



Be-Bratz links MGA Entertainment's popular dolls with an online community for children.

'Virtual' worlds luring children Online social sites can feature toys, learning

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By Hiawatha Bray, Globe Staff | August 27, 2007

Children have always built their own fantasy worlds. These days, the Internet is making it easier -- perhaps too easy, some say.

Spurred by the popularity of social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook, a host of companies are developing social sites for children, with names like Club Penguin, Be-Bratz, Habbo Hotel, and Whyville.

Some are relatively basic membership-only websites where children can exchange messages and share photos and audio files. Others are "virtual worlds," similar to popular adult online hangouts like Second Life. Young visitors to these online worlds can build themselves digital bodies, move into digital rooms, and hang out with friends in three-dimensional play spaces.

It's difficult to say whether so much online fantasy is beneficial or harmful to children, said David Bickham, research scientist at the Center on Media and Child Health at Children's Hospital Boston. But "there's a lot of potential in both directions," he said.

Bickham suggests that many children can benefit from the chance to reach out to their peers.

"If you have lonely kids or kids who can't get out of the house very often," he said, "this can provide a really positive place for kids to have the opportunity to socialize."

The threat of online sexual predators and cyberbullies on children's sites is greatly exaggerated, Bickham said. "Most of the sites that I've looked at have done a pretty good job of providing a pretty safe space."

Their chat rooms generally use filtering software to block obscenities, sex talk, or information that could undermine someone's privacy. For instance, filters prevent children from sharing phone numbers, street addresses, or e-mail addresses. In addition, many sites have adult chaperones to monitor chats. Some don't even let users type their own messages. Instead, they communicate by sending preapproved phrases like "I love your outfit," or "I feel bored."

More worrisome is the content being offered by the sites, and the amount of time children are spending online. While the sites can provide valuable educational tools and ways for children to socialize, "those kids might be missing out on the positives that real-world social friendships have," Bickham said.

Also, specialists worry that some social sites, run by major toy companies, could overexpose children to commercial messages.

Social sites for children have been around for years, but garnered little notice until a host of recent high-profile deals. This month, [Walt Disney Co.](#) paid \$350 million to acquire Club Penguin, a children's virtual world that boasts 700,000 paying subscribers.

On the same day, MGA Entertainment Inc., maker of the popular line of Bratz fashion dolls for girls, launched Be-Bratz, an online community linked to a new kind of Bratz doll that has a USB computer interface. Plug one into an Internet-linked computer, and the owner gains free access to the Be-Bratz world.

MGA's rival, the Barbie doll line from [Mattel Inc.](#), has also gone virtual. Mattel's Barbie Girls online community, opened in April, has been one of the fastest-growing virtual communities for children or adults. Over 4.5 million people have signed up for the free service. Mattel will soon begin selling Barbie Girls dolls. Each \$59.95 doll includes a built-in MP3 digital music player and a sign-up for the Barbie Girls online world.

Rosie O'Neill, whose title at Mattel is "chief Barbie Girl," said the online service is designed to expand and enhance the experience of playing with Barbie dolls. Every feature of the online Barbie Girl can be customized, including eye and skin color, hair style, and the design and color of shoes, jewelry, and clothing. "On other sites you're simply picking a fashion to wear, O'Neill said. "On Barbie Girls, you design it."

O'Neill rejects the idea that Barbie Girls is little more than a marketing tool. "In the site we don't actually show any other products," she said. "There's no advertisement on the site."

Lisa Sirlin, director of online development at MGA Entertainment, also disputes the suggestion that Be-Bratz merely exists to push more Bratz toys. Instead, she said that MGA wants to expand the value of Bratz dolls, by giving girls two ways to play with them. "They like the online experience as much as they like the doll," Sirlin said.

But Peggy Meszaros, director of the Center for Information Technology Impacts on Children, Youth, and Families at Virginia Tech University, isn't buying MGA's contention. "I've had grandchildren with me this summer," said Meszaros. "I've been playing along with them" online. Of the sites she visited, Be-Bratz was most troublesome, Meszaros said. "That is pure consumerism."

Be-Bratz website users can collect clothes and accessories they buy with "points" that are won by playing games on the site, or by purchasing Bratz points cards at retail stores. And members get access to more game characters and accessories by purchasing more dolls. To Meszaros, the process encourages an unhealthy focus on consumption, and undue attention on physical appearance -- "looking beautiful as opposed to being smart," she said.

For a brainy online experience, many children go to Whyville, a virtual world founded in 1999 with an explicitly educational mission. Site members chat and play games, but they also tackle challenging projects, such as running a business or designing a car. Jim Bower, founder of Whyville, is a computational neurobiologist who lives in San Antonio and teaches at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution.

"Our objective from the beginning was to build a virtual world that would promote learning," Bower said. Whyville has 2.6 million registered users, and about 300,000 unique visitors every month; 85 percent are between 8 and 14 years of age, and two-thirds are female.

"You'd be amazed at how many times we hear from parents and girls that they love to go to Whyville because it's OK there to be smart," Bower said.

Still, Meszaros urges parents to limit their children's computer time, and to get to know their online friends. "Don't let it be an isolated activity where you're putting the child in the bedroom with a computer and shutting the door," she said.

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