



Step Diet

Home

NEWS SECTIONS

Breaking news

State

National

Election 2004

World

Sport

Football

Business

The Eye

Entertainment

Technology

Health/Science

Multimedia

Learn



OPINION

Editorial

Andrew Bolt

Terry McCrann

COFFEE BREAK

Daily horoscopes

That's Life

Trivia Quiz

CLASSIFIEDS

General

CareerOne

Tenders

Announcements

Cars Guide

Personals

Land estates

New homes

Travel

Place an ad



# Herald Sun

## NATIONAL

[back](#)

[▶ PRINT-FRIENDLY VERSION](#)

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### Not McHappy with blackjack for kids

Danny Buttler  
13oct04

CHILDREN are being lured to play computer casino games including blackjack, lotteries and poker machines on a website linked to fast-food giant McDonald's.

Neopets, part of a cross-promotion with McDonald's Australia, is an online activity in which about 25 million children worldwide have created and raised their own virtual pets.

The Herald Sun this week registered in the under-8s section of the website and gained access to a games room in which children could also gamble on roulette, keno, scratchie tickets and poker.

Points won in the games are used to buy food for pets, but losers may need to visit an online soup kitchen to keep their virtual friends from starving.

Cuddly characters like Brucey B explain how many lines of pokies to play. JubJub's Blackjack shows how to double bets and how the dealer "sits" on 16.

And if you "fancy trying your luck at winning a fortune . . . the scratchcard kiosk could mean that today is your lucky day".

Visitors to the Neopian Lottery site are urged to get involved, with messages such as: "You don't have any tickets yet . . . why not buy one?"

The US-based site has provoked outrage from Victoria's gambling watchdogs, who fear it could lure children into real gambling.

McDonald's has been urged to drop its Neopets promotion, which suggests children to visit the Neopets website to "play some cool games".

Mark Zirnsak, of the Interchurch Gambling Taskforce, said if gambling activities were not removed from the site, McDonald's should abandon the Neopets deal.



Hard to digest: A Neopet.

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SUNDAY  
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[Weddings](#)

"In that case, McDonald's should definitely rethink the risk of exposing children to these types of gambling activities," Mr Zirnsak said.

"(The website is) luring young people into gambling without . . . appropriate education and appropriate safeguards."

But McDonald's, which is giving away a Neopet toy with children's meals, said it did not endorse any forms of gambling and denied it was encouraging its customers to become involved in betting activities.

A spokeswoman said McDonald's investigated the website and felt it did not support gambling.

"There's a number of games you can play on that website. It's an interactive website, it's not a reality game," she said.

The spokeswoman said McDonald's was not responsible for the content of the Neopets website.

"Our partnership with Neopets is about collecting the plush toys.

"With regards to the website and what's on that, that was developed independently from McDonald's Australia."

Neopets executive vice-president Stephanie Jost-Cameron said the "luck-chance" games comprised a tiny portion of the site and were not aimed at younger children.

Ms Jost-Cameron said the online experience could teach children the consequences of gambling without actually losing real money.

But Communities Acting on Pokies Problems convenor Mike Hill said the website made light of a serious issue.

"These games are quite clearly an encouragement to young people to experiment with dangerous forms of gambling," he said.

"It's turning the issue of potentially losing your livelihood or next meal into some sort of game."

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- ▶ [Bali pin still cuts deep](#)
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- ▶ [Labor keeps grip on marginal seats](#)
- ▶ [Soldiers guinea pigs for drug](#)
- ▶ [Vaccine will step on tonsillitis](#)
- ▶ [Weed found behind false walls](#)
- ▶ [Cash for lawyers and spin-doctors](#)
- ▶ [Not McHappy with blackjack for kids](#)
- ▶ [Aussie and Chinese navies join forces](#)
- ▶ [Poll claims Faulkner](#)
- ▶ [One more bridge to mend for Latham](#)

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