

Case study: Bin Weevils

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Overview

Bin Weevils is a UK-based gaming website for children, where players create their own insect avatars ("weevils") to play games in a 3D virtual world set in a bin. The game is free to join. Each player has a nest and a garden, which they can customise by playing games (races, puzzles, knowledge games) to earn in-game currency (mulch) to buy items to build for their nest and garden. Bin Weevils can interact with each other (chats, messaging, nest visits) and explore different places in the bin world. In addition to the free basis of the game, a paid membership option is available ("Tycoon membership", "dosh" currency) which allows users to access further paid-for features.

Bin Weevil world

[Source: Bin Weevils]

Bin Weevils aims to be a coherent virtual world for children, with an avatar which can shop, socialise, work and play within a shared world with its own geography. No children's content in traditional media approaches this level of immersion; indeed the one-to-many nature of broadcast media precludes it. The possibilities for children's content suggested by services such as Bin Weevils also raise concerns over privacy, security and aggressive marketing directed at children. Bin Weevils takes verifiable steps to address these concerns, but it is easy to imagine a similar service failing to do so.

Background and context

Bin Weevils started as a cartoon series on Nickelodeon in 1998. Due to its success, an online virtual site was created for the series, first on Nickelodeon and from 2007, as a stand-alone site. Since 2010, Bin Weevils has been independent from Nickelodeon. The site was redesigned and went into independent ownership (Bin Weevils Ltd.). The site has won the Bafta Award in the category "Best Children's Website" in 2011, 2012 and 2013.

Bin Weevils describes itself as “[...] a fun, friendly and engaging environment which brings social and educational values to kids by using brain games, or by teaching them about time and budget management.”

Content strategy

The content strategy of Bin Weevils can best be described as a combination of providing entertainment and education. The fun element of playing games is tied to rewards that allow players to build their own nests. Structurally, the game consists of the player’s own nest and other places in the bin world that weevils have to go to earn their currency, level points and interact with other players. These places and their related activities include:

- Shopping Mall: buy nest/garden items and pets
- Airport and Diner: eat, shop and fly to Mulch Island
- Gong’s Pipenest: sell old items and enter competitions
- Dirt Valley: play car races
- Bin Pet Paradise: play with your pet and shop
- Weevil Post: read magazines and collect tickets
- Rigg’s Movie Multiplex: watch TV shows (currently Bin Weevils cartoon, Tycoon TV (paid for), My Little Pony episodes and games), shop nest cinema items and collect earnings
- Figg’s Café: eat
- Flum’s Fountain: meet friends and earn currency/points
- Club Fling: dance, play games and buy party items
- Tink’s Tree: feed the tree to earn garden seeds
- Slam’s Party Box: party with friends
- Flem Manor: play word games, visit the editor’s office, library and art gallery
- Castle Gam: take part in secret mission to save the bin
- Dosh’s Palace: change the way the weevil looks
- The Summer Fair: play games
- Lab’s Lab: play knowledge games like the Daily Brain Strain

Contribution to Public Service Objectives

Bin Weevils contributes towards fulfilling PSO7 by providing original and high quality material for children and young adults.

PSO7 – Children and young people

Bin Weevils contributes to fulfilling PSO7 as it offers original and high quality material for children and young people.

The site and its material can be described as being of high quality as it offers different entertaining and educational activities. It can further be described as high-quality content as a number of safety measures are used to ensure that the site is a secure environment for children (see below). In the site’s section for parents, the game is described as an “educational adventure”.

In addition to providing entertainment value, as TV content does, the educational value of the game is different from that of kids TV programming, as it requires players to be active and also interact with other players. This stands in contrast to the primarily passive experience children have when they watch kids content on TV.

Some of the activities are of direct, others of indirect, educational value. Direct educational value is for example provided in the Lab’s Lab. Players can go there to

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take knowledge tests to earn currency and points. The Lab offers a Daily Brain Strain test as well as different subject tests.

Bin Weevil laboratory



[Source: Bin Weevils]

The Daily Brain Strain test develops different skills including, languages, logic and mathematics. The ten different subject quizzes test actual knowledge in specific areas and also train players' ability to answer questions under time pressure. Aside from the Lab's Lab, players can participate in Secret Weevil Service missions that teach problem solving skills.

Bin Weevil test subjects



[Source: Bin Weevils]

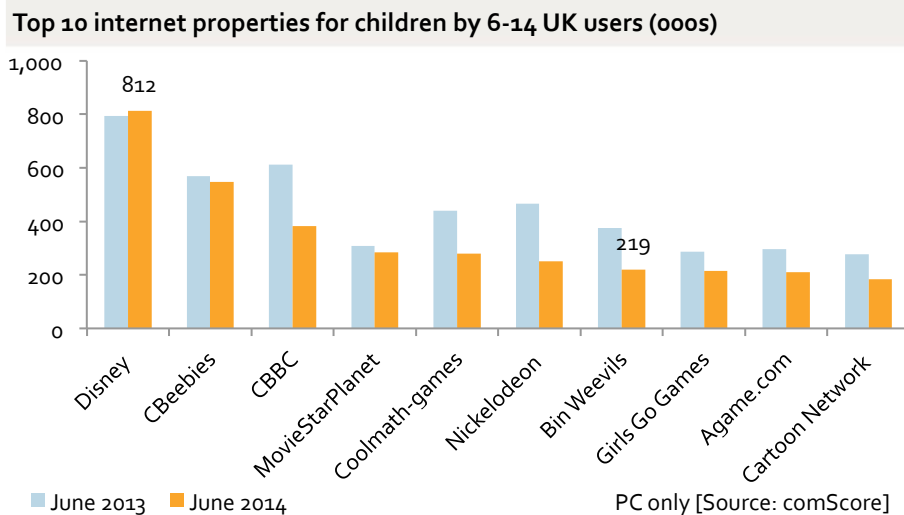
In addition to these directly educational activities, the majority of the other activities contribute to developing different types of general skills. By creating and looking after their own avatar, pets, nest and garden, children can learn to take responsibility for themselves and others. They can further learn about saving money and budgeting by earning currency and spending it on items to build their

