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Historical/Critical Methodology—Com701MAT

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Training junior capitalists: Neopets makes consumerism child's play  
In theory, Neopets is supposed to teach kids a sense of community and personal responsibility. But in practice, it's a playground for the junior capitalist.

--Pamela Tam, The Ottawa Citizen

### Introduction

With an ever-growing audience of more than 30 million users, the phenomenally successful Neopets Website warrants a closer examination. While the online games may not contain graphic violence, sex or offensive language, game content includes potentially exploitive interactive advertising that children do not have the sophistication to distinguish commercial from non-commercial portions of the Website. This type of advertising is unregulated by the federal or self-regulatory agencies and needs to be explored closely for its impact on unsuspecting children who may lack the cognitive development to identify and process the persuasive messages. Parents and educators, who have not taken the opportunity to fully explore the site and its overt and covert messages, need to be aware of the potential implications and take appropriate steps to shield or prepare children for exposure to this rhetoric.

Neopets receives scant attention in academic circles. The current research on the site deals primarily with user opinions (Chu 1-195; Shade and Grimes 1-24; Valkenburg and Soeters 652-675), quantitative analysis of time spent on the site (stickiness) (Danahaer, Mullarkey and Skander 1-16; Lealand and Zanker 1-23), analysis of learning opportunities presented by Neopets (Hobbs; Sky-McIlvain 3) and impact of immersive advertising on users (Chung and Grimes 1-10; Mastronardi 83-93; Seiter 123). Most criticism of the site surrounds Neopets' use of immersive advertising.

The addictiveness of Neopets Website provides ample time, essentially the equivalent of one school day per month, for the site to provide educational opportunities for users. But what lessons are

communicated? The symbolic messages expressed through the online content carry as much or more weight than the advertising messages about which previous research focused. Because this site is primarily aimed at children and youth under age 18, the values expressed either explicitly or implicitly by the site have the potential to influence users' ideologies.

Neopets functions as a training ground for future consumers and capitalists. Neopets supports the hegemonic consumption culture that is rampant in American society (Firat and Dholakia 194) and builds a strong consumer base for the advertisers who support the site. This sets up a relentless cycle of consumption messaging in which both desire and the means of satisfaction are simultaneously created and reinforced.

Given the lack of critical analysis, parents and educators have little information or understanding about the value messages and virtual culture expressed daily by Neopets. With a worldwide influence on millions of children and teens, it seems prudent to closely examine the virtual world of Neopia and critically assess its ties to the

American culture from which it emanates. In this review, the explanatory schema of consumerism, capitalism and social class structure will be employed.

### Background

Neopia is land of Lupes, Kougras, Kacheeks and Meercas. It boasts destinations such as Faerieland, Meridell, Mystery Island, the Haunted Woods and the Lost Desert (see fig. 1). If you haven't



Figure 1  
Screenshot of Neopets main navigation page.  
( Neopets "Press Kit")

visited this virtual world located at [www.neopets.com](http://www.neopets.com) you are quickly becoming the minority. The Website's press kit, states the site has over 30 million users worldwide with 120 million registered accounts. With 7 billion page views per month, Neopets is the ninth most visited site on the Internet based on a company-sponsored study by Media Matrix (Aug. 2005). NeoPets, Inc. estimates that 39 percent of its users are under 13-years-old with 40 percent 13-17-years-old and the remaining 21 percent are adult users. The free Website attracts slightly more females than males with 57 percent female users.

Two British students, Adam Powell and Donna Williams, created the site in 1999. It was originally targeted at college-aged students, and the twosome simply hoped to make some extra money with banner ads. The site quickly became popular and caught the attention of American market researcher Doug Dohring who purchased the company in 2000. The company turned its first profit just three months

Kacheek



Figure 2

This is a "Kacheek" and typifies the virtual pets available on Neopets.

( Neopets "Press Kit")

after Dohring took over management. Powell and Williams still continue to produce content for the Website, but do not participate in the overall management of the company (NeoPets "FAQs"). Neopets, Inc. was sold in June 2005 for \$160 million to MTV Networks, Inc., which is a subsidiary of Viacom, Inc., which also owns Nickelodeon, another successful children's media company. Following the purchase, Dohring still continues in his role as CEO (Oser and Klaassen 52).

To play the site, users must create or adopt at least one of 50 different virtual pet species (see fig. 2). These pets are cartoon adaptations of real animals and carry fantasy names such as Aisha, Kacheek, Lupe, Usul and Kougra. Neopets have a wide appeal with drawings that range from adorable and cuddly to ferocious and aggressive. Users may "own" up to four pets at any one time. Neopets are similar to their Tamagotchi predecessors, in that users must feed, play, and care for their virtual Neopets. Unlike Tamagotchi's, Neopets can't die; however, they do "starve" and become ill if neglected. This encourages users to continually visit the site to maintain their virtual pets (Seiter 88).

The user then plays the site with these pets and can visit the 10 continents in the World of Neopia. In each of these fantasylands there are 63 virtual shops (Neopets, 2005a) where players may purchase a variety of virtual goods for their pets or to restock in their own online “stores.” The site features over 200 games, many of which are based on popular arcade games. In interviews with users, the site’s games are one of the major draws for return visits.

Users earn Neopoints, the currency of this virtual world, for points scored in games. Game play is limited, with users allowed only three plays of each game per day. This forces users to visit more areas of the Website. Neopoints can also be earned by completing quests, winning games of chance, collecting bank interest, trading virtual stocks on the Neodaq, selling, trading or auctioning virtual items, collecting donations at the Money Tree and through random events generated by the site. These points are then used to buy virtual items, to train or advance pet’s abilities, play games of chance, buy and build a Neohome or to invest or save and thus earn additional Neopoints.

