

Eph 25 - in minecraft

Global Impunity Index 2020: “Getting away with murder”

<https://cpj.org/reports/2020/10/global-impunity-index-journalist-murders/>

Global Impunity Index 2021: “Killers of journalists still get away with murder”

<https://cpj.org/reports/2021/10/killers-of-journalists-still-get-away-with-murder/>

James Delaney’s 2018 thesis:

<https://www.blockworks.uk/democracy-and-urban-design>

Block By Block, a collaboration between UN Habitat and Mojang, builds faithful replicas of architectural proposals created via participatory design:

<https://www.blockbyblock.org/projects/>

The fake news article’s original source tweet:

<https://twitter.com/FreeDuck5/status/1453523224323510272>

Morgan Krakow’s thread about the fake article:

https://twitter.com/morgan_krakow/status/1453866420723339265

“Understanding the Mirai botnet” - a postmortem:

<https://elie.net/publication/understanding-the-mirai-botnet/>

TrendMicro white paper “Worm War: the Botnet Battle for IoT Territory”:

https://documents.trendmicro.com/assets/white_papers/wp-worm-war-the-botnet-battle-for-iot-territory.pdf

Reviews of anime “Mirai Nikki”:

https://myanimelist.net/anime/10620/Mirai_Nikki_TV/reviews

This month I’d like to talk about Minecraft, about a famous library that’s actually a museum, and commit criminal acts, comma, in minecraft, - or at least whether or not that’s a sound legal defense.

I’m Stephanie Boulding, and this is Ephemera.

[intro sting]

Have you heard of The Uncensored Library? I’ll play a little bit of the video that Reporters Without Borders, who commissioned the project, *announced* it with. First, there’s powerful sounding music, with some text over video of the minecraft server, which is built as an enormous marble library, in the neoclassical style but with way more foliage. Then we get profile

shots of dissident journalists and their surviving families, as on the right side of the screen, a Minecraft 'book' object is filled in with the text of a banned article they wrote.

[clip from 0:38 - 0:55 ish. The three speakers]

That third speaker is Hatice Gengiz, the surviving fiancée of murdered Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. It's Khashoggi's murder, in particular, that is central to the Library, so let's take a moment offline, before returning to the Web.

The UN's Special Rapporteur for Extrajudicial Execution, Agnes Callamard, published a very clear report. Here's her key finding:

[<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v9kaWSyaIQ> 0:10-0:36]

And here she is on the best interview show in news, HARDtalk with Stephen Sackur, on the BBC. Sackur asks her I think a very pointed question, one without an easy answer, which is kind of his whole, like, 'thing'.

[sackur part 1.wav]

After a little bit of back-and-forth, Sackur coaxes this actual answer from Callamard.

[sackur part 2.wav]

Callamard points out earlier in the interview some things that I've already discussed on ephemera, and in the Russian episode of SPLINTERNET, about the extrajudicial killing of journalists. If you haven't listened to that, I encourage you to check it out, but I'll quote Callamard again and say a few things.

[callamard 1.wav]

She's completely right, and she's THE person to be able to say that, in her role as special rapporteur to the UN on extrajudicial execution. Impunity isn't *quite* 100%, but it's close. The Committee to Protect Journalists, who are excellent, put out a report every year, something they call the 'Global Impunity Index'. In both 2020 and 2021, they identified at least 20 journalists who were conclusively killed in retribution for their reporting and coverage. They write in their 2020 report:

During the 10-year index period ending August 31, 2020, 277 journalists were murdered for their work worldwide and in 83% of those cases no perpetrators have been successfully prosecuted. For last year's index period, CPJ recorded complete impunity in 86% of cases. The rate of complete impunity has inched lower in recent years. In "[The Road to Justice](#)," a 2014 examination of the causes of impunity in journalist murders and possible solutions, CPJ found that the [killers went free in nine out of 10 cases](#) between 2004 and 2013. [BOOTS?]

So Callamard is right when she argues that things are improving, not getting worse, and Sackur is also right when he characterizes the gulf between Agnes Callamard's office's recommendations, and the implementations, or lack thereof, from UN member states.

Let's return to the library. I think we understand how important its contents are. Is it really, as the name implies, uncensorable?

If you visit it, which I really **do** encourage you to visit, if you like this episode, you spawn into the world in Creative Mode, with a single item in your inventory; a FAQ. Among instructions on getting around, citation of sources, and frequently asked questions like "Will there be more books added?", is something I appreciate their candor about.

