

# Recognizing the Best Children's Software in the World

*Sixteen Titles to Receive the 1999 Bologna New Media Prize*

What software raised the bar of quality for children in 1998? That was the question addressed by the jurors of the international Bologna New Media Prize ([www.bolognanewmedia-prize.com](http://www.bolognanewmedia-prize.com)). This annual juried award goes to outstanding children's software without regard to country of origin, language or size of the publisher. A jury of children's software reviewers from England (Pam Turnbull), France (Claude Combet), Germany (Thomas Feibel), Italy (Gigi Tagliapietra), and the USA (James Oppenheim and CSR's own Warren Buckleitner) met face-to-face for three days in Bologna, Italy to preview and then vote on the world's finest interactive children's programming. This year the competition was fierce, and the debate even carried over an extra day. A total of 850 software programs from 21 countries were entered in this year's contest and in the end just 16 titles were selected. Recipients of this important award will be formally recognized at the Bologna Children's Book Fair, which is becoming an important international forum on interactive products designed for children.

## LEGO Mindstorms Steals the Show

The most important award category is for "Novito" or Innovation. This year, the hands down winner was LEGO Mindstorms, LEGO Americas (Denmark and USA). The jurors agreed that this title, more than any other, helped to blur the distinction between toy and software, and they also reported that this innovative robotic construction set has set a new standard for smart play. Other USA winners were The ClueFinders' 3rd Grade Adventures for logical thinking, and SimCity 3000 for the best learning simulation. Another simulation that created quite a stir among the jurors was Mindscape's Creatures 2, which nosed out P.F. Magic's Petz for the best simulated life program, and brings a new level of sophistication to the medium. Jurors were especially impressed at how children can teach the artificial life forms a new language and appreciated the amount of Internet use inspired by this title. Another USA winner in the game category was Grim Fandango from Lucas Arts, which one juror described as being "strong, but it really grows on you." The unusual graphics, witty dialogue and innovative puzzles draw the player into the intrigue. This title narrowly defeated one of the best sports simulations ever made; FIFA Soccer. In the geography category, the jurors were impressed by Microsoft Encarta Africana, although the USA perspective was debated. "Who wants to hear Whoopie Goldberg talk about Africa?" said one European juror. In the end, the depth and quality of the content made this a winner. Finally, LEGO Loco, Lego Media International (Denmark) was selected for an award despite some known glitches. The win can be attributed to the way the program connects children throughout the world by exchanging train designs and simple messages over the Internet.

## Impressive Winners from Asia and Europe Raise the Standard

Just when you thought all electronic storybooks were the

same, along comes Midnight Play. This CD, a joint multinational effort between Japan's NHK Educational Corporation and Germany's Tivola Verlag, won the "best picturebook adaptation" category. There are no words or language barriers in this electronic picture book based on Kveta Pacovska's book. Characters transform themselves, create music and draw pictures, giving children an unusual opportunity to play with novel means of visual expression. From Israel, the award for the best foreign language title was given to The A-Files, Liber AB from Israel. The program gives older students learning English practice in a range of real-life settings and situations. The general purpose winner was Adi Maths and English Series, Sierra On-Line/Knowledge Adventure (UK), an affordable, powerful series of CDs that parallels the United Kingdom's educational curriculum.

## Welcome Innovation from Europe Inspires the World

In the hotly debated reference category, Microsoft Encarta Reference Suite was narrowly nosed out by an Italian children's encyclopedia called Omnia Junior Base Terra by Istituto Geografico de Agostini. The jurors were pleased to see a reference title designed with children in mind. Another wonderful discovery was a German music title called Opera Fatal by Heureka-Klett, in which children explore an abandoned Opera hall to uncover clues and solve music puzzles. The animation and story are both rich, and the music samples are all superb. In the reading category, an Italian title won, called Ventimila Rime Sotto i Mari or 20,000Rhymes Under the Sea, Lynx (Italy). Similar in ways to Broderbund's Amazing Writing Machine, this program lets children experiment with poetry and text. It includes excerpts from one of Italy's most beloved children's authors. For mathematics, a title from Poland called Virtual School - Mathematics Young Digital Poland impressed the jurors with its amazingly innovative math puzzles. Finally, The Way Things Work: Pinball Science, DK Multimedia (England) narrowly won over Edmark's Zap in the science category for playfully illustrating tricky physics concepts through a game of pinball.

## If You Need some Inspiration

A good reminder of the power of this new media can be found in a new title from France called Vikings (Index+). This study of Vikings from Norway to Vinland places children in the role of what it would have been like to live in the time of the Vikings, including the development of a sophisticated Atlantic trading system. The program sets a new standard in the use of live actors, and features an impressive underlying attention to detail and content. O

