



# Children's SOFTWARE

## & new media **Revue**™

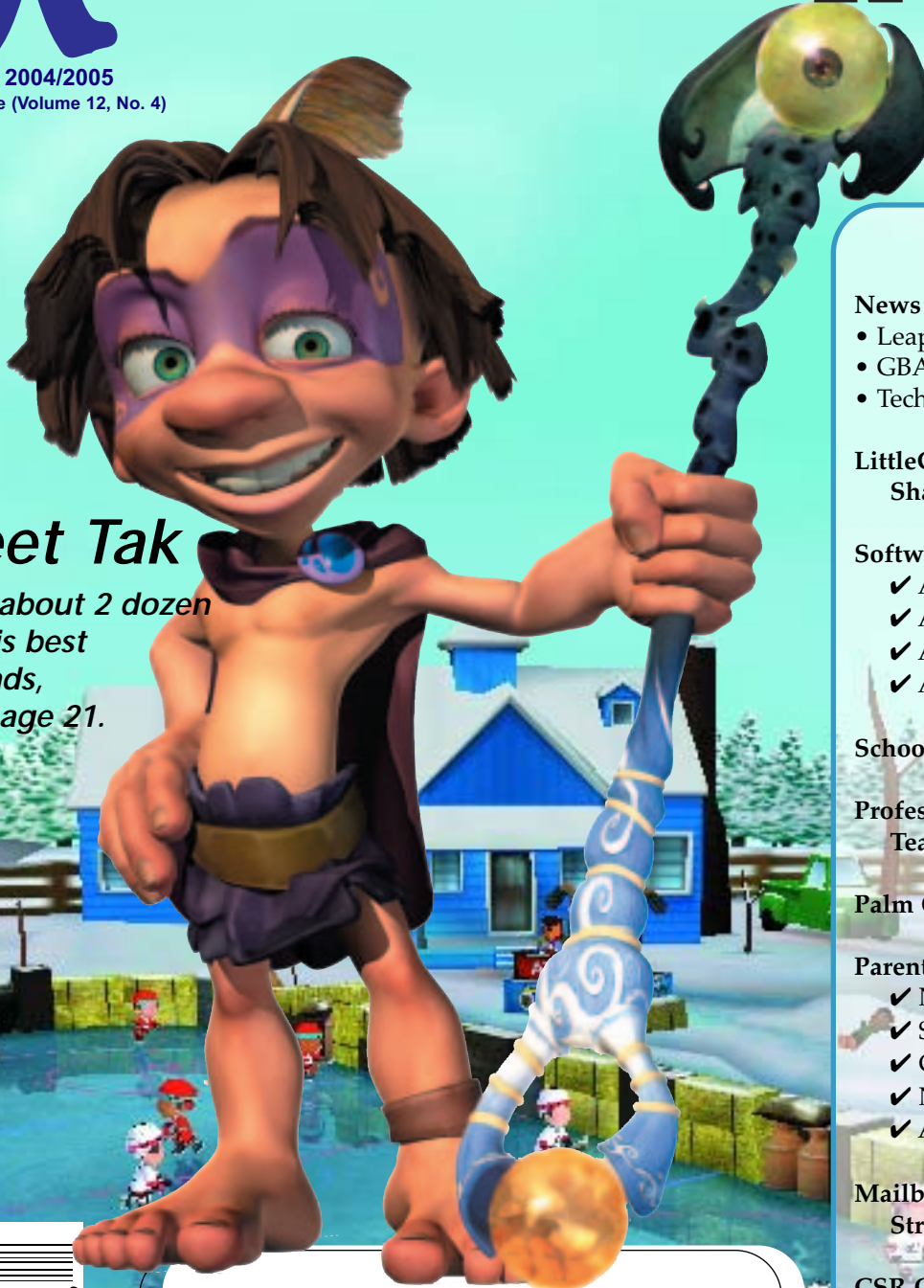
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**Children's TECHNOLOGY**  
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Starting with our next issue!

Winter 2004/2005  
Our 66th Issue (Volume 12, No. 4)

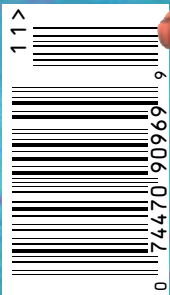
### Meet Tak

and about 2 dozen  
of his best  
friends,  
on page 21.



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Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter

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Welcome to the final issue of *Children's Software & New Media Revue*. That's because we're changing our name, to *Children's Technology Review* starting with the next issue.



Don't worry, we're not changing our review format. That will stay exactly the same. Each issue of "CTR" will continue to provide a comprehensive survey of the children's interactive media market, including software, computers, videogames, smart toys and educational software.

We'll even throw in a cell phone or camera review once in a while, if it has meaning to children.

We hope you like the new name and will let us know what you think.

Sincerely,

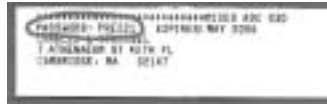


*Warren Buckleitner*

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### Testers & Advisors for this Issue

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### LeapFrog's Magical Pen—The Fly Pentop Computer

Back in 1999, LeapFrog released an innovative talking book reader -- the **LeapPad**. Kids loved it, as did teachers, who immediately recognized the educational potential of hearing print read in a clear voice. LeapFrog became the established leader in the learning toy category.

But six years is a long stretch in the software business. LeapPad sales have suffered due to competition from new finger based technology from Fisher-Price (the PowerTouch) and as what appears to be outright copycats, like the Publications International's **ActivePad**.

*What if you put an entire LeapPad inside a pen?*

It was time for LeapFrog to innovate, or perish. So I was intrigued to attend a carefully staged, Apple-like press event on January 12 in New York City, held by the top brass at LeapFrog.

The Steve Jobs at LeapFrog is Jim Marggraff, a former MIT engineer. Marggraff took the darkened stage

holding a marker-sized pen/stylus in his hand. The pen, called "FLY" was crammed with electronics, including a tiny camera in its tip, that can send 75 images per second to the pen's onboard computer. So jotted capital letters can be turned into words that can be read out loud.

The catch, if there is one, is that the pen needs special "dotted media" paper in order to get its bearings. These dots, we are told, can be printed by any standard printing process with regular ink and are barely visible to the naked eye. This creates a new set of interactive possibilities for software designers. Imagine a self-correcting math sheet, with the pen programmed to be a patient teacher, waiting to deliver instant verbal feedback or hints as each problem is solved. A storybook can become a "living book" and a map could turn into a geography quiz.

FLY has a built in lexicon (meaning a library of words that can form intelligent sentences) of 70,000 words, allowing it to become a portable dictionary, thesaurus, or language translator. Following the press event, I tested an early version of the pen, jotting a few words and hearing them read back, and creating our own calculator. It is clear that there are bugs to be worked out, but it is responsive. This responsivity, some theorize, is critical to the success or failure of any new interactive technology, and so far, FLY passes the test. We agree with LeapFrog that the potential of such a smart pen could be huge, but it still has a long way to go. The pen runs on one AAA battery (although a charging cradle will be sold separately) and has a planned release date of "Fall 2005" with an anticipated price of \$100.

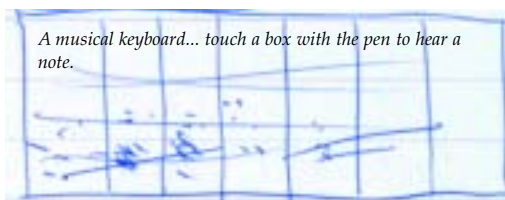
### Game Boys or Sedation? Study finds GBAs to be Effective for Treating Surgery-Related Anxiety

The University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey (UMDNJ) released the results of a study reporting that hand-held video games are as effective in treating severe anxiety in children about to undergo surgery as the usual approach of administering an anti-anxiety drug.

The December 2004 study involved 78 children aged 4 to 12 years of age, who were about to undergo general anesthesia for surgery. The children were randomly assigned to one of three groups. Each child had parents with them up to the point that the child lost consciousness from anesthesia being administered in the operating room. One group had only their parents with them to help cope with their anxiety; one group was also given an oral dose of midazolam about 30 minutes before anesthesia; and each child in the third group was given a Game Boy about 30 minutes prior to anesthesia. GBAs, it seems, curbs anxiety as much as anesthesia.

"Going into the operating room can be an extremely anxious time for children even though they are with their parents," said Dr. Anuradha Patel, an assistant professor of pediatric anes-

Jim Marggraff and the FLY Pentop Computer



**Question:** "What tech gadget or device has done the most to improve learning for children in the past year?"

**Answer:** One of these things



...at least according to 34 school technology coordinators, all members of the New Jersey Educational Computer Cooperative ([www.njecc.org](http://www.njecc.org)). The funny thing -- nobody seems to know what they are called. The following names were written on the ballots:

- Flash memory drive
- Flash Memory
- Disk on Key
- Flash Drive
- USB Disk Key
- Jump Drive
- Memory Disk Drive

Whatever it is, it received the most most votes from the group (16), ahead of the digital camera (6), the SmartBoard (5) and the Laptop computer (4).

The devices were praised for their durability and portability, making it easy for students to transfer work between home and school computers, and doing away with the headaches of unreliable floppy disks, once and for all.

thesiology at UMDNJ, who had seen how absorbed her friend's seven-year-old son is when he's playing with his Game Boy. "Over the years, we have tried a number of activities from watching television to reading stories to using coloring books to help alleviate their stress, but none of these approaches provided enough distraction to lessen the anxiety." "If the children get so anxious they act out, the only option had been to administer an oral dose of midazolam," said Dr. Henry Bennett, who helped with the study, "but the problem is that this drug can produce a 'drug hangover' which lasts longer than the effect of the anesthesia itself and makes some parents uncomfortable." The researchers used a modified version of the Yale Pre-Operative Anxiety Scale to determine when to intervene with a pediatric patient.



The Game Boys impressed the doctors. The median change in anxiety for the Game Boy group was zero while for the midazolam group the increase was 7.5. For the group who only had their parents, the increase was 17.5. "We would like to introduce the use of Game Boys in the pre-anesthesia waiting areas and allow the children to stay absorbed in the Game Boy right up until they are receiving the anesthesia in the operating room," said Bennett. [www.umdnj.edu/home2web/about/news\\_events/releases/r041210\\_gameboy.htm](http://www.umdnj.edu/home2web/about/news_events/releases/r041210_gameboy.htm)

**Fisher-Price: How Children's Books Form the Roots of the Toy Industry**

The influence of children's books on the toy industry is illustrated by Fisher-Price, who is celebrating its 75th birthday this year.

At the 1931 Toy Fair in New York, the young startup introduced a line of wooden pull toys inspired from books written and illustrated by co-founder Irving Price's wife, Margaret Evans Price, who was a nationally known children's book illustrator.

Today, after 75 years of toy innovation and corporate shuffling, the Fisher-Price (now part of Mattel) still keeps its headquarters in East Aurora, New York where it maintains its play lab to test new toys. Today, of course, interactive technology has taken a central roll in the companies toy development strategy with the PowerTouch and Pixter leading the line. For those who want to reminisce on the old toys, Fisher-Price (and Sababa Toys) will be releasing a line of the original toys at the 2005 Toy Fair.



1973: The Activity Center will bring back memories.

**Anti-Tech Group Releases Another Unabashed Report**

The Alliance for Childhood, the group who authored the debated 2002 essay "Fools Gold" has released another report, titled Tech Tonic: Towards a New Literacy of Technology. This time, the work was funded by an environmental group called

the Foundation for Deep Ecology ([www.deepecology.org](http://www.deepecology.org)), which is described as "an anti-capitalist organization fighting against technology in general on the rationale that technology corrupts spiritual and emotional life." ([www.undueinfluence.com](http://www.undueinfluence.com)).

The theme of this new report is essentially the same, condemning the "high-tech, screen-centered life style of today's children" calling it a health hazard and "polar opposite" of the education they need "to take part in making ethical choices in a high-tech democracy."

We found Chapter 3 to be particularly interesting-- where the authors make a piranha-like attack on educational technology associations such as ISTE and CoSN, describing in detail how these groups take money from companies such as Apple, Dell and Microsoft in exchange for access to educators. The resulting response by CoSN in Education Week resulted in "Who is Behind CoSN" (below).

The credibility of the report is compromised, not only by the funding source, but also by the scare tactics such as "the high-tech childhood is making children sick—promoting a sedentary life at a time when childhood obesity is at epidemic levels" and "to confront problems like the proliferation of devastating weapons and global warming, children will need all the wisdom, compassion, courage, and creative energy they can muster." Lashing your cause onto global warming can only help, right? It's a wonder they forgot Tsunamis. The 120+ page report has a useful but one-sided literature review and is certainly a good for spirited conversation starter on educational technology. It can be downloaded free as a PDF at [www.alienceforchildhood.org](http://www.alienceforchildhood.org).

**Who Is Behind CoSN?** by Joan Almon and Edward Miller, posted on the Alliance for Childhood website.

"Keep in mind just who CoSN is. While it calls itself an association that represents school district technology leaders, its 75 corporate partners include many of the largest technology vendors in the country—including Microsoft, Dell, IBM, and Intel. CoSN's efforts to make sure billions of taxpayer dollars will buy unproven technology for schools have been enormously successful. The extensive financial and political connections between education officials and school technology vendors are documented in Chapter 3 of Tech Tonic. We urge citizens to wake up to the pernicious and increasing influence of corporations in policymaking for public education.

Educators and journalists should also be aware that **Education Week**, a major national source of news about elementary and secondary education, is another of CoSN's corporate partners. It is disturbing that this respected publication, which ought to be independent and objective in reporting on technology education issues, is instead part of a lobbying group promoting a one-sided agenda that benefits wealthy corporations at the expense of children's real educational needs."

The Alliance for Childhood calls for a long-overdue reassessment of our assumptions about technology in children's lives, and for a more balanced and sensible approach to nurturing healthy children. We invite the Consortium for School Networking to retract its inaccurate statements about Tech Tonic, to explain how its financial entanglements with major technology vendors serve the public interest, and to engage with us in an open and continuing exploration of these issues. ☺

# Skill Sharpeners

Put some thrill in the drill!



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Subjects like math, reading and geography have more facts than MacDonaldis has french fries.

It is good to practice these facts, and if you can have fun while you do, well, that's all the better. Here's a collection of free websites to put some thrill in the drill.

**Hate math? Visit *MATH DOODLES*** [www.mathdoodles.com](http://www.mathdoodles.com)

Artist and computer programmer Daren Carstens loves math. He says "I am a lover of math...and interactive games and puzzles can make even the most advanced ideas understandable." Daren designed Math Doodles to help you discover how fun and playful math can be. Hint: Try to race against the timer for your best time. Best for 2nd grade-up.



Note that many of these sites require a current browser with shockwave.

**Are you a good profreader? Find out at *THE EDUCATION PLACE***

[www.eduplace.com/edugames.html](http://www.eduplace.com/edugames.html)

Six games let you pick your own grade level, and then practice spelling, reading and geography skills and facts. This site comes from a textbook publisher Houghton Mifflin. Don't miss the brain teasers! Best for grades 1-5.



**Test your logical thinking, at *RIVERDEEP***

[www.riverdeep.net/products/downloads/play\\_online.jhtml](http://www.riverdeep.net/products/downloads/play_online.jhtml)

Here's a site where you can play some select quality software activities for math, reading and problem solving, from Millie's Math House, the Zoombinies and others. For preschool on up.



**Are you a geo-champ? Find out at *GEOBEE!***

[www.nationalgeographic.com/geobee](http://www.nationalgeographic.com/geobee)

Every year, thousands of kids compete to see who knows the most geography facts. To see how you rate, try one of the fast paced multiple choice tests at National Geographic Kids. For grades 4-9.



**Practice parts of speech, with *MAD LIBS***

[www.penguinputnam.com/static/packages/us/yreaders/madlibs/madlibsgame2.html](http://www.penguinputnam.com/static/packages/us/yreaders/madlibs/madlibsgame2.html)

Give me a noun \_\_\_\_\_. Now give me an adjective \_\_\_\_\_. Once you plug in about a dozen of these prompts, you'll see your words, woven into a story. We can't think of a better way to learn the parts of speech. For grades 2-up.



**Give Your Brain some Fun, at *FUNBRAIN*** [www.funbrain.com](http://www.funbrain.com)



One of the oldest and best collections of free games has been helping millions of kids sharpen their skills over the years. This site has had many owners; the latest is Pearson Education, another textbook publisher. For grades 1-up.

You can **earn** extra money **making** **leves**.  
Click on the word that is spelled wrong.

**Get your drill at *PLUS MATH*** [www.aplusmath.com](http://www.aplusmath.com)

Looking for some no-frills math practice, minus the gimmicks? This site contains sets of math flashcards, where you can choose the subject and grade you need. There's also a game of concentration and other games, and self-checking worksheets. Caution, don't click on the advertisements. For grades 2-up.



In choosing the links on this page, we first considered ease of use, and then looked at accuracy, relevance and developmental appropriateness. CSR has no business connection with any of these links. This page is designed for parents and children to do together. To report a bad link, please email [info@childrensoftware.com](mailto:info@childrensoftware.com). You'll find direct access to past columns at [www.littleclickers.com](http://www.littleclickers.com)

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Here's an examination of the latest children's software and new media products, including CD-based software and smart toys. New titles are grouped by age and sorted by rating. For coverage of videogames, see the Parent's Videogame Advisor section.

**Preschool & Kindergarten (ages 3-6)**

**Dora the Explorer: Fairytale Adventure**, 4.8 or ★★★★★ stars, Atari, www.atari.com, \$19.99, Windows XP, ages 3-up. Looking for a near perfect software program for your preschooler? The fifth (and best so far) Dora CD, this adventure features Dora and friends as they attempt to save Boots from a sleeping spell by finding hidden rings in nine activities. The game starts as children are asked to sign in by decorating their own name-labeled key. Once this is done, the program can keep records for up to four children, which limits its use to home rather than preschool settings.



Next, children can choose to play the program in fairy tale adventure, or just play one of the nine games. Activities include "help the snowman", where children transform a winter scene into a spring day by moving the mouse, as they listen to catchy tunes that mix English and Spanish. Next, they may be asked to "find a small, orange hat" for the snowman. Other games include a set of mazes, a shape creation/matching game, a music recording activity, an addicting, "bejeweled"-type logic puzzle, and a music box featuring 14 sing-a-long songs from the show. Children can exit an activity at any time (they're never trapped), and the difficulty level can be changed on the fly. Progress is saved automatically, which is nice. About the only drawback is the limitation in number of children than can save games. The bottom line? The variety of games, strong storyline, and depth of well-designed early childhood content make this an ideal program for use with young children. For preschoolers, the content is perfectly matched with the television audience. Created for Atari by Imaginengine.



