



Walking in virtual forests: Using Minecraft to create digital Trees of Life

by Paul Graham



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Abstract

This article introduces the use of the video game Minecraft to complete the Tree of Life narrative therapy process and discusses new possibilities for practice that the medium creates. This is explored through a story of practice with an individual, with whom the practice provided an alternative to a traditional intake session. It also includes a story of practice in a group setting, as a program offered within a school.

Key words: *Tree of Life; video game; Minecraft; school; children; youth; young people; narrative therapy; narrative practice*

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The use of video games as tools to facilitate therapy sessions has become increasingly prominent in recent years (Bender, 2023). In my youth I was an avid player of video games and spent many hours playing a Nintendo 64, both on my own and with friends. However, as I got older, I moved away from playing video games and as a result missed much of the development that came with the sixth and seventh generations of video game consoles, particularly the presence of internet connectivity (Kemerer et al., 2017). I am not entirely removed from video game culture — I still play the occasional game, so I hold some degree of insider knowledge — but to position the young people I have worked with as the experts in these systems, I have taken an outsider perspective.

I began working in out of home care 10 years ago, and video game consoles were present in every group home I entered. I would often sit with young people as they played video games and was regularly impressed with the passion they showed. Minecraft (Mojang, 2011) was played by young people of all ages, and they would regularly express pride in their creations. I would see young people looking up tutorials on YouTube to build working cars, planes and even computers from the materials within the game. It became clear to me that Minecraft had incredible potential for creativity and engagement.

I was not alone in this observation. Since Minecraft was released in 2009, it has emerged as not only one of the most popular video games of all time (Mavoa et al., 2018) but also an effective educational tool (Baek et al., 2020). Minecraft released an “education edition” that has been rolled out in schools across Australia. The education edition features all the same features as the full game but with added controls for teachers and the incorporation of additional learning tools (such as items that allow for chemistry lessons).

I was curious about ways I might draw on young people’s engagement with Minecraft to facilitate therapeutic conversations and saw its potential as a tool for facilitating the Tree of Life.

The Tree of Life

The Tree of Life methodology within narrative practice draws on the metaphor of a tree to assist with the creation of a second story (Denborough, 2008; Ncube, 2006). Different parts of a tree are used to represent elements of a person’s life: the roots are used to explore where the person is from and their histories; the trunk represents values, skills or abilities; the leaves are used to reflect on significant people and relationships; the fruits represent gifts the person has received, and so on. The drawing and labelling of a tree creates space to view the story of a life from a different perspective (Ncube, 2006). Through the process of creating their tree and responding to prompts, participants can be invited to engage in further narrative practices (Dickson, 2009). These include externalising, where problems are named and located as outside a person (Carey & Russell, 2002; White, 2007); re-authoring, where alternative storylines are created to assist in exploring preferred identities (Carey & Russell, 2003; White, 2007); and re-membering, where relationships with others are explored to develop understandings of our identities (Russell & Carey, 2002; White, 2007). In a workshop setting, individual trees can be joined together to form a “forest”, providing opportunities for discussion about the “storms” or collective problems that trees may face.

Ncube (2006) and others (e.g. Carmichael & Denborough, 2015; Elhassan & Yassine, 2017; Ken, 2022; Nicholas, 2021; Senehi, 2015) have invited participants to draw on paper to create their trees. The use of Minecraft to render trees creates an alternative practice utilising digital resources to assist people to develop alternative storylines in their lives.

Working in Minecraft

Minecraft presents a number of possibilities for therapeutic conversations. It is a virtual sandbox with blocks that players can use to build structures (Davis et al., 2018; Mavoa et al., 2018). A sandbox game has no predetermined goals and instead allows for creativity in the way one interacts with



Figure 1. A Minecraft avatar

the game world (Ching, 2012). There is no one “correct” way to play. Minecraft players have access to a limitless virtual “Lego box”, allowing them to grow their confidence in a low-stakes creative environment (Kilmer et al., 2023). The user operates an avatar that can walk within and around the structures they create. Customisation of this avatar provides opportunities for identity workshopping (Li et al., 2013), and while there is risk of addiction when players have a high-level of self-identification with the avatar (Zhong & Yao, 2013), there is the potential to discuss values and personal goals through avatar exploration.

