

The Virtual Playground

Social Networks for Children

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Abstract: Designing Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) for early and pre-teen users presents a distinctive set of game-flow, usability, policy and safety concerns. Today's Web environment enables "zero-installation" applications, offering a better user experience that previously required more complex desktop software installation. Any Internet-PC offers an immediate window onto the game-world, allowing gameplay in a more casual and social manner. All these trends bring new possibilities for social gaming amongst young people.

Nowadays everything can be played online - from Scrabble to WoW. Since it's much more fun to play against real people than against a computer, MMOGs have developed their own social networks and communication options that enable players to exchange their ideas while in the game.

Children learn different skills from each other. As a quest arises in a game, sometimes it is much easier to solve it with 'buddies'. The game should provide children with stimulating environments that will excite them about learning and collaborating and in the same time be child-safe.

If the communication tools offered to children in MMOGs are limited due to safety regulations (ie. only to a set of predefined phrases, called 'Speed Chat') there is a chance that the game-flow will suffer in return. The value of social network in MMOGs is big and therefore children should not be entirely cut out of it. Usability studies show that children have very different behavior while reading, searching, assessing information, and giving away personal information online. This should be taken under serious consideration while designing MMOGs for pre-teens. The following questions arise:

- How can a game-world be simultaneously engaging, communicative, and child-safe?
- How can an international, multilingual user community communicate in a meaningful fashion while addressing the linguistic and child safety concerns inherent in such an environment?

Key words: MMOG, Virtual Worlds, Child online safety

1. Introduction

As access to the Web and other digital technologies is becoming more and more open and easy to reach, the age when children start being exposed to online interactive experiences is getting lower. Nowadays, there are clear regulations that protect children from

inappropriate content, yet virtual environments remain full of challenges. It is common that youngsters are engaging in online social networking activity even in their pre-teen year.

Multi-player games such as interactive adventures are offering highly attractive virtual worlds that easily engage many adult players, not to mention younger brains with vivid imagination (Kelly, 2004). In those worlds, there are many challenges and opportunities, collaborations and character building tasks. If you look at those features, it is all very positive for a child's creativity and development of social skills in general. But what is the core that makes games so attractive that people stay heavily engaged in front of their screens for hours?

2. Games for pre-teens

2.1 Game-flow

Games are structured as a set of puzzles and tasks that need to be solved or accomplished in order to advance and develop your character. Bleszinski argues that good flow depends on two factors (Bleszinski, 2000). The first is that although the puzzle must offer a challenge it should not severely halt progress. Puzzles that can only be solved in one way are likely to frustrate and inhibit flow. The second is through offering appropriate rewards for solving puzzles. He describes this process as 'game flow'.

A game designer's job is to make games that are - to put it simply - not dull! The way to do this is by creating unique and interesting challenges for the player. Challenge is a fundamental source of interaction in a game and it must allow the player to achieve a sense of accomplishment without causing frustration. Pacing as another important factor in game flow refers to the rate at which excitement occurs in a game.

2.2 Social games phenomena

Social networking hype is reflecting greatly on games too. It all started on a massive scale when almost 2 years ago the Facebook platform was opened to developers and started supporting 3rd party applications. Others followed quickly - with Google, Yahoo, MySpace and others teaming up to form OpenSocial, a move to simplify the process for developers so they can create programs that run on multiple networks. Games are amongst the most popular applications developed are still the games. Social networks allowed players to shared their experiences and invite other to join.

One of the leading companies in this business is Zynga. Their 'HoldEm Poker' is extremely popular. Versions of 'Scrabble' in this multiplayer online mode have also been very successful. Many people actually rediscovered games that they knew in a traditional form, and enjoy it much more when this online social aspect is added to it. This trend is also opening doors to new kinds of games, so building on the social and connected nature of sites such as MySpace and Facebook is definitely resulting in the formation of new social worlds where playing with friends is both easy and fun.

2.3 And what are virtual worlds?

Virtual worlds such as 'Club Penguin' and 'World of Warcraft' are becoming more popular every day.

These Virtual worlds includes elements familiar from MMOGs, but also non-gaming features that allow the world to be used for social networking. They are highly attractive for kids, with avatars and chats, mini games and games of a challenge with other kids. It is a place to hang out, check out, see what is going on and play some games. So, compared to regular MMOGs, games in virtual worlds are not the most important driver. The player can have great satisfaction by simply being engaged in a social part of the game. Chatting and exploring other avatars, inter-player challenges, all that is a part of the wider social exploration.

