Expert Guidance on Children’s Interactive Media

Children’s TECHNOLOGY Review™

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Bugsby Reading System
Cate West: The Vanishing Files
Circus Games
Crayola Colorful Journey
Curious George’s Dictionary
DanceDanceRevolution Disney Grooves
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V.Smile Smartridge for 2009

Putting the “L” in OLPC
ONE LAPTOP PER CHILD

The Atom Powered Intel ClassMate Convertable PC

DDR Disney Grooves, Help for Baby Animals, Curious George on an iPhone, Talking Pens and more...
One Laptop Per Doctor

“Mr. Buckleitner?” My doctor peered into the waiting room, juggling a battered HP Laptop in one arm. The computer was clearly both a nuisance and a necessity that had earned a proper place in the medical routine.

As the blood pressure monitor tightened around my arm, I asked about the laptop. “It’s been great,” she said. “But, I’ve been told that we’re getting some new tablet computers next week that will let me make instant referrals.”

Chances are, she’ll be getting a computer similar to the one on this month’s cover — the $500 Intel ClassMate Convertible PC. The big picture significance of this computer for children must not go unnoticed. The Classmate is one of a growing number of six-hour netbooks that will give teachers and students (and doctors) the tools they need to deliver a Flash-based curriculum (keep an eye on Waterford’s Central Park, as one example), Skype with colleagues, or make paperless assignments. One can easily imagine a multi-touch “MacTablet” in the not too distant future.

There’s a lot of software news in this issue, with a first look at EA’s Fall lineup in the New Releases section, a first look at VTech’s Bugsby Reading System, as well as these 12 Editor’s Choice titles:

- Bugsby Reading System, www.vtechkids.com
- Cate West: The Vanishing Files, www.destineerstudios.com
- DanceDanceRevolution Disney Grooves, www.konami.com
- Donkey Kong Jungle Beat, www.nintendo.com
- Excitebots: Trick Racing, www.nintendo.com
- Faceland, www.do2learn.com
- Free Realms, www.soe.son.com
- Intel ClassMate Convertible PC, www.intel.com
- Penguin Cold Cash, www.edven.com
- TouchMaster 2, www.midway.com

Video content in this issue includes some new thinking about Wii controls with an EA designer: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cpd0V45NOP8.

Finally, for this month’s LittleClicker’s column, we explore what you should do if you come across a baby wild animal, a common occurrence this time of year.

I hope you enjoy the issue.

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As we go to press, we’re testing the titles below for next month. Have you used them?
We welcome feedback:

An inside view of the Mediatech Foundation, where we test and archive our software.

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Products are tested and stored for public access and research at the Mediatech Foundation (www.mediatech.org), 118 Main Street, Flemington NJ.
Help! I Found a Baby Bunny...

Spring has sprung, and so has a new crop of baby animals. Do you know what to do if you find one? Here are some common questions and answers we found on the Internet about how to handle wild baby animals.

1) Help! My cat cornered a baby bird. What should I do?
At [http://www.sciam.com/article.cfm?id=fact-or-fiction-birds-abandon-young-at-human-touch](http://www.sciam.com/article.cfm?id=fact-or-fiction-birds-abandon-young-at-human-touch) you learn most experts say to leave it alone. Usually, the parents are watching from a distance. See how to build a bird’s nest at [http://pbskids.org/zoom/activities/sci/birdsnests.html](http://pbskids.org/zoom/activities/sci/birdsnests.html).

2) I found nest of baby rabbits. Can I keep one for a pet?
At [http://www.rabbit.org/faq/sections/orphan.html](http://www.rabbit.org/faq/sections/orphan.html), you learn that rabbits sometimes hide their nests in the middle of grassy field. Then, they leave them during the daytime (according to [http://www.hopperhome.com/wild_bunnies.htm](http://www.hopperhome.com/wild_bunnies.htm)), so they don’t draw the attention of preying animals. If a baby wanders from the nest, gently put it back. Whatever you do, don’t take the babies from the mom, or she will be frantic. See how one family helps wild animals at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7SmGzXajpUU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7SmGzXajpUU).

3) Worms cover the sidewalk when it rains, and they seem so helpless. Can I help them? Just don’t step on them and chances are they’ll be fine. At [http://www.wormdigest.org/content/view/100/2/](http://www.wormdigest.org/content/view/100/2/) you learn that worms don’t breathe like we do. They get oxygen right through their thin, moist skin. If the ground fills with water, they can’t breathe, so they come to the surface, until their underground homes dry. The best way to learn about worms is to study them. Here’s how you can make a worm observatory: [http://www.nrri.umn.edu/worms/educator/activities_observatory.html](http://www.nrri.umn.edu/worms/educator/activities_observatory.html).

4) I found a snake in my back yard. Should I be afraid?
Not likely, but don’t touch it, just to be safe. Poisonous snakes are very rare. Take a digital photograph of it (use the zoom!) and visit a site like [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Garter_snake](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Garter_snake) or [http://davesgarden.com/guides/articles/view/462/](http://davesgarden.com/guides/articles/view/462/) to see what kind of snake you have. Chance are, it’s a garter snake, which is very common in United States. This YouTube video, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xnD2m1vd2h4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xnD2m1vd2h4), demonstrates how gentle garden snakes can be, if handled properly. At [http://www.littleclickers.com/snakes/snakes.htm](http://www.littleclickers.com/snakes/snakes.htm), you can learn more about snakes in general, including poisonous ones.

5) What is rabies, and why should I worry?
That little squirrel might look cute, but it could be infected with rabies, a horrible disease. At [http://kidshealth.org/kid/health_problems/infection/rabies.html?tracking=K_RelatedArticle](http://kidshealth.org/kid/health_problems/infection/rabies.html?tracking=K_RelatedArticle) you learn that if you get scratched or bitten, you could get the same disease that could make you very sick.

6) Why should we not feed wild animals?
First of all, it is illegal in many places. At [http://tinyurl.com/illegaltofeedwildanimals](http://tinyurl.com/illegaltofeedwildanimals), you also learn that feeding any wild animal can be dangerous to both yourself — say if it’s an alligator or a bear — and to the animal you are feeding. You lessen their chances of survival, because they learn to become dependant on humans for food. This, in turn, makes them more aggressive towards humans and more dangerous. See [http://tinyurl.com/cfwlinfodontfeedanimals](http://tinyurl.com/cfwlinfodontfeedanimals) for more reasons why it isn’t safe to feed wild animals -- no matter how cute and cuddly they appear.
The Invasion of the Talking Pens!

Once upon a time (2005), there was the **Fly Pentop Computer**— an incredible gadget that looked a bit like an electric toothbrush.

But it didn’t brush teeth.

In its tip was an infrared camera designed to read a nearly invisible mist of dots on a page. So sound (text, music or narration) could be associated with any point on a page. Fly could also write, thanks to a ball point pen tip. It’s still on the market, but it continues to confuse busy parents. Perhaps it was trying to do too much. After an upgrade in 2007 (resulting in the more streamlined **Fly Fusion**), the guy who invented the Fly started a new company — releasing the $200 **Pulse SmartPen** in 2008, for the college and professional market. The Pulse could link handwriting to sounds in the room, ideal for journalists doing interviews or students in lecture halls. But it didn’t read children’s books.

In 2008, Leapfrog simplified things with the $50 **Tag Reading System** which did away with the writing abilities, creating an easy-to-use, talking stylus. It also did away with the cartridges, letting you download content from an iTunes-like application, via USB. Six months later, the first competitor appeared. **Poingo** ($35 from PIL, www.mypoingo.com) costs less but does less — reading only block paragraphs instead of each word.

This year (2009), two more systems were announced: the **Tag Junior** ($35 plus $10 per book) with books targeting younger preschoolers, and the **Bugsby Reading System** from VTech ($30, including a book, the lowest cost option). Both will be arriving in stores this fall.

