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Technology Review and Redesign
Stardoll

Stardoll.com (http://www.stardoll.com/en/) is a platform for children and teens to build fashion dolls and play games within an online community.

I explored Stardoll in our first day of class, but I was left with so many questions that I just had to go a bit deeper into this fascinating product. I'm not alone. According to the site's homepage, 399,363,255 users make up "the largest online community for girls who love fashion." Stardoll started in Sweden in 2002 as "Paperdoll Heaven" and is still based in Stockholm. Today, Stardoll is a global juggernaut, with gameplay available in 28 languages.

The first prompt on the website is to build your own Stardoll. Unfortunately, the issues start early. The start page shows dolls with a variety of different ethnic looks, giving a semblance of diversity. All of the doll options are thin and beautiful, with default "Barbie feet" ready for high heels. The doll is highly customizable, so it is possible to adjust the doll's shape and weight, skin color, and gender, but these options are not made clear on the homepage.

Each Stardoll also comes with a room, a personal page, and "a welcome gift of 500 Starcoins." Stardoll started as a virtual paper doll, so fashion is a major component of the game. Today, real world fashion brands like DKNY and Nelly.com feature their clothing on the site, available for virtual purchase using Starcoins.

Those Starcoins can be earned through gameplay, but they can also be purchased with actual money and then used in Starplaza, the in-game mall. The issue of using real money should be of interest to parents. Children need their parents' credit card in order to buy individual items or a membership in this world. The account is free and it is possible to use the platform without spending money, but memberships—which turn the user into a "Superstar"—will cost an automatically reoccurring $6.95 a month.

Another area of parental concern is the "Chat and Friends" category which allows users the opportunity to chat with other Stardoll users and join clubs ranging from "ZacEfron" to "StopSealKilling". As with all online games, users agree that they are at least 13 years of age or older to access the site. Of course, it's very likely that there are users younger than 13 on the site.

Seemingly created for young children on the platform, a "KidSafe membership" allows access to all doll related activities and games, but blocks the message center, Guest Book, and other forums. It's likely that this feature was developed based on parental feedback and issues related to cyberbullying. According to the website's FAQ section, "We are always working hard to improve the safety and security at Stardoll.com. We continuously moderate the site and have several filters in place to avoid name-calling and bad language." A violation of the code of behavior called the One Stop Rules will result in account termination.

Applying the "Criteria to Consider When Creating New Media Content for Children" to Stardoll is a difficult task. At almost every point, this tool reveals deeper issues within the game. The chat categories offer a community aspect to the game, where users can share the hard work they've done to create their dolls but can also speak more generally. Support might be found in clubs like "FamilyProblems," but these open forums can be potentially dangerous places for unwanted sexual content or users pretending to be someone they're not. Stardoll says it moderates these groups but with many millions of users, it seems very possible that troubling situations may slip through the cracks.

Unfortunately, I believe Stardoll helps children (though the site's language frames the

audience as girls) develop issues around body image and gender stereotypes that can cause difficulty throughout their lives. Rather than focusing on strong female characters, impossible beauty standards, makeup, and fashion are presented as the tools of the game.

Stardoll is a very fun and engaging site but in terms of value, it's a capitalistic game. Stardoll is a money-making platform and its unlikely that the company is going to abandon its lucrative partnerships with real clothing brands. However there are possibilities for improvement.

In terms of artistry, Stardoll is actually an extremely well designed platform with beautiful graphics. The final dolls can be works of art and are exhibited as such in the Spotlight tab. As a former Barbie Fashion Design maven, I think fashion games can help children develop creative design skills. As it is now, the design category is limited to hair, fashion, interior and jewelry.  This would be a great place for expanding the game.

The interior design interface offers a fairly robust option to design patterns, a process with mathematical applications. The design category could be much improved by including the option to create and build furniture. This could use 3D modeling to teach users geometry and spatial reasoning skills. Allowing users to move beyond fashion could open up additional graphic design, behavior design and engineering games within the platform.

In an ideal world, Stardoll would sever ties with fashion brands, build stronger characters for the much more diverse set of dolls, and explore the rich potential of arts-based learning games. While the new and improved educational Stardoll seems very unlikely, small changes could build on the existing artistic tools of the game to improve its learning potential. Stardoll has recently released its own line of mobile games. These games may offer more possibilities for creating more educational material that will depart from the issues of the main site. Stardoll isn't going anywhere soon, so hopefully she can diversify her portfolio beyond fashion and makeup.

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