

Level 1: Spark

Invent your game and make it playable. This PDF is the free Level 1 lesson, not the 178-page manual.

LEVEL UP · FREE CHAPTER · AGES 9–13

Level 1: Spark

Invent your game and make it playable.

Written for students to read with a grown-up nearby. This page is free to read and print. It does not ask for an email.

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Quest goal: By the end of this level, you will have

- your own **original** game idea,
- your own hero, drawn by you, and
- a **tiny game you can actually play**.

Time: About 60–90 minutes. You can split it into two play sessions.

Loot you need: A computer with a web browser, paper, a pencil, and a grown-up nearby.

Tool: Microsoft MakeCode Arcade. It's free. Go to arcade.makecode.com (https://arcade.makecode.com/). No account needed.

1. Welcome
2. The Idea Forge
3. Your Hero Card
4. Build Mode
5. AI sidekick prompts
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Welcome, Game Maker

You've played a LOT of games. You know when a jump feels good. You know when a level is too hard. You know when a game is boring.

That means you already have a game designer's brain. Now you'll use it to **make** games, not just play them.

Here's the plan:

1. **Idea Forge.** Invent your game on paper.
2. **Hero Card.** Create your own character.
3. **Build Mode.** Make a tiny game in MakeCode Arcade.
4. **Boss Challenge.** Make it harder (and more fun).

Ready? Press START.

Stage 1: The Idea Forge (15 minutes)

Rule #1 of Game Makers: Borrow the feeling, not the character

You probably love games with famous heroes. Those heroes belong to big companies. Their names, looks, and music are protected by law (called **trademarks** and **copyright**).

So in your games, you don't use famous characters, names, logos, or music. Not even a little bit.

But here's the secret: you don't need them. The heart of a game isn't the character. It's **what you do** and **how it feels**.

Pick a game you love. Ask yourself two questions:

- **What do I do in it?** (jump, run, swing, collect, fight, race, explore, build)
- **How does it make me feel?** (fast, brave, sneaky, powerful, clever, calm)

Now make something new with that feeling. Check out these examples:

A game you love makes you feel...	So you could make...
The joy of a perfect jump	A frog that bounces across lily pads in space
Super fast	A turbo snail racing on a rainbow slime track

A game you love makes you feel...	So you could make...
Like you're swinging through a city	A gecko with a grappling tongue zipping between treehouses
Like you're on an epic space adventure	A robot mail carrier delivering letters to alien planets

See? Same feelings. Totally new games. **All yours.**

Fill in your Game Idea Sheet

Copy this onto paper, or print it, and fill it in:

```
Game Idea Sheet · print or copy onto paper
```

```
MY GAME IDEA
-----------------------------------------
Game name: ______________________________
My hero is a: ___________________________
My hero wants to: _______________________
The player's main action (one word!): ____
The game should feel: ___________________
Things to COLLECT: ______________________
Things to AVOID: ________________________
Where it happens (the world): ___________
```

Pro tip: Keep it small. Real game makers start tiny. "A cat collects fish before time runs out" is a perfect first game. "A huge open world with 100 bosses" is a game for Level 50.

Stage 2: Your Hero Card (10 minutes)

Every great game needs a hero. Yours must be **100% original**. That means you invented it.

Draw your hero in a box on paper. Then answer:

- **Name:** (make it up. Mix two words: "Blazewhisker", "Captain Pickle", "Zoomtoad")
- **What are they?** (an animal, robot, blob, vegetable, cloud...)
- **One special power:**

- **One funny weakness:** (Afraid of butterflies? Sneezes glitter?)
- **Favorite color(s):** (you'll use these in a minute)

Originality check: Look at your hero. Does it look like a famous character with a new name? If yes, change at least 3 things (shape, colors, outfit, species) until it's truly yours.

Stage 3: Build Mode (30–45 minutes)

Time to make a real game. It's a "collect it" game: **Move your hero. Grab the item. Score points. Beat the clock.**

> **Grown-up step:** Open arcade.makecode.com (https://arcade.makecode.com/) in the web browser. You don't need to sign in. Your work saves in this browser on this computer.