So which is best? When you compare **Tag**, **Tag Junior**, **Poingo** and **Bugsby**, one thing is clear. There will be confusion as busy parents and teachers try to figure out the different formats. Like a fancy razor, once you buy into the hardware, you’re stuck with the software, which is in this case, the picture books.

Of the four options, **Tag Reading System** offers the most developed library of 28 books, and it can gather assessment information. **Bugsby**’s library is less in numbers, but will grow over time, and is equally high in child control. But, **Bugsby**’s extra noise will be less popular with reading teachers. For example, he comes with background music turned on by default (you can turn it off), and each book comes with the added step of a snap-in ROM cartridge.

When choosing a system, let the software — the books — do most of the talking. Visit each system’s website and scan the latest library. Which titles would interest your child, even if they couldn’t talk?

This competition is good news for consumers who will pay less for more. It’s also good news for a young child struggling to read. Because these devices offer a causal link between print and sounds, they serve as a crutch for meaning — creating a valuable new tool for the reading teacher.

Just don’t use them to brush your teeth.
The Entertainment Software Rating Board (the ESRB) assigns age and content ratings for video games. It offers a free electronic newsletter called ParentTools™. In addition to a list of top-selling games, each issue provides a list of recently rated titles that you can customize by rating and platform. We’ve highlighted some of the games from the last two issues that we felt you might want to know about. Keep in mind that some games may not yet be released, since they’ve only just recently received ratings. For each title, you can find the ESRB rating, content descriptors, platform, publisher, and rating summary. For more information visit www.esrb.org.

Selections of the latest E, E10+ and T rated games with ESRB rating, content descriptors and rating summaries.

4 Elements, EVERYONE -- No Descriptors, PC, eGames Inc. ESRB Rating Summary: This is a puzzle game in which players find matching groups of tiles on a game board to earn points. As players progress through the game, they unlock new chapters of a book filled with stories about dwarves, knights, and dragons.

Ant Nation, EVERYONE 10+ -- Mild Violence, Wii, Konami Digital Entertainment. ESRB Rating Summary: This is a strategy game in which players create an ant colony, manage the ants, and train them to grow stronger. As master of the colony, players can direct their ants to defeat enemy insects (ladybugs, beetles, spiders) to earn food and gain experience points. Players have the ability to harm their ants with magnifying glasses or hammer tools as a means of "toughening up" the ants for battle. Ants react by catching on fire or emitting high-pitched squeaks.

Burger Island 2, EVERYONE -- No Descriptors, PC, eGames Inc. ESRB Rating Summary: This is a strategy game in which players run a burger stand. Players take customer orders, accurately assemble the ingredients (patties, eggs, nachos, etc.), and serve multiple orders within a time limit.

Classic Word Games, EVERYONE -- Alcohol and Tobacco Reference, Mild Language, Mild Suggestive Themes, Nintendo DS, Ubisoft. ESRB Rating Summary: This is a collection of word games in which players can improve their vocabulary and language skills by conducting word searches, identifying idioms and quotes, and looking up definitions with example sentences. Players will sometimes encounter definitions and sentences that contain suggestive context (e.g., "cuddle bunny" = "female lover" and "Mitch ‘Manhandler’ Morris loved to bill and coo with his wife."). Some material contains references to alcohol (e.g., "Going to the opera, like getting drunk, is a sin" and "beer and skittles"), while tobacco is occasionally mentioned in the context of an idiom or example sentence (e.g., "...getting the order of the boot for smoking in the teacher’s lounge."). The expletive "damn" is also used in one sentence.

Commander in Chief - Geopolitical Simulator 2009, TEEN -- Drug Reference, Mild Violence, Sexual Themes, PC, EVERSIM. ESRB Rating Summary: This is a political simulation game in which players can assume the role of the head of state or government of a real country. Using text-based menus, players can enter military alliances, monitor political party activity, make economic and social decisions, and retain overall popularity. Players often make policy decisions on such varied topics as pornography, abortion, drug-related crimes, terrorism, suicide bombings, nuclear/chemical/biological weapons and warfare, and assassinations. Military tactics include the ability to engage in war (e.g., dropping bombs on cities), while covert operations include the option to assassinate political officials. Social decision-making allows players to make love to mistresses and engage in romantic affairs, though no depiction of the acts are shown.

Defense Grid: The Awakening, EVERYONE 10+ -- Fantasy Violence, Mild Language, PC, Aspyr Media, Inc. ESRB Rating Summary: This is a strategy game in which players oversee a futuristic base and protect it from invading alien troopers. Players can set up towers on a map, fortify them with weapons (flamethrowers, machine guns, lasers, etc.), and fire at the swarm of approaching alien enemies. Expletives such as "hell" and "damn" can be heard in the dialogue.

Divas On Ice, EVERYONE -- No Descriptors, Nintendo DS, Wii, 505 Games. ESRB Rating Summary: This is a rhythm game in which players can learn various ice skating moves (e.g., jump, spin, spiral) and compete to become a skating champion. Players can follow a beat, tap in-time with on-screen prompts, and get scored based on performance routines.

Drill Sergeant Mindstrong, EVERYONE 10+ -- Mild Language, Mild Violence, Wii, XSEED JKS, Inc. ESRB Rating Summary: This is a collection of mini-games (i.e., party games) in which players train and compete in math, rhythm, and reflex/firing/drilling guided by a trainer named Sergeant Mindstrong. Mini-games include shooting numbered targets according to the sergeant’s instructions; performing timed salutes and “at ease” cues; and marching in time while holding realistic-looking rifles. Each mini-game contains the word hell in the title (e.g., “Hell Roll Call” and “Hell Calculation”), and the drill sergeant sometimes provokes the players by using insulting nicknames (e.g., “Meathead,” “Arm Pit,” “Sugar Bum,” “Slisy,” etc.).

Drum King, TEEN -- Lyrics, Wii, 505 Games. ESRB Rating Summary: This is a music and rhythm simulation game in which players drum to the beat of songs. Players can simulate playing the drums by using motion controls and various button combinations in time with the music. Some song lyrics contain profanity (e.g., “shit,” “t**ch,” and “a’s”) and references to drug use (e.g., “...you were smoking crack” and “man I’m so strung out I’m high as a kite”).

Fashion Apprentice, EVERYONE -- Mild Suggestive Themes, Tobacco Reference, PC, Mumbo Jumbo. ESRB Rating Summary: This is a seek-and-find puzzle game in which players search for hidden items on a screen full of jumbled objects. Players follow the story of an aspiring designer who coordinates outfits for models and works her way up the fashion world. Some models wear low-riding shorts and bikinis and halters that accentuate their cleavage. One character is depicted with an unlit cigar in his mouth.

Fashion Stylist, EVERYONE -- No Descriptors, Nintendo DS, 505 Games. ESRB Rating Summary: This is a fashion simulation game in which players can create their own clothes, compete against a rival fashion studio, and complete various missions and mini-games. Missions/mini-games involve designing outfits; cutting, pressing, and sewing fabrics; and displaying completed outfits in photo shoots.

Fritz Chess, EVERYONE -- Mild Language, Mild Suggestive Themes, Wii, Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, Konami Media. ESRB Rating Summary: This is a chess simulation game with varying levels of difficulty, practice options, and single-player or multiplayer modes. There is also an “Adventure Chess” story mode in which players compete against various regal characters (e.g., a knight, a jester, and a queen). The queen character is depicted wearing a dress that exposes her cleavage, and in one animation she thrusts her chest toward the screen. Expletives appear in some of the dialogue (e.g., “You scared the hell out of me” and “scumbag”).

