

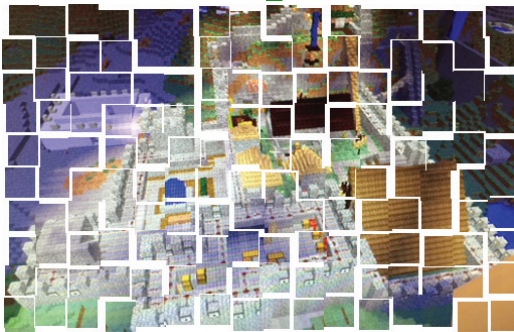
Minecraft or Mindcraft

Co-designing and co-learning in a virtual world

by Dan Kenkel



This year



at Valemout Secondary, we have embarked on a new venture in teaching and learning. In response to the need to restructure and reformat our school because of declining enrollment, and trying to improve student engagement and personalize learning, we are offering

some unique courses in an X block style. One of those is Minecraft.

For those of you who don't know, Minecraft is a video game. Well, actually it is more of a virtual world of creativity and design. Players mine resources, shape their environment and build things. They also have to acquire resources and prepare for survival challenges in the game world. I have seen my own children

play this game, and I was interested in tapping into its potential as a tool for learning.

Our X block was modelled after a successful program at AL Fortune Secondary in Enderby. The principal, Gene Doray, facilitated the implementation of an X block program (one credit Independent Directed Studies courses) that put students of different grades and teachers together to decide what they wanted to learn about, and then to co-design a curriculum. Teachers give up the control of the learning, and by exploring areas of student interest, sometimes surprising opportunities for learning happen, *both* for students and teachers.

This was the case in my Minecraft class. The ideas for X block classes come from the students. We polled them in May and asked them what they would like to do, or learn more

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about even if it was something that was not a traditional school subject. We got back an interesting list. From this, we pared down the choices to those ideas that had educational potential, and ones we felt we could deliver.

One of these was “*Minecraft Cooperative Build.*”

I really knew little about Minecraft, but what I did know was that kids loved it, and so did many parents, because it is creative, requires planning and resourcefulness, and is mostly non-violent.

I spent time this past summer researching Minecraft, and discovered that there was an education version (<http://minecraftedu.com/>). It had lots of lesson plans, ideas and resources made by teachers and for teachers.

But I didn’t use any of the prescribed resources. Something told me to unstrap my safety harness and step out onto the wire.

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They wanted time to build without restrictions – to create whatever their village required. They wanted

to have the freedom to let their individual and group design take off.

I thought that sounded good too. I added that I thought villages needed to reflect either diversity or homogeneity in some way. Multigrade or not, gender balance or not, abilities spread across groups or not. Either way, they needed to put some thought into the makeup of each village. We talked about why, and how to do this together. We came to an agreement.

They then suggested that once the creative build was done, that they wanted to switch to “Survivor Mode” and test the villages for their defenses against monsters and other challenges. I also learned that finding the Enderworld and the Enderdragon were fun goals in Minecraft, and could serve as a purpose and means of assessment. They agreed, but told me that how to do that was my job to figure out.

At this point, I knew I was in way over my head and told the students I needed their help to make this work. They assured me I would be fine. They also told me that I could participate as a builder by creating a Trade and Resolution Centre in the middle of the world.

Then the questions about rules came up. How would we keep it fair? What were the rules of behaviour? How would disputes be resolved? Who would hold players responsible for their conduct? Were rules different in different villages?

Was enforcement up to villagers? What about cheating? Hoarding supplies? Raiding resources and land? Undermining (literally) other groups and their work?

I soon realized that what I thought was going to be a technology or design class was really a class on ethics, morality, and society. We were building community on multiple levels, and we needed structure, rules, and cooperation. Whether it would be a digital *Lord of the Flies*, or *1984* was going to depend on decisions we made as a virtual society.

It was fascinating.

Together, we brainstormed and webbed out all the ideas, “*what ifs,*” rules, scenarios, exceptions, punishments, suggestions, and limitations. From that, I drafted up a “Community Charter” that would form the basis of good conduct. I presented the draft to students the next class for review, and after a few tweaks, the students thought it was fair and just. I helped them organize into their villages, and then I opened the world.

In the classes that have followed, there has been a hum of activity. The sound of key strokes and tapping, mixed with conversations, planning and questions fills the room. And, yes, there is lots of laughter ... and questions ... and peer support. At the end of every class, the bell interrupts the progress, and is met with groans and disappointment that it is over.




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When new student arrived and asked to join the class partially into the build, I knew this was not ideal. I stopped the class and talked about immigration. Do we need a policy for new members of our community? Can we help them? Who will take them in? What is the social contract they need to engage in to be successful as a new citizen in this world? I referenced Syrian refugees and the mindset of the established population in relation to immigrants. We share great dialogue over several interesting conversations.

There are many aspects of this

venture that are still fluid. Do I know what to call this course? No. It is an IDS 11/12 course for some, but do I attach it to Social Studies? Civilizations 12? I'm not sure. What about the Grade 8s and 9s? How do I put this in MyEdBC? I'm not even sure how this course is going to evolve, or what the final product, learning or assessment criteria will be. As I said, there is no safety line.

But I am certain of this. I have in-

credible engagement. I have learning. I have students who want to come to class, and stay in class. I am making connections with students that have been unreachable until now. And we are learning together. I am challenging their thinking and connecting their gaming to the real world in ways that are significant, and even surprising to me. In the process of using Minecraft, we are also crafting minds. Mine included. 

Dan Kenkel is Principal of Valemount Secondary. He welcomes your comments and questions at dkenkel@sd57.bc.ca and w

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