



TOP 163+ Video Games for Libraries

This is a current (3/23/2009) listing of the TOP 100 selections for game consoles or handheld game systems. We review E (Everyone) and T (Teen) rated products. Hardware products may be included as well.

Suggestions for using game consoles with children to maximize the learning potential.

- More game controllers increase the chance that the game will be a social experience.
- If you're using an Nintendo Wii, make sure you have room for children to move around in front of the display.
- Offer a variety of games for children to play, and make sure to provide a balance of real world options.
- Learn the game yourself and then play along with your child.
- Make sure younger children know how to save their game and escape from any activity. This makes it easier for them to self-limit.
- Understand and use the ESRB rating system. Check the Game Descriptors, located on the back of the box.
- Check ergonomics. Children should not have to lay on the floor, and the screen should be at a child's level.
- Create a video game storage area near the game console, so it is easy to store software.

Age of Empires III: The War Chiefs Expansion Pack

4.4 Stars

Here's some great news for US history buffs, as well as history teachers in general. This expansion pack to the famous real-time strategy game Age of Empires III provides boatloads of new content; as long as you have the original \$30 game installed on your hard drive, that is. There are three new empires on the disk: The Iroquois, The Aztec, and the Sioux. Each has their own buildings and artifacts, bringing the total number of civilizations up in the series to 11. Other new content on the disk includes new mercenary abilities for the game, including the spy, horse artillery, and petard—plus new maps and the ability to start your own revolution. All and all, it makes for a very solid expansion to this already great strategy game. Just make sure you can find your original game disks, and remember this is an expansion pack.

Details: Microsoft Corporation, www.microsoft.com. Price: \$20. Ages: 12-up. Platform: Windows. Teaches: history, logic, strategic thinking. Review date: 6/11/2007. ESRB Rating: Teen, Blood Violence

Age of Empires: The Age of Kings

4.7 Stars

Age Of Empires comes to your DS in this excellent immersion in history. While many strategic war games focus on combat and magic, this version gives you full wars with buildings and historical events on large battlefields. The themes and content come from Ensemble Studio's Age Of Empires II: The Age Of Kings for the PC.

You play as one of five cultures from around the world (Britons, Franks, Mongols, Saracens, and Japanese) and control historical leaders, (such as Joan of Arc), each with their own abilities. You can also train and hire various units that add more combat skill to your army as they fight against the other armies. Content includes 45 different types of military units, a turn-based combat (new to the Age Of Empires franchise), the ability to construct & upgrade buildings, 50 technologies like chemistry or ballistics, a new Combat Advisor and multiplayer scenarios which allow up to 4 players to battle each other wirelessly.

This game is fun and full of historic events that may or may not be completely accurate. Some things may have had to be embellished to make it more interesting. Age Of Kings is a fun game that will keep players engaged for days, if not months.

Details: Majesco Entertainment, www.majescoentertainment.com. Price: \$29.99. Ages: 10-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches: history, logic, strategic thinking. Review date: 8/7/2005. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+

- Software changes continually, and so does this list. For an updated version, please contact us by calling 908-284-0404 or by email.
- Prices are suggested retail, at the time of the review. Because some of these reviews are dated, prices can vary widely. You can also learn a great deal about any title by typing it, in quotations, into any popular search engine. Updated lists cost \$25 each and are sent by PDF or by mail.

Animal Crossing: City Folk

4.6 Stars

The first version of Animal Crossing for the Wii, Animal Crossing: City Folk is being called a "community simulation" either for one to four players, alternating (one at a time) or two to four people playing simultaneously over the Nintendo Wi-Fi connection. At first glance, "City Folk" looks and plays a lot like the old GameCube versions of Animal Crossing, with a lot of trading, fishing, and shell collecting. Lying under the surface of the game, however, is another layer of sophistication -- there are seasonal features. You notice fireflies in the summer, go trick-or-treating on Halloween, or build a snowman in the winter.

The magic of Animal Crossing is that time passes in real time, so there's always something new to discover. New to this version is a bus that takes you into the city for shopping or a show. With the new Wii Speak microphone (a \$20 accessory that plugs into one of your Wii's USB ports), you can have live chat with others -- providing you have the correct code. The microphone sits on top of the sensor bar and, as of this review date, was not working (there was nobody to talk to). Another key difference with this edition is the use of Mii avatars. This brings an added layer of personalization to the game. Content includes 2,400 items to collect, along with characters from past editions (K.K. Slider, Tom Nook, Blathers and Mr. Resetti).

You can use Nintendo Wi-Fi Connection to hang out in real time with up to three of your friends, and send them e-mails and text messages from the game. You can also play at different times of the year to experience different activities, holidays and seasons. For example, when visiting a friend in another country, you experience the holidays native to their culture. To use the connection, one location must serve as the host, who opens his or her gate to allow friends into the town. This is done by providing them with a code, while they are also online. (Note that they have to own a copy of the game). At this point, you can chat, trade, or write notes. A "DS Suitcase Mode" lets you carry your character from your Wii console to a friend's, thus giving people without an Internet connection the ability to experience multiplayer modes. Additionally, you can move your character from Animal Crossing: Wild World on Nintendo DS and play as him/her in Animal Crossing: City Folk. Jenna (13) liked this game, but liked Harvest Moon more, noting "you can do a lot more in Harvest Moon."

There's a lot of logical problem solving, reading, trading, and thinking in this game -- but it can be addictive. If you notice that your son or daughter has disappeared for a few weeks, it may be because they've been pulled into Animal Crossing. See also Harvest Moon: Tree of Tranquility.

Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 6-up. Platform: Wii. Teaches: creativity. Review date: 7/30/2008. ESRB Rating: Everyone, Comic Mischievous

Arcade Gold Featuring Pac-Man

4.4 Stars

Note: See Retro Arcade Pac-Man for an updated version.

Remember the good old days, when a video game was the size of a washing machine? Today, the fact that an entire arcade can fit on a one chip has given designers the interesting job of creating the look and feel of a giant many arcade games on a single hand-held controller. You supply the TV and four AA batteries.

Arcade Gold Featuring Pac-Man, just out from Jakks Pacific (\$20, jakkspacific.com) contains eight games: Pac-Man, Pac-Man Plus, Super Pac-Man, Galaxian, Bosconian, Dig Dug, and New Rally-X. This edition has some subtle but important improvements. There's a battery saving auto-off feature, so a forgetful child can coexist with the batteries, and high scores are saved in memory. The games are full versions of the originals, including demo loops and sound tracks that anyone who lived through the 1980s has embedded in their subconscious. So now you can sit your child down and say, "When I was a lad, this is the game your mother and I used to play."

Details: Jakks Pacific, Inc., www.jakkspacific.com. Price: \$20. Ages: 10-up. Platform: TV Game. Teaches: classic video games, spatial relations, timing. Review date: 8/22/2007.

Arthur and the Invisibles: The Game

4.5 Stars

This beautifully illustrated one-player adventure game is rich with problem-solving opportunities. Based on the movie, the game lets players control one of three characters -- each with different abilities. Each phase of a puzzle or combat requires using the skills of all three characters, each with their own unique but complimentary powers. While there is no shortage of fighting, the game is equally mixed with innovative problem-solving, flying, driving and collecting. If you're looking for a great game and you're up for a challenge, get this. More information at <http://www.atari.com/arthur>. Created in France by Etranges Libellules for Atari.

Details: Atari, Inc., www.atari.com. Price: \$30. Ages: 10-up. Platform: PlayStation 2*, Windows XP, Nintendo DS, PSP, Game Boy Advance. Teaches: logic, strategy, problem solving. Review date: 1/5/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Violence

Avatar: The Last Airbender - Into the Inferno

4.4 Stars

This action adventure game follows the plot of Season 3 of the animated television series, Avatar. In the story, the Fire Nation devises a plot to use the power of Sozin's Comet to rain devastation on the rest of the world. You will play as Aang and his friends as you prepare for battle against Fire Lord Ozai and his army. You will perform all of the martial arts moves of your favorite characters, and also have the ability to bend all of the elements and fly on gliders to explore the expanded Avatar world.

The experience is fun and fast -- especially as a two-player action game -- and is great for collaborative play. That's because a friend can take control of the second character by just plugging in another controller (we love these kinds of games).

Details: THQ, Inc., www.thq.com. Price: \$20. Ages: 6-11. Platform: PlayStation 2*, Wii, Nintendo DS. Teaches: logic, fighting. Review date: 8/20/2008. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+

Avatar: The Last Airbender (Wii)

4.3 Stars

There's no shortage of fighting in this richly illustrated one player 3D exploration game for Wii, designed to let you move one of the Avatar characters through well-illustrated landscapes. Based on the Nickelodeon show *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, children can play as all four main characters, including Aang, Katar, Haru and Sokka. Using the Wii's controller, they perform attacks in sweeping gestures to create combo-moves or they can draw symbols on the screen to generate special moves. The graphics look amazing, and the story is complex. We discovered a logic game, called "Four Nations! Mini-Game, which is a tile game. In other parts of the game, you trace over Chinese characters with the Wii remote; a very nice aspect of this game. On the downside, some of the controls are tricky. For example, in the advance bending move, you must hold two buttons at the same time, while swinging the remote upward. This takes a good deal of practice. If you like the show, you'll like this game, providing you spend the time to learn the controls.

Details: THQ, Inc., www.thq.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 10-up. Platform: Wii. Teaches: logic, memory, Chinese characters. Review date: 1/5/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Cartoon Violence

Backyard Basketball

4.7 Stars

Fun enough for grownups, but easy enough for kids, this fourth Backyard Sports title for GameBoy (following hockey football and baseball) is nice, overall basketball simulation.

Unlike the console or PC versions, the banter of the sports-casters is not present -- appearing instead as written dialog before and after matches. Minimal reading is required to use the menus, and there are three levels of play, with two mini games and a season play mode. It is possible to go head-to-head with another GBA player with a game link cable. Content includes kid versions of pros like Shaq and Yao Ming, 30 NBA team logos, and random powerups. There are some sophisticated options in the setup menu, including a fatigue rating. Games can be saved on the cartridge. All in all, this is an excellent game. Buy it.

Details: Atari, www.atari.com. Price: \$30. Ages: 6-13. Platform: Game Boy Advance. Teaches: sports, basketball. Review date: 10/11/2004. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Backyard Football '08

4.3 Stars

This sixth edition of Backyard Football comes on four platforms, which vary in look and feel. But if you've ever played any of the older versions, you don't notice much difference, other than the newer player roster. The one exception is the Wii version, which lets you make forward passes or tackles by flicking the Wii Remote. Other games play nearly identically to earlier versions. One thing in this version that isn't in previous editions is NFL stars (Tom Brady, Peyton Manning and Vince Young).

All in all, if you're looking for a strong beginning football simulation with kid friendly themes, Backyard Football continues to be a solid choice, with multiple levels, unlockables, powerups, minigames and funny play-by-play commentary. So why not a higher rating? Because other football simulations, such as those from EA Sports and 2K Sports have continued to improve, offering a viable alternative to the Backyard series. The DS and PS2 versions are \$30 and PC version is \$20.)

Details: Humongous Inc., www.backyardsports.com. Price: \$40. Ages: 5-up. Platform: Wii*, PlayStation 2*, Windows, Nintendo DS*. Teaches: sports, football. Review date: 7/10/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Backyard Sports Baseball '09

4.5 Stars

The seventh game in the series for one or two players, 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 an unlockable Babe Ruth. Prices are \$40 for the Wii, \$30 for the PS2 and DS, and \$20 for the PC version. Other 2009 Backyard titles include Baseball, Hockey, Basketball and Football.

Details: Humongous inc., www.backyardsports.com. Price: \$40. Ages: 5-up. Platform: Wii*, PlayStation 2, Nintendo DS*, Windows. Teaches: major league sports, baseball, coordination. Review date: 4/8/2008. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Backyard Sports Basketball 2007 (GBA)

4.3 Stars

A bit clunky to setup your teams (it seems there are options for everything, with a lot of menus that require reading), this two-on-two GBA basketball simulation is easy to play. The player roster has a lot of famous names, including NBA players LeBron James, Dwyane Wade, Shaquille O'neal, and Yao Ming -- all as kids.

There is full-court basketball sim action, interactive backgrounds, and realistic gameplay with Season Mode, stats, minigames, and unlockables. It also features all the NBA teams, uniforms, & league marks, as well as 10 Backyard teams with an extensive roster of Backyard Kids. The teams are fully customizable (players, fields, uniforms & logos).

Details: Humongous Inc., www.backyardsports.com. Price: \$30. Ages: 6-up. Platform: Game Boy Advance. Teaches: basketball. Review date: 11/16/2006. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Big Brain Academy

4.8 Stars

Second in the Nintendo Brain series (the first was Brain Age), this multi-player Nintendo DS title is a series of logic puzzles that require focused concentration. The better you do, the more your brain "weighs" (a tongue-in-cheek measurement of IQ). You start with a pretest which gives you a letter grade and a brain weight, detailing your abilities, and comparing your brain with a famous person. The program then designs a workout regime. This may seem like a tedious, school-like activity, but it proves to be completely addictive.

There are five categories of activities and three activities in each category. Each activity starts off easily and then escalates to a frantic race to perform some simple stylus-based action. For example, in "Get in Shape" the goal is to tap the stylus on the shapes on the bottom screen that make up the silhouette. The silhouettes start off simple (squares and circles), but escalate to complex shapes such as a discus thrower. First time players are helped by the blob-like "Dr. Lobe" who tells you what to do with the stylus. The movements are always simple and intuitive, and the activities actually do train your brain, providing a fun, unique experience for all ages. In the multiplayer mode, up to eight people can play to see who has the "biggest" brain, and the results will be displayed for all to see. A demo test can also be sent to another DS.

Sample activities include Heavyweight (choose which object weighs more), Sound Bites (listen to people and animals as they make noise, then try to touch them in the correct order), Memo-Random (examine the panels on the top row, then touch the correct one when the panel is replaced by a question mark), Missing Link (look at the red line in the picture on the top screen and draw it into the picture on the touch screen. Watch out! Some pictures will be inverted.) Coin-parison (choose the panel with the greater amount of money), Written Math (read the problems in word form, then solve them by tapping the number pad on the Touch Screen) and Shadow Shift (tap the images on the Touch Screen that match the spinning shadows on the top screen). See also Big Brain Academy Wii Degree, for the Wii, released June 2007.

Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$20. Ages: 6-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches: "mental training" (logic, math, spatial thinking, memorization). Review date: 5/28/2006. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Big Brain Academy: Wii Degree

4.9 Stars

The third "Brain" title from Nintendo and the first for the Wii, Big Brain Academy: Wii Degree sets a new standard in game design. Not only is it the first game to mix a kinesthetic interface with school content, but it also mixes in some new socialization techniques—up to eight players take turns.

At the core of the game are 15 timed minigames designed to last no more than a few minutes. They can be played by one player in the Mental Marathon mode or as a Mind Sprint, where teams pass a remote back and forth, directed by voice-cues that come straight out of the Wii Remote. Clever stuff. The first team to complete a set number of problems wins. You can choose from three levels, so younger children can pitch in with some ideas. Progress is saved either locally, or online where it can be seen by other groups. This management ability, along with the multiplayer options may make this one of the first "video games" to make it inside the schoolhouse. The management features track activity over time, and student records can be synched with another Wii owner who also has the game, from another location. So it's fun to think that it could be played against the classroom down the hall, in school-wide contests.

You start with a visit to a virtual office where you register your name and select an avatar, or "Mii", for use in your student photo. You can enroll eight students (the ninth will be automatically deleted). The game's 15 activities fall into five categories—identify, memorize, analyze, compute and visualize. For example, in Art Parts players must complete a sample painting by dragging and dropping missing pieces onto an unfinished scene. At the hard level, the parts must be flipped sideways or upside down. Balloon Burst falls under the "compute" category. Players race to pop balloons in rising numerical order. At its easiest, there are few balloons shown at once. On a higher difficulty level, Balloon Burst sends in more balloons, including some with negative numbers. In Fast Focus, players see how quickly they can recognize a distorted image that slowly returns to normal.

Note that it is not accurate to take the scores literally. While learning value of the puzzles are real, the "brain weight" measurements are fictional, and the puzzles, while valid exercises in logical thinking, are not aligned to any formal standards. So your Brain Age scores won't get you into Harvard—not yet anyway.

Like other Brain Age titles, there is a chatty coach, in this case Dr. Lobe, who suggests games and gives feedback. Testers complained that there was too much of Dr. Lobe's chatter; they also wanted to be able to add new players after the game starts, which requires restarting the game; a clumsy process. Big Brain Academy Wii Degree pushes the definition of educational software in a welcome new direction.

Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 7-up. Platform: Wii. Teaches: math, reading, logic, spatial relations, memory, ordering numbers, sorting, visual discrimination. Review date: 6/14/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Boogie

4.5 Stars

Ready to get up and dance? Easy to play and sure to bring a smile to your face, this is a singing and dancing game for the Wii that has a very funky look and feel to it. Players create and customize their own "Boog" avatar by choosing clothes, hair styles and so on. They then move to the stage, where they control their player using the Wii remote and Nunchuk. It feels a bit like controlling a string puppet—with your movements mirrored onscreen by your alter identity. The closer your moves and voice match the music, the higher the score.

The process requires a good deal of coordination, and our testers noted that they looked incredibly silly when playing this game. It would be good for a party game or perhaps an after-dinner family game. Note that some of the lyrics can contain suggestive language, resulting in the E10+ rating, although the songs are typical FM radio fare. Content includes a nice variety of 39 songs, including selections from The Jackson 5, Kool & The Gang, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Cyndi Lauper, Black Eyed Peas and Britney Spears. Dances can be saved as music videos and played back. Visit <http://www.ea.com/boogie/> for more information. Note that PS2 and Nintendo DS versions have also been announced. See also Boogie SuperStar.

Details: Electronic Arts, Inc., www.ea.com. Price: \$60. Ages: 5-up. Platform: Wii. Teaches: music, movement, pitch, singing, rhythm. Review date: 7/26/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Suggestive Themes
Lyrics

Boom Blox

4.5 Stars

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: spatial relations, logic, gross motor development (throwing), creativity, programming. Review date: 4/16/2008. ESRB Rating: Everyone, Cartoon Violence Comic Mischievous

Brain Age 2: More Training in Minutes a Day

4.7 Stars

Do you have a child who needs a real challenge? Like a workbook from the future, Brain Age consists of 15 innovative, challenging timed games, mostly centered around skills related to math, memory and spelling. These include one of the best games of Sudoku. These aren't your typical fill-in-the-blank IQ test types of puzzles -- these use the Nintendo DS microphone and touch screen, letting you scribble and speak your answers before time runs out. Other puzzles bring motion into the mix, by rotating letters to be mixed. What's more, each game is paired with a state-of-the-art management system. ETS, take note.

After you turn your DS on its side, like a book, you create a player profile by entering your age, creating a signature icon, and then take a pretest to learn your brain age, measured in years. A lower score (20) is the best, implying that a younger brain is better than an older brain; obviously a playful spin on IQ (there is no such real measurement). A calendar tracks you over time, and offers time-sensitive feedback such as "good morning, I haven't seen you for a while." If you play each day, you earn a reward stamp, and eventually you unlock a more games. BF Skinner would undoubtedly be pleased by this style of learning. Up to four different players can keep profiles on a single cartridge.

Particularly noteworthy activities include Rock, Paper, Scissors, where you compete by saying the answer that either wins or loses. You learn that it is very hard to mentally reverse your answer, and force yourself to loose -- and that mental discipline is what Brain Age is all about. In Memory Sprint, you watch a stream of runners in order to keep track of the placement in a race (like a dynamic number line). Word Scramble presents a spinning set of words -- you write in your answer one letter at a time. In Math Recall, you must memorize parts of an equation before they are scribbled out. Most of the time, there's a "pass" or "try again" option, which is very helpful to beginners (but it also lowers your score). Other games have you making change, and reading digital clocks as they rotate.

Up to four players progress can be tracked over time, in graph form. Some of the games can be shared with up to 16 players in one of four modes. The title is designed to be played in small chunks over a long period of time, and each record lasts for a year.

So does Brain Age actually make you smarter? That's up for debate, but it could be argued that it does what any school workbook does, only a lot better. Our testers found this second edition to be a lot like the first, suggesting that you should only get the second edition if you've run out of content in the first and are hungry for new games. But if you've never played Brain Age before, get this program.

Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$20. Ages: 10-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches: math, puzzle solving, memory, logic, patterns, money, clocks. Review date: 7/15/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Brain Quest Grades 3 & 4

4.5 Stars

Fun but challenging, the Nintendo DS versions of Brain Quest -- best known as printed decks of cards -- are effective at making multiple-choice style trivia questions interesting. That's because there's a range of content, with 6,000 questions covering five school subjects: English, history, math, science and geography.

To enter an answer, you sometimes drag-and drop questions so they're in the right order (e.g., state population) or connect dots (matching state capitals with the states). Wrong answers are explained, which increases the educational value of the title. A Quest Mode includes successively more difficult challenges in each category and the multiplayer mode asks players to compete by passing the DS back and forth, to see who can get the highest score.

Up to four players can save a game at once. Correct answers are rewarded with trophies, which are saved in your profile. There's also a game of Sudoku. Our testers found the game fun, although not nearly as fun as most typical DS games. All in all, Brain Quest for the Nintendo DS is a great title to keep on hand for a long car trip. Created by Planet Moon Studios for Workman Publishing and EA.

Details: Electronic Arts, Inc., www.ea.com. Price: \$30. Ages: 8-12. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches: school subjects: English, history, math, science and geography. Review date: 11/12/2008. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Brain Quest Grades 5 & 6

4.5 Stars

Like Brain Quest Grades 3 & 4, the Nintendo DS versions of Brain Quest -- best known as printed decks of cards -- are effective at making multiple-choice style trivia questions interesting. That's because there's a range of content, with 6,000 questions covering five school subjects: English, history, math, science and geography.

To enter an answer, you sometimes drag-and drop questions so they're in the right order (e.g., state population) or connect dots (matching state capitals with the states). For example, one question asks children to arrange the bones of the human skeleton from biggest to smallest, by dragging and dropping names like femur and stirrup bone. Wrong answers are explained, which increases the educational value of this title. A Quest Mode includes successively more difficult challenges in each category and the multiplayer mode asks players to compete by passing the DS back and forth, to see who can get the highest score.

Up to four players can save a game at once. Correct answers are rewarded with trophies, which are saved in your profile. There's also a game of Sudoku. Our testers found the game fun, although not nearly as fun as most typical DS games. All in all, Brain Quest for the Nintendo DS is a great title to keep on hand for a long car trip. Created by Planet Moon Studios for Workman Publishing and EA.

Details: Electronic Arts, Inc., www.ea.com. Price: \$30. Ages: 8-12. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches: school subjects: English, history, math, science and geography. Review date: 11/12/2008. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Brave: The Search for Spirit Dancer

4.5 Stars

Richly illustrated, easy to play and full of fighting, this one-player game kept our testers engaged for hours. Just make sure you have a memory card to save progress, before you invest a few hours in the game, because it will pull you in. The story is based loosely on Native American Folklore and starts with a very simple introduction that quickly gets busy. There's also a good deal of fighting that some players liked, but others found to be extreme. This game earns its E10+ rating, in other words. In the game, you take on the role of Brave, a boy warrior (yes, there's a bit of a boy gets girl theme in the story), on a quest through nine levels to find the Spirit Dancer, the greatest Shaman who ever lived. The girl plays the role of the smart helper.

Along the way, you fight wolves, giant bees and mythical beasts, go fishing, and gather clues needed to get through the next level. Colleen (12) liked the game, finding it "cool, with good graphics. I liked how you can swim and jump, and the gadgets are cool." But she didn't like how you use an ax/bow & arrow to kill wolves and beetles. "There is no blood, but you see the arrow go into them." She also wished there would have been a multiplayer feature and that there wasn't a lot of killing. Also, at times it was hard and sometimes confusing. Nick (11) agreed with Colleen, but thought the fighting made the game better. Both would buy the game.

Developed by Evolved Games for SouthPeak Interactive.

Details: SouthPeak Interactive, www.southpeakgames.com. Price: \$30. Ages: 10-up. Platform: PlayStation 2. Teaches: logic. Review date: 4/11/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Fantasy Violence

Burnout Paradise

4.4 Stars

Expensive but "amazingly fun," Burnout Paradise is an easy-to-play, one- to seven-player racing game with great graphics and "zero-to-none educational value." Even more fun than the driving is the crashing, which children can do in slow motion. In fact, controlled rolls are encouraged in the game, and earn points. You start with a learner's permit and can then progress to a Burnout Elite Driver's License by winning races. You can find shortcuts and smash through barriers to get to places that your competition can't reach. Content includes five events such as the Classic Race, Road Rage and Burning Route. You can also team up with seven friends for online FreeBurn Challenges or go head-to-head in user created race routes. This game is compatible with the Sony DUALSHOCK3 Wireless Controller. Ross (age 11 1/2) called the game "pure genius." We tested the PS3 version. A CTR video review is at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vCD3FMPSJfo>.

Details: Electronic Arts, Inc., www.ea.com. Price: \$60. Ages: 10-up. Platform: PlayStation 3*, Xbox 360. Teaches: some strategy, timing, fine motor coordination, sports, car racing, crashing, driving. Review date: 2/1/2008. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Violence Language

Bust-A-Move Bash

4.4 Stars

Bust-A-Move games abound, but this one takes the concept up a notch, especially as a party game. Bust-A-Move is a popular free online casual game, where you shoot colored balls (called bubbles that "bust") out of a cannon, in order to make matches. The process is easy to do, and addicting. The bubbles stick together, so when three or more are touching, they explode, leaving more room. The goal is to clear the screen in the fastest amount of time.

