

When Adults Crash Pokemon Party, Kids Grow Up at Net Speed

By Thomas E. Weber . Wall Street Journal , Eastern edition; New York, N.Y. [New York, N.Y.]25 Oct 1999: B1.

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

With the Pokemon craze in full swing and Internet mania as strong as ever, good Web sites don't stay amateur for long, even when they're run by kids. Young teens like Mr. (Bancho) Kitchpanich now routinely compete for visitors with professionally run sites and fret over their standing in closely watched rankings.

The Pokemon Web sites -- and there are thousands of them -- offer chat rooms, message boards and endless pages of trivia about the cute little "pocket monsters" that are all over video games, trading cards and a TV cartoon. But the staple offering is news. In recent days, Mr. Kitchpanich's site, www.pokec.com, has covered everything from the release of a new Pokemon game to a candy maker's deal to develop Poke Gum.

For a while the kids' Pokemon Web sites were innocent hobbies. Then, earlier this year, avaricious grown-ups descended on the scene. Sites like Pokemon Village popped up. The brainchild of Scott Smith, an adult who operates a variety of Web sites for profit, it ranks the top 2,000 Pokemon sites based on how much traffic they draw. To qualify, a Pokemon site must display a small "Pokemon Village Top Sites" badge. The emblem serves as a tracking device for Mr. Smith's rankings, but it also links back to Mr. Smith's site -- meaning that every site that displays the badge can potentially drum up visitors for Mr. Smith.

FULL TEXT

Fourteen-year-old Bomby Kitchpanich started his Web site to praise Squirtle's powers and explain how to defeat Rhydon. "It started out real small, with maybe one or two hits a week," recalls the ninth-grader at Dimond High School in Anchorage, Alaska.

That was in February. Now, Bomby's Pokemon Center site brings in several thousand visitors a day, runs paid ads from companies like American Express and Qualcomm and has attracted a potential buyer. "I never intended to make any money off it," he says. "But if you put in an hour every day for eight months, you get something pretty big."

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Billionaire Web executives brag about Internet time, the dizzying speed at which technologies evolve and innovators get rich. Judging by the frenzied maneuverings of young Pokemon Web masters, kids are being pulled into Internet time, too, as their hobbies are swept up in dot-com fever, complete with fierce rivalries, tempting ad deals and grown-ups seeking a piece of the action.

"I spend at least half an hour to an hour every day, more on weekends," says Richard Cao, the 16-year-old proprietor

of the Psychic Pokemon Connection site, located at www.psypoke.com. When I asked why, his answer echoed business presentations I've heard countless times from CEOs twice his age: It's critical to add new material to the site every day – or frequent visitors to the site will be disappointed, they won't drop by as often and traffic will drop.

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The rankings soon brought out the worst in Pokemon Web masters. Cheaters sought to fool the rankings by repeatedly viewing their own pages. "It's turned into a real headache," Mr. Smith says. "I get e-mails all day long saying this site's cheating, that site's cheating." He's counting on a new, cheat-resistant system to woo back several prominent sites that had defected in protest.

"The rankings changed things a lot," says Bill Gill, the grown-up proprietor of Pojo.com, one of the most popular sites. Mr. Gill, a self-described "Mr. Mom," started his site late last year after seeing how much his daughter loved Pokemon and quickly turned the site into a home business. Once, Mr. Gill says, Web masters young and old shared information, "but ever since the polls came out, it got competitive."

In addition to pitting the sites against one another, the ratings produced by Mr. Smith and a few other sites also drew advertisers out of the woodwork. Now they could see, at a glance, which sites were most popular, and therefore most valuable.

It took one more development to fully commercialize sites like Bomby Kitchpanich's. Not surprisingly, most companies are reluctant to sign business deals with youngsters. So other sites stepped in as go-betweens. These sites, typically bigger operations run by adults, entered arrangements to "host" sites for kids. The host deals with the advertisers and inserts ads into a kid's site. In exchange, the young Web master receives free Internet service and, in some cases, a cut of the ad money.

Are kids up to the task of unraveling complicated business agreements? I spoke to one girl, age 14, who operates a very popular site and agreed to a hosting deal for half of the ad revenue. When I asked her about the details, she wasn't sure how much money she could expect or when she would get it.

The big companies whose ad spending fuels this system never even hear about such deals. The U S West promotions running on the 14-year-old's site were placed by Flycast, a Web-ad network that sells space on more than 1,000 sites. Flycast, in turn, deals with the site host – not the kids producing the pages. A Flycast spokesman says the company wouldn't necessarily know if a site was produced by a kid.

At least Bomby Kitchpanich is dealing directly with the Internet start-up that wants to buy him out. And the price he hopes to get would cover a decent chunk of college tuition. His father, Bancha Kitchpanich, owner of a Thai

restaurant in Anchorage, has brought in a lawyer friend for advice. "I think it's a good opportunity for Bomby," Mr. Kitchpanich says.

His son, meanwhile, is busy preparing for the next big thing to hit the Pokemon world, the release of a feature film next month. "Mainly, I just want to be a resource for anything related to Pokemon," he says.

E-mail me at tweber@wsj.com or join me live online today to discuss kids and the Web. The chat begins at 2 p.m. EDT at wsj.com/voices.

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