

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Minecraft

Platform: PC, now on mobile and Xbox

Genre: Sandbox

Release Date: May 17, 2009

Developer: Mojang

Publisher: Mojang

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Markus Persson

Overview

It is reading our thoughts as though they were words on a screen.

Minecraft is a world-renowned sandbox survival game with a simplistic, cube-based visual style and world generation. While players do not experience a linear narrative, the game takes place in a rich post-apocalyptic setting with in-depth worldbuilding, biogeography, and history, all of which continues to retroactively develop as the game updates.

Minecraft's unique narrative style is built to prioritize Emergent Narrative: stories created solely by the player's own actions with no planned direction or writing from the developers. Rather than directing the player's actions with scripted adventures, *Minecraft* provides as rich and dynamic of a setting as possible, enabling players to create their own adventures and priorities, as well as providing context for the lives that players lead. Rather than using its worldbuilding to write new story beats, the game's history exists for the sole purpose of immersion, making whatever adventures the player makes feel more real. *Minecraft* refuses to present the player with events or new developments beyond their control, leaving the developing story totally within the player's grasp.

To properly execute this emergence-centric, history-assisted storytelling style, games need to be able to create intrigue without providing answers (such as in *Minecraft*'s Ancient Cities), to recontextualize existing game features with new history without retcons (such as in *Minecraft*'s dried ghasts), and to be so absent of planned current events that the player is devoid of any role or responsibility despite a rich setting.

Characters

We are the universe. We are everything you think isn't you.

Minecraft only has a handful of distinct entities that could be identified as “characters.” Most important actors come in the form of entire species, with the way they appear and behave in the world informing an understanding of the world’s history, also known as their biogeography. There are several distinct species, each of which have their own unique history and behaviour, such as the dimension-hopping Endermen or the weapon-wielding Zombies, both of which are uncannily similar to the player and hold a speculative relation to an extinct culture of builders. Only a few creatures in *Minecraft*’s world are examined in this review as they relate to *Minecraft*’s narrative style.

- **The Player** – the last of an extinct civilization of builders. The only one of their kind in the whole world (unless you’re playing with friends).
- **Ghasts** – Native to the fiery, ashen hellscape of the Nether, ghasts are giant, floating, white beasts resembling octopuses that constantly weep and spew fireballs at the player without hesitation. They’re found most frequently in the dry soulsand valleys of the Nether, but in contrast to their natural habitat, they heal in water and feed on snow, neither of which can exist in the Nether. Why are their biological needs so at odds with their habitat? Why do they behave so differently when raised in the moisture of the Overworld? And why are they always crying?
- **The Warden** – the ancient, blind protector of the Ancient Cities, hidden away at the bottom of the world. Although it lives in a “city,” implying hospitality and life, the Warden is the only life to be found in these cities, aside from the sprawling sculk mold that infests the cities. It’s unclear exactly what the Warden is, but many players posit that it’s a construct of some kind, powered by human souls and built to protect the cities. Although its wards are long gone, it still wanders the ruins, its body overgrown with sculk, searching for intruders with its sense of smell and hearing.

Breakdown

World History

This player dreamed of sunlight and trees. Of fire and water. It dreamed it created. And it dreamed it destroyed.

Because *Minecraft* puts so much emphasis on the present, using its history only to create a sense of life, the game’s developers have purposefully never explained the full history of the setting. Many players have pieced together what they can through contextual clues and spinoff content, and though the validity of their findings is uncertain, there are a few things that we can take as basic facts of history. The full history of *Minecraft*’s world is too much to explain in full for the purposes of this review, though certain points will be explored in more depth than others.

Briefly put, *Minecraft* consists of three dimensions: the Overworld, a lush natural landscape of forests, mountains, and oceans; the Nether, a fiery hellscape of ash and lava lakes; and the End, a dark, starless void home to a vicious dragon. The Overworld was once inhabited by a highly advanced society of builders who created cities, ships, mineshafts, and temples, among other wonders. The builders have all long since vanished after an apocalyptic event, though some of them still remain as animated corpses who retain many of the same abilities as the player (such as riding horses and wielding tools).

