

Intro to Library and Information Science

Summer Session 1

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Minecraft in the Library

While video games are usually not treated with the same respect as other forms of entertainment and learning, such as books or film, it is important for libraries to give serious thought to including games, whether as a part of a program or as part of the media collection for patrons to check out. Also, incorporating video games is one of the best ways to attract teens, preteens, and children to the library. As Kat Werner, a librarian from Benton Harbor Public Library, says in her article “Bringing Them In,” “Children and teens are living in an increasingly digital world, and libraries struggle with ways to continue to be relevant to the younger generation” (1). By bringing in games that are popular to children and teens, such as card game tournaments, board games, role-playing games, and video games, you can bring in more youth, such as adolescent males, who would normally never come to the library.

Games are also a great source of education. As Werner also states in her article, “Gaming programs can teach children and teens social skills, introduce them to technology, and start the process of helping them love the library” (1). In Beth Saxton’s article “All Thumbs Isn’t a Bad Thing,” she emphasizes the opportunities for library youth services to tie gaming into career building activities, such as inviting gamers to write for a video game magazine, bringing in local

game developers to give talks, and working with local gaming stores to host programs that teach kids the basics of creating, writing, or critiquing games (2). Saxton also mentions that, “Many teens who initially became involved in the library through gaming events have gone on to attend other library programs as well” (2). By attracting the youth with the popularity of current games, the library can then lure the teens and children into other educational programs and events hosted by the library.

Now one video game in particular I would like to review is the ever popular Minecraft and its potential for use in the library. Minecraft was created by Markus “Notch” Persson, a Swedish independent game developer, in 2009. It was released online in an “alpha” mode, meaning it was still early in development, and players were allowed to interact and cooperate in the creation of the game—a very innovative concept at the time. In the Publisher Weekly article “Mining the Minecraft Phenomenon” Calvin Reid says this about Minecraft and its development: “Minecraft has revolutionized the gaming industry; generated tens of millions of dollars in annual revenue; spawned its own convention; given its creator, Markus "Notch" Persson, a cultlike following in the gaming world; and made him an unlikely multimillionaire” (3). Once the game became incredibly popular and sales increased to the millions, Persson formed his own video game development company, Mojang, and made Jens “Jeb” Bergensten the new lead developer of Minecraft. In the same Publishers Weekly article, Reid states, “Mojang and Minecraft reflect a new ‘indie mentality’ in gaming. Goldberg noted, ‘They don’t want to be seen as businessmen, but as artists. It’s a new way to look at a game developer—more like a musician or a painter.’” (3). To this day, the game is continually being developed, with new updates arriving every month or so.

So what is Minecraft? Minecraft is an online virtual sandbox creative/survival game. It can be played on the computer, the Xbox 360, XboxOne, Playstation 4, and on certain handheld devices. As Wired magazine described it: Minecraft is “‘a virtual version of Lego’ that has ‘no instructions, no levels, no mission structure, no story, no lives, no points, no clear goal’” (4). The player loads into a large, randomly generated world and, depending on the difficulty setting, must immediately find a way to survive using the environment. The player’s character can starve to death or be killed by monsters that appear during the nighttime, so they must create tools using a complex crafting system in order to find food, build a shelter, and combat the hordes of monsters. There is no wrong way to play the game. As Erica Gauquier and Jessica Schneider, in their article “Minecraft Programs in the Library” write: “players have the freedom to alter the world and create how they play within the game” (5). The player is given total freedom to do as they choose, whether it is to build enormous structures, explore vast worlds, find villages to trade with, or domesticate animals and farm the land.

Sarah Ludwig, a school librarian from Hamden Hall County Day School, in her article, “Block Party” describes the Minecraft world as “huge—about eight times larger than Earth—with various biomes, including deserts, snowfields, and jungles” (4). There are multiple difficulty levels: peaceful, easy, normal, hard, and hardcore which will determine how difficult the game will be to play. Ludwig states, “I’d recommend that librarians start their servers on peaceful. That way new players can get the hang of building things and forming allegiances without having to worry about surviving a hostile attack” (4). She also mentions that, while it is good to start on the easier setting, or on “creative” mode, most of her students insisted that the game be moved to more difficult settings to encourage competition and heighten excitement in the gameplay. In the more challenging setting, Ludwig writes, “every time players slay a

monster, they accumulate experience points, or xp, which enable them to enchant materials (how about a pickax that breaks rocks faster?) or create magical potions, which can temporarily grant players invisibility, Herculean strength, or lightning-quick reflexes” (4). The endless possibilities of the game are what contribute to Minecraft’s effectiveness as a source of entertainment, and, importantly, a learning tool, especially when applied to the multiplayer aspect of the game.

In Erin Daly’s article “Explore, Create, Survive” where she writes from her experiences at Chicopee (MA) Public Library, she writes “While you can experience the game on your own in a single-player world, the multi-player experience is superior because it opens up the opportunities of cooperation and community and is more fun” (6). At Sarah Ludwig’s school library, she noticed that the children were creating their own virtual society within Minecraft. As she wrote, “they claimed land, built cities, appointed a leader for each city, began trading, and took on various societal roles. It was fascinating to watch. Our students completely governed themselves, and they had a strong sense of right and wrong. For example, damaging or stealing materials from other players (a practice known as "griefing") was firmly discouraged and met with swift punishment” (4). Her students were able to make new friends, collaborate in creating structures and surviving, which therein fosters communication skills, and they grew more interested in concepts of math, science, architecture, and writing. Importantly, Ludwig remarks, “Unlike some of the assignments we educators create to force kids to work together, Minecraft requires an organic type of collaboration that's managed by the students themselves, not by their teachers” (4). This especially is wonderful to consider when applying the use of Minecraft in a public library. The children are able to create through a kind of self-motivation that is typically hard to achieve in normal library programs.