2.4 Popular virtual worlds for pre-teens

Club Penguin is the most popular MMOG at the moment, with millions of kids playing it every day worldwide (see Figure 1). Within the game, there is a variety of locations that are appealing to children. Club Penguin is the only current game whose usage levels begin to rival that of the giant success called 'World of Warcraft' (Virtual World News, 2009).

In Club Penguin, the player starts the game by creating their penguin avatar, giving it a name, painting and customizing it. Since the game is strictly targeted to children younger than 13, during the registration process, the child is asked to provide a parent's email address to confirm their usage of the system. Challenges are structured to be simple, and the core of the game rather lies in a social activities. There are a couple of features that this game introduced that made it a leader in the pre-teens game industry. The entire game is ultimately built to be child safe, and one of these features is the presence of a moderator in every single moment of the game. The default option for chat that is enabled for children when they start the game is 'Safe Chat'.

This consists of a set of predefined sentences that allow the child to pick from 3 level of drop-down menus.



Figure 1. 'Safe Chat' in Club Penguin

What is quite surprising is that Club Penguin is listed in Nielsen's overview of social network statistics and it is in the top ten popular 'social network' sites, just under MySpace, Facebook and LinkedIn (Figure 2.).

Table 1: Top 10 Social Networking Sites for April 2008 (U.S., Home and Work)

Site	Apr-08 UA (000)	Apr-07 UA (000)	YOY Growth
Myspace.com	58,754	57,003	3%
Facebook	22,482	14,403	56%
Classmates Online	14,514	12,913	12%
LinkedIn	8,695	1,886	361%
Windows Live Spaces	7,869	8,349	-6%
AOL Hometown	6,362	8,497	-25%
Reunion.com	6,041	5,020	20%
Club Penguin	3,806	4,073	-7%
Buzznet.com	3,229	1,585	104%
Imcem	2,856	1,491	92%

Source: Nielsen Online

(Credit: Nielsen)

Figure 2. Top 10 popular Social Networks by Nielsen (Cnet, 2009)

The game is providing increased subscription revenues for the entertainment giant Disney. The business model is dependent on a membership fee, however the majority of users are using free accounts. Those that are full (paid) members can buy exclusive items to decorate their virtual igloos or dress up their penguin.

Pixie Hollow, Free Realms, Spineworld are other good examples of successful MMOGs. Pixie Hollow is also a Disney product targeted at young girls. You can create your fairy, socialise or fly around with other fairies and organize a party in your chambers.

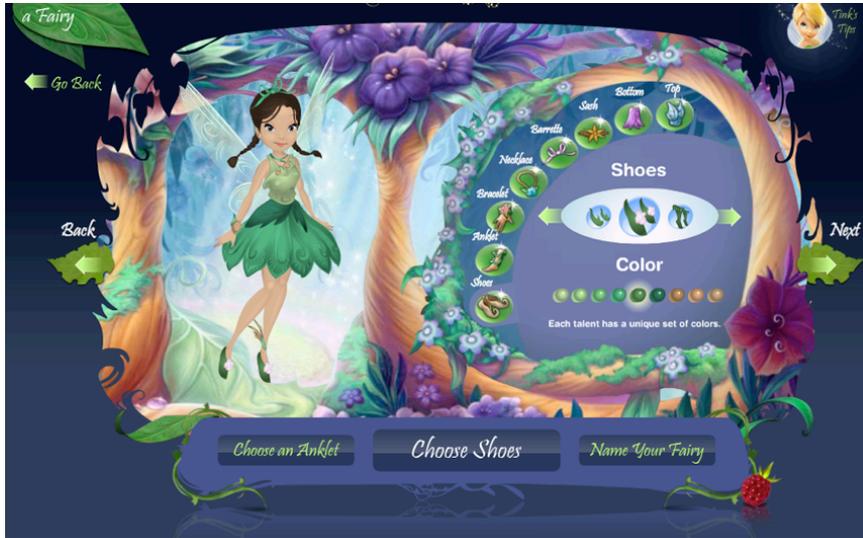


Figure 3. Create your fairy in Disney's "Pixie Hollow"

Spineworld includes adventures and places for users to visit, options to customize their avatar or room, or to upgrade by paying for digital goods. One feature that was popularized by this game is extraordinarily simple and yet very attractive. In Spineworld you can tell your avatar to sit down on dedicated places in a social hub, and soon other players will come to you, sit down and chat. So feature so simple as sitting down made a huge success.

