

THE MINECRAFT GUIDE FOR PARENTS

DOWN-TO-EARTH ADVICE FOR PARENTS
OF CHILDREN PLAYING MINECRAFT

CORI DUSMANN



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■ DEDICATION

For Xander, fellow adventurer, road tripper, gamer, writer, and pretty much the coolest and most supportive son a mom could hope to have. I learn as much from you as I teach you. We make an amazing team, and there is no way I could imagine this without you by my side.

And for our Rawcritics community—this book would never have happened without you and your unwavering friendship and support. We are one of the most supportive and wonderful communities on the Internet. We should be so proud of that. To every single one of you, a massive Whimsey *hug* and gratitude beyond measure. Thank you!

Last but certainly not least, for my building partner, in-game tutor and protector, IRL reader and sounding board, and amazing friend, who knew about this book before I did and still managed to act surprised when I told him. jsfm, you rock, and I am more grateful than you'll ever know for all your support and encouragement.

■ ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many, many thanks (and buckets of love) to my son, Xander, for being so supportive and understanding and just plain awesome.

This would not have been possible without my amazing team of patient, steadfast editors. Cliff Colby, Robyn Thomas, and Scout Festa, along with all the behind-the-scenes people who have made this guide so stunning—a million thank-you's wouldn't be enough.

To my amazing family—my dad, Rolf, who never had the chance to see me published. It was his dream for me, and I know he's proud of me.

I grew up with the best of female gamer role models—my mom, June. From Munchman on one of the oldest TI computers to the newest Nintendo systems, she has never failed to inspire me (and kick my butt at games). Your support has been ever-present and ever-appreciated, and I love you.

Thanks to my awesome siblings, Didi and Terry, and my delightful nephews and niece—Chris, Ivory, Dale, and Marc—along with their families, who have shared my excitement in writing this book.

Thanks to Xander's dad, Robert Wiersema, one of my first readers, whose keen and experienced eye and unending support has been ever so appreciated. I'm so glad we can still meet across the page, be it mine or yours.

What makes me strong are my communities, and I have several—including all my friends in the Getting Higher Choir and my circle of “teacher camp” friends. You buoy me up when I'm at my lowest, and celebrate with me when I'm at my heights.

To my colleagues and families at IMHS and FFGCA—thank you. The input from families has been invaluable, and the enthusiasm and support from all those I work with immeasurable.

And finally, my Rawcritics community. Some have had a direct hand in this book—reading, editing, or contributing screenshots. And there are so many more who never fail to ask how things are going,

who have suggestions or have let me rant or celebrate with abandon. In particular (and no particular order, except maybe my Skype, text, and irc most recent contacts!) jsfm, creepernick, guitar, shadow, money, King, goob, MrKM, sinslave, steamboat, jhc, Axonn, Wedox, sinew, Invineron, Tyr, Rhadley, nurb, Wnhs, Anubis, Ra, Nimbalo, Neon, War, E1ectric, nelag, Tara, Jet, bionicle, jmack, CAM, Zel, zeb, Dominus, el Barto, Vernenos, Yow, SirChicken, midstorm, and everyone else I may have missed (I owe you a blog entry if I did!)—thank you, thank you, thank you! I can't wait to continue this adventure with you all.

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CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i>	<i>ix</i>
CHAPTER 1 ■ Let's Talk About Minecraft	1
What Is Minecraft?	2
Introducing Notch	3
The Bigger Picture	5
So Much More than a Video Game	10
CHAPTER 2 ■ The Basics of Minecraft	11
Game Modes	12
Multiplayer Minecraft	16
Game Formats	17
CHAPTER 3 ■ Fitting Minecraft into Your Family	21
My Thoughts on Technology	22
Online Safety	32
The Minecraft Connection	39
Growing with Minecraft	40
House Rules	42
A Word on Addiction	43
Behavior Concerns	44
Balance	45
Managing Rising Emotions	45
Helping Your Child Lead the Way	55
CHAPTER 4 ■ Getting Started	57
Things to Consider Before You Buy	58
Purchasing Minecraft	63
Downloading and Installing Minecraft	70
CHAPTER 5 ■ Surviving Your First Night.	73
Game Settings	74
Getting Started	75
My Confession	86

