Video games: Minecraft

Overview

- Minecraft is the second most successful video game of all time behind Tetris.

- It was created and designed by Markus Persson, a game programmer, who also developed and published the game through his company Mojang. A full version of the game went on release in November 2011.

- To date, well over 121 million copies have been sold across all platforms, including over 27 million PC copies, making it the biggest selling PC game of all time.

This fact sheet introduces **Minecraft** as a case study to explore how the media industries' processes of production, distribution and circulation affect media forms and platforms. It also considers how **Minecraft** targets, reaches and addresses customers and examines the way in which audiences have reacted to the game both as consumers and prosumers themselves.

Section A: Media Industries and Audiences (Evolving Media, Paper 2 Question 2)

Sample exam question:

'Explain the impact of digitally convergent media platforms on video game production, distribution and consumption. Refer to Minecraft to support your answer.'[1]

[1] Question taken from OCR's sample question paper for H409/02
http://www.ocr.org.uk/Images/316675-unit-h409-02-evolving-media-sample-assessment-material.pdf

Key terms

Digitally convergent media: Video games consoles are an excellent example of a digitally convergent device, you can not only play games but access social media, surf the internet, stream films and TV content and upload content into cloud based servers. Cross-media content helps maximise profits and also improve reach to new customers.

Production: This refers to all phases of designing, developing and making the media product; this process is addressed in this factsheet.

Distribution: This refers to all processes linked to delivering the media product to audiences both through tangible (disc) and digital (Cloud based) media.

Consumption: Explores the way in which the media text is used by audiences for pleasure but also explores the rise of user generated content across several platforms.

Media industries

A recent report by the UKIE suggests that the global games market is now worth in excess of US$100 billion a year, with projections estimating revenue of US$120 billion by 2020 after a pattern of continued growth. The UK's share of the market is just over US$4 billion; China, the fastest growing sector, currently enjoys US$24.4 billion versus America's US$23.6 billion.

In comparison to traditional media like film, radio, print and television, video games are much younger, exponentially growing since the 1970s. This era was referred to as the golden age of the video games industry, peaking between 1978 and 1983 when the combined revenue of US arcade and home videogames was worth some US$11.8 billion - a sum that far outstripped the

profits of the American movie and music industries combined. However, rival consoles, poorly designed games and a lack of quality control meant that the market crashed heavily; by 1985 the games console industry in the US was estimated to be worth just US$100 million.

Over three decades later, the industry is enjoying a resurgence with new types of 'gamer' and much tighter regulation, aided by key developments in internet speeds and accessibility. Thus, video games are culturally and financially significant across major territories (including Japan, Europe and the USA) with new console and games releases from popular franchises classed as major economic events.

Minecraft

Minecraft is a sandbox game, created and developed by Swedish based Mojang Studios. The game has been described as a virtual world of Lego that involves following simple instructions in order to play it: explore, mine and build. Users only have to log in and proceed to create a world full of textured 3D cubes. There are predominantly two game modes: Creative or Survival, although more recent additions include Adventure, Spectator and also Multi-Player modes.

Minecraft's Swedish creator, Markus "Notch" Persson started creating the game in May of 2009 having been inspired by similar games such as Dwarf Fortress, a single-player construction and management game; his goal was to produce a RPG variation of such a game. Minecraft's initial reception wasn't commercially viable, seen more as a niche product for players with expert knowledge of computers and programming.

Without the commercial backing of a mainstream publisher, and no money spent on advertising revenue, the game relied on word of mouth between gamers and featured on sites such as the Penny Arcade web comic to generate interest amongst gamers. Consequently, by January 2011, the beta-version of the game had passed over one million purchases in just only a month, and by April 2011 Persson estimated that US$33 million of revenue had been made.

In November 2011, prior to the game's official release, Minecraft had over 16 million registered users and 4 million purchases. Due to its popularity, Minecraft was released across multiple platforms becoming a commercially viable franchise with increased interactivity. In particular, Minecraft: Pocket Edition was released on Sony Xperia Play, available on Sony Xperia smartphones. Minecraft also become available on Android and iOS devices shortly after.

Formats: By 2012, Minecraft was available for Xbox 360 and Xbox Live. In 2013, Minecraft: Pi Edition, meant for educational purposes for novice programmers and players, was also released. In 2014, Microsoft acquired Minecraft intellectual property for $2.5 billion. In 2015, it reached 30 million copies sold. To date, over 121 official copies of the game have been sold across a variety of formats and platforms.

