

The Educational Guide to Software, Electronic Toys, Video Games & Web Sites



Children's TECHNOLOGY Review

May 2008

Volume 16, No. 5, Issue 98

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Word Roots A1 Software



A first look at Steven Spielberg's

BOOM BLOX

PLUS

LittleClickers: Roller Coaster Sites

A Web 2.01 Patch

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Teachers: It's Time to Wii

I took a call last week from a subscriber from a large New Jersey school, serving children with special needs. She explained that her students ranged widely both in age (from K-12) and in their cognitive and motor abilities. She was on the hunt for new software.

I started by mentioning some classics, like **Exploring Verbs Sterling Edition** from Laureate Learning Systems and **2Simple Math Games** (both reviewed in this issue). But she wanted something more.

As I glanced over the top-rated products from last year, I made a recommendation that I could hardly believe I was saying. "Get a Wii," I blurted, immediately feeling better after saying it. There was silence. "A what?" she said. "A Wii, from Nintendo." "What's a Wii?"

After providing a quick Wii 101 tutorial over the phone, I started to convince myself that my recommendation made a lot of sense. "For a social, engaging classroom experience, you just can't beat what a Wii can do, especially with four controllers," I said. Now of course, every school board member is going to ask the same question at once. "What's a Wii have to do with our curriculum?" That answer obviously depends on how you define "curriculum." But consider this reality. Using our database, I can find a growing number of viable educational releases for either the Wii or the DS. And these are titles that ask children to touch and move rather than point and click.

Take the spatial thinking and impulse control required to knock down a tower of blocks in **Boom Blox** (on this month's cover) or the hundreds of realistic animal facts waiting to be discovered in **Wild Earth African Safari** (page 16).

And at Mediatech, we're training future New Jersey drivers with **Mario Kart Wii** (if you've ever tried to drive into Manhattan during rush hour, you know what I mean). As we ended the conversation, it was clear that I had her pretty confused, but she noted that she was at least eager to give a Wii a try. She then said "I have just one more question. Where can I buy one?"



Editorial

Warren Buckleitner



May 2008

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- We don't distribute/trade or sell subscriber information.
- There is no advertising content.

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Warren Buckleitner

Warren Buckleitner, Editor

*PS. The Consumer Reports WebWatch study on how young children use online content is finally available. Let me know what you think!
<http://www.consumerwebwatch.org/dynamic/press-release-kidsonline.cfm>*

Your Key to 8424 Reviews

Your paid \$64 or \$108 subscription to *CTR* includes exclusive password access to the **Children's Software Finder (TM)** database—a collection of reviews going back to 1985. If you've lost or forgotten your password, please call 800-993-9499 between 9-3 PM EST.



Directory

Both full reviews and future releases are grouped by age.



Preschool & Kindergarten

Build-A-Bear Workshop A Friend Fur All Seasons, www.gamefactorygames.com
Disney Pix Jr. Digital Camera For Preschoolers, www.disney.com
Lowey Hija & Friends (Book One, Ages 2-6), www.pianoplaymusic.com

Early Elementary

Putt-Putt Saves the Zoo, www.humongous.com
Backyard Sports Baseball '09, www.backyardsports.com
Boom Blox, www.ea.com
Mario Kart Wii, www.nintendo.com
Pajama Sam in "Don't Fear the Dark", www.humongous.com
Petz: Horsez 2 (Wii), www.ubisoft.com
Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Explorers of Darkness, www.nintendo.com
Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Explorers of Time, www.nintendo.com

Middle School

Lost Cases of Sherlock Holmes, The MapleStory, www.maplestory.com
Naruto: Path of the Ninja, www.d3publisher.us
Okami, www.capcom.com
Weekly Reader Visual Guides: Weather & Global Warming, www.innovative-knowledge.com
Word Roots A1 Software, www.criticalthinking.com

Upper Elementary

Chaotic Trading Card Game: Starter Deck, www.chaoticgame.com
Cory in the House, www.disney.com
Deca Sports, www.hudsonent.com
Diner Dash: Flo on the Go, www.brightermindsmedia.com
Eco-Creatures, www.majescoentertainment.com
Farm Vet, www.legacyinteractive.com

Gran Turismo 5 Prologue, www.us.playstation.com
High School Musical 2: Work This Out!, www.disney.com
My Horse & Me (Wii), www.atari.com
Wild Earth: African Safari, www.majescoentertainment.com

Schools

2Simple Math Games 1, www.2simpleusa.com
Building Thinking Skills Level 2, www.criticalthinking.com
Exploring Nouns Sterling Edition, www.laureatelearning.com
Exploring Verbs Sterling Edition, www.laureatelearning.com
Let's Face It!, <http://info.med.yale.edu/chldstdy/neuroimaging>
Matrix Math Plus, www.StellarLearn.com
NetOp School, www.netop.com

CTR Editor's Choice Selections, May 2008

2Simple Math Games 1
Boom Blox
Diner Dash: Flo on the Go
Exploring Nouns Sterling Edition
Exploring Verbs Sterling Edition
Farm Vet
Mario Kart Wii
Pajama Sam in "Don't Fear the Dark"
Pulse Smartpen
Putt-Putt Saves the Zoo
Wild Earth: African Safari

IN THE NEXT ISSUE...

As we go to press, we're testing the titles below for next month. Have you used them? We welcome feedback, at <http://ctr.childrenssoftware.com/writeuser.html>

Classic Quotes
"The test of the morality of a society is what it does for its children" Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), German Theologian and Nazi Protestor

Clicktoy: The Meadow Crosswords DS	SPY Fox in Dry Cereal
Doko! Discs	Tamagotchi Connection
(www.dokodrop.com)	V5: Familitchi
Jetix.com	teachermate
Kids Can Publish	The Meadow
(www.kidscanpublish.com)	The Tuttles: Madcap Misadventures
LEGO Indiana Jones: The Videogame	Toy Shop
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PetPetPet Habitats	Wall-E
Sega Superstars Tennis	ZooGames
Shining Stars	
Soundtech Lightsnake	
Vocal Trainer	

An inside view of the Mediatech Foundation, where we test and archive our software. Visit www.mediatech.org for more information.



Acknowledgments

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Lorele Bennet, 15; Jenna Buckleitner, 13; Sarah Buckleitner, 16; Jared C., 2; Tyler C., 4; David Carr 12; Daniel Della Fave, 8; Nick Della Fave, 12; Kelly H., 11; Thomas H., 14; Mohamed (Mo) Farid, 13; Caleb, H. 9; Ethan H., 11; Griffith, Tyler, 15; Griffith, Troy, 12; Griffith, Brett, 7; Jon Gick, 18; Michael Harrington, 14; Laura Henry, 14; Ellie Hilgen, 6; Erin Hilgen, 12; Matthew Kurza, 10; Frank Mondella, 13; Matthew Mondella, 10; Alyssa Mondella, 15; Keith Paternoster, 15; Greg Shriener, 25; Matt Ivans, 22; Austin Lyons, 15; Connor Lyons, 11; Owen Lyons, 8; Colleen Nester, 12; Ross Rackin, 12; Jose Rincon, 13; Steven Rofrano, 12; Tim Wolock, 16.

Products are tested and stored for public access and research at the Mediatech Foundation (www.mediatech.org), 118 Main Street, Flemington NJ.

Roller Coasters

When it comes to roller coasters, you either love 'em or hate 'em. Here's a closer look at these truly incredible machines.

1) What is the fastest roller coaster in the world?

At <http://www.rcdb.com/ig2832.htm?picture=42> you will find some pictures of the world's fastest roller coaster, in New Jersey (our home state!) Called Kingda Ka, this coaster goes 128 mph, is 45 stories high and does it all in just 15 seconds.



2) Who invented the first roller coasters?