There are many different playstyles and difficulty levels within Minecraft, which are relevant to those considering its use for the Tree of Life process. For playstyle options, there is “creative mode”, in which the player cannot be “killed”, can choose any item to use from a menu, and can fly around the map so they can access any area with ease. Alternatively, there is “survival mode”, in which all resources must be collected by the player before they can be used. Within either of these modes there is the option to set the difficulty anywhere from “peaceful”, with no enemies in the world, through to “hard”, where the “enemies” are more active in attacking your avatar and what you have built (Faulkner, 2025; Overby & Jones, 2015). These enemies take the forms of skeletons, zombies

and “creepers” (which explode if touched). The game also offers a quest for users to collect a number of items that will allow them to face the “ender dragon” and “finish” the game.

When players or administrators are setting up their worlds, they have control not only over how the world is created and how characters in the game react to the player, but also who is able to access it. This means the game can be tailored to be an individual experience, or through internet connectivity, other players can be invited in.

One of the strengths of using Minecraft is that it has become highly accessible. It is available on computers, every major video game console, and there are even options for the game to play on smartphones (Scianca, 2025). Its low-resolution graphics mean that it can run on computers with lower processing power, meaning anyone with access to a device from roughly the last decade should be able to access and play the game.

Minecraft is a “cross-platform” game, meaning that people using a variety of devices can access the same online server to play with others (Scianca, 2025). This offers possibilities for engaging in collective “forest of life” processes. However, there are limitations to this. There are two editions of Minecraft and players will need to be aware of which version of the game they are playing to ensure they are able to access the server. Beyond this, Minecraft has been available since 2011, so while cross-platform play is available for current consoles and computers, people playing on older machines may not be able to connect with people playing on a different system. Players must also ensure they have updated their games to the newest edition to increase the chances of cross-play compatibility (Scianca, 2025).

Video games have frequently been subject to moral panics and have been blamed for causing social isolation, antisocial behaviour and even school shootings (Ferguson, 2008; Puri & Pugliese, 2012). Despite little evidence that video games cause such issues, this

discourse ignores the many positive elements that can come from playing video games. Beyond improving reflexes and hand-eye coordination (Rosenberg et al., 2005), video games played a crucial role during the COVID pandemic in maintaining social connections (Ballard & Spencer, 2023; Marston & Kowert, 2023).

Not just mindless entertainment, video games have the potential to facilitate play-based learning (Ritterfeld & Weber, 2006). Since the 1990s, “edutainment” has emerged as a process to improve engagement in learning settings. Play-based learning has broad implications for how video games can be adapted to multiple settings to improve learning outcomes (Kenwright, 2017). This process can also be flipped to great effect. That is, employing “gamifying” elements to tasks can improve engagement and increase the chance of people entering a “flow state” (Chan et al., 2019; Guerrero-Puerta & Guerrero, 2021; Nicholson, 2015).

Trialling the Minecraft Tree of Life with John

John, a 12-year-old boy, was referred to our service because had been refusing to go to school over the past few months. In the referral it noted that he was struggling with “anxiety” and would often shake if he was near the school. When I met John, I did our standard intake process (asking about his family, community, school etc.), but John responded to nearly all my questions with a shrug and “I don’t know”. I wasn’t sure if John would return, but when I called back the following week, I was told he was looking forward to working with me. Our next session was similar, in that any questions I asked John were met with a shrug of the shoulders and him saying he wasn’t sure. The exception to this was when we spoke about video games. John went into depth about the game Fortnite (Epic Games, 2017) and the friends he had met online through playing. John also spoke about Minecraft and how a group of online friends were working together to finish the game.



Figure 2. Using signs to mark the various parts of the tree John created in Minecraft

Seeing John’s passion for video games, I asked if he would be interested in doing a session using Minecraft. I described the Tree of Life methodology and, as I was not overly familiar with the game, asked if he would help me trial the process within Minecraft. John agreed, and as we sat down at his computer, he showed me some of the world he had been playing in with his friends before generating a new world for us to work in. Once this had loaded, I asked John to find an area where we could “build” a tree. He noticed a relatively flat area with sunflowers growing on it and flew down to begin building.

I explained that the first thing we would need to build was the root system of the tree. John was initially unsure whether to build these underground or above ground. He settled on having “wavy roots” that were partially above ground. Once he had built out a number of roots, I explained we would need to label them in some way. John then showed me two options for signs: a hanging sign and a signpost. We settled on attaching the hanging signs to some of the above-ground roots.

I asked John to use the signs to name places that were important to him. John then labelled the roots with “Croatia”, where his extended family had moved from, alongside various local areas and some locations from video games. John told me

about the “battle bus” from Fortnite, which had been an important online meeting point for his friends through COVID. John also named San Francisco, which he said was for his favourite basketball team, the Golden State Warriors.