**My Own Learning Leap**, 4.7 or ★★★★★ stars, LeapFrog, www.leapfrog.com, \$35 (cartridges are \$13/each), Smart Toy, ages 2-5.

Finally -- a toy that puts YOUR voice inside of it, instead of a stranger's. This talking frog has a membrane keyboard on it's belly and a wired remote microphone in a little Velcro pocket on his



back. After you put in the 4 AA batteries, it's easy to program the toy -- you take out the microphone and answer a 15 item questionnaire designed to capture your voice giving some background information about your child. Questions include "Is your child a girl?", "Say your child's name", and "Record a special message for your child." The recording removes any dead sound automatically, inserting your information into story scripts and puzzles. It is also easy to erase this information—just remove the microphone and start again.

We were particularly impressed by the way the toy customized the activities, based on your response to questions such as "does your child know most of his letter sounds." There are four additional cartridge/book packs (\$13 each) covering topics that are right on target for the early preschool age range—potty training, going to sleep, expressing feelings and new baby. This is an innovative, easy to use, educational toy.



**Color Pixter Digital Camera**, 4.6 or ★★★★★ stars, Fisher-Price, Inc., www.fisher-price.com, \$30, Pixter, 3-up. Now this is cool... plug the cartridge/camera into the top of your Pixter,

and your Pixter screen is transformed into a large viewfinder, showing whatever the Pixter sees. To save the current picture, just touch the screen. The camera comes with just one setting - indoor or outdoor, and can save up to ten pictures in memory (the 11th replaces the first). When in the scrapbook mode, it is easy to scroll through the pictures, scribble on them, add shapes or stamps. A special effects menu lets you add type, rotate, or frame the pictures. The images are very grainy and obviously can't be printed or transferred to a computer, but they do bring a smile to children's faces, especially when they put a pair of glasses on the image of their dog.



**My Little Pony**, 4.2 or ★★★★★ stars, Atari, www.atari.com, \$19.99, Win 98, Win XP, ages 3-6. If you can get beyond the too-sweet voice of the narrator (dahhhrrrling) and the stereotyped colors and themes, you'll find that children will enjoy the creativity aspects of this program. Based on the Little Pony toys, the CD lets children help a herd of onscreen ponies get ready for the friendship ball by collecting items needed for a party: a cake, flowers, socks, and so on. Once they've

collected their goods, they can choreograph a dance, and decorate the cakes and ponies by dragging and dropping jewels, flowers and so on. The graphics are very attractive, and true to the theme of the toy. As a reward, children can print pictures in a coloring book containing 14 pages, as well as a recipe for real chocolate cake and a variety of cut outs. Be wary— this program can be hard on your printer's ink supply. Up to six games can be saved. Created for Atari by Imaginengine. A toy pony is included in the package.



**Disney Princess Magical Dress-Up**, 4.0 or ★★★★★ stars, Buena Vista Games (formerly Disney Interactive), [www.buenavistagames.com](http://www.buenavistagames.com), \$19.99, Win 98, Win XP, ages 5-8. This simple, dated creativity kit lets you design your own princess (body, hair, eyes) using art and themes from three Disney princess worlds (Bell, Jasmine or Ariel). We liked the range of body types -- not just thin. The creation portion of the program lets you drag and drop new jewels, dress patterns, backgrounds and stickers onto your design. There was a nice selection of art items, although the range was limited. A sign-in system can save progress. The overly perky narrator can get irritating, and the sound may be choppy on Windows XP— perhaps due to the use of QuickTime. The biggest limitation is the unresponsive menus. Finished products can be printed or saved. Note that this title is also part of the trio package called Disney Princess Jewelry Box Collection -- for the same price.



**Disney's Jewelry Box Collection**, 4.0 or ★★★★★ stars, Buena Vista Games (formerly Disney Interactive), [www.buenavistagames.com](http://www.buenavistagames.com), \$19.99, Win 98, Win XP, ages 3-6. Three older, generally well rated creativity CDs come in one package: Disney's Princess Fashion Boutique (4.2 stars, CSR March 2000), Ariel's Story Studio (4.6 stars, January 1998) and Disney Princess Magical Dress-Up (4.0 stars). The entire selection comes boxed in a small jewelry box. While the quality of these three titles was high in their day, they are older and may perform unpredictably on Windows XP and don't compare well to newer titles.

**Letter Factory Game**, 4.0 or ★★★★★ stars, LeapFrog, [www.leapfrog.com](http://www.leapfrog.com), \$25, Smart Toy, ages 3-6. This talking, singing board game is designed to teach and reinforce phonics sounds. After the three AA batteries are installed in the letter machine, each card must be placed in position on the board; a good matching exercise. Because each letter card has punch holes in it, the letter machine can tell what letter is on the card. Next, 1-4 players each choose a game piece, and



- ✓ Very easy to use, and durable
- ✓ Tinny sounding audio
- ✓ Engaging, arcade-style games
- ✓ Software varies in quality but is generally liked by children

## A Closer look at VSmile

Plug this battery-operated "computer" into your TV to play cartridge-based learning games. Our two testers (ages 3 and 4.2) learned to use the VSmile on their own, and the software cartridges are mostly engaging, but can vary in quality and age-appropriateness, so make sure you consider your child's abilities and interests before investing in another \$20 cartridge (we plan to review future releases). Educationally, the titles are hit or miss— presenting simple no-fail explore/collect ("side-scroller") games, along with games like concentration, sorting, and so on; where the idea is to collect letters or shapes in a timed format. While nothing is innovative about these games, this tried-and-true-format pulls in kids, and keeps them coming back. A game that is too hard simply doesn't get played. This is the main strength of the VSmile. Some of the titles are classic examples of poor design such as a reading activity that requires reading to start, and several instances of poor audio, including off-key music and infrequent narration. "You get what you pay for" aptly applies.

There are family-friendly design characteristics of the VSmile that must be noted. The console contains a handy storage bin for up to six cartridges, which makes it easy for a child to change games independently, and keep them away from the dog; and the controller can be adjusted for both left or right handed children. The on/off buttons are lit and easy to find, and an auto power off feature saves batteries. The cord is long enough to move a good distance from the TV; about twice the length of a typical PlayStation controller. It is possible to plug in an AC adapter, sold separately, which is another winning feature. The fact that our test families wanted to keep their unit is a testament to success of the VSmile. This is one of the rare smart toys that outlives the first set of batteries.

As of Fall 2004, ten software titles, or "smartridges" have been released featuring characters that include Winnie the Pooh, Scooby Doo, Care Bears, Spider-man and so on. The cartridges are organized into three overlapping age-based categories: Early Learners (ages 3-5), Junior Thinkers (ages 4-6) and MasterMinds (ages 5-7). Considering the price vs. the no-hassle features, the VSmile is worthy of consideration, especially as an alternative to hard-to-play game console titles and non-interactive television. 4.4 or ★★★★★ stars, VTech Electronics North America, [www.vtechkids.com](http://www.vtechkids.com), \$60, VSmile, TV based game, ages 3-7.



press "start" on the letter machine to hear a challenge question, such as "find the letter that comes before the letter Q" or "which letter does the word 'tap' start with." If the incorrect card is inserted in the machine, the player loses a turn. The sound quality could be better -- it was hard to hear the difference between "tap" and "cap." Also, the pacing is determined by the computer rather than the child, which may limit a child's ability to sit through the entire thing; perhaps because there seems to be so many instructions. Finally, if a card gets lost or damaged, the game is useless. Still, this could be good language skill option for preschools or daycare centers, as another way to playfully introduce phonics concepts.



recorder-style controls and buttons for saving and emailing. A "goof guard" feature is designed to capture the sound before the RECORD button is pressed, just in case your child says those magical words a bit too early. The best part about this package is the video collection of other children's first words, with their age in months—this gives you a general idea of what to expect in your child's speech development. One could argue that there is nothing this program does that most computers can't already do.



**Krusty Krab Cash Register**, 3.9 or ★★★★★ stars, Wild Planet, www.wildplanet.com, \$25, Smart Toy, ages 3-6. This cheaply made cash register has a numerical key pad and four "special items" buttons. If you press the Krabby Patty button, you hear

SpongeBob say "One Krabby Patty, Coming Up!" A large green money button opens the cash register drawer, revealing nine plastic coins and 12 SpongeBob SquarePants dollars.

There's also a credit card scanner. There is no connection between the coin value and buttons pressed, and no other interactive features. For example, when you press a numerical key, you hear a beep, and that is all. About the only innovative feature with this cash register is the microphone, that slightly amplifies your voice (for shouting out orders).



**What's the Time Mr. Wolf?**, (not rated), Tool Factory, Inc., www.toolfactory.com, \$60, Win 98, Win XP, Mac OSX, ages 4-6. Nine time-related activities feature Mr. Wolf in his clock shop. For instance, when children help Mr. Wolf mend his chiming clocks, they'll get a lesson on telling time to the hour and half hour. Another activity has children sequencing photographs to their appropriate time of day. Concepts and skills include telling time up to the quarter hour on analog and digital clocks, and ordering the days of the week and the months of the year. Teacher options allow for some customizability, and progress reports are available, as are a set of printable worksheets. We found the program potentially effective in its efforts to teach time, but note that it is very directed and slow moving. It's perhaps best-suited to special needs students in grades 1-3.



## Early Elementary (ages 5-8)

**Saddle Up: Time to Ride**, 4.6 or ★★★★★ stars, DreamCatcher Interactive, www.dreamcatchergames.com, \$20, Win 98, Win XP (32 MB videocard), ages 6-up. Easy to play, with plenty of content, this riding simulation takes you through every aspect of riding a horse, from grooming, to cleaning a stall, implied flirting with Mathio (the cute barn hand), and riding on a champion course.

Testers wanted more control over the look and personality of the horse, as well as the look of the rider ("why is she always blond?" and "Why can't boys ride horses?"). The 3D graphics are rough at times, but these are minor issues that

**Symphony Painter**, 3.5 or ★★★★★ stars, Fisher-Price, Inc., www.fisher-price.com, \$19.99, Pixter, ages 4-8. Drag your stylus (or finger) across the Pixter touch screen, to leave a colored line. Next, touch a "play" button, and a scanner line moves across the screen from left to right, roughly translating the line into a stream of sounds. The more lines, the more sounds, and each color creates a different sound effect. The poorly designed menu blurs the relationship between graphics and sounds, which is unfortunate given the creativity promise of this title. In the free-painting mode, a 32 item clip art library is related to concerts, singers and so on. There's also a game of musical follow-the-leader. Weaknesses include a limitation on what each screen can hold—after too many items are added, the overloaded Pixter beeps at you. Also, erasing a line is not a straightforward process, which curtails creative energy. While the idea is a good one, it is not implemented well in case. Learn more about the development of this project at [www.media.mit.edu/press/symphpainter/pixter-release.html](http://www.media.mit.edu/press/symphpainter/pixter-release.html).

**First Wordz**, (not rated), TP Kidz, www.tpkidz.com, \$19.99, Win XP. This is a utility designed to help parents record a child's speech, and then easily share it by email. Contents of the package include a cheap wand-style microphone and a CD-ROM. Once the program is started, it appears as a popup window (pictured) in the corner of your screen, with tape



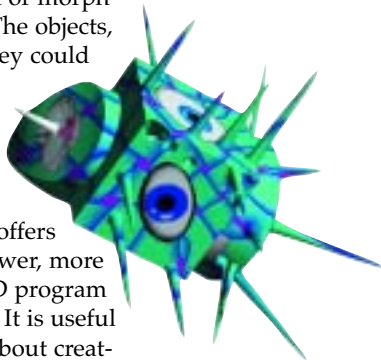


don't get in the way of the larger game. This mission pulls kids in, and keeps them playing by letting them do the things they might expect to do with real horses—grooming, practicing and competing, with as many as seven horses on 14 courses. The

better you do in contests, the more horses you can keep in your barn. Features include 2-4 player riding contests, and an autosave feature.

All in all, this is the best riding/horse simulation to date. Note, though, that you'll need a 32 MB video card and 800 MBs of hard drive space to run the game as it is designed to be played. Created in France by Lexis Numerique using Virttools. Published by DreamCatcher Interactive of Canada, with US distribution by Ubisoft.

**Cosmic Blobs Lab Rat Edition**, 4.5 or ★★★★★ stars, SolidWorks, [www.solidworks.com](http://www.solidworks.com), \$40, Win 98, Win XP, ages 6-up. This 3D creativity program starts with a blank screen, surrounded by sets of responsive but complex menus designed to help you add or take away items, squish or extrude them, color them in or morph them into new 3D shapes. The objects, like digital clay, look like they could be straight out of a Pixar movie—one tester called it his "Jimmy Neutron construction set." The program takes an afternoon of tinkering to figure out, but offers a good deal of creativity power, more in fact than any previous 3D program we've reviewed in the past. It is useful for helping children think about creating in 3D, which is quite a different process than typical flat drawing, such as with programs like KidPix. Moving around is made easier with shortcuts—use the mouse wheel to zoom in and out, for example, and a back arrow key thankfully takes away multiple steps. Projects are saved automatically, which is also not obvious due to the nonstandard menu



system (some good old-fashioned pull down menus would also be nice). In one case, when you click on the help icon, the program takes you online without warning. It is also not immediately obvious how to export work into other program formats; with some work we finally made a BMP file.

So what do you do with such a program? The creative potential is big, and there is no commercial agenda to the clip art such as in most Disney creativity programs. As a new way to let children create, and better understand 3D design, this is a breakthrough product.

Note that you'll want to have a computer running Windows XP, with a 2.4 GHz CPU or better and a 64 MB graphics card. There are several ways to try or buy this program. You can download it free, as a 32 MB file that will work for 14 days. After that, you can buy a key for \$40. You can also buy a CD version for \$45. Visit [www.solidworks.com](http://www.solidworks.com).

**Disney TV Games**, 4.5 or ★★★★★ stars, Jakks Pacific, Inc., [www.jakksstvgames.com](http://www.jakksstvgames.com), \$20, TV based Game, ages 5-up. There's a lot of content packed into this battery operated game controller, that you plug into the video/audio jacks of your TV.



Simba & The Tree of Trials is a timed Tetris-like game where rotating fruit blocks must be sorted in order to score points. This activity is fun and requires logic and matching skills. There's also a nicely leveled maze game, where parts of the path can be rotated in order to unite Timon and Pumbaa. There are two side scrolling games, featuring Aladdin (collect gems and free Jasmine) and Lilo & Stitch (find a lost trail of photos to get home), and a confusing 18 hole golf game encourages social interactions with a two player mode (pass the controller back and forth for each shot). There's a nice mix of activities and levels, and the joystick is easy to control. One drawback--there is no auto-off feature, so when kids forget to turn the power switch off, the batteries can drain. Powered by 4 AA batteries.

**Sonic Sleuth**, 4.4 or ★★★★★ stars, Educational Insights, [www.edin.com](http://www.edin.com), \$25, Smart Toy, ages 6-up. Like a giant hearing aid, this pistol-shaped unidirectional microphone comes with a clear parabolic dish and a set of headphones. After installing one 9-volt battery, you pull the trigger to hear sounds. Setup and operation are very simple, and the unit appears to be durable. Does it work? Yes. Small sounds, like distant conversations, are easy to hear. Testers found the look and functionality to be very appealing.

**SpongeBob SquarePants Fact or Fishy DVD Trivia Game**, 4.3 or ★★★★★ stars, Imagination Entertainment, Ltd., [www.imaginationgames.com](http://www.imaginationgames.com), \$29.99, DVD, ages 5-up. This interactive DVD requires a standard DVD player with remote and TV. Two or more players pass the remote to control the pace of a stream of 500 or so randomly delivered 5 to 20 second T/F questions, followed by a short 5 to 20 second video-



clip which provides the answer. You really need to be a SpongeBob fan in order to win the game, with T/F questions like "The Jellyfish convention happens twice per year" and "SpongeBob talks to his spatula". The answers are delivered by way of fun, short clips from various

SpongeBob episodes. It is up to the players to keep score by distributing cardboard Krabby Patty tokens for each correct answer. Every ten or so questions, a longer video segment is shown which contains five science questions, such as "A dolphin is a species of whale" ... the only educational component of the game.

Weaknesses include limited content (after a few games, the content starts to repeat), an inability to skip already seen segments and a lame singing component. Also note that there is no leveling, record keeping, or branching; in other words, this is not very interactive. The main strength is the content-- if you like the SpongeBob, you'll enjoy the videoclips. The social aspect of the game is also nice-- the frequent questions and pacing encourage plenty of give-and take-between players.

**The Incredibles: When Danger Calls** (Windows/Macintosh), 4.0 or ★★★★★ stars, THQ, www.thq.com, \$29.99, Win 98, Win XP, Mac OSX, ages 6-up. This activity pack is designed for players that are younger than those who might be interested in the videogame.

From the main menu, children can select from nine activities. Each is introduced with an uninterrupted clip from the movie. Playing the games lets you win stickers, screen savers and unlock more games.



The games vary in quality, from poor to good, and stay with familiar movie themes. There's plenty of catching falling objects, moving through mazes, deflecting bullets, and firing a water hose to save a building. Our testers, who liked the movie, liked the video clips but found the games to be tedious after a few plays. Up to six players can save games, and there is a closed captioning option. The game is made for THQ by Imaginengine using Bink Video and Smacker technology. If you can find this one in the bargain bin, it might be worth it, otherwise pass.

**Pocket Pixter**, 3.8 or ★★★★★ stars, Fisher-Price, Inc., www.fisher-price.com, \$15, Smart Toy, ages 6-11. About the size of a deck of cards, this small, limited Pixter comes in six colors and themes, and is powered by three button cell batteries. Each theme features an animal character and simple arcade-like game, along with a crude etch-a-sketch-like draw-

ing/stamping activity. There is no touch screen, so drawing is done with direction keys, which can be tricky. For example, making a curved line is nearly impossible. Also, there is no volume control so the chirping sounds that the gadget emits while drawing can get tedious. A small hook lets you attach the toy to a backpack. Bag it or borrow it.

**LeapPad Game: Mind Wars Junior Interactive, 2.0** or

★★★★★ stars, LeapFrog, www.leapfrog.com, \$15, LeapPad, ages 6-7. This clunky quiz kit contains two buzzers that plug into the cartridge port of any LeapPad. A plastic board then fits over the LeapPad itself. The board has peg holes, and each



player is supposed to move his or her marker around the board, but there is no start or finish, like a standard board game, which is confusing. Other problems include not knowing when your category window is open or closed; the LeapPad doesn't always register your position on the board, and the method of buzzing in multiple choice or T/F answers is abstract (3 times for the letter C). There is another title for older children called **Mind Wars Interactive** with a similar design.

