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# VIDEO GAMES

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## Disney Fairies: Pixie Hollow

By LEIGH ALEXANDER

A Disney Online presentation of a game developed by Disney Online for the PC. Free-\$6/per month

Virtual-world spinoffs from popular entertainment brands can grab millions of eyeballs with minimal effort, which is why it's so impressive that Disney has put together a rich, friendly and full-feeling environment for its successful Fairies franchise. "Pixie Hollow" takes major design cues from its older sibling "Club Penguin," but raises the formula to robust new heights with a focus on personalization that successfully targets young girls who want to go beyond watching Tinkerbell's world and start living in it.



Disney Fairies: Pixie Hollow'

Given the existing popularity of the brand, Disney could have easily slapped together low-budget graphics and a feeble, ad-festooned web interface, put the "Fairies" label on it and still made megabucks. Instead, the colorful and engaging "Pixie Hollow" online play space, with its lush floral fantasy backdrop and sonorous orchestral background music, puts to shame its much more overtly opportunistic competition. In a climate where virtual worlds are widely viewed as another hot brand extension tactic, "Pixie Hollow" can fly on its own two wings.

Kids first create, customize and name their fairy avatar from a dizzying array of options, like hairstyles and colors and a broad swath of fairy-appropriate fashion choices including leaf skirts and flower-petal tops. While there are no boy fairies -- this is squarely a girl's world -- the sheer number of options guarantees that no two fairies will look alike. Things are already off to an auspicious start: Disney unveiled the character creation tool solo several months ago and already has more than 7.5 million user-designed fairies.

"Pixie Hollow" loosely follows the "Club Penguin" layout style that distributes minigame spots across several interconnected areas. Most of the games are engaging and original, not just old casual games re-skinned with "Fairies" trappings. Players have to build a spider web to guide a dewdrop, for instance, or loop together airborne flower petals to collect them. They're all simple enough for little hands, but feature gradually increasing difficulty levels for older players.

Social elements in "Pixie Hollow" are minimal, thanks to a rigorous filtering system that prevents kids from cursing or sharing personal information, and basically encourages them to speak only in pre-approved phrases such as "Tinker-talents are great!" Kids can add other fairies they meet in "Pixie Hollow" to a buddy list, but they will probably do so more for the rewards given for collecting friends than the minimal opportunities for interpersonal relationships.

Continuing "Pixie Hollow's" theme of personalization, the prizes for most minigames and other activities are things like flowers, leaves and seeds that can be used to create or purchase additional clothing items or furniture for a fairy's home hollow. Nonpaying users can traverse the world, chat with other fairies and play games, but only paying subscribers can participate in the shopping and crafting. While there's plenty of fun to be had for free, Disney has reserved the best rewards for those who convince Mom and Dad to hand over a credit card.

Of course, the currency system still means that kids will end up repeating the minigames not necessarily out of sheer enjoyment, but to earn enough pumpkin seeds to buy that cornsilk bedspread or those pricey saffron shoes. A recent in-world event to celebrate the release of the "Tinkerbell" direct-to-DVD movie, for instance, was basically just a way for players to earn prodigious amounts of dandelion fluff they can use to craft new items.

Though proportionate to a player's success at a game, payoffs are generally slim and earning any of the huge selection of desirables on offer will take time. While some parents may consider this a lesson in working for rewards, others may feel skeptical at seeing their child learning the skills that could one day make them a "World of Warcraft" addict.

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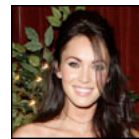
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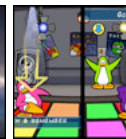
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