The site is constantly updated with new games, worlds and pets being added regularly. The variety and freshness of the site, along with the need to care for pets, entices users to make repeat visits. The Web site is considered one of the “stickiest” sites on the Internet. Marketers use the term “sticky” in reference to the amount of time spent on any given Website (Danahaer, Mullarkey and Skander 1-16). The longer a user is on a Web site, the more opportunity that user will have to view advertising. Nielsen Net-ratings ranked the site fourth among U.S. users with about four hours spent per person per month on the site (Wingfield B1-B5). Another ratings service, Media Matrix, estimates that the average time spent per person per month is 6 hours and 42 minutes. Compare Neopets’ number two ranking to the 30 minutes spent by users on Google and the one hour, 48 minutes spent monthly on eBay, or the 3 hours and 47 spent by third ranked Yahoo and the “stickiness” of the site becomes evident (NeoPets Ratings).

On initial examination, the pixie pixeled Neopets and their relatively utopian online world seem like a safe online haven for children. The site is strictly monitored by Neopets, Inc. for potentially offensive content and language. In accordance with the federal 1998 Children’s Online Privacy Act

(COPA), which requires commercial Websites aimed at children to notify parents and obtain permission before collecting information from children, Neopets requires users under age 13 to have parental consent before accessing the site (Federal Trade Commission). Of course, children can falsify their birth dates and circumscribe this regulation, but it potentially increases parental awareness and involvement in children's participation on the site. Religious and political user-generated Web pages are banned to protect children from offensive user-created Webpages known as Guilds. A number of Wiccan guilds proliferated prior to the ban which raised concern from parents about guild content. The ban resulted from this outcry. Parental controls are available to limit users access to the asynchronous chat boards and Neomail system.

#### The hegemony of consumerism

If you've ever experienced the Christmas season with children, you can appreciate the level of consumerism ingrained at an early age in our children. With mega-dollar wish lists, children parrot the materialism cherished by American culture. Having more is equated with happiness and the hegemony of consumption makes the stash of consumer goods an inalienable right spawned by the free market capitalism that Americans hold dear.

There is ample support that the American culture is one focused on consumption. Firat and Dholakia rightly claim that the U.S. culture is "consumed with consuming"(2). Bauman asserts that individuals in our society progress from citizen to consumer by creating their identities not through self-exploration, but by consuming pre-packaged identities. Individuals find identity through their possessions and thus consumption becomes essential our concept of self (18-36). Media's role in creating a commodity culture, in Baudrillard's view, is one of constructing individual desires for goods. Media serves to create the desire rather than actual needs for goods thus stimulating consumption. This ongoing separation of the referent from the symbol while create a perceived need for the referent in the individual is a hallmark of our consumption culture (Baudrillard, Simulations 69)

McLuhan compares how a bomber pilot is totally detached from the disruption and rearrangement of lives, families, and businesses caused by the bombs below with the separation between creators of

technologies and the awareness of how their inventions are the impetus for social, cultural, political, and economic changes. Limited attention is given to the ethical issues, side effects, and associated transformations that accompany new media technologies, such as the Internet, until society is faced with unintended results (McLuhan, Essential 376). Website creators likely do not intentionally expound the virtues of consumerism through their programming. Rather as members of a consumption society that embraces materialism as a God-given right, it is simply the essence of their worldview that becomes expressed in the created virtual reality. Like the pilot, Website developers do not come face-to-face with their targets and thus do not see the disruption, heartache and emptiness of children and youth whose identities are tied to possession and consumption or as Bourdieu labels this pursuit, “the rhetoric of despair.”

In examining the ethical effects of new technologies, Cooper takes a proactive approach in establishing 40 ethical considerations. Number nine on the list was consumerism/commercialization/materialism. The vision of a lavish lifestyle that is imported through advertising messages transports the consumption message across new technologies (74). Cooper asserts that these ethical considerations are critical to our society and often not considered in our media policy discourse. To gain an understanding of the effects and ethical issues accompanying new technologies, it is not sufficient to merely study the overt messages. An examination of the “submerged social, cultural, and institutional factors within corporations and countries” is required (86). (Cooper 71-93) It is not enough to examine the surface messages. Rather until the underlying ideologies are explored a full understanding of online media ethics cannot be established.

Media consumption is linked to shaping children’s worldviews. Gerbner’s Cultivation Theory asserts that television viewing contributed to audience perceptions and beliefs about stereotypes, politics, religion, and a variety of other topics. The more viewing that takes place, the theory states, the stronger the media influence (Gerbner 179). It seems reasonable that Cultivation Theory could be extended to

Internet consumption, given the similarities between the visual medium of television and the visually interactive medium of online entertainment. The online environment has similar potential to shape audience perceptions and beliefs.

The amount of research on consumerism/materialism and media consumption from a Cultivation Theoretical perspective is limited and previous exploration focused only on television viewing. The largest studies of materialism and television viewership involve analysis of secondary data. Easterline and Crimmin's secondary analysis of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) and the Monitoring the Future project's survey of 200,000 college freshman from 1966 to 1986 found a "substantial increase in private materialism as a life goal, a modest turning away from the public interest, and a sharp decline in emphasis on personal self-fulfillment" (529). However, it did not confirm a clear link to television viewing as respondent viewing decreased slightly during the survey period. Harmon in a secondary analysis of 1972 to 1996 General Social Survey (GSS) found a correlation between materialistic values and television exposure. However, Harmon did not find a similar correlation when similar analysis was conducted on Market Research Bureau (SMRB) Study of Media and Markets (SMM) 1993-94 data (405-418). Since the reporting times overlapped, similar findings would be expected. The differences in samples and research methodology between the two studies may account for the variation. It seems that materialism is increasing, however the definitive cause of that increase has yet to be fully determined.