### Upper Elementary (ages 8-12)

**Learn to Play Chess With Fritz & Chesster Part 2**

4.8 or ★★★★★ stars, Viva Media, www.viva-media.com, \$29.99, Win ME, Win 98, Win XP, ages 8-up. In this follow-up program to the playful chess adventure/tutorial, Fritz and Bianca must once again outwit King Black to save the day.

The King has kidnapped chess champ Chesster, so the kids must take on a series of chess challenges in order to gain his freedom. Play begins with a clever review of the chess pieces and moves, and is followed by a series of games designed to



strengthen logical thinking skills and chess strategy. One game has players learning ways to get out of check, another coaches players on best opening moves. Middle game tactics and end game strategies are also explored. The format is engaging, there is lots of content, extending on the first episode. The watercolor graphics are pleasant and nicely toned down compared to the usual over-the-top bells and whistles fare. Our one complaint? Sometimes the characters talk too much. This is the best children's chess program on the market.



**Zoo Tycoon 2**, 4.8 or ★★★★★ stars, Microsoft Corp., [www.microsoft.com](http://www.microsoft.com), \$39.99, Win 98, Win XP (DirectX 9.0, 16 MB graphics, uses 900 MB of hard disk space), ages 7-up. This powerful business/ecology simulation lets you build and manage your own zoo, from the ground up. Unlike the first Zoo Tycoon, you can even design the ground, with a new set of land-sculpting tools

for making lakes or mountains. Other menus let you choose from a variety of fences, buildings and decorations, to make your dream zoo look just the way you want. The main improvement is the ability to zoom right in (roll the mouse wheel forward) for a first-person look at your zoo. Or, if you're in a less creative mood, the Zoo Guest mode lets you walk around and enjoy the zoo from the perspective of a typical visitor (a Zookeeper mode gives you additional control over feeding and care issues). So what's improved? The controls are easier to use, and the entire look and feel of your zoo seems more real, despite the fact that there is less content.

There's still a few quirks— a dromedary camel seemed perfectly happy to live underwater, and placing objects can be hit-or-miss. The most impressive aspect of Zoo Tycoon 2 is the realistic interactions between the animals and the environment you create for them. Attention to detail will make your profits increase, and you can buy more animals. Note that there's not as much content in this edition, with fewer animals and decorations. There's no violence to worry about—put a zebra in with a lion, you see a dust cloud and the zebra disappears. Because multiple zoo projects can be saved, this program could also work in a classroom setting. Zoo Tycoon 2 provides an excellent opportunity to playfully try out management and ecosystems. Created by Blue Fang Games for Microsoft.

**Backyard Hockey 2005**, 4.7 or ★★★★★ stars, Atari, [www.atari.com](http://www.atari.com), \$19.99, Win 98, Win XP, ages 7-up. Updated with 3D graphics (the last version was 2002), this easy to play hockey simulation lets you create players or select from the Backyard gang, which includes both neighborhood kids and mini versions of 30 NHL teams. Next, you'll choose from eight different rinks and pick what type of game to play-- single or season. The game has a well-designed learning curve; it is easy to get started with but tough to master. It's also very fun. A practice option helps you learn how to control your player's skating and shooting, there are one and two player modes,



and there's even an air hockey table for extra action. The graphics and sound effects are super, and secret coaches and rinks can be unlocked. This is a fun program. Made with Renderware.

**Cube-Mania**, 4.4 or ★★★★★ stars, Psyonic Entertainment, Inc., [www.psyonicentertainment.com](http://www.psyonicentertainment.com), \$19.95, Win 98, NT, 2000, Win XP, ages 8-up. More addicting than Tetris? You betcha. When we got through testing this fun logic game, we tested it some more, despite sore hands and a hungry cat. The game is Tetris-like in look and feel -- match falling cubes to clear the board before they pile up and hit the top. This time, the cubes have four-color sides, and you must match three cubes in a row to clear them. Features include sound-track variations, four ways to play and two modes- Normal and Chaos. It's worry-free fun for the whole family, and a great exercise in spatial thinking. (Don't forget the cat).



**Phonics 3a Advanced Level Sports Edition**, 4.3 or ★★★★★ stars, Help Me 2 Learn Company, [www.helpme2learn.com](http://www.helpme2learn.com), \$24.95, Win 98, Win XP, Mac OSX, ages 7-14. It's rare that you come across a phonics program designed for third graders and older, but truth be told, there are a lot of kids who need this kind of practice beyond the early elementary years. Instruction and activities are housed within a sports theme in which kids receive "coaching" on reading skills and then compete in events to practice. Bronze, silver and gold medals can be won in such events as long jump and kayak racing. Skills and concepts covered include word families and patterns, syllables, antonyms, synonyms, homophones, prefixes, suffixes, spelling and comprehension. Features include pre-and post-tests, record keeping, and printable worksheets. Over 500 words are studied. The cartoon-theme makes this best suited for 3-5th grades. In general, this is a likable, potentially effective set of activities. School editions with printed lesson plans are available.



**Soccer Math**, 4.3 or ★★★★★ stars, EdVenture Software, [www.edven.com](http://www.edven.com), \$29.95, Win 98, Win XP, Mac OS9, Mac OSX, ages 7-14. This soccer-themed math drill program is ideal for providing engaging, fast paced math practice. Play begins as students select and name a male or female team, and then select a math skill area and level. Topics include place value, addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, measurement (US and Metric), greatest common factor, least common multiple, fractions, decimals and percents.

After choosing a team name, students first are given a pretest with ten problems. After choosing one of three timer response levels, the game begins. To control the ball, students must read each problem. In fractions, for instance, the prob-

lem might read "which fraction is greater than  $1/5$ ?" The choices might be  $1/4$ ,  $2/16$ ,  $3/24$  and  $1/6$ . With each correct answer, the ball moves down to a player closer to the opponent's net. Wrong answers send the ball to the opposing team. Scores are kept (the topic practiced, and percentage of correct answers). On the downside, the game's narrator makes repetitive comments, and in our easy level games, the same player made every goal (ball hog!). Note that this happens less often when the clock is running down, which results in a corner kick situation, with new narration and another chance to solve the problem in less time. It is clear that a classroom teacher designed this program... the animations are simple but fun, especially the celebrations after a goal, but they, too, are repetitive. Still, the format is engaging and the amount of skill practice over a wide content area is impressive, as is the ability to zero-in on specific skills.



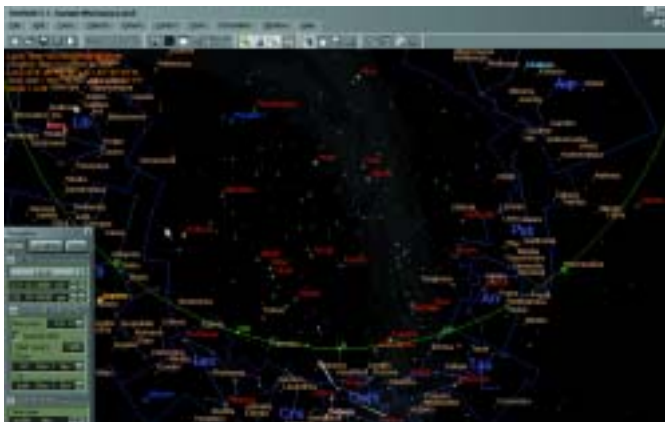
**National Geographic Presents RedShift 5**, 4.2 or ★★★★★ stars, Topics Entertainment, www.topics-ent.com, \$49.95, Win 98, Win XP (300 MHz), 12-up, Redshift is the oldest astronomy reference package (or virtual planetarium) around, and it has been distributed by many companies over the years we've been watching it (our first review was in 1998). This latest rendition flies the National Geographic banner, and is distributed by software bundler Topics Entertainment. Note that there is no difference over previous editions published by Viva Media.

This powerful, information-packed astronomy program comes on one CD-ROM, and is about the closest thing you can get to having an actual observatory on disk. Like its competitor, Starry Night, the heart of the program is a star filled night sky that is currently overhead, as long as you put your

town in correctly. You can click on a star to learn more about it by way of a popup window, or you can roll the mouse wheel forward for a closer look. According to the promotional materials, the program includes data on 20,000,000 stars, 70,000 galaxies, 7,000 deep sky objects, 1,500 comets and 50,000 asteroids (we didn't count them all). Also on the CD are both the Tycho-2 and the Hubble Guide Star Catalog, Version 2.2. A second CD contains some choppy videos on topics such as grading stars, comets and constellations. We found this program to be less smoothly designed than Starry Night, which also contains a vast amount of star information. For example, viewing the pictures is clumsy, and the movies appear in small windows on the screen. The menus are technical, which can be unwelcoming to a novice. It is possible to install the entire program on your hard disk so you don't need the CD to run it. Because the program offers such a detailed level of information we would recommend it for the expert rather than the novice astronomer. If you teach astronomy, get this program. Otherwise, consider Starry Night. Developed for Topics Entertainment by Maris (of the UK).



**Spider-Man TV Games**, 4.2 or ★★★★★ stars, Jakks Pacific, Inc., www.jakkstvgames.com, \$20, TV based Game, ages 7-up. A good value for \$20, this plug-and-play (plug into your TV, that is) controller runs on 4 AA batteries, and comes with five built-in games. Spider Training is a challenging side-scroller, where you try to collect bags of cash before taking too much damage. The game is hard to figure out... read the instructions carefully. Vulture's Venture is a speed game, where you catch bombs by quickly placing webs in their paths. This game is too hard, and similar to Venom's Vindication -- where you catch the bombs, and beat up thugs at the same time. Our favorite game from a learning perspective is Escape from the Sewers, a maze game where you use a small heads-up display to figure out the directions through a maze of tunnels, in a race to diffuse bombs. Points are earned in each game, and a high score roster is kept. The controller is stiff and hard to hold in your lap, and your hands can get sore due to the frequency of button presses required in several of the fast-paced activities. Also, there is no power saving mode. Spider-Man TV Games delivers a good deal of variably designed content in an easy to use package.



**Juice Box Portable Media Player**, 4.0 or ★★★★★ stars, Mattel, Inc., www.mattel.com, \$70 (\$45 for MP3 kit), Win 98, Win XP (500 MHz), ages 8-14. Clunky yet versatile, this portable device for kids functions as an MP3 player, a digital picture viewer, and a video player all in one. Think MP3 player, with a 2.5 inch color backlit screen that is a bit smaller than a Game Boy and you get the idea. For \$70, you get a basic kit that can play short G-rated videos stored on cartridges from The Cartoon Network, The Discovery Channel, World Wrestling Entertainment and so on. Cartridges cost \$10 to \$25; additional titles are planned.

We tested the Kids Next Door Volume 1 cartridge, with three full length, commercial-free cartoons, totaling 45 minutes of content on 32 MB. Video quality was slightly higher

than the GBA video, and it is easy to pause, fast forward, or rewind. As a video player alone, the Juice Box functions as promised.

The \$45 MP3 kit, sold separately for Windows computers, expands the functionality with a USB adapter that can transfer MP3 music and JPG pictures into a proprietary Juice Box format. Songs and pictures are stored on standard 32 MB SD RAM media cards—the kind used in many cameras—and the transfer process is not direct. You have to first start the software, import the files from a music CD or camera, and then download it to the Juice Box format. When we put generic JPGs and MP3s on the RAM card, they were not recognized. This is too bad—kids who want to freely swap pictures and music, without being tied to a computer will be sorely disappointed. The MP3 starter kit includes a blank 32 MB SD card, software, a flash card adapter, and a USB card reader/writer. Additional accessories will include an AC adapter, headphones and a carrying case.

We tried the unit on several kids who didn't like the boxy size and weight of 9 ounces, compared to 5.5 ounces for a Game Boy Advance SP. Other drawbacks include the scratchy audio quality for MP3s and movies; not bad, but not great, and clumsy controls, with cheap forward/rewind keys in a vertical row, and a strange procedure to switch between music and pictures. The kids wanted to watch pictures while they listened to music, which they couldn't do.

If you're in the market for a kids MP3 player and like the idea of portable videos, the Juice Box is worth considering. But keep in mind that by the time you've purchased a few titles, the \$45 MP3 kit and a few dozen batteries, you're nearly up to a "real" MP3 player, with better features built in.

**Atari Paddle TV Games**, 3.9 or ★★★★★ stars, Jakks Pacific, Inc., www.jakksstvgames.com, \$20, TV based Game, ages 5-up. How far we've come. One battery-operated controller -- that resembles an early Atari "paddle" -- contains thirteen authentic versions of the earliest videogames. The best known are Pong (like ping pong) and Super Breakout. The most fun is an Atari Pong spin-off -- Arcade Warlords. There is no battery saving mode, so if you leave the power switch on, you come back to a dead set of 4 AA batteries. So should you buy it? We'd pass, unless you long for the good old days. Once you play for about fifteen minutes, you realize how far games have come. We'd only recommend this for someone interested in studying the development of videogames. Note: see also Atari Flashback.



**Elementary School Learning System**, 3.9 or ★★★★★ stars, Fogware Publishing, www.fog-ware.com, \$39.99, Win XP with DVD drive, ages 6-11. This suite of software serves up no less than 42 CDs, fortunately contained on two DVDs. Many different subject areas are covered including math, science, history, writing, literature and U.S. Geography. What you're really getting here is a lot of dated multimedia content, much of it resembling narrated filmstrips. All of the programs have been published in the nineties as stand alone products, most coming from Zane Publishing and SVE & Churchill Media. Most of it is solid content, but usually dull in terms of presentation, and multimedia bells and whistles. Some of it, however, is simply lousy, for instance, the Zane Publishing solar system program that refers to the sun as "Mr. Sun". One brighter spot is the inclusion of three quality math programs: Pre-Algebra World, Algebra World, and Geometry World, all published by Cognitive Technologies Corporation in 1997. These provide interesting activities and good skill practice. Note that the two main DVDs are accompanied by a third entertainment DVD about animals called Funny Farm. The bottom line? While you get a lot of content, most of it is pretty useless. Better bundles are available from Topics Entertainment and Encore.

#### NOT RATED

**Inventive Quotient, I.Q.**, Inventive Quotient, LLC, www.inventivequotient.com, \$29.95, Win 98, Win XP, Win 95, ages 5-15. "Guaranteed to raise your child's IQ or your money back," this is a series of games that attempts to strengthen logic, verbal and general thinking abilities. Children first sign in and take a 24 question, multiple choice "IQ" test (we scored 22/24 and were assigned an IQ score of 115). Children can then play any of ten games, several of which require or allow for multiplayer gameplay. Children's progress is automatically tracked, and reports can be printed. Games include a poorly



designed word game that asks users to spell a word containing a certain three letters (harder than it sounds!), and several sequencing and sorting activities that use a deck of playing cards as sorting items. There are also games to build mathematical skills. The games can be played as long as children like, and get harder as children progress. They are easy to get started with and fairly engaging, but are crude in design, much too hard for younger children. Supposedly, if a teacher or parent uses the program with a child for ten minutes a day for six weeks, the child's IQ will rise. The same could be said for one-on-one time with a game of chess or cards. Some of the content has a religious tone to it, with an advertisement for a spiritual music CD as part of the pull down menu options.

**Mini Room Mates**, Wild Planet, www.wildplanet.com, \$22, Smart Toy, ages 8-up. This kit consists of three kid-friendly,

battery-operated devices -- a fan (with plastic safety fins), a small radio (with a scan feature for finding a local station), and a light. Each device is powered by a battery pack. Kids simply plug them in to make them work. Powered by 3 C batteries.



**My Voice Alarm Clock**, Wild Planet, [www.wildplanet.com](http://www.wildplanet.com), \$20, Smart Toy, ages 8-up. This LCD, non-backlit alarm clock is designed to appeal to girls, although there is nothing gender-specific about this toy. A built in microphone lets kids record their own voice as the alarm. The setup process is easy and typical for most alarm clocks, and two alarm settings can be stored in memory. All in all, not a bad idea; especially letting children customize their own alarm.



### Middle and High School (ages 12-up)

**Sherlock Holmes Secret of the Silver Earring**, 4.6 or ★★★★★ stars, Ubisoft, [www.ubisoft.com](http://www.ubisoft.com), \$20, Win 98, Win XP (DirectX 8.1, 1.5 GB HD, NVidia GeForce or ATI graphics only), ages 12-up.

This beautifully illustrated but frustratingly complex mystery lets you assume the role of Sherlock Holmes or Dr. Watson, as they try to figure out who killed a wealthy London businessman. You explore by moving Holmes or Watson around rooms, gardens and hallways of 40 different locations. The program is frustrating in the wrong way -- moving can be clunky -- the avatar follows the cursor, and a right mouseclick activates a popup menu, used to store items. The graphics are incredibly detailed, right down to the shine of the floors. You notice clues -- dust on the floor, scraps of paper and so on -- and interview witnesses. Items and tools, such as Holme's famous magnifying glass, are stored in the pop-up menu and can be studied later. This game takes time (along with 1.5 GB of hard disk space) and a lot of reading. On the positive side, you'll find the story and acting all delightfully true to the theme, and the music is excellent. In fact, this is a rare example of good acting in an interactive medium. But be forewarned -- read the hardware requirements carefully, and be ready to work diligently at the puzzles. We could see no reason for the TEEN rating other than the fact that the actors drink wine and Sherlock smokes a pipe (use of alcohol and tobacco). Made for French-based Ubisoft by Frogwares. Most of the programming was done in Russia.

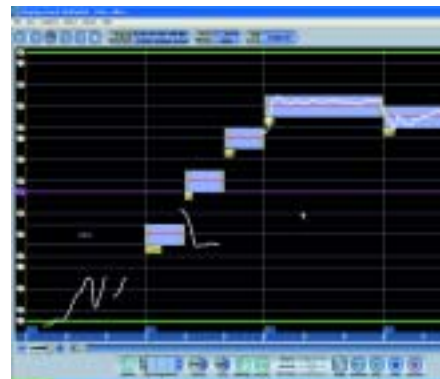
**Singing Coach**, 4.6 or ★★★★★ stars, Carry-A-Tune Technologies, [www.carryatune.com](http://www.carryatune.com), \$50 (\$100 for the unlimited version), Win ME, Win 2000, Win XP (128MB RAM, Pentium II, 400 MHz), Microphone/headset required, ages 7-up. This innovative set of singing lessons lets you see your own voice, in real time, on the screen. This is a good tool for providing ear training for a choir member who needs some extra practice, or a family that can't afford professional vocal lessons. Note that you'll need a special headset microphone



One can deduce that the artists who created *Sherlock Holmes: Secret of the Silver Earring* did a great job.

to make this work properly—the hardware is included in the Unlimited version. If you buy the \$50 starter version, you'll have to buy your own headset mike; the \$100 "Unlimited" version (which we reviewed) includes everything you need.