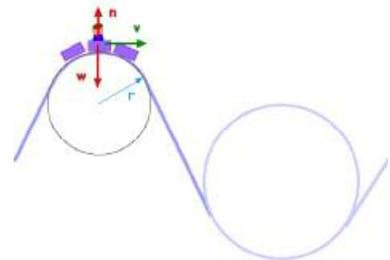
According to Britannica.com, or <http://search.eb.com/coasters/index.html> you can learn about a Russian roller coaster made from icy hills and cut lumber dating back to the mid-1600s (you rode on straw mats). The first such rides with attached cars and a track, however, date back to 1817 in Paris, France with a ride called The Les Montagues Russes.



<http://www.coastergallery.com>.

3) Could you design a Roller Coaster?

There's a lot of math involved with creating a roller coaster, but don't worry. This is fun math. Thanks to sites like <http://www.funderstanding.com/k12/coaster>, <http://kids.discovery.com/games/rollercoasters/buildacoaster.html> and <http://www.ux1.eiu.edu/~cfadd/1150/05UCMGrav/Vert.html> you can make your own roller coaster by dragging and dropping track parts into place. Will your coaster car make it to the end?



4) What do the Thunderbolt, the Beast and the Texas Giant have in common?

All are famous roller coasters from around the country, and each is described at <http://kids.discovery.com/games/rollercoasters/coastervideos/coastervideos.html>. If you're hungry for more photos of cool coasters like the one of the Kingda Ka (upper right), visit <http://www.coastergallery.com>.



<http://kids.discovery.com/games/rollercoasters/coastervideos/coastervideos.html>



A front row view of the world's fastest roller coaster!

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HN8nv4tVFuA>

Kingda Ka Front Row Video



Rate: ★★★★★ 2,324 ratings

Views: 1,841,719

Thoughts for Designers: Announcing the WEB 2.01 PATCH

By Scott Traylor

Last month, I was presenting at a conference for education publishers when someone raised his hand and asked “What’s a Webkinz?” Hmmmm, I thought. Doesn’t everyone know about Webkinz World (www.webkinz.com)? Shouldn’t everyone know about this site and others like it without the excuse “I don’t have kids.” The next day, somebody asked me, “What’s an avatar?” I was starting to understand that there were still plenty of publishers firmly stuck in yesterday’s Web 1.0 world. But don’t worry. We’ll fix the problem the way we developers always do—with a Patch.

The Web 2.0.1 Patch is designed to help you become more thoughtful when creating interactive experiences for children (and it works well for school or library websites, as well). Installing this Patch in your brain is a quick and painless process as long as you have a USB 2.01 port just behind your left ear. Or, you can follow these three steps.

STEP 1) Create an account for yourself in a virtual world like Club Penguin, Pirate’s Online, Nicktropolis, Second Life or any of the many virtual worlds that are popping up all over. Once you have an account, test it out and play with it. Keep in mind—like many other Web 2.0 products available you may not see the benefits immediately, but you will see incremental improvements every time you come back to visit one of these virtual worlds.

STEP 2) Upload digital photos to Flickr or a video to YouTube. Don’t forget to include some tags that describe what you’re uploading so for others can easily find it. Once you have posted something, control your excitement, pat yourself on the back, and email friends and family with a link to your newly posted UGC (User Generated Content)!

STEP 3) Create a personal profile on Facebook, LinkedIn, or any another similar social networking site. If you don’t know one that’s right for you, ask a smart computer friend what she uses (chances are she will have already installed the 2.0.1 Patch and will be familiar with the requirements). If your techy friend is not available, casually ask someone under the age of 20 what sites they use. Don’t tell them that you are setting up a new account. If you do, he or she might give you that “Web 1.0 look” and then slowly back away.

(DRUMROLL) “I am pleased to announce the Web 2.01 Developer Patch”

Here are just a few of the benefits you’ll be able to enjoy from downloading and installing this Patch:

- **You will start from, and work from, a central plan.** If you’re designing a site or service with social features, there will be no more “winging it” or making it up as you go along. Thinking through the design of your new web idea, writing it down, and sharing it with all of your team members are more important now than ever before.
- **You’ll test your work with your target audience.** The Patch works best when testing is considered at the very beginning of your product’s definition on paper and throughout the development process. Some of you might explain “We never had to test our products during the Web 1.0 days!” Yes, in many ways the Web 1.0 days were a simpler time, and a time we will all look back on with nostalgia. However, the hustle and bustle of today’s fast-paced Web 2.0 world demands ongoing testing.
- **After you install the 2.0.1 Patch, you’ll have zero tolerance for UI (user interface) mistakes.** If buttons or other interactive controls don’t function as they are supposed to, your product will be in violation of the User’s Agreement. It is important to fully think through the entire user experience fully before launching an interactive product. This requirement can’t be overstated. You can’t blame it on Flash, Microsoft or some browser

error. That’s the 1.0 baby talk of the past.

- **If you are a Web 2.0 savvy developer, keep in mind that it is possible your audience is not acknowledging that he or she is a Web 1.0 user.** Education outreach and friendly intervention is an important component of the Web 2.0 vision. Take the time to gently explain how their actions are hurting others around them. Also explain the benefits of the Web 2.0 universe. (Note: This should be apparent in the development documentation you will have recently created for your plan). To keep your Web 2.0 chops fresh, try out the latest ground breaking technologies, like the iPod Touch interface, for example. You may not know how to find it at first, but be diligent.

These steps can avoid wasting countless hours and dollars, and they can prevent you from having to install the 2.11 Patch and a 2.2 Update. In the end, keeping your Patches up-to-date can result in better products and happier users.

Scott Traylor is one of our favorite presenters at the Dust or Magic Institute each year. A former teacher at the Harvard University’s Extension School, he’s the founder of the development studio 360KID (www.360kid.com). His collection of electronic learning aids is stored in his Newton, Massachusetts office.



Want to see a Web 1.0 site? Visit www.DustorMagic.com (Nov. 2-4, 2008 in Lambertville, NJ)



Feature Reviews

MAY 2008

Here's an alphabetical listing of new products, along with a full review, ratings and tester feedback. The "Entry Date" refers to the date we first learned of the product.

2Simple Math Games 1

Teachers or homeschoolers, take note of this six-pack of math games that forces children to think and apply basic math facts such as adding, subtracting and factors in real time. For example, in FunkyPlatform, they use the arrow keys to move a calculator across two moving platforms (like a typical log/river game) only they must balance an equation to make it across.

Other games include: Factoroids (break down the factors into equal parts); Dividers (target each number with the correct divider); FacWall (arrange the fractions together to create a whole); BondBubbles (join the bubbles for rapid recall of number facts) and SeqSnake (work out the sequence to grow the snake).

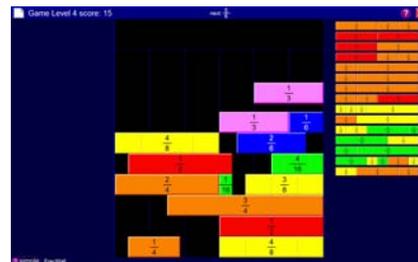
For teachers longing for the days of Math Blaster, when you could put in a disk and get some solid games that worked like a charm for a reinforcement activity, this is an excellent choice. The program was written by Max Wainewright.

The \$50 price is for a single license. Additional licenses are available at a cost of \$30 each for 5-9 licenses; \$20 each for 10-19 licenses; \$17 each for 20-49 licenses; or \$884 for an unlimited site license.

Details: 2Simple USA Inc., www.2simpleusa.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 9-up. Platform: Windows. Teaches/Purpose: math, fractions, basic math facts, factors. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 4.7 stars. Entry date: 8/27/2007. [WB]

Ease of Use	8
Educational	10
Entertaining	10
Design Features	10
Good Value	9

94%

Boom Blox

If you've ever tossed pebbles at a stack of cans, you can easily get to the core of Boom Blox -- a throwing/problem-solving game for one to four players that exploits the Wii's kinesthetic controls. The concept is easy to learn, and once you start, it is hard to stop.

