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Experiencing Minecraft: How Game Difficulty Affects Gameplay

Minecraft, developed by Mojang Studios, introduces you to a world full of creativity, survival, and most of all blocks. An optional mode to the normal Survival is Mojang's Hardcore Survival mode. This permadeath unforgiving survival experience constrains the player just enough to the point of a faded path they must follow to survive and ultimately beat the Ender Dragon. A mode like this calls for more caution than actual freedom, given that any small mistake could cost you your life and the world's existence. These "Higher stakes can create more tension. For many players that means having to be more careful and think of safer ways to accomplish certain goals."(Monscawiz, 2023)



Figure 1.: This is the Game Over screen for Hardcore, there is no respawn button

In *Minecraft*'s Hardcore mode, the permanent death mechanic intensifies the player's experience by heightening tension and encouraging strategic decision-making, while simultaneously constraining exploration and risk-taking. A large part of *Minecraft* is the exploration of the many biomes and generated structures such as villages, woodland mansions, sand temples, etc. Yet, in Hardcore you can't experience all that the game offers because of the difficulty it brings when you step outside your base. Eventually, after hours upon hours of playtime, you'll have enough gear, food, and items to explore the world you're in but what's the point when most scenarios are high-risk low-reward?

Overall, Mojang built and continues to build *Minecraft* through only the perspective of regular Survival mode. By introducing new biomes, structures, and items, they ensure that their players always experience new sides of the same game. But by doing so, a lot of the new additions to exploration, which isn't a challenge for normal Survival players, the Hardcore players instead of exploring have to use looked-over mechanics to survive. For instance, a casual player can look over the protection items such as armor and shields because they can jump into any situation. Whether it is low or high risk, they will always respawn and find their equipment over and over again. Where Hardcore players will ensure their survival by overlooking the optional exploration areas such as ancient cities. Even if exploration is very optional in Hardcore mode, structures like end cities or mansions entice the player to work towards them because of the treasures they contain.

In woodland mansions, the loot that is most valuable in one is the Totem of Undying. This item is very pivotal to a player's game strategy because it acts as a one-time-use emergency revival if the player were to die and be holding it in hand.



Figure 2: After this player drowns, the Totem of Undying flashes on the screen showing that it is now broken but you have been revived. It also gives you regeneration and protection as seen in the top right of the screen

As powerful as it is in Hardcore mode, the chances of finding one of these mansions are slim and to find it you must explore. This poses a very high-risk low-reward scenario for a Hardcore player because while preparing for the chance of encountering this mansion, they in turn become powerful enough to the point where they don't need an extra life. This is the problem with most structures that a player stumbles upon, there isn't enough reward for them to consider it a required mechanic to invest their time into.

This sort of problem continues into a post-game area called End Cities, distant structures in the End. The End is filled with Endermen and floating islands above the void, so already this is very high-risk but what makes it high-reward is the Elytra.



Figure 3: This is what an End City looks like, as you can see the possibility of falling off is pretty high

This very valuable long-term item provides the player with flight making exploration easier, but introduces the risk of kinetic energy. Similar to the woodland mansions, a player will already be well equipped given they have to beat the Ender Dragon to gain access to End Cities. So any treasure they find along with the Elytra may be just a waste of inventory space. Many other structures become inconsequential because of the chance that the player will find what they're looking for. Ever since the armor trims were created, that's all that exploration gives you along with other junk in chests.

A prime example of a location designated for armor trim hunting is the Ancient City. This city can be found deep underground, infested with Skulk, and patrolled by the Warden, so otherwise a very dangerous area not worth the heartache. But as stated before, a Hardcore player would likely skip over this area unless they wanted to find all the armor trims. Other than that, Ancient Cities don't have much reward.



Figure 4: This overlay is an example of underwhelming loot that a player might find in an Ancient City. Swift Sneak is only good while traversing the city, but a Golden Apple is an amazing food item

In Survival mode, it's a fun experience because you're trying to hide from the Warden and loot what you can before you eventually fail and die. In Hardcore, the high-risk low-risk just isn't worth the time of some players, especially when they'll have better equipment and enchantments than what they would find in the city.

With such optional content on the exploration side of Hardcore mode, how does the use of mechanics balance this major chunk that was taken out of *Minecraft*? Well, in a Survival world, there isn't much need to stay alive especially when they'll respawn shortly after their demise. To those players, certain mechanics such as brewing and food are useless because they can die whenever they'd like. On the other hand, these mechanics of brewing and food are vital for a Hardcore player's survival in the world.

The brewing system Mojang created for *Minecraft* is one dealing with great confusion but also great uses. With the right resources, a player can brew their potions with certain status effects that come in handy in certain situations both in Hardcore and normal Survival worlds. But like the rest of the game, there needs to be more in-game guidance when it comes to creating the right potions and the recipes for them. As stated in a review, "things like crafting recipes aren't given to the player in-game, requiring players (and especially newbies) to make frequent trips to the Minecraft wiki or another such resource"(Cunningham, 2011) The game provides you with the tools but it's your job to figure out what the right sequence to use them is. The only problem with potion brewing is that it never feels like you're learning the recipe because someone else gives it to you.

