

Casual Connect

Virtual Worlds The Next Casual Frontier

Kevin Richardson - Casual Connect Magazine, Winter 2008

You would be hard pressed to eat breakfast in the Silicon Valley without overhearing a conversation about the latest virtual world. And there's a good reason. Games sell. Communities sell. And venture capital follows the buzz. Bumping into Trip Hawkins, I asked him what his thoughts were on casual virtual worlds.

"The Wii is arguably the most successful casual virtual world. There is (also) a myth that you cannot make money with games on the web, and a perception that you cannot have a virtual world without 3D immersion. Club Penguin, anyone?"

What Makes a Virtual World Virtual?

A virtual world is a computer-based simulated environment intended for its users to inhabit and interact using avatars. And to illustrate the breadth of Wikipedia's definition, Club Penguin promises "... a safe virtual world for kids to play, interact with friends and have fun letting their imaginations soar." Meanwhile, on the other end of the continuum, Entropia Universe touts "... the range of professions available to colonists on Calypso literally allow a participant to live a completely different life than the one they live in the real world." Demographics and themes aside, what sets these worlds apart is the degree to which the architects enable and encourage residents to part with reality, and become part of an alternative one.

The Landscape

To research this article I've been a monkey, a roll of toilet paper, and a one-eyed space alien. I have dressed like a girl (the game made me do it!), had a transformer-thing flirt with me, and was horrifically killed by a multi-headed monster. Luckily I was also reincarnated (hooray for that!) so that I could continue spending gPotatoes, the currency of that particular world. As points of reference, let's look at some mature virtual worlds with large communities along with some fairly new ones with just a handful of residents. Almost all combine community, games, some form of currency, and plenty of stuff to spend it on. Let's start with the most adult-centered one and finish up in kiddyland.

Supple—www.supple.com

Supple claims to be the only social interaction, human-scale video game whose

Casual Connect

Virtual Worlds The Next Casual Frontier

Kevin Richardson - Casual Connect Magazine, Winter 2008

virtual characters have enough intelligence to compete with human players. It's a single player trial-to-purchase game that marries Sims-like game-play with a TV show. In episode one, you play Arin, a young woman at a magazine competing for a promotion against a male colleague, an interesting predicament for male players. The world includes well developed characters, funny dialogue, and situations that will make you reach for your antiperspirant (especially if you don't like wearing women's clothing). Supple is one of those rare video games that features realistic, sitcom-like spoken dialog which occurs in real-time between characters. The Sims of The Sims "speak" gibberish, whereas the Virts of Supple—that is, the simulated human characters in Supple—speak real English dialog.

Entropia Universe—www.entropiauniverse.com

Entropia Universe entered the Guinness World Records Book in 2004 and 2008 for the most expensive virtual world objects ever sold. Since Entropia is a downloadable client, there are no strict levels within the universe, and it is not officially categorized as an MMORPG; however, it shares elements of MMORPGs in that skills and special items are central to the experience. The Entropia online community claims to have over 665,000 registered participants from over 220 countries, with the average number of players online at any one time being around 600. I particularly liked the character builder—although it forced me to run around in a pair of dirty long underwear until I bought myself some clothes. (At least they were men's clothes this time.)

Second Life—www.secondlife.com

Second Life was launched in 2003. It was developed by Linden Research, Inc. (Linden Labs) and came to international attention in late 2006 and early 2007. The Second Life Viewer is a downloadable client that enables residents to interact with each other through avatars. I entered the world through Ben and Jerry's, flew around and then met up with some Residents with some very cool accessories. I soon realized that I could get another body if I wanted one, depending upon what I wanted to do. The tools to create things, and the virtual property and services, were straightforward.

Habbo Hotel—www.habbo.com

Supported through advertising by some top brands (Disney, Adidas, Target),

Casual Connect

Virtual Worlds The Next Casual Frontier

Kevin Richardson - Casual Connect Magazine, Winter 2008

Habbo is owned and operated by the Finland-based Sulake Corporation. Aimed at teenagers, it combines the two concepts of a chat room, which is presented in the form a virtual hotel, and user profiles. To protect against pedophilia and bad guys, Residents who misbehave or break the rules can be reported and banned from the site for days, or forever. The service began in 2000 and as of July 2007, over 82 million avatars have been created worldwide and there are six million unique visitors to the Habbo websites around the world every month.

