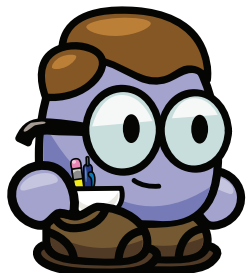
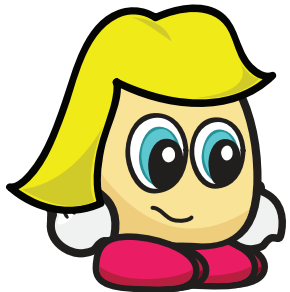


Welcome to My WORLD

How one parent developed a virtual world for children that is age-appropriate, educational, and fun.
by Ellen Ullman



When Scott Dow set out to create a virtual world for children, he wanted to benefit both the children and the future of our society.

Dow is chief executive officer of Children’s Way, a project of the Family Home Foundation, a nonprofit corporation based in Provo, Utah. Through the Children’s Way Foundation/Woogi World Program, Dow envisioned a safe and engaging website to help elementary-age children worldwide become responsible Internet users as well as better citizens at home, at school, and in their community.

“As the father of five children, I saw the power of the Internet to be a great motivator,” says Dow, who began developing the site in 2006. “I wanted to use the Internet as a tool for learning—for kids to explore hobbies, do community work, and help others. I thought it was important for kids to spend time on this sort of stuff early in their Internet careers.”

When Woogi World first came online in 2007, 21 schools were testing it out. As word spread and more parents learned of it, 160 districts signed on and 300 schools became active users. Today, thanks to some recent partnerships, one or more classes at 50,000 schools use the site.

Why is everyone eager to use Woogi World? Because it is one of a kind. In fact, it is different from other children’s social-networking sites in three distinct ways: its employees, its activities, and its rewards system.

Who Works at Woogi World?

When kids join the community, they start by adopting and naming an avatar known as a Woogi, who lives on the Planet Woog. Before they receive any privileges for play, however, kids participate in basic Internet training. In this way, they learn what is expected of them and how to be good cybercitizens. “Once they agree to follow the rules of our community, they get chatting privileges,” says Dow.

And once kids start chatting, adult and young adult Online Kid Coaches (OKCs) monitor all interaction and activity to enforce the site’s rules and to step in when anyone misbehaves.

Even so, some kids figure out how to get around the rules. Dow’s development team, however, anticipated that possibility and put a reporting process in place that kids learn about during their Internet training.

“Woogies are responsible for their own behavior as well as



In Woogi World, children adopt avatars and use them to play games, do activities, and interact with other kids in a safe, controlled environment.

for the rest of the kids on the site. So if they see someone misbehaving or mistreating another Woogi, they are encouraged to report that incident,” says Dow. The call center also is monitored by the OKCs, who view reports, see chat logs, evaluate incidents, and keep parents informed of their children’s activities on the site.

If there is a problem, a child may be banned from Woogi World for an hour, a day, or permanently. The next time he logs in, he is informed of what rule he broke and is asked to write an apology that states how he will correct his behavior. An OKC reviews the apology and decides how to proceed: let the child back on the site and/or watch and coach him.

“So far, we’ve had great luck with this method,” says Dow. “Kids who are trying to cause trouble have realized their behavior is not acceptable and decide to behave properly.”

Dow adds that the process can be illuminating for parents too. Many who contact him to ask why their child has been barred from the site say they don’t believe their children would behave inappropriately online. Typically, Dow says, his coaches respond, share the chat log, and then let the parents handle the situation further.

What Do Kids Do There?

By far, the most obvious difference between Woogi World and other websites of its kind is that Woogi World promotes a balance between online and offline activities for its young

audience. While most other sites do everything to keep users online, Woogi World actually encourages kids to spend productive time away from the computer.

On the site, children play games and participate in activities and adventures that promote positive behavior and character development. They learn about art, science, music, and writing; interact with new friends in the safe Planet Woog environment; play games with parents; write in their journals; and create art and music to put in their private galleries. Along the way, kids learn to protect themselves from the Internet's dangers.

