

## **GOOD BAD BILLIONAIRE: MARKUS PERSSON: THE MIND BEHIND MINECRAFT**

### **Scrolls Judgement Update - Jakub - Poor-ser**

**SIMON:** It's May 2009. In a small flat in the Swedish capital, a stocky man sits hunched over his keyboard. His room is cluttered — empty coffee cups, paper scribbled with ideas — the bad ones crinkled-up on the floor. It's dark out. The only light is the blue glow of his computer monitor.

- He's furiously typing code... It's java script, incomprehensible to most, but practically his native language. He's been up all night... and most nights this week... working. On the other screen, a world begins to emerge.
- It's rough and blocky—grass, dirt, and even a pixelated figure with blue eyes and a dark beard. Perhaps a digital reflection of the man himself.
- The man types more code, hits return, and tugs at his straggly beard as he watches his little avatar start digging up blocks on the screen. Outside, dawn is breaking over Stockholm, casting an eerie light through the window.

And now, it's ready: his side project, his *baby*. In just a couple weeks, he'd walk into work and hand in his notice. Time to go independent. To go all in, betting on himself. Because this stocky coder just wrote, on his own in one week... the highest selling video game of all time.

Its name? **Minecraft**. And it will make Markus Persson a billionaire.

**ZING:** Welcome to Good Bad Billionaire from the BBC World Service. Each episode we pick a billionaire and find out how they made their money.

**SIMON: Pod:** Then we judge them: are they good, bad or just another billionaire?

**SIMON: WS:** We take them from zero to their first million, then from a million on to a billion.

### **[SIMON AND ZING INTRODUCE THEMSELVES]**

Introduce Markus -

### **BILLIONAIRE IN NUMBERS**

**[Discuss: Have you ever played Minecraft? Or know anyone who does - what did you know about the game before this ep?]**

**ZING:** It's a pretty simple game, but it's been hugely successful.

**SIMON:** It's sold over 300 million copies to date, and as of the start of last year, more than half still played every month. That'd be like if the entire population of both Canada and Japan were playing Minecraft every single month!

**ZING:** And now Minecraft is a major Hollywood movie, starring Jack Black.

On April 4th, the much-anticipated Minecraft: The Movie will hit cinemas.

- And it's incredible because usually games are produced by these massive studios with dozens of staff, a lot of funding, big marketing budgets... but Minecraft all started with **one guy**, Swedish programmer, Markus Persson, who is currently worth \$1.2bn.

**SIMON:** And being independent was always *extremely important* to Persson. It would make him a sort of God to gamers. So how would this lone-coder become a billionaire, and how would he handle the pressure once he did? Let's find out.

## **ZERO TO A MILLION**

**SIMON:** Markus Persson was born on June 1, 1979, in a small Swedish town called Edsbyn [Ear-d-spin - hear Markus' pronunciation: [Minecraft: The Story of Mojang - Official Complete Movie - video Dailymotion at 04:15](#)].

**ZING:** He loved exploring. Their home was surrounded by snowy forests, and Markus used to say he loved wandering around, or as he'd put it, 'just barely not getting lost.'

- But what he loved even more was Lego. For hours, he'd sit building intricate structures and scenes out of the tiny plastic bricks.

**SIMON:** His dad was a railway worker, but as Markus says, also a 'really big nerd.' When Markus was seven, his dad brought home a computer, and even built his own modem.

- Markus used to fake stomach aches just to stay off school so he could play with the computer. He loved the pirated games his dad brought home.<sup>12</sup>

**ZING:** By eight, Markus was already programming.

[!!]

**SIMON:** He taught himself. He'd later call himself, "a cowboy programmer." He even recruited his younger sister, Anna, as a sort-of-secretary who would patiently read out lines of code from computer magazines, which Markus would then type out line by line.

- And that's when he figured out that if you didn't type exactly what the magazine said, you could make something totally different happen. He said, "*That sense of power was intoxicating.*"<sup>3</sup>

[Discuss -1980s fear of gaming harming kids]

**ZING:** Well, Markus's mum, Ritva, bought into that and she was worried that Markus was becoming addicted to gaming. she'd even sneak into his room and put up posters of soccer stars to encourage him to play outside.

- Apparently, one time, she dragged him to a local soccer club. But he kept missing the ball when he tried to kick it, so the coach gently told her, "*He's not going to be a soccer player*".<sup>4</sup>

**SIMON:** By 1988, the family had moved to Stockholm. Markus found a group of like-minded friends at school—nerds like him who loved gaming and programming. They'd set each other coding challenges.

- One time Markus coded something which was merely large text that scrolled across the screen really quickly and he was so proud of it, he saved it onto a floppy disc and put it in his friend's mailbox with a note saying, 'Look what I did!'

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/86f438ee-3f38-11e4-a861-00144feabdc0>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/the-creator?printable=true&currentPage=all>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/the-creator?printable=true&currentPage=all>

<sup>4</sup> Pg 25 Minecraft : the unlikely tale of Markus "Notch" Persson and the game that changed everything by Daniel Goldberg and Linus Larsson (and translated by Jennifer Hawkins). Published by New York : Seven Stories Press 2012

**ZING:** So he's really starting to find his footing socially... But things at home begin to unravel. Markus's dad had been struggling with depression. He'd turned to heavy drinking and then amphetamines. Then his parents divorced.

