



PRINTER FRIENDLY

[\[Print\]](#) [\[Close\]](#)

## Disney pulls plug on virtual world

By **Tim Barker**

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Friday, Apr. 18 2008

How does the world end? Simple. Someone flips a switch.

At least that's the way it will go on May 21 when Disney shuts down its Virtual Magic Kingdom, a game that lets players interact with one another in an online theme park.

Disney's decision to end the game set off a flurry of criticism from parents and players who say the entertainment giant is turning its back on thousands of fans.

The company wouldn't discuss the matter but issued a statement saying the free game was intended to be a 50th anniversary promotion and it has gone on longer than planned.

"All good promotions must come to an end, so we have decided the time is right to close VMK," the company said.

The fast-approaching doomsday raises an interesting question at a time when many popular games are essentially online communities, known as massive multiplayer online role-playing games. In them, large numbers of players — the current king is World of Warcraft, with more than 10 million subscribers — gather in virtual worlds to adventure and socialize.

But what happens when one of those worlds is shut down?

It's not something that happens very often, largely because it doesn't cost a lot to run a game, once the programming and development costs are recouped through game purchases and monthly subscription fees.

Certainly Disney won't be the first to make such a move.

Mike Allen of Maryland Heights was playing Earth and Beyond when Electronic Arts decided to cancel it in late 2004.

"It's one of those things that every gamer knows," Allen said. "At some point, the game could go. It's in the back of your mind."

And if the worst does happen, Allen said he usually knows how to get into contact, generally through e-mail, with friends he met in the game.

But that won't be the case for rule-abiding residents of Disney's Virtual Magic Kingdom. More than a million players have signed up since its debut in 2005, though the game has a relatively small player base, with only a few thousand players on at any time.

The game targets players ages 8 to 14 years old and features security measures to keep users safe from predators. For example, players are limited to a Disney-approved dictionary of words, which keeps them from typing numbers,

e-mail addresses and the names of cities or states. Players who work around the filters can be banned.

The downside of that protection is that players will have no way to get in touch with their in-game friends once the game closes, said Nicholas Bourne, a Los Angeles player and spokesman for fan site [www.savevmktoday.com](http://www.savevmktoday.com).

"Most people will permanently lose contact with other players," Bourne said. "You'll lose your friends."

The website is one piece of a multimedia campaign to save the game. Fans are reaching out in a range of ways, including letters, e-mails and YouTube videos.

James Smith of Utah joined the effort shortly after hearing the news from his 12-year-old daughter. "I've never seen her so upset," said Smith, who started [www.savevmk.com](http://www.savevmk.com).

The site has collected more than 12,500 signatures. He is hopeful Disney will rethink its position, even if it means a monthly subscription fee.

The situation represents one of the disconnects between the designers of virtual games and players who use them.

Dean Terry, director of emerging media at the University of Texas at Dallas, said creators tend to think they are building games, but players, the serious ones at least, tend to be more interested in the social aspect.

"People who design games should take that seriously, but it's not their primary mission or concern," Terry said.

When those virtual worlds are threatened, there's often very little the players can do.

In some cases, there are opportunities for another company, or even a collection of fans, to take over the game and keep it running, said Rusel DeMaria, the author of dozens of game-related books, including "Reset: Changing the Way We Look at Video Games."

The chances of that happening in this case are slim at best, considering that Disney is a company known for keeping tight control of its brand.

When the end does come, some say it may not be as painful as players think.

"These virtual places are easily replaced. There are lots of options out there," said Michael Stefanone, an assistant professor of communication at the University of Buffalo who studies social media and its cultural impacts.

And the loss of a virtual friend is really not too different than the loss of one in real-life.

"When a close friend moves away, it's painful," he said. "But in the end, those lessons are a good thing."

[tbarker@post-dispatch.com](mailto:tbarker@post-dispatch.com) | 314-340-8350

---

If you enjoy reading about interesting news, you might like the 3 O'Clock Stir from STLtoday.com. Sign up and you'll receive an email with unique stories of the day, every Monday-Friday, at no charge. Sign up at <http://newsletters.stltoday.com>

---