

# **Minecraft Servers are Providing Safe and Nurturing Communities for Young People**

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## **Abstract**

The global popularity and influence of online video games has been the subject of debate for nearly three decades, often with the claim of video games promoting aggressive and anti-social behaviour. Minecraft is an online multiplayer game played by over 74 million active monthly players across over 10,000 live servers. These servers are often designed, built and operated by volunteer staff called administrators. It is through the rules set by these administrators, combined with their constant presence within these online worlds, which has enabled the creation of virtual communities that are proving to be safe, nurturing and supportive environments for young players to develop creative and social skills whilst developing friendships and feeling a strong sense of community within this blocky digital landscape. This paper argues that with the implementation of server rules and the involvement of mature and supportive administrators, many Minecraft servers are proving that it is possible for young people to become part of an online community that promotes self-expression and friendly collaboration while providing a diverse collective of supportive and nurturing players and administrators.

## **Key Words**

Online gaming, online communities, multiplayer games, Minecraft, MMORPG, affinity spaces

## Introduction

Improved digital technology combined with the acceleration in accessibility of the internet over recent years has fuelled the growth in the number of platforms, websites and apps offering online users a wide range of products and services intended to satisfy and enhance almost every aspect of their lives. This includes providing digital environments that facilitate online communities and gaming. The potential for negative influence through many video games has been the subject of public debate for nearly three decades, with the issue regularly being raised as a possible contributor towards influencing dangerous behaviour (Collins, Freeman, Chamarro-Premuzic, 2011, p. 1). Indeed, there are some video games, which are highly combative and have been accused of promoting aggressive attitudes and conduct from their players towards other online players (Stavropoulos, Kuss, Griffiths, & Motti-Stefanidi, 2016, p. 3). However, some online games such as Minecraft provide players with vastly different environments, where aggression and poor conduct are rarely seen and strongly discouraged. Minecraft online servers are providing affinity spaces that support online communities, through which young players are developing online social and communication skills in a safe, supportive and friendly environment. This paper will draw on the observations and findings of scholarly research into the online world of Minecraft and the people playing it, with the intention of showing that with the implementation of server rules and the involvement of mature and supportive administrators, many Minecraft servers are proving that it is possible for young people to become part of an online community that promotes self-expression and friendly collaboration while providing a diverse collective of supportive and nurturing players and administrators.

## Discussion

To help achieve a proper understanding of the online communities that Minecraft players occupy, it is important to first clarify the difference between a network and a community, as it appears that there may be some scholars that confuse the terms, such as Blažič-Džonova and Blažič (2016, p. 1) who declared that “virtual communities...are frequently referred to as social networks.” Networks are generally identified as structures that consist of elements

that are linked through either commonality or purpose. Online networks can consist of apps, websites, locations, addresses, servers and accounts. Boyd and Ellison (2007) identified social networks as online facilities that provide a means for users to connect with a set group of friends and other groups through platforms where they can create customised personal identities within the confines of the network. By this understanding, a network provides the online structure required to house the online community. This can be compared to a church which is attended by the congregation, or a club that is populated by its members. It is the congregation and members that have the potential to become communities. As the people within these groups start to experience a sense of genuine involvement, believing that their contributions to the group are of value and appreciated, receiving recognition, feeling needed and experiencing a “...shared emotional connection...”, a strong sense of community will develop (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). While these characteristics were observations of real-world communities, it would not be difficult to apply them to people occupying online communities.

The emotional benefits of joining an online community, becoming an active participant and contributor and subsequently feeling a sense of belonging has been acknowledged by several scholarly observers of these virtual worlds. Woodbridge (2017) supports this by declaring that in addition to feeling like their regular online contributions make them important members of their online community; users may also experience an elevated sense of self-esteem and emotional health (Woodbridge, 2017, p. 20-22). Blanchard (2007) identified that while people within “...virtual communities...” may not believe that their online actions may not be as effective on others as those in the real world, there was a firm belief that they “...feel that they know the personalities of others and experience and observe more personal relationships than do members of face-to-face communities” (Blanchard, 2007, p. 827). In addition to this, the manner of engagement between members of online communities often becomes similar to that of the real world, leading to strong bonds involving a sense of trust and support (Cole & Griffiths, 2007) (Kaye & Bryce, 2012). While these observations tend to reflect a very positive and healthy environment within online communities, it is well recognised that this perspective cannot be applied across all realms within the digital world. The networks needed to facilitate these supportive and

friendly online communities often require a well enforced set of rules combined with a team of mature and active administrators and moderators.

