

In Tech: Minecraft for schools, Amazon Dash, data encryption

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Microsoft is buying the educational version of Minecraft and has plans to create a bigger and better version of the popular world-building video game that's designed for classrooms.

The Redmond, Washington, software company will partner with TeacherGaming LLC, creator of MinecraftEdu, to transform that game into "Minecraft: Education Edition." Financial terms were not disclosed.

Microsoft says the new version will add and expand features intended to make the game classroom friendly, including better maps and coordinates that will help teachers and students find their way around a Minecraft world together. Developers will also beef up the game's multi-player capabilities so that a classroom of up to 40 kids can work together.

The game lets players explore, fight monsters and build surprisingly complex structures—even electrical circuits—out of blocks. You could easily use it to teach math, said Deirdre Quaranstrom, Microsoft's director of Minecraft education. But kids could also explore ancient temples in the game for a history class or view the inside of an eyeball as part of a science lesson.

Perks for educators include an online community with a mentorship program for connecting teachers experienced with Minecraft to those new to it.

The new game will be available this summer, with free trials available for teachers and students. Microsoft will announce pricing details before the end of the current school year, but says it currently plans to keep the price at \$5 per user per year.

— Bree Fowler, AP Technology Writer

Amazon is expanding its smart-home ordering service to a range of new appliances. Its Dash "replenishment" service lets users reorder common household items with a touch of a button. (Its first incarnation involved plastic "Dash buttons" dedicated to particular products; pressing one orders a set quantity of, say, diapers or dishwasher detergent.)

The new Dash devices will work in a similar fashion, although they won't be dedicated buttons anymore. Instead, Brother connected printers will let you order replacement toner or ink automatically. A GE washer will reorder detergent when it runs low. And a Gmate glucose meter, which tests blood sugar for diabetics, automatically reorders testing strips and blood-drawing lancets when needed. Users can sign up online to activate the service.

Amazon first announced the expansion to the Dash line in October; now the new products are hitting the market. Others in the works include Purell hand-sanitizer dispensers, Samsung laser printers, "smart" home locks from Austin and others.

— Mae Anderson, AP Technology Writer

Some government and police officials may be seething because

encryption makes it harder for them to track criminals and extremists, but it turns out that many companies aren't bothering to protect their data by encoding it in the first place.

A new study released Tuesday by the security firm Sophos surveyed 1,700 IT managers at mid-sized businesses in the U.S., Canada, India, Australia, Japan and Malaysia. Of those, 44 percent say they're currently making extensive use of encryption, while another 43 percent are using encryption to some degree.

Encryption levels were lower among the smaller businesses surveyed, with just 38 percent of organizations with 100 to 500 employees saying they're encrypting extensively.

In the U.S., encryption rates are higher, with 54 percent of those surveyed saying they make extensive use of the technology. Australia came in second with a rate of 49 percent, while Malaysia posted the lowest rate of 26 percent.

The top reason for not encrypting extensively—supplied by 37 percent of those who responded—was a lack of budget, while 31 percent cited performance concerns.

— Bree Fowler, AP Technology Writer

Verizon is the latest cellphone company to offer Web surfing for customers that doesn't count against their data caps.

Under such caps, you can get hit with extra fees or slower speeds if you go over your plan's data limit. That's not particularly difficult, especially if you're often watching video and listening to music on the go.

Verizon has said that it's interested in "sponsored data" as another source of revenue. A company can pay Verizon so that phone users can browse their websites, watch video clips or download their apps without using up their data allotment. Verizon says brands that have signed up include Hearst Magazines and AOL, which Verizon owns.

AT&T also launched a sponsored data program two years ago, but relatively few companies are participating.

By contrast, T-Mobile exempts several dozen music and video providers from caps, but says it isn't charging them. It says it wants to appeal to customers who watch a lot of video in a way that doesn't strain its network as much. To do that, it degrades video quality across the board, even for video that isn't exempted from caps. T-Mobile says that lets customers watch more.

Government regulators have asked AT&T and T-Mobile for more information about their strategies. While net neutrality rules enacted last year don't ban the practice of picking and choosing services that won't count against data caps, technically known as "zero rating," some advocates say it could hinder innovation or favor some companies over others. Net neutrality refers to the concept that websites and apps should be treated equally by Internet service providers.

— Tali Arbel, AP Technology Writer

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