

Forthcoming attractions

This month we've mostly been playing a game called Sea Dogs, developed by Bethesda and published by Ubisoft. We were going to do a review of Sea Dogs – after two people have logged approximately 60-80 man hours playing it, you'd expect a little work to result.

But no. However much like a book that you can read four different ways Sea Dogs is, it's got some terrible, terrible flaws. It's a swashbuckling 3D adventure that involves wandering around ports, sailing the high seas, doing battle, plundering what you will. But it can be astoundingly dull. It's also buggy as hell, and we've had the patched version.

It feels ultimately pointless in much the same way the classic Elite space trading game did, and that comes from people who liked Elite. Really, it's a game for acquired tastes – if you like adventures you may well love this. We're trying to give it up because we can't understand why we're still playing it. But we refuse to review it – the number of bugs is enough to warrant that.

→ Pass the port: don't let the bugs run you aground

↓ A vast disappointment: seadogs just couldn't make the cut



So what's coming up? This month there's some rare variety – Spencer Dalziel uses the force in the latest in the Star Wars first-person series, Jedi Outcast, we give the Sims' latest add-on the runaround and there's a guest appearance from the wonderful Bagpuss.



Plus, in a special review, the children of St James Primary School, Surrey, give us their expert opinion of Zoombinis Mountain Rescue.

In the coming months Lifestyle's hoping to get its paws on Sudden Strike II, the

latest in the series from German publisher CDV. Sudden Strike was a remarkably successful WW2 RTS (real-time strategy) game and the second instalment has some vital additions, such as unit morale. Check it out on www.suddenstrike2.de/english/index0.htm to find out more. ■

Bagpuss – We will print it!

This children's activity centre may well be wasted on its target audience (seven years and over), simply because they're too young to remember this cloth cat character's hit TV show, which was a favourite back in the mid-70s and 80s.

Nonetheless, as an activity centre the software is pretty good although it won't keep kids amused on a long-term basis. And despite children not remembering Professor Yaffle and the ever-helpful mice,

the characters are still very cute and kids will soon warm to them.

There are several activities to choose from, including making stickers, posters and calendars. Inside each section there is the option to use an already existing template or you can create your own using the toolbox on the screen. You can trawl through a selection of backgrounds and then adapt them by changing colours with the paintbox. Once you have picked a background you can then choose characters from the list and place them where you want, adding accessories and text as you go.

However, retrieving saved pictures is difficult and changing designs after you make a mistake is almost impossible, which becomes frustrating. The backgrounds are also limited, but there's a variety of pictures to use.



↑ Retro vision: look back on 70s wallpaper with the big cat

Perhaps the most important thing to note with this activity centre is that you will need a colour printer, as the pictures don't work when printed in black and white. Not only that, many of the more complex designs such as T-shirt printing will require more tools and equipment, which will result in extra costs. All in all, though, this is a great package to keep your pride and joy amused on a wet weekend. ■

Wendy Brewer

Dinosaur Adventure 3-D

The word 'edutainment' has become so common a term that it's easy to forget what difficult bedfellows education and entertainment are. We often fail to realise how complicated it must be to wrap historical or scientific facts up in a seemingly frivolous fun package. It takes a game that does it as badly as Dinosaur Adventure 3-D to remind us that this is indeed a demanding skill.

Now don't get me wrong, there are a lot of facts in here, and they are thrown at you thick and fast enough for it to be

certain some of them will sink in. Likewise the games, while not taxing an adult too dearly, should hold the attention of the game's target audience of four- to eight-year-olds. The problem is that the boundary between fact and fiction has been blurred, so the game becomes misleading.

It's all very well being guided through the various tasks by a cute, talkative dinosaur that has trouble pronouncing its own name. Children can tell the difference between a cartoon compère and the real thing. But when we're told that the dinosaurs are under threat from a Tyrannosaurus rex that seems to have crossed the ocean on a raft, alarm bells start to ring.



↑ Natural selection: as dino searches for the eggs you wonder how dinosaurs became extinct

This inconsistency brings everything else into question. If games like this teach children by allowing information to sink in while they play, then it could well be the inaccuracies that ultimately lodge in your tot's brain. This defeats the purpose of buying it in the first place, so you might want to think twice about this one. ■

Simon Easterman

DK Rainbow Fish

Take the following ingredients: a seasoned 40-year-old hack with 13 years experience in IT, a bright nearly-three-year-old and a copy of Rainbow Fish, a game for children aged between three and seven. What do you get? Answer: complete bafflement. And that was on the easy level.

