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Today's toys lead kids to Web play

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Children have long imagined that their toys come to life when they're asleep or at school, just like in the movie *Toy Story*, but now their playthings really are living secret lives online.

Stuffed animals are meeting friends at the arcade. Barbie is out shopping, and Polly Pocket is getting a rock-star makeover.

The newest trend in toys is for stuffed animals, dolls and even trading cards to have accompanying Web sites, says Mark Randall, vice president of toys and baby for Amazon.com.

It started in 2005 with the wildly popular Ganz's Webkinz, a line of stuffed animals that come with a special code on their tags that admits kids to the virtual "Webkinz World." Kids adopt a virtual version of their stuffed animal and care for it online, buying it clothes, food and decorating its room.

With more than \$45 million in retail sales in 2006, the success of Webkinz inspired knockoffs, such as Russ' Shining Stars, and sparked a toy-related Web site craze.

"The toy industry," Randall says, "is kind of being attacked by many different angles," losing children at a younger age to electronic gadgets, video games and online games. The industry has responded by modernizing traditional toys with high-tech double lives, hoping to hold onto kid customers longer.

The toys offer the best of both worlds, Randall says: a huggable, playable real-life toy and a virtual plaything online.

"It has a lot of potential as long as the content is meaningful, and that will be driven by consumer demand," says Alisa Clyne, a Tempe mom of three.

Her 8-year-old daughter, Lily, loves horses and collects Bella Sara trading cards. Kids can go online to name, care for and feed a horse, play games and read stories about horses. Lily's online horse is named Peter.

"These are cool," Lily says, holding up a trading card of a horse named Cupid and [reading](#) off the front, "Your heart is free. Have the courage to follow it."

Web sites connect children to a community of people and products - books, movies, fan fiction, toys - of similar interests, says Jim Gee, an education professor at Arizona State University who [studies](#) video games and learning.

"This is typical of kids today that they do stuff across multiple platforms," he says. "As to the question of whether it is good, bad or indifferent, it depends on what you do with it."

Like anything else, moderation is key. Many Web sites offer real learning opportunities for children, Gee says. Although today's kids may not read as many novels as previous generations, they are reading much more online, sometimes highly technical language.

Studies show that game play detracts from the time children spend in front of the [television](#), not from playing outside or reading, Gee says. Online, kids are using critical-thinking skills to navigate virtual worlds.

Clyne is less than enthusiastic about some sites aimed at girls, which mostly involve fashion and shopping. When her sons, Ruston, 8, (he's Lily's twin) and Otis, 10, play online, they go on quests for magical gems and other adventures.

"For girls, it's like, 'Eek! Pick out my outfit! Decorate my room! What shoes go with that bag?'" Clyne bemoans.

Her kids spend just a small fraction of their playtime on the computer, so Clyne is not worried about tech toys pushing aside skateboards, bouncy balls and board games.

Amazon.com's Randall, a father of three, agrees: "The toy industry is catching up to the environment we're living in," he says, though traditional toys such as dolls, building sets and board games still sell well. Kids' wish lists on amazon.com include a mix of toys, both traditional and high-tech, he says.