The heart of the program is the Singing Window, where the pitches/notes are represented in line graph form. As the words and notes of a song move by, your voice appears as a "Pitch Tracking Line" -- so you can "see" your voice. Karaoke Revolution for the PlayStation 2 uses a similar system, without the notes. After you sing a song, the computer calculates how close your voice is to the central pitch and gives you a score. The 20 lessons in the tutorial section are well designed, walking you through the basics of singing, from warming up properly to exercising. Your progress is automatically saved. Classroom teachers will want to note that the Unlimited Version of the program keeps progress for just six people. Content on the CD includes 30 vocal exercises (e.g., octave drills), and 45 songs, ranging from easy ("Go Tell It on the Mountain") to hard ("Star Spangled Banner"). Other tools include a metronome, and the ability to change the tempo, accompanying instrument, volume and key. There's an online store of new songs that we did not test, and the ability to import your own songs by way of MIDI microphone. The software is well designed, professionally narrated, and the technology worked without a glitch on our HP Pavilion zd7000. If you're looking for an affordable source of singing lessons, this package is well worth the time and money.



**Lord of the Rings, The: The Battle for Middle-earth**, 4.6 or ★★★★★ stars, EA, www.info.ea.com, \$50, Win XP, Win 2000 (1.3 GHz, 256 MB, 4GB, online play), 12-up, Teen, Violence.

Say buddy, can you spare 4 gigs of hard disk space? If so, and you happen to share a strong interest in the Lord of the Rings (or perhaps in exotically illustrated, sci-fi underworlds) chances are that you'll love this cinematic RTS-- or "real time strategy" game. The package includes four installation CDs and a user's guide. After signing in, you have a wide variety of options and battles.



You can select from three challenge levels, and decide which region of the Middle-earth to fight over. You start in a scene with a small squadron of fighters made up of Lord of the Rings characters. As you explore, you encounter monsters -- to kill them, you merely move toward them (there is no explicit fighting). This game is more about strategy, picking things up, and trading. An online option, that we did not try, lets you challenge other players. The graphics are very rich, and each scene has video from the movie woven into it. Created using the Sage 3D game engine (also used in Command & Conquer) by EA Los Angeles, for Electronic Arts.



**Rollercoaster Tycoon 3**, 4.5 or ★★★★★ stars, Atari, www.rollercoastertycoon.com, \$39.99, Win XP, ages 9-up. A good sim keeps getting better-- at least in terms of 3D graphics. Now you can get inside the attractions you put in your park and go for a ride using a "Coaster Cam," or you can design your own family to turn loose in the park. But make sure you read the minimum system requirements carefully before trying to install this program.

As with other newer simulations, performance on an older computer can be very disappointing. Other new features include a fireworks editor, the ability to assign music to different rides, and a park lighting system that allows your park to stay open at night. Note that the viewing process -- like steering a helicopter -- can be tricky, which raises the learning curve, and testers complained that the program wasn't as smart as in early versions. Visit



www.rollercoastertycoon.com for more information. Created by Frontier Developments of Cambridge England, in consultation with the original designer, Chris Sawyer.

**Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events**, 4.4 or ★★★★★ stars, Activision, www.activision.com, \$30, Win XP, 10-up, Everyone, Mild Violence. This beautifully illustrated 3D scavenger hunt game has a different start than the console version, but the idea is the same. Because the game uses the arrows and mouse simultaneously, it isn't as easy to move around and play as the console version. Also, some of the levels are too hard for younger children.



Despite the E rating, this game may be too creepy for younger children--there's no shortage of thugs and jumping crabs. All in all, this is a very challenging, beautiful game that is a nice addition to the movie.

**Atari Anthology**, 4.4 or ★★★★★ stars, Atari, www.atari.com, \$40, PS2, Xbox, ages 4-up (most content suited for older children or adults). Send your PlayStation 2 or Xbox into a time warp with 85 of the first Atari arcade games, all on one disk. First you see a main menu, in the form of a galaxy. Each category of software is represented by a cluster of stars -- selecting one zooms into a list of the games. The stars of this CD are the 18 classic arcade games, including the famous Asteroids (shoot from a rotating craft, trying to break up an asteroid field before they hit you), Centipede (shoot a falling stream of bugs), Missile Command, Super Breakout and Warlords. Each of the classic games includes some of the original documentation (e.g., users guides) and several screen viewing options. The audio and video quality is identical to the original game. Note that many of the games are of little interest except to those who are students of game design. It is fun to see so much of yesterday's content on just one of today's disks.

**EazySpeak Spanish**, 4.4 or ★★★★★ stars, Kutoka Interactive, www.kutoka.com, \$24.99, Win 98, 2000, ME, Win XP, Mac OSX, ages 12-up. This clever immersion-style program teaches 800 Spanish vocabulary words and basic conversation skills. The action takes place in Doki, an edgy cartoon world to explore. In each location, like the hospital, bar, supermarket, travel agency, etc., there are activities to complete that require listening and speaking. In the hospital you'll restore a body to its pre-skeletal state by correctly identifying requested body parts. In the bar, you'll practice ordering drinks (including wine), and at the supermarket, you'll do a little shopping. The format is engaging and non-linear. The latter quality means that it's easy to miss some things, but it's nice to be able to explore the program freely. Because of the all-Spanish, immersion approach and some nonintuitive icons, navigation can be tricky, especially when working with the voice recording feature. A tutorial video and help panel are

available when you get stuck. A built-in chat feature lets you talk with other Doki players on the Web. One big drawback is that there are no record-keeping or sign in features. Still, this is a very well-done program, with a variety of interesting activities-- even teens will want to play. A French version is also available.



**Mathville Middle School: Where Kids Love Math**, 4.3 or ★★★★★ stars, Courseware Solutions Inc., www.mathville.com, \$45, Win XP, Mac OSX, ages 6-12. Great with content depth but clumsy in presentation, this update to MathVIP (1998) lets 6th and 7th grade students explore a virtual village where they can earn money by working in shops. For instance, as a chef, you are asked "a recipe calls for 3 1/8 cups of flour. You have 2 7/8. What fraction of a cup are you short?" Kids can use mental math or an onscreen calculator to type the correct answer. Correct answers earn more money, and gain access to new shops. Printed, nonspecific hints are provided for wrong answers. Topics include decimals, fractions, percents, ratios, integers, algebra, graphs, word problems, estimating, exponents, area, perimeter and volume. Progress can be tracked for just a single session for one student; a key drawback to the single use version. The network version (\$700) has a network based tracking system that we did not test.



Drawbacks include a clunky design that locks students into a problem until it is solved, and a cryptic help system that requires reading -- there is little or no hand holding with this program. The graphics, done in Macromedia, are crude at best. However, the content is rich, and the idea of earning money over time is engaging. Of most value are the "real world", practical applications of math. The CD also contains a collection of printable worksheets and tests. In sum, this is a useful program for both home and school settings.



**Atari Flashback**, 4.2 or ★★★★★ stars, Atari, www.atari.com, \$44.95, TV based Game, ages 7-up. This TV game plugs directly into your video/audio in ports, and simulates the original 1980's Atari 7800 game system, with 20 games. Two authentic joy-



stick controllers are included in the box, along with an AC adapter (no batteries required!). The games vary in quality. The most noteworthy are Asteroids, Breakout and the incredibly addicting Centipede. We started playing it, and were still playing it two hours later. This is a hybrid of the classic Atari 2600 and 7800 consoles and is modeled to resemble a smaller replica of the 7800. Built in games include Adventure, Air Sea Battle, Asteroids, Battlezone, Breakout, Canyon Bomber, Centipede, Crystal Castles, Desert Falcon, Food Fight, Gravitar, Haunted House, Millipede, Planet Smashers, Saboteur, Sky Diver, Solaris, Sprintmaster, Warlords and Yar's Revenge. Should you buy it? Perhaps, for a trip down memory lane. Our younger testers looked at it and said "are you kidding?" Note that Atari also publishes a PS2 title called "Atari Anthology" that contains 85 old games. Also see Atari Paddle TV Games.

**Ms. Pac-Man TV Games**, 4.1 or ★★★★★ stars, Jakks Pacific, Inc., www.jakksstvgames.com, \$19.99, TV based Game, ages 5-up. After you install four AA batteries, plug this controller into the video/audio channel of your TV. A well-designed



menu features five classic arcade games published by Namco in the '80s. Our two favorites are Ms. Pac-Man, the famous timed maze game, and Galaga-- a fast-paced Space-Invaders like game, where you shoot streams of moving aliens. These games are presented just like you remember them, with the same graphics and sounds. The other three games, Mappy, Pole-Position and

Xevious are not as fun. The main weakness to note is a sticky down direction on our test unit, making Pac-Man particularly frustrating at times when "down" is the only path to avoiding being eaten. Plus, there is just one channel of audio. Also, the steering mechanism for the Pole-Position is not intuitive. The bottom line? The price and simplicity make TV game worth the purchase. Note that the this game does not have an auto-off feature, so if (when) your children leave the unit switched on, the batteries will die in about 14 hours.

**Magical Sketch 2**, 3.9 or ★★★★★ stars, Curious Labs, www.curiouslabs.com, \$30, Win XP, Mac OSX, 3-up, Like virtual modeling clay, this program starts with a blank screen and some drawing tools. You first create an outline with a pencil tool, and watch as the shape turns into a 3D shape (a circle becomes a blob of clay, for example). From this point, you can twist, push and pull the shape into different. The program is hard to figure out (unintuitive icons and no tutorial) and limited -- it seems like there are many more things you can't do, than you can do with it. Also, it is not possible to



save work in popular graphics formats. The program could be used as an introduction to wireframe animation. See also Cosmic Blobs.

**Maestro Travel Chess Computer**, 2.5 or ★★★★★ stars, Saitek Industries, Ltd., [www.saiteckusa.com](http://www.saiteckusa.com), \$100, Smart Toy, 11-up, The same size as a Palm or PocketPC, this travel chess device is designed to let you take your game on the road. Unfortunately, the menus are cryptic and clunky, and the touch screen is often unresponsive. Content includes 100 levels (60 fun and 40 competition), a hint mode, 64 study positions (to see how expert chess



players would do it), take back and replay over 200 moves, and a chess clock.

Unfinished games are held in memory, and an automatic power down feature saves on your three AAA batteries. Unfortunately, the interface is so poorly designed that simple tasks like saving games, changing levels, or turning off the loud beeps that accompany each move -- are all an exercise in logic. Note that there are a variety of affordable chess programs for the Palm or Pocket PC that are easier to use, providing better portable chess options.



Another beautiful scene from *Sherlock Holmes* (see the review on page 14)

## School Supplement

Here's a listing of the products of special interest to classroom teachers or home schoolers.

**LogiRobot Kit**, 4.4 or ★★★★★ stars, Educational Insights, [www.edin.com](http://www.edin.com), \$100, Smart Toy, ages 7-up. The LogiRobot Kit contains 60 parts, including ten switches and a docking station so you can work on your robot without having it scoot away. The robot itself (called the LR001) contains two microprocessor controlled motors -- one per wheel -- which can be controlled either by a remote infrared unit, or by letting it respond to Logibloc sensors. The optical sensor makes it possible for the robot to follow a white path, mechanical switches let the robot respond to bumps. A pen tool turns the robot into an art tool, and an instruction booklet provides ideas for 30 projects. The robot runs on 4 AA batteries, with 1 9V battery powering the remote. Unfortunately, the robot eats batteries (there does not seem to be an auto-off feature), and the wheels need a flat surface in order to move. Also, the number of parts in the kit limit the movement features of the robot—it's good for driving, but not much else. Finally, some of connections can get finicky, which can create frustrating situations (the wrong kind of problem solving). Still, this kit holds great potential for helping middle or high school students better understand the principles of control, automation and robotics. The kit is compatible with other Logibloc parts and kits, which can extend the capabilities of the device.



**School All Stars Award Winners for this Issue**

- ★ **Phonics Super Star Reading System**, Help Me 2 Learn Company, [www.helpme2learn.com](http://www.helpme2learn.com), \$79.95, 4-11, Win 98, Win XP, Mac OSX.
- ★ **Phonics 3a Advanced Level Sports Edition**, Help Me 2 Learn Company, [www.helpme2learn.com](http://www.helpme2learn.com), \$24.95, 7-14, Win 98, Win XP, Mac OSX.
- ★ **Soccer Math**, EdVenture Software, [www.edven.com](http://www.edven.com), \$29.95, 7-14, Win 98, Win XP, Mac OS9, Mac OSX

Continued on page 19



by Ann C. Orr, Ed.D.

## Professional Development for Teachers— Just a Click Away

Back in my day, professional development was something foisted upon us already too busy and over-scheduled teachers. On a certain designated date, the kids stayed home while we carpooled over to the ISD and crammed into the auditorium, for a rousing lecture on emergent literacy, motivation or higher order thinking skills. We didn't pick the time or date, let alone the topic—it was one-size-fits all, whether you were a green, first year, first grade teacher or a veteran subject area expert at the secondary level.

Thankfully, those days are gone—well, at least they should be, given the myriad of interesting and useful Internet-delivered professional development options available to today's educators. Some are free, some are not, and some you can take for grad or continuing education credits. The beautiful thing is, YOU pick the topic or course, based on YOUR exact needs, be it how to teach chemistry through inquiry, better integrate technology into your courses, or improve your science lab safety procedures. Whether it's content or pedagogy you want, there is a course out there that will meet your needs. Here are some good places to start.

*"The beautiful thing is, YOU pick the topic or course, based on YOUR needs."*

**George Lucas Educational Foundation's Professional Development Modules**, George Lucas Educational Foundation, [www.edutopia.org](http://www.edutopia.org). This free website offers articles, video footage, PowerPoint presentations, and activities, drawing from George Lucas Educational Foundation's archives of best practices. Modules for teachers focus on classroom innovation and "Project-Based Learning", "Assessment", and "Technology Integration". Modules for educational leadership include "View of the Principal and the Job" and "Teacher Supervision & Development". We found the information well presented and the module format easy to follow. The profiles of actual teachers, principals and programs are particularly valuable. Visit <http://www.edutopia.org/foundation/courseware.php> for more details.

**JASON Academy**, JASON Foundation for Education (Arlington), [www.jason.org](http://www.jason.org), \$225/course. This impressive service is designed to help elementary and middle school teachers teach math and science more effectively. There are 29 web delivered courses, available anytime. Each course is five weeks long and requires about 6 to 10 hours per week (up to 30 to 50 hours per course). Activities include reading online text, exploring web sites, discussion board, and preparing student activities. Instructors incorporate personal home pages and instructor "office hours" for time zones around the world. Course topics align with most state content standards, with titles such as Chemistry through Inquiry, Forces and Motion, Structure of the Earth, Teaching Project-Based Science, and Problem Solving in Geometry.

We were very impressed by this service. Everything is intuitively designed and thoroughly explained, so that novice teachers will have no problem at all jumping right in. The video segments are of good quality and numerous, and the assignments are interesting and varied.

**eSchool Online**, Classroom Connect, [www.classroom.com](http://www.classroom.com), \$call. Designed for K-12 teacher training, eSchool Online can be customized for any district. The district first identifies a goal, and then a course designer meets with district personnel, in person, to storyboard a custom professional development solution. Yes, this is expensive. The designers create instructional plans and scripts, shoot original video featuring the district's own master teachers, and create web content and interactive activities. The eSchool Online platform is then used to coordinate video, web-based content, and associated resources into one online staff development program.

For example, one school created a course to promote science lab safety; another used the program to train middle school math teachers on the latest pedagogy. The example modules we examined were easy to use and included classroom video. The modules also contain interactive activities related to the subject matter. Some of the modules we examined seem light on content, but we couldn't tell if this was attributable to the district, or Classroom Connect.

**Seminars on Science**, American Museum of Natural History, [www.amnh.org](http://www.amnh.org), \$445/course. This is a very nice series of online professional development courses for science teachers. Each course is authored and taught by AMNH museum scientists, and runs six weeks with an additional week for assignment completion. Course fees are \$445 per course with additional fees if you want to take it

### Forget how to add those @\$(# page numbers?

Can't remember how to create headers and footers in Word, or enter formulas in Excel? **Atomic Learning** can help. It's an online library of 10,000 short video tutorials covering 70 software applications. Each tutorial is broken into segments, making it easy to zero in on just the little piece of how-to info you need. Between 300 and 400 new videos are added every 45 days (these guys must be busy!) Applications listed include Word, Excel, Outlook, PowerPoint, Windows XP, Photoshop 6, Photoshop Elements, iMovie, HyperStudio and BlackBoard. It's certainly a great idea, and fairly well executed, too, although the quality of the tutorial videos varies -- some are more "polished" than others. The "extra" area containing lesson ideas for the applications is unnecessary and the plans themselves weak, so avoid this part. The tutorials alone are worth the subscription price.

**AtomicLearning.com**, Atomic Learning, Inc., [www.atomiclearning.com](http://www.atomiclearning.com), subscriptions start at \$79.99/year.

for graduate or continuing education credit. As of January 2005, course titles include "The Diversity of Fishes", "Earth: Inside and Out", "Genetics, Genomics and Genethics" and "Space, Time and Motion". [We found the courses easy to navigate, interesting, and deep in content.](#)

[Assignments include essays and participation in online discussions.](#)

Visit

<http://learn.amnh.org>.

**PBS TeacherLine**, PBS, [www.pbs.org/teacherline](http://www.pbs.org/teacherline) \$varies. This is a collection of 90 courses in mathematics, reading, instructional technology, instructional strategies, science, and curriculum mapping. Courses are conducted by real teachers, and are made available through partnerships with PBS member stations and local education agencies. The content comes from entities such as Indiana

University, Tom Snyder Productions, McREL, ISTE, NCTM, NCTE, the IRA and The Concord Consortium. Courses are generally six weeks in length and cost between \$150-\$350 to complete.

