

# BIRDS OF A FEATHER KNIT TOGETHER IN ONLINE CHAT

## As Facebook loses members over privacy worries, niche social network sites that target specific interests are booming, says Mark Harris

With more than 800m people signed up to it, Facebook is on course to hit its target of 1 billion users next year. But the site's biggest growth areas are not its heartlands of North America and Europe; they're Asia and South America. In fact, according to the researchers Inside Facebook, over the summer more than 100,000 Britons closed their Facebook accounts, as well as 6m Americans. Those users have not lost the social networking bug, though. They're simply migrating to more specialist sites.

There are now hundreds of social networking sites online, catering for every nationality, age group and special interest you can think of and some that you probably can't. Are you a fan of Japanese anime? Join 25m friends of big-eyed cartoons on Gaia Online. Want to track down long-lost relatives? There are 60m (possibly including a few rich, ailing uncles) waiting for you on Geni. Need to network with scientists? ResearchGate has 1m boffins signed up. There is even a social networking haunt for 2m fans of fangs: VampireFreaks.com.

"Facebook and Google+ are catch-all, umbrella social networks," says Michael Inouye, an analyst with ABI Research, which tracks how people use technology. "Smaller, niche networks

have an important role to play by allowing individuals to express more deeply whatever their interests are. It's the next level of how committed you are to that topic."

Take Ravelry, for instance. This knitting and crochet social network has 1.4m users swapping thousands of patterns, posting hundreds of crocheting events, visiting online shops and discussing the best yarns, wools and threads. There are no intrusive ads, no venture capitalists demanding a return on their investment (it was started by a husband and wife) and few of the privacy concerns that dog the larger networks.

As Gilbertine, a long-time Ravelry user in Canada, says: "I don't do Facebook. Ravelry is all the Facebook I need. If there were any danger of having the two integrate, I sincerely pray there would be a way to opt out of any Facebook features."

The trend towards more fragmented social networks is one of the reasons the bigger players are constantly upping their game and adding new features to their services. Facebook is rolling out its Timeline tool, a way of changing your profile page into a CV of your "life events" dating back to when you joined Facebook. It's a neat idea, but it also suggests that the network is having to fight ever harder to keep second-generation social networkers engaged.

"We are the anti-Facebook, and much closer to the original idea of social networking," says Sabine Heller, president of ASmallWorld. "We're

**'I keep in touch with friends on a superficial level on Facebook but LibraryThing has deeper discussions'**

Niche networks, in contrast, are usually happy with smaller, stable audiences that mean low overheads and no expensive marketing campaigns. Some niche networks even restrict the number of people who can sign up. ASmallWorld is a social network for jet-setters that styles itself as a "private online community" — hence its unwanted nickname of "Snobster". It works strictly by invitation only, and just a quarter of its members have the privilege of inviting others.

"We are the anti-Facebook, and much closer to the original idea of social networking," says Sabine Heller, president of ASmallWorld. "We're

careful to ensure that there's no more than three degrees of separation between any of our members. We have a pretty tight algorithm that controls our growth."

By only allowing newcomers who already have real-world links with existing members, ASmallWorld aims to preserve an exclusive, club-like atmosphere that the sprawling Facebook and Google+ have long lost.

"If you're going to travel to another country and rely on someone for advice or even to take you out for a drink, it's important to have a level of accountability and trust," says Heller. "ASmallWorld is a tribe of people who share a world view and who feel loyalty to one another."

The site currently has around 650,000 members worldwide and promises never to have more than 2m. Like many other smaller networks, it relies on specialist advertising and events for funding rather than the highly personalised and occasionally creepy adverts seen on Facebook.

There are signs that as Facebook and Google+ become more sophisticated, they are starting to allow users to fragment inside the site: both now offer tools for communicating with specific groups of people by sorting your contacts into groups. You can now show your mum one set of photos, for example, your dachshund appreciation



From knitting to science and religion, there's a network for you

club another set, and your volleyball team a third.

The good news for Facebook is that most users don't jump ship when they join another social network. ABI Research found that the average person is now juggling two to three social network accounts. They might use one of the big networks for photo sharing and communication, taking advantage of free messaging, chat and

even video calling. The niche networks, on the other hand, are where enthusiasts head to geek out over their obsessions.

Helen Kestle is one of a growing band who are branching out from Facebook without severing their ties to it completely. She is a member of LibraryThing, a network for book lovers, (see panel) but hasn't yet deserted Facebook.

"LibraryThing seems to encourage deeper discussions, longer posts, more thoughtful words. And there's a need for that," she says. "On Facebook, I keep in touch with a far wider group of friends, acquaintances and family members, but on a more superficial level. And that's okay. I don't necessarily want to have a long talk about the merits of Virago Press versus Persephone Books with my cousin's 11-year-old daughter. But, at

the same time, I do like to know what she's up to on a day-to-day basis, what television programmes she watches, what she's doing in school.

"I wouldn't say that LibraryThing necessarily attracts a different sort of people, but it's a subset of the people I keep in touch with on Facebook."

The other advantage that niche networks have is that you don't have to

use your real name, unlike on Facebook and Google+. For anyone nervous or ashamed of their enthusiasms, smaller networks can offer reassuring anonymity and camaraderie.

Facebook might be slicker and better looking, then, but only HoffsSpace has nearly 25,000 fellow David Hasselhoff fans waiting to test you on your knowledge of Baywatch and Knight Rider trivia.