- He says, *"It was pretty bad. I lost contact with my dad for several years. My dad went to jail for bad stuff—robberies, break-ins—because he got stuck in substance abuse."*<sup>5</sup> It hit the kids hard.

**SIMON:** *For a teenage Markus, programming became an escape—a refuge where he had total control. He knew this was what he wanted to do for the rest of his life...*

- And he said as much to his school counselor, they laughed at him. Instead, they suggested a career in graphic design, arguing that print media—unlike computer games—*"had a bright future."*
- So he dropped out of high school, taking an online programming course instead.<sup>6</sup>  
[Discuss - that independent streak. Billionaires and dropouts - again!]

**ZING:** But there's a problem. Now, he needs to find work, but it's 2001. And the dot com bubble had just burst.

[Discuss Dot com bubble bursting - context]

**ZING:** Markus spent days holed up at home, rarely stepping outside, entering game-development contests online, and telling his mom, *"Mum, I'm going to live with you my whole life."* [just what every parent wants to hear!]

**SIMON:** Well, luckily for Markus' mum, a few years later he managed to land a job IN the games industry, first creating game prototypes to test gaming systems and then, at a mobile games company called Midasplayer, now known as King – which you might recognize from Candycrush fame.

**ZING:** It was a fast-paced, demanding job, but Markus enjoyed it. He was known for inviting colleagues out for drinks after work or to play computer games during lunch.

**SIMON:** At King, Markus met Jakob Porser, a programmer who quickly became a close friend. Jakob described Markus to Rolling Stone magazine as *"a lot of fun and slightly weird [...] He can be superhappy or superdown as well. There's normally not a lot of in-between."*<sup>7</sup>

**ZING:** And one day at work, a new programmer comes in for a job interview, and she catches Markus's eye. Her name is Elin Zetterstrand. They soon start dating.

- So, things are looking up for Markus! He's got a girlfriend, a steady job, good friends, and he'd finally moved out of his mum's apartment into his own place.

**SIMON:** But soon the corporate games world began to frustrate him. King had a high-volume, quick-turnaround approach to game design. Sometimes, they'd spend just one or two months designing a game. Markus felt the "quantity over quality" mindset was stifling.

**ZING:** He actually spent most of his free time after work on this games forum called TIGSource. TIGSource was an online community for indie developers and fans. They talk about games, build their own games and play each others'.

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<sup>5</sup><https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/the-wizard-of-minecraft-85823/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ryanmac/2015/03/03/minecraft-markus-persson-life-after-microsoft-sale/>

<sup>7</sup><https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/the-wizard-of-minecraft-85823/>

- I mean, the guy *really* loved gaming. And honestly, this is where you start to understand what drives Markus. The games being shared on TIGSource were raw, wildly creative, and nothing like the cookie-cutter mobile games he was being asked to churn out at work.
- These indie games didn't scream commercial success at first glance. They could be complex strategy games with simple graphics—but they were passion projects made by hardcore gamers.
- Markus once said, *"Studios make games to make money. [Indie gamers] build games to just build games."*

**SIMON:** Markus had already made some of his own games outside of work too. He was really interested in games called MMO-RPGs, or "Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games. In plain English? It means you play a character in a vast virtual world alongside thousands of other players in real time.

- Even when you log off, the game world keeps going. World of Warcraft is probably the most famous example. They're notoriously difficult to program, but Markus had actually already managed to build one, with just one other friend – in his spare time.

**ZING:** There was another needle in his side about his day job. It's rare for designers to get recognition. While we all know the names of famous musicians or film directors, game designers often fade into the background.

- At King, Markus knew that the company would get the credit for anything he created. Plus they took issue with him building games in his free time, saying *"We felt that we couldn't have someone working for us that at the same time was building his own gaming company."*<sup>8</sup>
- They asked him to adapt one of his personal projects for King's customers, but the game flopped. Markus knew that if he wanted to be a visionary, he couldn't remain a cog in the big game machine. By 2008, he left the company.

**SIMON:** So... at Markus's new job, this time not in gaming - he insisted he be allowed to work on his own games in his free time—and his new boss was fully supportive...

**ZING:** So, Markus had to figure out what kind of game he wanted to create next. He'd left his first game behind—but he wanted to stay in the same multi-player genre.

- Markus had always loved exploring. As a kid, he'd wander through the forest with friends, venturing into the unknown. *"just barely not getting lost."* That mix of fear and excitement—the adventure without clear boundaries—was something he wanted to capture in his game design.

**SIMON:** Next, he thought about the gameplay. He thought that too many games simply handed players a list of tasks to reach the next level. Markus had always gravitated towards open-ended games.

- Games like Roller Coaster Tycoon, where you're tasked with building elaborate roller coasters to attract crowds.
- What drew Markus to these games wasn't the goals but the *freedom* they gave players to create and experiment. It reminded him of playing with Lego as a kid—being able to build anything he wanted.
- That sense of unbounded creativity became a cornerstone of his vision of a new game, which would ultimately change his life..

