11 Journeys in Intensity
Human and Nonhuman Co-Agency, Neuropower, and Counterplay in *Minecraft*

Marleena Huuhka

In the end, you know it's all just blocks.

akkashtin (*Minecraft* Forum, n.d.[1])

Once again, I find myself and other entities in a random location in world that is constantly being generated – block upon and next to another – as far as my avatar's body and location let me see. And beyond that, ever so far are the unreachable edges and countless wonders of the virtual world I have just entered. The end of the world is unreachable as the world is constantly, randomly, and infinitely generated as my avatar moves forward in the world. As a result of this procedural creation, the world in question does not exist, yet. Only the algorithm and the code do, but everything else is on the verge of being actualized. This process happens as a shared activity between the player and countless other elements and agents, such as pixels, algorithms, and game developers.

This engagement to creation and co-agency happens inside the player experience of a commercial product called *Minecraft*. *Minecraft* is a sandbox videogame first developed by Mojang AB in 2009. In 2018, it was the second best-selling videogame of all time – after *Tetris* – and available for various platforms including consoles, PCs, and mobile devices (Wikipedia 2018). It can be played both as a single-player and as a group of many players via the Internet, and it has several game modes, which vary in difficulty.

The basic idea of *Minecraft* is to explore and build a world of one's own. The world consists of blocks of different materials, and the player digs, chops, shovels them up, and then organizes them again in different formations such as houses and railroads. Food is acquired by hunting, gathering, or farming. The basic gameplay has no specific goals; the only set objective is to survive in a sometimes-perilous environment. The game does not end if the player dies; they merely drop all they are carrying at that moment and then respawn again to previously determined coordinates. Even though the game has no set goals or quests, the players easily set them for themselves. The urge to accomplish something – whether it

is a huge castle or a gate to the Netherworld – makes *Minecraft* a highly addictive game. As the possibilities are almost endless – limited only by the rules of the game and the players' imagination – one can never win or finish the game.

As said, the world is created and constructed in front of the avatar's/ player's eyes, and it is tied to the movement of the avatar and thus to the choices of direction or speed of movement and action the player makes. Herein lies the immersive power of *Minecraft*: everything is always new and exciting even though the player might have seen every single block type many times before. It is the specific way the blocks organize; this time is always different from the last. As *Minecraft* is filled with little bugs and strange incidents, such as a tree growing from air or an abandoned well in the middle of the desert, the player never knows what to expect. The player is constantly invited to wander a step further or to dig one cube deeper. Desire to go further and to dig deeper can rouse desire to possess and to leave traces or signs of one's presence in the virtual environment. This desire can be interpreted as colonial: the narrative of the game rests upon the trope of the great (male) explorer bravely venturing into uncharted, uninhabited lands. This desire is obviously more distinct in multiplayer games, where the players express their presence and accomplishments to other players. However, even when playing alone, the desire to leave a mark on the environment is present.

This chapter sets out to map the human and nonhuman co-agencies at work in videogames and gameplay situations. Videogame studies have multiple and contradictory definitions for the concept of a game. The main disagreement has long been about the ontology of games: whether they are essentially systems of rules, or narratives. I wish to pass this conflict of narratological and ludological theories by relying on Ian Bogost's definition: "video games are a mess" (Bogost 2009). Bogost states that games are by nature vague and effusive and as such they cannot be pushed to fit into strict categories. Games are never either/ or but always both – and thus it is beneficial to abandon hierarchical definitions altogether. Some common elements – which are also present in *Minecraft* – can, however, be defined. All videogames have some sort of rules limiting and guiding gameplay (e.g. Suits 1978), and they are all characterized by the interaction between human and the game device (Galloway 2006, 2). In addition, all videogames are play, *paidia*, which is by definition voluntary and meaningful in itself (e.g. Huizinga 1967; Suits 1978; Caillois 2001; Salen and Zimmerman 2004).

This chapter has three key points. The first is to deconstruct the subject-object dichotomy surrounding human interaction with other materialities. Drawing from the works of Baruch Spinoza, Jane Bennett, and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, I argue that we cannot take responsibility nor glory for our actions, as they are always produced in

cooperation with forces sometimes unknown and unseen to us. Spinoza argues that everything in this world is made of the same substance. All separate bodies – human and nonhuman – are manifestations of this divine substance (see Spinoza 1994). Deleuze and Guattari follow Spinoza with concepts of *rhizome* and *assemblage*, which both are horizontal ways of organizing agencies and relations (Deleuze and Guattari 2014). In her book *Vibrant Matter – A political Ecology of Things* (2010), Bennett builds upon Spinoza, Deleuze and Guattari, and suggests ways of taking inorganic matter seriously in the contemporary anthropocentric atmosphere.