- CHAPTER 6 ■ Basic Gameplay 89**
 - Starting a New Game 90
 - Basic Commands 95
 - Biomes and Terrain 99
 - Mobs 104
 - What To Do in Minecraft 122
- CHAPTER 7 ■ Digging Deeper: Technical Specifics 145**
 - The Minecraft Folder 146
 - Skins, Resource Packs, and Mods 149
- CHAPTER 8 ■ Playing on Servers. 163**
 - Introduction to Servers 164
 - Home Servers 165
 - Minecraft Server Hosts 177
 - Public Servers 177
 - Online Safety 184
 - Online Communication 186
- CHAPTER 9 ■ See What I Made? 195**
 - Sharing Online 196
- CHAPTER 10 ■ The Bigger Picture 209**
 - Community 210
 - Minecraft and Education 213
 - Creativity 219
 - Video 224
 - MineCon and Other Gatherings 224
- APPENDIX ■ Parent-Child Computer Contract 227**
 - Contract 228
 - Additions 230
 - Glossary* 231
 - Index* 235

INTRODUCTION

WELCOME TO THE WONDROUS, creative, challenging, and occasionally maddening world of Minecraft. If you are an adult who has found yourself drawn or perhaps dragged in to the world of a Minecraft-playing child or youth, you may be feeling as though you've entered a slightly askew parallel universe. Your children seem to be speaking another language, one where *biomes*, *skins*, *mods*, and *screenies* have become everyday vocabulary. Everything is now formed of pixelated cubes, from trees and livestock to the very landscape itself. And your children may alternate from being absolutely proficient at everything they do to becoming incredibly stuck, calling on you for assistance for the most confusing of activities, such as taming a cat or crafting a potion stand.

You'd like to help your child, you really would, and you know a thing or two about computers. "Check the tutorial," you might say. Or perhaps you look at the directions yourself—only to discover that this amazing game, one with literally endless possibilities and variations, does not come with a user's manual. Nor is there a tutorial, a walk-through, or any other form of guideline. It is a learn-as-you-go game, and without any idea of the purpose, the goal, or the steps to be taken, you may flounder.



In Minecraft, cats (along with dogs and many other animals) have distinct characteristics and uses—but taming cats is not the easiest of endeavors.

WHO IS THIS BOOK FOR?

This guide to Minecraft is designed to help parents, guardians, teachers, leaders, and any other adults who are being called upon to help young people in their mining and building adventures. I'll cover everything from the very basics of purchasing and installing the game to technical challenges such as updating, installing mods, and finding custom skins and texture packs. And I'll be sure that you actually understand what all of those things are and why they are important to the game and to your children. We'll explore the various modes of game play—Creative, Survival, and Hardcore—as well as the difficulty

settings, from Peaceful to Hard (in other words, from monster free to monster intense). I'll teach you how to play the game, so you'll be able to help your child when they become stuck and you'll have the skills to log on and play alongside them should you choose to. In addition, we'll explore the less tangible side of online games like Minecraft—the questions of balance, fitting gaming into your family, navigating the world of servers and online communities, sharing work through such sites as YouTube, and much more. I'll touch on Minecraft's educational uses and explore the social side as well.

DO YOU DO WINDOWS?

When Minecraft was introduced, it was a PC game, though it was quickly expanded to run on the Mac and Linux operating systems. More recently, Minecraft Pocket Edition, for tablets and phones, was released, as was an Xbox edition. This book focuses on the original Minecraft game as designed for PC and Mac. The other versions share many components of the full game but are more limited. Directions for playing the game will be primarily Windows focused, with instructions for installation and accessing files on Macs as well.

WHO AM I?

I wear many hats—in a large nutshell, I'm a childcare provider, a child and youth counselor, a writer, a gamer, and a homeschooling mom. Whenever I can combine any of those passions, I'm as happy as can be, and I'm fortunate enough to be able to do so much of the time.

