

APPENDIX II: A Closer Look at Children's Online Destinations

What follows is a closer examination of the 21 sites visited by children in this study or mentioned by their parents. Internet sites are dynamic, so some details mentioned may no longer apply. Each site was reviewed by Warren Buckleitner and Debbie O'Grady in late 2007, and again in February 2008. The commercial context of the site was rated using a Likert scale, as follows:

- 5 = Extremely high.** A mixture of three (or more) types of sponsored activity was observed.
- 4 = High.** A mixture of two or more types of sponsored activity was observed.
- 3 = Medium.** No more than one types of advertising is used, in moderation, and there is a clear distinction between sponsored content or images and/or licensed characters.
- 2 = Low.** There are no banners or subscription prompts. There may be an underwriters logo at the bottom of the page, or the use of licensed characters, but not at the expense of the child's play.
- 1 = Not Present.** No presence of branded characters, use of brand names, links or banners.

The mean rating of the 21 sites was 3.47, which can be characterized as medium to highly commercial.

AddictingGames

URL: www.addictinggames.com

Parent company: Nickelodeon, MTV Games and Viacom.

Site Traffic: 6,221,000 unique visitors in March, 2008, according to Nielsen//NetRatings.

Ages: 12-up (some content not appropriate for young children).

Cost: Free.

Commercialism level: Medium (3).

Commercial content: Contains banner advertisements and pop-ups. Promotes related Viacom properties like NeoPets, or third parties, i.e., banner ads for Denny's.



This site's name says it all. A collection of more than 300 games, or in some cases, movie clips designed for mass appeal. The site contains a wide assortment of advertising, and in some cases, content not appropriate for children.

BarbieGirls.com

URL: www.barbiegirls.com

Parent company: Mattel, Inc. Site design by Studiocom.

Site Traffic: 1,033,000 unique visitors in March, 2008, according to Nielsen//NetRatings.

Ages: 7-12.

Cost: Some portions free, with exclusive content and chat options offered to those who own a \$40 MP3 player that is plugged into a PC's USB port.

Commercialism level: High (4)

Commercial content: Embedded messages in chat, shows items being sold, promotes overall brand both directly and indirectly.

BarbieGirls.com is an online community where children can design their own Barbie avatar and virtual room, then chat with other avatars. The site uses a “velvet-rope” approach, letting anyone in for free, but reserving exclusive content for those who have a special \$40 MP3 player plugged into the USB port of their Windows computer. Called the “Barbie Device,” the player is also a sort of electronic doll, with snap-on clothes; ear buds have snap-on beads and earrings.



BarbieGirls.com uses proven features similar to other sites such as [Webkinz](#) (buy a toy to get online access) and [Club Penguin](#) (free to enter, pay for additional content), but most closely resembles [Ty Girlz](#). Each account includes a room kids can decorate with a variety of items they purchase with "B Bucks." For example, in B Chic Boutique, children can purchase new clothes, and in Furni Fever, a pink sofa or a fish tank goes for \$120 "B Bucks."

Club Penguin-seasoned testers had to be convinced to take a second look at Barbiegirls.com. There's simply not that much to do. Kids can watch Barbie commercials, paint their nails or create the perfect outfit for Ken—each of which awards users with B Bucks. While there's a chat option, heavy filtering makes it cumbersome. The sentence, "I like to eat pizza," for instance, shows up as unreadable characters ("I like to ## ##").

There's another form of chat ("Secret B Chat") available only to those who own the MP3 player and physically plug it into a computer. This innovative lock-and key-approach allows for a more trusted chat level. The ability to adopt and care for a pet is nice, and the idea that creations can be shared with others from anywhere in the world is powerful. But the site also encourages children to ask parents for an MP3 player that only works with Windows-based PCs. Some parents may not care for the emphasis on boys, fashion, thin girls (there is no option for body type), make-up and "packaged in pink" messages that saturate this site.

Beanie Babies 2.0

URL: www.beaniebabies20.com

Parent company: Ty, Inc.

Site Traffic: 195,000 unique visitors in March 2008, according to Nielsen//NetRatings.

Ages: 3 and up.

Cost: Starts at \$7 (the cost of one Beanie Baby).

Commercialism level: (3) medium.

Commercial content: Promotes purchase of additional toys that are necessary to “build your Beanie family,” which will promote the “happiness” of child's toy and provide access to additional games.

The Beanie Babies 2.0 site features a clean, friendly look, but a clunky and sometimes frustrating design. Compared to Webkinz, testers were less impressed by this interactive counterpart to

Beanie Babies. Each of the Beanie Babies 2.0 is marked with a tag that includes a scratch-off secret code needed to gain access to the site.



Once registered, the site presents an online version of the stuffed animal. Unlike Webkinz, the virtual pet's house is pre-decorated, and there's no expiration date. But there's also less to do. There are games, but they're locked, and can only be opened by purchasing yet another Beanie Baby with the appropriate secret code.

So, though Beanie Babies stuffed animals cost less than their Webkinz counterparts, there's far less to do if you own just one. Gaining access to all features on the site entails purchasing all 13 stuffed animals at a cost of \$91. This fact is not disclosed either on the animal or on the site.

Parents can set up a child's account with two chat options: "Basic Chat," with pre-selected phrases, or "Freestyle Chat," where members can type their own messages by selecting words from a restricted dictionary.

Bratz.com

URL: www.bratz.com

Parent company: MGA Entertainment

Site Traffic: 348,000 unique visitors in March, 2008, according to Nielsen//NetRatings.