Second, I build on Pasi Väliaho's (2014) work, which suggests that videogames and their immersive qualities have a role in building docile neoliberal subjects constantly ready for change and insecurity in today's capitalist societies. These building processes rest on the use of "neuropower", which Väliaho defines as follows:

> capturing the brain's capacity to simulate in order to teach the political reality of life today based on the management of risk and the securitization of the future, whether through military action, financial speculation, or other means.
>
> (Väliaho 2014, xiii)

Though examples used by Väliaho are mainly from first-person shooter games, similar processes are at work also in *Minecraft*: the logic of capitalism, conquest, and possession are offered through the narrative and the game mechanics. As previously mentioned, *Minecraft* is in its infinity an addictive game. This addiction is crucial to videogames as capitalist consumer products, which – however pleasant or educative they might be – invite players to invest both their time and money in global corporations.

Third, I will explore the concept of counterplay used by Rika Nakamura and Hanna Wirman (2005), and Thomas Apperley (2010). Counterplay is a collection of tactics the players can utilize when they wish to do something un-thought of by the developers of the game in question. Toward the end of this chapter, I will discuss two possible ways of resisting the capitalist agenda of colonialism and docile subjectivity available for the player in *Minecraft*. I wish to draw a (part of a) map of possible resistance through aimless wandering and immobility, which are both seen here as journeys in intensity.

The perspective in this chapter is that of my own body, mind, and avatar; this is an auto-ethnographical piece based on my experiences. Something else, however, is lurking behind the human-produced body of text. Because the perspectives of countless other human and nonhuman entities are constantly influencing my experience of the game, I am never alone on my adventure in this block-shaped world.

Co-Agencies

> You are the player, and I am the block. Together we make Minecraft.
>
> Pizzamanilla

When I start *Minecraft* on my Xbox, I am greeted by a random word or a phrase chosen first by the people who created the game and then presented to me by the algorithm managing this particular function. One day this greeting is "*Polynomia!!!*" I become immediately fascinated by this word. It is the plural of "*polynomium*", which is a noun for something that is "*polynomial*". *Polynomial* is a term used in algebra to mean "an expression of more than two algebraic terms, especially the sum of several terms that contain different powers of the same variable(s)", or in taxonomy to mean "a Latin name consisting of more than two terms". The word consists of the Greek word *poly* ("many") and the Latin word *nomen* ("name or part") (Oxford Dictionaries, n.d.). *Polynomials* are also used in coding, which is probably the reason the word has found its place among other, more content-related words, in the *Minecraft* menu.

All this seems perfectly understandable in the context of *Minecraft*. It can indeed be considered an expression consisting of a sum of more than two terms and variables as well as a designation consisting of multiple terms. As such, the word provides an entry point to the co-agential, material rhizomes that are in action and existence during and around my active gameplay sessions.

Gameplay as an action reaches beyond the representational levels of the game in question, and can thus be seen as material activity created through and in the bodies of my human and nonhuman peers and myself. All agencies involved in my game experience are physical bodies, though some of them cannot be reached directly by human senses. A concrete, material body in direct contact with the player is the game device: the computer or the console. It is a composition of metals and plastics that can be extended by additional parts, like a mouse, a screen, or an Internet cable. More bodies can be found behind this device's visible materiality: for example, the body of programming language, that manifests and moves the pixels, and that of electricity, which powers up both my experience and the processes of programming and development before that. Electricity and pixels can easily be seen as something less material, something from the other realm. However, their materiality is undeniable.

All the nonhumans and humans – coders, other players, and designers among others – are located in the common rhizome on the same plane of immanence that is in existence during my gameplay sessions. In other words, I am never alone but always unavoidably connected with countless others and other worlds. This connection surpasses the limitations of time and place and relies on co-agency beyond the differences in

materiality. In *Minecraft*, I am connected with all the forces mentioned above. As also argued above, gameplay is never merely a human experience. In *Minecraft*, the materiality of the blocks is, in the end, connected to my own as gameplay can be seen post- or antihumanist in nature.

