

Reviews of software, tech toys, video games & web sites... for learning



# Children's TECHNOLOGY Review™

March 1 2007  
Volume 15, No. 3, Issue 84

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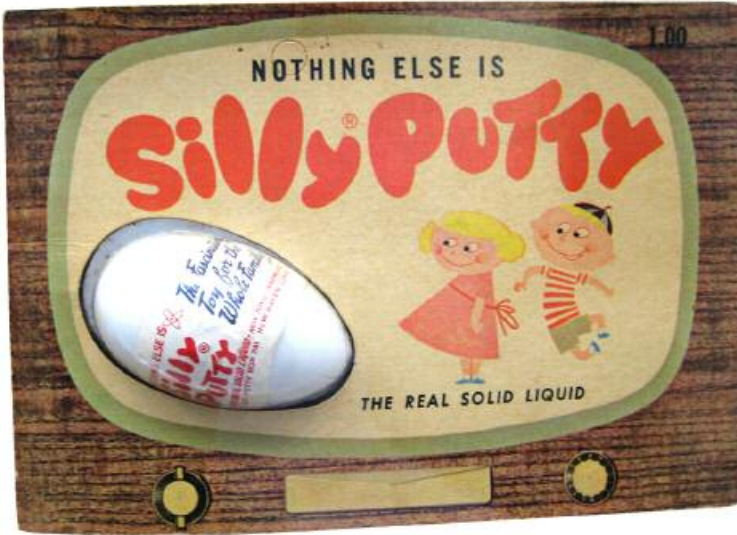


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## When Moore's Law Meets Toys

Highlights from the 2007 American International Toy Fair





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## Lessons from Silly Putty

This year at the recent American International Toy Fair, I wandered by an exhibit of classic toys put together by the Strong Museum's National Toy Hall of Fame (<http://www.strongmuseum.org/NTHoF/NTHoF.html>).

Inside a set of showcases was a collection of classic toys like Slinkies, Silly Putty, Crayons and Lincoln Logs. It was fun to watch how people reacted to these classic toys, as they undoubtedly brought up fond play memories.

As we evaluate the merits of the new technology-based toys, starting on page 5, it is useful to think about why some toys are noted to be timeless classics today. Take Silly Putty, for example— a flexible, durable open-ended substance that can tranfer newsprint, snap when quickly pulled into a string, take the shape of a container or bounce when made into a ball. Or the Slinky; a simple spring that could walk down the stairs, or make fun sounds when pulled tight. Both are incredibly simple to use, yet they can do complex things.

We must always ask ourselves if microprocessors contribute to or perhaps even take away from the sense of childhood empowerment offered by some of these classic toys. I wonder if any of the products in this issue will someday be in a showcase 50 years from now.

We hope you enjoy this issue.

Sincerely,

*Warren Buckleitner*

Warren Buckleitner, Ph.D., Editor



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The temporary password for this issue is **mmorpg**



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## Coming in the April Issue

As we go to press with this issue, we're testing the titles below. Have you used them? We welcome your feedback, at

<http://ctr.childrenssoftware.com/writeuser.html>

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# When Moore's Law Meets Toys

by Warren Buckleitner

There was no blizzard for this year's American International Toy Fair, the first time in several years. But a lack of snow didn't mean a lack of digital innovation, as Moore's Law\* continues to influence the toy industry. This year, interactive DVDs moved from a niche market to a major category (over 39 titles for Snap TV) along with two pretend guitars, increasingly sophisticated robots, more sophisticated TV toys and new forms of Internet-enabled toys. Here's a closer look at what we found. Keep in mind that these are first looks at products that are not yet on the market, and details may change.



## ClickStart My First Computer: A computer for your TV

This is a toy-like wireless QWERTY keyboard and mouse that turns your TV into a computer monitor. It functions like the V.Smile Infant and Baby Development system, only for older children.

Onboard content includes four games, plus one extra reward game. Extra cartridges can be purchased for \$20 each. The \$60 system consists of two parts—a keyboard/mouse, which sends infrared (like a TV remote) signals to the second part: a receiver, which you keep near your TV and plug into the AV port. Both the keyboard and receiver are battery-operated (4 Cs and 4 AAs), so be prepared to stock up on batteries. The games seemed to be well-designed, although we did not test them in depth. Coming in August. Details: Leapfrog, [www.leapfrog.com](http://www.leapfrog.com). Price: \$60. Ages: 3-6.



## Digital Arts & Crafts Studio: A talking graphics pad

This talking graphics pad for children plugs into a Windows computer and brings menu elements from the screen onto the pad itself. Children can freely sketch, color or select from 256 colors or 300 stamps. Projects can be saved or printed. It connects to your computer via USB port, and is powered by batteries. Coming Fall 2007.

Details: Fisher-Price, Inc., [www.fisher-price.com](http://www.fisher-price.com). Price: \$50. Ages: 4-up. Platform: Windows XP. Teaches: art, creativity.



## Digital Blue QX-7 Microscope: A better computer microscope (finally)

This is the long-awaited update to the QX line of computer microscopes. We've been told that this QX-7 will have 1.3 megapixel resolution with the ability up to 300x. In addition, a new \$150 "Pro" version will come with an AC adapter, a 3 megapixel camera, an SD card slot, and metal finish. Both ver-

sions feature LED lighting. Details: Digital Blue, [www.playdigitalblue.com](http://www.playdigitalblue.com). Price: \$100. Ages: 5-up. Platform: Mac OSX, Windows XP. Teaches: science, observation.



## Digital Movie Creator 3.0: with preview screen

This RAM-based movie camera now comes with a small (1.5 inch) color preview screen and SD memory card slot for additional storage. If you plug the camera into your Windows computer (a USB cord is included) the battery charges while the movies are transferred. The internal memory will provide six minutes of recording, but a 1 GB SD memory card (not included) will provide up to two hours of video. There is also an AV jack for external viewing on a TV screen. As with the earlier versions, a docking station and AV cable is included, along with some basic video editing software. Details: Digital Blue, [www.playdigitalblue.com](http://www.playdigitalblue.com). Price: \$80. Ages: 3-up.



## Easy Link Internet Launchpad: bundles (and sells) access to free sites

Best described as a children's Internet portal, this software/hardware product makes it possible to direct preschoolers to pre-selected sites, like *Sesame Workshop* or *Dragon Tales*. First, you plug the cradle into the USB port of your web connected Windows computer. Three figurines come with the cradle, and others will be sold separately. It is not clear yet how this will work with your browser, or how it will prevent children from going to other sites. There are nine websites to choose from, including Fisher-Price.com. Details: Fisher-Price, Inc., [www.fisher-price.com](http://www.fisher-price.com). Price: \$30. Ages: 3-6. Windows.



\* **Moore's Law:** In 1965, Intel co-founder Gordon Moore famously noted "...(T)he first microprocessor only had 22 hundred transistors. We are looking at something a million times that complex in the next generations—a billion transistors. What that gives us in the way of flexibility to design products is phenomenal." His prediction, called Moore's Law, states that **the number of transistors on a chip doubles about every two years.** <http://www.intel.com/technology/mooreslaw/index.htm>

## TWO GUITARS—TWO VERY DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES

### Power Tour Electric Guitar (Tiger/Hasbro)

Featuring styling by guitar maker Gibson, this is the best pretend guitar to date based on first impression. It uses a touch sensitive fret board and motion sensing strumming area, making it easy to pretend to be a rock star so you can play classic songs like "Frankenstein." Unlike "I Can Play Guitar" (right), it is easy to have a powerful first experience. As you run your finger along the fret board, your fingertips cause each of the 14 note regions to light up and play an associated note. There are no actual strings which makes the process very simple. To bend a note, you simply shake the guitar, and motion sensors change the pitch. The sound comes from an internal speaker, or sound can be exported to any speaker system. There's a tutorial mode, so that if the player gets the segment wrong, the guitar will play back the example a little slower. This cycle will continue until the segment is mastered. There are four modes: metal, punk, rock or indie. Runs on four AA batteries. There's an extra (optional) \$50 amp. Coming in August. Details: Tiger Electronics (Hasbro), [www.hasbro.com/tiger/](http://www.hasbro.com/tiger/). Price: \$70. Ages: 10-up. Teaches: music, the mechanics of playing the guitar, rhythm.