Page 11 of 13 of the book asks: Can the library be censored?

Technically yes, practically no. This library has already been downloaded thousands of times, and re-uploaded to multiple servers. It's spreading quickly worldwide, making it difficult to take down.

It's an excellent point; certainly it would be trivial for a state like to restrict access to the official IP of the official server. Half a dozen have. But downloaded copies of the world file can be re-hosted by those who would care to do so, and the game of whack-a-mole it would require to identify and IP ban **all** versions of the map is beyond all but the most capable and willing states.

Among other elements of the library is a hall detailing attacks on press freedom that cite COVID-19 as rationale. I saw ten articles installed as exhibits, but there were easily 20 or 30 nooks for installations, most empty. The dates of all the articles in the wing are from the very end of 2019 and the latest dates to March 2020. The FAQ you receive, and a lectern in the central area of the wing, indicate that yes, more books will be added. But I certainly didn't see them being added to the COVID wing.

Whether or not more texts have been added to the canonical version of the Library - and I don't think they have - the texts that **are** there are presented with reverence. The library has a central rotunda, with press freedom information for 180 countries on lecterns below minecraft replicas of their flags. It also has some very large subject-specific wings, on Vietnam, Saudi Arabia, Reporters Without Borders more generally, Russia, and so on. The COVID-19 wing I described a minute ago is more like a minor element of the library; these larger wings are enormous, and each has a central sculptural component that evokes the reading material. Two new wings were added for the 1-year anniversary of the library; Brasil and Belarus.

The sculptures were amazingly well done. The physical space, which the company who built it says took 5 months to create, and 3 months of work to build in Creative Mode, is a stunning jewel of digital architecture. I really, really like it.

My favourite piece is an optical illusion in the Reporters Without Borders hall. A cloud of glowstone blocks hovers in the air like dust from an explosion. As you make your way to the lectern at the far edge of the hall, the perspective trick takes place, and the chaotic mess of blocks resolves into a single glowing word: TRUTH. The wall above you - so, looking the other way - bears a glowing statement: NO FREEDOM WITHOUT PRESS FREEDOM. That's what you're seeing in the episode art for this episode, that piece of sculpture.

The Vietnam hall has a labyrinth you can get lost in on your way to the central pavilion with the texts on it. I spent a few seconds in the labyrinth, got lost, and then double-jumped into a Creative mode hover and simply flew over to the pavilion. If this is an emotional response I was supposed to have as I navigated the gallery, I think it was incredibly smart and beautiful, something that acts as a thesis for the project as a whole.

The Jamal Khashoggi hall, because that's what the Saudi Arabia hall truly is, encases his articles in a lacy cage of obsidian. I spent about twenty minutes in the Khashoggi hall, and I saw a lot of people reading his Washington Post articles.

It's clear to me that the library succeeds both as a virtual space and as a statement about press freedom. It's less clear to me that the press interacted with the space that way. If you were familiar with this story before I started it telling it to you today, you almost definitely heard about it on the news, most likely as a breathless human interest story, most likely promising or implying a version of the library that looked like real-world *libraries* - dense temples of catalogued text.

The map itself is much larger, more open, airier, however you want to express the liberating nature of unconstrained digital space and the ability to fly. Maybe it's what a library might look like in the metaverse, if someone were to ever build one there. James Delaney, founder of BlockWorks, the design company that was contracted to build the library, said this to the BBC:

It is kind of plausible as a real building, but is pushing the limits of what's possible. We went for a design in the neoclassical style. It's similar to things like the British Museum and public libraries in New York. [LUKE, DONE]

Very few articles identify that the idea to build the Uncensored Library was not Delaney's or Blockworks's, but the idea of the marketing group of the German branch of Reporters Without Borders. Two years previously, the DDB Group, which is the group's name, won several awards for a project called the 'Uncensored Playlist'.

[uncensored playlist clip.wav]

To understand just how distinct their process of arriving at this idea was, I'd like to quote some great reporting in The Verge, by Cian Maher.

[sound bed]

DDB senior creative Tobi Natterer explains that this isn't the first Reporters Without Borders project to grapple with press censorship in recent years. "We did [The Uncensored Playlist](#) two years ago, to make censored information available through music because Spotify is available in each country in the world," Natterer explains. Ever since, the DDB and Reporters Without Borders teams have been working on transforming the concept of "Uncensored" into an ongoing series of creative ideas intended to combat censorship all over the world.

