Parents and Teachers – Support children's creativity using virtual worlds!

A white paper on the empowerment of children's creativity by using virtual worlds and games.

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Overview

The internet is abundant with educational activities as well as games for children of all ages. Is it possible that by playing games over the internet, children's creativity and imagination are still fostered? Do they assist in nurturing the essential building blocks of self-confidence and innovation as kids grow? Can children really engage with educational software? And maybe, most importantly, can fun and engaging games contribute to a child's mental and creative growth?

We believe the answer to all these questions is YES. New interactive games and virtual worlds are offering participants superior, empowering engagement and the mechanics that drive players in a way that was never done before; players can create their own environments and experiment with their own rules and interpretations. New online virtual worlds in particular, focus on providing tools rather than pre-set items and pre-determined story lines, to encourage a child's creativity.

If you believe that natural and nurtured creativity and imagination has all but disappeared from the world of 21st century children, due to video games, hand-held electronic games and interactive media, think again!

History and Current Status

Interactive games have been and still are a favorite pass time for children and grown ups. 97% of American kids play videogames and half of women and 55 per cent of men play computer games, with one in five (21%) playing every day (PewResearch). The internet has provided a massive gateway and distribution platform for many games, including casual downloadable games and browser based games that appeal to the mass market, due their simple rules and lack of commitment required, in contrast to more complex hardcore games.

Additionally, the internet allows players to connect and play together with multi-user games; participate in competitions and take part in massive multi-user happenings, such as MMOGs (massive multi-user online games).

Many sites aggregate and offer these types of games including addictinggames.com, Miniclip.com and games.yahoo.com. Some sites such as Primarygames.com focus solely on educational games. Games are also one of the most used types of applications in social networks such as Facebook and MySpace.

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Virtual Worlds

Over the past few years, building on the successful interaction between the fun aspect of games and the social, multi-user aspect of social networks, a new breed of games has formed called *Virtual Worlds*. Virtual worlds provide an on going fun experience that is enhanced by social features such as chat, sharing, teaming and competitions. The term "world" suggests that these environments are ever changing and offer their visitors new activities and content every time they come in to visit.

User of all ages and particularly children, find virtual worlds a place they are happy to return to. The on-going "story line" as well as specific features that allow children to express themselves through the use of avatars (personal representations), mark virtual worlds as a preferred game activity for kids online. Virtual worlds like Club Penguin, Whyville, Gaia and games like Webkinz offer children a fun and safe place to play with a personal representation (avatar), a virtual house and the chance to play in a social "get together" space.
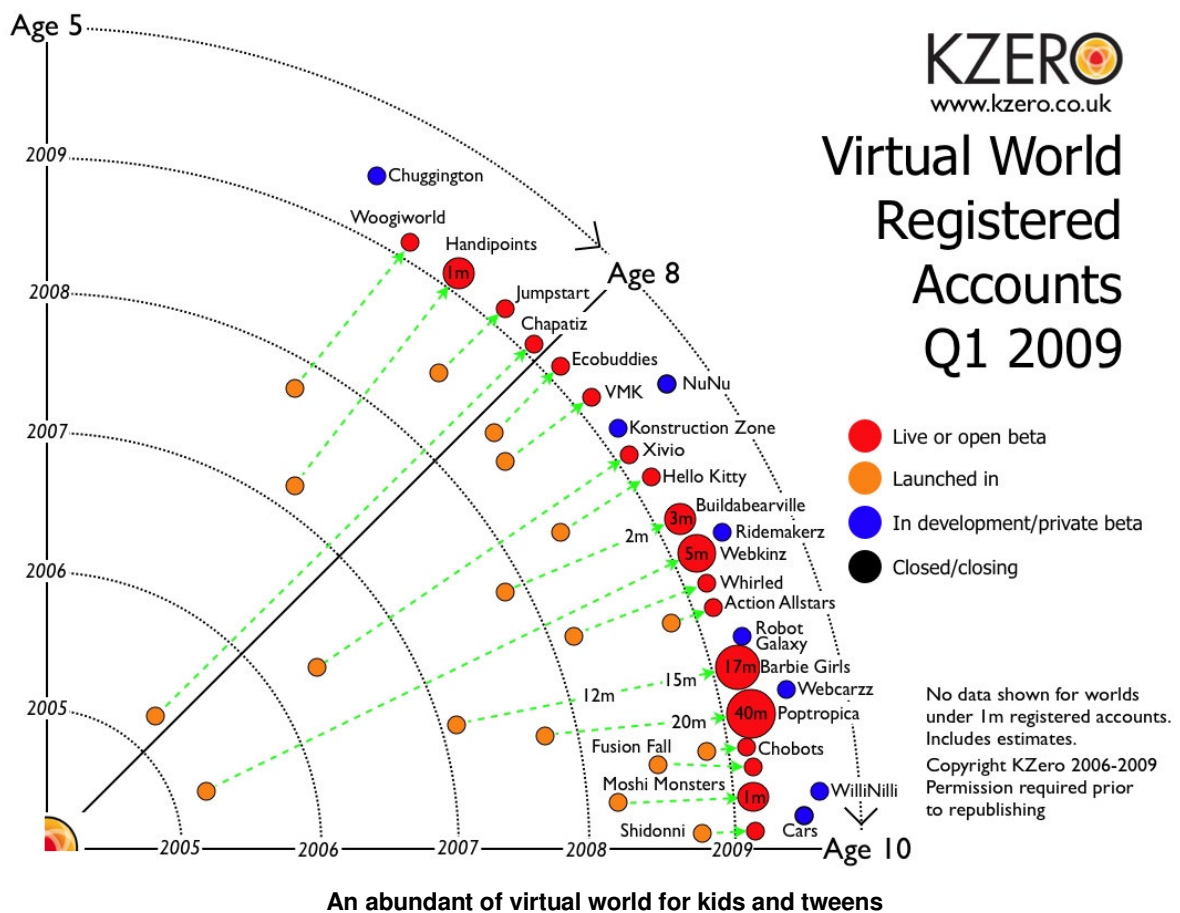
An abundant of virtual world for kids and tweens

