



2006 Best Video Games for Kids

We tested 287 titles to find the best of the best in video games for kids this year. See which games top our list for consoles and handhelds. Plus, find out our Game of the Year winners.

WRITTEN BY WARREN BUCKLEITNER, PH.D.

The buzz in 2006: the much awaited releases of the Nintendo Wii (pronounced WEE) and the Sony PlayStation 3 consoles. The Wii, which introduces state-of-the-art wireless technology, comes out of the gate this holiday season with a few top-of-the-line games for kids. The new PlayStation 3, on the other hand, delivers high-end graphic capabilities likely to appeal to serious teen and older gamers.

Despite the excitement, however, most of this year's new games are for existing systems—so think twice before you invest in the latest and greatest hardware. A look at our award winners proves there are lots of great options out there for kids 4 and up. We tested them all and narrowed the list to these sure-bet holiday hits.





THE TOP CONSOLE & PC GAMES

Game of the Year

LEGO Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy (LucasArts) Leading the pack in two-player gaming, this second-edition title has better puzzle-solving levels that can be played solo or with two players. In the expertly designed challenges, players work together—not in opposition—to complete each task. It's top-of-the-pack game play (two years in a row!). **GC, PS2, PSP*, Win*, Xbox, Xbox 360***; ages 5+; rated E 10+ (also on DS*, GBA*)



Best Graphics

Viva Piñata (Rare) This is the only Xbox 360 title for young players this year to take full advantage of the platform's rich graphic capabilities. Players explore a vibrant world full of Piñatas to be tamed, nurtured, and traded—a process that can take months. Think of it as having 60 adorable house pets. **Xbox 360**; ages 6+; rated E



Best PC Puzzler

ISPY Mystery (Scholastic, Inc.) It's the "greatest hits" of the I SPY series. The idea: Find small hidden clues in each picture. The bonus: It's great to play alone or with a group. Plus, game play reinforces visual discrimination and language skill building. **Win/Mac**; ages 5+; rated E

play and understand. Players help Mumble find a soul mate by scoring well on tests of skill—mostly swimming through hoops and dancing. It's sweet and funny. **PS2, Wii*, Win***; ages 4+; rated E (also on DS*, GBA*)

Best Comedy Adventure

Barnyard (THQ, Inc.)

Game play is as funny as the movie with the bonus of problem-solving challenges for one to four players. Kids customize a cow and then keep the farm running by collecting items, talking with other animals, and playing mini-games. **GC, PS2, Wii, Win***; ages 7+; rated E 10+ (also on GBA; rated E)



Most Innovative Family Game

Super Monkey Ball: Banana Blitz (Sega of America) There's an entire carnival for the family to explore in this action-packed four-player game. Events like the virtual ring toss and heart-pumping hurdle race, where players fling and swing the remote to control the fast-paced action, make the most of the Wii technology. It's a true crowd pleaser. **Wii**; ages 7+; rated E



Best Dancing Moves

Happy Feet (Midway) Great for little feet, this dancing adventure game (based on the movie) is easy to



Know the Codes

DS: Nintendo DS or DS Lite
GBA: Game Boy Advance
GC: Nintendo Game Cube
Mac: Apple Macintosh

PS2: Sony PlayStation 2
PS3: Sony PlayStation 3
PSP: Sony PlayStation Portable
Wii: Nintendo Wii

Win: Microsoft Windows
Xbox: Microsoft Xbox
Xbox 360: Microsoft Xbox 360
 *: Platform not tested

Note: DS, PS3, Wii, and Xbox 360 are backward compatible to older platforms. Check game packaging for details.