Your goal might be to inflict as much damage on a tower of blocks as possible, or perhaps to grab as many blocks as you can from a tower, without knocking it over. The better you get, the more challenges you can unlock, and your high scores can be saved on the Wii's hard disk. (EA is quick to remind you that the producer of this game was movie director Steven Spielberg, who was inspired by the Wii's controls.)

However, before you break the shrink wrap on this game, you might want to actually follow those warnings that appear at the start of every Wii Game -- the ones that tell you to put on a wrist strap. That's because to play the game, you continually make sharp throwing motions at the screen; a motion that can easily send a controller flying. Get four kids doing this, and the breakage could become real.

To make a throw, you first choose a target by positioning cross hairs onto a block. Then, while holding the A button, you make a throwing motion. The effect is amazingly like real throwing, partly because of the motion, and partly because of the tactile feedback as you release your throw. But the most exciting part of this game is the creative aspect, where you can build your own structures and knock them down. You can also populate your level with 30 characters, each preprogrammed to interact with others in a certain way. Because of the variety in building options, it is possible to make a pretty sophisticated chain reaction, which you can share online (a feature we did not try). You can play as a single player or against your friends with just one controller that you pass back and forth.

So how could it be better? The menus are a bit clunky (not bad, but the pop-ups cover the choices when you roll over them), and despite the variety of the levels, all the throwing can get a bit tedious. We also didn't like the commercial implications of seeing EA's logo integrated into one of the puzzles. These points are more than compensated for by the rich creative possibilities, and the idea that you can have a virtual set of smart blocks that never need to be cleaned up or moved when you vacuum the rug. This can add months of playtime to the \$50 investment. Another plus is the implied physics behind the graphics. It is very fun to toss rocks at a structure to see if it can take the punishment; and then watch it slowly start to sway as the foundation gives way. See the preview at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7zjWzpZN2Cg>.

Details: Electronic Arts, Inc., www.ea.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 4-up. Platform: Wii, Mobile Phones. Teaches/Purpose: spatial relations, logic, gross motor development (throwing), creativity, programming. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 4.5 stars. Entry date: 4/16/2008. [WB]

Ease of Use	9
Educational	8
Entertaining	10
Design Features	9
Good Value	9

90%



ESRB Rating: Everyone, Cartoon Violence
Comic Mischief





Building Thinking Skills Level 2

Like Building Thinking Skills, Level 1, this single CD contains 38 activities that provide a guided introduction to logical thinking concepts, especially related to spatial terms, classification and following directions. The activities are designed in Flash, and work fine on either Mac or Windows computers.

Each activity contains about 20 problems. In a typical activity, children are asked to fill in sentences by dragging and dropping terms into the sentence. For example, you are asked to "drag the green ball with the blue triangle under the red ball with the black square." Each problem is instantly graded, so children can see their progress, and reading is required.

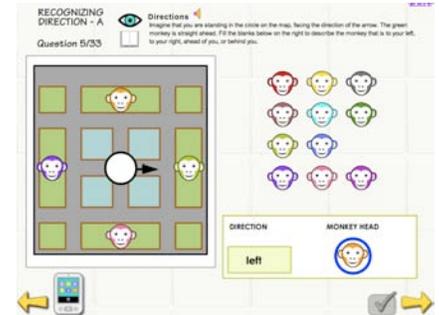
There are two modes of play. In the adventure mode, you are required to pass each level before going to the next. You can choose easy, medium or hard -- in the hard level, you must get 95% of the problems correct in order to progress. In practice mode, you can freely access any of the games. The program tracks each child's progress when in the adventure mode.

In easy mode, children are asked to label spatial relationships shown on the screen. At the hardest level, children are asked to complete verbal sequences, such as "inch is to length, as square is to (correct answer: volume)."

The features are classroom friendly, and the activities -- while dry -- get children thinking about concepts they'll most likely be encountering on a typical standardized test. If you're looking for flashy graphics and sounds, you won't find it with this program. For a classroom or home school setting, this program is worth a second look.

Details: The Critical Thinking Co., www.criticalthinking.com. Price: \$37. Ages: 9-12. Platform: Windows, Mac OSX. Teaches/Purpose: logic, vocabulary, reading, mathematical reasoning, analytical skills. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 4.2 stars. Entry date: 3/19/2008. [WB]

Ease of Use	8	84%
Educational	10	
Entertaining	7	
Design Features	8	
Good Value	9	



Diner Dash: Flo on the Go

Warning, this game is addicting, so consider yourself warned. Anyone who's ever waited tables knows that it requires juggling a variety of tasks at once. In this game, you assume the role of a fast-footed waitress named Flo. As customers line up at the front door, you must seat them, take their orders, turn them into the kitchen, deliver the food, take the bills, bus the tables and seat the next customers. The better you do, the bigger your tips. Customer satisfaction is measured by a set of hearts; if a customer waits too long, they will leave and your score goes down.

There's been a variety of Diner Dash games in the past (the original idea comes from GameLab). This edition combines casual gaming with a story where Flo is going on a vacation, but loses her suitcase. She has to use her waitress skills to get her vacation and wardrobe back on track. The game features 50 levels and includes blackout and turbulence modes that make waiting tables more difficult, as well as nine types of customers -- including tacky tourists and lovebirds. For \$20, you can't go wrong with this fun game, and it definitely stretches your short-term memory. Created by PlayFirst for Bright Minds Media.

Details: Brighter Minds Media, Inc., www.brightermindsmedia.com. Price: \$20. Ages: 10-up. Platform: Windows, Mac OSX. Teaches/Purpose: logic, timing, memory, some math. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 4.3 stars. Entry date: 4/2/2008. [WB]

Ease of Use	8	86%
Educational	6	
Entertaining	10	
Design Features	9	
Good Value	10	



ESRB Rating: Everyone, Use of Alcohol





Disney Pix Jr. Digital Camera For Preschoolers

These days, every kid needs a digital camera, especially if a trip to the zoo is on agenda. The \$60 Disney Pix Jr. Digital Camera (at www.disneyshopping.com) is one consideration, although there are weaknesses to note.

Shaped like a large rubbery bar of soap, the camera has 32 MB of RAM plus an internal SD card slot for more, and 1.3 Megapixels of resolution, producing images on par with most modern cell phones. The 4AA batteries give it enough power to last for several days.

The clunky-feeling camera has rounded edges which makes it completely symmetrical, giving a child a 50% chance of grabbing it upside down. There's no optical viewfinder, and getting the SD card from the camera or changing batteries requires a small Phillips-head screwdriver.

This camera is a case study in how an Interface can be simplified to the point of bewildering you (the user) -- at first anyway. There's no power on/off button, for example. The idea is, that if you press any of the five buttons, the camera turns on. A timer automatically turns it off after 30 seconds if nothing is pressed. The problem with this approach is that the camera can turn on and possibly take pictures when being bumped around inside a backpack.

Getting the pictures off the camera is simple -- just plug in the USB cable (provided) to any Macintosh or Windows computer. You can use your existing photo editing software, or you can install the included disk on your Windows computer -- for even more Disney themes. Other features include an auto flash, 1.5-inch viewfinder, wrist chord, and the ability to overlay Disney characters onto the subject in the viewfinder.

Digital cameras are great creativity devices for all ages, and every child should have one. This particular camera can do the job, but keep in mind that a real camera is only a few dollars more, and can take much higher resolution photos.

