epic minecraft movie* successfully synthesizes audience's expectations with their understanding of other structures and media, regardless of their distance from the base game itself.

Overall, *my epic minecraft movie* successfully fulfills the challenge inspired by *Parkour Civilization* to use *Minecraft's* systems to its advantage. The comments all come from people who are familiar with the game and how its different game modes function. While the video itself is able to clarify some of the differences between peaceful and normal mode, it does not cover the full breadth of either experience. The video relies on the viewer's own understanding within its own storytelling, as well as their knowledge of the common bias that stands against players who choose to play peacefully. The viewing experience is also influenced by the viewer's relationship to other existing *Minecraft* video content, such as with a comment that compares *my epic minecraft movie* to the work of popular *Minecraft* content creator StampyLongNose. *my epic minecraft movie* does not stand alone as an isolated work: it is equally informed by the systems of *Minecraft,* existing familiarity with other *Minecraft* video content, and the viewer's own individual experience playing *Minecraft.* It is all these interacting components working together that forms much of *Minecraft* video content's specific appeal.

Analysis

Ultimately, the underlying strength in *Minecraft* machinima comes not from the merit of the film itself, but from its deep community ties. The seeming inherence of community woven into *Minecraft* has been studied since early in the game's lifespan. "Maker culture and Minecraft" examines the phenomenon of "maker culture," which "draws upon a more participatory approach than traditional learning, encouraging learners to collaboratively engage

with others as they learn through the creation of new items" (Gerber & Niemeyer 218). As it applies to maker culture, *Minecraft* offers an incredible amount of depth in both the digital and physical medium. A film produced in *Minecraft* generates interactability that extends beyond the comments section: fan art and fan content aside, the events and maneuvers showcased in *Minecraft* content, from dramatic tournaments to gamified parkour schemes, are easily repeatable by viewers. There is an open invitation towards participation within *Minecraft* machinima's public performance. Audience emulation and reinvention, in turn, is what keeps the *Minecraft* sphere spinning, and is why the community has refused to die over the years.

The entertainment aspect of *Minecraft* video content often works in tandem with the educational side. Video tutorials on how to build a certain structure or redstone contraption in *Minecraft* usually come with all the tenants of standard entertainment content. *Minecraft* content that uses fan made games and mods within the game point viewers towards discovering and participating in such practices themselves. While *Parkour Civilization* does arguably have some burgeoning commentary on capitalism and discrimination, it also opens viewers up to the practice of *Minecraft* parkour in an entirely new form. Following the movies' burst in popularity, fans took recreations of *ParkCiv's* map and put it into a public server.[9] With built-in achievements that allow players to ascend the different layers of the world, just like Evbo does in *ParkCiv,* players get as close as possible to experiencing the raw *ParkCiv* experience for themselves.

All this points beyond *Minecraft* and towards a larger topic of community-based digital makership. James Paul Gee calls communities like these "affinity groups:" "[Members of the group] may not see many people in the group face-to-face, but when they interact with someone on the Internet or read something about the domain, they can recognize certain ways of thinking,

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[9] EvPk, a *ParkCiv* world map public *Minecraft* server: https://minecraftservers.org/server/661567

acting, interacting, valuing, and believing as more or less typical of people who are 'into' the semiotic domain" (27). The world of *Minecraft* content makes exploration and the act of creating art more accessible to people, especially younger children. *Minecraft* YouTube videos serve as a repository of information coming directly from the creators of the videos themselves and fellow viewers, blurring the boundary between "creator" and "consumer" in this niche internet ecosystem. Suddenly, consumers can be creators, too. Nascent creators are further supported by the validating factor of the community they originate from, which, per the mission of *Minecraft,* is the constant and highly valued act of creation.

Conclusion

As players discover new and exciting ways to contribute to the community—from modding to fan art to skin creation to huge builds—the seeds are sown for the next great generation of *Minecraft* fans and content. Participating in these communities also strengthens the raw skills required for all these different activities: skills that can be applied elsewhere. As the games industry expands, the *Minecraft* community defines a new standard for how, when, and why people can develop the skills that go into creating these different outputs and productions that change the game of *Minecraft* itself. *Minecraft* is more than a game: it is a widespread culture of collaboration and feedback, one that the developers have steadily been embracing more and more across the years.

Engaging in my own experiment made me appreciate this creative ecosystem more than ever. While I am far from becoming a professional video editor or director in my own right, filming my own *Minecraft* machinima was a fun and approachable way to engage in some practices that are hugely relevant to producing any type of filmed content. It is also significant that *my epic minecraft movie* was a solo production. If I were to introduce a friend or two, or

even some strangers, into my recorded gameplay, it'd change the engagement with the medium completely. In this way, there are seemingly endless ways to engage with *Minecraft*. It's what has kept players and modders busy for years, and why *Minecraft* continues to be relevant to some degree. While *Minecraft* fans are sometimes critical of the developers' continued updates, these updates speak to a long-term commitment to a community just as invested in the experience of *Minecraft* as the developers are. Both parties keep each other energized and form the baseboard from which future creators—those who look up to the creators of today—will grow.

The world of *Minecraft* machinima, and *Minecraft* content in general, is a prime cycle of consumption and creation that keeps the internet turning. There have, and will, be other kinds of media that function to this effect. But there will always be much to glean from *Minecraft's* age and longstanding cultural impact. The more forms of creative engagement like *Minecraft* machinima are taken seriously, the more support and freedom the creators of tomorrow will be afforded. The world may change, but that community will always be a rock.

I am excited for the future generations of multidisciplinary online creators. Aren't you?

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