Best Musical

Karaoke Revolution American Idol (Konami Digital Entertainment, Inc.) Skip the auditions. Players jump right onto the *American Idol* stage with this addition to the Karaoke Revolution. As in the show, singers are judged in order to proceed to the next round. Reading (and some vocal skill) required. **PS2; ages 7+; not yet rated**



Most Active

Wii Sports (Nintendo of America) You have to play it to believe it. The incredibly innovative Wii simulates real sports play—hitting a baseball, lobbing a backhand, swinging a golf club, etc. This is the game to get players up and moving with the action. **Wii; ages 5+; not yet rated**

Best Skill-Builder

Thrillville (LucasArts) True, developing a thriving theme park business is what this unique title is all about, but behind the fun and games is a quality learning experience. Thrillville helps sharpen creativity, planning, and financial know-how. **PS2, Xbox; ages 9+; rated E 10+ (also on PSP*)**



Best Racing Scenes

Pac-Man World Rally (Namco Bandai Games America Inc.) Fast paced and easy to maneuver, this two-player racing game lets users zip through a racetrack, sliding around corners as one of the Pac-Man characters. Other options: race against the computer, or test your luck at demolition derby. **GC, PS2, Win*; ages 5+; rated E (also on PSP*)**

Most Creative

SpongeBob SquarePants: Creature From the Krusty Krab (THQ, Inc.) A larger-than-life Plankton is out to wreck Bikini Bottom—but not if SpongeBob can stop him. Innovative controls and unexpected artistic styles add dimension. Variety, humor, and achievable game play make this a single-player standout (DS has two-player options). **GC, PS2, Wii; ages 6+; rated E (also on DS*, GBA*)**



Smart Gaming Checklist

Use these tips to help narrow your picks before purchasing new games.

Age and Interest Know your child's ability, as many games are too hard for younger kids. Pick topics and characters of interest to your child.

Research Go online and search for demos, reviews, and the publisher's Web site, which will include hardware requirements.

Check Ratings Some games are not suitable for kids. See "Ratings Reminder" on page 31 for details.

Variety A mixed selection of games will keep interest levels high and offer more learning opportunities.

Multiplayers Two-or-more-player game options up the social value of the experience for the whole family.

Save Your Game Nothing is more frustrating than making progress in a game and then having it erased. Purchase a memory cartridge if necessary, and teach kids how to save before they start the game.

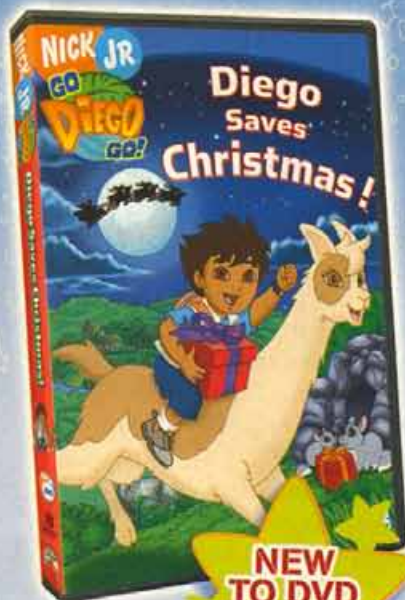
Share Before you buy, consider swapping games with another family. You'll both save money and double the size of your libraries.

Making the Cut

The competition is tough, and so are our criteria. Here's what we look for in a standout title:

- **Kid Appeal** Success is easily achieved and reading is minimal.
- **Entertaining** A meaningful story line is matched with engaging (not frustrating) challenges.
- **Educational** Informal learning opportunities are intrinsic to the play.
- **Good, Clean Fun** The experience is wholesome—that is, devoid of excessive violence, gender or ethnic bias, overt commercialism, and inappropriate themes.
- **Smart Features** Includes wireless features for easy game sharing, a well-designed help system, and easy save and level-jumping options.
- **Value** It's worth the investment.

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THE TOP HANDHELD GAMES

Game of the Year

New Super Mario Bros.

(Nintendo of America) The playful tradition of Mario and Luigi comes to the DS platform in a game that's easy to play—just steer and jump through tropical islands and snow-capped mountains—with creative twists on the original. Up to three players can join using the DS wireless game sharing feature.