Cyworld—us.cyworld.com

MySpace meets Habbo, sort of. Or Gaia Online meets MySpace, but not really. Cyworld has been building its online world since 1999. It currently has members in the United States, China, Japan, Korea and Taiwan, and soon it will be bringing their world to Europe, South America and India as well. In Cyworld you create a version of yourself, or Mini-Me (like Dr. Evil's clone), set up a living room and change it whenever you want to reflect your mood. Write your profile. Keep up with your friends. Upload your photos, drawings and images—they give you unlimited storage so you can save and display as much as you want. No real theme here, except to connect, express, and hang out.

Zwinktopia—www.zwinktopia.com

Zwinky is currently advertised on social networking sites such as MySpace, along with television shows and networks which target young audiences. It is owned by IAC Search and Media and launched in June 2006. Quirky and viral, Zwinktopia allows players to create virtual versions of themselves and post them on blogs or anywhere HTML editing is allowed. Within this world Zwinkies can purchase dorm rooms to live in and decorate using items purchased with Zbucks or a Zcard, the Zwinky debit card. Zbucks can be earned by visiting areas and playing games within Zwinktopia, and by inviting friends to create their own Zwinkies. Zbucks can be also be added to Zcards using PayPal or a major credit card.

gPotato—www.gpotato.com

GALA-net is leading the virtual world charge by localizing games from Korea such as Flyff (Fly For Fun) and Rappelz for every market. The site includes free clients with stunning graphics, big, rich worlds, and plenty of stuff to entice players and keep them hooked. The single currency can be used in any of their games, including a driving game Upshift Strike Racer in which you can buy a

Virtual Worlds The Next Casual Frontier

Kevin Richardson - Casual Connect Magazine, Winter 2008

decent car for around \$42 and then soup it up with weapons and other cool stuff, as needed. All the worlds in GALA-net use the same currency, gPotatoes—a smart move as players can deposit money in one place and then enjoy many cool games.

Gaiaonline—www.gaiaonline.com

Gaia Online is an anime-themed forums-based website aimed at teens. Build an avatar, own and furnish a house, play games, and go to real movies with your friends. Originally named Go-Gaia, it was released to the public on February 18, 2003 by Gaia Interactive. Big-Boards.com reports Gaia is the largest forum on the Internet with over a million posts made daily, over a billion posts total, and over 2.5 million unique users each month. Gaia also won the 2007 Webware 100 Award in the Community category. Users of the site, referred to as Gaians, create a customizable avatar and a customizable virtual home for which they can purchase items using what is called Gaia Gold. This virtual currency is given to users after they engage in some of the website activities, like posting on forums or playing a series of Flash games (of which there are eight). The site also rewards users everyday with random quantities of gold. In October of the 2007 Gaia released a new kind of currency (called Gaia Cash) that can be bought at Rite Aid or Target stores.

Neopets—www.neopets.com

Set in the world of Neopia, neopets.com has over 45,000 players on line at any given time and over 224 million neopets created to date. It has its own economy, with neopoints as the smallest denomination. The virtual pet website was launched by Adam Powell and Donna Williams on November 15, 1999. Six months later, they sold a majority share to a consortium of investors led by Doug Dohring. On 20 June 2005, Viacom bought Neopets, Inc. for \$160 million. With a simple avatar creator, 150 games such as Itchy Invasion and Hot Dog Hero, trophy rooms, boards and user generated content, it's no wonder the site is such a draw. Neopets also operates a pay-to-play Premium version for a monthly fee. Several issues with the site, such as immersive advertising, gambling-based games, and hacks and glitches have garnered criticism. Despite that, Neopets consistently ranks as one of the stickiest sites. Its main drawback as a "virtual world" is that you cannot see your character move around and interact with others in virtual space, which for some may detract from the fantasy. But who knows what's next?

Casual Connect

Virtual Worlds The Next Casual Frontier

Kevin Richardson - Casual Connect Magazine, Winter 2008

Mokitown—www.mokitown.com

Mokitown is provided by Daimler (the German auto maker) free of charge and without commercials. With a look-and-feel similar to Habbo, this award-winning multi-player platform is the first global communication network aimed at teaching children about traffic safety. Children can meet each other to experience adventures and learn more about traffic rules. Children who move through Mokitown in a safe way earn points which can be traded in for extra privileges. This gives the city a very unique character. Mokitown offers children the opportunity to train for difficult situations without exposing them to real risk. It is also a lot of fun, since it brings across its message in such a playful way. High security standards ensure that kids can safely move through the virtual city.