### I Can Play Guitar (Fisher-Price)

You really can't compare this guitar with the Power Tour Guitar. Based on the same teaching principle as last year's Learn to Play Piano, this toy guitar plugs into the AV ports of your TV, and runs on batteries. Instead of strings, the fret



*Details: Price: \$100, [www.fisher-price.com](http://www.fisher-price.com), Teaches: music, rhythm, guitar, pitch, musical notation.*

bar is loaded with oval color-coded buttons, and the idea is that you follow a series of streaming notes on the TV screen as your favorite rock song plays in the background. If you've ever played Dance Dance Revolution, the idea is the same, with a fret board instead of a dance pad. We played "Smoke on the Water". In the easy level, you match the colors. Harder levels involve a faster tempo and strumming the strings simultaneously. Fortunately, the tempo can be adjusted, which is necessary in order to figure out the process. It's like paint-by-number guitar, where quick matching can let you into the song, sans any talent or pitch. As with the piano, you can toggle between four screen themes, one with real notes. So does it work? We can tell you that the guitar is much more complex to learn than the piano, because at least with the piano, the keys are in one line. Plus, the button/fret process is very different than a real guitar. We'll have to try it on some testers. Runs on four C batteries, coming July 2007.

### Eyeclips: turn your 42" plasma into a world of wonder

Perhaps our favorite new product of the 2007 toy fair, this eyeball-shaped 200 power TV microscope can turn your TV into a science exploration tool. We were able to explore the hidden printing on a dollar bill, or see the cell structure of a dragon fly wing. The simplicity of this microscope is its key strength. Jakks says it is designed for ages eight and up, but we see one in classrooms for all ages. Runs on AA batteries. Coming late summer 2007. Details: Jakks Pacific, Price: \$50. Teaches: science, observation.



shoot video. It stores 120 photos or five minutes of digital video on the built-in 16 MB of memory. An SD expansion slot is also available. Like the Fisher-Price camera, the Kidizoom uses a dual-eye viewfinder. Details: VTech Electronics North America, [www.vtechkids.com](http://www.vtechkids.com). Price: \$60. Ages: 3-up. Platform: smart toy. Teaches: creativity, digital photography.



### Made for Me MP3 Player: a musical soul for a toy

You can put your own custom music inside a child's toys with this \$80 MP3 player, made for Hasbro by Creative. Once the palm-sized player is loaded up with as many as 50 songs using your computer, you insert it into a cradle that is in other toys, such as the \$40 2-in-1 Infant Gym (with lights, mirrors and sounds), or the \$35 Day to Dream soother with lights, music and ceiling light projection that works in day or night conditions. There's also a regular music player, with an external speaker. Details: Hasbro, Inc., [www.hasbro.com](http://www.hasbro.com). Price: \$80. Ages: 0-3.



## MY Q: More brain-game hype

Two LCD handheld games, MY Q and MY Q Junior each include a mix of 10 age- and skill-appropriate games (we'll see) ranging from math and word challenges to memory and concentration tests. An additional two titles, MY Q Pocket NUMBERS and MY Q Pocket WORD Edition provide games designed to be played in three minutes or less. Coming summer 2007. Details: Hasbro, Inc., [www.hasbro.com](http://www.hasbro.com). Price: \$25. Ages: 6-up. Teaches: logic, math, language, vocabulary.



## Sharp Cookie Series: Preschool software's new form factor

This is a series of TV-toys that is noteworthy because they are designed specifically for the preschool set. Just plug them in and you have three educational games, covering typical early learning content, namely letters, numbers and shapes. Games were developed by a variety of studios, including HotGen in the UK. The units will be designed around characters like Thomas and Friends, Spider-Man, Scooby Doo, and Dora. Details: Jakks Pacific, \$20. Ages: 3-6.

## Net Jet: Turning the Internet into a limitless hard drive

For casual game players tired of popup ads and other browser-related clutter, here's a new way to sell and deliver children's content over the web. This is a USB game controller for Windows computers that are connected to the Internet. The controls are similar in many ways to a typical PS2 controller. When you plug it into a computer, an application opens an Internet portal that shows a menu of ten (as of January 2007) games. But you can't play the games until they are unlocked, by putting a thumb-drive sized key into the controller. The keys, which can be clipped onto the controller are sold for \$14 at retail or at <http://www.hasbro.com/tiger/netjet/>. Most of the games resemble traditional casual games. We tried a version of Marble Blast during a demonstration and found it to be surprisingly responsive for a web-driven application. Details: Tiger Electronics (Hasbro), Price: \$25. Ages: 8-up. Platform: Windows XP with Internet. Teaches: logic, timing, classification.



## Smart Cycle: stretching the definition of "TV toy"

This child-sized stationary exercise bike plugs into the A/V jacks of your TV. A child must pedal and steer in order to race, avoid obstacles, or get to games that are found by the side of the road. One software title, called "Learning



Adventure" is included with the bike, and others are sold in cartridge form that plug into the bike for \$20 each. These will feature Dora, Barbie and others. One drawback to note is that the bike is powered by four D batteries. Coming July 2007. Details: Fisher-Price. Price: \$100. Ages: 3-6. Platform: TV. Teaches: physical fitness, logical thinking, movement.

## Squawkers McCaw: Hasbro's latest living robot

Following last year's success with Butterscotch the robotic pony, Hasbro has announced several new furReal robots includ-

ing a pig, line of kittens and a lamb. But the star at this year's toy fair was a robotic parrot, with touch, light and sound sensors and the ability to snore when it is dark. He can dance to external music, turn his head toward a cracker and repeat phrases like "you're so cute." Using a remote control, children can create routines and assign them to a macro key, so there might be a bit of programming. Coming Fall 2007. Details: Hasbro, Inc., [www.hasbro.com](http://www.hasbro.com). Price: \$70. Ages: 5-up.



## V.Smile Keyboard & SmartBook: adding more functionality to the S.smile

The success of the V.Smile TV Learning System, now four years old, can be measured by the increasing number of software titles and peripherals that work with it. The \$30 V.Smile Keyboard turns your TV into a child's first typing tutorial. Note that there is a bit of controversy about the developmental level that children should be at before they start keyboarding. Also available is the \$30 V.Smile SmartBook, which uses a tethered stylus to let children touch pictures or words to see the animation on the TV screen. The book plugs into one of the controller ports on the V.Smile and comes with software that features Toy Story, Spider-Man and Dora. Details: VTech Electronics North America, [www.vtechkids.com](http://www.vtechkids.com). Price: \$30. Ages: 3-6.

## VTech Wiz Kid Learning System

Children slide one of 40 page-sized activity cards into a holder. They can then touch the page to hear words read aloud or pictures described. The pad can be connected to a computer to play activities, have their progress tracked, or print new sheets. Software includes Wondertown Whizware, a focused reading program. Additional software titles cost \$20 each. It runs on batteries; no TV required. Details: VTech Electronics North America, [www.vtechkids.com](http://www.vtechkids.com). Price: \$50. Ages: 3-6. Teaches: reading, logic, counting, math.

## WordLaunch: Phonics exploration on the TV

By combining tangible magnetic letters with TV graphics, Leapfrog's new WordLaunch system allows children to play with word sounds, much the way they would with regular blocks. After the batteries are installed and the device is plugged into the video port on your TV, children turn on the device to see three games, built around 300 preschool and kindergarten words. The kit includes 32 letter tiles and an alphabet tray for organizing and storing the letters. There are three single-session games that automatically increase in challenge as the child plays. In Bumper Cars, children put together words like "cat" and "dad." Each bumper car is a letter. In order to make the cars crash together, they must combine the correct letters to spell out words. Also, in the hardest level, a child might have to add the silent "E" to words, such as turning the word "kit" into "kite." So can you turn a TV into a phonics teacher? Look for a review in early August, when WordLaunch is released to the market. Details: LeapFrog, [www.leapfrog.com](http://www.leapfrog.com). Price: \$50. Ages: 4-6. Platform: TV. Teaches: reading, spelling, phonics, letter recognition. ☺





# Feature Reviews

MARCH 2007

## Break'em All

This is a complex breakout-style game with a wide variety of game play options, including a multiplayer mode for up to eight other players. Breakout is one of the oldest forms of a video game; an evolution of "Pong" where you use a paddle to deflect a bouncing ball. Each time the ball hits a brick, it breaks — earning you points and extra time. The game can be addicting.