Details: Disney Consumer Products, www.disney.com. Price: \$60. Ages: 3-up. Platform: Windows, Mac OSX. Teaches/Purpose: creativity, digital photography. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 3.5 stars. Entry date: 4/17/2008. [WB]

Ease of Use	5
Educational	N
Entertaining	8
Design Features	7
Good Value	8

70%



Eco-Creatures

Confusing and hard to learn, this one-player DS game attempts to teach players about the effects that over-industrialization, deforestation, pollution, extinction and global warming have on the environment. While these are big topics, it is hard to figure out what they have to do with this game. Players use the Touch Screen to move a tribe of woodland creatures around an island. Each creature-type has different abilities (Ecolis grow trees, Ecoby build bridges and swim, and Ecomon move objects and fly, and so on). There are 40 missions, but we couldn't get through the first, and our testers all gave up as well. So this really could be a good game, but we'd never know. Other features include a two-to-four player game-sharing mode, and a make your own island feature. Developed by Lightweight Co. Ltd., and Headlock Corporation for Majesco.

Details: Majesco Entertainment, www.majescoentertainment.com. Price: \$30. Ages: 5-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches/Purpose: environment; pollution; deforestation. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 3.6 stars. Entry date: 3/18/2008. [WB]

Ease of Use	5
Educational	7
Entertaining	8
Design Features	7
Good Value	9

72%

ESRB Rating: Everyone





Exploring Nouns Sterling Edition

Designed to teach and reinforce vocabulary in English to children with special needs, this program uses full screen scenes to train 120 early developing nouns, by way of 10 nicely illustrated scenes, such as a barnyard, restaurant or jungle.

Like prior Laureate programs, the content is extremely customizable. Teachers can quickly toggle on/off which items are illustrated and work with a set of just one or two words. Once a scene is launched, children are asked to find a particular item, with direct instructions such as, "This is a horse. Find the horse." A child must click the horse to get the problem correct.

Later, a child might be asked to identify the nouns associated with a simple statement such as, "The girl is singing." There are two types of reinforcements for correct answers: either the noun animates or characters perform a short skit using enriched language. The skits and animated graphics are well done, and the graphics are clear and well illustrated. In other words, a spoon looks like a spoon, and there's no additional visual clutter.

There are eight types of activities, as follows. Optimized Intervention tracks student responses and guides the user through the curriculum; Exploration is an open-ended activity that lets students select an item on the screen, hear the word, and see the associated text and animation; Identification lets students identify nouns from selected scenes; Mixed Explore/Identify alternates between the Exploration and Identification activities; and Testing is used to document pre- or post-training performance. There are also three supplemental activities. Word Introduction (Cards) presents a single word and it's associated animation, Word Introduction (Scene) introduces vocabulary items one at a time until a full scene is displayed, and Animated Routines.

It is based on behavioral theory; with a lot of direct instruction and training (another approach might be to let the child visit a real farmyard). When used in conjunction with real experiences, this type of software works best.

Management features include the ability to keep detailed records (recorded for each student), and switch between scanning or direct select input.

Prices are \$225 each for one to four copies, \$157.50 each for five to nine copies, \$135 each for 10-19 copies, \$112.50 for 20-49 copies, and \$1125 for a Network License. Note: See also Exploring Verbs.

Details: Laureate Learning Systems, www.laureatelearning.com. Price: \$225 and up. Ages: 5-up. Platform: Windows, Mac OSX. Teaches/Purpose: language arts for special needs, reading, grammar, phonics. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 4.4 stars. Entry date: 1/25/2008. [WB]

Exploring Verbs Sterling Edition

Designed for children with special needs, this program uses eight scenes (such as children playing at a camp) to train children on 50 early developing verbs like singing, jumping or running. After you set up an account for every child, children sign-in and press "go." They are taken to the last point in the program. First, they see a scene, and then are asked to identify the verbs -- for example, "The girl is singing. Find the girl that is singing." Once a child can identify each vocabulary item, the program automatically moves to the next scene. There are two types of reinforcement for correct answers: either the noun animates or characters perform a short skit using enriched language.

The software features eight activities including: Optimized Intervention (tracks student responses and guides the user through the curriculum); Exploration (open-ended activity that lets students select an item on the screen, hear the word, and see the associated text and animation); Identification (students must identify nouns from selected scenes); Mixed Explore/Identify (program alternates between the Exploration and Identification activities); Testing (used to document pre- or post-training performance), and Three Supplemental Activities (Word Introduction (Cards) presents a single word and its associated animation; Word Introduction (Scene) introduces vocabulary items one at a time until a full scene is displayed, and Animated Routines).

The items are well illustrated and the speech is clear; this looks and feels very much like the type of software that Laureate is best known for. We were able to run in on a very old iMac with no problem.

Prices are \$195/each for 1-4 copies, \$136.50/each for 5-9 copies, \$117/each for 10-19 copies, \$97.50 for 20-49 copies, and \$975 for a Network License.

Details: Laureate Learning Systems, www.laureatelearning.com. Price: \$195 and up. Ages: 5-up. Platform: Windows, Mac OSX. Teaches/Purpose: language arts for special needs, reading, grammar, phonics. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 4.4 stars. Entry date: 1/25/2008. [WB]

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

88%




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

88%






Farm Vet

Say, can you cure a nasty case of greasy pig disease? You'll be able to after you play Farm Vet, another veterinarian simulation from Legacy Interactive, a company that has become known for first-person medical simulations. After you sign in (progress is saved automatically), you choose and dress a boy or girl avatar. Next, you meet an old, wise farmer who explains how important it is to be able to take care of the animals in order to save the farm.

As you explore the 3D barnyard, you meet a variety of sick animals. There are chickens with eye infections, ducks with broken wings and a pig with bad-looking skin.

Your job is to cure as many animals as you can before the day ends (which takes about 30 minutes in real time). Content includes three challenge levels, 60 cases and five mini-games. The program doesn't skimp on the real terms; words like Exudative Epidermis. Our testers, aged 13, commented that the "boy sounds wimpy" and the "girl looks stiff". But the content is good, with real tools and treatment using authentic antibiotics. The music and graphics have a distinct feel to them that some children might find to be initially strange.

Features include the ability to increase or decrease the level of detail in the game, and the ability to toggle subtitles on/off. Note that you'll need to have a 3D graphics card with at least 128 MB of RAM. If you're expecting state-of-the-art characters, you'll be disappointed in this game. But if you're a future vet, you should jump in. Visit www.farmvetgame.com for more information.

Details: Legacy Interactive, www.legacyinteractive.com. Price: \$20. Ages: 6-up. Platform: Windows. Teaches/Purpose: science, medicine, veterinary science, deductive reasoning, problem solving. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 4.3 stars. Entry date: 3/4/2008. [WB]

Ease of Use	8
Educational	10
Entertaining	8
Design Features	8
Good Value	9

86%



ESRB Rating: Everyone



Lowey Hija & Friends (Book One, Ages 2-6)

Designed to introduce musical terminology to young children, this is a cartoonish collection of seven activities that vary in quality, but are generally poorly designed -- too much narration and not enough feedback.

Children can choose a game using a menu that requires reading, which is unfortunate given the target age range for this title (ages two to six). In the first game, children are supposed to sort sounds by loud (Forte) or soft (Piano); the sounds are represented by various farm animals. But the goal isn't clear, and mistakes can be confused with correct answers. Much of the content is delivered by way of short, narrated episodes. To learn about instruments, children are supposed to select one, but it won't stop playing until the animation finishes, reducing feelings of control. If you make it to the end, you can print out a certificate. There are better music software packages.

Details: Piano Play Music Systems, www.pianoplaymusic.com. Price: \$40. Ages: 2-6. Platform: Windows XP, Windows 98, Mac OSX. Teaches/Purpose: music appreciation, musical terminology. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 1.6 stars. Entry date: 2/26/2007. [WB]

Ease of Use	4
Educational	3
Entertaining	2
Design Features	3
Good Value	4

32%





MapleStory

This Korean massive multiplayer online game (MMOG) shows off some nice animated graphics and state-of-the-art game sharing technology, with free-chat abilities. It was first released in 2006 and appeals primarily to middle and high school age players. (Note that you first need to download and install a small file to play the game. It would not work on our Macintosh.) While the game has no cost to start playing, some of the game items cost real money, presenting a type of velvet rope approach.