Club Penguin—www.clubpenguin.com

Targeted to eight-to-14 year olds, Club Penguin announced last year that it had joined the Walt Disney Company. When it was started in March of 2005 by New Horizon Interactive, the founders set out to create an online world for kids in which they could safely play games, have fun, and interact. As parents and Internet specialists, the owners wanted to develop a place they and other adults around the world would feel comfortable letting their own children and grandchildren visit. By the summer of 2007, Club Penguin had grown to 700,000 current paid subscribers and more than 12 million activated users.

ZooKazoo—www.zookazoo.com

Targeted at six-to-12-year-olds, ZooKazoo is an online environment of imaginary and adventurous destinations where children can safely hang out, have fun, and make their world a better place. Unlike Club Penguin, there is curriculum hidden behind the fun in ZooKazoo. It's all about healthy personal and social development—taught not in a heavy-handed way, but rather through plain and simple fun, challenge, and the joy of learning and helping others. It features great art direction, animation, and audio, and a wide range of locations to explore. If the games are good (it's still in alpha and the games are “coming soon”) this world is sure to be popular. There is great effort to make each transition a cinematic “cut” so as not to disrupt the illusion of physical space. The locations include a futuristic city, lagoon with a pirate ship, jungle, a tree house and storybook castle. Sound a little like Disneyland? Watch out Club Penguin.

Casual Connect

Virtual Worlds The Next Casual Frontier

Kevin Richardson - Casual Connect Magazine, Winter 2008

Meet The Builders

On my journey I was fortunate enough to bump into a few of the creators and custodians of these worlds who can provide some clues to where this is all headed. Joining us now are Jeff Segal from Supple, a try-and-buy episodic world, John Young from GALA-net, offering free worlds with micro transactions for stuff you'll need, Steve Hoffman and Eric Hayashi from Rocketon, the most "alpha" of the bunch, and Michael Carter, Chief Playwright and producer for ZooKazoo, a new world being born.

What's the demographic for your world?

Supple: It's overwhelmingly female with a skew towards the teens but it ages up pretty well, too. Currently, we've only been using adwords to market the game and our hottest keywords are definitely ones that teens would type in. The game is going to be distributed more widely soon so we'll be exposed to a wider age range and it will be interesting to see how our audience morphs—if it does.

Rocketon: Teenagers.

GALA: 72% of Gala-Net's registered users are 15–35, and about 88% of our users are men. This does vary by game: A friendly anime-style MMORPG such as Flyff skews more female and younger, while a more "realistic" game like Rappelz is more male and slightly older.

ZooKazoo: We're building it for girls and boys six-to-12 years old—our kids and grandkids.

How do you compare your site with the current "casual" demographic and style of play?

Supple: Well, as I mentioned, the game is really focused on a female audience, and we'll soon see how well we span the age range. In any case, even now, we have female fans in their 30s and 40s.

GALA: You said the C-word! I dislike using that term "casual" because to some it means a demographic, while to others it means a business model, a development budget, or a time commitment. We don't overlap much with the crowd at pogo.com, as our players will play for hours per session and commit

Casual Connect

Virtual Worlds The Next Casual Frontier

Kevin Richardson - Casual Connect Magazine, Winter 2008

20+ hours per week to our games. Psychographically our players are in a different space as well. They're looking less to pass the time and more to socialize, achieve, explore, and sometimes kill their fellow players. However, given that the games are free and digitally downloadable, it's incredibly easy to give any of our games a try. You can participate as much or as little as you like in our virtual worlds pretty effortlessly. In terms of accessibility, the "casual" industry has a lot to teach the "core games" industry.

Rocketon: We've included a lot of casual games from top developers, but we aren't targeting the traditional 35+ female demo. We're after a younger audience, 13–25, the type that spend a lot of time on Facebook and MySpace. That said, we're embedding some of the very best downloadable and Flash casual games into our virtual world, so it should appeal to a broad range of ages.

What do you see as the main sticky components that bring your players back for more?

GALA: It's the sense of community, and the other players who become your friends. Our games are easy to learn but hard to master, and we strive to give a pleasing progression through the games to people who never pay us a cent, as well as give appropriate benefits to people who choose to pay for various virtual items that will help them along. Balancing the two is tricky but essential if you want people to keep coming back. We're very actively running events and contests and adding new content so that there is always something new in-game.

ZooKazoo: Friends and games—a virtual place for friends to get together and games to play while they're there.

Rocketon: We're creating an environment filled with social games. Each of the games we're developing emphasizes a different way of communicating online. We have flirting games, chatting games, and trading games.