The premise sounds simple enough. Rainbow Fish, the most beautiful fish in the ocean, has had some of his scales stolen. To help him find them, you have to let his friends lead you to a variety of sea-creatures who know where his scales are hidden. Each time, you must

complete a task or set of tasks to get the information.

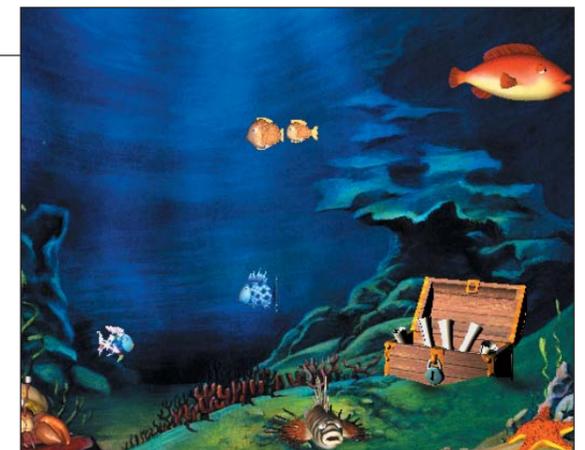
But the tasks themselves, though not intellectually complicated, are often deeply confusing. In one sequence, for example, you have to manoeuvre Rainbow Fish through various obstacles to get to a cave, but in practice the fish doesn't seem to follow the direction of the mouse-clicks. Every time you get it wrong, two fishy friends called Head and Toe shout "No, not that way, this way!" and 'point' in the right direction. If you've ever seen a fish point, you'll know why this doesn't help.

Once you get the hang of it, though, Rainbow Fish turns out to be strangely compelling and finishing the game was as satisfying as completing a tricky jigsaw puzzle. The nearly-three-year-old seemed to

enjoy it too, though mainly for the music and the bright colours than because she had any idea what was going on. In fact, I wonder what sort of child *could* follow this game.

I have a horrible feeling there is probably an army of six-year-olds out there who could complete the whole thing in an hour, but perhaps I'm better off not knowing for sure. ■

Kim Thomas



↑ Deep sea confusion: it all goes swimmingly 'til you ask a fish for directions

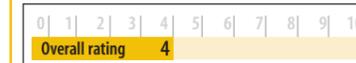
Dinosaur Adventure 3-D

System requirements: 120MB Pentium; Windows 95/98/Me/XP; 16MB RAM; 10MB hard disk space.

Focus Multimedia: 01889 570 156

Website: www.focusmm.co.uk

Price: £24.99



DK Rainbow Fish

System requirements: 133MHz Pentium; Windows 95/98/Me; 32MB RAM; 100MB hard disk space.

GSP/Dorling Kindersley: 01480 497 050

Website: www.gsp.cc

Price: £19.99



The Sims: On Holiday



← Half-pipe dreams: create the perfect holiday for your Sim family

↓ In tent on having a good time: mindless automatons will enjoy anything



Since The Sims were launched back in 2000 they have become a part of our lives. We have partied with them, dated with them, photographed their marriages and seen the birth of their babies. Now we can take the family out into the big wide world and go on holiday with them too.

Maxis, the maker of The Sims, has launched several add-on packs for the game, but the last one, Hot Date, was the first that allowed you to take your Sims out of their neighbourhood and go downtown on a date. The Sims: On Holiday builds on this, allowing you to travel further afield, taking your Sims on trips to the beach, the great outdoors or a snow-covered ski lodge. But apart from different scenery, On Holiday doesn't really add all that much more than Hot Date.

Eat all you like

I found that managing the Sims while on holiday was trickier than in Hot Date as their actions are not tied to one another. When you are downtown you only control the Sim who set up the date while the other one simply follows along, so you can ensure that both are fed, entertained and relieved when necessary.

On Holiday allows you to take the entire family away. Each has free will but intelligence levels remain as low as ever and they will quite happily spend their entire time eating, while failing to notice an urgent need for the loo or that their energy levels are running dangerously low. This can lead to a stressful trip for

the compassionate player who likes to see their Sims kept happy.