Distribution: Versions of the game can be purchased over the internet using such outlets the Playstation Network or Xbox Live Arcade. Recent additions include the Nintendo platform which was excluded from the initial Minecraft releases; available to download from December 2015 with physical copies from June 2016 and most recently for Nintendo Switch (May 2017) and Nintendo 3DS (download only from September 2017). The Minecraft: Story Mode - A Telltale Games series is also available via Steam.

Critical reception: On its release, the game won five awards at three conferences, including an Innovation Award, Best Debut Game, Best Downloadable Game, Audience Award and Seumas McNally Grand Prize.

Genre - Sandbox game: A game free of structure and constraint; players are free to roam and make choices about how they use available content. Sandbox games are often described as having open world settings. Minecraft later created a hybrid genre with the story versions and is sometimes categorised as sandbox, survival.

Processes of production, distribution and circulation by organisations, groups and individuals in a global context

Here are some key points to consider. There is a variety of links at the end of this worksheet used to support the construction of this resource and with references that can support the teaching of the following:

The specialised and institutionalised nature of media production, distribution and circulation.

Here you could consider how video games have developed as a medium. There are several documentaries and fan-made videos shown online which compares the types of games and their evolvement over the years, including the improvement of graphics and capabilities of modern games. Ironically, it is the simplistic nature of Minecraft and its blocky, universal nature which seems to have maximum appeal across a range of audiences.

It is worth considering how a simple PC Java game has become a globally successful phenomenon across all consoles and hand-held devices; Minecraft is now a multi-platform game which is not only just for PC gamers but those who own smartphones, Microsoft consoles (Xbox); Playstation 3, 4 and PS Vita; and more recently Nintendo consoles (Wii U) and hand-held devices (Nintendo Switch and Nintendo New 3DS, New 2DS XL and New 3DS XL) – all of which opens up new markets of profitability and increased exposure to new and existing audiences.

Modern versions of the game, notably Minecraft: Story Mode, follow more of the recognisable institutional conventions of game development including tutorials on how to play the game, something the original Minecraft series never had.

In a global context, the purchase of Mojang by Microsoft Studios for US$2.5 Billion is a testament to the lucrative industry and global appeal of such a game across different platforms.

The relationship of recent technological change and media production, distribution and circulation.

Due to the original nature of the game, most players simply logged in to play Minecraft and didn't need a physical copy of the game. When the Xbox and PlayStation versions were created there was often a chance to offer digital versions of the same game across the Windows 10 operating system to promote the Microsoft brand across home computers, a form of synergy. Users were often encouraged to download the

game through the cloud servers rather than a physical copy of the game which would incur more of a cost for the institution. The pattern of release for Minecraft shows that physical copies are often released six months after the downloadable version, most likely as a way to limit the impact of piracy, hacking and file sharing.

The introduction of Minecraft Realms (2013) has tried to give the producers more control over the distribution and circulation of the game since some pro-am consumers were creating their own virtual spaces and hacks across illegitimate servers, such as https://www.wizardhax.com/play/ as one example. It would be worth considering how some audiences might be playing Minecraft through these channels and are not included in the extensive official user figures.

The significance of patterns of ownership and control, including conglomerate ownership, vertical integration and diversification.

You could focus on the developer, Mojang Studios, which is now owned by Microsoft Studios, a division of the parent company, Microsoft. Mojang Studios is their only first-party studio in Europe. Given the nature of the parent company and the loyal fan base of PC gamers, it was in the company's interest to invest US$2.5 billion to purchase Mojang for long term revenue.

Other collaborations with games developers includes Telltale Games who helped develop the Minecraft: Story Mode in 2015. The Playstation versions were developed by 4J Studios.

Other noteworthy soundbites include the offer of investment from former Napster founder and Facebook president Sean Parker in 2011, which was declined by Mojang. When Facebook bought Oculus in March 2014, Markus Persson was quick to vocalise that he would not be developing a version of Minecraft with Oculus because Facebook was not owned by a group of 'grassroots' game developers. However, when Microsoft bought out Mojang and the intellectual property rights of Minecraft in November 2014 of that year, plans to work on a virtual reality version of Minecraft were renewed; Markus Persson's stakes in the company were no more. This can spark interesting debate about the ideology of game developers and prosumers who often surrender their creative license to conglomerate interests to maximise profits.

