

# Learning to play the students' way

**David Dodgson** gets to grips with gaming.

**F**or the last couple of years, I have been exploring an interest in digital game-based learning (DGBL). Games are increasingly ubiquitous as they move beyond traditional PC and console formats and onto personal mobile devices. People spend hours at a time engrossed in games. Many people, of course, see this as an addiction, but it can also be seen as an *opportunity*. Games are able to hold the player's attention for so long because they are engaging. A good game offers just the right amount of challenge: not so easy that it quickly becomes boring, and not so hard that it gets frustrating. A good game allows exploration and choice, drawing in the player as decision maker. A good game encourages the use of critical thinking skills to solve puzzles, defeat foes and advance the plot. Most crucially, a good game allows for failure. The player gets stuck or loses, and then has to go back and critically reassess where things went wrong and how to do it better next time.

A high level of engagement? A stimulating level of challenge? Participant-driven progress? Critical thinking skills? Not fearing mistakes? That sounds like a recipe for good learning to me! If we embrace games and bring them into the learning process, we can not only excite our learners, especially the young ones, but we can encourage them to think critically and talk about their experiences in English as well.

## Considerations

But, of course, video games are not for everyone, and we may not be familiar with the most popular games amongst our young learners at any given time – or

we may not be familiar with games at all. Likewise, just because a game is popular, it doesn't mean everyone in the class has had the chance to play it. That does not mean, however, that we cannot make use of such games. Take *Minecraft*, for example. I used to call it 'the best game for learning I have never played' simply because my students (I was working with 10–12 year olds in Turkey at the time) were finding all sorts of creative ways to bring it into our lessons, and I encouraged them to do so, even though I knew very little about the game at the time.

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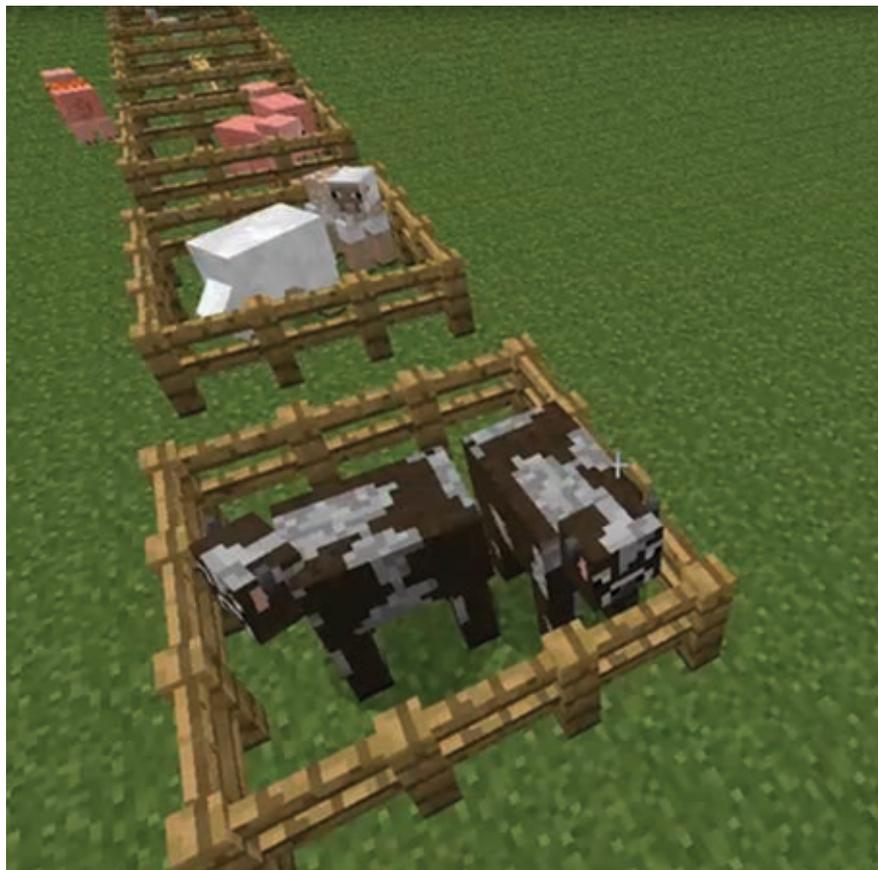
My students would set stories in the *Minecraft* world, composing and sharing them with much more enthusiasm than they would for regular story-writing activities. They would build and create things in the game relevant to our lesson topics, then take screenshots and use them as part of poster presentation projects. They would even create screen capture videos, showing something they had created or found in the game, and narrate the entire thing in English. The level of engagement, creativity and skill, both in terms of putting their language skills to use and their computing skills, astounded me and prompted me to investigate the area of DGBL further.