Under the username *Whimseysgirl*, I play Minecraft both on my own and with my son, Xander (who goes by *Wrednax*). We are part of an amazing community on *Rawcritics*, a family-friendly server (primarily

for players age 11 and older), though we also play single-player games and venture onto other servers. Minecraft has been something we've shared from the beginning, and it has become a source of common ground with the kids I work with as well.

■ HOW I BECAME INVOLVED IN MINECRAFT

When Xander was 11 (as I write this he's 14), he was already pretty computer savvy. I've been a haphazard but avid gamer since childhood (though less seriously in recent years), so he's grown up in a house where gaming is just part of the culture. Since I teach him at home, the computer is an important learning tool as well as a toy, and he was well able to navigate it from early on, often faster than I could.

Xander was and is very interested in gaming, vlogs, blogs, and popular-culture websites and seems to always have a finger on the pulse of the gaming community. He knows how to do his research, and he knows the value of checking reviews or opinion pieces and of seeking more than one answer to a question.

When Xander started showing me pictures and videos of this new game he was interested in, Minecraft, I was less than impressed. It was still in its earliest version. The company was hoping to raise money to expand the game and release a beta version. Their marketing seemed basic, and when I watched video clips or saw pictures, those pixelated cubes seemed positively simplistic and outdated. But Xander continued to explore it, and soon enough the story of this new game, with its small independent game designer taking a chance, had me in its thrall too. We ordered a copy.

Suddenly we found ourselves well into the unknown—not only were there no directions, but even fan-made YouTube tutorials were scarce at that point. The learning curve was steep. But Xander soon learned the ropes and began playing in earnest, creating cool structures and farming, mining, and exploring. I started my own game, slowly learning as I went and often calling on his expertise.



In Minecraft, large cubes are the basis of everything. Decorating a tree means giving up the notion of rounded ornaments.

It wasn't until Xander discovered online servers, though, that I became truly involved in his gaming. Until then he'd played only on his own. The idea that he was playing with strangers and conversing with them in game chats was worrying to me. Although I'm far from being a controlling parent, I do like to know who he's playing with and what he's doing. He settled on the Rawcritics.com server, a family-friendly community that offers a PVP (player versus player) world as well as a more peaceful build world. And I was right there watching over his shoulder to see what he'd gotten himself into.

What he found astounded me. It was a community, a true community, with players of all ages. There were staff keeping an eye on things and providing support and activities. There were groups, factions, and teams gathering and pooling resources, creating amazing builds, and banding together in battles and raids to protect their creations and materials. Yes, there was drama and some negative attitudes between players, but there was also caring, friendship, and mutual support. Players knew that I was watching and commenting over Xander's shoulder, and they began to ask if they could show me their work and their skins (the appearance of their characters in the game), drawing me in to their community alongside Xander. I watched him slowly gain confidence and ambition until he

started his own town—a town that grew and gained members under his leadership.

It was then that I realized the potential of Minecraft to be far more than a simple building game. It could be an educational tool, a creative outlet, a social platform, and so much more. There was space to work independently as well as with others. By that point there were countless communities and servers, and people were making YouTube tutorials and game walk-throughs, and even writing songs and making music videos. Inspiration, passion, and creativity were abounding, and it really had me thinking about the ever-changing role of technology and gaming in our lives. It also had me thinking about Internet safety, about communication between Xander and me, and about my role as an educator and the parent of a pre-teen in this new age of digitally connected peers.

■ MY MOTIVATION IN WRITING THIS BOOK

In addition to homeschooling Xander, I've worked with kids and teens for over 20 years in a variety of settings, from daycares to classrooms to a psychiatric hospital. My roles have ranged from care worker to educational assistant to school-age daycare manager. I've watched children and families get swept into gaming and the online world, and I've seen it become both a source of battles and a place of learning and connection. I've seen parents and children become hooked on online activities, and I am aware of the need for balance, but I've also seen people gain confidence through their experiences in online communities. Navigating the positives and negatives, finding balance, creating dialogue and communication—those are of vital importance too.

Xander eventually convinced me to get my own Minecraft account. I joined his server, and immediately we were playing, working, and creating together. I soon formed friendships with players on the server—some were Xander's friends and others were strictly my own. It was exciting to be able to work and play with him, but at the same time it was exceedingly frustrating.

