

## NEWSROOM

[Home](#) / [News](#) / [2020](#) / [May](#) / Innovative Course Uses Minecraft to Teach Leadership

## INNOVATIVE COURSE USES MINECRAFT TO TEACH LEADERSHIP

**PROFESSORS RESEARCH LEADERSHIP EDUCATION METHODS USING POPULAR VIDEO GAME.**by [Jane Heeter](#) | May 28, 2020*Above: Students explore leadership themes using Minecraft.**Read time: about 2 min*

A group of freshmen taking a video game-based class may sound like a recipe for distraction and disaster. But for Professor Lisa Heuvel and her students, it's been an innovative way to teach and learn.

Heuvel uses the interactive video game Minecraft to teach two sections of the introductory [leadership studies](#) class, "Self, Group and Leadership." Minecraft is a popular game – Microsoft recently announced downloads have exceeded 200 million – in which users can create their own pixelated world.

The leadership course is focused on the basics of understanding the role of self and group in the leadership process, how self-understanding creates effective leadership, and the various aspects of group dynamics.

Heuvel thought the subject matter was ripe for experimentation and wondered if a group dynamic could be studied and practiced in a video game environment. She thought the experience would add relevance to a “wired” generation.

Heuvel took the idea to Jan Dougherty, an instructional technologist. As a member of the academic technologies team, Dougherty has advocated for the educational use of video games since she joined Christopher Newport.

Heuvel hoped students would be able to develop their teams and knowledge over the course of the semester by doing various tasks together. She also wanted the work to culminate in a final project. As a gamer herself, Dougherty suggested Minecraft for its ability to let users create and collaborate.

Heuvel, a grandmother, learned to play the game. That way she could solve issues that might arise. She also watched as her 8-year-old grandson played to check her instructional plan.

As the class began, students were broken into small teams, with one experienced gamer per group. Their first task: build a residence hall together, complete with individual bedrooms and decorations.

In Minecraft, that involves exploring the virtual world together in real-time, locating and harvesting wood, and crafting the look of the residence hall. Teamwork is necessary to survive, although the game can be reset if any serious trouble befalls the players.

Each following task grew in complexity, and the appointed leader of each group changed with each new mission.

Written reflections also culminated with an end-of-semester presentation of the worlds the teams had built, including a giant statue that had to relate to their understanding of leadership.

Freshman Sienna Zimmerman was one of the experienced gamers who took the class not knowing it would be Minecraft-based.

Although initially dubious, she saw it work to bring her and her teammates together as they created a world.

"Learning leadership through Minecraft was very hands-on and gave us the opportunity to learn leadership concepts in real time," Zimmerman said. "As a person who enjoys video games, it was not weird for me to play a game for class; it was actually quite enjoyable. It was a fresh take on learning that I enjoyed."

The third round of classes this fall will involve students in both sections beginning a virtual Christopher Newport campus using Google Earth for the correct dimensions, starting with the Great Lawn.

The semester-long endeavor will involve active research and planning for the teams – the key, Heuvel said, to leadership and group dynamics.

Heuvel and Dougherty believe the class is among the first to use Minecraft to teach leadership concepts. The pair are collaborating on a research project to test the effectiveness of the model and will continue to gather data through the fall courses.

"We're hoping this encourages people to start thinking of technology in their curriculum in unexpected ways," Dougherty said. "That's what really excites me, being able to look at these new mediums and these new pieces of technology and think of them as tools that are as worthy of study as anything else here."