One example of primary cultivation theory research by Yoon found a positive and significant relationship between materialism and general advertising attitudes but the small survey size and use of shopping mall intercept interviews were problematic. University students generally have lower TV viewership levels, and mall shoppers might be more predisposed to advertising messages (455-467).

The apparent lack of academic interest in studying materialism/consumption issues and media seems to support the hegemony of consumerism. While there may be many reasons for the dearth of

research, one possible conclusion is that we take our consumption culture for granted. We find ourselves in the proverbial forest but cannot see the trees. The materialistic drive becomes so engrained that we cannot culturally separate ourselves from it long enough to study it.

When examining media effects studies concerning children, you find the focus is rarely on the cultural impact on children. Media watchdog agencies such as National Coalition on Television Violence, the Kaiser Family Foundation, Children NOW, and the American Academy of Pediatrics primarily concentrate on issues such as violence, sexual content, privacy, obscenities and childhood obesity. While these are arguably critical effects to explore, the cultural implications of media effects on children warrant further exploration. One watchdog group Common Sense Media includes commercialism as one of its online review typologies, but only online advertising — not game or editorial content — is considered as part of their analysis (Polly 3).

In a consumption culture, media creators — like researchers who assume the values of society — can be expected to reflect those values in their work. While violence, sexuality, language and other issues come to the forefront of ethical debates regarding children and the media, the hegemony of consumerism is so deeply entrenched that it is normalized to the point of invisibility. It is at that level that we begin our search to uncover the intrinsic messages of one of the world's most popular children's Websites.

#### Consumption in a virtual world

The driving force behind all activity on Neopets is the accumulation of Neopoints, the electronic currency of the virtual world. Newbie's (novice Neopets players) begin with a pet and 250 Neopoints. Neopets must be fed regularly or their screen lookup will say they are "dying" and their happiness level declines. There are "free" food banks, such as the charitable Soup Faerie, the Giant Omelets, Jelly World, and advertiser-sponsored food (like Pepsi), players soon realize that Neopoints are needed to develop their pets abilities and easily kept them fed and happy. Luxuries such as a NeoHome and furnishing require more Neopoints. Toys to play with Neopets (which builds happiness levels) require Neopoints.

Gourmet foods, which if eaten are recorded and increase pets' ranks in the Gourmet Food Club. You can have a "genius" pet if you read enough virtual books to it. These tomes average 500 Neopoints for each book. These are just a few examples of how Neopets creates an artificial "need" for virtual goods.

The site taunts players to earn additional Neopoints. In the mythic narrative about the Neopian founders, Adam and Donna, the founders gloat about their Neopoints: "Adam currently has 11,068,736 (emphasis theirs) Neopoints, more than you - haha!" and "Donna currently has 46,684 Neopoints, more than you - haha!" (Neopets "About Us") The gauntlet is thrown and most Neopians pick it up and run out to acquire more Neopoints.

In addition to purchasing virtual items and Neohomes (virtual housing), points are used to buy stocks and for gambling (lottery, slots, poker, and scratch cards). Points can also be used to place Neopets in the Neolodge, a fantasy hotel with different levels of care for pets from the "one-star" Cockroach Towers to the "five-star" AstroVillage. Overnight stays range from 5 Neopoints to 500 Neopoints. Pets can stay for 28 days at a time in one of the lodges, relieving owners of daily feeding chores, as pets are cared for in the Neolodge.

Accumulation of virtual wealth in the form of Neopoints is encouraged in the Neopian Bank. Players earn different "status levels" that rewards "wealthier" players with additional bank interest (Neopoints) at each higher level. Millionaire status is revered in the Neopian community and a number of guilds (user groups) are dedicated to the accumulation of Neopoints (Neopets "National Neopian Bank"). The use of the term "millionaire" to refer to players with a million Neopoints refers users back to the real world and brings the concept of status that accompanies the term "millionaire" in our culture. Prestige is awarded to those who achieve "financially." As Baudrillard asserts, "economic exchange value (money) is converted into sign exchange value (prestige, etc.); but this operation is still sustained by the alibi of use value" (Baudrillard, For a Critique 112). Consumption becomes an activity that has nothing to do with needs and their satisfaction by the use-value of objects, which only serve to disguise its underlying social logic. For that matter, in a virtual environment there are no use-value objects, which relegate all

virtual purchases and accumulation of wealth purely to a social function. Accumulation of wealth in a virtual environment like Neopets can only exist to provide social status and prestige among the online community. “In consumption generally,” Baudrillard asserts,

“economic exchange value (money) is converted into sign exchange value (prestige, etc.); but this operation is still sustained by the alibi of use value.” Consumption, in other words, involves an operation that has nothing to do with needs and their satisfaction by the use-value of objects, which only serve to disguise its underlying social

logic (Baudrillard, For a Critique 112). Virtual objects,

by their nature have no practical use or value. Their

consumption is based solely on the meaning ascribed to them by users.

A royal paintbrush (see fig. 3) has no pragmatic value, it is merely data

in a server, but to a Neopian it means the ability to create a distinctive pet that others will admire. It is the status that the symbol provides, not the utilitarian value, which creates a demand for the item and a perceived worth of 1.7 million Neopoints.

The very premise of the game is accumulation of “wealth” and virtual objects. Does this sound familiar? The accepted “game of life” in the U.S. shares the same objective. Like the famous line from the movie Jerry McGuire “Show me the money” resonates throughout the real and the virtual worlds.

(Crowe) As children spend hours in this pursuit of virtual wealth, the concept of consumption becomes further engrained in the psyche of our youth. During a Discussion Board about what item users would most like to have on Neopets one user responded (I want) “whatever is the most expensive so that I have gratification for owning the most expensive item in Neopia” (Sharondewealth). The craze to consume is built into the game.



