A Minecraft Camp for All Children

by Carli Spina[1]

Since its initial alpha release in 2009, Minecraft[2] has grown in both popularity and versatility. Though at first glance Minecraft appears to be nothing more than a simple construction game that allows players to use cubes to build structures, in reality it is a complicated game that includes multiple modes and options to heavily customize their experience. Popular with players of all ages, it is not only fun but also lets players build their problem solving, construction, coding, and online socialization skills.[3]

Given its versatility, it is no surprise that a group of educators at the Connected Learning Alliance[4] took note of Minecraft's potential for online education. With support from the MacArthur Foundation, the Connected Learning Alliance launched a pilot session of a free, online Minecraft camp in 2014, building on their previous research and work[5] offering similar programs for other digital technologies such as Scratch, Arduino, and digital photography. This initial camp was offered as part of Pursuitery and brought in children from around the world who used the camp servers "to build, code, and learn together." According to Tara Tiger Brown, the Minecraft camp was the one that "stood out the most in terms of engagement."[6]

Based on this, the lead team of researchers from the Connected Learning Alliance, including Tara Tiger Brown, Mimi Ito, and Katie Salen, quickly realized that they had found a program that could introduce a wide range of participants to coding skills through an activity that they enjoy and that would prompt positive interaction with their peers online. At the same time, they realized that expanding the program in a sustainable manner would require a new approach. By the beginning of March of 2015, they had founded a for-profit benefit corporation called Connected Camps that allowed them to move forward with vastly expanded offerings for their second summer. A few short months later in July of 2015, they launched their first Summer of Minecraft, which welcomed over 2,000 students. Currently, they offer a "Kid Club," where participants can play Minecraft in a safe, moderated environment afterschool and on weekends, and "Coding Camp," each session of which is a month long and broken into eight online meetings of 1.5 hours each.

DIVERSE PARTNERS

Connected Camps is a project that has brought together a wide range of organizations with different roles. From the investors who provide funding for the corporation's endeavors to the organizations that partner with Connected Camps to offer programming for students who would not otherwise be able to participate, Connected Camps has worked with

[1]The event design team is grateful for Carli Spina's work in creating this case example write-up, in addition to the insight provided by Mimi Ito of the University of California, Irvine. In conjunction with event participants, we look forward to developing this case example further through the recommendations and reflection generated from event discussions.

[2]Minecraft is an open world video game created by Markus Persson, a Swedish developer. Players navigate a space where they can build structures with cubes. The game offers five modes: Adventure, Survival, Spectator, Creative, and Hardcore. The game surpassed 100 million players early in 2014 and was purchased by Microsoft in November of that year. At this point, over 21 million people have purchased the game for either a Mac or PC. Further background on the game is available on the Minecraft website.

[3]See Dr. Ito's post, "Why Minecraft Rewrites the Playbook for Learning."

[4]The Connected Learning Alliance "supports the expansion and influence of a network of educators, experts, and youth-serving organizations mobilizing new technology in the service of equity, access and opportunity for all young people." With the support of the MacArthur Foundation and the New Venture Fund, the organization strives to achieve its vision of "[a] world where all young people have access to participatory, interest-driven learning that connects to educational, civic, and career opportunities."

[5]The Connected Learning Alliance's work can be found at http://clrn.dmlhub.net/.

[6]For more information on this pilot camp, see Henry Jenkin's interview with the three founders on his blog, Confessions of an Aca-Fan.

a diverse group of organizations and individuals. At its core is a collaboration between the Connected Camps team, who were originally based at the Connected Learning Alliance when the project began, and the team at the Institute of Play (IOP), a nonprofit that aims to "create learning experiences rooted in the principles of game design." This partnership has continued throughout the program's development, with IOP continuing to work with Connected Camps on new curricula and also serving as a non-profit partner for the project, which allows IOP to accept donations for student scholarships and pursue grant funding for specific sub-activities.

In addition to this core partnership, Connected Camps has worked closely with several other institutions while offering their online camps. On the operations side, they have partnered with three schools to develop a strong team of counselors for their camps. These high school and college students provide support and mentorship for camp participants and are a key piece of the camp experience. In addition, Connected Camps has extended its reach to a diverse group of communities by partnering with local organizations such as schools, libraries, and community groups to offer in-person camp sessions for students who might not otherwise have the resources to participate in the online program. One of the first of these partnerships was with LA Makerspace and the Los Angeles Public Libraries. Through this program, Connected Camps' programming was offered at L.A. public libraries on servers owned by the libraries rather than through Connected Camps' networked servers to address the technological needs of the libraries. These partners and others like them not only provide staffing, space, and resources for the camps, but also help Connected Camps to identify students and keep them engaged.

PUBLIC BENEFIT CORPORATION

Once the team started their work with Minecraft, they realized that they needed to move beyond the nonprofit or academic roles that many of them had worked in before. Institutions with those structures generally rely on grant funding to start these sorts of programs. While this may have been suitable for a short-term, small-scale proof of concept, the Connected Camps team wanted a structure that would allow them to create a long-term program that could scale up to include more students and programs over time. This required a different type of support, which led them to incorporate as a benefit corporation at the beginning of 2015.