The significance of economic factors, including commercial and not-for-profit public funding, to media industries and their products.

With the continued growth of video games you could focus on the marketing campaigns for games often having worldwide and simultaneous releases across each video game market. Budgets for games vary and

Minecraft is a good example of a game that was made and developed using readily available open source software within the gaming community; creating the original Minecraft using Java gave it the advantage of being cross-platform: it will run on Windows, Mac OS X, and Linux. You can compare this to other mainstream games that require entire teams of programmers, artists and engineers to make video games that have budgets equal or exceeding that of mainstream films.

Minecraft has also been linked to non-profit projects such as the UNs Block by Block project, which encourages communities around the world to redesign their neighbourhoods using Minecraft. An educational version has also been developed, MinecraftEdu (2012), which has several applications to help teach subject and develop a culture of computer programming amongst digital natives.

How media organisations maintain, including through marketing, varieties of audiences nationally and globally.

The cultural impact of Minecraft is significant and you could discuss ways in which much of Minecraft's success was due to word of mouth and audiences sharing their own mods and game footage across web forums and video sharing sites such as YouTube. Different versions of Minecraft were released to entice different audiences, moving away from creation only narratives to include story modes, spectator modes and multi-player functionality across Minecraft Realms.

Further developments included the introduction of a physical Lego set to encourage younger audiences as well as merchandise opportunities and bonus content for buying more than one version of the franchise across platforms. Culturally, other developers and games studios have made intertextual references to Minecraft across games such as Runescape and The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim to name but a few; Lady Gaga, South Park and The Simpsons have also parodied Minecraft. All of this benefits the game by heightening its exposure to audiences.

In 2019 there will be a joint venture with Warner Brothers to release Minecraft the movie, this will be anticipated as having as much commercial success as The Lego Movie, also a Warner Brothers Movie. No doubt, there will be several spin-offs as a result of this.

The regulatory framework of contemporary media in the UK and the impact of 'new' digital technologies on media regulation, including the role of individual producers.

A link has been included in this worksheet to the UK Video Standards Council which applies the PEGI rating system to Minecraft. It is regarded as being family friendly and the initial Minecraft series was rated a PEGI 7 but the later

introduction of Minecraft Stories were classified higher because narratives and dialogue were being introduced. The ESRB rates Minecraft using different criteria. You could consider whether a game such as Minecraft even needs regulating and perhaps consider more the impact of freely available, fan-made videos where language and content is likely to be more risqué and unregulated by such bodies. A direct comparison to similar games and their ratings would also fuel debate, e.g. Tetris is a PEGI 3.

It is also worth considering how material is accessed and played. Minecraft Realms are hosted on specialised servers by Mojang. The terms and conditions are extensive and bring into debate issues of ownership of intellectual content and the disclaimers that now have to be issued by media industries. Most interestingly, there are stipulations by the company that they own everything created using blocks within these virtual worlds and that accreditation for worlds and structures created by fans is not guaranteed.

In 2016 a marketplace was created for communities to trade in maps, skins and texture packs.

How processes of production, distribution and circulation shape media products.

Here you should refer to the common generic features of sandbox games that can be accessed on servers in 'the cloud'. It is a good idea to compare and contrast similar games.

The impact of digitally convergent media platforms on media production, distribution and circulation, including individual producers.

