HELOA

Session Title:	Minecraft and Autism – how to use video games for outreach projects
Speaker(s):	Fraya Morris – Widening Participation at Cardiff University
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Overview/ Aim of session:	Sharing insights into how they use Minecraft in outreach with 14 to 19 years old. Structure of the session: • Why Minecraft • Activity with iPads • Discovery and Minecraft
Workshop Content	**Why Minecraft** • The world isn't designed for people with autism, so Minecraft enables us to re-design the world for them, more than we can do on campus. • It's a Sandbox, like Lego, you can make whatever you can imagine. We created several buildings from Cardiff university and created activities for them to do **Accessibility** • With covid, we couldn't do summer schools anymore, so during the pandemic we ran a summer school through Minecraft • Going forward we can continue for people who can't get onto campus • For people with autism, anxiety can prevent them getting onto campus • All schools in Wales have access to Minecraft through their Microsoft accounts (most schools in the UK will have access) **Ability to control the environment** • Can control who can use it and how they interact • Lots of adaptability to create a positive and focused environment for users **Using Minecraft on the iPad** • Explore your own world – first time at university These are photos of us exploring Cardiff University Freshers Fair within Minecraft. Image one – joining the Creative Writing Society, being given a book

Image 2 – joining the Harry Potter Society, being given a wand

Image 3 and 4 – Interacting with characters in the freshers fair
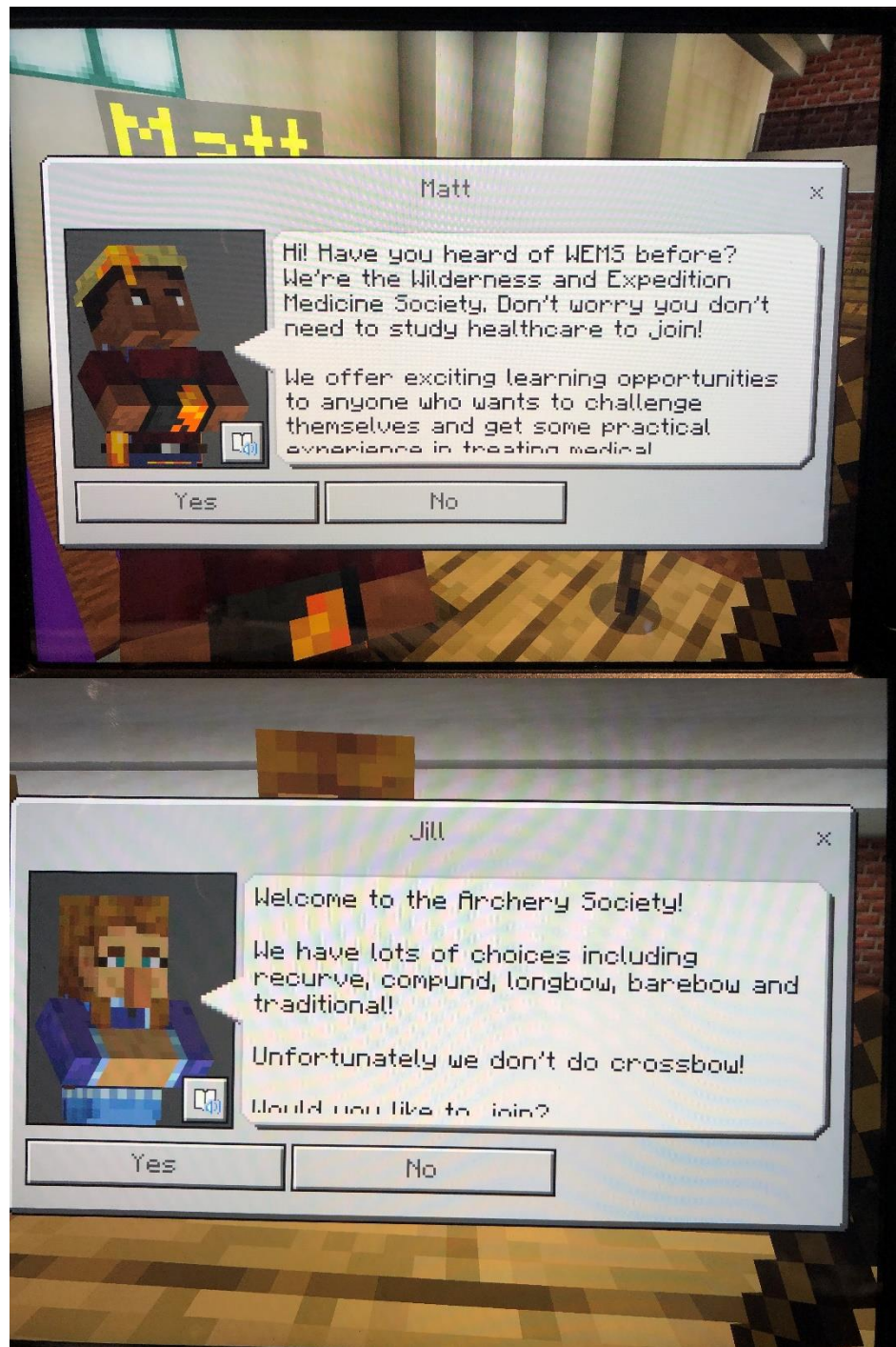
Case Studies /Examples:	• Students complete common university task of collecting an ID • University language, SU and societies • Social connection with others from a clear focus point. • Learn what the building shape and size is • Limited in the choices students can do • Themed different activities of what your first day, week, month will look like.