Figure 3

A royal paintbrush (left) when applied to a Neopet creates a newly designed character such as the Kougra show above. (Neopets “Rainbow Pool”)



Some may argue that this approach is not without merit. Educating children about how to succeed in business may prepare them for real-world experiences. However, is a constant diet of buying and consuming the best way for our children to spend their free-time? Do children need a day-long lesson in consumerism each month? It would seem there are plenty of opportunities for learning these life lessons outside of playtime.

To aid users' quest for the elusive million Neopoints, a number of user-created Websites offer insider tips to wealth. One user-created site "Who Wants to be a neoMillionaire?" explains how earning 3000 Neopoints per day translates into a million Neopoints in a year. The site gives the following advice that almost sounds like the introductory lecture to Capitalism 101.

Buy low sell high — that's the name of the game. With your newly-minted NPs (Neopoints) accumulating in the Bank, you can start spreading the wealth, sharing the goods, driving the Neopian economy. Hit the Neopian Shops (don't forget about the ones in each World) and start shopping!(Al)

One site, "Frisky Business" which was developed by an adult user who claims to have made a million Neopoints in three months, offers a "business plan" to help users achieve millionaire status. The site counsels users on how to set up a Neopian shop and advises that retailing is the best way to "earn a fortune"(1). (Kristi)

The American dream to own your own business is easily achieved in Neopia. The Horatio Alger myth is exemplified in "JenesisX's Guide to Becoming a Millionaire" who tells users that "Neopia really IS an equal opportunity world, where ANYONE can get rich just as easily as the next person" (Jen). The newbie who starts with a mere 250 Neopoints can aspire to great wealth. He or she can "have it all" and be a Neopian millionaire, live in fabulously furnished Neohome and enjoy gourmet foods and the "finer things" that virtual life has to offer.

The time and effort to set up Websites dedicated solely to the pursuit of Neopian wealth demonstrates the strong capitalistic drive created by the site. Users spend weeks, days, months and even

years pursuing virtual money and goods. This quest for the virtual rings true with Baudrillard's contention that simulacra is replacing reality. Neopets is a case study in simulacras. It is as Baudrillard suggests "a network of endless unreal circulation" (Baudrillard, Simulations 26). There is no original for a Gangee or Krawk Crisps? Baudrillard's conceptualization of consumption not of material goods, but of the ideal elements (Gane 33) is lived out in Neopia. Users pursue electronic images as though they were priceless gems. The most sought-after items, such as rare paintbrushes that can "paint" a Neopet a new and exotic color or pattern, fetch millions of Neopoints much like "priceless" works of art, painting and luxury items do in the world that Neopets reflects.

The site provides "galleries" where users can display the rare items and collections of items that they have acquired. These are available for other users to view, and are often a source of pride for users. In an interview with one 13-year-old user this pride of possession is evident: "They are more of a toy that you build up to make as awesome as possible to show off."

Even if rare items are not put out on display in galleries, they still provide a source of social order for those who own them. As Bourdieu points out, consumption "need not be conspicuous in order to be symbolic." In other words, it is not just in the consumption of "status symbols" that the logic of social differentiation is manifest. All consumption practices, however mundane they may appear, serve to classify an individual's social status, and hence provide for the reproduction of the social order (Bourdieu 483).

The site supports a hierarchical structure through several methods. Pets are assigned different ranks by the number of jobs they've completed. Each pet also has ratings for characteristics that have been acquired through play. Such characteristics include ratings levels for Strength, Intelligence, Mood, Defense, Movement, Health and an overall Level rating. Through time, training and other events in game play, Neopets can advance up the ranks and become a "more powerful" pet capable of winning in the various battledomes across the site (Neopets "User Lookup").

Many areas of the Website rank order players achievements. Games list the top 200 scorers. Pets that consume the most “gourmet” foods (foods items with a rarity listing of over 90) become the top members of the Gourmet club. If you “read” the most books to your pet, you can win the Neopian Book Award. Trophies are awarded each month for the top pets in all of these categories. These trophies are then displayed on user lookups for all Neopians to see. Consumption is rewarded, revered and publicly displayed.

A type of class structure is evident in the Neopian Bank, which rewards individuals with higher Neopoints with extra daily bank interest and status labels such as Millionaire Platinum (1 million Neopoints), Millionaire Double Platinum (2 million Neopoints), Neopian Mega-Riches (7.5 million) and Ultimate Riches (over 10 Million Neopoints) (Neopets "National Neopian Bank"). The focus on accumulation and labeling “rich” Neopians (users) builds a type of class structure within the site and assigns positive labels to those achieving success in the Neopian economy.

A related theme to consumerism is capitalism, which is the basis of the Neopian economy. The economic principles of supply and demand are mediated by the site. Certain “items” are available online in limited quantities, so the “price” escalates due to the limited supply. Demand is created by the uniqueness of the items and also by the site itself. Varieties of “quests” are assigned randomly to users and also can be self-selected. These quests demand items be supplied to online characters that in turn award items, generally of greater value than those required by the quest, to the user who completes the quest in the allotted time. Increasingly “rare” items are required as the user completes more quests, thus demand is created for rarer items. Inflation impacts the Neopian economy as it does the free-market economy. Current inflation rates are posted in all of the virtual store pages. The rate generally reflects the current U.S. inflation rate and hovers slightly over 2 percent (Neopets “Food Shop”).

Protestant work ethics are reinforced by the sites’ “Employment Agency” which allows users to bid for and complete jobs for Neopoints. These “jobs,” which are quests to find virtual items in a prescribed amount of time, provide “income” for pets that complete the task. Pets must compete to

acquire the jobs with other players as jobs only load on the site six times per hour. Because of the competition for jobs and limits on the number that can be completed per day, it is difficult to “become rich” working for the Employment Agency. Those who become rich, are the entrepreneurs who manage their own stores and who invest wisely in the bank and the Neopian Stock Market.