Why the builders vanished and where they went remains a mystery, although common theories posit that the builders who survived the apocalypse went to one of two places. They may have gone to the End, where they remained trapped and transformed into Endermen while continuing to build their cities. Or, they may have built Ancient Cities deep beneath the mountains, powering themselves with the energy of human souls and guarding themselves with Wardens before escaping through a portal in the city's centre (or being absorbed by carnivorous sculk mold).

But past the vague historical worldbuilding, all of the game's story is left up to player emergence. When the player begins the game, they simply navigate the tragic ruins left behind by this civilization, building their own stories from scratch using the fragments left behind. They create their own goals, their own priorities, and their own story. They can allow the past to influence them as much or as little as they want. And as they travel the world, the game is careful to remove all sense of obligation and identity from the player, ensuring that any adventures they seek will be entirely their own choice.

Removal of Player Identity

And the player was a new human, never alive before, made from nothing but milk and love.

In sandbox or open world games, developers must balance between two forces: story and autonomy. The more story a game has, the more it necessitates an identity for the player to help them fit in, but the more defined a role is, the more it limits what the player can do. Inversely, the more autonomy a player has, the more ambiguous they become as an entity in the game's world, and the more ambiguous the world itself becomes.

Other sandboxes may define the player as a farmer (*Stardew Valley*), a criminal (*Grand Theft Auto 5*), a prophesied hero (*Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*), or a gritty survivor (*Rust*). Even in something like *Civilization*, the player takes on the role of a whole society. The world is allowed to be more grounded and detailed when the player has a clear role within it that doesn't break the boundaries of the game, but this limits what the player can do and what makes sense for them narratively. When the player has no clear role, they have much more autonomy, but become more of a godlike observer of the world rather than a living part of it. This can be seen in *Totally Accurate Battle Simulator* and *Tiny Glade*, where the player is more so running experiments or painting pictures rather than acting within the limits of a story-imposed role.

Minecraft circumnavigates this problem in a clever manner. The player is given the ability to change absolutely everything in their environment to their will, but this autonomy itself is what defines their role in the world. They are the last of the society of builders, the last person

alive with this ability. The player is simply given a dystopia and allowed to be whatever type of character they wish; a wanderer, an entrepreneur, a builder, a hunter. They can be bent on vengeance, or exploration, or simply seeking peace and quiet. They have no obligations or responsibilities to anything, and so, like the game, they are contextualized by their past but only defined by their present actions.

Ruins and Unexplained Wonder: Ancient Cities

It dreamed it hunted, and was hunted. It dreamed of shelter.

One of the main channels in which the game presents its history is through ruins. *Minecraft* is famous for its randomly generated structures. While a few are occupied and implied to have been built by the world's current occupants, such as villages, mansions, and witch huts, the majority of these structures are much older, more intricate, and totally abandoned. Some, like jungle temples, desert pyramids, or ocean monuments, seem to be places of worship: decorative and well-protected, with no space for amenities. Others are places of research: strongholds, centred around portal chambers and hiding vast libraries in their veins, or damaged Nether portals, spilling the guts of another dimension out into the landscape. Others are signs of development, such as shipwrecks and empty mineshafts. But the strangest of all the structures are the empty homes. Ancient cities are one such example. Hidden deep below the tallest mountains of the world, tucked into the bowels of the darkest cave systems, totally overgrown with carnivorous sculk mold, lies a dark city lit by trapped human souls. Although there are structures resembling homes, and a strange, portal-like monument in the city's centre, no people reside here; rather, the only life to be found is the sculk mold and the city's abandoned protector, the Warden. Why does the city lie empty? Why does the sculk grow so thickly here? What is the Warden? Why are there so many soul lanterns? And what's with that giant portal-shaped monument in the city centre?

Well, we have no idea. And that's the point.