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<sup>8</sup> <https://archive.is/xvoGI>

[Discuss: appeal of user freedom - bucking the trend of rules driven play. Also more broadly - think of the popularity of UGC - was he ahead of his time?]

**ZING:** And then came the breakthrough moment. While scrolling through TIGSource - that indie gaming forum, he discovered Infiniminer, a game by American designer Zach Barth.

- Infiniminer was a sandbox game, meaning players could build freely in an open environment, often without specific objectives. Markus exclaimed: *"My god, I realized that that was the game I wanted to do."*
- The premise of Infiniminer was simple: to mine minerals. Barth originally envisioned it as a competitive team game but he noticed players just mining for fun.
- The graphics were basic, with the minerals appearing as blocky, mottled textures. Markus later admitted these blocks directly inspired Minecraft's signature blocky look.

**SIMON:** Now Barth has been asked more times than he cares to remember about whether he feels Markus ripped off his idea, but he says,

- *"The act of borrowing ideas is integral to the creative process. There are games that came before Infiniminer and there are games that will come after Minecraft. That's how it works."*<sup>9</sup>

[discuss: IP theft?/plagiarism, how it's considered differently in the gaming industry - games readily borrow from each other - polishing and improving previous ideas. E.g. Most platform games originate from Nintendo's first Super Mario Bros., released in 1985.]

**ZING** And who knows? Maybe Infiniminer would have become a hit, but sadly, it never really had a chance. Its source code was leaked just a month after it launched. Lucky for Markus. He was ready to start making his own masterpiece

**SIMON:** *So, let's return to the scene we started with. Markus is only 30 years old, he's sitting in his apartment in Stockholm, the first light of dawn creeping in, and he's still there, glued to his computer, furiously coding. And he finishes the first version of his new game, Minecraft.*

**ZING:** The idea was simple, yet brilliant: you could do anything. Explore a massive world, mine resources, and build.

- The graphics were blocky on purpose. In Minecraft, every block you see—trees, dirt, rock—could be collected and turned into tools like swords, pickaxes, and torches. The gameplay was simple: one button for breaking blocks, another for placing them.
- But the game wasn't *completely* open-ended. Yeah, you could do anything – but you had a limited set of tools, and one simple task: to survive.
- Because here's the twist: when night falls, the monsters—zombies, spiders, creepers—come out. So, you've got to hustle, gather materials, and build a shelter before the sun goes down.
- The name says it all: mining and crafting.

**SIMON:** Markus couldn't hide his excitement. He chatted non-stop to his Mum about the game. He even started thinking maybe he should quit his day job and go all in on this project. His Mum smiled, happy to see his passion, but she didn't quite get it, so she suggested he take it slow.

- But Elin, his gamer girlfriend? She was totally on board. She was the first person to test the game, and Markus would listen to all her suggestions and reactions as she played, and then made changes based on her feedback.
- His dad was also supportive – they were back in touch now. His dad gave him the feedback that the dark caves were too scary for him – but that was his only critique. Markus said, "When I decided I wanted to quit my day job and work on my own games, he was the only person who supported my decision. He was proud of me and made sure I knew."

**ZING:** Markus started sharing everything on his blog— every little update. It's called *The Word of Notch* and it's still up today. Notch, his nickname, became his online persona. It gave him the courage to open up, to connect with fans directly, and to share not just the game, but details of his life.

**SIMON:** Then, on May 17, 2009, Markus uploaded the first playable version of Minecraft to his beloved TIGSource forum...

- He was eager to get feedback from the indie game community there—what they liked, what they didn't, any bugs they noticed—and most importantly, whether it could stand out from the tons of other games constantly getting uploaded.
- It'd be his opportunity to find out if there was any real interest.

**ZING:** And they loved it! Right away, people started sharing screenshots of what they'd built—everything from bridges and boats to, well, a giant penis.<sup>10</sup> And these were the early days of "Let's Play" videos on YouTube.

- This is where gamers post videos of themselves playing games while commentating. Minecraft happened to launch right as this trend was exploding.

**SIMON:** And it wasn't just the YouTube community. It was everywhere. People were building a direct relationship with the game, eagerly sharing their latest creations or memes on forums like 4Chan and Reddit. The buzz was real.

**ZING:** The press noticed too. Early reviews said things like, *"The graphics might be blocky, but Minecraft certainly has a charm about it. Looking out across the game's stunning landscapes is quite special, while the freedom to do what you want is refreshing."*

And, *"Almost anyone who's played "Minecraft" is instantly pulled in, spending hours either just building things in Creative mode or trying to get by in Survival mode. It's incredibly easy to get lost in."*<sup>11</sup>

**SIMON:** But here was the real test: Would people actually pay for it? Markus was bold enough to charge people right from the start. Now, this was unusual for the time—most online games either had no payments or charged just a dollar for a game like Angry Birds—money usually came from ads.

**ZING:** Markus had made that early test version free, but he told everyone the first real completed version of Minecraft would cost \$26 when it was finished, or only \$13 if they paid in advance.

**SIMON:** It was a bet. But it was a bet that paid off. Just 24 hours after announcing the price, \$150 appeared in his PayPal account. He couldn't believe it.

