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he playground was always our favorite place to be. It was everyone's favorite place. It was a break in the routine, a place where you could go to unwind, be with your friends and relax. I didn't realize it then but the playground was also a great place to learn. It was an informal laboratory where the rules of the world could be explored.

Crazy

"Is he crazy?, I didn't learn anything on the playground!" Sure you did. You learned about the rules of social interaction; who were your friends, who weren't, what you could say or do to people. You learned about physics; if you throw a ball at this angle and that speed, it would go so far. You learned about mathematics; if you are in center field and your opponent is rounding second, do you have time to cut her/him off at third or throw the kick ball to home plate?

All this learning was taking place subconsciously. You never actually thought about it, but it happened. You have the proof because you got better at passing or catching the football, you got better at timing that kick at the kick ball, and you got better at finding and keeping your friends.

Edmark has attempted something similar with their Thinkin' Things series. They wanted to make an electronic playground where kids could experiment and learn some of the skills

they will need later in life.

Overview

Thinkin' Things is a collection of three CD ROMs, each one geared to a different age group. Series one is for 4- to 8-year-olds, Series two is for 6- to 12-year olds, and series three is for 7- to 13-year olds. The age levels of the disks overlap, thus allowing children of various ages and abilities to experience success in most of the games.

The manuals attempt to do the same thing that Paramount did in their manual for Busytown (see Review-IMG Nov. 95). The Thinkin' Things manuals have a set-up section, a section to describe the rules of each game, and a together-time section with parent/child activities (but only in the manual for series one), and a troubleshooting section. Unfortunately the manual is difficult to read at times, the type is quite small, and the manual is written for the parents, so the child may have a hard time using it on his/her own.

On each series there is also a program called Dear Parents which is a multimedia tour of the disk. This program gives an overview of Edmark, an explanation of the theories behind each section of the disk and summary of the Thinkin' Things series. Dear Parents is a very nice touch. It shows what the company was thinking when it designed the program.

Series One

Before we start reviewing this series, we have to warn you; one of us has used it in her classroom, so this may be coming from a biased opinion. Series one consists of six games; Oranga Banga, Frippl Shop, BLOX-Flying Spheres, BLOX-Flying Shapes, Feathered Friends, and Toony Loon. The disk is designed for children aged 4-8, and addresses logical thinking skills, auditory memory, basic geometry, spatial concepts, pattern recognition and creativity.

Oranga Banga invites the child to create his/her own rhythms which Oranga will copy. He also invites you to attempt to copy his rhythms (kind of like a Ringo Star version of Simon). The rhythms range in difficulty from a simple one-two beat to a seven beat rhythm that tests the limits of some people's auditory memory. For added difficulty, you can turn out Oranga's studio lights and try to recognize the instruments by sound alone. A neat little feature is that Oranga always looks at the instrument he is playing so you can get a clue by watching his eyes (which seem to glow in the dark like a cat's).

Feathered Friends is an exploration in pattern recognition and matching. Younger children will like this game. Older children may become bored quickly by the game's simplicity. The object is to build a little feathered friend by combining color, body pattern, hat, and foot wear including some nice boots. The child can either create his/her own bird or build the next bird in a prescribed pattern. The problem with this game is that there is not much positive reinforcement.

BLOX Flying Spheres is pure experimentation. There is not much in the way of problem solving skills but this game is more like a laboratory. The child makes seemingly three-dimensional backgrounds and then drops "balls" into it to see how they will react. They grow larger and smaller, developing the child's sense of depth perception. A nice feature allows the child to pick different styles of music that play while the balls are hurtling through space.

LOX Flying Shapes allows the child to create a picture out of basic geometric shapes and then set the picture, or parts of it, in motion. This is another laboratory setting that allows the child to explore different possibilities of shape and movement.

Fripple Shop was a classroom favorite. As shopkeeper it is your job to fill fripple orders. The orders can either be taken by fax or phone. The fax machine is good for those children who need visual reinforcement while the phone orders are good for developing auditory memory. As the difficulty is increased, the differences between fripples becomes very subtle and the child must work to decipher the clues. When the child makes two or more mistakes fripples are removed to make the requisite fripple easier to find.

Toony Loon is a musical bird with some decidedly strange instruments to play (including chickens). You can play with Toony's instruments or play a Simon-like game matching what Toony plays. This game is a cute little diversion that should keep your child busy for a while.

Series Two

Series two has five games on it; Frippletration, Toons with Loony, Snake BLOX, 2-3D BLOX, and Oranga-Banga's Band. The graphics, as with series one, are very colorful and cute. The voices are adequate, although Toony Loon's voice may get annoying after a while.

Frippletration is a variation on the classic game Concentration. Colored blocks, pictures, symbols, or even sounds may be used to help test your memory. It is a good conversion of the game but it does have some faults. In one set of pictures you have to match the top of a fripple to its bottom. The problem is that some fripples have very similar tops and bottoms and on the advanced level it can be very difficult to match them correctly. The auditory matching is very good. Some auditory sets include animal sounds and vocalizations of the

letters of the alphabet. A welcome feature is that Frippleration can be set for one or two players, allowing the child to play against a friend or parent.