DS; ages 6+; rated E



the popular Internet game has a simple mission: create varied color patterns. Players use the DS pen to slingshot multicolored balls while dodging exploding crystals. Up to five Wi-Fi player options. **DS, PSP; ages 7+; rated E**

Best for the Game Boy Beginner

Cabbage Patch Kids: The Patch Puppy Rescue

(D3Publisher of America, Inc.) Players (in the role of a Cabbage Patch kid) search for lost puppies, collect items, and water plants in this simple adventure title. Game play is easy to decipher without reading; print is a bonus learning op.

GBA; ages 4+; rated E



Best Sports on the Go

Backyard Baseball 2007

(Humongous, Inc.) Even preschoolers can play this well-designed title. As with previous Backyard Sports series, kid and adult versions of Major League players take a swing at a mix of challenges. The better the player, the more features unlocked. **GBA; ages 5+; rated E (also on GC, PS2, Win*)**

Most Captivating

Bust-a-Move Deluxe

(Majesco Entertainment) Easy to play and extremely addicting, this version of



Best Community Simulation

Harvest Moon DS

(Natsume, Inc.) The concept: Help a young farmer settle down, plant crops, round up chickens, raise cattle and sheep, and more. Festivals and mini-games break up those long days on the farm. Best for older kids. Reading required. **DS; ages 9+; rated E**

Most Preschool-Friendly

Miss Spider Harvest Time Hop and Fly

(The Game Factory, Inc.) Players help Miss Spider gather food by playing innovative games that exercise fine motor skills and logical



thinking. The experience is rich with informal learning, like blowing to create wind and drawing to lead characters in the right direction.

DS; ages 4+; rated E

Best Quiz Games

Nintendo's "Brain" Series (Nintendo of America) Two breakthrough games—**Brain Age** and **Big Brain Academy**—transform the DS into an unending source of mental math tests, Sudoku puzzles, listening games, and shape puzzles. The quizzes are timed and are intensely entertaining. Best for older players.

DS; ages 7+; rated E

Best New Media Storybook Classic

Charlotte's Web (Sega of America, Inc.) Players jump into E.B. White's beloved story as Wilbur the pig or Templeton the rat in an excellent



re-creation of the famed farmyard fable (also a great companion to the book). The DS version includes 12 mini-games, some of which are multiplayer.

The GBA version is similar, minus game sharing. Some reading required. **DS, GBA; ages 7+; rated E (also on Win)**

Most Quick-Thinking

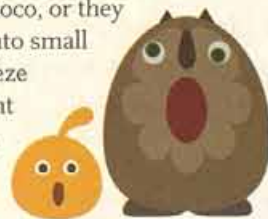
PQ: Practical Intelligence Quotient (D3Publisher of America, Inc.) This collection of 100 3D puzzles creates a mind-bending gaming experience. There are 13 puzzle elements; each starts easy, but gets difficult quickly.

PSP; ages 8+; rated E

Most Innovative

LocoRoco (Sony Computer Entertainment America) Players steer LocoRocos (little round creatures) through a variety of funky artistic mazes. The liquid, bubble-like creatures can melt together to create a giant LocoRoco, or they can break into small bits to squeeze through tight spaces. **PSP;**

ages 5+; rated E



Warren Buckleitner, Ph.D., father of two kids, is the editor of Children's Technology Review. Special thanks to our game testers at Mediatech Foundation in Flemington, New Jersey: Conner, Jenna, Jon, Josh, Mike, Nick, Owen, Sarah, and Tim.

Ratings Reminder

Rated E: Everyone • Rated E 10+: Everyone ages 10 and older

Games are evaluated and rated by the Entertainment Software Rating Board based on content, not skill level. The E 10+ games included on our list may be developmentally appropriate for younger children, though some content may be considered by some parents too mature for children under ten. Visit esrb.org for more information on specific title ratings and use your parental judgment. We've assigned age levels based on our assessment of the developmental skills required to play each game.

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