Through the Nether:
A Critical Examination of Minecraft as a Social Construct

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Abstract

Minecraft has become one of the defining video games of the 2010s, selling over 144 million copies, and receiving critical acclaim, with reviewers praising Minecraft's open-world sandbox gameplay. This thesis is concerned with online communities within *Minecraft*, and how they are formed. The research project examines how players interact with one another in a virtual online environment, how an online identity is formed through an avatar, how players learn how to play *Minecraft*, how language affects the way people play *Minecraft*, and how intentional harassment towards other players help create online communities. This thesis explores these questions through the lens of participatory culture and fandom.

The research findings reveal players are more likely play *Minecraft* with friends, highlighting the game's social element. Furthermore, *Minecraft* players perceived their in-game avatar to be dissimilar to their offline identity. Participants mainly used online resources, including wikis, forums, and YouTube, when they needed help. The findings also reveal players predominately do not use specific in-game language when playing *Minecraft*. Furthermore, participants were divided in their opinion as to whether male and female gamers spoke differently or not, with some participants stating male gamers are more aggressive, while other participants found it difficult to discern a person's gender from how they speak. Finally, although the research findings reveal a larger percentage of players take part in griefing – intentional harassment towards other players – than expected, which affected a substantial number of players, the research findings did not find evidence for a community built around intentional harassment.

Keywords: *Minecraft*, video games, participatory culture, fandom, online communities.

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ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I hereby declare this submission to be my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the qualification of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning, except where due acknowledgement is made in the acknowledgements.

Signed:

April 1, 2019

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Eo crustulam semper erit.

1. Introduction

Minecraft is undoubtedly a cultural phenomenon; it has had an enormous impact on gaming and popular culture. The video game has universal appeal, with its popularity evident amongst both young and older players. Although not the first game to feature user-generated content, *Minecraft*'s open-world sandbox structure transforms players into prosumers - players are both the creators and consumers of media (Niemeyer & Gerber, 2015). The game's willingness to incorporate players into the creation process highlights how participatory culture can explain the game's success. *Minecraft*'s greatest selling point is the game's online multiplayer function, which allows players to interact with one another and collaborate within the game (Cilauro, 2015; Overby & Jones, 2015). As a result, large online communities have formed around the video game (Goldberg & Larsson, 2013). The game has garnered critical acclaim, with several publications citing *Minecraft* as one of the greatest video games ever made (Polygon, 2017; IGN, 2018; Fitzpatrick et al., 2016). Since it was released, *Minecraft* has sold over 144 million copies[1] over several different platforms, with 74 million people actively playing *Minecraft* online (Horti, 2018), becoming the second best-selling game of all time[2].

Minecraft's release coincided with the growing popularity of indie games. In contrast to video games created and released by major publishers, an indie game is developed by a single person or small group of programmers. Produced on a smaller budget, indie developers rely on digital distribution to sell their games. While video games developed by major publishers prioritise high-resolution graphics over gameplay, indie games usually skew normal rules surrounding video games due to having a smaller budget, thus creating innovative experiences, such as the *Minecraft* open-world sandbox gameplay (McGuire, Jenkins, & Chadwicke, 2009; Gril, 2008). *Minecraft* helped create the trend where video games are funded through crowdsourcing – the game's early adopters not only gave feedback, which in turned shaped *Minecraft*, but also helped pay for the game's development cost (Silverman, 2010). Known for its pixelated art style (Goldberg & Larsson, 2013), *Minecraft* is one of several video games released in the last decade to feature 16-bit or 32-bit graphics (Byford, 2014). Multiple games have been released that incorporate similar gameplay mechanics and art design to *Minecraft*, such as *Junk Jack* and *Terraria*. Although these different video games incorporate the same design philosophy,

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[1] These figures may not be up-to-date. *Minecraft* was recently released in China. While the game is available for free in China, it has been reported that *Minecraft* has up to 100 million registered Chinese users (Kerr, 2018). Because of this, it is difficult to truly engage the number of actual active *Minecraft* players. The actual number might be double those 144 million copies (Horti, 2018).
[2] Tetris has sold 495 million copies, making it the best-selling video game of all time (Tassi, 2016, July 8).

where players are given very little instruction to play the game and instead are encouraged to set their own goals within an open-world sandbox, *Terraria* and *Junk Jack* are 2D side-scrolling platformers which limit the structures that can be made. Despite these limitations, *Terraria* and *Junk Jack* involve more exploration elements, with the player being able to gain higher tiered equipment by exploring the game's world map. Unlike *Minecraft* which has only one endgame boss, the ender dragon, *Terraria* features numerous bosses to challenge the player, whether it is the Eye of Cthulhu or The Wall of Flesh (Kolan, 2011).

The purpose of this master's thesis is to examine how online communities are formed within *Minecraft*, using participatory culture and fandom as the research's foundation. Specifically, this research project examines the interactions between players in a virtual online world, the creation of an online identity using an avatar, the ways in which player learn how to play *Minecraft*, the effects language has on the way people play *Minecraft*, and whether online communities are built around the intentional harassment towards other players.

This introductory chapter explores the history of *Minecraft*, explaining the video game's development and its relationship with the open-world sandbox genre, and will describe what it is like to play *Minecraft*, observing the different modes offered in the video game, and how these connect to participatory culture and fandom. Finally, I will explain why this research project examines *Minecraft* and identify and why *Minecraft* has become so successful. The research project discusses how *Minecraft* has impacted many aspects of popular culture, and how the video game is starting to be perceived less of a game and more of a tool which allows players to do an extremely large range of things within *Minecraft* (Goldberg & Larsson, 2013).

1.1. History of sandbox games

Minecraft is the brainchild of Markus Persson, better known as Notch. A Swedish game developer, Notch was alienated by the mainstream video game industry. Inspired by roguelikes[3], such as *Dwarf Fortress*, and building simulators, such as *RollerCoaster Tycoon* and *Dungeon Keeper*, Notch used his knowledge gained from working for major video game publishers, such as Midasplayer, to create *Minecraft*. Seen as an overnight sensation, *Minecraft* went on to sell 4 million copies in its first year of release (Goldberg & Larsson, 2013). In 2014,

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[3] Roguelikes is a subgenre of games where the player is tasked to explore a randomly-generated dungeon. Roguelikes have permadeath – whenever a player dies they are forced to restart the game afresh. Players are encouraged to learn the game's mechanics to advance further in a roguelike (Dotson, 2018; McHugh, 2018).

Microsoft bought the *Minecraft* IP, and its development team, for US$2.5 billion (Etherington, 2014). (For a detailed history of *Minecraft*, see Appendix A)

To understand the creation of *Minecraft*, it is important to first understand the history of the sandbox-game genre. *Minecraft* has been commonly described as a sandbox game and, more descriptively, a virtual Lego (Craft, 2016; Beale, McKittrick, & Richards, 2016). By manipulating the world around them, players are able to create whatever they desire (Niemeyer & Gerber, 2015). Like Lego, *Minecraft* involves building worlds using one-by-one cubic bricks, each block measuring one meter squared (Craft, 2016). The twist is that this is all done virtually through a computer game. The bricks do not physically exist. Unlike non-sandbox games which have handcrafted worlds, *Minecraft* – and other sandbox games – skew this concept of game design by procedurally generating its worlds - players might not play the same map twice (Breslin, 2009). As result, games like *Minecraft* have abundant replay value. Sandbox games usually lack instructions, forcing the player to learn while playing the game, or look up fan-made guides online. As a result, this opens a plateau of opportunities, with the players entering the creative process of making games – they have become both consumers and producers (Niemeyer and Gerber, 2015). The types of sandbox games large, varied, and span multiple gaming genres (Breslin, 2009). These include first-person-shooters to action platformers, roleplaying games to craft-like experiences (see chapter one, section 4, sub-section 1 for examples of sandbox games).

Open-world sandbox games, where the player can explore and interact with a large virtual world, can trace their origins back to a transition between arcade gaming and home consoles. Where arcade games involved short bursts of play, with the player tasked in defeating as many enemies as possible or gaining a high score, home console gaming allowed players to explore the game's world at their own leisure, therefore giving the player a break between the actions. Personal computer gaming jumped on this trend earlier with the highly influential *Rogue* and *Ultima*, both released in 1980. However, home consoles began getting adventure-style titles such as *Pitfall* and the infamous *E.T.* game, which were both released in 1982. While the early adventure games were limited in scope, the video game *Elite* introduced the idea of a 3D open world. Although primitive in today's terms, *Elite* allowed the player to explore an open world (Breslin, 2009).

Minecraft follows this trend in sandbox games. While the game lacks a traditional narrative, something which Breslin (2009) argues is needed for an open-world to be believable, Jenkins

(2003b) argues that although some video games lack an resemblance narrative structure, such as Tetris, games are able to tell a narrative through gameplay and environmental storytelling. The sheer scope of potential *Minecraft* can deliver has allowed gamers to come up with imaginative ways to enhance the game beyond its intended purpose, and therefore create their own narratives. Examples of creations players have made include rebuilding famous buildings, such as the Taj Mahal and Notre Dame Cathedral, and faithfully recreating fantasy worlds such as Westeros (Levy, 2014). The crazier yet inventive creations include an in-game port of the original *Pokémon Red* (Riboldi, 2015), and a working 1kb Redstone hard-drive (Levy, 2014). Furthermore, players have created Machinima using *Minecraft* (Johnson and Dean, 2014), such as recreating entire scenes from the film *Frozen* in *Minecraft* (Baseel, 2014), created mini-Massive Multiplayer Online (MMO) games where community-based activities can occur and players are able to engage in player-versus-player battles (Quiring, 2015), just to name a few. *Minecraft* has also been used as an education tool, teaching players team-working skills (Cilauro, 2015; Overby & Jones, 2015; Short, 2012; Lastowka, 2014; Koltz & Tarabochia, 2014).

1.2. Participatory culture

Because *Minecraft*'s open-world sandbox structure allows the players to enter the creative process of making a game, transforming the player into both the consumer and producer (Niemeyer & Gerber, 2015), *Minecraft* can be viewed from the perspective of participatory culture. Jenkins (2013) describes participatory culture as "a world where everyone participates, where we take media in our own hands, where we have the capacity, often, to produce media, share media".

The rise of new media has changed the way people communicate and interact with one another, causing researchers to rethink the way the media function. Because of new media, the difference between consumers and producers has blurred considerably. An interconnected media network, where online users create and share their own content on the internet, has transformed audiences from spectators into contributors. This phenomenon has been coined as participatory culture (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, & Weigel, 2009). To describe participatory culture, Alvin Toffler coined the term prosumers by combining the words consumers and producers (Toffler, 1980).

Jenkins et al (2009) states participatory culture has five elements: an easy engagement of expression; a strong support system for creating fan products; an informal mentoring system

where a more knowledgeable member of a group can pass their skills onto others; a sense where a person feels their contributions matter; and an environment where people feel socially connected and their contribution is acknowledged. According to the authors, participatory culture can come in many forms including affiliation, expression, and collaborative problem-solving. People affiliate with their favourite media product by joining an online community centred on that fandom, such as a Facebook page or Subreddit. People express themselves by producing new media content, such as writing fanfiction or digitally sampling footage to create mash-ups. By working together in groups, people engage in collaborative problem-solving to accomplish goals and create new knowledge. This can range from online encyclopaedias, such as Wikipedia, to online YouTube videos that speculate on the lore surrounding a certain media product. Finally, people create their own news outlets through podcasting, blogging, and Facebook pages. Overall, participatory culture is changing the way media is produced, moving the power away from massive media companies[4]. The potential benefits of participatory culture include peer-to-peer learning, expansion of cultural identity, and empowering the idea of citizenship. Unlike traditional media, where the audience has very little control, participatory culture empowers people with skills that can make them meaningful members of society (Jenkins et al, 2009). Furthermore, new information-communication technologies have enabled more people to interact on a level playing-field such that grassroots campaigners and minority cultures are able to express themselves publicly through social media. Examples include a human rights campaign supporting LGBT+ rights, and the Black Lives Matters movement (Tombleson & Wolf, 2016).

Participatory culture can be seen in *Minecraft* through the interactions between players. Jenkins (2015, May 25) acknowledges *Minecraft*'s potential as a tool to promote the concept of participatory culture, with the author noting how a camp, dedicated to teaching the use of technology to children, uses *Minecraft* as a way to introduce camp-goers to participatory culture. Joseph (2015) observes how education is moving towards transmedia learning, the concept that narratives are understood through several different media. He argues that *Minecraft* is an example of transmedia due to the ability of the video game to be used for a different purpose besides simply playing the game, whether it is parkour challenges, player-versus-play, or scavenger hunts. Niemeyer and Gerber (2015) observe how young *Minecraft* players are able to work together using different skill sets, identifying how one player is better

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[4] Although Microsoft bought *Minecraft* in 2014 (Etherington, 2014), for the first few years after release *Minecraft* was an indie game (Goldberg & Larsson, 2013).

at gathering resources while another prefers the building aspect of *Minecraft*. The aforementioned example also illustrates how one of the boys created a YouTube channel to help other *Minecraft* players. Because *Minecraft* is able to bring together different types of people with different skill sets and experiences, *Minecraft* is also builds a shared learning environment allowing for effective participatory culture. Instead of YouTube videos created by *Minecraft*'s developers being the most popular, fans prefer to watch videos created by and for fans (Joseph, 2015). These YouTube videos can range from showing off new mods which change the way a person play *Minecraft*[5], to showcasing maps. YouTube can, therefore, be seen as a depository for educational resources. Niemeyer and Gerber (2015) note how the creators of *Minecraft* YouTube tutorials interact with their viewers through the comment section, allowing the viewers to discuss aspects of the video. These interactions can involve the viewer of the video providing their own experience of a situation, a chance to give feedback on the tutorial's production and sound quality. Participatory culture goes deeper than simply producing video tutorials, with some YouTubers delving into making Machinima. Mueller (2014) explains how Machinima is "the process of creating animated videos by utilizing a video game's real-time graphics engine" (p.4). Because Machinima is an easy method and affordable method of creating movies, Machinima is a way for amateur filmmakers to learn how to make movies.

1.3. Fandom

Because *Minecraft* has garnered a devoted fan-base, with many fans willing to dress as characters from the video game (Goldberg and Larsson, 2013), it is important to look at the fandom surrounding *Minecraft*. By discussing *Minecraft* on internet forums and at fan conventions, sharing ideas and creations, players can interact with other fans though the use of fandoms.

Fandoms originated in the late Victorian era, with the mass-produced printed press. Duffett (2013) states early fandoms involved the devotion of royalties and religious symbols. However, in the 1880s a recognisable version of fandom would form with the rise of the capitalist economy. Newspapers would attempt to increase excitement and prepare fans for a celebrity's tour, such as the book tours Dickens undertook. Photography helped people become

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[5] The types of mods showcased in these YouTube videos are too many to list here. However, while searching for examples, a few mods did stand out. These included a mod which allows players to brew in-game alcoholic beverages (Eddy, 2013), a mod that spawns roguelike dungeon into the game (Harris, 2013), and a mod which allows players to craft in-game parachutes (Middleton, 2012).

recognisable celebrities and was eventually followed by sound recordings, cinema, and radio. The 1910s saw the introduction of the Hollywood star system, with film studios using an actor's name to promote a movie. Because of the exposure actors were receiving, film studios created departments to deal with fan mail. The fans would be vocal in their support of certain actors, helping certain stars receive better roles. Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, young people were recognised as a distinct population group, ripe for marketing, causing fandom to be become perceived as something young people engaged in. The internet has changed fandom, moving away from zines and conventions. Instead, the internet allows fans to interact with other fans around the world, whether it involves discussing fandom or writing and publishing fanfiction (Duffett, 2013). New technologies have made it easier for audiences to engage with fandoms. These have included photocopiers to print zines, amateur filmmakers using camcorders to make fan films, and portable media which allows fans to take their fandom wherever they go (Jenkins, 2003a). Social media websites, such as YouTube and Facebook, have made it easier for fans to upload and share their fan-works (Jenkins, 2013). Because new media has enabled the creation of fan productions, whether fanfiction or a fan film, alternative narratives are able to appear, allowing for minority groups – which have been traditionally shunned by the mainstream media – to express their opinions and cultural identities (Jenkins, 2003a).

Despite its rise, the legality of fandoms has been questioned. Stanfill (2015) notes how the law perceives fan-made content as illegitimate and as lesser works. Because copyright owners have exclusive rights to media content, they see fandoms as not only a breach of copyright but also a threat. As a result, fan-made content is not only unrecognised by the law but also discouraged. Historically, members of fan communities have had a turbulent history with the owners of a copyrighted work. Companies that owns media product have been known to threaten fan-made content producers with legal actions, with authors such as Anne Rice forbidding the practise of fanfiction. Recently, however, some authors and media companies have ease their position and allowed some types of fandom practises to occur as long as they fans do not profit on the content (Jackson, 2018). Despite the laissez faire approach media take when it comes to fandoms, issue do still arises, especially when it concerns merchandising rights. With more fans wanting an experience based around their favourite fandoms, media companies will cite their exclusive right over an intellectual property to stop fan-made activities. In recent years, fans have received cease-and-desist letter stopping them from creating fan-made product (Sunder, 2019).

In contrast to a western interpretation of ownership, certain indigenous cultures see creative work as a shared community product, such as the African-origins of the blues where repetition of musical themes is emphasised. The earliest forms of fan-made content, such as hip-hop, created works by sampling and reinterpreting them in newer texts. Although seen as a 'shortcut', sampling allows artists to indicate their membership to a subcultural community. In music, this might involve sampling a previously recorded guitar riff while overlaying it with rapping or singing. Successful sampling involves the artist understanding the history behind the work being referenced. It should also be noted fan-made content creators have ethical principles, with some fan-artists acknowledging the work they are sampling, for example, by way of a disclaimer at the beginning of fanfiction (Stanfill, 2015)

Fandoms are popular because they can come in different forms and encompass a wide range of practices. One person might enjoy taking part in a fandom differently to another person. Early fan practices involved collecting items based around a common media-related theme (Duffett, 2013). Subsequently, this came to include a range of activities ranging from autograph collecting, to buying merchandise based around a television or movie franchise. Fans are able to assert their dedication and identification with a specific media product, creating a social and subcultural capital (Geraghty, 2014). Fanfiction allows for alternative narratives the official cannon avoid, such as romantically pairing characters together, or putting characters into strange and unusual situations so that fans can do what creators previously have not allowed. Fans spend countless hours canvassing future plotlines to a television show, analysing every frame for information, while other fans will take part in cosplay and re-enact scenes from popular media (Duffett, 2013). Like participatory culture, people use multiple media to pursue their interests and engage with fandoms, whether it is through Facebook, Reddit, or an online fan-site. Instead of observing the relationship between a fan and a single media product, fandoms should instead be considered in terms of prolonged relationships between multiple people and products (Nikunen, 2007; Jenkins, 2003a). Fandom can be understood, therefore, as a return to traditional folk culture, where the community collaborates to create cultural products. This is a far cry from the political economy of capitalism and intellectual property rights, where the general audience is locked out of the creative process (Jenkins, 2003a).

1.4. Gameplay

As previously established, *Minecraft* is an open-world sandbox game (Craft, 2016; Beale et al, 2016). *Minecraft*'s open-world sandbox nature allows the player to approach the game in multiple directions. As with any sandbox game, *Minecraft* promotes experimentation (Breslin,

2009). *Minecraft* offers players three different methods by which to play *Minecraft*: single player – the default option where players brave the world of *Minecraft* alone; multiplayer – where players explore the same *Minecraft* world using the same network; and realms – and are able to interact with others through an online server. It is important to note that Mojang offers paid servers, although there are *Minecraft* servers not owned by the developers. Besides these three methods of playing *Minecraft*, the game has a number of different modes, each one changing the way in which players interact with the game. Creative mode gives the player unlimited resources; survival mode forces players to scavenge for resources while fighting enemy hordes; and hardcore mode, which is similar to survival mode but when the character dies the game deletes the player's world (Milton, Davies, & Jones, 2017). While not an official mode, I will include server mode on this list (see chapter one, section 4, sub-section 3 for explanation of server mode and reason for inclusion).

No matter which modes the player chooses, whenever they create the new world, *Minecraft* procedurally generates the landscape according to a seed – a series of numbers or characters that decide the world's layout. Players are able to type in a seed, generating a specific world. Similar to the real world, the worlds generated in *Minecraft* have biomes, each with its own unique designs and properties. These biomes can range from deserts (large open expanses of sand without much in the way of resources), forests and jungles (which are densely populated with trees with the occasional expanse of tall grass) ice-plains (snow-covered landscape with sparse trees) and plains (the most basic biomes which have large areas of grassland). While there are more biomes than the ones listed here – messa, ocean, swamp, mushroom, savannah – there is insufficient space here to explain the intricacies of each biome. Suffice to say, there are resources online that explain *Minecraft* biomes (Milton et al, 2017).

Unlike more narrative-driven games, *Minecraft* has very little in the way of instructions. The player is simply dropped in a randomly generated world and expected to learn the rules of the game whilst playing it (as per the cliché of 'throwing a person into the deep end of a swimming pool'). While the world of *Minecraft* is seemingly peaceful during the day, after ten minutes of in-game time the night will slowly creep upon the players forcing them to create a shelter. Night-time is when the game truly begins. Once dark, the game's enemies appear – zombies and skeletons – and an unprepared player can be easily overwhelmed by these foes. When a player respawns, after being killed by an enemy, they lose all their resources and equipment (Goldberg & Larsson, 2013).

1.4.1. Creative mode

Essentially the first mode offered in *Minecraft*, creative mode is the most sandbox-like. Players will most likely gravitate to this mode when first playing *Minecraft* since it offers the least amount of hurdles for the player allowing them to ease into the game. Creative mode removes many of the features seen in survival mode, such as health and hunger, and gives the player unlimited access to all the blocks available in the game. Along with the ability to fly anywhere, creative mode allows the player to literally create whatever the player wants without any limitations (Milton et al, 2017).

Creative mode, however, is not unique to *Minecraft*. Many games have experimented with the concept, with the earliest being 1982's *Utopia*. Focusing on freeform gameplay, which avoids the competitive nature of other games of the time, *Utopia* inspired 1989's *SimCity*. The long-running and successful series spawned an equally influential spin-off, *The Sims*, where players were tasked to manage the virtual person's daily life (Breslin, 2009). Although not a complete list, other videos besides city-building simulators have experimented with including a creative mode. These creative modes gave players all the in-game building resources, allowing them to create and customise a level or game world. Furthermore, the creative mode included in these games allowed players to test their created worlds using the game's normal set of rules. Games with creative mode have included: *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 2* (released in 2000), which allowed players to create their own skate-park; the long-running *Far Cry* series (2004-2019), which gave the player a level editor to build their own levels and multiplayer maps using in-game resources such as buildings and trees; and *LittleBigPlanet* (2008), which focuses on players building 2D platforming levels which they can share online. *Minecraft*, and other craft-like games such as *Junk Jack*, has continued the trend by including a creative mode.

1.4.2. Survival mode

If creative mode allows for unlimited freedom in creativity, it would be a mistake to think survival mode is the complete opposite. While survival mode does not give the player unlimited supplies – the player finds all the building materials themselves – it still allows players the ability to create whatever they want. Like creative mode, survival mode drops the player into the centre of a random, procedurally-generated map. The players start with nothing and are tasked to survive *Minecraft*'s hostile world through exploration and understand the crafting system. During the daytime, the player is relatively safe from any danger. Once the sun sets, however, is when the true fun begins. During the night-time, all kinds of evil mobs spawn with the intent to create chaos for the player. Skeletons will shoot the player with arrows, while

zombies will chase the player in a frenzied manner (Milton et al, 2017). The plant-like creeper[6], the most feared foe in the game, will follow the player if spotted. If a player gets too close, the creeper will explode destroying everything around it (Goldberg & Larsson, 2013). Because these mobs wander around in the night-time world, players find a way to defend themselves against such hostile creatures. Instead of being cosmetic, the structures players build are for protection. With enough knowledge of the game's crafting system, the player builds weapons and armour to fight against the mobs. And, eventually, the player will be able to create a bed, which if slept in skips to the daytime, avoiding the night-time completely. By thoroughly exploring the surrounding areas – delving deep into *Minecraft*'s labyrinthine cave systems to mine rare ores, or underground dungeons to collect rare resources – the player gathers enough materials to defend themselves from enemy threats (Milton et al, 2017).

Despite survival mode having very little educational purpose within the realm of multiplayer, it is still important when observed in the context of video tutorials. One can google survival mode and find many YouTube videos detailing how a player can survive their first night in survival mode. These tutorial videos are usually Let's Play, a genre of videos which chronicles a play-through of a game through gameplay footage. This essentially involves the viewer watching another person play a video game. Because of this, these YouTube tutorials are rarely edited, depending on the editing capabilities of the YouTuber making the tutorials. These videos can range from teaching players how to create a basic shelter, to finding rarer items such as diamonds.