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## ▶▶▶ Solutions

I started a new job last year at a school where every teacher is asked to run an after-school club. When asked what kind of club I would like to run, I immediately suggested *Minecraft*. It was a popular choice, and the club soon filled up with eager secondary students (aged 11 and up). But then a few other students approached me and asked if they could join the club even though they had not played the game before. That was something I had not thought about: I had assumed that all the students would already know how to play and that I would simply create tasks for them.

The solution I came up with was simple and was one that would finally lead to me getting to grips with the game myself. I asked those students who knew the game to prepare an introductory guide for new players, and I informed them that their first task would be to teach the other students – and me – how to play. In this way, the game made us all equals in the classroom. There was no hierarchy of the teacher as expert imparting knowledge to the students. The students were able to take a degree of control as we cooperated to learn together, using English as the vehicle to do so.



Student animals project (*Minecraft*)

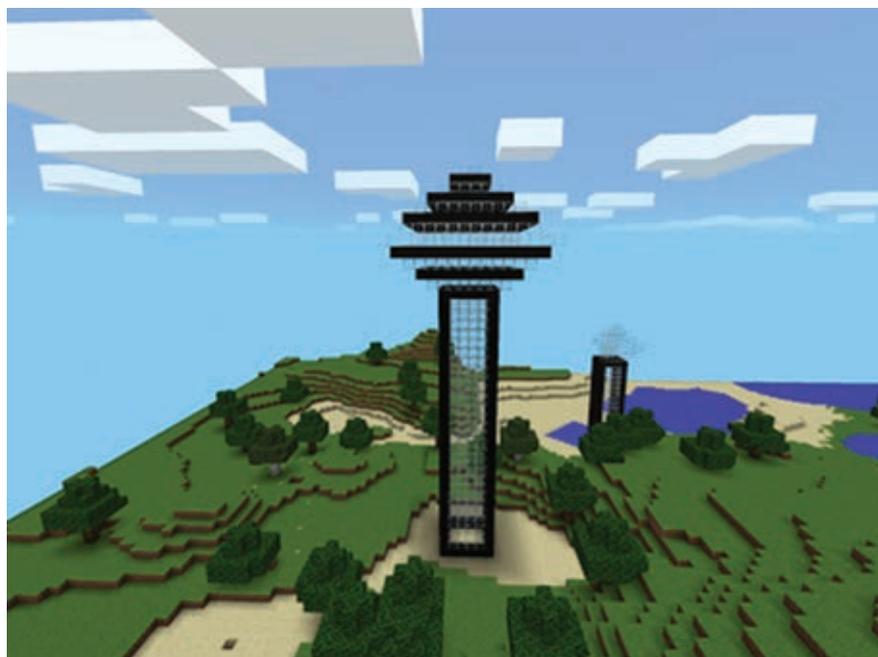
I asked those students who were not familiar with the game to brainstorm questions they had about the game and how it worked. I helped them, as I too had many questions I wanted to ask. Meanwhile, I helped the other group with

the language needed to give instructions and advice. One group loved the fact that their teacher was learning with them, and the other loved being able to teach the teacher. I then paired experienced players with novice ones, and told them that their first task was to collaborate in order to play the game together.

