
Wood & Pixels

A Reflection on Process

The Common People - Arts Residency Fall 2106



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Django - Moses

How we came to be here...

In December 2015, we applied to be the Bernheim Arboretum and Research Forest Artist in Residence programme. The residency, running for over thirty years, invites artists to “work within the forest and/or arboretum to create works that are inspired by and potentially installed in the natural world”. Our proposal marked a new adventure in the history of this programme. Not only were we applying as a family, but our artists’ medium was Minecraft. Our proposal was simple: to explore the forest as a family of artists, using play, digital art, poetry and to create a ‘virtual Bernheim’ within the online video game of Minecraft. We were delighted when we got word that the judges had selected our proposal and, in September 2016, shortly after attending the Minecraft ‘Minecon’ Convention in Anaheim, we flew to Kentucky, where for the next seven weeks, we would live, play, create and discover as a family. We soon discovered that Bernheim is home to an amazingly warm, forward-thinking and groundbreaking community. This would certainly be a mutual exchange of knowledge and passions.

Who are we and what was our big idea?

We are The Common People: Adam Clarke, global pioneer of Minecraft based arts and heritage projects and the friendly Wizard Keen in Wonderquest; Victoria Bennett, poet, creative artist and home-educating mother, and Django Moses, free-range explorer of the world, Minecrafter, and awesome eight year old boy.

As artists, educators and parents, we understand the value and potential of Minecraft as a platform for creative engagement. We wanted to take this further, and explore it alongside

the natural world, bringing together two words that are often, seemingly oppositional. In our proposal, we outlined four main questions.

The Four Questions...

- Are we as artists just “playing around” or are we as children in fact “creating as artists”?
- How can a family learn from each other and share concepts and responses?
- Where do the boundaries blur between nature-play and digital-play?
- Can a meaningful dialogue between nature and gaming be established?

A bit about our process...

The way in which we approached these questions was simple: we played. Every day, we began our day with walking. We walked the forest trails, we wandered without aim around the arboretum, we strode with purpose and we meandered with pleasure. All the time we walked, we created. We listened, we watched, we observed, we talked, we took photographs and sketched and wrote poetry. Whilst we did this, we watched how our son responded to the environment - sometimes he would run or hide, sometimes he would be quiet and low down to the ground, sometimes he would pick up sticks and build things, sometimes he would take a stick and play music with the trees and structures and stones. We took his lead and in an unspoken mutual exchange, he took ours - letting us guide him at times with closer observation or asking questions.

We also talked: to each other and to the staff, volunteers and visitors at Bernheim. We discovered more about Forest Communities, Living Building Design, Regenerative Ecology, Nature Play, Cookery, Garden Cycles and Edible Energy Exchange, Habitats and History. We listened to stories, scratched surfaces and dug deeper. From all of this, we created poems, music, song, sketches, sculpture, toy boats, video blogs and, finally, Minecraft maps. After each walk, we would go back to our cabin and get together around our large wooden table, overlooking the lake. Covered with large sheets of paper, forest finds, books, magazines, pens and pencils, this table became our creative hub. It was our Kentucky “kitchen table”, where the seeds of our ideas would grow into art.

We did not want to attempt to recreate Bernheim. At 14,000 acres of natural forest and 240 acres of Arboretum, it was too vast and too diverse to consider creating a topographically accurate single map. We wanted to convey some of the diversity of the place, not just in habitats but in the way it is a living art gallery, history project, ecological experiment, pioneering steward and community archive as well. So, how could we express this within Minecraft? How could we bring this huge experience into creative focus?

It seemed appropriate to start with the idea of the tree and looked at the symbol of the tree in myths, such as the Tree of Creation and the Norse Yggdrasil. We wanted to tell more than one story, so we explored ideas of branches and tree structures. Could we create a map that was an actual tree, where the player explored the tree and found branches of stories? Maybe the stories would be in the seeds and leaves and roots? Or maybe it would be more like the nine realms in Norse mythology? In the end, it was a graphic icon

that gave us our “A-Ha!” starting point of how to bring these ideas together. On the stationery, website, doors, signs, gates and publicity material of Bernheim, we found ourselves looking at a cube, on which sat nine trees (or lollipops, as we discovered they were locally referred to). These nine trees became our focus. We decided to create a map based on this image, that would contain within it nine independent, yet interconnected, map-worlds. These worlds would represent nine different areas of Bernheim, and the “stories” would contain the stories we discovered in these areas, and our responses to our experience.

In the end, we opted for a combination of structures and natural spaces, that included the Visitor Centre, Rock Run Loop, the Edible Garden, Guerrilla Hollow, the Artist’s Cabin, the Fire Tower, the Play Garden and what came to be known as the Wilson Slice. Each was connected, yet different, to the other, offering a diverse playing experience and insight into our residency at Bernheim. The game premise is simple: the player spawns into the map on top of the cube and finds nine trees. Each tree has a door through which the player can choose to enter. The door motif was inspired by Django, who made a fairy door on each trail we took. Each door takes the player into one of the nine stories. Once inside the tree, the player encounters a magical space where they are then transported into the story of that tree. Each story is distinct. We discuss the maps in more detail in our essay, *The Nine Stories*.