Supple: Supple is kind of a hybrid virtual world and game and to boot it's an episodic game. So, there's a number of things going on. First off, people get hooked by the characters, how they speak real English, as opposed to gibberish in other virtual world games. Then they get hooked by the game. Episode 1 consists of a week in the working life of Arin Costello and her cohorts at Supple Magazine. The player's goal is to get Arin the promotion to style editor before the week is over. We treat days sort of like levels in that you have to pass a

Casual Connect

Virtual Worlds The Next Casual Frontier

Kevin Richardson - Casual Connect Magazine, Winter 2008

performance review at the end of every day in order to get to the next day. The game is sticky in that you get involved in Arin's world. Oh, yeah, you can flirt with Hugh and if you have played the game well, he'll be attracted to you and things can heat up. Well, if you go to the website (www.supplegame.com) and take a look at the movie, you'll get an idea of where things can head. Just a hint: gifts and lingerie help things move in the right direction. Just a disclaimer: there is no nudity in the game.

Please explain how the episodic content works and what's involved with creating it and releasing it to your users.

Zookazoo: We will add games with new characters to those involving the panda, chimpanzee, and jaguar, then add fables, some facts, and concerns for their future to the quests. We'll also add a new level of complexity to each game on a regular basis. The former is research and writing, the latter is adding a stage to the xml configuration document for the given game.

Supple: Each episode will be a game unto itself. Right now we have Episode 1 up there and we're working on Episode 2. We've been listening to the players and taking a lot of their advice in terms of what to do differently in Episode 2. We look at the episodes like a TV series, sort of like a sitcom/soap opera. You play the lead role and in each episode, there will be a game goal and some new storyline. In some episodes we'll be introducing new characters, some will stick around and some will be just for one or two episodes. The trick is to make each episode stand on it's own but also be connected in some story and game-play way to the other episodes. For Episode 2 we're trying to implement systems to streamline the episode development process so we can keep that sense of continuity—too much time between episodes and people may lose touch with the characters and storyline.

Rocketon: We're continually evolving the virtual world in which people play these games. We're always adding new content in the form of "Bots." Bots are custom game servers that can be embedded into the virtual world and contain all the logic for a particular game. New Bots will be released continually, so the site will always remain fresh and engaging. The Bots will range from mini-games that take a couple of minutes to learn, to more complex interactive experiences. On our website, the Bots appear as Flash objects, so the player doesn't have to install them. This makes it very easy to release new content.

Casual Connect

Virtual Worlds The Next Casual Frontier

Kevin Richardson - Casual Connect Magazine, Winter 2008

GALA: Some of our new content is player-focused, in that we're leaving the game basically untouched but holding events. Recently in Flyff we held auctions for certain rare items, and created a fun frenzy of bidding that went over well. Another event was when giant eyebats invaded the world and if players killed them and found a rare card and gave it to one of our in-game GMs, they received a prize in return. The focus here is creating player fun, and ideas bubble up from there about what we can do that will make it interesting for players. Other content reflects programming changes in the game itself. Flyff is on Version 10 and Rappelz is in its fourth version now. In Flyff we save up most changes for a big release, whereas in Rappelz there is a constant flow of new quests and geographies but we bundle up the larger, structural changes and release those every six months or so. The focus here is noticing where we need big chunks of new content (endgame dungeons, for example) or where the core rules need an upgrade (a revamped pet system, or enabling player-vs-player combat). The designers dream up cool new things and work diligently to bring them to life.

What was the biggest design challenge in making an episodic casual game?

Supple: Well, the big one is this: You want each player to end the episode at the same place so that you can have some storyline continuity in the subsequent episodes, yet you are building an interactive game which implies choice on the part of the player. So, how do you bring those both together? One way would be to think of the episode as sort of an adventure game where you have to do things in a particular order: get this key to open that door, bring this object to that person to make him do something to the other person and so on. That was tempting but we wanted a much more open-ended player experience. So we created a collection of activities that you could do in any order and with more or less emphasis on one than the other, but that would advance you in the episode.

What surprised you the most about what people enjoy in your world?

Supple: I think I didn't realize how much people would just like making believe they are Arin working at a magazine. I think people really get into the simulation of being her and doing her job, flirting and fighting with Hugh, trying to impress Margot, their boss, and so on. People write to me about how much it's like real life. Of course, not their real life, but a life they are very attracted to. Next time, we'll either record more nice dialog or rejigger the game so nasty is rewarded, too. In fact, we added a game feature in a new release we did this past summer. We call it Perk Points. It is sort of like Achievements in Xbox 360 games. There

Casual Connect

Virtual Worlds The Next Casual Frontier

Kevin Richardson - Casual Connect Magazine, Winter 2008

are four categories—romance, bitchy, and so on. So, if you want to play the game nasty, for example, you can try to get a high Perk Point score. Sort of a consolation prize for that type of playing.