Despite the Sims' virtually insatiable appetite for food, the gastronomic options are limited – the choice is between

a buffet, barbie or takeaway snack, none of which is that filling. Also, while it is fun at first to try out all the new activities, such as snowboarding, water balloon fights, amusement arcades and fishing ponds, these swiftly start to pall.

The opportunity for social interaction isn't as great as Hot Date either, as there are fewer Sims to get to know. Apparently it is possible to win special awards for sociability on holiday, but despite considerable hours of play I was never awarded one. It is possible to build up

relationships while away, but like all holiday romances they can fade quickly on your return unless you keep in touch.

Dream holiday

Unlike Hot Date, which comes with a well developed downtown area, On Holiday's areas are pretty poor so I'd recommend you spend some time redeveloping. In fact, this was where the game had the most to offer, as you can spend hours creating the perfect vacation location. There are loads of new objects, floor and wall coverings to play with, and a host of new characters who inhabit your resorts – Betty the Yeti was one of my favourites.

On Holiday is a worthwhile addition for addicts desperate to give their Sims more to do, but I didn't think it had as much to offer as Hot Date in terms of new features. Get Hot Date first, because without the extras it offers, On Holiday won't be so much fun. ■

Ursula Seymour

↓ The youth of today: I blame computer games



The Sims: On Holiday

System requirements: The Sims original game installed; 64MB RAM; 600MB hard disk space.

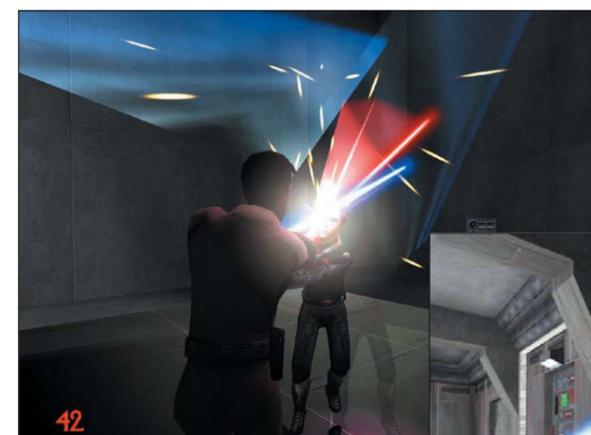
Electronic Arts: 01932 450 000

Website: www.thesims.co.uk

Price: £19.99

0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10
Overall rating **8**

Star Wars Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast



← Rattling of lightsabres: Jedi Knights trade more than insults to settle arguments

↓ Dance trooper: a clone in the imperial boy band pays dearly for getting his moves wrong



When it comes to transposing the *Star Wars* universe to the games industry, Lucas Arts has had a patchy history. While most titles were anodyne at best, the FPS (first-person shooter) genre proved to be a fertile stomping ground. Released not long after *Doom II* – the real daddy of FPS games – *Dark Forces* introduced gamers to a sub-Han Solo character called Kyle Katarn and gave us our first opportunity to blast 10 tons of tessie out of Stormtroopers. All was good.

This was followed by some highly acclaimed shooters including the lauded predecessor to this release, which finally put a lightsaber and the power of the force in the player's hand. So, with *Jedi Knight II*, are we talking Jar Jar Binks or the dark Lord Vader? Well, we've had a go and are glad to say that *Jedi Knight II* is Darth through and through. It's not without its problems but (grimace now) the force is strong in this one. Strong enough, in fact, to pull the ears off a Gundark.

History repeats itself

Jedi Outcast continues to tell the well-chronicled story of the mercenary Kyle Katarn, essentially a good boy but infused with just enough bad to make him interesting to women and teenage boys. In a previous incarnation he wielded Jedi powers, but now he chooses the odd smuggling job for the Alliance in a universe where the once-mighty Empire has splintered. We join Kyle and

his co-pilot when they're sent to investigate a distress call from a planet everyone thought was uninhabited. Duh! Bad move – have these people not read game plots? I don't suppose they

get much time what with all that uncovering of evil machinations they do.

They end up discovering that a group of Imperial forces are planning nefarious deeds. The following gameplay doesn't delve into the entire franchise, it's strictly a recreation of the *Star Wars* and *Empire Strikes Back* universe and all the better for it. You get to fight on a Death Star, go to Cloud City and even fight a lightsaber battle alongside Luke Skywalker.

