



For Immediate Release

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WHYVILLE.COM KIDS EAT HEALTHY OR GET SCURVY

*125,000 Whyvillians Engaged in Virtual Nutrition Project;
Recent Survey Shows that Whyvillians Now Paying Better Attention to Their Diet*

(Pasadena, CA - May 23, 2007) – As childhood obesity, health education and children’s nutrition continue to be major concerns for parents and policy makers worldwide, Whyville.com – the only learning-based virtual world for today’s digital kids – has engaged kids in an innovative virtual nutrition project in which “you become what you eat.” Launched in November 2005 through a partnership with nutrition experts at The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio, with funding provided by the executive vice chancellor for health affairs of the UT System, WhyEat has now close to 125,000 Whyvillians volunteering to keep their virtual selves healthy by eating virtual food everyday.

Through the WhyEat project, Whyvillians have collectively made more than 3.5 million trips to Whyville’s virtual Cafeteria and consumed more than 8.5 million food items. Of this total, approximately 20 percent have found the appearance of their avatar (virtual persona) altered by a poor diet and have had to find ways to restore their health. Additionally, more than 245,000 trips to Whyville’s virtual dietician have been logged.

“In our virtual world, we can speed up the effects of bad nutrition, taking days not years to see the consequences of the food choices our kids make,” said Jen Sun, director of the WhyEat project in Whyville. “If Whyvillians choose an unbalanced diet filled with junk food, they rapidly see the negative effects through changes in their avatars’ appearance. At the same time, maintaining a healthy diet helps their avatar look good and function well in Whyville.”

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In a recent survey, 45 percent of WhyEat participants stated the program has changed the way they think about nutrition choices in their real lives. This impact of the virtual world on the real world is now also the subject of a scientific investigation being conducted by researchers at The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio. Further, WhyEat is starting to be used in middle school health and sciences classrooms throughout the country.

“It’s extremely alarming to see that the number of overweight children and adolescents is on the rise; in fact, the prevalence of obesity in children 6-11 years old is three times what it was in the 1970s,” continued Sun. “It is pretty clear that lecturing kids about nutrition isn’t going to solve the problem. In Whyville, kids are given the tools to figure it out for themselves – with a little help from us, of course.”

WhyEat is an interactive experience that involves Whyvillians planning their own meals by purchasing food at the grocery market, grill, or the Whyville Cafeteria, which is sponsored by the School Nutrition Association. Each Whyvillian has their own “nutrition calculator” that lists the nutritional value of the foods they eat, and also calculates imbalances in their diets. The calculator also helps kids understand how to interpret nutritional information and food labels.

Too few calories and the avatars become pale and sickly. Too much junk food or desserts might result in bloating and gas. Not enough Vitamin A and the avatar’s eyes are affected. A lack of vitamin C causes unsightly scurvy sores, while a lack of calcium results in weak bones and a bandaged head. Conversely, Whyvillians who maintain healthy eating habits are rewarded with additional clams (Whyville currency). Since their avatar is their “face” to the Whyville community, Whyvillians are motivated to figure out how they can look healthy again. The virtual dietitian in the nutrition center also gives diagnoses and advice based on the virtual eating habits of the specific avatar.

When surveyed whether WhyEat has made an impact in their real life, one Whyville citizen from New York stated, “I’ve been eating better and I’m at the perfect weight range for my height. I started getting active too and now I walk dogs every afternoon. Healthy lifestyles are great. Of course there’s nothing wrong in eating pizza on Fridays. Just not too much and work it off ☺.”

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About Whyville

Whyville.com is the only learning-based virtual world for today's digital kids. For eight years, the site has successfully created an environment that engages its vested "citizens" to learn about life, while having fun. Inside Whyville, kids play, engage with activities, earn currency, socialize, learn, design, eat, dance, govern and much more. For sponsors, Whyville enables organizations to *be on the inside* of the virtual world, providing them with the means to truly interact with the hard-to-reach demographic of 8 to 15 year olds. Numedeon, the parent company of Whyville, was created by scientists from Caltech who combined research expertise in neuroscience with education experience to conceive of an innovative way to harness the power of the Internet for the purpose of engagement and real learning. In addition to its flagship property, Numedeon has developed a number of virtual worlds using its proprietary technology.

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