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<sup>10</sup> Pg 93 Minecraft : the unlikely tale of Markus "Notch" Persson and the game that changed everything by Daniel Goldberg and Linus Larsson (and translated by Jennifer Hawkins). Published by New York : Seven Stories Press 2012

<sup>11</sup> Factiva - Dig into "Minecraft", The Wilkes-Barre Times Leader (PA), Dale Culp Weekender Correspondent, 1 September 2010

- He spent hours watching the sales numbers shoot up, day turning into night and back again. His game was actually selling—and it wasn't even out yet.
- On June 1st, 2010, his birthday, he gave himself the best gift he could think of: he quit his job to focus on Minecraft full time. It was exactly one year after he'd first uploaded the game. He was going to make it as an indie game designer.

**ZING:** By July 2010, he was pulling in over \$5,000 a day in online sales. And the crazy part? He didn't spend anything on marketing!

[discuss - how unlikely this is - esp in gaming?]

**SIMON:** Alright, well maybe it's time we give this thing a go..or well, watch the experts do it, you wouldn't want to hear me trying to get my head around playing this thing -

(this is one of the videos posted after Markus first uploaded Minecraft <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LEG9feKeQMY>)

**ZING:** So by September of 2010 Minecraft had sold 300,000 copies. It's worth noting that this is only a year and some change after he'd posted that trial version of Minecraft on the forum.

- At one point, there was so much money flooding into his PayPal that they blocked his account thinking something must be illegal.
- Well, he sorted that out. He had made \$3.8 million dollars, and just like that, Markus was officially a millionaire. All from an unreleased game based on a trial he had designed by himself, in just a few weeks.

Come on, let's take him to a billion.

## **MILLION TO A BILLION**

***SIMON: Markus had been working on the paid version of Minecraft. He set the goal of releasing the game in November 2011, more than two years after he started the presale. He realized he needed help.***

**ZING:** So, he reached out to his old friend Jakob Porser, who he'd worked with at King, the mobile games company. He asked if Jakob would quit his job and join him to help develop Minecraft. Jakob didn't hesitate—he quit the very next day.

- Markus officially registered a company name: Mojang AB. Mojang, by the way, is an old Swedish word for “gadget” or “thingamajig.”<sup>12</sup>

**SIMON:** But Markus didn't want to be the boss of his old friend. They set up the company as partners. Markus would keep the intellectual property rights to Minecraft, but the company would retain exclusive rights to develop and sell the game.

- They brought in a CEO to help - Markus' old supportive boss - and by December 2010, Mojang had hired a small team.

**ZING:** They rent this tiny, scruffy office in Stockholm, where they work tirelessly on finishing Minecraft—and in the meantime, sales keep creeping up. By January 12, 2011, Minecraft had surpassed 1 million copies sold. And just three months later, it doubled to 2 million.<sup>13</sup>

[DO SOME QUICK MATH TO TALLY THE INCOME - do you know of anything else that has had such high pre-sales?]

**SIMON:** Naturally, the big players started to take notice. Investors came calling.

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.minecraft.net/en-us/article/meet-mojang-studios#:~:text=We%20will%20say%20this%3A%20play,%2C%20old%20timey%20Swedish\).](https://www.minecraft.net/en-us/article/meet-mojang-studios#:~:text=We%20will%20say%20this%3A%20play,%2C%20old%20timey%20Swedish).)

<sup>13</sup> <https://x.com/notch/status/25304319339274240>



**ZING:** Enter Sean Parker. Fresh off his private jet, dressed in a designer suit, Parker strolled into Mojang's offices in Stockholm. You might remember him as Justin Timberlake in The Social Network—the Napster guy, who made his fortune from Facebook and later invested heavily in companies like Spotify.

- And at first, the Mojang crew is thinking... we don't need an investment, we have plenty of money, thank you very much. But Parker had another offer. He invited the founders to join him at a cool party he was hosting... in Soho.
- Not Stockholm's hipster neighborhood Södermalm (also known as Sofo), but *London's* Soho. And by the way, his private jet was waiting.
- Markus made a quick call to check with Elin— very sweet— she was good with it. So, the Mojang team hopped on the jet.

**SIMON:** When they landed in London, they headed straight to The Box, a fancy members-only club. Cee Lo Green was performing, the champagne was flowing, and the whole night was a blur of drunken glamour.

- Around 3:30 AM, they stumbled out of the club, and into a luxury hotel suite—paid for, of course, by Parker. Then it was back onto the private jet for Stockholm, just in time for an interview with a new employee.

**ZING:** Markus said, "I feel like James Bond," This was from a blog post titled *Weirdest Night of My Life*.<sup>14</sup> He marveled at how amazing it was to realize, "there are people who actually do this all the time—flying around in private jets, having assistants who have their own assistants."

- That moment would mark the beginning of Markus' taste for the high life—private jets, parties, and all the perks that came with it.