Baruch Spinoza, the philosopher of joy, has been considered one of the first antihumanists. Spinoza implies that if humans are different and separate from the rest of the world and its beings, then humans cannot exist (Hardt and Negri 2005, 103). For Spinoza, there is only one infinite godly substance that is everything and everything is a part of this substance (Spinoza 1994, 54). The world, every single thing in the universe, every single body and being are moduses of this substance (Spinoza 1994, 145). That is to say, all of us, all of these human and nonhuman bodies that form and manifest themselves in this world, are embodiments of the same substance or material. This is Spinoza's antihumanism at its barest: humans cannot be separated from everything else. In other words, hierarchies between beings are – or at least should be – fundamentally non-existent.

Even though all beings have the same fundamental desire to remain in existence, it is hard not to slip into an anthropocentric view of human dominance, in this case myself and my playership, as something of higher relevance to this specific gameplay experience. However, when I strive to see and recognize the ways in which the other agents affect me, this attempt to build a hierarchy with me on top as a facilitator is met by objections. I do not dictate gameplay situation; I am by no means responsible or at the top of the imagined hierarchy. That being said, it is also crucial to recognize the fact that accepting others as equals does not erase all hierarchies. Nonetheless, active attempts to shake them can and should be made. In the era of global environmental catastrophes, deconstructing the dream of human dominance over other species and materialities is crucial. Analyzing videogames through materialist theories is important: videogames, virtual reality, and augmented reality have an increasing influence on how humans – at least in the Occident – perceive the world around them, and the agents present in these new environments differ from the ones humans are used to taking into account.

Political philosopher Jane Bennett uses the concept of vibrant matter to show a glimpse of the world in which we humans change our perception of the things normally seen as lifeless. Matter, according to Bennett, is to be taken seriously as companions: active, vibrant bodies of something, which have affective relations with humans (Bennett 2010, viii). At the same time, Bennett sets out to grasp subjectivity outside the notion of humans as the rulers of the world and themselves. This goal can be achieved by searching for horizontal and equal practices in interaction with human and nonhuman matter (Bennett 2010, ix).

According to Bennett, the idea of matter as dead and inactive emphasizes the notion of human as the king of the world. This human dream of omnipotence leads to destructive practices of control, conquest, and

possession. As humans are eager to trivialize the sensations received from other materialities, we tend to over-emphasize our own liability and control of our actions. However, there is always more in action than a mere human: rhizomes of social relations as well as nonhuman actants influence our actions in unforeseen, yet unavoidable, ways (Bennett 2010, xii).

Bennett's aim is to render the multidirectionality of all relationships visible. In *Minecraft*, this relationship is seen clearly, as I, as a player, have the power to modify and enhance my environment. That is not all: I operate with pixels directly impacted by the algorithms, which of course are coded by humans, but which inside their margin of operation act freely and sometimes unexpectedly.

This engagement happens in a rhizome of different materialities and entities. Rhizome – a concept used by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari – is a way in which agencies organize. It takes its form from the mushroom kingdom and stands in opposition to binary tree-like models of organization. All the points of the rhizome can be connected with all the other points; there are no hierarchies in this model. Everything happens in these lines of connection, not in their meeting points (Deleuze 1992, 27). As every single point of the rhizome is potentially connected with all the others, it can be broken, yet it continues its existence infinitely toward other bodies and via other lines. Deleuze and Guattari use an ant colony as an example of rhizomatic organization. The fate of a single ant or a single nest is meaningless in regard to the fate of the colony, which will continue to grow and exist (Deleuze 1992, 30).

Rhizome is a territory of affiliation and fleeing, which produces endless indeterminate multiplicities and potentialities for infinite freedom of creation. Every single element and entity possible in a videogame, such as *Minecraft*, comes into existence solely through the lines connecting them. This means that every physical and virtual body – of mine, of the machine, and of the others – is created in relation to other bodies in that specific rhizome.

Assemblage is a form of rhizome, often explained through the concept of love. According to Deleuze and Guattari, love is not love for a person, but rather for an assemblage consisting of the loved one, the lover and all the emotions and memories associated with that relationship.

Acting with the Others In *Minecraft*

> Gravity is a lifestyle choice for many elements of the world.
>
> Hexus_One

Now that we have acknowledged the others connected to the Minecraftian rhizome, it is time to look more closely at the ways their agencies manifest. The agency of the machine, in this case my Xbox, becomes visible through mistakes. We usually think of computers as extensions

of our brains or mind, or – in the case of, for example, game consoles – as some kind of cyborg-style extra limbs providing access to the world on the other side of the screen. However, the agency of a machine has always been present, but we only take it into consideration when something unexpected happens, when the computer crashes, freezes, or breaks. The idea of being in control of the machine was thus merely imagination, as the mistake opens up a possibility of withdrawal for all the agents involved.

