

Minecraft Spawns Classroom Lessons

By Christina Barron (adapted)

Do you dream about books of enchantment? Do you know the difference between sandstone and cobblestone? Does the word "creeper" give you, well, the creeps? If you answered yes to any of the above, you are probably a Minecraft kid. And you're not alone. More than 9.6 million people have downloaded the video game in little more than a year.

Would you be shocked if your teacher assigned you to play Minecraft at school? At a few area schools, teachers are doing just that. The Lego-like building game has become a popular tool for classroom lessons as well as life lessons.

History in the making

Hank Lanphier and Amy Yount, social studies teachers at St. Patrick's Episcopal Day School in Washington, experimented with using Minecraft this year to transport students to an ancient Roman city. Lanphier built the city's sandstone block walls and then assigned each sixth-grader a plot of land on which to build a home.

During a recent class, Espeana Green, 12, was using a computer to create an insula, a kind of ancient Roman apartment building. She had drawn a floor plan and had a builder's checklist.

"Every house needs to have an entrance," Espeana said, reading over the list. Check. "The first floor needs to be made of stone." Check. Then she moved on to placing wood blocks to form the upper floors.

Mac Johnson, 12, was also working intently on an insula. Mac had played Minecraft before and wasn't surprised that his teachers decided to use it in class.

"Mr. Lanphier said the reason that we're using this is because it's an accurate way to build things without just having to write down all this stuff," Mac said. "You still have to make floor plans, but it's more interactive and more fun."

The students play in Minecraft's Creative mode, which means that they don't have to search for building materials. But that didn't mean the students didn't face challenges.

"We need mud brick," Lanphier said. Minecraft doesn't offer that building material, which was common in Roman times. "So what are we going to do?" he asked.

Lanphier said the ability to tackle that kind of problem-solving is part of why he likes Minecraft. He plans to use the game again for next year's sixth-graders, many of whom are already excited about the project.

Piper Phillips, 11, had a warning for her younger schoolmates. "It's not all fun and games," she said while making adjustments to her insula. "There's actually a lot of work involved."

From game to lesson

When St. Patrick's teachers decided to use the game, school technology coordinator Jonathan Fichter contacted TeacherGaming, a company that helps schools set up Minecraft.

Joel Levin, the company's co-founder, had been using Minecraft with his students at a New York City private school for months. The first lesson for his second-graders was about online behavior, Levin said. They had to work together and show respect while playing the game, just as they did in the classroom.

"They were used to winning at all costs," he said. "It was the first time they had done something like this with limits...setting expectations on their behavior."

What Is Minecraft? Frequently asked questions

Minecraft is a video game in which players create and break apart various kinds of blocks in three-dimensional worlds. The game's two main modes are Survival and Creative. In Survival, players must find their own building supplies and food. They also interact with blocklike mobs, or moving creatures. (Creepers and zombies are some of the dangerous ones.) In Creative, players are given supplies and do not have to eat to survive. They also can break all kinds of blocks immediately.

Are there points or levels? No. The purpose of the game is simply to build and explore (and survive).

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How many players can play it? You can play by yourself or you can play online with others. The smartphone and tablet versions offer multi-player options through WiFi networks. Players can connect to thousands of Minecraft online games (servers), some of which involve battling other players.

Which devices can I play it on? There are versions for PCs, Macs and Xbox 360. There's also a version for iPhone, iPad, Kindle Fire and Android smartphones

How do I get started? Players age 12 and younger must have a parent create an account for them. Always ask a parent before going online.

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