Ages: 5 and up.

Cost: Free for general access, \$20 for a toy to access a site that includes chat features.

Commercialism level: High (4).

Commercial content: Embedded ads in chat, displays items for sale with links to an online store, promotion of overall brand both directly and indirectly.

Bratz.com is a highly commercialized hub for MGA Entertainment toys for girls featuring the Bratz line of dolls and related accessories. Individual sites listed on the bottom of Bratz.com include www.bratzpetz.com, www.yummi-land.com, www.rescue-pets.com, www.littletikes.com, www.miuchiz.com, www.zapfcreation.com, www.mgae.com, www.be-bratz.com and www.MyePets.com. These are also promoted via banner and streaming ads.

Each site freely mixes games with promotional materials designed for kids. "Bling," fashion, cute guys, big houses and sports cars inspire content. Some games are free, others require registration in order to become a "fan club member," but there's there's no way to tell one from the other without clicking first.



The most sophisticated offering is www.be-bratz.com, a community site that includes chat and a customizable home. The price of admission is a \$20 Be-Bratz doll, which comes with a USB plug-enabled “glam-necklace” that works with Windows-based PCs. Once inserted in the USB drive, it “unlocks” the Be-Bratz.com website, where children can play games to earn points needed to buy Bratz virtual accessories. Social features include the ability to send “eCards” to friends, and multiple-choice chat options to comment on fashions.

This site can be classified as an interactive commercial, with an emphasis on products that can be purchased. A “where to purchase” section of the site lists existing Bratz toys and computer accessories, including a webcam, keyboard and speakers.

Bratz have been the subject of controversy due to their suggestive clothing. A report published by the American Psychological Association to establish their "[Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls](#)" in February, 2007, said the following: “Bratz dolls come dressed in sexualized clothing such as miniskirts, fishnet stockings, and feather boas. Although these dolls may present no more sexualization of girls or women than is seen in MTV videos, it is worrisome when dolls designed specifically for 4- to 8-year-olds are associated with an objectified adult sexuality.”

Club Penguin

URL: www.clubpenguin.com

Parent company: Created by New Horizon Interactive, purchased by Walt Disney in 2007.

Site Traffic: 4,623,000 unique visitors in March, 2008, according to Nielsen//NetRatings.

Ages: 6 and up.

Cost: Free for basic mode, or \$6 a month/\$58 a year.

Commercialism level: Medium (3).

Commercial content: Teases children on free section by showing features that require a subscription. Offers virtual pets that must be cared for, playing on children’s emotions. Places virtual items into storage when subscription lapses.

Club Penguin is a Flash-based MMO (massive multiplayer online game). The free trial mode is easy to play, and offers many options. In the August 2007, Club Penguin was purchased by The Walt Disney company for \$350 Million. Although there is no advertising, children in three of the ten families that used Club Penguin begged their parents for subscriptions that cost real money.

Club Penguin loads quickly, is user-friendly and remarkably free of clutter compared to Webkinz, Be-Bratz or EverythingGirl.com, which front-load a great deal of animation and streaming video. After registering, which requires a valid e-mail, and logging in, children are asked to choose one of several penguin worlds to join. Each world offers the same activities, but some fill up faster than others. A child wanting to meet up with a friend can choose to wait for an opening, or go to a less popular world to kill time or meet new friends.

From the main screen, children can click to move their penguin to a variety of dynamic places. There's a pizza shop, a disco, a sledding race, a hockey game, a fishing game and a dance club. Players can also click on another penguin to invite him or her back to an igloo, throw a snowball or add to a buddy list. The games are not unique or new, but when placed in a social setting, can be very interesting and competitive. For example, in the sledding game, kids can race against each other kids as soon as four players fill the spots on the top of the hill. Children can jump in or out of games or visit their igloo, which serves as a home base for awards, games, and decorations. Over time, children can earn money to purchase more decorations.

Below is what an expired Club Penguin account looks like. Faded items will remain off-limits to a player until the subscription is renewed.



Of all social sites reviewed, Club Penguin offers the least restrictive, most intelligent chat options. Ultimate Safe Chat lets kids use a defined list of greetings, questions and statements. Standard Safe Chat allows players to type their own messages, but every message uses filtering software to block inappropriate words. In addition, the site claims human moderators monitor chat sessions as well.

While there is no advertising, children who aren't subscribers are frequently reminded to become full members in order to enjoy features they see being used by other penguins, like hats or igloo decorations. Subscribers also receive access to exclusive areas of the site. Judging from the number of snazzy penguins our testers spotted, the business model is a successful one.

A non-paying member's penguin and igloo look plain by comparison. Children might be lured into clicking on an attractive accessory, only to be told they need subscription. When subscriptions expire, "stuff" (including furnished igloo) is put into "storage." The only way to get everything back is to pay.

EverythingGirl.com

URL: www.everythinggirl.com

Parent company: Mattel, Inc.

Site Traffic: 3,173,000 unique visitors in March, 2008, according to Nielsen//NetRatings.

Ages: 6 and up.

Cost: Free.

Commercialism level: Extremely high (5)

Commercial content: Embedded messages in chat; shows items being sold with links to a "wish list" promotion of brands and related licensed characters; promotes overall brand directly and indirectly.