1.4.3. Server mode

While server mode is not an official mode within *Minecraft*; observing the differences between playing offline and online reveals the need for a separate classification for playing on a server. Although the research done on MMOs will be covered in more detail in the literature review (see chapter two, section 1), I will briefly discuss why I have separated server mode from the other two modes.

Unlike the two previous modes, using a server to play *Minecraft* involves the player going online. Although server mode has similarities with creative and survival modes, the main

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[6] The creeper sums up the creation of *Minecraft* – the game coming together by accident. According to Notch, the creeper came about after he attempted to design a pig. The game's creator got the variables wrongs which resulted in a deformed creature with a long upright body and four smaller legs. Instead of discarding this mistake, Notch gave the monster a greenish tint. From this mistake, Notch gave *Minecraft* one of its most iconic characters (Goldberg & Larsson, 2013).

distinction is the interacts with a hundred or a thousand other players in a massive multiplayer area. Different servers have different objectives; for example, one server might be dedicated to building structures within a creative mode setting, whereas another server will cater for players interested in player-versus-player. *Minecraft* allows for two different types of servers; privately owned servers that are not affiliated with Mojang, or realm servers which are owned and run by the developers.

1.5. What makes *Minecraft* successful?

As established at the beginning of this chapter, *Minecraft* is a worldwide phenomenon. The cultural impact of the video game is immense, with people of different generations and backgrounds playing *Minecraft* – or at least being aware of the game (Goldberg & Larsson, 2013; Cilauro, 2015). Because *Minecraft* has become one of the most successful games in recent times (Sarkar, 2017), one question arises: why is *Minecraft* so successful?

A reason for *Minecraft*'s success is its pixelated design, creating a sense of nostalgia for older video games. Although other games at the time strived for ultra-realistic graphics, *Minecraft* remained simplistic in its design. Whereas AAA games have massive budgets, pulling a vast assortment of talents to create a polished product that can span a dozen or so sequels, *Minecraft* was created by a small development team. In the game's early days, Notch singlehandedly did most of the work on the game. *Minecraft*'s 'blocky' design helped win many gamers over Although it is difficult to tell whether *Minecraft* influenced the field, the last decade has seen an increase in independently-developed video games – these indie games being developed by a small team of coders and designers (Goldberg & Larsson, 2013). Similar to *Minecraft*, games such as *Terraria* and *Stardew Valley* reject fancy graphics, instead focusing on a more pixelated art style reminiscent of 'old-school' 16bit games.

It should be noted that while video games usually strive for realistic graphics, they do not always resemble reality. For example, Ezio *of Assassin's Creed II* needs superhuman strength to climb up buildings, while in a first-person shooter hitting someone with a gun is usually more effective than shooting at someone. The same thing applies to *Minecraft*. Because the human mind has the ability to fill in gaps, abstract constructs – such as a construction of blocks – can be identified as objects according to the player's knowledge. For example, wood and cobblestone blocks can be formed in a way to represent a house, or a pillar of wood with leaf blocks covering the top of the pillar can represent a tree. Because of this simplistic nature,

Minecraft is accessible to players of all age groups and does not need a lengthy tutorial to explain its gameplay (Goldberg & Larsson, 2013).

Furthermore, *Minecraft* offers the opportunity for significant customisation. The player is represented as a block figure, which allows the player to determine a character's personality traits. While a game might not have to obey reality, it must remain consistent for it to be believable. A game needs goals for the player to achieve; by accomplishing these, players also need rewards. This can be seen in *Minecraft* through its crafting system. With the right amount of recourse, collected through exploring the sandbox world, and the knowledge in the game's many recipes, the player is able to craft items to help them. Such craftable gear can range from pickaxes to swords. Better quality resources allow for better-tiered items. But even if recipes are not involved, players are able to gain rewards by simply doing a task. The open-ended nature of *Minecraft* allows players to set their own goals, such as building a cathedral or even an entire town (Goldberg & Larsson, 2013).

Minecraft's rise in popularity occurred at the same time as Let's Plays on YouTube were becoming popular. Let's Play is a genre of YouTube videos where a person records their gameplay session, usually with commentary. This style of videos benefitted *Minecraft*, since the game involved players showing off their creations. Because *Minecraft* has no main goal, it allows YouTubers the flexibility to set their own goals and purposes within the game. This has also benefitted Mojang since YouTube videos can be seen as a form of free advertising. Mojang did not have to advertise the game, instead, they relied on word-of-mouth to promote *Minecraft* (Goldberg & Larsson, 2013).

The biggest factor contributing to *Minecraft*'s popularity is that it relies on user-generated content. A large culture has grown around *Minecraft*, and it is its player-base that is the most important asset. David Pakman, the CEO of eMusic.com, argues that *Minecraft* should not be called a video game, but instead a form of social media. *Minecraft* is, therefore, an activity which people gather around, and from that can socialise. Because the players have their own views on what *Minecraft* is, Pakman argues it is difficult to know whether *Minecraft* is what it is because of the developers, or because of the fan-base (Goldberg & Larsson, 2013).

One aspect of *Minecraft* that has kept the game fresh for many players is texture packs. While you can create your own or downloaded fan-made ones from the internet, *Minecraft* does offer a number of texture packs for purchase. Ever since Microsoft bought the *Minecraft* IP in 2014 for US$2.5 billion (Etherington, 2014), they have needed to justify that purchase. One point

many media outlets made during this time was that almost everyone seemed to own the game already (Schreier, 2014). By offering texture packs, I am certain that this is how Microsoft aims to recoup the cost of buying the *Minecraft* IP. In any event, while texture packs might seem like purely an aesthetic element, something that does not truly affect the gameplay, I would argue texture packs can heighten the sense of roleplaying, especially if the texture pack is based on other video game franchises.

1.6. Conclusion

This research project aims to examine *Minecraft*'s online community within the context of fandom and participatory culture. Because *Minecraft* is an open-world sandbox game (Craft, 2016; Beale et al, 2016) which encourages players to create whatever they want (Milton et al, 2017), this characteristic highlights the importance of studying *Minecraft* as a form of participatory culture. Furthermore, *Minecraft*'s reliance on user-generated content has helped form online communities devoted to sharing player-made maps and character skins (Goldberg & Larsson, 2013), highlighting how *Minecraft* is also a social experience.

Minecraft's multiplayer online component – which allows players to collaborate or compete against one another (Cilauro, 2015; Overby & Jones, 2015) – has also helped *Minecraft* build online communities centred on the game (Goldberg & Larsson, 2013). The video game's devoted fan-based can be explained through the context of fandom (Duffett, 2013; Jenkins, 2003a; Nikunen, 2007). *Minecraft*'s online component has highlighted, in particular, the importance of examining avatars and how they are formed. Because there will always be conflict within a video game, especially if it is competitive in nature, it is also important to examine disruptive behaviour from gamers.

The next chapter will examine the current literature surrounding *Minecraft* and gaming in general, looking at the issues gaming is experiencing. The areas the literature review will examine are: gaming as a social experience; how online avatars are formed and the purpose of an online avatar within an online community; and how griefing and disruptive behaviours within gaming affects online communities.

2. Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to critically examine the previously published research into the study of video games and their potential as a communication tool. This literature review aims to look at *Minecraft* within the context of participatory culture and fandom. By focusing on gaming as a social experience, this literature review will examine the fandom of the game *Minecraft* and research conducted into how online communities are formed. Since a person's identity is linked to communication (Vasalou & Joinson, 2009), this literature review will also examine how online identities are formed. Studying the creation of avatars is important since a person online would be anonymous without them. Avatars are also important because it allows people to do activities they might not be able to do in the real world by assuming an alternative identity (Vasalou & Joinson, 2009; Guitton, 2012). Furthermore, this literature review explores how interpersonal relationships between online gamers are formed (Turkle, 1995; 1999). *Minecraft* is a highly social game (Madden, 2016; Page, 2013) which involves multiple players interacting with one another. Research has already been conducted observing how younger *Minecraft* players work together to achieve in-game goals, developing game-specific dialects and languages to suit their playstyle (Cilauro, 2015; Overby & Jones, 2015).

This literature review is divided into three sections; each section discusses an issue surrounding the online gaming community, especially issues that concern *Minecraft* and the game's treatment as a Massive Multiplayer Online (MMO). The topic discussed in this literature review are: how gaming can be perceived as a social experience and how that affects the gameplay of an online video game (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2005; Silva & Mousavidlin, 2015; Dietrich, 2013; Guitton, 2012; Raymond, Soutter, & Hitchens, 2015; Jiang, 2008; Watson, Wang, & Zheng, 2014; Koster, 2011; Kelly, 2011; Cilauro, 2015; Overby & Jones, 2015; Voorhees, 2009; Sourmelis, Ioannou, & Zaphiris, 2016; Koltz & Tarabochia, 2014; Lomanowska & Guitton, 2011; Amichai-Hamburger et al, 2016); how player avatars are created within a virtual environment and how players use their avatar to interact with one another (Hooi & Cho, 2012; Midha & Nandedkar, 2012; Myers, Kostek, Ekeh, & Sanchez, 2015; Vasalou & Joinson, 2009; Turkle, 1995; 1999; Taylor, 2002; Axelsson, 2002; Guitton, 2011b; 2012); and how griefing, the intentional destruction of in-game property to incite a reaction, contributes to building a community and its effect on the general gaming population (Foo & Koivisto, 2004; Beale et al, 2016; McAllister, 2004; Christie & Dill, 2015; Ducheneaut & Moore, 2005).

2.1 Gaming as a social experience

This research project aims to answer why people play games such as *Minecraft* and look at whether players prefer experiencing *Minecraft* as a solo player or as a social multiplayer game. Because of this, it is important to examine the literature already written on MMO games and how they function, so as to understand how players interact with one another within a virtual playground. Furthermore, this research project also aims to examine how players seek help and learn how the play a video game, whether this is done within the game, approaching other players on a forum, or by other means. Therefore, it is important to discuss why players interact with one another and how players work together to achieve a specific in-game goal.

Research into gaming has looked at the entertainment value of video games while working out how to utilise that for educational purposes. Ducheneaut and Moore (2005) note how gaming has been a social experience from its earliest incarnation. Once machines were able to connect to each other, gamers were able to use the internet to play within shared virtual worlds. The social aspects of video games has caught the attention of researchers since they are implemented in players' gameplay strategy, coordination and communication (Silva & Mousavidlin, 2015). MMO games are set up in a way that forces players to cooperate to achieve a game's goals (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2005; Silva & Mousavidlin, 2015). This signals the idea that video games are not a passive media; the audience is an active component in understanding a game's text (Dietrich, 2013; Guitton, 2012; Raymond et al, 2015). While *Minecraft* can be a single-player experience, the potential to connect multiple players across the globe reveals the game's potential as an MMO. It is therefore important to look at the research done on MMOs.

Minecraft is similar to other online video games, in which a large number of players interact with one another at the same time. In February 2017, it was reported by Polygon that 122 million copies had been sold, with 55 million users per month actively playing *Minecraft*[7] (Sarkar, 2017). Because *Minecraft* is a large player base, it is important to determine reasons for the game's success. Observing what makes a video game popular, Watson et al (2014) states

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[7] In contrast, according to Polygon, The *World of Warcraft* had reached 10 million active players in 2016, although at one point the *World of Warcraft* dropped to 5 million active players. Despite the games developer Blizzard never officially releasing player statistics (Kollar, 2016), the original *Destiny* at its height had 30 million active players, with each player logging in a hundred hours of playing time. *Hearthstone*, a *Warcraft* card game spinoff, has 50 million active players (Nunneley, 2016). The only current video game that can possibly surpass *Minecraft*'s popularity is the MOBA (Multiplayer Online Battle Arena) *League of Legend*. A spiritual successor to a *Warcraft III* mod, League of Legend has amassed over 100 million active players. The popular MOBA has spawned several eSport events, along with a large audience watching video streams of the game (Tassi, 2016, September 13; Volk, 2016). This is in stark contrast to the MOBA's main competitor, *DOTA 2 (Defence of the Ancient)*, which only has 13 million active players (Volk, 2016).

that only a small percentage of video games become popular. Because of this, the authors list several factors that determine a game's success. These range from the game's difficulty to the number of achievements available, an indication of player success. The authors argue that the amount of content within a game contributes to a game's popularity. Watson et al came to this conclusion after they noticed a strong relationship between the number of achievements offered in a game and the score given by players. However, when comparing *Minecraft* to a traditional concept of popularity, such as Watson et al's, issues begin to arise with games that lack in-game achievements. In contrasted to a traditional idea of a game, *Minecraft* has very little in the way of goals or achievement[8]. The players are expected to learn the game's mechanics through experimentation in terms of deciding what task they want to complete. *Minecraft*'s worlds are randomly generated. There is no backstory to the world a player is dropped into. Overall, it is up to the player to create their own story and world – whether as a solo player, through cooperative teamwork-based creativity or as a competitive multiplayer.

Since *Minecraft* is an MMO, it is important to look beyond the game's basic mechanics and, instead, focus on how the video game keeps players engaged and continuing to play. Jiang (2008) lists four stages in a gamer's life cycle, with each stage having the player focus on a certain aspect of a game. The author argues that players react to the game differently depending on what stage they are at. While players begin a game confused and not knowing what to do, once the game's rules have been explained the player has a sense of excitement as they explore new things. According to Jiang, unless the player becomes socially engaged with a game, they become bored. If boredom towards a game occurs, players turn to other video games, losing interest in the original game. Jiang states that, as time passes, the player focuses less on gameplay and instead on the game's social aspects. While it is difficult to verify Jiang's claims, according to Koster (2011) and Kelly (2011), multiplayer games allow for multiple and numerous forms of social interactions, most of which the developers did not intend. Some include more controllable interactions between players, such as an in-game auction house to trade rare items, or less formal arrangements, such as guilds that aim to help less experienced gamers. While a game's core gameplay mechanic may not change, if a game allows players to experience new social interactions then it will encourage players to continue playing.

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[8] Although there is an end-game boss known as the Ender Dragon, which the player can work towards defeating through crafting better items along with learning and mastering the game's core gameplay mechanics, the player has very little direction.

An important aspect of playing a game involves overcoming the learning curve. While this can be done through trial and error, Silva and Mousavidin (2015) suggest that players find it easier to overcome obstacles by working together. This is especially effective when it comes to MMOs, where many players inhabit the same world-space together. The authors examine whether communication within video games is for learning purposes, and discuss how players learn to overcome in-game obstacles by communicating with other players. To work successfully as a group, Silva and Mousavidin state how players must be able to cooperate and adapt their playstyle according to whatever situation the game throws them into. While Silva and Mousavidin are describing a different MMO than *Minecraft*, similarities do exist. Like traditional MMOs, *Minecraft* promotes the idea of learning through teamwork. Cilauro (2015) and Overby and Jones (2015) have already noted the most effective way to overcome the challenges that *Minecraft* present is through collaboration. During an experiment at a library which involved children creating the 'perfect library', Cilauro notes that when technical errors occurred the children were able to work together to resolve the problem via sharing advice. Similarly, Overby and Jones explain how sisters taught each other to play *Minecraft* through sharing resources and trading items. The authors also explain how more experienced players created YouTube tutorials, thus sharing their knowledge. Both studies highlight how players can work together to solve problems, but neither delves into the communication process. Although it is obvious that players will need help eventually when playing a video game such as *Minecraft*, as indicated by the numerous strategy guides online, we still do not know how the players themselves go about learning how to play the game. The current literature simply observes how players collaborate to solve a problem. So far, no one has asked the players what methods they use to learn how to play the game, such as follow another player in-game or resorting to a YouTube tutorial. Therefore, research is needed into how players communicate to help each other, whether it would be through talking to other players or reading online guides.

According to Silva and Mousavidin (2015), an important component of their research is how players are assigned roles. Since many of the quests in *World of Warcraft* involved teamwork to complete, each member of the group must serve a specific role. MMOs, such as *World of Warcraft*, have a class system, whereby each new player chooses a class at the beginning of the game. These can range from healers to warriors. Also observing the way groups work, Duchenrsut and Moore (2005) note how a player's class by itself will not do much to advance the game, but when a party of different classes are together they can do things they would not

otherwise be able to do. According to Voorhees (2009), the class system forces players to understand their differences and work out how to use their different skills to complement one another. When examining *Minecraft* in relation to the class system seen in many MMOs, we come across a problem. Unlike other MMOs, *Minecraft* does not have a class system. Each character is essentially a blank canvas – the game does not prescribe a role or identity to the players; each player has to decide their role within the game on their own. However, as shown by both Cilauro (2015) and Overby and Jones (2015), teamwork does occur in *Minecraft*. Therefore, this suggests that there is a lack of research into how players select their groups – whether it is done manually or randomly – and how roles are assigned within a team on *Minecraft*. There is no information on what these roles entail, let alone how they interact with each other.

Since MMOs have a massive number of users playing together on the same server, players group together and develop cultural practices. Duchenrsut and Moore (2005) list three types of social interactions found within an MMO: when a player meets new people with the intention of forming a group; when a group of players discuss strategy making; and the small talk that occurs between players within a group. While there has been research observing the general banter between *Minecraft* players (Potts, 2015) and discussion on how people work together to solve the many problems thrown at a *Minecraft* player (Cilauro, 2015; Overby & Jones, 2015), there has been very little research into how players form groups in *Minecraft*. According to Duchenrsut and Moore (2005), when it comes to forming groups within a traditional MMO, players do this through social interactions within the game. However, *Minecraft* works somewhat differently when it comes to group forming. While it is certainly possible for people to form groups through interacting with strangers within the game, the literature points to the understanding that players mainly play with people they know (Koltz & Tarabochia, 2014; Overby & Jones, 2015). This is especially the case when it concerns younger *Minecraft* players as parents are concerned about their children playing on servers with strangers (Oakley, n.d.). There have been cases of children being cyberbullied on *Minecraft* (Smith, 2015), and even more experienced players have encountered disruptive behaviour (Foo & Koivisto, 2004). While the disruptive behaviour, known as griefing, will be covered in a later section, it should be noted that antisocial behaviour affects what type of people players choose to interact with. Furthermore, we must take into account the fact that *Minecraft* does not have an auto-group option, meaning players must discover a server's IP address before they can enter it (Mojang, 2018). Overall, Duchenrsut and Moore's (2005) idea regarding group formation is too

simplistic, and, within the context of *Minecraft*, the literature on this subject requires more in-depth analysis. Instead of focusing on in-game interactions, these authors suggest that researchers should also observe how dedicated forums surrounding a video game affect the gameplay.

Since not all games have multiplayer features, there is a large population of gamers that play in isolation (Stuart, 2014). According to Amichai-Hamburger et al (2016), even if user participation within an online group occurs this does not mean everyone will take part in the conversation. Whether it is because a person is shy or feels as if they do not have time, Amichai-Hamburger et al finds that a large population of online users are passive. If the tools used for communication are too burdensome, people may not take part. The default option to communicate in *Minecraft* is through text-chat. Unless a player is using a console version of *Minecraft*, the game has no in-built voice-chat features. If players want to talk to a friend in real-time in *Minecraft* they have to find a mod that allows voice-chat, or uses a message system, whether in-game or through other means. Having to install mod can be burdensome to some, especially younger players. As a result, many players are left with using text-based communication to talk to other players. Since having to balance between using the game controls and typing to communicate, this might place a barrier stopping players from actually talking to each other. If players do not communicate through video games, perhaps there are other reasons for the popularity of video games. Even with single-player video games, there may be some engaging social elements, such as players discussing the game on forums. This also suggests the issue of where in-game communication ends, and out-of-game communication begins.

2.2 The player avatar

Because an MMO involves interaction between players (Duchenrsut & Moore, 2005; Lomanowska & Guitton, 2011), it is also important to examine how a person creates their identity, especially within a virtual landscape. This research project aims to answer explore whether a person's identity within a video game is flexible or if it is fixed. It is, therefore, important to examine the research into identity, looking at both sides of the argument. While in the real world a person inhabits a physical form, online their identities become avatars (Taylor, 2002), a digital representation of the user (Hooi & Cho, 2012; Midha & Nandedkar, 2012). According to Taylor, an online user brings life into an avatar making them become real. Hooi and Cho (2012) state that when an avatar reflects its user's physical appearance, it can create a high degree of self-awareness. While other online video games allow for in-depth

customisation, *Minecraft* lacks the same level of detail. The player avatar is essentially a block figure. While there is some degree of user control over appearances, *Minecraft* characters will not fully reflect the player. Therefore, questions should be asked as to how a player creates an identity in *Minecraft* despite the limitations. Due to the game's building mechanics, a person's identity might be better reflected in their world designs than their avatar. Because of their virtual nature, Hooi and Cho (2012) point out that avatars interact differently than their real-world counterparts. According to Myers et al (2015), unlike the real world, it is easier for people to change their identity according to whatever situation arises, although people usually create an online avatar based on an idealised version of themselves. Despite similarities between a person and their avatar, Midha and Nandedkar (2012) argue that a person's online representation might not completely reveal their offline identity. Because games like *Minecraft* involves roleplaying, Midha and Nandedkar's claim might have some truth to it when taken in the context of gaming. However, they note that if an avatar is similar to its user, the easier it is to be identified, causing people to regulate their behaviour online.

While an avatar might not reflect a person's offline identity, there is a process through which a person creates an online identity. Vasalou and Joinson (2009) argue people choose their avatars depending on the situation due to a large assortment of different online environments. With online interactions, a person can change their avatar in real time allowing for flexibility in presentation. The authors state some online environments, such as blogs, encourage people to make avatars based on themselves, while other areas of online interactions promote the creation of new personas, usually for roleplaying purposes.

Turkle (1995; 1999) states that a person's identity is complex; it is not simply about the physical self. She argues that a person has multiple personalities – shuffling between these different personas. This becomes more noticeable when someone enters the online world, where roleplaying is popular. By interacting online, Turkle says we reconstruct ourselves digitally. The online world is a metaphorical representation of a physical space, where players interact with each other and develop their relationships much like the offline world. The anonymous nature of the internet allows people to explore the creation of the self since they are not restrained to be themselves; allowing for experimentation and roleplaying. Turkle compares the experience people have online with the way adolescents develop their identities. According to her, during a person's childhood and teenage years they are able to experiment without significant consequences. She claims the internet has filled the role traditionally reserved for adolescence, arguing it is easier for people to experiment online without consequences.

Observing identity as a performance, Taylor (2002) expands upon Turkle (1995; 1999). According to Taylor, an identity is created through performance. An identity is not static, rather, it is constantly changing. While accepting avatars as a reflection, the author states it is still possible to use an avatar as a way to experiment with one's identity. By using virtual objects, the avatar's user is able to identify with a subculture. The avatar's affiliation to a subculture signals how they want to be perceived by others based on social conventions. These social conventions are dictated by the user's cultural value system and worldview. As a result, avatars can be based on stereotypes. Appearances can range from the colour of their clothes to the accessories worn on the avatar's body. Furthermore, Taylor says that making items and character skins rare causes the user to feel unique. While player skins are available in *Minecraft*, to say each player skin is unique would be untrue. It is easy for most players to download any skin they want from an online archive. While players can create their own skins, the *Minecraft* community promotes the idea of sharing. Players that create their own skins can upload them onto sharing archives, therefore making them readily available to other players.

Taylor (2002) argues that identity involves presence; for a person to present they must have a body. However, online a person's identity is virtual. Therefore, presence is represented online through an avatar, which allows a person to interact and socialise with others. Despite the online world being virtual, Taylor states avatars need a space to interact. An online virtual world needs to be treated as if real, with interactions between players. It is important for avatars to use body language to communicate. Garau (2006) proposes that nonverbal communication relies on face-to-face interactions. Facial cues serve two purposes: to control the flow of conversation; and to portray emotions. However, avatars in modern video games have limitations. Some other games have given players the option to assign emotes to their d-pad. By selecting an action, the player's avatar will do a certain bodily action such as wave, dance, or point. However, characters in *Minecraft* cannot fully replicate realistic human behaviour, and there is no option to apply emotes to a character. This means that players have to improvise by assigning meanings to certain actions. The 2013 video game *Journey* proved that there can be nonverbal interactions between players without the need for emotes or voice-chat. Perhaps the same applies to *Minecraft* – a simple jump could be used to communicate between players.

