

Is Minecraft Educational?

by Judy Arnall



Your ten-year old daughter is wasting another beautiful summer day inside the house, playing Minecraft. You fear that her brain is becoming atrophied for lack of academic stimulation. You worry about education company warnings that children can lose a month of their school year learning during the summer. Will summer fun and a "break from formal learning" cause kids to fall behind academically in the Fall? Is there another way to keep up with academic learning other than by text books and lectures? Could video games support education? Hey, isn't Minecraft educational? Yes, of course it is! Any type of toy or game is educational, in that it teaches children knowledge, life skills and the competencies outlined by Alberta Education in the new curriculum redesign.

Often, parents are critically conscious of the time spent on computer games, and assume that video games and toys are a frivolous waste of time. They think that if the game doesn't directly teach math or language skills, time is wasted. However, indirect teaching of communication and math skills may be the best feature of gaming, along with enjoyment of plot, graphics, music and gameplay. A game can develop academic learning and competencies, even though not marketed as an "educational game".

As a parent of five gamers (both genders), I learned early that my children hated the "educational games" that have primitive graphics, poor logic, clumsy interface, are non-multiplayer and just plain lame. "Educational games" seem to be marketed to parents that aim for functional use of time, rather than fun. When my kids immersed themselves in games like World of Warcraft, Nox, Spore, Gizmos and Gadgets, Age of Empires, Graal, Runescape, Heroes of the Storm and League of Legends, they learned not only reading, writing and math skills, but also knowledge of social studies, mythology, history and science. They learned valuable social skills such as cooperation and conflict resolution with other players in the same game, and with buddies outside the game playing with them in the same room. They learned personal skills, such as resilience during adversity, perseverance and commitment to continue and finish for the team despite discouragement. They learned how to deal with problems, team members and competitors

under time pressure. They learned how to win gracefully, and how to face losing with dignity and without throwing a keyboard across the room.

Indirectly, games and toys teach some academic concepts in a way that is compelling to children, aided by the focus that is essential for game success. Parents who don't play the game may not realise how their children have learned these competencies. Here is a brief overview of how toys and video games teach children skills and knowledge within the framework of the new curriculum redesign by Alberta Education.

Of course, children still need exercise, fresh air, and breaks from screens, which are also great life skills, but if your daughter chooses to spend her quiet time playing Minecraft, relax! She is counteracting summer learning loss in a fun, educational and engaging way.

*Competency	Playing "Minecraft"	Playing with "Lego"	Playing "Settlers of Catan" Board Game
Knows how to learn	Get models for building new things. No built-in instructions. Must work with interface to experiment.	Learn which blocks fit together the best.	Learn how to read game instructions.
Can apply critical thinking	Make decisions such as where to put the floor plan - can't be next to the forest.	Apply building to a mental conceptual plan. Must figure out how to make structure strong.	Plan where to put settlements and roads to maximize resources.
Can identify and solve problems	Learn how to manage resources.	Must figure out how to make corners and rounded pieces.	Figure out how to get resources when the dice is not giving them to you
Can manage information effectively	Use and find online guides for information and building recipes.	Use the internet to seek out instructions.	Decide what the next move is - build a road, settlement or trade?
Can innovate through creativity	Create a world. Learn to build parts of structure to solve a problem.	Create anything.	Invent new ways of negotiating with other players.
Knows how to create opportunities	Help each other through in-game talk.	Can play in groups or alone. Can engage in imaginary play with build items. Can make movies with the items and a camera.	Find ways of acquiring ports.
Can apply multiple literacies of math, reading, writing, language and listening	Learn about perimeter and area. Speak to players outside game through writing. Need to estimate how many blocks required for a structure.	Apply spatial geometry and math skills reading instruction sheets.	Read game instructions.

	Reading required for online guides.		
Can communicate and work cooperatively with other people	Learn not to wreck others things.	Negotiate with others for pieces.	Negotiate with others for resources.
Possesses global and cultural understanding	Learn about scarce resources and how to conserve.	Express ideas in models.	Learn about resource management.
Is able to apply career and life skills	Obtain tools. Must work for stuff Must build many walls to ward off creatures before one can mine again.	Enjoy creation.	Enjoy a well-played game. Learn how to accept defeat graciously.

*Competencies retrieved from Ministerial Order on Student Learning (#001/2013), Alberta Education and adapted for this article. Retrieved from <http://education.alberta.ca/department/policy/standards/goals.aspx> on April 29, 2014

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