**SIMON: Meanwhile, The buzz around Minecraft just kept growing...**

- They struck a deal with Sony Ericsson to develop a mobile version of the game, set to launch on their new phone in just three months.
- When Markus showed up at the E3 Expo in Los Angeles for the launch, he was mobbed by fans. He'd started wearing a black fedora, so he was easy to spot in the crowd. This would be the last conference he attended without a bodyguard..<sup>15</sup>

**SIMON:** At the Expo, Mojang signed a million-dollar deal with Microsoft to create an Xbox version of Minecraft. But even without that deal, Mojang was already predicting a \$50 million turnover for the year.<sup>16</sup>

**ZING:** Amid all this, Markus somehow found time to marry his girlfriend of four years, Elin. But of, course, he had to do a Minecraft tie-in.

- To celebrate their wedding, Mojang launched a special offer: buy a copy of Minecraft, and get a free one "to give to the one you wub."<sup>17</sup> Romantic, right?

**SIMON: Finally, the official release day had arrived. On November 18th, 2011, after over two years building his own company, and landing multi-million dollar deals, Markus was ready to release the finished version of Minecraft.**

**ZING:** So let's take a trip...In the middle of the Nevada desert, there's a place that never sleeps, where jackpots are won under flashing neon lights. Sin City. I'm talking, of course, about Las Vegas.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://blog.omniarchive.uk/post/4208328890/the-weirdest-night-of-my-life/>

<sup>15</sup> Pg 136 Minecraft : the unlikely tale of Markus "Notch" Persson and the game that changed everything by Daniel Goldberg and Linus Larsson (and translated by Jennifer Hawkins). Published by New York : Seven Stories Press 2012

<sup>16</sup> Factiva - The secret to controlled chaos, Financial Times ([ET.Com](https://www.ft.com/content/2011/06/20/mojang-secret-to-controlled-chaos)), By Tim Bradshaw, 20 June 2011

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.reddit.com/r/Minecraft/comments/jh0e3/wedding\\_weekend\\_discount\\_for\\_your\\_wubd\\_one/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Minecraft/comments/jh0e3/wedding_weekend_discount_for_your_wubd_one/)



- Inside a convention centre, thousands of people are stamping their feet and cheering. This is the first official MineCon—a gaming convention for Minecraft fans. Thousands of fans roam the packed exhibition hall, many of them wear big, blocky heads, dressed as their favorite characters. The oldest delegate is 77, the youngest is just four.<sup>18</sup>

**SIMON:** A man climbs onto the stage, wearing a black fedora. He smiles nervously, revealing his dimples. Maybe he's a little tipsy from the shot of vodka he'd taken just before walking on stage. He's nervous. It's almost as if he can't quite believe what's happening.

- The crowd erupts, yelling his name—"Notch!!"—and gives him a standing ovation. He blushes, quietly pleased or feeling awkward – it's hard to tell. He's their unlikely hero.
- The man who created an indie game which today has brought together over 4,500 people from 24 countries and created a digital world eight times the size of Earth, played by millions.

**SIMON:** Notch turns to the crowd, mic in hand. "It's very overwhelming. The reason I started working on Minecraft and kept working on it was because there were people playing it. The reason we started the company was because there were fans."<sup>19</sup>

(You can see this in a documentary at 1 hour, 22 minutes in <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x1745rc>)

**ZING:** The music ramps up, and Markus, aka Notch, yanks down a lever to announce that the complete version of Minecraft has officially been released. Streamers explode from the ceiling, showering the excited crowd.

**SIMON:** Markus seems to be enjoying the party, though he's also finding the attention a little bewildering. At one point, a fan hands him her baby to sign.

**ZING:** Yeah, that was weird. But the best part? Markus' family was there for the launch to witness his meteoric rise as a game developer. Years earlier, Markus had promised them all a helicopter ride if he ever got rich.

- And now, he had his chance to make good on his promise. In 2011, Mojang brought in over \$78 million, \$60 million of which went to Markus' own company, Notch Development.<sup>20</sup>
- The day after the launch, he ushered his family onto a private helicopter for a flight over the Grand Canyon.

**SIMON:** *But shockingly, After that triumph, Markus made the decision to step down as Minecraft's lead designer...*

- He'd still be involved, but he planned to move on to new projects at Mojang.<sup>21</sup> The last year had been a whirlwind—he created and launched a game, became a multi-millionaire, and got married.
- So, he took the rest of the year off to rest, play video games, and reset after what he called, "the weirdest year of my life."<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.wired.com/story/changing-the-game/>

<sup>19</sup> 1hr 22mins in Minecraft: The Story of Mojang directed by Paul Owens and produced by Paul Levering. Production company: 2 Player Productions. Released 2012

<sup>20</sup> Pg 171 Minecraft : the unlikely tale of Markus "Notch" Persson and the game that changed everything by Daniel Goldberg and Linus Larsson (and translated by Jennifer Hawkins). Published by New York : Seven Stories Press 2012

<sup>21</sup> <https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2011/12/markus-notch-person-steps-down-as-lead-minecraft-developer/>

<sup>22</sup> Minecraft: The Story of Mojang directed by Paul Owens and produced by Paul Levering. Production company: 2 Player Productions. Released 2012

**ZING:** But just a few weeks after stepping down, on December 14th, Markus received a phone call. His father had died by suicide after struggling with substance abuse and alcoholism.<sup>23</sup>

- Markus had just rented his father a flat in Stockholm, hoping a change of scenery would help.<sup>24</sup>
- In an interview with Rolling Stone, he said, *"It was shocking. It took me a while to even realize it was real."*

**SIMON:** It was a bleak Christmas that year. His father's death prompted some deep soul searching. Markus worried that his father's mental illness might be hereditary.