This is the first eight-player version we've seen (provided you have enough Wii remotes). You move your cannon, simply by tilting the Wii remote left or right, and then pushing the trigger button, making it possible to make very accurate shots. There are four game modes: Puzzle (with 500 levels in five puzzle areas; Endless (test your endurance); Vs. (play against up to seven others for a high score); and Shooting Mode (use both the Wii Remote and Nunchuk controllers to hit bubbles coming from all directions). Other features include a "Hyper" option that speeds up gameplay; a "Slip" option--great for younger children or beginners--that lets you connect your fired bubbles to similar colors, even if your aim is off; and a Gallery Mode that lets players access in-game artwork. This game is worth buying, especially if you have enough remotes to go around. There is no worrisome content. Details: Majesco Entertainment, www.majescoentertainment.com. Price: \$40. Ages: 6-up. Platform: Wii. Teaches: logic, classification. Review date: 5/1/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Cake Mania

4.4 Stars

Addicting and fast-paced, this Nintendo DS game has you racing to keep up with a steady flow of customers who walk into your bakery, each with a specific demand. To take an order, you tap a waiting customer with the stylus. They might ask for a specific type of cake; say one that is star shaped, with red icing. To take the order you must tap on the correct shape icon on the oven (matching) and then find another job to do while the cake bakes. In the meantime, another customer might come in, and start waiting. So you take that order, but your first cake is done, so you move it to the icing machine where you select the correct color of icing. Getting through the first level takes a good degree of practice, concentration and timing. Happy customers leave their money on the counter, while mad ones walk out the door. After a few levels, you have enough money to upgrade your kitchen with some state-of-the-art baking tools. Content includes the original online Cake Mania; a total of 84 fast-paced levels, each with a specific Baker's Goal. We (DC) found this game to be very addicting, helped by features such as changing seasons and seasonal cake options. Winning a level takes organization and planning. Even though you can play online, it is a good investment to take with you anywhere. Developed by Digital Embryo for Majesco Entertainment and based on the online game from Sandlot Games. Details: Majesco Entertainment, www.majescoentertainment.com. Price: \$20. Ages: 8-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches: auditory discrimination, problem solving, patterns, planning, organizing activities. Review date: 4/11/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Carnival Games

4.3 Stars

Step right up, folks, for a test of skill and strength, on your own TV screen. One to four players take turns with the Wii's motion detection controller system to simulate 25 famous carnival games like the Balloon Darts, Alley Ball and the Dunk Tank. The result is a fun, social after dinner game for all members of the family. For example, in Test Your Strength, players twirl the Wii controller in the air to gain momentum, and then fling it toward the ground to simulate hitting the target with a hammer. This is one of those games where you provide a good space around other players in order to avoid getting whacked. Note that some of the games are better than others, but it is always possible to leave a game and jump to another. In addition, some of the initial menus are a bit tricky, so younger players will need help the first few plays. The prizes consist of 250 virtual items such as animated disco aliens and giant stuffed animals. In addition, players can customize their in-game characters with zany clothing items. All in all, this is a fun collection of party games with something for everyone. While the overall quality isn't as good as Mario Party, the carnival theme works very well. The game was designed for the Nintendo Wii. Developed by Cat Daddy Games for Global Star Software. Visit <http://www.globalstarsoftware.com/carnivalgames/> for more information. See also the DS version. Details: Global Star Software, www.globalstarsoftware.com. Price: \$40. Ages: 5-up. Platform: Wii. Teaches: timing, logical thinking, movement (fine and gross motor). Review date: 7/16/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars

4.4 Stars

Our testers liked this real-time strategy game set in the year 2047. The game is about a fictional struggle between the allied nations of the Global Defense Initiative (GDI) and The Brotherhood of Nod. Both of these factions are fighting over Tiberium, a green crystal of alien origin that is both the ultimate resource and the worst environmental disaster in history. Whoever controls Tiberium decides the fate of humanity and the Earth. Players play as a battlefield commander whose goal is to defeat opposing armies and destroy their bases. There are three different factions a player can control in a battle: the GDI: The Brotherhood of Nod: or the alien, Scrin. Players must construct their own base of operations, train their combat units, and use strategy to deploy them against their opponents. The game features over 35 single-player missions, a skirmish mode for playing against the computer, and an online multiplayer option. Mike (14) played the game and liked how realistic it was. For example, if you run over a tree with a tank, the tree falls down. The armies are made up of squads, so you could make larger armies if you like. Mike didn't like how the game could be either too easy or too hard, noting that in the beginning, it was too hard. But he would definitely buy it. Details: Electronic Arts, Inc., www.ea.com. Price: \$60. Ages: 13-up. Platform: Xbox 360, Windows XP. Teaches: strategy, logic. Review date: 5/14/2007. ESRB Rating: Teen, Animated Blood, Mild Language, Violence

Crosswords DS

4.5 Stars

When should Grandma get a Nintendo DS? When it means she can play an endless supply of crossword puzzles, that's when. Crosswords DS (\$20, www.nintendoDS.com) puts 900 crossword puzzles, anagrams and word search puzzles at the tip of your stylus. You start by turning the DS on its side, in book-fashion, and select whether you're left- or right-handed. If you're a lefty, you flip the Nintendo DS upside down.

Next, you create a profile where you can save puzzles in progress. Because you can make up to four profiles, this game can be shared by children or adults alike, and used as a means to playfully introduce spelling and vocabulary skills. The fine motor feature -- scribbling your initials in a box -- is also nice, especially if you plan on passing this game around the mini-van on a long trip. The handwriting recognition feature gives the puzzles an organic feel that appeals to the traditionalist. To enter a letter, you write it in a screen-sized box. Once the DS recognizes the letter, the box is filled in on the puzzle, located on the other screen. Erase your mistakes by tapping on the screen or writing your new answer over the old one, plus there's a hint system. Harder puzzles must be unlocked; a process we did not try. The game was developed by Nuevo Retro Games for Nintendo.

Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$20. Ages: 8-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches: vocabulary, reading, spelling, handwriting (fine motor skills), language. Review date: 5/2/2008. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Custom Robo Arena

4.3 Stars

Easy to play and addicting, this is a fast-paced fighting game featuring robots. Each maze-like arena contains different places to hide, adding a fun twist to the game. Children use the Nintendo DS controls to jump, shoot or launch bombs against a computer controlled opponent. You can also choose to challenge another player in a one-on-one battle using the local wireless Wi-Fi connection, without needing to own the game. Our tester, aged 18, found the controls to be easy to learn, and liked the many ways you can customize your robot. He did not see any worrisome content, besides the obvious fighting theme. All in all, this is a fun fighting game, either with another DS owner or by yourself.

Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$35. Ages: 8-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches: logic, strategy. Review date: 3/19/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Fantasy Violence

Dance Dance Revolution Hottest Party

4.4 Stars

Combining the Wii Remote and Nunchuk with traditional Dance Dance Revolution (DDR) dancing, Konami's Fall 2007 addition to the growing DDR series incorporates arm movements, by way of the Wii controls, along with 50 songs going back to the 70's. So now, you can coordinate your arms (moving them up, down, left or right) along with your feet on the dance pad. A four-player split screen mode lets you add additional dance pads, for synchronous dancing contests. Other features include a Kid Mode, where the action is slowed considerably, and a battle mode where you can send obstacles to your opponent.

Songs include 1 - 2 Step, Clocks, Caught Up, Hot Stuff, Blue Monday, Too Little Too Late, Lips of an Angel and 99 Red Balloons. A Kid Support mode makes the series more accessible to children. (See also Boogie.) The kit includes the disk and one dance pad. For additional players, you must supply the pads and Wii controllers. If you liked DDR in the past, there's no reason you won't like this title, especially with the added upper body movement features.

Details: Konami Digital Entertainment, Inc., www.konami.com. Price: \$70. Ages: 7-up. Platform: Wii. Teaches: music, dancing, bodily kinesthetic movement. Review date: 7/23/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Mild Lyrics

Dance Dance Revolution Ultramix 3

4.5 Stars

With a design similar to the first two Dance Dance Revolution (DDR) titles, this third dancing release contains 70 new songs across multiple genres of music. Most of the new features involve online play, which is not required to enjoy this active game. A dance pad is required, however. The music is varied, and comes from bands such as the Black Eyed Peas, Blackalicious, NOFX, and Moby. Other songs include "Crazy In Love" and "Play That Funky Music". This is the first DDR version to contain music videos that play in the background during the dancing. Another first for the series -- the ability to download up to 60 songs via Xbox Live. The cost is \$5 for 5 songs. This is a fun, engaging way to improve lower body coordination.

Details: Konami Digital Entertainment, Inc., www.konami.com. Price: \$65 with pad, \$40 without. Ages: 8-up. Platform: PlayStation 2, Xbox. Teaches: Physical Education, gross motor, rhythm, coordination, dancing. Review date: 11/2/2005. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Suggestive Themes

Dance Dance Revolution Universe

4.3 Stars

This DDR (Dance Dance Revolution) kit (sold with a dance pad for \$80 or without for \$50) is designed for the Xbox 360. The dance pad plugs into the USB port of the Xbox 360; no other controller is needed.

If you like DDR, you'll find a challenge along with some new modes of play in this package—not to mention the 65 fast-moving songs that represent a variety of genres. The word "universal" in the title is supposed to mean this game is for everyone; a goal it only partially fulfills. Our testers found the screens to be cluttered (sometimes making it hard to see the arrows), and it is easy for very early beginners to feel rejected, when "failing a stage." Also, one of the levels features a wriggling female form that will—let's just say—distract male dancers from the arrows. Another minor quirk: what's the different between "basic" and "beginner" in the level menu?

That said, if you're looking for a DDR option for the 360, this is a good choice—due in part because it uses a tried and true DDR format and has some new modes of play, such as a relay mode, where dancers take on a marathon race. There are also modes called Edit, Quest and Party—11 in all. The Xbox Live option lets you post scores online or download (for a cost) additional songs that can be saved on your Xbox's hard drive.

Details: Konami Digital Entertainment, Inc., www.konami.com. Price: \$50/\$80. Ages: 10-up. Platform: Xbox 360. Teaches: movement, rhythm, lower-body coordination, PE, music. Review date: 8/28/2006. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Suggestive Themes
Lyrics

Dewy's Adventure

4.4 Stars

Grab the Wii controller like handlebars and hang on in this creative, beautifully illustrated storybook game for one player (some of the mini-games can be played by four players). You control Dewy, a drop of water, tilting the landscape to roll him through a series of exotic levels. There are many additional controls to discover. If you shake the controller, you can cause an earthquake, and holding the 1 button causes Dewy to jump. As they play, children are exposed to a good deal of reading (optional for the game play), and plenty of problem solving. Younger children can become frustrated, especially in the harder levels.

In the story, Evil has descended upon the peaceful forest and it's up to you to save the forest creatures. There are some creative features -- you can turn Dewy to steam by increasing the heat, or cool things down to turn him into ice. Games are saved automatically to one of three game save slots, and there are two modes of play. In the "Goody" menu, you can create your own stage. Our testers noted that the controls can be frustrating at times, but once they got used to it, they found this game really grew on them. One 13-year-old tester called the story "corny". There's an underlying ecological feel to the game, as you fight against the "black water" that pollutes things. This is an innovative, fun game with plenty to do and discover. Borrow it or buy it. Details: Konami Digital Entertainment, Inc., www.konami.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 7-up. Platform: Wii. Teaches: logic, problem solving, creativity, reading. Review date: 7/26/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone, Mild Cartoon Violence

Diddy Kong Racing DS

4.6 Stars

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

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

Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$35. Ages: 6-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches: racing, spatial reasoning, problem solving, classifying, planning, fine motor. Review date: 2/8/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone, Mild Cartoon Violence

Disney Princess: Enchanted Journey

4.7 Stars

Finally... a well-designed, family-friendly game where children build things -- rather than break them -- to earn points. Even if you dislike Disney princess characters and all the typical stereotypes that accompany them, you'll have a problem not liking this title, that combines the worlds of Cinderella, The Little Mermaid, Snow White, and Jasmine into one game.

Children start by creating their own princess, by combining dresses, accessories, hair, skin tone and eye color. Next, using their own avatar, they can help restore a giant castle of princesses, that has fallen into disarray by an evil spell. It's up to you to visit each Princess world, and play through three levels (there are 12 total) in order to make things right. There are several innovative twists to this game that are worth noting. First, you can play any level you want, in any order. So if you're up to a challenge, you can visit the land of Snow White, whereas Ariel's "The Little Mermaid" world is easier. Secondly, as you explore, you earn points by helping plants grow, or resorting flower arrangements by using a magic wand. While the wand shoots things, it never hurts or destroys. So you get the fun of controlling a powerful spell, minus the violent underpinnings. Also, it is possible for a second player to join in at any time, and take control of one of the princess characters. This drop in, drop out technique creates a good cooperative learning setting. (Wii and PS2 versions, only). The game also features mini-games, and an unlockable bonus world featuring Belle and Lumiere. Developed by Papaya Studio for Disney, the Wii version is \$40 and the PS2 and PC versions are \$30. The Wii and PS2 versions are highly recommended.

Details: Disney Interactive Studios, www.disney.com. Price: \$30 (\$40 for Wii). Ages: 4-8. Platform: Wii*, PlayStation 2, Windows, Nintendo DS. Teaches: logic, classification, socialization. Review date: 11/9/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone, Mild Cartoon Violence

DK Jungle Climber

4.5 Stars

If you've ever wanted to climb like a monkey, here's your chance. Using the same innovative control scheme used in the older GBA version of this game, you use the L and R trigger keys to swing--or rock--your monkey through the jungle mazes, collecting bananas and fighting the bad guys. You can challenge up to three friends in multiplayer games using DS download play (meaning they don't need to own the game). In the story, DK (Donkey Kong) and friends are enjoying their vacation on a tropical island when the evil King K. Rool's ruins their fun. He is planning to steal the Crystal Bananas from a visiting alien and use them to take over the universe.

The game features simple controls to make it easy for players of all levels to play. You use three buttons: pressing L controls DK's left hand, R his right hand, and pressing A or B makes DK do a jumping attack. Players can team up with Diddy Kong or Cranky Kong for quick tips and advice. The mini-games including a jumping game, a juggling game, and a climbing race. There is no worrisome content. Created by Paon for Nintendo. Note that this review applies to the Nintendo DS version only.

Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$35. Ages: 6-up. Platform: Nintendo DS*, Wii. Teaches: logic, spatial relations. Review date: 8/30/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone, Comic Mischievous

Dogz (DS)

4.4 Stars

More like Pokémon (with cute puppies and no violence) than previous versions of Petz, the DS version of Dogz is very different than the Windows version, so don't be confused by the similar title. This is a one-player, real-time simulation where you train and raise your own pet.

You start by customizing a virtual boy or girl (with a name and type of dress) and then explore a virtual house and pet store where you choose and name a puppy. There are 18 realistic breeds to choose from, although the puppies look a lot like the kittens in the Catz program. There's a lot of reading, which is both a strength and weakness of this program. Because the idea of adopting and training a puppy is so compelling to children, this would make an excellent early reading experience for first or second graders. Next, you learn how to train your pup with voice commands (say the name into the microphone) and where to feed him (in the kitchen). The game operates in real time, with a clock and calendar on every screen. For example, at 3PM, you can take your dog for a walk. In addition, there are several innovative features to this game to note. By speaking into the microphone, you can teach your dog its name, and at any time you can find out how happy and healthy your puppy is. Before bedtime, you can write in your journal using the touch pad.

Our testers liked the ability to customize the house, as well as the pet shows with the mini-games that include an obstacle course, a game of puppy concentration and a sliding square puzzle. It is possible to trade items with other DS owners who have the game, or play one of the two mini-games in two-player mode, without owning a second copy of the game. Unlike Nintendogs, you can't have your puppy visit with others, and your puppies can't grow up to have their own puppies. Testers rated the DS versions of both Dogz and Catz much higher than the PC version. Also note that this game format is very different than the DS version of Horsez (see the review).

Details: Ubisoft, Inc., www.ubisoft.com. Price: \$30. Ages: 3-up. Platform: Windows XP, Nintendo DS. Teaches: economics (money), logical thinking, planning, budgets. Review date: 1/5/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Donkey Kong Barrel Blast

4.6 Stars

Take control of popular Nintendo characters, like Donkey Kong, as you race down courses on pairs of barrel rockets. By alternately shaking the Wii Controller and Nunchuk, you can accelerate through the course as you try to avoid moving obstacles while you collect bananas.

Moving forward has a bit of a learning curve (preschoolers can get frustrated), requiring some gross motor coordination -- not unlike rowing a canoe. There's a lot of jumping and timing involved in this fast-paced game that is a lot of fun. You can slow down other racers with attacks and power boosts, in the tradition of Mario Kart. The general gameplay feels a lot like Mario Kart, with one-to-four player competition. The game is a bit slower and less complex than Mario Kart, but it's still lots of fun thanks to the innovative control scheme. This would be a fun family game. Buy it.

Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 6-up. Platform: Wii. Teaches: rhythm, racing, timing, gross motor coordination. Review date: 10/10/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone, Mild Cartoon Violence
Suggestive Themes

Dora the Explorer: Dora Saves the Mermaids

4.4 Stars

This collection of 19 mini-games is a great starter title for preschool-and Kindergarten-age children, but is not quite as good as its brother title -- Go, Diego, Go! Safari Rescue.

You start by choosing one of four save slots to play, and then decide to play in either story mode, or simply play any game. The games are fun and easy, lasting from 10 seconds to two minutes. Players use the stylus to drag trash to a trash can to clean up the beach, or tap as fast as they can on the screen in order to free a trapped mermaid, or to help Dora do the Conga. The microphone games ask children to either repeat a word to remove garbage, or blow sand from piles to find a hidden crown.

The background music and constantly repeating instruction can be overbearing, at least to nearby adults, and there is no option for adjusting sound. But these are minor issues because the games are generally responsive and easy to figure out. Progress is saved automatically. For a solid early childhood title that covers a variety of skills, from timing, classification, spatial relations, spoken language and Spanish, this is a good choice. Created by Black Lantern Studios for 2K Play. See also Dora Saves the Mermaids for the PS2, with similar content but no touch screen features.

Details: 2K Play, www.take2games.com. Price: \$30. Ages: 3-6. Platform: Nintendo DS* PlayStation 2. Teaches: some Spanish (counting from 1 -10), timing, classification. Review date: 10/12/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Dora the Explorer: Dora Saves the Snow Princess

4.6 Stars

Looking for a well-designed first game experience for a preschooler? This is an excellent choice.

In Dora the Explorer: Dora Saves the Snow Princess, players join Dora, Boots and Pirate Piggy as they help the Snow Fairy save the Snow Princess and the Magical Snowy Forest while defeating the Mean Witch. The game features 12 minigames that can be unlocked; all are easy to play and master. In the console edition, adults can pick up the second controller to help, or just play along, creating an excellent social opportunity. In the Wii version, players hold the Wii Remote like a pair of handlebars, leaning left or right to move through the side-scrolling levels. Along the way, they climb, dig, build snowmen, paddle a canoe, steer a dogsled and ride a Pegasus using various motions. You can also ice skate, snowboard and ski while trying to find the magic crystal. In the DS version, you can shout into the microphone to make the sea snake go away, blow into it to help the Snow Fairy fly across the moat, tap with the stylus to steer Paj's dogsled, and use the stylus to drag ice blocks to light up the ice cave.

Both the Wii version and the PS2 version are well-designed, although the game play is very different. Testers found the DS version to be more limited in content, resulting in a slightly lower rating (4.5 stars), compared to the Wii and PS2 versions (4.6 stars). Prices are \$40 for the Wii version, \$30 for the Nintendo DS, and \$20 for the PS2.

Details: 2K Play, www.take2games.com. Price: \$40. Ages: 3-6. Platform: Wii*, PlayStation 2*, Nintendo DS. Teaches: language (English/Spanish), fine motor skills, logic, classification. Review date: 9/8/2008. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Drawn to Life

4.4 Stars

Like Orly's Draw a Story (1998), this innovative single-player adventure for the Nintendo DS lets you create the hero by drawing him (or her) in this game. The navigation is comparable to Pokémon--you move around a village aided by a map and reading--but instead of the fighting, you draw elements of the story, such as trees, flowers, and so on. A good deal of reading printed dialog is required (such as children try to save a village from an evil force that is covering it in darkness). Content includes three hero characters that you can draw, 15 vehicles (such as a sled, rocket or submarine) and tools (such as wings, weapons and scuba gear). The game itself has four worlds and 16 levels with 50 stages, promising about 15 hours play. Progress can be saved. Note that the interface in the pre-release copy we played was a bit clunky; at one point we became stuck and couldn't get back to the main menu. Our testers didn't seem to mind, especially liking the drawing parts of the story. Developed by 5th Cell for THQ, Inc. See also Drawn to Life SpongeBob Editing.

Details: THQ, Inc., www.thq.com. Price: \$30. Ages: 8-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches: creativity, logic. Review date: 9/7/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Electroplankton

4.8 Stars

Better described as musical scribbling than a game, Electroplankton is a completely different kind of musical "sandbox" for the Nintendo DS. This is actually the second title by Toshio Iwata, Electroplankton's author. The first, SimTunes (Maxis, 1996), ran on Windows, and let you program tiny moving bugs; each with a musical attribute, on a football-field like grid. At the time, the program was recognized in the new media community as completely different, but it didn't sell. Now, a decade later, Iwata has returned with ten times more content, running on the Nintendo DS, a platform that seems made for this type of activity, especially when you plug it into your surround sound stereo system. If you're looking for a game, you may be left wondering "what's the point?"

The point is that you can create visual and musical effects; and the process can be fun and relaxing. It's like stepping inside a painting, with sounds and dynamic art. Some of the activities sample your voice, and incorporate it into a rap-like song. Tiny critters sing, expand, mimic your speech, or explode into colors. You can start plates spinning, and as they spin, they create rings of color. The quality of the sounds and graphics are great; but it helps to plug your DS into an external speaker system.

Our testers ages and opinions ranged considerably. Our preschool-age testers delighted in hearing their own voices; a great informal early language activity. Jon (18 years), said, "Electroplankton is a work of art that should be recognized by anyone who likes to create music. The sounds you hear in this game are like nothing you've ever heard in a video game. It is easy to get addicted to this game. The game is simple and can be played by any one who can poke little things with a stick."

Drawbacks are few; it would be nice to be able to save works of art on the cartridge, which is not possible. Hats off to Iwata and Nintendo for having the courage to publish something completely different.

Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$35. Ages: 3-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches: music, creating melodies, art, creativity, drawing, publishing, listening to one's own language, making recordings. Review date: 6/9/2005. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Endless Ocean

4.6 Stars

More of an experience than a game, Endless Ocean is a one-player scavenger hunt that lets you move freely around a 3D undersea world. To "swim," you point the Wii Remote in the direction you want to go while holding the B (trigger) button. This two-things-at-once type of control system takes some getting used to, but all our testers were able to figure it out. As you move, you might come upon a fish or item that you want to learn about. By clicking on it and shaking the controller an information card comes up with facts, and the critter is added to your collection. There's also some gold bullion and ancient artifacts -- just to keep things interesting. The goal is to collect as many interesting creatures or items as you can. Different regions of the fictional ocean contain coral reefs, shipwrecks, WWII bombers or caves. Because there are no time limits, you can explore at your own pace.

If your Wii is online, you can swim with another player on the same screen, providing they also own the game and you've exchanged "friend codes" in advance. Content includes 50 treasures and 230 living creatures. While you can freely explore, a set of missions can be completed to earn money. For example, you might be asked to lead a diving tour, or take photos of special animals for a travel magazine. As you dive, you can listen to your own music as long as they're MP3 files loaded on an SD card.

Our testers fought over this game -- they all couldn't wait to play it, and didn't want to stop once they started. Daniel (age 8) played this game for three days (over a weekend) and then couldn't wait to get his homework done (during the week) to play some more. He loved the soothing music and the sound effects of the underwater breathing. He was able to train a dolphin and identify fish on his own. The more he played, the more marine life he encountered including a hammerhead shark, octopus, groupers and stingrays. At one point, he found a cave where he saw penguins. He was also able to unlock a camera to take pictures for his photo album and an underwater pen that he wasn't sure what to do with, but had fun scribbling underwater. His parents loved how much he learned from this program, with no "shooting, crashing, and the usual things little boys like." He would definitely buy this game. Developed for Nintendo by Arika.

Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$30. Ages: 6-up. Platform: Wii. Teaches: science, oceanography, sea life, animals, biology. Review date: 1/22/2008. ESRB Rating: Everyone

FIFA Street 3

4.4 Stars

Even if you don't like typical sports games (or soccer, for that matter), you can enjoy this easy-to-play soccer simulation. Note that we tested the PS3 version, and features may vary by platform.

Content includes 250 celebrity soccer players representing 18 international teams. You can choose from Tricksters, Enforcers, Playmakers and Finishers, each giving you different skill sets and options on the ball. Unlike most soccer simulations, the players are shown in detail and are easy to control. When you fill your "momentum meter", you can use new tricks, including leaping past defenders and flipping over teammates -- a process that quickly grew on our testers, who liked this game.

Features include tournaments that can be unlocked, both in online and offline play. You can also play head-to-head in a "best of" series against a friend or play offline with one to four players for Xbox 360 (or one to seven players on the PS3). A version is also available for the Nintendo DS for \$30 that we did not test. This is a great family game, with no worrisome content.

Details: EA Sports - Electronic Arts Canada, www.eagames.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 8-up. Platform: PlayStation 3*, Xbox 360, Nintendo DS. Teaches: sports, soccer. Review date: 2/14/2008. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Final Fantasy VI Advance

4.4 Stars

This is a turn-based role playing game (RPG) for Game Boy Advance that builds on the respected Final Fantasy game franchise. Our testers, older teens who were familiar with previous Final Fantasy games, were very excited about this game—calling it "one of the best Final Fantasies ever."

In the game, your job is to steer a band of heroes through a fantasy kingdom on a quest to free the world from the Empire's grasp. The game play consists of exploration and battle. In the exploration phase, players wander through towns or dungeons, sail through the sky, or travel across the "overworld"—speaking using text bubbles, with the people they meet to gain clues. In certain locations, you might fall into a turn-based battles where you must equip yourself with armor, relics and magic. Content includes 14 characters, each with special abilities. So there's a lot of detail in the story, with plenty of trading and strategy required to win. Games can be saved on the cartridge. Developed by Square Enix for Nintendo.

Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$35. Ages: 10-up. Platform: Game Boy Advance. Teaches: logic, strategy, reading. Review date: 2/9/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Fantasy Violence, Suggestive Themes

Go, Diego, Go!: Great Dinosaur Rescue (Console Version)

4.7 Stars

Failure simply isn't an option, with Go, Diego, Go!: Great Dinosaur Rescue; the second Diego title for the Wii and PS2, with another version for the DS (see the review). Designed either for independent play, or for a parent and a child to play together, the fast-paced side-scroller game design makes it easy for young child to feel in control of the action.

The Wii version lets you hold the controller like a pair of handlebars, leaning left or right to move or scroll through menus. Along the way, you move the controller to dig a hole, shake a stump, stomp like a dinosaur, climb up a vine, fly on a Pteradon or bounce over obstacles on a pogo stick. The graphics are grainy at various points in the Wii version.

A helper mode makes it possible for a nearby adult to pick up a controller and join in to play along, a feature that promotes socialization. If you're looking for a starter game for a preschooler, this is an excellent choice. Just make sure you're around to help your child get started. The DS version isn't nearly as well designed as the PS2 and Wii versions. Prices are \$40 for the Wii version, \$30 for the Nintendo DS, and \$20 for the PS2. See also Dora Saves the Snow Princess (for Wii, PS2 and DS) with a very similar design.

Details: 2K Play, www.take2games.com. Price: \$40. Ages: 3-6. Platform: Wii*, PlayStation 2*, Nintendo DS. Teaches: language (Spanish, English), dinosaur facts.. Review date: 9/8/2008. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Gran Turismo 5 Prologue

4.4 Stars

If you're looking for a realistic racing program with graphics so clear that you can see the bugs on the windshield, keep reading. Grand Turismo 5, or GT5 is one of the few games designed to run at 1920 by 1080 pixels. If you have a screen that can support this resolution, you can see very fine details such as the individual faces of fans. Note that it helps to have a steering wheel peripheral as well as a good sound system. As a racing game, there are few surprises, with unlockable cars, tracks and a tournament mode. Testers noted that once the race starts, things can get a bit boring because the tracks are so flat and realistic. If you're limited to Sony hardware and love racing sims, this should be a strong consideration.

Details: Sony Computer Entertainment America Inc., www.us.playstation.com. Price: \$30. Ages: 10-up. Platform: PlayStation 3, PSP. Teaches: sports, racing. Review date: 5/24/2006.

Green Eggs and Ham

4.6 Stars

If you have a newer Macintosh and a child, here's some good news. First released in 1986, this Living Book has been updated and enhanced, so that today's children can freely play with the graphics and language in this classic Dr. Seuss's book, just like their big brothers or sisters did back in the good old days. Content includes 19 interactive pages, with some reading games mixed into the clickable routines. Features include Let Me Play Mode (any click leads to a related sound or animation), Read To Me Mode (children can sit back and watch the book read aloud), as well as some games such as Make A Word with a Fox In A Box (where children can make their own three-word rhyme, and the characters will act it out). You can also export the music and animation to iTunes. Too bad we can't have a Windows version!