Coursework includes participating in online discussions with your facilitator and fellow students, reading, watching video, and responding to online assessments and activities. Graduate credit can be earned with an extra fee. Visit [www.pbs.org/teacherline](http://www.pbs.org/teacherline) for more information. ☘

## New Palm OS Titles

**BackupMan 1.51**, Bits 'n Bolts Software, [www.palmgear.com](http://www.palmgear.com), \$10. Ever had your handheld crash on the road, when there's no access to the desktop computer for back-up? Here's a solution that backs your data onto your memory card. You just "set it and forget it", and you'll always have a recent copy of your data at hand in the event of an accidental deletion, errant program crashing, or even a complete hard reset of your handheld. The application has been designed for PalmOS 5 devices, but also supports PalmOS 3.5 and above that contain a VFS enabled expansion slot. The fully automated backup (daily, hourly, or scheduled after each HotSync) is fast-10MB per minute. A free seven day evaluation is available at [www.palmgear.com](http://www.palmgear.com).

**IdeaPad 1.4.2**, nosleep software, \$free. Sort of a "lite" version of Inspiration for Palm OS, this concept mapping application has one distinct advantage-- it's free. You begin by drawing a concept map and then convert it to a text outline-- or, you can start with a text outline and then generate the diagram. The diagrams can be exported to any desktop graphics program, and the outlines can be sent to any word processor via the MemoPad. Beaming and export capabilities allow you to share your projects with others. The application supports color handhelds, and runs on anything from Palm OS 3.5 or later.

**Lesson Plan**, Tapperware, [www.tapperware.com](http://www.tapperware.com), \$20. Lucky you! Now you can work on lesson plans anytime, anywhere. The program will work for the Palm only, or in conjunction with a Mac or Windows computer, which makes it possible to print or save plans. You can enter up to 25 classes (who teaches that many?), along with dates and times. Features include the ability to view a summary of any day's lesson plans, by period; attach a note to any school day; and create templates of frequently-used text, which can be quickly inserted into any lesson plan. Another neat feature is the ability to "bump" all or part of a lesson plan to the next time the class meets. It's also possible to print to an IR printer (PalmPrint required) directly from the handheld.

**MathChamp! 1.1**, Leading Step, Inc., [www.palmgear.com](http://www.palmgear.com), \$14.95, ages 6-12. Children can practice early math skills (addition, subtraction, multiplication and division) on a Palm. There's a nice range of content. Young children can match numerals and older students can identify equivalent fractions or multiply fractions. Quick answers score more points, and bonus rounds bump the score even higher. We liked this program for many reasons, especially for its range of content, clean design and easy to use interface. Available at [www.palmgear.com](http://www.palmgear.com).

**Thesaurus/Spellcheck 2.2**, DDH Software, Inc., [www.ddhsoftware.com](http://www.ddhsoftware.com), \$15.00, 8-up. This is a Thesaurus with 55,000 words and a SpellCheck with 45,400 words. More words can be added, via download from the DDH Software website ([www.ddhsoftware.com](http://www.ddhsoftware.com)), where there are additional word lists and tools to make your own customized lists. This updated version of the application features faster spellchecking capabilities. The screens are cleanly designed and the interface is intuitive, making this a useful tool even for younger students. Available at [www.palmsource.com](http://www.palmsource.com).

**WordSmith 2.221**, Blue Nomad LLC, \$29.99, ages 8-up. This wonderful productivity application has been upgraded once again. As you may already know, it's actually three programs in one--a word processor, an book/document reader and a memo pad. Features include integration with Microsoft Word for Windows; all the requisite word processing functions (i.e., cut, paste, select all, word count, font color and style, etc.); and compression of documents during HotSync. New to this version is a faster install, AlphaSmart Dana support and better compatibility with Tungsten T3 handhelds. If you do a lot of reading and writing on your Palm, consider this program. Available at [www.palmsource.com](http://www.palmsource.com). ☘



## BOOK REVIEW

The Technology Coordinator's Handbook, stars, ISTE Publications, [www.iste.org](http://www.iste.org), \$28. Written for both working technology coordinators and those preparing to enter the field, this 178 page softcover book serves as both a guide and a reference. Chapter subjects include technology integration, network operations, administrative computing, budgeting and planning. Model policies and forms for grant applications, bid requests, acceptable use guidelines and maintenance schedules are included, as are interesting interviews with tech coordinators in the field. ☘



(from page 17)

**Phonics Super Star Reading System**, 4.3 ★★★★★ stars, Help Me 2 Learn Company, [www.helpme2learn.com](http://www.helpme2learn.com), \$79.95, Win 98, Win XP, Mac OSX, ages 4-11. Four programs in one, this is an affordable set of engaging activities designed to teach and drill basic phonics skills. Included are Letters & Numbers, Phonics 1a Vowel Sounds, Phonics 1b Consonant Sounds, and Phonics 2 Intermediate Level (see the individual reviews). More than sixty activities are offered, along with pre-and post-tests, songs, and progress reporting features. There's also a network version. In brief-- these are solid programs, and fairly entertaining, too.

NOT RATED

**Encyclopaedia Britannica 2005 Ultimate Reference Suite**, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., [www.eb.com](http://www.eb.com), \$69.95, Windows XP, Macintosh OSX DVD, ages 6-up. Encyclopaedia Britannica 2005 includes three encyclopedias, a dictionary and thesaurus, rich multimedia, a world atlas, timelines, online magazines and more. Content includes 100,000+ articles, 17,000 images and illustrations and over 550 audio and video clips. Comes on 6 CDs or on DVD.

**Dyscalculia Screener**, Tool Factory, Inc., [www.toolfactory.com](http://www.toolfactory.com), \$399.00, Win 98, Win XP, 6-14. Sometimes called number blindness, dyscalculia is a condition where children cannot understanding simple number concepts. Developed in the U.K. with an authority on dyscalculia, this is a screening tool for children ages 6-14. A series of

activities tests reaction time, number sense and simple addition and multiplication. From the performance on these activities, the software generates a bar graph showing the student's strengths and weaknesses, and suggests whether a possibility of dyscalculia exists. The software is easy to use, and the activities are straightforward on the screen but require keying in yes and no responses by certain hot keys, which can be difficult for kids with special needs.

**FlipPublisher**, E-Book Systems, [www.flipalbum.com](http://www.flipalbum.com), \$249.00, Win 98, Win XP, ages 13-up. This utility is designed to let you transform a document into a "flip book", a.k.a. electronic book. It's fairly easy to use, although not exactly intuitive; in other words, keep the manual. You begin by creating a cover, and then add content by inserting text documents, photos, illustrations, movies and audio files. The software does the formatting work, so that you can flip the pages, just as you would any book. Teachers could use this in a variety of ways. Students could use the software to turn their reports into electronic books. Once a FlipBook is created, it can be delivered by email, or saved onto a CD-ROM. Books can also be presented in slide show format. Features include Auto pagination and chaptering and the ability to import HTML documents into individual pages. You can also automatically create a table of contents page, with links to chapters. The software can work with text files (DOC, RTF, TXT), image files (GIF, JPG, PNG, BMP, WMF, ICO, PCX, TIF, PCD, PSD), sound files (MID, WAV, MP3) and Video Files (AVI, MPG). ☼

**KidzMouse**

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**Buy It:** You won't be sorry!  
**Borrow It:** Fun for a few days.  
**Bag It:** Don't bother

We love your reviews! Visit [www.childrenssoftware.com/writeuser.html](http://www.childrenssoftware.com/writeuser.html)

**KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS:** GC=GameCube, PS2=PlayStation 2, PC=Windows XP, GBA=Game Boy Advance, DS=Nintendo DS or Dual Screen, PSP=PlayStation Personal

Parents, take note. There's a lot of game news in this issue, including the PlayStation Portable (PSP) from Sony and a batch of amazing new games like Tak 2. It's worth your time to take a few minutes and read this section, so you can be smarter than your kids.

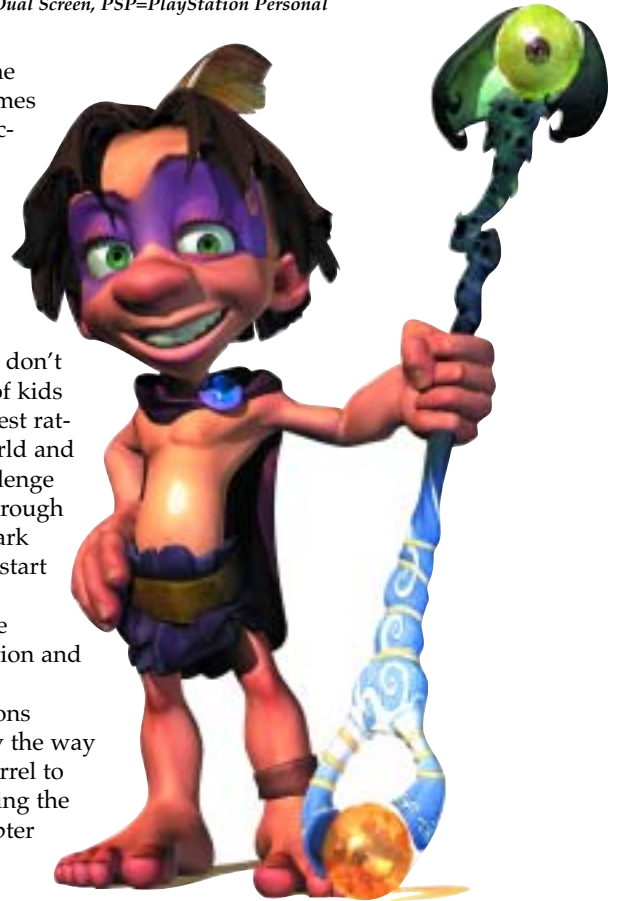
**CONSOLE GAMES (Rated from highest to lowest, for all ages)**



**Tak 2: The Staff of Dreams**, 5.0 or ★★★★★ stars, THQ, [www.thq.com](http://www.thq.com), \$40, Game Cube, PlayStation 2, ages 9-up, Everyone, Cartoon violence. Five stars? We don't often dole out this kind of rating, but after extensive testing with a variety of kids (including some who refused to stop), our instrument churned out the highest ratings. This 3D scavenger hunt is easy to play, starting in a lava-lamp like world and progressing through lush jungles, islands and mountains full of magic, challenge and peril. After the introduction you steer Tak, the "shaman's apprentice" through each level to collect "juju potions" and eventually free a princess from the dark tower. If you stumble off a cliff, Tak falls with a shriek (no blood), and you start over in a reasonable place. Fortunately, you are not punished for mistakes, which helps make the game a friendly yet challenging experience. The game shows its improvements over the first version with its rich Pixar-esq animation and humorous dialogue, and games are saved automatically.

The game play is typical—jumping, gliding, throwing, but the interactions between the characters are what set this game apart from the rest, especially the way they work with the story. For example, Tak can transform into a flying squirrel to glide over mountains, or summon up other animal inspired powers (including the smell of a skunk). Each level is introduced with a preview—sort of a helicopter view fly over—which is good for helping you understand the length of the level, and the end goal. This is a great technique, and one that more games should use.

Also nice -- the forgiving nature of the game. Novice players, or stumbling parents, have a good chance at the early levels, and the challenges are well leveled. While most of the gameplay is for one player, there are five one-or two-player games accessible from the main menu. If you could step into a dream, it might just look like Tak 2. Buy it. Created by Avalanche Software for THQ.



The color of Tak's feather indicates his current health status. This, and fly over preview of each level, make the game particularly child-friendly.



**Mario Party 6**, 4.9 or ★★★★★ stars, Nintendo, [www.nintendo.com](http://www.nintendo.com), \$50, GameCube, ages 5-up, Everyone, Comic Mischief. Designed especially for a group of 2 - 4 players (although solo play is available), this wonderful update to the Mario party series raises the bar in the party game category, over Muppet's Party Cruise. But keep in mind that it has a very strong "Nintendo/Mario feel" which may or may not appeal to some players. The game presents frequent opportunities for fast-paced competitive play, for all members of the family, and a new "Mic Mode" lets you play games-- with your voice-- using an included microphone (that plugs into the second memory slot). This is the first use of voice recognition in a videogame. Each player grabs a controller and signs in as a Nintendo character (e.g., Mario, Luigi, Peach, Yoshi and so on). It is possible to set a handicap level, so that beginners can play with more experienced players. Next, a board is selected -- there are five in all,



**Ten Games to Avoid**

The Institute for Media and the Family advises parents to avoid these M-rated video games for their children and teens:

1. Doom 3
2. Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas
3. Half Life 2
4. Halo 2
5. Resident Evil: Outbreak
6. Psi Ops: The Mindgate Conspiracy
7. The Guy Game
8. Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude
9. Mortal Kombat Deception
10. Rumble Roses

and the features on each change randomly depending on the time of day. The goal is to collect as many stars as possible, which are scattered around the board. Turns are assigned automatically, and each player rolls for a turn. The boards are full of many colorful, changing random options, which can be confusing for younger players. Of course, the best aspect of this program is its 75 minigames, which include endless variations on the themes of racing, bingo, king of the hill, shooting, jumping and so on. The games change, depending on how many players are signed in, and there is a variety of levels. The most interesting are the microphone games, which include a game show that's played with the sound of your voice and some arcade side scrollers where you control action with words like "JUMP!".

Once you learn the basics of this program, it will present



endless hours of multiplayer play, with bonus opportunities for informal vocabulary and math practice.

**Paper Mario 2**, 4.9 or ★★★★★ stars, Nintendo of America, [www.nintendo.com](http://www.nintendo.com), \$49.99, GameCube, 6-up, Everyone. Wander around with a treasure map in search of Princess Peach in this creative strategy game. Even though the game is in 3D, Mario is as thin as paper so he can squeeze under doors or around corners. Throughout the game, different characters have different abilities, and you must decide which is the best for each battle or job. Buy it.

**ATV Offroad Fury 3**, 4.8 or ★★★★★ stars, Acclaim Entertainment, [www.acclaim.com](http://www.acclaim.com), \$49.99, PS2, 6-up. This update to the highly regarded ATV (All Terrain Vehicle) series has more hills, jumps, bridges and roads, plus more tournament opportunities. Two players can play in split screen mode. Borrow it or buy it.

**Karaoke Revolution Volume 2**, 4.7 or ★★★★★ stars, Konami of America, Inc., [www.konami.com/usa/](http://www.konami.com/usa/), \$40, PS2, ages 6-up. With the exception of a new Medley Mode -- the ability to link song clips together for competition -- this edition works the same as the first excellent game. New content includes seven characters, three venus and 30 outfits, with 35 songs, from dance, pop and rock. Created for Sony by Harmonix Music Systems.

**The Incredibles**, 4.6 or ★★★★★ stars, THQ, [www.thq.com](http://www.thq.com), \$40, Xbox, Game Cube, PS2, Win XP, Mac OSX, 8-up, Teen, Cartoon

*Violence.* This single player, 18 level game follows the movie with fast-paced fighting action. Each level is introduced with a short film clip. The characters are well represented -- if you liked the movie, you'll probably like the game providing you have the persistence to make it through all the levels. The challenge starts by beating up gangs of thugs in order to foil a bank heist, and later includes a fun racing game featuring Dash, and a very exciting and challenging battle on Nomanisian Island, against a group of pesky robots.

There's a lot of shooting and cartoon violence, perhaps the reason for the T rating, but we could not find any blood or worrisome content. In fact, the darker themed, E-



rated Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events is much more violent. The 3D graphics and sound are much like any other state of the art video game. We liked the problem solving opportunities and autosave feature, so that more than one player can play. If you can, stay with one of the console versions of the game, which are very similarly designed; the Xbox version has an online feature which we did not test. The Mac/Windows version is tricky to learn because of the controls, but otherwise is very much like the console game, other than the fact that it takes 500 MB of hard drive space and comes on two disks. There is also a PC/Mac game called The Incredibles: When Danger Calls that is designed for younger players. Developed by Heavy Iron Studios for THQ.

**Fairly Odd Parents Shadow Showdown**, 4.6 or ★★★★★ stars, THQ, [www.thq.com](http://www.thq.com), \$40, PS2, GameCube, 6-up, Everyone. This nicely done scavenger hunt adventure is full of the wry humor of the Nick TV show. You must find the ingredients to the Fairyversary muffin. A tutorial teaches the basics of jumping and running. Bonus features include six two-player minigames and a "behind the scenes" video. Games can be saved on a memory cartridge. All in all, this is a solid, fun game.

**Nicktoons EyeToy**, 4.5 or ★★★★★ stars, THQ, [www.thq.com](http://www.thq.com), \$19.99, PlayStation 2 EyeToy, 5-11, Everyone. Your arms are the control pad in this collection of 11 fast paced EyeToy games (for PS2 only). Our favorites include Bikini Bottom Bowling, where you direct a bowling ball as it rolls down an alley by leaning left or right, and Robot Invasion -- a maze game where you chase robots by rolling a large ball (like a hamster ball). Though it is designed to be for one player, many of the games invite multiplayer participation, such as Fishbowl Frenzy, where you try to patch as many leaks in a fish tank as possible before the water runs out. This is a fun diversion from the typical sit down videogame fare.

**Dance Dance Revolution Extreme**, 4.5 or ★★★★★ stars, Konami of America, Inc., [www.konami.com/usa/](http://www.konami.com/usa/), \$40, PlayStation 2, 7-up. This edition of Dance Dance Revolution includes 70 new songs and Sony EyeToy integration. The new "Hands & Feet" mode lets players follow visual cues to complete the song, while the "Clean the Screen" mode requires players to

wave their hands to clear an obstructed view on the screen. The "Watch Me Dance" mode lets players see themselves strut their stuff in the background of the game. The song library includes 70 songs from folks like Duran Duran, Junior Senior and the Village People. A "Work Out" mode allows players to track the calories while dancing off the pounds.

**EyeToy: AntiGrav**, 4.5 or ★★★★★ stars, Sony Computer Entertainment America Inc., [www.scea.com](http://www.scea.com), \$49.99, PS2 (EyeToy required), 7-up. If you've ever had one of those dreams where you're flying, you get the idea of this new EyeToy title. The third game in a series that's been bundled with an EyeToy (following Groove and Play), this is a hoverboard simulation, where you control an onscreen "skier" with your arms. The motion tracking technology lets you do tricks, jumps, and interact with the futuristic environment. It is a great way to get in shape. Testers loved it -- in short spurts. This is not a

long term type of program.

**Hot Wheels Interactive Stunt Track Challenge**, 4.5 or ★★★★★ stars, THQ, [www.thq.com](http://www.thq.com), \$20, PS2, Xbox, Win XP, 9-up, Everyone. For some mind-numbing after-school racing, this game is ideal. Weaknesses include hard to read screens and menus (the type is small and frequent). The setup menus are too complex, and the program nags you in an unintelligent way if you don't have a memory card. Also, the game stereotypes "boy culture" with cheesy actors such as "Ryan Storm" (girls will want to play this game, too). Versions are also available for Xbox, GBA and Win XP. Buy or borrow.

**Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events**, 4.5 or ★★★★★ stars, Activision, [www.activision.com](http://www.activision.com), \$30, PlayStation 2, GameCube, Xbox, 10-up, Everyone, Mild Violence. This richly animated, one player 3D scavenger hunt is combined with fast paced arcade elements -- the graphics look a lot like last

## Ready or not, here comes the **PSP!**



**H**ave a look at the real-sized image of the PSP (PlayStation Portable) screen below, and you can understand the building excitement over this latest entry in game hardware. Besides being the first real competition to Nintendo handheld space. PSP does a few things well -- like showing movies or playing PS2 videogames. Over the next year, Sony will be spending millions to make sure you know that the PSP is more than a game player. It is also designed for music, video, communication, and wireless, with the games as the main driver. The removable memory stick can show your digital pictures, and/or perhaps your digital video. Drawbacks include the price-- the PSP will probably be more expensive than the Nintendo DS, and the PSP is not backwards compatible with anything (whereas the Nintendo DS comes with a library of hundreds of existing titles. Software will come on 1.8GB optical discs. USB 2.0, IR port and WiFi wireless LAN, PSP is the new entertainment platform from PlayStation. Key details are still being worked out (such as price and firm US street date, although we were told "probably March"). Stay tuned!

- Dimensions:** Approximately 6.7 by .9 by 2.9 inches
- Weight:** About the same as the Nintendo DS (.62 lbs versus .61 lbs)
- CPU:** 333 MHz PSP CPU
- Memory:** 32MB with 4MB of DRAM
- Display:** 4.3 in, 16:9 wide screen high-resolution TFT LCD, 480 x 272 pixel, 16.8 million colors. Maximum Luminance: 180 / 130 / 80 cd/m2 (when using battery pack); 200 / 180 / 80 cd/m2 (when using AC adapter)
- Battery life:** Sony doesn't talk about this. We'll see. The PSP ships with one Lithium ion battery and an AC adapter
- Sound:** Built-in stereo speakers, headphone jack with earbuds
- Networking:** Ad hoc mode (connection for up to 16 consoles)
- Main Input/Output:** IEEE 802.11b (WiFi), USB 2.0, Memory Stick PRO Duo, IrDA, IR Remote (SIRCS)
- Ports:** Memory Stick Duo slot, USB connector, DC 5V connector, headset connector, wireless ability to talk to 16 other PSPs.
- Keys/Switches:** Nearly identical to a PS2 controller, with the addition of a power/hold switch, display button, sound button, volume buttons, wireless LAN switch, UMD open latch.
- Disc Drive and Storage:** One read-only UMD drive, with a 32 MB Memory Stick port.
- Remote control:** remote controls for basic functions
- Storage:** Comes with a black soft case and hand strap
- Codec:** Video: H.264 / AVC MP Level3; audio: ATRAC3plus, MP3





Last fall, four movies resulted in 21 videogame renditions, spread among six platforms, mostly from THQ and Activision



year's Harry Potter video games. Your goal is to steer the Baudelaire orphans through a maze of hallways, collecting parts of inventions, earning puzzle pieces, and killing nasty things like rats or henchmen. There is a hint system that is not very useful; younger children will get stuck. There are 20 missions based on the 1st three books of the series. You can switch between

characters easier than the PC version, in fact, the entire experience is smoother with any of the three console editions of this game. The violence is thinly disguised, you shoot guys with machine-gun peppermints which give a red mist when they hit -- which, when coupled with a machine gun sound, makes a mockery of the ESRB "mild violence" descriptors. In fact, we found the violence to be more realistic than the cartoon-like T rated Incredibles. The main drawback is that some levels of the game are very challenging, and the frustration can grow...only vague hints are offered. The narration and vocabulary used in the game are refreshingly honest (like the books) making this game a good language experience. We found the console versions easier to use than the Windows version, although the graphics are sharper with the PC version. Note that you must have a memory card to save the games on the GameCube and PS2 versions. Created by Adrenium for Activision.

**Polar Express, The**, 4.1 ★★★★★ stars, THQ, www.thq.com, \$30, Windows, GameCube, PlayStation 2, 5-10, Everyone, Mild Fantasy Violence. This 3D exploration of eight different Polar Express worlds contains some perplexingly difficult challenges, many of which are also addictingly fun. The format is hardly unique -- each level asks you to solve a specific challenge which is introduced with a short movie clip. For example, to retrieve a child's lost ticket, you move through eight cars of the train, dodging mischievous marionettes that pop up from anywhere, sneaking past the cook, or kicking soccer balls into large bins. Too many stumbles sends you way back to the start. While the graphics and music are beautiful, some levels are too hard for younger players who comprise the film's



audience. Someday, perhaps video games will be customizable, to let players skip the frustratingly difficult levels. The PS2 edition of the game has two additional activities designed especially for the EyeToy (decorate a tree by scaring away nasty puppets with hand waves, and drive the Polar Express by wiping the snow from the windshield and controlling track switches). There is no worrisome

content. Games can be saved if you have a memory card (not needed for the Windows version). Created by Blue Tongue Entertainment for THQ using Bink Video and RenderWare.

**Gallop Racer 2004**, 3.9 ★★★★★ stars, Tecmo, Inc., www.tecmoinc.com, \$49.99, PlayStation 2, 10-up, Everyone. This is a horse racing simulation for one or two players. There are betting and season modes of play, and it is possible to manage a team of horses in order to build a racing empire if you like. As you race, you steer the horse as you ride, and decide when to use the whip. There's a bit of strategy that is required in order to win a race. Testers lost interest after a few races due to the similarity of the format. This is a complex game that takes time to figure out. Borrow it or bag it.

### GAME BOY ADVANCE (YOUNGER KIDS)



**Kirby & the Amazing Mirror**, 4.9 ★★★★★ stars, Nintendo, www.nintendo.com, \$30, Game Boy Advance, 6-up, Everyone, Mild Cartoon Violence. Steer Kirby -- a speedy, marshmallow-like critter-- through a rich labyrinth of side-scrolling mazes. This game is easy to play and there's plenty of surprises. This is one of the most innovative GBA games we've reviewed all year. Buy it.

**Dora the Explorer Super Star Adventures!** 4.5 or ★★★★★ stars, Global Star Software, www.globalstarsoftware.com, \$19.99, Game Boy Advance, 3-6, Everyone. This nicely done collection of six Dora games offers plenty to do. Drawbacks include no ability to save games or remember progress, plus the content grows repetitive after a while. But considering the price and ease of use, this is a good product.

**Hot Wheels Interactive Stunt Track Challenge**, 4.5 or ★★★★★ stars, THQ, www.thq.com, \$20, Game Boy Advance, 7-up, Everyone. Despite the clumsy password-based save system, this is one of the better GBA racing programs on the market. Like the console version, there are five modes of play, and your goal is to win races (plus points for jumping tricks) in order to unlock new cars and tracks. The cars are easy to control, and there's plenty of content. A two player mode is available if you have a Game Link cable. Buy it or borrow it.

**Codename Kids Next Door: Operation S.O.D.A.**, 4.3 or ★★★★★ stars, Global Star Software, www.globalstarsoftware.com, \$20, Game Boy Advance, 5-12, Everyone, Cartoon Violence. Fly, run and shoot your way through five fast paced missions. There is no learning value, a strong junk food theme and the looping music can be repetitious. But it is a forgiving game, with minimal reading, so that younger players (as young as five) can have a successful time. Buy it or borrow it.

**Polar Express, The**, 4.3 or ★★★★★ stars, THQ, www.thq.com, \$30, Game Boy Advance, 6-12, Everyone. This side-scrolling scavenger hunt for the Game Boy Advance follows the story line



of the Tom Hanks movie. While this program is fairly easy to play at first, some of the levels are hard so be on hand to help. Like the movie, there is no worrisome content. All in all, this is a nice, handheld extension of the movie. Buy it or borrow it.

**Nicktoons Freeze Frame Frenzy, 4.0 or ★★★★★ stars, THQ, [www.thq.com](http://www.thq.com), \$19.99, Game Boy Advance, ages 6-10, Everyone.** This shooting gallery-style game uses a camera viewfinder rather than a gun, letting you race the clock to collect pictures of popular Nickelodeon characters before the time runs out. The game is fast paced and addicting, but requires reading and is limited compared to many GBA titles. There's no worrisome content. Borrow it.

**Nickelodeon All Grown Up! Express Yourself, 3.6 or ★★★★★ stars, THQ, [www.thq.com](http://www.thq.com), \$29.99, Game Boy Advance, 6-10, Everyone.** Designed with girls in mind, the goal is to help Angelica with the school paper by exploring the town and school, collecting stories. You can also jump directly one of nine minigames, providing they are unlocked. The leveling is off -- too hard for younger children, and it is too easy to get lost in the first level of mazes. Some of the games are fun, but are not well leveled. Bag it.

## GAME BOY ADVANCE OLDER

**Urbz, The: Sims in the City, 4.7 or ★★★★★ stars, Electronic Arts, [www.theurbz.com](http://www.theurbz.com), \$29.99, Game Boy Advance, 12-up, Everyone, Crude Humor, Suggestive Themes, Mild Violence.** Like the Sims Bustin' Out for GBA, this clever urban life simulation program lets you steer a small person around five environments in the city of Miniopolis, while trying to balance personal and job needs. Unlike the PC and console versions, dialog appears in a small text window, so your Sims can "talk." Unlike the earlier title, we did

not notice mature content in the dialog although there are suggestive themes (e.g., "will you move in with me?"). Note that a good deal of reading is required. In the first level -- "High Above the World" one of the five goals is to help a janitor wash windows to learn about the city and earn a bit of money. Once the basics are mastered, it's on to Urbania, where you interact with characters and help Grandma Hattie get things fixed around the house. A good reputation is important in order to succeed in this game. A character generator lets you pick clothes and features of each Sim, and games are saved on the cartridge. The DS version is very similar in design and content.

**Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events, 4.6 or ★★★★★ stars, Activision, [www.activision.com](http://www.activision.com), \$30, Game Boy Advance, ages 9-up, Everyone, Mild Violence.** If you liked the books and/or movie, you'll also like this 2D sidescroller. Reading is required in order to understand the story and instructions. Picking up items, opening doors or interacting with characters requires calling up a tool and inventory menus, which can be clumsy. Games can be saved directly on the cartridge. Buy it or borrow it, if you have the time.



**The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie, 4.1 or ★★★★★ stars, THQ, [www.thq.com](http://www.thq.com), \$30, Game Boy Advance, 7-up, Everyone.** This edition of the SpongeBob movie game wisely starts with a choice of easy, medium or hard levels, but the easy level is hard for younger children. This is too bad, as the game is full of creative moves and irreverent SpongeBob fun. Games are not automatically saved—a clumsy password system is used instead. If you're up to the challenge, borrow it.

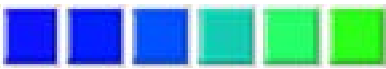
**Classic NEC Series: Castlevania, 4.0 or ★★★★★ stars, Konami of America, Inc., [www.konami.com/usa/](http://www.konami.com/usa/), \$20, Game Boy Advance, 12-up, Everyone, Mild Fantasy Violence.** First released in 1987, this is a limited game by current standards, with scratchy sounds and just 16 colors. But once you master the controls, the format can be addicting. Unless you're a die-hard fan, borrow or bag it.

**Disney's That's So Raven, 4.0 or ★★★★★ stars, Disney Interactive, \$29.99, Game Boy Advance, ages 7-up, Everyone.** Steer Raven through the halls of a school, collecting water bottles, CDs or perfume, and avoiding moving custodians, flying food and so on. There are four side-scrolling episodes. While there's plenty of places to explore, the doors in the mall are tricky to navigate and there is no overall map. Reading is required to understand the challenge. Borrow it.

**Need for Speed Underground 2, 4.0 or ★★★★★ stars, Electronic Arts (EA Games), [www.eagames.com](http://www.eagames.com), \$30, Game Boy Advance, 11-up, Everyone.** This is typical racing on the small screen -- the better your times, the more tracks and cars you unlock. The entry bar is set rather high on the starting races, making this tough for younger children. The music and seductive girls (and sports cars) suggests this is a game designed for older racers as well. While the driving is above average, the graphics are limited on the GBA format. We'd stay with the console version.

**The Incredibles (Game Boy Advance), 3.7 stars, THQ, [www.thq.com](http://www.thq.com), \$30, Game Boy Advance, ages 8-up.** Following the plot of the movie, this game lets kids try their hand as one of the movie superheros, saving cats and defusing bombs. The content is like the movie (lots of cartoon violence) and the controls can be tricky to learn, so take this one in small doses. Also, the program uses a clunky password system instead of an automatic save system, which further lowers the rating. Younger kids will have trouble with the complex controls, while one seasoned player (age 13) burned through the game in three hours. Stay with the much better designed console version instead. Created by Helixe for THQ.

**LEGO Knights' Kingdom, 3.0 or ★★★★★ stars, THQ, [www.thq.com](http://www.thq.com), \$25, Game Boy Advance, 8-up, Everyone, Fantasy Violence, Impossibly hard to learn, this jousting and fighting game has little to do with LEGO building. It also uses a clumsy password system to save games. Bag it.**



**NINTENDO DS**

**Urbz, The: Sims in the City (DS)**, 4.7 or ★★★★★ stars, Electronic Arts, www.theurbz.com, \$29.99, Nintendo DS, 12-up, Everyone, Crude Humor, Suggestive Themes, Mild Violence. With the exception of a slick, two screen introduction and a much easier menu system, there is little difference between the GBA and DS versions of the URBz. There's one additional location called Splicer Island, with create-a-pet features. Games are automatically saved. Buy it.

**Feel the Magic XY/XX**, 4.5 or ★★★★★ stars, Sega of America, Inc., www.sega.com, \$30, Nintendo DS, 13-up, Teen, Crude Humor, Mild Violence, Suggestive Themes. If you've ever done something strange to impress a date -- like swallow a goldfish—you'll get the idea of this creative collection of games. For example, Goldfish shows a cross section of a guy's digestive tract, with swallowed goldfish swimming around in the stomach. You are instructed to "rub the stomach." You start madly rubbing, which makes bubbles that expel fish. Strange? There's more. Other games test your ability to color between the lines, trace the path of a unicycle, or madly zap scorpions on a girl's dress. One false touch and the girl gets annoyed, and you lose "love points." The games vary widely in level, requiring various combinations of fine motor skill, memory, and persistence to make it through. Fortunately, hard earned progress is automatically saved. The suggestive themes descriptor is accurate but things are done in fairly good taste. The gameplay suggests the ideas that make young boys blush-- like holding hands; the rest is left to the imagination. Unfortunately, the game stereotypes girls as big busted bug-haters, with "bimbo" voices, and the story line is all about doing crazy things to impress girls. This game breaks new ground in alternative input devices (touch and sound), and offers a good deal of challenge and content for the money. Created by Sonic Team for Sega. At the very least, borrow it.

**Super Mario 64 DS**, 4.2 or ★★★★★ stars, Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com, \$29.99, Nintendo DS, 8-up, Everyone. A remake of the originally Nintendo 64 launch title, this game features some innovative ideas, using the DS's new capabilities. Overall, the game is worth getting, although the controls are clumsy for the first outing on a new system; after you get used to the controls, the action starts to pick up. 🍄



Coming soon for the DS -- *Animal Crossing*, with the ability to design clothing.

**Younger Kids**

**GAME BOY ADVANCE**

- ★ **Dora the Explorer Super Star Adventures!**, www.globalstarsoftware.com, \$20, ages 3-6, Everyone
- ★ **Kirby & the Amazing Mirror**, www.nintendo.com, \$30, ages 6-up, Everyone
- ★ **Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events**, www.activision.com, \$30, ages 9-up, Everyone
- ★ **Polar Express, The**, www.thq.com, \$30, ages 6-12, Everyone
- Crash Bandicoot Purple: Ripto's Rampage**, www.vugames.com, \$50, ages 7-up
- Backyard Hockey**, Atari, www.atari.com, \$30, ages 6-up
- Backyard Basketball**, Atari, www.atari.com, \$30, ages 6-13
- Barbie as The Princess and the Pauper**, Vivendi Universal Games, www.vugames.com, \$30, ages 6-14
- Disney's Home on the Range**, Disney Interactive, www.disneyinteractive.com, \$35, ages 6-up
- Finding Nemo**, THQ, 818-871-5000, ages 6-up, \$30
- Pokémon Fire Red and Leaf Green**, Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com, \$35, age 6-14
- Mario Pinball Land**, Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com, \$35, 5-up, Game Boy Advance
- Rescue Heroes Billy Blazes**, www.vugames.com, \$30, ages 4-7
- Spyro Orange: The Cortex Conspiracy**, www.vugames.com, \$50, ages 6-up

**CONSOLES (PS2, XBOX, GC)**

- ★ **Fairly Odd Parents Shadow Showdown**, THQ, www.thq.com, \$40, 6-up, PS2, GameCube, Everyone
- ★ **Karaoke Revolution Volume 2**, Konami of America, Inc., www.konami.com/usa/, \$40, 6-up, PlayStation 2, Everyone
- ★ **Mario Party 6**, Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com, \$49.99, 5-up, GameCube, Everyone
- ★ **Nicktoons EyeToy**, THQ, www.thq.com, \$19.99, 5-11, PlayStation 2 EyeToy, Everyone
- ★ **Paper Mario 2**, Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com, \$49.99, 6-up, GameCube, Everyone
- Amazing Island**, Sega of America, www.sega.com, \$40, ages 5-up, GC
- Animal Crossing**, www.nintendo.com, \$50, ages 6-up, GC
- Backyard Baseball**, www.atari.com, \$30, ages 6-12, PS2
- Backyard Basketball**, www.atari.com, \$25, ages 6-up, PS2
- Backyard Football**, www.atari.com, \$50, ages 7-up, GC
- Barbie Horse Adventures: Wild Horse Rescue**, www.vugames.com, \$50, ages 7-up, Xbox
- Dance Dance Revolution**, www.konami.com/usa, \$30, ages 6-up
- Disney's Extreme Skate Adventure**, www.buenavistagames.com, \$50, ages 6-12, PS2, Xbox, GC
- Donkey Konga**, www.nintendo.com, \$50, ages 6-up, GC
- Finding Nemo**, www.thq.com, ages 7-up, \$40, PS2, GC, Xbox
- Muppets Party Cruise**, www.tdkm.com, \$20, ages 6-up, PS2, GC
- Shrek 2**, www.tdk-mediactive.com, \$50, ages 5-up, Xbox
- SplashDown Rides Gone Wild**, www.thq.com, \$40, ages 8-up, PS2
- Super Mario Sunshine**, Nintendo of America, 800-255-3700, \$50, ages 7-up, GC
- Super Monkey Ball**, www.sega.com, \$50, ages 7-up, GC
- Taiko: Drum Master**, www.namco.com, \$60 (includes drum), ages 6-up, PS2

