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Neopets the chosen one for a whole matrix of kids

By Graeme Philipson
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I was sitting in an airport lounge recently downloading some email. Two children walked by with their father. As soon as they saw the internet terminals, they screamed out: "Dad, Dad, can we play Neopets?"

They scrambled to the computers, logged on to what is now the world's fourth-most popular website and immersed themselves in the virtual world of Neopets.

I was not surprised - the same thing happens in our house every night and in millions of homes around the world.

In a world where the internet has created thousands of virtual communities, where it has become the preferred medium for mailing, banking, dating, researching, gambling, investing and all the rest of it, Neopets stands out for the sheer size and complexity of the world it has created, and for the numbers of its users.

Neopets is a virtual pets site where you can keep electronic pets and nurture them, train them and feed them. But there is much more to it than that. In Neopia there are shops, games, chat rooms, schools, newsletters, even a stockmarket.

You may remember the Tamagotchi virtual pet craze of the mid-1990s. This is a thousand times bigger. More than 70 million people around the world - 80 per cent of them children - have Neopets. The site gets more hits than any other in the world, except eBay, Yahoo! and Google.

We have a 12-year-old girl and a 10-year-old boy. They are each on the Neopets website an average of two hours a day and would be on for longer if they could be.

Rosalie (Neopet moniker mycat369) keeps four Neopets - a white Grundo, a yellow Aisha, a blue Uni, and a purple Kougra. Konrad (coolkid131111) keeps just two - a rainbow Quiggle and a white Grundo.

There are 46 different kinds of pet, some of which can only be acquired with great difficulty or with the expenditure of copious amounts of Neopoints.

There are many ways to earn these. One of the most popular is by winning games, of which there are more than 100, divided into puzzles, action games, and games of luck and chance. You can also speculate on virtual Neopian stocks or trade the many toys and other objects that circulate in the virtual world of Neopia.

It is not an easy life. Neglect your pet and it will wither or even die. A Monocerous may sap your pet's health. Forget to bank your money and it may be stolen. Even once it's safely in a Neobank, the tax beast may appropriate it, seemingly at whim.

Various heroes and villains float around Neopia and the other Tolkien-like netherworlds of Neoworld. Dr Frank Sloth and his evil minions are out to get you. Join forces with King Skarl of Meridell or the evil Lord Kass and fight it out in the Battledome.

Mycat369 and coolkid131111 have been on Neopets for more than a year now. Neopia seems almost as real to them as the normal world that you and I inhabit. Indeed, reality often seems to come a poor second. But otherwise they would probably be watching TV.

Neopets is free. But, like many free sites, it is not a charity. Founded in 1999 by two British university students, it is now a hard-headed business run out of Glendale, California. It makes its money from product placements on its site.

There is a close tie-in with Disney and a few other websites and when you buy things in Neopian shops they often have real-life brand names.

The site's success has spawned many imitators, such as PowerPets, Cyberpets and the gloriously named Virtual Dog.

However, mycat369 and coolkid13111 reckon these others are "pretty crappy". And none of them have anything like Neopets' following.

There are also hundreds of fan sites, cheat sites and unofficial sites. There is a site devoted to poems about Neopets. There is a magazine, there are toys, there is even talk of a movie.

Neopets has attracted its share of criticism. The most common is that it is indoctrinating children into consumerism and American-style capitalism. Another charge often levelled at Neopets is that it is homophobic.

It is certainly apple-pie wholesome, and any attempts at profanity or stalking or anything vaguely sexual in its chat rooms is totally forbidden and impossible in any case because of the constant monitoring. Children must have parental approval (signed and faxed or posted back to Neopets) before they can use the site.

Any inappropriate behaviour and you are "frozen". Internet chat rooms are full of former Neopets users complaining about being frozen for the slightest indiscretions, including indulging in certain same-sex role-playing games.

Neopets plays its cards extremely close to its chest. Its directors rarely give interviews and for such a popular site there is little published about its activities. Its financial affairs are a closely guarded secret and, unusually, it does not have any press information on its site. You can request a press kit, which it claims will be sent within 24 hours but mine never came. I guess they really are teaching us the American way.

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