

BUYER'S **guide**

Multi-user virtual environments, also known as virtual worlds, have become mainstream. Mattel's Barbie Girls surpassed three million registered users in its first 60 days after launching in July 2007 and is growing at the rate of 50,000 new users a day, according to a report from *Scientific American*. To put that in perspective, Second Life took three years to get to a million registered users. In August, the Walt Disney Company purchased New Horizon Interactive's popular Club Penguin site for \$700 million. The Virtual Worlds Conference and Expo in San Jose, California, in October boasted 35 virtual world publishers.

Most virtual worlds share basic traits in common. Users create a customized avatar, a representation of themselves in the virtual environment. "In world," they can chat with other users through instant-message style texting or, in some worlds, voice over Internet protocol. Users can take part in various activities and obtain accessories and other items (including homes and furnishings!) with in-world currency, which they acquire either

through participation, through winning games or contests, or through purchasing from the world's publisher. Some worlds allow users to create, develop, and sell items within the world.

In addition to worlds such as Whyville and Quest Atlantis created specifically for educational purposes, educators are colonizing existing virtual world platforms as a means to extend and enhance teaching. Many educational institutions, including ISTE, run virtual classrooms and discussion and workshop forums in Second Life. Active Worlds, Inc. created Active Worlds EDU specifically for educators.

Interaction with various types of people and experimentation with different identities and social groups is a formative part of adolescence, and new worlds are launched on a regular basis. The list at right is merely representative; each world outlined is worth hours of exploration. As online social networking becomes more commonplace and sophisticated, virtual worlds will become a rite of passage for students, and a necessary tool for educators.

Virtual Worlds

	Publisher	Target Age Range
Active Worlds EDU http://www.activeworlds.com/edu/	Active Worlds	Educators
BarbieGirls http://www.barbiegirls.com	Mattel	Girls 6–16
Club Penguin http://www.clubpenguin.com	New Horizons Interactive/Disney	6–14
Gaia http://www.gaiaonline.com	Gaia Interactive	Teens
Habbo Hotel http://www.habbo.com	Sulake	11+
Quest Atlantis http://www.questatlantis.org	Center for Research on Learning & Technology, Indiana University	9–12
Teen Second Life http://www.secondlife.com	Linden Labs	13–17
There http://www.there.com	Makena Technologies	13+
Toontown Online http://www.toontown.com	Disney	7+
Whyville http://www.whyville.com	Numedeon	8–15

Cost/Membership Types	Media	In-World Activities	Control and Safety Features	Number of Users	Developers Tools	Platform
Free basic account \$650/year for 20 student licenses See AW Web site for complete details	Download	Chat, games, shopping, virtual construction	Code of conduct in public areas	Unknown (1,000+ worlds)	Software Development Kit	Windows 98, Me, 2000, or XP
Free basic account	CD, MP3 player	Chat, accessorizing Mattel marketing throughout	Language filter	3 million	No	Windows XP or Vista
Free basic account Subscription plans starting at \$5.95/month	Web-based	Chat, games	Language filter, in-world moderators	5 million/month	No	Flash 6-enabled browser
Free basic account Extras require Gaia Gold	Web-based	Chat, forums, games, auctions	Optional language filter, in-world moderators	2 million/month	No	Java-enabled browser
Free basic account Extras require Habbo Coins	Web-based	Chat, games	Language filter, in-world moderators	7 million/month	No	Shockwave-enabled browser
Memberships restricted to teachers and other facilitators. See QA Web site for complete details.	Download	Quests	Access restricted to authorized users Communication is recorded	Unknown	Teacher Toolkit and professional development workshops	Windows XP
Free basic account Additional basic or premium accounts starting at \$9.95/month Extras require Linden dollars	Download	Chat, games, virtual construction Campus:TSL Public and private educational projects	Age verification, community standards, in-world moderators	Unknown	Yes	Windows XP sp2, Mac OS X 10.3.9+, Linux i666
Free basic account Extras require Therebucks	Download	Chat, games, auctions	Customizable profanity filter, "PG-13" content standards	Unknown	Yes	Windows 2000, XP, Vista
Free basic account Subscription plans starting at \$9.95/month	Web-based	Chat, playgrounds, teamwork against Cogs	Predefined chat phrases, profanity filter, parental controls menu	1.2 million	No	Windows 98, ME, 2000, or XP with Internet Explorer v. 5.1+ Mac OS X 10.4.6 (Tiger) with Safari Browser
Free basic account Extras require Clams	Web-based	Educational quests and games	Language filter	2.27 million/month	No	Flash-enabled browser