The rise of the massive multiplayer online role player game (MMORPG) has led to a wide variety of environments for video game players to interact with others and become a part of an online community. Developed by Mojang Specifications and launched in 2009, Minecraft is an online MMORPG that is more focused on exploration, adventure and building rather than the constant combative nature of many other online games (MacCallum-Stewart, 2013, p. 16). While originally classified as a single player game that can still be played in this manner, the adaptation of Minecraft into an online game means that online players will almost always see or meet other players on most Minecraft servers. With a current average of 74 million users per month, Minecraft's new General Manager, Helen Chiang declared that many returning fans of the game and regular upgrades are contributing to a global increase in the size of the Minecraft online population and stated that "that's really our goal, to keep building the community that we have" (Lilly, 2018). Minecraft is proof that online gaming has developed into much more than the aged concept of one or two players competing against each other on an isolated console (MacCallum-Stewart, 2013, p7). With an average of over 300,000 players online at any one time across over 10,000 active servers ("Global Minecraft statistics", 2018), the blocky virtual world "...with no tutorial, an infamously precipitous learning curve, and few ludic objectives" (MacCallum-Stewart, 2013, p. 3) has a large, global following consisting of highly dedicated players committed to fully explore, craft and develop elements within their Minecraft servers, while sharing and teaching those skills with other players (MacCallum-Stewart, 2013, p. 3). These findings support the argument that online multiplayer games do not need to be solely dedicated to combat and strategy to attract millions of players.

The virtual worlds that are accessible within the many Minecraft servers are constructed and operated by, largely, volunteer operators called administrators. In addition to playing Minecraft, these dedicated fans regularly commit their unpaid time to ensuring the constant and smooth operation of the server, through new designs, regular updates and modifications (Pellicone & Ahn, 2015, p. 9). Many players use the modifications provided on servers to customise their game environment and their personal avatar that, like that game

environment, is made of blocks and has been designed to be consistent with the game's setting (Tran, 2013, p. 14). Furthermore, these avatars reflect no specific gender, as was intended by Minecraft developer Markus "Notch" Persson, who stated "The human model is intended to represent a Human Being. Not a male Human Being or a female Human Being, but simply a Human Being" (Persson, 2012). The near neutral graphic appearance of the Minecraft avatars may be an important contributor to why players feel less pressured within the game's environment, where aside from being able to choose from a range of different skins, their characters have an overall similar appearance to those of every other player.

It cannot be claimed that Minecraft is a completely non-violent game, as players within the survival mode of Minecraft will need to battle zombies, creepers, spiders, witches and skeletons, plus kill animals for food and resources. Likewise, some servers have specific fan-based themes that may include challenges requiring combat such as duels. However, due to the blocky nature of all images, players are not subjected to any graphic scenes of violence. Due to the lack of tutorials and the almost immediate need for guidance once immersed in a Minecraft world, interaction with other players becomes an essential component of successfully navigating, surviving, building and playing the game, including defeating monsters (Tran, 2013, p. 17). It is this need to liaise with other players and administrators within the game that makes Minecraft unique in the nature of the communities that have developed within its structure. Cole and Griffiths (2007) have dismissed past claims of a lack of sociable behaviour in MMORPGs, instead suggesting that these types of online games have become "...highly socially interactive" (Cole & Griffiths, 2007, p. 581). It is this need to be actively involved in regularly communicating and often playing with other players, that further supports the suggestion that these online communities have started to reflect similar characteristics to those of the offline world, as described by McMillan and Chavis (1986) where participants within the group have a sense of actively being an important part of the community, that their contributions are recognised and appreciated, and that they experience a "...shared emotional connection...(which) relies on positive interactions between members, shared history and experiences, and mutual investment in the community" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). It is this development of strong social bonds and the ongoing nurturing support in and outside of the Minecraft virtual world that has succeeded in setting it apart from most other online multiplayer games, where players are

not under constant pressure to perform and compete, but are allowed to develop their gaming and social skills at their own pace in a safe and friendly domain.

While Gee (2005) devised the term “affinity spaces” to help better define focused learning environments with the schooling system, the classification has since been adopted to better describe the nature of online communities within games such as Minecraft that are identified as “...informal learning environments where players share resources and knowledge” (Pellicone & Ahn, 2015, p. 2). Applying the term affinity spaces to Minecraft servers helps to differentiate them from other MMORPG games. Within a Minecraft community, players regularly demonstrate the key characteristics that define an affinity space through ongoing interaction with other players with the intention to achieve shared targets, learn or share certain skills, provide support or guidance through relevant game features and even sharing emotional and personal support through game forums (Lammers, Curwood & Magnifico, 2012, p. 4) (Gee, 2004, p. 85). It is this focus on skills development and learning gameplay that helps administrators of Minecraft servers ensure that their communities remain safe and friendly affinity spaces for players of all ages, particularly young people. Aggressive behaviour such as bullying, inappropriate language, sexual advances, and sharing of personal information are generally not permitted on most servers, with the breaching of such rules often resulting in a player being banned from the server. The successful management and enforcement of these types of rules adds further testimony to the positive and nurturing calibre, plus the dedication and diligence of the administrators of many Minecraft servers, who have to deal with the constant dilemma of ensuring that while they want to be inviting as many players to their server as possible through a wide range of incentives such as the potential to earn virtual currency in the form of in game money, rare artefacts that can be used within the Minecraft world plus the opportunity for players to advance within the specific server to become developers and administrators themselves, they still need to ensure that the wrong types of people are either refused entry or quickly identified and removed (Woodbridge, 2017, p. 26). Having strong, enforced rules combined with the support of reliable administrators, helps to establish Minecraft servers as safe environments for young players to interact with other players of all ages, who provide them with nurturing guidance, setting examples of supportive and respectful social behaviour whilst improving their technical and communication skills.