Details: Software MacKiev, www.mackiev.com. Price: \$25. Ages: 3-8. Platform: Mac OSX. Teaches: reading, word recognition, vocabulary, comprehension. Review date: 4/10/2007.

Guitar Hero Encore: Rocks the 80s

4.6 Stars

The same format with new content, this edition of Guitar Hero features rock characters dressed in outfits from the 80s, who play at concert venues that grow in size as your rock career progresses. You "play" the guitar by matching a stream of color coded notes with one of five color-coded buttons on a guitar controller (not included) fretboard, starting your gig in the corner bar and working yourself up to a stadium.

All the music comes from the 1980s, from New Wave to Rock to Heavy Metal, leaving our testers with mixed feelings toward the choices available. Only those teens who were familiar with the songs liked this edition, whereas the adults who also played with them (college coeds during 80s) loved it. The (25 recordings) song list includes titles such as *Caught in a Mosh* by Anthrax; *Electric Eye* by Judas Priest; *Hold On Loosely* by .38 Special; *Turning Japanese* by the Vapors; *What I Like About You* by the Romantics; *Carry On My Wayward Son* by Kansas, *We've Got The Beat* by The GoGo's and *Sweet Child o' Mine* by Guns N' Roses. Whatever your taste in music, this is a fun game.

It is designed for one or two players—with one player on lead guitar and the other on bass or rhythm guitar. You can also compete in one of the multiplayer modes. In addition, there is a practice mode where you can play any part of song or slow it down to master it. Developed by Harmonix for RedOctane. Note that a Guitar Hero SG Controller is required, and this version of Guitar Hero only works for PlayStation 2.

Details: RedOctane, www.redoctane.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 10-up. Platform: PlayStation 2. Teaches: music, rock trivia. Review date: 6/14/2007. ESRB Rating: Teen, Lyrics

Guitar Hero II (PS2)

4.6 Stars

If you've ever seen Dance Dance Revolution — where arrows rain down the screen and your feet try to keep up on a dance mat — you get the idea of this addicting game. Just substitute a toy guitar, with five colored buttons on the fret board, for the dance pad.

Now let's get one thing straight up front. You won't learn to play guitar with this program. While the program is excellent for hand-eye coordination and learning melodies of famous rock songs, that's about it. New Multiplayer Mode lets players form their own rock band by playing the same song, while playing two different guitar tracks simultaneously. In Pro Face-Off, players can battle head-to-head with both players playing lead guitar tracks. The Classic Face-Off Mode allows players to compete against each other while trading off sections of the lead guitar track. Note that you'll need a second guitar controller in order to use the two-player mode.

Content includes 55 new songs from Van Halen, Guns N' Roses, Avenged Sevenfold, Motley Crue and Nirvana. Our testers liked both versions, but noted that the background graphics are more detailed in this edition. The Teen rating is due to lyrics. We've had testers as young as seven years old playing the Guitar Hero I version. Developed by Harmonix for RedOctane.

Details: RedOctane, www.redoctane.com. Price: \$80. Ages: 10-up. Platform: PlayStation 2. Teaches: hand-eye coordination, rhythm, music. Review date: 11/21/2006. ESRB Rating: Teen

Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock

4.6 Stars

If you liked past versions of Guitar Hero and want more songs and harder challenges, Guitar Hero III is a good choice. Note that not all Guitar Hero peripherals are compatible with every platform, so make sure you call first if you plan on using your existing controller.

The game follows the format of all other Guitar Hero games, using a "follow the moving notes" technique developed by Harmonix (who was not involved in the creation of this game). If you don't like hard rock music, you won't like this title. This game will not teach you how to play guitar, but it will help you better understand the structure of classic rock songs. Think of it as paint by number rock songs.

This \$100 package includes a wireless controller, modeled after the Gibson Les Paul guitar that comes with a detachable neck for easier transport to a friend's house. Game features include a multiplayer battle mode, grueling boss battles, and exclusive unlockable content. The tracks include songs from Aerosmith, Guns 'N' Roses, Sex Pistols, Rolling Stones, Pearl Jam, and Metallica, as well as original music composed by guitarists Slash and Tom Morello. There are both career modes and head-to-head competitions, including an online option. Other features include detachable necks on the guitars for easier portability and storage.

The Wii guitar incorporates the Wii Remote (you snap it into place) to give it a rumble feature. If you're looking for an excellent version of Guitar Hero, we recommend this title. The PS3 and Xbox 360 were developed by Neversoft for RedOctane; the Wii version is \$90, by Vicarious Visions; the PS2 version is also \$90 and was developed by Budcat. Note that RedOctane was purchased by Activision. Note that a Macintosh and PC version is available through Aspyr (<http://www.aspyr.com/>).

Details: RedOctane/Activision, www.redoctane.com. Price: \$100. Ages: 10-up. Platform: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, Wii, PlayStation 2, Windows, Mac OSX. Teaches: hand-eye coordination, rhythm, music. Review date: 7/16/2007. ESRB Rating: Teen, Suggestive Themes, Lyrics

Guitar Hero World Tour

4.4 Stars

Good news for rock rock star pretenders. Now there are two music kit options available -- this one (GHWT) and Rock Band 2 (RB2)-- for just under \$200. It includes one guitar, a drum set and a microphone; so if you want to add a second guitar or bass, you'll need to spend more.

How does GHWT compare with Rock Band 2? The similarities outweigh the differences. The process of matching a stream of moving notes with colored keys is the same. Our testers liked both, although they found Rock Band 2 to be easier to play. They also managed to break both kits in less than two weeks. Rock Band 2 suffered from a sticky drum pad, and one of the keys on the new GHWT wireless guitar controllers stayed in the down position. To be fair, both kits were used daily by a variety of players. Still, this is not the best news for schools or libraries planning to test the rock band waters.

The GHWT kit is backward-compatible with existing guitars, and the new guitar controllers come with extra features, including an accelerometer, two sets of buttons and a touch-sensitive slider bar. Testers noted that the drum kit has five pads, but they found the additional color hard to get used to. This drum set seems well constructed, with velocity sensitive heads and two raised cymbals. Because the instruments are wireless, they are easy to set up, move, break down and store.

Other features include the ability to compose and share tunes through the GHTunes network. The Xbox 360 and PS3 versions can be used with the more professional Line 6 POD instruments. Content includes 85 tracks of diverse music that ranges greatly in difficulty, including Van Halen, Linkin Park, The Eagles and Sublime. Additional tracks can be downloaded at a cost. Additional online content includes a "Battle of the Bands" mode, where eight players can join online and challenge each other band-to-band. Virtual musicians in need of band mates can take their careers online to form virtual bands. GHWT also features more customization options for your rock star and his or her stage props. All in all, this is a well-designed kit that raises the bar for play-along sims. See also Rock Band 2.

Details: RedOctane/Activision, www.redoctane.com. Price: \$190/bundle. Ages: 10-up. Platform: Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, Wii, PlayStation 2. Teaches: music, timing, coordination. Review date: 7/16/2008. ESRB Rating: Teen, Suggestive Themes
Lyrics

Guitar Hero: On Tour (DS)

4.5 Stars

Our testers -- fans of Guitar Hero -- loved this portable edition of Guitar Hero, although it made their hand sore, making one mom worry about Carpal Tunnel Syndrome. One tester with large hands (a high school junior) had to stop playing after just one game because his hand cramped up.

You start by inserting the Guitar Hero Guitar Grip into your Nintendo DS game port (the large one, for Game Boy Advance cartridges). Like the Guitar Hero guitar peripherals, the grip has four color-coded buttons. Once the game is started, you turn the DS on it's side (long-wise) and strum on the touch screen. Next, you select a musical style and a challenge level, or you can choose to challenge others using the wireless play -- the other players must also own a copy of the game.

The music selection is more diverse than most Guitar Hero games, with classic rock, alternative and pop favorites -- such as Nirvana, OK Go and No Doubt, and headphones make things sound much better. The kit includes a custom pick/stylus. A co-op mode using a local wireless network for Guitar Duel using new Battle Items is unique to the DS platform. For example, players must blow into the microphone to extinguish a pyrotechnics effect gone wrong, or use the touch screen to autograph a crazed fan's shirt in the middle of their set.

Content includes five unlockable levels. You can personalize the guitar, or select to play as one of six characters with different outfits. Created for Vicarious Visions for Activision/Red Octane. If you like the Guitar Hero concept, you won't be disappointed by the portable version of the game. Otherwise, it is a bit of a one-trick pony.

Details: RedOctane/Activision, www.redoctane.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 11-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches: fine motor coordination, rock music. Review date: 3/20/2008. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Lyrics

Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix (PS3, Xbox 360 and PC)

4.4 Stars

Fun, beautiful, but pricey, this one-player adventure for "next gen" consoles was rated highly by our testers; and scored better than the Wii version because the spells are easier to cast. The Windows version looks and plays the same, as long as you have a proper controller. Otherwise you're stuck trying to use the keyboard, which makes things complicated. The Wii uses the Wii Remote to cast spells; which is harder to learn than in previous Harry Potter games. For those seeking a good *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* experience, stick with traditional game console.

The story follows the movie, involving plenty of exploring through the exotic halls of Hogwarts, talking with other characters to pick up clues, and spell casting. There's no worrisome content--despite the E10+ rating (no surprises)--although the realism of the graphics could make this game frightening to a little brother or sister who happens to be in the room. That's due to the ghosts, monsters and evil spirits that frequent just about every corner of this game.

Problem solving is in the form of games of Exploding Snap, Gobstones and Wizard Chess, which can be played against computer-controlled renditions of characters from the movie. They can fly Fred and George out of Hogwarts, play as Sirius Black to protect Harry, or play as Dumbledore in his final confrontation with Voldemort. The bottom line? This is a solid adventure game that is true to the book and the movie that won't disappoint. Note that there is a limited amount of content, which an experienced player will be able to get through in a single weekend. So this is a title that may be one to borrow if that is of concern. Prices are: PS3 & Xbox 360 - \$60; Nintendo Wii - \$50; PS2 & PSP - \$40; and Nintendo DS & GBA and PC versions are \$30.

Details: Electronic Arts, Inc., www.ea.com. Price: \$60. Ages: 8-up. Platform: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, Windows. Teaches: logic, spatial relations, problem solving, memory. Review date: 8/2/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Fantasy Violence

Harvest Moon: More Friends of Mineral Town

4.7 Stars

Well liked by our girl testers due to the female lead character, this Game Boy exploration game lets you run and develop your own farm in a town full of strangers. As you explore, you find tools, make trades, ride a pony, raise crops, meet a husband and try to start your own family. There's a good deal of reading, and the trading economy takes some thinking. Buy it. Details: Natsume, www.natsume.com. Price: \$29.99. Ages: 6-up. Platform: Game Boy Advance. Teaches: logical thinking, math, reading. Review date: 8/7/2005. ESRB Rating: Everyone, Use of Alcohol

Harvest Moon: Tree of Tranquility

4.7 Stars

Looking for a kinder, gentler type of game experience, with a lot of learning potential? In this mostly one-player game, you can play either as a boy or a girl to raise crops, trade, and attempt to create the ideal farm. There's a lot of problem solving, reading, and six multiplayer minigames to unlock.

In the story, you've moved to an island town that was once enchanted...however it has been years since the mystical Mother Tree has shown any signs of life and the Harvest Goddess has vanished. The island has lost its connection with nature and the inhabitants don't know what to do. By planting crops, helping animals nurture friendships and build a family, you can wake up a giant Mother Tree, who will smile upon the island once again.

New features include the use of the Wii Controller to plant seeds (move sharply down) or harvest crops (pull up). It is possible to save games.

Content includes a wide variety of crops, animals (including a horse that you can ride) and events. You can play with your classic controller if you like. There's a good deal of narrative to read, which is both good and bad. In many ways this game looks a lot like Animal Crossing -- with a more realistic, farming-based feel. If you've never heard of the Harvest Moon series before, it may be because it's been overshadowed by Animal Crossing, especially on the Nintendo platforms. But, our testers found this Harvest Moon to be the best ever, preferring to play it over Animal Crossing: City Folk, when given the choice of both.

Details: Natsume, www.natsume.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 8-up. Platform: Wii. Teaches: creativity, logic, economy. Review date: 8/30/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone, Alcohol Reference
Comic Mischief

Hot Brain

4.5 Stars

Following the success of Nintendo's Brain Age series for the Nintendo DS, comes Hot Brain, a similar collection of logic puzzles for the Sony PSP. The puzzles are designed to "raise the activity and temperature of your brain" and are hosted by Professor Ed Warner, who guides you and offers encouragement.

There are five categories of puzzles, with hundreds of math problems, logic games, memory tests, and so on. Game modes include Practice (encourages the player to practice on a regular basis to increase test scores), Test (quizzes you in the five categories and gives a score for each, including an overall performance score), Brain Race (compete against up to four other players in a series of math fact challenges) and Think Tank (where two to four players work together to solve challenges and raise the temperature of the 3D brain).

Tester Mike H. (14) reported that the game "wasn't as original as Nintendo's Big Brain Academy, and I missed the touch screen." He added, "As for strengths, it was funny, and I liked the narration and the sound effects. It was a test of logic and concentration, and my brain really did ache after I played this game. There was no worrisome content at all. If you can read, you can play this game." Details: Midway Home Entertainment, www.midway.com. Price: \$30. Ages: 8-up. Platform: PSP. Teaches: logic, memory, math, language, concentration. Review date: 5/9/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Hot Shots Golf Open Tee 2

4.6 Stars

Playful and powerful, our testers liked this second PSP version of Hot Shots Golf. This version contains the content from the original PSP title plus six new courses and 12 new characters. You can compete in matches with up to 16 players from around the world using the Wi-Fi multiplayer, or compete in an eight-player Match Play mode using the head-to-head competition via Ad Hoc. By incorporating special combinations of clothing and accessories, you can boost to your character's abilities, earn new clubs, and perform more accurate shots. If you're looking for an easy to play, pocket-sized golf game for the PSP, this is a great choice. Note that other versions are available for the PS2 and PS3 which we did not review.

Details: Sony Computer Entertainment America Inc., www.us.playstation.com. Price: \$30. Ages: 7-up. Platform: PSP. Teaches: sports, golf. Review date: 6/3/2008. ESRB Rating: Everyone, Suggestive Themes

Hot Shots Golf Out of Bounds

4.6 Stars

If you're not fond of most golf simulations featuring celebrities such as Tiger Woods, this latest edition to the Hot Shots series of games is a good choice. It is easy to play, with exaggerated motions and visual effects that make you feel like a golfing superhero, minus the hours of practice. You can either customize your avatar with more than 300 options or choose from 15 playable characters. A new shot system offers a high risk to reward ratio and gives you the ability to hit the ball farther and straighter, but also penalizes you more on the bad shots. You can also customize a tournament and play with up to 50 other players online. In addition, the game features six courses, different modes of play including VS, Training, Tournament, Stroke, and Match Play. You can also download content including characters, courses, clubs, clothing and other golf items. Created by Clap Hanz for Sony. Buy it or borrow it.

Details: Sony Computer Entertainment America Inc., www.us.playstation.com. Price: \$60. Ages: 8-up. Platform: PlayStation 3. Teaches: sports, golf. Review date: 3/18/2008. ESRB Rating: Everyone, Suggestive Themes

Hot Shots Tennis

4.5 Stars

Fun and easy to play, this tennis game features 14 characters and 11 court settings including beaches, ancient ruins, and parks, for one to four players. It blends arcade-style action with in-depth strategy, and features a pick up and play control scheme for novice players, as well as a deep features set for more seasoned players that allows them to practice a variety of strokes, enter challenge modes, and play singles or doubles matches with up to four players. There is also a training mode with various on-court drills to improve timing and skills, with scores that can be saved as a benchmark for skill progression.

Details: Sony Computer Entertainment America, www.scea.com. Price: \$30. Ages: 7-up. Platform: PlayStation 2. Teaches: sports, tennis. Review date: 7/19/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone, Suggestive Themes

Hotel Dusk

4.5 Stars

Warning: this innovative mystery novel for the Nintendo DS can become addicting—especially if you like mysteries. Designed by the same studio that created Trace Memory, most of this game is driven by conversations that must be read in a specific order, which our testers noted can slow the pace of the game. But it also adds an interesting feel to the game, and you really get to know the characters.

As you explore the hotel, you uncover the clues and clever puzzles needed to unlock doors. The game uses branching storylines that give players many options for how to speak to people (nicely or strong arm). Content includes 14 people to talk to and a range of simple touch screen tasks—such as picking a lock, decorating a Christmas tree, or completing a jigsaw puzzle. A lot of reading is required.

Although the game is rated Teen (mild language, mild violence and use of alcohol by characters in the game), we found that middle-school-age mystery novel fans, as well as kids that typically shyed away from reading for pleasure, were intrigued by this game. One of our testers (Steven, 12) felt that although the 3D graphics weren't that good, the storyline was interesting, and the way you played the game was cool (you hold the DS sideways, as if you're reading a book). He also thought the characters were interesting and that the 2D graphics had a cool background and collage-effect. On the downside, Steven noted that it was sometimes hard to progress through the story and found it frustrating if he said the wrong thing and became stuck. (hmmm...The sign of a good mystery?)

Created by Japanese studio Cing, Inc. for Nintendo.

Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$35. Ages: 13-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches: reading, deductive reasoning, logic, problem-solving. Review date: 1/31/2007. ESRB Rating: Teen, Mild Language, Mild Violence, Use of Alcohol

Jam Sessions

4.4 Stars

This guitar simulator lets you brush the stylus (or your finger) across a line on the Nintendo DS touch screen to hear a surprisingly realistic sounding guitar chord. The feeling is akin to an autoharp, with a one-button set of chords, controlled with the DS direction keys. To modulate up or down a step (or half step), you use the A and B keys. So it is easy to quickly strum out a four- (or eight) chord folk song, for example. In addition to the free play mode, there's a set of songs you can learn, presented one chord at a time. Because the chord notation is real, some of these skills could transfer to real music. For example, the program could be used for showing music students how chord changes work, minus the pain of the calluses. Other features include a karaoke mode (using the internal DS microphone), the ability to turn on or off features like distortion or reverb, and the ability to change the pitch of your guitar, say, to match your slightly out-of-tune piano. If you plug your DS into an external set of speakers, you can get a very big sound; but be forewarned that pulling out your Nintendo DS during a campfire sing-along could max you out on the geek scale. This title was originally called DS Guitar M-06 in Japan.

Details: Ubisoft, Inc., www.ubisoft.com. Price: \$30. Ages: 7-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches: music, chord notation, pitch, guitar playing. Review date: 8/8/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Mild Lyrics

Karaoke Revolution

4.6 Stars

From the makers of Dance Dance Revolution (CSR, 3/02) comes another innovative use of the PlayStation. Plug a special USB microphone into your PS2, start the CD, and you have a unique Karaoke experience that both children and adults can use. Note that one headset microphone is included in the box for the price of \$60, or you can buy the software alone for \$40 and get your own Logitech microphone. We tried both, and they work fine. The Konami headset microphone has an earpiece that makes it easier to hear your own voice, however. Clearly the most amazing and fun feature is the ability for you to actually visualize, in real time, the pitch of your voice. It's sort of like biofeedback. In other words, as the music flows by, the tones of the melody flow by, from right to left on the bottom of the screen, in the form of lines. The pitch of your voice, as heard through the microphone, controls a cursor that moves up or down the staff. When the cursor hits the note, you earn points. So you're directly rewarded for staying on pitch -- which results in your singing a bit like a robot. It's sort of like trying to stay in the wake of a boat, that is steered by the melody of the song. The better you sing, the better the gig you can perform at, and the louder the crowd cheers. Content is sung by the original artists and includes 36 popular songs like Billie Jean, Like a Virgin, Celebration, Girls Just Want to Have Fun, and Red, Red Wine. Note that some of the lyrics are suggestive (e.g., Like a Virgin), but not extreme. The bottom line? This is an outstanding way to turn your Playstation 2 into a Karaoke machine, and a means for children to learn to control the pitch of their voice. Note -- Volume 2 (Fall 2004) 35 new songs, in the same format, again with a broad spectrum of music (including Heartbreak Hotel).

Details: Konami of America, Inc., www.konami.com. Price: \$60. Ages: 6-up. Platform: PlayStation 2. Teaches: music, singing, language, pitch, rhythm. Review date: 11/17/2003. ESRB Rating: Everyone, Mild Lyrics

Karaoke Revolution Presents: American Idol Encore

4.6 Stars

Our testers loved the American Idol version of Karaoke Revolution for three reasons. You actually sing along with the sound tracks, the music list is varied and appeals to everyone, and you get to have the real American Idol judges give you feedback. Content includes 40 songs; many of which have been featured on previous versions of American Idol. There are multiple game modes for up to eight players, who can compete for the best score. It should be noted that this game uses the same amazing voice visualization technology originally developed by Harmonix, that lets you see your voice, and that can also score your rhythm (e.g., when you clap). In addition, there is new and improved commentary and interaction between all three judges -- although testers noted that the judges looked a bit plastic in the way they moved. All in all, this is one of the most fun, family-friendly editions of Karaoke Revolution yet, especially if you like the American Idol show. The game comes bundled with the necessary microphone. Prices range from \$70 for the Xbox 360 or PS3 versions, \$60 for the Wii version, and \$50 for the PS2 version. We reviewed the Xbox 360 version.

Details: Konami Digital Entertainment, Inc., www.konami.com. Price: \$70. Ages: 8-up. Platform: Xbox 360, PlayStation 2, PlayStation 3, Wii. Teaches: music, signing, rhythm. Review date: 3/18/2008. ESRB Rating: Everyone, Mild Lyrics Suggestive Themes

Kororinpa: Marble Mania (Wii)

4.4 Stars

Applications for the Wii remote's abilities keep expanding, and this title is case in point. By holding the remote in one hand, you can tilt a floating marble maze, in order to roll a marble along one of 50 tracks. The Nunchuk is used to change the views. Because the tracks are suspended over mountain gorges, the effect is thrilling.

After each maze is mastered, you are rewarded with another, with new physics and sounds, and the marble can take on the form of a cat, UFO, penguin and rugby ball. By far, the best part of this game is its simplicity--anyone can pick up the remote and start playing; all you have to do is tilt it to move. If the ball drops off the track, you merely start over. This is not to say that the game cannot be challenging, however, as sometimes it can even be tediously hard. Therefore, be on hand to help a younger child who might get frustrated.

Features include a two-player racing mode, that allows players to go through the entire game with a friend, competing against one another to finish first (although there is no direct interaction between them). The only drawback is that this title has limited content. For serious players, the fifty levels may not last that long, and while there is some fun in trying to beat your own times, it's just not a long game. However, it is loads of fun while it lasts, especially when playing with other people. Created by Hudson Entertainment for Nintendo.

Details: Konami Digital Entertainment, Inc., www.konami.com. Price: \$40. Ages: 7-up. Platform: Wii. Teaches: logic; hand-eye coordination. Review date: 3/28/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Kung Fu Panda

4.5 Stars

Can beauty, humor and fighting coexist? They do in Kung Fu Panda, a multiple-platform game for one to four players (although most of the game is for one player). We looked at the Wii and PS3 versions, and were impressed by the topnotch narration, and content right out of the movie. The graphics on the PS3 are presented in a high-definition (1080p) output, which adds an extra degree of frosting to the experience. In terms of game play, this game follows a pretty well-worn path, with 13 levels, auto game saving, and progressively harder levels. In terms of children, the game is easy to pick up and play with minimal reading, and there is minimal gore and no obvious bad language. The levels are set in ancient China. If you have a high-definition screen and a PS3, this is a fun game to get, just to enjoy the graphics. For sure borrow it. Prices are \$40 for the PS3 version, \$30 for the Xbox 360 and Wii versions, and \$20 for PS2, Nintendo DS, or PC versions.

Details: Activision, Inc., www.activision.com. Price: \$40. Ages: 10-up. Platform: Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 2, Wii, Nintendo DS, Windows. Teaches: logic, memory, martial arts. Review date: 3/19/2008. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Fantasy Violence Mild Language

Legend of Spyro, The: Dawn of the Dragon

4.6 Stars

Some things get better with time, and -- according to our testers -- so does Spyro, the one-player game that features a small, flying, fire-breathing dragon.

For the first time, Spyro can fly at any time in the game, creating many new possibilities. This time, you can team with his enemy, Cynder, in a mission to stop the evil Dark Master.

This cooperative drop-in/drop-out play allows you to complete the game as either Spyro or Cynder, giving you more ways to explore Spyro's world with a friend. The game also features new attack moves/combos, enemies, and environments. Developed by Etranges Libellules (PS3, Wii, Xbox 360, and PS2) and Tantalus (DS). Note that features vary according to platform. We tested the Wii version. Prices are \$50 for the PS3, Wii, and Xbox 360, \$40 for the PS2 version, and \$30 for the DS.

Details: Activision, Inc., www.activision.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 8-up. Platform: Wii*, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PlayStation 2, Nintendo DS. Teaches: logic. Review date: 12/3/2008. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Fantasy Violence

Legend of Zelda, The: Twilight Princess

4.7 Stars

Your mission is to free the land from the dark shadows, in this one-player fantasy adventure that features rich 3D graphics which could be from a *Lord of the Rings* game. We tested both GameCube and Wii versions, although our ratings apply to the GameCube version. Testers found both to have the identical storyline, with seemingly endless problem-solving opportunities. Note that the GameCube version of this game was originally created for release late 2005, but was delayed until the Wii's release, along with the Wii version.

In the game, your mission is to steer a young farm boy (named Link) as he travels through the countryside looking for a mysterious girl named Midna (aka the Twilight Princess). As you might expect, many predictable gender stereotypes lurk in the boy-hero storyline, although Midna is cast as being clever, with plenty of personality which was noted by our female testers. Violence is typical for the genre, with plenty of sword fighting, arrow shooting and fishing. In the Wii version, this is done with the Wii remote and Nunchuk controllers, and is especially fun. There are puzzles to solve and innovative weapons to find. Testers, two girls (both 11) and one boy (15) found the Twilight Princess to be easier to play than Windwalker (the previous version), and especially liked all of the horse riding options in the game. They also liked the ability to change into a wolf. Just make sure you have a memory cartridge to save your games for the GameCube.

Note that both the Wii Remote and Nunchuk controller are required for the Wii version. Despite the lack of mulitplayer options, this game is actually worth spending \$50 for, according to our enthusiastic testers, as long as you have the time to invest in it. Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 10-up. Platform: GameCube*, Wii*. Teaches: problem solving, logic. Review date: 8/10/2005. ESRB Rating: Teen, Animated Blood, Fantasy Violence

LEGO Batman: The Videogame

4.5 Stars

Fun and rich in features, but not all that different than previous LEGO games (see LEGO Star Wars and LEGO Indiana Jones), this one- or two-player cooperative game is full of action and collaborative problem solving opportunities.

In the game, you and another player assume the identity of Batman and/or Robin in a battle against the bad guys, including The Joker, The Penguin, Poison Ivy, Catwoman and Mr. Freeze. In a new twist, you can join the enemy, playing as one of the villains and see the game from a different view. As with the other Traveller's Tails titles (the studio who came up the first LEGO Star Wars title), a second player can drop-in or drop-out of a game at any time. Keep in mind also that this game is available on a wide variety of platforms. Our ratings apply to the game console editions.