In contrast to the notion of online identity as a flexible construct (Turkle, 1995; 1999; Taylor, 2002), Axelsson (2002) argues that people use the internet in the same way to communicate as they would in the real world. According to this author, people are more likely to socialise with friends and those they know, which goes against the assumption that the internet would remove

barriers similar to what the telephone had done a hundred years previously. Axelsson critiques both Turkle and Taylor's notion of people freely changing their identities online. While there is some room for experimentation, she argues that as time passes a person's identity becomes more stable. While Axelsson does have a point – online identities are not as flexible as they seem to appear – she ignores the fact that people do interact with strangers online. While it is true that some online spaces have users interacting with friends, such as Facebook, other websites and online services involve interaction between strangers, such as Reddit and Twitter. Vasalou and Joinson (2009) support this by stating how different websites promote different approaches to avatar creations.

Another aspect of identity is the player's ability to roleplay. Because online identities are represented as avatars (Taylor, 2002), which can be customised by the avatar's owners due to online anonymity, it is difficult for someone's identity to be revealed through their avatar (Midha & Nandedkar, 2012). Since a person's avatar does not have to reflect the user's self, online anonymity, therefore, allows people to take on new identities; players are not restricted to their own identities. Guitton (2012) describes how virtual worlds can allow people to re-enact their favourite fictional universe, whether it is based on a film franchise or a television series. User-generated sandbox games, such as *Minecraft*, can be used as a virtual canvas where artistic players are able to release their creative and imaginative talents. Players are able to craft their own world, with its own backstory, and allow that world to take on a life of its own.

Guitton (2012) explains how there are two types of virtual environment: traditional-styled video games where user behaviour is limited through pre-packaged settings; and user-generated sandbox MMOs where players are able to express themselves within an online virtual environment. Sandbox games *Second Life* and *Minecraft* fall under this category (Guitton, 2011a). Guitton (2011b) points out that for a user-generated sandbox to work, it needs to be immersive. While realism is not necessary, a game needs a variety of gameplay elements to create an immersive world. Based on an understanding of certain human behaviours, such as how people interact in a virtual space, developers are able to make a social space that feels as if it is believable living world. This can be seen in games such as *Minecraft* and *Second Life*, where user-generated content is the games' primary selling point. Although *Minecraft* is not the most realistic game, with blocky textures, it conforms to Guitton's idea of the successful open-world sandbox. To explain why *Minecraft* is immersive, we must look at the works of the philosopher Aristotle. In his treatise *Poetics* (Aristotle, 335 BCE/1996), he argues that a plot's believability depends on the consistency of the characters. In other words, a character

must behave according to their personality. *Minecraft*'s consistency depends on its gameplay; once a player works out how *Minecraft*'s gameplay mechanics work they are able to handle whatever the game throws at them. Cutting down trees produces wood, sand obeys gravity, sheering sheep produces wool – just to name a few. Taylor (2002) supports this notion, stating how inconsistencies within a game's world can disrupt a player's experience.

However, the most important factor for immersion in *Minecraft* is its social elements. Guitton (2011b) observes how virtual communities, such as *Second Life*, focus on roleplaying. Through avatars, players are able to express themselves online and create whatever world they desire (Guitton, 2012). Guitton, (2011b) lists three elements that help create a sense of immersion in a virtual world: commitment, cohesion, and coherence. Commitment involves a player's commitment and affiliation to a virtual group, such as a guild. Cohesion is how a player interacts with one another, usually within a group. Because MMOs involve a large group of people interacting with one another within a shared space, it is important to observe the interactions that are occurring, whether it be the players trading items or more competitive behaviour such as player-versus-player (PVP). Coherence is how players interact with the environment. Locations within an in-game world need to serve a purpose, whether it be for socialising with other players, a marketplace, or an arena dedicated to PVP.

2.3. Gender and gaming

As the gaming community becomes more diverse, with female gamers becoming more prominent, attention has been brought to the issue of gender in gaming. Statistics reveal males and females play video games with an almost equal ratio, with 55% of gamers in the United States being male, while the other 45% is female (Statista, 2018). Although males and females play video games equally, the genres of video games played by each gender differs, which suggests that males and females have different interests when it comes to gaming. According to Yong (2017), males spend more time playing videos, preferring action orientated games. In contrast, female gamers have a more negative attitude towards video games, being less likely to cite the benefits of gaming. Female gamers preferred playing simulation and puzzle orientated games. When asked why they avoid playing action orientated games, such as first-person shooters, female gamers were deterred from those types of games due to their violent nature. According to Kaye, Pennington, and McCann (2017), female gamers frequently face harassment while playing video games, especially when playing violent or competitive video games. These authors state that there is a double standard when it comes to judging a gamer's performance, with male gamers' success being attributed to ability, whilst female gamers'

success is attributed to luck. These stereotypes can be explained by the assumption that females lack spatial and mathematical skills, the important abilities needed to succeed in playing video games. However, the studies which examined spatial and mathematical skills were conducted before the internet and social media became prominent. Because people are now using new information-communication technologies from an early age, their brain functions have changed, so the assumption that females lack spatial and mathematical skills might be highly inaccurate (Yong, 2017). Because of the harassment and stereotyping directed towards female gamers, females occasionally take on a male persona to avoid such prejudice (Kaye et al, 2017).

As the world becomes more complex, so do fandoms. As a result, questions arise over the relationship between fandoms and gender, especially when discussing issues that either affect or concern women specifically. With the internet becoming the most popular way to engage in fandoms, there has been an increase in misogynist behaviour (Busker, 2013). According to Proctor (2017), fans feel as if they own the text, with fandom being a way for people to identify with a group. Fandom, like any other form of group identification, involves othering – group identities are defined by their differences (Powell & Menendian, 2016). Proctor (2017) argues how othering can lead to hostility to those that do not conform to their view of a fandom. Fans have become so attached to a media text that any deviation is seen as heresy. Whenever a popular media franchise is rebooted, with the new series aiming for a newer audience instead of the original, backlash ensues. Proctor reports how fans will see a reboot as going against the ideal narrative of reliving the past. Since nostalgia is the yearning for a time and place that does not exist anymore, or may have never existed, nostalgia is used as tool to give people meaning in their lives by maintaining a sense of continuity through their experience with a media text. Therefore, nostalgia is less about the media property itself, but instead the experience fans have while consuming the text – what's happen to the fans live at the time. This will lead to fans protecting their media text, as if a holy book, from perceived threats. Fans will police what they deem inauthentic, by commenting, for example, that a newer version of a movie and television show has ruined their childhood. Media companies see reboots as a way to start afresh. Although reboots have worked for some franchises, such as *Batman* (2005–2012) and *James Bond* (2006-2020), failed reboots are seen by fans as inauthentic or illegitimate. Furthermore, reboots are also seen as a sign of Hollywood's lack of imagination and ambition. The internet has made it easier for fans to be less passive and more active as they move towards openly critiquing or commenting on changes made to the media text. As a result, fandoms have become more mainstream, making the toxic behaviour of fans visible. Although unintentional,

social media promotes and encourages toxic behaviour by rewarding misogynists through likes and retweets (Proctor, 2017; Salter, 2018). Salter (2018) argues that this is due to social media owners refusing to properly moderate the content shown on their platforms; they prefer to take a libertarian approach promoting a free market place of ideas. Although social media perceives themselves as neutral, by ignoring inequality and the manipulation of outsider groups, their actions reveal a different picture. Proctor (2017) notes how fans who take part in toxic behaviour will rebuke claims that they are racist or sexist, usually by conducting counter research on the journalists highlighting these issues. However, the author also states that only a small percentage of fans actually take part in such toxic behaviour. Furthermore, trolls intentionally cause flame wars, making it difficult to determine whether something is an actually genuine opinion of a fan.

The watershed moment in the relationship between fandom and gender is the 2014 Gamergate controversy, where a game developer Zoë Quinn was accused by her former boyfriend Eron Gjoni of using sexual favours to advance her position in the gaming industry. Salter (2018) explains how within fandoms females are perceived as threats. This notion has caused female members of fandoms to suffer abuse, whether physical or verbally, from other community members. The Gamergate controversy has been linked to the alt-right, a political movement which harbours racist and misogynist far-right views. According to Salter, hatred towards women and minorities within gaming communities, a characteristic shared with the alt-right, reveals how fragile geek masculinity is due to its dependence on inequality. Unlike mainstream masculinity, which focuses on strength and athleticism, geek masculinity substitutes traditional masculine traits of sportsmanship with the knowledge and mastery of technology. As a result, male geeks perceive women as encroaching on their domain of technology. Although early computer coders were women, due to the labour shortage during the Second World War, the concept of being a computer programmer was rebranded after the war, transforming it into a male occupation. The later change in the way information-communication technology came to be perceived has been evident in popular culture with the trope of the male hacker. As a result of the rebranding, female coders became marginalised. The increase in women using this kind of technology is perceived as a threat, since it threatens the alternative pathway towards gaining and maintaining a man's masculinity.

2.4. Griefing

As noted by Ragin and Amoroso (2011), social research not only focuses on social interactions but also asocial interactions. Just because a person refuses to take part in a society does not

mean they should not be included by researchers. To the contrary, it is also important to examine why a person would refuse to follow the rules established by an online community and instead strive to undermine them. This research project aims to answer whether antisocial behaviour within video games can also create online communities based around intentional harassment and destructive play-styles. Therefore, this section of the literature review will examine 'griefing', why people engage in such play-style, and how it affects the experience of other players.

Although MMOs such as *Minecraft* promote a sense of community through player cooperation (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2005; Silva & Mousavidlin, 2015), not all MMO players have the right intention. Instead, some players seemingly want to see the world burn. An aspect of *Minecraft* that has caused plenty of misery for many players is griefers. These are players that engage in disruptive playstyles (Beale et al, 2016). While only a small percentage of players are griefers – around 3% of all players – their behaviour has been known to affect a large proportion of players. While there seem to be differing opinions on what can be defined as 'griefing' – some MMO players see any form of antisocial behaviour as being griefing even if the culprit does not intend to grief (Foo & Koivisto, 2004). According to Beale et al (2016), griefing involves purposely disrupting another person's gameplay experience through acts such as destroying buildings, killing a player, or stealing the victim's items. This can also include befriending a player and pretending to cooperate with them, before betraying that player. Foo and Koivisto (2004) note it is important to ask the following questions: is the act of griefing intentional; does griefing cause victims to lose interest in the game; and does the griefer find enjoyment in the act. These authors have attempted to define griefing by placing it into four categories: harassment – causing emotional distress towards someone; power superiority – exhorting power over another player; scamming – deceiving other players by exploiting the game's design; and greed playing - actions such as killing, stealing and camping.

Online instructions explaining how to grief can give researchers an insight into how griefers think. According to Beale et al (2016), while appearing as if professional, 'griefing guides' eschew traditional instruction manuals. Relying on personal stories, the guides encourage readers to find pleasure from the misfortunes of others. These instruction manuals teach people how to best access a server, and how to gain pleasure derived from griefing others. McAllister (2004) notes how griefing guides attempt to legitimise and justify griefing behaviour by presenting the guides as an instruction manual. Despite seeming professional, McAllister states the griefers are aware of their own limitations and will openly admit to this in their guides, such

as by apologising for their lack of writing abilities. Despite this, the griefer will not show any signs of remorse, instead presenting griefing as a work of art.

Foo and Koivisto (2004) report how a griefer's success depends on the victim's emotional response. Going against the traditional ideas of cooperation and creativity which *Minecraft* promote, griefing is instead disruptive and causes mistrust within an online community. According to McAllister (2004), much like any other communities, gamers will base their playstyle according to established rules. The author proposes that these rules "determine how a community makes meaning out of its collective experiences" (p. 201). Beale et al (201) argue that in an open-world game such as *Minecraft*, it is up to the game's community to determine the ethical codes of conduct. These are based on the assumptions and rules gleaned from the players' collective experience. Therefore, players negotiate these rules whilst they explore the game's world. In contrast, griefers attempt to negotiate the rules by subverting the established rules and questioning their legitimacy. Beale et al point out that griefers are not accepted by the larger *Minecraft* community. Despite efforts by some players to censor griefers, the latter still fight for approval among other players.

An issue with the research on determining why players take part in griefing is that it assumes griefers are only harassing other players for the sake of seeing the world burn. McAllister (2004) suggests griefers are simply attention seekers. However, the idea of becoming infamous online conflicts with the notion of online anonymity. Despite this contradiction, observing anonymity and how it affects the online world might shed light on why some gamers take part in griefing. When a person loses their sense of identity by becoming anonymous, a hostile or unethical environment can be created (Midha & Nandedkar, 2012). Because of this, not everyone on the internet is honest. According to Hooi and Cho (2012), because the online world relies to a certain extent on anonymity, this allows people to deceive others more easily. The concealment of a person's identity allows for someone to pass on false or misleading information. Deception online is dynamic, allowing people to hide cues, that would expose lying, through modifying and adapting their crafted identity. Hooi and Cho believe it is instinctive for people to lie, whether about feelings or their whereabouts. Lying is seen as a way to protect oneself. Lying and deception can be seen within the online world through role-playing, which involves a person taking on an alternative identity that usually enhances its user's characteristics. Therefore, the way griefers trick and bait their targets can be seen as role-playing.

Observing how anonymity affects the behaviour of online users, Christie and Dill (2015) recount how computer-based communication can create asocial and unregulated behaviours. They state that online communication differs from face-to-face communication in that the former involves anonymity. Christie and Dill highlight how a 2013 Pew study revealed that 25% of adults posted anonymous comments online to conceal their behaviour from others. Due to a lack of accountability, anonymity can allow people to become more aggressive. However, using anonymity to explain the actions of griefing does have some problems. Because griefing is usually the action of a single person, it comes into conflict with the notion of the 'faceless crowd'. According to both Gustave Le Bon and Zimbardo (as cited in Christie and Dill, 2015), people lose their identity when within a crowd and instead will think and act in unison. In contrast, Reicher et al (as cited in Christie and Dill, 2015) argue that a person's self is not a single construct, but instead a bilateral struggle between a personal identity and a group identity. A person identifies as an individual or as a crowd depending on the situation. The crowd can give a person the sense of anonymity, which allows them to do actions they would not otherwise be able to do as an individual. Perhaps a possible explanation for a griefer's action is that they want to be accepted into a group. The only way to be accepted is to harass other players.

2.5. Conclusion

In summary, this literature review will be used to determine what questions appear in the online survey. The literature review reveals how Minecraft can be considered a mini-MMO where players are encourage to work together for a common goal. Previous research shows how players use online avatars when interacting with others in a virtual space. Furthermore, gender within gaming affects how people are perceived online. The literature review also shows how online anonymity allows people to harass others without consequence. This research project aims to prove or disprove the claims made in the literature review using an online survey.

3. Research Methodology

As part of the research process, the literature review gave an overview of the previous research into video games and their potential as a communication tool. The literature review examined theories important to the study - including gaming as a social experience, the player avatar, gender within gaming, and griefing – with the intention of identifying gaps within the literature. The aim of this research project is to answer the question as to how online communities are built in the video game *Minecraft* through participatory culture. By examining the fandom community surrounding *Minecraft*, the gaming language used by players whilst playing *Minecraft*, and the construction of interpersonal relationships within the bounds of a popular online medium, this research project aims to explain how these elements helped to improve the gameplay experience. By gathering new evidence, through an online survey, the data was then used to re-evaluate the research question and current literature within the field of research (Ragin & Amoroso, 2011).

Because this research project covered a broad scope, observing the complexities of communication within *Minecraft*, this research project is split into five areas of concern. These are: the preferred method by which the participant played *Minecraft*, whether offline or online; the role online avatars have in the creation of identity; the method by which participants learned how to play *Minecraft*; how language affects *Minecraft'*s gameplay; and the impact of intentional harassment toward other players. Therefore, in order to answer how online communities were built in the video game *Minecraft* through participatory culture, this research project asked the following sub-questions:

- Are players more likely to enjoy *Minecraft* if they play the game with other players?
- By allowing players to experiment with their identity, does roleplaying in *Minecraft* enhance the players' experience?
- How are players able to change and adapt their online identity to suit their situation?
- What tools or methods, whether using forums or interacting with other players, do players use to learn how to play *Minecraft*?
- Do players use specific 'sayings' when playing *Minecraft*?
- Is there a difference between how male and female gamers speak?
- How does griefing – the intentional harassment towards other players through destructive play-styles – help or hinder in creating online communities?

3.1. Methodology

The purpose of empirical research is to gather and analyse data, and then interpret and report the findings. Empirical research involves finding new information to add to the existing body of knowledge concerning a phenomenon. While conducting a research project, researchers use specific terminologies to explain what they are researching and how they approach collecting the necessary data (Grix, 2002). Ontology refers to what can be known about a specific field of research, and how knowledge is connected (Löfgren, 2013). It involves examining previously conducted studies and academic works surrounding the field the researcher aims to research. Ontology allows the researcher to make a sound argument over a field of knowledge. Because this research project aimed to research how online communities were built in *Minecraft* and how the game is used as a communication tool, the ontological position for this research project was to examine how gaming was used as a social experience, and how players communicated and interacted with one another. Epistemology questions how we know the knowledge we have. It is not simply explaining where the knowledge comes from, but how the research is able to gather such knowledge. The epistemological position of this research project was that *Minecraft* was a communication tool and interactive medium, therefore the researcher had to discover how players used and engaged with *Minecraft*.

This research project adopted a positivist approach to research when collecting and analysing the data and interpreting the findings. Positivism, a research paradigm, defines how the researcher will approach a topic. It creates a set of ethical codes, and informs the researcher on what can be learnt, how this knowledge can be identified, and how a researcher proceeds to uncover knowledge. Positivism asserts that there is only one reality. According to this paradigm, it is the task of the researcher to uncover the true nature of reality by eliminating alternative solutions until only one explanation of an existing reality can be given. Positivism holds that human-made concepts can be measured by using the scientific method. Due to the imperfect nature of people, positivism affirms statements through probabilities instead of certainties. Positivism uses probabilities because of the flaws in measuring abstract concepts such as thoughts and feelings. Furthermore, positivism strives for standardisation, with the researcher making sure that the data is collected in a nonbiased way. Because this paradigm strives to be neutral by avoiding outside influences, it is essential that each research project participant should be given the same set of questions under the same conditions. Positivism mainly uses quantitative research, although qualitative research can be used with this paradigm (Mertens, 2014).

The reason for using positivism instead of other paradigms is its ability to measure reality through statistical means. In contrast, other paradigms, including constructivist, transformative, and pragmatic, perceive reality as a social construct, instead focusing on how people interpret reality. The reason for not using the other paradigms is due to their vagueness; the other paradigms argue that reality cannot be measured and it is the task of the research to focus on other areas of concern, such as developing strategies for marginalised to fight oppression, or explain why there are different perspectives when concerning truth (Mertens, 2014).

Methodology examines different research approaches by describing each approach's advantages and disadvantages with the intent of finding which approach has the best and most appropriate way to obtain data. It involves critiquing the way knowledge is obtained, working out which is the best way to gather data. Methodology involves describing the method in which the research data is obtained, explaining the process in a clear manner. Essentially, methodology is how we go about acquiring the necessary data to understand the topic (Grix, 2002). Therefore, to gain the information to understand *Minecraft* as a communication tool, the methodology used in this research project was an online survey where *Minecraft* players were asked how they used *Minecraft* with both open and closed questions.

This research project used both quantitative and qualitative research, known as a mixed method (Mertens, 2014). This research project focused prominently on quantitative data, measuring the frequency of occurrence within the responses. Qualitative research was used to explain implied meanings behind the occurrence in the data (Krippendorff, 2004). Using a mixed method approach allowed the researcher to use various different approaches depending on the situation, while also strengthening the research results. While quantitative research gave the researcher a broader view of the overall data, qualitative research allowed the researcher to conduct an in-depth analysis of the data (Mertens, 2014).

Quantitative research involves collecting statistical data (Mertens, 2014). It is the process in which the researcher observes reoccurring patterns within the data, known as variables, and describes the relationships between variables (Ragin & Amoroso, 2011). The collection of quantitative data can range from questions with defined answers, such as a 'yes' or 'no' question, to the use of variables where abstract concepts are turned into measurable statistics (Ragin & Amoroso, 2011). These abstract concepts are determined by counting the frequency of an occurrence of a specific predetermined category. For example, if several participants mention a specific concept within their responses it will be noted by the researcher. The themes

and concepts that are identified in the data are then linked to the research questions, focusing on the idea of *Minecraft* being used as a communication tool (Hartley, 2002). When researchers describe the relationships between variables, it is known as covariation. It is important to note that just because the researcher is able to describe a relationship between two variables does not mean one of the variables is the cause of the other. Therefore, covariation only provides evidence that a relationship exists (Ragin & Amoroso, 2011). The benefit of using quantitative research is its ability to follow orderly rules, allowing for defined classifications of research objectives. Because it is up to the researcher to define the objectives, it is important for the researcher to also make it clear what they are looking for in the data. Furthermore, quantitative research needs a sufficient sample size to be effective and useful. Limitations to quantitative research is the subjective nature of the analysis, with issues arising when determining the category to scrutinise the text through. It is therefore important for the researcher to justify the defining of the categories. Due to this limitation, it is important for quantitative research to be used as a starting point, with further investigation using other research methods, such as qualitative research (Hartley, 2002). The benefit of using quantitative research is its ability to reveal trends in the data while allowing the researcher to predict future occurrence which the research might not be able to observe directly (Krippendorff, 2004).

To make identifying themes and patterns in the data easier, this research project compiled the data together into graphs, allowing the researcher to compare and contrast different variables in the data in a clean and simple manner. The researcher perused the participants' answers, identifying specific themes by noting certain phrases and concepts within the responses. After all these themes were identified, each occurrence of a phrase and concept were counted to see how many times they occurred. The numbers of occurrences were then compiled into a graph. For certain questions, themes that were similar were grouped together, with the researcher noting whenever this occurred. Furthermore, the individual themes were represented in the graph through subcategories. It should be noted that, although a participant predominately answered the questions with a single statement or theme, on numerous occasions participants answered questions with multiple statements or themes. Because of this, each theme observed within an individual response was counted as a separate statistic. Therefore, each graph dealing with an open-ended question did not always have its data add up to match with the sample size.

3.2. Research design

The participants in this research are self-identified *Minecraft* players that took part in the online survey. The participants were recruited by advertising the online survey on *Minecraft*-related

forums and social network pages. Every participant was given the same set of survey questions. However, at certain points in the online survey, the questions changed and adapted depending on how the participants answered previous questions. The variation of questions was reactive – asking the participants why they answered a question in a specific way. The only set of questions that was different depending on how the participants answered a previous question was the final set of questions, the questions which concerned griefing.

Obviously, this research project was not able to interview every member of the *Minecraft* community, the population being studied. Because of this, the project focused its attention on using a sample consisting of *Minecraft* players, a section of members from the population, which served as a representative of the entire population (Mertens, 2014).

However, the issue of a self-selecting sample caused problems. Because many people lack internet access, or were not aware of the online survey due to not visiting the forum or website it was advertised on, this meant the researcher did not have control over who took part in the online survey (Greenarce, 2016). Furthermore, the researcher had to take into account the potential for certain types of participants taking part in the survey, and skewing the data by expressing more extreme opinions. As a result, this research project used generalisations to make conclusions concerning a population. Generalisation is when the researcher makes a statement about a population based on the results of a sample group (Ragin & Amoroso, 2011; Mertens, 2014).

One way for a researcher to obtain the necessary knowledge to answer a research question is through interviewing people involved with the relevant specific subject (Grix, 2002; Krippendorff, 2004). The quickest and easiest way to obtain the necessary data is by using an online survey. An online survey involves collecting information on a population group through questionnaires. Surveys are favoured in research projects for their practicality and cost-effectiveness. The researcher makes a generalised conclusion concerning the opinions of a whole population by using a randomised small sample group. Because of this, this research project uses an online survey. By using an online survey, the research project is not limited to a specific location, allowing participants from around the world to take part in the online survey. While it is possible to conduct the research in other ways, such as through a focus group or observing directly how participants play *Minecraft*, an online survey is the easiest and quickest way to obtain the necessary data. Furthermore, an online survey is not restricted by geographical barriers, allowing for a wide range of different participants. Although conducting

a focus group would allow the researcher to have a direct conversation with the participants, and observation of the participant's gameplay would allow for more honest data; conducting this research project these ways would be more time consuming and would require more resources. By conducting an online survey, the researcher does not have to go through the difficulty of finding suitable interview subjects. Furthermore, participants are able to take part in the research when and wherever they desire and are able to retain their anonymity. The anonymous nature of an online survey makes it easier to gain ethics clearance. It should be noted, however, this research project uses a cross-sectional approach when conducting the online survey. In contrast to a longitudinal survey, which observes a group or an event of a period time, a cross-sectional survey involves taking a metaphorical snap-shot of a specific group. As a result, the online survey is conducted over a limited time period (Mathers, Fox, & Hunn, 2007). The advantages of using cross-sectional research is its ability to collect data in a speedily manner, while allowing for the researcher collect data across different variable groups, such as age and gender (Cherry, 2018). However, online surveys have shortcomings, with the issue of participants self-selecting. Instead of surveying a random sample, this research project's online survey aimed towards a specific group, namely those who played *Minecraft*. As a result, only those with a vested interest in *Minecraft* were able take part in the online survey, therefore limiting the survey's scope (Greenacre, 2016). The website that was used to conduct the online survey was Survey Monkey, utilising the paid premium option.

