

HOLIDAYS

# Software & Video Games

By Alex Chisholm

The past few years have seen an explosion of new software titles and electronic games that move beyond what's possible with the keyboard and joystick. These innovations invite kids of all ages to literally jump in to experiences with easy-to-use dance pads, skateboards, drawing slates and other devices that connect directly to the computer and TV. These wonderful new ways of interacting with technology enable designers to create products that go way beyond old-school "drill and thrill" activities. These NAPPA Gold Award-winners represent some of the best.

## Preschoolers and Elementary Students

• **Piano Wizard**, Allegro Multimedia, 2005; \$199.95; Windows 98 and later; [www.allegroirainbow.com](http://www.allegroirainbow.com); for ages 5 and up. Pricey, yes, but a worthwhile



investment. This USB plug-in works with your PC and introduces kids to the keyboard, sheet music and many popular piano classics. Highly versatile, it provides step-by-step instruction — often through simple games and visuals — to help kids learn where to place their fingers, how to count measures, read music and progress through more advanced musical exercises. A proficiency meter helps kids track their progress.

• **V-Smile Art Studio**, VTech, 2006; \$29.99 for Art Studio, \$59.99 for V-Smile TV Learning System; [www.vtech.com/toys](http://www.vtech.com/toys); for ages 5 to 7. Putting a blank paper and crayons in front of a child is one of the simplest things we can do to unlock

imagination and empower creativity. As an add-on to VTech's popular V-Smile TV Learning System, Art Studio provides reams of virtual paper and a bucket of interactive tools that allow children to create the next generation of "refrigerator art." With a tethered stylus and smooth design surface, young artists learn



how to match colors, draw different shapes and objects, animate illustrations and play games.

## Ages 9 and Up

• **Big Brain Academy** and **Brain Age** for Nintendo DS Lite, Nintendo, 2006; \$19.99 each (\$129.99 for Nintendo DS Lite); [www.nintendo.com](http://www.nintendo.com). Nintendo has a reputation for making the most basic activities and game play fun and engaging.



Big Brain Academy and Brain Age keep you wanting more and always deliver. Leveraging the dual-screen (hence the "DS") mode and

touchscreen features of its powerful new handheld gaming system, Nintendo has released a series of "brain-teaser" games to help kids keep their minds sharp. Although it may appear like a simple series of activities — players have to perform basic math, identify moving figures, memorize lists of words — Nintendo's approach makes it exciting by allowing players to compete against themselves with a running log of daily performance. The wireless feature enables competition among friends and family. Included, of course, is Sudoku. Need we say more?

*Continued on page 31*



*Software & Video Games - from page 30*

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• **Xipster FullStop**, XOW, 2003; \$39.95; Mac/Windows 2000 and up; [www.xipster.com](http://www.xipster.com). This is the perfect tool for today's media-savvy kids who want to grow up and make movies or produce games. Xipster puts a powerful set of PC-based video and digital capture tools in their hands. The interface is easy to learn

and use, allowing them to quickly start creating their own stories and producing their own animations.

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