Designed specifically to promote toys for girls, everythinggirl.com is a collection of six sites under one URL. Each site promotes the others via a common menu, in addition to advertisements (marked with the word "Ad") for specific toys. As of January 2008, the sites are: BarbieGirls.com,

PixelChix.com, MyScene.com, Barbie.com, High School Musical and Polly Pocket. Because different studios make each site, features and quality of play differ.

But the sites all have one thing in common: a "find online" feature that uses a service called "Channel Intelligence" to tell which stores have a particular toy in stock, with one-click access to the store's catalog page. According to the Channel Intelligence site, the service claims to "turn online browsers into buyers." Each of the member sites also includes a collection of "movies" sometimes labeled "watch TV," or TV spots that can include TV commercials for a particular toy.



Activities vary in quality, but deal with the main theme of the toy. So children can dress Barbie, or take care of a pet at the Polly Pocket site, or go on a shopping spree where they can buy virtual accessories for the virtual versions of their toys. One gets a sense from these sites that every pixel is strategically placed to leverage participants toward a shopping cart of some kind. Ascertaining the amount of advertising on EverythingGirl.com is difficult, since the entire site functions as one sophisticated interactive advertisement.

Hasbro MonkeyBar TV

URL: www.hasbro.com/monkeybartv/

Parent company: Hasbro, Inc.

Site Traffic: N/A.

Ages: 6 and up.

Cost: Free.

Commercialism: High (4).

Commercial content: Games feature toys in close proximity to a shopping cart, along with stories and videos that feature the toys.

Hasbro's Monkeybar TV is a well-designed, highly commercialized Internet site designed to lure young boys into a collection of more than 160 arcade-style games. The site also features comics and videos, the latter consisting of Hasbro-sponsored cartoons like the Transformers, or repurposed TV commercials for Hasbro toys.

Many of the games are based on branded characters such as Spider Man and GI Joe, and opportunities to purchase toys and related accessories are prevalent throughout the site. The games load quickly and are generally hard to stop playing. They may have levels or are timed. Typical "high score" contests are combined with a weekly Top 100 tournament that teases kids with the line "someone's going to win. Why not you?" Those who make it into the top 10 list could win a Hasbro toy. But in the prize showcase, each "prize" also includes a "buy it" button.



Because scores range high, to the tens of thousands, children may think they have a best score, and therefore want to enter the tournament. Other games include assembling jigsaw puzzles from photos of toys (with three levels), or playing a computer in a game of Battleship. The Super Soaker Tag Elite game consists of a virtual shooting gallery with choice of types of Super Soakers (canon-sized squirt guns). The goal is to shoot other computer-controlled kids before they soak you, and players lose points if they shoot other kids in the face. At the bottom of the screen are the TV commercials, toy demos, and a "Buy Now" link to a wish list and shopping cart, where a "Super Soaker AquaShock Secret Strike" can be ordered for \$15.

This site also includes a downloadable program called the MonkeyBar TV Communicator, advertised prominently in the upper-left-hand corner of the homepage with animated graphics and the tag line: "Get the Latest Games and Videos On Your Desktop." Clicking on this link takes players to a page highlighting the joys of MonkeyBar TV without any disclosure about the nature of the download, beyond the fact it's compatible only with PCs.

Clicking "Download Now" downloads a 1.2 MB file called the MonkeyBar TV Communicator to the desktop. Once the program was installed and the computer rebooted, we observed a new pop-up in the toolbar, informing us of the "feature of the week" and a prompt to "Watch this week's lineup!" Uninstalling the program, however, was a straightforward process.

Whether MonkeyBar TV is a more accurately characterized as a toy catalog 2.0 or merely a collection of fun games depends on whether you take the perspective of the publisher or the child. But there's no doubt the games are fun, and although the toys aren't free, we watched kids who really wanted to win a toy.

JETIX

Parent company: Disney.

URL: <http://tv.disney.go.com/jetix/>

Site Traffic: 890,000 unique visitors in March, 2008, according to Nielsen//NetRatings.

Ages: 5 and up.

Cost: Free.

Commercialism level: Extremely high (5).

Commercial content: Entire site is cluttered with contests, ads and previews for Disney's Jetix TV programming: Power Rangers, Batman and Captain Flamingo. Each page contains short video clips from forthcoming episodes, mixed with banner ads and a few well-designed games. A menu of options includes games, movie and TV listings, music, travel, shopping, live events, mobile (cell phones), characters and a "for you" (arranged into age groups/interests). With this many categories, there should be something for every Disney fan. The problem is accessing it.

Clicking on the "games" tab on the homepage spawns a pop-up box that displays this message: "Hey Kids! You are about to go to a page that may have ads for Disney products or services." That's an understatement. In the "Streets of Justice" game, for example, players steer a

Batmobile through a maze to avoid damage, while shooting at bad guys. Banners for Frosted Flakes, Burger King, Fruit Loops, and the chance to win a mountain bike flash over the screen.

The site bombards users with non-stop audiovisual advertisements. Clicking on the “Live Events” tab opens a page full of promotions for Broadway shows, Disney on Ice, touring Disney Shows, DVDs, and more. It’s extremely difficult to monitor this site, since every click takes you to another page full of dozens of links, making it very easy to stray from a specific topic.



Every page features advertisements for brands such as Burger King, Fruit Loops, Build A Bear, and, of course, Disney. And though the advertisements are labeled, either with the word “advertisement” or “ad,” the graphic style is confusingly similar to that used for the activities, which may confuse young children who are not proficient readers.