Gourmania, EVERYONE -- Alcohol Reference, PC, Viva Media LLC. ESRB Rating Summary: This is a seek-and-find puzzle game in which players search for menu items (e.g., bread, meat, and ice cream) in a pizza parlor, fast food restaurant, and beach-side drink stand. Players must find...

What Are People Buying?
Top Selling Games for March 2009

2. Pokemon Platinum Version, Platform: Nintendo DS, EVERYONE — No Descriptors
5. Wii Fit, Platform: Nintendo Wii, EVERYONE — Comic Mischief
6. MLB ’09: The Show, Platform: Playstation 3, EVERYONE — No Descriptors

*Includes Collector’s, Limited, and Legendary Editions
Source: The NPD Group Inc./Retail Tracking.

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these hidden objects within a time limit in order to satis-
fy customers. A couple of the searchable items include champagne and liquor.

Harvest Moon: Frantic Farming, EVERYONE -- No Descriptors. Aspyr Media, Inc. ESRB Rating Summary: This is a puzzle game in which players move around a color-coded game board to harvest crops that correspond with each color. Players follow the story of a cast of characters investigating the sudden irruption of vegetables on an island.

Hot 'n' Cold, EVERYONE -- No Descr, Nintendo DS, Majesco Entertainment. ESRB Rating Summary: This is a seek-and-find puzzle game in which players search around a house to find hidden objects as they are told how “hot” or “cold” they are to each item. Players can also arrange/hide the items themselves and challenge other players to find them.

Hotel for Dogs, EVERYONE -- Comic Mischief, PC, Aspyr Media, Inc. ESRB Rating Summary: Hotel for Dogs is an adventure game based on the movie of the same name. Players adopt dogs and care for them through interactive functions such as feeding, petting, and cleaning. In a video clip from the film, characters briefly discuss dogs “peeing,” “pooping,” and stepping in the latter.

I Love Beauty: Hollywood Makeover, EVERYONE -- No Descr, Nintendo DS, City Interactive S.A. ESRB Rating Summary: This is a simulation game in which players assume the role of an aspiring makeup artist who competes in fashion contests. Players can dye and style hair; apply eye makeup, and lipstick; and coordinate earrings, brooches, and necklaces.

Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs, EVERYONE -- Mild Cartoon Violence, Nintendo DS, Activision-Blizzard. ESRB Rating Summary: This is an action adventure game based on the movie Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaur. Players roam through prehistoric landscapes in search of a boy kidnapped by a Tyrannosaurus Rex. Along the way, players can attack enemies such as dinosaurs, bugs, or plants by stomping on them or hitting them with projectiles. Some dinosaurs shriek or make chirping noises when they are hit.

Imagination Boutique Owner, EVERYONE -- No Descr, Nintendo DS, Ubisoft. ESRB Rating Summary: This is a simulation game in which players set up and manage a local boutique. Players can create products (e.g., cakes, flowers, and perfumes), interact with customers, and prepare orders for every occasion (e.g., weddings and anniversaries).

Imagine Soccer Captain, EVERYONE -- Mild Language, Nintendo DS, Ubisoft. ESRB Rating Summary: This is a sports simulation game in which players assume the role of a young soccer captain who leads her team through various leagues. Players can customize characters, assign training programs, compete in soccer matches, and improve skill levels. Story events involve frequent interaction with rival teams, and teammates and can include mean-spirited remarks (e.g., “major butt-kicking,” “The rest of you are garbage,” and “…we left them with some pretty bruises! Hey, that one looks like potential!”).

Jojo’s Fashion Show 2, EVERYONE— Mild Suggestive Themes, MAC, PC, iWin, Inc. ESRB Rating Summary: This is a fashion dress-up game in which players coordinate outfits for models. Players dress up models in different styles (e.g., “tropical,” “business,” “hipster,” etc.) and coordinate earrings, brooches, and necklaces.

LEGO Battles, EVERYONE— Cartoon Violence, Comic Mischief, Nintendo DS, Warner Bros. ESRB Rating Summary: This is a real-time strategy game (RTS) in which players build landscapes, build civilizations, and send “LEGO” troops into battle. Presented from a bird’s eye view, battle sequences can involve small boats/pirate ships shooting cannon fire at each other; LEGO knights dueling with swords; and tiny sol-
diers walking toward and stopping in front of pirates, skeletons, and alien-like creatures. Laser sounds, sword swipes, and alien screams are occasionally heard dur-
ning combat. Some cutscenes depict slapstick behavior, such as a pirate that stumbles when his drink is replaced with a puff of smoke (e.g., “The pirates attack everyone and ‘everyone thought…they were all killed’.”)

Lost Secrets: Caribbean Explorer, EVERYONE -- Mild Violence, MAC, PC, GameMill Entertainment. ESRB Rating Summary: This is a puzzle game in which players control a group of Marvel Comics superheroes that fight enemies and complete various missions. Players can explore multiple levels and engage in hand-to-hand combat (e.g., punches, kicks, and even lightning strikes) against enemies who sometimes with guns, lasers, and flamethrowers. Players can also use a “special attack” that inflicts dam-
age upon all opponents within range.

Mean Girls: High School Showdown, TEEN -- Mild Language, Suggestive Themes, Tobacco Reference, PC, Legacy Interactive. ESRB Rating Summary: This is a collection of farm-themed spor-
ting events in which players compete as hog athletes in footraces, swimming, and fencing. Some cutscenes depict slapstick behavior, such as a pirate that stumbles when his drink is spilled (e.g., “Oh, no! I dropped my drink!”)

Marvel Ultimate Alliance 2, EVERYONE 10+ -- Fantasy Violence, Mild Language, Nintendo DS, Activision-Blizzard. ESRB Rating Summary: This is an action game in which players control a group of Marvel Comics superheroes that fight enemies and complete various missions. Players can explore multiple levels and engage in hand-to-hand combat (e.g., punches, kicks, and even lightning strikes) against enemies who sometimes with guns, lasers, and flamethrowers. Players can also use a “special attack” that inflicts dam-
age upon all opponents within range.

MySims Racing, EVERYONE -- Comic Mischief, Nintendo DS, Electronic Arts. ESRB Rating Summary: This is a kart racing game in which players can customize characters, create their own kart, and race them on a variety of tracks. Players can also drive around town and provide taxi service to pedestrians. During the racing stages, players can shoot soccer balls or throw pumpkins at other karts, causing them to slow down or spin out.

Mystery PiL - The New York Fortune, EVERYONE -- Alcohol and Tobacco Reference, PC, PopCap Games, Inc. ESRB Rating Summary: This is a seek-and-find puzzle game in which players search for hidden items on a screen full of jumbled objects. Players follow the story of a private investigator who must track down a hidden will. Searchable items can include alcohol or tobacco products (beer bottles, champagne, cigarettes, etc.).

Party Pigs: Farmyard Games, EVERYONE -- Comic Mischief, Wii, Destineer. ESRB Rating Summary: This is a collection of farm-themed sporting events in which players compete as hog athletes in footraces, swimming, and hurling, and other party games. One event involves throwing turnips at animals that walk past. The animals cluck, moo, or neigh when struck and quickly disappear from the play area.

Penguins & Friends, EVERYONE -- No Descr, Wii, Gammick Entertainment S.L. ESRB Rating Summary: This is a puzzle game in which players move penguins around a screen full of jumbled objects that are scattered throughout. After there are no more reachable spaces on the board, the player with the most fish wins.

Pett Fashion Dogz and Catz, EVERYONE -- No Descr, Nintendo DS, Ubisoft. ESRB Rating Summary: This is a pet care simulation game in which players feed, groom, and play with cats and dogs. Players can dress their pets with colorful outfits and accessories and showcase them in a fashion show.

