



## Vagabond Mimesis – Nomadic Wanderings through "Minecraftian" Performance Space

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**Abstract:** *This essay focuses on nomadism as a way of navigating and existing in virtual performance spaces, such as Minecraft. As nomadic thought is present not only in philosophy but also in art, we can assume that game play as performative action also has nomadic qualities. In my examples, the nomadic attitude includes the non-human materialities in interaction with the player. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the nomad worker does not reproduce, he/she follows, embarking on journeys in both immobility and distance. The avatar/performer in Minecraft is such a worker, engaging in endless functionless labor, that in itself is creative and ever forward-striving and, therefore, mimetic. I discuss possible ways in which the nomadic approach practiced in performance studies could be applied to the study of video games as spaces of performance and what kind of perspectives on mimesis could be opened through this line of thought.*

**Key words:** *nomadism, non-human agency, video games, virtual performance, mimesis.*

### Introduction





This is a picture of a pig standing on a chest, looking intensively into the camera. We can distinguish the difference between the pig and its surroundings, even though all of what we see is pixels organized in representational clusters. When playing video games, such as *Minecraft*, one is always also engaging in performance and in mimetic action. Performance can be defined here as non-representational, functionless and gratuitous action (see e.g. Roihankorpi 2015), produced by one or more agents and one or more spectators that can be human or non-human.

Performance gains its power from mimesis. My rendition of mimesis is that it is a force and an action with infinite potentiality to create new worlds. It exceeds theory and representation and refuses to settle down and to adapt to norms. Mimesis is not merely a human trait, but is produced by agents of all species and materialities. Mimesis is a process of continuous and endless creation (see Roihankorpi 2015).

This text<sup>1</sup> serves to offer the reader a glimpse of my explorations on co-agential nomadic performativity in video games. The example here is a video game called *Minecraft* (2009- ). Firstly, I will briefly explain the basics of *Minecraft*, and then move on to the non-human rhizome present during game play. Secondly, I will introduce nomadism as a concept, followed by a performative take on it. Lastly, I will suggest some possible strategies for nomadic, performative gameplay within the world of *Minecraft*.

### ***Minecraft* as a game and as a virtual space**

*Minecraft* is a so-called sandbox video game that invites the players into a never-ending digging and building frenzy. The term sandbox refers to the freedom of play as opposed to following strict goals or quests. Upon entering the game, the player encounters a limitless world created by algorithms hidden beyond the visual pixel façade. The world is created and constructed in sync with the movements of the player: the landscape is generated as the player moves forward. This means that things that are beyond the player's vision only come into existence as a result of human and non-human cooperation. As the player wanders and explores, the world also gets bigger.

The world consist of pixelated cubes, which can be cleared and gathered with tools and then placed in whatever formations the player chooses. Everything is the same size, only the surfaces vary. *Minecraft* has no story beyond the player's experiences. The game has a certain amount of affordances that the player may use as they like.

*Minecraft* offers various positions the player may take up. They can be a farmer, miner, colonizer, explorer or wanderer, just to name a few. Although the game has no set goals or quests, it is hard not to set them for yourself. The player wants to dig

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is based on my presentation in *The Vanishing Point in Theatre* conference at the University of Arts in Tîrgu-Mureş, October 2016. Parts of it will later be included in my PhD thesis. All screenshots by me.



deeper, climb higher, build a huge stronghold or vast railway networks. *Minecraft* invites the player to inhabit, colonize and modify the environment around them.



My interest lies within the nomad way of being and wandering in the performance space in question. When the player has no specific goals in mind, it is easier to engage in the mere existence in the virtual world inhabited by countless pixels and blocks, thus abandoning strict separation between subject and object. This approach emphasizes the performative qualities of game play – the player is in the mimetic process of creation with other, mostly non-human agents.

### **Non-human agencies**

As previously mentioned, the human player is never the only entity responsible for the performative actions materialized in the screen. Political theorist Jane Bennett has coined the term “vibrant matter”, which strives to take seriously into account the non-human matter affecting us (Bennett 2010, viii). The aim here is to think of subjectivity and the processes of subjectivation as something reaching beyond mere humans. This means acknowledging the others engaged in the processes – whatever task currently at hand – with us.