The game puts you on journeys that require cooperation with other players. Your job is to protect Maple World by fighting monsters (there are plenty of battles) and eventually build your own house in a quiet rural village. There's a variety of settings to explore -- an island, a town and back alleys of a city. You can choose one of four roles: Warrior, Bowman, Thief, or Magician. The more you play, the more skills you earn.

Jon says, "This is a fun way to spend a boring Saturday. Whether you are a serious adventurer looking for a challenge, or you just want to walk around fighting monsters, MapleStory is fun. You start as a beginner with no particular skills. The controls are easy to learn and there's a lot to explore."

MapleStory is free to play, but some items can be purchased with real money online. There is also a MapleStory trading card game which includes cards with codes that can be entered into the game to earn special items. With cute characters, fun music and loads of character customization, MapleStory is worth the download, providing you have a Windows computer.

Details: NEXON Corporation, www.maplestory.com. Price: \$free. Ages: 13-up. Platform: Windows. Teaches/Purpose: logic, reading, economics. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 4.2 stars. Entry date: 4/15/2008. [JG]

Mario Kart Wii

Fun, fast, and full of surprises, the Wii edition of Mario Kart provides some top notch racing, and is an ideal way to transform your TV into a racetrack. This edition comes with the Wii steering wheel, a peripheral that our testers deemed unnecessary for the game. In fact, they preferred to race with the Nunchuk instead.

Once you sign in by either creating a Mii or using an existing Mii icon, you choose a car and Nintendo character. Or you can put your personalized Mii behind the wheel.

There's a wide variety of multiplayer features in this game. You can play either in split screen mode or compete against 11 other players online. There are 32 racetracks (16 new and 16 from previous Mario Kart games) and a variety of cars, including a rocket-powered baby carriage. A big part of winning the race is in your ability to defend your car by dodging missiles, mud baths or zaps of electricity. There's plenty of random events to keep things interesting, including a set of cows that might wander onto the track. With Mario Kart Wii, Nintendo also announced the "Wii Wheel," a non-electrical accessory that is rally more a prop than a controller. You can also drive with the Wii Remote, Wii Remote & Nunchuk combination, or older Nintendo GameCube controller in case you can't afford Nunchuk/Wii Remote sets. Visit www.mariokart.com to see the latest scores. Our high school intern, Jon, says, "This game has the best controls for a Wii racing game I've played yet."

Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 6-up. Platform: Wii. Teaches/Purpose: racing, social play, strategy, logic, spatial relations, fine motor development. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 4.6 stars. Entry date: 3/12/2008. [WB]

Ease of Use	7
Educational	8
Entertaining	9
Design Features	8
Good Value	10

84%



Ease of Use	9
Educational	N
Entertaining	10
Design Features	9
Good Value	9

93%



ESRB Rating: Everyone, Comic Mischief





My Horse & Me (Wii)

Like the Windows version of this game, the Wii adaptation (for one player, Nunchuk required) also features beautiful scenery but a clunky design, following the same pattern used by previous horse sims we've reviewed over the years. You choose a horse, take care of him, practice, and compete in a variety of jumping events to unlock more horse equipment and tracks.

You can choose from girl or boy characters, then customize your character and horse with clothes, hair color and so on. You can clean and groom your horse, and learn how to ride with basic dressage and jumping lessons. There are different obstacles in both the indoor and outdoor areas, and players train to win the five international championships.

Mini-games include collecting butterflies, herding chickens and catching falling stars, all to improve your riding skills. The game features four outdoor environments -- each with multiple courses that can be tackled at different times of day -- and four indoor locations with their own courses. In addition, you can take pictures of yourself and your horse while riding, then add them to your user profile on the official website (www.atari.com/myhorseandme). Testers were not impressed by the controls or the feedback, which they said was for "little kids." Versions are also available for Windows or the Nintendo DS.

Details: Atari, www.atari.com. Price: \$30. Ages: 8-up. Platform: Windows, Wii*, Nintendo DS. Teaches/Purpose: creativity, timing, equestrian sports, horses. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 2.7 stars. Entry date: 5/2/2008. [WB]

Ease of Use	6
Educational	5
Entertaining	4
Design Features	6
Good Value	6

54%

ESRB Rating: Everyone



Operation Vietnam

This one-player DS simulation game lets players command their soldiers through war-torn Vietnam. On a routine run over the Vietnam war-zone, your chopper is taken down in enemy territory. The object of the game is to make it out of the war zone while freeing civilians and eliminating the bad guys. You use the touch screen to issue commands and select which squad members to give orders to. Up to four soldiers can be commanded at once, and you can use their squad to combat multiple enemy types (including soldiers, tanks, turrets, and enemy barracks), while taking advantage of different specialties and weapons per soldier (including long range shot, grenade launcher and automatic weapons). The game also features 20 different jungle missions including rescuing POWs, saving civilians and hunting enemy soldiers.

Our tester (Jon) really liked this game, saying that it put players in a dark time in American history. "The features are really cool... each soldier has different skills; your medic can heal wounds. Plus, your sniper can pick off far away targets and detect traps. Keeping your soldiers alive is important because each of them has useful skills that you may need. This is a game definitely worth playing." Developed by Coyote Console for Majesco.

Details: Majesco Entertainment, www.majescoentertainment.com. Price: \$20. Ages: 10-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches/Purpose: history. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 4.3 stars. Entry date: 8/24/2007. [LD]

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

86%

ESRB Rating: Teen, Blood, Mild Language, Mild Violence



Pajama Sam in "Don't Fear the Dark"

Formerly released in 1996 as Pajama Sam in "No Need to Hide When It's Dark Outside" this newly titled version runs on Windows computers.

The program stars Pajama Sam, an adventurous little boy who's afraid of the dark. Led by his imagination, Sam enters a secret world to capture Darkness. In the end, he learns that Darkness isn't all that scary after all; a nice underlying theme for many young children.

There's no shortage of content in this adventure, with 50 locations to explore. As kids travel, they must work out solutions to puzzles. In one scene, they meet a wooden boat named Otto, who is afraid of sinking. Since they need to ride up the river in this boat, children must find a board to show Otto that wood actually floats. In another scene, kids pick up a magnet behind a hidden door and then later use it to grab a lunch box. It takes hours of play to find all the necessary items and solve all the puzzles—and then players finally get to meet and defeat Darkness.

Children unfamiliar with the Humongous navigation systems may need assistance at first, and three- and four-year-old children will need help all the way through. Some parents questioned the recommended age range; they felt that the program would be too tricky and a little scary for preschoolers. We say 5-up is best for this title (even adults will enjoy the hunt).

Details: Humongous Entertainment, www.humongous.com. Price: \$19.99. Ages: 3-8. Platform: Windows. Teaches/Purpose: dealing with fear of the dark, problem solving. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 4.5 stars. Entry date: 5/1/1996. [WB]

Ease of Use	8
Educational	9
Entertaining	10
Design Features	9
Good Value	9

90%



ESRB Rating: Everyone





Petz: Horsez 2 (Wii)

If you're looking for a horse or pony-related game for the Wii, this is currently the best (better than My Horse & Me, according to our testers who played both). Also, for some reason, this game is not nearly as poorly designed as the other recent Wii Petz titles (Dogz2 and Catz2).