This version offers three modes of play, each with a complex number of settings (up to five must be selected prior to starting a game). There's a wide variety of setup options, including the size of the paddle, speed of ball, laser, bomb, etc. For example, in Survival Mode, you must choose between a single player game or play two to eight players through wireless hook up. During this mode you need to dodge balls and try to protect your paddle. This is a challenging process that is not easy to setup. As a result, it is not a good choice for younger players. The best parts are the power ups, which add variety to the game, and the wireless game play options. High scores are saved, but games are not. A new game is started when the system is turned back on. Developed by Warashi for D3Publisher.

Details: D3Publisher of America, Inc., [www.d3publisher.us](http://www.d3publisher.us). Price: \$20. Ages: 10-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches: puzzle solving. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 3.4 stars. Review date: 6/28/2006. [DC]

Ease of Use	3	68%
Educational	7	
Entertaining	9	
Design Features	6	
Good Value	9	

ESRB Rating: Everyone



## Charlotte's Web Storybook Creator v.1.2.9

A great idea, but poorly implemented, this creativity program is designed to let children create storybooks and comics using content from *Charlotte's Web*. Unfortunately, the program uses the same clunky menu system that prior versions of *Comic Book Creator* uses, which makes simple tasks such as adding a graphic or recording a sound tedious at best. In fact, we gave up after 15 minutes of trying to find a picture of Wilber.

Features include the ability to share work on a website and the ability to resize art, copy and paste, and so on. We liked the variety of text bubbles, which look like a real comic book.

Weaknesses include a forced activation process, which requires an Internet connection. This could make it possible for children to explore other parts of the Internet. The menus are cryptic and hard to understand.

For an older student with a good deal of patience and expertise with the Windows file system, this could be a good writing activity. However, for most children, this program could be a frustrating experience.

Details: Planetwide Games, Inc., [www.planetwidegames.com](http://www.planetwidegames.com). Price: \$30. Ages: 10-up. Platform: Windows XP. Teaches: writing, creativity, publishing, storytelling, making recordings. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 2 stars. Review date: 2/16/2007. [WB]

Ease of Use	4	40%
Educational	8	
Entertaining	2	
Design Features	4	
Good Value	2	

ESRB Rating: No ESRB rating



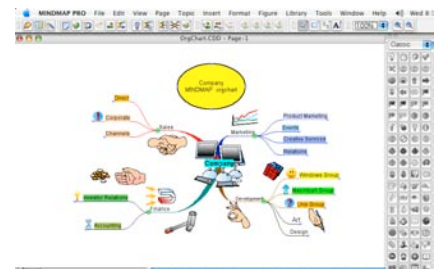
## ConceptDraw MINDMAP Professional Edition 4

Powerful but pricey, ConceptDraw makes it easy to turn a brainstormed list (such as field trip ideas) into a visual chart, with headings and subheadings. It could be good for both personal planning as well as note-taking or team brainstorming. We especially liked the ability to jump between text outlines and the automatic visual layout, on-the-fly as well as the ability to export the finished graphics as graphic images (PDFs or JPGs) or PowerPoint or MS Project. The clip art library is useful, with plenty of bullets. However, the larger graphics seem cartoonish, and they become bitmapped if they are increased in scale.

Two versions are available. The Professional Version supports extra file formats, multi-page documents, and has extended capabilities for creating web sites and PowerPoint presentations. Prices start at \$249. The Personal Version is \$120, and is perfectly adequate for students. Both versions have site license options. See also Inspiration and Kidspiration.

Details: CS Odessa LLC, [www.conceptdraw.com](http://www.conceptdraw.com). Price: \$119/single user. Ages: 12-up. Platform: Mac OSX, Windows XP. Teaches: creativity, brainstorming. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 4.3 stars. Review date: 1/23/2007. [WB]

Ease of Use	8	85%
Educational	9	
Entertaining	N	
Design Features	9	
Good Value	8	





### Diddy Kong Racing DS

This true-multiplayer adventure racing game is playful and fast-paced, and was quickly crowned (to quote 11-year-old Colleen), "...the best DS racing game ever! Soooooooo much better than Mario Kart!" Now if you've ever played Mario Kart, you know this is a pretty strong statement. One reason is that it is so easy to succeed, plus there's a lot of variety in the tracks, and interesting characters to talk to. Players can use the Nintendo Wi-Fi connection to go online and race against up to five other players from around the world. The game also features an eight-player multi-play mode, by way of the DS download play option, or via local wireless play.

Content includes 38 tracks, including four new tracks that were not in the N64 version. There are also three different vehicle types: cars, hovercrafts, and planes, with plenty of customization options. Comments from Daniel (age 7): "I love this game and would definitely buy it. It's the best racing game for DS."

Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$35. Ages: 6-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches: racing, spatial reasoning, problem solving, classifying, planning, fine motor. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 4.6 stars. Review date: 2/8/2007. [WB]

<b>Ease of Use</b>	9
<b>Educational</b>	8
<b>Entertaining</b>	10
<b>Design Features</b>	10
<b>Good Value</b>	9

92%



ESRB Rating: Everyone, Mild Cartoon Violence



### Disney's Cinderella's Dollhouse 2

Beautifully illustrated but loaded with narration that can't be skipped, this royal adventure asks children to help the Fairy Godmother decorate Cinderella's castle, in this follow-up game to Cinderella's Dollhouse. Children begin by visiting a village where they select what should be decorated first. They can visit the Floral Shop to select flowers, vases, garland, ribbon, or potted plants. The Print Shop is where children can make the invitations. The Bakery Shop is for decorating the cake, and The Palace has many rooms to explore and help prepare for the wedding. You can save at least ten of your designs for the wedding celebration and visit them at any time from the main menu.

The graphics are great, and the narration is right out of the movie. Once the decorating was complete, however, it was unclear how to see it at the celebration. But the biggest problem with this game is all the narration, which can't be skipped. If your child has the patience and enjoys the Cinderella theme, this is a good title to borrow at the very least.

Details: Buena Vista Games, www.buenavistagames.com. Price: \$20. Ages: 4-6. Platform: Win XP. Teaches: creative play, matching, patterns. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 4 stars. Review date: 8/7/2005. [DC]

<b>Ease of Use</b>	8
<b>Educational</b>	9
<b>Entertaining</b>	8
<b>Design Features</b>	6
<b>Good Value</b>	9

80%

ESRB Rating: Everyone



### Electronic Test Tube Aliens

This unique, gimmicky toy combines rudimentary chemistry, a virtual life toy and a web site. The toy consists of an eight-inch tall plastic cylinder containing a large foam ball. When you add water through a hole in the top, the ball starts to melt and foam, revealing a plastic toy alien with a flashing LED. Don't worry, all the mess is contained inside the large plastic test tube. The only interaction is by way of a multicolored LED, that signals if the creature is hungry, agitated or drowning. Red means he's doing well; green means he's drowning, and orange means he's hungry and needs more water. The critters come with a photosensor, so if they are held up to a computer screen, they can pick up light patterns and respond with a series of colored flashes. These coded messages help you monitor how your alien is doing. Of course, you have to register with an email address before you can use the web site, an obvious means of harvesting information. Other than that, there is no real interaction with the web. All in all, this is a strange toy that is very light on educational value. There are six varieties of aliens available.

Details: 4Kidz Inc., 4kidzinc.com. Price: \$15. Ages: 7-up. Platform: Smart Toy. Teaches: no educational value. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 3.4 stars. Review date: 2/7/2007. [WB]

<b>Ease of Use</b>	9
<b>Educational</b>	3
<b>Entertaining</b>	9
<b>Design Features</b>	6
<b>Good Value</b>	7

68%





### Fritz & Chesster's Chess for Winners

The idea of this third Fritz & Chesster adventure is to help children develop chess skills by embedding chess tutorials in an animated adventure. Unfortunately, the tutorials are not well explained, and it is impossible to skip through the program, making the experience tedious.