**Older Kids**

**GAME BOY ADVANCE**

- ★ **Urbz, The: Sims in the City**, www.theurbz.com, \$30, ages 12-up, Everyone
- Cartoon Network Speedway**, www.majescosales.com, \$20, ages 7-14
- Spider-Man 2**, Activision, www.activision.com, \$40, ages 9-up
- The Legend of Zelda**, www.nintendo.com, \$35, Game Boy Advance
- The Hobbit**, www.vugames.com, \$50, ages 10-up

**NINTENDO DS**

- ★ **Feel the Magic XY/XX**, www.sega.com, \$30, 13-up, Nintendo DS, Teen
- ★ **Urbz, The: Sims in the City**, www.theurbz.com, \$30, ages 12-up, Everyone

**CONSOLES (PS2, XBOX, GC)**

- ★ **ATV Offroad Fury 3**, www.acclaim.com, \$50, ages 6-up, PS2
- ★ **EyeToy: AntiGrav**, www.scea.com, \$50, ages 7-up, PS2 (EyeToy required)
- ★ **Hot Wheels Interactive Stunt Track Challenge**, www.thq.com, \$20, ages 9-up, PS2, Xbox, Win, Everyone
- ★ **The Incredibles**, www.thq.com, \$40, ages 8-up, Xbox, GC, PS2 (avoid the PC/Mac version), Teen
- ★ **Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events**, www.activision.com, \$30, ages 10-up, PS2, GC, Xbox, Everyone
- ★ **Tak 2: The Staff of Dreams**, www.thq.com, \$40, ages 9-up, GC, PS2, Everyone
- Drome Racers**, www.ea.com, \$30, ages 8-up, GC, PS2
- DreamWorks' Shark Tale**, www.activision.com, \$50 (\$30 for PC), ages 7-up, Xbox, PS2, GC, Windows
- FIFA Soccer 2004**, www.ea.com, \$50, ages 7-up, PS2, Xbox, GC
- Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone**, www.ea.com, \$40, ages 7-up, PS2, Xbox, GC
- Jak and Daxter**, www.scea.com, \$50, ages 8-up, PS2
- Looney Tunes: Back in Action**, www.ea.com, \$20, ages 10-up, PS2, GC
- Madden NFL 2004**, www.ea.com, \$50, ages 8-up, PS2, Xbox, GC
- Mario Golf: Toadstool Tour**, www.nintendo.com, \$50, ages 6-up
- Midtown Madness 3**, www.microsoft.com, \$50, 10-up, Xbox
- NCAA Football 2004**, www.ea.com, \$50, GC, Xbox, PS2
- Pikmin 2**, www.pikmin.com, \$50, ages 10-up, GC
- SplashDown Rides Gone Wild**, www.thq.com, \$40, ages 8-up
- Sly 2 Band of Thieves**, www.scea.com, \$40, ages 8-12, PS2
- Star Wars Battlefront**, www.lucasarts.com, \$50, ages 12-up, PS2, Xbox, GC, Windows
- The Simpsons Skateboarding**, www.ea.com, ages 12-up, PS2
- Sonic Heroes**, www.sega.com, \$50, ages 6-up, PS2, GC, Xbox
- SSX3**, www.ea.com, \$50, ages 7-up, Xbox, PS2
- Wakeboarding Unleashed Featuring Shaun Murray**, www.activision.com, \$50, ages 8-up, PS2, Xbox

**PC GAMES (WINDOWS)**

- ★ **Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events**, www.activision.com, \$30, ages 10-up, Everyone
- ★ **The Lord of the Rings, The Battle for Middle-earth**, www.info.ea.com, \$50, ages 12-up, Teen

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The "magic" awards—products we will demonstrate at our next Dust or Magic Institute—go to 10 products from this issue. For younger children, the award goes to **My Own Learning Leap**, for letting you put YOUR voice in a toy, rather than some strangers, to **VSmile**, for empowering young children with an easy-to-use, durable game system, and to **Dora the Explorer Super Star Adventures!**—finally a quality GBA title for preschoolers!

For home computers, the award goes to **Cosmic Blobs Lab Rat Edition**, for daring to go where no other 3D creativity program has gone before, and to **Singing Coach**, for letting you visualize the pitch of your own voice. Also to Ubisoft/Frogwares for the brilliant visual detail in **Sherlock Holmes Secret of the Silver Earring**—it is clear that somebody stayed up late working on this title.

For game consoles, the award goes to **Tak 2: The Staff of Dreams** for the clever fly through introductions, and the dynamic visual status system, in the form of the feather on Tak's head. We'd also like to recognize **EyeToy: AntiGrav**, for putting a child inside the game, both left/right and upside down, and to the brilliant designers at Nintendo for titles like **Paper Mario**, and **Mario Party 6**. You continue to amaze us. Finally, to Sega's first DS title, **Feel the Magic XY/XX** for rubbing interactive media quite literally in a new direction. Our hats off to the people behind this magical programming.

**Dear CSR -- It is time to get a new computer for our family. Any recommendations? (What about the new cheap Mac from Apple?)** The \$500 "Mac Mini," which we have yet to test, will undoubtedly have some great features, but it is always smart to wait to make sure all the bugs are worked out on any very new system. If you want to run most software, you'll need a Windows XP based computer with good, mainstream graphics card. For close to \$500, you have a range of choices. One we've personally tested is the **eMachines T3256**, (eMachines, [www.e4me.com](http://www.e4me.com), \$600 after about three rebate forms). This computer comes with a 3.2 GHz AMD Athlon XP processor and DVD-R and CD-R drives. The computer has an **nVideo GeForce 4** graphics card that can handle high end sims such as the Sims 2 or Lord of the Rings. The computer also lets you directly plug in two sizes of RAM chips, e.g., from your digital camera, which is very nice. Don't forget an LCD monitor (about \$250).



Above: The back of the new Mac Mini. Below: the eMachines T3256



**Dear CSR -- What's the best way to avoid viruses, spyware, and the like?** We asked the members of the New Jersey Educational Computer Cooperative ([www.njecc.org](http://www.njecc.org)) this question. They recommend educating children and teachers to recognize, and AVOID shady sites and free services such as Kazaa, Weather Bug, big time wrestling and so on. Like many things in life, prevention and education is the best way to avoid trouble. They also recommend getting rid of Microsoft's Internet Explorer, and instead downloading Mozilla's Firefox browser ([www.mozilla.org](http://www.mozilla.org)). This is because Internet Explorer is more vulnerable to a web site's hidden commands, which can activate programs that you may not be aware of. Many tech coordinators recommend not purchasing anti-spyware or anti-virus programs, calling them a waste of money. We tend to agree. Instead, make sure you keep your original "restore" disks onhand, to reset your computer if need be. Good luck!

**Straight from the Testers**  
**The Spongebob Squarepants Movie Game (for GameCube)**

Ben Kates  
 Rating 3.5 out of 5  
 This is a great game. When you advance levels, they show pictures of the movie with the characters talking. This gives the story away a lot. The graphics are a little fuzzy, but overall they are OK. The controls are touchy... you can't get to the place sometimes because the jump is too far and the game is just too hard in general. In other Spongebob games, you get to play as all the characters, but in this one you don't. The good part is that there are more moves than earlier games, and you have to earn the moves by collecting coins. All of the levels that let you slide are the best. The races and time trials in the car are very fun and they include nitrox for the car, too. This is one of those really good games even though it gives the movie away, but it is still fun.



**New Interaction Technique—"Drop in, drop out cooperative mode" coming in Star Wars game**

With the release of the **Revenge of the Sith** -- the third Star Wars movie due May 19 -- will come an E rated game designed for children and parents to play together. **LEGO Star Wars: The Video Game** from Eidos, lets each player assume the identity of a Star Wars character. Together, you battle your way through the plots of all three Star Wars films. Unlike most games where players compete against one another, this one goes out of the way to create a cooperative problem solving setting. Because each player has different abilities, working together is mandatory. It's like you and a friend exploring a dark cave, but only your friend has the flashlight. What if one player leaves midstream?

The computer takes over, and the avatar goes into autopilot mode. The developers call it "drop in, drop out cooperative mode." This game is being developed by Traveller's Tales (both of the UK), and is distributed in the US by Eidos ([www.eidos.com](http://www.eidos.com)). An April 2005 release is planned. ☺

We welcome your criticism, questions, comments, stories and especially reviews from our readers. Submitted materials become property of CSR and may not be returned. Editors • CSR • 120 Main Street • Flemington NJ 08822 [warren@childrenssoftware.com](mailto:warren@childrenssoftware.com) (Warren Buckleitner) [ann@childrenssoftware.com](mailto:ann@childrenssoftware.com) (Ann Orr)

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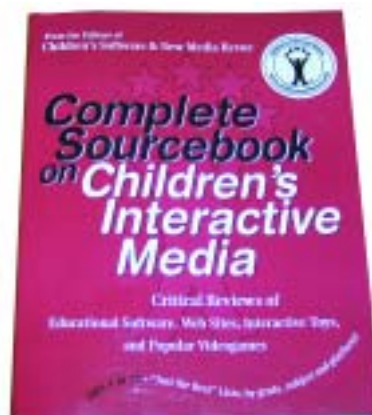
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- The Complete Sourcebook on Children's Interactive Media (2005-2006, Vol. 11) Available Spring 2005**, this essential reference contains 7000+ reviews sorted by grade, subject and platform. Also included is a directory of publishers (including their URLs, addresses, phone and fax numbers) and a directory of software catalogs.  
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Here is an alphabetical directory of the new titles listed in this issue. Note that software information changes often. Check with the companies directly for the latest information.

**Atari Anthology**, 4.4, Atari, www.atari.com, \$40, PS2, Xbox, ages 4-up, page 15  
**Atari Flashback**, 4.2, Atari, www.atari.com, \$44.95, TV Game, 7-up, page 16  
**Atari Paddle TV Games**, 3.9, Jakks Pacific, Inc., www.jakksstvgames.com, \$20, TV Game, 5-up, page 13  
**AtomicLearning.com**, Atomic Learning, Inc., www.atomiclearning.com, \$79.99/year, Internet Site, page 19  
**ATV Offroad Fury 3**, 4.8, Acclaim Entertainment, www.acclaim.com, \$49.99, PS2, 6-up, page 22  
**BackupMan 1.51**, Bits 'n Bolts Software, www.palmgear.com, \$10.00, Palm OS, page 19  
**Backyard Hockey 2005**, 4.7, Atari, www.atari.com, \$19.99, Win 98, Win XP, 7-up, page 11  
**Classic NEC Series: Castlevania**, 4.0, Konami of America, Inc., www.konami.com/usa/, \$20, Game Boy Advance, 12-up, page 25  
**Codename Kids Next Door: Operation S.O.D.A.**, 4.3, Global Star Software, www.globalstarsoftware.com, \$20, Game Boy Advance, 5-12, page 24  
**Color Pixter Digital Camera**, 4.6, Fisher-Price, Inc., www.fisher-price.com, \$30, Pixter, 3-up, page 6  
**Cosmic Blobs Lab Rat Edition**, 4.5, SolidWorks, www.solidworks.com, \$40, Win 98, Win XP, 6-up, page 9  
**Cube-Mania 4.4**, Psyonic Entertainment, Inc., www.psyonicentertainment.com, \$20, Win 98, NT, 2000, Win XP, ages 8-up, page 11  
**Dance Dance Revolution Extreme**, 4.5, Konami of America, Inc., www.konami.com/usa/, \$40, PlayStation 2, 7-up, page 22  
**Disney Princess Magical Dress-Up**, 4.0, Buena Vista Games (formerly Disney Interactive), www.buenavistagames.com, \$19.99, Win 98, Win XP, 5-8, page 7  
**Disney TV Games**, 4.5, Jakks Pacific, Inc., www.jakksstvgames.com, \$20, TV based Game, 5-up, page 9  
**Disney's Jewelry Box Collection**, 4.0, Buena Vista Games (formerly Disney Interactive), www.buenavistagames.com, \$19.99, Win 98, Win XP, 3-6, page 7  
**Disney's That's So Raven**, 4.0, Disney Interactive, \$29.99, Game Boy Advance, 7-up, page 25  
**Dora the Explorer: Fairytale Adventure**, 4.8, Atari, www.atari.com, \$19.99, Windows XP, 3-up, page 6  
**Dora the Explorer Super Star Adventures!**, 4.5, Global Star Software, www.globalstarsoftware.com, \$19.99, Game Boy Advance, 3-6, page 24  
**Dyscalculia Screener**, Tool Factory, Inc., www.toofactory.com, \$399.00, Win 98, Win XP, 6-14, page 20  
**EazySpeak Spanish**, 4.4, Kutoka Interactive, www.kutoka.com, \$24.99, Win 98, 2000, ME, Win XP, Mac OS X, 12-up, page 16  
**Elementary School Learning System**, 3.9, Fogware Publishing, www.fog-ware.com, \$39.99, Win XP with DVD drive, 6-11, page 13  
**eMachines T3256**, eMachines, www.e4me.com, \$599 (after rebate), Win XP, 3-up, page 28  
**Encyclopaedia Britannica 2005 Ultimate Reference Suite**, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., www.eb.com, \$69.95, Windows XP, Mac OS X, DVD, 6-up, page 18  
**eSchool Online**, Classroom Connect, www.classroom.com, Internet Site, page 18  
**EyeToy: AntiGrav**, 4.5, Sony Computer Entertainment America Inc., www.scea.com, \$49.99, PS2 (EyeToy

If you see it on this page, you can read the full review (often with more detail) at [www.childrenssoftware.com](http://www.childrenssoftware.com) (password required).

required), 7-up, 24  
**Fairly Odd Parents Shadow Showdown**, 4.6, THQ, www.thq.com, \$40, PS2, GameCube, 6-up, 22  
**Feel the Magic XY/XX**, 4.5, Sega of America, Inc., www.sega.com, \$30, Nintendo DS, 13-up, 26  
**First Wordz**, TP Kidz, www.tpkidz.com, \$19.99, Win XP, page 8  
**FlipPublisher**, E-Book Systems, www.flipalbum.com, \$249.00, Win 98, Win XP, 13-up, page 20  
**Gallop Racer 2004**, 3.9, Tecmo, Inc., www.tecmoinc.com, \$49.99, PlayStation 2, 10-up, page 24  
**George Lucas Educational Foundation's Professional Development Modules**, George Lucas Educational Foundation, www.edutopia.org, \$free, Internet Site, 18  
**Hot Wheels Interactive Stunt Track Challenge**, 4.5, THQ, www.thq.com, \$20, PS2, Xbox, Win XP, 9-up, page 24  
**Hot Wheels Interactive Stunt Track Challenge**, 4.5, THQ, www.thq.com, \$20, Game Boy Advance, 7-up, page 24  
**Incredibles, The**, 4.6, THQ, www.thq.com, \$40, Xbox, GameCube, PS2, Win XP, Mac OS X, 8-up, page 22  
**Incredibles, The (Game Boy Advance)**, 3.7, THQ, www.thq.com, \$30, Game Boy Advance, 8-up, page 25  
**Incredibles, The: When Danger Calls**, 4.0, THQ, www.thq.com, \$29.99, Win 98, Win XP, Mac OS X, 6-up, page 10  
**IdeaPad 1.4.2**, nosleep software, \$free, Palm OS, 19  
**Inventive Quotient, I.Q.**, Inventive Quotient, LLC, www.inventivequotient.com, \$29.95, Win 98, Win XP, Win 95, 5-15, page 13  
**JASON Academy**, JASON Foundation for Education (Arlington), www.jason.org, \$225/course, Internet Site, page 18  
**Juice Box Portable Media Player**, 4.0, Mattel, Inc., www.mattel.com, \$70 (\$45 for MP3 kit), Win 98, Win XP (500 MHz), 8-14, page 12  
**Karaoke Revolution Volume 2**, 4.7, Konami of America, Inc., www.konami.com/usa/, \$40, PS2, 6-up, page 22  
**Kirby & the Amazing Mirror**, 4.9, Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com, \$30, Game Boy Advance, 6-up, page 24  
**Krusty Krab Cash Register**, 3.9, Wild Planet, www.wildplanet.com, \$25, Smart Toy, 3-6, page 8  
**LeapPad Game: Mind Wars Junior Interactive**, 2.0, LeapFrog, www.leapfrog.com, \$15, LeapPad, 6-7, page 10  
**Learn to Play Chess With Fritz & Chesster Part 2**, 4.8, Viva Media, www.viva-media.com, \$29.99, Win ME, Win 98, Win XP, 8-up, age 10  
**LEGO Knights' Kingdom**, 3.0, THQ, www.thq.com, \$25, Game Boy Advance, 8-up, page 25  
**Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events**, 4.5, Activision, www.activision.com, \$30, PlayStation 2, GameCube, Xbox, 10-up, page 24  
**Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events**, 4.4, Activision, www.activision.com, \$30, Win XP, 10-up, page 15  
**Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events**, 4.6, Activision, www.activision.com, \$30, Game Boy Advance, 9-up, page 25  
**Lesson Plan**, Tapperware, www.tapperware.com, \$19.99, Palm OS, NA, page 19  
**Letter Factory Game**, 4.0, LeapFrog, www.leapfrog.com, \$25, Smart Toy, 3-6, page 7  
**LogiRobot Kit**, 4.4, Educational Insights, www.edin.com, \$100, Smart Toy, 7-up, page 17  
**Lord of the Rings, The: The Battle for Middle-earth**, 4.6, EA Los Angeles, www.info.ea.com, \$50, Win XP, Win 2000 (1.3 GHz, 256 MB, 4GB, online play), 12-up, 15  
**Maestro Travel Chess Computer**, 2.5, Saitek Industries, Ltd., www.saitekususa.com, \$100, Smart Toy, 11-up, page 17  
**Magic Sketch 2**, 3.9, Curious Labs, www.curiouslabs.com, \$30, Win XP, Mac OS X, 3-up, page 17  
**Mario Party 6**, 4.9, Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com, \$49.99, GameCube, 5-up, page 21  
**MathChamp! 1.1**, Leading Step, Inc., www.palmgear.com, \$14.95, Palm OS, 6-12, page 13  
**Mathville Middle School: Where Kids Love Math**, 4.3, Courseware Solutions Inc., www.mathville.com, \$45, Win XP, Mac OS X, 5-up, page 16  
**Mini Room Mates**, Wild Planet, www.wildplanet.com, \$22, Smart Toy, 8-up, page 14  
**Ms. Pac-Man TV Games**, 4.1, Jakks Pacific, Inc., www.jakksstvgames.com, \$19.99, TV based Game, 5-up, page 16  
**My Little Pony**, 4.2, Atari, www.atari.com, \$19.99, Win 98, Win XP, 3-6, page 6  
**My Own Learning Leap**, 4.7, LeapFrog, www.leapfrog.com, \$35 (cartridges are \$13/each), Smart Toy, 2-5, page 6  
**My Voice Alarm Clock**, Wild Planet, www.wildplanet.com, \$20, Smart Toy, 8-up, page 14  
**National Geographic Presents RedShift 5**, 4.2, Topics Entertainment, www.topicsent.com, \$49.95, Win 98, Win XP (300 MHz), 12-up, page 12  
**Need for Speed Underground 2**, 4.0, Electronic Arts (EA Games), www.eagames.com, \$30, Game Boy Advance, 11-up, page 25  
**Nickelodeon All-Up Growth Up! Express Yourself**, 3.6, THQ, www.thq.com, \$29.99, Game Boy Advance, 6-10, page 25  
**Nicktoons EyeToy**, 4.5, THQ, www.thq.com, \$19.99, PlayStation 2 EyeToy, 5-11, page 22  
**Nicktoons Freeze Frame Frenzy**, 4.0, THQ, www.thq.com, \$19.99, Game Boy Advance, 6-10, page 25  
**Paper Mario 2**, 4.9, Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com, \$49.99, GameCube, 6-up, page 22  
**PBS TeacherLine**, PBS, www.pbs.org/teacherline, \$call, Internet Site, page 19  
**Phonics 3a Advanced Level Sports Edition**, 4.3, Help Me 2 Learn Company, www.helpme2learn.com, \$24.95, Win 98, Win XP, Mac OS X, 7-14, page 11  
**Phonics Super Star Reading System**, 4.3, Help Me 2 Learn Company, www.helpme2learn.com, \$79.95, Win 98, Win XP, Mac OS X, 4-11, page 18  
**Pocket Pixter**, 3.8, Fisher-Price, Inc., www.fisher-price.com, \$15, Smart Toy, 6-11, page 10  
**Polar Express, The**, 4.1, THQ, www.thq.com, \$30, Windows, GameCube, PlayStation 2, 5-10, page 24  
**Polar Express, The**, 4.3, THQ, www.thq.com, \$30, Game Boy Advance, 6-12, page 24  
**Rollercoaster Tycoon 3**, 4.5, Atari, www.rollercoastertycoon.com, \$39.99, Win XP (64 MB graphics card), 9-up, page 15  
**Saddle Up: Time to Ride**, 4.6, DreamCatcher Interactive, www.dreamcatchergames.com, \$19.99, Win 98, Win XP (32 MB videocard), 6-up, page 8  
**Seminars on Science**, American Museum of Natural History, www.amnh.org, \$445/course, Internet Site, page 19  
**Sherlock Holmes Secret of the Silver Earring**, 4.6, Ubisoft, www.ubisoft.com, \$20, Win 98, Win XP (DirectX 8.1, 1.5 GB HD, NVidia GeForce or ATI graphics only), 12-up, page 14  
**Singing Coach**, 4.6, Carry-A-Tune Technologies, www.carryatune.com, \$50 (\$100 for the unlimited version), Win ME, Win 2000, Win XP (128MB RAM, Pentium II, 400 MHz), Microphone/headset required, 7-up, page 14  
**Soccer Math**, 4.3, EdVenture Software, www.edven.com, \$29.95, Win 98, Win XP, Mac OS 9, Mac OS X, 7-14, page 11  
**Sonic Sleuth**, 4.4, Educational Insights, www.edin.com, \$25, Smart Toy, 6-up, page 9  
**Spider-Man TV Games**, 4.2, Jakks Pacific, Inc., www.jakksstvgames.com, \$20, TV based Game, 7-up, page 12  
**SpongeBob SquarePants Fact or Fishy DVD Trivia Game**, 4.3, Imagination Entertainment, Ltd., www.imaginationgames.com, \$29.99, DVD, 5-up, page 9  
**SpongeBob SquarePants Movie, The**, 4.1,