Designed for one player (Nunchuk required), children can choose a pony to raise, earning points by cleaning, feeding and grooming, and earn the chance to compete. You can use the Wii motion controls to spray a hose, move a brush or lean left or right to ride. The competitions include cross country and jumping. Versions are also available for the Nintendo DS and PS2 for \$30, and for the PC for \$20. According to Jenna, age 13, "this game is far, far better than My Horse & Me from Atari, but younger kids may need some help to figure out all the steps." There is no worrisome content (we were a bit mystified by the ESRB descriptor of "comic mischief").

Details: Ubisoft, Inc., www.ubisoft.com. Price: \$40. Ages: 8-up. Platform: Wii*, PlayStation 2, Windows. Teaches/Purpose: spatial relations, horses. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 4.3 stars. Entry date: 11/26/2007. [WB]

Ease of Use	7
Educational	9
Entertaining	10
Design Features	9
Good Value	8
86%	

ESRB Rating: Everyone, Comic Mischief





Pulse Smartpen

Ideal for augmenting an older student's note-taking abilities, the Pulse Smartpen (www.livescribe.com) is a lithium-ion, Java-powered recorder that is just a bit fatter than a Sharpie marker. The pen has a tiny camera in its tip that can detect a faint pattern of dots on the paper to give the pen its bearings. Without this special paper, you're left with an old fashioned, rather expensive (and fat) ballpoint pen. Here's a summary of the three biggest features:

- a) It can capture everything you write and "replay" it on a Windows computer screen, when synced with the included charging cradle.
- b) It can record large amounts of extremely clear stereo audio (up to 100 hours for the 1GB model and 200 hours for the 2 GB model), using innovative stereo headphones that double as stereo microphones -- one in each earbud.
- c) It can associate written notes with the sounds that are going on, at the exact instant the marks on the page were made. So you go back to a page of old notes that you made yesterday, touch the point of the pen on a sentence or sketch, and hear that exact point in the lecture. For a reporter doing an Interview, this feature alone could be the killer application, and it was this feature that made the biggest impression on high school kids I showed it to.

But wait, there's more. Those who remember Leapfrog's FLY Pentop computer (later called the Fusion) will recognize the writing recognition features, where you write a word and hear it repeated back to you. The pen we tested did not have unlimited handwriting recognition, beyond the ability to say a collection of 20 or so words in Spanish, Mandarin, Arabic and Swedish. The demonstration is amazing but limited -- you write a word like hello and can hear it (and see it in the pen's display) translated. There were some notable empty icons for features in the works; a reminder that this pen represents a new platform, and you'll be able to download more software in the future. Currently, besides the amazing note-taking and recording abilities, there's not much else it can do, besides the ability to tell time, draw a piano on any page, a calculator (just write the math equation and the pen does the math) and the language sampler.

The pen uses the very same Swedish-based Anoto dotted media technology as the Leapfrog FLY, and it also comes from the mind of the same inventor, Jim Marggraff, who's been championing pen-and-paper-based computing at LeapFrog, and later at Anoto. The Pulse will come in two varieties: the 1GB for \$150 and 100 hours of recording time; and 2GB, with 200 hours recording time.

If there's downside to the pen, it's in the paper. It has to be preprinted with a faint-mist of dots to give the pen its bearings. In addition, there's no way to stop or start the recorder if you are away from a printed page (the pen can only be controlled by touching the cross-shaped menu). But the good news is that for the first time, you can print your own paper on a laser printer. The kit includes 100 sheets of paper, USB mobile charging cradle, the 3D headset, case and two spare ink cartridges.

For years, the computer-in-pen technology has been the classic solution in search of a problem. In the Pulse form, however, with the hearty batteries, slimmer form factor and amazing audio recording, it will become a must-have item for back to school. Why? Because students who have one will have "bigger ears for listening" compared to the student without such a device. Just don't put it through the wash.

Details: Livescribe, Inc., www.livescribe.com. Price: \$150 and \$200. Ages: 14-up. Platform: Windows XP (Macintosh promised for Fall '08). Teaches/Purpose: creativity, pen-based computing. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 4.6 stars. Entry date: 2/29/2008. [WB]

Ease of Use	9	92%
Educational	10	
Battery Life	9	
Design Features	9	
Good Value	9	



ESRB Rating:





Putt-Putt Saves the Zoo

Rereleased in 2008 and sold exclusively in Target stores, this cartoonish scavenger hunt-style program lets you drive Putt-Putt (a car) around the paths in three zoo regions (the jungle, the arctic and the grasslands) in search of six missing baby animals. As you explore, you find special items necessary to help the animals. For example, a rope found in an arctic snow bank must be taken into the jungle and lowered down a waterfall to rescue a trapped lion cub. Freeing a stranded hippo requires building a bridge of uniquely shaped icebergs and finding a shovel to clear away an avalanche. Unless the necessary special items are found, the animals remain lost and the zoo cannot open. Testers aged three and four became frustrated in their first few plays, and required adult assistance. Older children (and adults) loved the program.

Especially enjoyable are the multilevel activities found around the zoo. In Animal Tag, kids must pay attention to detail as they match special animals that pop up at random from the Savannah. Other activities include six different information stations offering interesting animal facts like "hippos eat 100 pounds of grass for five hours each night". There's also a water-slide maze game that's just for fun and a camera option for printing out pictures of each animal. The program was first released in 1995, setting a new standard for excellence in interactive design. Today, this game still makes a welcome addition to any home library. Note that the graphics can look grainy on large screens.

Details: Humongous Entertainment, www.humongous.com. Price: \$18. Ages: 3-7. Platform: Mac CD-ROM, Windows CD-ROM (plug & play). Teaches/Purpose: problem solving, logical thinking, animal facts, shapes. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 4.4 stars. Entry date: 8/30/1995. [WB]

Ease of Use	7
Educational	9
Entertaining	10
Design Features	9
Good Value	9

88%



Weekly Reader Visual Guides: Weather & Global Warming

For classrooms that don't have Internet access for such things as Google Earth, but do have computers, this two-CD package may be a solution. Best described as a weather encyclopedia, children can use it to browse through general weather-related topics like meteorology, climate change or pollution, delivered by way of professionally produced photos, narrated movies or diagrams. The title was designed for both instructors as a teaching aid as well as students or anyone interested in weather, global warming and the environment. Topics include the difference between El Niño and La Niña, sandstorms of the Sahara, nuclear waste, air pollution, the Greenhouse Effect and Global Warming. The interface is clean and easy to use, and can be searched; although there is no quiz or application component. Because it was designed in 2002 in Montreal by QA International, metric units are used. The second disk claims to contain Podcasts, but we found only three biased essays on global warming, complete with typos. With the exception of disk #2, this is a solid, general science reference.

Details: Innovative Knowledge, www.innovative-knowledge.com. Price: \$20. Ages: 10-up. Platform: Windows, Mac OSX. Teaches/Purpose: weather and global warming. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 4.1 stars. Entry date: 10/2/2007. [WB]

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

82%

ESRB Rating:





Wild Earth: African Safari

You can almost smell the elephants in this safari simulation that represents another important addition to the growing category of educational exploration games for the Wii, such as Endless Ocean. The game embeds facts about 30 common indigenous African animals in each mission, including cheetahs, crocodiles, bats, gazelles, hippos, zebras and leopards.

After you create your player card (which saves games automatically), you start a mission as a novice nature photographer, assigned to collect a set of specific shots for a magazine. As you wander a 3D African safari with your powerful camera (press the + and - keys to zoom in or out), you are given specific picture assignments. The Nunchuk is required to move, while you point the Wii Remote to determine your direction -- a very easy-to-learn process, for both children and adults. Content features 11 missions that include observing giraffes from a helicopter and meeting a family of elephants as they take care of their young, plus 11 arcade games -- such as the Elephant Wash (point the Wii Remote to aim your trunk and hold the B button to shoot water) and Meerkat Madness (a game of whack-a-mole with the Wii Remote, earning the "comic mischief ESRB rating).