Step 1: Start a new project

1. Click **New Project**.
2. Type your game's name. (Use your game name, not your real name.)
3. Click **Create**.

You'll see the game screen on the left (it's called the **simulator**). The **block drawers** are in the middle. Your big coding area is on the right. There's already an **on start** block there. Code inside it runs when the game starts.

Step 2: Add your hero

1. Click the **Sprites** drawer (sprites are game characters and objects).
2. Drag the block **set mySprite to [ ] of kind Player** into **on start**.
3. Click the little gray box inside that block. The **image editor** opens.
4. Draw your hero using the colors from your Hero Card. Each square is one pixel. Simple is great.
5. Click **Done**.

Look at the simulator. Your hero is on the screen.

Step 3: Make it move

1. Click the **Controller** drawer.

2. Drag **move mySprite with buttons** into **on start**, under your hero block.
3. In the simulator, use the **arrow keys** (or W A S D) to move.

Your hero moves. You just coded controls. That's a real game-dev skill.

Extra: Want your hero to stay on the screen? In **Sprites**, find **set mySprite stay in screen** and drag it under the others.

Step 4: Add something to collect

1. From **Sprites**, drag another **set mySprite to [ ] of kind Player** block into **on start**.
2. Click the word **mySprite** in this new block. Choose **New variable** and name it **treasure**.
3. Click the word **Player** in this block. Choose **Food**. (Or make your own kind, like "Treasure".)
4. Click the gray box and draw your item. It could be a fish, a star, a gem, a pizza slice...

Step 5: Score points when you grab it

1. From **Sprites**, drag the block **on sprite of kind Player overlaps otherSprite of kind Player** into an empty space. Don't put it inside **on start**.
2. Change the second **Player** to **Food** (or your treasure's kind).
3. Click the **Info** drawer. Drag **change score by 1** inside the overlap block.
4. Now move the treasure to a new random spot. From **Sprites**, drag **set mySprite position to x ( ) y ( )** into the overlap block. Change **mySprite** to **treasure**.
5. Click the **Math** drawer. Drag **pick random 0 to 10** into the **x** spot. Change it to **10 to 150**.
6. Do the same for **y**, using **10 to 110**. (The screen is 160 pixels wide and 120 tall.)

Play it. Touch the treasure. Your score goes up and the treasure jumps somewhere new.

Step 6: Beat the clock

1. In **Info**, find **start countdown 10 (s)**. Drag it into **on start**, at the bottom.
2. Change 10 to **15** or **20** if you want more time.

When the timer hits zero, the game ends and shows your score. **You made a real, playable game.**

Step 7: Make it yours

Pick at least **two** of these upgrades:

- **Background:** In the **Scene** drawer, use **set background color to** (or **set background image to**, and draw a world).

- **Sound:** In the **Music** drawer, drag a **play sound** block into the overlap block. Pick a sound you like, such as "ba ding".
- **Effect:** In **Sprites** → **Effects**, add **treasure start spray effect** for sparkles.
- **Speed:** In the **move mySprite with buttons** block, click the **+** to change how fast your hero moves.

Save your game

MakeCode saves automatically in this browser. To keep a backup, click the **disk (save) icon** next to the game name at the bottom. A file downloads to the computer.

> **Don't share online yet.** Sharing makes a public link. That comes in **Level 10**, with a grown-up and a safety checklist.

AI sidekick prompts (for your grown-up's AI account)

AI can be a great sidekick for ideas and fixing bugs. But **you** are the game designer. A grown-up types these into their own AI chat (like ChatGPT or Gemini), and you decide what to use.

Never give the AI your real name, school, town, age, or photos.

Prompt 1: Hero Brainstorm

Copy and paste. A grown-up fills in the brackets.

