

Archives and Minecraft: the HullCraft project (as of *November 2014*)

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You are possibly wondering how computer games can be used with archives? One answer to this question is a project called HullCraft, a collaboration between the University of Hull and the Hull History Centre since August 2014.

The aim of HullCraft is to engage young people with archival material by recreating architecture and artefacts from the collections at the Hull History Centre using Minecraft.

What is Minecraft?

Minecraft can be described as digital LEGO. It is a computer game where players can place and break blocks enabling them to modify and explore open, virtual worlds. Players can build alone or collaboratively with others on an online server. The creative possibilities are endless, opening up new pathways for learning.

Minecraft has become a cultural phenomenon appealing particularly to teenage gamers, with over 54m licenses sold on several platforms since the game was launched in 2009. In September 2014 Microsoft purchased Mojang, the developers of the game, for \$2.5bn.

Heritage organisations, such as the British Museum and the Tate, are beginning to realise Minecraft's potential as an engagement tool with built heritage, historical artefacts and art. For archives engagement the virtual world allows for players to explore beyond the imagery and the text, offering new ways of learning through participation and 3D visualisation.

Where did the HullCraft idea come from?

In December 2013, the University archives at the Hull History Centre secured an award from the National Cataloguing Grants Programme to fund the cataloguing of material by the Yorkshire architect Francis Johnson. In the summer, project archivist Claire Weatherall and colleagues, used Lego as a way to engage families about the Francis Johnson collection and architecture in general. HullCraft developed when Joel Mills (Technology Enhanced Learning Advisor, University of Hull) suggested we could also use Minecraft to extend the involvement with the local community beyond the Lego family days and engage younger audiences with the work and collections of the History Centre.

Phase One – HullCraft website www.hullcraft.com

For the first phase, we digitised some of Francis Johnson's architectural plans and made these accessible (as jpegs and PDF files) on the HullCraft website. The players would download these plans, recreate the buildings on their own version of Minecraft, and submit a screenshot to the HullCraft website for display in the online gallery. The more archive buildings a player creates, the more achievements they will receive, gaining a virtual badge to display to friends when they complete specific tasks.

Phase Two – HullCraft world

With the success of Phase One we began Phase Two where we purchased and developed an online Minecraft server as a space for players to work collaboratively on builds.

The multiplayer function is useful for enabling players to develop their teamwork and negotiation skills through working with others on joint builds, but can also introduce new problems. To solve this we used plugins to modify and secure the game to prevent griefing (the destruction of other player's creations with malicious intent) and introduced a whitelist based on player's usernames to control access to the server. It was important to us that archives and the History Centre were central to the HullCraft world so on entry to the HullCraft server the player begins their journey at the Hull History Centre reception desk. The building can be explored in full, from the glass arcade, the Local Studies Library, search room and lecture theatre. Upstairs the player will encounter the archives storerooms just like the real-world Hull History Centre.

The reconstruction also acts as a hub where the player can travel through portals into other areas of the server, one where they can be assigned plots of land to build and interpret their archive document, and the other where their finished builds will be showcased as a community built reconstruction of Hull's past periods.

We are aiming for players to engage with the architectural plans by translating space, proportion, dimensions, material and style into 3D buildings that can act as a virtual historical record and can be used for research purposes. Players gain a greater knowledge of Francis Johnson's architectural style and develop their problem solving, self-efficacy and evaluation skills along the way. To evidence their learning we are hoping that players can reflect on the construction of their builds through blog posts, YouTube curatorial tours and video logs.

The Future

At the time of writing (November 2014), we have secured funding to run workshops at the Hull History Centre with students working together as a class on builds. There is also the potential for University departments to be involved by creating interesting content to facilitate learning, or even using the existing builds as research tools.

We are also looking beyond the Francis Johnson collection to others held in the archives as a result having several themed worlds from Hull's past. We will also expand to a wider variety of resources for players to engage with, such as digitised books, photographs and audio.

The project has been successful in making archives more accessible through technology and embracing the player's creativity to use archival collections to create virtual reconstructions. It will be interesting to see how the HullCraft project will evolve as more participants take part and more buildings are constructed. Above all, we are hoping it will inspire the younger generation to view archives as treasure troves for interesting historical content and encourage them to use the service in the future.

We would be interested to hear from other archive services that are already using, or thinking of using Minecraft with their collections.

Visit www.hullcraft.com History Centre Blog: <http://hullhistorycentre.blogspot.co.uk/>