Minecraft's ruins are designed to use unresolved intrigue to create wonder. We may be able to piece together that the city was built as a refuge from something above ground. We may even be able to theorize that the Warden is some kind of soul-fueled construct built to protect the city, similarly to an Iron Golem in a village. But we aren't certain, and there are all sorts of things about the city that remain totally unexplained. The best part of the city's design is that it uses things that players already recognize: soul lanterns, for example, and something resembling a portal in the city square. Because there's just enough connections to what the player already knows, players can easily add the city to their mental model of the world's history, but don't understand every aspect of its existence. And it's this lack of resolution that creates a sense of wonder and investment. Because players don't have all the answers, they're more likely to keep looking and yearning for a conclusion to the city's story, and thus will feel more involved in the world, as if they were investigating the history themselves.

Most importantly, it's this sense of wonder that fuels the game's emergent narrative. When players experience curiosity and wonder, it drives them to create their own goals and priorities, exploring the world and establishing their homes entirely of their own volition. When

goals are not provided, the world must put the player in the right headspace to make their own goals. And what better way to build that headspace than through wonder?

Biogeography and Recontextualization: Ghosts

Sometimes the player dreamed it was other things, in other places. Sometimes these dreams were disturbing. Sometimes very beautiful indeed.

The other channel through which *Minecraft* shows its history is through biogeography: the presence and behaviour of animals in various ecosystems. *Minecraft* is a story of a failed people told through the remnants of their culture, but it also tells stories of failed and altered ecosystems. There are several species through which this can be observed, but none are so heart wrenching as the ghosts.

Ghosts are hostile beasts native to the soulsand valleys in the Nether – vast, sprawling plains of dry sand and bones, lit only by the flames of burning souls. Oddly enough, ghosts need ice and water to live, but neither of these are found in the Nether. Because of this, juvenile ghastrlings are left scattered around the soulsand valleys of the Nether as sessile, shrivelled husks, tucked away in the shelter of giant fossils. If a player finds a dried ghastrling, they can take it back to the Overworld and soak it in water to revive it, keeping it as a pet and feeding it with snow. When raised in this fashion, ghosts are totally passive, even being uniquely identified as a “happy ghost.”

The reason why ghosts are so intriguing as a storytelling feature is the staggered method in which their story was told. Ghosts were added along with the Nether in 2010, but their habitats of Soulsand valleys weren’t added until 2020, and happy ghosts and ghastrlings weren’t added until 2025. Thus, right up until 2025, ghosts were pests, simply viewed as another mob to slaughter. When Soulsand valleys were introduced as their habitats, players experienced unresolved intrigue and wonder (as described earlier with the Ancient Cities), but while their intrigue was piqued, their understanding of ghosts didn’t change.

Then, when happy ghosts were added, everything became suddenly and horrifyingly clear: ghosts are victims of climate change. Because they’re native to the Nether, they must have been able to thrive there once upon a time. So while water and ice existed in the Nether at some point in history, its climate has since shifted so drastically that the ghosts can’t thrive in the hellscape it is today. Real-world analogies help further define the story: deserts, where ghosts are found, are frequently the remnants of ancient oceans in real life. A popular theory even posits that the reason adult ghosts cry so much is because they’re trying to rehydrate their dying babies. None of this story was told explicitly, but with such a discordance between the ghost’s newly discovered dietary needs and where they’re naturally found, players were left with a tragically clear picture.

Players widely reacted with heartbreak and intense sympathy for the ghosts, latching onto their new ghastrling pets with ferocity. One community member on Tik Tok, aust3rs, shared his thoughts in a video where he openly cried, writing “this stupid Minecraft update man wdym that poor little ghastrling is stuck next to her mom’s bones withering away. Wdym they are originally aquatic creatures and the ghosts cry to keep their babies alive? Exist only to suffer there and we only killed em for their tears. What cruel world is this” [sic]. Once viewed only with anger and

predation, ghosts were suddenly and tragically recontextualized as the result of years of worldbuilding, now viewed with pity and sadness. Yet despite the sudden and sharp contrast in context, the new discovery feels natural and fitting for the world.