As in the real world, you are penalized for disturbing the animals. An "Impact Meter" tracks how much of a disturbance you make. If you disturb too many animals, the Wii Remote will rumble at varying degrees (like a rattlesnake) until you've gone too far and have to start the mission over. Your photos are collected in a slide show that mixes facts with articles. Other unique features of this game include the ability to drive the vehicle or take the pictures while playing with up to three friends.

Our tester, Daniel (8 1/2), had plenty to say about this game, comparing it to Endless Ocean. "The fourth assignment, where I had to take pictures of meerkats, was my favorite. The meerkats were near my campsite, and I had to sneak up on them to take their pictures, but they kept going back into their holes in the ground so it was very challenging." He observed that it really doesn't matter how good your pictures are in completing the assignment, but that he liked the challenge of trying to get the best picture he could. Daniel also liked taking shots of the giraffes from the helicopter. In addition, he noted, "You can also learn a lot about the animals from this game because your pictures are put into an article with facts about the animal you've photographed. I learned that zowilla is a skunk-like animal that can spray you." This game was created by for Majesco by James Thrush of Seattle-based Super X Studios (www.superxstudios.com).

Details: Majesco Entertainment, www.majescoentertainment.com. Price: \$40. Ages: 6-up. Platform: Wii. Teaches/Purpose: biology, African animals. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 4.6 stars. Entry date: 4/28/2008. [WB]

Ease of Use	8	92%
Educational	10	
Entertaining	9	
Design Features	10	
Good Value	9	



ESRB Rating: Everyone, Comic Mischief
Mild Cartoon Violence





New & Future Releases

MAY 2008

This section contains a listing, with notes, on products currently being reviewed or being considered for a review. Some of these may appear in upcoming issues following further testing.

Backyard Sports Baseball '09

The seventh game in the series, and the first one for both the Nintendo Wii and DS, this game features animated kid versions of the top MLB players including Alex Rodriguez, Albert Pujols, Derek Jeter, and the cover athlete David "Big Papi" Ortiz. Also for the first time, the game includes at least one pro player from each of the 32 MLB teams. Additional features include a new MLB All-star Game, new tournament mode, new power-ups with meter, new player capabilities, and unlockable Babe Ruth. Prices are \$40 for the Wii, \$30 for the PS2 and DS, and \$20 for the PC version.

Details: Humongous inc., www.backyardsports.com. Price: \$40. Ages: 5-up. Platform: Wii, PlayStation 2, Nintendo DS, Windows. Teaches/Purpose: sports. Entry date: 4/8/2008.

Build-A-Bear Workshop A Friend Fur All Seasons

Coming Fall 2008, a second Build-A-Bear title designed especially for the Wii (the first ran on the Nintendo DS).

According to press materials, this edition will be more of a party game, so up to four players can create a bear, play the mini-games for medals, experience an "adventure mode," and use the medals to buy more outfits and accessories.

The Wii Remote will be used to "hop" in a sack race, throw flying discs or jump on a trampoline. The game is being created by Neko Entertainment, with 3D rendered graphics. The Game Factory is a subsidiary of the K.E. Mathiasen Group A/S, a Nordic company that creates apparel, toys, candy, home furnishing and games. For more corporate and product information visit www.gamefactorygames.com.

Details: The American Game Factory, Inc., www.gamefactorygames.com. Price: \$40. Ages: 3-up. Platform: Wii. Teaches/Purpose: socialization, creativity, economics. Entry date: 4/16/2008.

Chaotic Trading Card Game: Starter Deck

Based on the animated TV series, this is a trading and collecting card game combined with an online game experience. After purchasing the cards, players can battle friends in person, or upload each card's code to play online at www.ChaoticGame.com. They can store their decks, trade cards, form player communities, and compete online against other Chaotic players.

The online game feature seven leagues of increasing skill level, all included free with the purchase of Chaotic trading cards. In addition to playing online, you can also participate in monitored message boards and chat rooms. The Starter Deck includes a 48 card pre-constructed player deck ready for play, an additional four (random) collectible rare foil cards, one Tip Card, one Master Upload Card, one Rule Book, and one Playmat. Additional cards are available in five sets of five booster packs for \$20.

TC Digital Websites LLC, the developers of the Chaotic game, say they monitor the message board and chat for predatory behavior. In addition, they do not allow the posting of any personally identifiable information such as full name or phone numbers. If a child attempts to post an item that breaks the rules, their membership may be suspended. Parents can also manage their child's activities by logging onto the Parent Zone to approve your child's level of participation. You can choose the activities in which you want your child to engage and block their access to forums and chat, or limit the users with whom your child can chat.

Details: TC Digital LLC, www.chaoticgame.com. Price: \$14. Ages: 8-12. Platform: Internet Site. Teaches/Purpose: collecting, logic. Entry date: 4/3/2008.



Cory in the House

In this one-player game (set in the White House and based on the the Disney Channel show of the same name), you play as characters Cory, Newt, or Meena. Cory's award-winning presidential bobble-heads have gotten into the hands of an evil toymaker who is trying to control people's minds through the hypnotic technology that he has built inside the toys. In the game, you explore classified locations to obtain top secret clearance, and you unlock security doors and PDAs through brain-teasing mini-games. You must also use stealth tactics to sneak past patrolling guards, security cameras and automated toys to reclaim the bobble-heads and save the nation's capitol. Developed by Handheld Games Corporation for Disney.

Details: Disney Interactive Studios, www.disney.com. Price: \$30. Ages: 6-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches/Purpose: reading, logic, memory, timing, spatial relations. Entry date: 4/25/2008.

Deca Sports

Released exclusively for the Nintendo Wii, Deca Sports features 10 sports including Soccer, Beach Volleyball, Supercross, Kart Racing, Basketball, Snowboard Cross, Badminton, Figure Skating, Curling and Archery. The 10 sports can be played in both single player or multi-player modes for up to four players, and in some events, the players can play cooperatively on the same team. The single-player modes include Open Match, Tournament, Deca Challenge and Deca League. Players can keep track of their medals and trophies using the Locker Room feature.

Details: Hudson Entertainment, www.hudsonent.com. Price: \$30. Ages: 5-up. Platform: Wii. Teaches/Purpose: sports. Entry date: 4/8/2008.



Gran Turismo 5 Prologue

Released exclusively for the PS3, this game runs in 1080p High Definition and is the first Gran Turismo game to feature an in-cockpit view -- giving you a unique perspective. It also features real-time gauges and human animations that represent the true performance and handling of the race cars. Also for the first time, the game will support up to 16 players online. In addition, 60 detailed cars -- including vehicles by Ferrari, Audi and Nissan -- are featured, as well as five reversible tracks from the around the world. Developed by Polyphony Digital, Inc., this game is available both on Blu-Ray disc and as a download via Playstation network.

Details: Sony Computer Entertainment America Inc., www.us.playstation.com. Price: \$40. Ages: 8-up. Platform: PlayStation 3. Teaches/Purpose: racing, timing, strategy. Entry date: 4/22/2008.

High School Musical 2: Work This Out!

Play as any of the six High School Musical characters (Troy, Gabriella, Ryan, Sharpay, Chad and Taylor) as you work, dance and play your way to winning the Star Dazzle Talent Show. You will explore the Lava Springs country club, carry out daily assignments, find and collect hidden items, and rehearse dance routines. The content includes 10 songs from the show, which can be played with the Nintendo DS lid closed (how did they do that?). Parts of the game are two-player, using the DS wireless download play or multi-card play.

Daniel (8) loved the game, citing the ability to find jobs and switch characters as strong points. He also liked the music, calling it "fun to listen to." Says Daniel, "The mini-games are a lot of fun, but the best feature is that the game saves automatically after each mission, which comes in handy when your mom tells you you have to stop playing right now and eat dinner." The game was developed by Artificial Mind and Movement, for Disney.