We then moved away from the roots and John installed signposts on the ground. I asked him to write on the signs any activities he currently engaged in or enjoyed. John named basketball, Minecraft, Fortnite, handball and drawing. We spoke about John’s interest in basketball, and he shared that his dad was a fan of the sport and that it was something they watched together. When I asked about drawing, John got up excitedly and said, “I have a whole binder full of drawings”. John began looking for the binder but soon sat back down saying he would try to find it during the week to show me. I said that I would love to see his drawings and asked some questions about what he liked to draw. John said, “anything really”, and then noticed that it had turned to night in the game. He quickly built a bed and “rested” his avatar in it to return the Minecraft world to daytime.

John then built up the trunk of the tree from the roots and placed some more hanging signs around it. I asked John to label the trunk with his values, skills and abilities. John noted first that he was creative. I reinforced this by noting his love of drawing and the way he used creativity in Minecraft. John also noted that he was caring and competitive. I asked John when he was competitive, and he said that it was video games and sports where he would see his competitive side show up.

As we built out the branches for the tree, the game world again turned to night. John dropped to the ground briefly to fight away some skeletons that had appeared around the area before putting his avatar to bed to return to daytime. John initially said he didn’t have many hopes or dreams “at the moment”, but after thinking further, he began labelling the branches with “travelling”, “getting better at Minecraft”, and “getting better at Fortnite”. When I asked John about where he would like to travel to, he said he mainly wanted to visit San Francisco to see his basketball team play.



Figure 3. John used picture frames to represent “fruit” on his Minecraft Tree of Life

As we moved out to the leaves of the tree, John named various family members and some of the friends he had made through video games. When I asked John how we could put “fruit” on the tree, he was at first unsure. John then showed me that he could place on the tree a “picture frame”, which could display any item in Minecraft. John set some frames along the branches and inserted pictures of apples within them. John hung signs from these frames and recorded some of the gifts he had received like his love of basketball, the support he had received from his parents, and friendship from the people he had met through gaming. We finished that session with me thanking John for his help in showing me how the Tree of Life could be done in Minecraft. I asked him how he found the session. John said he found it made it easier to talk about his life and that it was fun.

For our next session, we used John’s love of drawing to externalise anxiety (which was represented as a large wave named “Mr Wave”) and began unpacking some of the effects of the problem. This included drawing on metaphors for waves: that as you swam past a wave you would be able to reach a calmer part of the ocean. By engaging John through his interests in video games and drawing, I was able to begin exploring the values and skills John already held and help him to discuss his experiences.

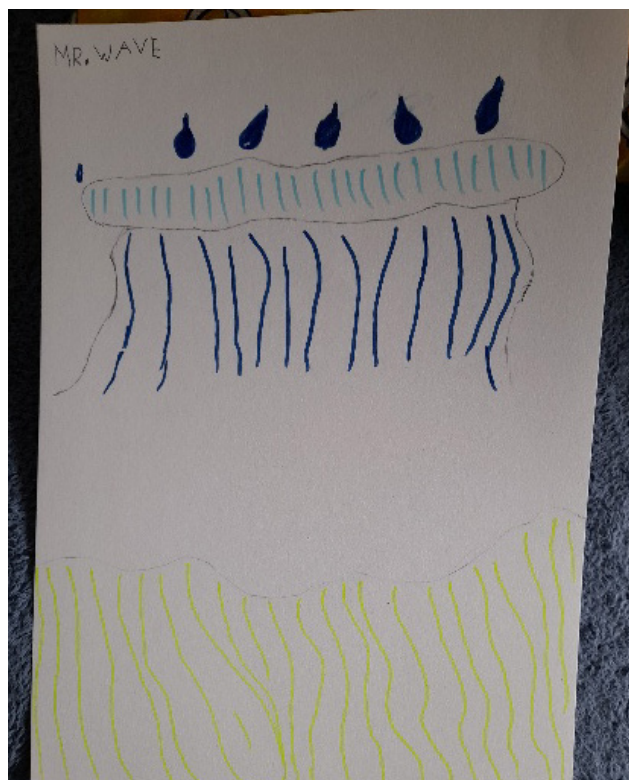


Figure 4. "Mr Wave"

Using Minecraft for Tree of Life groupwork in a school

After the successful process with John, I spoke to the chaplain of a school we regularly work in and asked if they would be interested in running a digital Tree of Life program. The chaplain had a few young people in mind and began setting up a group to engage in the process. We ended up with a group of six young people who were both skilled with computers and interested in being part of the group. Their names were Tony, Dan, Benny, Chris, Sam and Bob. The group met for six weekly one-hour sessions, with our final session consisting primarily of a celebration.

