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Whitepaper

How to Encourage Participation and Player Loyalty in Virtual Worlds

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The growth of the market

Virtual worlds, online environments and Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs), have never been so popular among children. Virtual Worlds Management [<http://www.virtualworldsmanagement.com>], which tracks networking sites and virtual worlds, estimates that there are more than 200 youth-focused virtual worlds either live or in development¹. This figure has more than doubled since the same time last year.

According to VW Management, these worlds, aimed at 18's and under, can be broken down as follows: 107 worlds are aiming for at least part of their main audience to fall in the under-7 range; 'tweens' lead the next bracket with 90 offerings; and 'teens' are still a relatively open space with only 78 worlds targeting them. The proportion of under 7's has risen markedly against tweens in the months following Virtual World's Management's last analysis in August 2008.

Virtual worlds catering to younger children, the five to 10-year-old segment, are really on the rise. According to KZero's analysis of the different players in the market², with 40m total accounts in Q1 2009, Family Education Network's Poptropica (launched in September 2007) accounts for almost 60% of the total accounts in the five to 10-year-old segment, while Mattel's Barbie Girls comes in second with a quarter of the total market share.

Moving onto the 10 to 15 'tweens' age group, there's a slightly more proportional split of market share. Habbo of course is the big one here, representing almost 50% of total accounts (124m total). But there are other major players going after these tweens and teens: Neopets (19% and 45 million neopet owners), Stardoll and WeeWorld both with 9.9% and Club Penguin – aimed at 6 to 14-year-olds - with an estimated 8.3%. Nickelodeon Kids & Family Virtual Worlds Group's online community, Nicktropolis, targeted at 8+, boasts 8.6 million users³.

The need for moderation

According to the Byron Report⁴ "There are new risks presented in online gaming, many of which are similar to the potential risks to children of other internet use. These games offer new opportunities for social interaction between children and there are a number of potential benefits for children and young people from playing video games, including cognitive and educational gains and simply having fun." However, it goes on to explain that much of the attraction and benefits of online gaming, such as playing somebody you

¹ <http://www.virtualworldsnews.com/2009/01/virtual-worlds-management-today-released-its-updated-youth-worlds-analysis-based-on-comprehensive-research-available-through.html>

² <http://www.kzero.co.uk/blog/?cat=34>

³ <http://www.nick.com/nicktropolis/game/index.jhtml>

⁴ <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/byronreview/pdfs/Final%20Report%20Bookmarked.pdf>

don't know, can be the very things that can create the potential risks. And are beyond the control of any potential ratings labelling schemes. Of course, there is the perennial problem of giving away personally identifying information which could lead to the dangers of grooming and abuse. Also, in virtual worlds and MMOGs, there is not only the 'static' content which the commercial developer created (and which can be reliably rated) but also potentially inappropriate material that is user-generated and can be shared. Conduct is a major issue: in the 'anonymous' online environment, children often behave in ways they would not behave in the offline world: using sexist or other abusive or threatening comments, employing bullying tactics or using bad language. Interestingly, in her report Byron says: "gamers also told me that it is usually the younger players who use bad language and threaten each other, whilst older players tend to use the mute options more and ignore the younger players." In the younger age groups it would seem that they have not yet developed any of their own controls and checks. Their perception that this is an unsupervised, repercussion-free environment leads them to violate codes of conduct more gleefully than older children who have learned some social responsibility.

Understanding all this, Byron says "helps us appreciate ways in which children's experience of the internet can present risks. We can use these findings to help us navigate a practical and sensible approach to helping our children manage risks. This is no different to how we think about managing risk for children in the offline world, where decreasing supervision and monitoring occurs with age as we judge our children to be increasing in their competence to identify and manage risks."

So, as in the real world, any dangers that do exist must be mitigated as much as possible by labeling (picked up by the recent Digital Britain Interim Report⁵), intelligent and informed site design, content, and of course, moderation. According to a recent study from MSN into the online habits of 20,000 14-19-year-olds in Europe⁶, 51 per cent of those questioned frequently surf the web without any supervision and 29 per cent of these teenage web users also admitted to being bullied online, which underlines the need for MMOGs and virtual worlds to ensure their sites are efficiently moderated.