Details: Disney Interactive Studios, www.disney.com. Price: \$30. Ages: 8-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches/Purpose: music, rhythm. Entry date: 4/25/2008.



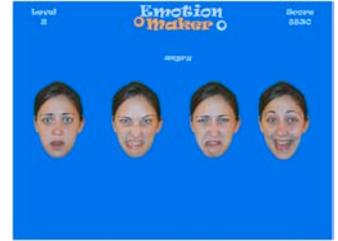
Let's Face It!

This is a collection of free Internet-based face and expression recognition games designed to teach "face processing skills" to children with autism. The idea is that in addition to their difficulties with language and social communication, children with autism may experience difficulties in their ability to recognize facial identity and emotions. The activities consist of straight forward matching games, and recognition of facial emotions, interpretation of eye gaze and eye contact, and the recognition of people across changes in facial expression.

For example, Smile Maze is an interactive face training exercise that incorporates the active production of expressions into the human-computer interaction using CERT technology. Users are required to produce and hold a target expression for varying lengths of time in order to pass obstacles while navigating their way through a maze. Game players interact via real-time video capture and analysis. The result is a tight coupling between user action and system feedback, providing an intuitive and comfortable interaction.

Let's Face It is a collaborative effort between the University of Victoria Brain and Cognition Lab and the Yale Child Study Centre. Visit <http://web.uvic.ca/~jtanaka/letsfaceit/index.html> for more information.

Details: International Society for Autism Research, <http://info.med.yale.edu/chldstdy/neuroimg>. Price: \$call. Ages: 3-up. Platform: Internet Site. Teaches/Purpose: classification, expressions, interpersonal development. Entry date: 5/1/2008.



Lost Cases of Sherlock Holmes, The

In an example of a new way to distribute software, this one-player mystery is available as a download. You become part of the Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson team, using your powers of deduction to identify the culprits in 16 different cases. As you explore, you find puzzles and mini-games, hidden objects, a game of picture Sodoku and tests of memory. Content includes 40 historically accurate locations set in Victorian London. You can download the game at http://legacygames.com/download_games/394/the_lost_cases_of_sherlock_holmes.

Details: Legacy Interactive, www.legacyinteractive.com. Price: \$20. Ages: 12-up. Platform: Windows, Mac OSX. Teaches/Purpose: logic, puzzle solving, memory, observation. Entry date: 5/2/2008.



Matrix Math Plus

Matrix Math Plus is an educational program designed to improve basic math skills in addition, subtraction, division, and multiplication. The publisher claims it will help students achieve and exceed grade level standards. Note that this upgraded version includes a Help Tutorial feature that students can access by pressing the "H" key at any point on the main screen. Cost for a 50-unit site license is \$2925 (includes a 10% discount) and a 100-unit site license is \$4550 (includes a 30% discount). Although it is designed primarily for classroom use, a home version is also available as a single unit for \$65.

Details: Stellar Learning, www.StellarLearn.com. Price: \$65 & up. Ages: 6-up. Platform: Windows. Teaches/Purpose: math, addition, subtraction, division, multiplication, negative numbers. Entry date: 1/9/2008.

Naruto: Path of the Ninja

This game for the Nintendo DS features a time-based combat system where players must determine each characters' strengths and use them to help defeat the enemy. In addition, by choosing individual character's stances (aggressive, neutral, or defensive) the team can build formations that will give bonuses to the entire group's abilities. Players can choose from six different characters from the show including Naruto, Sasuke, Sakura, Shikamaru, Neji, and Rock Lee. Players can also train their ninja team to learn 90 different jutsu, and use the DS Touch Screen and button inputs to take their attacks to the next level, or combine their jutsu techniques to create all new jutsu.

Brett (age 7 1/2) enjoyed this game so much that he played it for four hours and definitely wants to buy it. He noted that there was some cartoon violence, but that it was fun to "learn jutsu". Developed by TOSE for D3 Publisher.

Details: D3Publisher of America, Inc., www.d3publisher.us. Price: \$30. Ages: 10-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches/Purpose: logic, jutsu. Entry date: 10/26/2007.





NetOp School

Designed to let teachers control and monitor student PCs, this package lets teachers broadcast their screen to the students' screens, scan the classroom to view each students' PC, lock-down the students' keyboards and mice, control applications and Internet access, and create tests that are distributed and collected automatically. Other similar services include Vision, Synchroneyes, NetSupport School, LanSchool, SchoolVue.

Details: NetOp Tech, Inc., www.netop.com. Price: \$call. Ages: NA. Platform: Windows. Teaches/Purpose: classroom or computer lab management. Entry date: 4/15/2008.

Okami

Previously released for the PS2 in 2006, this game is now available for the Wii. This edition is designed with higher definition graphics for widescreen, as well as the Japanese art style. The game tells the story of the Japanese sun god, Amaterasu, who takes the form of a wolf and sets out on a journey to restore a ruined, darkened world into a beautiful place of life and color. You use the Wii Remote to paint on the screen to revitalize life and defeat the monster, named Orochi. Not yet reviewed.

Details: Capcom Entertainment, Inc., www.capcom.com. Price: \$40. Ages: 12-up. Platform: Wii. Teaches/Purpose: creativity, logic. Entry date: 4/25/2008.



Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Explorers of Darkness

Pokémon Players become a Pokémon after first taking a personality test at the beginning of the game. You will then embark on a journey to find out why you've become a Pokémon and to try and stop another Pokémon from stopping time and plunging the world into darkness. In the game, randomly generated dungeons make every mission different so that players never see the same dungeon twice. The game features 490 Pokémon appearing in both this game and Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Explorers of Time, and these Pokémon can join you on your expedition teams. You can also use the Nintendo Wi-Fi Connection to rescue friends in trouble or send out an SOS Mail if you need rescuing. Also see the review for Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Explorers of Time.

Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$35. Ages: 6-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches/Purpose: reading, logic. Entry date: 4/22/2008.



Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Explorers of Time

We've reviewed 38 Pokémon titles to date, and most are designed especially for the Game Boy or DS handheld game platforms, like this one. So what's so special about number 39? This is the first time you can become a Pokémon. First, you take a personality test. You will then embark on a journey to find out why you've become a Pokémon and to try and stop another Pokémon from stopping time and plunging the world into darkness.

Randomly generated dungeons make every mission different so that players never see the same dungeon twice. Because the dialog requires reading, the game is an excellent early reading activity, with a good dose of spatial reasoning (e.g., navigating a maze) thrown in. Content includes 490 Pokémon -- appearing in both this game and its sister title, Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Explorers of Darkness. If you meet another player with either copy, you can connect your DS units via Wi-Fi and compete, or perhaps cooperate on one of the expedition teams. You can also use the Nintendo Wi-Fi Connection to rescue friends in trouble or send out an SOS Mail if you need rescuing. Also see the review for Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Explorers of Darkness.

Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$35. Ages: 6-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches/Purpose: reading, logic, spatial relations, math. Entry date: 4/22/2008.



Word Roots A1 Software

This Win/Mac CD-ROM is designed to teach spelling and vocabulary by teaching Latin prefixes, roots and suffixes. By learning word elements, students should be able to better decode unfamiliar words and improve their spelling. For each lesson, students learn the meanings of prefixes, roots, and suffixes. Then they divide known and unknown words into their elements, or assemble elements to form whole words. After that, they match word parts or whole words to their definitions by analyzing meanings, and then they apply their new vocabulary in sentences. Content includes 30 activities and records can be kept.

Details: The Critical Thinking Co., www.criticalthinking.com. Price: \$26. Ages: 9-up. Platform: Windows, Mac OSX. Teaches/Purpose: language, reading, spelling. Entry date: 3/19/2008.