Clicking on the “games” link also leads to Disney’s recent acquisition, Club Penguin, which proudly boasts being 100% ad free—but the path to this commercial-free zone was literally overgrown with ads.

This site touches on everything Disney, which is a plus and a minus. On the plus side, there’s a wide range of activities for a wide range of ages. On the minus side, the ads are constantly in your face. It was a difficult site to navigate, and young children may become frustrated.

LEGO.com

URL: www.lego.com

Parent company: The Lego Group.

Site Traffic: 1,596,000 unique visitors in March, 2008, according to Nielsen//NetRatings.

Ages: 6 and up.

Cost: Free, although four premium games are available for \$19.95 per download.

Commercialism level: Low (2).

Commercial Content: Lego.com is designed to promote Lego products, and combines an online catalog and store with free games. The site contains no third-party advertising, and it’s easy to tell the difference between free and premium content.

The official site for Lego toys is organized into three sections, “products,” “play,” and “shop,” all clearly marked and easily accessed from the main menu. The products section lists hundreds of Lego toys, information, reviews and links to the store. Testers headed straight for the “play” option, where they found 50 free games organized by category (action, puzzle, exclusive, preschool and creative), as well as a few “premium” games.

The products section is like an online catalog, featuring specific Lego toys or Lego-related licensed characters such as Lego Indiana Jones. The section also features the “Lego Factory,” where kids can design, share and buy their own customized toys after downloading free Lego

software. The shop section highlights new items, current sales and offers a store locator.



The play section offers a generous amount of Lego-themed games. Legos appeal to a wide range of ages, as do the games on the site. Younger children may require a parent nearby to help them avoid more complicated games aimed at older children. Free subscriptions to Lego magazine are also available.

This site is noteworthy for its efforts to avoid teasing children with pay-to-play content, which comes in the form of Lego Premium Games, four 15MB downloads that cost \$19.95 each. Clicking on the Premium Games button launches the following pop-up: "Warning! You are going to a section of LEGO.com that offers games for sale. Remember to ALWAYS get your parent's permission to purchase products on this or any other Internet site! Never give out your personal information like your name, email, IM handle or address without your parent's permission."



Also praiseworthy is the display of the price for each game over the graphic promoting each one. Premium games only run on Windows, a detail provided only when clicking a "more info" button. Because this information is not clearly shown on the order form, it is possible Macintosh users will miss it.

There are no third-party advertisements. In-house promotion includes a link to the Lego theme park ("although the banner is away from games," noted our reviewer). The site includes a "Parents" page that reminds parents to tell their children not to give out real names or phone numbers. When we entered a birth date for a free magazine subscription, we were asked for a parent's e-mail address for approval, though it should be noted a child could enter any valid e-mail address to get around this. An Educator's Page includes activities and lesson plans.

Littlest Pet Shop VIPs

URL: www.hasbro.com/littlestpetshop/default.cfm?page=Entertainment/onlinegames/virtual-world/virtual-interactive-pets

Parent company: Hasbro, Inc.

Site Traffic: 415,000 unique visitors in March, 2008, according to Nielsen//NetRatings.

Ages: 5 and up.

Cost: \$15. One toy equals 12 months of access.

Commercialism level: Medium (3).

Commercial content: Promotes additional toys, and offers exclusive membership to members who purchase additional pets.

Littlest Pet Shop VIPs (Virtual Interactive Pets) are a series of big-headed, large-eyed, stuffed animals. Each \$15 toy comes with a sealed secret code that lets the owner register at the Littlest Pet Shop site to gain access to a virtual world.

After typing in a code and choosing a screen name, a simple 3D town appears that can be explored using the arrow keys. There are many similarities to Webkinz, but there are also design problems, given the fact young children are likely to be attracted to this service.



Besides dressing up a pet, children can choose from 16 addicting mini-games to earn “Kibble points” in different areas of the town, including a beach, playground and an adoption center. There’s a hang-gliding game, a bejeweled-like puzzle called Water Balloon Garden, a jigsaw puzzle and a dress-up game. Some games are clunky and crudely designed. After ten minutes or so, games are abruptly ended with a “time to take a break” message. While this makes sense from a child-development perspective, a visible timer should be used to help children know how much time is left. Other design issues include an over-stylized interface with arrows that don’t always line up, a menu of activities that requires reading, and an abstract scoring system that uses big numbers.

There are no chat features, but it is possible to invite other players to enter a player’s house, or to visit theirs. These features are limited, though. By playing games, children can earn Kibble points that can be used at the “Get Better Center” to keep animals happy and healthy. A “Breaking News” prompt alerts children to new activities and, predictably, which new pets are available to buy.

Under the “What’s New” section, players are reminded that “if you adopt 4 or more pets, you will become a Gold Member of Littlest Pet Shops VIPs! This will give you access to special places and more over time!” These exclusive access features are not defined for the extra investment of \$45. Although one might expect buying more pets will add more time to accounts, registration periods are not cumulative, a fact disclosed several screens into the User Agreement rather than

on the FAQ page. It is also not obvious to children what happens when the registration period expires, although a login date is easy to find under a “My Account” option.

Millsberry.com

URL: www.millsberry.com

Parent company: Mills Online, Inc., a subsidiary of General Mills.

Site Traffic: 1,064,000 unique visitors in March, 2008, according to Nielsen//NetRatings.

Ages: 6 and up.

Cost: Free.

Commercialism level: Extremely high (5).

Commercial content: Mixes news items with commercial content. Contains banner ads (both internal and third-party), promotional contests and “advergaming” (designed to promote a brand).