## FLIRTS & FAECES

Some of the social networking sites touting for your loyalty

**BADOO (badoo.com)**  
**Users:** 127m  
**Special interest:** Dating. Run from London but best known on the continent, Badoo puts the emphasis on finding people nearby to, as it puts it, "flirt" with. Free to use, although members can pay extra to raise their profile in search results.

**STEAM (steampowered.com)**  
**Users:** 35m  
**Special interest:** Gaming. The world's biggest computer games download service also has a strong social networking element. Users send messages to each other as they play, or boast of high scores on its forums.

**LIBRARYTHING (librarything.com)**  
**Users:** 1.4m  
**Special interest:** Books. Discuss the titles on your shelf with other bibliophiles worldwide.

**XT3 (xt3.com)**  
**Users:** 50,000  
**Special interest:** Catholicism. XT3 stands for Christ in the third millennium, and was founded in response to Pope Benedict's call to spread the faith using new technologies. Features include "Ask a priest".

**EPERNICUS (epernicus.com)**  
**Users:** 20,000  
**Special interest:** Links up researchers in physics, biology and chemistry worldwide. Epernicus means nothing — it's a made-up, science-y sounding word.

**MY MICROBES (my.microbes.eu)**  
**Users:** 170  
Who wants to meet people with similar intestinal flora? You, sir? Then post the site a stool sample — at your own expense.

## GAMES

New titles this week

**FORZA MOTORSPORT 4**  
★★★★★  
Xbox 360; £50. Age 3+

Pull over to the kerb. Gran Turismo: this is the new king of driving games. Everything about Forza 4 is a triumph, from the roads and tracks you drive on and the mountain scenery backdrop, to the line-up of hot hatches, vintage beauties and supercars available. To top it off the commentary's provided by none other than Jeremy Clarkson. You can even take a spin around the Top Gear track in a Kia Cee'd — the vehicle used in the show for its "star in reasonably priced car" feature. Owners of the Kinect motion sensor accessory get an additional bonus. Cleverly, you can use it to supplement the handheld controller: turn your head as you're driving and it tracks the movement to let you get a better view of bends in the road ahead. Away from the track, you can also use the Kinect to explore a number of cars in greater detail, employing gesture control to swish your way around the cockpit and the engine. Those who prefer their racing games to feel ultra-gritty still might not be won over to Forza — the driving simulation is a little too smooth and easy at times — but being packed with features, upgrades and extras to unlock, the overall package is so generous that it's hard to find fault. **Stuart Andrews**



**X-MEN: DESTINY**  
★★★★☆  
Xbox, PS3; £40. Age 16

Time to slip on that Spandex superhero suit again. In a ruined San Francisco where a conflict is bubbling between mutants and humans, you must choose to play as one of three rookie mutants. Will you align yourself with Magneto and his Brotherhood, who are hellbent on creating a mutant-only nation, or fight alongside Wolverine and co for the X-Men, who favour co-existence with humans? This game is supposed to be about choice, and depending which ones you make, the developer promises that the plot will pan out differently. The truth is ... it doesn't. Whichever side you choose, you'll still have to dispatch the same enemies and journey through the same storyline. With no online multiplayer option, this game's destiny is a solitary, largely disappointing trip to the game store remainder bin. **Steve O'Rourke**



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## IPHONE GAMING

**Stuart Dredge**  
reviews games for the iPhone and iPod Touch

**FUNPARK FRIENDS**  
★★★★☆  
Free; Age 4

One of the biggest names in gaming, EA, is working on an iPhone version of its classic Theme Park, but it's been beaten into the App Store by the indie title Funpark Friends. The idea of both games is the same: build and then run your own theme park, keeping visitors happy by adding new rides and attractions. You can also keep tabs on the progress of any of your real-life friends playing the game. Funpark Friends is free to download and play, but you can buy in-game currency (in bundles, from 69p to £69.99) to help speed up your theme park's growth. With more features promised as a free download, this game is still in its early days but is certainly fun.



**KATAMARI AMORE**  
★★★★★  
Free; Age 4

The games in the Katamari series for consoles have been cult hits in their native Japan and in the West, thanks to their quirky but addictive gameplay. Katamari Amore is the second outing for the series on the iPhone, and it's a big improvement on the first effort, with well-tuned controls for the touchscreen. Your task remains the same: you control a ball that can be rolled around a surreal landscape, picking up objects as you go. These items are small at first but, like a snowball, your sticky sphere grows and grows until even bridges and buildings can be crumpled into its body. The initial free download gets you one level, but you have to pay £2.49 for the full game. For fans, the Pac-Man themed level alone will be worth the price.



**GOLF PUTT PRO 3D**  
★★★★☆  
Free; Age 4

Don't be fooled by the "3D" in the title — Apple's new iPhone 4S doesn't include a genuine 3-D screen. The truth is that this sequel to the popular Golf Putt Pro has greens that are a little bumpier than its predecessor. Your task is to swipe and tap the screen to sink a succession of putts, taking in golf courses in New York, Las Vegas and Sydney; more are promised as a free update. Getting the controls right in golf games can be tricky, as they can veer between leaden to over-sensitive. Here they're just about right, giving you the required precision without being too fiddly. As with Funpark Friends, it's free to play but you can pay from 69p upwards to unlock new putters and custom balls more quickly.