It is important to mention one thing common to all the popular MMOGs here - they are browser based, with only a few minutes of easy plug-in installation needed to start diving in the wonderful world of the virtual.

3. Popular virtual worlds for pre-teens

The hype started fully in 2005, when online social network sites like MySpace and Facebook became common destinations for young people. In 2006 it was already a mandatory to have a MySpace page to be 'cool'. Teenagers typically learn about social network sites through their friends - they join because a friend invites them. Those sites became an important part of teen social life (Magrid 2006). So why do teens adopt so fast web services like this? One of the initial reasons for the success of MySpace is young people's love of music. When they found the pages of their favorite bands there, they arrived in their thousands. They could listen to and download music for free and musicians had a fast, interactive connection to their fans.

Facebook and similar sites are based around 'User profile' pages. In addition to text, images, and video created by the member, the social network site profile also contains comments from other members, and a public list of the people that are their 'Friends' within the network. As soon as a user profile page is created, the user is invited to look for friends. To be somebody's friend, the relationship typically needs to be confirmed from the both sides.

In some sense, people have more control online - they are able to carefully choose what information to put forward, how they present themselves and with whom they befriend. Social networks simply gives an easy access to youth to present themselves, explore and find friends with a similar interest, share their experiences. And by interacting with others online, teenagers are being socialized into society.

4. Safety regulations and concerns

4.1 Who is protecting your children from Cyberbullying?

"Be careful, there's nasty stuff out there on the Internet!" is a common comment a parent will pass to a kid every once in a while. What does "being careful" mean in actual practice? The best advice to a parent is to make their main objective as the parent of a young MMOG player to remain figuratively logged in to their activity. It shouldn't be taken literally - sit 24 hours with the kid - but rather try to provide a young gamers with guidance that they need from you.

4.2 'Cyberbullying'

Recent research showed that sixty per cent of kids are cyberbullying victims (The Inquirer, 2009).

This topic is better known in the gaming world as "griefing" and it's important to realize that it is not something that came as a product of online gaming, but it's a problem that was present in the 'offline' society for much longer. It's just that we realized how big an issue it is when we all went massively online. And it remains easier to avoid 'the authorities' in the online world.

There are some basic rules that need to be explained and respected in order to stay safe while online. The main issue is to make it clear that a stranger in a virtual world is exactly as risky as a stranger in the real world. It gets trickier since some players tend to pretend

to be what they are not. Do not give your personal data away, not yours, nor about your family or friends.

Every game company is treating the cyberbullying issue very seriously, so there's always an easy way to report suspicious players. If anybody is upsetting you, it should be reported immediately. Offline parenting skills and intuitions often translate well to online situations, once the basic environment is understood.

4.3 PEGI and COPPA

Europe's games industry fully understands the need for games to be properly rated to ensure that only the right games get into children's hands. This 'gold standard' PEGI was set in 2003, which stands for the Pan-European Game Information rating system (PEGI, 2003). The system was established to help European parents make informed decisions on buying computer games. It replaced some national age rating systems with a single system now used throughout most of Europe.

COPPA stands for Children's Online Privacy Protection Act, which is a United States federal law (COPPA, 1998). It applies to the online collection of personal information by persons or entities under U.S. jurisdiction from children under 13 years of age. It details what a website operator must include in a privacy policy, when and how to seek verifiable consent from a parent or guardian, and what responsibilities an operator has to protect children's privacy and safety online including restrictions on the marketing to those under 13. While children under 13 can legally give out personal information with their parents' permission, many websites altogether disallow underage children from using their services due to the amount of paperwork involved.

5. Conclusion

Children are developing their social and personal skills in their preteen years. Examples that are mentioned above are designed as safe environments for children; or at least they are advertised as such. There is no doubt that features like safe chat, strong language control and strict rules about banning users when they cross their limits are making those worlds more comfortable for children. But are those worlds offering sufficient learning experiences for children of that age? They all advertise features like improving spelling and reading skills, taking care of their virtual pets, managing virtual

budget, and hanging around with other children of their age. But are virtual worlds actually influencing too strongly on a natural way children are learning in the real life?

On the other hand, it is important that children are exposed to a creative learning environment. Virtual worlds are offering perfect space for that; they offer children a valuable opportunity to "try" different roles and ways of interacting in a safe place, free of real world consequences. In this way, children can learn early about the basics of creativity and collaboration. And there's no better way of doing that than through joyful experiences. If those are relevant to child's interest, cultural background and personality then the development of creative learning is greatly supported by these virtual worlds.

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