Watching over his shoulder had given me much of the knowledge I needed, but I soon discovered I didn't have the skills. I was slow and clumsy. I died—a lot. I got lost in caves and on land. I struggled with updates and maps. I was constantly referring to video tutorials, wiki pages, and fellow players, many of whom are much closer to Xander's age and far more computer savvy than I can ever hope to be. I once again saw the need for a guide, something that I could refer to when I got stuck.



Whimseysgirl and Wrednax

Since then, I've become more competent but certainly not proficient. My lack of skills is a bit of a running joke on our server, but I manage to stay alive, create bigger and better builds, and support new players who need help. Xander and I play together and apart, but we constantly share what we're working on. A wonderful and unexpected bonus is being able to connect in a completely different way with the children in the afterschool program where I work. Our discussions about Minecraft give us a positive common ground—once they finish grilling me to ensure that I am genuine and not a gaming poser. In addition, I've been able to help their parents navigate this confusing new world, assuaging their concerns and helping them support their children.

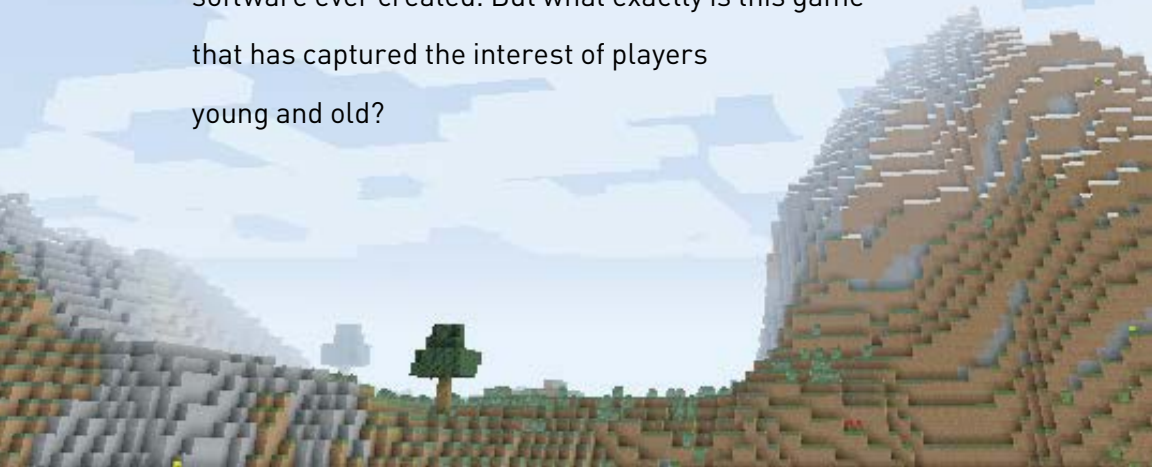
I'm looking forward to doing the same for you. I hope to help you find ways to connect with your child through this amazing game, even if you never mine or place a single block yourself—though I certainly encourage you to give it a try; you might be pleasantly surprised!

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LET'S TALK ABOUT MINECRAFT

OVER THE PAST THREE YEARS, a small independent video game has managed to gain as much attention as so-called “A-list” games released by some of the largest developers and companies in the world. With over 20 million copies sold and thousands more being bought every day, Minecraft has defied the pundits and become one of the most successful pieces of entertainment software ever created. But what exactly is this game that has captured the interest of players young and old?



WHAT IS MINECRAFT?

Minecraft is what is known as a *sandbox* game—that is, it takes place in an open world where the player has complete freedom to explore and create and isn't restricted to an existing storyline. In Minecraft, players acquire resources, build, explore, and create anything they wish (within the parameters of the game, of course). There is no plot or storyline, and there are no set goals or activities that must be completed (although those that play Minecraft have found myriad ways of creating goals and activities). In short, Minecraft is a completely open environment in which to create and play while constantly interacting with other human players from all over the world.