The idea to use Minecraft as part of this movement has an unlikely origin. While watching television at home, Natterer noticed that the people on-screen were using a video game in an ostensibly unconventional way. They weren't actually playing, but were using the in-game chat to speak to each other. "Computer games are partly about the game experience, but also about meeting in a virtual space," Natterer says. "I did some research and found out that countries with press censorship often [have] huge gaming communities." After another round of probing, Natterer discovered that Minecraft, as well as being almost unparalleled in popularity and accessibility, offers players the ability to write books in-game.

That sentence, uh, "in an ostensibly unconventional way" I *think* is the reporter giggling a little at the idea that chatting in a virtually-mediated world would *at all* be unusual. It's certainly not unusual to me. It's probably 70% of what I did in Runescape?

It would be hard to have hired a better company to build the library than James Delaney's company, BlockWorks, though. Unlike most of the team at the marketing company who came up with the idea of a minecraft library, or most of the journalists answering questions at the various streamed Q&A events I watched, Delaney **grew up** with Minecraft. He also has a degree in architecture, and his company has done a lot of, like, promotional minecraft builds.

Delaney writes in his architecture thesis from the University of Cambridge, which I read and liked, something that I think I'd like to underline for this discussion of what it means to do something "in minecraft". He writes this amazing fact:

Whilst mature VR software has been developed specifically for 3D city model representation and urban planning, the majority of this software is reserved for professionals and lacks even the most basic public consultation features. The most accessible and easy-to-use VR technology has instead been developed by the computer game industry, which now leads the way in the development and production of VR technology with at least 90% of all content built for VR created on the video game engine 'Unity'.²³ In

2016, Microsoft released a new version of Minecraft specifically tailored for VR, so that users could experience existing Minecraft environments as virtual reality environments, as well as design new ones using the software.

Although this was an expected and seemingly obvious development from Microsoft, the consequence of this was to arguably make Minecraft the most effective and easily available participatory design tool on the market – one that combines the social networking and communication aspects of platforms such as 'Commonplace' with the immersion and interactivity of virtual environments used in VR technology.

That idea, that minecraft is the single most successful participatory design tool available, with a proper consultation framework where even those who've never used a computer before can participate, like in Delaney's second trial in Surabaya, that's amazing.

Earlier in this episode, I was vaguely critical of the way the Uncensored Library was presented and breathlessly reposted, as if it were *primarily a library of texts* as opposed to a museum about press censorship. As a virtual museum, I think it's great. One of my favourites, maybe. It's really beautiful, and with Minecraft's ethereal score, the experience of flying around and experiencing more and more and more of the build was just awesome.

I found something Tobias Natterer, whose idea the Library was, who didn't know about people chatting to each other in video games, something he said in a 2021 Q&A to be clarifying. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A1Vih4dObDo> from 1:11:15ish to 1:11:50ish.

It's clear to Tobi, uh, that's his nickname, that the purpose of the Library is not only to act as a repository for individual censored articles, but to prompt thought and consideration by young people of the idea of press freedom to begin with, something he says many visitors, particularly American children, have never before considered. This makes the current implementation of the Library an unequivocal success for Reporters Without Borders.

It was also a huge success for DDB Germany, Tobias Natterer's creative team, behind the Uncensored Playlist and the Uncensored Library. They received a number of awards that, in the words of the industry organization, are **awarded only to outstanding work that achieves true creative excellence.** [SANGI]

The Uncensored Playlist won four wooden pencils and two graphite pencils from D&AD, if that means anything to you. The Uncensored **Library** was awarded a staggering five wooden pencils, one graphite pencil, TWO yellow pencils, and made three additional shortlists.

In their page on the project, D&AD say:

The Uncensored Library reached over 20m gamers, made more than 790 news articles, became an educational tool in schools and universities and increased donations for Reporters Sans Frontieres by 62%. [SANGI]

As marketing tool, and as a museum and art piece, I think the Library is an unqualified success. But I think that like, maybe 80% of those initial news articles just copied the press kit and called it a day? And the press kit is all about, this is a **library**, this is a collection of articles and materials IP banned in many countries, there are **over 200 books** :rolleyes: :laugh: . But it's reached hundreds of thousands of people, and probably hundreds of thousands of children, for whom it might nourish a lifelong fascination with journalism. And that's not in the press kit at all! But it's so....incredible! Right?

It's a museum, but in Minecraft. But I wanna ask... what does "in minecraft".....mean?