Loony's Toons brings back Toony Loon to teach you how to play music. Armed with his trusty xylophone (and a few other instruments, including sheep [yes. . . sheep]), he has a collection of 20 songs to play or, if you like, teach you how to play (he teaches you by playing the song in parts and having you repeat what he did). The songs range from standards ("Do Your Ears Hang Low") to not so standard (Bach's "Minuet" from Anna Magdalena) This is a great game for the musically, and not so musically inclined.

Snake BLOX is the weakest "game" on this disk. The object is to draw a picture then create a "mask" for the picture so that when a "snake" crawls around on the screen it will go behind the masked areas creating an illusion of 3-D. The game is very confusing and somewhat difficult to work. We did not find working with it enjoyable and we feel that children will not find it fun to use either.

2-3D BLOX is an interesting concept and one that we both felt was a good experiment in cause and effect and spatial relationships. You draw a picture on a two dimensional workspace then map your drawing onto a spinning three dimensional image. You can have the program pick the solid for mapping or you can create one of your own with an ingenious little tool. This game was a fun little experiment, especially when it came to creating your own solids.

Oranga Banga is back, but this time he's brought the band. All of them are on percussion instruments and this time your child determines the beat. The game uses a basic MIDI sequencer type input screen that allows you to set up rhythms for the three to play. This is a good introduction to auditory sequencing and rhythm recognition and allows a lot of great experimentation.

Series Three

Series three has five games on it also; Stocktopus, Half Time, Frippl Place, Carving BLOX, and Photo Twister.

Stocktopus is a trading game where you must help the stoctopus trade the items he has for the items he needs. This is a great game that teaches the player sequencing and causes and effect (you must plan your trades ahead or you may be left with items you do not need). Stoctopus also offers help by showing you what trade needs to be the next one made. There is a lot of positive feedback here and on the most advanced level, we had some problems figuring out a correct sequence without some help. A welcome feature was the multicultural approach (The traders are from various countries around the world and extend pleasantries to you in their native languages).

Carving BLOX is an interesting idea but just doesn't fly. You are given a piece of moldable "plastic" and tools to draw designs and shapes. You are also given six "balls" of various weights and tools to change gravity and friction. The box claims that it is an experiment in physics but it is more of an experiment in frustration. The tools are very intuitive to use but there is no joy in experimentation. We feel that children will get bored quickly because there is no real point to this experiment and it is very difficult to make a "structure" that will work correctly (and even if the structure works, it is not enjoyable to watch balls bounce around it for more than 30 seconds or so)

Photo Twister is a junior version of Photoshop where the child can use various fripples to alter a given photograph. Some fripples can bend, twist, stretch, and pull the photo while others will lighten, darken or smudge the picture to change it. Most of the changes made are quite silly and not the least bit intuitive. Another section of Photo Twister gives you a picture and an altered version and you must put together a team of fripples to make the requisite changes. This is the weakest part of the program because some of the changes are so subtle it is almost impossible to figure out what was done. We gave up after about five minutes of frustration. We don't think a child will last much longer.

Half Time is a basic introduction to programming. You are the coach of a marching band and during the half time show, you have to use a palette of moves to create patterns for your marchers to follow. Unfortunately, this is also a very ineffective game. It is difficult enough to program the moves of one person, but when you have to program in the various moves for the band, cheerleaders, and players as well, it gets overwhelming very quickly. The patterns that can be formed are intricate; but, it is probably beyond anyone but the most advanced children to get a "program" that will work with anything more than rudimentary results.

Fripple Place is the last game on the disk and one of the strongest. The fripples must be put back into their home and you are the one to do it. Following the rules given to you by the fripples, you must place them into the proper rooms in the house. The rules range from simple ("I live in the top-left room") to oblique ("I live above a red fripple"). The game is terrific for building logical thinking and observational skills. Synthesizing the information into a working plan is an important skill that the child will use in later life.

Summary

The "Dear Parents" program has a saying on it; "At Edmark, we put learning first." Unfortunately, that is their downfall. For edutainment to be an effective medium, it must be fun to use. Disks two and three fall short of this mark. Although series one is a delightful jaunt for the younger children, the other two disks pale by comparison. Some of the games are too abstract and, truthfully, not at all entertaining.

For the younger children, we heartily recommend Thinkin' Things-Disk One. Series Two has redeeming qualities that make it a little less entertaining but, overall, a solid piece of software. Series Three has too many flaws and is too abstract to be recommended, although two games (Stocktopus and Fripple House) do stand out.

Pros

- Some great games
- Colorful graphics
- Good music and sound effects
- Some strong educational possibilities

Cons

- Some games are too abstract
- Some games are just not fun

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