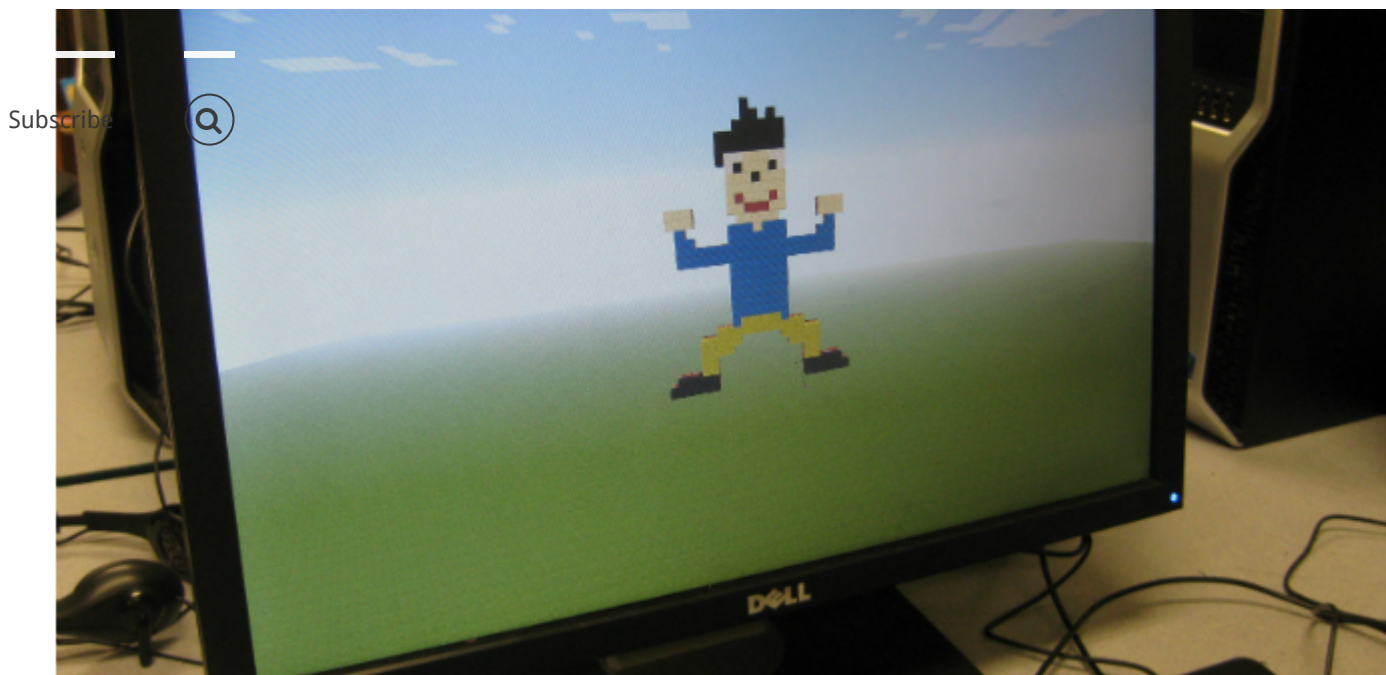


Learning more than Minecraft – A case from Jamaica

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*Can Minecraft teach digital skills? **Anthea Edalere-Henderson** looks at how games such as Minecraft can help educate parents about the new digital worlds of their children. Anthea teaches in the **Caribbean Institute of Media and Communication (CARIMAC)** at the **University of the West Indies** at Mona, Jamaica. Her work focuses on globalized forms of media technologies and media consumption, branding, children-as-audiences, and parental mediation of digital tools.*

I'm learning Minecraft. I've decided that this is a good introduction into a zone I've known about for decades – ever since my teenage friend at summer camp explained at exuberant length the joys of **Pac-Man** – but have never had the slightest interest in exploring. I've just never been drawn to video games. But now the weight of ignorance is catching up with me; I need to be able to understand the basics if I'm going to appreciate this aspect of children and their engagement with digital media. Not surprisingly (and middle-aged parents will probably identify), as (1) someone in her 40s and (2) a media studies academic, I'm learning about Minecraft just like a typical **digital immigrant** – by reading about it more than actually playing it.

Teaching teacher...

My teacher for this pixelated excursion happens to be my 17-year-old son.

Helpful as he is, an hour ago he sent me a link to an online Minecraft tutorial on Messenger. He wasn't being condescending; he just realised that based on my knowledge level and learning pace, I would need an instructional video if I was to master it by the end of the year. (I am well aware of the fact that *he* learned Minecraft just by 'doing it'.)

I watched a couple videos and realised that the tutorial aficionados on YouTube were using a considerably more ramped-up version of Minecraft than the game-play available in the free trial I was using. This led to a discussion with my son about purchase costs for video games, about the mechanics of chiselling virtual blocks with a make-believe axe, and him teasing me about possibly

wanting to play Need for Speed some day. I hadn't heard of Need for Speed, but I was sure it was bad for my heart.

Is it just me or has the digital age disrupted the ~~notion~~, or if not the notion, the routines of parenting?

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Thorny question

A key question for parents of children and teenagers who still want to exert a measure of oversight over the use of digital media in the household is: how do I monitor their use of tools that I actually don't know about, understand, or care for? Children and adolescents have a difficulty too; they may want to respect their **parents' authority**, but in the digital media age there is no denying that many parents have less know-how with emerging technologies than their children.

In my case, my **digital engagement** has been more intensely clustered around critical skills such as information gathering than technical or creative skills. I am more likely to ask my son to install virus protection software on my computer or download a music file for me than do it myself. So when there are significant gaps in knowledge about particular technologies compared to their children, how do parents 'mediate'? The very acknowledgement that, as parents, we aren't 'up to speed' in the digital arena can itself evoke a **sense of anxiety** or embarrassment. Additionally, the backdrop of **economic and social disadvantage** can make the dilemmas of the **digital generational gap** harder to negotiate for families – working-class families have less access to digital media, and fewer opportunities to become comfortable with using them.

A good disruption

The digital age may have disrupted some practices of parenting, if by 'practice' we mean technique or method, but it hasn't nullified the relevance of it. The disruption could actually be a good thing. It forces us to dig deeper – we move from questions of what and how to mediate (which TV shows? which websites? which software filters?) to questions regarding why we are mediating in the first place, and the **kinds of attributes** our guidance or interventions are designed to nurture as our children and teenagers engage with digital media.

But also, I'm made vulnerable when I have to ask my son's help with navigating Minecraft (as well as a host of other things I need help with online). At the same time, I'm building trust for his technical competence with digital media, as well as trust in his judgement regarding the online choices he makes. Sometimes I let my son know I'm concerned about a particular platform or website he may be using, but usually I'm expressing awe at his prowess on the internet.

Parental authority isn't necessarily threatened by digital media. If children and teenagers are convinced that parents are acting in their best interest when mediation occurs, they are more likely to trust them. And for those already experiencing a robust **family connection**, media use in the home may well augment those relationships.

The digital age provides a learning opportunity for children *and* for parents – embracing the opportunity means embedding a range of **digital skills** into the daily practices of parenting:

- intentionally **nurturing values**, so children learn **why parents make the decisions** they make about media and other things;
- migrating to (or incorporating) new media tools and platforms like **WhatsApp** and **Facebook**, to **engage and connect** with children and teenagers where they are, when appropriate;
- **learning new technical skills from children** if they have gained competence in useful areas we can benefit from.



Learning to mediate in the age of digital media is a bit like learning Minecraft – it can be a little daunting at first, but with commitment, a dose of humility and imagination, the outcome may well be impressive.



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