- He made a point to resist self-isolation, to surround himself with people and work.

**ZING:** So, he turned his attention to the tricky second act—the notoriously difficult second album...

**SIMON:** He started working on an ambitious new game called "ten to the c."<sup>25</sup> It was a sandbox game like Minecraft, but players would control a character aboard a spaceship.

- And he really felt the pressure. He struggled with writer's block and now, he was no longer this lone guy coding in a basement.
- He was Notch. He was famous, and with fame, comes attention. And that's not always a good thing for the creative process.
- He told The New Yorker, *Now, I post a new idea and millions of people scrutinize it. There's a conflict between the joy of being able to do whatever I want and the remarkable pressure of a watching world. I don't know how to switch it off."*

[discuss: is it only when a billionaire's wealth relies on their creativity that they tend to have this fear and feel the pressure? When it's purely business/market based - is it easier to shrug any failures off? TIE BACK TO INDIE CREATIVITY VS. BEING BIG/CREATING FOR AN AUDIENCE]

**ZING:** Meanwhile, he's got access to more money than he could have ever imagined, and a taste for the millionaire lifestyle—private jets, extravagant parties.

- And he was a massive EDM fan, so Markus would throw these over-the-top bashes with arena-level talent—think Avicii, Skrillex.
- He was constantly posting about his parties on Twitter. One of his colleagues at Mojang even said, *"Markus loves getting wasted."*

**SIMON:** Markus himself said he was just making up for lost time: *"Partying's not the smartest way to spend money, but it's fun. We didn't have much when we were younger, so I thought, if I get rich, I'm not gonna become one of those boring, stuffy rich people who never spends anything."*

**ZING:** But that's not to say the extravagance came naturally. He's Swedish, after all, and there's a strong cultural value there about being modest. Markus admitted that early on, he struggled to spend the money.

- He even said he'd worry that the game would stop selling. But eventually, he embraced it. He came up with a rule for himself: *"I'm allowed to spend half of whatever I make. That way, I'll never be broke."*

**SIMON:** Sounds like a pretty good rule! But it wasn't all about him. Markus was generous too. In 2011, he gave away his £2.2 million Mojang dividend to his employees.

- And when Minecraft hit 10 million downloads? He treated the whole staff to a lavish trip to Monaco—three days of luxury cars, yachts, and non-stop partying.

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<sup>23</sup> <https://www.polygon.com/2012/12/13/3763968/notch-father-minecraft>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/the-creator>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.pcgamer.com/notch-wants-to-make-a-firefly-inspired-sandbox-space-game-like-elite-except-done-right/>

**ZING:** Quite the way to celebrate success! But it wasn't without cost, figuratively-speaking. His lifestyle took a toll on his marriage.

- A year after getting married, Markus announced that he and Elin had filed for divorce. The couple had a daughter together.

**SIMON:** A year later, Markus announced that he had shelved his next game.. The pressure to match Minecraft had become too much and it zapped the fun out of the project. He said *"I spent a lot of time thinking about if I even wanted to make games anymore."*<sup>26</sup>

**ZING:** Once, Markus was at home, wrapped up in blankets and feeling the effects of a nasty cold. His phone kept pinging, flashing where it lay on the table. He picked it up. A torrent of abuse from his social media feeds: "Notch has always struck me as being a giant tool," "Notch is a fat loser."<sup>27</sup> That was just the tip of the iceberg.

- He was Already feeling miserable, and now, he sank even lower. Didn't they realize that everything he'd done was for them – the fans? The nasty comments loomed large on his phone, dwarfing any others.
- The reaction was all about a change to Minecraft rules. Mojang had just added a limit on what players could charge each other for, like improved weapons. Players were angry and directed their fury at Markus personally - even though he hadn't even been involved in the update.
- He was fed up. He started furiously typing out a new Tweet: "Anyone want to buy my share of Mojang so I can move on with my life?"

**SIMON:** A few minutes later, Carl Manneh, Mojang's CEO, got a call. It was their contact at Microsoft. They'd seen Markus' tweet. "Is he serious?" Carl had just read it himself. "I don't know... let me find out."

- A few days later, he asked Markus if he was serious about selling the company - because Microsoft had already made some offers. Markus thought about it... and said yes.

**ZING:** In the past, Markus had been adamant he'd never sell out to "big evil corporations"—that independence was integral to Minecraft's identity. But in the end, Markus admitted, "People change their mind about things all the time." Microsoft would give him the clean break he wanted.

- Mojang also stressed that none of their staff would be laid off. Despite this and the bonuses they received, many employees felt "disappointed" and "empty" when they heard the news. Markus didn't get it. "We spoiled them, and their reaction hurts me."

