

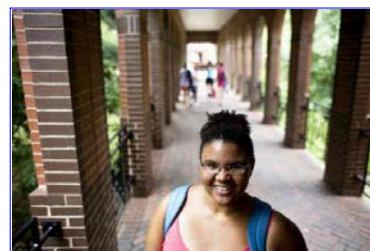
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## VIRTUAL HORSE FUN SUCCESS AT A GALLOP Student's game is an Internet hit

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By LAURA MOYER

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[Jade Krafsig, 21, created an online game for girls when she was 15, and now nets about \\$15,000 a year from it. The money helps pay her tuition at UMW, where she is majoring in computer science.](#)

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In real life, University of Mary Washington senior Jade Krafsig hopes someday to have a horse and some land to keep it on.

Online, Krafsig already rules an equine empire--an interactive Web-based game aimed at preteen and teen girls who share Krafsig's passion for horses.

Whiteoakstables.net has thousands of players, of whom 70 or so may be online at any time, especially during afternoon hours in the U.S.

Krafsig, 21, said she has received e-mails from players in Australia and Asian countries, too.

The game is aimed at the 10- to 12-year-old age group, but Krafsig said players range from 5- or 6-year-olds to women in their 40s.

The game is free to play, but once a participant gets hooked she (or her parents) can purchase membership that allows for greater privileges and bigger horse dreams.

Krafsig's entrepreneurial effort hasn't made her rich, but it has helped her pay college expenses and get her to and from a stable near her Fauquier County home where she helps with lessons and occasionally gets to ride as well.

virtual horses

Krafsig has been tech-savvy since young childhood, when her mom signed her up for a computer tots class in Northern Virginia.

Besides computers, she grew up loving animals of every description. She and her mother volunteered at a no-kill shelter, and these days they have four dogs at their home in Bealeton.

As a little girl, Krafsig also played with ceramic horses, galloping them across imaginary pastures. Her grandfather, she recalled, spent a lot of time gluing fragile legs back on.

She dreamed of riding, but horseback lessons were expensive. Her mom was reluctant to invest money in what she thought was a youngster's passing fancy.

"My mom said, 'You'll grow out of it.' So I made sure I didn't," Krafsig said, smiling.

Instead, Krafsig read everything she could about horses and spent hours on the Internet on horse-related game sites. Those online sites gradually lost their charm for her, she said, because they weren't realistic--encouraging players to dream up fanciful horses with magical powers and place them in far-fetched situations.

Krafsig wanted a game that simulated the experience of owning a real horse.

Using self-taught computer skills and programming basics learned in a high school class in Fairfax County, where she lived at the time, Krafsig created an early version of whiteoakstables as a young teenager. She has run and refined it ever since, adding features and paying for a more powerful server to support increasing numbers of visitors.

In the game's current incarnation, players spend virtual finances to own and care for virtual horses.

Those horses must be stabled, fed, ridden, groomed and given veterinary care. They can also be shown, raced and bred. Everything costs, though, so players must budget their virtual money wisely.

In her quest to make her horse game realistic, Krafsig has learned some real-life lessons of her own.

One: Running a popular Web site is hard work. She has spent so much time enhancing the game, fixing technical problems, answering e-mails and acting as moderator of discussion forums that she has never had a chance to play the game herself.

Two: When handling real money, hire an accountant at tax time. Be ready to write some checks.

Smart planning

When she graduated from Liberty High School in Fauquier, Krafsig considered living on campus at UMW.

But as a careful handler of finances, she realized it would be a better deal to live at home and commute.

Earnings from the game and from a side business doing Web design and writing programs for other gamers go mostly for practical things such as her car and insurance, she said.

"I live economically, and if I don't have the money for something, I don't buy it."

Responsibility has given her independence and the confidence that she'll be able to make a go of the adult world.

In rare moments of downtime, she occasionally visits game Web sites such as secondlife.com for fun. But that, too, has a purpose.

After she graduates next spring, Krafsig hopes to land a computer science job, pay off her student loans and launch her adult life.

But her long-term dreams are more ambitious. She'd love to have a job creating computer games for preteen girls--a demographic many big game companies overlook, she said.

Eventually, she said, she can see herself running her own computer-game business.

She's not fanciful, and she knows nothing in life is guaranteed. But when she allows herself to imagine her future, it includes a little place in the country with a horse or two.

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