The obvious implication is that 'in minecraft' is less than 'in real life'. Fair enough. But I think a hidden implication is that it's somehow *more embodied, more 'real'*, if you want to use that word, than *other* virtually mediated spaces. I think probably part of that is the shared aspect of a minecraft server; players act in an embodied way upon and in response to *other embodied players*.

There was a story that I saw online in some viral image, and I really wanted to tell that story here because, well, it would've just been perfect. But unfortunately, the story was never written, the author it's purportedly written by in the screenshot says she never wrote it, and the two images in the screenshot were something I was **eventually** able to trace back via my own detective research as not in any way related to the story being alleged.

The viral image is a screenshot of a tweet, with a fake news article, whose headline reads this: **"Virginia man arrested for having minecraft worlds that were exact replicas of classified US military bases."**[SARAH] It's accompanied by two images on twitter; the first is a side profile photo of a white man, graying hair, military uniform, and the second is of a minecraft map that is alleged to be one of these 'exact replicas'. I wasn't intrigued by the first image at the time, but in my research again for this episode, I reverse image searched it on a couple engines, none of which found any matches. So that's kind of weird. Whatever.

But at the time, something DID bug me about the *second* image; it has some jeeps and other vehicles that have presumably been added by a mod, because they're way higher-fidelity than any minecraft model gets to be. And the screenshot is weirdly positioned and staged. It just didn't look like what the article was purporting it was, and the author in the screenshot says the article never existed. So the story just can't be true.

The tweet, by the way I don't think I've mentioned the tweet yet, but it assumes that this article is factual, and the person tweets **"my 'in minecraft' excuse might not work". [GANYM3D3]**

"In minecraft", to certain posting communities, is a jokey disclaimer way to say oh, but don't worry , cops, I won't *actually* do that. I'm just venting. It's kind of similar to the old drug forum canard, "SWIM", meaning Someone Who Isn't Me, and used liberally as a first person pronoun. Neither is a particularly sound legal defense.

—ADDED SECTION TO RE-RECORD—

Speaking of memes, uh, you may have seen proof that 'in minecraft' isn't a particularly sound legal defense. Probably if you did, you saw the following legal footnote taken out of context.

2: Minecraft is a video game. Based on information provided by the FBI, the government understands that it is common for persons discussing criminal activity online to refer to such activity as occurring "in Minecraft" to conceal the true nature of the activity. [RUCCI]

Now, this IS from a real court case, and that IS the opinion of the US government in its findings. The specifics, you may not have known, but if I tell you that the accused in the case is Rufio Pan Man, who led about a hundred Proud Boys inside the US Capitol on January 6th, I think you can guess? At issue, specifically, is a text message sent by the vice president of the Philly chapter of the Proud Boys, a man with a very strange pretend relationship with the FBI. The government seizes Rufio's phone, because of, well, you know, and on the phone is a series of Telegram messages where Whallon-Wolkind is giving out operational instructions, and where he also says, "If you're talking about playing minecraft, just make sure you don't use your phone at all, or even have it anywhere around you".

From the same Philly guy, uh, he also texts everyone: 'I want to see thousands of normies burn that city to ash today.', and, uh, also ALSO texts the phrase "Storming the capitol right now!!", two exclamation marks, he sends that four times in a row.

But there's actually an even bigger, uh, "in minecraft" crime, and it's not just American, but global. Did you ever hear of , uh, the Mirai botnet?

Okay, so, Mirai was a computer worm that made a botnet. The three American college students who wrote it, they allegedly didn't know just how strong a program they'd designed. They kind of knew, though, maybe? Mirai is japanese for "the future". It's an interesting worm, and it

represented a more effective strategy for botnets than had previously evolved. Unlike traditional worms, Mirai attacked internet-of-things devices, and had a large table of default usernames and passwords that it could shuffle together in a pseudo-targeted way. It's impressive that its coders named it mirai, and I used to think, wow, that's remarkably prescient.

But THEN I found an allegation that the name was taken from the anime *Mirai Nikki*. Apparently the show is very stupid, so who knows what this metaphor about prescience even means anymore. For what it's worth, one of Mirai's big initial families was called 'dot anime'.

It used to be, a decade or so ago, that a botnet attack would hit your server at, like, 10 to 20 gigabits per second. The first super-botnet, something called vDOS, could hit at like, up to 50 gigabits. Mirai, which was released in 2016, when they hit French network provider OVH, they hit with **about a terabit of data per second**. It hit someone else with one point two terabits.