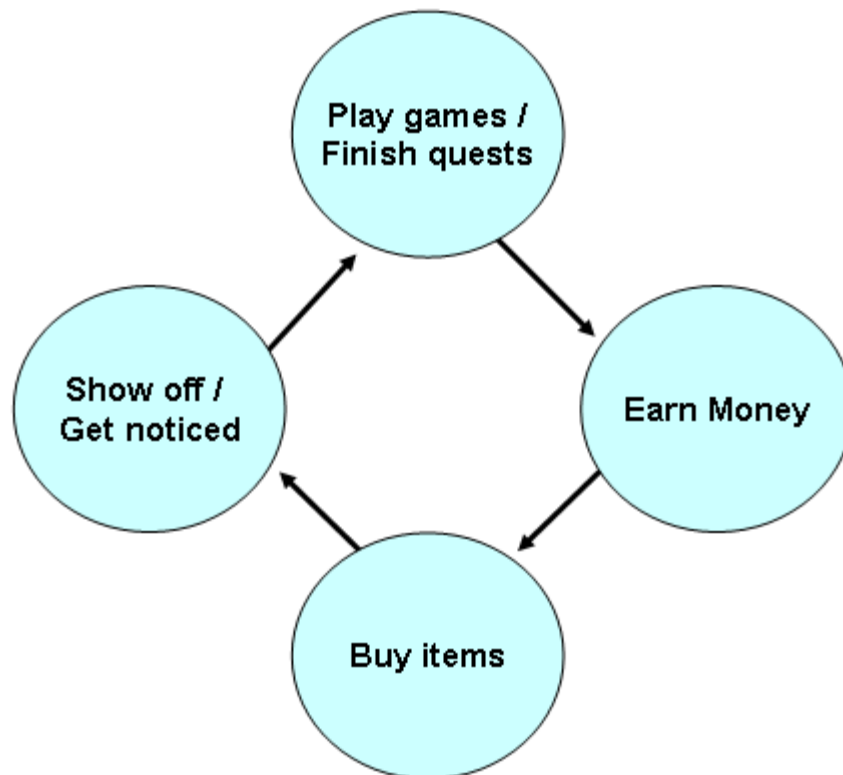*Parents and Teachers - You can support children's creativity using virtual worlds!*

Virtual World Mechanics

In most virtual worlds, children get an 'avatar' (a personal representation of themselves) or a puppet that they control. With it comes a 'home' or a personal place for that character.

Children then need to complete quests or play games in order to get currency which will allow them to buy special items for their avatars and their homes. This personalization process is a big motivation.

Additionally and importantly, children can "show off" their new personalized avatars and homes and the best equipped avatars usually get attention and friends as a reward. This cycle gets children to log in again and again to play, earn money and spend it in the game to gain a better status.