We can harness and use electricity, but as it is flowing, bouncing, wild, and in a constant process of becoming by nature, its body is beyond our grasp. It can break free from cables and cause blackouts and short-circuits. It can, in cooperation with other agents of the grid, disturb my game experience as well as the infrastructure of entire cities. This moment of interruption and disturbance is where the nonhuman force running our lives becomes and manifests its agency (Bennett 2010, 25–28).

Gameplay as a co-agential rhizome can be explored through Spinoza's philosophy of joy. All entities pursue happiness and greater perfection, and happiness for one is usually happiness for others, the co-actors, close by. For humans, this greater perfection can be pleasure; for electricity, the chance to flow and sparkle; and for the pixels, the chance to arrange themselves repeatedly. Here the danger of anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism, however, lurks near. My knowledge of the sought-after or avoided perfection or imperfection of the nonhuman is always limited; one could say it is merely a guess. However, as I previously argued, for nonhumans there exists a chance to leave this relationship through a mistake: electricity can, for example, fry the circuits, thus allowing for console to crash. As long as our cooperation runs smoothly, I can only assume we are engaging together, somewhat freely, in this rhizome of gameplay.

Above I have discussed human and nonhuman agents. However, this division is problematic. I can declare my body to be human, but I am already many, a mixture of human and nonhuman entities. Together, we are involved in constant processes of subjectivation, of multiplicity, of becoming-something (see Guattari 2010). As Donna Haraway says: "To be one is always to become with many" (Haraway 2008, 4).

Gaming as action is essentially materialistic, rhizomatic, and mimetic, and it is constructed in cooperation with human and nonhuman agencies. As such, it is always in motion, both physically and conceptually. All human actions are constructed in similar cooperative unions. When playing videogames, we gain contact with materialities often thought to be non-material or somehow out of reach. A multitude of electricity, machines, players, and algorithms engages in an assemblage that is *Minecraft*, and every moment in this assemblage is a potential moment both for creation and for a mistake as a manifestation of human or nonhuman autonomy.

The rhizomatic, shared materiality does not end where the game ends. The acts conducted in-game resonate off-game into and through my

body, in the electric wires, and so on, forever. The first step toward understanding co-agential rhizomes of humans and nonhumans is to ditch the idea of separateness or material uniqueness.

However, back to polynomia: what captured my attention was the roar of power and freedom embedded in that word. Polynomia resonates, in my ears, with the word *autonomia* (autonomy). When associated with *Minecraft*, it uncovers the potential sovereignty of the rhizome, of the collective engaged in the gaming experience. Polynomia reaches beyond me as a subject, inviting along the multiple agents involved. It opens up a possibility to start a journey of finding new ways of resisting immersive passivity of *Minecraft*. These ways of resistance can be approached via the theory of counterplay.

The power of polynomia is the notion that sovereignty is also shared. It cannot be achieved alone, and thus it is parallel to freedom. Every single agent in *Minecraft* acts with and in relation to others. Becoming-something is always rhizomatic: all my tactics and practices inside *Minecraft* are the result of cooperation. Polynomia is thus an active, political word. It is more than a word: it is a philosophical approach.

Neuropower

> You haven't played Minecraft until you forget what year it is.
> Stealthman917

When playing, I become immersed, drawn into the creative process of gameplay. I lose track of time; I lose track of my body. Robbie Cooper has photographed people engaged in immersive situations, such as gameplay or movie screenings (Open Culture 2013). The kids portrayed mid-game stare with unseeing eyes, their facial muscles are relaxed, leaving their mouths somewhat open. I, too, feel the muscles in my face relax as the muscles in my shoulders and arms tense. These sensations vanish quickly and return only when something interrupts my immersion. Immersion is a thorough experience; it engages all of me: my brain and my body.

What, then, is immersion, and how does it affect my fellow gamers and me? Pasi Väliaho has written about videogames as the site for production of neoliberal, docile subjects. Väliaho reminds that, in modern neuroscience, the brain is considered an adaptive, creative, and constantly self-modifying organ. It is thus not merely copying or picturing but actively predicting and hypothesizing. Brain's primary function is to anticipate the things to come, in other words, to predict the future so that the rest of the body knows what to do and how to react (Väliaho 2014, 40).