The online survey was open to those over the age of 18 and who were active *Minecraft* players. A disclaimer page featured at the beginning of the online survey, detailing how, by taking part in the online survey, the participants were giving consent. The page detailed the survey's age requirement. Although it was impossible to tell whether the participants were telling the truth about their age, the researcher trusted that they were. It was difficult to assess how many participants took part in the online survey, due to the unpredictable nature of an online survey, this research project filtered through the responses to make sure there were no unusable responses. Because of this, criteria were established to decide which responses were to be included. The criteria for inclusion were that a participant had to fill out at least two of the written answers, and the responses could not contain offensive or racist comments. The reason for removing offensive or racist comments was because the participants who made such comments were deemed rogue responders – participants who were attempting to sabotage the online survey by answering survey questions with inappropriate responses (Stevenson, 2017). Therefore, the sample size was determined by the total number of participants that took part in

the online survey, subtracted by the responses deemed incomplete or offensive[9]. This online survey was open to anyone worldwide and took place over a period of one month.

The aim of the research questions was to support or dispute ideas and concepts in the literature review. As mentioned earlier, the hypothesis is based on what the research aimed to find, this means the literature review was used as a guide to deciding which questions would be in the online survey (Ragin & Amoroso, 2011). The online survey sought both quantitative and qualitative data by asking the participants open-ended and closed yes-or-no questions.

As mentioned previously, the online service this research project used to conduct the online survey was Survey Monkey. The reason for using Survey Monkey was due to the website's reputation as a reliable way to conduct an online survey. According to Schindler (2017), the website is known for its ease of usability, allowing the survey creator to design an online survey that is not only pleasant to the eye but is also highly customisable allowing for a number of possible design combinations. The survey is extremely flexible with its drag-and-drop mechanism which allows the researcher to move questions around to where they are desired. Certain features that stand out with Survey Monkey include the ability to create logics, which allow the researcher to direct participants towards certain questions depending on their previous answers. In other words, depending on whether a participant answered yes or no for a specific question determined what follow-up question the participant was given. This, therefore, allowed the survey to feel more personalised for the participants, with the survey responding to their actions. Furthermore, Survey Monkey has a robust management system, allowing for the data to be easily exported to a pdf format. The researcher was then able to compile the data into an excel file, by going through the responses and noting how each participant answered each question. The excel document containing all the responses allowed the researcher to work out how different demographic factors, such as age and gender, shaped the answers to the survey's question. Besides exporting each survey responses separately, Survey Monkey can also export the responses to specific questions as a separate pdf file, giving the researcher a broad view of the answers given to that specific question. Furthermore, because Survey Monkey allows the user to conduct the survey on the internet, this, therefore, allowed the researcher to obtain more answers and allowed for a wider demographic of participants.

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[9] The responses of two participants were removed due to racial slurs. Both incidents included the use of the derogative 'n' word. When the participants were not inciting racial slurs, the answers were nonsensical and therefore did not help with the study.

The online survey, titled *Minecraft* Community Survey, was advertised on Facebook pages devoted to *Minecraft*[10], Subreddits concerned with both *Minecraft* and general gaming[11], and *Minecraft* fan forums[12]. An exemplar of the online survey's advertisement will be included in this document as an appendix.

The online survey contained 22 questions, with the participants being presented with 19 to 20 of those questions depending on how they answered certain questions (see Appendix B). These questions were based on the issues found in the literature review, focusing on areas where there was a gap in the literature. The aim of this questionnaire was to answer how online communities were built in the video game *Minecraft* through participatory culture. The survey's questions related to: the participant's preferred method of playing *Minecraft*; the role of online avatars; the method of learning to play the game; the effect of language within *Minecraft*; and the impact of griefing – the intentional harassment of other players.

3.3. Conclusion

In summary, this research projects aims to explain how online communities were built in the video game *Minecraft* through participatory culture. Because the research project involved examining gaming as a social experience and explaining how video games can be used by players to communicate and for social interactions, an online survey was used to gather the necessary data to answer the research question. Using the website SurveyMonkey, the online survey engaged with active players of *Minecraft*, asking them questions informed by the literature review.

This research project used a mixed method approach, using both qualitative and quantitative data. By using the positivism paradigm, quantitative research was used to measure reality by counting the number of occurrences within the data, while qualitative research was used to explain the findings.

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[10] Facebook: MinecraftNZ, AUT - Auckland University of Technology, MINECRAFT PS4, POPCULT (AUT).
[11] Reddit: r/GameTheorists, r/Minecraft360, r/pcgaming, r/gaming, r/Minecraft.
[12] Forums: www.fruitservers.net, https://www.lolnet.co.nz.

4. Findings

4.1. The online survey

This research project used the website SurveyMonkey to conduct the survey. Besides asking for demographic information about the participant - age and gender - the online survey comprised 20 questions spread over several topics related to *Minecraft*. The purpose of these questions was to elicit responses as to how *Minecraft* is used as a communication tool. More specifically, these questions examined *Minecraft*'s social elements, what keeps players engaged, how players perceive themselves within the game, and whether they take part in destructive behaviours within *Minecraft*.

The online survey received a total of 123 responses, although many of these were incomplete. A large proportion of participants had only answered the first page of questions, which involved asking their age and gender. To make sure the data was useful and accurate, I examined the participants' responses, weeding out any unnecessary responses. It was decided that a participant had to fill out at least two of the written answers within the online survey for their responses to be included in the research findings. Furthermore, two responses that had been completed were excluded for racist comments. Once the responses that did not meet the requirement were removed, total number of useable responses was 68.

4.2. Reason for playing *Minecraft*

Participants were asked how they preferred to play *Minecraft*. They were given three different options: the participant preferred to play *Minecraft* by themselves; they preferred to play *Minecraft* with friends; or they preferred playing *Minecraft* with strangers.
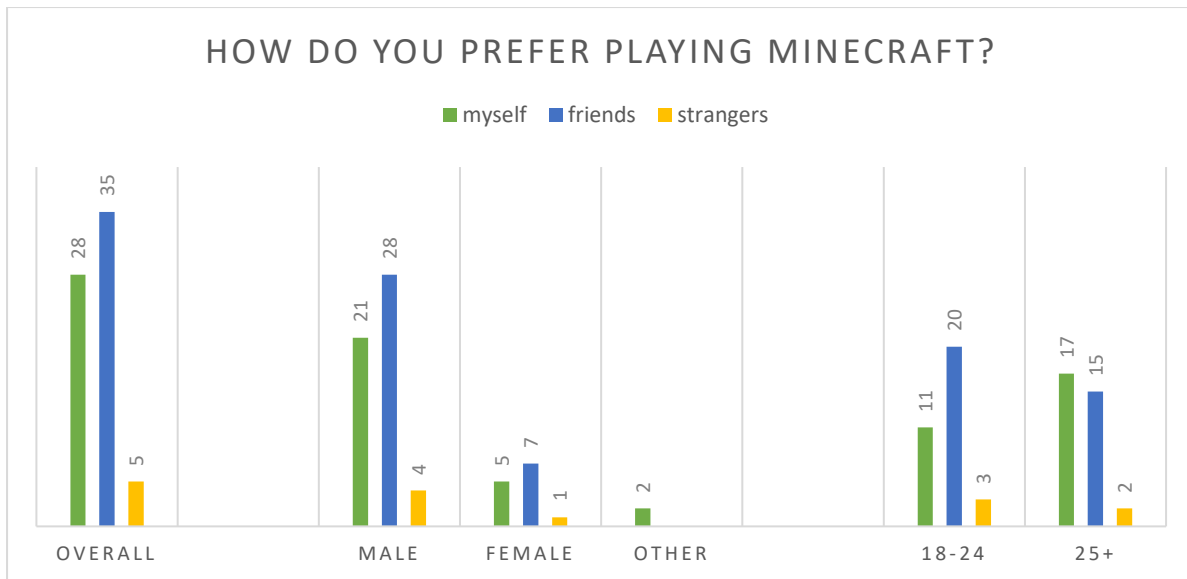
Figure 1: Preferred method of playing Minecraft.

Unsurprisingly, a large proportion of participants said they preferred playing *Minecraft* with friends (see figure 1), with 35 responders choosing this option. Although a smaller proportion of players said they preferred to play *Minecraft* by themselves, it is still a large proportion of responders with 28 choosing this option. A small number of participants said they prefer playing *Minecraft* with strangers, with five responders choosing this option.

There were no differences between the male and female responses in how they preferred playing *Minecraft*. Because the gender divide did not appear as a factor when it comes to how players preferred playing *Minecraft*, there must be other factors explaining why one group of participants preferred playing *Minecraft* with friends, compared to the other group which preferred experiencing *Minecraft* as a solo player. There is a noticeable difference, however, between the 18-24 age group and the 25+ responders. The findings suggest age is a bigger factor than gender when it comes to determining how a player prefers to play *Minecraft*. While 11 responders in the 18-24 category said they preferred playing *Minecraft* by themselves, almost double the number of responders in the 18-24 age bracket said they preferred playing *Minecraft* with friends, with 20 responders choosing this option. Only three responders said they preferred playing *Minecraft* with strangers. However, for the 25+ age group, around an equal number of participants said they preferred playing Minecraft by themselves compared to the participants who said they preferred playing Minecraft with friends. Slightly more 25+ responders said they preferred playing *Minecraft* by themselves, with 17 participants choosing this option, while slightly less of the responders said they preferred playing *Minecraft* with

friends, with 15 participants choosing this option. Only two 25+ participants said they preferred playing *Minecraft* with strangers.

The data suggests *Minecraft* is a social game, with players preferring to play *Minecraft* with people they know instead of strangers. However, there is a large proportion of players who play *Minecraft* as a solo experience. Although *Minecraft* is perceived as a social game, the data suggest that as a person becomes older, they are less likely to play *Minecraft* with other players. Instead, the players' enjoyment of a video game such as *Minecraft* comes, therefore, from solitary activity. As before, because the survey does not ask the participants' reasoning, due to lack of foresight, we can only guess the reason why.

Participants were then asked why they played *Minecraft*. This was an open-ended question, which allowed participants to give multiple answers.
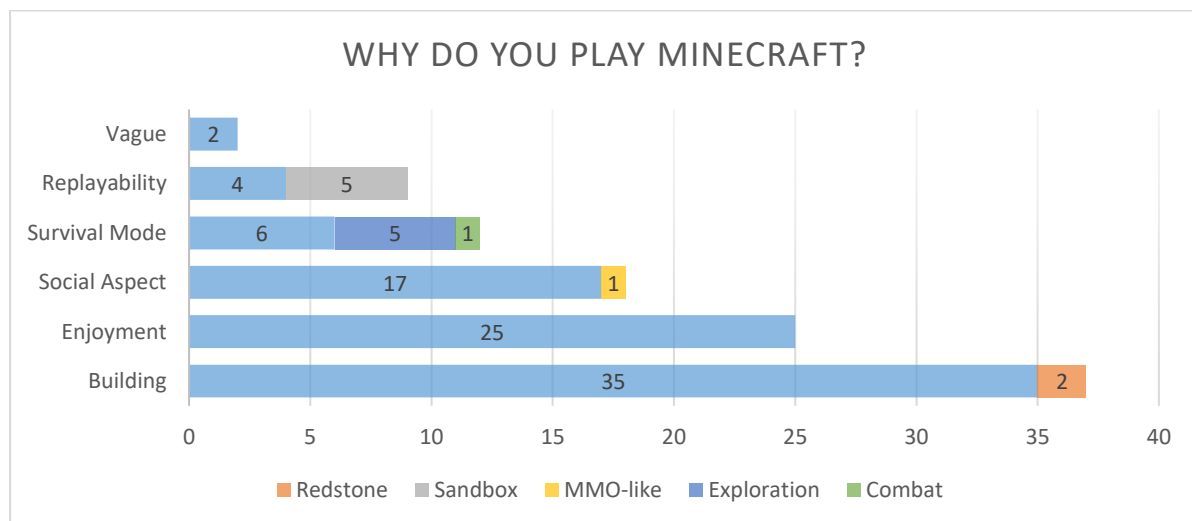

Figure 2: Reason for playing Minecraft.

The results (see figure 2) show that the majority of the participants played *Minecraft* for its creative potential, with 37 participants mentioning this in their responses. Many of the participants who cited creativity as a reason for playing *Minecraft* said they liked building things and sharing their constructions with others. A few of the participants mentioned how they preferred building things with friends, highlighting the fact that *Minecraft* is still a social experience. Two of the participants said they liked making redstone circuits, a system that allows players to build an automated machine within the game's world. Redstone is considered an advanced component of the game, with only a few players truly mastering the system. Automated creations made in *Minecraft* range from a simple light mechanism, to a fully running 16-bit computer. One participant said:

> "I enjoy building, exploring, and the small community of friends I play with. The concept is simple, almost like LEGOs but digital. We create our own society and adventures."

25 participants simply mentioned the 'fun factor' for playing *Minecraft*. Unfortunately, stating enjoyment as a reason for playing a game reveals very little about why the participants play *Minecraft*. The participants' definition of fun could range from creating worlds in solitude to playing *Minecraft* with other players. It should not come as surprise that 17 participants mentioned the social aspect as a reason for playing *Minecraft*. One of the biggest selling points for *Minecraft* is its multiplayer aspect (Goldberg & Larsson, 2013). At least one participant compared *Minecraft* to a mini-Massive Multiplayer Online (MMO) game, especially when mods are implemented to create in-game jobs. But not all participants mention playing online. Many of the participants cited the split-screen option as a reason to play. Split-screen in video games allows multiple players to play the same game using a single television screen. Split-screen also adds a physical element, with the gamers being in direct contact with one another. There is no need for an in-game voice chat since interaction is not hindered by location. A few participants said they like to play *Minecraft* with their kids and family. This shows that the social aspect is not simply an online phenomenon. Instead of perceiving multiplayer games being solely an online experience, researchers should alternatively see social interactions within video games as a shared experience whether online or offline. Furthermore, social interaction between players goes beyond the gaming experience, and can create life-long relationships, as a number of participants explain:

> "It's fun alone or with others (split-screen or online), whether in 'Survival' or 'Creative'; it is suitable to play with my [two] children and spouse."

> "I have met friends online who I believe to be now long life friends. If I don't feel like building I love the company considering we can also talk verbally on Discord."

12 participants cited survival mode as a reason for playing *Minecraft*. While more participants cited creative mode as a reason to play, which should not come as a surprise since *Minecraft* is oriented towards building, a small but significant portion of participants play *Minecraft* for adventure. This can range from an exploration of a *Minecraft* world, to the combat gameplay. While *Minecraft* does not have the most complex combat system, there is a community of

Minecraft players that take part in game modes such as *Hunger Game* (Garcia, 2016). Participants explains why they like *Minecraft*'s survival mode:

> "I often enjoy the survival mode quite a bit, from a nomadic start to settling down in a really cool landscape to finally building up a big ol' town or castle."

> "I rarely play it, but when I do it is to just chill out and play a relaxing survival game (needing to find food, build a shelter, etc.)"

Finally, nine participants mentioned *Minecraft*'s replayability as a reason for playing the game. Because the game is described as an open-world sandbox (Niemeyer & Gerber, 2015), participants said that *Minecraft* has enough variety to keep them entertained. As a whole, *Minecraft*'s ability to change and adapt to whatever the players desire is the game's biggest strength.

4.3. Interactions within the community

Participants were asked to state their main purposes for using *Minecraft* forums. This was an open-ended question. Because of this, many of the participants replied with multiple answers. For the following graph, common motifs within the responses were counted.
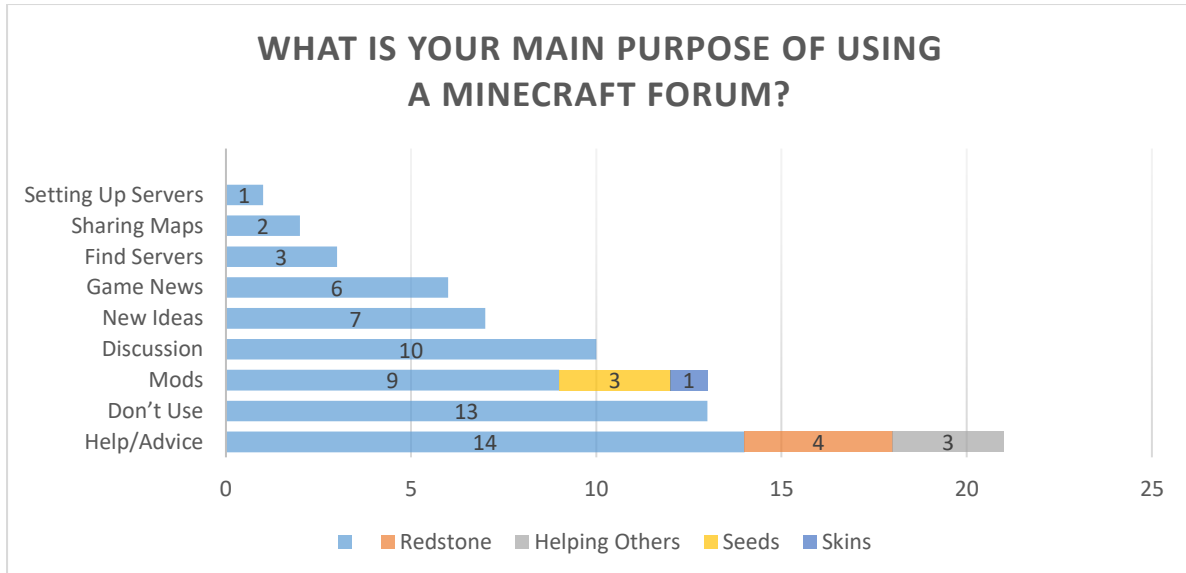

Figure 3: The purpose of using a Minecraft forum.

59 participants chose to answer this question, while nine of the participants chose to skip this question. As mentioned previously, many of the participants' responses overlap, with some participants giving multiple answers.

The results show that the largest proportion of participants use *Minecraft* forums for help or advice (see figure 3), with 21 participants mentioning this. Although not all participants were specific in what advice they were seeking, at least one participant stated they ask for help on how to craft certain items within the game. Four of the participants who stated they used *Minecraft* forums for help or advice said that they specifically looked for instruction on how to make Redstone contractions. Another three participants who stated they used forums for help said they also used forums as a way to help other players. This reveals 'help and advice' is a two-way process.

The next most comment response was that the participants did not use *Minecraft* forums, with 13 mentioning this aspect. It could be possible that the participants who skipped the question felt the same way, but it is impossible to determine. Another 13 participants said they use *Minecraft* forums to find mods, in-game modifications that can change the appearance or gameplay of *Minecraft*. Three of these participants specifically stated that they look for seeds, the in-game mechanic to generate a new map, and one participant said they specifically looked for player skins.

The next most common response was that participants used *Minecraft* forums to meet other players and for general discussion, with 10 participants mentioning this. Although the participants did not go into further details on what they discuss, in a broad sense it would seem that they discuss both matters pertaining to *Minecraft* and off-topic discussions. Seven participants reported that they used *Minecraft* forums to obtain new ideas for buildings. Six participants stated that they used *Minecraft* forums to keep them updated by getting the latest *Minecraft* news. Three participants said they used *Minecraft* forums to find servers. Two participants said that they used *Minecraft* forums to share their custom maps. And one participant stated that they used *Minecraft* forums for help in setting up a server.

Participants were then asked to identify where they went for help with *Minecraft*. This, too, was an open-ended question, which meant many of the participants replied with multiple answers. For the following graph, common motifs within the responses were counted.
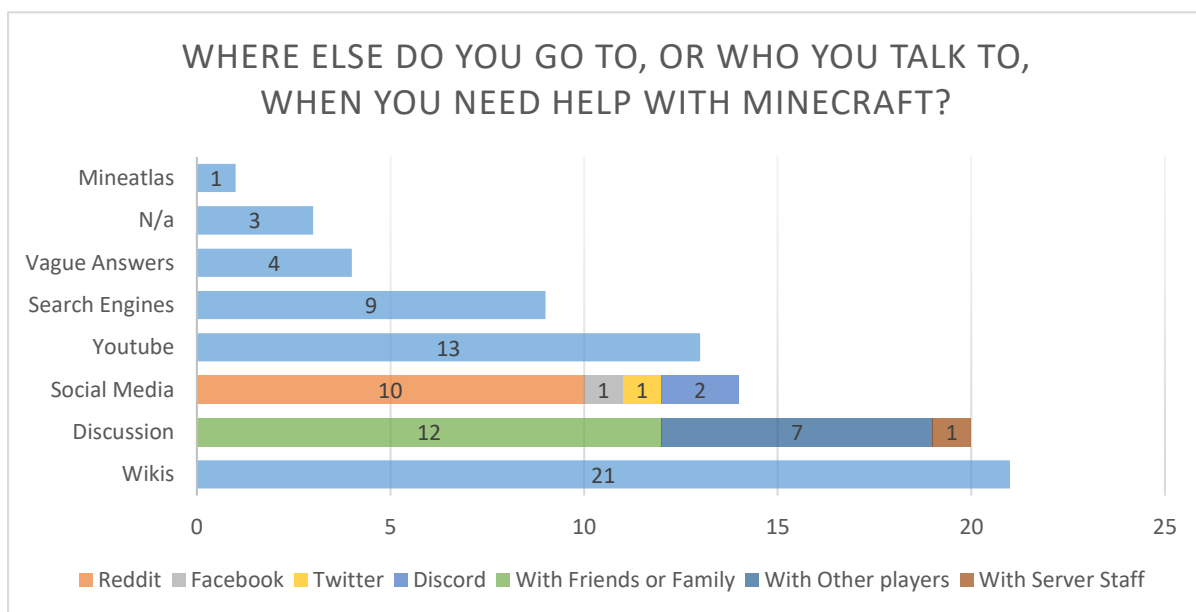
Figure 4: Where players go to seek help with Minecraft.

The findings show the biggest share of participants said they used *Minecraft* wikis when needing help (see figure 4), with 21 participants mentioning this in their responses. While this was an unexpected result for the researcher, it should not come as a surprise with the rise in online wiki resources. While the research project did not ask participants the reasons for using these sources, further research can expand on this topic.

The next most common motif seen within the data was participants talking to other people for help. 20 participants brought this up in their responses, however their responses can be split into smaller groups: 12 participants said they approached friends or family for help; seven participants said they discussed the game with other players; and one participant said they consulted with server staff for help. Overall, this suggests that interpersonal communication between players is an important factor for people learning how to play video games.

The third most common motif is participants consulting social media for help, with participants citing social media in their responses 14 times. Social media can be split into four smaller groups, with 10 mentions of Reddit, two mentions of Discord, and a single mention of Facebook and Twitter respectively.

Online video sharing websites was the fourth most common motif seen in the participants' responses, with 13 participants stating they used websites such as YouTube for help in *Minecraft*. While only one of the responders did not name YouTube or any other video platform - they said they watch "videos of others who play *Minecraft*" - the overwhelming majority of

participants cited YouTube in their responses. While there are other online video sharing websites, such as Dailymotion and Twitch, the fact that YouTube dominates is an interesting finding. Future research could look at YouTube's dominance and how it affects the gaming community, especially with the concerns about the impact of YouTube's Ad Revenue partnerships with content creators and how demonetisation can be used to censor speech (Sawyer, 2017; Grubb, 2017; Tassi, 2017). This has, as a result, created a phenomenon known as 'The Adpocalypses' (see chapter five, section 1 for further information).

Nine participants stated they use search engines as a way to find *Minecraft* help, with seven of those participants specifically mentioning Google. Four participants gave vague answers, which were too difficult for the research to decipher. Only three participants said they did not seek help with *Minecraft* when needed. One participant stated they use the website Mineatlas.com, a seed locator website.