**SIMON:** Many people were surprised by the sale, but in a lot of ways it's completely consistent with who Markus, or Notch has always been. Markus explained, *"I'm not an entrepreneur. I'm not a CEO. I'm a nerdy computer programmer who likes to have opinions on Twitter."*<sup>28</sup>

- Adding, *"It's not about the money. It's about my sanity."*

**ZING:** In September, Mojang was sold to Microsoft for \$2.5 billion. Markus, Carl Menneh, and Jakob Porser all left the company.<sup>29</sup> Markus even gave them equity in the deal. Shortly after, the founders jetted off to Miami and St. Barts to celebrate - Markus called it "the sellout trip."

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<sup>26</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2013/aug/19/minecraft-notch-0x10c-project-trillek>

<sup>27</sup> Factiva - Life After God, Forbes, By Ryan Mac,David M Ewalt, Max Jedeur-Palmgren, 23 March 2015

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.wired.com/2014/09/microsoft-buys-minecraft/#:~:text=%22I%20don't%20want%20to,to%20have%20opinions%20on%20Twitter.%22>

<sup>29</sup> Factiva - Life After God, Forbes, By Ryan Mac,David M Ewalt, Max Jedeur-Palmgren, 23 March 2015

**SIMON:** The exact details of how much Markus got from the deal weren't made public, but it made him a billionaire. In 2015, he hit the Forbes rich list, with his net worth estimated at \$1.3 billion.<sup>30</sup>

## **BEYOND A BILLION**

**ZING:** *And with that, the infamous indie game developer is semi-retired, at the ripe old age of 36!*

**SIMON:** Sure, Markus has a new gaming company, Rubberbrain, which he co-founded with Jakob Porser, but they spend more time playing games and scrolling through Twitter and Reddit. Markus has even called it "daycare for adults."

And at least he's pretty self-aware saying: *"The gaming world doesn't need more under delivering visionaries."*

**ZING:** Not long after the Microsoft sale, Markus made his flashiest purchase yet—\$70 million on a mansion in Beverly Hills. And get this, he even outbid Jay-Z and Beyoncé.<sup>31</sup> But don't worry, they weren't too upset—later on, they attended parties Markus hosted, alongside guests like Selena Gomez and pro skater Tony Hawk.

[REACT: What could they possibly have in common? I guess, 70 million dollars]

**SIMON:** So, what does a cool \$70 million get you? According to the listing, it's an "overwhelming sensory experience." Among the essentials? M&M towers, vodka and tequila bars, a movie theatre, and a car elevator that takes your guest's cars to underground storage.<sup>3233</sup> What more could you possibly want!

[You can check out a video of it here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2M\\_xlVlvuyo&t=9s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2M_xlVlvuyo&t=9s)].

**ZING:** *But, as we know, all that money can't buy you happiness...*

- In the summer of 2015, Markus started tweeting about how lonely he was. *"The problem with getting everything is you run out of reasons to keep trying, and human interaction becomes impossible due to imbalance,"*<sup>34</sup> he wrote. *"Hanging out in Ibiza with a bunch of friends and partying with famous people, able to do whatever I want, and I've never felt more isolated."*<sup>35</sup>

**SIMON:** At least he showed some self-awareness, apologizing the next day, tweeting, "To people out there with real problems: I'm sorry the whining of a newly wealthy programmer gets more attention than yours. Stay strong."

**ZING:** *But Markus was about to get into serious trouble...*

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<sup>30</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/erikkain/2015/03/07/the-top-10-video-game-billionaires/>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/zillow/2015/01/02/beyonce-jay-z-lose-home-bidding-war-to-minecraft-creator/>

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.vox.com/2015/8/29/11618134/minecraft-billionaire-markus-persson-hates-being-a-billionaire>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/video/4120105872001/inside-markus-notch-perssons-70m-mansion/>

<sup>34</sup> [https://x.com/notch/status/637562496056995840?](https://x.com/notch/status/637562496056995840?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E637562496056995840%7Ctwgr%5E033ec3efe2c844c1be2d1669d6d3e013751f1f2d%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.gamespot.com%2Farticles%2Ffive-never-felt-more-isolated-says-billionaire-mine%2F1100-6430171%2F)

[ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E637562496056995840%7Ctwgr%5E033ec3efe2c844c1be2d1669d6d3e013751f1f2d%7Ctwcon%5Es1\\_&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.gamespot.com%2Farticles%2Ffive-never-felt-more-isolated-says-billionaire-mine%2F1100-6430171%2F](https://x.com/notch/status/637562496056995840?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E637562496056995840%7Ctwgr%5E033ec3efe2c844c1be2d1669d6d3e013751f1f2d%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.gamespot.com%2Farticles%2Ffive-never-felt-more-isolated-says-billionaire-mine%2F1100-6430171%2F)

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/global/shortcuts/2015/sep/01/markus-persson-the-minecraft-billionaire-sending-lonely-late-night-tweets-from-ibiza>

- In 2017, he was condemned for tweeting racist and homophobic comments - and these were really nasty aggressive things, like anyone who opposed “heterosexual pride day” should be “shot”. Then, in 2019, he caused even more upset with transphobic comments and an endorsement of QAnon.<sup>36</sup>

**SIMON:** By this point, Microsoft had had enough. They scrubbed all references to Markus' alter ego, Notch, from the game and didn't include him in any of the Minecraft 10-year anniversary celebrations.<sup>3738</sup>

### **SIMON: So, what's the semi-retired gamer up to now?**

Not much, it seems. Since the sale to Microsoft, Markus has posted about starting various new gaming projects, plus a new company, Bitshift Entertainment, but there's been no actual release of any new games.