The items that children buy are being offered from an almost endless set of ready made virtual stocks that adapt to the game's theme.

Virtual world mechanics tend to focus on simulating real life commerce and ego

These game mechanics are still very popular and establish the core experience of most virtual worlds, within their theme.

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New Games Focus on Engaging Creativity

In the last few years several game developers started to change and re-evaluate their paradigms in game design. This followed market demand as well as the understanding that games need to bring additional values to players, especially to children.

Game developers started to focus on engaging users' creativity and move away from an over commercial game-play. During 2008, games like LittleBigPlanet , Spore , World of Goo , Roblox and Crayon Physics offered gamers of all ages to be part of the creative process of the game itself. These games are based on experimenting with the game and exploring it, more similar to toys than games.

These games proved to be fun and captured the hearts and minds of children and grown ups and are being applauded as "game changing" interactive entertainment.

Shidonni - A study case for a virtual world supporting children imagination and creativity

Shidonni is a virtual world based on children's creativity.

Similar to the games mentioned above, it focuses on providing tools for kids rather than preset templates. It is is based on the experience of drawing, which is one of the greatest pastimes for young children as well as a natural mode of expression for boys and girls (Koppitz). The enjoyment and sense of achievement of creating their own characters and objects, coloring and painting and proudly showing their creations to friends and family happens all over the world, every day.

Shidonni provides the simple joy of drawing characters and animals, with a 21st century twist - after drawing their virtual pets, children play with them as they magically 'come alive'. Children then care for, feed and play games that incorporate their drawings as main characters. Children can then share their creations with friends and family online to show off their creativity, and participate in multi-user games. Their drawings can also be printed on paper, simulating a traditional drawing activity, or be taken one step further, to have their drawings printed on T-shirts!

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The core experience of Shidonni is based on imaginative creation. Shidonni goes beyond the typical interactive pet game concept, empowering kids to draw their imaginary pets and worlds, and play with them in a safe, fun environment. A key benefit of the Shidonni world is the promotion of 21st century computer literacy skills as well as early childhood coordination and creative development

Shidonni changes the rules of virtual worlds by focusing on motivating children to create and then rewarding them throughout the creation process. Shidonni stays away from motivations that are built on money and goods, found in other games. Through the creation process, Shidonni introduces child friendly drawing tools and editors as incentives and motivators, and assist children as they use the computer and mouse to design their animals and worlds.

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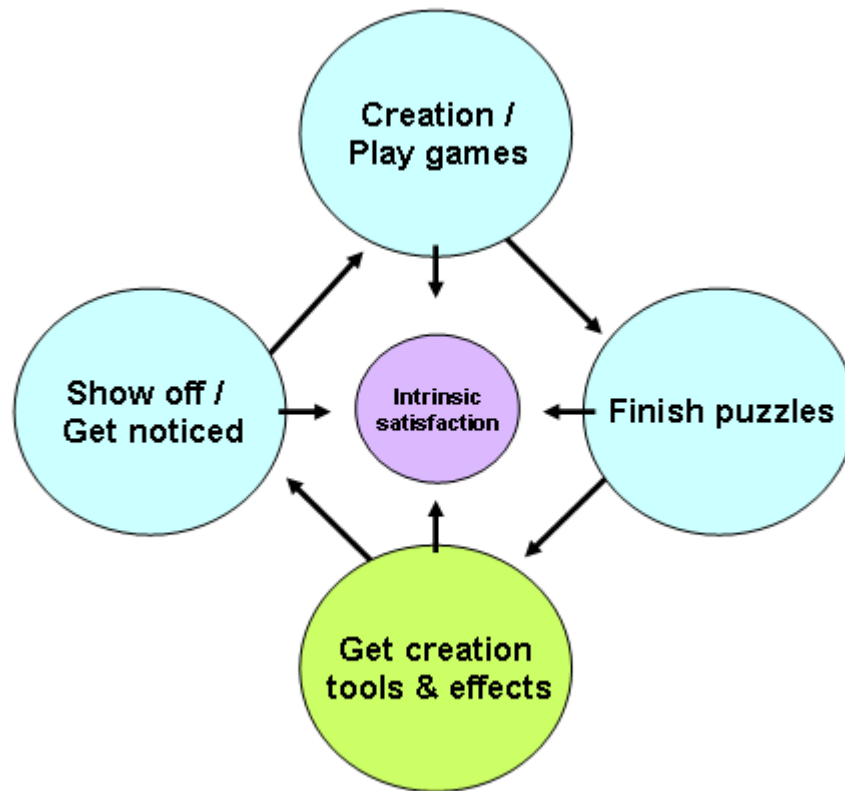
Shidonni's new paradigm focus on rewarding creativity with enhanced creative tools

Through the enjoyable challenges, games and design experiences, children are exposed to the value of computer and internet norms and conventional operating processes.