There are two modes of play: Story and Freeplay. In the Story mode, you move through the game, one level at a time. In Freeplay mode, you can replay any level with the characters you've unlocked in search of additional rewards. In addition, you can collect LEGO parts used to unlock extra content including special power-ups and bonus levels that include the ability to drive vehicles like the Batmobile, Batboat and the Batwing.

Prices are \$50 for Xbox 360, PS3, and Wii; or \$30 for the PS2, Nintendo DS, and PC. Both the Xbox 360 version and the PS3 versions feature 720p/1080p display support, and the DS offers touch-screen interaction and two-player co-op mode, using the DS local wireless network. In the Wii version, you use both the Wii Remote (to hit) and the Nunchuk (to move). Our testers tried all versions of the game and, in all cases, refused to give it back within the five-day deadline; a good endorsement of any game. We especially like the logical problem-solving opportunities this game affords, along with the collaborative nature of the play. Even at \$50, this game is worth the investment.

Details: Warner Brothers Interactive Entertainment, Inc., www.warnerbros.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 6-up. Platform: Windows, PlayStation 2, PlayStation 3, PSP, Wii, Xbox 360. Teaches: logic, collaborative play. Review date: 6/5/2008. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Cartoon Violence

LEGO Indiana Jones: The Original Adventures

4.7 Stars

Even if you don't like the new movie (our testers were mixed), you'll love this game, especially if you liked LEGO Star Wars, which was designed from the same UK-based studio, Travellers Tales.

Especially good for two players but still fun with just one, the console versions of Indiana Jones have more content than Star Wars, and a wider range of problem solving opportunities.

The game starts in Barnett College, where Indiana Jones teaches, with one classroom per adventure. Three classrooms each lead to a movie-inspired level (Raiders Of The Lost Ark, Temple Of Doom and The Last Crusade) -- each with six jungle adventures, giving you 18 levels to solve. Progress is automatically saved.

The game is a partnership of two avatars, which you can customize, that move together through each level, smashing things to earn LEGO Studs and health points. At various points, you have to work together with your avatars. To open a trap door, each must stand on a counterweight to continue. There are boats used to cross an alligator-infested swamp that require that one person steers and the other paddles. You can play as 60 movie characters, and mix and match body parts. Between each level is an animated scene featuring a slapstick LEGO rendition of the story. There's no shortage of smashing, shooting and building in this game, but no worrisome content.

The Wii, PS2 and Xbox 360 versions of the game are nearly identical, with a few control differences for the Wii. To use the whip, for example, you can flip the Wii controller (a Nunchuk is required), or push down to dig with the shovel. But there are no real dramatic differences in the controls. Our recommendation is to take your pick; they're all good. We did not try the Windows version, however, and the DS version follows the same storyline, but uses the touch screen to activate the whip (by tracing the outline). The microphone is also used to blow out torches. We tried the game with younger children, and found that age 6-up really is a better age range for this title, unless a big brother or sister is willing to help out. The bottom line? If you liked LEGO Star Wars, you'll like LEGO Indian Jones even more. More information can be found at <http://www.lucasarts.com/games/legoindianajones/>.

Details: LucasArts, www.lucasarts.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 6-up. Platform: Windows, PlayStation 2*, Wii*, Xbox 360, Nintendo DS. Teaches: letter recognition, logic, problem-solving. Review date: 7/30/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Cartoon Violence

LEGO Star Wars 2: The Original Trilogy (Console version)

4.6 Stars

This two-player collaborative adventure takes things up a notch compared to last year's already excellent LEGO Star Wars (Eidos/Traveller's Tales). Note that you'll want to have two working controllers plugged into your console to take advantage of the richness of the most unique feature of the game—namely the collaborative play. Still the program is fun to play alone. This edition features 24 levels, a richer storyline and the ability to customize your characters with different outfits. The core game content, levels and features are the same for all three main consoles (PS2, GameCube and Xbox, with the graphics more enhanced on the Xbox 360 and the PC). The PSP version shares the same rich soundtrack and is also very similar in design to the console version with the bonus of wireless game play. The GBA version is very fun, but obviously does not have the rich sounds, graphics or two-player mode of play. The DS version gives you more creative options and also offers easy wireless game-sharing with nearby players.

The story is a comical take on the *Star Wars* Trilogy (*Episode IV: A New Hope*; *Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back*, and *Episode VI: Return Of The Jedi*). The goal is to stop Darth Vader's attempt to take over the universe. Of course, this requires plenty of exploring maze-like space stations and interesting planets. Along the way, players must work together to get trap doors to open or to find parts of inventions needed to deactivate a force field. Each goal results in earned lives or LEGO studs, that can be used to buy additional outfits or features. Too many wrong moves can result in needing to start over in a level; however, in general, the game is very easy, with even young players enjoying levels of success.

Testers liked how the game captures the feel of the original three movies, right down to the classic opening scene of a massive Star Destroyer in pursuit of Princess Leia's ill-fated Blockade Runner. All of the major events from the movies are in the game. The "drop-in, drop-out" gameplay of the first game is still there with the addition of new special moves. There's no shortage of shooting, light-sabre fighting, kicking and punching—all done with dose of comic mischief. For example, when an enemy is blasted with a laser, he breaks into dozens of Legos. There's no actual building with Legos in this game, only the ability to customize characters with accessories and clothing, so the entire experience is light on the creative thinking.

All in all, this game sticks to the same formula as the first, but adds more things to do, making it an all-new, easy-to-play experience. Definitely pick this one up.

Details: LucasArts, www.lucasarts.com. Price: \$40. Ages: 6-up. Platform: PlayStation 2, Xbox 360, Xbox, GameCube, Windows XP, Nintendo DS, PSP, Game Boy Advance. Teaches: social collaboration, logic, problem solving. Review date: 6/1/2006. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Cartoon Violence

LEGO Star Wars: The Video Game

4.9 Stars

Star Wars: The Video Game is designed especially for two players, featuring a unique interaction style called "drop in, drop out cooperative mode." Together with a friend or a parent, you battle your way through Star Wars scenes.

This exploration adventure features LEGO Star Wars characters, including content from the third movie: the Revenge of the Sith. Unlike most games where players compete, this game goes out of the way to create a cooperative problem solving setting. Because each player has different abilities, working together is mandatory to getting through the game to unlock all 48 characters. It's like you and a friend exploring a dark cave, but your friend has the only flashlight. Discussion is mandatory.

So what if your friend has to go? The computer's AI sniffs that nothing is happening with the other controller, and takes over in autopilot mode, so it is possible to continue play by yourself. At any time, a new player can pick up the controller, and join the game. This game was developed by Giant Software/Traveller's Tales (both of the UK), and is distributed in the US by Eidos. See also the review of the GBA version. See also LEGO Star Wars 2: The Original Trilogy.

Details: Eidos Inc., www.eidos.com. Price: \$40 console, \$30 PC & GBA. Ages: 5-up. Platform: Win XP, PlayStation 2, Xbox. Teaches: cooperative play. Review date: 12/10/2004. ESRB Rating: Everyone

LittleBigPlanet

4.5 Stars

There are a few games that make the purchase of a new game system worth the price. This is one of them. Just make sure you note the tester comments, below.

Designed specifically for the PS3, LittleBigPlanet is best described as a side-scrolling game editor with state-of-the-art 720p graphics for one to four players either locally or remotely via the PlayStation Network.

You freely move a rag-doll-like character through a series of worlds where any object or background can be modified. The game comes with 50 mission-based challenges. Imagine the Incredible Machine set in an endless side-scrolling world that can be shared, and you get the idea. You start by moving Sackboy, a rag-doll-like character through the first level of the game, as a witty narrator explains the basics of the game. There are obstacles to explore, bits and pieces to collect, and puzzles to solve that requiring problem solving and, at times, collaborative teamwork.

As your operation skills grow, you can start modifying the environments by stamping backgrounds or placing objects in the scene. Anything you see is fair game for painting, dragging, dropping or deleting. In addition, if you have a PlayStation Eye camera plugged in, you could put your own face on items, such as a billboard.

Levels can be saved and posted online for others to try — creating a nice shared community aspect to the game. After all, it's a lot more fun to create something if there are others to see it. Note that games can be played together online with an open chat system and a reporting system for inappropriate content that we did not test. So keep your eye on the screen. Our testers loved the concept and graphics, but found the PS3 controls to be complicated -- especially when entering text. Fortunately, you can use a USB computer keyboard if you have a spare. It would certainly be fun to see this game made with a Wii-like interface. Finally, early versions of this game were recalled because of the inclusion of the song "Tapha Niang" found in one of the levels, which includes some lyrics that some found to be offensive. Any title released after Nov. 1, 2008 will not have this music included. Other content includes 60 tutorials, and a shared community that Sony hopes will create an "endless game" (similar to the Spore concept). It is rare to find a game that can both teachers and gamers like. This is one of them. Developed in the UK by Media Molecule Ltd. for Sony Computer Entertainment America.

Details: Sony Computer Entertainment America Inc., www.us.playstation.com. Price: \$60. Ages: 5-up. Platform: PlayStation 3. Teaches: creativity, logic, physics. Review date: 9/13/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone

LocoRoco

4.8 Stars

Note: See LocoRoco 2 (CTR, Feb. 2009). The best software this year for the PSP, this creative, exotic program lets players steer blob-like creatures—called LocoRoco—to safety through a variety of gravity mazes. You use the LEFT and RIGHT trigger buttons on the PSP to "tilt" the PSP, which causes the landscape to shift either left or right and sets the creatures in motion. Likewise, if both the LEFT and RIGHT buttons are moved simultaneously, the creatures jump; handy for getting up hills or over things. The creatures are like bubbles of Mercury that melt into one larger creature if they touch, or you can break them into smaller bits to get under low areas. There are ramps to jump and spongy fields of blobs to jump through. In some cases, the creatures are sucked into a pipe, bouncing into another set of creative new challenges.

There are six types of LocoRoco, each with different voices and attributes. They can stay round to roll, become slim to squeeze through narrow passages, or disassemble into smaller LocoRoco to pass through small crevasses and paths. Eating special fruit will increase the size and quantity of LocoRoco and help players gain access to secret areas and hidden rewards.

There's a good deal of problem solving, and the art and music (Japanese rock, similar in style to "We Love Katamari") is exceptional. The game is easy to play, and there is no worrisome content.

Details: Sony Computer Entertainment America, www.scea.com. Price: \$39.99. Ages: 6-up. Platform: PSP. Teaches: logic. Review date: 5/24/2006. ESRB Rating: Everyone

LocoRoco 2

4.8 Stars

It's been nearly three years since Tsutomu Kouno, a Japanese game designer first tilted the video game landscape, proving that aesthetics and fun can go hand-in-hand and fit in your pocket. If you're familiar (and liked) the first edition of LocoRoco, you'll appreciate Part 2 more.

The control mechanism -- unique to the PSP's trigger keys -- hasn't changed. You use the LEFT or RIGHT trigger buttons to "tilt" the screen landscape, causing the blob-like creatures (called LocoRoco) to roll. When you snap, or release the triggers, the critters hop. Because they resemble balls of mercury, they can break into smaller parts, or merge back into one large blob depending on the maze requirements. The goal is to jostle your way through 12 worlds as fast as you can to see how many blobs you can save.

Additional content includes six mini-games, including a multiplayer (up to four player) battle experience that uses the PSP's ad hoc, or local wireless connection. Note that the other player needs to have a copy of the game for this feature.

So what else is new? These mazes are more interesting, and challenging. Sometimes you have to match a beat. Other levels require swimming underwater, jumping between blades of grass, uncoiling springs, and leaping inside a shell to sled safely across spikes and burrs. Unlockable quests and zany Japanese pop music give this game a flavor spice that stays with you, long after you've turned off your PSP.

The good news for kids is that the first levels seem easier to master than the first edition -- making this the kind of game you can pass to a child for a long car ride. There's also a well designed "no-fail" tutorial, making this a game for all ages -- even Grandma.

Details: Sony Computer Entertainment America, www.scea.com. Price: \$20. Ages: 6-up. Platform: PSP. Teaches: logic, problem solving, spatial relations, mechanics, art, creativity. Review date: 1/14/2009. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa Video Game

4.7 Stars

Looking for a great starter video game, with nearly endless play options? The second in the series, this Madagascar title is one of the best designed children's titles of the year, based on our testing of the PS3, Xbox 360 and Wii versions. Note that we did not test the handheld or Windows version as of January 2009.

After selecting one of the four game-save slots, you can choose to start unlocking the eight levels of adventure mode in sequence, or you can jump straight to the one-to-four player set of 12 minigames.

While the packaging states this is a four-player game, this only applies to the minigames. The heart of the game is the adventure mode, where you steer one of four characters through rich 3D environments. Each character has their own unique combat moves.

For example, Alex the Lion has a loud roar and can throw mangos, while Marty the Zebra can jump and kick.

Play modes include swimming, driving, racing, playing soccer and safari photography. There's plenty to explore, including a Watering Hole, the African Jungle and Savannah, the Hippo Mud Pit and the Volcano. Games are saved automatically.

The best part of this game is how easy it is for a younger child to pick up and play, due to the over the shoulder instructions and bite-sized challenges that make it easy to be successful. Because this game shares a design with dozens of other games (but is still easy to play), it makes an excellent first gaming experience for a child as young as four years of age. Just be on hand to help them through the bottlenecks.

But what about the E10+ rating? Note that the ESRB ratings vary depending on the platform, but all are either E or E10+, with some mild suggestive themes and cartoon violence. Don't mind the ESRB 10+ rating, unless you have strong feelings about cartoon violence. For example, there is a lot of hitting or bumping other players in order to get through a maze first. But the comical context makes it seem painless. If you're OK with the movie, you'll also be OK with the game. Note also that there are a lot of cultural stereotypes in both the game and movie. This is a great addition to any library.

Created for Activision by Toys for Bob with Blink Video (PS3, Xbox 360, Wii - \$50), Aspyr (Games for Windows/PC - \$20), Idol Minds (PS2 - \$40) and Amaze (Nintendo DS - \$30).

Details: Activision, Inc., www.activision.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 5-up. Platform: Windows, PlayStation 2, PlayStation 3*, Wii, Xbox 360, Nintendo DS. Teaches: logic, collaborative play, timing, memory, spatial relations, video game operation. Review date:

8/27/2008. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Cartoon Violence
Comic Mischievous

Madden NFL 07

4.6 Stars

Now in its 17th version, this year's edition of Madden football is the best ever. For the first time, players can step up as the lead blocker to create a hole and then take control of the tailback and overpower tacklers. In addition, the Wii version lets you use the Wii remote like a virtual football for carrying the ball and making virtual passes.

Other features to note include new rushing controls, an NFL Superstar Hall Of Fame Mode with simulated running styles of real NFL players (where your actions on and off the field determine your impact on the game), use of actual plays from your favorite team's defensive playbook, a Franchise Mode, and interactive online play. In addition, the Xbox 360 version lets you create a player and lead him through pre-season camp, as well as challenge plays during the game.

Nick (age 11) played the Hall of Fame version for PS2. He loved it so much he didn't want to give it back and has already requested it for his birthday. He thought the graphics were fantastic and the controls easy to use. He especially liked that he could create and customize his own player. By having his player play well in games and meet his season, career and media goals, his player could earn a place in the NFL Hall Of Fame. Football fans - definitely get this game.

Details: EA Sports (Electronic Arts, Inc.), www.ea.com. Price: \$49.99. Ages: 8-up. Platform: PlayStation 2*, GameCube, Xbox, Xbox 360, PSP, Wii. Teaches: football, sports, strategy. Review date: 5/28/2006. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Madden NFL 08 (Wii)

4.5 Stars

Our testers liked the way you can 'throw' a pass by flicking the Wii Remote, in this latest edition to EA's Madden NFL. There's more detail and a new Front Office mode, which focuses on the business side of football -- things like constructing a stadium, setting prices, hiring staff and managing players.

The game mode has an on-screen display of your opponents' strengths and weaknesses, so you can better exploit them, as well as more subtle techniques such as auto-motion, backward passes and low-hitting tackles. Players can use the Wii Remote alone in the Family Play mode -- making it easier for a new player -- or you can use both the Wii Remote and Nunchuck for more advanced controls. The Party Mode features trivia and 22 mini-games. Players can also use the Wii remote to diagram key moments on the Madden NFL 08 telestrator, highlighting key blocks and moves, or challenging friends online in a Play Now mode. All in all, this is a solid addition to any sports game lineup.

Other versions run on the Xbox 360 and PS3 for \$60, the PS2 for \$50, and PSP, GameCube, and Xbox for \$40. Note that a Nunchuck is required. The graphics on the PS3 are the best, provided you have a good projector or screen, of course.

Details: EA Sports (Electronic Arts, Inc.), www.easports.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 10-up. Platform: Wii. Teaches: sports, football; hand-eye coordination, timing. Review date: 7/26/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Mario Party 8

4.7 Stars

Since the first Mario Party came out for the Nintendo 64 back in 1999, there have been many advances in the franchise. But this one makes the biggest jump. That's because of the Wii Remote's natural role in the 18 + mini games.

Designed for up to four players, each with a Wii Remote and Nunchuck, the game features 14 Mario characters in a board game format. After you pick a board character and a level, you spin to try to gather coins, stars and candy. You may land on a "versus" square where you compete against the other players in a mini game where they can try to steal your coins. These mini games are the best part of the game, as the board game is loaded with options that can slow things down for non-Mario fans. There is a mode to play mini games by themselves, but you have to unlock them by way of the regular game before you can play them in the alternate mode. We also noted that it is not possible to add a player mid-game. This can be frustrating, as games can last as long as 30 minutes. These are minor gripes, and they are well compensated for by the incredibly fun mini games.

Testers Nick (11) and Dan (7) were so hooked to the game they played for five hours straight the day they got it. They both thought it was definitely the best Mario Party yet, as they have played most of the previous versions. They were especially impressed by the quality of the graphics and the mini games. "In some cases," stated Nick, "you get a full workout in order to win due to the way you have to tilt the remote, such as in rowing a boat, twirling a lasso or firing in a shooting gallery." All in all, the game Mario Party has a great story mode, great multiplayer/team action, and amazing mini games that could be played for hours on end. Hats off to the team at Hudson Soft/Nintendo once again.

Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 7-up. Platform: Wii. Teaches: logic, socialization, timing, memory. Review date: 3/20/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Mario Party DS

4.4 Stars

Fun, fast and very busy, this roll the dice, turn-based board game comes to the handheld Nintendo DS for the first time (prior versions ran on the Wii and GameCube). The best part about this game is that four children can share one game cartridge, thanks to the DS wireless capabilities. In addition, there's never a shortage of something fun or creative to do, with the touch screen, microphone or regular keys. For example, in the game, each player is represented by one of the Mario characters. If there's not four players, the computer takes over, so you can also play this game alone. After rolling the dice, you move through the board, where you might encounter one of 70 minigames, that range from blowing out candles with the DS microphone, to flipping giant hamburgers with the stylus.

Each game board is based on a theme, with titles like Todette's Music Room or Bowser's Pinball Machine. In the story, Bowser (the bad guy) is trying to get five crystals, so he has shrunk everyone so they can't stop him. In Solo Mode, players make their way to Bowser's castle, winning first place on each game board and then beating the Boss Minigame to win. In Party Mode, players compete against human or DS-controlled players. There is also a Minigame Mode with just six of the bigger games that can also be shared by four players after they are downloaded to the other player's DS. Note that this is not a simple game. Reading the instructions is necessary, and there's a good bit of setup needed to get everyone signed up and on the same activity, at the same time. The manual to this game is 42 pages long. You can save up to two individual games on one cartridge. If you're looking for a great way to play with other DS owners, and don't mind all the Nintendo-themed characters, you'll love Mario Party DS. Created by Hudson Soft for Nintendo.

Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$30. Ages: 6-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches: classification, logic, timing, reading, socialization, problem solving. Review date: 11/27/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone, Comic Mischievous

Mario Strikers Charged

4.6 Stars

In this well-designed soccer game for the Wii, one to four players can create their own teams of Nintendo characters, each with their own characteristics. Content includes nine fields, each with unique hazards that alter game play, such as earthquakes, firestorms and electric shockwaves. This game is one of the first Wii titles to use the "Nintendo Wi-Fi Connection," a wireless gaming service that lets you meet and compete against other players, online. Each player is ranked and the rankings are reset to zero each week to keep things fresh.

Using both the Wii Remote and Nunchuk controllers, the game incorporates unique Wii controls such as flicking the Wii Remote to take the ball from your opponent or using it to block shots. The Nunchuk controls the characters and deploys items, while the remote is used to perform the defensive "Big Hit" moves and flatten foes. The game also features single-player modes, including tournaments, challenges and tutorials. In the multiplayer mode, up to four players can battle locally, or they can go on the Nintendo Wi-Fi connection to compete with friends and rivals. The SGTC (http://www.mediatech.org/?page_id=27) testers found this game to be easy to learn, and hard to stop playing. They did not try the online features. Developed by Next Level Games for the Nintendo Wii. The game web site is <http://www.MarioStrikersCharged.com>.

Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 8-up. Platform: Wii. Teaches: soccer, sports. Review date: 7/24/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Mild Cartoon Violence, Crude Humor

Mario Super Sluggers

4.8 Stars

Fun but expensive, our testers went wild for this wacky baseball game for 1-4 players. You first grab your bat (Wii Remote) and step up to bat as one of 40 Nintendo characters (or your Mii), in this playful fantasy baseball game. The Wii Remote controller is used to swing the bat; or you make a throwing motion to pitch. The single-player mode takes place in Baseball Kingdom, where you encounter characters with different baseball skills. For example, Mario has a fireball, while Luigi can turn infield hits into a tornado. Some players play better together than others, and different character combinations result in good chemistry for a team. In the multiplayer mode, up to four people compete at once. If you're looking for a realistic baseball sim, this isn't the game. But if you don't mind a bit of vintage Nintendo craziness, this is a great choice. More information is at www.MarioSuperSluggers.com.

Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 8-up. Platform: Wii. Teaches: sports, baseball, gross motor development (timing), temporal relations. Review date: 8/25/2008. ESRB Rating: Everyone, Comic Mischievous

Master of Illusion

4.5 Stars

In yet another creative use of the multi-faceted Nintendo DS, Master of Illusion (\$35, www.nintendo.com) contains 20 step-by-step magic tricks, taught and introduced using the Nintendo DS touch screen, microphone and a special set of included marked cards. This game is not really a game, so set your expectations accordingly. Instead, it is more like a magic tool kit, with 20 tricks that range from easy to advanced. So how does it work? In one of the first tricks, you see two on-screen candles and ask for a volunteer to choose a candle. While nobody is watching, you touch either the left or right trigger keys, programming the DS so that the chosen candle goes out, when the volunteer blows into the DS microphone. Other games use the marked cards, teaching you tricks you can do with or without the DS. At any point, you can use the animated tutorial to help you review the trick. One drawback to note -- the assistant is a busty store clerk named Barbara who pretty much sets a world-record for female stereotypes, which some will find offensive. This is unfortunate because learning to perform and perfect magic tricks is a skill that has many applications in the outside world. If you're looking for a fun way to introduce the fundamentals of being a magician, this is a good choice. Developed by Tenyo for Nintendo.

Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$35. Ages: 6-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches: magic, language, performing. Review date: 11/27/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone, Sexual Themes

Mercury Meltdown Revolution

4.6 Stars

Like Kororinpa: Marble Mania (Wii), this is a collection of animated mazes for one player with some excellent problem solving opportunities. You hold the Wii remote sideways, and tilt it to move a ball of shimmering mercury through the floating mazes before time runs out.

There are some clever twists in some of the cartoonish puzzles, which get harder as you progress. For example, you might need to go through a paint sprayer, to properly mix the color of your mercury. If it is in more than one rolling blob, you might need to make two colors and mix them.

The background music is annoying but can be turned down. The game was previously released for the PSP and PS2, but this is the first to take advantage of the Nintendo Wii's motion detection features. Players must sometimes control more than one blob at a time, being careful to keep enough mercury in play to finish the level. Completing levels allows the player to unlock additional content including mini-games such as Race, Shove, Rodeo, Paint and Metrix.

The menus are a bit complex, and the format can get repetitive, but these are minor issues. Content includes 150 levels, and high scores can be saved. Testers noted that it would be nice if there were some sort of narrative or story instead of just just progressive levels. We were able to get through 11 levels in about 20 minutes.

If you're into this type of problem solving and are up for a challenge, this is an excellent addition to your library, with plenty of problem solving challenges.

Details: Ignition Entertainment USA, www.ignitionusa.com. Price: \$20. Ages: 10-up. Platform: Wii. Teaches: logic, spatial relations, fine motor control, problem solving. Review date: 10/19/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Miss Spider Harvest Time Hop and Fly

4.4 Stars

Here's something rare: a one-player Nintendo DS game that is preschooler-friendly. The object of the game is to help Miss Spider's children collect food for the winter ahead. This is accomplished through four types of games involving steering Miss Spider toward things (such as honeysuckle blooms and acorns) or away from things (thorns or falling leaves), or bouncing through a forest maze. Unlike many rather complex Nintendo DS titles, this game uses a simple, well-designed scoring mechanism to help children understand how much time they have left in the race or how many points they need to get to the next section of the game. Informal learning opportunities include timing and classification along with some problem solving, (you have to plan to store up enough jumps in order to get to the top of a tree, for example), and a rare opportunity to exercise fine motor skills, (you use the stylus to circle fruits you want Miss Spider to collect in one game). Another game requires blowing into the microphone, in order to give Miss Spider the lift she needs to surf the wind. The more children play, the harder the challenge. Progress is saved automatically (no sign-in is required). We'd like to see more games like this one. Created by Shin'en Multimedia for The American Game Factory.

Details: The American Game Factory, Inc., www.gamefactorygames.com. Price: \$20. Ages: 4-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches: logic, sorting, fine motor skills, planning. Review date: 6/19/2006. ESRB Rating: Everyone

MotorStorm (PS3)

4.4 Stars

You can almost taste the grit in your teeth in this extremely fun but also pricey off-road racing romp. Our testers especially liked the slow motion crashes, where you can see racers flying into sign posts at high speeds. Ouch. The game takes particular advantage of the PS3's beautiful graphics and sounds. We tried a race that was set in Monument Valley's desert badlands--the goal being to win the race and survive against other racers in a combat racing format. The AI in this game is noteworthy. For example, each vehicle carves up the track in varying depths, making navigation of each lap different than the last. Developed by Evolution Studios for Sony.

Details: Sony Computer Entertainment America Inc., www.scea.com. Price: \$60. Ages: 13-up. Platform: PlayStation 3. Teaches: sports, racing, hand-eye coordination. Review date: 3/5/2007. ESRB Rating: Teen, Language, Violence

MVP '07 NCAA Baseball

4.5 Stars

Crowd chants, school fight songs and a variety of ballparks to visit in this game put you in the middle of college baseball--making it appealing to both the young and older baseball fan.

A new feature to this version is the Rock and Fire pitching. This novice gamer found it exciting and rather easy to use. Using your analog sticks, you can choose the location and accuracy of your pitches. Commentary by Mike Patrick along with an ESPN ticker and ESPN SportsCenter radio updates gives an authenticity to the game. Another new feature that caught the attention of our eight-year-old tester was the ability to choose his own bat. Again, this simple action puts the child into the game.

Our adult tester fully enjoyed the Dynasty mode. He was able to choose a team and oversee all areas of that team keeping him fully engaged. Scenario editor allows you to delve into the past and relive college games. A knowledge of baseball history would be a plus to take full advantage of the game's features.

