

Reviews of software, tech toys, video games & web sites



Children's TECHNOLOGY Review™

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Virtual Animals

A Roundup of the Latest Pet Sims
PLUS: The year ahead in Children's
Interactive Media

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Suite Life of Zack & Cody: Tipton
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Shop 2



Pet Pals Animal Doctor by Legacy Interactive, page 24

The Year Ahead in Children's Interactive Media

So, it's January, the start of 2007, and we're sitting on the tip of a fresh new year. As I see it, we're at the start of a transition in children's interactive media, when hardware is getting to be so easy to use that it is becoming transparent to the software. That moves the conversation to the experience, where it should have been all along. But change never comes without some stress, and 2007 will undoubtedly see its share. Here's some good news and bad news, as we enter into this new year.

FIRST, THE BAD NEWS

- There is still a shortage of quality educational applications for both home or school use. The trend of most children using powerful technology for un-powerful activities (at least in terms of learning) has continued into 2007. Increasingly, the only interactive options available to children are free, flash-based casual games full of advertising or worse, thoughtless design.
- The cost of new video games cost upwards of \$50, meaning more families and children will be left out of the new technology than at any other time.
- MIT Professor Seymour Papert, best known as the driving force behind LOGO, was badly injured in a traffic accident in which he was struck by a motorbike, ironically while studying the flow of traffic patterns in Vietnam. The good news is that he seems to be recovering. You can see (or sign) the get well card, MIT style, at <http://papert.media.mit.edu/>

AND THE GOOD NEWS?

- Isn't Google amazing? It just keeps getting better with tools like Blogger and Google Docs, and the price is right. It will be interesting to see where it takes us in 2007.
- **There are some stellar examples of design to be found. In this issue, see *Pet Pals Animal Doctor*, *Clifford the Big Red Dog Reading* (for the Leapster), and *SpellingTime.com*.**
- Hardware has finished its 5 year molting, and it has never looked better. The past year has given us two exciting new game systems, affordable LCD screens, Windows Vista, Bluetooth controllers, Intel-based Macs, and smarter smart toys that can make a TV interactive. The Nintendo Wii's innovative control system has opened up a whole new set of interactive possibilities for children.
- Ideas can flow more freely than ever. The current generation of young teachers can't remember not IMing with their friends. We're starting to see some results in the form of classroom blogs and web sites. We'll soon witness more products that integrate idea sharing as a standard feature as the information culture matures.
- Next-generation games can improve family dynamics, by offering a viable option to the culture of TV viewing that is active rather than passive. Rather than silently sit and watch a sports game for hours at a time, parents can now pick up a controller and play with their child.

We're looking forward to keeping an eye on these new products in 2007. Enjoy the issue.

Sincerely,

Warren Buckleitner

Warren Buckleitner, Editor



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Singstar Rocks!

Think "Karaoke Revolution" — only with real music videos — and you get the idea of this competitive signing game, for up to eight players. Content consists of 30 songs and music videos from such artists as Gwen Stefani, Coldplay, Elton John and The Rolling Stones. Our testers especially liked the two-player mode, where they could compete against one another to see who could get a higher score. As a language activity, this is a good way to playfully introduce vocabulary by way of song lyrics, in a very active way.

If you have an EyeToy (optional) you can see your own image, mixed on the screen with the likes of Elton John or The Rolling Stones. There are multiple game modes including Solo, Freestyle, Pass The Mic, Battle and Duet. The software has the ability to recognize the pitch, tone and rhythm of your voice. The more notes you fill in, the higher your ranking. It is also possible to record a performance on a Memory Card for future playback, or customize and enhance your playback with numerous audio effects. Songs come in different challenge levels and lengths. The price (\$50) includes two USB microphones, the game and a Singstar USB converter. Note that some of the songs have suggestive lyrics, hence the E10+ rating. If you're looking for a great singing game, this a good choice.

Details: Sony Computer Entertainment America Inc., www.scea.com. Price: \$50. Ages: 10-up. Platform: PlayStation 2. Teaches: music, pitch, language experience (reading lyrics), rhythm, singing. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 4.6 stars. Review date: 1/7/2007. [WB]

Ease of Use	9
Educational	9
Entertaining	10
Design Features	9
Good Value	9

92%

ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+, Lyrics Suggestive Themes, Tobacco Reference



SpellingTime.com

Responsive and free, this talking, Flash-based online spelling service is designed from the ground up to help an elementary student with that dreaded Friday weekly spelling list.

There are three types of memberships — individual, student and classroom. Using a management screen, parents, children or teachers can enter their own spelling words. These lists (up to 20 each week) are saved on the remote server. All a student needs to do is remember his or her screen name and password, so the program could be used both from both home or school settings.

The best part about this program is the way the spelling words are presented — in a clear, spoken voice, used both alone and in a sentence. This is remarkable considering that everything is streamed through your browser. After each quiz or test, children can earn game coins to play an arcade games to shoot hoops, capture flying bugs, and so on. We were able to successfully sign up for an account, create a custom spelling list with words like "separate" and "fishgig" (both were already in the database) and get started. Words not in the database can be requested.

So what's the catch? We're honestly not sure. Not only is this program easy to use, but it meets a need every elementary student eventually has. When we reviewed it (December 2006) there were no ads, and we noticed no offers for subscriptions. This service is certainly good news for home-schoolers or teachers on a budget. Note that as of January 2006, Flash Player 9 is required to run the program, which is available as a free download. We tested the program using Safari on a Macintosh with no problems.

Details: Synergy1 Group, Inc., www.spellingtime.com. Price: \$free. Ages: 6-12. Platform: Internet Site. Teaches: spelling, language, reading. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 4.6 stars. Review date: 1/7/2007. [WB]

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