When players log in, they find themselves in a world formed of one-meter cubes (**Figure 1.1**), which are known in the game as *blocks*. These blocks are made from a variety of materials—from dirt, sand, and stone found underfoot to the trees and plants scattered across the landscape. The world is randomly generated, so it is never the same, and it features a variety of biomes, including snowy, desert, and forest. Also scattered across the land are animals such as cows, sheep, and chickens. And at night, if the game isn't set to Peaceful, the monsters (or, as they're known in Minecraft, *mobs*) come out. Zombies, skeletons, giant spiders, and the green, exploding creepers add a level of difficulty to staying alive as you traverse the Minecraft landscape. From building a shelter to finding resources, there are many basic tasks to tackle as soon as the game begins—and that's just the beginning of what Minecraft has to offer.



FIGURE 1.1 A one-meter cube, the building block of Minecraft

Minecraft is written in the relatively accessible programming language Java. This means that anyone with basic programming knowledge can write modifications, or *mods*, for the game that can range anywhere from small changes that don't affect gameplay to massive alterations and additions that shift the entire nature of the gaming experience. Minecraft players have embraced the opportunities that such coding provides, and there are now thousands of mods that can be downloaded.

This combination of freedom in the very core of gameplay and the addition of endless options in mods means that Minecraft can be whatever the gamer desires. Add to that the special adventure maps that are available and the countless *servers*—websites that allow gamers to play together and which turn single-player games into multiplayer ones (more on these later)—and there truly is something for every player.

So where did such a creative, open game originate? In a time when the big game developers embrace elaborate plots and structured games, how did this little independent game rise to such heights? Read on, intrepid Minecraft aficionado!

INTRODUCING NOTCH

In May 2009, Swedish independent game developer Markus Persson released a demonstration version of Minecraft. It was a very basic game at that point, though all the main creative features were already taking form. He began to sell the still-in-development game at the low cost of 10 British pounds (about \$15 USD) to raise funds to further develop it. Those buyers were assured free upgrades for life.

Game sales took off, and soon Persson was able to leave his job and work full time on developing Minecraft, hiring other game developers and releasing two other versions before the far more complete

Alpha edition was released in June, 2010. Sales of the early versions reached 200,000 copies, an almost unheard-of amount for an independent game still in development. Persson, along with Carl Manneh and Jakob Porser, launched the video-game company Mojang that summer, and in December 2010 they released the Beta version of Minecraft.

When Minecraft was officially released in November 2011, it had sold over one and a half million copies. Not too shabby for a small independent game. Persson, who is known in Minecraft circles as Notch (**Figure 1.2**), has since passed the Minecraft torch to a new team of developers, led by Jens Bergensten. The game is constantly being upgraded, with additions and changes occurring with every update.

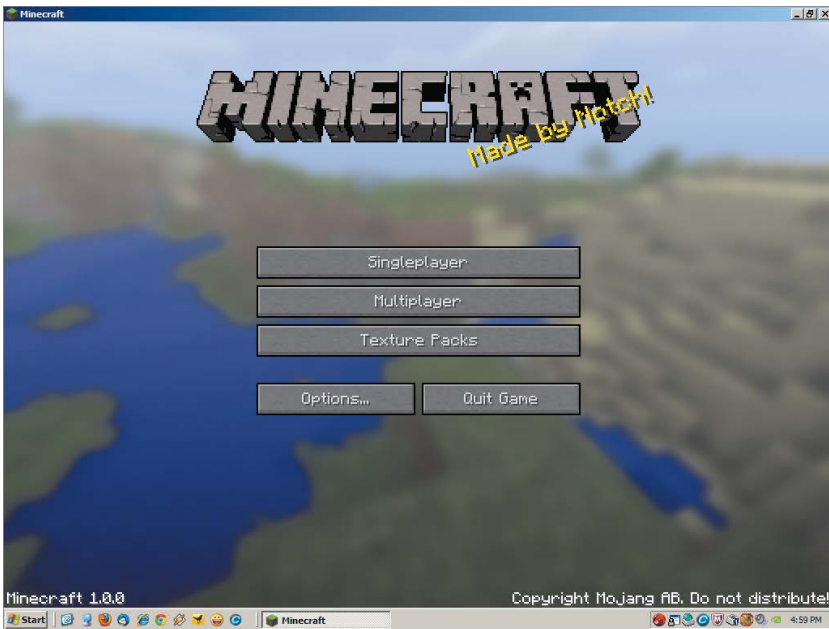


FIGURE 1.2 Minecraft 1.0.0, with its signature ever-changing yellow comment—in this case proclaiming its creation by Notch