Look on the back or the side panel of a General Mills cereal box, like Cinnamon Toast Crunch, and there’s likely to be a promotion for Millsberry.com, a free online destination that serves up a buffet of “advergaming” activities²¹ along with banners promoting healthy foods and sugary breakfast cereals. Because the games look like a typical social gaming site, Millsberry.com looks like a safe, pleasant, child-friendly place (one mother confused the site as a virtual version of “Mayberry” of Andy Griffith Show fame). But the town designed with the sole purpose of promoting General Mills products.



For example, the Arcade contains 24 games that vary in quality, with generic names like Sudoku, Bumper Boats or Tricky Touchdown. But the game of Sudoku is based on Lucky Charms cereal pieces. The rafts in Bumper Boats are really giant Fruity Cheerios. These games are designed to be addictive rather than educational. The snack bar serves up healthy foods, like fruit smoothies, along with General Mills snacks like Chex Mix.

In the “News” on the front page current items appear, such as a bylined article on Martin Luther King Jr., along with a reminder to “get personal” with MyFruitRollups.com Valentines Day cards, available in the Millsberry.com Post Office. “There are two different cards that give you the choice of being flashy and animated, or a little more reserved and sophisticated. It’s never too early to start spreading some MyFruitRollups.com love,” says the reminder.

²¹ The term “advergaming” has been attributed to Anthony Giallourakis who purchased the URLs Advergaming.com along with Adverplay.com in 2000. The term Advergaming used later by the Kaiser Foundation in 2006, in the report *It's Child's Play: Advergaming and the Online Marketing of Food to Children*.

Millsberry.com does clearly disclose its use of advertising. Most of the pages in the site—including the homepage—contain the following disclaimer at the bottom:

THIS PAGE CONTAINS ADVERTISEMENTS. MILLSBERRY®, characters, logos, product names and all related indicia are trademarks of Mills Online, Inc., © 2004-2008. ® denotes Reg. US Pat. & TM Office. All rights reserved. Use of this site signifies your acceptance of the Terms and Conditions. Please view our Privacy Policy.

But to our child testers, Millsberry.com seems no different than PBS KIDS and Club Penguin. To them, it is merely another collection of games, some fun and others not. Whether they notice or understand the disclaimer is debatable.

MushABelly

URL: www.mushabelly.com

Parent company: Jay at Play International, an affiliated company of Jay Franco & Sons, Inc.

Site Traffic: 74,000 unique visitors in March, 2008, according to Nielsen//NetRatings.

Ages: 3 and up.

Cost: \$10 (small) and \$17 (big).

Commercialism level: Moderate (3).

Commercial content: While there is no external commercial content in the games, additional plush toys are featured, and the “movies” include commercial spots for MushABelly toys.

Like Webkinz, MushABellies are collectable plush animals that come with a code on a sealed tag that unlocks an online virtual world. But unlike Webkinz, there is no instant messaging, chat or social games on the site. Each toy contains a belch-like sound effect (called a “grumble”) that’s activated when the toy is squeezed, and an electronic sound when a button is pushed. They also come with a game card that tells their species, name, birthday, and the food they like to eat.



The MushABelly world contains four areas, MushABelly Commons, MushABelly Pond, MushABelly Village and MushABelly University. Our tester visited the latter, and enrolled their animal in the University, which includes a dorm room, a store, a hall for classes and a registrar’s office. Each enrollment of a new toy is rewarded with additional dorm rooms, which can be placed next door or on another floor.

Mushkin Hall offers classes or a game to earn credits to spend in the store. Our testers took a typing class that let children practice typing by selecting the key on a keyboard that matched the letter shown in a box. The entire class has to be completed to earn credits. Testers also played a game called Crazy Keys, which required them to type the key of the displayed character. The game was fast-paced and engaging.

In the Theatre, children can choose from six MushABelly commercials, including a segment from the TV program “The View” featuring the MushABellies. (At the start of the segment, the TV Rating Symbol indicated the content is unsuitable for children under 14).

The MushABelly concept is interesting, similar to Webkinz, but with a greater emphasis on learning. The online experience, however, is clunky and needs refinement before it can compete with similar sites. For instance, our tester’s stuffed animal was a monkey. But when we entered the monkey code, it appeared as a dog on the screen, upsetting the tester.

MyePets.com

URL: www.MyePets.com

Parent company: MGA Entertainment.

Site Traffic: 646,000 unique visitors in March, 2008, according to Nielsen//NetRatings.

Ages: 4 and up.

Cost: \$20 for one year.

Commercialism level: Moderate (3).

Commercial content: The “news” includes new pets.

“Rescue Pets” are robotic stuffed animals with a “rescue” theme—provide a home for a loveable stray. This new line of stuffed animals includes a code that provides access to MyePets.com, where children can feed, entertain, house, and pamper their pets. The town square contains an arcade, vet, spa, post office, flea market and diner.



New registrants are given a house to decorate, using credits earned by playing games and sending e-cards to parent-approved pals. The virtual store is stocked with furniture, clothing and accessories. While items available for purchase and arcade games are limited, they seem appropriate for the target audience.

The sites promotes the stuffed animals on the site, and under pictures and descriptions of each currently available pet, a prominent “Where to buy Your MyePet” banner highlights hyperlinked logos for stores like Target, WalMart and Amazon. The site promotes forthcoming lines of pets on a “Gazette” page.