The story takes place in the beautifully illustrated Pleasantville Village Fair where children challenge Chesster, King Color, King Black, or a friend to a chess game. At any time you can click on a crown icon to learn about chess pieces, save, print, load, exit a game, play mini-games or a chess game. There are 18 mini-games, but they must first be unlocked. They include Capture Chess, Ferris Wheel Chess, Blitz Chess, and Chesster's Flea Circus. In Chesster's Flea Circus it is up to you to place chess pieces so that the purple king is always checkmated. During chess game play you can choose a level of difficulty, resign, draw or evaluate the game. This software also includes a one-year membership to [www.playchess.com](http://www.playchess.com) where you can play online games against real players.

Our test family felt that there were too many skits to work through before playing a mini-game. The premise of the game was interesting because it allowed you to sharpen up your chess-playing techniques before challenging someone to an actual game. If you are really into chess and want to practice your skills, it might be something worth looking in to; otherwise pass.

Details: Viva Media, [www.viva-media.com](http://www.viva-media.com). Price: \$30. Ages: 8-up. Platform: Windows XP. Teaches: chess, logic. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 3.9 stars. Review date: 1/2/2007. [DC]

<b>Ease of Use</b>	9
<b>Educational</b>	9
<b>Entertaining</b>	7
<b>Design Features</b>	6
<b>Good Value</b>	8

78%

ESRB Rating: Everyone



### LEGO Mindstorms NXT

Back in 1998, the LEGO Mindstorms robotics kit set the standard for children's programming activities, both at home and at school. Lego Mindstorms NXT is a major upgrade to the original kit. While the function — to build rolling or crawling robots — is similar, the technology in this kit is much more powerful, due to the battery-powered, Bluetooth-enabled, 32-bit NXT controller brick. Using a graphical programming language, children can first program their robot on a PC or, for the first time, on a Macintosh and then transfer the code to the computer, thanks to the Bluetooth or the USB 2.0 cable.

The kit has 519 parts, including three interactive servo motors with rotation and speed sensors, a movement detector, a sound sensor that can react to patterns or tones, an electric eye that can discriminate between colors or light intensity, and a touch sensor. For more information, visit [www.mindstorms.com](http://www.mindstorms.com). Each kit costs \$250, with group discounts available for schools.

Details: LEGO Americas, [www.mindstorms.com](http://www.mindstorms.com). Price: \$250. Ages: 10-up. Platform: Windows XP, Mac OSX. Teaches: logic, deductive reasoning, inductive reasoning, problem solving, spatial reasoning, classifying, mathematics, programming, instrument use, taking things apart, building, planning, organizing activities, reviewing, evaluating, working cooperatively, interpersonal problem solving, fine motor. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 4.6 stars. Review date: 1/5/2006. [WB]

<b>Ease of Use</b>	8
<b>Educational</b>	10
<b>Entertaining</b>	10
<b>Design Features</b>	9
<b>Good Value</b>	9

92%



### Phil of the Future

With a theme straight out of the Disney show, this is an explore-and-shoot game, featuring 15-year-old Phil. In the story, Phil and his family are stuck in the present time. Players must overcome numerous obstacles and challenges to help Phil and friends capture the "blahs" using dance moves, laser guns or agility to avoid trouble. Along the way, there are 20 new gadgets to find that are saved on the cartridge. There's a lot of reading in this game. For example, for every move that a character makes, there are as many as 10 screens of print representing dialog between Phil and his father. This wasn't an action game of constant playing. There are a series of Mini-Games to be played that are more arcade-like but other boards need to be completed before playing them. If you are familiar with the show, then this game may be more appealing to you. Otherwise pass. Developed by Handheld Games Corp. for Buena Vista Games and based on the popular Disney show of the same name.

Details: Buena Vista Games, [www.buenavistagames.com](http://www.buenavistagames.com). Price: \$29.99. Ages: 6-12. Platform: Game Boy Advance. Teaches: some logic, reading, problem solving. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 3.5 stars. Review date: 10/10/2006. [DC]

<b>Ease of Use</b>	9
<b>Educational</b>	5
<b>Entertaining</b>	7
<b>Design Features</b>	8
<b>Good Value</b>	6

70%

ESRB Rating: Everyone





**Pixie**

Looking for a solid drawing program for Mac or Windows computers? Pixie is a classroom friendly, no-gimmicks creativity drawing tool that will work well in a school setting despite a few rough spots (described below).

You start with a blank page, surrounded by icons for text, paint brushes, an eraser, lines, shapes, fill, an image scrambler, an eyedropper for sampling colors and a smearing tool for blending colors. There are 256 color options displayed on the bottom of the screen along with a library of stickers that can be dragged onto the picture and resized. Each option is also available as a standard drop down menu, which is nice.

To add text, you first select the text insertion tool which creates a text box on the screen, that can be edited at any point. We liked how it is possible to go back and reposition text and sticker elements. It is also possible to record sounds with a picture, if you have a microphone. Importing JPG photos for altering is easy, and you can also export work in five common formats, including JPG and BMP. So this is a versatile graphics utility.

Weaknesses include some sluggishness when switching between menu items on the Mac OSX version, and there are no text-to-speech options. Also, when you resize a brush using the slider bar, the process isn't WYSIWYG. In other words, there's a bit of guess work involved which adds to the complexity of the interface. Missing also are advance art features such as different textures. Like early versions of KidPix, this program makes it easy to make slide shows out of children's work, and there's a nice variety of classroom ideas. For example, if you are focusing in on the Science Curriculum, you may want to choose Nutrition. Your background picture will be a place setting and then children can choose nutritional food from the sticker gallery. All in all, this could be a useful classroom tool. We tested both the Mac and Windows versions, with no glitches.

Details: Tech4Learning, Inc., [www.tech4learning.com](http://www.tech4learning.com). Price: \$45. Ages: 5-10. Platform: Windows XP, Mac OSX. Teaches: creativity, art. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 4.3 stars. Review date: 11/27/2006. [DC]


**Scene It? Deluxe Marvel Edition**

Challenge your Marvel knowledge with this interactive DVD quiz on *Spiderman*, *X-Men* and *Fantastic Four*. Two disks contain 1,000 short clips that are used in this trivia game. The kit also comes with a game board, six tokens, 200 Trivia cards, 30 Buzz cards and four Category Reference cards. As with most *Scene It?* games, you can change the length of the game by how you arrange the game board. The game can be played with two- to four-players or in teams.

Note that the movie and TV clips have graphic violence which could frighten younger children. The DVD is only used when you land on one of the two categories that require it to be used. The various types and numerous amount of questions make the game interesting. Our test family didn't have a lot of background with Marvel material, but they enjoyed the concept of the *Scene It?* game and thought it would make an exciting party/group game. Other titles available include: Nick Scene It? (\$40 - ages 8-up); Banzai DVD Game (\$30 - ages 16-up); and Blast! DVD Game (\$20 ages 13-up).

Details: Screenlife, LLC, [screenlifegames.com](http://screenlifegames.com). Price: \$50. Ages: 13-up. Platform: DVD Game. Teaches: comic book trivia. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 4.1 stars. Review date: 11/22/2006. [DC]

<b>Ease of Use</b>	8	86%
<b>Educational</b>	9	
<b>Entertaining</b>	8	
<b>Design Features</b>	9	
<b>Good Value</b>	9	




<b>Ease of Use</b>	10	82%
<b>Educational</b>	8	
<b>Entertaining</b>	8	
<b>Design Features</b>	8	
<b>Good Value</b>	7	





### Sid Meier's Pirates (PSP)

This fun PSP adventure/strategy game is a great way to pass the time — as a 17th century pirate — despite a few rough spots in the game play. You start by selecting which type of pirate you want to become (there are five choices; each representing a different level). After you identify your pirate style, you start exploring the Caribbean by steering your ship around, using a map and attacking other ships with your cannons. When you win a battle, you can acquire the loot and the crew, increasing your status. It is possible to lose, however, and end up in a prison.