In our first session, I described my limited knowledge of Minecraft and Tony stepped up to help. I asked if it was possible to set up a single world that all the members of the group could have access to. Tony immediately set up a "flat infinite world" and invited the others into the server. After explaining how the group would play out over the next few weeks, I invited the young people to make the world their own and play around. Within minutes, Dan had built a

house surrounded by a moat made from lava, while Chris had built "a laser beacon to shoot into the sky". I acknowledged their skills and asked questions that invited all the young people to assume the role of expert in Minecraft.

We moved into creating the roots of our trees. Benny created a flying tree with roots made from "glowing obsidian". He noted that he wanted his tree to be "like a futuristic thing". The young people used signs to list places that had played important roles in their lives. Benny spoke about the Big Banana in Coffs Harbour, which had been a holiday destination when he was younger. This led me to reflect on the Big Oyster that had been in Taree when I was younger. The other young people spoke about the many "big things" around Australia that they would like to visit. Dan named his love for the local skate park and how he had met many of his friends there, which led into discussion about important friendships (and spending time at their houses). These discussions moved quite naturally into the "ground" section of the Tree of Life process, where we discussed activities such as skating, drawing and playing video games.

As we discussed the values, skills and abilities that would populate the trunk, Bob spoke about the value of "being free" and how when given more freedom he tended to "do the right thing". As we were speaking, Dan hollowed out the inside of his trunk to create a cubbyhouse. This allowed us to discuss how one could choose to "live inside" one's values and the protective qualities they could have. All the young people in the group listed "creativity" as a skill, which

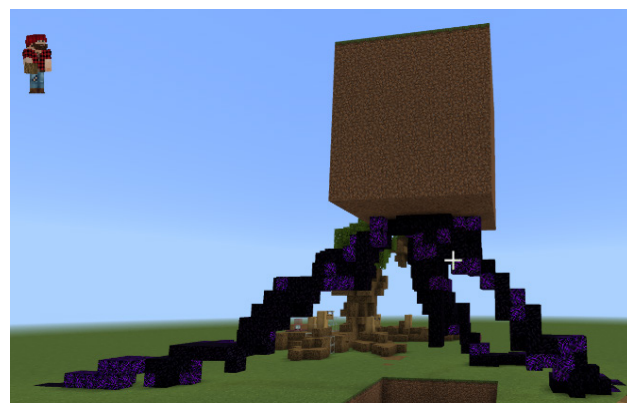


Figure 5. Benny's futuristic tree



Figure 6. Dan's tree-trunk cubbyhouse

I reflected was apparent in the creative ways they were approaching the Tree of Life process.

As we moved on to creating the branches of the tree and discussing our hopes and dreams, we spoke about the height of the branches, and how the higher branches could be used for more "important" hopes. Tony decorated his branches with white blocks, which he said were "like teeth". When asked what the teeth represented, Tony said, "Nothing really, I just think they look cool". Tony spoke about his goal of "getting fit". We discussed how he had recently signed up to the gym and the skills he was using to pursue that goal.

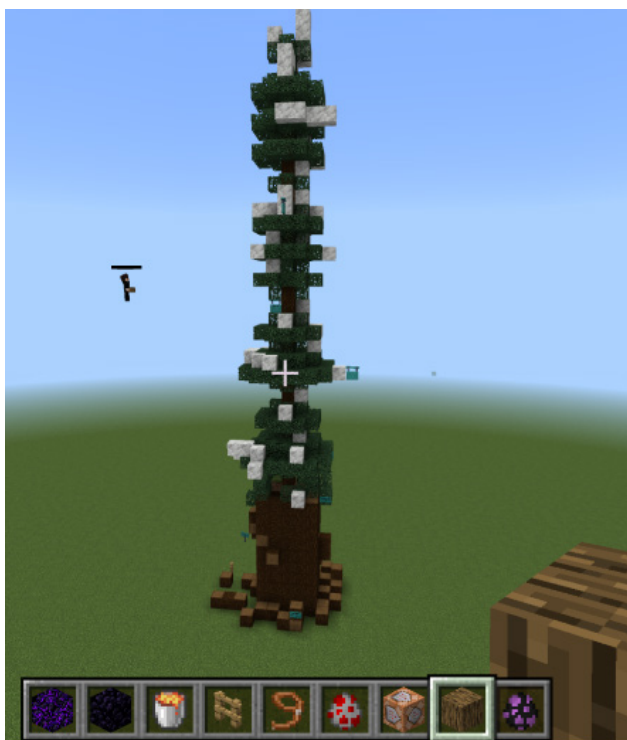


Figure 7. Tony's "Teeth Branches"

Bob said that his dream was that his sister who had died at a young age would come back to life. We spoke about how hard it was to lose a young family member, and this allowed for the use of re-remembering questions (Russell & Carey, 2002; White, 2007). My co-facilitator and I discussed ways we could bring Bob's sister into the present, how she might feel knowing she was so cared for, and the role Bob played in her life.

