Doll Web Sites Drive Girls to Stay Home and Play

Presleigh Montemayor, 9, likes the Cartoon Doll Emporium.

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Presleigh Montemayor often gets home after a long day and spends some time with her family. Then she logs onto the Internet, leaving the real world and joining a virtual one. But the digital utopia of Second Life is not for her. Presleigh, who is 9 years old, prefers a Web site called Cartoon Doll Emporium.

The site lets her chat with her friends and dress up virtual dolls, by placing blouses, hair styles and accessories on them. It beats playing with regular Barbies, said Presleigh, who lives near Dallas.

“With Barbie, if you want clothes, it costs money,” she said. “You can do it on the Internet for free.”

Presleigh is part of a booming phenomenon, the growth of a new wave of interactive play sites for a

Multimedia

Virtual Playgrounds

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Dress up dolls include Beyoncé Knowles, from Stardoll, and Rudolph Giuliani, from Cartoon Doll Emporium.

Players at Stardoll.com can buy credits over their cellphones and use them to buy more clothes for dolls like the actor Will Smith.

“Hey, Web sites like this are really popular among kids,” Mr. Bernoff said, noting the enthusiasm has a viral analogy. “It’s like catching a runny nose that everyone in the classroom gets.”

Even as the children are having fun, the adults running the sites are engaged in a cutthroat competition to be the destination of choice for a generation of Americans who are growing up on computers from Day 1.

These sites, with names like Club Penguin, Cyworld, Habbo Hotel, Webkinz, WeeWorld and Stardoll, run the gamut from simple interactive games and chat to fantasy lands with mountains and caves.

When Evan Bailyn, chief executive of Cartoon Doll Emporium, said that when he created the site, “I thought it would be a fun, whimsical thing.” Now, he says, “it’s turned into such a competitive thing,” adding that “people think they are going to make a killing.”

Even Barbie herself is getting into the online act. Mattel is introducing young generation of Internet users, in particular girls.

Millions of children and adolescents are spending hours on these sites, which offer virtual versions of traditional play activities and cute animated worlds that encourage self-expression and safe communication. They are, in effect, like Facebook or MySpace with training wheels, aimed at an audience that may be getting its first exposure to the Web.

While some of the sites charge subscription fees, others are supported by advertising. As is the case with children’s television, some critics wonder about the broader social cost of exposing children to marketing messages, and the amount of time spent on the sites makes some child advocates nervous.

Regardless, the sites are growing in number and popularity, and they are doing so thanks to the word of mouth of babes, said Josh Bernoff, a social media and marketing industry analyst with Forrester Research.

Hitwise, a traffic measurement firm, says visits to a group of seven virtual-world sites aimed at children and teenagers grew 68 percent in the year ended April 28. Visits to the sites surge during summer vacation and other times when school is out. Gartner Research estimates that virtual-world sites have attracted 20 million users, with those aimed at younger people growing especially quickly.

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BarbieGirls.com, another dress-up site with chat features.

In recent months, with the traffic for these sites growing into the tens of millions of visitors, the entrepreneurs behind them have started to refine their business models.

Cartoon Doll Emporium, which draws three million visitors a month, is free for many activities but now charges $8 a month for access to more dolls to dress up and other premium services. WeeWorld, a site aimed at letting 13- to-25-year-olds dress up and chat through animated characters, recently signed a deal to permit the online characters to carry bags of Skittles candy, and it is considering other advertisers.

On Stardoll, which has some advertising, users can augment the wardrobe they use to dress up their virtual dolls by buying credits over their cellphones. At Club Penguin, a virtual world with more than four million visitors a month, a $5.95-a-month subscription lets users adopt more pets for their penguin avatars (animated representations of users), which can roam, chat and play games like ice fishing and team hockey.

Lane Merrifield, chief executive of Club Penguin, which is based in Kelowna, British Columbia, said that he decided on a subscription fee because he believed advertising to young people was a dangerous proposition. Clicking on ads, he said, could bring children out into the broader Web, where they could run into offensive material.

Mr. Merrifield also bristles at any comparison to MySpace, which he said is a wide-open environment and one that poses all kinds of possible threats to young people.

To make Club Penguin safe for children, the site uses a powerful filter that limits the kinds of messages users can type to one another. It is not possible, Mr. Merrifield said, to slip in a phone number or geographic location, or to use phrases or words that would be explicit or suggestive. Other sites are also set up to minimize the threat of troublesome interactions or limit what users can say to one another.

“We’re the antithesis of MySpace,” Mr. Merrifield said. “MySpace is about sharing information. We’re all about not being able to share information.”

Other sites are more open, like WeeWorld, which permits people to create avatars, dress them up and then collect groups of friends who type short messages to one another. The characters tend to be cute and cartoonish, as do the home pages where they reside, but the chatter is typical teenager.

“There’s a lot of teasing and flirting,” said Lauren Bigelow, general manager of WeeWorld. She said that the site had around 900,000 users in April and is growing around 20 percent a month.

Ms. Bigelow said that 60 percent of WeeWorld users are girls and young
women, a proportion that is higher on some other sites. Stardoll said that its users are 93 percent female, typically ages 7 to 17, while Cartoon Doll Emporium said that it is 96 percent female, ages 8 to 14.

Some of the companies are aiming even younger. The Ontario company Ganz has a hit with Webkinz, plush toys that are sold in regular stores and are aimed at children as young as 6. Buyers enter secret codes from their toy’s tag at webkinz.com and control a virtual replica of their animal in games. They also earn KinzCash that they can spend to design its home. The site draws more than 3.8 million visitors a month.

Sherry Turkle, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who studies the social aspects of technology, said that the participants on these sites are slipping into virtual worlds more easily than their parents or older siblings.

“For young people, there is rather a kind of fluid boundary between the real and virtual world, and they can easily pass through it,” she said.

For some children, the allure of these sites is the chance to participate and guide the action on screen, something that is not possible with movies and television.

“The ability to express themselves is really appealing to the millennial generation,” said Michael Streefland, the manager of Cyworld, a virtual world that started in South Korea and now attracts a million users a month in the United States, according to comScore, a research firm. “This audience wants to be on stage. They want to have a say in the script.”

But Professor Turkle expressed concern about some of the sites. She said that their commercial efforts, particularly the advertising aimed at children, could be crass. And she said that she advocates an old-fashioned alternative to the sites.

“If you’re lucky enough to have a kid next door,” she said, “I’d have a play date instead of letting your kid sit at the computer.”
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