

Surfin's safe for the small set

By Jackie Burrell

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There's no denying that penguins -- those tuxedoed charmers with the happy feet -- are hot these days. But the flippers cinematic stars are just the tip of the iceberg.

While grownups fret over MySpace and Facebook, ClubPenguin.com is taking over playgrounds and computer screens in elementary schools in Walnut Creek, Moraga and around the world.

The Penguin appeal? Besides being engaging and cute, the site is safe, wholesome, commercial-free and predator-free.

In Moraga, for example, 18 out of 23 fourth-graders in Ruth Manlove's Rheem Elementary classroom spend their leisure time swooshing down virtual ski slopes, decorating igloos and chatting with friends on ClubPenguin.com.

Tweens and pre-tweens may not be allowed on teen fave MySpace -- at least not without lying about their age. But they can make their own cozy virtual homes at ClubPenguin and similar sites, such as Neopets, Whyville and Nickelodeon's new virtual world, Nicktropolis -- which are laden with safety features and designed for kids 6-14.

Youth culture expert Anastasia Goodstein calls it a natural outgrowth of younger kids' love of video games and their endless fascination with what teens -- the arbiters of all things cool -- do.

"Parents are desperate for online spaces for kids, especially younger kids, that are safe," says Goodstein, a San Francisco author whose "Totally Wired: What Teens and Tweens are Really Doing Online" hits bookstores next month.

"(Sites) that don't have the whole predator issue around putting their pictures up, having public information up," she says, "and (that are) free of the constant drumbeat of marketing messages."

And sites like Nicktropolis and ClubPenguin also allow kids to explore identity, play games, hang out with friends and polish not just their social skills, but their writing and communication skills in site writing contests and community "newspapers."

"Chatting, creating a character or an avatar," says Goodstein, "all of that taps into creativity and expression and language skills. They are writing. They are thinking about communicating."



After his homework is done, Rheem Elementary fourth-grader Marty Cunnane enjoys chatting with his friends at playing games on ClubPenguin.com.



A big part of ClubPenguin's appeal is that it's safe, wholesome, commercial-free and predator-free.

And Penguin time turns out to be a powerful homework completion motivator all on its own. Rheem elementary fourth-grader Marty Cunnane can visit ClubPenguin as soon as his homework is done. Classmate Madison Browning's mother links computer hours and reading time, tit for tat.

"But I normally read more," the Moraga fourth-grader says, "than I go on the computer."

It's the safety features that appeal to parents.

"That MySpace stuff scares me," says Susan Horning, a Walnut Creek mother of two boys, ages 8 and 10. "(This) is a different world. It's more like little penguins can play little games. I know it's really safe. Part of the reason parents allow their kids to go on is that they have faith that it is monitored."

Real names are never exchanged. A "safe chat" feature means kids converse online using prescribed lines and emoti-cons. Regular chat mode runs through a filtering dictionary and is monitored by ClubPenguin staff. And anyone older than 18 is given a penguin with a cane.

In short, you won't know who's waving at you or inviting you to be their "buddy," unless a real-world friend gives you his penguin name.

Horning's sons aren't allowed to become buddies with anyone they don't know. But they were mystified by the rule, the Walnut Creek mom says, and they fretted they might hurt someone's feelings by saying "no."

It was those concerns -- that children could be approached by dangerous strangers -- that prompted the site to begin with.

"As parents of young children," said co-founder Lane Merrifield, in a prepared statement last fall, "we wanted to incorporate games, safe chat and social interaction in a unique way by creating a fun, online world that we'd be comfortable letting our own kids visit."

Run by British Columbia-based New Horizon Interactive, ClubPenguin has attracted more than 3 million players, largely by word of mouth, in just over a year. Its attention to safety garnered an Online Kid's Privacy Seal of Approval from the Better Business Bureau and applause from parents.

But it's the puffles, games and online events, including last week's Festival of Snow, that grab kids. Marty says he loves talking to friends online. Classmate Josh Sherman dotes on his puffles, Piggy and Throng. The fuzzy, virtual pets are just like dogs, he says, if dogs were red ... and blue ... and round. And Sarah Sweeney enjoys shopping.

"I buy a lot of (penguin) clothing," she says. "Jackets and a lot of winter stuff because it's in the Arctic. Guitars and hula outfits."

"You play the games and you end up getting tokens and coins," says Walnut Creek eighth-grader Jamie Cropper, who let her young baby-sitting clients play after she vetted the game herself. "You can buy (penguin) clothes. It's pretty cute."

A steady stream of new games, accessories and special events helps keep enthusiasm fueled on all these sites, but fourth-graders are a pretty savvy bunch. ClubPenguin is ad-free, the Rheem Elementary kids said, but that's not the case for other sites.

Neopets devotees say they know they're being bombarded by commercial messages -- last week's banner ads touted bankruptcy attorneys. They recognize that the DisneyChannel site and Nicktropolis, with its neon-drenched, SpongeBob appeal, promote TV shows.

And RuneScape, an ad-free adventure fantasy game, is really fun, says Rheem fourth-grader Steven Wescott, "but you can kill things."

ClubPenguin, on the other hand, has neither ads nor weapons and, the kids say, they feel safe.

"This guy was calling me a name," says Juliet Rosso, "so I reported him, and he disappeared."

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PENGUINS & MORE

- ClubPenguin.com -- Aimed at kids 6-14, this animated penguin world won the 2006 Better Business Bureau's Online Kids Privacy Seal of Approval for its safety features, including prescribed chats for young users. Online filters and staff monitor all conversation. A \$6 monthly fee keeps the site ad-free (but you can play with fewer bells and whistles for free, too). Parent's section on the home page.
- Nicktropolis.com -- This new, free Nickelodeon site allows players, 6-14, to create avatars with "NickNames," play games, watch videos or interact with friends and Nickelodeon characters. Default safety feature gives kids prescribed chat phrases. Regular chats run through a filter. Parent's guide is on the neon-hued home page. No ads as yet, unless you count the entire site as an ad for Nickelodeon.
- Habbo.com -- This Finnish online community for teens and tweens has events, games and virtual rooms in which you can decorate with "Habbo furni." There are chat filters and staff monitors, and kids whose parents read the parent and safety guides (link from home page) get a badge. The site has ads, including a series of "Pop-Tart Webisodes."
- Neopets.com -- This Viacom site features virtual pets with a Pokemon feel to them. Members create pets, play games, enter writing contests, shop and add to monitored discussion boards. Banner ads adorn every page, and the parent guide is difficult to find. Click "Help" on the home page, scroll down and click "Neopets FAQ," scroll down again and click "Parental Consent."
- Whyville.net -- An educational social networking site, Whyville gives its players, ages 8-15, a chance to run for the Whyville Senate, tour museums, write for the site newspaper, earn "clams" by playing educational games and design their own car -- a Scion. That's because Toyota sponsors the site.
- Runescape.com -- This fantasy adventure game features strange creatures, logic puzzles, riddles and challenging "quests." The game is free, but membership (\$5-\$8/per month) gives players more access. A chat filter monitors language. Parent and safety guides are linked to the home page, and the company encourages parents to play, too.

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