By coupling automated and human moderation techniques with common sense, children are free to explore and experience everything these online communities have to offer while being afforded an acceptable level of safety. (For more information on this, see our white paper: [Virtual World and MMOG Moderation: five techniques for creating safer environments for children](#) at www.emoderation.com.)

Moderation adding value

With so many MMOGs to choose from, keeping children's interest is as significant a challenge as keeping them safe. No matter how appealing an online environment is, it won't stop a child from visiting other digital playgrounds – in exactly the same way a child won't go to one theme park repeatedly, but will prefer to visit different parks. The key for businesses, therefore, is to ensure the child – and the parent – has a compelling reason for a return visit. Sites that do not engage effectively with youngsters will quickly pay the price; children are often very harsh critics if they deem a virtual world to be sub-standard!

⁵ <http://writetoreply.org/digitalbritain/2009/01/29/section-53-online-safeguards/#1>

⁶ <http://www.pcadvisor.co.uk/news/index.cfm?newsid=110647&>

This is where moderators really come in to their own, adding tangible value to virtual worlds. In addition to monitoring digital communities and helping to ensure players' safety, they are increasingly becoming integral and active components of the game itself and enhance the game-playing experience. They understand how and when to engage a child in conversation so s/he won't get bored, while at the same time keeping an appropriate distance, knowing when to allow the child to resume playing alone.

The new role of moderators

Today, there are two types of moderators. The first and more traditional type is the silent moderator, who stays in the background blocking offensive material from participants, warning users, defusing confrontation and reacting to abusive or illegal behaviour.

The second and increasingly-popular type is the in-game moderator, who actively participates as a character or avatar on the site, helping other players engage with the various activities within the game. This type of moderator may also act as an in-game host – ie visible to the children – and can be compared to the host of a children's party: the role is about encouraging children to explore and try new things and have as positive experience as possible, but stay safe and secure while doing so.

Setting and enforcing policies

Quite simply, children and parents who know a virtual world is as safe as possible are far more likely to return to the site. One of the best ways for a virtual world to prove this is to draft clear user guidelines and make it very easy to report inappropriate behaviour – backed up with moderators who are ready to intervene if necessary, making sure the rules are consistently applied.

Sites must have a very clear policy on what constitutes bullying, so that children understand what is, and what isn't, acceptable behaviour before they play. When drafting the policy, it is important to ensure that the language is very easy to understand and the tone is not too intimidating for children. Remember, if they understand the rules and why they are there, they are far more likely to adhere to them and encourage other players to do the same. Also, encouraging parents to discuss the policy with their children is likely to give children a greater understanding of the rules and why they must be followed.

The maxim 'children need boundaries' applies just as much in online environments as it does in the real world. eModeration has found that not only do children respond positively to boundaries being enforced, they're often very happy to help enforce guidelines and remind other children when they're breaking the rules.

Intelligent automated filters will typically detect when one child is demonstrating bullying or abusive behaviour towards another child – but this doesn't remove the need for human moderators, who are trained to help maintain a peaceful and healthy playing environment. A good analogy is CCTV cameras: they are able to monitor a large space very quickly, but they still need a human operator to interpret the information

and intervene with appropriate action when necessary. eModeration has found that simply the visibility of a moderator is often enough to prevent instances of bullying or abusive behaviour.

However, it is very important for moderators to keep a certain level of detachment from the children and not become their friends, ensuring they remain impartial and act consistently. To this end, moderators should be clearly identifiable as such within the game so that a child can never confuse them with another player. A very effective way of doing this is for the moderator to become an active character or host in the game. In this way, moderators can blend in to the game itself, letting children know they are there without becoming over-bearing. This also deters children from wanting to chat to the moderator, which could distract them from the game itself.