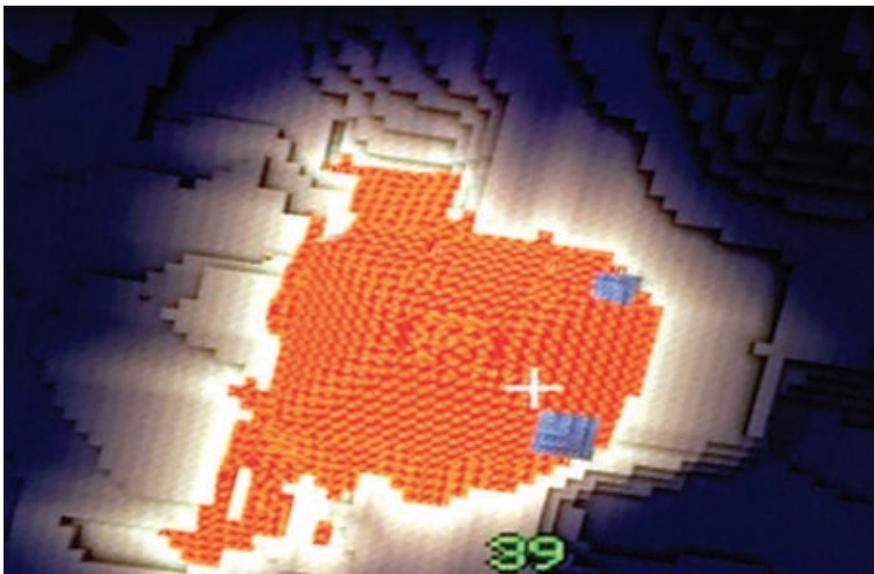
In terms of language, we had one group giving commands and advice, and we had another group forming questions to learn more about the game and ask for clarification. In terms of learning, we had a high level of engagement, a strong element of collaboration, and a clearly-defined purpose for learning, all of which was student-driven.

## Suggestions

This is not just about *Minecraft*, of course. I have gone through similar sequences of learning from my students with other popular games or apps, such as *Angry Birds* and *Can You Escape?* Should you wish to do something similar, you don't have to be a gamer yourself – in fact it helps if you are not – and you don't even have to play the game in class. The students can simply describe how to play it, using screenshots or information



Student recreation of a city landmark (*Minecraft*)



Student volcano project (*Minecraft*)

found online as a visual aid. My lesson outline is as follows:

- Ask your students what games they are playing at the moment.
- Choose a game that you have not heard much about (or pretend you don't know it!) and ask them some basic questions about it, such as the genre of game and the platform it is played on.
- Tell your students you want to try this game out and you want them to help you.
- Put them in groups and ask them to compile a beginner's guide to the game. With a larger class, you could ask them to focus on different areas, such as 'How to survive your first day in *Minecraft*', 'How to make your own pickaxe' and 'How to build your first shelter'.
- If there are any students who don't know the game, ask them to join you in writing questions to find out more about it.
- Invite the groups to present their guides and answer your questions about the game.
- If you have access to the game in class, try to follow their instructions on the spot.
- If not, play the game away from class (this works best when the game is a free app or download) and give your students feedback on how it went.

This process does not only have to be used for digital games, of course. You could ask your students to teach you about their hobbies or any other skills they have. It

also does not have to be confined to teenagers or young learners. I have used a similar approach with business English groups in order to learn more about my clients' jobs and specialist areas. This is all useful information to recycle throughout the course, to help make the learning programme as personalised as possible.



It is important for our students to see that they, too, are experts. They have interests and pursuits that they can teach other people about. Giving them control of the teaching and learning process in this way is very empowering. This sense of purpose and personal investment can create powerful learning opportunities, and that is where our role as teachers comes to the fore – to guide our learners to these moments and equip them with the language they need. We might just learn something new at the same time! **ETp**



**David Dodgson teaches and learns at an international school in Gabon. He has previously taught in Turkey, working with children, teens and adults in general English, ESP and EAP. He believes that personalising the learning process is the key to success, and has a strong interest in using and adapting authentic input for learners of all levels. He blogs at [davedodgson.com](http://davedodgson.com) and runs [eltsandbox.weebly.com](http://eltsandbox.weebly.com), a site dedicated to game-based learning.**

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