Fast-forward to 2013, and Minecraft has sold over 20 million copies and shows no signs of slowing down. No wonder that Persson and Bergensten ended up on the 2013 “*Time* 100,” *Time* magazine’s annual list of the 100 most influential people in the world. Persson continues to work on games, and he promotes independent game developers, speaking up against the large companies in defense of the independents. He has proven himself to be an inspiration and role model for up-and-coming developers, and he has started many a young person on the path of programming and game development.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

So now we’ve looked at the very basics of what Minecraft is and how it came to be. But that is just the tip of the iceberg. Yes, Minecraft is simply a video game, and at first glance a very basic game at that. But it is what can be done with it that truly astounds, and begins to explain its popularity.

■ IT’S A WHOLE NEW WORLD

Players can work independently on whatever they choose, but with the availability of servers (multiplayer online Minecraft worlds), they can also join up with others who share a similar vision. The collaborative server of *WesterosCraft*, for example, has become a gathering place for fans of the *Game of Thrones* television series (**Figure 1.3**). Players have created a scale model of the world featured in George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* books and the incredibly popular television series that is based on them. The model stretches the equivalent of 500 miles, with buildings created in exquisite detail. Other servers host battle-like competitions based on themes such as the *Hunger Games* books and movies and the *Team Fortress* video games. These

servers have played an important role in connecting solitary Minecraft players, changing the face of the game.



FIGURE 1.3 A small portion of the community-built WesterosCraft world

What Minecraft offers—and what most video games fundamentally cannot—is a way for players to create. And not just create using small, restricted methods, such as being able to select the details of your character’s appearance from a menu; Minecraft offers complete artistic freedom to design entire worlds in any manner you choose. Players can be artists, architects, engineers, designers, and so much more. In fact the scope and depth of Minecraft continue to evolve, with new (and usually clever) concepts introduced with reliable regularity.

Most players start independently, playing in a single-player world and learning how to mine for materials and work with blocks. Builds (locations created by a player) start small and simple, and then become more and more elaborate as the player develops skills. With fancier builds comes a player’s need to share what they’ve been working on. The desire to share work, or perhaps to work with others, often leads players to seek out multiplayer servers or to post their work in blogs or on YouTube.



Wrednax

I'VE BEEN BUILDING for about two years now. My most recent build, which I've spent about three months on, is the Tower of Babel from the 1927 German silent film *Metropolis*. It's given me a really cool chance to play with the Art Deco architecture style (**Figure 1.4**), and it's also shown me how much can be done with different styles in Minecraft.



FIGURE 1.3 Wrednax's Tower of Babel

COMMUNITY

Something that has arisen, not just through Minecraft but across the Internet, is a sense of community that has nothing to do with physical proximity. Minecraft has spawned a plethora of such connections and communities. Through online tutorials and wiki pages, multiplayer servers that can host hundreds of people, and chat rooms and forums, Minecraft players are connecting, talking, and playing together.

YOUTUBE AND LIVESTREAMING

Since early on in the development of Minecraft, people have explored the many ways they could use YouTube. Some gamers record

themselves playing Minecraft. Others make tutorials, videos with step-by-step directions for everything from installing games to crafting tools or making elaborate builds. And still others use YouTube to share songs or parodies they've created; there are now well over a hundred songs about either Minecraft itself or jingles that tell stories from a fictional Minecraft character's point of view.

In addition, there are now livestream websites, where players share their games—live—with online viewers. Viewers log in to a streaming website, and the player's game is visible in a window on the stream page, sometimes with a smaller window that shows the player as well. There is usually a chat window on the screen, which allows viewers to interact with each other and leave comments for the player. Streams are often recorded and posted on YouTube.