The game switches between three basic modes: Sailing, Sword Fighting and On-land Dialog. Up to four players can participate in the gun battles simultaneously using the Wi-Fi capabilities of the PSP. While the overall premise of the game is fun, some of the events don't seem logical, and the goals could be better explained. We noted some gender stereotypes and implied sexual overtones not reflected in the ESRB rating, (for example, when the pirate approaches a busty female barmaid for "some rest"). There is a bit of historical value to the game, although events and facts are highly embellished. Created by Full Fat for 2K Games. The game's web site is <http://www.2kgames.com/pirates/psp/>.

Details: 2K Games, [www.take2games.com](http://www.take2games.com). Price: \$30. Ages: 10-up. Platform: PSP\*, Xbox, Windows XP. Teaches: logic, history. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 4 stars. Review date: 6/1/2006. [WB]

### Sims Life Stories, The (PC)

This is the first release in a new line of standalone games called The Sims Stories that is designed with more flexibility, for play on a variety of platforms. Again, let us repeat -- this is not an expansion pack, although the design is very much like the other Sims 2 products. Our testers found the game to be just like a regular version of the Sims. Some liked the idea of an external story, but most wanted the standard Sims open-ended format.

The game features two themes. The first features Riley, a young adult who is starting a new life with new friends. The second features Vincent, high tech whiz who's unlucky in love. The game also features a Classic mode which lets you create your own Sims' stories. As in other Sims, it is up to you to create their Sims, design their dream homes and tell their stories. There are two different tutorials for either the novice or experienced player, and the game also features a new Auto Save function so you can start and stop anywhere, making it easier to play on the go. All in all, this is a nice addition to the Sims lineup. Parents, take note that while there is no explicit or bad language, there is no shortage of implied sexual relationships, as you might expect in an open-ended simulation of a young adult's life.

Details: Electronic Arts, Inc., [www.ea.com](http://www.ea.com). Price: \$40. Ages: 12-up. Platform: Windows XP. Teaches: creativity, logic. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 4.4 stars. Review date: 2/21/2007. [WB]

<b>Ease of Use</b>	8	80%
<b>Educational</b>	7	
<b>Entertaining</b>	9	
<b>Design Features</b>	8	
<b>Good Value</b>	8	

ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Mild Violence



<b>Ease of Use</b>	8	88%
<b>Educational</b>	8	
<b>Entertaining</b>	10	
<b>Design Features</b>	9	
<b>Good Value</b>	9	

ESRB Rating: Teen, Violence, Sexual Themes, Crude Humor





### Strawberry Shortcake Strawberry Land Games

Designed for younger children, this game features a cast of dessert-theme characters (Strawberry Shortcake, Pupcake and Blueberry Muffin) in a variety of games that focus on the value of friendship.

Children play as one of the characters, moving them down a cookie path toward four event fields where they can play games such as Black Licorice Leap and Berry Boarding, as well as complete three activities and mini-games. Black Licorice Leap has children clicking and dragging licorice drops onto a pond so their virtual cat or dog can hop from one to the next until it reaches the other side. Berry Boarding requires them to get to the bottom of Sundae Mountain as quickly as possible while doing snow board stunts. Children need to zigzag, speed up and slow down. Courses become more difficult as they progress. There is also a two-player version of Berry Boarding using the WiFi multiplayer function.

The timed Berry Cherry mini-games are easier, rewarding children with a number of tickets depending on how well they do. Berry Tap has them tapping strawberries as they pop out of holes in the ground (similar to Whack -A -Mole), and Berry Bounce requires them to tap a sequence of berries represented on the top screen. Note that the berries don't have to be tapped in the same sequence as they appear, making the game easier for young players. Berry Tiles lets children move Pupcake over 16 tiles so that they all match. The earned tickets can be used at the Dessert Booth to whip up treats that will reenergize their character during game play.

We liked the fact that the Berry Cherry Games were simpler for younger players, while the other games began at easy levels that progressively became harder — allowing both younger and older children to participate. The characters and content are well-matched to a five- through eight-year-old audience, but note that reading is required throughout the game. Children will need to be able to read words like "bouncing", "location" and "activity" if they are using the game on their own. Also, as you might expect from any Strawberry Shortcake-licensed product, the instruction booklet smells like strawberries!

Details: The American Game Factory, Inc., [www.gamefactorygames.com](http://www.gamefactorygames.com). Price: \$30. Ages: 5-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches: logic, problem solving, counting, patterns. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 4.1 stars. Review date: 11/27/2006. [AH]

### Tonka On the Job

This one-player GBA cartridge looks fun, but unfortunately employs a clumsy control scheme that requires reading, potentially confusing younger players.

Your mission is to drive one of 15 tiny construction vehicles through a maze of roads or construction sites to dig, dump and demolish. In Job Mode, players must control the vehicles and finish the jobs they start (creating a trench, digging foundation, etc.). In Sandbox Mode players have access to all of their favorite vehicles for unlimited construction and destruction in dirt yards, cities, gravel pits and forests. Players can save the day by putting out yard fires, rescuing injured workers and hauling vehicles out of the crew's way. The menus require reading, and are not easy to figure out. For example, the game uses a password save system, with passwords like 030VCG8T1S. Still, once you master the first few levels, the game could be potentially be fun. Even one of our 18-year-old testers found it to be interesting. Designed by Webfoot for THQ.

Details: THQ, Inc., [www.thq.com](http://www.thq.com). Price: \$20. Ages: 5-up. Platform: Game Boy Advance. Teaches: spatial relations, some problem solving. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 3.8 stars. Review date: 1/2/2007. [WB]

Ease of Use	8	82%
Educational	9	
Entertaining	8	
Design Features	8	
Good Value	8	

ESRB Rating: Everyone

Ease of Use	6	76%
Educational	7	
Entertaining	8	
Design Features	8	
Good Value	9	

ESRB Rating: Everyone





### Totally Spies! 2 (DS)

Based on the same-named Cartoon Network animated show, this challenging game allows children to play as one of three female high-school secret agents (Clover, Alex or Sam) trying to complete missions and defeat the evil Geraldine.

Operating out of a secret room under the Beverly Hills High School, the girls are equipped with gadgets — such as a Laser Nail File and a Wind Tunnel 9000 Laser-Tornado Blast hair dryer — to help them complete their missions. For example, when their adversary, Geraldine, unleashes a tornado, you have to run from it and jump over debris while waiting for your hair dryer to charge so you can blast it. On another mission, you have to dissect a flower by dragging its seeds through a maze in the body of the flower without touching the sides of the maze. After you complete one such maze, a more difficult one replaces it until you have dissected all the flowers.

Our 11-year-old tester found Twister Sisters and Guard Distraction to be two of the most challenging mini-games because they require you to do several things at once. For example, in Guard Distraction children have to tap on icons (such as a telephone), while simultaneously blowing into the microphone to activate it and watching the screen to make sure the guard doesn't see them. At the end of the mission, they have to answer five questions in the Confessional quiz, requiring them to hold the DS sideways. There are five missions to complete, each containing four mini-games with enough space to save three of the games.

Fans of the series will probably want to pick this one up. There is enough variation in the mini-games to keep it interesting, and all the buttons are used in clever ways. There is also a two-player wireless DS (single-card) download option. Our gripes? We didn't like the fact that all three girls look more like Charlie's Angels than normal high-school students, and some of the gadgets leaned toward the ridiculous rather than clever. We felt that the gas mask that looks like a stuffed teddy bear is a bit much. Developed by Mystic Software, Inc. for Atari.

Details: Atari, inc., [www.atari.com](http://www.atari.com). Price: \$30. Ages: 8-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches: logic, memory, problem solving, patterns. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 4.1 stars. Review date: 11/29/2006. [AH]

### Wii Play

Nintendo's collection of nine new Wii games vary in quality, but have enough value to merit the \$50 price tag, especially considering that an extra Wii Remote is included in the box. Each game needs to be unlocked before it can be played, which is a bit unfriendly (unlike Wii Sports). Fortunately, the unlocking process is easy, and progress can be saved — so this is a one-time process.

