



2 new kids' social spaces: ToonsTunes, Scuttlepad

One is both feature- and media-rich, the other plain & simple. Both aimed at under-13s, they're social in different ways (one a virtual world, the other a social network site).

Scuttlepad.com

My first reaction to Scuttlepad was that its basic concept – that kids under 13 need their own spaces online for safe social networking – certainly made sense. This is a social utility for kids, with the most basic social network site features: profile with the user's photo and status updates. The difference is the safety feature that only pre-approved words can be used in site communications or status updates (not phrases, as in some kids' services such as [Togetherville](#) and [TinyPlanets](#)). So Scuttlepad not only blocks profanity, it has "white lists" of approved words in several categories for phrase and sentence construction (subject words, verbs, and object words) – 100-600 words per category, Scuttlepad CEO Chad Perry told me, adding that moderators watch text-based self-expression 24/7 (and photos all pre-approved before published).

So I'm thinking this limits self-expression quite a bit for the upper end of Scuttlepad's targeted age group, 6-11, which – as they approach middle school – are getting increasingly social and have come to expect a lot of freedom of expression online (including the large number of under-13s already using Facebook contrary to its terms of use). But Perry told me the site's users see this sentence construction as a game. In fact, in this site that decided to forgo the "clutter" of games, Scuttlepad itself is supposedly the game.

That's fine, especially for very verbal kids, but how long will the game of constructive use of the white lists hold their attention, when we know that they also tend to make a game of "gaming the system" in virtual worlds (see ["Top 8 workarounds of kid virtual world users"](#)). What I've learned from my friends who are virtual-world moderators and online-community managers is that kids are brilliant at profanity-filter and keyword-blocker workarounds (e.g., the old and probably now passé use of periods or ellipses to give their ages).

Scuttlepad moderators will be ready for this, the company says, but I wonder how long even this activity can be sticky for 6-to-9-year-olds for whom, research shows, games are the favorite online activity. An iPod Touch with half a dozen game apps downloaded to it would easily eclipse Scuttlepad use after a quick check-in for a clever status update. But I really wonder if this is a viable service for 5th- and 6th-graders who are already middle-schooler wannabes. It may eventually become a more viable business model as kids' tech use gets increasingly segmented, but I'm not sure.

[Fast Company's lightweight review](#) of Scuttlepad suggests it might be "fertile ground for strangers with candy," but I think there's much more such fertile ground online – such as text and videocam chat rooms – than a service that says it approves all photos before they're posted, restricts all communications to white-listed words, and has moderators watching 24 hours a day. I think Fast Company's just echoing mainstream news reporters who choose to ignore youth-risk research (see, for example, just the executive summary of our recent report to Congress, "Youth Safety on a Living Internet," linked to and described [here](#); the [Harvard Berkman Center task force's "Enhancing Child Safety & Online Technologies"](#); and ["Online Safety: Why Research is Important"](#)).

ToonsTunes.com

Surfing through ToonsTunes's information pages, demo videos, and kid-created music videos indicates to me that this is a great addition to the kid virtual world lineup – especially for young music fans, who can create and perform their own tunes here.

TT has all the usual kid-virtual-world features (avatars, places to hang out virtually, and games kids play to earn currency – “koynz” – to buy clothes, living quarters, furnishings, pets, etc.), but it also has some creative features and activities I've seen nowhere else.

First, your avatar gets an instrument right at the beginning, and instruments are key covetable items. Then there's Mix-O-Matic, “the music-making engine” in the TT recording studio. With it, avatars “create tracks by selecting from thousands of different instrumental loops – hip hop drums, pop guitar, funk keyboards, etc.” – recorded for ToonsTunes by professional artists, according to the [TT press page](#). Then they can go to one of ToonsTunes's clubs and perform their songs, turn them into background music in their “pods” (their furnishable in-world homes). Finally there's the Jukebox, which allows avatars “to share their music directly on the site by requesting it on the Jukebox,” the site says. “Users can request any song that has ever been created on ToonsTunes. Tooners can also ask for an encore of the song if they really like it.”

To me (who studied music for a long time as a kid), this sounds like awfully fun Music 101 right when everybody should have a chance to mess around with music (I'll be interested to see if the musical parts prove to be as fun for the 8-to-14-year-olds it's aimed at as it sounds to adults). The other thing I like about ToonsTunes is how its focus naturally nudges young users into what social-media researchers call “interest-driven social networking,” with elements of interest and skill development as well as social development.

ToonsTunes is all about “messing around” and points users in the direction of “geeking out” – or serious informal learning and professional work – in the taxonomy of “hanging out, messing around, and geeking out” you'll see in the [Digital Youth Project's book of that title](#) (the subtitle is “Kids Living and Learning with New Media”). This is what's really exciting about social media and technology: how they enable children and young people to find their interests, develop skills and talent, find and be mentors, participate in interest communities, and even become professional whatever long before they've finished school!