Pretty in Pink, EVERYONE 10+ -- Suggestive Themes, PC, Legacy Interactive. ESRB Rating Summary: This is a seek-and-find game with characters and events from the movie Pretty in Pink. Players can search for specific items on a screen full of jumbled objects or engage in min-games that include several jigsaw puzzles. Players can also follow the story of Andie, an awkward high school girl who meets a wealthy teenage boy named Blaine. Some of the dialogue, particularly com-
ments made by Blaine’s friend, Steff, can be suggestive and rude (e.g., “If you want a little piece of low-grade tail, go ahead” and “You guys want some punch? Or would you rather have a bed?”).

Roogoo Twisted Towers, EVERYONE -- Mild Cartoon Violence, Wii, Southpeak Games. ESRB Rating Summary: This is an action/puzzle game in which players guide small shapes and objects into corresponding slots. Players can sometimes use a hammer to clear “carboony” vamps, bats, and other creatures from a play area. During one level, players can skydive towards the earth and shoot tiny stars at biplanes and balloons, resulting in small explosions or clouds of smoke.

Satisfaction, EVERYONE -- No Descr, eGames Inc. ESRB Rating Summary: This is a strategy game in which players create makeup and clothing combinations for fashion shows. Players can earn in-
game money for identifying new styles and fashion accessories.

Space Camp, EVERYONE -- Comic Mischief, Nintendo DS, Activision-Blizzard. ESRB Rating Summary: This is an adventure game in which players assume the role of young child at “Space Camp” who is accidentally sent on a rocket to the moon. Players make their way back to Earth by engaging in various min-games (e.g., navig-
ating space stations, examining space crystals, and creat-
ing new items). In one mini-game, players roll/launch small red bombs up a ramp in order to hit aliens; when an alien is struck, a puff of smoke appears and its face turns black.

Summer Games II, EVERYONE -- No Descr, Wii, Commodore Gaming. ESRB Rating Summary: This is a 2D sports game in which players can participate in vari-
ous summer sporting competitions. Events include bike racing, track and field, slalom kayaking, and fencing.

Tiger Woods PGA TOUR 10, EVERYONE -- No Descriptors. Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, Wii, Electronic Arts. ESRB Rating Summary: This is a golf simulation game in which players can customize a character, play as or against real-life PGA golfers, and compete on realistic courses from around the world. Players can also engage in a variety of min-games to practice com-
bining their golfing skills (e.g., Knowing the correct number for an item of clothing, etc.).

Wizard’s Pen, The, EVERYONE -- Alcohol and Tobacco Reference, PC, PopCap Games, Inc. ESRB Rating Summary: This is a puzzle game in which players uncover clues to solve the mystery behind a wizard’s disappearance. Players find clues by guessing the item in a picture as it is slowly revealed. Items that can be revealed include a magic glass and a tobacco pipe.

Tower Toppler, EVERYONE -- No Descriptors, Wii, Commodore Gaming. ESRB Rating Summary: This is a 2D platform game in which players make their way to the top of various towers while avoiding obstacles. Once they reach the top, players can topple the tower and send it crumbling to the ocean below.

Vertigo, EVERYONE -- Mild Fantasy Violence, PC, Wii, Playlogic International N.V. ESRB Rating Summary: This is a puzzle game in which players navigate a ball through a series of courses without having it fall off the tracks. Players can also compete in a battle mode where the balls are equipped with futuristic weapons (e.g., “EMP missiles” and “concreteavalanches”). Players can shoot the ball of an opponent, resulting in bright, loud explosions.
Feature Reviews
MAY 1, 2009

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.

Bugsby Reading System
Coming “Fall 2009” and shaped like a bookworm, VTech’s Bugsby Reading System is a talking book-reading stylus with light-up antennae, that makes it possible for children to touch the words or pictures in a traditional-looking book, and to hear them read aloud. The Bugsby system joins three others based on the same “dotted media” technology: Poingo from Publications International, and the Tag and Tag Junior from Leapfrog. The books cannot work with one another. For $30, you get one book and the stylus; additional books cost $13 each.

Getting the books synched to Bugsby is different than with the other systems. Once the batteries are installed, you place a thumb-drive-sized ROM cartridge, found in a pocket in the back cover of each book, into Bugsby’s back. If the cartridge is lost, the book won’t work. Children turn on Bugsby by finding a small red switch in his ear. Youngsters will initially need help with both of these steps. After that, things are simple. Children can freely jab at individual words to hear them, or drag the tip of the stylus along the words to hear the entire sentence read aloud. Several of the pages contain puzzles that ask children to find rhyming words, creating an excellent informal introduction to words and story structure.

Additional books in the library feature Dora the Explorer, Olivia, Scooby Doo and others. We tested two books and found them to be a bit noisy, with pushy background music. Fortunately, the music can be turned off, but the default setting is on. Bugbsy hits the stores “Fall 2009.”


Cate West: The Vanishing Files
If you like “find the hidden object” puzzles, keep reading. This mostly one-player puzzle/mystery game for the Wii is based on a series of mysteries. Your goal is to help a female detective (Cate West) find the clues by finding 1,000 clues in 57 backgrounds.

There are five investigation types, and different crime scenes. For example, you might use a magnifying glass -- or a flashlight -- for a better view of the screen differences between two similar scenes, recreate crime scenes, and use what you’ve learned to identify the criminal. A nicely designed hint system provides help just when you need it.

You can work with a friend in Story Mode, or compete to see who is the best detective in Competitive Mode. At some points, you shake the Wii Remote to clear away dust and cobwebs to reveal evidence, and use the magnifying glass to better view your surroundings.

For this type of game, graphics really count, partly because your success requires long periods where you study the screen. Even with a good quality LCD screen, some of the images seem fuzzy (don’t attempt this game on a regular TV). The bottom line? If you like these kinds of games, you’ll like Cate West. Otherwise either pass or borrow the game for a weekend. Progress can be saved. Prices are $30 for the Wii version and $20 for the Nintendo DS version.

Crayola Colorful Journey

Sometimes great ideas are poorly implemented. Such is the case with this game, which combines 3D exploration, coloring, and problem solving. You start by choosing one of three levels (easy, medium or hard), a male or female lead character (Fillup or Violet), and then start moving across a scrolling landscape with your pet dog.

As you move, you see trees that must be filled in with color. This requires "coloring" by moving the cursor in the white space. Some of the smaller areas create targets that are small, which is frustrating for younger children. Likewise, some objects are "smart." For example, if you fill in the clouds, you create a storm, which fills up a pond with floating logs that can be colored in order to make a bridge. At times you must grab or flick objects, requiring the use of simultaneous keys -- another problem for younger children. If you don't complete the level in time, you must start over at the beginning.

If you have the time to figure out the controls, this could be an excellent game. Unfortunately, the genius is buried behind some sloppy interface decisions. Bag it.


Curious George's Dictionary

Few would debate the cuteness of Curious George, until they download this 131 MB app for $10 -- only to discover the title is nothing more than a narrated slide show instead of something interactive and engaging. That's because the designers ported the print version of last year's Curious George's Dictionary (2008, Houghton Mifflin) to the iPhone's touch screen, sans animation, a bit of narration, and very little interactivity -- besides the ability to swipe through the pages. Purists will note that even the art is inauthentic -- "illustrated in the style of H.A. Rey by Mary O'Keefe Young [et al]." Any interactive designer these days knows that you don't take flat print to an interactive venue such as an iphone -- unless you want the kid to toss your iPhone out your mini-van window.

After you download the file and restart your iPod Touch, you see a menu that requires reading -- the first sign of trouble with this "child friendly" title. The idea is that a young child can swipe through several hundred words, to hear them spoken. The biggest problem is that the pictures, while they look engaging, don't do anything other than read a single word. So, you see a picture of an alligator and hear the narrator read "alligator," but it just sits there. No snapping jaws, no eating apples, no narrated sentences. Boring!