Videogames tap into this function and thus into the core characteristics of humanness. In first-person shooter games, the player is sucked into a constantly changing and evolving web – or rhizome – of actions and reactions, which, according to Väliaho, is an accurate portrayal of the

way games offer "movement and contingency as an adaptive challenge". This is a way in which the biopolitical power structures of the techno age operate: the player engages with preemptive processes that happen somewhere out of reach of conscious awareness. The rhythms and excitements produced by the speed of certain games engage the brain: they ready all our senses in the face of this virtual danger (Väliaho 2014, 40). This is the desire of conquest and thus colonization. Even though *Minecraft* has a different pace and visual identity than first-person shooter games, it is no less efficient in generating immersion and engaging the player with colonial, capitalist practices. The game itself as well as the materialities engaged with the player are active participants and agents in this production of desire and neoliberal subjectivity.

Väliaho writes:

> For player, then, the screen exists as a simulated future, capturing our bodily rhythms and prenoetic adjustments through which the affective and predictive functions of the brain merge with the video screen and vice versa.
>
> (Väliaho 2014, 41)

The body, however, does not engage merely through simulations of bodily functions. In *Minecraft*, the movements of the character are not reproductions of human movements, but something existing in their own right. The character is stiff, "unnatural", more of a pixel than a representation of an actual human entity. It can be seen as an extension of human agency, although it clearly has agential qualities itself. The likeness, or mimicry, does not play a significant role here. The immersion emerges from the actual bodily engagement of the human player, and screen is merely a device in between. I would argue that the simulated future is thus created within the player, in the desire of conquest and possession, and manifested through the cooperational rhizome of the gameplay situation. The whole gameplay situation is thus inherently nonhuman.

Minecraft caters to the desire of infinite conquest and colonization, the infinite lust of being in control. It is a platform for domination and god-like fantasies, however educational its uses might sometimes be. But are there ways to immerse oneself in *Minecraft* without being subjected to these oppressive and compelling processes?

Counterplay

Thank you for helping us help you help us all with building.

Axalto

Contemporary theories of gameplay build upon Roger Caillois's theory of play. Caillois defines two modes or opposites that govern all play,

paidia and *ludus*. *Ludus* – which also gives the name to ludology – is a disciplinary form of play, which is characterized by skill, effort, patience, and other such traits. *Paidia* is an opposing (or complementing) type of play: it is based on joy and improvisation (Caillois 2001, 13). Most forms of play obviously contain both characteristics with varying intensities. According to Caillois, ludus-guided rules are essential to play: for play to be play, basic freedoms and stimulation for fantasy are needed. The two are always complementary and related, though Caillois considers ludus to be a refinement of *paidia* (Caillois 2001, 27–29).

Thomas Apperley (2010, 141) brings up the discussion over the importance and meaning of *paidia*. *Ludus* has been considered to hold some meanings that contribute to institutional practices, such as rites and sports. *Paidia*, however, is another thing entirely: it opens up a view to play as something that does not necessarily provide any cultural values outside itself. According to Apperley, Caillois seems to set *ludus* and *paidia* in a hierarchical order. *Ludus* refines and disciplines *paidia* and turns the wild and naive elements of play into something that has meaning outside the playing field. This does not mean that *paidia* is insignificant outside the play act, rather that the significance of it is extracted through/with *ludus*.

The relevance of *ludus* and *paidia* and their different hierarchical positions comes clearer when approaching the areas where counterplay happens. Apperley describes these areas as the margin where one is free to express oneself within the limits set by the rules (and their errors) and the material requirements and limits of the game. This margin is created when the creative and unruly forces and practices are combined with the formal rules. As the "margin" is not, according to Apperley, "a realm of pure potentiality"; it is vulnerable to exploits or acts of counterplay (Apperley 2010, 140).

According to Apperley, "there is a tension between the society of control, or 'algorithmic culture' and counterplay: the emergent practices of digital game players". This tension comes from the alleged notion that the algorithms of a game already contain all the possible meanings, leaving no room for critical approach or new engagements (Apperley 2010, 132). Apperley sees counterplay as something unthought of by the developers, practiced by the players on the margins of possibility offered by the game. This approach distinguishes it from counter-gaming, which relies on interference to the code as its method (see Galloway 2006).

The significance of the human player is, according to Apperley, to be the force that sets things into motion. As long as the human does not use or tap into the code, it is mere potential. However, everything is in existence, material, yet dormant until utilized (Apperley 2010, 143). In other words, counterplay can be perceived as active participation that arises from the human need or will to do something. As long as the code just exists, it is not counterplay, even though everything needed for an action already exists.