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 programming language, which manifests and moves the pixels, and electricity, which provides power for my computer and has previously done so during the programming and testing stages of the game in question.

Other non-human agents include pixels, which by thousands and thousands constitute my avatar’s movements via mathematical dance. A hidden but crucial agent is the electricity, which provides power for me and the others playing a certain game. The agency of electricity becomes clear through its bouncing and flowing essence. In a



constant process of becoming-something, the body of electricity remains beyond our reach. Even though we use and harness it, it can break out of broken cables and sockets; it can escape or cause blackouts and short-circuits. (Bennett 2010, 24–28) Electricity can, in cooperation with other agents of the grid, interrupt my game experience anytime. Here, in this very moment of interruption, the non-human agency that virtually runs our lives becomes concrete and manifests itself through disturbance.

Bennett emphasizes the importance of rethinking matter in order to rid humans of their destructive phantasies of world domination. Current ecological crisis stems from the notion of the human as a ruler of the planet to whom all other beings – both organic and in-organic are subjected to.

Organizing with the non-human must be done as horizontally as possible, in order to find more creative and constructive ways to coexist. A way of thinking these relations is the concept of the rhizome, devised by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. A rhizome is a horizontal way of organizing, and it is always changing and re-organizing itself (Deleuze and Guattari 2014). Rhizome is a process on which things happen in the relations between involved entities. No single body is in control of the process.

The rhizome I engage in extends through the pixels, devices, electricity, metals, and plastics to other humans such as miners, factory workers, and game designers. As we now continue with the nomadic subjects embodied by me and my avatar, it is crucial to keep in mind that these subjectivities are also in a constant, relation-based process of becoming-something with myriad of others.

The agency of the machine can be grasped through mistakes. When a computer crashes, freezes or breaks, when it becomes useless, trash, it stops being an artificial limb and emerges as an agent on its own. This, however, is solely an illusion, the agency of the machine has existed all along, even though it has performed the way we wanted. Still, we have merely imagined our position on the top of the hierarchy. Now the mistake opens up a relationship from which all the agents have the possibility to withdraw.

## Nomadism

As *Minecraft* is a game with no predetermined, specific goals, it invites players to explore new, unorthodox methods of playing. My method of choice has been nomadism.

Rosi Braidotti describes the nomad as a figuration of a “situated, postmodern, culturally differentiated understanding of the subject in general”. Depending on one’s location or position, that subject can also be seen as postcolonial, postmodern, or postindustrial. That subject is thoroughly intersectional, as the subject carries multiple meanings. Recognition of difference as a positive, creative force is a key point when discussing nomadic subjectivities (Braidotti 1994, 4).

Although the concept of nomadic subjects is inspired by actual nomadic cultures and their experiences, the nomadism that Rosi Braidotti approaches is about “a critical consciousness



that resists settling into socially coded modes of thought and behavior.” Braidotti writes that the nomad does not necessarily move – great trips and travels can also take place in immobility. Nomadism is thus about subverting conventions (Braidotti 1994, 5).

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari claim that the nomad does not move. They distinguish movement from speed. Movement is closed; it has to have a beginning and an end in striated space, while speed operates in a smooth space and enables the nomad to appear anywhere. Our thoughts can be fast or slow, yet they never move. (Adkins 2015, 204) Thus, the nomad does not necessarily travel via physical roads or paths, but engages on journeys that are undergone in a specific place. Nomadism is defined by its power of unraveling and breaking conventions and norms (Braidotti 1994, 5).

Nomad space is smooth; we do not encounter walls, enclosures or roads, only traits (Žukauskaitė 2016, 12). The nomad moves on trajectories, rather than roads. Roads run from point to point and are closed spaces, while trajectories run between points and distribute people in open spaces (Adkins 2015, 204). Trajectories erase the hierarchical relations proposed by roads. There can be no right or wrong direction or order of things; all agents are fundamentally free to organize as they wish. However, as discussed, the smooth and the striated spaces do not exclude each other’s existence. Lines of flight are drawn from the striated towards the smooth, from the state to the nomad. The process also goes the other way – in the smooth space, the nomad is absorbed by the state, by the dominant, by the conventional, the hierarchical.