To work out what keeps players engaged with the *Minecraft* community, participants were then asked what would stop them from taking part in the *Minecraft* community. As before, this was an open-ended question, allowing the participants to reply with multiple answers. The following graph shows the common motifs within the responses.
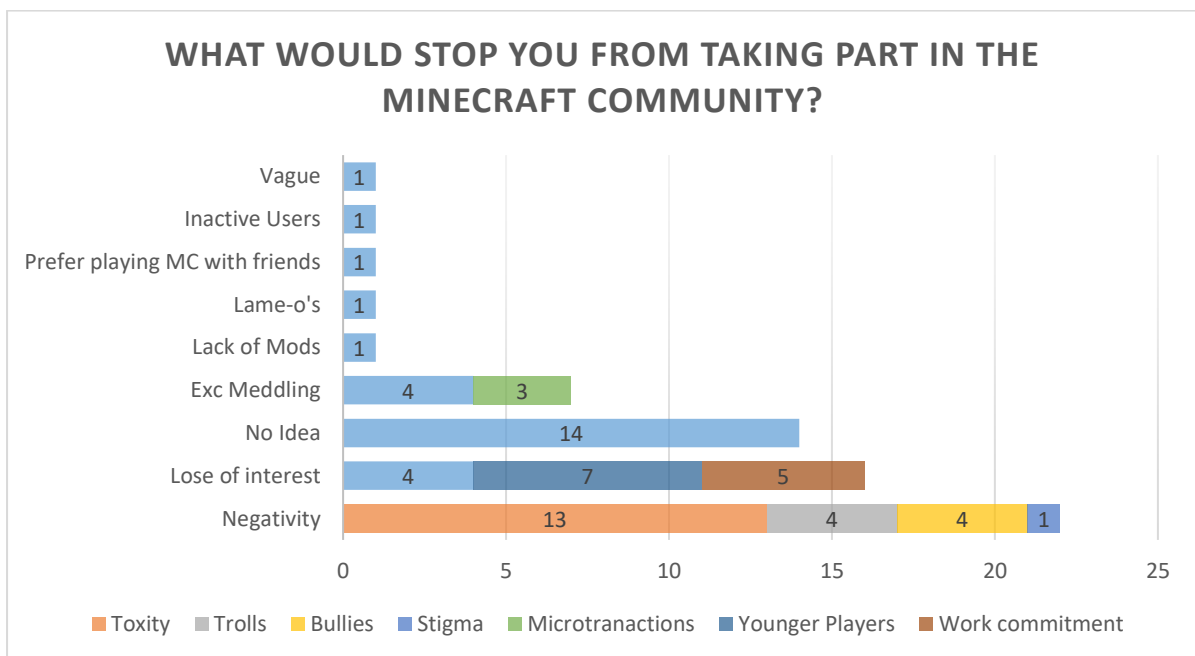

Figure 5: The reason for players to cease taking part in the Minecraft community.

In total, 57 participants answered this question, with 11 participants choosing to skip the question. As stated before, many of the participants' responses overlap, with some participants giving multiple answers.

The most common issue participants had with the *Minecraft* community, which could make them leave the community, was negative behaviour from other players (see figure 5), with 22 participants stating this as an issue. This can be split into four subgroups: 13 participants mentioned general toxicity as a reason for leaving the *Minecraft* community; four participants said they would stop taking part in the *Minecraft* community due to trolls; another four participants highlighted that bullying would make them leave the *Minecraft* community, and one participant posited stigma as a reason for leaving the *Minecraft* community. While the latter participant was not specific when discussing stigma, the concept of stigmatism appears in another participant's response – although for a different question. When asked for thoughts on why male gamers speak differently to female gamers (a question which will be covered in more detail in chapter four, section 5), one participant cited stigmatism towards female gamers as a reason. However, the participant who referred to stigma as a reason for leaving the *Minecraft* community identified as male. It is unlikely, then, that the participant was referring to gender issues as a reason for stigmatism.

The second most common issue identified as causing a person to leave the *Minecraft* community is losing interest in the game. 16 participants responded with this in their answers. Within this motif there are two subgroups seven participants said they lose interest in the game's community due to younger players joining the community; and five participants said work commitments are a reason for losing interest. 15 participants stated that they had no idea what would stop them from taking part in the *Minecraft* community.

Seven participants said executive meddling would be a reason for leaving the game's community. Executive meddling refers to when the heads of a media company interfere with the production of a movie or video game. These interferences are usually done to make the end product more commercially viable. However, as a result, executive meddling can affect the creator's original vision (Longridge, 2017; Anders, 2013; Masters, 2016).

Three participants that cited executive meddling also highlighted micro-transactions as an issue. With the controversy over loot-boxes within video games (Lum, 2018; Freedman, 2018; Webb, 2018), and the introduction of purchasable texture packs and skins (Brown, 2017),

further research is needed for the effects of micro-transactions within video games (see chapter five, section 1 for explanation on loot-boxes).

One participant stated a lack of mods would stop them from taking part in the *Minecraft* community. Another participant said they prefer not to take part in the *Minecraft* community. One participant said that "Lame-o's" would be the reason for leaving the *Minecraft* community. Furthermore, one participant stated that inactive members would stop them from taking part in the game's community. Finally, one participant gave a vague answer which was difficult to decipher.

However, some issues do arise when analysing the responses to this question. Although the question's aim was to learn about the players' interactions within the *Minecraft* community, a few participants seemed to have misunderstood the question. It is difficult to tell whether the participants thought they were answering a question around playing *Minecraft* itself, or if the question was about the community and not the game. In hindsight, this question should have been clearer in its explanation.

Participants were then asked how conflicts are resolved when they occur on a *Minecraft* server. This was an open question. Participants gave multiple answers, many of which overlapped.

Figure 6: How conflict is resolved.
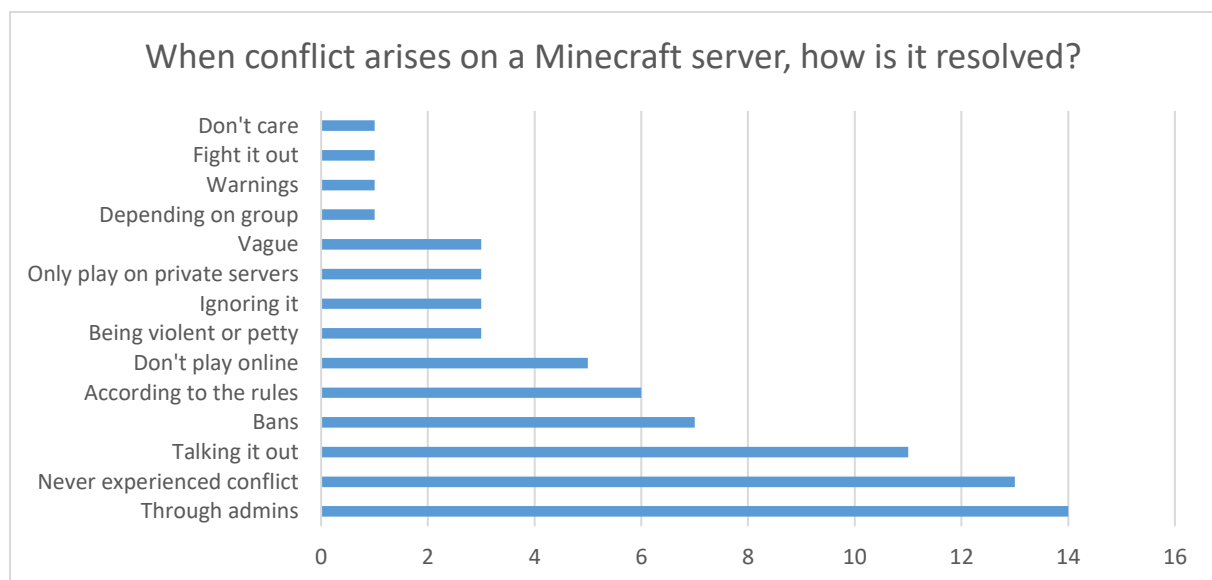
The results show that the largest percentage of players prefer to let administrators or moderators resolve conflicts on a *Minecraft* server (see figure 6), with 14 participants mentioning "admins" in their responses. Although difficult to determine, the responses reveal that quite a few *Minecraft* players prefer to avoid conflict. Several participants stated how they would get in

contact directly with the server's admins. However, the results suggest that people prefer to allow other players solve an issue without them having to get involved, as the following participants explain:

> "Most often by a moderator or someone who has authority. That person tries to calm the situation, hear from the parties involved and investigate the problem. Ultimately in an effort to find a solution."

> "If it cannot be resolved through communication between the parties, it gets reported to the Mod or Admin who utilise server logs to determine the truth of the matter and ban, restrict, discipline or inform the guilty/incorrect party."

However, a large percentage of participants had not experienced conflict on a *Minecraft* server before, with 13 participants mentioning this in their responses. Many of the participants stated that they preferred to play in smaller close-knit groups. Other participants – a total of five - mentioned that they never play *Minecraft* online.

The third most common response came from participants who reported that they prefer to resolve conflict on a *Minecraft* by "talking it out". 11 participants said that they prefer to resolve conflict by discussing the issue with other players. This suggests that *Minecraft* players are both willing to see the opposing side's point of view and go on to negotiate. Even when a server's administrator gets involved, *Minecraft* players prefer to solve the matter though talking the matter through, as exemplified by participant comments:

> "Ideally through communication, in game or through a voice chat or forum, with the aid of staff members."

> "Listen to both sides and compromise."

Seven participants pointed out that conflicts are resolved through banning players. This goes hand-in-hand with the next most common response, with six participants saying that they resolve conflict via the server's rules. The comments concerning bans and following rules overlap at times, with some of the participants referring to both in their responses. The results suggest that *Minecraft* players do not see anything wrong with banning players that cause trouble as long as it is within the rules. This links back to the concerns expressed about favouritism, and how much power an administrator can have on a server, as evident in participant comments:

"Admin warn people, then kick the offenders and slow learners off the server."

"Often this is due to a player breaking the server rules, which results in them getting banned."

Three participants mentioned that they prefer resorting to violent or petty means to resolve conflict. Another three participants highlighted how ignoring conflict seemed to be their best solution. A small proportion of participants stated that they only play on private servers, with three participants mentioning this in their comments. One participant said it all depended on the group they were currently in, while another participant admitted that they preferred to 'fight it out' to resolve conflict. Finally, one participant stated that they simply did not care.

4.4. Roleplaying in *Minecraft*

Participants were then asked if they had ever taken part in roleplaying in *Minecraft*. This was a simple yes or no question.
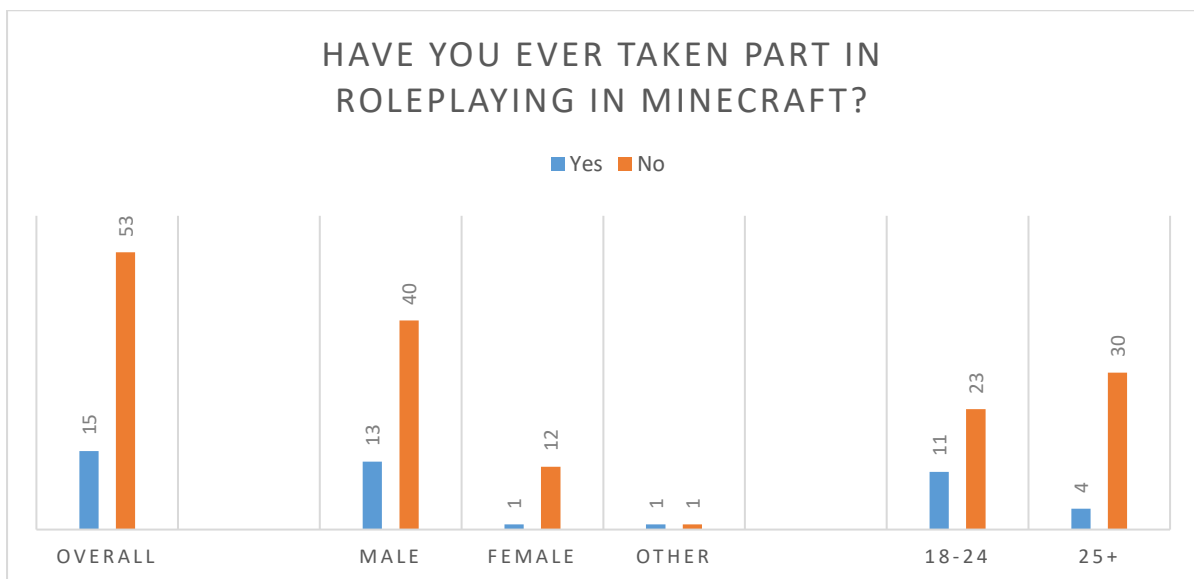
Figure 7: Statistics on roleplaying.

The results show that a majority of participants indicated that they do not take part in roleplaying in *Minecraft* (see figure 7). Only 15 participants said they roleplay in *Minecraft*, while 53 participants said they never roleplay in *Minecraft*. All participants answered the question. For the male participants, the results are similar to those overall. 13 male participants said they take part in *Minecraft* roleplaying, while 40 male participants said they do not take part in *Minecraft* roleplaying. In contrast, almost all the female participants stated they never take part in roleplaying in *Minecraft*. Only one female participant said they do roleplay in

Minecraft, while 12 female participants said they never roleplay in *Minecraft*. This suggests that it is more likely for a male *Minecraft* player to roleplay than a female player.

Comparisons between the 18-24 and 25+ age groups also reveal a significant contrast between those that take part in roleplaying, and those that do not. Although both age groups stated they prefer not to take part in roleplaying, the data suggest that younger players are more likely to take part in roleplaying. For the 18-24 age group, 11 participants said they take part in roleplaying in *Minecraft*, and 23 participants said they do not take part in roleplaying in *Minecraft*. In contrast, only four participants stated they take part in roleplaying in *Minecraft*, while 30 participants said they never take part in roleplaying in *Minecraft*. Similar to how players prefer to play, the survey did not interview people below the ages of 17. Because of this, it is difficult to tell what the trend would be for younger gamers. The data suggest those under 17 are even more likely to roleplay than the 18-24 group. However, this is speculation, and further research is needed to prove this prediction. Therefore, given the data revealed differences between the younger and older age groups, then it would be interesting for future research to investigate how younger gamers under 18 roleplay.

When asked why they took part in roleplaying, participants gave varying answers. Only a few of the responses overlapped, with most participants giving unique responses. The most common response from participants is that they took part in roleplaying for enjoyment reasons, simply stating that "it's fun". Five participants mentioned in their responses the fun-factor for roleplaying. The other motifs seen in the responses are 'immersion' and 'story-driven elements, with two participants mentioning both these points respectively in their responses. In terms of immersion, the two participants who mentioned this in their responses stated roleplaying allows the player to see things from another person's perspective, and this gives the game meaning:

> "Further immersion into the experience. Gives some sort of on the fly RPG meaning to the block world my character lives in."

> "It can be fun to put yourself in someone else's shoes."

As for the story-driven element with roleplaying, the two participants that referred to this said that their roleplaying experience involved playing story-driven maps. Other comments made by the participant who said they took part in roleplaying in *Minecraft* include a point about the game's limitless potential, allowing for interesting interactions between players, creating challenges for the player with the introductions of limitation, and to keep the game fresh.

As for why players choose not to take part in roleplaying, an overwhelming majority of participants stated they were not interested in roleplaying, with 45 of the participants mentioning this point in their responses. The comments concerning the lack of interest in roleplay range from considering it "boring" or "unappealing", to "lame" and "immature". The data suggest players find the concept of roleplaying unrealistic within the *Minecraft* setting, or that roleplaying is perceived as something only "kids" take part in. One participant even noted how they play video games to escape having to "play a role":

> "We roleplay enough in this slave life to be bothered with it in the escapes of such!"

Of the participants who said they were not interested in roleplaying in *Minecraft*, four highlighted how they prefer the building element of *Minecraft* and that roleplaying would distract from that, with one of those participants saying:

> "I do not like role playing, and I spend most of my time experimenting with different building styles."

Another motif seen in the results relates to the issue of a lack of servers. Four participants mentioned that they were not able to take part in roleplaying due to the difficulty of finding a server dedicated to roleplaying or other players willing to take part in roleplay. Three participants noted that there are better media for roleplaying. Although these participants did take part in roleplaying, none of them used *Minecraft* for roleplaying, preferring to use non-video game media such as Dungeons and Dragons. This point could also relate to another participant's comment, which pointed out that *Minecraft* is restrictive. Yet another participant mentioned how *Minecraft* lacks the immersion for roleplay. Two participants said they lacked time to take part in roleplaying, which does not rule out the possibility that they might otherwise be interested. One participant stated they prefer to make roleplaying maps for others instead of taking part in roleplay.

4.5. 'Sayings' within *Minecraft*

Participants were asked whether they used 'sayings' while playing *Minecraft*. This was a simple yes or no answer.
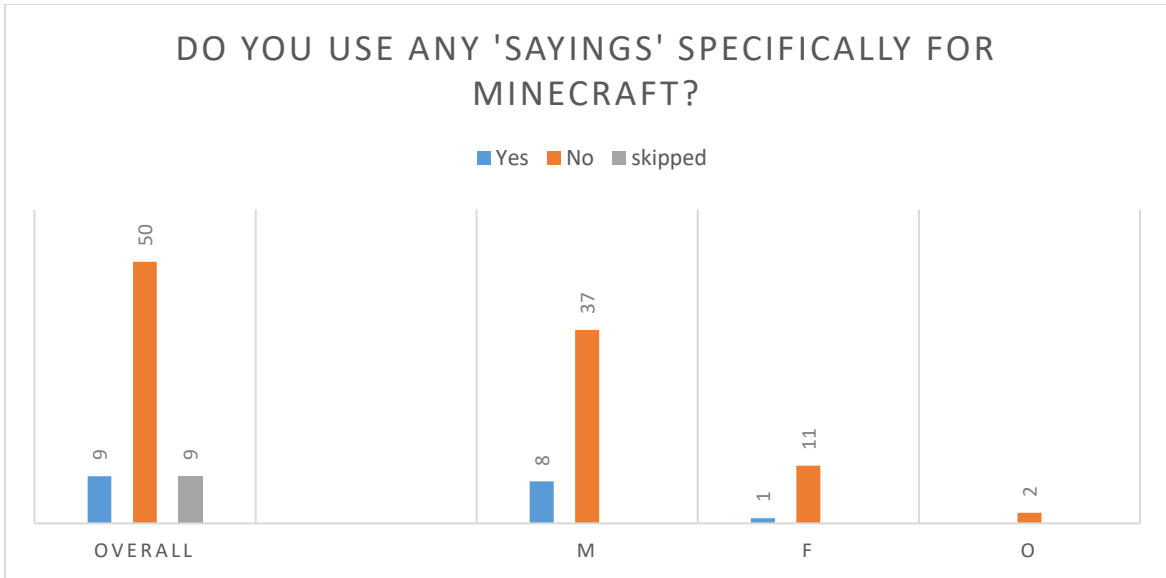
Figure 8: 'Sayings' in Minecraft (according to gender).

The findings show that a majority of players claimed that they do not use 'sayings' while playing *Minecraft* (see figure 8). 50 participants said they did not use 'sayings' while playing and only nine participants said they do use 'sayings'. Another nine responders skipped this question. Around a fifth of male respondents said they use 'sayings', with eight participants answering 'yes', while 37 answered 'no'. A tenth of female participants said they used 'sayings' while playing *Minecraft*, with only one responder answering 'yes', and 11 answering 'no'.

Figure 9: 'Sayings' in Minecraft (according to age).

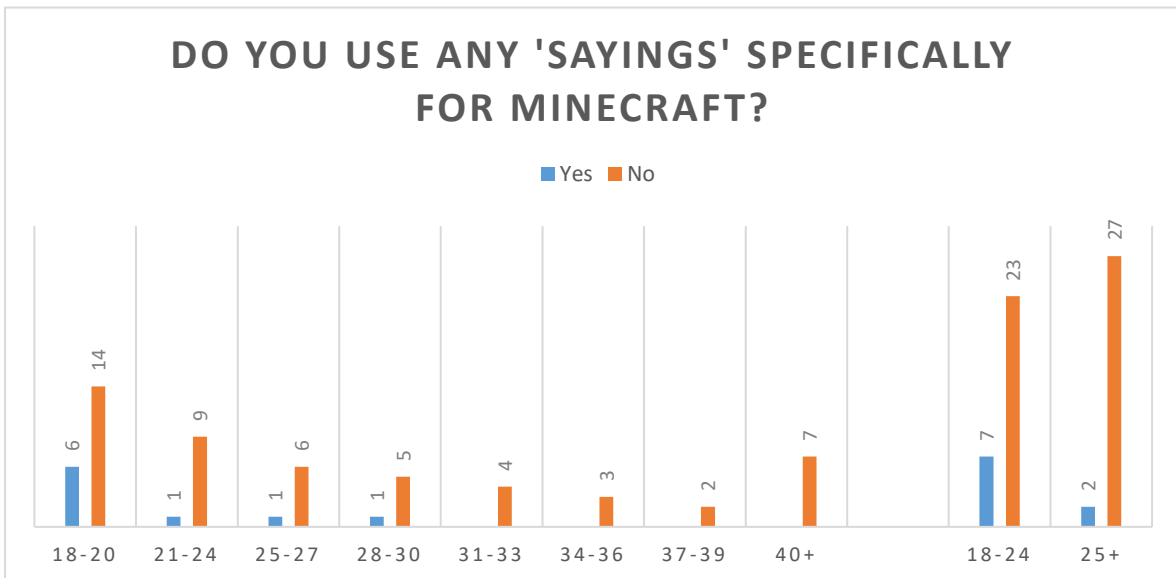It should be noted there was confusion over the meaning behind 'sayings'. The original intended meaning of 'sayings' was game-specific words. However, on one of the Reddit pages where the online survey was advertised, one of the participants who took part in the survey asked for clarification on the term 'saying' as they found it confusing. Although the term 'saying' draws on *Minecraft* terminology itself and how it is used when playing *Minecraft*, the final question in the survey did not address this. Because of this limitation, future research should consider the potential for confusion between gaming language and everyday language when designing survey questions.

Participants who answered 'yes' to the previous question were then asked to give examples of the 'saying' used while playing *Minecraft*. This was an open question, allowing the participant to give multiple answers. All nine of the participants who said they used 'sayings' specifically for *Minecraft* answered the question. Although none of the participants' answers overlapped, common, yet at times vague themes were noticed. Two participants explained what the 'saying' they used meant.

The 'sayings' the participants specified can be divided into five categories: items, gameplay, vague, greetings, and insults. Two of the 'sayings' mentioned by participants involved in-game objects, such as cobblestone and gunpowder. When mentioned outside the context of *Minecraft*, these 'sayings' might not mean anything, but within *Minecraft* context gives them meaning. Five participants referred to gameplay elements within their comments. This ranges from quite generic terms that are used throughout the gaming world, such as "PVP" and "PVE", to more specific terms dedicated to *Minecraft*, such as "shit house" and "pillar-jump". One gameplay-focused 'saying' involves advice and was highlighted by one participant - "Never dig straight down"[13]. One participant mentioned how they would greet players differently depending on the server. Another participant's 'saying' could be considered an insult, with the participant calling new players 'noobs'[14].

To gauge whether gender has an effect on the way gamers talk, participants were then asked whether they think male gamers speak differently compared to female gamers. This was a simple yes or no answer.

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[13] "Never dig straight down" refers to the fact *Minecraft* has underground lava pools, which could kill a player if they dig straight down to bedrock.
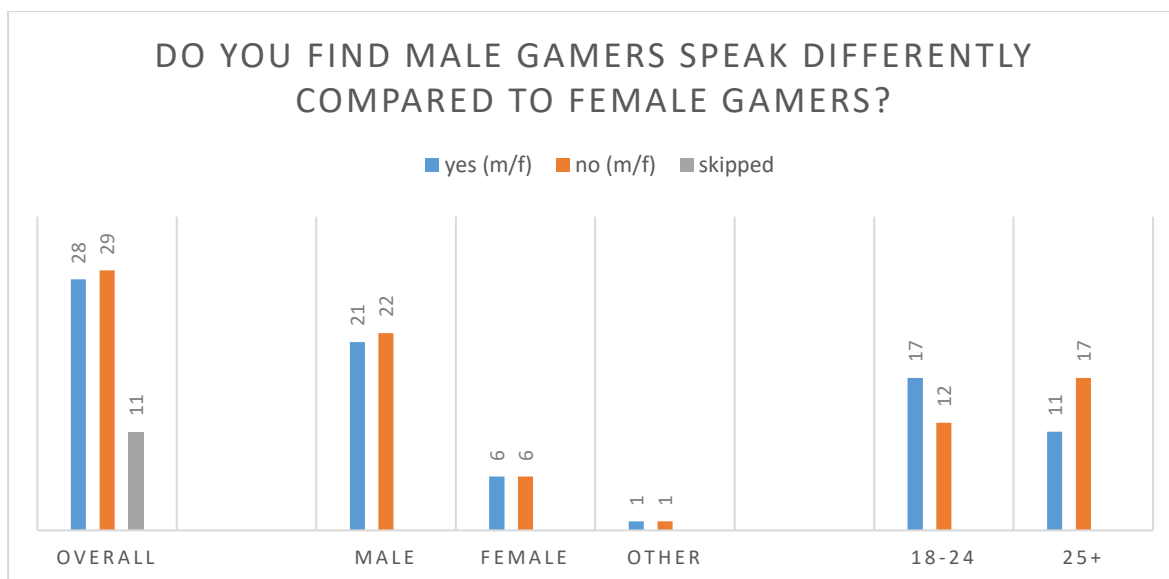[14] "Noob" is a slang-term for a newcomer.