Other content includes an illustrated set of numerals, colors, shapes, and opposites. Besides being limited in interactivity, the title is also buggy. If you flip too fast, it results in the wrong word being read to your child. We noticed an interesting note on the iTunes App store download page: "Note: This app is a large multimedia experience. For best results, reboot your device after download. We will make periodic updates to address known issues. Please email us at icebergsupport@scrollmotion.com with any technical problems before posting a review." Sorry, but it doesn't work that way. Better to finish the App first. The Curious George's Dictionary iPhone application costs $9.99 (USD) and was released on April 12, 2009.

Dance Dance Revolution Disney Grooves

Great as an after-dinner family game for four players, this raucous (and headache-inducing) $70 DDR bundle includes two vinyl dance mats that plug into your Wii. The mats work with two sets of Wii controllers (Nunchuks are required) so you can move your feet and arms at the same time, or invite mom and dad to help out -- say by letting them control the arm motions, while the kids do the footwork.

As you dance, you are represented by your “Mii” on the screen, while moving Disney characters decorate the screen. Content includes 40 songs that vary in quality, such as, "It’s a Small World", "Circle of Life", and "A Spoonful of Sugar".

A handicapping feature lets each dancer choose from four levels; plus there’s a cooperative mode so even a preschooler can help out. Note that adult help will be needed to setup the songs. If you haven’t played a DDR title lately, it is fun to see how the format has evolved since the first arcade versions appeared, circa 2001. For example, at points in the song, everything might freeze for a few seconds, requiring that you not move. Or special icons might swirl around the screen, making it harder to know when your foot or hand movement is required.

Weaknesses include frenetic looping music during the setup menus, and a complex scoring system with lists of numbers that could require a CPA to fully understand.

Additional frosting lets you pose your Mii with Disney characters, or take your Mii to a dressing room. This is a great game to borrow for a weekend or perhaps buy, even at $70. The challenge is there for seasoned DDR fans, and the new Wii specific features succeed in distinguishing it from the earlier PS2 Disney edition. Developed by Bemani for Konami.


Donkey Kong Jungle Beat (Wii Edition)

Fast-paced and very easy to use, this side-scrolling one-player adventure turns you into the large, very strong ape known as Donkey Kong. Note that the first edition of this title was released in 2005 for the GameCube, using the bongo controllers. This edition does away with the drums, using the motion sensors in the Wii Remote and Nunchuk instead.

As you jump, slide and swing your way through the exotic jungle levels, you find yourself jabbing sharply in the air to smash bad things, or flipping the Wii remote up, to hop up to a ledge. As you might guess, this takes a good deal of coordination; but, we noticed that this new “Play Control” edition is easier for younger children to pick up and play -- making this a good starter program. The graphics and sounds are pure Nintendo glee.

Testers found it to be easy to learn, and hard to stop playing. However, the seasoned middle school testers made it all the way through the game in a single weekend. "For $50, we’d like more content." All in all, borrow or buy this well designed game.

Elizabeth Find, MD: Diagnosis Mystery

Fun, nicely illustrated, easy-to-play, but involving a good bit of reading, this is a cross between an I SPY game and a medical mystery. In order to cure a patient, you hunt for clues scattered around the hospital room -- involving a lot of searching, and a bit of reading. The clues are easy to find, however, and the format keeps you engaged.

Management features allow for up to three games to be saved -- either in timed or free play mode. You must play the game in sequence, however, since there is no way to skip ahead. One of the puzzles uses a unique simultaneous two-cursor mode that makes it easier to spot the differences between two scenes -- the first time we've ever seen this technique. In terms of medical content, things are a bit far-fetched. This program could be a good informal exposure to health care-related topics. For example, in one puzzle, we had to find a biohazard symbol.

The installation process starts with an advertisement for Best Buy, and you're required to install DirectX 9.0c. Produced by Gunnar Games and Virtual Prophecy, published by Valusoft, a division of THQ.


Emergency! Disaster Rescue Squad

Hard to figure out and full of instructions, this disaster squad simulation walks you through the steps involved with a serious car accident, forest fire, or earthquake. After you select one of the four gamesave slots, you see a map of the accident scene along with several screens of text explaining the situation. Your objectives are explained on the top screen; e.g., treat all casualties and put out the fires. You do this by touching a firetruck or emergency worker and selecting an action icon (sort of like the Sims).

This indirect control system is clumsy, and it is easy to make mistakes. In addition, some of the graphics don't make sense -- for example, when putting out a car fire, the firefighter kept squirting the wrong part of the car. Twenty scenarios can be unlocked in order of difficulty, with up to 15 different types of emergency workers. This is a good idea, but frustrating to use. That's too bad, because younger children will be attracted to the topic. Created by Sixteen Tons Entertainment for Destineer Studios.

Excitebots: Trick Racing

Fast paced and fun for two players, this racing game for Wii features robotic insect- and animal-themed vehicles that you can drive, walk or fly around the tracks. You also earn stars for being the first to cross the finish line, and the stars can be traded for new vehicles, icons, and statues.

Vehicles are controlled using the Wii Remote -- the "2" Button is the gas, the "+" button gives you a speed boost, the "A" button is used to activate items, and you turn the controller left or right to steer. The Wii Wheel accessory (sold separately) is not required, but is mentioned on the back of the game.

As in the previous version of this game, Excite Truck, you can hit blocks that change the terrain, as you try to hit the mega-jumps. In addition, you can aim for and swing around boost bars, or open presents that release items -- such as bottle rocket boosts or clacker mouths -- that chomp on other racers to slow them down. Minigames include Soccer (drive your vehicle into the ball and try to hit it into the goal); Bowling (drive through the pins to get a strike); Darts (line up your bot, release the dart, and try to get a bulls-eye); Clowns (hit the clown in the face with a pie), and Sandwiches (drive through the ingredients in the proper order to make the sandwich).

Brett (8 1/2) and Troy (13) played the game together for a weekend and liked the different twist to the usual racing games. However, they thought the game would be best for ages 8-up because it takes time to figure out the controls. They would buy it, even at $40. Developed by Monster Games for Nintendo. The $40 price is for the game alone or you can purchase it for $50 bundled with the Wii Wheel.


Faceland

Can you glance at a facial expression, and tell the difference between anger and disgust? Most people can, but if you have autism or some other learning difficulty that prevents you from picking up this "untaught" skill, you may have trouble. Here's a solution. Set in an amusement park setting called Faceland, this collection of 11 games and six tutorials teaches and provides practice on distinguishing between Surprise, Fear, Disgust, Anger, Sadness and Happiness.

The tutorial portion of the game shows video scenarios, such as a person walking into a surprise party (Surprise!), and then teaches "clues" for each expression, drawing on the work of Ekman and Friesen. At various points, children are asked to mimic the expressions with a mirror -- we wondered why you couldn't use your computer's webcam as an option. Next, children apply the knowledge in a game such as Face Cakes, or children use a unique submarine vacuum to scoop up divers whose faces show signs of fear. Face Cubes are flipped to make rows of happy faces and so on.

Management features include a Demo Mode (that can be turned off in the Adult Section), the ability to track progress for multiple children, with records for the number of correct and incorrect responses, and completed sections. These reports can be printed for use in portfolio assessment or IEPs. Visit www.do2Learn.com or Don Johnston Inc.

Free Realms

One of the better designed virtual worlds for older children is finally out of beta testing mode. Free Realms combines social features with problem solving skills, set in a rich fantasy adventure with mushroom zombies, racing, fights and man-eating plants. Note that you'll need a Windows computer, plus keep in mind that this velvet rope site lets kids in for a taste, and then teases them with subscription-only content and features for $5 per month. The characters, which resemble fairies, can fly around and have magical powers, so there's a good deal of fantasy in a setting that has a Disney-esque feel to it. Learn more at http://www.freerealms.com, or see our interview with Laralyn McWilliams, the creative producer, at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yFSB9e6rTio


Intel ClassMate Convertible PC

What do the PeeWeePC, the CLT 2Go Classmate PC, and the Intel Powered Convertible PC all have in common? They’re the same thing; a 1.6 GHz Intel Atom-powered Windows XP tablet, that is just slightly larger than a typical netbook. Rest assured, this computer is not a ‘peewee’. For the first time, you can put into a child's hands a computer that would be the envy of any accountant or graduate student.

