



Photos courtesy of Nanci Nickelson

# Building a kids' world

Oxnard woman hopes her Startheria website, linked goods catch on

By Allison Bruce  
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It's a fantasy world where good battles evil, secret codes abound, and children use avatars to fly around, interact and play games.

The Magical World of Startheria is a virtual world created by an Oxnard entrepreneur who hopes to expand the interactive online experience into books, toys, other retail products and a television show.

Nanci Nickelson hopes the website, to officially launch in mid-January, will grow to rival other online sites for the "tween" set, such as Disney's Club Penguin or toymaker Ganz's Webkinz.

Eventually, a related business of Nickelson's, Mother's Garden, will sell bottled, flavored waters for kids that feature the characters from Startheria.

Kids will be able to use codes from those products on the site, similar to the kind of tie-ins found with Webkinz toys, she said.

Nickelson said she wants the site to be something beyond games that helps teach kids ethics and values and how their ac-



tions affect those around them. "The books and the stories are all about love, hope, peace and joy and kindness," she said.

It took about 18 months to get the con-

cept down and the entertainment franchise fleshed out. All of the design and programming took another two years.

"It's been a long journey," Nickelson said.

Virtual worlds for the 8-to-11 crowd (Startheria targets those 6 to 12) is a hot place to be. According to M2 Research, which puts out a report twice a year on kids and games, 90.8 percent of tween boys ages 8 to 11 and 93 percent of tween girls play games online.

Of the top five sites that had more than 1 million visitors a month at the beginning of this year, four were started by smaller, independent companies, according to M2 Research. One of those, Club Penguin, was later acquired by Disney.

Louise Curcio, a senior analyst with M2 Research, said competition from big-name toy and entertainment companies makes it more of a challenge for new independent sites.

"The initial companies that were in this business had the advantage that there weren't that many players in the market," she said. If they had good game play and were able to get the word out, they had a good chance at success.

With companies such as Disney, Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network now using their brands to offer casual games and virtual worlds for kids online, it's harder for an independent site to step out of the pack.

But even with that challenge, the market is there, Curcio said.

"If a company can produce the right

See STARATHERIA on E6

# A formal plan will help conquer financial anxiety

Well-off pair's prudence offers lessons

By Dave Carpenter  
AP personal finance writer

CHICAGO — It's time to take stock of your finances.

The average household's net worth is down 23 percent from three years ago. Unemployment is at 9.8 percent, and 11 million homeowners owe more on their mortgages than their houses are worth.

But there are signs of a recovery. Jobless claims have fallen 15 percent from a year ago. The stock market is up 18 percent since September, and the expected tax cuts for most Americans means they'll have more to spend.

After two years of embracing frugality, 2011 will be the year millions will make financial decisions they put off. This includes

everything from buying a new car to getting back into the stock market.

The mixed signals have prompted even those who have been spared from serious financial trouble to second-guess old assumptions about investing, debt and home values.

"It's almost scary to be doing OK in this economy," said Andrew Craig, who owns a small telecommunications consulting firm in Chicago.

Andrew, 46, and his wife, Kelly, took a 50 percent hit in their investments and are now rebuilding. Overall, the couple from Clarendon Hills, Ill., have weathered the market turmoil well.

A key factor is that they had significant, stable income to help



M. Spencer Green / AP

The Craig family of Clarendon Hills, Ill., dad Andrew, mom Kelly, and sons Quintin, 7, and Cullen, 4, weathered the Great Recession comparatively well, a look at their situation shows.

rebuild their losses. They have combined income of \$210,000, no debt besides a mortgage on their

three-bedroom house, and can afford private schooling for sons Quintin, 7, and Cullen, 4.

Nevertheless, the stock market cut the value of their investments in half, and left the Craigs questioning how to proceed.

"As we bottomed out and were climbing back up, we really felt we needed a new perspective," said Kelly Craig, executive account manager for a biochemicals company. "We needed to be cautious because it might happen again."

The Associated Press paired them with a certified financial planner, Ed Gjertsen of Mack Investment Securities in Glenview, Ill., to analyze how they're managing their money.

## Retirement savings

Many investors moved their money into bonds after the 2008 stock market meltdown. The Craigs, though, haven't wavered.