Is potentiality action? Or is something considered an action merely when human influence is added to the mix? Apperley seems to think that human activity is the catalyst, the force that can bring forward the hidden potentialities embedded in the mishaps and the unthought-of thought of the code. This is clearly an anthropocentric approach, which sees the human as the only relevant actor. Everything else is just preparing. However, if we look at *Minecraft* as an example, things happen without direct human engagement. If we look past the act of turning the game on, all sorts of processes run even when the player does not actively practice counterplay. Thus, the potentiality is always more than mere opportunity waiting to be seized. Apperley's approach also sees action as something related to movement: something must be done to actualize the potentialities left in the margins of the code. Yet we can assume that there are other modes of moving and resisting than those that require movement in space: for example, those that concern the body of the player or temporal engagement.

Apperley points out that as gameplay is always situated and created through the human body, there are limitations to the modulation of the algorithmic culture. In order for the gameplay to actually happen, the algorithms must work in some cooperation with the rhythm of everyday life. The rhythm of everyday life is the location where, according to Apperley, the practice of counterplay takes place and from which it arises (Apperley 2010, 132). When approaching games as material environments, one may easily become stuck with the idea that the code somehow limits what one can and cannot do. It is clear that the material foundation formed upon code and algorithm do define the actions one may perform inside a game world as every single choice has to be coded in order to be made. This, however, is only one and clearly limited approach to materiality and games themselves.

According to Apperley, in order to understand the effects of everyday life and its rhythms in digital games, we must see games as more than mere codes and algorithms (Apperley 2010, 134). He does not deny the influence the regime of compulsion or discipline has on gameplay, but emphasizes the more complex ways gameplay affects and is affected:

> Rather than in relation to compulsions it is ambiguous and paradoxical; disciplinary and adaptive. It operates both as a mediator and intermediary; consequently game play is in some contexts an impartial transferor of culture, but in others, a source of new culture and relations. This is not a binary relationship: adaptation and compulsion exist in an imbricated spectrum.
>
> (Apperley 2010, 134)

To move beyond the binaries of compulsion and adaptation, Apperley draws from Bruno Latour and his discussion of mediators and

intermediaries. In Latour's actor-network theory, the roles of actors tend to be largely immaterial. An object, such as a videogame, can function in a social ensemble undictated by its essence or status. Instead, the role or function is formed in relation to other actors and connections. Apperley states that reducing games to their code is to reduce a complex activity into a closed circuit of player and the game, which already contains everything, all the meanings and possibilities (Apperley 2010, 134). With the concept of counterplay, Apperley strives to open that relationship and to follow human and nonhuman interactions further down or around the rhizome.

Following Apperley's theoretical approach does not undermine the importance of the materiality of games and gameplay. Rather, it opens up a possibility to take in consideration the different materialities entwined in gameplay processes. Counterplay can thus be seen as something that may get a little out of human or machine hands, thus creating something that cannot be described solely as one or the other. In other words, counterplay emphasizes play over gaming, which downplays the role of calculated achievements.

Counterplay is formed and practiced through actions and affordances that are already available and allowed within the rules of the game. However, actions of the counterplayer are typically something that was left to be done by mistake or that was not intended to be of any/much relevance to the gameplay. Apperley calls these actions emergent forms of play, which overlap and cross with the ways the game is meant to be played. The player may cooperate in these intersections with other human players via Internet or with machinic forces (Apperley 2010, 140). Counterplay is thus a shared affair and hence one manifestation of *polynomia*.

In their article "Girlish Counter-Playing Tactics", Rika Nakamura and Hanna Wirman list various ways of practicing counterplay in videogames still very much dominated by male players and developers. These tactics include "non-violence", "peaceful pace", and "alternative pathways" (Nakamura and Wirman 2005). As my emphasis lies within resisting the capitalist, goal-oriented ways of gameplay, these tactics are useful, as they highlight a more equal relationship between the game and the player.

In order to take the agency of the nonhuman seriously, the possibility of nonhuman counterplay must also be considered. Do the pixels, algorithms, game devices, or electricity have a desire to commit counterplay? One way of looking at this is to consider mistakes or bugs as forms of nonhuman counterplay. As I argued previously, machines and also algorithms make their agency noticeable through mistakes, or when something the player had not expected occurs. In *Minecraft*, it can be a non-player character getting stuck behind a rock or in mid-air, a tree growing from air, or other such quirks. If the agency of the machine is shown through the mistakes it

makes, is it not possible to see misbehaving pixels and NPCs as an act of a rebellion? Algorithms have means of deciding for themselves. It is true that their actions are limited to the programming, but so are – according to Apperley – the possibilities of humans in a similar situation. Everybody operates in the margin defined by the developers of the game. A problem lies, however, in the access to nonhuman counterplay and its intentions. As I can never know the intention of a pixel or a specific NPC, I can only guess and hypothesize about it.