`Prompt · grown-up pastes this`

```
I'm helping a student design their first video game. The main action is
[JUMPING / COLLECTING / RACING] and it should feel [FAST / BRAVE / SILLY].
Suggest 10 original hero ideas. Each one should be a short description
plus a made-up name. They must NOT be based on, or look like, any
existing game, movie, or comic character. Keep it child-friendly.
```

Prompt 2: Twist Generator

Prompt · grown-up pastes this

```
We made a simple MakeCode Arcade game: the player moves a hero to
collect [ITEM] before a countdown ends. Suggest 5 fun, simple twists
a beginner could add using MakeCode Arcade blocks. For each one, list
which block drawer to look in. Keep the explanations short and easy
for an 11-year-old.
```

Prompt 3: Bug Detective

Prompt · grown-up pastes this

```
My student's MakeCode Arcade game has a problem: [DESCRIBE WHAT HAPPENS,
e.g., "the score doesn't go up when the hero touches the fish"].
Don't fix it for us. Instead, ask us 3 questions, one at a time,
that will help us find the bug ourselves.
```

Sidekick rule: If AI gives you an idea, change it to make it yours. And remember: AI can be wrong. Always test it in your game.

Boss challenge: The Chaser

Your game is fun. Now let's make it **exciting**. Add an enemy that hunts your hero.

Your mission:

1. In **on start**, add another sprite. Name the variable **chaser** and set its kind to **Enemy**. Draw something sneaky (a grumpy cloud? an angry sock?).
2. Find the **set chaser follow mySprite** block in **Sprites** and add it to **on start**. Now the enemy chases you.
3. In **Info**, add **set life to 3** to **on start**.
4. Add a new **on sprite of kind Player overlaps otherSprite of kind Enemy** block. Inside it, add **change life by -1** (from **Info**).
5. **Problem.** You lose all your lives super fast. Can you fix it? *Hint:* move the chaser to a far corner after it touches you, using **set chaser position to x y**.

Boss bonus: Can you make the chaser slower, so the game is fair? Look for the speed number in the follow block.

When you beat the boss: Have someone in your family play your game. Watch them, but don't help. Write down:

```
One thing they loved: _____________________________
One thing that confused them: _____________________________
```

That's called **playtesting**. Real game studios do it all the time. You'll learn more in Level 8.

Level 1 complete

Check off your loot:

- [ ] I filled in my Game Idea Sheet
- [ ] I created an original hero (not a famous character)
- [ ] My hero moves with the arrow keys
- [ ] My game has a score and a timer
- [ ] I added at least two upgrades
- [ ] I tried the Boss Challenge
- [ ] Someone playtested my game

XP earned: +100. You are now a **Level 1 Game Maker**.

Next up: Level 2, Rules of the Game. You'll learn the secret "core loop" that makes games fun to play again and again.

Parent note

What your child learned: Game design basics (actions, goals, feelings), events ("when this happens, do that"), variables (score, lives), randomness, and playtesting. These are real programming ideas, taught with drag-and-drop blocks.

About the tool: MakeCode Arcade is free from Microsoft and runs in the browser. No account is needed, and work saves locally in that browser. Signing in is only needed for cloud saving. Clearing browser data can erase projects, so use the save/download button for backups.

About AI: Most AI chat services aren't meant for children under 13. ChatGPT, for example, says an adult should do the actual interaction for under-13 users. Please keep AI on **your** account, sit together, and type the prompts yourself. Encourage your child to change AI ideas rather than copy them, and treat AI answers as suggestions to test, not facts.

About originality: Children naturally want to recreate their favorite characters. That's fine as private practice, but anything **shared or sold** must use original characters, names, art and music. Famous franchises are trademarked and copyrighted. The "borrow the feeling, not the character" exercise helps children turn what they love into something new.

About sharing: Please hold off on MakeCode's Share button for now. It creates a public link. Level 10 includes a "Ready to Share?" checklist. Make sure the project title and any in-game text contain no real names or personal details.

How to help: Ask questions instead of giving answers. "What do you think will happen if...?" is the best tool you have. Getting stuck and fixing it is the actual learning, so let them struggle a little before stepping in. If a step's wording in MakeCode looks slightly different, the tool may have been updated. Look for the closest matching block.

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