Moderators as in-game characters/hosts

As touched on earlier, moderators now have a wider role than just monitoring online worlds and ensuring these environments are safe play areas for children. Today, moderators also act as hosts, becoming interactive characters within the game itself and enhancing the experience for players in virtual worlds. Using moderators in this way can significantly deepen children's participation in the game and develop a greater attachment and loyalty to the site.

For example, in one of the virtual worlds where eModeration works with in a host capacity, our moderators act as guides to the world. There are more than 50,000 environments for players to discover in this virtual world and our moderators track where players are going and help move them through the game, encouraging them to explore new planets by explaining to them what they will experience there.

In another very popular children's virtual world, eModeration's moderators have acted as in-game characters. For example, they appeared on the site as a leprechaun for St Patrick's Day. The leprechaun would interact with the children and reveal hints in rhyme that would help them land rewards, such as gold coins. Here, the moderator is not only monitoring behaviour, but also adding an extra fun and interactive element to the game. Different moderators would take turns to control the leprechaun, but each adhered to set guidelines to ensure the character was consistent and equal treatment was applied to each child.

Use humour and quirkiness

If you can make children laugh and enjoy themselves, they'll engage with the site, so add as many humorous and quirky elements as possible. For example, make a moderator's character something outside of a child's normal experience, such as an animal that talks in rhyme; and make the character change shape or colour every now and then to sustain interest. Obviously, the character needs to be consistent with the style and tone of the game.

Engage with parents

Essentially, if parents believe the site is safe, they'll have no qualms about encouraging their children to play the game. To help get parents on board, make sure there is a 'guidelines for parents' page clearly visible on the site. Moderation companies will be very willing to help draft appropriate guidelines.

It is very important that parents are encouraged to adopt a balanced approach when it comes to educating their children on the dangers of virtual worlds, and do not unwittingly frighten them before they've even played the game. The golden rule for children to remember is that when online, never share personal information; this way, a child can never be traced.

Moderating the moderators

Human moderators inevitably bring a degree of subjectivity to their work, but it is still important to be as consistent as possible. It's best practise for moderators actions to be logged so that their actions can be assessed for quality assurance and consistency by a team leader.

In being consistent throughout the game, children know where they stand and know that each player is treated fairly. This makes the game a trustworthy site in the eyes of children and parents, and one that is likely to enjoy repeat visits.

Build moderation in to the game

With moderation playing such a pivotal role in these child-centred online communities, and because in such vast domains automated moderation is crucial, moderators and clients should collaborate from the outset of a virtual world's development. This allows clients to test the automated moderation software before it goes live; adding moderation tools after a site has launched is far more resource intensive.

The role of the moderator has evolved. By using experienced and skilled moderators, organisations can not only protect children and reassure parents, but also improve game play and make virtual worlds an even more enriching experience – and increase player loyalty in the process.

About eModeration

Founded in 2002, eModeration Limited is an international, specialist user-generated content moderation company. It provides 24-hour community management and content moderation to clients in the entertainment and digital publishing industry and major corporate clients hosting online communities and consumer-driven projects.

eModeration's CEO and founder, Tamara Littleton, has an established background in editorial quality control, fault escalation and process management gained from previous work as the Product Delivery Director for Chello Broadband and Online Operations Manager for BBC Online, where she managed the world's first ISO 9000-accredited team for digital publishing management and monitored over 400 BBC websites. Tamara Littleton is a member of the Home Office Internet Taskforce for Child Protection on the Internet which brings together government, law enforcement, children's agencies and the internet industry, who are all working to ensure that children can use the internet in safety. She was also the Chair of emint, the online community for community professionals from 2006-2007.

eModeration's team of moderators and staff are the key to eModeration's success and excellent client list. eModeration draws on the expertise of carefully recruited and trained moderators located mainly in the US and Europe with specialist editorial and community moderation skills, which are matched uniquely to the client. The company can moderate 24/7 in more than 30 languages. All its moderators are managed online from eModeration's headquarters in London, United Kingdom.

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