The restrictions imposed by the mysteriority of the other guide my attention to another realm of counterplay. I am interested in processes that happen mostly in the player herself. This aspect of counterplay resides in the area of imagination and thus play, *paidia*. It is something undisciplined and therefore beyond strict limits or characteristics. It is also without direct consequences or benefits. This imaginary act of counterplay can be called a journey in intensity. It stems from doing much and nothing simultaneously. Counterplay is thus expanded to the body of the player: it is relevant how and what the player feels at a specific moment, what kind of resonances leave and return to the body, what is the relation between my body and, for example, the controller I am holding, and so forth. The things done or left undone are equally important: the practice can thus sometimes be situated solely in immobility. Practices of resistance and counterplay can also take place in the body of the player/performer. As discussed earlier, gameplay alters human tissues with its immersive potential as well as with the physical injuries and aches that prolonged gaming session may produce.

Counterplay may sometimes be as simple as choosing to immerse in the game world without moving the avatar at all. Immobility may, however, be intense and thus active gameplay in itself. What is active then is the performative aspect of both the player and the avatar. What is radical in this exercise is the refusal to anticipate the future, refusing to anticipate the stimuli the game is about to offer. In other words, the player rises, no matter for how briefly or incessantly, against the production of neoliberal subject described by Väliaho.

Nomadic Resistance

> It's a big world. But someone has to explore it.
>
> Tic_Tac_Toe

My counterplay in *Minecraft* has taken the form of nomadic expedition, which challenges the urge for productivity that the game promotes. I will give two examples of my own counterplay practices: aimless wandering and immobility. In order to truly open their potentiality, a brief explanation of nomadism as a philosophical concept is in order.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari describe the nomad as someone who does not move. This may seem weird, as wandering and displacement is characteristic to traditional nomads, but Deleuze and Guattari point to a conceptual difference. Movement requires a plan, a destination; it is something that happens between two or more predetermined points. Nomad has no plan and no destination, nomad travels via speed and intensity (Adkins 2015, 206). For Rosi Braidotti, nomadism "refers to the kind of critical consciousness that resists settling into socially coded modes of thought and behavior". Thus, a nomad does not necessarily travel along physical roads or paths but engages on journeys that take place in a specific place. Nomadism is defined by its power to unravel and break conventions and norms (Braidotti 1994, 5). Deleuze, Guattari, and Braidotti all see nomadism as an active practice, which is possible in both philosophy and art, and in other areas of life.

As mentioned before, the modulation of the algorithmic culture has a material limit. The practices I am proposing do not erase the materiality of gameplay, but rather tap into different kinds of materialities. When traveling in intensity and engaging in speed rather than in movement, the limits of actions inside the game world are no longer of concern. In other words, nomadic attitude to counterplay is more a philosophical than an operational practice and, as such, relevant for developing a different approach to game studies.

As *Minecraft* is all about building and establishing locations of virtual residence, wandering around aimlessly can be seen as a means of counterplay. If I start *Minecraft* in "Survival mode" in the easiest setting possible, "Peaceful", I will face no enemies nor will I die of hunger. This means that there is nothing I need to do or avoid – the only exception is falling from a place high enough for the blow to be lethal – in order to keep existing in the world (Figure 11.1).
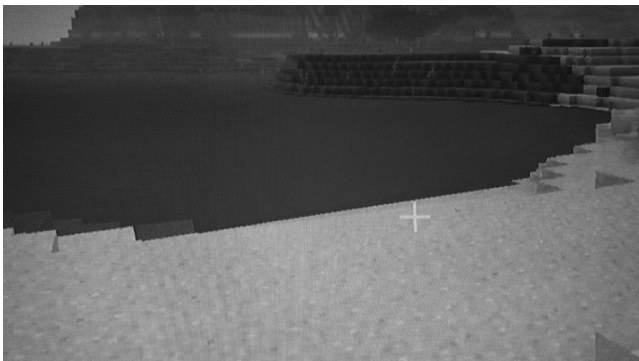

Figure 11.1 Wandering.[2]

When the players choose to exist in a wandering state, they refuse to stop and claim ownership of the possible wonders and quirks they encounter. This is obliviously a goal in itself, but one that resists the basic hierarchies provided within the gameplay ideals. Leaving things behind can be a challenging practice, at least in my own experience. When I encounter a village full of non-player-characters or a temple rising in the middle of a jungle, a part of me wishes to claim some kind of ownership or to acquire a lasting memory of that place. However, there is nothing to possess or acquire; the fleeting moments spent inside the game leave material mementos within the game, but they tend not to be accessible to the player and their materiality. This acceptance of the impossibility of colonialism and, thus, power, can be considered one of the possible radical implications of counterplay.