Each game can be played with either one or two players, and some require the extra Nunchuk peripheral. Games include: Billiards - players use the remote as a pool cue in a nine-ball game of pool (fun); Find Mii - players scan the crowds to find the right Mii (fairly fun); and Pose Mii - the player moves his Mii on the screen, rotating it and changing its pose to match the silhouettes inside the falling bubbles (not fun). The player must pop the bubble by matching its pose before the bubble hits the bottom of the screen. Other games include Tanks! — players command a toy tank on a miniature battlefield in 100 missions (very fun) — and Table Tennis where players rally the ball back and forth, shooting for the longest sustained rally (fun).

In Multi-player Mode, players compete to score points. Additional games include: Fishing - players must catch the fish indicated at the top of the screen (fun); Laser Hockey - players move paddles on an air hockey table, trying to hit the puck past the opponent's goal (fun); Shooting Range, a target-practice game in the style of the classic Duck Hunt where players shoot down targets ranging from clay pigeons to ducks to UFOs (very fun); and Charge! - the player controls a charging cow, guiding it into scarecrows and knocking them down by holding the Wii remote like a handle bar (silly and fun). If you're getting tired of Wii sports, this is a good addition to your library.

Details: Nintendo of America, [www.nintendo.com](http://www.nintendo.com). Price: \$50. Ages: 6-up. Platform: Wii. Teaches: cooperative play, fine and gross motor movement, sports. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 4.5 stars. Review date: 2/20/2007. [WB]

<b>Ease of Use</b>	8	82%
<b>Educational</b>	7	
<b>Entertaining</b>	9	
<b>Design Features</b>	9	
<b>Good Value</b>	8	

ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Cartoon Violence

<b>Ease of Use</b>	8	90%
<b>Educational</b>	8	
<b>Entertaining</b>	10	
<b>Design Features</b>	9	
<b>Good Value</b>	10	



ESRB Rating: Everyone, Mild Cartoon Violence





### Worksheet Station

Worksheet Station, found at <http://www.worksheetstation.com>, is a searchable database of curriculum-based worksheets (in PDF, JPG or DOC format). Nearly all of the worksheets have been submitted by teachers, whose names are included on each worksheet. Here's how it works. To find a worksheet, you can either search the database by keyword or follow a hierarchical listing. Most worksheets give you the option to choose a graphic format; some of which allow editing. Visitors are encouraged to upload their own worksheets (there is no cost for uploading, just for downloading). Every teacher receives "Author Credits" for each submission, which the site claims will be a good resume-builder. We noticed that many of the worksheets cross-reference Tool Factory software products; also the Worksheet Station URL is listed on every page. In addition, we did not notice any answer key on the (free trial) fractions worksheet that we printed. Note that many free worksheet generators are available, although quality varies greatly.

Details: Tool Factory, Inc., [www.toolfactory.com](http://www.toolfactory.com). Price: \$30. Ages: 6-up. Platform: Internet Site. Teaches: a utility for teachers and home schoolers. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 4 stars. Review date: 2/26/2007. [WB]

### Yoshi's Island DS

Fun and full of clever problem solving situations, this is a maze game full of items to collect. The goal is to get through each level before time runs out, by picking up different critters and getting them to the end of the level. There are a variety of enemies and unique obstacles, not unlike many Mario games. Yoshi can eat some of the bad guys, and then turn them into eggs; or you may see white clouds that lead to a set of stairs that are needed to get to the next level. Minimal reading is helpful at first, to learn how the game works.

Although this game is for the DS, the touch screen is rarely used. Our testers, ranging from age 4 to 18, had a lot of fun with this game, and appreciated the ability to save up to four games on the cartridge. Parents should note that there was some name calling ("brats" and "fools") directed at the characters. Overall it was a fun game to play and challenging to get through the levels of play. It was also interesting to see the Mario characters as babies. Yoshi's Island is worth playing and is a welcome addition to the Mario universe.

Details: Nintendo of America, [www.nintendo.com](http://www.nintendo.com). Price: \$35. Ages: 6-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches: logic, spatial relations. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 4.3 stars. Review date: 11/20/2006. [DC]

Ease of Use	9
Educational	N
Entertaining	N
Design Features	7
Good Value	8

80%

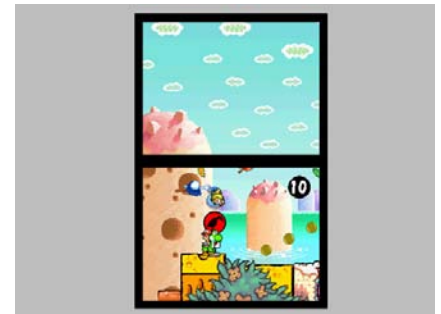


Ease of Use	8
Educational	N
Entertaining	10
Design Features	8
Good Value	8

85%



ESRB Rating: Everyone





# New & Future Releases

MARCH 1, 07

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## V.Flash Home Entertainment System

Think V.Smile for older kids and you have the idea of this new 32-bit system. This stand-alone gaming console is designed to play specially formatted educational disks, called V.Discs. Content was formed with some relationship with *The Princeton Review*. There are now nine titles (six at launch and three in 2007) sold for \$15 each. Out testers found the games to vary in quality. While they are significantly less fun than any video game, they do a good job at embedding skills into tried-and-true arcade-like settings for a reasonable price. Note that games can be saved if you have a \$15 memory card.

Details: VTech Electronics North America, [www.vtechkids.com](http://www.vtechkids.com). Price: \$100 (\$30 for disks). Ages: 6-10. Platform: V.Smile. Teaches: math, reading, social studies -- basic skills. Review date: 2/15/2006.



## Avatar: The Last Airbender (Console Version)

Based on the Nickelodeon TV show *Avatar*, children play as Aang, Katara, Haru or Sokka as they develop their team's magic and martial arts skills. Children can customize their bending powers to help them master the four elements (Earth, Air, Water, and Fire) as they journey through the various nations of the Avatar world.

Available platforms include: GC, PS2, PSP and Xbox (\$39.99 each), PC (\$19.99), Wii (\$49.99). Developed by Studio Oz for THQ.

Details: THQ, Inc., [www.thq.com](http://www.thq.com). Price: \$39.99. Ages: 6-11. Platform: PlayStation 2, GameCube, Wii, Xbox. Teaches: logic. Review date: 9/8/2006.

## Las Parabras Interactivas

Designed for religious education, the Interactive Parables is a Windows-based game with 24 lessons from Jesus' parables grouped by theme. Children complete each lesson to win a crown. Available in English and Spanish.

Details: GraceWorks Interactive, [www.graceworksinteractive.com](http://www.graceworksinteractive.com). Price: \$10.00. Ages: 12-up. Platform: Windows XP, Windows 98. Teaches: Bible stories, religious education. Review date: 9/11/2006.

## Little Mermaid: Magic In Two Kingdoms, The (GBA)

This maze-like GBA adventure lets children explore Ariel's undersea world, following a format that has been used in dozens of other GBA titles. As they explore, children encounter eight games. For example, in *Defend the Ship*, they try to hit Ursula's tentacles by dropping items on them. Note that reading is required. Our tester, age four, found it was helpful that there was a demonstration on what needed to be completed for each game. For example, When Ariel and Flounder were searching for treasure, Flounder became transparent, and he showed you what you needed to do to rescue the treasure. Then it was up to you to make the real Flounder do it and retrieve the treasure. No scores are kept. Once he was able to get past the intro, our tester enjoyed the games. Overall the game was fun to play, and not too difficult for young children — providing they have some coaching at first. Developed by Gorilla Systems Corporation For BVG.

Details: Buena Vista Games, [www.buenavistagames.com](http://www.buenavistagames.com). Price: \$20. Ages: 4-6. Platform: Game Boy Advance. Teaches: following directions. Review date: 11/15/2006.

## Yu-Gi-Oh! GX Tag Force

Players begin their adventure at the Duel Academy by entering one of the three dorms, Ra Yellow, Obelisk Blue, or Slifer Red. The school is holding a different tournament this time; players now have a tag team partner to help them duel. Practice dueling with your friends, find the best partner, and if you win the competition, you will be allowed use of the duel Academy Island for a day. The game features new characters, monsters and cards from the Yu-Gi-Oh! GX world, tag team wireless dueling, and also comes with three exclusive trading cards.

