

Chapter 6

The Role of Minecraft Build Challenges in Esports

Steven R. Isaacs

Epic Games, USA

Erik Leitner

Broward County Public Schools, USA

Laylah Bulman

Microsoft, USA

Rick Marlatt

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2182-1655>

New Mexico State University, USA

Miles M. Harvey

University of New Mexico, USA

ABSTRACT

In this case study, a team of educators explored the power of Minecraft Education so that students could advance their learning in core academic subjects. This study examined what happened when students utilized Minecraft Education challenges and scholastic esports in a classroom, across a school district, and around the world. The authors share a variety of challenges that demonstrate the power of Minecraft esports as a powerful pedagogical strategy for engaging students and building an interest in STEM-based initiatives that align with the National Council of Teachers of English and the Partnership for 21st Century Skills. As Steve, Erik, and Laylah worked to create challenges for students to compete in Minecraft, Rick and Miles examined the participation of each event, examined the quotes from students, and analyzed the data for clues into what phenomena or processes occurred as students navigated Minecraft challenges. This study examined the evolution of competitive Minecraft challenges during its early phases of integration.

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INTRODUCTION

From the moment *Minecraft* hit the gaming scene, there were educators who saw its pedagogical potential. This was a game that not only captured the imagination of students but one that also built clear connections to concepts taught in the classroom. While its kinship to subjects like architecture, geometry, and engineering was intuitive, it was the creative power inherent in the game that excited many educators. To them, *Minecraft* was not simply another educational game, like many that masked content under the guise and veneer of a video game. *Minecraft* offered something radically different. It offered a new digital classroom for experimentation and exploration. Teachers realized *Minecraft*'s potential as a content creation tool to demonstrate student understanding on content *and* skills. Gone were the days of the identical, tired projects that always failed to inspire and captivate. No more shoebox dioramas or presentation boards. *Minecraft* offered meaningful, inspired collaboration through immersion into student-created worlds. This was a journey, and people took notice.

Esports is a booming industry and over the past few years the need to offer scholastic esports in schools has become clear for many reasons. Colleges have been offering scholarships for competitive gamers, as well as those interested in many of the ancillary skill and career-based opportunities surrounding esports. Most of the competitive experiences and work in esports in education has been related to game titles that have been popular in the college and pro circuit. As a result, the initial focus on high school esports players and team formation made for a logical transition as many of the competitive games were teen rated and were popular among students of that age group. However, the focus on high school certainly seemed to be missing a huge opportunity to fully develop the K-12 to College (and beyond) pipeline. In traditional sports, participants start development at a very young age, often through organized youth leagues, allowing them to work on skills, gain competitive experience and incorporate the values inherent in competitive team-based activities. It became apparent it was needed to find ways to include elementary and middle school students, as they also share the passion for video games and would love to participate in esports.

This chapter will discuss and dissect how *Minecraft* has played a significant role in expanding opportunities for gaming as an accepted and powerful learning tool in global education and skill-building strategies. Specifically, the present study examines the educational outcomes of students pursuing *Minecraft* build challenges and esports activity. Our team of educators interested in game-based learning examined *Minecraft*'s expansion into the realm of scholastic esports, STEM-based team challenges, along with examples of live-streamed faceoffs with design teams from around the globe. The North American Scholastic Esports Federation assembled three educators and two researchers to design, facilitate, and research the use of *Minecraft* as a curricular tool and competitive esports title. Steve Isaacs, a teacher, and founder of the NASEF affiliate, Garden State Esports (GSE), partnered with Laylah, founder of the NASEF affiliate, Florida Scholastic Esports League (FLSEL), and Erik Leitner, chief strategist for FLSEL, to expand *Minecraft* as a critical scholastic esports function during the global pandemic. Rick Marlatt, a research professor interested in scholastic esports and game-based learning, jumped in to assist in researching the utilization of *Minecraft*. Miles Harvey, a NASEF Fellow, researcher, and esports coach also joined the project. Tom Turner, chief education officer of NASEF, supported the expansion of *Minecraft* as an esports tool noting, "Many teachers who are interested in scholastic esports haven't had time to explore the options and understand how engaging this is for students, the incredible learning opportunity esports present, and the number of free resources available from NASEF. Certainly, teachers are going to be working to keep their students on track during the school closures, but without full

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