Woogies also learn about getting involved in charitable causes, how to eat healthfully, and how to be good cybercitizens. Woogies are encouraged to complete such offline activities as helping adults cook, reading books to siblings, assisting friends with their homework, or mowing a neighbor's lawn. They also are encouraged to practice their musical instruments, do good deeds daily, or share their talents at a local senior-care facility.

Appropriate Rewards

Many virtual-world websites encourage kids to earn points through activities and then spend them on prizes and possessions, thus reinforcing our consumer-oriented culture. Woogi World rewards children for doing their homework, practicing piano, or providing community service.

"We took into account not just what kids were doing on the surface but what habits they were picking up while they did it," says Dow. "The site uses reward mechanisms, but focuses on producing a real world for the kids. By doing good things—homework, hanging out with your family—kids receive benefits. We've added social value and meaning to a kid doing good things."

Dow says his staff has learned how to motivate kids to get off the computer, do something good, and then come back and report and receive a reward, recognition, or benefit. For example, because many schools have downsized or ended their music programs, Woogi World started a music club and brought in violinist Ben Chan (an online music teacher and member of the YouTube Symphony Orchestra) to serve as its guru. Chan built a club with videos, curricula, games, and activities to help kids learn about, get excited about, and enjoy music. He also included a practice log so that kids would practice their instruments without complaining. To progress up to different levels in the club, kids have to practice 30 minutes a day. Once they do, they come back, log their minutes, and answer some questions to verify their truthfulness.

A World of Partnerships

Dow has partnered with a variety of organizations to promote the site and spread the message of safe, responsible Internet usage for children. Some of the site's many partners are iKeepSafe, National Exchange Club, Utah PTA, and Habitat For Humanity.

One of the site's curriculum partners is Studies Weekly, a standards-based curriculum for teachers. Each student gets a weekly newspaper that includes a comic strip on the back page that sets up a situation with some of the Woogi characters. The strip leads students to an activity or game on the site that supports a lesson they are working on. "It's the first-ever integration of traditional classroom curricula and a kid's virtual world," says Dow.

In April, Woogi World launched the Billion Reading Minute Challenge in conjunction with the national Drop Everything and Read Program. From April 12 through the end of the summer, kids are being encouraged to join the Woogi Readers Club and log the books they read. Dow hopes to reach a billion minutes of reading.

Still another partner is The Foundation for a Better Life. It provides commercials that play on Woogi World about honesty, service, friendship, and other values. Kids get rewarded for watching the videos.

Understanding Media Literacy

Dow's latest mission is to help Woogies learn about media literacy. The newest content partner, iKeepSafe, is creating adventures with media-literacy components embedded into them. As kids work through each adventure, they will be asked questions to help them evaluate the activities more closely so they can understand what they are experiencing. Each episode also will have an offline component, such as watching a show and coming back online to share what they found with other Woogies.

"Woogi World is all about helping set good patterns and expectations," says Dow. "We want to help parents know their kids can be trained and can learn to use online environments."

So far, Dow is pleased with the site's progress, but knows it is continually expanding and evolving. "We have a product that will not only attract and motivate a young elementary school student to use the Internet for good, but we also have a site where a parent, educator, or lawmaker can say, 'That's a good place for kids to spend time on the Internet.'" ❖

Ellen Ullman is senior editor of Cable in the Classroom Magazine.

TIPS FOR EVALUATING WEBSITE SAFETY

Cable in the Classroom Magazine asked Woogi World staffers Alice Osborne and Patty Liston to note what parents should look for to confirm if a website is appropriate for their children.

BALANCE: The site should encourage children to get offline to apply what they've learned online, helping to keep the balance between the virtual and real worlds.

SUPERVISION: Site staff should monitor chats and keep everything copasetic.

SMART CONTENT: There should be worthwhile activities that build on academics, hobbies, community service, and family connectivity.

AD-FREE: There should be no commercialism, exploitation, or enticement to buy products. In fact, the focus should be on producing and creating—not on consuming.

KID-FOCUSED: There should be age-appropriate activities, games, language, and site goals.

RELATED RESOURCES

The Foundation for a Better Life
www.values.com

iKeepSafe
www.ikeepsafe.org

Studies Weekly
www.studiesweekly.com

Woogi World
www.woogeworld.com