At the heart of this device is the Intel Atom. Released last spring, the penny-sized CPU was designed to bring desktop power to mobile devices, while just sipping on your battery. For this ClassMate, the resulting 4-6 hours away from an outlet -- plus the touch screen and wireless features -- represent huge classroom potential. We were thrilled by the two USB ports, an SD card slot and rotating webcam, plus stereo sound and presentation-friendly VGA out port. Missing is a disk drive, a large hard drive (you get 16 GB of internal memory).

According to Jeff Galinovsky, a Regional Manager for the Intel Classmate team, the computer we tested was originally designed to be purchased in lots of 1000, by schools who want a low price and a say in how they are configured. One such customer was Portugal (the country). For example, you can have Linex pre-installed, required for the mesh computing feature, or individualize a desktop with your school logo and your own software choices. Other software choices include teacher/student file sharing, video streaming and group management functions, as well as a theft deterrent feature which we fortunately didn't need to test.

After a week of heavy use, we noticed that websites designed for a larger screen can look miniscule on this computer’s 5x7-inch screen. While this is no different than a typical netbook -- and it didn't seem to bother the kids -- it is a constraint that designers will need to keep in mind. And -- no surprise -- children struggled with Windows-related issues; not able to get online right away when switching zones, and needing to recalibrate the touchscreen at times. These were minor issues. Once they figured out they could watch YouTube videos or check their FaceBook page, we couldn’t pry this computer -- and all the social connectivity it represents -- out of their hands. Before you run out and buy one for your entire kingdom, try an Acer Aspire One ($250). It has nearly identical features, with the exception of the touch screen. With features like this, you might find yourself asking to borrow your child's computer more frequently.

Jewel Master: Cradle of Rome

If you like "Bejeweled" style games, the timed, addicting matching puzzles where you try to match columns of gems so there are three in a row, you'll most likely appreciate this Ancient Rome-themed edition for the Wii, for one player. Just keep in mind that you can get the same thing for free online. Also note that this edition has also been released for the DS, where the stylus makes flipping the jewels very easy. There are no surprises -- you move the Wii Remote to scan for matches, as a sand timer shows remaining time. The more you play, the more treasure you earn, and the harder things get. Content includes 100 Match-3 puzzle boards.


Mortimer Beckitt and the Secrets of Spooky Manor

The ever growing "seek and find" genre continues to grow, with this clue-finding scavenger hunt, for up to four players. Your objective is to click around the haunted halls of the Beckett family mansion to find hidden objects. Unlike the familiar I SPY format, however, this game only shows you part of an object, so you end up doing a lot more random guessing. Too many guesses cause a ghost to attach itself to your cursor, which requires a sharp shake to get it off. This rather creepy feature helps to keep things interesting. Up to four players can search the screen at once. Content includes 150 rooms. Our testers liked the idea at first, but soon grew confused by the format. In addition, some of the scenes look blurry, even on a good quality LCD screen. Borrow it.


Penguin Cold Cash

Terrific for helping children recognize units of money -- from a penny to a $100 bill (including all 50 state quarters) -- this is a collection of seven games that succeeds in getting children engaged. After children sign in, they see a rather complex menu that lets them choose a game and one of four challenge levels. At the hardest level, you're asked to identify the backs of large currency bills, a skill that most adults (at least public school teachers) aren't likely to have.

The arcade-like activities immerse you in the task -- you steer your penguin through a maze of icebergs in order to identify coins and bills, shoot on a hockey goalie when making change, or catch fish while deciding which collection of coins is the most. The problems are presented in sets of 10, and your progress is saved. In addition, there is an activity in which you must identify the reverse side of the 50 State Quarters -- the coin is gradually revealed -- the sooner you identify it by choosing one of the state options, the more points you earn.

Weaknesses include the fact that the activities are more similar than different, and the menu looks complicated when you first see it. Each student has their own sign-in, allowing for a 'leader board' to keep track of high scores. This game is ideal for use in an elementary classroom setting. We've reviewed a lot of currency-counting programs in past years, but none as good as this one. The program is easy to install (no registration) and runs without the disk in the drive.

**Professor Heinz Wolff's Gravity**

Our rather jaded game testers don’t usually go for "educational" titles. So we were a bit surprised when they refused to stop playing this one-player puzzle game, featuring 100 "incredible" machine-like puzzles for the Wii and DS.

Your goal is drag and drop objects onto the screen, to set up chain reactions that solve problems -- such as to pop a balloon or to get a ball into a basket. Each puzzle has more than one way to solve it. You roll balls, stack bricks, and try to transport glassy eyeballs across the screen on wheeled carts as you play with the real physics behind each movement. The mechanical toolkit includes building blocks, levers, conduits and pulleys, and success requires plenty of trial and error.

The DS version ($20) is easier in ways because you use the stylus instead of the Wii Remote, which can cause your arms to get tired. Both versions have sandbox modes (for free experimentation), plus hints. Progress is saved automatically. Created by Extra Mile Studios for Deep Silver.


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**Rosetta Stone Version 3, Level 1: Italian**

Featuring an excellent design that uses voice recognition and instant feedback (and a very high price tag --$260/level), this language package is designed to teach through immersion -- meaning it simulates a setting where you have to know the language to function. Designed for either Mac or Windows, the program recreates the Italian language learning experience through a variety of methods. (Other languages are available and are mentioned below.)

Inside the large, dictionary-sized box you'll find a headset with microphone that plugs into your USB port, and four CDs -- an install disk, a content disk (for the language), and two "Audio Companion" disks (for listening on your portable music player or in your car -- say on your drive to work).

The setup installs the main application on your hard drive, with the idea that you can install language modules later down the road. Each level has to be activated with a 24-character code in order to work -- a fact you learn after a 20-minute install. After entering the code, you have to either call in the number, or activate over the Internet.

Each four-unit, $260+ language level includes 30 lessons. The mastery learning model is combined with a staiiopt recording system, so you can see exactly where you are in the lesson. Techniques include Dynamic Immersion, a technique designed to help you think in a new language. Other techniques include Contextual Format (enables new language production from the first lesson by placing you in the right context), Adaptive Recall (which tracks progress), Proprietary Speech Recognition Technology (which uses speech analysis tools to help perfect pronunciation, by way of the included USB microphone/headset), Milestone Feature (which simulates real-life situations in which to practice language), and Audio Companion CDs (to allow users to practice on the go).

The Rosetta Stone is available in 21 languages including Arabic, French, Russian, Spanish, and Chinese. Prices are $259 for Level 1, $279 for Level 2, and $299 for Level 3. Bundles versions are also available: Level 1 & 2 ($419) or Levels 1, 2, and 3 ($549). In addition, online subscriptions are available: six months ($200) or one year ($300). This is the best language learning option to date, if you can afford it.

Super Secret (www.supersecret.com)

Targeting kids too old for Webkinz (8-up), and too young for RuneScape or Second Life (14 and younger), SuperSecret.com is a virtual world that is free at first, but traps you into a subscription, if you play long enough to get hooked.

After you design your avatar (either a male or a female), you can freely roam around, chatting with other avatars, and playing games to earn "age points." So the idea is to give kids what they want the most -- age. But the trick is that once your character ages beyond 12, you have to pay. Otherwise, you've discovered the fountain of youth, and will stay 12 forever. Subscriptions cost $5 per month, or $20 for a half year. So before you get your child started on this, make sure they know that there are costs involved.

