

Subj: Children's software
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From: simsong@vineyard.net (Simson L. Garfinkel)
Sender: owner-simson-says@vineyard.net
Reply-to: simsong@acm.org
To: simson-says@vineyard.net

Brøderbund Software Living Books

Recently, we've had the pleasure of introducing our toddler daughter, to Brøderbund Software's collection of "Living Books" CD-ROMs. Many parents have probably noticed the glut of children's software on the market, much of it of questionable quality. But Brøderbund's "Living Books" have impressed us: they're entertaining, educational, and easy-to-use – at least, most of them are.

Brøderbund has been developing original Mac and PC titles since the early 1980s. But the company also has been transposing well-loved children's stories into interactive software for nearly a decade, periodically revamping them to keep up with advances in multimedia technology. The company's current offerings for younger kids' (ages 2-7) includes three Dr. Seuss books, two Arthur stories, and one title from Mercer Mayer's "Little Critter" series.

Every Living Book is introduced by the story's main characters. It then gives young users (or their parents) two options: "Read to Me," and "Let Me Play." If the child clicks on "Read to Me," the program will read the story aloud, highlighting each printed word in the text as it is spoken. At the end of each numbered "page," the program shows a few animated tricks. While the disc plays, Mommy and Daddy are then free to do something else, with their child glued to the tube.

For those youngsters sophisticated enough to master a mouse or a trackball, click "Let Me Play." Children can jump from page to page, as if they were flipping through the printed book. Once on a page, virtually every object and every word on every page responds to a mouse click. Click on the word "puppy," for instance, and the word changes to a picture of a puppy, the narrator says "puppy," and the puppy yips and pants. There is a lot buried on each page: often, when you hit the same object, you will get a different responds each time. The interactive play easily stretches a fifteen-minute story to at least twice that length. Unfortunately, it was all too sophisticated for our 18-month-old daughter.

Our daughter is positive that no CDROM should come without a game, and Brøderbund didn't let her down. Arthur's Birthday has "pin the tail on the donkey" and a version of the game "Concentration." Green Eggs and Ham includes a paper activity book called "Beyond the Computer," for parents and children to go through together. Dr. Seuss's ABC, designed for the younger set, plays the musical numbers from the CDROM when you spin it on a conventional CD player.

Obviously, parents should be careful about these discs, as they don't all provide a well-balanced educational diet. Green Eggs and Ham, with its bubble-gum colors and fast, discordant music, is too reminiscent of a conventional Saturday-morning cartoon. Just Grandma and Me has jerky graphics and too little text to support it. We also found that the CDROM's animations were too violent for the intended age.

Brøderbund has gone to great lengths to make the CDROMs faithful to the books on which they are based: the text and the illustrations displayed on the screen are identical to what appears in the paper versions.

Unfortunately, merely replicating award-winning books wasn't enough for Brøderbund's developers: they've gilded the lily by inserting additional dialogue into virtually every scene. The added dialogue is never as good as the original, and it's frequently out of character—as when the boy in *The Cat in the Hat* talks about being grounded and having his mother call the police.

Most of the Living Books software packages cost \$29.95. Each includes a CD-ROM that runs on the whole range of Windows (both 3.1 and 95) and Macintosh (both 68K and PowerMac) computers. The faster your computer, the better you'll find the animations. Most of also come with a soft-cover copy of the original book, although—ironically—*Arthur's Reading Race* didn't. On the Mac, we had to turn off the virtual memory on our souped-up Quadra 605 in order.

We found that the programs ran better on the Macintosh than on the PC. Although we had to disable the virtual memory on our antique Quadra 605 in order to get the character's mouths to synchronize with their speech, the programs ran smoothly. On a PC, we first had to run Brøderbund's installer and create a special directory on our C: drive. The animated figures and text looked a little jagged on a 200 Mhz Pentium with 32MB of RAM; the problem went away on our system with 64MB of memory. We were disappointed by the performance under Windows NT: most of the CDROMs started well enough, but the crashed a couple minutes into playtime.

Brøderbund likes to believe that each of its Living Books serves an important educational function. Each software package touts the skills children should learn. For example, in addition to "language acquisition" and "computer literacy," *The Cat in the Hat*, is designed to tutor preschoolers in "spatial relations." *Just Grandma and Me* introduces children to foreign languages, by allowing them play options in French, German, and Spanish.

We think that the educational claims hold up for Dr. Seuss's ABC and *Arthur's Reading Race*, but for the most part, these Living Books are more fun than they are educational. But that's not to say that our daughter isn't learning anything. At a year and a half, she's already starting to recognize some letters. Her ability to sit through longer, more complex stories has dramatically improved, now that she's seen the *Arthur* CD-ROMs and we've read to her the accompanying books. Her short-term memory, particularly to follow directions and to find objects, is better. And yes, she has learned how to take a CD-ROM out of its jewel box, put it in the CD-ROM drive, and close the drive, all without touching the disc's delicate underside—an indispensable skill for anyone these days.

—Beth Rosenberg & Simson Garfinkel

Dr. Seuss's ABC \$29.95
The Cat in the Hat \$34.95
Green Eggs and Ham \$29.95
Arthur's Reading Race \$29.95
Arthur's Birthday \$29.95
Just Grandma and Me \$29.95

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This message (C) Simson L. Garfinkel. .

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This message was sent to you by way of the SIMSON-SAYS mailing list. SIMSON-SAYS is Simson's column on computer issues that appears weekly in The Boston Globe. Hopefully one day I'll have SIMSON-SAYS syndicated in hundreds of newspapers world-wide. Meanwhile, I'm distributing it in cyberspace using this mailing list.

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From: "Simson L. Garfinkel" <simsong@vineyard.net>

To: <simson-says@vineyard.net>

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Sender: owner-simson-says@vineyard.net

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Reply-To: simsong@acm.org