As a benefit corporation, Connected Camps has investors but is also required to consider how their actions can make a positive impact on society. Such a corporation is not focused solely on making money for investors, but has social goals as well. With this structure, Connected Camps can accept investors, most of whom are currently technology companies with an interest in improving technology education, but still retain its focus on providing high-quality education programs regardless of economic need. And, it has proved successful, allowing them to develop a group of investors who are, in the words of Dr. Mimi Ito, "investing in the people and the vision of the work." This, in turn, has given them the resources to not only increase their offerings quickly but also offer training in a need-blind manner.

COMMITMENT TO EQUITY

Though Connected Camps made the decision to incorporate as a for-profit corporation, they still remain committed to their original equity agenda. Many of their online camp participants come from middle class, tech-savvy families, who join the camp through the Connected Camps website and pay $200 per camp session, but they also work to ensure that they are reaching out to low-income children. Many of these children participate through the Connected Camps sessions offered with local organizations, and in these situations Connected Camps works closely with their partners to determine student need and ensure that everyone has access to the camp. At times, this may mean

that students at the same camp are paying different amounts to participate or that some campers aren't paying at all. As Dr. Ito put it, "[the] bottom line is we don't want to turn anyone away."

VERSATILITY AND FLEXIBILITY

A core feature of Connected Camps is its flexibility. Even its inception was only possible because the team was quick to build on a suggestion from students participating in their programs at Quest to Learn that they add Minecraft to their existing programming. Over the course of a few short weeks, they moved from the first consideration of the idea to offering a popular Minecraft program on their own server. This popularity led the team to shift their focus towards Minecraft and ultimately led to the decision to spin this off from the Connected Learning Alliance's other work.

This responsiveness and agility has continued to be important for Connected Camps. Today they offer several options for children who want to enroll and participate from home, organizations who want to run on-site code camps using the curricula developed by Connected Camps and the Institute of Play, and materials for educators who want to learn more about how they can use Minecraft in the classroom. They also work with partners to adapt their existing materials to meet their technological and curricular needs.

Connected Camps' sessions have been run by a wide range of organizations from schools to libraries to community organizations and they have designed options for groups that can connect to the Connected Camps' servers online and those who need to run the program on internal servers. Moreover, camps have been offered in a wide range of sites, including settings where participants attend on a set schedule and in locations, such as libraries, where students drop-in only periodically. They also offer further customization for specific institutions, such as their current project to create a custom on-site camp for a private school. The ability to offer versatile products and remain flexible in the face of differing needs has been an important part of Connected Camps' success.

CHALLENGES

Connected Camps' unique program and structure has led to some challenges along the way. Though the benefit corporation structure has been very successful for this project, combining a for-profit mission with a strong commitment to fairness, access, and "need-blind" enrollment has required careful thought. Currently, Connected Camps has benefited from having a group of investors who are "hands-off," but Dr. Ito did note that "it's really about choosing wisely about who your investors are and what their motivations are."

An additional challenge for the project has been the wide variability in the technology available at many of their partner organizations. Though their core programming takes place on Connected Camps' Minecraft servers, many of their partner organizations must run internal servers rather than connecting online to remote servers either for structural or policy reasons. This has challenged the original approach that Connected Camps developed and ultimately required them to offer new options to meet the needs of these partners. However, Connected Camps has been able to deftly navigate these challenges to offer a range of Minecraft-based curricula and camp options.

Discussion Questions:

1. What do you think of Connected Camps decision to form as a benefit corporation? Is it something you would consider for your own work?
2. How do you see Connected Camps' relationship with their investors impacting its work? Do you see it helping or hindering them over the long-term?
3. Connected Camps was able to move from a small pilot to a program available for 2,000 participants in a very short period of time. What do you see as the challenges and benefits of scaling a program up this quickly?
4. What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages of designing camps for such diverse audiences? Similarly, what do you see as the advantages and disadvantages of partnering with so many types of organizations?
5. How could your organization structure itself to be flexible and able to respond to a range of needs from various partners?

OUTCOMES

Though the pilot Minecraft program only started a little more than a year ago, it has already grown to accommodate over 2,000 participants in the summer of 2015. Of these, approximately 500 participated through the online program and the other 1,500 through partner programs. This split was very important to Connected Camps as it allowed them to prove the viability of their consumer product while still making an impact on underserved communities. Going forward, Connected Camps is testing a model for afterschool programming throughout the year and continues to partner with educators of all kinds of expand their offerings, particularly for institutions that do not have in-house expertise in Minecraft or programming. They are also working on partnerships with new schools and organizations, including exploring a possible partnership with Digital Youth Network, an organization that offers programming for Chicago Public Schools. In addition, they hope to continue to do assessment work, such as analyzing the projects that students have created.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

These sources offer more background information about the Connected Camps, the institutions that partnered to create it, and Minecraft.

Connected Camps: http://connectedcamps.com/

Connected Learning Alliance: http://clalliance.org/

Institute of Play: http://www.instituteofplay.org/

Minecraft: https://minecraft.net/

MinecraftEdu: http://minecraftedu.com/