Sprinkled around the world are single-player casual games that vary in quality. We did not see any multiplayer or collaborative games, however. Based on our hour of time exploring, there's plenty to do, people to see, and nothing to worry about -- with the possible exception that your tween may be asking for a subscription. See also Free Realms.


TouchMaster 2

This second edition of TouchMaster contains 19 games that vary widely in format, difficulty and quality. The $30 title offers you a lot of content and features for the money, and the two-player option is great for a car-load of kids.

Activities are organized by category, as follows: cards (five games), strategy (three games), picture (four games) and puzzle (three games). Our testers' favorites include Speed Solitaire (where you drag and drop cards on the DS bottom screen, while your score and time are tracked on the upper screen), Beaned (a shooting game where you try to hit moving targets with paintballs), and Spellwinder (a word search game). One of the more innovative titles is View Finder, where you are shown a model picture on the top screen, and must find slight differences shown in the same picture on the lower screen.

Most of the games can be transferred to a second DS (no cartridge required), or you can compete by passing the Nintendo DS back and forth. Scores are saved in one of the three gamesave slots, with high scores used to earn trophies -- in your quest to earn the title, Ultimate Touchmaster. Some reading is required to setup the games. Although there is no worrisome content, we did notice some stereotyping in the paintball game -- where the "bad guys" are represented as muscular males, and the "good guys" are shown carrying briefcases. This is a good all-purpose title with a good deal of informal educational value -- something for everyone. Borrow it or buy it.

New & Future Releases
MAY 1, 2009

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.

Circus Games
In this game for the Wii, you enter the Big Top and become part of a Circus. The two-player game features 20 circus games including tightrope walking, feed the animals, and dunk tank.

Teaches/Purpose: n/a. Entry date: 11/26/2008.

Grand Slam Tennis
Available for both Wii and PS3, the Wii version of this tennis sim takes advantage of the new $10 MotionPlus device, that snaps onto the end of your Wii Remote for another level of motion realism. According to EA, you’ll be able to spin the racket, with an exact mapping, and control your in-game player with exact precision.

You can create your player and compete to win the four Grand Slams, which only a few professional players have done. The player roster includes famous names like McEnroe, Roddick, Sampras, Federer, and Williams.


Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince
As in all the previous Harry Potter games, this first-person exploration scavenger hunt takes you inside and around the maze of Hogwarts as Harry Potter. Your goal is to see if you can help Harry make it through the sixth year of wizard duels in order to lead the Gryffindor Quidditch team to victory.

This is the first version in which the Wii version was designed ahead of the other platforms, with simplified spells and more logical movements. This edition is scheduled for release with the movie in the Summer of 2009. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cpdoV45NOP8 for an interview with lead designer Chris Roberts.


Hell's Kitchen
Based on the TV show featuring Chef Gordon Ramsay, this game allows you to complete a series of kitchen and dining room challenges to find out if you have what it takes to be a Five-Star Chef. You must master all elements of cooking including preparation, cooking and service. And just as in the show, your every move is watched and judged by Chef Ramsay. As you progress through the game, you will gain access to Chef Ramsay’s authentic recipes, some of which are exclusive to the game.

The game features four ways to play. In career mode, you earn your stars as you build up from a Single-Star to a Five-Star restaurant, then continue through seven more restaurant ranks. With each advance, the recipes become more varied and complex. In Arcade Mode, you concentrate solely on food preparation and cooking, and must deal with demanding customers as well as Chef Ramsay. You can also team up with a friend in Co-op Multiplayer Mode and have double cooking stations and shared ingredients. Or, you can compete head-to-head in Versus Multiplayer Mode to see who earns Chef Ramsay’s praise and who is sent home. Prices are $40 for the Wii, $30 for the DS, and $20 for the PC. Developed by Ludia Inc. for Ubisoft.

**Kids Collection DVDs**

This collection of British and European animated stories, each based on a children's book. The series has not previously been available in the US. Titles include: The Adventures of Mouse and Mole, Volumes 1 and 2; Stories from East of the Moon; The Mousehole Cat; and The Angel and the Soldier Boy. There is no interactive content.


**LEGO Education: WeDo Robotics**

Designed to give students an introduction to robotics, WeDo Robots is a software/hardware bundle that requires a newer Macintosh or Windows computer with a free USB port. The kit is more affordable than LEGO Mindstorms, and makes it easier to zoom in on specific programming concepts. Besides the programming experience, children can better understand working with simple machines, gears, levers, and pulleys.

The $40 software features a drag-and-drop icon-based interface. The $130 Construction Set includes 158 pieces -- including a motor, tilt sensor, motion sensor and USB hub. The third component is the Activity Pack ($130), a CD-ROM that features 12 activities which integrate with the WeDo software. The activities are based on four themes: Amazing Mechanisms, Wild Animals, Play Soccer, and Adventure Stories. The Activity Pack allows for installation on all computers in a single school or institution.


**LEGO Rock Band**

Want to create your own rock band? Now you can, out of LEGO blocks at least, according to the press release announcing LEGO Rock Band, coming "Holiday 2009" for Wii, Xbox 360 and PS3.

This collaborative adventure will let you move through progressively harder venues, including stadiums and fantasy locations on Earth. You can create your own avatars and entourage -- including roadies, managers and crew. The title will support Rock Band drum set and guitars, as well as other music game controllers. The song list includes titles from Carl Douglas (Kung Fu Fighting) and Pink (So What). The title will probably be worth a second look because of the developer, TT Games (www.ttgames.com) -- the studio behind LEGO Star Wars.


**M&M's Beach Party**

This Beach Party game features the Red, Yellow, Green, Orange, and Blue M&M's. You start by choosing your M&M and then play one of six games including Volleyball, Kayak Race, Ring Toss, Colorator, Mr. Runch Slam, and Skeeball Race. You can collect seashells on the beach in single-player mode to unlock new games and features, and explore environments including the beach, pier, booths on the boardwalk, and more.


**Madden NFL 10**

New features in this Madden NFL game for PS3 and Xbox 360 include EA’s Pro-Tak animation technology for more control over the outcome of each play. For example, when you are driving a receiver towards the first down or fighting for a fumble, the play won’t end until the whistle blows. The Wii edition ($50) features a new art style and player characteristics, along with stadiums modeled after 32 real NFL fields.

NCAA Football 10

New features include a Season Showdown, a new mode that lets you see if your school team can become the best in the nation. Content includes 120 Football Bowl Subdivision schools, and custom stadiums packed with school colors, and cheerleaders. Other frosting includes new field goal nets, flags and camera flashes.


Nitro Jr. Notebook

This simplified version of the Nitro Web Notebook contains 40 activities plus a year of access to PlanetVtech.com. Two bonus cartridges unlock a brain teaser and an extreme sports game.


Nitro Tunes Desktop

This pretend laptop computer has an LCD screen, and 80 drill and practice activities that cover math, social studies, science, language arts, music and Spanish. You can also connect your MP3 player to the speakers, or connect the computer to your Windows or Mac computer allowing you to download content from PlanetVtech.com. Sold exclusively at ToysRUs.


OMG! High School Triple Play Pack

This collection of three games for Windows is based on the Paramount Picture's films Pretty in Pink, Clueless, and Mean Girls.

The Pretty in Pink game takes you on a trip back to the 1980's with Andie and friends in a scavenger hunt adventure with hidden object, logic, and puzzle games. Your goal is to recreate the classic romantic triangle between Andie, Duckie and Blane while collecting hidden items such as prom items and clothing. Content features 49 levels in 10 locations, plus six minigames.