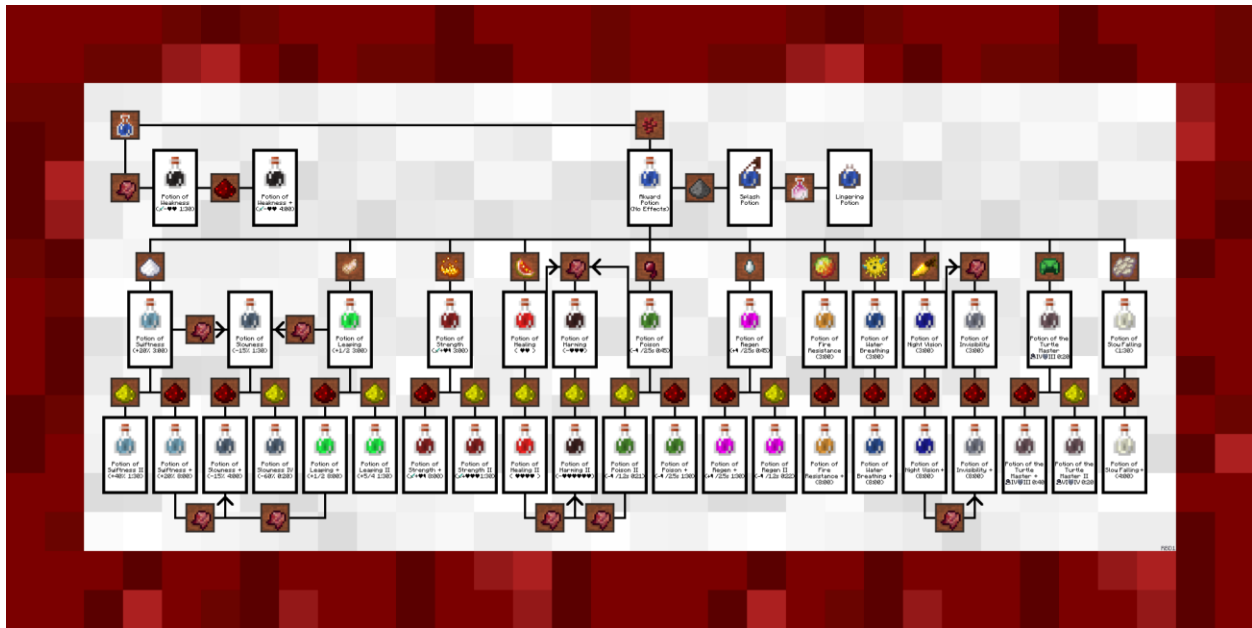


Figure 6: This chart presents all of the possible potion recipes, you can see how difficult it would be in theory to have all these memorized

Other than that, potions are an extremely helpful mechanic that is promoted in a Hardcore world. For instance, in a normal Survival world, a player could go without them because there is not as big of a risk when dying but in Hardcore you have to use every mechanic at your reach. Hardcore mode forces your hand when looking for a play-style because to survive you're expected to integrate these vital mechanics such as potions and or totems.

Another system in *Minecraft* is the hunger and food items. Just like other survival games, food is useful because it's used for sprinting and regenerating lost health. In a regular Survival game, a player can always die on purpose and they'll respawn with max hearts and a full hunger bar. Whereas, Hardcore "gives an actual use for food instead of putting your stuff in a chest and then suicide to recover your hunger"(xtylorx, 2014) Food is one of the most important mechanics to Hardcore players because without a full hunger bar, they cannot run away from danger fast enough and they cannot take damage as well as they could with a full health bar. Since food is

sometimes the first item that players look for when starting a world, Mojang has made it so you can find food anywhere you look whether it be the fish in the water, the livestock, or farming crops.

In *Minecraft*'s Hardcore mode, the permanent death mechanic intensifies the player's experience by heightening tension and encouraging strategic decision-making, while simultaneously constraining exploration and risk-taking. As stated, Hardcore mode takes many elements of the world generation and turns them into optional side-quests when you're bored. But, at the same time, a player won't be as easily bored by the gameplay because they are to be constantly invested in the many mechanics that as easily looked over for normal players. Mojang's attempt to balance this mode, instead drew players away from early to mid-game exploration because of the amount of time they were stuck gathering resources and preparation for survival. A way that they encourage exploration within Hardcore mode is through the use of special items, like the Totem of Undying and the Elytra, that can be found somewhat regularly throughout the world. Any way to make the high-risk low-reward structure more useful in a permadeath world, either by making some low-risk or removing the junk items in loot chests. Ultimately, Mojang should switch perspectives from Survival to Hardcore to get a better understanding of how the gameplay isn't changing much when they introduce more environmental instead of mechanical additions to *Minecraft*. By viewing *Minecraft* from the player's point-of-view, they'll be able to pinpoint what Hardcore mode lacks compared to regular Survival as well as what features make players always come back to it.

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