The Stock Market or Neodaq works much like Wall Street. Stocks are traded, and Nigel the Commodity Broker Chia charges commissions when stocks are sold. Prices rise and fall based on “events” that occur in the Neopian narrative. “Fortunes” can be made or lost depending on the saavy of the investor. The site even features a “ticker” that scrolls current prices across the screen (Neopets “Stock Market”). Although children might never look at the New York Times Stock Exchange closing results, or have the resources to invest in real world stocks, they become venture capitalists in the Neopian market. In this way, children learn firsthand the ins and outs of the stock market, one of the hallmarks of our free-market society.

Another game, Plushie Tycoon, is a virtual experience in capitalism. Players start a plushie factory with 50,000 Neopoints. With this “cash,” they must hire workers, buy supplies, advertise and manage production, warehousing, shipping and retailing. The game has a one-month duration. If at the end of the month you still have 50,000 Neopoints, you are labeled a “plushie tycoon” and are awarded a special avatar and a trophy. Those with scores over a million Neopoints are awarded 100,000 Neopoints for their success. Lesser amounts are awarded to lower scoring players (Neopets, “Plushie Tycoon Help”). The game requires constant monitoring and therefore contributes to Neopets “stickiness.”

The game raises questions such as, “Do you hire several inexpensive untrained workers who are less productive or a couple experienced crafts people?” “Do you use cheap, shoddy materials to mass produce items for unwitting consumers or do you use high-end materials for the luxury market?” These are choices budding industrialists must make to earn the “tycoon” label. This represents one of the most overt examples of junior capitalist training. Undoubtedly the purpose of the game is to teach the basics of the free-market system, including the exploitation of cheap labor and the ability to foist substandard

products off on an unsuspecting target market. With a little advertising (which all players must buy to be successful), consumers will rush to the store to buy your discount items. The game makes the essence of capitalism comprehensible and entertaining for young audiences. The game doesn't yet offer the option to use overseas labor in exchange for longer shipping times, but that option can't be far off. Consumption, production and ideology are married in the game with the lure of greater material reward for the CEOs that succeed. Compared to the few thousand Neopoints a worker in the Employment Agency, the fantastic "salaries" offered the top Tycoons reflect the wage disparity facing American corporate management and the frontline employee. Managers are rewarded while workers languish in line at the Soup Faerie Kitchen.

Life in Neopia is not utopian. Virtual characters "steal" Neopoints and "valuable" items that are not safely maintained in the bank, in stores or in user's safety deposit boxes. Neopets can be struck with sudden illnesses such as neomonias or the hoochie coochies and need to purchase the appropriate medicine to cure your pet. Pets become unhappy, hungry, weak (various events can cause Neopets to lose "hit" points which weakens them). All of these conditions may be remedied through the purchase of the appropriate item. This trains children to respond to problems with purchases. Clark points out that:

The consumer society both cultivates and thrives upon a sense that one can, ultimately, always buy oneself out of trouble. It proposes a market solution to each and every one of life's problems. It declares that all one needs to ensure, finally, is that the private resources for coping with such eventualities are in place. This is a particularly insipid, anemic, and regressive vision of society (Clarke 23).

Purchasing one more item can solve all of life's worries. This establishes yet another justification for endless consumption — we are shopping to solve problems. If the problem doesn't exist, then one will be created for you so that you will have a perceived need to consume.

By teaching children that acquisition and its accompanying consumption are ultimate goals, Neopets serves to reinforce what Veblen calls the "norm of consumption" (71). Because children are immersed in an online world of acquisition and "conspicuous consumption" they are taught to believe that

this endless quest for more is normal. The hegemony of consumption is ingrained at then at the very core of the Neopian experience.

#### Roll the dice

Las Vegas may be the epitome of conspicuous consumption. Vegas-style gambling is well entrenched in the Neopian landscape. My content analysis of games shows that 24 percent of entertainment-based games on the site are games of chance that replicate traditional casino games such as poker, roulette, blackjack and slots and includes the Neopian lottery and various scratchcard games. In fact, one of the classification for game genres on Neopet's game directory is entitled "Luck/Chance."

The promise of instant wealth offered by gambling is compatible with the consumption culture of Neopets and American culture. A description of Las Vegas by Homer-Dixon's in his book entitled The Ingenuity Gap could be a description of Neopia: "Gambling is, after all, about living a fantasy of sudden riches; computers allow us to create virtual worlds that erase the line between reality and fantasy (314). (Homer-Dixon 485)

Because of American culture's acceptance and veneration of gambling, the presence of games of chance on Neopets has yet to draw ire from parents and child advocacy groups. Gambling is very commonplace in North America where 48 states have legalized gambling (Utah and Hawaii are the exceptions) (National Gambling IMpact Sutdy Commission Final Report). A national survey found that 80 percent of children ages 12-17 and 82 percent of U.S. adults report that they gambled at least once in the previous year (Gupta and Derevensky 315). More than 15 million youth gamble without adult supervision or knowledge (Hollander, Buchalter and DeCaria 629). Two studies of pathological adult gamblers found that between 25 and 36 percent of these adults began gambling before age 15. This seems to indicate a link between childhood gambling and adult gambling addictions (Volberg 237). American society pays little attention to these statistics. Such is not the case in Australia.

Parents in Australia are more sensitive to childhood gambling issues than are Americans as evidenced to Aussie reaction to Neopets. When McDonald's exported their Neopets Happy Meal

premiums to the Australian markets, outraged parents took their case to the media and won. Parents were upset that family-friendly McDonalds was associated with a Website that promoted gambling.

McDonald's influenced Neopets to shut down the gambling portions of the Website in Australia. This appeased parents and child psychologists who claimed there was a "very clear link between people exposed as kids to these sorts of games and developing gambling problems later on" and felt it inappropriate for McDonald's to participate in promoting gambling to children (Wenn).