The remarkable thing about these updates is how *Minecraft* approached them as recontextualization rather than retconning. Instead of rewriting old content, asking their players to suspend their disbelief and imagine that *this was here all along, please forget everything you were playing for the last five years*, *Minecraft* treats their updates like new discoveries. It's through this that *Minecraft* executes its strongest element: its retroactive worldbuilding.

Strongest Element: Retroactive Worldbuilding

Leptons, quarks. The words change. We do not change.

Like many open-world games of its caliber, *Minecraft* aims to sustain its playability through novelty, offering new updates like the happy ghosts to draw new players and refresh interest. For most open-world games, new updates take the form of either a new chapter of a story or a new set of mechanics. These present themselves as new developments in the world: current events, scientific progress creating new technology. Or perhaps, like green storms in *Stardew Valley*, the advent of an unexplained weather phenomena, never before seen in the world. But all this is still new: things that occur in the world after the player joins.

Minecraft's narrative is unique in that it allows the game to develop its story without progressing it. While most stories have to provide updates that progress a linear story (think *Genshin Impact*), *Minecraft* players experience new updates the way an archaeologist experiences the discovery of a new dig site. *Minecraft* updates enter the worldbuilding with the assertion that they were always there, simply lying undiscovered by the player. It wasn't that it hadn't been invented, or that it didn't previously exist; rather, it was always there, hidden away, and players simply hadn't explored far enough to find it yet. In conjunction with this assertion, players can experience new updates in old worlds by simply travelling further away to spawn new terrain. Through this method, *Minecraft* can continually add new content without rewriting previous stories. Similarly to our own world, while the discovery of a new species or ancient ruin contextualizes our modern life, it need not dictate our everyday actions. Rather, it enriches the world we inhabit, blessing us with a sense of relatedness with our past or a deepened awareness of life in the world around us.

Unsuccessful Element

It creates worlds that have no summer, and it shivers under a black sun, and it takes its sad creation for reality.

An unfortunate side effect of *Minecraft's* update-oriented worldbuilding style is oversaturation of the world. Many players complain that the game has grown too complex, and although many of these players may have a case of nostalgia bias, it's true that *Minecraft's* current rate of growth through its updates doesn't look sustainable. This is a common trap for sandbox games and can be difficult to avoid. Simply put, more isn't always better.

An example of a poor update that only served to saturate the game is the *Garden Awakens* update in 2024. The pale garden biome is amazing as a self-contained experience which executes its intended design very well and has a great aesthetic. Unfortunately, as an addition to *Minecraft* and its world, it feels clumsy. It offers no recontextualization or further detail of the rest of the world's history, instead tacking on an entirely new feature totally disconnected from the rest of the world. Like its narrative presence, gameplay doesn't require the player to visit the pale garden biome more than once. After collecting a few saplings and flowers and gathering all the resin needed for a build, the player can leave the biome and never need to return. The result feels like a poor attempt to replicate the success of the Ancient Cities' fear factor on a smaller scale with less concern for the world's history, creating something of a shoehorned environment.

This is an unfortunate result of prioritizing update frequency and content capacity, which Mojang has shifted towards in recent years. Frequent updates means the world is prone to oversaturation and extraneous content that doesn't mesh with the established worldbuilding.

Highlight

To tell them how to live is to prevent them living.

Different highlights emerge for each player based on how they play through their game and how invested they are in discovering the world around them. However, some of the greatest highlights come from how the world presents a challenge to the player which must be overcome through exploration, incentivizing interaction with the rest of the world, which in turn reveals the interconnectivity of the world itself.

In a world I created recently, I discovered an ancient city just beneath my home. I was brave, at first, and ventured into it with no preparation. I was very swiftly and disgracefully chased out by a very angry Warden, a cluster of souls screaming unhappily in its chest cavity. The treasure-laden city was such a clear and tantalizing goal, but I simply wasn't prepared to venture into it. Instead, I chose to wait until I had night vision potions and a collection of wool to dampen my footsteps. To get potions, I needed to go to the Nether, and to pass the giant lava lake in the Nether I needed an ice bridge, and to get an ice bridge I needed an enchanted pickaxe, et cetera. I had a long, self-imposed list of things to get through before I'd be ready for the city.