See PLANNING on E8



# Credit bureaus make it difficult to purchase one report

By David Lazarus

Los Angeles Times

Tony Cabral is the kind of consumer who makes a habit of checking his credit files at least twice a year. "I just want to be safe," he told me.

These days, though, it's become surprisingly difficult to stay on top of this most basic of consumer needs, an especially timely concern as hordes of shoppers break out the plastic in search of holiday deals.

Consumers are entitled to one free credit report annually from each of the three leading credit bureaus — Experian, Equifax and TransUnion. You can get this via a website called AnnualCreditReport.com.

But what if, like Cabral, you want more than one report a year? Then you have to purchase additional access. And that's a whole lot easier said than done.

Cabral, 47, a development consultant who resides in a

loft in downtown Los Angeles, said the credit bureaus seem determined to enroll people in credit-monitoring programs with recurring monthly fees, not provide easy access to basic credit information.

As an example, he encouraged me to visit the TransUnion website and find the option of a single purchase of my credit file. I quickly discovered he was right.

The main page contains no clear offer of a one-time-only credit file purchase. But it instructs you to click a

button for a "free" credit score. Doing so took me to a page to sign up for a credit-monitoring service costing \$14.95 a month.

I scoured the site in search of where to simply buy a copy of my credit file. I couldn't find a link that seemed even remotely promising.

Cabral finally showed me where it's hidden. On the main page you have to click a link at the top left-hand corner marked "Personal."

Then you come to a page with a link for "Credit Re-

ports and Monitoring," but don't click that; it's a trick. You'll just end up being offered more services with recurring payments.

What you actually have to do is click a drop-down menu under an innocuous box saying "Access Accounts" in the top right-hand corner. Then, inexplicably, you have to select "login assistance."

At last you'll arrive at a page with a link for purchasing a single credit report for \$10.50.

"Look how hard that is,"

Cabral said. "If you didn't know it was there, you wouldn't know to even look for it."

I found the Experian site a bit easier to navigate. But Cabral warned me that when he tried to purchase his credit report there, he ended up inadvertently signing up for a credit-monitoring service as well.

"I thought I was being real careful," he said. "But then I got an e-mail welcoming me to Experian Direct, which costs \$14.95 a month."

Of the three bureaus, only the Equifax site seemed to lead fairly smoothly to the option of buying a single credit report for \$10.50. But it still required a couple of tricky clicks, such as first hitting "view all products."

Each bureau should be required to prominently feature a link not just to access your free annual credit report but also to purchase an additional report, without any bells or whistles attached.

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## Website is start of a larger plan

### STARThERIA

From E1

product and the marketing is there, kids will try it," she said.

### Kids seek interactive fun

Successful sites are those that are engaging and allow kids to play fun games along with interaction — and are always evolving and adding new experiences and entertainment, she said.

Nickelson isn't new to product launches. She started Baby's Garden back in 1984, a company that brought to market a line of aseptically packaged baby food.

She credits the experience with giving her a "street MBA" as she learned the ins and outs of entrepreneurship.

Although she was approached with licensing deals for Startheria, Nickelson decided to do it on her own — both to keep control and to eventually see some financial gain from the site.

She brought on partners to form a team of creative, programming and entertainment industry talent to get the website off the ground.

It's a good model for a tough economy, she said.

"It's really important that, especially in today's world, everybody feels what they're contributing to the project is important," Nickelson said. "The people who are part of the team, they're partners, so when it takes off, they're all going to benefit."

### A dad joins the team

Michael Arucan of Integrated Logic Group in San Diego started off as a consultant for Nickelson but quickly became a partner to help her build the technology needed for the site.

Having three children in the target market, Arucan said, he could see the value of the site.

"I really wanted to be a part of that," he said.

Startheria's first efforts center on drumming up interest on the site and through Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, holding a contest to find two kids who will have their likenesses used as the boy and the girl in the animated series.

Once the contest is over, Nickelson said, the site will lose its social media aspects so it will remain a safe environment for kids. The virtual world also won't have third-party advertising to kids, she said.

Initial revenue sources include contest entry fees, subscriptions, related books and trading cards, although Nickelson said she wants to donate part of the contest proceeds to support education, clean water and food for children.