After 11 attempts to name her new pet, our 7-year-old tester gave up in desperation. Each name was already taken. Once an adult intervened, a suitable name was found. However, the child remembers the frustrating experience, and regrets using a name that she didn’t create.

NickJr.com

URL: www.nickjr.com

Parent company: Nickelodeon Kids and Family Group, a Division of Viacom.

Site Traffic: 4,471,000 unique visitors in March, 2008, according to Nielsen//NetRatings.

Ages: 6 and up.

Cost: Free.

Commercialism level: Extremely high (5).

Commercial content: Site presents a mixture of familiar characters with advertising, both internal and third-party. Some of the banners change in size when moused over, which is confusing to children, and some games advertised are actually free trials, a fact not advertised up front.

Designed for both parents and preschoolers, visitors to NickJr.com will notice ads, craft ideas, a TV schedule, activities and short promotional video clips that automatically stream in a postage-sized video player. There are also links to a variety of NickJr.-branded sites that include [NOGGIN](#), [myNOGGIN](#), the [NickArcade](#) and others.



The overall effect is a confusing mishmash of inter-linking brands and services -- some for sale and others free -- that feature characters best-known from the TV screen, such as Dora the Explorer, the Backyardigans, Yo Gabba Gabba, Blue's Clues, Max and Ruby and others.

External (non-Viacom) Advertisers on NickJr.com promote mouthwash, vacations, drugs, toys, phones, cars and fast food in varying-sized banner or display ads. One of these banners, for McDonalds restaurants, expands in size when moused-over, an effect particularly mystifying to our young testers with limited mouse control abilities. If the cursor passes over any part of the banner, even accidentally, it blows up in size, covering parts of the screen. When the mouse is moved away from the banner, the ad shrinks back to normal size, a control mechanism that requires some learning.

Because ads open new browser windows, the browser's back button doesn't work, so a child looking for a game may end up on listerinekids.com where they can zap food and germs in a Flash-based arcade game called "Mission Magnetizer," designed to highlight the importance of mouthwash.

Most of our testers visited NickJr. thinking they were going to find free games. In fact, most of these games are located in myNOGGIN or the Nick Arcade, a subscription-based service advertised in a billboard that alternates between free and for pay. For example, one message offers children a chance to "Play Bingo with Dora at the NickJr. Arcade." There is no mention that to actually play bingo with Dora, a parent will have to either download a free timed trial, which includes an installation that can alter browser settings, or purchase an Arcade Pass for \$20 per game.

NickJr.'s lure is the quality of the games featuring popular and familiar characters. The Flash-based programming is state-of-the-art, and effectively extends characters and concepts from the

TV shows. This may explain why our very young testers came back so frequently, despite the advertising clutter.

NOGGIN

URL: www.noggin.com

Parent company: Nickelodeon Kids and Family Group, a Division of Viacom.

Site Traffic: 2,106,000 unique visitors in March, 2008, according to Nielsen//NetRatings.

Ages: 3-6.

Cost: Free.

Commercialism level: Moderate (3).

Commercial content: External and internal banner advertisements, plus content that leverages TV programming.

NOGGIN is one of several online services for families that carry the brand “Nickelodeon Kids and Family.” Others include Addicting Games, Nickelodeon, Nick Jr., Nicktropolis, Neopets and most recently, a subscription site called myNOGGIN.



Families in this study frequently used NOGGIN, on par with Webkinz and Club Penguin. Contents include 20 sets of Flash-based activities, each with four to six games each, plus a video player, so children can watch excerpts of the TV channel's programming in their browser. This was a popular option for one of our testers, aged 2 ½.

The 20 clusters of games are each based on a TV show, including characters from Blue's Clues, Dora the Explorer, Little Bill and so on. Activities include games, videos and work sheets that can be printed and colored. There's plenty to do, and the activities are well designed and engaging. In Oobi's Rhyme, children are asked to click on the picture that rhymes with another picture. In Franklin's Scribblevision, several sizes of paint brushes and colors can be selected to paint a picture. All online work may be saved to a cubby.

While NOGGIN Television advertises itself as being “the only commercial-free educational channel dedicated to preschoolers 12 hours a day, 7 days a week,” the NOGGIN Web site certainly isn't free of commercials. Rotating banner ads and smaller ads for cruises, cleaning products, appliances, cars, and special offers from retail outlets abound.

All ads are clearly marked with the word “Ad” or “Advertisement,” though the banner ads for Nickelodeon-related content feature familiar characters that may prompt preschoolers to inadvertently click on a registration form. The site features an extensive amount of in-house promotion, with ads for Nick at Night, Flicks for Kids, myNOGGIN and a direct link to a catalog page for a SpongeBob SquarePants DVD Player.

The amount of content on the site is impressive, but varies in quality and difficulty. This leads to a hit-or-miss experience, since there are nearly 100 different activities on the site. Any kindergarten teacher would appreciate the quantity and quality of school-readiness skills covered by many of the games, including matching, rhyming, and creative thinking. But the banner ads and commercial offerings clutter the site with distractions, which can frustrate younger children.

PBS KIDS

URL: www.pbskids.org

Parent company: Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

Site Traffic: 4,132,000 unique visitors in March, 2008, according to Nielsen//NetRatings.

Ages: 3-6

Cost: Free.

Commercialism level: Not present (1).

Commercial Content: None. A parent's page provides information about special programming.