The nature of the game and development in Java has meant that there are several rival and clones to the game Minecraft. http://castleminer.com/ is just one example of a game with remarkable similarities and there is much scope for debate about how you go about copyrighting ideas if everyone is using open source software. Indeed, when Microsoft purchased Mojang there was a surge in clone titles for rival consoles, such as Nintendo (who did not officially receive versions of Minecraft at the time) including Battleminer for the Nintendo 3DS https://www.nintendo.com/games/detail/battleminer-3ds Notice the slight variations in story narrative and the glaringly obvious similarities. One could argue that Minecraft was simply the right version of a block building game at the right time; it also highlights the importance of the emerging portable device market and capitalising on audience desires.
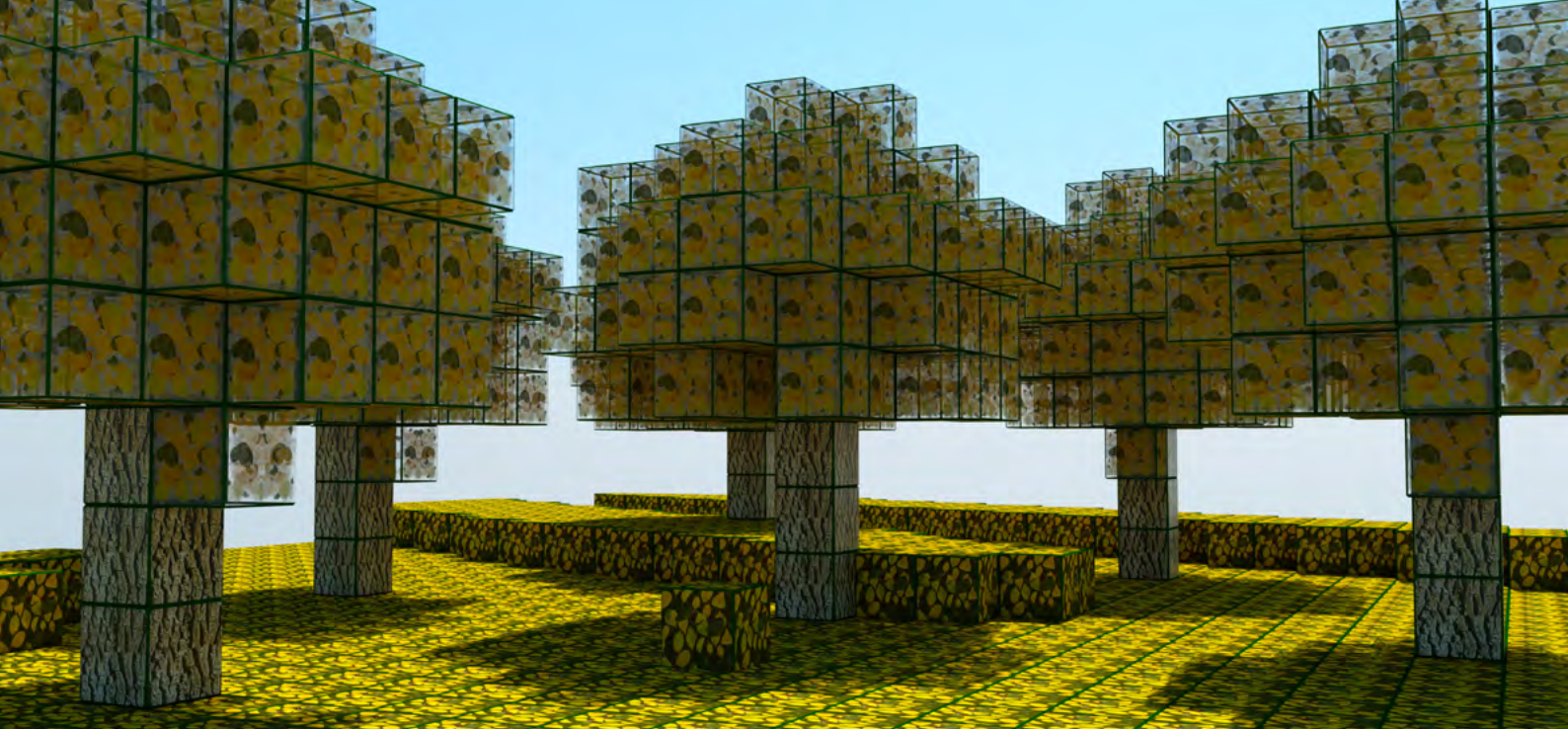
Media audiences

There are many discussion points to consider when looking at audience reception and use of Minecraft. Multiple gameplay modes are now available across several platforms now that the game is finally available across all markets on all consoles and hand-held devices.

The PC version of the game was noted for its modding scene where prosumers would alter the gameplay mechanics, change the assets and develop new skins and textures for other fans of the game to use.

The game is a global and commercial success and also praised by several high profile critics and gaming institutions. The game has amassed such a following that MineCon conventions can be found all around the world and further support popularising the game. There are other conventions of the game that have proven popular, including the release of albums featuring the music of the game, produced by German sound designer Daniel "C418" Rosenfeld.