Figure 10: Speech and gender in Minecraft.

Of all the questions asked in the online survey, this one appears to be the most controversial. The participants' answers were split evenly (see figure 10), with 28 respondents saying 'yes', and 29 saying 'no'. 11 participants skipped the question. There is no difference between male and female respondents, with both groups being divided on the topic. In contrast, there is a slight difference between the 18-24 and 25+ age groups. By a small margin, more participants within the 18-24 group believed male gamers talk differently compared to female gamers, with 17 answering 'yes', and 12 answering 'no'. On the other hand, slightly more participants from the 25+ group believed male gamers do not talk differently compared to female gamers, with 11 answering 'yes', and 17 answering 'no'.

While the data remains inconclusive in terms of gendered responses to the question of gendered talk, it does suggest that younger gamers view this topic differently compared to older gamers. It should be noted that, much like the 'sayings' question, some participants may have misunderstood the question. When asked to explain their answers, a few of the respondents said they thought the question was around the physical pitch of a person's voice, instead of the content of the speech. This was possibly due to the survey question's poor wording. A better wording of the question should have focused on the informal notion of 'talk' instead of 'speak'.

When asked why they thought male gamers talk differently compared to female gamers, the 27 participants who answered this question said male and female gamers talked differently due to different group dynamics. Many participants mentioned how male gamers were more aggressive, and more willing to engage in competitive behaviour. In contrast, participants said

female gamers are less likely to engage in conflict, instead focusing more on the game itself. These views are exemplified in the following responses:

> "Males generally want to voice their opinion whenever they can, whereas female gamers tend to talk only about things that are necessary to the gameplay. This is probably due to males having personalities that lean towards competition with others, and females tend to stay away from conflicts that don't directly involve them."

> "There's more of a sense of competition and brotherhood among male gamers and they're also more verbal with their frustrations."

> "Male gamers tend to get more into verbally taking out frustration when something isn't going right in a game … Male gamers swear a lot in more of an offensive way, I've noticed."

A few participants mentioned how male gamers tended to be ruder. Male gamers are perceived as more likely to swear compared to female gamers, as indicated by the participants quoted above, while female gamers are considered to be more polite and, less definitively expressed, as more mature:

> "Occasionally they appear to be more immature, or even vulgar, but I think it is more dependent on age, life experiences and education than gender."

> "Girls tend to be more helpful and non-judgemental."

As indicated by one participant in the excerpt above, it is difficult to tell whether such qualities as politeness and maturity have to do with the gamer's gender and/or other factors such as age and education.

Another motif seen in the responses is that male and female gamers interpret the world differently. The excerpts below from two participants suggest that there is a sense in which male and female gamers have different perspectives not only on how interactions should proceed, but also on the very nature of humour:

> "The group dynamics between men and women are different. Things are seen in different light and interpreted in vastly different ways."

> "They [male gamers] do tend to have more jokes that can offend. Females (unless they hang around guy gamers) don't usually get those jokes."

Finally, some participants brought up how female gamers have higher pitched voices compared to the lower male voice pitches. These answers, as mentioned above, are likely to have been made because of confusion over the meaning of the word 'speak' in the question. Although the question was designed to focus on the language aspect, vocal range does seem to play a part in how someone is perceived. Just because someone has a high pitch voice does not automatically mean they are female. Therefore, voice pitch is not a factor that can automatically determine a person's gender.

The participants who said that male and female gamers do not speak differently were asked why they answered the question that way. 29 participants chose to answer the question. A common theme seen in their responses is that participants felt they did not interact enough with gamers of the opposite gender for them to accurately answer the question, with a few of the participants saying:

> "I have not experienced this, as I rarely interact with female players other than those within my own household. I have no meaningful frame of reference."

> "Most *Minecraft* players I know aren't females, though the few interactions I had with the ladies I never made a point to think about different behaviour between genders."

Furthermore, some participants mentioned how it is difficult to tell the gender of another player, unless voice chat is on, with one participant saying:

> "I think a lot of people see each other as genderless regardless of the avatar."

Either the participants said that they did not notice gender, or did not have experience on the question's topic.

Even when participants said they interacted with the opposite gender, most of the responses expressed the feeling that male and female gamers use the same type of language. According to many of the participants, gamers speak a universal language irrespective of the gender. One participant said they felt gender distinctions were barely noticeable in the gaming world:

> "Gamers tend to use very similar language overall. Sometimes I don't know the gender unless they say."

One participant suggested that life experience, rather than gender, could have a bigger influence on how a person talks. As in a previously presented excerpt, one of the participants who felt

that male and female gamers spoke differently said they thought males were more 'vulgar' and 'immature'. But this view was qualified by the proposal that different ways of speaking could be due to age, life experiences and education as opposed to gender.

It should be noted that one participant took offense to the question. Pointing out how badly written the question was, the participant queried what the question actually meant. In hindsight, this question could have been worded better.

Participants were then asked if they use any *Minecraft* terminology when not playing video games. This was an open question, although many of the participants treated it as a yes or no question. Of the 54 participants who chose to answer the question, the overwhelming majority said that they do not use any *Minecraft* terminology outside of playing the game. The nine participants who do use *Minecraft* terminology when not playing the game gave short and concise answers. Two of those participants gave vague answers, while the other seven participant responses varied, none of them overlapped. One participant said they use the word diamonds in general conversation, referring to a rare resource found in the game which allows players to craft the most powerful items in *Minecraft*. Another participant said they use griefing to describe something, although they admitted the word has become common outside of video gaming. One participant jokingly said "Sssssss", which, for gamers, obviously refers to the noise creepers in *Minecraft* make. Another participant admitted to calling people Steve, the name of the default playable character in *Minecraft*. One participant simply answered "yes", without clarifying further. Two participants said they used "chunks" and "AFK" respectively, terminology which was difficult to determine whether it was related to *Minecraft*. Overall, the result shows *Minecraft* terminology is rarely used outside of playing the game, suggesting there is a divide between the language used in *Minecraft* compared to out of *Minecraft*.

4.6. Player identity

Participants were asked to give a score for their *Minecraft* avatar, with the number 0 meaning the person found their avatar similar to their perceived real self, and 100 meaning the person found their avatar dissimilar to their real self. The participant scores were tallied, and an average was given to each gender and age group.
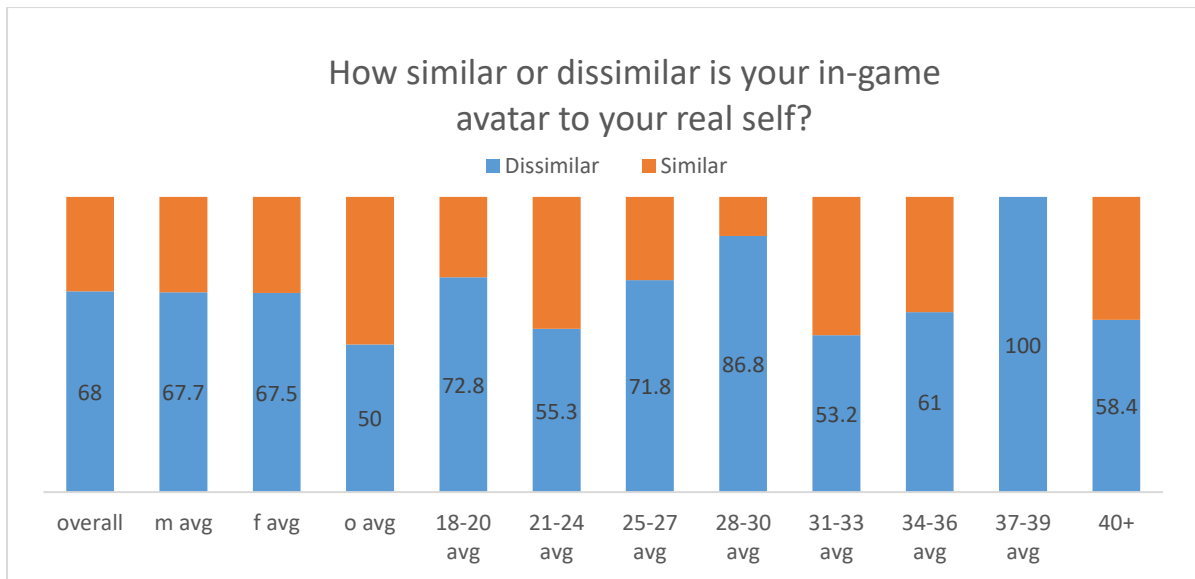
Figure 11: Player identification with in-game avatar.

The findings suggest a large percentage of *Minecraft* players perceived their in-game avatar dissimilar to their real-life counterpart (see figure 11). The overall average score is 68, with minimal difference between the male and female average scores. The male average score is 67.7, while the female average is slightly lower at 67.5.

A common theme among the responses is that participants highlighted that they do things in *Minecraft that* they would never do in real life. While it might not be strictly perceived as role-playing by the participants, video games serve as an outlet for people to escape their ordinary life. Participants discussed how they build structures within *Minecraft*, a task seemingly impossible except for a select few in the offline world:

> "I build tons of stuff in *Minecraft* just for the sake of it, but in real life [sic] I don't build many things."

Because *Minecraft* does not reflect the real world, some participants brought up the absurdities within the game. Certain gameplay mechanics, such as creating a nether portal, is not something anyone does in their real life. Yet in *Minecraft* it is seen as normal:

> "Who beats rocks into nuclear reactors?"

> "I have never built anything. I don't dig holes, or explore caves, or pretty much anything I do in *Minecraft*."

4.7. Griefing

Participants were asked whether they had ever taken part in griefing. As mentioned in the literature review, 'griefing' is the intentional harassment of other players through destructive play-styles. The question was a simple yes or no.
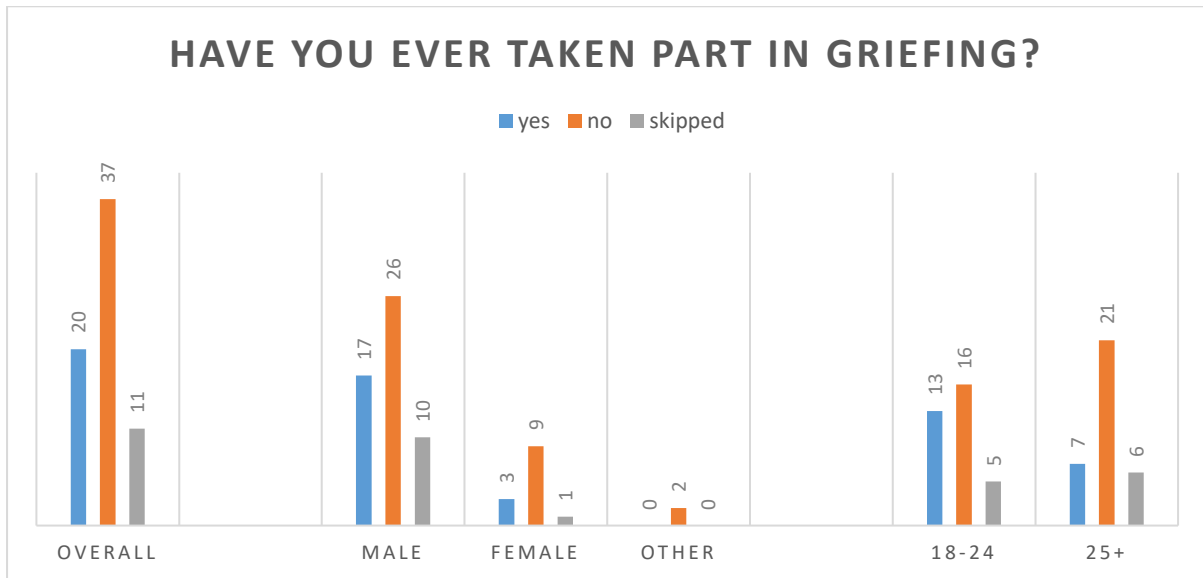

Figure 12: Statistics on griefing.

A quick glance at the graph above shows that a majority of players do not take part in griefing (see figure 12); 37 participants answered 'no' to the question. It should be noted that griefing within the gaming community, especially with *Minecraft*, is perceived as being detestable and antisocial (Beale et al, 2016). Despite the negative connotations associated with griefing, 29.4% of participants admitted to taking part in griefing, with 20 participants answering 'yes' to the question.

When comparing male and female participant responses, a significant difference can be seen. For the male participants, 17 respondents admitted to having taken part in griefing, while 26 participants said they have never done so. Ten male participants chose to skip the question. Percentage-wise, 32% of the male participants answered 'yes', while 49% said 'no'. In contrast, only three female participants said that they had griefed in *Minecraft*, while nine female participants said they had never taken part in griefing. One female participant chose not to answer the question. In total, 23% of female participants answered 'yes', while 69.2% said 'no'. (The percentages for males and females also take into account those that chose to skip the question). The data suggest that griefers are mainly male gamers; only a small percentage of female gamers have ever griefed.

The gender of the player is not the only factor that determines whether a gamer is more likely to take part in griefing. When it comes to the 18-24 age category, 13 participants said they had taken part in griefing, while 16 respondents said they had not. Five participants chose to skip the question. In total, for the 18-24 group, 38.2% answered 'yes' while 47.1% said 'no'. In contrast, for the 25+ category, seven participants said they had taken part in griefing, while 21 participants said they had not. Six participants chose not to answer the question. In total, for the 25+ category, only 20.6% answered 'yes' while a much larger 61.8% said 'no'. (The percentages for male and female participants also take into account those that chose to skip the question). Similar to the comparison between genders, the data reveals that griefers are mainly younger players.

However, there are some limitations to making definitive conclusions regarding which categories of people have taken part in the most griefing. Four participants emphasised that they used to grief but no longer do so. The way the question was worded most likely had an effect on how the participants answered the question. . If the question had asked if they currently take part in griefing, the participant may have given a different answer. Interestingly however, every participant who said they were former griefers was in the 18-20 age category. This could indicate that they were even younger, possibly even under 18, when they griefed. This, together with their statements that they no longer griefed, could support the finding that griefing is more common amongst young players.

Furthermore, it should be noted that a significant proportion of participants chose to skip the question, despite the participants remaining anonymous. Because griefing is frowned upon (Beale et al, 2016), this may have caused some participants to choose not to answer the question. However, it is difficult to determine why the participants chose to skip the question. Another possibility is that, given the griefing section of the survey appeared at the end, participants simply may have lost interest or run out of time and thus not completed the survey.

The participants that admitted to having once griefed were then asked why they took part in griefing. Because of this, not all participants saw this question. This was an open ended question.
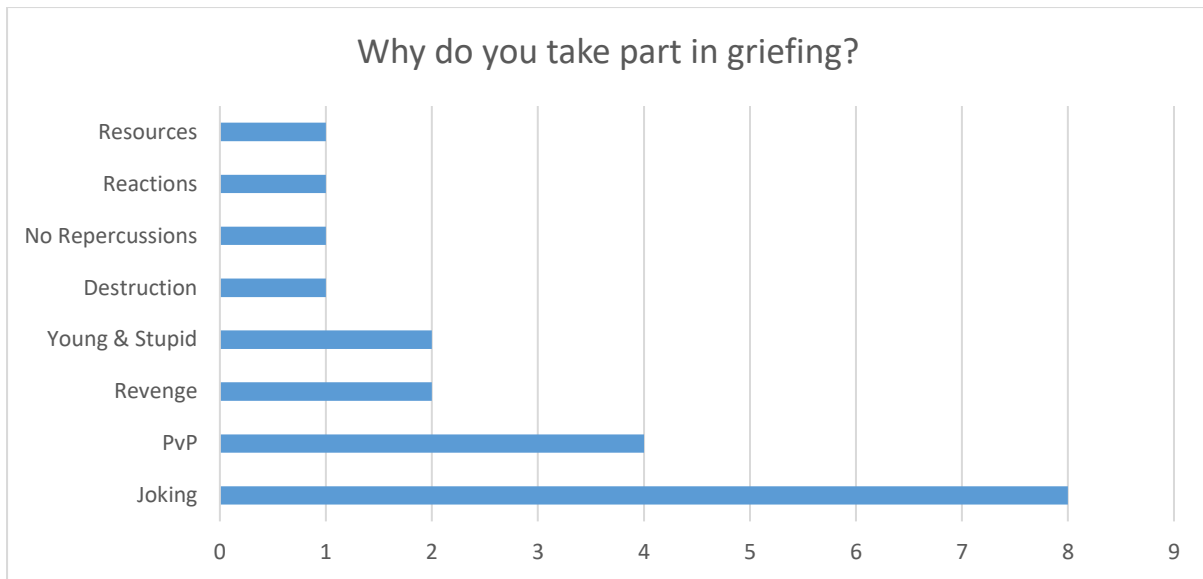
Figure 13: Reason for taking part in griefing.

The most common response of the participants was that their griefing was simply them joking around (see figure 13). Eight participants mentioned how griefing could be seen as friendly banter between friends. One participant even pointed out that they make every effort to revert the world back to its previously save state, while another implied sensitivity to other players in the process of griefing:

> "Grab-ass is fun, provided the world can be reverted or it is possible to recover from any damage done. When I participate in griefing, I either revert the world myself (I usually grief in my own worlds), else prior to doing so I confirm that the world can be reverted, else I assist directly in recovery efforts."

> "I will grief as comedic relief. I do not beat a dead horse though, and I'll move on if I sense that the player is too serious about the game."

This could be seen as a way for the participant to deflect the negative components of griefing, especially if it involves cyberbullying.

Four participants made it clear that they how they only grief on dedicated servers where griefing is expected. These servers can be defined as PVP (player versus player), where players battle each other on dedicated maps. None of the participants specified what griefing activities these PVP servers involve, besides destroying the enemy's base:

> "In some PVP servers, it is the entire goal. Find their base and grief it, steal."

A small proportion, only two participants, admitted that they take part in griefing for revenge. One of the participants explained how they had been griefed by another player, and to get back at them the participant griefed in return. The other participant stated they would only grief players who they deemed rude or who had been harassing them.

Two participants revealed that they griefed because, at the time, they "young and stupid". One participant said they griefed to gain resources. Another participant said they griefed to gain reactions from a victim. While only one participant gave this answer, it fits into the current literature where griefers are solely reaction-seekers. One participant asserted that griefing is simply mindless destruction, without any sense of accomplishment. This response fits into the narrative that griefers simply want to see the world burn. Finally, one participant observed how there are no repercussions for griefing. This is an interesting point, especially concerning the anonymous nature of the internet. Scholars have argued for some time anonymity causes people to behave differently online compared to the off-line or 'real' world (Turkle, 1995; 1999; Midha & Nandedkar, 2012).

The participants who said that they had never griefed were asked what they do to cope or deal with disruptive players. This was an open question. Of the 37 participants who said that they have never taken part in griefing before, 36 of them answered this question.
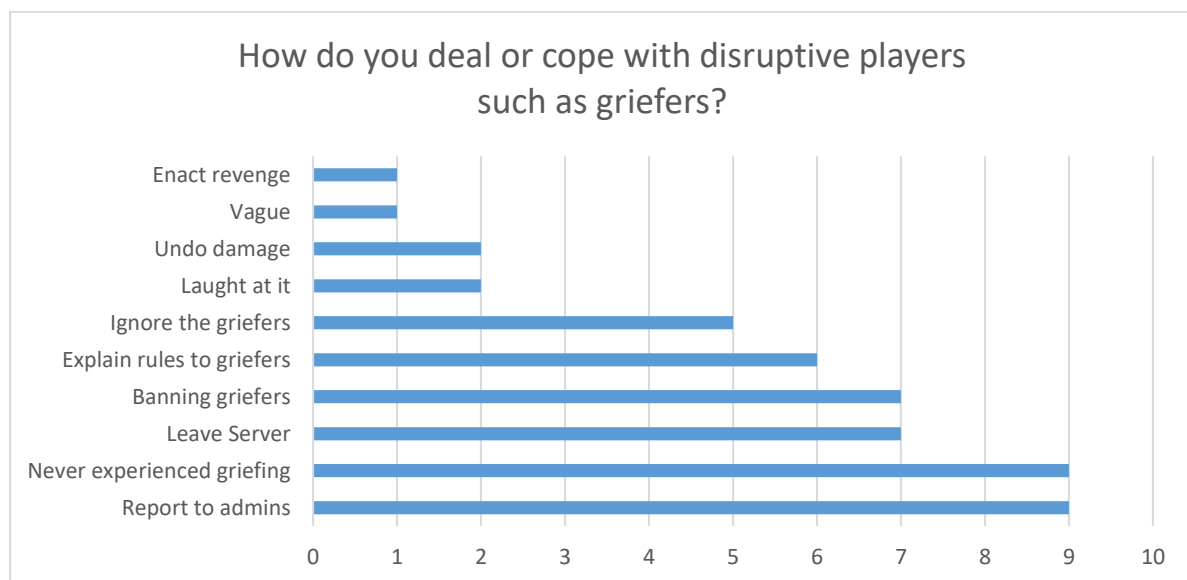

Figure 14: How players deal or cope with griefers.

The results reveal that a large percentage of non-griefers in *Minecraft* have never experienced griefing, with nine participants noting this in their responses (see figure 14). These numbers, then, tell the story that three-quarters of non-griefers experience griefing while playing

Minecraft, supporting statements made by Foo and Koivisto (2004) that griefing affects a large proportion of gamers. It should be noted again here that only non-griefers answered this question. Observing the responses made by participants who admitted to griefing, there is evidence that they also have been victims of griefing. In hindsight, this question about dealing with disruptive players should have been directed to all participants; that is, the survey should have also asked participants who griefed whether they had been griefing victims.

An equal amount of participants stated that they dealt with griefers by reporting them to administrators as they did for reporting them to moderators, with nine participant responses for each category. Similar to the results concerning conflict in *Minecraft*, a participant saying that they contact 'admins' to resolve the issue of griefing could suggest that the player prefers to avoid conflict:

> "Report them so that staff of the server can take appropriate action."

However, it should be noted that unlike the conflict question, the participants replying to the griefer question said they directly contacted 'admins' instead of relying on the server's staff independently picking up on the griefers. This also suggests that gamers are willing to at least combat destructive behaviour if only by reporting it to moderators.

Another way to deal with griefers is to ban them, with seven participants stating this in their answers. This is usually done after a warning. It should be noted that four participants mentioned that they were admins on a server, with two of those participants using bans as a final solution. A few of the participants stated:

> "Swift and ruthless banhammer."

> "I am an administrator on a server, so dealing with disruptive players and griefers is a large part of my job. I usually try talking to the players causing issues, explain the rules of the server and try to resolve any issues they may have. In extreme cases I can mute or kick players or issue a warning or ban."

In contrast, seven participants stated they would leave a server if ever griefed. According to one participant, leaving a server can put an end to the griefing insofar as griefers quite simply need victims:

> "If it gets too unbearable then I'll usually just leave the area or server, since I find that griefers are hard to persuade to stop. I think it's best to just remove yourself from it. They can't grief if there's no-one around."

Another way to deal with griefers is to explain the server's rules to the player causing problems. Six participants mentioned that talking to the griefer culprits, by explaining how griefing is not allowed on their server, is the best way to combat them. Many of these participants asserted that banning should only be considered in the most extreme cases:

> "Depends on what you can do with them. Sometimes you can verbally make them think about what they've done, or ask why they've done it. This especially helps if you're a staff on the server and if the accused is a child."

However, it should be noted a few participants felt that it was impossible to negotiate with griefers.

Six participants proposed that ignoring the griefers was the best solution to combat their destructive behaviour. This is quite astute since the enjoyment of griefing comes from the reactions of others, especially the victims (Beale et al, 2016; Foo and Koivisto, 2004). Thus, a possible reason for ignoring griefers is that, in doing so, it would dampen any pleasure the griefer might get and, instead, might even discourage their behaviour.

In contrast, two participants said they preferred to laugh at the griefers. According to these participants, griefing is all "part of the game", and that players should not be bothered over some unwanted tinkering with worlds that can easily be reversed, and the original worlds restored. On that note, two participants claimed that the damage caused by griefers can easily be undone. This is similar to the comment made by the participant who admitted to griefing; by reverting a *Minecraft*'s world back to its previous save state then they are able to deflect the negative impact of griefing. Finally, one participant said they deal with griefers by enacting revenge, although the participant did not go into further detail. Yet again, this is similar to the reason participants gave for taking part in griefing, with a few participants stating that they griefed as a way to get revenge.