Details: EA Sports - Electronic Arts Canada, www.eagames.com. Price: \$30. Ages: 8-up. Platform: PlayStation 2. Teaches: baseball. Review date: 2/13/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone

MySims

4.7 Stars

A cross between LEGO Creator, Animal Crossing and The Sims, My Sims is a one-player creativity/exploration game. You start by creating your own Sim by mixing and matching hair styles, clothing and so on. Additional items can be unlocked as you play the game. You then enter a town, where you interact with town residents, as you help them rebuild the town. In the Wii version, you can build homes, one block at a time; and even go inside the home to choose furniture. Testers found this both easy to do, and very, very fun. Work can be saved over time, for ongoing games.

As players explore, they meet and help new characters who explain the next challenge. Note that reading is required. In one scenario, you create a new Pizza Oven for Gino or put the finishing touches on a new roof for Buddy's hotel. Each completed task helps the town grow. As it expands to new areas, players receive special building blocks, decorations and patterns that help customize their unique creations. All in all, this is an easy to play, powerful addition to the Sims line of products, with no worrisome content. Buy it. See also MySims Kingdom

Details: Electronic Arts, Inc., www.ea.com. Price: \$50, \$30 for DS. Ages: 5-up. Platform: Wii*, Nintendo DS. Teaches: creativity, reading, money, building. Review date: 2/26/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone, Mild Cartoon Violence
Comic Mischief

MySims (DS)

4.4 Stars

This mostly one-player trading/creativity game for the Nintendo DS lets children help to rebuild a town by trading and interacting with the locals. Reading dialog is required in order to progress through the game, and unlike the Wii version of the same game, the building options are limited. In the DS version, you become a Sim, who can be customized as either a male or female, with clothing and accessories. Content includes 10 mini-games including scuba diving, paragliding, fishing and racquetball. It is possible to play some of the games with others via Nintendo DS local wireless connection, and two games can be saved per game card.

Details: Electronic Arts, Inc., www.ea.com. Price: \$30. Ages: 6-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches: creativity, reading, spatial relations (using maps), money. Review date: 9/21/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone, Simulated Gambling

MySims Party

Stars

Fifty fast-paced minigames are fun and easy to play with up to four players. Race to see how fast you can flip bacon, eat sushi, shine a flashlight beam to find a hidden mummy or chop wood. The DS version follows a familiar theme, but has 10 fewer games. If you win, you get a customized statue, in your name. Note that some reading is required and children will need help to set up the game, although this process is easier than many party games. Each game is hosted by a different Sim (no Wiis are used). Each MySim has different skills including strength, speed and endurance. In some games, success depends on combining the right characters, who combine to meet the challenge.

Details: Electronic Arts, Inc., www.ea.com. Price: \$40. Ages: 6-up. Platform: Wii, Nintendo DS. Teaches: creativity, logic, gross motor coordination. Review date: 2/26/2009. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Mystery Case Files: MillionHeir

4.8 Stars

If you like "I SPY" puzzles, you'll love this title, designed especially for the Nintendo DS touch screen.

In the story, eccentric millionaire Phil T. Rich vanishes from his mansion and is presumed dead. You take on the role of a detective and must determine if he really is dead, and if so, who is the rightful heir to his fortune. You must investigate suspects by finding hidden items in their environments. The objects are displayed in sight, but are interwoven into the illustration, making it challenging to find. Once you find enough hidden objects in a certain area, the character and area will be considered investigated, and you then move on to the next clue. There are 12 potential heirs to examine, 30 scenes to investigate, and more than 1,000 hidden objects to find. The DS stylus is used to move around and find the hidden objects, and when you do, you tap it to collect it -- removing it from the environment and your object list. You will be able to use special tools to help you -- including a flashlight for when the lights go out and an X-ray to see items hidden behind larger ones. In addition, some of the objects you find may require you to solve riddles. For example, you may be asked to find a slice of bread, but can only find a whole loaf in the environment. By pressing and holding the L or R button, you can use your stylus to slice the bread. Developed by Big Fish Games / Cryptonite Games for Nintendo.

Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$20. Ages: 7-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches: logic, problem solving, memory, deductive reasoning. Review date: 9/9/2008. ESRB Rating: Everyone, Violent References

NBA Live 09

4.6 Stars

Looking for a hard core basketball sim? This year's NBA Live title features "Dynamic DNA," designed to more accurately emulate NBA players. Other features include NBA Live 365, which updates the Dynamic DNA data, so your players might change from week to week. You can use the NBA Rewind feature to replay last night's game with the updated statistical data that captures injuries, hot/cold streaks and player tendencies. Another new feature is the Pick and Roll Control, where two players can control both the ball handler and the screener as on-court instructions pop-up to guide you through each play. According to Nick (age 13), this is a "great game, with terrific graphics and controls that are easy to use and learn. The best feature is the 'create a player' option." Last year's NBA Live was good, and this year's continues the tradition.

Details: EA Sports - Electronic Arts Canada, www.eagames.com. Price: \$60. Ages: 8-up. Platform: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360. Teaches: sports, basketball. Review date: 10/20/2008. ESRB Rating: Everyone

NBA Street Homecourt

4.4 Stars

Our testers quickly fell in love with NBA Street Homecourt which combines legendary playgrounds with the hometown courts of your favorite male and female NBA stars, featuring 360 degrees of views and a lot of action. Key features of the game include: Trick Remixer (allows players to take control of their player's rhythm mixing tricks with elaborate moves using two trick buttons); Game Breaker (whoever has the money ball owns the Game Breaker, and players can unleash it to perform over-the-top tricks and dunks); new dunk control (players can leap off a teammate's shoulders for a jump-off dunk or pull off the ultimate double dunk); Homecourt Hero (go from an unknown talent to a playground legend by creating a player, improving his/her game and taking on the NBA's best). Content features six WNBA stars, including Diana Taurasi, Sue Bird and Sheryl Swoops. If you're looking for an easy to play, extremely fun basketball simulation that looks great on the PS3 or Xbox 360, this is a good choice.

Details: EA Sports - Electronic Arts Canada, www.eagames.com. Price: \$60. Ages: 8-up. Platform: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360. Teaches: street basketball. Review date: 3/21/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Need for Speed: Carbon (PS3)

4.4 Stars

The latest version of Need for Speed and the first PS3 title we've tested — this one is fast, and the cars look good; but, you need to have a display that can handle the increased number of pixels.

In the game, police force the races to the outskirts of the city where the battle shifts to Carbon Canyon. For the first time in a Need for Speed game, you can build a crew and race in a war for your city against rival crews and opposing car classes. Each crew member has unique skills that you trigger during races that will give you an edge over your opponents. You can also customize your dream car using the new Autoscript tool. The game features over 50 licensed cars, including the new Ford Shelby GT500.

Players will want to achieve a high "wanted" profile so that all the other crews know about you. You also get to dodge through spike trails to avoid a blowout, showcasing your driving skills. Note that Nick, age 11, loved this game, especially being chased by cops when he crashed into innocent cars or signs. And, he loved when rival crews drove up to challenge him to races. The only dislike our tester had was that he wished you could have your driver get out of the car and walk around. Note that the Xbox 360 version costs \$60, and the Nintendo Wii retails at \$50. A PSP version is also available for \$40. The GBA & DS are rated E and are \$30 each.

Developed by EA Black Box for Electronic Arts, Inc.

Details: Electronic Arts, Inc., www.ea.com. Price: \$60. Ages: 10-up. Platform: PlayStation 2, PlayStation 3*, GameCube, Wii, Xbox, Xbox 360, Windows. Teaches: sports, racing, spatial relations. Review date: 11/3/2006. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Violence

Neves

4.4 Stars

This is a collection of 500 virtual Tangrams -- or block-shaped puzzles -- where you drag and drop shapes using the Nintendo DS stylus. Originally published in Japan as Hanayama's Lucky Puzzle, each puzzle contains seven blocks that must be aligned to match a corresponding silhouette in order -- forming a key, chair or (at the harder levels) a bird or an airplane. Features include five game modes (Silhouettes, 7 Steps, Time, Pressure, and Versus), the ability to store progress over time, and a wireless game-sharing feature where one player (with the game) can challenge another DS owner in a timed race. Drawbacks include a limited puzzle format, which could grow tedious. All in all, this is a very strong spatial experience for children and adults alike.

Details: Yuke's Company of America, . Price: \$30. Ages: 7-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches: tangrams, spatial relations, geometry. Review date: 8/22/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone

New Super Mario Bros.

4.7 Stars

It's been more than 20 years since the first Super Mario Bros., and this new fast-paced version captures the original ease of use, while exploiting the power of the two-screen Nintendo DS for new challenges. Children can explore eight worlds, from tropical islands to snow-capped mountains. Mario can now change between three sizes to make it through the level. There are two- and three-player modes of play, creating a fun social opportunity. This is a very rich game with a lot of depth. There are two multiplayer modes--Mario vs. Luigi and Minigames.

In Mario vs. Luigi mode, each player races for giant stars. The goal of the game is to collect the stars that appear throughout the stage at timed intervals. If your opponent gets a star first, you can run into them and make them drop the star. This mode is available for two players, and you only need one game card to play.

The Minigames mode offers a variety of simple touch-screen activities. You can challenge them solo, or use them as the basis of a mini-game tournament for up to four players. The mini-games may be simple, but they're surprisingly fun when you're putting your skills to the test against those of your friend's.

Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$34.99. Ages: 5-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches: problem solving, timing, strategy. Review date: 5/5/2006.

NHL 09

4.5 Stars

EA Sports makes particularly beautiful simulations for the PS3 and Xbox 360, and this title is proof. Note that we did not test the PS2 or Windows versions of this title, but suspect that the game play is the same. We tend to avoid the PC-based versions because the use of a keyboard and mouse makes gameplay too hard.

Our testers, who were familiar with NHL 2008, liked the new features -- which include a "defensive skill stick," giving you more control and power to stop opponents. In the game, you take on the personality of one player on the team. Your performance is rated in 60 categories, and you are shown where your game needs improvement. Too bad EA Sports doesn't make software for times tables.

You can also join the EA Sports Hockey League and take your player online and join a team with friends, or scout for other players. If you like hockey (or even if you don't), you'll have a great time with NHL 09. Nick (age 13) said, "This is a great game that is lots of fun. The best part is the 'create a player' feature where you select the attributes and look of your player, and then pick what team you want to be on. You start playing for their minor league team, then have to meet your goals and work your way up to play on the NHL team." Even though this game is expensive (\$60), his recommendation was to "buy it!"

Details: EA Sports - Electronic Arts Canada, www.eagames.com. Price: \$60. Ages: 10-up. Platform: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PlayStation 2, Windows. Teaches: sports, hockey, fine motor coordination. Review date: 9/16/2008. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Mild Violence

Nicktoons: Battle for Volcano Island (Console Version)

4.5 Stars

This 3D exploration game for one or two players follows a familiar format that's been used hundreds of times before in games, such as Lego Star Wars. But it does a nice job of it, and features excellent renditions of six Nicktoons characters such as SpongeBob, Patrick, Timmy Turner and Danny Phantom -- each having a unique set of moves.

The game is easy to get started with, thanks to a forgiving tutorial that shows you each action. You start by choosing a character to control, and then you start exploring, smashing treasure chests or punching nasty birds to collect shells. There's no shortage of non-worrisome cartoon violence. The environments are fun to explore, with plenty of ramps, underwater bridges and other creative touches. A key feature to note is that the game uses drop-in drop-out interactivity, meaning a second player can join at any point, providing their controller is plugged in. Note that a memory card is strongly advised, or you'll have to start from scratch each time you turn off the game console. All in all, this is an excellent game that is a fun addition to a home game library, especially when played by two children. Both the GameCube and the PS2 versions were created by Blue Tongue entertainment for THQ. The Nintendo DS version was created by Natsume and features a different design, with five stages and minigames that can be shared. Details: THQ, Inc., www.thq.com. Price: \$40. Ages: 5-up. Platform: PlayStation 2, GameCube. Teaches: logical thinking, socialization, spatial relations. Review date: 8/4/2006. ESRB Rating: Everyone, Cartoon Violence

Nights: Journey of Dreams

4.5 Stars

More of a surrealistic experience than a traditional video game, this is a flying, fighting artistic experience -- like stepping into an orchestrated aquarium. Testers were impressed by the music and beautiful graphics found in the seven levels of game play. In the story, players enter Nightopia, where dreams come to life. Players choose between a male or female lead character and start the story, using the Wii Remote with Nunchuk to weave, dive or loop through a series of mazes.

There's also a two-player race mode, where players challenge family and friends locally and/or online via Wi-Fi connection. The flying takes a bit of getting used to, as some of the moves use two keys at once, which will be too hard for younger players. Also, some of the monsters and fighting may be scary for younger children, especially when you confront your first 'Nightmarens.' Jon (18) says, "If you played the first version, you'll like this one. It is well worth buying." All in all, this is an innovative, beautiful title that is worth a second look.

Details: Sega of America, Inc., www.sega.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 7-up. Platform: Wii. Teaches: logic, problem solving, spatial relations. Review date: 12/21/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone, Mild Violence

Ninja Reflex (Nintendo DS)

4.4 Stars

Fun, creative and fast-paced, this collection of reflex games for one to four players makes a great party game. It is specifically designed to take advantage the Wii and DS touch or move control scheme. After you choose your Ninja, you are presented with six martial arts challenges, each with multiple challenge levels. In Shuriken, you practice defending a courtyard from attacks on all sides by throwing stars (flicking the DS stylus, or the Wii Remote with a sharp jabbing motion). In Hotaru, you test your quickness against the flash of a firefly, again with a sharp jab. Your reaction time is presented on the screen -- the fastest player wins. Other games have you catching flies with chopsticks, grabbing at fish, or stopping aerial assaults with nunchucks.

The violence is animated, and was not a problem for our test families, with no bad language or gore. But some parents will want to note that nearly all of this game deals with a fighting theme. As you play, your progress is automatically saved, and there are 11 belt ranks for you to master. Other content includes meditation lessons from your Sensei when you need to take a break from the training. Testers called the game "a lot of fun, with simple games although the controls could be explained better." Created by Nunchuck Games and developed by Sanzaru Games Inc. exclusively for EA. The game is sold for \$30, or \$40 for the Wii version. See also <http://ninjareflex.com>.

Details: Electronic Arts, Inc., www.ea.com. Price: \$40/\$30. Ages: 8-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches: timing, fine motor coordination (DS), gross motor coordination (Wii), martial arts. Review date: 3/3/2008. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Mild Violence

Nintendogs

4.7 Stars

Even cat lovers will like Nintendogs, an easy-to-use virtual pet game, featuring realistic animated dogs who respond to touch (petting with the stylus) and voice commands. Like real dogs, the virtual ones want to socialize. And have puppies! If another Nintendog's owner gets into wireless range, your dogs can visit. This is done with a wireless "bark" mode, which must be turned on. Think of it as IM-ing with little dogs; very fun stuff.

The graphics are terrific—you can almost see the hair on the dog—but the screen can often feel cramped. The sound is also good, consisting of dog sounds and cheers or "awws" from the crowd. The microphone, used for training your pup to do various tricks such as sit or lay down, works well even if it is somewhat unresponsive at times. Our personal favorite was the bubble wand, used to blow bubbles around the dog. As you enter more dog shows, you can earn money to purchase additional toys (up to 100 are available). This game is good for dog-lovers of all ages, and most activities can be understood without knowing how to read, though often times it helps.

This cartridge was in high demand at Mediatech, but there are some drawbacks to note. For one, there are ownership issues that can create disputes among children, and force a frustrated parent to the store to purchase another cartridge. That's because only three dogs can "live" on a cartridge. One option is to put your dog in a "pet hotel." Also, because the game operates in real time, your pup may want to take a nap, just when you want to play. They're moody little critters. Optional Nintendogs cartridges feature up to 15 different dog breeds; a very smart marketing move by Nintendo.

Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$30. Ages: 5-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches: creativity, caring for animals. Review date: 6/9/2005. ESRB Rating: Everyone, Comic Mischievous

Okami

4.6 Stars

Previously released for the PS2 in 2006, this beautifully illustrated one-player adventure has been redesigned for the Wii, with the same storyline and art style and traditional Japanese music. There's a good deal of fighting and gender stereotyping, so note the ESRB descriptors. This edition offers widescreen graphics. The story, told through text boxes (reading required), colorful watercolor scenes, and traditional Japanese music tells the story of a sun god who takes the form of a wolf and sets out on a journey to restore a ruined land. You use the Nunchuk to navigate and the Wii remote to fight, at times making a quick watercolor sketch on the screen to complete screen elements. Games are saved using a save point system. Testers said, "I would buy this game because it is so imaginative."

Details: Capcom Entertainment, Inc., www.capcom.com. Price: \$40. Ages: 12-up. Platform: Wii. Teaches: creativity, logic, Japanese mythology. Review date: 4/25/2008. ESRB Rating: Teen, Blood and Gore

Crude Humor
Fantasy Violence
Suggestive Themes
Use of Alcohol
Use of Tobacco

Online Chess Kingdoms

4.3 Stars

Looking for a great game of chess for the PSP? This title simulation embeds challenging games of chess into a richly animated fantasy adventure, letting you match wits with magicians, servants of chaos and creatures from an aquatic civilization. After a beautiful introduction that cannot be skipped, you are asked to enter a name or load a prior game. You can then choose to play against another player online, providing your PSP web settings are working. The initial set of options is complex, which lowered the Ease Of Use rating. For example, just entering a name took three tries.

We had time for just one chess game on the easiest level and found the computer to be aggressive; taking our king in just ten moves. So this game could be rather hard for beginners, despite the ability to choose from five levels. The five available 3D chess boards are fun, and can be rotated for any view. You can choose to have the chess pieces represent the fantasy themes or traditional looking classic pieces; or you can choose the story mode to integrate your games into a "save the universe against evil" type of theme.

The game uses the PSP's Ad Hoc mode for wireless multiplayer gameplay.

Details: Konami Digital Entertainment, Inc., www.konami.com. Price: \$20. Ages: 8-up. Platform: PSP. Teaches: chess, strategy, logic. Review date: 12/5/2006. ESRB Rating: Everyone, Mild Violence

PaRappa the Rappa

4.3 Stars

One of the strangest video games we've ever reviewed and you'll ever want to play, PaRappa the Rappa is a rhythm game, where you take turns with an on-screen character who raps out a song. In order to get to the next level, you have to match the rap, in a style similar to Dance Dance Revolution, only you use the control keys on the PSP. This game was first released for PlayStation in 1997.

This version has the same characters and songs, plus a multiplayer option so that up to four players can compete in synchronous (ad hoc) battles. As the player's skill level progresses, they are able to enter a freestyle session, giving them the freedom to create a new experience with each play. The process can be hard, but addicting. Testers had a mixed reaction to the game. Some saw it as one large mini-game (the type of activity they might find embedded in a larger game), making them wonder if it was worth the \$30. One thing's for sure, this is a unique game that may have helped inspire the first DDR title. Borrow it.

Details: Sony Computer Entertainment America Inc., www.scea.com. Price: \$30. Ages: 10-up. Platform: PSP. Teaches: music, beat, timing, rhythm, fine motor coordination. Review date: 7/9/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Personal Trainer: Math

4.5 Stars

Now you can turn your child's Nintendo DS into a math learning aide. This title, one of a series of self improvement titles from Nintendo, puts thousands of math facts -- and their answers -- at your child's fingertips. Developed by Japanese math teacher Hideo Shogakukan, the \$20 cartridge combines a calendar based record-keeping system with timed sets of addition, subtraction, division and multiplication math problems. Because you enter your answers in writing, this is one of the few games where penmanship counts. You can choose to take a daily test, or fill in a grid with as many as 100 problems in one sitting -- ranging from counting to division equations. The better you do, the higher your score, which is saved along with earned medals. A single cartridge enables up to 16 other players to compete by downloading one of the quizzes, so you can turn a school bus into a rolling math contest. Other than recycling your missed problems (so they show up later in the set of problems for another try) and reporting your child's percent correct, there's no coaching or help for a struggling learner. This software is good for one thing -- machine-gun drill, with lots of problems in a short amount of time. Weaknesses are minor, but should be noted. All the instructions are presented as text and can be a bit lengthy, although it is easy to skip through; much like the Brain Age problems. There is also no summary of your work after a set of problems -- ideally you would get a list of the problems you missed, or a chance to work on just the missed problems if you like. Finally, we found the background music to be annoying. Fortunately it can be turned off in the preferences. With software like this, it's only a matter of time before we hear teachers saying "boys and girls, please get out your Nintendo DS." See the demo at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jIx4BE2vRRw>. Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$20. Ages: 5-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches: addition, subtraction, multiplication, division. Review date: 1/23/2009. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End (Wii)

4.4 Stars

This one-player scavenger hunt adventure for the Wii (Nunchuk required) puts you in the shoes of one of three of the main characters from the movie--such as Jack Sparrow, Will Turner or Elizabeth Swann--on a mission to fight with bad guys and earn notoriety. It won't disappoint those seeking a good adventure, but requires some persistence in order to get to the end of this 12-level game, and some of the later challenges can be frustratingly difficult. The game is easy to get started, however, thanks to the narrated hints. There's a nice variety of unlockable moves, weapons and secret locations, which keeps things interesting. These include running, climbing, moving blocks, and wild swinging with the Wii Remote at things in order to slash at bad guys. While it is fun to swing the remote control as an actual sword, testers noted that it would be a lot more fun if it were less random feeling. In other words, it feels as if you just whack away at things with no real accuracy. This is a minor point, however. There are two-player mini games: dice and poker, with the poker game based on Texas Hold 'Em rules. Both games require an application of logical thinking. Note: the T rating and age are based on the use of alcohol and gambling; however, both Nick (11) and Daniel (7) played this game and loved it. Nick did say that it taught him how to gamble (play dice). We tested the Wii version, to which the rating applies. Other versions are available for PS2 (\$40), PSP, DS and PC (\$30). Developed by Eurocom for Disney Interactive Studios. 1-2 player. Created by Eurocom Developments for Disney. Details: Disney Interactive Studios, www.disney.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 13-up. Platform: Wii*, PlayStation 3. Teaches: deductive thinking, logic. Review date: 5/22/2007. ESRB Rating: Teen, Alcohol Reference, Mild Language, Simulated Gambling, Violence

Pogo Island

4.4 Stars

This is a collection of five addicting, timed sorting games adapted from the free casual gaming site www.pogo.com. Each game has three levels (easy, medium and hard), but even the easy levels can be challenging. There's a lot of brain-stretching to be had in these games, although most of the game play is merely addicting matching. For example, Word Whomp is a timed spelling game where you touch letters with the stylus in order to spell out as many words as quickly as possible. At the end of the round, the answers are shown, which helps you get better. Tri-Peaks Solitaire is a fast-paced solitaire game where players remove cards to uncover tokens and powerup bonus cards. The other three games--called Poppit!, Phlinx and Squelchies--are all multimedia adaptations of Tetris, requiring a good deal of spatial manipulation, matching, and at times, planning one or two steps ahead. We tried the easy level of each game in our testing and found them to be challenging, yet easy to learn. Each game has a short tutorial, and high scores are saved on the cartridge. There are two multiplayer modes. Party Play is where you pass the DS between four players, and Multi-Card Play lets you host other players. You can choose to jump directly to one of the activities or play an Island Adventure Story Mode, which is like a board game with a spinner. There are also micro-games scattered throughout the game. All in all, this is a nice collection of games that lean more toward fun than learning. Keep in mind that you can play each game for free, online at www.pogo.com. Details: EA Sports - Electronic Arts Canada, www.eagames.com. Price: \$30. Ages: 7-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches: logic, sorting, spelling. Review date: 4/11/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Pokemon Battle Revolution (Wii)

4.3 Stars

There are a lot of firsts for this Pokémon game. It is the first for the Wii, the first with online features, and the first to link a Nintendo DS to a game console, with no wires. Designed for one to four players, the game takes place on an island called Pokétopia. There are 11 Colosseums, and the object is to win all the battles and become the Poketopia Master. By using the Wi-Fi connection, players can use their Wii Remote to battle directly with friends after exchanging Friend Codes, or they can fight against anyone in the world, anytime. This is clearly a breakthrough in the Pokémon series.

In DS Battle Mode, you can link up your Wii to your DS, and then unlock your Nintendo DS Pokemon Diamond or Pokemon Pearl characters, if you own those games. Some of these characters could've come from earlier GBA versions of the game (Ruby Red or Leaf Green). So Nintendo is helping old characters live in new platforms. Players can also create and customize their own Battle Pass by transferring their favorite Pokemon from Diamond or Pearl onto the Pass. They can then save the Battle Pass to their Wii Remote and take it to a friend's house.

Tim (age 13) played the game for one hour, but did not try the online features. He did try the multiplayer features, however. He found the format to be repetitive when scrolling through a lot of text early on, but rated the program fun and easy to play. His recommendation? Buy it. Created by Genius Sonority for Nintendo.

Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 6-up. Platform: Wii. Teaches: reading, logic, classification, strategy. Review date: 6/28/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone, Fantasy Violence

Pokémon Diamond

4.8 Stars

This is the twin title to Pokémon Pearl (both released April 2007) and is another solid adventure that offers a good deal of depth, a lot of reading and problem solving opportunities as well as new content.

After signing, you start out as an aspiring Pokémon Trainer who can be a boy or a girl. The game takes place in a new location called Sinnoh, where 151 Pokémon are hiding. In the story, the bad Team Galactic is trying to rule the region with their bad Pokemon. You can prevent this by exploring the world and picking up clues as you interact with residents by exchanging lines of printed dialog and duel against their Pokémon.

New features include the ability to play with others in the same room, or use a Wi-Fi Connection to play with another registered player. The coolest new feature is the ability to chat with the other player using the Nintendo DS microphone peripheral; a specialized headset which is sold separately. Other smart features to note: the power of certain Pokémon is related to the time of day, and, according to Nintendo, once the player has become League Champion, he or she can use the dual-slot feature of the Nintendo DS to import Pokémon from older titles, including Ruby, Sapphire, FireRed, LeafGreen and Emerald. In addition, once players enter an area called Pal Park, they can see and capture their Pokémon from previous games, which are then permanently transferred to Pokémon Diamond and Pokémon Pearl. Up to six Pokémon per day can be transferred to Pal Park and then captured in Pokémon Diamond and Pokémon Pearl. Also, if players own Pokémon Ranger, they can enter a code (found on www.Manaphy.com) to unlock a mission to receive a special Manaphy Egg from Pokémon Ranger and then hatch it in Pokémon Diamond or Pokémon Pearl.

Pokémon Diamond and Pearl are proof that a good title can get even better.

Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$35. Ages: 7-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches: reading, logic, mathematics, graphs. Review date: 4/15/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Pokémon Fire Red

4.9 Stars

Part of two installments (with Leaf Green) to the addictive card/TV/movie franchise, this game contains one cartridge and a unique wireless adapter that plugs into the back of any Game Boy Advance or Game Boy Advance SP unit. The only difference between Green and Red titles are the sets of Pokémon characters; all other aspects of the game seem similar. The 2.4 GHz wireless adapter, by Freescale Semiconductor, has a range of 30 feet and enables up to 5 players to chat, trade or duel Pokémon simultaneously, with only a slight battery drain. That means two sisters can trade Pokémon or instant messages from their cozy beds, after the lights are out, as long as they're 30 feet from each other.

