

Girls just want to have fun - on computers

By BETSY HART

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It's been a long two-week Christmas break. Fun. But long. I'm ready for the brood to head back to school.

On the other hand, it's always fun to get to know my kids and their friends a little bit better over the holidays.

One of the things I've finally figured out is that the video game industry has finally figured out that maybe "girls just wanna have fun," in the famous words of singer Cyndi Lauper.

My 12-year-old son has long loved video games. Duh. Yes, I limit his time on the computer or in front of the TV with the games, encourage him to play primarily with friends and all that jazz. Important jazz to be sure. But he and all of his contemporaries love the intense, mind racing, competitive games and, from what I understand, will continue to love and play them until their wives or girlfriends try to get them to stop. (Good luck.)

Anyway, my three girls have _ dare I say "of course" _ never been much interested in those things. I always laugh when I hear parents of daughters only pronounce that they don't understand why some parents allow their children (meaning sons) to get so caught up in the games and they simply wouldn't let (ital) their (end ital) boys, if they had any, become so interested in gaming. Um yeah. Right.

Anyway this summer my older two girls, 7 and 10, actually started getting interested _ really interested _ in a computer site on which they built their own virtual pet. But that paled in comparison to their discovery this fall of a "game" site called Club Penguin. For the first time in our family's history, I am having to both police and limit my girls' time on the computer, too.

More than ever that new dynamic was evident over Christmas break.

I had observed them on the site for some time, but I still didn't "get" what it was that so drew the girls. Okay, I'm a little slow. I finally asked them what was different about this game site that they liked so much. "Mom" my 10-year-old answered, "it's not like one of those games where you have to compete and you get all upset. On this one we get to do things, and talk to our friends, and build our houses and have parties."

Shazaam.

Club Penguin is a site featuring a North Pole kind of world where kids have the alter ego of a penguin and talk to their friends in real time _ kids they know, via code names they exchange at school. They can plan to meet at the "pizza parlor" then go to someone's house _ or igloo. Best of all they get to build and even decorate their igloos (There was an on-line contest for the best "home" decorated for Christmas.) They can invite each other to virtual parties. They can play some games, but while those are fun the goal is apparently to win "coins" that they can then spend on things like clothes.

While some young boys do play, by all accounts the site is dominated by girls. And it's wildly popular. The Wall Street Journal reported this week that it's largely in response to the interactive nature of the Club Penguin site, and the young kids flocking to it, that Disney is completely

revamping it's own on-line offerings to soon become an interactive, community oriented site for the younger set.

All this is in contrast to the gaming industry investing heavily for years to try to somehow get girls interested in traditional, i.e. boy-style gaming, with so little to show for it.

So, decades of feminist preaching and social engineering aside, girls and boys are still different. Who knew?

Well I actually think girls want a lot more than to just have fun. So really, the great thing about Club Penguin, and later interactive, community oriented sites for older kids like My Space (yes, with all of its attendant risks) is that it does help interest and teach girls those computer tech skills they'll have to have to flourish in the 21st century.

They may just get there in a little different way than the boys do.

This is one mom who thinks that's just fine. I also really like the idea of all those girl-only parents having to squirm when their daughters start asking for more and more computer game time.

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