The biggest discussion point for Minecraft should be 'which platform do I play?' With so many versions and formats available there was no sign of an outright console winner despite the game originating for the PC. However, in July 2017 a 'cross-play' feature was developed, meaning there was less emphasis on showing brand loyalty to either console. Despite audiences possibly owning more than one device, or a console and hand-held device by the same company, there does seem to be a focus on only developing content for the newer devices. For example, the recent Nintendo versions are not supporting on the Nintendo 2DS and 3DS, but are on the 'newer' 3DS and 2DS XL and 3DS XL models. This highlights an ongoing concern about the proliferation of technology and sustainability of audiences being able to afford new

consoles just to play a game (you could consider the expectation of gamers to invest in VR headsets).

There is evidence to suggest that mobile and hand-held devices are really driving the sales of Minecraft forward. For example, the release of the Playstation Vita version of Minecraft boosted sales of Minecraft by 79%, outselling PS3 and PS4 releases and making it the largest launch on a Playstation console. The appeal is being fuelled by a new generation of gamers who prefer hand-held devices over traditional consoles.

The continued development of fan made media across social media platforms and dedicated fan sites and blogs means that there is an active community of gamers who share a common interest linked to Minecraft. This can include groups such as The Yogcast who regularly produce videos that collectively have billions of views. Future conventions are expected to take place online as the demand and attraction of the game shows no sign of deteriorating (November 2017).

Fan made clones of the game are now ubiquitous across market place apps and various merchandise (both official and fan made) is available to purchase online. A series of books and magazines have also begun to appear after a deal with the Egmont Group.

Further applications of the game in the fields of computer aided design (CAD) has seen a cultural impact on the education system with MinecraftEdu (September 2012) as well as partnerships with global charity projects such as the UN's Block by Block project, an ongoing social experiment to encourage audiences to improve their communities by designing utopian worlds using Minecraft.

How audiences are grouped and categorised by media industries, including by age, gender and social class, as well as by lifestyle and taste.

Minecraft has universal appeal. It is useful to explore how such a game can appeal to different ages, genders and audiences from different social and cultural backgrounds. The variety of different modes is certainly a contributing factor to the game's success, but also the way in which audiences can control and shape their own worlds and create new identities through mods and altering textures, maps and craft kits.

How media producers target, attract, reach, address and potentially construct audiences.

Minecraft and subsequent versions and variations of the game offers familiar pleasures to existing fans (narrative features, open world gameplay etc.) along with new elements to target a wider audience (e.g. Story Mode). The creation of Minecraft Realms was a well-considered way to attract and encourage audiences to use the game on dedicated servers and increase subscription revenues. There already exists an established network of fans across the internet who share game footage, tutorials, mods and hacks so that gamers can get new experiences from the game.

How media industries target audiences through the content and appeal of media products and through the ways in which they are marketed, distributed and circulated.

Initially there was little work to advertise the original version of Minecraft; it was simply word of mouth across forums that created a buzz about the game. Now that Minecraft is established and owned by a division of a conglomerate, the methods used to distribute and market the game are similar to popular mainstream releases.

The interrelationship between media technologies and patterns of consumption and response.

YouTube, Facebook and online fan communities has enabled Minecraft's audience to have an active voice in its ongoing production through detailed feedback and commentary on modifications and beta tests. There are several niche forums that should also be investigated across the internet.

How audiences interpret the media, including how they may interpret the same media in different ways.

There are now several formats and versions to play Minecraft, however one of the most important developments has been the introduction of 'cross-play' which means that players no longer need the same console to play against each other. The development of the Minecraft 'cross-play' is just one example which enables gamers (the audience) to experience online play with other Minecraft players at the same time. (July 2017, 'cross-play' is available across all devices which can support Windows 10, iOS, Android, Xbox One and Nintendo's Switch.)

How audiences interact with the media and can be actively involved in media production.

The establishment of Minecraft Marketplace is a great example of the industry listening to their audiences (fans) and allowing the trade of different maps, textures and 'add ons' in a legitimate setting. The nature of the game has also allowed audiences to learn new skills, such as programming.