The main formula is unchanged from previous versions -- an 11 year old boy or girl explores a maze of towns, caves and houses in search of new Pokémon critters to duel in command based battles. The goal is to be the best trainer. While the last Pokémon cartridges were good, this version is better in subtle ways. For example, there's a better depiction of girl players, a better help system for beginner players, and more sophisticated Pokémon creatures that can evolve over time. We noticed a clever new review system, helping you remember what you did right before your last session. Wireless gameplay can be found by visiting any Pokémon center building, and going to the second floor, called the "Union Room" that opens if there is at least one eligible player in range. First, you visit the counter, where you can find out if there is any other player in range. If so, you can chat using a multiple-choice alphabet system, trade critters, or have a battle. Parents with multiple children will want to note that only one game can be saved per cartridge, creating an ideal scenario for a family feud when/if a little brother/sister erases a game. Reading is required, along with a good deal of deductive reasoning, making this a nice general cognitive activity. But it can also become socially isolating and addicting, even with the highly-touted multiplayer features -- remember that these features are not the core part of the game. All in all, this is the best addition to the Pokémon franchise we've reviewed. Developed by Game Freak for Nintendo.

Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$34.99. Ages: 6-14. Platform: Game Boy Advance. Teaches: logic, reading, deductive reasoning. Review date: 6/3/2004. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Pokémon Pearl

4.8 Stars

This continuation of the Pokémon card-dueling game contains new competitors, battles and the ability to fight against other players using the DS wireless system. It is a great early reading experience.

The storyline is very much like previous versions—a young boy or girl explores a maze of towns, caves and houses in search of new Pokémon critters to duel in command based battles using spells. The goal is to be the best trainer. Wireless gameplay can be found by visiting any Pokémon center building and going to the second floor, called the "Union Room" that opens if there is at least one eligible player in range. First, you visit the counter, where you can find out if there is any other player in range. If so, you can chat using a multiple-choice alphabet system, trade critters, or have a battle. Parents with multiple children will want to note that only one game can be saved per cartridge, creating an ideal scenario for a family feud when/if a little brother/sister erases a game. Reading is required, along with a good deal of deductive reasoning, making this a nice general cognitive activity. But it can also become socially isolating and addicting, even with the highly-touted multiplayer features—remember that these features are not the core part of the game. This is yet another excellent title in the Pokémon series. Buy it. Developed by Game Freak for Nintendo. Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$35. Ages: 7-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches: reading, math, logic, math. Review date: 4/15/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone

PQ: Practical Intelligence Quotient

4.5 Stars

Turn your PSP into a mind-bending puzzle center, with this collection of 100 3D puzzles. There are 13 puzzle types that start easy, but eventually become very hard. Most involve moving through different types of 3D grids. Many involve dodging timed laser beams, or strategically placing blocks on the grid to create a path. Progress can be saved. You can also test a player's problem-solving abilities. Scores are based not just on solving the puzzle, but also on how fast and how many moves it takes. Players can post their scores using the PSP's infrastructure mode to receive a world-wide ranking and compare their score with other players. All in all, this is an excellent and addicting exercise in logical-mathematical thinking. See also Brain Age for Nintendo DS. Details: D3Publisher of America, Inc., www.d3publisher.us. Price: \$30. Ages: 8-up. Platform: PSP. Teaches: logic, puzzles, problem solving, spatial relations. Review date: 1/20/2006. ESRB Rating: Everyone

PQ2: Practical Intelligence Quotient 2

4.6 Stars

The second edition of PQ, this game features a space-age interface and better Internet connectivity, so it is possible to download new puzzles each week. The heart of the program is the puzzles—250 3D block mazes—that involve moving a small man or woman (your choice) through 3D grids. Many involve dodging timed laser beams or strategically placing blocks to create a path. It takes a lot of persistence and problem-solving to solve these puzzles. The marketing materials seem to be casting this product as an IQ test of some sort, perhaps following the success of Brain Age. There is no actual IQ test in this game, though. What there is are some really challenging, clever puzzles.

After you enter your country, age range, gender and blood type (no kidding) you can start by taking a short test to get a PQ score. Or, you can follow the well-designed tutorials, which is recommended for first-time players. Up to four player profiles can be saved. This second version is easier to use, and you can jump to any puzzle. You can also create your own puzzles that can be uploaded to the Internet, as well as play against another player using the PSP's "Ad-Hoc" feature. Developed by Nowproduction Inc. for D3Publisher.

Details: D3Publisher of America, Inc., www.d3publisher.us. Price: \$30. Ages: 8-up. Platform: PSP. Teaches: logic, logical thinking, spatial relations, problem solving. Review date: 4/19/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Ratchet & Clank Future: Tools of Destruction

4.4 Stars

Designed especially to tap the graphics power of the PlayStation 3, this version of Ratchet & Clank sets a new standard in one-player shooters, at least in terms of fireworks. Note that it is a pretty hard game, with challenges that can frustrate even our seasoned players. But the challenge is worth the beautiful graphics in this game.

You control two wisecracking robots, Ratchet and Clank on a quest to save their race from an infestation of insect-like monsters. As you explore the detailed levels that include a cloud city and a space-age amusement park, you encounter plenty of things to smash and shoot which is necessary in order to kill off the enemy and restore health. Sound familiar? While this game follows a similar format as many first-person shooters, you can't help but notice the smooth animation and selection of weapons that include the Plasma Beasts and Tornado Launcher, which uses the Sixaxis motion-detection controller to direct tornadoes that suck up enemies and whip them around with debris. Some of the levels are incredibly rich, which makes this game all the more interesting. But first-time players, aged 12-up, struggled at first, even at the very first levels. So be prepared for a challenge, because the hand-holding in this game is limited. All in all, this is an excellent state-of-the-art game that could easily take up more than one weekend. Too bad there's no two player modes.

Details: Sony Computer Entertainment America Inc., www.us.playstation.com. Price: \$60. Ages: 10-up. Platform: PlayStation 3. Teaches: logic. Review date: 8/16/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Alcohol Reference, Animated Blood, Crude Humor, Fantasy Violence, Language

Ratchet & Clank: Size Matters

4.4 Stars

Testers liked this 1-4 player version of Ratchet & Clank, saying it is "fast paced and fun to play." In the game, Clank returns as a playable character, and players can control the gadgetbots or pilot super-sized robotic torsos as they engage in space combat missions as Giant Clank. The game features both new and familiar weapons including the Mootator, Agents of Doom and Shrink Ray. Players can unlock six armor types with a customizable armor system that gives Ratchet new abilities. The multiplayer mode is done through the PSP's wireless Ad-Hoc or Infrastructure mode. Ty (age 13) played the game for 8.5 hours, but didn't test the multiplayer options. He thought the game would be best for kids 10 and up. Weaknesses include loading into a saved file brings you to the beginning of the level and not at your nearest checkpoint. He liked the action packed fighting and the ability to upgrade your character. There was no worrisome content. Buy it! Developed by High Impact Games for the PSP.

Details: Sony Computer Entertainment America Inc., www.scea.com. Price: \$40. Ages: 8-up. Platform: PSP. Teaches: logic, strategy. Review date: 2/20/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Animated Blood, Fantasy Violence

Rayman Raving Rabbids TV Party

4.4 Stars

The zany antics of Rayman (Ubisoft's set of screaming, crazy rabbits) continue with this second edition in the series. This title is best described as a competitive party game for one to four players simultaneously. In addition, some of the games can be played by up to eight players who can take turns. Note that this is one of the few eight-player Wii titles.

After each player signs in, you are asked to test your movement skills in the 65 short minigames. Some of these are very innovative, such as a sledding game in which you sit on the Wii Balance Board (optional), steering by shifting your weight. When you go over a jump, you need to match poses using the controllers, or avoid snowballs being thrown by the other players, keeping everyone involved. However, you don't need a Wii balance board to play the games (the game recognizes if you have one). Another game lets you dance, using the Wii Remote and Nunchuk (required) to match the music on the screen. A big part of the game is dancing -- which has you waving your hands in the air. Accurate motions score more points, that can be shared online. This game takes some getting used to. Some parents may not like the irreverent tone of the rabbits. Still, there's no worrisome content, and once you get past the setup screens (which younger children will need help with), you'll find plenty of addictive games to share with other players. Note that the ratings apply only to the Wii version.

Details: Ubisoft, Inc., www.ubisoft.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 6-up. Platform: Nintendo DS, Wii*. Teaches: movement, gross motor coordination. Review date: 7/16/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Comic Mischievous

Rayman: Raving Rabbids

4.2 Stars

Certainly more fun than educational, this Wii game makes great use of Nintendo's new kinesthetic control system, for as many as four players. Our testers loved it. Note that we only reviewed the Wii version of this game.

The zany story behind the game is how Rayman is being threatened by an invasion of crazed bunnies. It is up to you to help him save the world by twirling cows over your head (by spinning the Wii controller like a lasso, letting go of the trigger to throw the cows at the bunnies) and by milking pigs (pumping the controllers in the air). Rayman can master each animal's unique capabilities to help in his battle against the rabbits. Testers liked how you can customize and disguise Rayman.

Details: UbiSoft, Inc., www.ubisoft.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 6-up. Platform: Wii*, Windows, PlayStation 2, Xbox 360. Teaches: rhythm, movement, strategy. Review date: 11/30/2006. ESRB Rating: Everyone, Cartoon Violence, Comic Mischievous

Rock Band

Update June 10, 2008. The Wii edition of Rock Band shipped June 23, 2008. The core gameplay is the same and there are no motion-related controls. Differences include a white drum set that must be hard wired to the powered USB expander, that plugs into the Wii. The guitar is wireless, and is different than the Wii Guitar Hero guitar (it has no relationship to the Wii), connecting to a dongle (a small receiver) that also plugs into the USB expander. The gameplay is pretty much identical to the other versions, although five additional songs have been added to the library (Roxanne, Dirty Little Secret, Don't Look Back in Anger, Rockaway Beach and Rome).

The following review ran in our December '07 issue:

A great cooperative play opportunity for kids and adults alike, this four-player game combines the elements of Guitar Hero and Karaoke Revolution. Each player gets their own instrument -- vocals, bass, drums and guitar -- so they can play together in a simulated live rock concert. (Note that only one guitar is included in the \$170 price. See below for more information regarding peripherals and compatibility.)

In the game, you try to keep up with the flow of notes, on a color-coded fret board, drum set or stream of lyrics, each shown in one of four areas of the screen. The singer matches the words and pitch of the song in order to score points. The computer listens to each note, and if it passes inspection, the player earns more points; a process first developed by two graduate students in the MIT media lab. The reward, of course, is what any musician craves: thousands of screaming fans. Bad notes can result in you "failing out," although the other band members can carry the tune in order to finish. However, if one player is knocked out three times, the instrument fades away until the next song.

The song list contains 58 licensed songs, 13 of which can be unlocked with good scores. Artists include The Who, David Bowie, Blue Oyster Cult, The Ramones, Rush, Bon Jovi, Nirvana, Stone Temple Pilots, Weezer, Foo Fighters, Metallica, The Hives, The Strokes, and Queens of the Stone Age. Some songs are simulations, but most are built on the original musical tracks, so it really feels like you're standing in the middle of a recording studio, playing with the master tracks. The Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 versions allow for internet game play as well as the ability to download more songs, including complete albums. (Prices range from \$.99 to \$2.99 per track; more for complete albums. See www.rockband.com for complete information.) The Wii and PS2 version do not support this online feature.

The 'special edition' includes game software, drums (with sticks but no stool), microphone and one Fender Stratocaster guitar peripheral (wireless for PS3 and PS2; wired for Xbox 360). This means in order to have four-person gameplay, you need to have another guitar. Stand-alone Rock Band instruments won't be available for individual purchase until January 2008, but you might be in luck if you happen to own a previous version of Guitar Hero. According to Harmonix, "Rock Band is designed to work with the open-controller standards of the Xbox 360 and PlayStation platforms, and should therefore work with third-party controllers that are also based on those standards."

However, there are compatibility issues with the PS3 Guitar Hero III Les Paul guitar controller not working with the PS3 version of Rock Band. Harmonix is reportedly working on a patch. It is also important to note that controllers are specific to the console they were designed for. Therefore, you can't use any type of Xbox 360 controller (including guitars) on a PS3 or PS2 or Wii -- or vice versa.

So what other guitar peripherals will work for the bass part? If you're an Xbox 360 owner, both the wired X-Plorer Guitar Hero II guitar and the Guitar Hero III Les Paul guitar (as well as other unspecified third-party Xbox 360 guitar peripherals) will work. Likewise, the PS2 Guitar Hero II will work on PS2 Rock Band, as well as on the PS2 version of Guitar Hero III. The Rock Band Stratocaster guitar is the same for the PS2 and PS3, and therefore will work on both systems. The Wii version uses its own wireless guitars (Note: If you later upgrade to a PS3, your PS2 Rock Band Stratocaster guitar will work on the PS3, but the PS2 Guitar Hero guitars will not.) This leaves PS3 owners out of luck until Harmonix issues a patch. Or you can wait until 2008 to buy a second Stratocaster guitar. In addition, the PS3 Rock Band Stratocaster is not compatible with PS3 Guitar Hero III.

Other peripheral notes: Rock Band also supports two microphones for head-to-head competition. However, in full band play, you can only have one singer. Harmonix notes that Rock Band works with the current USB collection of headsets and mics. A plug adapter is available for the Xbox 360 allowing you to plug in a three-prong Xbox 360 headset into the drum or guitar if needed. A USB port hub is included with the Xbox 360 and PS2 versions, but not the PS3 version, so if you have the smaller 40GB PS3 console, you will need to get a hub to connect all the peripherals. The PS2 version was released on December 18 for \$160. The game is also available for purchase individually (\$60), so if you have a compatible guitar controller and mic, you could play vocals, lead guitar or bass guitar. A good sound system, large TV, and cooperative neighbors (perhaps with ear plugs) are also good ideas. Hands down, this is a very fun party game for anyone 10 and up. More information can be found at www.rockband.com.

Details: Harmonix Music Systems, Inc., www.harmonixmusic.com. Price: \$170 (includes 3 instruments). Ages: 10-up. Platform: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PlayStation 2, Wii. Teaches: cooperative learning, timing, rock music, timing, temporal relations, fine motor skills, pitch, rhythm. Review date: 7/26/2007. ESRB Rating: Teen, Mild Lyrics Suggestive Themes

Rock Band (Wii)

4.6 Stars

The Wii edition of Rock Band, which shipped June 23, 2008 features a white set of drums and wireless guitar controllers. As with the other editions, just one guitar ships with the kit. If you want to add a bass or second guitar part, you'll need to purchase a second guitar. The core gameplay is the same, and there are no motion-related controls, as you might expect from a Wii version. The drum set must be hard wired to the powered USB expander that plugs into the Wii. Also, we should note that this version of Rock Band is not compatible with the version of Guitar Hero for Wii.

With Rock Band Wii the guitars transmit signals (each requires three AAA batteries) to a dongle (a small receiver) that plugs into Wii's USB expander. The gameplay is pretty much identical to the other versions, although five additional songs have been added to the library (Roxanne, Dirty Little Secret, Don't Look Back in Anger, Rockaway Beach and Rome). More information can be found at www.rockband.com.

Details: Harmonix Music Systems, Inc., www.harmonixmusic.com. Price: \$170 (includes 3 instruments). Ages: 10-up. Platform: Wii*. Teaches: cooperative learning, timing, rock music, timing, temporal relations, fine motor skills, pitch, rhythm. Review date: 6/11/2008. ESRB Rating: Teen, Mild Lyrics
Suggestive Themes

Rock Band 2

4.5 Stars

This second generation of Rock Band has better drums and offers an overall smoother experience, both for novices and seasoned players. The guitars and the drum set are wireless, and are higher quality. Content includes 80 songs on disc, plus an additional 20 via download from AC/DC, Guns N' Roses (a debut new release), Bob Dylan, Metallica and Pearl Jam. Old Rock Band tracks must be updated (for a small fee) in order to work with Rock Band 2. You can see a complete list of songs here: <http://www.rockband.com/forums/showthread.php?t=63006>.

Harmonix is promising new releases every week to bring the library up to 500 songs within a year -- that's 200 songs from the original, 100 with release, and 200 more over time. The new Guitar controllers have a "reinforced strum bar, quieter buttons, wireless functionality, along with a built in calibration tool that automatically sets your AV setup". The drum set is also wireless, and includes thicker pads that are velocity sensitive, plus an improved (thankfully) pedal that is less likely to break.

According to press materials, RB2 will work with 3rd party support with a deal with Mad Catz -- who are making a guitar and bass the size and weight of real Fender instruments and a cymbal add-on for more realistic (and difficult) drumming. Like Guitar Hero World Tour, RB2 can work with the ION Drum Rocker, a more realistic \$300 drum kit that works as a controller but is designed as a stand-alone instrument. The bottom line? While our testers liked the familiarity and ease of use of Rock Band 2 a bit more than Guitar Hero World Tour, both cost the same, and offer very similar experiences. You might want to have a look at the music lists to make up your mind.

Details: Harmonix Music Systems, Inc., www.harmonixmusic.com. Price: \$190. Ages: 8-up. Platform: Xbox 360 (September, others TBA), PS3, PS2, Wii. Teaches: music, rhythm. Review date: 8/1/2008. ESRB Rating: Teen, Suggestive Themes
Strong Lyrics

Rubik's World

4.2 Stars

If you're ready to give your cerebellum a stretch -- and we mean a real stretch -- Rubik's World, with versions both for the Wii and the Nintendo DS, is a good choice. Just be ready to read the instructions before you try to play one of the eight games, which can be confusing in a bad type of way.

Each activity is based generally on the idea that the cubes, called "cubies" can be thrown, stacked, placed into mazes, or used to create patterns in order to solve one of the multitiered puzzles. Most start easy and progressively get harder, and some offer incredible problem-solving opportunities. Both the Wii and the Nintendo DS versions contain traditional-looking Rubik's Cubes -- the famous 3D twisting cube consisting of 36 colored squares that can easily drive you insane unless you figure out the patterns. In the Wii version, one task is to use the colors to program a path through a maze. Another has you building a matching Rubik's Cube using three different plans, each showing a different angle. As a result, you have to do the flips and turns in your mind, which is not an easy task. Our testers found some of the games, such as "Compose", to be simply too complex and gave up; but others, like "View", are hard to stop playing. "Deconstruct" is a lot like EA's Boom Blox, where you toss carefully aimed cubes at a structure to earn points.

Nearly all the puzzles are timed, and they take a good deal of concentration. Both versions also offer multiplayer, although there's far less content that can be shared than when in one-player mode. This is a game to borrow for sure, and to buy if you're really interested in puzzles. It could also be used in the classroom to provide a challenge to any child who really needs a challenge. Up to nine different game profiles can be saved. The price is \$40 for the Wii version and \$30 for the DS version. Developed by Two Tribes (based in Europe) for The Game Factory.

Details: The American Game Factory, Inc., www.gamefactorygames.com. Price: \$40. Ages: 8-up. Platform: Wii, Nintendo DS. Teaches: logic, programming, problem solving, spatial relations. Review date: 12/3/2008. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Scooby-Doo: Unmasked

4.6 Stars

If you could step inside the Scooby-Doo cartoon, this is what it would be like. Your goal? To collect enough Scooby Snacks to keep monsters at bay, and free Fred's cousin. Our testers noted that the game is especially easy to learn and play. A one-player game, you can make Scooby run, jump, roll, and spin through ChinaTown, a sewer tunnel and in a factory, collecting ingredients for food and health. We played through 25% of the game, in about 2 hours, and did not notice any puzzle solving opportunities--this game is light on the learning. All text is narrated, so no reading is required. This is a good starter game for younger children.

Details: THQ, Inc., www.thq.com. Price: \$29.99. Ages: 5-up. Platform: PS2, Xbox, GameCube, GBA and DS*. Teaches: logic, deductive reasoning, sorting. Review date: 8/3/2005. ESRB Rating: Everyone, Cartoon Violence

Secret Agent Clank

4.4 Stars

This one-player game for the PSP is the newest game in the Ratchet & Clank series and features Clank as the Galaxy's greatest undercover agent. In the story, Ratchet is locked in a maximum security prison for a crime he didn't commit, and you must follow Clank as a secret agent and prove Ratchet's innocence.

Using stealth, puzzle solving, combat, and a variety of clever weapons, you follow clues and gather evidence. There's a good deal of problem solving in these games, plus some fun creativity. You will also play as Ratchet, receiving weapons from Clank to help you stay alive in prison. Other playable characters include Captain Qwark and Gadgetbot. The game features weapons and gadgets such as the Tanglevine Carnation, Cufflink Bombs, and the deadly Tie-A-Rang — as well as spy vehicles such as sport cars, speedboats and snowboards.

Details: Sony Computer Entertainment America Inc., www.us.playstation.com. Price: \$40. Ages: 10-up. Platform: PSP. Teaches: logic, strategy, puzzle solving. Review date: 5/13/2008. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+

Shrek the Third (Nintendo DS)

4.4 Stars

This is a well-designed multiplayer side-scrolling game for the Nintendo DS. To get through a typical level, you must switch between Shrek (who can punch), Puss in Boots (who can jump and sword fight) or Arthur (who can shoot magic spells or float on his shield). There are switches that control moving platforms, ladders to climb, streams to cross and nasty birds to shoot at.

By changing between each character (just touch the icon on the screen bottom) you can get through the level. If you happen to have two other friends, each with a copy of the game, you can play the game in three-player cooperative mode, which adds a nice social twist to the game. Friends without the game can download a demo, but that's all.

If you make it all the way through the game (which we didn't do), you are rewarded with powerups. You can also unlock these capabilities by starting up the game with a Shrek GBA cartridge in your DS slot. Pretty clever. While this isn't the easiest game to master, our testers liked the variety of the challenges, and found the *Shrek* humor to be nicely depicted. Jon (19) says, "I don't normally like movie games, but this one is really worth playing."

Details: Activision, Inc., www.activision.com. Price: \$40. Ages: 7-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches: logic, memory, problem solving. Review date: 5/29/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Crude Humor, Cartoon Violence

Shrek the Third (PS2)

4.3 Stars

This brawl-filled scavenger hunt features rich graphics, plenty of action and narration right out of the movie. As movie games go, this is certainly a solid one, with a bit of problem-solving thrown in as a bonus. Our testers found little not to like about this game, with its nice mix of levels to explore, puzzles, and humor. Like the Wii version, younger children (ages 6 and 7) will certainly experience a few "Hey Mom" moments with the tasks. Unlike the DS version, you can't change characters on the fly.

The only two-player option is a catapult game that is also "rather lame." The other five mini games, on the other hand, are addicting and fun—including target practice (shoot ships with a cannon), frog herding, and "Shrekleboard" (a version of shuffleboard). These offer a nice variety of options, and the target practice is addicting and easy. Our testers ranked both the PS2 and Wii versions of this game about the same, but liked the DS version the best of the three. "This is one of the best PS2 games I have played in awhile and the only thing I find wrong with it is that you can't switch characters on the fly."

Details: Activision, Inc., www.activision.com. Price: \$40. Ages: 7-up. Platform: PlayStation 2*, Wii, Nintendo DS. Teaches: logic, spatial relations, strategy. Review date: 5/17/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Crude Humor, Cartoon Violence

SimAnimals

4.6 Stars

Fun and educational, this latest addition to the Sims, for both Wii and Nintendo DS, lets you manage the plants and animals from a typical peaceful northern forest. Our testers found the game to be easy to learn and hard to stop playing. As educators, we were happy to see some authentic animal facts mixed into an excellent higher order thinking opportunity.

You are represented by a large, on-screen hand that you move with the Wii Remote or DS stylus. You can pick up a fox and place it next to a squirrel to see how they behave, or toss an ornery skunk into a stream. Don't worry -- if the fox decides to eat the squirrel, you only see a cloud of dust. There's no graphic violence or other worrisome content in this open-ended experience.

You start by taking a tutorial that shows you the essentials -- how to shake a tree to dislodge an acorn; and then either store in your backpack for use later, or perhaps place it next to a squirrel to make it happy. Placing your hand over any water makes a rain cloud, which you can move over a seed to make it sprout into a tree. Once the squirrel is happy with you (as indicated with a small bar graph) you can move to the next part of your forest to increase other happiness levels. Your goal is to get all 34 animals and 60 plants in balance; if you do, you can unlock the next area of the forest, with a harder set of challenges.

A reference encyclopedia helps you learn which plants grow better in damp soil, and that certain animals need others animals to survive. While the facts are real, there's a range of fun fictional elements, which keeps the game moving along. The Wii version makes it easy to play cooperatively with up to four players, on the same screen. You just pick up a controller and the game dumps you in, Nunchuk optional. The Nintendo DS version includes features such as the ability to blow into the microphone to become the wind to spread blossoms or knock fruit down from the trees. Both versions require a bit of reading in order to understand the challenges. One flaw with the Wii version is that saving your progress isn't automatic or obvious, resulting in a disaster when a child loses an evening's work. If you're looking for a wonderful higher order thinking experience, get this game, and don't tell the kids they're learning about ecosystems. Prices are \$50 for the Wii and \$30 for the DS version. See the CTR testers at work with an early version of the game, here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ueQOpRwBJw>.

Details: Electronic Arts, Inc., www.ea.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 10-up. Platform: Wii, Nintendo DS. Teaches: biology, ecology, animals, northern forests, plants, herbology. Review date: 9/10/2008. ESRB Rating: Everyone, Comic Mischievous

Simpsons Game, The

4.8 Stars

Easy to play, and packed with crass jokes and video game industry insider humor, The Simpsons Game just might be one of the best RPGs (role playing games) ever made. Just be warned that just about every possible ESRB content descriptor applies to the content, with gender and ethnic stereotyping on par with a typical Simpsons TV episode. The drop-in, drop-out feature means that two players can work together to team up on the challenges, making the game a social experience.

You start in the Land of Chocolate, where you steer Homer around in an effort to eat everything. This part of the game uses traditional video game controls, and such features as a power burp to melt enemies to the ground. The next fifteen levels are parodies on video game history, with titles like Shadow the Colossal Donut, Grand Theft Scratchy, Medal of Homer, and a parody on Japanese games called "Big Super Happy Fun Fun Game." The final chapter is called "Five Characters in Search of an Author" which leads up to Simpson's creator Matt Groening's house, where you battle the evil lawyers.

At any time, you can switch between one of five Simpsons characters, each with his or her own attributes. The game is easy to play, and there's plenty of coaching for novice players. While there's a bit of logic and problem solving in this game, it has far more entertainment value, and it is one of the first ever attempts to parody the video game industry, making it a one-of-a-kind. Prices are \$60 for the Xbox 360 and PS3 versions, \$50 for the Wii, \$40 for the PS2 and PSP, and \$30 for the DS version. We tested the PS3 and the Xbox 360 versions.

Details: Electronic Arts, Inc., www.ea.com. Price: \$60. Ages: 13-up. Platform: Xbox 360*, PlayStation 3, Wii, PlayStation 2, Nintendo DS, PSP. Teaches: logic, video game history. Review date: 7/16/2007. ESRB Rating: Teen, Alcohol Reference, Tobacco Reference, Animated Blood, Cartoon Violence, Crude Humor, Language, Suggestive Themes

Sims 2 Castaway, The

4.7 Stars

Giving new meaning to the one-player game, this edition of the Sims is noteworthy for several reasons. The biggest is that for the first time in a Sims game, players can directly take control of one Sim character, playing in the first person, rather than clicking on the screen to make the characters walk around the screen. This direct control gives the game a new kind of intimacy and control that has always been missing from prior Sim games. It is also used in many other games, so it is easy to learn. Our testers were hooked. You start by designing your Sim. While there are millions of combinations of body styles, skin colors, jewelry and clothing, the unique and well-tested interface makes it easy to figure out what to do. Strangely, though, all the tinkering in the world seems to result in yet another type of thin, young adult model.

