

PLUSH PET GETS A LIFE

Webkinz craze unites physical, online worlds

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Susanne Martin is hunting for an Internet-savvy koala.

Talk about an endangered species. She thought she might get one last week, but it eluded her.

"I'll be going every day now until I get one," the West Toledo mom said.

The object of her search is called a Webkinz, a stuffed animal that quietly has become a must-have toy for kids.

What sets apart these koalas - and dogs, cats, pigs, and others - is that each comes with a unique code promising entrance to a world of fun on the Web. Punch the code into the Webkinz Web site (www.webkinz.com) and you'll find a virtual reality for your plush toy, complete with games and activities.

This marriage of physical and online worlds has made the toys a recent sensation that reminds some retailers of the mania that once surrounded Beanie Babies.

"The kids are crazy about these things. I get at least three calls a day," said Sandy Sack, co-owner of Schramm's Flowers in West Toledo.

She said business was slow for a while but picked up after Christmas. Now the items are out of stock at her store.

Scott DiPierro, buyer/manager for the St. Vincent Mercy Medical Center Auxiliary Gift Shop, which sells Webkinz toys, said they have become incredibly popular lately.

"It's just been an overnight sensation," Mr. DiPierro said.



Each of the stuffed animals comes with a code that, when entered into the Webkinz Web site, allows the toy's owner to play with an online version of the pet, and to participate in games and other activities.



Webkinz toys are on display in Yankee Doodle Flag Co. in Sylvania Township. (BLADE PHOTOS/ERIC SUMBERG)

Word seems to be spreading by mouth more than anything else; the toy's maker says it hasn't done any advertising. (Local stores that carry the stuffed animals are listed on the Webkinz Web site.)

"It's being promoted by other kids. It's not being hyped or marketed," said Susan McVeigh, communications manager for Ganz, the Ontario company that dreamed up Webkinz. "They're not being force-fed it. They're talking about it to each other."

She said Webkinz toys were developed as a way to take classic stuffed animals to the next level.

"Webkinz is just sort of taking a look at how kids are playing these days and how you integrate their traditional love of plush," she said. "They love the nurturing and the caring for a plush pet, and so how do you make it more exciting?"

At a time when kids seem to be born with a keyboard attached to their hands, Ganz found the answer in the Internet.

With Webkinz, children can hop online and see Web versions of their animals. While online, the youngsters can outfit their pets with clothes and decorate their toys' rooms using virtual money earned through games and quizzes. They can even invite their friends' Webkinz pets over for a party, communicating by choosing among a list of preset phrases so that no personal information is shared.

There are hunger, happiness, and health meters on the screen too, reminders that all pets - even Web ones - need to play, eat, and exercise.

Webkinz toys sell for around \$10, and smaller versions, called Lil' Kinz, retail for around \$7.50, Ms. McVeigh said. Each Webkinz comes with a free one-year membership to the Web site, which can only be extended by buying another toy.

Industry insiders are taking note. Webkinz won the Toy of the Year Award in the Specialty Toy category at the annual Toy Industry Toy of the Year Awards earlier this month.

"Webkinz are creating a new phenomenon in the toy industry that crosses over gender boundaries and retail outlets," said Reyne Rice, toy trends specialist for the Toy Industry Association, the trade organization for North American toy manufacturers.

It's also part of a trend toward developing safe online portals for kids to satisfy concerned parents who want their kids to be tech-savvy but safe, she said.

Ganz won't say how many Webkinz units are made or sold, but Ms. McVeigh said the Web site has more than 1 million members.

Kids like Mrs. Martin's 9-year-old son, William Beebe, keep those figures going up. At last count, he had 17 and rising.

"My friend has 45," he said.

Collin Walsh, 8, used his own money to buy a Webkinz last week at Yankee Doodle Flag Co. in Sylvania Township. He chose a cocker spaniel while his brother, Evan, got a Webkinz pug.

Their mother, Lisa, of Sylvania Township, believes that young boys should be outside running around and using their muscles, but she said there are some benefits to Webkinz.

"I think it's a great alternative to computer games," Mrs. Walsh said. "I think there are some good lessons."

Yankee Doodle president Fred Bretzloff, who has trouble keeping the things on his store's shelves due to their popularity, agreed that they teach young kids both practical skills and intangible ones, like responsibility.

"The nice thing is that they learn how to use the keyboard. They learn how to use the computer. They have to use money management," he said.

His store now advertises Webkinz birthday parties, complete with one of the toys for each child. He said he has a waiting list of more than 1,000 customers looking for different Webkinz toys.

Kids just need to have them, it seems.

"Everybody at our school has one and we wanted one," said Emma Boeke, 8, of Petersburg, Mich.

She and her brother, Reed, nearly 7, are allowed to play with their Webkinz toys online for 30 minutes a day.

And for good reason, according to their mother, Rebecca.

"I had to do that or they'd be on for hours."

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William Beebe, right, has 17 Webkinz toys and rising.