Remaining in immobility is the other form of counterplay I have practiced on my adventures. This means that the player spawns to the world and then remains immobile. The avatar does not do or accomplish anything, and neither does the player. This results in something that can be described as traveling in intensity. I, both my physical body and my avatar's, engage in active nothingness, active non-movement that still resonates with speed. Intensity is traveling in place. We choose not to engage in movement and, thus, choose not to deliver the expected behavior. This tactic pushes Nakamura's and Wirman's "peaceful pac" to the extreme (Figure 11.2).

Both of these practices set the player against the inherent colonialism of the game: my objective is no longer to expand, own, and possess. In fact, I no longer have an objective. Thus, this approach is the refusal to succumb to the logic of capitalism. As all means of counterplay, these as well are provided to the player by the game and its mechanics. However, these practices cannot be absorbed or capitalized on by the game company – there are no added value or innovations present here. The intensity produced in the player in cooperation with nonhumanity around them is all that it is.
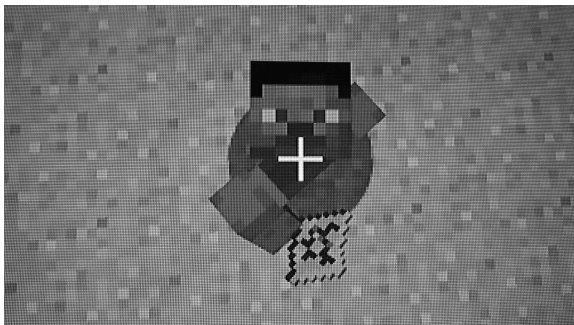

Figure 11.2 Traveling in intensity.

A nomadic way of playing, of remaining in immobility can be a way to engage in resistance and in counterplay. When both, the player and the avatar, remain in fixed locations, the prospects for the future change radically.

Conclusion

> The thing is, there's only six sides to a block.
>
> <div align="right">Direwolf20</div>

This chapter has pieced together a picture of gameplay – especially that of *Minecraft* – as a rhizome of human and nonhuman co-agencies affecting our brains and our bodies. Practices of colonialism, conquest, and possession intertwine with immersive pleasure during gameplay, thus strengthening and enforcing harmful, capitalist, and anthropocentric power structures. To challenge these processes, I have introduced some tactics of counterplay practices by Nakamura, Wirman, and Apperley, and then expanded the concept with my own examples from *Minecraft*.

The force of these practices lies in the refusal of the player to be subjected as a vehicle of capitalist dreams of expansion. My interpretation of counterplay is that it is a philosophical practice, which extends outside mere gameplay. In other words, taking passive actions and engaging in resistance in videogames are bound to have an effect on the player also in other situations. Acknowledging one's position in the hierarchy helps to undermine and deconstruct it. It is also crucial to see other agencies and materialities affecting the player.

Doing nothing is, however, still a choice, and a choice is always a question of internality that somewhat dismisses other agencies despite their influence on me. The choice here restores the hierarchy in favor of the human: it makes room for oppression of the other. The power of capitalism is to restore human rule, ensure that the human – and a very certain kind of human – stays on the top of the hierarchy. Counterplay might not be able to abolish hierarchies, but it can make them visible.

The absence of plan and destination in my examples of counterplay is set against the logic of capitalism, however brief these moments of resistance may be. The possibility for the subject to choose such an approach, one that acts or at least tries to act outside a possessive and destructive ideology, is indeed a contested one. The notion of the end of the history, of current *status quo* as the best and final one is hard to overcome. Cultural and artistic practices are, however, keys to resistance, as they approach the question through pleasure and play instead of pain and gain.

Notes

1 All the quotes are from the same discussion thread on *Minecraft* Forum. In the thread, players invented their own *Minecraft*-related quotes.
2 All the images are screenshots from *Minecraft* taken by the author and used under fair use according to Digital Games Research Association guidelines.

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