Next, you see a short video of your Sim being thrown overboard from a ship. The screen goes black, and your Sim wakes up on a deserted beach. You survive by collecting, building, exploring caves, playing with the monkeys to stay sane, and working with others to build shelters. If you are successful, your Sim's health and happiness goes up. But this can be hard, due to things like sudden storms and the constant shortage of good food.

In the DS version, children use the stylus to hunt for bugs, go spear fishing, and painting. Note that it is important to learn how to save progress over time, especially with the PS2, Wii and DS versions. Prices and ratings are: \$50 for the Nintendo Wii (T); \$40 for the PS2 (T) and PSP (E10+); and the DS version is \$30 (E). Will your Sim survive or thrive? That is up to you.

Details: Electronic Arts, Inc., www.ea.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 10-up. Platform: Wii, PlayStation 2, Nintendo DS, PSP. Teaches: creativity, biology, survival skills. Review date: 10/24/2007. ESRB Rating: Teen, Crude Humor, Mild Violence, Suggestive Themes

Sims 2: The

4.8 Stars

The PC version of the Sims used to be the best, with the Console versions lagging behind in details and control. Not anymore. This sophisticated people simulator lets you create and control realistic people; but the best new feature is the simultaneous split-screen control option for two players. Other features include the ability to create a family tree, or make individuals with a variety of facial features, hairstyles and outfits. There's plenty of content, including 10,000 fashion styles and 16 locations, with 400 building options. Note that some of the themes are mature, involving dating, romance, and non-graphical physical relations such as hugging, kissing, dancing and so on. A story mode will bring your Sim in contact with as many as 60 story characters. If you liked the Sims 2 for Windows, you'll likely notice the same features, with more ease of use.

Details: Electronic Arts, Inc., www.ea.com. Price: \$39.99. Ages: 13-up. Platform: PS2, Xbox, GameCube. Teaches: creativity, logic. Review date: 10/27/2005. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, crude humor, sexual themes, violence

Sims Life Stories, The (PC)

4.4 Stars

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

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

Details: Electronic Arts, Inc., www.ea.com. Price: \$40. Ages: 12-up. Platform: Windows XP. Teaches: creativity, logic. Review date: 2/21/2007. ESRB Rating: Teen, Violence, Sexual Themes, Crude Humor

SingStar Pop

4.6 Stars

Want to exercise your singing voice? Here's a solution, for either one or two players. This follow-up to SingStar Rocks (www.us.playstation.com/SingStar/) takes the typical Karaoke experience up a notch, with smart features that include the ability to evaluate the pitch of your voice. There's also an online component where you can post high scores, download music or compete against as many as eight players. We did not test the online component. The single disk contains 38 songs, each with an MTV-style video. Artists include Alicia Keys, Britney Spears, Cyndi Lauper (Girls Just Wanna Have Fun), U2, Rihanna, the All-American Rejects (Move Along), The Clash, and Panic at the Disco. As you would expect from the lyrics of the songs and suggestive videos, not all the content is appropriate for children, hence the E10+ rating.

As with the previous version of SingStar, players can perform a solo or try the Cooperative Duet Mode, One-On-One Battle Mode or the team-based Pass-the-Mic Mode. After any song, you can replay your performance. Other features include the ability to incorporate your own image into the video (if you have an optional EyeToy) and some cool vocal mixing tools that can modify your voice.

The \$30 price does not include a microphone; however, there is a \$50 bundle that includes two well-designed microphones that plug into one USB adapter, leaving a port free for your EyeToy. The game uses the same visual feedback system used by Karaoke Revolution (Konami), making this a very strong musical experience. If you're looking for a solid singing game, SingStar is certainly worth consideration, especially if you have a duet partner around.

Details: Sony Computer Entertainment America Inc., www.scea.com. Price: \$30. Ages: 10-up. Platform: PlayStation 2. Teaches: music, pitch, language experience (reading lyrics), rhythm, singing. Review date: 5/27/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Alcohol Reference, Mild Lyrics, Mild Violence, Suggestive Themes

SingStar Rocks!

4.6 Stars

Think "Karaoke Revolution" — only with real music videos — and you get the idea of this competitive singing game, for up to eight players. Content consists of 30 songs and music videos from such artists as Gwen Stefani, Coldplay, Elton John and The Rolling Stones. Our testers especially liked the two-player mode, where they could compete against one another to see who could get a higher score. As a language activity, this is a good way to playfully introduce vocabulary by way of song lyrics, in a very active way. If you have an EyeToy (optional) you can see your own image, mixed on the screen with the likes of Elton John or The Rolling Stones. There are multiple game modes including Solo, Freestyle, Pass The Mic, Battle and Duet. The software has the ability to recognize the pitch, tone and rhythm of your voice. The more notes you fill in, the higher your ranking. It is also possible to record a performance on a Memory Card for future playback, or customize and enhance your playback with numerous audio effects. Songs come in different challenge levels and lengths. The price (\$50) includes two USB microphones, the game and a Singstar USB converter. Note that some of the songs have suggestive lyrics, hence the E10+ rating. If you're looking for a great singing game, this a good choice.

Details: Sony Computer Entertainment America Inc., www.scea.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 10-up. Platform: PlayStation 2. Teaches: music, pitch, language experience (reading lyrics), rhythm, singing. Review date: 5/24/2006. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Lyrics Suggestive Themes, Tobacco Reference

Skate City Heroes

4.4 Stars

For those tiring of the dozens of Tony Hawk-like skating games out there, keep reading. Designed for one to four players, this fun, but tricky skating game brings a new dimension to onscreen skating thanks to the clever integration of the Wii controls, including the balance board (optional).

Note that Nunchuks are required. The downside is that there's a learning curve, and reading is required in order to get through the tutorial, which our testers said "can be tough." So younger children will need help.

The game is presented in Japanese Anime-style cartoons. If you're looking for realistic, Tony Hawk-like graphics, this isn't the game for you. The game takes place in the context of a story in which you try to save your kidnapped skating buddy. You can play as six characters that are gradually unlocked — each with different skating abilities, as you explore the futuristic skating parks. You can jump, grind on rails, pull combos, and skate between cars — eventually earning enough points to free your friend. We noticed no worrisome content. If you're looking for a new twist to skating programs, buy or borrow this title.

Details: Zoo Games Inc., www.zoogamesinc.com. Price: \$30. Ages: 7-up. Platform: Wii. Teaches: temporal relations, gross motor skills, timing, reading. Review date: 1/16/2009. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Sly 3: Honor Among Thieves

4.8 Stars

Addicting and fun, this 3rd installment in the adventures of Sly Cooper is set in Venice, Italy, with plenty of imaginative 3D environments to explore, and a two player game of tag (in split screen) set to a fully orchestrated score. There's no worrisome content, and a lot of fun game options. For example, you can ride on moving boats around the streets, jumping over bridges as you try to hide from (or find) your partner. The game is best for ages 10-up. The game includes bonus levels that are shown in 3D as long as you wear the special glasses, which are included). Created for Sony by Sucker Punch Productions. Buy it.

Details: Sony Computer Entertainment America Inc., www.scea.com. Price: \$40. Ages: 10-up. Platform: PS2. Teaches: logical thinking, spatial relations. Review date: 6/24/2005. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Cartoon Violence

Smarty Pants

4.6 Stars

This fast-paced multiple-choice trivia game for the Nintendo Wii offers both depth and ease-of-use for up to four players that can vary in level, with either one remote to be passed, or with multiple remotes. A Nunchuck is not required.

Of course, the core of any trivia game is the questions. This game has a lot -- 20,000 (per publisher), divided into eight categories (books, entertainment, sports, art, science and math, people and places, games and fashion). Because each player enters his or her age at the start of the game, the program adjusts the questions accordingly. Each question is presented along with a timer, represented by a burning fuse. In order to score points, you must enter the correct answer in multiple choice format before time runs out, either by clicking on the answer, or in some cases by raising your hand (the motion is picked up by the Wii remote). Questions we spotted include, "Who founded Google", and "Which of the following four occupations can be found in the World of Warcraft?"

The questions come fast. Players' answers are tracked, and the game automatically adjusts the difficulty. Besides the hand-raising, the Wii remote is used for actions such as spinning the category wheel, tug-o-wars over correct answers, and dance-offs between players. These movement games help break the monotony of reading hundreds of multiple-choice questions.

Note that a good deal of reading is required to understand the questions, and incorrect answers are not explained, reducing the educational value of the experience. But the plus side of this is that it is fast and responsive -- this game delivers more questions within a shorter period of time than any other trivia game we've tested. If you like trivia and have a Wii, this is a good choice. See the demo at <http://www.ea.com/smartypants/>.

Details: Electronic Arts, Inc., www.ea.com. Price: \$40. Ages: 8-up. Platform: Wii. Teaches: trivia, reading, art, science, technology, music, fashion. Review date: 11/15/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Snoopy vs. The Red Baron (PS2)

4.5 Stars

If you're looking for an easy-to-play, action-packed flying game for one player, look no further at this superbly-designed flying game. It is one of those rare games that a preschooler can play, yet an experienced older player will find enjoyable. Note that we tested the PS2 version.

Admittedly, it may be a little strange to see the the mixing of the Peanuts gang in such wartime battles, but the entire feel of this game is playful action. In the game, you play as WWI Flying Ace Snoopy, and pilot aircraft through six worlds, collecting clues to reveal the whereabouts of The Red Baron. Players can upgrade with 25 weapons and gadgets and fight through 20 single-player and co-op missions. While there is one multiplayer mini-game dogfight, most of the action is reserved for one player.

Testers raved, "this game is so awesome! The missions are fun, and you never crash!" They especially liked all the surprises, trick moves and variety of the objectives. Note that there is no actual killing -- when an enemy plane is shot down, the pilots parachute to safety. Developed by SmartBomb Interactive for Namco.

Details: Namco Hometek, Inc., www.namco.com. Price: \$29.99. Ages: 6-up. Platform: PlayStation 2*, PSP, Windows XP, Windows 98. Teaches: spatial relations, temporal relations, logic. Review date: 1/12/2006. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Cartoon Violence

Sonic Riders: Zero Gravity

4.4 Stars

Testers agreed that this version of Sonic Riders (release date, 1/8/08) qualifies as "another good, really fast Sonic game." New features include a gravity-altering power that can transform walls into tracks and the ability to create a black hole that sucks you through and gives you a speed boost. You can race at the speed of light on 16 courses in 60 vehicles that include a hover board, motorcycle and futuristic hover craft. The ability to switch vehicles mid-race, to best suit your racing styles is a plus, along with the ability to race another player, in split screen mode.

You can play as Sonic or one of 18 other characters, and compete with up to three friends in the multiplayer modes: Free Race, World Grand Prix and Survival mode. In the Wii version, you can download ghost data (you see the outline of the other player) to hone your racing skills to try to beat the top racers.

Our tester (Devon, age 15) played the Wii version for about two hours and found that the graphics weren't that great and could be tuned up a little. But he liked the fast-paced, addicting nature of the game. If you like racing games and have never tried Sonic before, this could be a fun addition to your Wii or PS2 library.

Details: Sega of America, www.sega.com. Price: \$40. Ages: 8-up. Platform: Wii*, PlayStation 2. Teaches: racing, logic, hand/eye coordination. Review date: 1/11/2008. ESRB Rating: Everyone, Cartoon Violence

Sonic Rivals

4.5 Stars

See also *Sonic Rivals 2*.

Easy to play and addicting, this racing game is for one to two players. It starts out as a friendly race between Sonic -- a very speedy hedgehog -- and his friend Knuckles, but quickly gets intense as other rivals enter the race. Players can utilize boost moves and power-ups as Sonic's rivals try to trip, shove or vault over Sonic while hurtling towards the finish line. Players must negotiate twisting 3D tracks, avoid hazardous traps and watch out for Dr. Eggman and his contraptions.

In Single-Player Mode, you compete one-on-one with each of Sonic's rivals. In Multiplayer Mode you can race against a friend. The game features four characters and four different story lines, a rewards system based on trading card-collecting to enhance your character's skills, as well as character customization. Wi-Fi connectivity allows you to wager trading cards for various multiplayer challenges. If you're looking for a fun two-player racing game for the PSP, this is a good choice. Developed by Backbone Entertainment for Sega.

Details: Sega of America, www.sega.com. Price: \$40. Ages: 6-up. Platform: PSP. Teaches: logic, temporal relations. Review date: 12/5/2006. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Sonic Rivals 2

4.4 Stars

Fast-paced and well-designed, the second edition PSP version of Sonic the Hedgehog lets you compete against eight Sonic characters, including Tails, Espio and Rouge, characters that were absent from the first Sonic Rivals.

No reading is required, and the game is easy to learn, making this a possible consideration for younger players.

For anyone who has played any one of the older Sonic games, there are few surprises, with plenty of interesting levels to explore, laced with racing opportunities on classic looping tracks. New to this title is the competition aspect, where you can race either against the computer or another person. Note that your partner will also need a copy of the game. Our tester noted that the story is rather confusing to anyone who hasn't been following the series, but that doesn't seem to matter too much. The fun part of this game is the racing. All-in-all, this is a solid title PSP, and aside from the prequel, there's really nothing like it out there. Buy it.

Details: Sega of America, www.sega.com. Price: \$40. Ages: 6-up. Platform: PSP. Teaches: some logic, racing, fine motor coordination. Review date: 11/27/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Spider-Man: Friend or Foe

4.5 Stars

Yet another solid game in the Spider-Man franchise, this game features drop-in, drop-out interactivity (much like LEGO Star Wars). We reviewed the Wii version. In the game, two players can work together to defeat bad guys like Doc Ock, Green Goblin, Venom, and Sandman, and embark on a quest to overcome a worldwide evil threat. Players can control Spider-Man and one of many Super Hero or Super Villain characters and master unique fighting moves and styles while switching between characters to execute team combos and defeat enemies. Wii specific moves include the ability to punch with the Nunchuk (required), or throw enemies by twirling the Wii Remote. In addition, the game features a co-op mode in which a friend can join the game at any time and take control of Spider-man's sidekick as they battle together. Prices range from \$20 (for Windows) to \$50 (for the Xbox 360, Wii and PS3). Visit www.friendorfoe.com.

Details: Activision, Inc., www.activision.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 8-up. Platform: PlayStation 2, PlayStation 3, Wii, Xbox 360, Nintendo DS, PSP, Windows. Teaches: cooperative play, fighting, strategy. Review date: 10/10/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Cartoon Violence

SpongeBob SquarePants: Creature From the Krusty Krab

? Stars

Plankton has grown into a gigantic monster who is rampaging through Bikini Bottom. Your job is to help the SpongeBob Gang save the day, by either fighting, flying, skydiving, chasing or driving through seven levels. This isn't your typical SpongeBob game. It was created by Blitz (PS2, GC, Wii) and Wayforward (GBA, DS) to expand modes of play and the look of the game. This is shown in the art style. At one point in the game, you visit a comic book world of Starfishman, and the game becomes comic-book looking, in 2D art.

Our testers liked how easy the game was to play and the rich variety of things to do. For example, you can steer Patrick through an asteroid field or race through the wreckage of Bikini Bottom in a hot rod racer. There is a lot to this game. It is a one-player game, although the DS version will have some two-player elements.

Price is \$29.99 for DS & GBA.

Details: THQ, Inc., www.thq.com. Price: \$39.99. Ages: 6-up. Platform: PlayStation 2, GameCube, Game Boy Advance, Nintendo DS, Wii. Teaches: art, strategy, spatial problem solving, logic. Review date: 5/31/2006. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Spore (Windows/Macintosh)

4.7 Stars

What begins as a cell in a tide pool just might end up as a space-age civilization with Spore, a \$50 Mac/Windows title that mixes creativity with strategy. Despite the evolutionary design, the primitive installation regime nearly spoils the fun. Fortunately, EA changed the rigid digital rights management system a month after launch, so that a single game disk can be installed on five computers. Still, the large program requires the installation of EA's Download Manager, which does its best to make your computer an outpost for EA marketing.

Once you get past the clumsy installation process, a digital masterpiece awaits for older children (10-up). Be sure to check the graphics requirements. While Spore runs on older graphics cards, it looks a lot better on newer systems. A creature editor lets you make your creature, spaceship or planet. These creatures can be shared with the other players online. Once in the game, you choose to either fight with other creatures or make friends with them.

You start in a tidal swamp, first choosing a level—easy, medium or hard—using the Spore Creature Creator to mix and match eyes, skin, arms, wings, sensors and so on. You can do this without buying the game by downloading a limited version of the Creature Creator for free. Teachers and parents take note: because this is an open-ended experience, it is possible to add appendages that might look like genitals. While these types of creatures are removed from the game, some players have posted such creations on YouTube.

As you explore, you meet and eat other creatures to collect their DNA. If you are eaten, you merely start over, so it is easy to succeed. A "Sporepedia" makes it easy to jump around in the game or swap characters. Soon, your creature evolves into a land-based community, where you search for mates and form a tribe. A Civilization Game mode follows, where you build a city or destroy others in an effort to continue your evolution. Testers found the civilization mode tedious at points, but noted that it is easy to move to another part of the game. At this point, the Spore experience is more like chess, with a building, exploring and collecting theme. Because the players take an active role in building the experience, there's a strong feeling of ownership -- much like the Sims.

One unique aspect of Spore is that it is a culture-free experience. There are no races or genders, although creatures need each other to reproduce. There are some interesting social implications to the game -- you can play as a peacemaker or aggressor, and live with the consequences. The title also pushes the limit in interface design, with menus that have been designed to help you feel in control as you slide through time and space. The bottom line? If your computer can handle it, get Spore. See also the Nintendo DS edition.

Details: Electronic Arts, Inc., www.ea.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 6-up. Platform: Windows, Mac OSX. Teaches: creativity, logic, classification, reading, strategy, evolution. Review date: 6/10/2005. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Comic Mischievous

Fantasy Violence

Animated Blood

Spore Creature Creator

4.7 Stars

Want to make a really cool looking animal/monster? Spore Creature Creator is like a Whitman sampler for the upcoming game, Spore. But it is hard to download, and is sure to test the limits of your Mac or Windows graphics card. Once you get the 300MB file downloaded and installed (it took us three tries on either platform), the game lets you mix and match arms, legs, feet and eyes to create your own customized creature. The level of detail is striking, and the creatures' movements are amazingly realistic. In fact, parents and teachers should note that it is possible to create creatures with breasts and/or genitals, which is the price of an open-ended creativity system. You can see samples of such work on YouTube. In addition, read the technical requirements carefully. We were never able to get the game running correctly on Windows Vista, and had to upgrade our Macintosh to System 10.5.3 before it would work. If you don't have 10.5, don't bother.

You start with blobs of body parts, which snap together automatically, and can be stretched or easily repositioned -- like virtual silly putty. Once you start mixing and matching the eyes, claws, noses, fins and so on, you realize just how different Spore is. The innovative drag and drop interface makes it fun and easy to experiment with a wide range of parts. Once your creature is assembled, you can try it out to see what it can do, with entertaining animations. If you like your critter, you can upload it to the site. The full version of Creature Creator costs \$10. The free-trial version that we tested contains "25% of the creature-making parts from Spore." Creatures made in the Spore Creature Creator can also be imported into the full Spore game, allowing players to populate their own galaxies when the game ships worldwide later this year. Players can also share their creations with others by uploading to the Sporepedia at www.Spore.com. The Sporepedia is an online destination where people worldwide can search for and share Spore creations and comment on other player's designs. The Spore Creature Creator is rated E, although the game itself has an E10+ rating. The downloadable demo version is free. The complete version costs \$10.

Details: Electronic Arts, Inc., www.ea.com. Price: \$9.99. Ages: 10-up. Platform: Windows, Mac OSX, Nintendo DS. Teaches: creativity. Review date: 6/18/2008. ESRB Rating: Everyone

SSX Blur

4.5 Stars

As snow-boarding, skating and skiing simulations go, this is the best we've ever played. Why? Because it uses the motion-sensing capabilities of the Nintendo Wii's controls (both the Remote and Nunchuk; one in each hand) to let you "feel" the tricks. For example, if you bend both hands left and right, you get the unique sensation of carving a path down the hill. While in the air, the remote motions are used to create spins or flips; and a bit of skill is required in order to make a good landing.

Content includes three peaks and 12 tracks with a range of fireworks, jumps, rails and lighting effects. There are both racing and freestyle modes, plus a tutorial to help you learn the tricks. You can race against another player either in split screen, or you can take turns on the full screen to see who can earn the best score. Unique features include the ability to throw snowballs to distract the other racers. The rather intense music might be liked or disliked by some (we found it to be rather headache-inducing). Fortunately, there are options for adjusting the volume. All in all, this is an excellent, action-packed snowboarding simulation.

Details: EA Sports - Electronic Arts Canada, www.eagames.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 8-up. Platform: Wii. Teaches: sports, snowboarding, temporal relations, gross motor coordination. Review date: 2/26/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone, Comic Mischief

Star Wars Battlefront 2

4.3 Stars

Star Wars Battlefront 2 is an action shooting game set in the world of the "Star Wars" movies. You start the game as a clone trooper and wage war over various maps based on battles in the movies. New features to the sequel include space combat and the ability to play as a Jedi warrior. As the game progresses you can play for the side of good or follow the evil path. Testers noted that the controls can be confusing, due to the fact that you move a character with one joystick and aim your weapon with the other. Features include both online and multiplayer modes that we didn't get to test; note that Ethernet Broadband is required for online play. Although rated T (Teen), this is one of six-year-old Daniel's favorite games, as it is for most of his Star Wars-obsessed friends. There is no blood--just fighting--as in the Star Wars movies, and if they've seen the movies, they will want this game. After all, who wouldn't want to fight with a lightsaber?

Details: LucasArts, www.lucasarts.com. Price: \$49.99. Ages: 6-up. Platform: PlayStation 2. Teaches: logical thinking, strategy. Review date: 4/7/2006.

Star Wars: The Force Unleashed

4.5 Stars

Easy to play and packed with fighting, drama and strategy, this expensive mostly one-player game is worth the rather high price of admission, but note that features vary by platform (we tested the beautifully illustrated PS3 version).

In the story, you become Darth Vader's secret apprentice, in a story that falls between Episode III and IV. The game features "digital molecular matter," "euphoria" and "havok physics" to "bring a new level of realism to the latest game consoles." So wood breaks like wood, glass shatters like glass, and so on. The end result is a realistic-looking game.

Note that the PS2 version contains levels that are not included in the next-gen systems. Also, the Wii version lets two players fight against each other in light saber duels. If you're a Star Wars fan looking for a good fight, this beautifully illustrated title won't let you down. More information is at www.theforceunleashed.com.

Details: LucasArts, www.lucasarts.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 10-up. Platform: PlayStation 2, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, Nintendo DS, PSP. Teaches: fighting, timing, logic. Review date: 7/31/2008. ESRB Rating: Teen, Violence

Super Collapse Puzzle Gallery

4.4 Stars

While this discount CD for Windows computers (\$7 at www.gamehouse.com) isn't designed for classroom use, don't be surprised if you find creative teachers using it to provide an engaging mathematical problem solving experience, say, to an older child who has finished her homework early. Before you read much further, note that there are many varieties of this game, both free and available as an installable download. (Free versions are loaded with ads and other gimmicks. We tested a Windows version, installed from a CD-ROM.)

The best part about this game is the simplicity. After you sign in (to save high scores and record which puzzles you've unlocked), you see a collection of game boards, each designed with a pattern. Your goal is to click on an area of similarly colored blocks in order to remove them from the screen, in as few steps as possible. The process requires planning, spatial thinking and a lot of problem solving, and as a result could be useful teaching material. Content on the purchased version includes 600 game boards, with different designs and challenge levels, plus the ability to save high scores. Created by Mumbo Jumbo for GameHouse Studios. Details: GameHouse Studios, www.gamehouse.com. Price: \$8. Ages: 7-up. Platform: Windows*, Mac OSX. Teaches: logic, geometry, problem solving, math. Review date: 9/20/2007.

Super Mario Galaxy

4.6 Stars

Warning: if you can make it past the first level of Super Mario Galaxy -- where you play tag with a rabbit on a rotating 3D planet full of tunnels -- you'll become addicted to this well designed one-or two-player title for the Nintendo Wii.

In the game, you become Mario as you shake, tilt, point and drag items on the screen in order to jump across alien terrain. The goal is familiar to any Nintendo fan -- to help Mario rescue Princess Peach. In this game, however, each planet is a level, with unique attributes. Since he's in space, Mario might jump, fly, or -- in some cases -- swim through craters. The scenery is creative. You surf on rays of light, roll a ball through a treacherous garden maze, float in a bubble over a swamp, and so on.

Players move Mario with the Control Stick and shake the Wii Remote to perform a spin move or cue stars that launch him to and from planetary objects. With a second Wii Remote, another player can play alongside by pointing at and collecting items called Star Bits, then launch them at enemies. The second player can help by sweeping aside projectiles or stalling enemies. The controls are surprisingly good for a game with such unique physics and it brings back some memories of the mushroom stomping fun of the Classic Super Mario games. Our testers' only complaint was that the camera controls tend to be a bit sticky or too distant. One parent complained of motion sickness. All in all, this new Mario title really does take the series, quite literally, to new heights. Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 6-up. Platform: Wii. Teaches: logic, spatial relations, problem solving, deductive reasoning. Review date: 5/28/2006. ESRB Rating: Everyone, Mild Cartoon Violence

Super Paper Mario

4.7 Stars

Called "one of the best games for the Wii" by one tester, but "too much reading" by another, Super Paper Mario is undoubtedly one of the most graphically creative products we've reviewed—perhaps ever. The one-player game combines a variety of gaming elements, such as side scrolling, shooting and strategy—as well as some fast-paced problem solving.

You start off as Mario, holding the Wii remote as handlebars to move through a traditional side-scrolling maze. In the story, both Princess Peach and the evil King Bowser have been captured by a new villain named Count Bleck, and it's up to Mario to save the day. Along the way, you also get to play as Princess Peach and King Bowser, each with a special skill. But only Mario can switch between the 2D and 3D views, allowing access to areas normally blocked by 2D. It is a brilliant way of thinking.

Jon (age 18) said, "Everything about it is fun... the characters, the music and the controls are all perfect. Games like this are what make the Wii a system worth owning." Nick (age 11 1/2) said, "The only thing I didn't like about this game was that if you didn't read the instructions, you could get lost, and there is no tutorial." All in all, if you have a Wii, this is a title that may actually be worth \$50.

Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 6-up. Platform: Wii. Teaches: logic, spatial relations, problem solving. Review date: 4/10/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone, Comic Mischievous, Mild Cartoon Violence

Super Smash Brothers Brawl

4.8 Stars

"It's finally here!" screamed our testers (two 13-year-old girls) as they saw the box of Super Smash Brothers Brawl. Soon they were fighting for the chance to fight in the first Super Smash Bros. game for the Wii (called "Brawl"), for one to four players.

The first step is to choose a Nintendo character to represent you. New characters include Meta Knight (the sword-fighter from Kirby); Pit (the archer from Kid Icarus); Zero Suit Samus (from Metroid--minus the armor); and Wario and Snake (from Konami's Metal Gear series). In the solo mode called "The Subspace Emissary," you fight against the Ancient Minister and his army of creatures. This game is a celebration of Nintendo culture, with bits of musical scores or obscure items from other games.