5. Discussion

This chapter will discuss the research findings, linking it to the literature review. The area this chapter will cover is *Minecraft*'s social aspect, how identity affects *Minecraft*, how players communicate with one another in *Minecraft*, and the affects griefing has on *Minecraft*.

5.1. The social aspect of *Minecraft*

The aim of this section of the online survey was to answer whether players are more likely to enjoy *Minecraft* if they played the game with other players. Furthermore, the online survey also aimed to determine what tools or methods participants used when learning how to play *Minecraft*. To answer these questions, the online survey asked the participants how they play *Minecraft*. The online survey also asked questions concerning how participants overcome issues within *Minecraft*, such as whenever there is conflict or arguments between players.

The research findings showed that the majority of participants stated that they prefer playing *Minecraft* with their friends, with 51.5% of participants choosing this answer. However, there was also a large proportion of participants who said they prefer playing *Minecraft* by themselves, with 41.1% of participants choosing this answer. Only a small fraction of participants said they play *Minecraft* with strangers, with only 7.4% of participants choosing this answer. Because more players prefer playing Minecraft with friends, as online survey reveals, this supports the argument that Minecraft is a social game (Jiang, 2008; Silva & Mousavidin, 2015; Cilauro, 2015; Overby & Jones, 2015). Although players have the opportunity to play *Minecraft* with people they do not know, most of the participants in this study said that they prefer playing with people they know. One of the five elements that make up participatory culture, as mentioned by Jenkins et al (2009), is an environment where people feel socially connected. Not only are gamers able to interact with one another in *Minecraft*, but the results also revealed that a large proportion of participants actively play *Minecraft* with other players, although these interactions is with people with existing social connections. This demonstrates how *Minecraft* has the capacity to foster an environment for participatory culture. Furthermore, the results revealed that younger participants prefer playing *Minecraft* with friends while older participants preferred playing a game by themselves. This highlights how *Minecraft*'s social element is directed towards younger players. Jenkins et al (2009) note that there is a sharp contrast in how younger and older generations of internet users perceive the online world, with younger users preferring to use the internet as a tool to socially connect with others, while older users see the internet as an information gathering tool. Because the research findings revealed how younger players prefer playing *Minecraft* with friends than solo, this

suggests participatory culture is predominantly something a younger person is more likely to engage in.

It should also be noted, however, that a large proportion of players did say that they played *Minecraft* as a solo experience, revealing a possible split within the *Minecraft* community where half of *Minecraft* players do not interact with other players. In hindsight, the survey should have asked why participants prefer playing *Minecraft* solo or with friends. Without this information, we can only assume the participants' reasoning. Perhaps the participants who choose the option of playing *Minecraft* by themselves do not have access to Wi-Fi while playing the game, such as on a train. Another limitation in the survey was that participants could not choose multiple answers when answering how they prefer playing *Minecraft*. It is possible some of the participants switch between modes, jumping back and forth between playing offline by themselves and online with friends. As such, it is difficult to tell whether participants are switching modes. However, it is possible to assume the participants have chosen the mode the engage in most often. Furthermore, if an option in the survey question for the participants to say they liked to play *Minecraft* both alone and with friends, the results may have been different.

Although *Minecraft* was described as a mini-MMO in the literature review, with multiple players interacting with one another on the same server, the research results cannot prove or disprove this notion due to a lack of evidence resulting from the online survey not asking more detailed questions regarding the social aspect. Only a small percentage of participants said they prefer playing *Minecraft* with strangers, with the majority of players preferring to play *Minecraft* with either friends or as a solo experience. As mentioned previously, the online survey did not ask participants whether they play *Minecraft* offline or online, nor were they given the ability to choose multiple options. While the research does not disprove the notion of *Minecraft* being a mini-MMO, the idea of *Minecraft* as a space where players from around world interact with one another might not be true. Duchenrsut and Moore (2005) cite three types of interactions within an MMO: interactions involve meeting new people; interactions discussing strategy; and general banter between players. Although discussing strategy and general banter certainly occur with friends playing *Minecraft*, the results also did not reveal how groups are formed. Perhaps the online survey could have included a question asking participants how they formed groups within *Minecraft*. Without responses containing that kind of explanation, the results cannot reveal whether players assign roles when forming a group (Silva & Mousavidlin, 2015; Ducheneaut & Moore, 2005; Voorhees, 2009).

Building on the theme of *Minecraft* being a social game, when participants were asked why they play *Minecraft*, a majority of players said they do so for the creative element. Many of the participants said that they liked building structures in *Minecraft* with friends – highlighting the collaborative element of the video game. This is in line with the current literature which represents *Minecraft* as a collaborative experience. Both Cilauro (2015) and Overby and Jones (2015) observe how *Minecraft* players are able to solve problems within the game by working together. Cilauro's study reveals how children are able to work together to build the 'perfect library' in *Minecraft* by sharing advice. Overby and Jones, on the other hand, observe how two sisters teach one another how to play *Minecraft*, while also sharing resources and trading items. Silva and Mousavidlin (2015) state that although players are able to solve problems through trial and error, the most successful method is by working together with other gamers. This might explain why many participants cited building structures with friends as a reason for playing *Minecraft*.

It should not be surprising, then, that the second most common reason for playing *Minecraft* was for the game's social element. A number of participants mentioned that they play *Minecraft* with friends and family. Again, this further highlights *Minecraft* as a social experience. A core component to participatory culture is that people should feel socially connected to other fans (Jenkins et al, 2009).

Observing the research findings from a broad perspective, it suffices to say players are more likely to enjoy *Minecraft* if they play the game with other players. It should be noted, however, *Minecraft* players prefer playing the game with people they know, such as friends and family, compared to playing *Minecraft* with strangers. Furthermore, players enjoy *Minecraft* not just for its social element but for other reasons, such as being able to build things in the video game, revealing a game's enjoyment value is more complex than originally assumed.

When asked why they use *Minecraft* forums, the majority of the participants said they use *Minecraft* forums as a means for seeking help in the game. *Minecraft* forums can, therefore, be seen an outlet for participatory culture, where newcomers to a gaming community can learn new skills from more knowledgeable members. The research findings revealed how players are able to work together to solve in-game problems by collaborating and generating new knowledge through discussions, which corroborates Jenkins et al (2009).

The other reasons for using *Minecraft* forums include looking for mods and finding inspiration for new building ideas. Both examples highlight *Minecraft*'s contribution to participatory

culture, with each example reflecting one of the five elements of participatory culture. According to Jenkins et al (2009), two of the five elements of participatory culture are: an informal mentoring system where knowledge is passed from one member to another; and an environment where a person's contribution is acknowledged. By sharing mod-creations and building ideas on *Minecraft* forums, players are able to gain feedback from their creations while inspiring other players to create similar constructions. Furthermore, because other players are consuming content created by other *Minecraft* players, those that create the mod or build structures in *Minecraft* are being acknowledged by the *Minecraft* community. Observing it from this perspective, these two elements of participatory culture create a loop, reinforcing *Minecraft*'s prosumer nature.

However, a large proportion of participants said they do not use *Minecraft* forums. The results, however, did not provide the information to explain why participants do not use them. One explanation for why a player does not use forums is because they lack the knowledge to use new media. Jenkins et al (2009) propose that a common barrier for people to engage in participatory culture is the participation gap. Similar to the digital divide, the the participation gap arises from a lack of access to the internet. The authors argue that wealth gaps and lack of quality internet access can have a detrimental effect on a person's knowledge in using new media. However, this is not a sufficient explanation for why this study's participants refused to use forums since a participant needed internet access to take part in the survey in the first place. Another explanation is that participatory culture is not compulsory. Jenkins et al (2009) elaborate on this: "Not every member must contribute, but all must believe they are free to contribute when ready, and that what they contribute will be appropriately valued" (p.7). The authors explain how different people have different levels of commitment to participatory culture, with some delving deeper than others. Whatever is the case, future research could examine why a large percentage of *Minecraft* players refuse to use *Minecraft* forums and whether this is linked to the participation gap.

The research revealed that *Minecraft* forums were not the only way for participants to access help with the video game. When participants were asked to identify where they go for help with *Minecraft*, a majority of participants said they use wikis as a source of help. Wikis are online encyclopaedias that are open to anyone to use and edit and are governed by a community. Although the topics covered in a wiki can vary, with Wikipedia dealing with a broad range of topics, some wikis are devoted to a specific topic, such as the *Minecraft* wiki. Wikis are popular because they allow people to express their opinions while encountering, and

engaging with people with opposing views. By allowing anyone to contribute, wikis become a form of collaborative learning, with knowledge becoming democratised (Sharp & Whaley, 2018; Arazy & Gellatly, 2013). Wikis are, therefore, linked to participatory culture since they enable all members of a society to engage in the collection of knowledge through group problem-solving (Jenkins et al, 2009).

Similar to those that cited wikis as a source of help, roughly the same number of participants said they had discussions with other players whenever they had difficulties playing *Minecraft*. However, apart from one participant who said they discussed issues in *Minecraft* with server moderators, none of the other responses indicated whether these discussions were occurring in *Minecraft*, or in any other setting, such as on a forum or in everyday life. Future research should look into how in-game interactions foster mentorship relations, as described in the five elements that contribute towards participatory culture (Jenkins et al, 2009).

It should be noted none of the participants cited using *Minecraft* forums. The reason why participants did not cite forums as a source for help was due to the way the question was worded.

The research also revealed how online video sharing websites are a major source for seeking help, with YouTube being the most popular. This should not come as a surprise since it can be argued that *Minecraft*'s rise in popularity is linked to YouTube. According to YouTuber Matthew Patrick (2017), YouTube's algorithm promotes long-form videos, such as Let's Plays where a person records their gameplay session. Because *Minecraft* videos are quick to make – the video's creator only needs a capture device – this has allowed the video game to dominate YouTube. Joseph (2015) notes how *Minecraft* videos created by fans are more popular on YouTube than videos created by the developers and publishers themselves. Instead of watching trailers and professionally-made guides, fans prefer to watch walkthroughs created by other fans. Unlike the professionally-made content, fan-made YouTube videos take a freeform approach, with the video-creator improvising based on a loose plotline surrounding *Minecraft* (Goldberg & Larsson, 2013).

Because YouTube is cited by this research's participants as the most popular video sharing website, it is important to consider the website's dominance and its effect on the gaming community. An issue that has affected many YouTube channels is a controversy known as 'The Adpocalypse'. Through YouTuber's ad-revenue scheme, content creators receive a proportion of the revenue made from the advertisement appearing at the beginning of any YouTube video.

However, because of 'The Adpocalypses', YouTubers are finding the revenue made from ads is decreasing dramatically, with some video creators making zero profits. The decrease in advertisement revenue is caused by YouTube's 'ad-friendly' policy, where videos considered not-friendly to advertisers are demonetised. However, the method YouTube uses to determine whether a video is or is not 'ad-friendly' has been criticised. The video sharing website uses an algorithm to filter through the videos, causing many videos to be flagged by accident. YouTube implement the 'ad-friendly' policy after advertisers complained that their adverts were appearing before controversial videos, such as neo-Nazi content. Unlike traditional media, where the advertiser knows exactly what content their advertisements will appear alongside, YouTube sells ad-spaces according to categories. For example, if an advertiser is targeting gamers, they can buy ad-spaces for the gaming category. However, advertisers do not know exactly what video their advertisement appear alongside (Sawyer, 2017). Because YouTube is inconsistent in what they deem violent or controversial, non-violent gaming channels are also being affected. Words in video titles, such as 'kill-streaks' and 'guns', are being flagged by YouTube's automated algorithm (Tassi, 2017). As a result of 'The Adpocalypses', many video creators are moving to other websites, such as Twitch and Patreon. Furthermore, a number of YouTubers are making direct deals with advertisers (Sawyer, 2017; Tassi, 2017).

Fan-made content and participatory culture have been seen as a form of unpaid labour, where the fans do not get compensated for the time and effort that goes into making content such as fanfiction and fan-art (Stanfill, 2015; Chaplin, 2009). The reason for fandoms being a form of unpaid labour is due to the legality – or illegality – of fan-made content since it is based on copyrighted works (Stanfill, 2015). However, YouTube's advertisement revenue scheme allows fans to make money from their fan-made content. By cutting off advertisement revenue from certain types of videos, such as violent content, this raises questions over free speech and censorship. Future research should look at the issue of free speech and its relationship with participatory culture, especially when it is concerning YouTube.

To discover how participants problem-solve when disagreements occur within a group, participants were asked how conflict is resolved when it occurs on a *Minecraft* server. The common method of resolving conflict involved a player contacting a server's moderator to remedy the situation. The results revealed how a large proportion of players prefer to avoid conflict, instead they prefer to leave the task to others. In contrast, a large group of participants said they prefer to resolve conflict by discussing it with other players, especially those causing the conflict. A small minority of players, however, said that they resorted to violence as a means

of resolving conflict. In an attempt to fight fire with molten lava, these participants prefer to escalate the situation by using trolling tactics. Silva and Mousavidlin (2015) suggest that working together in a group is the best way for players to solve problems, which can easily lead to conflict between players. Cilauro (2015) gives an example of players resorting to teamwork to resolve issues, with children working together to overcome technical limitations. Although a large majority of players prefer to avoid conflict entirely, the results of this research suggested that teamwork and communication is a legitimate method of resolving conflict between players. The results revealed, however, that a large proportion of participants said they did not experience conflict within *Minecraft*, revealing how conflict does not affect everyone.

In summary, the research findings revealed that *Minecraft* players are using forums and wikis as online learning resources, tools which allow players to share their knowledge while gaining new insights through collaborative learning. In turn, forums and wikis help create a thriving participatory culture. Watching video tutorials proved to be another popular method for learning how to play *Minecraft*. Although participants interacted with one another through other methods, such as discussing *Minecraft* with other players, the research findings did not reveal exactly how these communications were occurring – whether within the game or in other environments. One participant described a conversation in *Minecraft* – which involved discussing problems with server staff. Further research could explore this area further in terms of how player discussions occur. It should also be noted that, despite a large proportion of participants saying they would discuss *Minecraft* with other players, a lot of the participants said that they prefer to avoid other players if conflict occurs in-game.

Participants were also asked what would cause them to stop taking part in the *Minecraft* community. Although the research seems to support Jiang's notion of a successful video game, with the lifeline of a successful game depending on social interactions, the responses revealed the situation is more complex. According to Jiang (2008), the success of a video game depends on the life-cycle of the gamer – at different points in the player's experience with a video game they continue playing the game for different reasons. The author argues that the most important aspect in keeping a person playing a video game, especially a game that has an online component, is by ensuring the player is socially engaged. Although the reasons cited by the participants for leaving the *Minecraft* community involve the game's social aspect, the responses go deeper. The most common complaint made by the participants which would discourage them from taking part in the *Minecraft* community was negative behaviour. This included toxicity, trolling, being bullied, and stigmatisation. The literature already reveals how

negative behaviour can affect a person's experience with online gaming, whether it involves griefing (Beale et al, 2016; Foo & Koivisto, 2004), or gender issues (Proctor, 2017; Salter, 2018; Kaye et al, 2017; Busker, 2013). According to Beale et al, (2016) and Foo and Koivisto (2004), only 3% of gamers are griefers. However, the impact of griefing is immense, affecting a large population of gamers. Foo and Koivisto state how griefing can cause victims to lose interest in a video game. Similarly, the gaming community has seen a rise in misogynist behaviour. Spurred by a controversy where a game developer was accused of using sexual favours to advance her position in the gaming industry, the gamergate movement has tried to curb the representation of women and minority groups within gaming and the media in general. Misogyny in gaming and technology can be perceived as a way for a person to maintain their masculinity by suppressing those they deem to go against the masculine norm, such as women and people of minority groups (Salter, 2018). By discouraging players from engaging in the *Minecraft* community through negative behaviour, this in turns disrupts the whole notion of participatory culture, which involves a society where anyone and everyone can engage in (Jenkins et al, 2009).

A number of participants cited executive meddling as a reason for leaving the *Minecraft* community. Executive meddling refers to the interference of a game's publisher, which involves changing a video game to make it more commercially viable. As a consequence, executive meddling can have an effect on the creator's original vision (Longridge, 2017; Anders, 2013; Masters, 2016). Because participatory culture moves the power of creation away from media companies and into the hands of the audience, executive meddling might be irrelevant (Jenkins et al, 2009). With the rise of indie games developed by small development teams (McGuire, Jenkins, & Chadwicke, 2009; Gril, 2008), it might be possible for people to play games which the original creator intended. However, with the purchase of *Minecraft* by Microsoft in 2014 (Etherington, 2014), and the introduction of the marketplace which sells skins and texture packs (Brown, 2017), it is understandable many participants are concerned about executive meddling.

Three participants mentioned micro-transactions within gaming as an issue relating to executive meddling. Micro-transactions come in different forms, with the most controversial method being loot-boxes. A recent appearance within video games, loot-boxes use real-world money to purchase in-game cosmetics or boost the player's character. The items contained in loot-boxes are, for the most part, random, which encourages gambling. Developers are known to slow down a player's progress, or even restrict game content, in an attempt to force players

to purchase loot-boxes. Players are forced to either grind for hours or spend a few dollars and gain the necessary items to advance through the game. As a result, this creates a pay-to-win situation (Drummond & Sauer, 2018; Freedman). Although *Minecraft* has not implemented loot-boxes, the game has recently introduced an in-game marketplace which allows players to buy texture packs and skins. Unlike loot-boxes, however, the player knows exactly what they are getting whenever they purchase something from the *Minecraft*'s marketplace store (Brown, 2017). Although fans have traditionally not been paid for fan-made content (Stanfill, 2015; Chaplin, 2009), many of the items sold on *Minecraft*'s marketplace are created by fans. This presents an interesting example where fans are able to be compensated for their time and effort. Micro-transactions might be perceived as obstacles to participatory culture, and *Minecraft*'s marketplace can be seen as a blatant attempt at monetizing player-made content, yet features such as *Minecraft*'s marketplace might not need to be understood so negatively. This may be an unpopular notion, but micro-transactions can be beneficial to player engagement depending on the context, such as allowing players to gain monetary profits from their creations. Future research should further examine micro-transactions in video games, and whether they have an effect on player engagement.

It should be noted, however, that players can simply lose interest in a video game, with a number of participants citing this as a reason for leaving the *Minecraft* community. This includes players having work commitments, which interferes with the time available to have gaming experiences, and an abundance of younger and immature players.

Although the research findings suggest that players are more likely to enjoy *Minecraft* when playing the game with friends, certain interactions between players can discourage them from engaging in *Minecraft* or at least ruin the game's enjoyment value. The main concern participants said discourages them from playing *Minecraft* is negative behaviour. With the increase in misogyny and trolling in gaming communities (Salter, 2018), it is concerning that negative behaviour stops players from gaining enjoyment from a video game, as well as from taking part in a participatory culture. Furthermore, a video game itself can discourage players from enjoying the medium due to executive meddling, such as micro-transactions which gate-keep certain aspects of a video game. Although *Minecraft* is freely updated with new content and features, the video game has introduced an in-game marketplace where players can purchase skins and maps (Brown, 2017). While micro-transactions do not disrupt the communication between players, there is the possibility that this will create a divide between

players, where one has access to content and another does not. It should also be noted that fans can simply lose interest in a video game, such as due to work commitment.

5.2. Player identity in *Minecraft*

This section of the online survey aimed to answer whether *Minecraft* players perceive themselves differently when playing the game online with other players. The literature review concerning online identity presented two different and conflicting views, with Turkle (1995; 1999) asserting a person changes their identity depending on the situation, while Axelsson (2002) argued a person's identity is static whether offline or online. Furthermore, the research project enquired as to whether roleplaying enhances a player's experience by allowing them to experiment with their identity. To explore this debate, the online survey asked participants whether they thought their online identity when playing *Minecraft* was similar or dissimilar compared to their real self.

The research reveals that two-thirds of participants believed that their online identity and avatar contrasted with their offline self. The research suggests that Turkle's (1995; 1999) positing of identity as fluid has more weight than the notions of Axelsson (2002) – that identity remains static whether offline or online. Axelsson (2002) argues that identity can change slightly as a person matures; a person's identity becomes stable as they grow and develop. This research brings this idea into question. Although it might be possible that some participants are still experimenting with their identity, the results revealed how participants establish identities when playing an online video game that differ from their offline real-life counterparts. In this regard, the research's findings fit into the theory adhered to by Turkle (1995; 1999). According to Turkle, people jump between different identities through their lives. Due to the anonymous nature of online communication, the author argues that this allows people more room to experiment with their identity. This is further supported by Vasalou and Joinson (2009), who explain how players choose their online avatar depending on the situation. Future research could examine why players choose certain persona when playing an online video game.

To further support Turkle (1995; 1999), many of the participants cited the reason for taking on a different identity online was because *Minecraft* allowed the player to do things they would not otherwise be able to do in the offline real-world, such as being able to build large structures. A few participants also noted *Minecraft*'s absurdity, highlighting how the game does not reflect the real world. Certain game mechanics would appear bizarre and unrealistic within the context of the real world. However, within the context of a video like *Minecraft*, they are seen as being

mundane. For example, a person in real-life would not build a nether portal, nor fight a zombie horde, but within *Minecraft* not only is it possible but it is a part of a player's in-game routine. Despite the unrealistic nature of *Minecraft*, participants were able to immerse themselves in the video game by adopting a persona. The research's findings suggest a successful open world game depends on the immersion of the in-game world, as described by Guitton (2011b). The reason why participants said they perceive certain game mechanics to be believable despite their unrealistic nature, is due to the consistency of gameplay. This, therefore, supports the point identified in the literature review that a video game's immersion depends on its consistency – if a player performs a specific action they should expect a predictable result. Guitton (2011b; 2012) further expands on this by stating immersion can be built through social interactions. Future research should look into whether social interactions create immersion.

Overall, the research findings support Turkle (1995; 1999), with the majority of participants saying their online *Minecraft* identity is consciously created as being different to their offline identity. The finding suggests that *Minecraft* gives players the freedom to do things differently from their real selves by allowing them to adopt an alternative identity. The participants mentioned how video games, in general, allow players to engage in activities that are impossible for them to do in the real world. It should be noted, however, that around one-third of the participants thought their online and offline identities were the same, if not similar, giving some support to Axelsson (2002), who argues a person's identity, whether online and offline, is unchanging.

Because online games such as *Minecraft* allow players to take on alternative identities, as discussed above, it was important to examine the potential for adopting multiple identities. As a result, the online survey asked participants whether they take part in roleplaying in *Minecraft*, and if so, why they did so. The purpose of this question was to see whether roleplaying in *Minecraft* enhanced a player's experience by allowing them to experiment with their identity.

Despite *Minecraft*'s more fantastical elements, one would assume that the video game would be suitable for roleplaying. However, when asked whether they take part in roleplaying in *Minecraft*, only a small percentage of participants said they did so. Nearly all of the participants who said they had roleplayed in *Minecraft* were male - only one female participant stated she roleplayed. Furthermore, the research findings suggest that the younger the player the more likely they are to roleplay. Although none of the authors cited in the literature review studied the demographics of those who roleplay, there is still a common stereotype of role-players

being young, white, and male (Curran, 2011). Although the research project did not ask participants to identify their race and ethnicity, it did ask for their age and gender. The results support the commonly held understanding that role-players are young and male. Due to the concept of younger persons developing their identity through experimentation (Turkle, 1995; 1999; Taylor 2002), it should not come as a surprise that younger players are more likely to roleplay than older players. However, the research's findings reveal roleplaying is not as common as studies discussed in the literature review would suggest.

The participants who answered 'yes' to whether they roleplayed in *Minecraft*, were then asked why they took part in roleplaying. Although the answers varied, there were enough responses which could be linked to the previous literature on roleplaying. At least two participants cited immersion as a reason for roleplaying, with one of the participants saying that roleplaying allows them to put themselves "in someone else's shoes". Not only does this suggest that Guitton (2011b) is right about the importance of immersion within a roleplaying experience for it to be successful, it also supports the notion of players being able to experiment with their identities by experiencing the lives of others through virtual roleplaying (Turkle, 1995; 1999; Taylor 2002). However, as mentioned in the findings (see chapter four, section 4), it is not possible to generalise as to why players take part in roleplaying since only a small percentage of participants answered the question.

Unlike the participants who said they do roleplay in *Minecraft*, the participants who said they do not roleplay in *Minecraft* were able to give a clear reason why they choose not to take part in roleplaying, with abundantly more participants answering this question. An overwhelming majority of participants said they were not interested in roleplaying, with a few participants saying they saw roleplaying as being lame and immature. Some of the participants said they preferred the building elements of *Minecraft*. Although the studies discussed in the literature review examined why players did not take part in roleplaying, the reasons given by this project's participants who do not roleplay provide further insights.

