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Head over heels for cyber-steeds

By Rita Giordano

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Ever since the movie *Seabiscuit*, Jackie Klemens has been a goner, totally smitten with all things equine.

Nowadays, her personal herd numbers around 30; she's training 100 more horses, and, at her Horse's Dream Stable, she's responsible for the feeding of 1,500 boarders.

Sometimes, she admits, at school her mind wanders: "Are the horses OK?"

Klemens, of Berks County, is only 12 years old. But, then again, her ponies do all their galloping in cyberspace, and her stable is just a mouse-click away.

Klemens is part of an enthusiastic and even international following of online equine games that let people buy, sell, breed, train and show virtual horses. Given the wide-open nature of the Internet, there is no official count of these games, but hit a search engine, and you'll come up with scores of them.

For the most part, the games don't advertise. People hear of them by word of mouth or stumble across them. Many can be played for free; some charge player-upgrade fees for added privileges.

And often the people behind the games, like most of their players, are girls or young women who love horses and know their way around a computer. For some, the games have actually become a business, making money from those upgrade fees and sometimes advertising.

"Right now, the profits I'm making are actually paying my way through college," said Jade Krafsig, 18. A student at the University of Mary Washington in Virginia, Krafsig started her White Oak Stables game (whiteoakstables.net) at 15.

"Right now, this is my income," said Shannon Cusick, 26, of Austin, Texas, who started her Virtual Horse Ranch (virtualhorseranch.com) to play with her friends in early 2003. Then a girl from Japan joined the game - and came back the next day. "I was, like, wow."

Probably the biggest game is Horseland.com, which grew out of a Web page that Christina Gerskovich, 23, of Rochester, N.Y., created with her father's help when she was 14. Like Cusick and Krafsig, she doesn't own a horse. And she barely has time to play her own game; she said Horseland has about 100,000 users a month from all over the world.

The games vary, but usually players are given a certain amount of "money" to start with. Horses age in the games. You can increase their value and your bank account, but there's no real winning or losing. It's all about your horses and what you want to do with them.

Players can communicate through bulletin boards and chat rooms, and virtual friendships or feuds form, just as in real life. In the cyber world, as in the real one, if you don't feed and care for your horses, depending on the game, they can be taken away, get sick, or even die.

Around these parts, horse fever definitely extends into cyberspace.

"I'm on every day. Every day," said Tori Leibrock, 16, a Horseland.com player from Vineland, N.J. "I'm on

anywhere from an hour to all day. On weekends, I'll be on it at 6:30 in the morning until 10:30, 11 at night. I spend hours and hours. I'm addicted."

With no real horse, she lets her virtual horses feel the love.

Once she had a deal with another player to train her favorite, a Palomino named Last Train Home, and sell him back to her for \$2 million in Horseland currency. The other player went back on the promise and sold the horse to somebody else for \$6 million.

"I was so upset. I was like, 'Mom! Mom! They stole the horse!' " Leibrock said.

She ended up forking over \$12 million. "I got my horse back."

Elizabeth Gilliam, 14, of Radnor, has something like 100 horse books in her room, about 40 horse models, and, since April, a bay thoroughbred she boards named JP. But she's still devoted to her online herd.

Some months back, Gilliam said, she was grounded for algebra-related issues. No television or recreational computer use for two weeks.

"It was tragic," she said. "I had to call one of my friends and ask: 'Could you feed my horses?' "

In Franklinville, the Ilic sisters, Morgan, 15, Anna, 14, and Emily, 10, have six horses in their backyard, including Raven, a paint who will smile, kiss and hug for treats. But that doesn't keep them from jockeying for time on their mother's computer for virtual horse play.

Like a lot of other parents, Melissa Ilic, an artist and horse lover, said she'd rather see her girls horse crazy than boy crazy, and she believes that their online horsing around helps teach responsibility "even if it's only virtual."

Still, as with other kinds of online communication, the games do have a less innocent side. Players complained about nastiness, online flirting and even outright propositioning. Most blamed the problems on silly kid stuff.

Grown-ups are a smaller but devoted game constituency, and they can be pretty horse-serious.

"I'm a horse-crazy adult," said Patty Garrison, 50, a Wilmington jeweler and Horseland regular whose husband recently bought her a horse after she'd leased one for years.

The other week, Garrison's doctor gave her a clean bill of health. Last spring, she underwent chemotherapy and radiation for cancer. Horseland helped.

"I couldn't walk around. I couldn't ride the horse, but I could sit at the computer and play Horseland," she said. "I scored lots of points."

Sunny Richard, 44, a Pottstown housewife and mother of two teens, never in her real life owned a horse. But on White Oak Stables, she has ridden Wildwonderstar, her virtual Lipizzan, to dressage honors. "It's kind of like having a part of the world I've never been able to have," said Richard, who estimates that she plays about five hours a day.

So what is it about females and horses?

Michelle Ascher Dunn, a New York City psychoanalyst who specializes in preteens and teens, said there is much about horses that speaks to girls. There is, she said, the mastering of something bigger than oneself; the fantasy of the horse choosing them; the grooming of the mane and tail that appeals to the girl part of them; the horse as protector and confidante.

The horse lovers had their own ideas.

Lucy McInerney, 11, of Ardmore, has a long-distance romance with French Toast, a strawberry roan who lives at her aunt's farm in Canada. She gets to see Toasty only a few times a year, so she takes riding lessons at Ashford Farm in Miquon and plays Horseland.

One thing she likes about horses is that they're not big on platitudes.

Take, for instance, when you are having a bad day. A person might say, " 'It's going to be OK.' And it's not. A horse won't do that," McInerney said, adding, though, that it may nuzzle you.

Lexis Riley, 11, of Washington Township, likes that horses are nonjudgmental.

"They don't care what you look like or if you're disabled," she said. "They're just loving."

Riley has eight Horseland horses, including her beloved quarter pony, Fran. If she makes honor roll, her mother told her, she'll get a real horse. She has her fingers crossed.

"I'm going into middle school next year, and it's going to be hard. There's a lot of judging," Riley said. "My horse will make it better."

In a pinch, a virtual horse may do.

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