Light relief

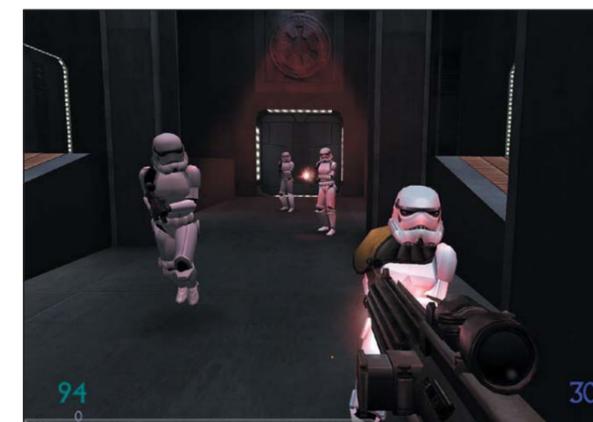
Co-developer Raven Software has sensibly bought into the Samurai

mythology that so permeated *Star Wars*, thanks to the influence of Japanese film classics like Akira Kurosawa's *Hidden Fortress*. Raven understands that the lightsaber has to be an effective weapon because you are a Samurai and it is your sword. In fact, it's so useful that it's easy to forget the other weapons at your disposal. Swordfights have subtle nuances that must be learned and, in conjunction with force powers, you'll soon be emptying a room of armed Stormtroopers in seconds.

The only bad point we can note is the implementation of puzzles. They're not hard, just badly designed; you will spend time in absolute frustration – much like the original *Dark Forces* games. But this is a test of your powers and you must not stray to the dark side – if you stick with *Jedi Outcast* you'll be rewarded with one of the best action games of the year. ■

Spencer Dalziel

↓ Having a blaster: try not to get on the business end of imperial rule



Star Wars Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast

System requirements: 350MHz Pentium II; Windows 95/98/Me/2000/XP; 128MB RAM; 665MB hard disk space.

Activision: 01753 756 100

Website: www.activision.com

Price: £29.99

0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10
Overall rating **9**

Jojo in Numberland

Jojo in Numberland is a series of mathematical challenges for infant school-aged children. The graphics are of good quality and it starts with an animated clip to introduce the story. Lenny Henry narrates in his customary lively style, giving very clear instructions and much encouragement.

My son, Jonah, has helped me review this edutainment title. Jonah is five years old and in reception at school, so he falls in at the lower end of the recommended age range. We played together twice, after that Jonah was sufficiently confident to play the game on his own.

Jojo in Numberland

System requirements: 100MHz Pentium; Windows 95/98; 16MB RAM; 5MB hard disk space.

Learning Land: www.learningland.co.uk
Price: £19.99



Jojo the squirrel finds herself lost in Numberland and has to complete eight number tasks to escape. The challenges start with basic counting skills and number recognition, and progress to tasks based on place value. This area is fundamental to the numeracy strategy used in infant schools and the tasks provide a useful opportunity to reinforce this in a fun way, which definitely does not seem like work.

To complete the program from start to finish takes about 30 minutes. This is a realistic timespan for schools, as it wouldn't take long to ensure that all the children get a turn. They may well need adult supervision, particularly Years R and 1. You can print out worksheets based on the task, which Jonah enjoyed filling in.



↑ You can count on me: Jojo will help your children improve their numeracy

Jonah is a fan of the game. He says, "I like it so much because it teaches me things and I can do it all by myself."

As a Primary school teacher and a parent, I would recommend Jojo as an interesting way of practising national curriculum Key Stage 1 maths, as well as developing mouse control and problem-solving strategies. ■

Sarah and Jonah Lucas

Zoombinis Mountain Rescue, reviewed by St James C of E Primary School



We asked pupils from St James C of E Primary School in Surrey to tell us what they thought of Zoombinis Mountain Rescue. There was some disagreement about the turtles, but everyone agreed on the rating.

"Zoombinis is a fun game. Jessica liked the turtle game best. We had to stop the bridge from falling down. Emily liked the pipe game. We stood the Zoombinis on the holes and made the handle twist and they went down the tubes. We managed to save them. It's cool! We give it 10 out of 10."

Jessica Collett and Emily Braiden, aged 8

Zoombinis Mountain Rescue

System requirements: 200MHz Pentium; Windows 95/98/2000/Me/XP; 32MB RAM; 50MB hard disk space.