nest and garden. In the paid-for version (“Tycoon membership”), players can run their own business or write their own magazine to earn a monthly salary when other players visit their business or rate their magazine.

As mentioned above, Bin Weevils addresses the safety concerns associated with online sites for children to ensure that the site is a secure environment. Safety information is provided for parents and additional resources are listed to further learn about child safety online. The site carries the kidSAFE® seal, which is awarded by an independent certification service after reviewing safety practices of websites for children. Bin Weevils also ensures that children’s behaviour, chats and messages are monitored and moderated.¹ Children are educated to avoid using bad language and to take precautions such as reporting other players.

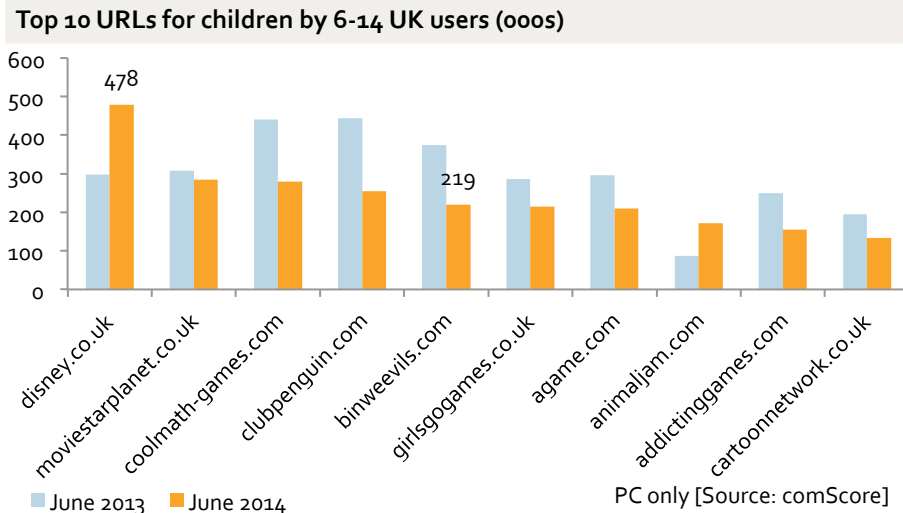
Audience reach and profile

In the UK, according to comScore, Bin Weevils was accessed by 430,000 unique visitors in June, putting it in the top 15 sites aimed at children, which is dominated by broadcaster and games websites, led by Disney and the BBC.



Whilst comScore does not track under-18 mobile internet users, amongst 6-14 year old PC-based users, Bin Weevils ranks in the top 10 online properties, with 220,000 unique users in June 2014, just under a quarter of the audience for the Disney, the No.1 ranked property. Amongst single URLs, as opposed to broader internet properties, Bin Weevils performs even better, as the fifth most visited children’s address by 6-14 year olds in June 2014.

¹ Only pre-approved words and phrases are allowed. The communication of phone numbers or other personally identifiable information is blocked.



Business model and revenue

The site generates different types of revenues. The free version of the game is supported by advertising. Bin Weevils states that it showcases third party child-friendly advertisement and campaigns with educational benefits (such as NHS, TFL road safety or online safety campaigns). No advertising is run for brands that promote unhealthy lifestyles.

The site offers diverse branding opportunities, including transforming existing areas of the virtual world into branded zones; creating dedicated branded areas; offering branded items or games; in-world billboards (display ads); as well as more traditional pre-roll video ads.² Given that Bin Weevils aims to provide an immersive virtual world experience, these extensive opportunities to promote products within that world are bound to be attractive to brands.

Additional paid-for revenue is generated through the Bin Tycoon monthly membership fees paid by some players, which range from £3-£5/month.

Membership gives players access to additional items as well as whole new categories of activity, such as the opportunity to run an in-game business mentioned above. Ancillary revenues related to the franchise include merchandising, magazine, trading card series, clothing, books and music sales. A new game "Weevil World" is expected to launch in 2014.

Summary

Bin Weevils is a virtual world aimed at children, offering original games and media, and the opportunity to interact with other players. It therefore fulfils the public service requirement to include "high quality and original material for children and young people". Some of the experience it offers, particularly the immersive and interactive elements, are not and could not be found on television or other traditional media. It is representative of a wider realisation of the interactive possibilities of the internet for young people (e.g. Neopets, Kim Kardashian: Hollywood, Runescape etc.), which offer new forms of entertainment, as well as new risks, for young people.

² <http://advertise.binweevils.com/what-we-do/>

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