Whether online gambling creates mini-gambling addicts has yet to be determined. Since the odds are not stacked in favor of the player in all the games, it is possible that the games may teach children the hard realities of gambling with Neopoints instead of real money when they are adults. However, the amount and content of casino-type games on Neopets may be a cause for concern. In addition to the obvious fears that it may contribute to adult gambling addictions, the pervasive gambling supports a culture of greed and a fascination with instant riches. The "get rich quick" schemes that ensnare real-world victims play out on the computer screen as well. It could be argued that experiencing the negative effects of gambling using virtual currency is a far better than experiencing with real currency. However, if research is correct in asserting that childhood gambling is a precursor for adult gambling addictions, then the risk of exposure to gambling far outweighs the experiential learning.

#### Companies cash in on kids

Neopets is a commercial enterprise whose survival depends on advertising and retail purchases. Unlike many of the failed dot-com companies, Neopets is an economically viable entity. CNN reports that the site earns more than \$15 million per year in advertising revenues (Boese 2). The drive for capital pushed the site from the dorm room of two British college students into the boardroom of the Viacom media conglomerate.

Neopet's client list includes major advertisers such as McDonald's, Limited Too, General Mills cereals and Disney Studios (Neopets "Client List"). In addition to the standard banner and display advertising, Neopets employs a type of advertising that the company has trademarked as "immersive

advertising” (Neopets "Immersive Advertising"). This type of advertising, also known as “embedded advertising,” is actively incorporated into the Web content (see fig. 4).

Neopets has two advergames as of Dec. 2005 that use McDonald’s logos and themes. Children are constantly exposed to these embedded advertising messages while they play. The Disney Theater allows children to see previews of new DVD releases or links participant to Disney Online’s branded games. Campbell’s “Chicken and Stars Going Hollywood” allows users to take paparazzi style photos of Neopets “celebrities” (some of the Neopets characters) all while being exposed to Campbell Soup billboards strategically placed in the game. Branded food products are sold in Neopian stores that can be resold or “fed” to user’s Neopets. (Pereira 14).

In addition to fantasy items such as a “rainbow hot dog” or a “starlight potion” users may use Neopoints to purchase Wrigley’s Gum, Sunny Delight, Oreos or a McDonald’s Happy Meal.

This form of advertising is cost effective for marketers. The average television commercial ranges from \$7.31 CPM (cost per thousand exposures) to \$29.90 during prime time. The cost for advergames is less than \$2 CPM, with the biggest expense the development of the game (Pereira 2).

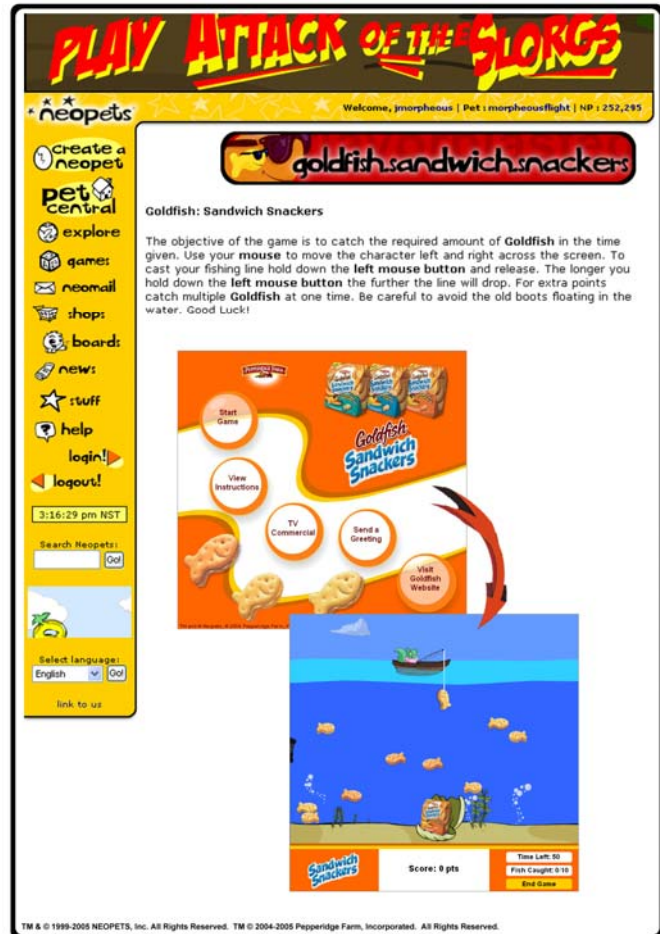


Figure 4  
Neopet’s Immersive Advertising, like this advergame for Pepperidge Farm’s Goldfish crackers, embeds the product into game play and offers links to TV commercials and other branded activities.

Immersive advertising raises concerns among several children and media advocacy groups. In testimony before the FCC in 2005, three groups asked that this type of advertising be banned from Websites aimed at children and youth.

Neopets was cited as a primary offender through its use of immersive advertising (Prime et al. 1-16).