There are several prosumers on YouTube and across blogs who have their own dedicated channels discussing Minecraft, offering tutorials or who just want to show off their gameplay or promote their own maps.
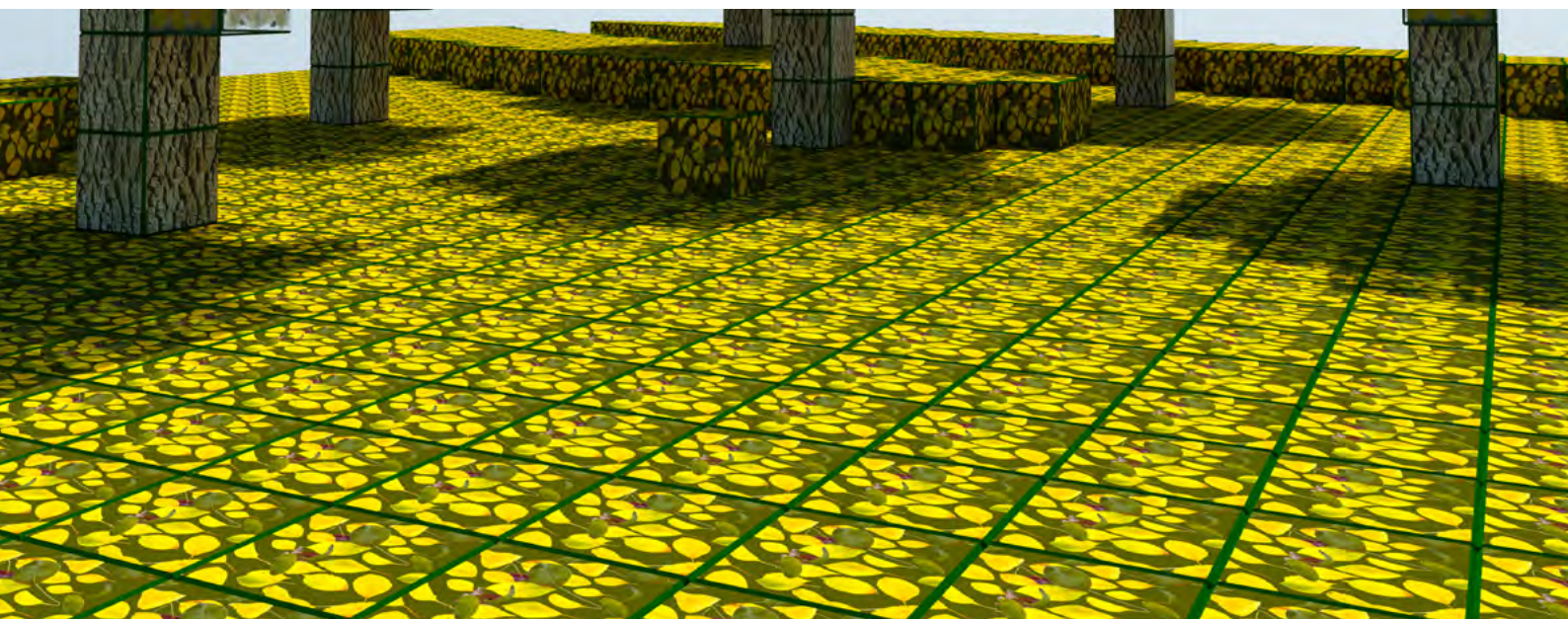
Whilst there is NO REQUIREMENT to directly reference theory for this question in the exam, you could consider introducing the following theoretical perspectives at A Level

Regulation – Sonia Livingstone and Peter Lunt

New technologies (in this case the convergent devices with access to internet, Bluetooth, etc.) opens up opportunities and risks that complicate regulation.

Cultural Industries – David Hesmondhalgh

Explore how cultural industry companies attempt to minimise risk and maximise audiences. The game has a large fan base and is owned by a division of a global conglomerate. The purchase of Mojang for US$2.5 billion illustrates that Microsoft are clearly attempting to harness the popularity of this franchise to encourage sales both of the game itself and promote Windows 10 and their smartphone market.

Identity – David Gauntlett

Gauntlett conducted a series of studies based around the use of Lego to create and share ideas and has also compared this to how audiences use the internet (one giant allotment). Making is Connecting is all about how people build a stronger sense of self-identity through creative practices. Minecraft adopts the same principles and shows how audiences are not only 'making and connecting' but are infinitely more creative through the use of the internet. The critical response of Minecraft as a media text highlights how the game is a way for people to socially create and interact is testimony to this idea.