So how does it work? Like "king of the hill," this fast-paced game uses either the GameCube controls or the Wii Remote and Nunchuk in a traditional fashion, with no motion sensing. Your job is to jump, shoot, kick and knock other players out of the game. This game plays a lot like the last version; only with more frosting. Our testers liked the ability to create their own levels, and there's now a cooperative mode so two players can gang up on one player. For the first time, you can play with others over the Internet. The experience would make a great game for a party, or a family to play together, although novice players will quickly meet their demise from more experienced players. As the name implies, the Super Smash series is the poster child for animated cartoon violence; however, this was not a concern for any of our test families. Still, it helps to note the ESRB descriptors.

There's no formal learning in this game, but it is a great opportunity to apply some logical thinking at a high rate of speed. There's also a good deal of fine motor motion, with simultaneous jump/kick motions required to win. Clearly, the people who made this title had as much fun as you will when you play it.

Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 8-up. Platform: Wii. Teaches: logic, creativity, timing, cooperative and competitive play, Nintendo trivia. Review date: 5/28/2006. ESRB Rating: Teen, Cartoon Violence
Crude Humor

Thrillville

4.5 Stars

Taking theme park Sims up a notch, Thrillville looks and plays a lot like RollerCoaster Tycoon, with the added feature of being able to interact with the characters and a wide selection of multiple player games. The idea is to edit and customize your own theme park, making as much money as possible. The process is rich with a chance to apply higher order thinking skills; meaning it is more educational than you might think.

You build your park, and then you play in it, by riding the rides, racing on the race tracks, or playing against other players in 1 to 4 player rounds of mini-golf or at a shooting gallery. In one game, you can compete with the other players to jump on a trampoline, which requires careful timing. There's also a bit of Sims aspect to it, as you get to know some of the park visitors and staff.

Multiplayer games include miniature golf, a go-cart track and a shooting gallery. In the go-cart track, there is a wide choice over the type of track, the layout and the cars. There are 75 ride possibilities that include both wooden and steel coasters as well as classic merry-go-rounds. Note that the PSP version has a Teen rating. We did not notice any worrisome content; however, we did not listen to all of the dialog between the characters, and some of the females are scantily clad.

While designing the park is easy, understanding the business aspect is complex, with no shortage of graphs and charts to understand. As a result, this game is better for older players. This is also an excellent context for the application of higher-order thinking skills.

Details: LucasArts, www.lucasarts.com. Price: \$40. Ages: 10-up. Platform: PlayStation 2, PSP, Xbox. Teaches: logic, deductive reasoning, classifying, evaluating, synthesis, balancing a budget, managing resources. Review date: 6/1/2006. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Fantasy Violence, Mild Language, Suggestive Themes

Thrillville: Off the Rails

4.6 Stars

This sequel features a new story that ties together 100 missions, 34 playable multiplayer theme-park games and social interaction with park guests that features in-depth conversations to advance the plot and suggest better ways to manage the park. Players create their theme park, build and ride their creations, talk with guests and play minigames.

The game features 15 theme areas, including Battleville, Winterville, Spaceville and Aerobille, as well as five new parks. Players can create death-defying coasters such as Hotrod Stunt, where a nitro-boost propels a car across a broken track, or the Escape Drop, where the track holds the car stationary as it lifts itself from level ground to a full 90-degree drop. Players can customize their rides by attaching animatronics, flowers and flaming hoops.

Colleen (12) liked how you can make your own person and talk to people. "The games are cool, the graphics are great, you can ride the rides, run the park and build extreme roller coasters! The two-player feature for the minigames is fun, but it would be more fun if you could play two-player mode in the park. That way, you can find each other and ride the roller coasters you each built together." Colleen also felt the tutorial was too long, it took a long time to unlock things, and there weren't as many clothes to choose from. That being said, however, this is definitely a game she plans to buy (or at least put on her "wish list"). Prices are \$40 for PS2 and PSP, \$50 for Wii and Xbox 360, \$35 for Nintendo DS, and \$30 for PC.

Details: LucasArts, www.lucasarts.com. Price: \$40. Ages: 10-up. Platform: Xbox 360, Wii, Nintendo DS, PlayStation 2*, PSP, Windows XP. Teaches: creativity. Review date: 8/20/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Fantasy Violence, Mild Lyrics, Suggestive Themes

Tiger Woods PGA Tour '07 (PS3)

4.5 Stars

The prettiest golf game we've seen, this simulation uses the PS3's motion-sensor controller for a greater degree of things like ball spin. If you tilt the controller, you can affect the ball direction, and the longer you tilt, the greater the effect. The game also includes something EA Sports calls UCAP (Universal Facial Capturing) technology that combines head scanning, motion capture and video capture to deliver the actual expressions of folks like Tiger Woods, Chris DeMarc, Luke Donald, Mike Weir and Colin Montgomerie. Another feature to note, is an aiming system where you use the analog stick swing to create a shot circle for people to aim, that gets smaller as the player's skill grows. Content includes 12 courses, 15 golfers and an online play version, plus two new arcade style golf games for practice. There are four modes of play: Tiger Challenge, Training Challenges, Mini-games, One Ball, Greensome, Bloodsome, Battlegolf, and Tutorials. All in all, you can't go wrong with this version of Tiger Woods--if you can afford it, that is. Also see the Wii version.

Details: EA Sports (Electronic Arts Inc.), www.eagames.com. Price: \$60. Ages: 12-up. Platform: PlayStation 2, Windows 98, Windows XP, Xbox*, Xbox 360, PlayStation 3*, Wii. Teaches: golf, sports. Review date: 11/29/2006. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Tiger Woods PGA Tour 08

4.5 Stars

Want to play a few rounds of golf with Tiger Woods? This state-of-the-art golfing simulation is available for a variety of platforms, so features vary. We tested and compared versions for both the Wii, PS3 and Xbox 360, and found them all to be worth the rather hefty price tag of \$60. But each has unique features to note, so read the web site descriptions carefully before you buy, because they offer different experiences. The most exciting feature is called "Game Face" which makes it possible to use an Internet-connected console (the PS3 or Xbox 360 only) to upload up to six specially sized digital photos of your face, which are then automatically altered and downloaded back to the game (visit <http://www.easports.com/tigerwoods08/> for more details). Once your face is generated, you can change your hair, put on glasses or change the outfit. Next, you can challenge other golfers online, including your best friend (as long as s/he also owns a copy of the game).

Nearly all versions of the game have a Confidence Meter that uses factors from previous rounds, including shot type and hole, to determine your confidence level heading into each shot. The riskier the shot, the less confidence you will have hitting the ball well. The Wii version's motion detection features have been improved in this year's version, offering more accurate swing control. Last year's version was too sensitive. This year's Wii version also contains a mini-game of putt-putt and four taunting mechanisms that allow players to throw each other off their game; features not in other versions. Besides Tiger Woods, other famous players in the game include John Daly, Vijay Singh, Annika Sorenstam, and Natalie Gulbis. If you're looking for a serious golfing simulation with a good deal of detail, and you don't mind spending some money, you won't go wrong with this one. Versions are available for the PS3 and Xbox 360 (\$60) the Nintendo DS, PS2, PSP, and PC (\$40).

Details: EA Sports (Electronic Arts, Inc.), www.ea.com. Price: \$60. Ages: 10-up. Platform: PlayStation 3*, Xbox 360, Wii*, Nintendo DS, PSP, Windows. Teaches: sports, golf. Review date: 8/31/2007.

Tomb Raider: Underworld

4.4 Stars

In the newest edition of Tomb Raider, super hero archeologist Lara Croft uncovers proof of the Norse underworld in this fun, face-paced fantasy adventure for one player and a variety of platforms. Our middle-school-age child testers compared the PS3 and Wii versions (Nunchuk required for the Wii) and found both to be fun and easy to play, with slightly better graphics on the PS3. While Laura Croft's tight clothing was amusing to the teenage boys, no worrisome content was detected. As you might expect, there is a lot of smashing, fighting and shooting, but this is mixed with problem solving, and there were no bad parenting surprises.

You will play as Lara, using her acrobatic abilities to perch, balance, swing and ride an all-terrain motorbike through different worlds that include fictional versions of Thailand, the Arctic Sea, and the jungles of Mexico. New features include the ability to kill or pacify bad guys, target multiple enemies, and shoot with one hand while suspended with the other. Navigation is made easier thanks to a sonar map that emits a ping, providing a 3D image of Lara's surroundings. If you're looking for a fun, one-player thriller, this is a good choice. Our testers recommendation: borrow or buy it. Note that this is one of the few video games with a female lead character. Prices are \$60 for the PS3 and Xbox 360 versions, \$40 for the Wii, and \$30 for the Nintendo DS.

Details: Eidos Inc., www.eidos.com. Price: \$60. Ages: 13-up. Platform: Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, Wii*, Nintendo DS. Teaches: logic, spatial reasoning, problem solving. Review date: 12/5/2008. ESRB Rating: Teen, Blood, Mild Language, Suggestive Themes, Violence

Toy Shop

4.6 Stars

Your challenge: to transform your Grandfather's toy shop into a profitable \$30,000 business within three years. This is an economic simulation for one player on the Nintendo DS.

You start by assuming the identity of one of two grandchildren, a boy or a girl. In order to attract customers (and make money) you make toys, stock the shelves, and organize the displays.

You can toggle between the characters in order to take advantage of their abilities. The more toys you make, the easier and cheaper it gets; just like the real world. Soon, more toys are unlocked and profits increase.

Features include the ability to speed up productivity, using speed boosts, or the option of adding new display cases, setting up seasonal decorations, and watching how much money a customer has.

The overall experience is quite fun, and you learn basic business skills as frosting. This is a good game for the portable DS format.

Whether you have five minutes or five hours, there is always something fun to do. Buy it. Created by Gameinvest for Majesco.

Details: Majesco Entertainment, www.majescoentertainment.com. Price: \$20. Ages: 8-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches: math, economics, logic, business. Review date: 2/1/2008. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Turn It Around!

4.6 Stars

This is one of the most innovative uses of the Nintendo DS touch screen we've seen. Turn It Around uses just one type of control -- a spinning wheel, to play 24 mini-games. In some ways, this game resembles WarioWare, with a lot of fast-paced mini-games. Players use the stylus to spin the wheel and master speed, technique or power in the various games, and can also compete against friends in three multiplayer modes. You must maintain your balance on a crowded train, destroy all the blocks before you lose three paddles in a pong-like game, turn the wheel to crush a robot, time your shot to make it to the green, make snow cones, and so on. Developed by 505 Games for Majesco.

Details: Majesco Entertainment, www.majescoentertainment.com. Price: \$20. Ages: 7-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches: logic, spatial relations. Review date: 8/24/2007.

Ultimate Band

4.4 Stars

Think "Rock Band" or "Guitar Hero" without the instruments, and you have the idea of this well crafted and innovative music simulation, designed to work with the Wii's motion-based controls instead of plug-in instruments. Our testers found it to be easier to play than Guitar Hero, and liked the more diverse selection of music, but some complained that it can "tire you out rather quickly." A version for the Nintendo DS comes with an option that can turn the DS into a fifth controller, so players can use their DS touch screen as a DJ turntable. Note that you'll need four complete sets of controllers if you want to have a four-player band (each player needs both a Wii Remote and a Nunchuk).

As with many of these types of games, this is a test of your ability to match hand and arm motions with a song's rhythm. You can play guitar, drums and bass. The music list is more diverse and family friendly than the typical Guitar Hero titles. We tried the Easy level for all the instruments and found the entire experience to be easy for a novice; although the drums are easier to learn than the guitar. There's a well designed "show and tell" type of tutorial that is recommend for the other instruments.

In the Wii version, you live the life of a rock star by advancing your career and popularity from playing in a neighborhood garage to performing in front of an international audience, unlocking new songs and equipment along the way. The DS version includes a recording studio where players can play along with the current songs using the drums, lead guitar, bass guitar, or rhythm guitar, or create their own original songs using the DS touchscreen and stylus. The DS version also includes game sharing features through DGame (Disney's new game sharing system). The title is produced by Disney's Fall Line Studio and by Radial Music, a London-based studio.

Details: Disney Interactive Studios, www.disney.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 8-up. Platform: Wii*, Nintendo DS. Teaches: Music, rhythm. Review date: 2/27/2008. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Mild Lyrics

Ultimate I Spy (Wii)

4.6 Stars

Here's a collection of 3D I Spy puzzles, that two people can play at once. In other words, you can reach inside of a puzzle to look for a clue, or move around the perimeter on a search for that hidden coin or camouflaged toy.

In one of the puzzles, a giant aquarium lets you hunt for items from all four sides, which is required in order to find the clues. One might be pictured on a fish, which is swimming by. Another might be peeking out of the sandy bottom. Ten puzzles include four riddles each, plus three hidden minigames. Like previous I Spy puzzles, the more you solve, the more you unlock. Management features allow four players to keep a profile at once.

Our testers found the game to be fun, but noted that younger children can become frustrated when they can't find that last fish. So be available to help out. In addition, they noted that in some of the puzzles, the graphics seemed blurry due to the match between the Wii graphics and the display. We noted this also, but found it to be a minor issue. Still, this game would look great in high definition. All in all, if you're looking for an amazingly fun collection of I Spy puzzles, look no further than this innovative title. Created by Elastic and Gusto Games, published by Scholastic.

Details: Scholastic, Inc., www.scholastic.com. Price: \$40. Ages: 7-10. Platform: Wii. Teaches: reading, logic, classification, visual relationships, language, rhythms, poetry. Review date: 5/29/2008. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Unsolved Crimes

4.5 Stars

Players take on the role of a rookie detective in the New York City Police Department homicide unit, in this one-player Nintendo DS game that has a look and feel like an episode of a Dragnet television show. There's a good deal of reading, although it is nicely mixed with the story. Betsy Blake, an aspiring model, has disappeared, and your job is to find out what happened. You gather clues to unravel the mystery. There are three modes of play: an action game; a 3D crime investigation; and a crime quiz. You use the DS stylus to trace marks, routes and memos on suspicious items discovered at crime scenes. Content includes eight cases and five action games related to the story. Nick (age 13) loved this game. He said it really made him think, and he liked trying to solve the cases. While the violence refers to the fact that you are solving homicide cases, you don't actually witness the violence; however, you do see the bloody bodies. He would buy this game. Developed by NowPro for Empire Interactive.

Details: Empire Interactive, www.empireinteractive.com. Price: \$30. Ages: 12-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches: logic, problem solving, reading. Review date: 10/20/2008. ESRB Rating: Teen, Alcohol Reference

Blood
Violence

Virtua Tennis 3

4.4 Stars

Looking for a good clean game of Tennis, with great graphics and a well designed interface? Since we reviewed the first version of Virtua Tennis seven years ago on the PlayStation, the Virtua Tennis series has evolved nicely onto the new game platforms. In the PS3 version, you can choose to play a standard game either against or as tennis celebrities such as Roger Federer or Venus Williams, with real cut scenes -- or video clips -- between each set. In the Tournament Mode, you can create your own player, letting you choose details such as the the number of arm bands, height, weight and stroke style.

There are seven mini games to train for footwork, shot accuracy, and overall skills to build up stats, and compete in exhibitions and tournaments to become a world champion. If you have a PS3, this is a great choice for a tennis game. We are still looking at the Xbox 360 and PSP versions. The price for the PSP version is \$30. Developed by Sumo (Xbox 360 & PSP) and AM3 (PS3) for Sega. Details: Sega of America, www.sega.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 8-up. Platform: PlayStation 3*, Xbox 360, PSP. Teaches: sports, tennis. Review date: 3/21/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Warhawk

4.4 Stars

Here's a title that helps redefine the term "serious games." Warhawk is a beautiful one to four player MMOG (Massive Multiplayer Online Game) for the PS3 that makes it possible for you to fight against as many as 32 players, in real time as long as your PS3 is properly configured for the Internet. A split screen option allows for three friends on a single PS3. This is the type of game that could give Halo a run for its money (as long as you have a PS3, that is). In the game, players explore a battle-zone starting on foot, and then move up to tanks, trucks and a flying hovercraft that is controlled using the Sony six axis controls. You merely tilt the controller to tilt your plane which is a very powerful feeling. There's an assortment of rifles, flame throwers and missile launchers as well.

The game is available on Blu-ray Disc at retail and includes a Jabra BT125 brand bluetooth headset for talking with other players online, a USB cable and quickstart guide. This version also includes bonus video content. The game is also available for download directly from Playstation Network for \$40. Developed by Incognito Entertainment. If you have a PS3 and older players, you should consider looking into Warhawk.

Details: Sony Computer Entertainment America Inc., www.us.playstation.com. Price: \$60. Ages: 12-up. Platform: PlayStation 3. Teaches: logic, tactical movements, fighting, strategy, verbal skills. Review date: 8/29/2007. ESRB Rating: Teen, Blood, Mild Language, Violence

Wario: Master of Disguise

4.3 Stars

Mario's wild cousin and rival, Wario, is on a quest for money and treasure. It is up to you to explore eight worlds that take place inside a TV show to help him find it. As you explore, you might have to draw symbols on Wario, putting him in outfits or giving him items needed to attack the enemies in each location in order to get past obstacles. The opening menu is confusing, presenting you with a number of options. Reading is required at many points in the game, (e.g., "Whadda entrance! And for my big break in TV too! I'm on that dork's show." Notice the unconventional English). While there's a bit of "dorky" humor and language, there's nothing extreme to worry about in any of the content we played. Our testers noted this game would be fun for fans of past Wario games.

Content includes eight stylus/microphone-driven mini-games that grow more difficult as the game progresses. Several are excellent for exercising fine motor abilities as well as memory and timing. For example, there's a dot-to-dot puzzle, several timed tracing challenges, and a sliding square game where you must create a match for a target picture. Progress is automatically saved.

Developed by Suzak for Nintendo.

Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$35. Ages: 9-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches: fine motor development (tracing), memory, logic, counting, creativity, reading. Review date: 3/1/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Mild Cartoon Violence, Crude Humor

WarioWare Touched!

4.8 Stars

It's hard to imagine how 180 games can fit on one tiny DS cartridge. The games (more mini-games) make creative use of the stylus, letting you direct the arms of a swimmer to win a race, tilt a simple maze to free a mouse, or pet the head of a dog to make it happy. Though this title is rated E, there are some crude themes, such as a urinating cherub, or a horse that you must "beat" in order to win a race (the game is rather tastelessly called rump roast). The game kept testers engaged for hours. All in all, this is a case study in the future of pen based interface, and the format keeps things interesting. By Scott Traylor. See *WarioWare: Smooth Moves for Wii*. Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$34.99. Ages: 10-up. Platform: Nintendo DS. Teaches: logic, timing, fine motor coordination. Review date: 6/14/2005. ESRB Rating: Everyone, Cartoon Violence, Crude Humor

We Ski

4.5 Stars

If you happen to have a Wii Fit Balance Board (optional), you can have more fun with this realistic skiing game that includes 14 courses for beginner, intermediate and advanced skiers. But the board is not required in order to play.

While the game is for up to four players (each needs a Nunchuk and Wii Remote to play), only one can use the Wii Balance Board. To play, you start by either using your Mii, or customizing a character with an assortment of features. To move forward, you move both arms down, to simulate putting weight on the poles. If you make it down the hill without falling (or in good time, if it is a race) you earn points, you can buy new skis, gloves, outfits and other accessories. There are freestyles, moguls and slaloms. Other activities include a Ski School, Centipede Races, and Search and Rescue. You can also take pictures and share them with friends on WiiConnect24, and there's a night and day mode. The game is also compatible with the Wii Fit Balance Board to make the skiing experience even more realistic. Some reading is required, and we noticed a few rough spots, such as with one menu that shows a list of mini-games before it is unlocked.

Given the unique motion-based controls, this is the most realistic skiing simulation we've ever played. We can't wait for a skate board edition.

Details: Namco Bandai Games America Inc., www.namcobandaigames.com. Price: \$30. Ages: 7-up. Platform: Wii. Teaches: balance, coordination, skiing, timing, lower body coordination. Review date: 5/13/2008. ESRB Rating: Everyone, Alcohol Reference

Wii Fit and Balance Board Bundle

4.7 Stars

Turn your TV into a ski jump, tight rope contest or yoga studio, with this innovative, well-built Wii peripheral called the Balance Board. It is sold together with the software title *Wii Fit* for \$170. The Balance Board looks like a large bathroom scale that calibrates itself to your weight and movement. It is powered by four AA batteries and comes with leg extenders for use on shag carpeting. The first time you use it, you need to synch it with your Wii by pressing a small button in the battery compartment. Once things are working, you can lean forward, backwards, left or right to block soccer balls or compete in a hula hoop contest. Each is fast-paced, and it is easy for a group of children to take turns, lining up behind the balance board for a high score.

There are two modes of play -- minigames and body test. In the body test, you must first calibrate the board -- a process that asks you to enter your age and height before standing on the foot pad areas of the board and start the software. You can lean to block soccer balls, swivel hips to power hoop twirls or balance to hold the perfect yoga pose. Your Body Mass Index (BMI) over time (that's the weight evaluation based on a ratio of weight to height) is recorded, and a calendar starts tracking your weight loss (or gain) over time. Testers noted that you rarely break a sweat in any of these games -- the most active of which has you stretching forward or doing pushups. So don't throw away your stationary bike or treadmill. What *Wii Fit* is especially good for is balance and coordination.

Hats off to Nintendo for yet another interface breakthrough. See also *We Ski*, which is compatible with the Balance Board from Namco Bandai Games.

Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$170. Ages: 5-up. Platform: Wii. Teaches: fitness, coordination, lower body coordination, timing, balance. Review date: 9/27/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone, Comic Mischievous

Wii Play

4.2 Stars

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

Each game can be played with either one or two players, and some require the extra Nunchuk peripheral. Games include: *Billiards* - players use the remote as a pool cue in a nine-ball game of pool (fun); *Find Mii* - players scan the crowds to find the right Mii (fairly fun); and *Pose Mii* - the player moves his Mii on the screen, rotating it and changing its pose to match the silhouettes inside the falling bubbles (not fun). The player must pop the bubble by matching its pose before the bubble hits the bottom of the screen.

Other games include *Tanks!* -- players command a toy tank on a miniature battlefield in 100 missions (very fun) -- and *Table Tennis* where players rally the ball back and forth, shooting for the longest sustained rally (fun).

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

Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 6-up. Platform: Wii. Teaches: cooperative play, fine and gross motor movement, sports. Review date: 2/20/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone, Mild Cartoon Violence

Wii Sports

4.8 Stars

Looking for a good workout? *Wii Sports*, the title that comes bundled with all Wii consoles, is a great option. In fact, it is one of the best designed Wii titles on the market. There are five sports on one CD: tennis, golf, bowling, boxing and baseball. In the tennis game, up to four players can swing at, hear and feel the ball using the Wii Remote to hit straight shots and lobs (with top spin or a slice) using their forehand or backhand. With each stroke, a sound comes from the Wii remote, indicating the smack of a ball, or signaling whose turn it is to serve. In the baseball game, players can hit or pitch a baseball using the Wii Remote while the characters on the screen mimic their movements. In the golf game, players can drive the fairways or putt for the cup simply by swinging the Wii Remote as if they were swinging a real golf club. All the games are excellent renditions of the sport they simulate, and there's a nice range of activity level. Testers as young as five were able to play the games, although they'll need help with some of the more technical sports.

Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 3-up. Platform: Wii. Teaches: movement, sports, gross motor skills. Review date: 5/28/2006. ESRB Rating: Everyone

WiiMusic

4.6 Stars

Like paint-by-numbers for music, this simulation (for one to four players) requires a Wii Remote, Nunchuk, and Wii Balance Board to play a wide range of instruments to the beat of a song or by improvising. The faster you play, the faster the song moves. Our testers had mixed feelings about the experience; perhaps because they were expecting more of a game element. There's no arguing that Wii music is both immersive and innovative -- it is a title that every game designer should spend some time with. But it has a "one trick pony" element to it which is important to consider before investing \$50.

Unlike the many other music sims being released this fall, WiiMusic has a LOT of instruments and music styles (compared with titles like Rock Band 2 or Guitar Hero, which seem to focus on the rock genre). Content includes the ability to choose between 60 instruments using the Wii Remote and Nunchuk controllers (both are required). To strum a guitar for example, you make a strumming motion; each stroke is directly mapped to a musician avatar on the screen, that you design. You can also use your Mii. There's a collection of instruments for each motion: guitar, banjo and sitar; or you can drum to play jazz, congas, and marching drums. A hammering motion is used for the piano, vibraphone or marimba; or to play in a handbell choir. If you have a Wii Balance Board accessory and you want to play drums, you use the Wii Remote and Nunchuk controllers as drumsticks, and use your feet on the Wii Balance Board to operate virtual pedals for the bass drum and hi-hat cymbal. Connected features let you send recordings to other players, as long as they also have a copy of the game and also use the WiiConnect24 service. In addition, there is a tone quiz. The bottom line? This is an amazing new title that breaks new boundaries in game design, but it may be better to borrow than to buy, unless you're a game designer or interested in using it for introducing children to musical concepts.

Details: Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 5-up. Platform: Wii. Teaches: music, rhythm, gross motor coordination, music, timing, ear training, music appreciation. Review date: 7/30/2008. ESRB Rating: Everyone

Wing Island (Wii)

4.5 Stars

Anyone who has played with the Wii remote knows that it was meant to fly, which is the key to this one- or two-player flying game. You start out as a young pilot, and are given missions—for example, to drop boxes around different landing pads on the island or to do some crop dusting. When in two-player mode, the view changes to a split screen. Games include trying to pop a string of balloons trailing from the other player's airplane, or racing to see how many balloons you can pop. This is one of the few flying games where no shooting is involved.

The controls are sensitive and make the experience very engaging. If you have the Nunchuk attachment (optional), you can use additional controls and change the view while you fly. If you twist the remote, your plane will do a corkscrew. The slightest change in angle will make your plane react accordingly. You can also learn to fly in formation, controlling a group of five planes at once. The game content includes 20 missions which are rewarded with money that can be used to unlock new planes. Our tester wanted more levels to the game, but really liked the overall controls, the island scenery and some of the challenges. Designed for Konami by Hudson Entertainment.

Details: Konami Digital Entertainment, Inc., www.konami.com. Price: \$40. Ages: 7-up. Platform: Wii. Teaches: flying, timing, spatial relations, fine motor coordination. Review date: 3/28/2007. ESRB Rating: Everyone, Cartoon Violence

World of Goo

4.8 Stars

This construction game lets you drag-and-drop sticky blobs to construct structures that look a bit like carbon molecules. You quickly learn which structures work best to solve a particular problem. On one puzzle, you must construct the highest tower using the fewest possible parts. Another presents you with a spinning set of teeth that requires a curved structure.

There's a lot of different ways to solve the same problem, making this game addicting. Content includes 15 different varieties of blobs, each with different properties; enough to keep things interesting. Note that a Wii-Ware version is available, as a download. This is a fun way to introduce building dynamics to young science students. Created by 2D Boy (www.2dboy.com) for Brighter Minds Media.

Details: Brighter Minds Media, Inc., www.brightermindsmedia.com. Price: \$20. Ages: 7-up. Platform: Windows, Mac OSX, Wii. Teaches: science, creativity, building, physics, forces, potential energy. Review date: 10/15/2008.