

Is virtual playtime over?

After a surge last year in the arrival - and an increase in popularity - of a number of virtual online worlds, **Lutz Muller** takes a look at how the trend is progressing...

EVEN THOUGH there are any number of virtual playgrounds out there, and a lot that have arrived only this year, there are really only five that matter at this point.

These are Neopets.com, Clubpenguin.com, Webkinz.com, Barbiegirls.com and ShiningStars.com. Since all five are totally Internet driven, I will assess their performance accordingly.

“Virtual playgrounds are not growing in terms of traffic or interest.”

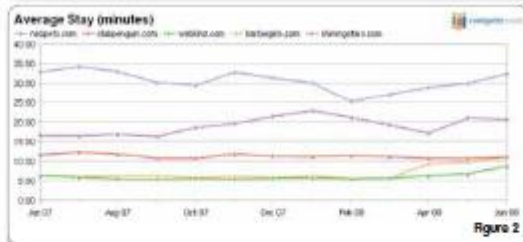
Interest by non-users

The first metric of interest is that of people trying to find the site - they are not yet users or they would know the accurate domain name. Google has recorded searches for the top three brands over the past 12 months.

First, in the US, where Webkinz's vast dominance is slowly eroding, but the other contenders are not growing either. In the UK, Club Penguin is dominating but stagnating, while the other four are not doing any better. And, finally in Germany, where Neopets dominates, but again is eroding, followed by Barbiegirls with the same trend.

Web traffic

The next metric demonstrates what is happening on the websites themselves (figure 1). In terms of how many individual visitors are calling on the sites of these five playgrounds, here again the picture that presents itself is one of stagnation and decline, with the trend particularly sharp for Neopets. However, visits are one



thing, what people do when they are on the site is another (figure 2). The three websites that show growing improvement are Neopets, Barbiegirls and Webkinz. However, in the case of the latter two we are looking at ten minutes or less average stay versus about 37 minutes for Neopets.

Yet, I would not derive too much consolation from this if I were Neopets - firstly, the involvement is still lower than it was a year ago, and secondly, the precipitous drop in web traffic itself would really worry me.

Blog metrics

These basically measure the incidence in which a product is

publicity engendered by a class action suit initiated by one of its retailers. Not much is happening with Neopets, while Shining Stars and Barbiegirls are both on a slightly lower level than they were a year ago.

Conclusions

On the basis of all these metrics, I must conclude that virtual playgrounds are no longer growing, either in terms of traffic or in terms of interest. That is at least anecdotally supported by the reports received from retailers that Webkinz sales have slowed down fairly significantly. Also, to judge from their most recent quarterly report, the same seems to have happened to Shining Stars from Russ Berrie.

Lutz Muller is a Swiss who has lived on five continents. In the US, he was the CEO for four manufacturing companies, including two in the toy industry. Since 2002, he has provided competitive intelligence on the toy and video games market to manufacturers and financial institutions coast-to-coast.
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discussed on the web. This can demonstrate both positives (increased interest) as well as negatives (criticism). A recall would, for instance, engender the latter.

Club Penguin seems to be mildly positive, but again it is now on the same level as it was a year ago. Webkinz is up, but this may have something to do with negative

