RISING STARS

SWITCHED ON
MINECRAFT

Minecraft in the classroom: the gaming phenomenon brings the curriculum to life

By Tracy Broadbent

I'm a 40-something female teacher and I'm a gamer. There, I said it! Gaming is what I do in my spare time. It's what I've done since gaming became "a thing". In fact, my children refer to me as "Tracy Broadband" rather than "Broadbent".

Over the 20 years or so I've been enjoying my hobby, it has become obvious to me that some games have the capacity to engage pupils in their learning in a way that traditional methods can't. Minecraft is by far the most obvious – it's accessible, open-ended and children love it.

I became so convinced that the building game would work in the classroom that I bought the Minecraft licences myself and decided to put it to the test. A colleague who was teaching World War 2 to Year 4 pupils agreed to let her class use Minecraft in a lesson on Anderson shelters. She was massively sceptical but willing to give it a go.

The lesson was a revelation. Building the shelters involved measuring out plots, using area and perimeter scales and deciding what materials would have been used in the period. But beyond the actual building of the structures, the children managed to incorporate in to their Minecraft world most of what they knew about what was happening in the UK during the war.

They wrote ration books and as they grasped the extent of the food shortages, decided to set their shelters in gardens where they planted potatoes. Their role play reflected the lack of dads around because they were off fighting the war. One of the rules was that they had to use materials that were around in the 1940s so Minecraft's leather helmets, that are actually armour, were co-opted to stand in for gas masks. They were truly immersed in what they were doing.

When the shelters were built, we hovered above them in the sky,

turned day into night and scanned the ground to see if we could see the shelters in the dark. In a grand finale, we bombed the structures to see which ones survived and which ones didn't – and then asked why.

Historical empathy was palpable in the classroom. Pupils were fascinated by the minutiae: Was there toilet paper in the shelters?; Where did the air supply come from?; What happened to the pets? Questions that they, and I, might never have considered before.

The level of interest in the subject prompted by using Minecraft put a traditional lesson in the shade. Children wanted to go away and research. They looked things up for themselves and the topic was still being referred to days and weeks afterwards when a new nugget of information had been unearthed. That is the beauty of Minecraft – it almost doesn't matter what Minecraft is, it is the effect it has on sparking pupils' interest in the subject at hand. ▶

One important thing I've noticed is the extent to which pupils using Minecraft support each other in ways that I don't think they do in traditional lessons. They want to learn from each other. In every classroom you will have your Minecraft experts, and what is nice is that they are not always the children who are experts at other things. Sometimes it is the quieter pupils who come to the fore.

We had one boy who was mute in school but because you can message in Minecraft, he began to message everybody else about what we were doing. It gave him a voice.

Pupils know that we have to be very strict about how we use Minecraft because unless we show that we are using it as a learning tool, it will be abandoned. That is the last thing they want. Because children are so keen to keep using Minecraft in the classroom, they don't mess around and they keep to the brief.

In another example, we dipped in to Minecraft to help Year 2 boys who were struggling with basic numeracy. In a simple counting exercise with coloured blocks, pupils arranged them in lines of 10 so that we could visualise breaking them apart and putting them together. It wasn't complex or time intensive but it was effective. Because they love Minecraft so much, they want to do it.

" We won't shoehorn Minecraft in for the sake of it. We start with the curriculum and use Minecraft to bring it to LIFE. "

For these groups of children this was a new and exciting approach. It wasn't a worksheet or an exercise book, it was Minecraft. Some of the children who had Minecraft at home carried on their learning. One boy came back and said he'd made 100 lines of 10 in different colours and was breaking them apart and adding them up every evening. We didn't ask him to do that; his love of Minecraft prompted him.

Unlike Minecraft's younger fans, parents needed a bit of persuading. They voiced concerns about game playing and screen time so we got them in to show them. Through some short workshops, we explained how we were using it, let them have a go and reassured them that it was curriculum-led. By the end of the sessions, we were getting a round of applause.

Teachers were also reluctant. They have so little time and initially thought it was just another thing to try and cram into a busy working day. Once they realised how effective and accessible Minecraft was, their opinion changed. The resource guide I've co-written, *Switched on Minecraft*, will help other teachers use Minecraft in the classroom and is based on

everything I've learned over the last two years about employing this transforming technology to teach the curriculum.

Minecraft is now one of the tools that we regularly use in my school. We are at the stage where a teacher will come to me and say, "This is our topic. We think Minecraft might work. How shall we do it?" and if we can we will. But we won't shoehorn Minecraft in for the sake of it. We start with the curriculum and use Minecraft to bring it to life. ∎

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tracy Broadbent, an ICT Technician and Leader from Manor Park CE First School in Dorchester, was awarded an Inspirational Educators Award at a ceremony hosted by The Worshipful Company of Educators and RM Education, which this year commended educators who were using ICT in innovative ways to support students. She has co-written *Switched on Minecraft* to ensure that all teachers can tap into pupils' engagement with the digital world. The Minecraft-made-easy guide provides step-by-step guidance and video tutorials to ensure staff will feel fully equipped to use Minecraft as a platform for lessons that motivate and inspire.