My emergent gameplay presented itself as my journey to prepare for the city's exploration, which took me all across the world as I checked off my self-assigned task list. Through this exploration I found the sunken ruins of a town, which I excavated for treasures. One such treasure was a shard of pottery depicting a tall, horned, two-legged beast. The game identified the artifact as a "Mourner Shard," but I immediately recognized it for what it was: a depiction of the Warden. I was immediately intrigued. Why is the Warden painted on this ancient piece of pottery? Why is it described as a mourner? Why is the city that it guards devoid of life, and why does it carry souls within its chest?

The richness and self-referentiality of the world around me resulted in a moment of my journey that imbued me with a sense of purpose, and my work with a sense of meaning. For a moment the world felt deeply and truly *alive*, and my quest for the city felt more important than ever. How influential must the city have been, for me to find imprints of its guardian all the way out here, lost in the middle of the ocean? I felt like a clever, intrepid explorer, reaching every corner of the world and uncovering its secrets, preparing for an ultimate challenge that only I could overcome.

Critical Reception

and the universe said you are not separate from every other thing

- *GameFAQs, neonreaper*. This classic review from 2010 provides an insight into *Minecraft's* addictive emergence from before the game was fully released. Despite criticizing the game's poor graphics and occasional performance issues and bugs, they emphasize how rich with meaning the world already feels. They describe it as "a fairly personal experience, putting together your own little world...", feeling a sense of purpose and drive despite the game's less developed world at the time of the review.
- *Phenixx Gaming, Keiran McEwan, 9.5/10*. McEwan claims that the game has developed so far with new updates as to be nearly unrecognizable to older players, creating a sense of confusion and oversaturation. Still, he believes the game retains its original charm of possibility and endless emergence, even with the new additions.

Lessons

and the universe said you are the universe tasting itself, talking to itself, reading its own code

- When building a convincing world to support a sense of adventure, it's crucial to leave some things unexplained. It doesn't mean that one can just throw random elements into the game and refuse to elaborate, but knowing when to shut up in key moments creates a deep sense of curiosity and wonder which fuels gameplay. Make sure that unexplained elements have just enough references to what players know and understand to seem plausible and grounded, but that the end to their story remains ambiguous. Like in the ancient cities, players can identify what something is or resembles, but have no solid idea of how it got there or how it was supposed to work.

- Successful worldbuilding updates recontextualize existing content instead of just adding new features. New features are often fun or necessary, but unless they meaningfully connect to something already in the world, they will feel disjointed and irrelevant. New content should feel like it connects and interacts with other parts of the world, joining or filling in the gaps as part of a balanced ecosystem. The key to a world that feels real is interconnectivity and self-referentiality, which is broken when self-contained units are presented in an otherwise interconnected world.
- Players feel more of a sense of adventure when their role is connected to the world around them, but feel more autonomy when the role doesn't restrict them with identity or responsibility. Presenting the player as an extension of a group which no longer exists allows the player to feel as though they make sense in the world, but removes any kind of obligations that limit their actions.

Summation

and the universe said I love you because you are love.

Minecraft isn't designed to be a narrative game at all. Some players don't even choose to approach it as an adventure game, choosing instead to be a god in creative mode and alter the landscape to their whims. But for those players who choose survival, *Minecraft's* worldbuilding is a masterclass in enabling emergent narrative. Although story games are often associated with following someone else's script, stories don't need to limit players in the slightest – sometimes all they need to be is a backdrop, something to enhance a feeling as the player carves an adventure out for themselves. *Minecraft* is a game about exploration, wonder, and creativity, and the subliminal presence of a story accentuates that. Those who came before us are long gone, and while their mistakes inevitably affect our present, they need not define our future.