Using the game's graphical editors, children learn how to use the mouse, engage with visual editors and create worlds and animals. Younger children learn how to use the mouse (or a tablet) as well as familiarize themselves with computer usage and jargon such as "New", "Undo" and "Trash".

Personalization is developed through creation. Unlike other games, food, clothing and items are done by designing them rather than buying them. As a reward, the more creative a child is, the more they can "show off" their creations.

Sharing and networking with friends in Shidonni is done at a "baby step" safe model. Children can add their class friends by adding their unique user names. However, only when a both kids add each other, can they be connected. Once they are connected, they can share their animals and worlds, and even play online together. As social networks become mainstream, introducing their

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usages, upsides and issues become crucial as part of 21st century internet skills, such as information skills, communication skills and interpersonal skills (21stcenturyskills.org) .

Creativity and "Right brain thinking" lead Shidonni's unique concept and success

Shidonni is a unique game that supports cognitive development and what is considered as "right-brain creative thinking" through drawing and animation. The left and right hemispheres of the brain are known to process information in different ways.

The left hemisphere is the seat of language and processes in a logical and sequential order. The right hemisphere is associated with creativity and imaginative thinking. It is more visual and processes intuitively and holistically. The ultimate creation freedom in Shidonni, supports a right hemisphere activity and focus on the creativity and imaginations centers in a more prominent way than many games available today.

Young children naturally exhibit remarkably high levels of creativity, which decline as they grow up. Many have suggested that "the process of schooling, with its' focus on the acquisition of knowledge and correct (rather than imaginative) answers, promotes the decline" (James C. Kaufman and John Baer; "Creativity and Reason in Cognitive Development").

Shidonni brings back the focus to the natural creativity of children. Here there are no correct answers and no correct way to draw your pets and worlds – only freedom to achieve.

Creativity development helps children at all cognitive levels

Thanks to creative freedom, children of all ages and levels of cognitive development can benefit from Shidonni.

Gifted children can improve and heighten their creative abilities. Watching their creations come to life triggers their imagination even more, challenges them and encourages them to be more creative and use the editor. They begin to use the computer in new ways!

Very young children (aged 4 and 5) and even special needs children can build up their confidence through positive reinforcement, simply by the fact that there are no right or wrong ways to do things. It doesn't matter if it's a meaningless scribble or a brilliantly drawn character; in Shidonni all creations come to life! The feeling of creating a leaving creature is incredibly satisfying.

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Quotes and Credentials

"Shidonni is a breath of fresh air in games for young children. The intrinsic reward that comes from creating something from nothing with one's own hands and sharing it with others is timeless and priceless. In a time when kids are surrounded by the lures of material acquisition, competition, and rating and ranking themselves and others to achieve popularity, the makers of Shidonni bring the simple concept of creative illustration to life online. Bravo!" – **Linda Young, Ph.D., Counseling Psychologist and family cyber-safety expert**

Shidonni is an amazing way for kids to express themselves creatively. They will LOVE the interaction that this site provides. I am really in awe of this site and its capabilities. The site is simple enough for kindergarten students to use but will keep even 5th grade students intrigued.   - **Kelly Tenkely, Teacher and blogger at iLearn Technology**

This really seems like a site that can capture a student's imagination for some time!   - **Kevin Jarrett , Teacher**

I feel like Harold with the Purple Crayon :)   - **Adam Kinney**, **User**

Summary

New games built upon new paradigms support essential learning values such as creativity, imagination, and innovation like never before. By using enhanced computers and game consoles, as well as broadband internet penetration, game designers and players will be able to interact in more exciting and challenging ways.   The innovation of virtual worlds will provide tools and special effects to players, allowing them to build the world and environments they want, unique and personalized to them. Players will be able to move away from the current standard of pre-set templates and options found in so many of today's online products, towards new user experiences, such as Shidonni, where the product interaction and game opportunities are created using imaginative creativity, essential to children and adults alike.

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Thank you

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