Rocketon: We're still in "closed" Alpha mode, but we can already see how sticky the site is. People are very involved. Our Alpha users are giving us lots of feedback and ideas.

Zookazoo: They're making up their own games, like hide-and-seek. Some get together there regularly.

GALA: I heard one Game Master ask, "Does anyone have time to do a wedding?"—meaning that one of our staff was needed to officiate an in-game wedding between two players. I personally thought it was hilarious. But you get used to things like this. We have to manage a bunch of things that hopefully players will never encounter, such as billing fraud (don't share your password!), the growth of money supply and inflation, and abusive behavior between players. But if we do these things and others, we'll create a safe and fun world for people to create their own adventures in.

What do you think is the "secret sauce" of creating a compelling virtual world?

Rocketon: I think it's no single thing. We're focused on creating an extensible platform that can grow with our users. The key to our system is flexibility. We'll be able to constantly add new games and see what takes off. The games that don't work, we'll quickly and quietly move to the background. The games that do work, we'll keep tweaking and improving. The "secret sauce" for us is flexibility and rapid game deployment.

GALA: Take care of your players! Listen to them, solve their problems quickly, respect them, and make sure you're giving great customer service. This may be the biggest change for game developers used to making a product and then taking a break post-ship. Launch is just the start!

Zookazoo: (For us it's giving the player) a good reason to come back.

Supple: First of all, you have to divide them up into single player and multiplayer. Supple is a single player virtual world with deep AI moving the non-player characters (NPCs). So, the "secret sauce" here I think is the AI—it has to feel like

Casual Connect

Virtual Worlds The Next Casual Frontier

Kevin Richardson - Casual Connect Magazine, Winter 2008

the NPCs are people. Also, in multiplayer worlds, a lot of the “game” is leveling up, but in *Supple* it’s a virtual world with a real game in it. So, the game has to be compelling, as they say. And if you put the two together, you get great AI characters playing a compelling game with and against you. This is the magic combo that drives *Supple* and this is what people are responding to.

What are your specific distribution and marketing challenges?

GALA: Our games are available on all of the big download sites, so they’re quite easy to get a hold of. We are our own portal, so we don’t need to cut deals with other sites to reach the eventual players. We don’t see much value in physical distribution: our players only play online anyways (we support a very little bit of single-player action, but even that is online), so why not take the 25% that retailers would have taken and plow that back into making a better game? Our biggest marketing challenges are just wanting more money to get the word out even further!

Zookazoo: I think it’s mostly getting the word out from kid to kid more than anything else, so the site has to speak for itself.

Rocketon: The best marketing in the world cannot match a truly viral product. All of our effort is going into making a viral gaming system that markets itself. We’re a startup, so we don’t have the marketing power of EA or Disney. For us, it’s all about the games and the experience the users have. *ROCKETON* will either spread like crazy by its very design, or it won’t spread at all. Marketing and distribution will help, but it won’t make or break us.

How does advertising fit into your model?

Supple: We currently are using Massive’s dynamic advertising in the game, but we are planning on implementing sponsorship and product placement in future episodes. Shopping is an integral game activity in *Supple* and so it’s a natural for some sort of product placement or sponsorship situation. In Episode 1, you must purchase better outfits to make it through the week, but it’s a no-brainer to add designer brands in there. You also purchase gifts to sway the NPCs; these are currently made-up products, but these could be actual products, too.

Rocketon: We are including brands into the fabric of our world. We’re trying to avoid blatant marketing like banner ads or annoying pop-ups. Instead, many of

Casual Connect

Virtual Worlds The Next Casual Frontier

Kevin Richardson - Casual Connect Magazine, Winter 2008

the actual objects in our world that people use will be branded in a way that makes them feel integral to the world.

GALA: I'm personally a huge fan of in-game advertising given my background at Massive, and there is tremendous potential in generating revenue from the sort of impressions, reach, and frequency generated by these kind of games. Most of GALA-Net's players enjoy fantasy environments where ads don't fit, but the challenge ahead is to convince the ad world that free-to-play non-traditional games are valuable media outlets, and not second-tier. The perception is that Madden and a Transformers movie tie-in are prestigious but a free game or one made on a smaller budget is less so. There is a huge value to be unlocked for whoever can package the reality of what we know is happening—lots of real people spending lots of media time—and open the spigots of ad dollars. It will happen soon.