	Discovery session Started in the university halls • Design common areas • And what you'd like your halls to look like – a lava pit, slide etc.. • They worked in their groups to make the buildings • They were putting into practice skills like communication, compromise, problem solving Come up with a university society and make it • They had to learn what a university society is and what roles are needed to help it run, e.g., treasurer Create your own university • Univers-city – Travelled there by spaceship, and had lots of therapy dogs • Universi-tree – build something that represents their experience of university, they built the tree of life. Had a Graduation in Minecraft • They dressed up • Had speeches • Felt just as personal as a in person. Best activity has three channels • Direct learning, e.g collect your ID, what is a freshers fair • Indirect learning – from freedom of choice, by practicing skills • Indirect learning from each other, sharing tips It was a multi layered experience • Create a goal and environment • Staffing – need the right staffing to prepare, test, build and run the activity. Ambassadors were key in creating it. • Safety and accessibility – Minecraft is very accessible, but it also presents safety issues, can they chat, can they kill each other. Minecraft allows modifications so it can be safe. We didn't have any issues.
Questions and Answers:	**What was the starting point?** We didn't have a lot of time because we needed to run a summer school online. We ask two trusted ambassadors who took in seriously. **How long did it take to create?** 2 months. The students were still studying, so they weren't putting in 80 hours weeks. It was important that the building was accurate. But you could use an empty field and create activities for them to do. Next time, we asked students from the School of Architecture and Engineering who took 6 months to create the large buildings and then they could use them as part of their work. **Are there any legal challenges taking it into schools?** Minecraft has an education version which is built to be used in schools, it's the most accessible version. It will work on iPad, phones, computers, games consoles. It's easy for us to use and design worlds, there are also elements of coding and chemistry, climate change that you could pick up and use. You can run servers for multiplayer experiences, which is what we did for the summer school.

What support is available after they've played the game and what to come to university? The traditional discovery event is on campus helps to acclimatize them to the environment in small groups. This helps reach people who were nervous to come in small groups. The game helps them build up to coming onto campus after playing the game in Minecraft.

Did you find any issues of any students being able to use it if they haven't played video games?
I was concerned about this, it's not easy to teach someone to download it on zoom. We asked them their level of ability in the sign up. But it was quite a self-selecting group who signed up. Some hadn't played it before, so we created a handbook with how to install it, tips, and shared tips available on YouTube. Then offered sessions before the summer school to talk it through with a student ambassador. Everyone was able to use it, no one dropped out because they couldn't play the game.

Did you have any issues with parents thinking it wasn't academic? No one said that, but it might have been a self-selecting group of parents.

What it used in other WP or just autistic students?
This was just autistic students. But it can be applied to different groups.

Is there a cost to Minecraft education?
For students in Wales, they have access through Office 365 through their school email addresses, so it's free for them. It is free to use through university accounts too.

Questions about safeguarding, how do you manage the safeguarding if they can interact?
They use the in-game chat, they can direct message a student through Whisper, but you can turn that off. The education version has all that build in so they can't talk to others and kill others. You can protect what they build, so they can't destroy others house.

How did you start them off? All on a zoom?
In our first year, we set up a zoom call. We had a small session about how to interact with your groups, then the afternoon they had breakout rooms on zoom for their groups with an ambassador, so they could chat with each other and the ambassador, so it was safe and monitored. At one point we thought about using Discord, but it has more safeguarding issues, so we used zoom.

Have you tried replicating it on Roblox? I thought Minecraft might be too young for them.
We didn't explore that. It was always Minecraft from the start. It was in the news at the time that all Welsh students had access. There was a TED talk about a father who set up a server for his autistic kids - AutCraft
https://www.ted.com/talks/stuart_duncan_how_i_use_minecraft_to_help_kids_with_autism

What was the age group?
14-to-18-year old's. People play Minecraft at any age, so it depends how you pitch it. You could play it with younger kids, and it would be an easy sell.

	When you gave them a task, how long do you give them per task? How do you manage that? We thought it through beforehand, 'Design your own room' was the task on the first day, it was all new and we didn't want to make it time pressured. They had a 2-hour Minecraft session in the afternoon. For societies they had 2 or 3 sessions. With this group it's important to be clear with the timings and their expectations. We got an ambassador who knew it and one who didn't and timed how long it took them and figured it out that way.
Summary Key takeaways:	• Minecraft is an accessible, safe and fun platform for young people to learn about university, and build skills in communication and teamwork, especially if they are on the autistic spectrum. • The team at Cardiff University carefully planned and prepared the sessions, using their student ambassadors to co-create the world and feedback on the sessions. And they worked closely with the families and young people to ensure they had a rewarding and fun learning experience.