Seiter found that elementary school children have mistaken ideas about Neopets. She found that children cannot identify the embedded advertising and also believe, partly due to the narrative provided in the Website’s “About Us” section, that a single individual produces the Website and the cost of production did not exceed the cost of a single personal computer (100). (Seiter 123) In personal interviews with 12 Neopets users ranging from age 8 to 34 years old, only 2 users were able to identify advergames and product placements as a form of advertising. One adult and one teen were able to identify the advertising unassisted. This observation supports Seiter’s contention that elementary school children cannot recognize this form of advertising and extends it to a lack of

awareness among teens and adults. Although each page contains the disclaimer “This page contains paid



Figure 5  
Screenshot of Neopet’s Shops Page. Note the size, color and location of the advertising disclaimer ( Neopets “Press Kit”).

advertising” the bottom of the page location and small gray type generally obscures the message from view (see fig. 5). Users with small monitors never see these messages, as they require scrolling to uncover them. Even if the messages were more prominently displayed, their impact may be limited. In tests, similar separators in television programming prove ineffective in aiding children’s ability to discern advertising from non-commercial contents (Palmer and McDowell 197-201)

It is highly unlikely that advertisers will walk away from the lucrative online child and youth market. According to eMarketer, over 34 million children ages 3 to 17 were online as of April 2004, which represents 20 percent of the total Internet user base in the United States (National Retail Federation 1) Jupiter Research reports that kids and teens are expected to spend \$4.9 billion online in 2005 (National Retail Federation 1). In another Jupiter survey, 67 percent of online teens (13-18 years old) and children (5-12 years old) have researched or bought products online which demonstrates that children are willing to adopt the Internet as an online shopping mall (Montgomery 642). With billions of dollars at stake, efforts to reach the fast growing online children and youth market will certainly intensify. There are currently few regulatory limitations for online advertising and site content, which adds to the appeal of reaching children online. Unlike broadcast television, online content is not restricted to the 10.5-minute commercial time limit during weekdays and 12-minute per hour cap on weekends required by the 1990 Children’s Television Act and the subsequent 2000 update that included digital television. Beginning in 2006 digital networks along with analog broadcast television networks were required to air 3 hours of educational programming for children weekly. The new restrictions would restrict broadcasters from showing Web addresses sites in which program characters sold products. This type of host selling has already been banned on analog television stations (FCC 1). This marked the first limitation the FCC sought regarding online content. Unfortunately, it appears the FCC will bow to advertiser pressure and back down on the proposed regulations just two weeks before they were to go into effect. Under the proposed, revised guidelines broadcasters can link to Websites that include host selling; however, they can’t display on TV the directly link to any page containing this form of advertising. That means that

Viacom can employ SpongeBob to sell products on the Nickelodeon Website, just not only any Web addressees mentioned in the TV broadcast (Teinowitz 16 Dec. 2005).

The advertising industry has a self-regulatory body, the Children's Advertising Review Unit (CARU) which was established in 1974 to encourage responsible advertising towards children. Originally focused on television advertising, the group extended its reach online in 2001 when it set up its "Kids' Privacy Safe Harbor" program aimed at encouraging compliance with COPPA ("Children's Advertising Review Unit (CARU).").

As evidenced, online advertisers face few of the restrictions regarding educational and advertising content, host selling, or time restrictions that broadcast advertisers face. Online restrictions are primarily focused on privacy issues, however, even with COPPA-compliant measures in place, children can provide personal information simply by lying about their ages.

The lack of self or government regulations allows for an advertising free-for-all on the Web. Children are sold as commodities to mega advertisers chasing the billions of dollars spent by youth and their parents. The selling is done so subtly that neither children nor parents are aware that the ad pitch has been made and accepted. Parents who would balk at plastering their children's athletic equipment with advertisements think nothing of allowing advertisers to load children's online games with ad placements. Like the consumerism it represents, this type of immersive advertising becomes part of the fabric of the culture through repeat exposure, which in turn normalizes and creates the consumption culture.

Veblen explains that consumption on this level is merely a "wish to conform with established usage" (71). This is a powerful motivator for children and teens that feel the peer pressure to conform. So when a popular Website, like Neopets provides links to Neopet branded t-shirts, plush toys, games and magazines, it seems natural for users to respond with their wallets. Consumption is required to be like "all the other kids." Purchasing a Neopets shirt or buying a McDonald's Happy Meal with a Neopets toy can achieve this normalcy. It allows users to "live up to the canons of expected decency in the kind, amount and grade of goods consumed" (Veblen 71).

This use of consumer goods builds what Burke labeled as “identification.” Through the shared symbols of material goods and the shared language and activities associated with these symbols, the online community of users is strengthened. Using Burke’s term, they are “consubstantiated” by their consumption (Burke, A Rhetoric 20, 24, 64). They are linked through the shared language and symbolism of the online Neopian experience. This is reinforced through possession of material symbols that represent the shared identity created through interaction with the material and the virtual. Users identify with the characters and want to incorporate that identity in a tangible way. Because of the isolation of the online experience and an inability to interact tangibly with other community members, the only remaining outlet to express that identification is through consumption. The young consumer is unaware that his or her behavior acts to identifying themselves with their online experiences. This form of identification (or persuasion) is what Burke deemed the most powerful, because it “derives from situations in which it goes unnoticed” (Burke, Dramatism 28).

Advertising brings the cycle of consumption full circle, taking it from the virtual world and transporting it into the tangible. Commercial messages brand product logos into the psyches of unsuspecting children who are “just playing a game.” Advertisers hope that when the child leaves the virtual world they will take those messages and the lessons learned in consumerism with them and convert the stored rhetoric into cash. It seems that hope is not unfounded. Capri Sun, for example, enjoyed a 7 percent jump in consumption by Neopets’ users after featuring the beverage on the Website (Weintraub 1).

#### Premium services take consumption to new level

Neopets is now beta testing a “Premium” Neopets service that provides additional services and an easy-to-use portal page for the site. Neopets, which will maintain its free site, charges \$7.99 per month for the current beta version. Referral to the Premium site is “by invitation only.” New users must be referred by existing users, which would seem to add to the “prestige” of the site. A user must be part of

the “in” group to become a “Premium” member. The “premium” label connotes a sense of status, which is an extension of the hierarchical status of the original Neopets Website.