**ZING:** Markus still seems excited about the Minecraft film, though. He even shared on X, "For a movie about a game with literally zero plot, it looks surprisingly fun."<sup>39</sup>

[discuss: how weird to have a film about a game? -would you watch it? Franchises again...]

**SIMON:** Although earlier this year, he hinted that he might make Minecraft 2—to the excitement of his followers. But, of course, since he sold the rights to Microsoft, he wouldn't be able to use the name. It would likely be more of a spiritual successor.

**ZING:** So, yeah, watch this space...

## **GOOD, BAD, OR JUST ANOTHER BILLIONAIRE?**

### **WEALTH**

- Markus' wealth hasn't changed much since he became a billionaire. He has said, “I'm allowed to spend half of anything I make. That way I will never be broke. Even if I spend extravagant amounts of money, I will still have extravagant amounts of money.”<sup>40</sup>
- He definitely likes splashing the cash: aside from the \$70m Beverly Hills pad, he owns the most expensive apartment in Stockholm (at time of purchase) \$2.6 million. Known for spending more than \$180,000 a night at Las Vegas nightclubs. Loves renting private jets.
- Once bought a rare Aphex Twin vinyl for \$46,300 ('Caustic Window')
- Markus says that he grew up in a “relatively poor family” and commented frequently of how overwhelmed he was by his fortune as he got richer.

### **VILLAINY**

- Persson hasn't officially apologised for his offensive tweets.
- He deleted his Twitter account in 2020, but it is back up and running.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.gq.com/story/notch-whiteness-tweets>; <https://fortune.com/2017/07/02/minecraft-markus-persson-homophobia/>; <https://www.newsweek.com/minecraft-notch-controversy-twitter-transphobic-q-1359020>; <https://www.newsweek.com/qanon-conspiracy-minecraft-creator-notch-markus-persson-1351465>

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidthier/2019/04/30/notch-the-creator-of-minecraft-wont-be-invited-to-its-10-year-anniversary/>

<sup>38</sup> <https://variety.com/2019/gaming/news/notch-removed-minecraft-1203174964/>

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.pcgamer.com/movies-tv/notch-thinks-the-minecraft-movie-looks-pretty-neat-actually-i-was-expecting-way-worse/>

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/the-creator?printable=true&currentPage=all>

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.denofgeek.com/games/notch-gmtk-twitter-qanon-politics/>

## **GIVING BACK**

- There isn't much information about how much Persson has donated.
- In 2013 he talked about philanthropy, *"I think the right way to use money like this is to set a decent portion aside to make sure my family is comfortable, spend some on living out your dreams, and then try to put the rest towards making society a better place. For me, this includes charities that help children, and charities that help promote freedoms I think are vital in the coming dozens of years, such as the EFF."*<sup>42</sup> (EFF stands for Electronic Frontier Foundation, a San Francisco-based non-profit that protects digital privacy, free speech, and innovation.)

## **POWER**

- Persson has not been involved with politics or publicly made any large political donations.
- Persson's legacy has been tarnished by his offensive tweets, but Minecraft is his legacy. The biggest supporters of the game are parents. Parents of autistic children have talked about how the game is helpful to help communicate with autistic children.<sup>43</sup>
- Guardian journalist Keith Stuart has said Minecraft helped with his relationship with his autistic son. He said, *"Minecraft seemed to have given him both a vocabulary and the confidence to use it...it created a safe and creative space for a lot of children who may struggle to find safe and creative spaces elsewhere."*<sup>44</sup>
- It's used widely in schools

## **GOOD, BAD, OR JUST ANOTHER BILLIONAIRE?**

### **WORLD SERVICE OUTRO**

- So, xxx
- And xxx
- On the Good Bad Billionaire podcast, we've also judged him on a set of billionaire categories – things like total wealth, philanthropy, legacy, and even villainy, before deciding if he's good, bad, or just another billionaire.
- You can find that by searching for Good Bad Billionaire wherever you get your podcasts.

## **THROW FORWARD**

### **TRAIL**

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<sup>42</sup> [https://www.gamespot.com/articles/notch-discusses-minecraft-money/1100-6403344/https://www.reddit.com/r/DecidingToBeBetter/comments/17v2kz/notch\\_creator\\_of\\_minecraft\\_on\\_wealth\\_i\\_think\\_the/](https://www.gamespot.com/articles/notch-discusses-minecraft-money/1100-6403344/https://www.reddit.com/r/DecidingToBeBetter/comments/17v2kz/notch_creator_of_minecraft_on_wealth_i_think_the/)

<sup>43</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=icIWth\\_VvBs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=icIWth_VvBs)

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/mar/04/minecraft-creator-notch-will-always-be-a-hero-to-me-he-gave-my-autistic-son-a-voice>