MULTIPLAYER SERVERS AND ONLINE FORUMS

There are other ways that players connect with one another. Multiplayer servers such as Rawcritics (the one Wrednax and I play on) abound. Simple Minecraft servers are not very challenging to set up, and players can be limited to an invitation-only list. Parents can and do set up servers that are only for members of their family or for their children and children's friends. At the other end of the spectrum are multiplayer servers that host hundreds or thousands of gamers. Gamers communicate with one another using onscreen chat.

Many servers also have forums where people can share ideas, hold longer conversations, and discuss anything under the sun. For example, the Rawcritics forums (**Figure 1.5**) are very eclectic, with topics ranging from server brainstorming and problem-solving to detailed conversations about other games to incredibly elaborate lore about the player-versus-player world (one of several types of Minecraft worlds on Rawcritics). Indeed, there are even discussions about epic videos, and for those who want to take a stroll into left field, a thread dedicated to all things *My Little Pony*.

General Rawcritics Community			
	Server Info MultiVerse IP: rawcritics.rawcritics.com FTB IP: minecraft.rawcritics.com:25571 Please read stickies on this board! Child Boards: Server Status: NEW Bug reports: NEW Add Issues: NEW	4105 Posts 429 Topics	Last post by The xvolt in Changes log on June 22, 2013, 04:30:20 am
	Announcements Info and announcements for the server and this forum. Child Boards: Archived Announcements, Reclamation Announcements	6074 Posts 85 Topics	Last post by Anubis in Server Information 3rd ... on June 10, 2013, 06:30:58 pm
	Contexts and Giveaways Giveaways and contexts are posted here.	2793 Posts 89 Topics	Last post by whenDefinrol in Giveaway Context on May 21, 2013, 06:16:06 pm
	New Players! Come and say Hello! Are you new to the Rawcritics Gaming Community? Whether here for DayZ or Minecraft, come and say Hello!	1482 Posts 189 Topics	Last post by zandrosen11 in New to Rawcritics on June 10, 2013, 10:26:36 am
	Feedback Child Boards: Regular Status Recommendations, Forum Badges: NEW	511 Posts 41 Topics	Last post by TyrOxIC in General suggestions on June 10, 2013, 10:57:48 pm
	Ban Appeals & Grief Reporting (All Games) Use this board to appeal a ban or to report an act of griefing. Excessive comments on this board will be removed.	5287 Posts 582 Topics	Last post by Trowmboob in Staff Decree on June 22, 2013, 12:23:32 am

FIGURE 1.5 The Rawcritics.com home page

MORE MINECRAFT ONLINE

Minecraft *wikis*—websites that allow their content to be added to and modified—attempt to answer questions related to the game. These can be great resources, and we’ll look at them in more detail later. There are also how-to guides and all manner of user-made sites. Minecraft players can connect easily with each other and find players with similar interests. And many of these servers, websites, and forums are family friendly, creating safe places for younger players to start interacting with the larger Internet community.

Another amazing aspect of Minecraft is its use in the classroom. Teachers are developing curricula that use Minecraft not just to teach computer skills, but to teach social skills, demonstrate cell structures, and show historical timelines. Even to those of us highly engaged in cutting-edge education, Minecraft continues to impress and amaze.

SO MUCH MORE THAN A VIDEO GAME

It's clear that Minecraft has had a dramatic and sweeping effect in a very short time. People are using this unique piece of software to design and build all manner of structures, from soaring castles to in-game music boxes and even functional in-game 8-bit computers. Even those who would say they don't have a creative bone in their body are finding themselves inspired. And perhaps more importantly, players are connecting with each other and are sharing their work and their ideas in ways that were previously unheard of. And I haven't even mentioned the people behind the scenes who write code—creating mods, additional game content, and texture packs that change the appearance of the game—or the ones who design, host, and staff the servers, often volunteering their time and energy to ensure that players have safe and stable game environments. The Minecraft community is a strong one and has added much to the game itself, and the community and the developers are engaged in a sort of organic symbiosis where they are driving each other to create a product/tool/game that is unique to the world.