This advertising-free site brings a variety of PBS programming to the online world with games, music, art, and stories. Each TV program's online equivalent offers activities suitable for the appropriate age level. Some games reinforce skills such as counting and patterning, while others include different levels for a broader audience. The site allows kids to print art pages and create and send e-cards to friends. There's also a well-designed parent/teacher page with helpful information, activities and lesson plans.



The games were numerous and varied in skill and content. Testers ran into trouble following directions while playing Inventor's Workshop. Although able to create an invention, we had difficulty getting it to the test course. At times, directions were missing with no way to decipher what the next move should be. This could easily frustrate a young child.

Teletubbies, Arthur and other familiar TV characters are here, but our testers were pleasantly surprised to see activities centering around Cyberchase, which would appeal to an older audience. PBS KIDS is a fun, safe site for a wide range of interests.

After we reviewed this site, PBS launched a subscription-only site called "PBS KIDS PLAY," which it promotes via a hyperlinked graphic at the bottom of its most popular sites. Clicking this link takes you to a warning screen ("You're Leaving PBS KIDS PLAY!") along with the following note: "PBS KIDS PLAY! is a personalized learning service that is designed to enhance school readiness skills through fun, educational games and activities that adjust in difficulty based on your child's skill level. PBS Kids Play! also features easy-to-use parental tools which enable you to track your child's learning progress - and more!" It's not until the "Visit PBS KIDS" link is actually clicked that the cost (\$9.95/month or \$79/year) is disclosed.

Sesame Workshop

URL: www.sesameworkshop.org

Parent company: Sesame Workshop.

Site Traffic: 930,000 unique visitors in March, 2008, according to Nielsen//NetRatings.

Ages: 3-6.

Cost: Free.

Commercialism level: Low (2).

Commercial content: Sponsors are listed via logos and banner ads. Clicking on banner ads leads to a pop-up warning that the user is about to leave the site. Online store links appear on every page.

Sesame Workshop was designed to entertain and teach preschoolers using characters and themes from Sesame Street television programming. Content includes games, stories, music, art, mail, and Elmo's World.



A variety of games are designed around concepts in the TV show. For example, in Elmo's Classroom children can practice counting and read a story with Elmo. Snuffy's Magic Garden lets children click on a watering can to create a garden. One game, "The Lemonade Stand," allows interaction with Elmo and Zoe make lemonade by counting out lemons, sugar, and amounts of water.

Sesame Workshop is quick to remind visitors they are a non-profit and accept donations. The donation link is prominently displayed on the home page. On the footer of every page there's also a link to the "Sesame Store" where toys like Mattel's TMX: Tickle Me Elmo 10th Anniversary Edition can be purchased for \$39.99.

Cynics might look at content at SesameWorkshop.org as a vehicle to extend the Sesame Workshop brands, but after playing through the activities it seems characters such as Elmo were selected because they support an educational objective, not a monetary one. It should be said that throughout the site, there is a heavy emphasis on Elmo.

While the activities focus on age-appropriate skills, they vary widely in quality, and many are dated. The Lemonade Stand story went on too long. In Elmo's classroom, clicking on an abacus made it count to ten, but our child tester only watched and did not participate. Considering this site is designed for preschoolers, Sesame Workshop.org offers a nice selection of activities that support a child's school readiness in a setting that feels refreshingly free of manipulative advertising.

Shining Stars

URL: www.shiningstars.com

Parent company: Russ Berrie, Inc.

Site Traffic: 204,000 unique visitors in March, 2008, according to Nielsen//NetRatings.

Ages: 6 and up.

Cost: \$15 a year, including the plush toy.

Commercialism level: Medium (3).

Commercial content: Teases children by displaying content like the "Snow World" that can't be accessed unless you own the "Christmas plush." The "news" is really a set of product announcements and special promotions.

Like Webkinz, Shining Stars are a line of plush toys, each with a unique registration code that provides access to shiningstars.com, which contains some limited games and numerous opportunities to purchase more stuffed animals.



Children can also send e-cards or earn money in units of "glow points" by playing the games, sending wishes or buying more animals. Some of the glow points can be used to make contributions to a charity. But clicking on the "donate your points" button may also enter the user in a raffle to win a two-night trip to New York City to attend the 18th Annual Celebrity Sports Auction. Although the rules page says parental permission is required, our child testers were able to enter themselves.

Time and again throughout the site, children are exposed to items for sale. New toys are announced on the "News page," links to other available Shining Star toys are ever-present, and a "My Star Space" page contains the hyperlink "collect them all."

There are no chat or community features, so children expecting to find a virtual version of their toy were disappointed. While the \$15 plush toys are well-designed, the Web site is not, compared to Webkinz. (Note: The Shining Stars site was redesigned in April 2008. This summary refers to a version reviewed in February 2008).

Stardoll

URL: www.stardoll.com

Parent company: Paperdoll Heaven Inc.

Site Traffic: 1,616,000 unique visitors in March, 2008, according to Nielsen//NetRatings.

Ages: 8 and up.

Cost: Free, although additional clothing or decorations can be purchased.

Commercialism level: high (4).

Commercial content: Banner ads (both internal and third-party), embedded commercial content, plus teasers for premium content.

Stardoll is a sophisticated and well-designed Swedish Web site that combines elements of MySpace.com with doll creation. Users can drag and drop clothing items onto paper doll templates. It's possible to make and save a personal look-alike doll (a "MeDoll") using a diverse number of hairstyles, skin tones, eye colors, noses and mouths. Users can also dress 400 celebrity doll templates, from Brad Pitt to Oprah and the Olson Twins, with related sets of clothing items and accessories.