The educational value of the game cannot be stated enough. At the Chicopee (MA) Public Library, Erin Daly spells out the education value in Minecraft in detail. Children and teens can learn: computer basics, three dimensional modeling, economy and city planning, mapping, engineering, circuitry, and computer mechanisms through the red dust system, animation, and creativity through inspiration (6). In a presentation at a conference for the Virginia Libraries, Matthew Williams and Sarah Vaughan from Roanoke Public Library tout that Minecraft is a “great learning tool, serving as a curiosity-driven exercise in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) skills (7). Erica Gauquier and Jessica Schneider from Darien, CT Library also state that “The critical thinking piece of the game is huge. Players are constantly faced with choices that need to be made. If you don't make good choices, it affects your chances for survival and affects your quality of life just the way it does in real life” (5). For teens and children, these tools for learning and everyday life are essential and can be achieved without pulling teeth through the use of Minecraft.

To enhance the educational aspects of the game, many of the libraries have created their own challenges and events within the game itself. Sarah Ludwig from the school library of Hamden Hall County Say School, created “races in survival mode, building in either creative mode or survival mode, treasure hunts in survival mode” as well as “combat in survival mode, survival challenges in survival mode, building and engineering challenges, either in survival or creative mode, depending on level of difficulty” (8). At the Mattituck-Laurel Library in Mattituck, NY, Elizabeth Grohoski and Karen Letteriello have created a 3D model of their library within Minecraft and their vision of the game features a library scavenger hunt with treasure chests located in virtual shelves and “clues provide students with a summary of the plot, title, author, and call letters--so children can locate the books inside the physical library”

(Minecraft library scores big). Matthew Williams from Roanoke Public Library “constructed a giant tower with special puzzles and challenges; any players that manage to work their way to the top receive a special kit filled with tools and items to use” (7). As Ludwig states, “All of these challenges, games, and activities require patience, teamwork, collaboration, problem-solving, and creative thinking, among other skills” (8). These activities show that libraries can do more than just host the game. They can use the Minecraft itself to create their own programs and events for the youth to participate in.

Now there are some issues to consider when using Minecraft, or any games, in the library. Namely: equipment, space, noise, and appealing to the right audience. While some games are relatively inexpensive, like card games, board games, and some tabletop role-playing games, video games can be highly expensive. For console gaming, the library must either purchase or rent a console and newer consoles can cost up to five hundred dollars or more. They also need to purchase the video games, which can also cost as much as sixty dollars each. With Minecraft, the game itself is a one-time price of \$27. Many teens and children may already own a copy of the game and can use their own log in information to join the library’s server. Running a server is free for Minecraft if you are technologically savvy and if you have a computer with enough memory capable of hosting it. There are some online server options for a monthly or yearly fee where a remote server can host your library’s world. As for the computer hardware, Minecraft can usually run without issue on a PC with Windows 7 or better. The biggest issue is with memory (RAM). The more RAM the computer has, the better. Other than that, Minecraft is not a high graphics or physics-demanding game and can run with basic graphics cards and processors.

Another couple of issues are space and noise. With some types of gaming, the noise level can get especially loud, so having a space in the library dedicated to gaming might be required. At the Sulzer Regional Library where I currently work, the Xbox gaming programs take place in the auditorium so as not to disturb the regular library patrons. Beth Saxton, in “All Thumbs Isn’t a Bad Thing” argues that “Librarians holding video game programs report that they have no more—and often fewer—behavioral issues at game programming events than any other kind of event” (2). Generally, from what I have seen of Minecraft players in library settings, such as downtown in the YouMedia center, the teens and youth are generally pretty quiet, but it is something to consider.

Many of the libraries have also utilized teen advisory groups with their gaming programs. By getting the feedback from the teens and youth themselves, the library can then make informed choices and form the best programs possible. For instance, many of the libraries found that teens and children needed to have separate servers and the teens often wanted to come up with their own rules, policies, and difficulty settings in Minecraft. Also, when the library wishes to incorporate other types of games, getting feedback from the teens is essential. As a librarian, you want to make sure you bring in games that the children and teens actually want to play.

Overall, through reviewing these articles, I agree that adding games like Minecraft to the library will attract new patrons, keep the library innovative and current, and will provide an additional learning tool for children and teens and allow them a place to become more involved with the library and their community. In the future, I think it would be interesting to consider adding Minecraft and other gaming events and programs for adults, with fewer restrictions than you would see in the teen and children’s programs, which can appeal to the large older gaming community.

End notes:

(1) Kat Wenrer's "Bringing Them In: Developing a Gaming Program for the Library" from *Library Trends* 61, no. 4: 790-801. 2013.

(2) Beth Saxton's "All Thumbs Isn't a Bad Thing: Video Game Programs @ your library" from *Young Adult Library Services* 5, no. 2: 31-33. 2007.

(3) Calvin Reid's "Mining the 'Mine- craft' Phenomenon." *Publishers Weekly* 260, no. 44: 6-7. 2013.

(4) Sarah Ludwig's "Block Party" from *School Library Journal* 59, no. 3: 34. 2013.

(5) Erica Gauquier and Jessica Schneider's "Minecraft Programs in the Library" from *Young Adult Library Services* 11, no. 2: 17-19. 2013.

(6) Erin Daly's "Explore, Create, Survive" from *School Library Journal* 58, no. 5: 24-25. 2012.

(7) John Connolly's "Minecraft in the Library" from *Virginia Libraries* 59, no. 4: 31-33. 2013.

(8) Sarah Ludwig's "Tag Team Tech: Wrestling with Teens and Technology February 2014: Minecraft I" from *Voyamagazine.com*. 2014.

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