Details: Konami Digital Entertainment, Inc., [www.konami.com](http://www.konami.com). Price: \$30. Ages: 7-up. Platform: PSP. Teaches: reading, strategy, logic. Review date: 11/27/2006.



**QuickCam Ultra Vision webcam**

Designed to capture both still images (up to 4 MP in size) or streaming web video with sound, Logitech's \$130 QuickCam features a larger glass lens, designed to capture more light. There's also an integrated microphone for use with phone services. Included software allows the ability to edit digital images (e.g., you can put a crown on yourself if you're feeling like royalty). The lens features 78 degrees of visibility so a group can get into the same photo.

Details: Logitech, Inc., [www.logitech.com](http://www.logitech.com). Price: \$130. Ages: 12-up. Platform: Windows XP. Teaches: a classroom utility. Review date: 12/20/2006.



**Rubik's Revolution**

At first glance, this talking, electronic cube looks like a traditional Rubik's cube. But don't be fooled -- this is a very different item. For one, the sides don't turn, so your first impulse of twisting the cube is met with rock-like resistance. A second look reveals an on/off switch, and a hollow center block, which is actually a lightup switch. Once turned on, a robotic voice explains that there are six games you can play, such as Light Speed, where you race the clock to press as many colors as possible. (The ticking increases with time, urging you to hurry up.) Other games ask you to pass the cube to another player, to see who can make the most matches without an error. Our testers found the cube's instructions at the beginning to be confusing, and quickly lost interest. Visit [www.rubiksrevolution.com](http://www.rubiksrevolution.com) for more information. Powered by three AA batteries.

Details: Techno Source, [www.technosourceusa.com](http://www.technosourceusa.com). Price: \$20. Ages: 5-up. Platform: smart toy. Teaches: classification, logic, memory. Review date: 1/22/2007.



**Made for Me MP3 Player**

You can put your own custom digital music inside your baby's toys, with this \$80 MP3 player, made for Hasbro by Creative. Once the palm-sized player is loaded up with as many as 50 songs using your computer, it fits inside other toys, such as the 2-in-1 Infant Gym (with lights, mirrors and sounds for \$40), or the \$35 Day-to-Dream soother with lights, music and a ceiling light projection that works in day or night conditions.

Details: Hasbro, Inc., [www.hasbro.com](http://www.hasbro.com). Price: \$80. Ages: 0-3. Platform: smart toy. Teaches: early learning. Review date: 2/14/2007.



**Disney XD**

Well-designed and highly promotional, Disney XD (Extreme Digital) is a collection of free multiplayer games, scavenger hunts and constructed chat (Disney calls it "speed chat") activities. Registration is required. The games are fun, and the site is thick with promotional materials for other Disney programming. For example, while you bowl, you listen to a recent music video from Hannah Montana. At other points, there are banner ads. It is easy to find other players to play against. This is not an MMOG (massive multiplayer online game) in the true sense of the term; rather it is more of a collection of two-player games, with chat and messaging thrown in. We did not see a free chat option; only the more safe constructed chat.

Details: Disney Interactive, Inc., [www.buenavistagames.com](http://www.buenavistagames.com). Price: \$free. Ages: 6-up. Platform: Internet. Teaches: a Disney web portal. Review date: 2/16/2007.





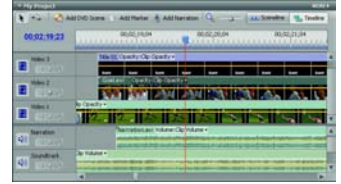
### Adobe Photoshop Elements 5.0 plus Premier Elements 3.0

If you know an older child that is interested in creating with digital pictures or video, you need to know about Adobe's answer to iMove and iPhoto. Designed only for Windows, this combination pack contains two powerful but complex products for photo and video editing. They are a logical bundle, because it is common to use still photos in your video productions.

New features of Photoshop Elements 5.0 include the ability to convert color originals to black and whites; make customized photo creations using themed layout options for albums, postcards, scrapbook pages, and more; as well as string together a series of still photos in a flipbook that creates a sense of motion. Images can be saved in JPG, TIF, PDS, PDF, BMP and GIF formats. If you want to prepare professional EPS images in CMYK format, you're out of luck with Elements, and will need to purchase a full version of Photoshop instead.

New features of Premier Elements 3.0 include the ability to edit and view your movie in a single location — the Monitor window — where you can drag one scene onto another to create picture-in-picture effects, trim and split clips and type text onscreen. Other new features of this package include the ability to capture a single video frame, add text, graphics, or other enhancements and then put it back in your movie for a freeze frame effect. According to the company's press materials, the process for transferring video straight to DVD has been simplified. We have yet to test all of these features. A fairly complete users guide is included in the box; one for each program.

Details: Adobe Systems Incorporated, [www.adobe.com](http://www.adobe.com). Price: \$130. Ages: 12-up. Platform: Windows XP. Teaches: art, creativity, digital photography and video editing. Review date: 2/21/2007.



### Power Tour Electric Guitar

The best pretend guitar to date, Tiger/Hasbro's stand alone Power Tour Guitar uses a touch sensitive fret board and motion sensing strumming area, making it easy to pretend to be a rock star to play classic songs like "Frankenstein." It is very easy to get started. As you run your finger along the fret board, your fingertips cause each of the 14 note regions to light up and play an associated note. Unlike I Can Play Guitar (Fisher-Price) there are no actual strings. To bend a note, you shake the guitar and motion sensors change the pitch. The sound comes from an internal speaker, or sound can be exported to any speaker system (a \$50 toy amp is also sold). There's a tutorial mode that teaches twelve songs. For example, if you get a segment wrong, the guitar will play back the example a little slower, which is continued until the segment is mastered. If only real guitars had this feature! There are four modes: metal, punk, rock or indie. Coming August 2007, powered by four AA batteries. Also see the Fisher-Price I Can Play Guitar and Guitar Hero.



Details: Tiger Electronics (Hasbro), [www.hasbro.com/tiger/](http://www.hasbro.com/tiger/). Price: \$70. Ages: 10-up. Platform: Smart Toy. Teaches: music, the mechanics of playing the guitar, rhythm. Review date: 2/26/2007.

### Easy Link Internet Launchpad

Best described as a children's Internet portal, this is a software/hardware product that bundles free Internet content. It makes it possible to direct preschoolers to pre-selected sites, like Sesame Workshop or Dragon Tales. First, you plug the cradle into the USB port of your web connected Windows computer. Three figurines come with the cradle, and others will be sold separately. There are just three characters. You can buy additional figurines for more sites. It is not clear yet how this will work with your browser, and how it will prevent children from going to other sites, but we assume there is some software that will need to be installed. There are nine websites, including Fisher-Price.com.



Details: Fisher-Price, Inc., [www.fisher-price.com](http://www.fisher-price.com). Price: \$30. Ages: 3-6. Platform: Windows. Teaches: a children's Internet portal. Review date: 2/26/2007.



### I Can Play Guitar

Based on the same teaching principle as last year's Learn to Play Piano, this toy guitar plugs into the AV ports of your TV, and runs on batteries. Instead of strings, the fret bar is loaded with oval color-coded buttons, and the idea is that you follow a series of streaming notes on the TV screen as your favorite rock song plays in the background. If you've ever played Dance Dance Revolution, the idea is the same, with a fret board instead of a dance pad.

We played "Smoke on the Water" and we had three levels. In the easy level, you match the colors. Harder levels involve a faster tempo and strumming the fret board simultaneously. Fortunately, the tempo can be adjusted, which is necessary in order to figure out the process. It's like paint-by-number guitar, where quick matching can let you into the song, sans any talent or pitch. As with the piano, you can toggle between four screen themes, one with real notes. So does it work? We can tell you that the guitar is much more complex to learn than the piano, because at least with the piano, the keys are in one line. Plus, the button/fret process is very different than the real guitar. We'll have to try it on some testers. Runs on four C batteries, coming July 2007.

Details: Fisher-Price, . Price: \$100. Ages: 6-up. Platform: Smart Toy. Teaches: music, rhythm, guitar, pitch, musical notation. Review date: 2/26/2007.