Although a minority, a few participants said they do not roleplay in *Minecraft* due to the lack of available servers devoted to roleplaying. They highlighted how they did roleplay, but prefer doing so using media other than *Minecraft*. One of the participants said *Minecraft* was too restrictive to conduct roleplaying exercises. Another participant cited the video game's lack of immersion, an element Guitton (2011b) says is needed for a successful roleplaying experience. According to Jenkins et al (2009), an important element of participatory culture is that it is easy

for a person to interact with and take part in the said environment. Therefore, although a *Minecraft* player might be interested in roleplaying, they are less likely to get involved if it is too burdensome to engage with.

Although the research findings revealed how *Minecraft* players are willing to change their identity when playing *Minecraft*, the majority of participants said that they were not interested in taking part in roleplaying in *Minecraft*. The participants who did roleplay in *Minecraft* said they did so because of the game's immersion value, allowing the person to walk "in someone else's shoes". However, the participants who did not roleplay in *Minecraft* saw roleplaying as childish and immature. A few of these said they prefer roleplaying using other games and media, stating that *Minecraft* is too restrictive for roleplaying.

5.3. Communication in *Minecraft*

Because communication is an important component to a successful online game, such as *Minecraft* (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2005; Silva & Mousavidlin, 2015), it was important to examine whether *Minecraft* players use specific and specialised language when interacting with other players. Not only was the aim of this section of the online survey to determine whether *Minecraft* players used 'sayings' when playing the game, but also to discover the exact language and dialogue used between players. Furthermore, the online survey also aimed to see whether male and female gamers spoke differently.

The participants were asked whether they used 'sayings' while playing *Minecraft*. A majority of players said they did not use 'sayings' at all. It should be noted that the results suggest that the younger the player the more likely they are to use specific terminologies while playing *Minecraft*. Since the studies carried out by both Cilauro (2015) and Overby and Jones (2015) involve young children communicating with one another to resolve in-game problems, this might hint at the notion of older players not using 'sayings' while playing *Minecraft*. However, there was some confusion over the definition of the term 'saying'. Because a few participants queried the use of the word 'saying', in hindsight the question could have been worded differently, perhaps asking the participants whether they use specific terminologies when playing *Minecraft*. Because of the ambiguity in the participants' responses, it was difficult to interpret the results.

Nonetheless, the participants who did say they used 'sayings' while playing *Minecraft* were asked to give examples. The examples the participants gave varied, with none overlapping, many of which referred to specific gameplay elements of *Minecraft*. The participants' examples

of 'sayings' ranged from discussing in-game items to more general banter associated with greetings and insults. According to Ducheneaut and Moore (2005), there are three types of dialogue used by players in an online game: discussion surrounding the formation of a group; discussion between team members over in-game strategy; and general banter between players. Although none of the examples of 'sayings' relate to how players form groups, discuss in-game items and gameplay elements, there was clearly demonstrated that strategy is discussed – players used specific terms to work out how to solve an in-game problem. Greetings and insults easily fit into the general banter category. Interestingly, one participant explained how they used different greetings depending on the server they were on, changing the 'sayings' depending on the context and situation, which suggest the idea of a person having multiple identities – a person swaps between different personas depending on the situation (Turkle, 1995; 1999; Taylor 2002).

The research findings also revealed how a majority of participants do not use *Minecraft* terminology outside of playing the video game. The results further revealed how there is a divide in the language used by gamers depending on the context and situation. Again, the findings support the notion of a person performing multiple identities (Turkle, 1995; 1999; Taylor 2002).

Although the participants were asked whether they thought male gamers speak differently compared to female gamers, the results were unfortunately inconclusive, with the participants' responses being divided. However, slightly more of the younger participants said they thought male and female gamers speak differently, compared to older players. This difference, nonetheless, was not significant.

Participants who thought male and female gamers speak differently said they found male gamers more aggressive and more likely to resort to violent rhetoric, compared to female gamers who prefer to avoid conflict. The research findings support Salter (2018), who suggests that the Gamergate controversy was caused due to male aggression in the video game industry. However, as stated previously (see chapter five, section 1), a large majority of players prefer to avoid conflict. Given that the participants in this research project were overwhelmingly male, the extent of male aggression within gaming is placed into doubt. As a result of this contradiction, further research is needed to examine more closely whether male gamer aggression is as common as people assume.

Another reason why participants thought male and female gamers speak differently was linked to the belief that they interpret the world differently. At least one participant noted how female gamers were more likely to be offended by an in-joke. Yong (2017) reports that male and female gamers prefer playing different genres of games, with male gamers preferring more action orientated games. Although Yong's research reveals how male and female gamers have different game preferences, the literature reviewed does not overtly address the notion that males and females perceive the world differently.

Conversely, when asked why they did not think male and female gamers speak differently, a majority of participants said they did not interact enough with those of opposite gender to notice whether there is a difference. Furthermore, the participants noted it was difficult to determine the gender of another player when playing *Minecraft*, possibly due to the game's anonymous nature. As a result, even when male and female gamers interacted with one another, the participants said they felt male and female gamers used the same type of language. According to Christie and Dill (2015), anonymity allows a person to conceal their identity, including their gender identity. If this is true, then it should explain why some participants felt there was no difference between male and female language use. The anonymous nature of playing online video games, and the concept of the player's gender remaining unknown, can offer insights into how proponents of the Gamergate movement perceive the perfect female gamer. According to video essayist Dan Olson (2014), the Gamergate movement is built on the premise that the gaming industry does not have an inclusion or representation problem, and therefore any criticism of the gaming industry is perceived as being a member of an invading force. Gamergate supporters use harassment, which creates an environment of fear, to suppress and silence opposing views. Olson explains how it is impossible to identify what another person's gender is unless they announce what their gender is. Gamers are able to gain the protection entitled to the majority group as long as they are willing to give up their identity. As a result, Gamergate's perfect women is one who remains passive, does not expose her identity, and would appear from another person's perspective as if they are a male gamer.

It should be noted that one of the participants suggested age might be a bigger factor than gender when it comes to how people speak. The research's findings already show how younger players are more likely to use specific terminologies when playing *Minecraft* compared to older players. As a result, it is possible that age is a factor that shapes language use in gaming (alongside others such as gender, ethnicity, class and education. Future research could examine

a larger range of demographic factors that may contribute to how people talk in and around the gaming world.

It is apparent from the findings that players do not use specific and specialised language when playing *Minecraft* with other players, at least not to the level I would have expected. When such language was identified by the participants, it ranged from referring to in-game objects related to *Minecraft* to simple banter such as greetings and insults. Furthermore, the research findings showed that participants' opinions about whether male and female gamers speak differently or not were split. While some of the participants thought male gamers were more likely to use violent and aggressive rhetoric, other participants said it was difficult to tell the difference between the two genders when playing an online game such as *Minecraft*. Despite the issue of gender, both the literature and research findings suggest players have more freedom to express and identify themselves due to the anonymous nature of an online video game.

5.4. Griefing in *Minecraft*

The aim of this section of the online survey was to examine how griefing, the intentional harassment of other players through destructive play-styles, help to create online communities built around antisocial behaviour. To answer this question, the online survey asked the participants if they had ever griefed before, and if so, why.

Even though I anticipated only a small percentage of participants would admit to taking part in griefing, surprisingly, a small percentage of the participants said they had at least once griefed in *Minecraft*. Due to the negative perception of griefing, an action frowned upon and discouraged within gaming (Beale et al, 2016), I was expecting no one to admit to griefing. However, because the participants had anonymity, this gave them the chance to say things they might not otherwise say. Although Beale et al (2016) and Foo and Koivisto (2004) say only 3% of gamers take part in griefing, this research project suggest the percentage of players who grief is higher, with 29.4% of participants said they took part in griefing. The research suggests more players take part in griefing than originally thought.

The research findings also revealed how male gamers are more likely to take part in griefing than female gamers. Furthermore, the findings showed that younger players are more likely to grief. The authors cited in the literature review did not focus on the demographics of those that take part in griefing, perhaps due to the anonymous nature of online gaming. Instead, previous research has only examined guides create by griefers to teach other players how to grief and how to gain enjoyment from it (Beale et al, 2016; McAllister, 2004). Because previous research

did not engage and interact with the griefers themselves, the authors were not able to discern the demographics of griefers. Because misogyny and harassment towards female gamers are so prevalent in the gaming community (Kaye et al, 2017; Proctor, 2017; Salter, 2018), it should not come as a surprise the majority of griefers are young males.

Because this research project engaged with griefers through a survey and with some degree of customisation, participants who said they took part in griefing were then asked why they griefed. The most common reason given by participants for why they griefed was it was simply a joke between friends. However, according to McAllister (2004), griefers will attempt to legitimise and justify their actions by presenting griefing as an art-form, while showing no remorse toward their victims or for the extent of their behaviour. Stating griefing is simply a group of friends making jokes can be perceived as an attempt by griefers to deflect the negative connotation towards griefing, therefore justifying their behaviour and actions. Because the research is only asking the griefing culprit's opinion, we cannot engage in whether the 'friends' consent to being griefed. Therefore, future research examining the relationship between the griefers and their victims would contribute significantly to understanding the activity of griefing.

The next most common reason given for griefing was because of player-versus-player. A number of participants said they play *Minecraft* servers which are devoted to griefing, and by playing on the server the person is already expecting griefing to occur. The literature review did not cover servers devoted to griefing in a player-versus-player environment, instead it assumed griefing did not involve consent from the potential victim. Furthermore, the idea of player-versus-player griefing does not conform to the categories established by Foo and Koivisto (2004) – harassment, power superiority, scamming, and greed play. Since player-versus-player can still be considered griefing, as it involves a destructive playstyle, the research findings suggest Foo and Koivisto's categories are not broad enough.

The research findings suggest that gamers see greed play as a form of griefing, with one participant citing gaining resources as a reason for griefing. Although greed play is listed as griefing category, Foo and Koivisto (2004) struggle to define greed play as griefing, simply saying that there is not enough evidence to prove otherwise. Although greed play involves harassing other players, the culprit has more to gain from greed play than simply seeing other players suffer, since it also involves actions whereby griefers steal from their victims. The results revealed the ambiguities involved in defining what is considered griefing, with different

participants having different opinions on the matter. Future research could attempt to elicit from participants more details as to what they perceived as griefing.

Although the majority of participants attempted to deflect the negative aspects of griefing, a few were more honest about their actions, admitting griefing was carried out for negative reasons. At least one participant said they griefed to gain a reaction from their victims, which supports the view that the success of a griefer depends on the emotional response from the victims (Foo and Koivisto, 2004). Another participant said they griefed because there was no repercussion, confirming that online anonymity allows a person to engage in antisocial behaviour such as griefing (Midha & Nandedkar, 2012; Hooi & Cho, 2012). Online anonymity allows a person to conceal their identity and to commit actions the person would not otherwise do if their identity was known (Christie & Dill, 2015).

The participants who did not identify as griefers were then asked what they did to cope with disruptive players. The results revealed that at least three-quarters of the participants who do not take part in griefing say they have suffered from disruptive players. Although the literature reviewed was vague in estimating the impact of griefing in online video games, the results herein gives us a better understanding of the impact of griefers. It should be noted, however, that the online survey did not ask participants whether they had experienced griefing. Using deductive reasoning, I was only able to come to the conclusion that three-quarters of participants had been at one point been griefed because one-quarter of participant said they had never been griefed before. Furthermore, the participants who griefed were not asked the question about how they coped with disruptive players.

In summary, the research findings revealed there is a reasonable size of griefers playing *Minecraft*. Furthermore, the griefers' actions impact a large proportion of gamers. Although the literature review highlighted how griefers create communities to teach other players how to grief (Beale et al, 2016; McAllister, 2004), the research findings could not answer how griefing creates online communities. The lack of evidence for a griefing community was due to the participants not mentioning it in passing when they discussed their online interactions, griefing.

6. Conclusion

This research project set out to explore how online communities are built in the video game *Minecraft*, observing it through the lens of participatory culture. By conducting an online survey, the research project examined the fandom community surrounding *Minecraft*, observing the language used by players whilst playing *Minecraft*, and the interpersonal relationships built around a popular online medium. The research project focused on players 18-years-and-older and comprised a sample of 68 participants. The research project's primary area of interest was the participant's age group and gender. As a result, the responses were split into categories – the participant's gender and age group – with the intention of comparing and contrasting the similarities and differences within each group. Although the research project was able to elicit opinions from males and females, because the online survey was open to only *Minecraft* players 18-years-and-older, the research project was limited to two age groups: 18-24 and 25+.

There were some limitations to the research project, especially concerning who would be included in the sample. *Minecraft* players under the age of 18 were not included due to ethical concerns. While there was an obvious difference between the two age categories (for example, participants in the 18-24 age group were more likely to play *Minecraft* with other players than alone), because there was no lower age categories the research project could not examine whether the trends seen in the older categories carried over to younger *Minecraft* players.

Sourmelis, Ioannou, and Zaphiris (2016) note that the current literature on MMOs focuses predominately on older players, such as high school and university[15] students. In contrast, research into MMOs does not focus on younger players. This is due to how a majority of MMOs, such as the World of Warcraft, enact age restrictions, usually set around 12+, causing the core audience to be adolescent and adults. Unlike traditional MMOs, however, *Minecraft* players are from all age groups (Thompson, 2016). Because *Minecraft* appears to be universal among all age groups, future research should not limit itself to participants 18-years-old and older.

Sourmelis et al (2016) state how researchers should not generalise players of all ages into one category. Taking this into account, the online survey asked participants to identify their age by selecting an age category – each age group containing a three-year bracket[16]. However, because

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[15] Sourmelis et al (2016) uses the word college instead of university. Regardless, it has the same meaning.
[16] Due to an error, the 21-24 age category had a four-year gap.

the participants' ages were mainly in the 18-20 bracket, with the proceeding categories decreasing in size, this made it difficult to identify common themes within the responses of the older participants to become due to the small sample size. As a result, the research project collapsed the age brackets into two categories, 18-24 and 25+, to allow me to interpret the data with more clarity.

The overall findings of this research project show that it is possible to interpret gaming communities through the lens of participatory culture. The overall research findings suggest players are using *Minecraft* as a communication tool, while also utilising other outside sources to gain help and insight into the video game, such as forums, wikis, and online streaming services. Furthermore, the research findings shows participants prefer playing Minecraft with other players, highlighting the social element of the video game. This is consistent with the research discussed in the literature review, which present online video games, such as *Minecraft*, as an outlet where players are able to collaborate to achieve a common goal (Cilauro, 2015; Overby & Jones, 2015; Ducheneaut & Moore, 2005; Silva & Mousavidlin, 2015). Furthermore, the research findings support the concept of people adopting an alternative avatar when engaging with other people online (Turkle, 1995; 1999), with a majority of participants stating their online identity was dissimilar to their real-life counterpart.

The research project's findings also reveal how many of the participants were concerned about executive meddling, which they perceived as a potential deterrent to enjoying *Minecraft*. This is pertinent now to *Minecraft*, due to the video's purchase by Microsoft (Etherington, 2014), and the introduction of a marketplace store within the game (Brown, 2017). Participants also expressed concern about negative behaviours within *Minecraft*, such as trolling, bullying, and toxicity. Furthermore, a large majority of the participants said they did not take part in roleplaying within Minecraft. The reasons given by the participants as to why they did not roleplay within Minecraft were because they perceived it as being either childish or that Minecraft itself was unsuitable for roleplaying.

There are, however, differences between the research findings and the studies discussed in the literature review, revealing interesting anomalies. Although the literature suggests that the griefer population is miniscule, with only 3% of players taking part in griefing (Foo & Koivisto, 2004), this research project found that 32% of the male participants admitted to griefing, while 23% of females griefed. As a result, the research findings suggest not only that griefing is present in *Minecraft*, but also that it is also more common than originally thought.

While conducting this research project, I played several different online video games, including *Minecraft*, as a way to experience what it is like to play video games of these types. During my time playing on online servers in *Minecraft*, I did not experience any form of griefing. Perhaps the administrators on the servers I played on were able to monitor player behaviour successfully. However, in contrast, while playing the multiplayer video game *Fortnite* I suffered repeatedly from the actions of griefers. On many occasions, other players would build a wall around me in an attempt to keep me inside. Whenever this occurred, I was at the mercy of being killed by a hostile player. Overall, I found my experience playing *Fortnite* unpleasant, unlike *Minecraft* which I found far more welcoming and friendly. Although I did not experience griefing while playing *Minecraft* online, it does not mean it does not occur. Perhaps I was lucky. My experience with griefing in *Fortnite* certainly gave perspective on what it is like to be griefed in a video game. A consequence of the research findings, which reveals how players are more likely to experience griefing than previous studies suggest, is to highlight the importance of not ignoring or underestimating the impact and scope of griefing within video games. Future research could examine the extent to which griefing is more common in *Minecraft* compared to other online video games and the reasons for this.

Participants in the survey said they griefed in *Minecraft* for numerous reasons, including joking between friends, competing against players, and as a way to gain resources from other players. Furthermore, many of the participants who griefed did not see their actions in a negative light, instead the participants justified their actions by deflecting the blame. Despite the negative connotations associated with griefing, a few of the participants admitted to griefing to garner an emotional response from the victims.

Overall, both the existing literature and this research suggest open-world sandbox games, such as *Minecraft*, encourage players to engage in the video games' creative and collaborative elements. By utilising many elements of participant culture – such as providing a mentorship where players are able to teach newcomers how to play, and giving an outlet for players to share their in-game creations – *Minecraft* has been able to build a thriving online community. The *Minecraft* fandom has several fan-sites devoted to the video game, whether it is an online forum where like-minded players can interact with one another, or wikis that have the purpose of compiling the shared knowledge generated around *Minecraft*. Although this research project was not able to answer all the questions concerning the *Minecraft* community, the research findings could be used as a guide to conducting further research into *Minecraft* and observing online video games through the lens of participatory culture.

Appendix A

History of *Minecraft*

Markus Persson, better known as Notch, became interested in video game development as a child when, in the 1980s, his father bought him a Commodore 128 – an early home computer. Although originally interested in Lego, his attention would be diverted towards programming video games. Besides computers, Notch also played table-top RPGs with his friend. Instead of relying on a gamebook to explain the rules, Notch would instead create his own campaigns to challenge his friends. These early experiences with games gave the boy the passion to create his own imaginary worlds. Despite his enthusiasm for video games, Notch was encouraged to enter print media. Disheartened at the printing industry, Notch found himself unemployed. Seeing her son in a depressed state, Notch's mother signed him up to a programming course in C++. In 2004, Notch began working for Midasplayer, a developer that focused on cheaply made web-based games. The company's philosophy was to create games as quickly as possible with a small development team. Notch quickly discovered the industry had become cold and unforgiving, with innovative title being side-lined for games with working and reliable formulas. This meant games made by Midasplayer would follow a certain template, whether it be a card or puzzle game (Goldberg & Larsson, 2013).

Dismayed at the fact he could not develop his own indie video games, Notch left Midasplayer in 2009. He began working for Jalbum, a photo managing company, which allowed Notch to develop games in his free time. The advantage of developing games independently allowed Notch complete control over his creation, ranging from the game's visuals to its sound effects, allowing him to experiment without having to compromise or listen to the demands of publishers. The increase in the popularity of indie games also coincided with the introduction of digital gaming stores. Online stores, such as iTunes' App Store and Valve's Steam, gave indie game developers a platform to release their games without the need of a major publisher (Goldberg & Larsson, 2013).

Notch released the first playable version of *Minecraft* on May 17, 2009, charging $13 for the alpha version with the intention of doubling the price once the game was properly released. Some of *Minecraft's* open-world influences included *Dwarf Fortress*, a rogue-like simulator where the player is tasked to manage a town of dwarves while protecting it from hostile beings, *RollerCoaster Tycoon*, where players use building components to make their own theme park, and *Dungeon Keeper*, which involved exploring torch-lit underground catacombs. The most important influence on *Minecraft* was *Infiniminer* – a proto-*Minecraft*. Using *Infiniminer* as a

template, Notch recoded the game, transforming it from a top-down strategy game into a first-person action-adventure game with building mechanics. Redoing the game's graphic, creating the iconic blocky style, a recognisable version of *Minecraft* was formed. Keeping players up-to-date with the game's development, *Minecraft*'s early players saw the game's potential. Although simplistic – many of the features associated with *Minecraft* had not yet been implemented yet, such enemies and randomised terrain – the game allowed players to use their imagination to create whatever they wanted. Through word-and-mouth, *Minecraft* began selling 20 copies a day, allowing Notch to quit his job at Jalbum (Goldberg & Larsson, 2013).

Although game developers Value offered to buy the *Minecraft* IP, Notch decided instead to found a company with fellow game designer Jakob Porser. In September 2010, Mojang was born. With Notch and Porser serving as the company's owners, Notch's former boss Carl Manneh was hired as Mojang's CEO. Jens Bergensten was hired to suit out *Minecraft*'s coding, while Aron Nieminen, a coder Notch met while working at Midasplayer, was tasked with porting the game to mobile phones. *Minecraft* was officially released in 2011. 16 million people had already downloaded the game in beta form, with 4 million people purchasing a full version of the game. Before the game's official release, Notch had already made $70 million on a prototype version of the game. After *Minecraft* was officially released, Notch decided to step away from the day-to-day developing of *Minecraft*, leaving future projects and updates to others at Mojang. By this point, Notch had felt the game had become complete, and anything else added was unnecessary (Goldberg & Larsson, 2013).

Appendix B
Online Survey Questions

The following section is an outline of the online survey, including which questions will be asked, whether those questions are open-ended or closed, and whether participants be asked different questions depending on their previous responses.

- Participants will also be asked to identify their age and gender.
- 'Why do you play *Minecraft*?' This an open-ended question.
- 'How do you prefer playing *Minecraft*?' The answer options are 'I prefer playing *Minecraft* by myself', 'I prefer to play *Minecraft* with friends', and 'I prefer to play *Minecraft* with strangers'.
- 'Have you ever taken part in roleplaying in *Minecraft*?' The answer options are 'Yes, I have taken part in roleplaying' and 'No, I don't take part in roleplaying'. Depending on how the participants answers this question affects the follow-up question.
- If the participant answer with 'Yes, I have taken part in roleplaying', they will then be asked 'Why do you roleplay?' This an open-ended question.
- Similarly, if the participant answer with 'No, I don't take part in roleplaying', they will then be asked 'Why don't you roleplay?' Again, this an open-ended question.
- 'How similar or dissimilar is your in-game avatar to your real self?' The participant will be given a scale from 0 to 100, with 0 meaning the person finds their avatar similar to their real self, while 100 meaning the person finds their dissimilar to their real self. The participant is able to place their answer anywhere within the scale.
- 'How would you describe your behaviour in *Minecraft* compared to the real world?' This an open-ended question.
- 'What is your main purpose of using a *Minecraft* forum? ' This an open-ended question.
- 'Where else do you go to, or who you talk to when you need help with *Minecraft*?' This an open-ended question.
- 'What would stop you from taking part in the *Minecraft* community?' This an open-ended question.
- 'When conflict arises on a *Minecraft* server, how is it resolved?' This an open-ended question.
- 'Do you use any 'sayings' specifically for *Minecraft*?' The answer options are 'Yes, I do use 'sayings' specifically for *Minecraft'* and 'No, I don't use 'sayings' specifically for

Minecraft'. Depending on how the participants answers this question affects the follow-up question.

- If the participant answer with 'Yes, I do use 'sayings' specifically for *Minecraft'*, they will then be asked 'What are some examples of the 'saying' used while playing *Minecraft*?' This an open-ended question. If the participant answer with 'No, I don't use 'sayings' specifically for *Minecraft*', they will not be asked a follow-up question.

- 'Do you find male gamers speak differently compared to female gamers?' The answer options are 'Yes, I find male gamers speak differently to females' and 'No, I don't find that male gamers speak differently to females?' Depending on how the participants answers this question affects the follow-up question.

- If the participant answer with 'Yes, I find male gamers speak differently to females', they will then be asked 'Why do you think male gamers speak differently to female gamers?' This an open-ended question.

- Similarly, if the participant answer with 'No, I don't find that male gamers speak differently to females', they will then be asked 'Why don't you think male gamers speak differently to female gamers?' This an open-ended question.

- 'Are there any *Minecraft* terms you use when not playing video games?' This an open-ended question.

- 'Have you ever taken part in griefing? (Griefing is the intentional harassment towards other players through destructive play-styles)'. The answer options are 'Yes, I have taken part in griefing' and 'No, I have not taken part in griefing'. Depending on how the participants answers this question affects the follow-up question.

- If the participant answer with 'Yes, I have taken part in griefing', they will then be asked 'Why do you take part in griefing?' This an open-ended question.

- If the participant answer with 'No, I have not taken part in griefing', they will then be asked 'How do you deal or cope with disruptive players such as griefers?' This an open-ended question.

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