THQ, www.thq.com, \$30, Game Boy Advance, 7-up, page 25  
**Super Mario 64 DS**, 4.2, Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com, \$29.99, Nintendo DS, 8-up, page 26  
**Symphony Painter**, 3.5, Fisher-Price, Inc., www.fisher-price.com, \$19.99, Pixter, 4-8, page 8  
**Tak 2: The Staff of Dreams**, 5.0, THQ, www.thq.com, \$40, GameCube, PlayStation 2, 9-up, page 21  
**Technology Coordinator's Handbook, The**, ISTE Publications, www.iste.org, \$27.99, book, page 19  
**Thesaurus/Spellcheck 2.2**, DDH Software, Inc., www.ddhsoftware.com, \$15.00, Palm OS, 8-up, page 18  
**Urbz, The: Sims in the City DS**, 4.7, Electronic Arts, www.theurbz.com, \$29.99, Nintendo DS, 12-up, page 26  
**Urbz, The: Sims in the City GBA**, 4.7, Electronic Arts, www.theurbz.com, \$29.99, Game Boy Advance, 12-up, page 25  
**VSmile**, 4.4, VTech Electronics North America, www.vtechkids.com, \$60, VSmile, TV based game, 3-7, page 7  
**What's the Time Mr. Wolf?**, Tool Factory, Inc., www.toofactory.com, \$59.99, Win 98, Win XP, Mac OS X, 4-6, page 8  
**WordSmith 2.221**, Blue Nomad LLC, not available, \$29.99, Palm OS, 8-up, page 18  
**Zoo Tycoon 2**, 4.8, Microsoft Corp., www.microsoft.com, \$39.99, Win 98, Win

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# All Star Awards

WINTER  
Dec 15 - Apr 15



Looking for the best of the best? In a hurry? Use this list. These products are the winners of *Children's Software Review's* All Star Award, based on the ratings. The All Star list for videogames and school titles can be found inside. (★ = new addition)

## PRESCHOOL

### FOR YOUNG PRESCHOOLERS

- Boohbah Online**  
(<http://pbskids.org/boohbah>), Ragdoll, Ltd.[pbskids.org/boohbah](http://pbskids.org/boohbah), 2-7, Internet Site
- Reader Rabbit Toddler Deluxe**, Riverdeep/The Learning Company, 800-716-8506, \$29.95, ages 18 mos.-3 yrs., Win; Mac
- ★ **My Own Learning Leap**, LeapFrog, [www.leapfrog.com](http://www.leapfrog.com), \$35 (cartridges are \$13/each), 2-5, Smart Toy,

### MATH AND LOGIC

- Curious George Downtown Adventure**, Knowledge Adventure, 800-545-7677, \$19.99, ages 3-6, Win, Mac

### MULTIPLE SUBJECT

- Didi & Ditto Kindergarten**, Kutoka Interactive, 877-858-8652, [www.kutoka.com](http://www.kutoka.com), \$19.99, 4-6, Windows, Macintosh, Summer 04
- ★ **Dora the Explorer: Fairytale Adventure**, Atari, [www.atari.com](http://www.atari.com), \$19.99, 3-up, Windows XP
- Leapster Software: Kindergarten**, LeapFrog, [www.leapfrog.com](http://www.leapfrog.com), \$25, 4-6, Leapster, 1/04
- Tonka Town Atari**, [www.atari.com](http://www.atari.com), \$19.99, ages 4-7, 9/03

### EARLY READING

- Beginning Sounds, Same or Different, Reading Readiness and Beginning Reading** by School Zone, 800-253-0564, \$19.99, Win, Mac
- Clifford Reading** by Scholastic Consumer Software, 800-724-6527, \$19.95, ages 4-6, Win, Mac
- Help Me 2 Learn Phonics Series**, Help Me 2 Learn Company, [www.helpme2learn.com](http://www.helpme2learn.com), \$29.95, 4-8, Win, Mac
- Kurzweil 3000 Version 7**, Kurzweil Educational Systems [www.kurzweileduc.com](http://www.kurzweileduc.com), \$395 and up, 6-up, Win, Mac
- Learn to Read for Children at Starfall**, [www.starfall.com](http://www.starfall.com), not available, \$free, 6-12, Internet Site

### REPRESENTATIONAL PLAY

- Barbie Fashion Show CD-ROM**, [www.vugames.com](http://www.vugames.com), \$19.99, 5-up, Win 98, Win XP
- ★ **Color Pixter Digital Camera**, [www.fisher-price.com](http://www.fisher-price.com), \$30

### SMART TOYS

- Creative Games Pixter Learning**, [www.fisher-price.com](http://www.fisher-price.com), \$16.00, 4-up
- PowerTouch Learning System**, [www.fisher-price.com](http://www.fisher-price.com), \$49.99, ages 3-8
- PowerTouch Baby**, [www.fisher-price.com](http://www.fisher-price.com), \$30, 6 months - 3 years

## GRADES K-3

### ART & MUSIC

- Flying Colors v. 2.11 Magic Mouse Productions**, 415-669-7010, \$29.00 (including delivery), ages 4-up, Win, Mac
- Imaginext Battle Castle** Vivendi Universal Games, [www.vugames.com](http://www.vugames.com), 800-545-7677, \$19.99, 5-10, Win, Mac
- Kid Pix Deluxe 3 for Mac OS X**, Software Mackiev, 617-227-6681, [www.mackiev.com](http://www.mackiev.com), \$39.95, 5-up, Mac OS X only
- Music Ace Deluxe** Harmonic Vision, [www.harmonicvision.com](http://www.harmonicvision.com), \$50, 6-up, Win, Mac

### FOREIGN LANGUAGE

- Mia's Language Adventure: the Kidnap Caper** Kutoka Interactive, [www.kutoka.com](http://www.kutoka.com), 877-858-8652, \$20, 6-10, Win, Mac

### HORSES

- Barbie Horse Adventures: Mystery Ride** VUGames, [www.vugames.com](http://www.vugames.com), \$29.99, 5-up, Win
- ★ **Saddle Up: Time to Ride**, DreamCatcher Interactive, [www.dreamcatchergames.com](http://www.dreamcatchergames.com), \$19.99, 6-up, Win 98, Win XP (32 MB videocard), Everyone

### MATH

- Math Missions K-2: The Race to Spectacle City Arcade** Scholastic, Inc., 212-343-6100, \$19.95, ages 5-8, Mac, Win
- Time, Money & Fractions, Math 2 and Math 3** School Zone Interactive, 800-253-0564, \$19.99, ages 6-8, Win, Mac

### MULTIPLE SUBJECT

- 1st & 2nd Grade Excelsior Topics** Entertainment, 425-656-3621, \$19.99, ages 6-8, Win, Mac
- Leapster Multimedia Learning System** LeapFrog, [www.leapfrog.com](http://www.leapfrog.com), 800-701-5327, \$80, 4-8
- Spider-man 2 Activity Center**, Activision Value Publishing, [www.activision.com](http://www.activision.com), \$19.99, 6-up, Win 98, Win 2000, Win ME, Win XP. Hard drive: 551 MB

### MUSIC

- Mozart's Magic Flute the Music Game** by Music Games International, [www.kidsmusic-stage.com](http://www.kidsmusic-stage.com), \$19.95, 4-up, Win

### LANGUAGE ARTS

- Flash Action Phonics Made Easy** School Zone Interactive, 800-253-0564, \$14.95, 4-7, Win/Mac
- I SPY Spooky Mansion Deluxe**, Scholastic, 212-343-6100, [www.scholastic.com](http://www.scholastic.com), \$29.95, 6-10, Win, Mac
- LeapPad** LeapFrog, 800-883-7430, \$79.99, ages 4-up

### Shrek 2 for LeapPad

- LeapFrog, [www.leapfrog.com](http://www.leapfrog.com), \$15, age 7, LeapPad

### GAMES

- Backyard Skateboarding**, Atari, [www.atari.com](http://www.atari.com), \$19.99, 5-up, Windows, Mac OS X
- ★ **Disney TV Games**, Jakks Pacific, Inc., [www.jakksstvgames.com](http://www.jakksstvgames.com), \$20, 5-up, TV based Game, Everyone

## GRADES 3-6

### CREATIVITY

- ★ **Cosmic Blobs Lab Rat Edition**, SolidWorks, [www.solidworks.com](http://www.solidworks.com), \$40, 6-up, Win 98, Win XP,
- Kidspiration Version 2** Inspiration Software, Inc., [www.inspiration.com](http://www.inspiration.com), \$69.00, 5-12, Win, Mac

### SPORTS

- Backyard Baseball 2005**, Atari, [www.atari.com](http://www.atari.com), \$40, 7-up, Win
- ★ **Backyard Hockey 2005**, Atari, [www.atari.com](http://www.atari.com), \$19.99, 7-up, Win 98, Win XP, Everyone

### GEOGRAPHY/HISTORY

- Explorer Globe** LeapFrog, [www.leapfrog.com](http://www.leapfrog.com), \$99/\$129.00, 8-up

### HEALTH

- STARBRIGHT Asthma CD-ROM Game: Quest for the Code** STARBRIGHT Foundation, 310-479-1212, \$free, ages 7-up, Win

### LOGIC & PROBLEM SOLVING

- ★ **Learn to Play Chess With Fritz & Chesster Part 2**, Viva Media, [www.viva-media.com](http://www.viva-media.com), \$29.99, 8-up, Win ME, Win 98, Win XP
- Nancy Drew: Ghost Dogs of Moon Lake** Her Interactive, Inc., 800-561-0908, \$19.99, ages 10-up, Win
- Zoombinis Island Odyssey** Riverdeep - The Learning Company, 800-825-4420, \$24.99, 8-up, Win, Mac

### MATH

- Math Arena** Sunburst, 800-338-3457, \$24.95, ages 8-12, Win, Mac
- Math Missions 3-5: The Amazing Arcade Adventure** Scholastic, Inc., [www.scholastic.com](http://www.scholastic.com), \$19.95, 8-10
- The Number Devil**, [www.viva-media.com](http://www.viva-media.com), \$19.99, 8-up, Win, Mac
- The Flying Carpet: A Mathematical Journey** Tool Factory, Inc., [www.toolfactory.com](http://www.toolfactory.com), \$59.00, 8-12

### MULTIPLE SUBJECT

- ClueFinders' Series** (Grades 4, 5 and 6) The Learning Company, 800-716-8506, \$14 each, Win, Mac

### MUSIC

- Alfred's Essentials of Music Theory 2.0 Student Version** Alfred Publishing, \$59.95, Win, Mac
- Morton Subotnick's Hearing Music**, Viva Media, [www.viva-media.com](http://www.viva-media.com), \$29.99, 8-up, Win, Mac

### REFERENCE

- World Book Encyclopedia 2004 Deluxe Edition** TOPICS Entertainment, [www.topics-ent.com](http://www.topics-ent.com), \$19.99, 8-up, Win
- Microsoft Encarta Reference Library Premium 2005**, Microsoft Corp., 800-426-9400, [www.microsoft.com](http://www.microsoft.com), \$69.99, 7-up, Win

## GRADES 7-12

### CREATIVITY

- Adobe Photoshop Elements 2.0** Adobe, [www.adobe.com](http://www.adobe.com), \$99, 9-up, Win, Mac
- iMovie** Apple Computer, [www.apple.com](http://www.apple.com), \$49.00, 10-up, Mac OS X

### HISTORY

- Microsoft Flight Simulator 2004: A Century of Flight** Microsoft, [www.microsoft.com](http://www.microsoft.com), \$54.95, 10-up, Win
- Immortal Cities: Children of the Nile**, [www.immortalcities.com](http://www.immortalcities.com), \$39.99, 10-up, Win

### LOGICAL THINKING

- Nancy Drew: Curse of Blackmoor Manor**, Her Interactive, [www.nancydrewgames.com](http://www.nancydrewgames.com), \$20, 10-up, Win
- ★ **Sherlock Holmes Secret of the Silver Earring**, Ubisoft, [www.ubisoft.com](http://www.ubisoft.com), \$20, 12-up, Win

### MATH

- Math Advantage 2004** Encore Software, 800-507-1375, \$40, ages 11-up, Windows XP
- Math Arena Advanced** Sunburst, 877-586-7123, \$79.95, ages 12-up, Win, Mac
- SimCity 4 Deluxe Edition** Maxis/EA, [www.maxis.com](http://www.maxis.com), \$30, 12-up, Win

### SIMULATIONS

- The Sims 2**, Electronic Arts, [www.ea.com](http://www.ea.com), \$49.99, 12-up, Win XP
- ★ **Zoo Tycoon 2**, Microsoft Corp., [www.microsoft.com](http://www.microsoft.com), \$39.99, 7-up, Win 98, Win XP

### TEST TAKING SKILLS/COLLEGE PREP

- Kaplan SAT, ACT & PSAT Deluxe 2005 Edition** Topics Entertainment, [www.topics-ent.com](http://www.topics-ent.com), \$49.99, 15-up
- Everything a Parent and Student Needs to Know About the Road to College, 2004-2005 Edition**, [www.techcounselor.org](http://www.techcounselor.org), \$19.99, 15-up, Win, Mac

### MUSIC

- ★ **Singing Coach**, Carry-A-Tune Technologies, [www.carryatune.com](http://www.carryatune.com), \$50, 7-up, Win

### TYPING

- Typing Instructor Deluxe Version 16** Individual Software Incorporated, [www.individualsoftware.com](http://www.individualsoftware.com), \$29.95, 10-up, Win

### CHESS

- Hoyle Majestic Chess** Vivendi Universal Games, [www.majesticchess.com](http://www.majesticchess.com), \$19.99, 10-up, Win

### SCIENCE

- Starry Night: Complete Space & Astronomy Pack**, Imagination, [www.starrynight.com](http://www.starrynight.com), \$49.99, 3-up, Win, Mac
- Zoo Vet**, Legacy Interactive, [www.zoovetgame.com](http://www.zoovetgame.com), \$19.99, 9-up, Win, Mac

### FOREIGN LANGUAGE

- ★ **EazySpeak Spanish**, Kutoka Interactive, [www.kutoka.com](http://www.kutoka.com), \$24.99, 12-up, Win 98, 2000, ME, Win XP, Mac OS X,

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