Moving on to the leaves and the fruit of the tree brought many great conversations. Benny said that a "gift" he appreciated was his phone. When asked who gave him the phone he said, "I got it myself, with my own money". We unpacked this further, discussing how his aunt supported him with pocket money and the ways his aunt had cared for him. Bob and Dan spoke about how their brothers had introduced them to riding bikes and scooters. As we expanded on this, we spoke about the ways riding bikes had helped Bob and Dan form many of their friendships (including with each other).

Minecraft provided many options for creative ways to collectively explore "when the storms come" (Ncube, 2006, p. 12). From the menu in "creative" mode, we were able to change the weather. This allowed us to create a strong visual representation of storms arriving, with additional commands allowing us to create lightning flashes. The game also has its own metaphors for problems in the form of "mobs" like zombies, skeletons and creepers. As we used these metaphors to speak about the hazards people can face in life, Bob described a period when he and his family had been homeless. Bob said his family was able



Figure 8. Chris's tree with a hopscotch area and laser beam to the side

to get through it by reaching out to others (namely his aunt and grandparents). I asked further re-membering questions about what it meant to those family members to be able to care for Bob's family.

When asked about the experience of completing the Tree of Life in Minecraft, all the young people said that they had enjoyed the process. Bob and Dan noted that it had been easy to identify the similarities between their lives and the trees. I also thanked all the young people for sharing their Minecraft skills, and the group agreed that the program had been a positive experience for them all.

Observations

Minecraft is a computer game, and even within a setting of flat grass, there remain distractions that may take away from the process. For example, Benny wanted to show me how to make an "ender portal", which forms part of the optional storyline of the game. Once through the portal, the player must defeat an "ender dragon" before they can return to the "overworld". This distraction derailed Benny's engagement for roughly five minutes before we could return to the Tree of Life process.

Due to the world being infinite when set up, it is possible for participants to get lost and be unable to locate their tree. When a person starts creating their tree, it would be helpful to have them make note of its coordinates on the map so they can easily return to it. Coordinates can be set to show up in the bottom left of the screen. With the coordinates in hand, players can use the "teleport" command to return immediately.

Just as drawing a Tree of Life creates ways for people to express their inner worlds through metaphor, Minecraft offers the same affordances while drawing on skill with a mouse and keyboard rather than a pen or pencil. Controlled digital environments can provide safety for sharing stories, with players able to decide on private or public expressions, and in turn, what elements of a story to share within these spaces.

Throughout the group program, there developed a true sense of collaboration and community building. The participants continually shared tricks and tips for each other's constructions, and the free-form creation that came with Minecraft meant there was no competition. All the participants were building this world together. Due to negative discourse that surrounds digital media, creating a space where skills with technology were affirmed helped to form second stories around the young people's interests and to form bonds across the group, which in turn had the effect of turning feelings of vulnerability into feelings of teamwork and connection.

The wide range of materials available in Minecraft allowed many opportunities to customise a tree, like Benny's use of glowing obsidian and Tony's inclusion of "teeth". There is potential to explore the choices made when building trees. For example, sections of the tree made from different materials may hold additional meaning. We might ask: "What does it mean that you chose to represent this section using that material?"

Possible future developments

My best hope for this work would be the creation of an online server that anyone could join to create their own Tree of Life. I imagine that people from all over the world might access the server, not only add to the "forest" but also to walk around and experience all the rich stories others have shared. I believe this would create a powerful living document and instil a sense of community among all who contribute.

In the work described in this paper, I used creative mode when the young people were constructing their Trees of Life. There is potential to expand this practice into survival mode, in which building a tree would not only require more effort and time to gather materials, but also be exposed to the risk of having "enemies" destroy it. This may deepen understanding of challenges that people face and provide a strong visual metaphor for problems.

The use of Minecraft in this way provides an opportunity to enrich distance therapy sessions. As Thompson (2024) noted, video games offer exciting new options to integrate therapy approaches in a fun manner. I hope that this paper will help practitioners add this approach to their work and more readily integrate narrative approaches into their distance sessions.

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