Did we get any answers...?

So, did the experience bring us any closer to discovering answers to the questions we posed at the start of our residency? We think so. How, then? Our first question was this:

Are we as artists just “playing around” or are we as children in fact “creating as artists”?

One of the most exciting factors of this residency was that we were there as a family, as equals, and our creative input and output was equally valid. This meant that the boundaries between ‘playing’ and ‘creating’ were soft borders, ones that we moved between with fluidity and fun. We discovered that we were playing and creating all the time. Our process as artists was connected at all times to our experience of play and delight and curiosity. This playfulness influenced the ways in which we approached the maps and music and poetry. The walks we engaged and the physical interaction we had with the environment, were equal to the creative sessions around the table, both stimulating ideas, solving puzzles, discovering solutions and new approaches and energising the creative mind. It allowed us to communicate and exchange ideas and ways of seeing in a mutual, respectful and equal way. This, in turn, influenced the way we responded to each other, and in doing so, provided us with answers to our second question:

How can a family learn from each other and share concepts and responses?

The fact that we were communicating on an equal platform, with equal validation to play and formal creative process, meant that we were able to share concepts and responses

with ease and without hierarchy. The notion of a relationship of expert and amateur, teacher and learner, was dissolved and we were able, as parents, to see the immense creativity and ingenuity of our son's play and ways of seeing and responding to the environment we were in. We were able to listen and respect and follow through on his ideas and, as a consequence, he gained confidence and creativity in the value of his perceptions. At the same time, we were able to share with him some of our ways of seeing and our process as artists. He was able to discover different ways of approaching things, and also able to respect our space as artists in a mutual way. It was immensely rewarding for all of us, as well as creatively affirming. We all contributed and all shared in the direction of the residency, allowing our own curiosity and passions to guide our work. When we took away the preconception of 'adult as expert' and 'child as learner', and moved beyond boundaries of 'art' and 'play', nature and digital, we laid the foundation for discovery and engagement in really interesting and positive ways. This experience responded to our third question:

Where do the boundaries blur between nature-play and digital-play?

The fact that we were selected to be the resident artists at Bernheim, where our artistic medium was the video game Minecraft, was in itself challenging and innovative. We discovered that whilst they have some obvious differences, such as physicality and tactile engagement, the two types of play share some core elements. In the digital play of Minecraft, and the nature-based play that a space like Bernheim offers, the key drive is curiosity. This is expressed in the desire to explore the landscape, to experiment with materials, to craft objects and to make connections. What was interesting was the way in

which these two forms of play began to influence each other. Which brings us to our final question:

Can a meaningful dialogue between nature and gaming be established?

We believe it can. At the start of our residency, we had little preconception as to how the outcome would look. We had some simple process guidelines and we allowed ourselves to be shaped by experience. We were met with some quizzical looks - how could we 'create a game in Minecraft' that could engage and connect people to nature and to Bernheim? How could Bernheim relate to the digital world of gaming? Throughout our residency, the natural world and all its stories became the source material for our game creation. The way we interacted with the environment, the narratives that we discovered within it, the play and poetry and art that it inspired, all this influenced the choices we made in creating the Minecraft maps, from the structure and interaction of the nine trees on the cube, to the details of the maps within those 'realms'. What was also interesting was the way we interacted with the natural world and the creative responses we had to. We began to see how these were influenced by some of the core principles of gaming, such as finding hidden objects, telling stories, layering narratives and creating conversations between elements. In our daily walks, we were experiencing many elements of gaming. Was it then possible to create a series of maps that would reflect upon this relationship?

Minecraft is an authentic space where children feel able to create without restriction and with amazing positive returns. What we witnessed in others, and experienced ourselves, was that by opening up the dialogue between the natural world and the gaming one, both

areas were positively influenced. By engaging with nature through the gaming medium, the oppositional argument was removed and curiosity was immediate in both directions. The restrictions placed upon this dialogue by perceiving them as antagonistic only serves to limit expansion. The more that children (and adults) can move between the two spaces, the more that will create interesting and inspiring dialogue, and open up the way to gaming being a platform whereby young people, as the digital citizens of the future, can nurture passions and interests in subjects such as ecology, developing a deeper understanding of the natural world around them and, through play, forming their own solutions to some of the serious threats to habitats.

But is it Art...?

As with all creative process, the residency also raised further questions. When discussing the residency with other people, the two most frequent responses were:

"...but is it Art?"; and

"...yes, but what exactly is it that you are making?"

These were interesting questions to consider. They were not posed antagonistically, but more in genuine puzzlement. This was a unique situation. Bernheim holds a long history of innovation and, in selecting us as resident artists, they were true to this foundation. Not only were we a family that was going to place play at the heart of our creative practice, but we were using an online, digital video game platform as our central creative material - something that has not happened before, either at Bernheim, or elsewhere in the world.