### ClickStart My First Computer

This is a toy-like wireless QWERTY keyboard and mouse that turns your TV into a computer monitor. It functions a lot like the V.Smile Infant and Baby Development system, only for older children.

Onboard content includes four games, plus one extra reward game. Extra cartridges can be purchased for \$20 each. The \$60 system consists of two parts, a keyboard/mouse, which sends infrared (like a TV remote) signals to the receiver, which you keep near your TV and plug into the AV port. Both the keyboard and receiver are battery-operated (4 Cs and 4 AAs), so be prepared to stock up on batteries. The games seemed to be well-designed, although we did not test them with children. Leapfrog has announced six software titles: Animal Art Studio, Dora the Explore Friends! Amigos!, Finding Nemo: Sea of Keys, Learning Carnival, Thomas & Friends: Learning Destinations, and Toy Story: To 100 & Beyond. Coming in August.

Details: Leapfrog, [www.leapfrog.com](http://www.leapfrog.com). Price: \$60. Ages: 3-6. Platform: TV. Teaches: early learning. Review date: 2/26/2007.



### WordLaunch

By combining tangible magnetic letters with TV graphics, Leapfrog's WordLaunch system links word sounds with blocks in an attempt to put a phonics teacher inside your television.

After the batteries are installed and the device is plugged into your TV's A/V port, children turn on the device to see three games, built around 300 preschool and kindergarten words. The kit includes 32 letter tiles and an alphabet tray for organizing and storing the letters.

There are three single-session games that automatically increase in challenge as the child plays. In Bumper Cars, children put together words like "cat" and "dad." Each bumper car is a letter. In order to make the cars crash together, they must combine the correct letters to spell out words. Also, in the hardest level, a child might have to add the silent "E" to words, such as turning *kit* into *kite*. Look for a review in early August, when WordLaunch is released to the market.

Details: LeapFrog, [www.leapfrog.com](http://www.leapfrog.com). Price: \$50. Ages: 4-6. Platform: TV. Teaches: reading, spelling, phonics, letter recognition. Review date: 2/26/2007.



### Kid Works Deluxe

Twelve years ago, Kid Works Deluxe was one of the leading creativity programs — allowing younger children to create with drawings and a large-font word processor. According to Knowledge Adventure, this new version (designed for the school market only) combines a word processor and paint program, allowing children to create media-rich stories. New features include the ability to import JPG graphics, 54 new textures to create with, updated text-to-speech abilities so that any text can be read aloud, and the ability to record a student's voice. Finished stories can be printed or emailed home to parents, where they can be played without any special plug-ins.

Details: Knowledge Adventure, Inc., [www.knowledgeadventure.com](http://www.knowledgeadventure.com). Price: \$30 and up. Ages: 4-8. Platform: Windows XP, Vista and Macintosh. Teaches: reading, writing, creativity. Review date: 2/26/2007.





### JumpStart World

Like Playhouse Disney Preschool Time Online, this is a subscription-based web-delivered personalized learning system that is divided by grades (K, 1 and 2). Children can explore in a 3D park, where they find games, quests and missions. As they play, children earn badges, while their progress is recorded in a parent report. New content is available as a download each month, along with parent tips and new adventures. Activities include sorting plants, designing billboards and adopting a virtual pet to play with and take care of. Children can eventually "graduate" to the next year's level. Coming Spring 2007.

Details: Knowledge Adventure, Inc., [www.knowledgeadventure.com](http://www.knowledgeadventure.com). Price: \$call. Ages: 5-7. Platform: Internet Site. Teaches: math, reading, logic. Review date: 2/26/2007.



### V.Smile SmartBook

This \$30 peripheral for the V.Smile TV Learning System (not included in the price) uses a tethered stylus to let children touch pictures or words to see the animation on the TV screen. The book plugs into one of the controller ports on your television. Three book/cartridge titles include Toy Story, Spider-Man and Dora.

Details: VTech Electronics North America, [www.vtechkids.com](http://www.vtechkids.com). Price: \$30. Ages: 3-6. Platform: V.Smile. Teaches: reading, language. Review date: 2/26/2007.

### V.Smile Keyboard

This \$30 peripheral for the V.Smile TV Learning System (not included in the price) is designed to turn your TV into a child's first typing tutorial. Note that there is a bit of controversy about the developmental level that children should be at before they start keyboarding. Other V.Smile peripherals include the V.Smile Jammin' Gym Class, V.Smile Art Studio and the V.Smile SmartBook.

Details: VTech Electronics North America, [www.vtechkids.com](http://www.vtechkids.com). Price: \$30. Ages: 5-8. Platform: V.Smile. Teaches: typing/keyboard tutorials. Review date: 2/27/2007.

### VTech Wiz Kid Learning System

Children slide one of 40 page-sized activity cards into a holder. They can then touch the page to hear words read aloud or pictures described. The pad can be connected to a computer to play activities, have their progress tracked, or print new sheets. Software includes Wondertown Whizware, a focused reading program. Additional software titles cost \$20 each. Runs on batteries; no TV required.

Details: VTech Electronics North America, [www.vtechkids.com](http://www.vtechkids.com). Price: \$50. Ages: 3-6. Platform: Smart Toy. Teaches: reading, logic, counting, math. Review date: 2/27/2007.

### Gadget

Shaped like a large walkie-talkie with a color LCD screen, the Gadget combines eight gadgets into one device, for \$100. It is a low-quality digital camera (.3 MegaPixels), a movie maker, an MP3 player, an FM radio tuner, and a digital recorder, with voice messaging abilities. The color screen is 1.8 inches in size, for displaying pictures. It will be interesting to see how easy the Gadget is to use.

Details: VTech Electronics North America, [www.vtechkids.com](http://www.vtechkids.com). Price: \$100. Ages: 6-up. Platform: smart toy. Teaches: creativity. Review date: 2/27/2007.

### Kidizoom Camera

Like last year's Fisher-Price Kid Tough digital camera, this camera also makes it possible for a younger child to shoot an endless supply of photos. The end result is low quality (.3 Megapixels), so don't expect professional results. Children can also shoot video. It stores 120 photos or five minutes of digital video on the built-in 16 MB of memory. An SD expansion slot is also available. Like the Fisher-Price camera, the Kidizoom uses a dual-eye viewfinder.

Details: VTech Electronics North America, [www.vtechkids.com](http://www.vtechkids.com). Price: \$60. Ages: 3-up. Platform: smart toy. Teaches: creativity, digital photography. Review date: 2/27/2007.





### Quamble

This clever memory toy turns short phrases like "follow the yellow brick road" into a timed memory game. The console consists of five colored balls and a cradle, along with 250 common phrases stored in memory. After hearing the phrase, the words are scrambled, with each part represented by a ball. To win, you must put the balls/parts of the phrase in correct order as fast as possible. The result is a strong language learning experience.

Details: Radica USA, [www.radicagames.com](http://www.radicagames.com). Price: \$25. Ages: 12-up. Platform: Smart Toy. Teaches: auditory discrimination, language, listening, memory, logic, grammar. Review date: 2/27/2007.



### IM-ME

This IM-ing device looks like a BlackBerry (with a small QWERTY keyboard and an LCD screen). It comes with a USB 900 MHz transmitter that is a bit larger than a flash drive. You first install software and then plug in the transmitter to broadcast text messaging throughout your house. In other words, your child can leave the computer, go up to his/her room and escape the prying eyes of a parent — or perhaps a younger sibling. There are no additional monthly fees.

Details: Radica USA, [www.radicagames.com](http://www.radicagames.com). Price: \$65. Ages: 10-up. Platform: Windows XP. Teaches: writing, communication, IMing. Review date: 2/27/2007.



### Digital Blue QX-7 Microscope

Finally! An update to the QX line of computer microscopes with some new features. We've been told that this QX-7 will have 1.3 megapixel resolution with the ability to zoom 100x larger, up to 300x. In addition, a \$150 "pro" version will come with an AC adapter, a 3 megapixel camera, and SD card slot, and metal finish. Both versions feature LED lighting.

Details: Digital Blue, [www.playdigitalblue.com](http://www.playdigitalblue.com). Price: \$100. Ages: 5-up. Platform: Mac OSX, Windows XP. Teaches: science, observation. Review date: 3/1/2007.