In the Clueless game, you are Cher, who is on a timed search for true love and good looks. Content includes 500 fashion items (tops, dresses, pants, shoes and accessories) found in 80 levels. Minigames include Fashion Memory Mode, where you match styles of outfits, and Concave Pavilion Photo Shoot where you dress your model, choose her position and location, and can then export the image to share with friends.

In the third game, Mean Girls, takes place at North Shore High. You're the new girl at school who must decide how to unite or control the school by playing either naughty or nice with the other students. Your ultimate goal is to achieve perfect social harmony or total domination of the school. The game is set up like a game board that can be played head-to-head or turn-based. Content includes 25 battles with 40 characters, in 12 locations. The goal is to unlock skills that you can use to customize your battle strategy. While the other games in the set are rated E10+, Mean Girls is rated T.

Paper Show

Teachers and presenters, take note. Similar in ways to the Pulse LiveScribe, this digital writing kit hardwires your pen to your Windows computer screen, by way of a Bluetooth USB key. If your computer is plugged into a projector, the device makes it possible to make the paper to big screen transition quite seamless.

By using menus on the bottom of the proprietary paper, you can adjust the ink color and line thickness on the fly. You can also incorporate perfect geometric shapes, or delete ideas with both erase and undo commands. Notes can be saved via email or printed, and the images can be incorporated into PowerPoint presentations. The kit is compatible with PCs running Windows XP Service Pack 2 or higher, and Vista. It includes one Papershow Bluetooth digital pen; a AAA battery; three ink refills; four silicon rings; one Papershow Bluetooth USB stick with PAPERSHOW software; one Papershow A4 notepad for digital flipchart work; 30 sheets of Papershow printer paper for interactive presentations; one-ring binder for Papershow printer paper storage; and one pencil case for the Papershow pen, a USB stick, and accessories.


PebbleGo

This is an animal database designed for K-2 emergent readers that introduces database and research concepts, along with animal facts. PebbleGo contains 200+ animal articles correlated to life science standards. Each article contains information tabs, along with audio and video clips, and games. Word-by-word highlighting and read-aloud audio provide age-appropriate access to the text. PebbleGo is available on a subscription basis for $395/year for access from school or home. Learn more at www.pebblego.com.


PeeWee Pivot Tablet Laptop

This is the consumer edition of the Intel Classmate Convertible PC (also called the CLT 2Go Classmate PC). While the hardware is the same, three software bundles can be ordered, depending upon the age of your child. The netbook-sized three-pound wireless computer feature a webcam, touchscreen, USB/SD ports, a six cell battery, and a carrying handle.

Based in San Francisco, PeeWee PC (www.peeweepc.com) offers three bundles -- Pre-K, Early Elementary and Upper Elementary. We counted 10 software choices -- including some older, but well-designed, Learning Company titles such as Millie’s Math House and Reader Rabbit. Onboard security software includes a timer and/or Internet filters. Also see the Intel ClassMate. Prices start at $550 with a coupon. While this is a good price for a tablet, keep in mind that there are similarly configured Intel Atom netbooks for less than half the price. See, for example the $250 Acer Aspire (www.acer.com/aspireone/style.html).


Ride & Learn Giraffe Bike

Part of Vtech's Jungle Gym line of products, this stationary bike is designed to look like a giraffe and features a built-in LCD screen. As your child pedals the bike and bounces on the seat, they can play activities designed to teach letter and number recognition and word association. The five modes of play include racing, ABCs, numbers, music and animals. The seat is adjustable to three different positions allowing the bike to grow with your child. See also the Fisher-Price Smart Cycle.

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SCRABBLE
This game features three modes of play, including: Classic (the traditional game), Speed (where players must race the clock as they compete against friends or the computer), and SCRABBLE SLAM (based on the card game where players try to be the first to discard all their Slam cards by making four letter words). There are six difficulty levels and a Training Mode with six training exercises to help you polish your skills. The game also features the Official SCRABBLE Players Dictionary, SCRABBLE Word Finder (provides hints on best words), and Wi-Fi multiplayer capability. Developed by Stainless Games for EA.


Secret Saturdays
The Secret Saturdays is a Cartoon Network show about a family of cryptozoologists, the Saturdays, who along with a team of Secret Scientists are trying to find and protect the cryptids from villains. Cryptids are strange creatures including Cherufes (lava lizards), Hibagon (a Japanese BigFoot) and packs of Atmospheric Jellyfish that can combine into a giant walking jellyfish. The Saturdays travel from ancient temples to caves in search of the Kur Stone, the key to finding the ultimate cryptid, as they try to save the world from the evil plans of V.V. Argost. D3Publisher and Cartoon Network have joined to develop videogames based on the series, with the first game scheduled for release in Fall 2009.


Sims 3, The
Offering more ways to customize your Sim characters, as well as the ability to move from house to house (for the first time), this edition of The Sims offers more realism, right down to the eyeliner color.

In addition to the outward appearances, you can also choose from five inner attributes, including romantic, kleptomaniac or evil. The new goal-oriented gameplay allows you to choose short- or long-term objectives for your sims and decide whether or not they will achieve them. Other features include the ability to create, edit and share your own movies by setting up the cameras in your Sim’s home. Included with this edition is $10 of SimPoints that can be used to purchase additional items.


Step & Count Kangaroo
Step & Count Kangaroo is like a stair master (exercise machine) for toddlers. Children hold onto the kangaroo ear handles, and move their feet on two pedals on the base. The light-up screen displays numbers up to 30, creating a great number experience. The kangaroo’s hat features colorful popping balls and four large buttons that play sounds, sing-along songs and phrases when pressed. There is also a baby kangaroo that moves up and down from the pouch of the kangaroo base. The toy is part of VTech’s Jungle Gym line.


Tiger Woods PGA Tour 10
Test your virtual golf skills in front of huge crowds, who roar at every hole. New features include a character progression mode (we’re not sure what that is) and a tournament challenge that allows you to relive actual moments in tournament history, with commentary from the real Tiger Woods. For the first time, you can try one of the toughest tests in golf, the U.S. Open at Bethpage Black. As with last year’s edition, there’s a variety of courses, real-time weather conditions and online tournaments.

NEW & FUTURE RELEASES

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Tiger Woods PGA Tour 10 (Wii)

This year’s Wii version of Tiger Woods PGA Tour is designed to raise the bar for motion detection in a sports game, by being one of the first titles to support Nintendo’s new WiiMotion Plus accessory (an extra add-on that plugs into the end of the Wii Remote). EA claims that it will give players a near perfect 1:1 swing.

Exclusive to this edition is disc golf (also called Frisbee Golf) which lets you throw a disk to score on 27 of the courses. As with the PS3 and XBox 360 versions, there is a tournament challenge that allows you to relive key moments in tournament history, with the real Tiger Woods as the narrator. Other features include real-time weather conditions, online tournaments, and a variety of courses. The game will cost $50 for the game alone or $60, with bundled with Wii MotionPlus.


Up

Based on the upcoming Disney/Pixar film, this game features 78-year-old Carl Fredricksen and Russell, an 8-year-old Wilderness Explorer. They teach you survival skills and aid you in your quest to reach Paradise Falls. Along the way, a dog named Dug and a prehistoric bird named Kevin will join your team of explorers.

You encounter exotic animals, battle anacondas and crocodiles, and evade man-eating plants. You will need to call upon the other characters to help you overcome obstacles, perform certain tasks, and scale the slippery slopes of the Amazonian Tepuis. The game also features a four-player aerial combat mini-game, and Quest Cards that you collect during your travels which contain information about collective items that can unlock special bonuses and film clips.


V.Smile Smartridges for 2009

Five new ROM cartridges (or Smartridges) are planned for the 2009 V.Smile Motion system. Note that the older V.Smile system is being phased out, although all the new titles will work on the older systems -- minus any motion features. The five titles feature Handy Manny, UP! and Wow Wow Wubbzy.