The site makes money by mixing ads with designer labels and through additional features such as "star dollars" which can be used to buy items. One real dollar buys about 10 star dollars, with 25 free "Stardollars" for first sign-up. Registration is fast and easy. A chat room function allows users to enter dolls in fashion shows, or vote for other dolls. The chat is filtered, but not as restrictive as most typical children's sites.

Once registered, ten dolls can be stored and users can post a personal presentation page in a similar fashion to social networking sites. There is also a message center and a diary that can be public or private. Stardoll brims with commercial logos. While on pages customizing a virtual doll, we could see a sidebar picture of a trendy look complete with brand names. The virtual mall was full of well-known stores and brand names. Users are encouraged to buy a membership, but the variety of convenient payment offers was enough to make one parent tester nervous.

Ty Girlz

URL: www.tygirlz.com

Parent company: Ty Inc.

Site Traffic: 235,000 unique visitors in March 2008, according to Nielsen//NetRatings.

Ages: 7 and up.

Cost: \$15 (the cost of one doll).

Commercialism level: 4 (high).

Commercial content: Requires the purchase of one or more dolls with a password in order to access exclusive content.

Ty Girlz are plush dolls, similar in appearance to Bratz, that contain a secret code used to register and log onto Tygirlz.com, a virtual world centered around fashion and decorating.

By playing arcade and trivia games, users earn "Ty dollars" they can spend decorating their rooms, purchasing clothes, or pampering their virtual doll in a spa. The games offer a nice range of challenges, but few surprises, such as having to guide a trampoline over a pit to keep a doll aloft or identifying the capital of Colombia. The games reward players with varying amounts of money, capping at 100 Ty dollars per session.

The mall and the spa will grab young girls' attention for quite some time. The selections of clothing, make-up and home decor is generous. Once a selection is made, there are myriads of color choices to customize purchases and create a personal look.



As with all sites we tested that are built around code-based toys, Ty Girlz constantly reminds users that registering another doll results in rewards. Each receives an outfit, a hairstyle, a room and 1000 Ty dollars to spend on clothing and décor. The motto often seen was "More Girlz = More Stuff." Although there are no banner ads, Ty's logo is frequently displayed, and subtle messages encourage buying more dolls.

The site provides a range of games, but they are slow to load. Some games are challenging, others allow breezing through. Most involve clothing, make-up or decorating. Lack of success at a game can inspire some relatively nasty comments for other dolls. We received this comment: "Whatever?! Try Again!" along with a harsh frown. The site is well-designed and the games did occasionally rise above the superficial, but Ty Girlz' focus is solely on appearances.

Webkinz World

URL: www.webkinz.com

Site Traffic: 11,938,000 unique visitors in March, 2008, according to Nielsen//NetRatings.

Ages: 6 and up.

Cost: \$8 or \$14 for a plush toy and one year of access.

Commercialism level: high (4).

Commercial content: Children are teased with the benefits of additional content in exchange for purchasing more toys or accessories. Ads are mixed with menu items for activities that are, for some reason, also labeled as ads. Few opportunities are missed to point out the benefits of buying additional pets and/or accessories. When a subscription lapses, a child risks losing all online work. Re-subscribing requires purchase of an additional toy, forcing parents to buy at least one new toy every year.

Webkinz, the most popular site among our ten families, combines a wide variety of responsive, cleverly designed games with manipulative marketing strategies. Webkinz are collectible plush animals, sold either as Webkinz (\$14) or as smaller Lil'Kinz (\$8), each of which comes with a special sealed tag containing a code that grants access to the site. While Webkinz was not the first site to use the "toy as a key" strategy, it was the first to achieve widespread success with it.

Once the code is recognized, children "adopt" a virtual version of their pet they can use to play games and chat with other Webkinz users. From this point, the experience is a bit like a MMOG (Massive Multiplayer Online Game), minus the ability to chat freely. Instead, users can send

messages to other animals using selected phrases, eliminating the possibility of worrisome contact with strangers.

The 32 addicting arcade games form the backbone of the site, and consist of mazes, scavenger hunts, sorting contests and trivia questions. Some are two-player games, allowing users to play against online friends. Good scores earn "Kinzcash," which can be spent on more clothing or furniture for a pet's house.



The site almost constantly promotes the benefits of additional pets and accessories, like lip gloss, body spritz and mouse pads. There's a homepage link to the Webkinz catalog, which features pets, accessories, wish lists and a store locator. The site also sells trading cards that unlock virtual prizes, and are, of course, collectable.

The site also encourages multiple adoptions, with perks like a new room with the 2nd through 10th adoption, and a super-bed with the 10th, 15th and 20th adoption. These prizes are visible to players but off-limits until the required amount of adoptions are made. Webkinz adoptions last one year. If a child becomes attached to his or her virtual pet and the room he or she worked so hard to create, parents must purchase another stuffed animal before the expiration date to renew the subscription for another year, and another for each subsequent year.

The site mixes poorly labeled in-house and third-party advertisements with responsive, addictive activities that appeal to a wide range of interests, abilities and ages. Any child can easily find enjoyable activities on this site, and an option is always provided to exit anything too hard or confusing. But they'll also be subject to manipulative marketing techniques, which could result in a parent spending far more than the minimum entry fee of \$8. One family in our study spent more than \$1,000 on Webkinz in a single year.