The new portal is overt in its commercialism. Users are offered a browser toolbar with hot link buttons to the original Neopets site. An additional button is labeled “Shopping” and takes users to a virtual mall of consumer goods. A new Super Shop Wizard, which is an upgraded search engine for those browsing items in user shops, pledges to take users into “Sniperspace.” The online definition of “sniping” refers to outbidding the highest offer on an auction in the last few minutes so that the offer cannot be outbid. Neopets users are encouraged to use their premium power to “steal” lower priced items from uneducated users using the superior powered Shop Wizard. The use of the term Wizard and the magical garb of the Shop Wizard character further enhance the magic of consumption metaphor. Shopping is elevated to a mystical event powered by a Wizard that will find the user their heart’s desire.

The new premium site is excess in the extreme, or as Baudrillard refers to in his Fatal Strategies, “hypertelia.” This is the point in which there is no relationship between physical needs and the purchase of objects. Consumption exists for its own sake as it approaches hyper-reality (9, 13). In Neopets Premium consumption becomes “super powered.” The Website’s elite keep lesser players out with a subscription fee and form an tighter club of consumers. To a preteen already insecure about his or her identity, \$7.99 is a small price to pay for prestige and acceptance. The child already knows from play on the site that problems can be solved if you have enough currency. It is only a small step to take this knowledge in the physical world and begin buying your way out of perceived problems.

### Conclusion

Neopets exerts a global influence on children and adults who fall under its addictive spell of virtual pets and repackaged games. While it touts itself as a safe place for children (Neopets “Corporate Fact Sheet”), a closer inspection indicates that the site is not an innocuous online playground. Users are bombarded with expressed and implied consumerism, capitalism, gambling and hedonism through game

play, Immersive Advertising and the Neopian culture. At every turn, players are faced with messages encouraging further consumption to the point of hypertelia.

Neopets is not alone in its commercialization of children's entertainment. Certainly many other sites would join the list of those preaching messages of consumption and capitalism that are reflections of the culture at large. Stallabrass concludes that computer games by their very nature are profoundly laden with cultural messages:

In their structure and content, computer games are a capitalist, deeply conservative form of culture, and their political content is prescribed by the options open to democracy under modern capitalism, from games with liberal pretensions to those with quasi-fascist overtones. All of them offer virtual consumptions of empty forms in an ideal market (Stallabrass 103).

What is worrisome is the lack of attention paid to the socio-cultural messages presented by Neopets and other similar Websites. Parents, educators and child advocates rally against the common themes of violence, sexual content, privacy, obscenities and childhood obesity. While these issues are worthy of attention, the socio-cultural issues should not be preempted from the discussion. The likelihood is greater that a child would engage in excessive consumption or gambling versus excessive aggression or sexuality as a result of mediated messages. The reason for this is that shooting, killing or raping another person is not socially acceptable in our culture — maxing out a credit card is.

To combat the rampant commercialism and consumerism expressed in this online environment, greater media literacy is needed. Turkle believes that the simulation culture in which we live requires a new form of media literacy. Architects use computers to design buildings, surgeons operate through endoscopes and chemists use 3-D renderings of atomic structures — all using simulation technology. “In 10 years the degree to which simulations are embedded in every area of our life will have increase exponentially. We need to develop a new form of media literacy: readership skills for the culture of

simulation” (Turkle B.26). We train children how to use computers, but now how to evaluate the content. We are more concerned with typing, programming and research skills than we are about critical thinking and content analysis.

Forty years prior, McLuhan called for the same media literacy when he expressed that “learning is an essential part of marketing and consumption.” He stressed that we encourage children to read books and thus learn the skills required for typography. In the same manner, McLuhan rallied for training in the “graphic” world because “the art of casting and arranging actors in ads is both complex and forcefully insidious”(Understanding 250-251). What McLuhan understood, but we have yet to grasp is the need to teach children and youth a new literacy that expands the bounds of the written page.

While computers have many wonderful educational applications, the “halo effect” surrounding the belief that computers are great learning tools leads parents and educators to place unconditional trusts in computers, and encourage children to spend free time online versus watching television (Britt), not realizing that Websites can be more Machiavellian than the worst television programming.

Certainly, the site offers some educational merits such as developing creative thinking, writing, business and mathematics skills (Sky-McIlvain 3). Parents and teachers need to understand both the positive and negative aspects of this popular Website. Once armed with that information, they can guide children’s use or avoidance of the site. Since no software exists to screen out embedded advertising, increasing media literacy to assist children in becoming better consumers of this and other entertainment Websites seems to be the best line of defense. In discussions with current users, making them aware of the presence and influence of embedded advertising and advergaming is an important first step in raising computer content literacy.

The industry demonstrates that it is unwilling to self-regulate online Websites targeted at children. Advertising revenues outweigh the value of child protections when facing quarterly profit and loss statements. The government, citing First Amendment concerns, refuses to take substantive action to

protect children's online experience. Even if restrictions were put into place, socio-cultural issues would not be included in any restrictions.

That leaves concerned parents, teachers and child advocates to create their own solutions. One group, Net Family News, offer suggestions to help children understand that "free" sites have hidden costs. These costs are paid for with profiling and advertising. This organization recommends limiting online time and selectively purchasing educational software so that children can enjoy advertising-free computer time. Teens, who are naturally adverse to manipulation, respond positively to messages that demonstrate the manipulative nature of commercial online rhetoric (Willard 3). Discussing the values and ethics of online commercial and non-commercial content with children and teens is an important step in developing the literacy skills for the "culture of simulation."

Since we are immersed in a culture of consumption, it seems unnecessary to expose our children to endless hours of materialistic messages. Neopets is one of the largest, most influential Internet sites for children. Its cultural messages about status, identity, capitalism and materialism inspire our junior capitalists to conspicuous consumption and unrestrained greed. In response, we have two choices — either open our wallets and surrender or use the tools of education and advocacy to expose and address these computer-mediated, socio-cultural messages.

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