The usual conversation ran a little like this:

“What is your media?” (*Minecraft*)

“Ok, so what are you creating during the residency?” (*a series of playable, downloadable maps within the game platform Minecraft*)

“Yes, but what is it you are actually making?” (*repeat above*)

It became a circular conversation, that helped us to really dig deep into how we perceived our own creativity and validity as artists, and also into perceptions and divisions between Art with a capital A and art in digital/virtual gaming.

The main issue of contention appeared to be around the idea that Art required a physical, tactile object to be considered as thus. The equation was simple: if it exists in what is referred to as ‘the virtual’, then it is not a ‘real creation’, not a ‘work of art’. We wanted to explore this further. We looked first at the principles of art making, which we defined as:

- to observe
- to question
- to respond
- to create
- to communicate

It was possible to look at all our practice and affirm these elements present. We observed, questioned, responded, created and communicated. So, what was different? It seemed to relate to the fourth element of process: to create. The notion of ‘originality’ in Art is still a

very powerful one. We were creating our art within a game platform that had already been created. Certainly, there are restrictions placed upon creativity by the limitations of the game coding itself - for example, trees in Minecraft are pretty uniform and certainly not as diverse as an arboretum, and, most obviously, everything is made of cubes! Minecraft is often referred to as 'digital Lego' but this analogy only goes so far. However, maybe it is more revealing to equate it to 'digital clay' - it has certain material limitations but within this, the possibility for creative play is enormous. As any artist knows, the creativity exists in pushing at the limitations of the medium. The simplicity of the platform allows for an expansion of creativity, rather than a reduction.

Is it original? Yes. When an artist takes found objects and makes something 'other' with them, the 'other' is an original creation. When a painter creates a portrait using oil paints, the painting is original, even though it is created within the prescribed limitations of the medium. A writer uses language that has been coded over time and cultures, appropriating phrases and structures that have been set out by someone else. A musician plays an instrument, using a set of notations, upon an instrument that has been made by someone else. In all these cases, the final art work is original. Why then is it hard to conceive of a virtual, gaming platform being Art?

Our responses to the residency are unique to us, and have upon them the digital equivalent of our thumb prints. They also contain, embedded within them, digital imagery, audio and poetry. They are open access and can be downloaded, for free, by anyone around the world who has the Minecraft game loaded on their device. We also created digital 3D versions to allow people to go online and wander around the spaces within the map without playing the map itself or needing to own Minecraft. In conjunction with what

exists online as a game, we have produced a secondary digital archive including digital photographs to be printed, digital PDF and audio versions of the poetry that can be printed or downloaded and listened to, videoblogs, and 3D sculptures from the maps themselves, that can be digitally produced in a physical format and, thus, tactile.

Historically, art has kept up with, and sometimes moved beyond, society. It is not unusual for a new movement in art to be met with “but is it Art?” By adding gaming into that mix, we can move even further from the preconceived notions and limitations of the Art Gallery and Art. There is no reason why gaming platforms cannot engage with art. Minecraft, as a sandbox game, allows the player to experience a work of art as a game (TateWorlds), it enables the artist use the platform to create an original work of art (My Mother’s House) and has the capacity to be used to create original works of art itself (Minecraft Infinity Project). It is unique, but not exclusive. The scope for video game as an art medium is relatively underdeveloped, restricted often to the animation element. There is so much more to be explored and we are excited by this. Through removing oppositional boundaries such as nature v. gaming, virtual v. real, we hope to move beyond what is different and explore how these worlds can enrich and engage with each other.

Thoughts for the future...

In an increasingly digital world, there needs to be a shift in perception that renders the term ‘virtual’ obsolete. So long as the term ‘virtual’ is tagged on to anything that is not analogue, then the implicit value judgement remains. Yet, within the digital sphere, art galleries can exist as spaces online, they can curate a global programme of artists that create work that exists only in a digital format, they can set up exchanges that cross

borders and boundaries, and they can engage viewers in that art and process in ways that we are only just beginning to conceive. The potential for cultural exchange is huge and the value of that only guessed at.

As we move into new territories of knowledge and technological advancement, our understanding and preconceptions of what is art is are being challenged. The leaders of this movement are not the college professors, or even the middle aged artists like ourselves. If we want to understand the movement, we need to look a little closer to home. The pioneers in this new art movement are children, who are effortlessly bridging the gap between the 'real' and the 'virtual', moving without issue between nature play and digital play. These new artists are able to conceive of the reality of something without needing physical proof beyond pixels of its existence. Their creativity within the game of Minecraft is as valid as Picasso's sketching as a young boy, and just as a child might see a piles of wood and create a castle, so a child might see a world of digital blocks and create a kingdom and within that world, interchangeable as it is for them, they can find connections, explore conversations and communicate experiences — with themselves, with each other and with a global community.

These are the people who have the potential to create positive change in the world we live in and lay down ways for future generations to understand the complexities of our lived history. Through the support of the Bernheim Artist Residency Programme, we have had the opportunity to open that door a little wider and, we hope, allow a little more space for these new seeds to grow.