Zookazoo: When we have made progress on helping kids learn to advocate, we want to partner with organizations that represent causes we think the kids should find of interest, whether its habitat preservation or animal rescue.

Conclusion

So there you have it. There is something to satisfy every age, taste, and degrees of separation one wants from their "real" life. One thing is for sure: a tsunami of virtual worlds is coming at us. So put on your penguin suit, grab your sword and shield, load up on PED or gPotatoes, and meet your buddies online. It's going to be BIG.

Kevin Richardson (kevin.richardson@casualconnect.org) is a consultant in the entertainment business. Kevin was the Executive Producer over the ClueFinders series and numerous Reader Rabbit games while at The Learning Company/Mattel Interactive, and spearheaded outbound licensing for books, music, and television on a variety of brands. Before that, Kevin ran the German wing of the European Studio Grouping PALOMA, developing and localizing animated content for the German television market. He has produced over 30 "E" rated games, contributed to five feature films, and overseen animation production at home and abroad.

Casual Connect

Virtual Worlds The Next Casual Frontier

Kevin Richardson - Casual Connect Magazine, Winter 2008

Jeff Siegel is in charge of Supple's game production and is currently president of JeffMedia Solutions, a company he founded to take advantage of the contacts and experience he has accumulated over two decades in interactive media. JeffMedia finds or creates gaming opportunities, comes up with creative and practical solutions, then contracts with the best team to execute. In addition to Supple, these games have ranged from traditional console entertainment, to downloadable games, to serious games for high school students, and on to advergaming. Previously, Jeff was Vice President of Product Development for Viacom's Simon & Schuster Interactive division, where he published over 200 titles.

Steve Hoffman is the CEO of Rocketon. He is also a founding member of the Academy of Television's Interactive Media Group and Vice Chairman of the San Francisco Chapter of the Producers Guild of America. Prior to starting ROCKETON, he was the COO of Zannel, the first large-scale mobile instant media messaging platform. Before that, he was the North American Studio Head for Infospace, where he ran the U.S. mobile games publishing & development group. From 1998 - 2002, he was the Chairman & CEO of Spiderdance, Hollywood's leading interactive television studio, whose customers included NBC, Viacom, Time Warner, TBS, GSN and A&E.

Eric Hayashi is the VP of Product Development at Rocketon. He was formerly General Manager and Executive Producer at Vivendi Universal Games, where he ran two game studios: Impressions Games, known for cutting edge historical RTS games and sims; and Papyrus Racing Games Studio. While at Vivendi Universal Games, he oversaw several key franchises, including Leisure Suit Larry, Empire Earth, Nascar Racing, Lords of the Realms III, Caesar, SWAT, and others. Before Vivendi, he was Executive Producer at Atari / Infogrames / Hasbro Interactive, where he pioneered the casual games genre with Hasbro's "crown-jewel" properties including Monopoly, Scrabble, and The Game of Life.

John Young is senior vice president of business development for Gala-Net, a publisher of online microtransaction-based games. Prior to joining Gala-Net, John was a senior director of business development with Massive Incorporated. He oversaw business development in North America and Asia for the venture capital-backed advertising-in-videogames company, which was acquired by Microsoft in 2006. Previously, John was a senior associate with Easton Hunt Capital Partners. Before that he founded and ran J. Walter Thompson's interactive business in Asia and created interactive marketing programs for

Casual Connect

Virtual Worlds The Next Casual Frontier

Kevin Richardson - Casual Connect Magazine, Winter 2008

clients including Citibank, Kodak, Hong Kong Telecom, the MTR and San Miguel Beer. John holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Communication from Queen's University in Canada and a Master of Business Administration from Columbia Business School.

Dr. Michael Carter is Chief Playwright for Zookazoo where he designs and produces games. Prior to Zookazoo he was co-PI on a three-year ethnographic study of kids' informal learning and digital media and a managing editor for the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning, just released by MIT Press. Over the years he has provided design, development, and strategic assistance to foundations, start-ups, universities, and corporations internationally. Throughout his career he has focused on applying technology to learning, including shaping the curriculum that Oxford, Stanford and Yale delivered to their alumni online, creating courses with faculty from leading business schools for corporate knowledge communities, designing and producing educational software for youth, and directing education research at Apple.

Special thanks to Karen Mason, Corporate Communications Manager of Club Penguin. And Wikipedia.