The nomadic approach is not only present and possible in philosophy and in science, but also – and especially – in the arts. Deleuze and Guattari (2014, xii) saw nomadic theatre in the works of Antonin Artaud, who challenged the conventional forms of performance. According to Audrone Zukauskaite, theatre, or, in this case, performance, becomes nomadic not only in the sense that all its conventional forms start shifting and trembling, but in the sense that it becomes a non-representable life flow, which is asignifying, asubjective and inorganic (Žukauskaitė 2016, 14).

### **Nomadism in Minecraft**

Nomadism in Minecraft can be practiced both in movement and in intensity. The player can choose to move like a traditional nomad, wandering while refusing to establish permanent residences. The avatar can wander forever: algorithms take care that the world will not end, unless a mistake, a bug, a power outage or death occurs. While wandering, several maps of the journey are drawn. One can be held by the avatar, one can be accessed in creative mode when floating in the sky, one is recorded in the muscles of the player, one in the player’s memory and one in the memory of the computer.

Although the memories of humans and computers are different in intensity, they both establish a map of the places explored. The memory of the computer is accurate, but it is also susceptible to glitches and bugs. The human memory may draw the cartographies based on mountains or bodies of water. It is deeply rooted in the visual and



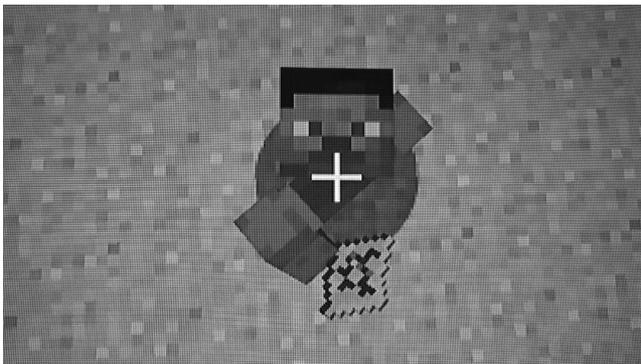
kinesthetic experiences of the player. The maps drawn here are the maps of experience: they relate to things the player has seen or done with the avatar. The map in the memory of the computer is rooted as well. The machinery, circuit boards and other members of the assemblage are physical bodies.

The maps caught in the bodies of the player and the machine are present in many dimensions, including time. There is no separate map or layer for different periods of the experience; rather, they are all present at once. Hence, now the time is part of/is a smooth plane of consistency.

The game play practiced and analyzed in my research aims for a rooted, yet flowing approach that refuses the ownership – even on a temporal level – of the virtual environment. The cartographies drawn here are not those of exact measurements and directions, but, rather, they map out horizons, approaches and affective relations the player engages in. The viewpoint is that of the player, as it is needed to ground yourself before flowing.

Wandering around aimlessly, grounding oneself through the cartographies and memories can be considered as something that opposes the norms set by the game. As the player does not engage in building and digging, but just enjoys the scenery and the infinite trip, the whole concept of game play becomes questioned.

The other way to practise nomadism is to allow the avatar to remain immobile. This is travelling in intensity. This is abandoning numbers, units and metrics systems and engaging with intensive multiplicities (Žukauskaitė 2016, 12).



Non-movement in intensity allows us to draw a different kind of map, a map of genealogy. All of the things involved in the performance rhizome have their own history. This does not mean that we should or could know the origin of every single member of the performance rhizome, but, rather, it emphasizes the non-representationality of the performance by recognizing it as a passing moment in intensity at the plain of crossing trajectories.

Both of these approaches require the immobility of the player. Thus, the player always travels in intensity. What makes the nomadic gameplay different from other forms



is that the avatar either travels via trajectories or stays put and thus operates in spaces uninvaded by accomplishments. The mimesis operates in the intensity somewhere between the nomadism of the player and the nomadism of the avatar. That intensity is immersion, an open smooth space full of potentiality.

This wandering nomad creates performances operating through creative nomadic and mimetic forces. These performances are shared and created with humans and non-humans, and as such, they transcend the boundaries of materialities and species.

Vagabond mimesis resists norms and strives to create an open, smooth space, in which the horizontal organization of difference is made possible.

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