TERC: 01664 481 563
Website: www.terc.edu
Price: £19.99



"Zoombinis Mountain Rescue is hard. First you had to match the Zoombinis. Then on level one – which we thought was the best level – you put the Zoombinis on the turtles. You have to be careful because the turtles can knock you off. The aim of the game is to complete all the levels and save your friends. The hardest bit is level three because we didn't know which control to use. It was very fun!"

Oliver Millward and Christopher Terry, aged 8

"We really enjoyed playing Zoombinis Mountain Rescue. We liked it because the Zoombinis are funny little creatures. Nick especially liked creating the Zoombinis at the beginning. We

→ Dressed to mill: they may not look much, but the Zoombinis are worth shelling out for

chose different eyes, hair, feet, hats and glasses for each Zoombini, which was funny. Alice liked the challenges. We had to rescue other Zoombinis. The graphics were fab! There were different scenes and adventures.

"It might have been better without the spinning turtles, as that wasted some time. Other than that, it is great. We both thought we would like to buy it, we enjoyed it so much. We give it 10 out of 10." ■

Alice Smith and Nicholas Budd, aged 8



Cossacks: Art of War

When I reviewed Cossacks: European Wars last year, I loved it. It put you at the head of a 17th century army, battling against other European nations while building up your settlements and developing technology to enable you to march forward into the 18th century, with the extra weapons and units that brings.

However, I did warn readers that to really shine in Cossacks' military arena you have to be prepared to dedicate a lot of time to it, as it is an addictive and sometimes tricky-to-master game. If you

are one of those who did devote the necessary man-hours to conquer Cossacks, then you will greet the arrival of the Art of War add-on with cries of joy, as it bulks up the game with plenty of extras and irons out some of the niggles as well.

The point of Cossacks is to terrorise your neighbours with your superior troops and, thanks to its larger maps, Art of War allows you to have up to 8,000 crack troops onscreen at any time. You can use the map and mission editor to customise the action and terrain, or play one of the six new single-player five-mission campaigns.

First-time players should note that it is a good idea to get to grips with the original Cossacks missions before moving on to the harder options offered by this add-on.



↑ Offensive game: beat your neighbouring warlords into submission to win at Cossacks

But if your skills don't quite match up there are four levels of difficulty to choose from and you can enable options that play to your strengths. New multiplayer options include a global ranking system and the ability to ally with AI-controlled armies.

Cossacks: Art of War is a worthwhile add-on for Cossacks addicts, but it might be overkill for first-time players. ■

Ursula Seymour

Cossacks: Art of War

System requirements: 233MHz Pentium; Windows 98/Me/2000/NT 4.0/XP; 32MB RAM; 400MB hard disk space.

Greenstreet: 020 8880 4145

Website: www.cossacks.com

Price: £18



Clangers Activity Centre

ATV favourite for many a 30-something, the Clangers make a welcome return in the form of this well-constructed activity pack. Unlike some television animation of the 60s and 70s, Clangers remains highly watchable as the video clips here prove. Though the game is cleverly packaged for kids aged five and upwards, the parents will be the ones that really love playing it.

After a brief introduction to the different areas of the Clangers' planet, first-time users are prompted to head for the parents' page where each activity is introduced and where you discover which

types of skill it helps your child practice. Games range from pop-up pairs to shape-recognition exercises. In each game you can switch between three difficulty levels and a simple mouse click will turn off the aural instructions should you prefer to explain what's required yourself.

While most of the activities have a very simple premise, others require users to think on their feet, choosing the right moment to click to catch flying debris and, in the case of the egg hatching game, to take account of in which direction and how hard to fire a blast of heat and to compensate for gravitational pull and moving planets too. Aim consistently accurately at the Clangers' moon on which the Soup Dragon

has laid an egg and, after a few blasts of heat, a baby dragon will be born.

This was a far more worthwhile creation than my pathetic musical efforts in the composing game. When the Soup Dragon conductor played back my composition it was drowned out by the sound of my cringing. No doubt precocious five-year-olds will come up with something far easier on the ears. ■

Rosemary Haworth

Clangers Activity Centre

System requirements: 300 Pentium; Windows 95/98/Me/XP; 32MB RAM; 190MB hard disk space.

Europress: 01480 357 183

Website: www.europress.co.uk

Price: £19.99



→ Drop a Clanger: somebody let on that the moon's craters are all wastepaper baskets