Brian Krebs, and we all know Brian Krebs, I hope, he spent months investigating Mirai, and he got hit with it so hard that his DDOS **protection** company had to stop protecting him; they were protecting him pro bono, but their business customers couldn't afford it. The WIRED article about the discovery and identification of Mirai quotes an FBI cyber agent:

Mirai was an insane amount of firepower. DDOS at a certain scale poses an existential threat to the internet. Mirai was the first botnet I've seen that hit that existential level. [JOE]

Uh, an aside, sorry, but I think this is pretty cool. Mirai is a worm, vDOS was a worm, they both replicate virally. And now that we've all learned to understand how to process that mentally, I can talk about how absolutely virulent this thing was. Mirai doubled in size every 76 minutes. I'll just give you a second with that idea.

....

Anyway. vDOS and Mirai actually fought it out for control over various pwnable devices, kind of like how we just saw Omicron and Delta competing with each other. And just like Omicron, Mirai just about annihilated vDOS.

There's a good research publication, linked in the show notes, called 'Understanding Mirai'. It's a great read for computer scientists and epidemiologists alike, and I genuinely mean that, but I want to highlight not Mirai's attack on Krebs on Security, the attack that put it on the map, but its attack on massive French web host OVH. It's in line with a pattern of gaming-based attacks. The Understanding Mirai authors infer:

This pattern of behavior suggests that the Dyn attack on October 21, 2016 was not solely aimed at Dyn. The attacker was likely targeting gaming infrastructure that *incidentally* disrupted service to Dyn's broader customer base. [TUMS]

Dyn's 'broader customer base', by the way? Netflix, Twitter, reddit, CNN, and so on. Therefore, the attack on OVH, as the WIRED article reveals:

As it turned out, French internet host OVH was well-known for offering a service called VAC, one of the industry's top *Minecraft* DDoS-mitigation tools. The Mirai authors attacked it not as part of some grand nation-state plot, but rather, to undermine the protection it offered key *Minecraft* servers.

Once investigators knew what to look for, they found *Minecraft* links all over Mirai: In an less-noticed attack just after the OVH incident, the botnet had targeted ProxyPipe.com, a company in San Francisco that specializes in protecting *Minecraft* servers from DDoS attacks. [SHELL]

So Mirai was invented, **designed to**, attack a big *Minecraft* server and its DDoS protection service at the same time, in order to gain a strategic advantage in online *Minecraft*. But it turned out to be, if I can make a covid analogy, an Omicron, not a small mutation. A total game changer. And Mirai has variants, SO MANY different reconfigured source codes for sale, including some variants which can be linked together genetically by the fact that someone wrote something racist in the readymade source code. Yeah.

Mirai came out in 2016, and the Mirai family of code remains the strongest botnet malware. Mirai's invention is just how botnets work now. If you own a smart device, you might have Mirai in your own home. Meanwhile, *Minecraft* is the most popular urban design consultation software ever created. And players have an embodied sense of self, at least a little bit. And so maybe, just maybe, 'in *Minecraft*' isn't so online after all.

[end music]

BUILDINGS AND BRIDGES - ANI DIFRANCO.

Ephemera is my passion project, but it's no longer something I make all on my own. Without the support of my patrons, I wouldn't be able to afford my research or spend as much time making Ephemera as good as it is. And it wouldn't sound as good without Miguel Tanhi as the sound engineer. If you like Ephemera and want it to thrive, patronage comes with a few hours of extra audio and some other benefits, like membership in my greek chorus.

This month, I'm sending pick emoji, and my sincere thanks, to Greg Stearns, Heather Turcich, Matthew J Bell, Aidan Day, The Sea Hag, Alice, Thomas Hale, Bernardasaur, Drew Kidd, Salubrius Rex, Al Ostapeck, Ben Mabbott, Brady Butterfield, Chris, Frank West, Homo Vulgaris, Karl Reinsch, Kevin Wray, Matthew Hathaway, Robyn, Shell Game, TF, and my friend Joe. I know this one was late, but SPLINTERNET 4 is coming out next, and I think you're really gonna like it.

Stinger:

Jha, the man behind Mirai, was also accused of—and pleaded guilty to—a bizarre set of DDoS attacks that had disrupted the computer networks on the Rutgers campus for two years. Beginning in the first year Jha was a student there, Rutgers began to suffer from what would

ultimately be a dozen DDoS attacks that disrupted networks, all timed to midterms. At the time, an unnamed individual online pushed the university to purchase better DDoS mitigation services—which, as it turns out, was exactly the business Jha himself was trying to build.

[SHELL]