Fandom – Henry Jenkins

Video games offer social experiences (online multi-player options) as well as communities outside of the core game experience. Jenkins' key quote 'if it doesn't spread, it's dead' can be used as a discussion point to track the birth and popularity of the franchise. Minecraft has a strong, well developed fan base that could be researched in more detail in relation to Jenkins' ideas about participatory culture.
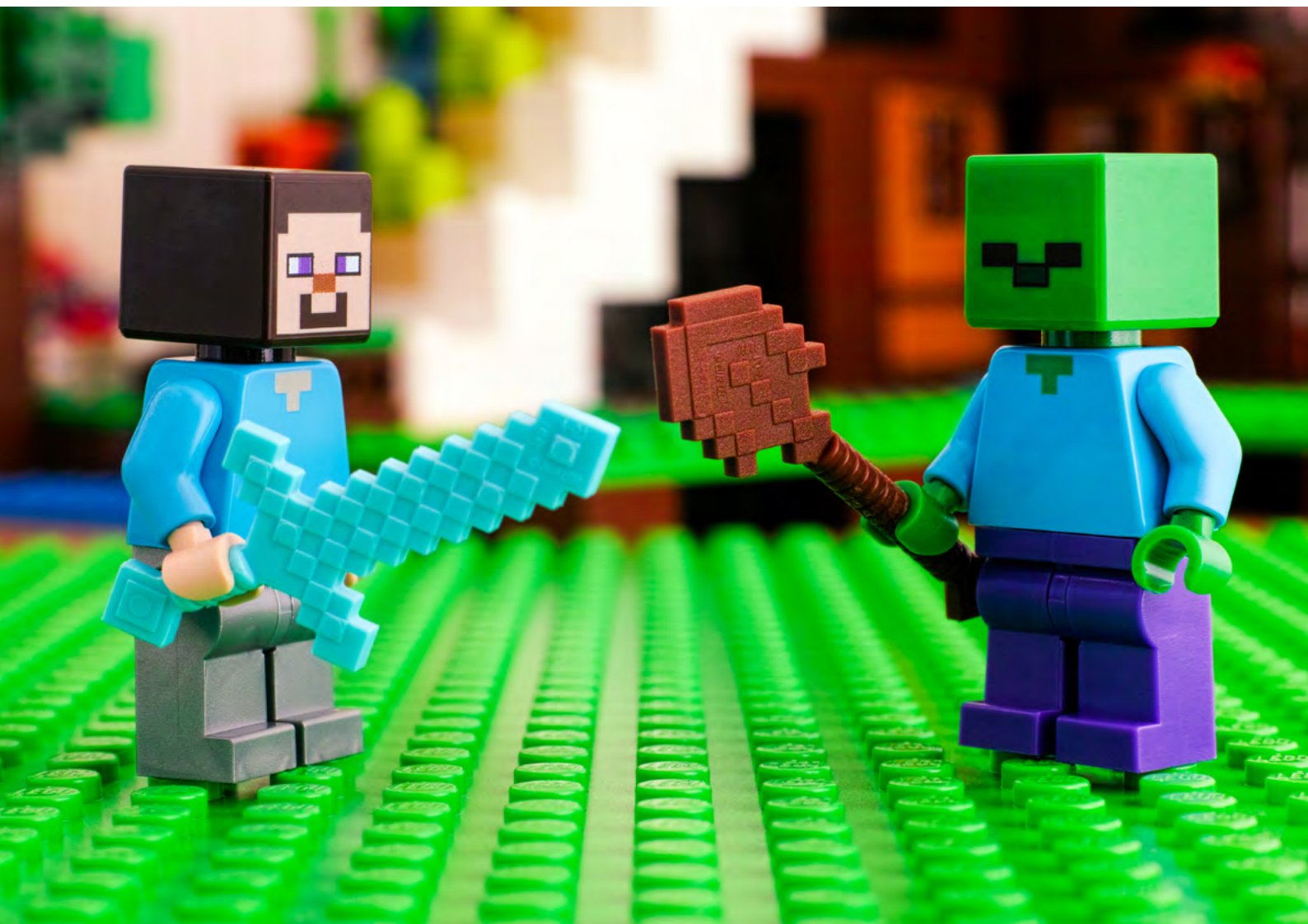
Webography of resources consulted in the construction of this resource

https://www.britannica.com/topic/media-convergence

http://www.denofgeek.com/games/24531/the-1983-videogame-crash-what-went-wrong-and-could-it-happen-again

https://www.penny-arcade.com/archive/results/search?keywords=minecraft

https://www.wired.com/2013/11/minecraft-book/

https://minecraft.net/en-us/marketplace/

For regulation see http://videostandards.org.uk/PEGI/index.html versus http://www.esrb.org/ratings/ratings_guide.aspx

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minecraft

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mojang

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