Within the Minecraft affinity spaces, it seems that the passion that the players feel for either the game of Minecraft or any particular fan based theme that has been applied to specific servers, acts as a driving force in the way in which players pursue achievements within their customised realms (Gee & Hayes, 2012, p. 9). This observation may serve to demonstrate how the key interest of the members of these communities, being a particular theme, lends to a strengthening of bonds and levels of support within the customised community. The success of online communities such as Minecraft servers has led to the call for more similar online communities, designed to support learning, creativeness, and sharing, particularly for children, where they can work and play with genuinely supportive peers who will help in improving their communication, expressive, technical and creative skills (Litts, Kafai, Fields, Halverson, Peppler, Keune, Tissenbaum, Grimes, Chang, Regalla, & Telhan, 2016, p. 4). To demonstrate their claim that playing within online Minecraft communities leads to the enhancement of communication and creative skills and helped to “...actively promote socialization,” Riordan and Scarf (2016) presented the case of the “United Nations Human Settlement Program (UN-Habitat)” working with Minecraft to give occupants of real world communities an online game to help make suggestions regarding future designs of their current locations, with the goal that “...they could cooperatively recreate their cities and show city planners how they want their cities to look” (Riordan & Scarf, 2016, p. 2). This connecting of real world environments to Minecraft further support the argument that the high levels of skill development, nurturing support and the lack of competitive pressure within this multiplayer gaming environment prove its positive difference to the majority of other, more competitive MMORPGs.

Regardless of age, the key motivations for Minecraft players, particularly those new to the game, are more based on achieving success in gameplay such as building something new, or completing a challenging quest. Players tend not to be looking for social success, as much as seeing the social aspect as a means to obtain recognition of the actual challenge achieved. The social structures within Minecraft communities seem to primarily function as a means to provide support to the players’ real interest, that being mastering the different elements of the building game itself (Grasso, 2016, p. 53). This dedicated focus by the majority of players, makes Minecraft an ideal online community for young people, providing support,

safety and assisting in the attainment of prosocial skills. Through their research, Pellicone and Ahn (2015) observed the nurturing element of Minecraft communities was further demonstrated through the more mature and experienced players feeling comfortable sharing positive cultural values within the game, whilst also working with the younger and newer players in roles similar to skilled tradespeople and their apprentices (Pellicone & Ahn, 2015, p. 2). These online relationships reflect parallels with a real world sense of community, where all members of the community contribute across various levels of responsibility and ability adding to the further development of the social conducts that result from these actions.

Riordan and Scarf (2016) claim that Minecraft helps to dispel the long held view that video games contribute to the social isolation of young players, instead suggesting that the online game has fuelled a worldwide shift in attitude towards online gaming, where the game is being acknowledged as strongly promoting the development of socialisation and team work. This was largely contributed to the constant presence of administrators and senior members, providing a safe, friendly and nurturing environment for young and new players to feel comfortable whilst learning new skills, improving social skills and developing new relationships (Riordan & Scarf, 2016, p. 2). The benefit of playing and working together within the affinity space of a Minecraft community, keeps players focused on game achievements plus helping others within their community attain those same goals. The resulting collaborations involving players of all ages with a common aim support the argument that, while not combative, Minecraft provides a vast online world made up of very sociable communities that enjoy playing, teaching and learning together (Duncan & Huang, 2014, p. 4). This supports the argument that the acceptance of young and new players in Minecraft of the help from more experienced members in developing building, gaming and social skills in a friendly and supportive environment is proof that through the Minecraft affinity spaces, these online players are learning how to be better members of real world communities.



## Conclusion

With the growing range of online multiplayer games available, it can be difficult for young people to find a game that provides an online community that is not facilitating aggressive, disrespectful and offensive conduct, but rather operates with the prime goals of providing safe online environments that support positive and friendly social interaction combined with developing gaming and creative skills. Minecraft has proven that, through its online servers, these needs are being met and supported through the dedication and passion of a global league of server administrators and skilled Minecraft players. As active members of these online communities, young players can feel a sense of safety, belonging, friendship and support as they explore the vast digital world of Minecraft, interacting with other players whilst being taught and mastering new skills.

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