

THE BEST

SOFTWARE

FOR KIDS

A BOOK • A GALLERY • A WEBSITE • & MORE

The Computer Museum this year elevated the notion of a traditional exhibit to a new level by offering Museum-goers several mediums through which to explore a single subject. The subject was choosing the best software for children, and the Museum wrapped it in a comprehensive package that included a best-selling book, a vibrant on-site exhibit, and a constantly refreshed website.

The match was thus made: Cathy and Alison would author the book, and the Museum would lend its expertise and objectivity. The result was *The Computer Museum Guide to the Best Software for Kids*, an informative, insightful collection of reviews published by HarperCollins in October 1995.

Cathy and Alison first worked with Museum staff to develop exacting standards by which to judge the software. They then tried out close to 1,000 titles for ages 2-12 with a group of test families. The *Guide*, which contains their final selection of 215 software programs, shows that the best titles are not necessarily the most popular on the best-seller lists.

Each title in the *Guide* is evaluated in rigorous detail, based on what the authors call the three L's: learning, looks, and longevity. A program, for example, should fit children's developmental needs and interests and have such a distinctive look and feel that they will want to play with it over and over again. The *Guide* met with immediate acclaim, and plans were put in place to publish an updated version each year.

THE WEBSITE

Meanwhile, the authors worked with Web developers and designers at the Museum to complement the print edition of the *Guide* with "electronic pages" on the Museum's website. Now people could choose the best



THE BEGINNINGS

The spark for *Kids Software* was kindled a few years ago, when Museum staff began to realize the same question was surfacing time and again from Museum callers and visitors: What software should I buy for

my kids? What's educational? What's worth the investment? Sensitive to the public's confusion and need for an answer, staff and volunteers began to brainstorm about how the Museum, as a source of accurate, reliable knowledge about technology, should respond to the question.

THE GUIDE TO THE BEST SOFTWARE

First to emerge from the brainstorming sessions was the concept for a book. Then began a search to find the right authors. Founding President Gwen Bell remembered Cathy Miranker and Alison Elliott, long associated with the Museum as members and supporters. California mothers with backgrounds in the computer industry, Alison and Cathy had discovered independently that no good sources of impartial information about software for kids existed. Gwen persuaded them that their collective experience in the areas of education, journalism, the computer industry, and parenting, as well as their belief in the Museum's mission of informal learning, made them the perfect pair to become authorities on the subject.



Some of the education staff. From left: (back) Patrick Mungal, Rina Granizo, Tanya Morris, Sheila Sibley, Andrea Browne; (front) Ann Fraioli, Jennifer Rich.

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KIDS SOFTWARE

GALLERY FUNDERS

The *Best Software for Kids Gallery* couldn't have happened without the generous support of these sponsors:

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of both worlds: the reassuringly low-tech book and its high-tech counterpart, the website (<http://www.tcm.org/>), for new information not included in the original *Guide*.

The website offered several sections to browsers:

- “Reviews” provided periodic new-product assessments, using the same categories and criteria developed for the book.
- “Parent Tips” delved into topics such as kid-proofing your computer and choosing reading software.
- “Best Lists” enumerated such things as the best programs for kids and parents to use together, or the best programming activities for kids.
- “Talk to Us” invited browsers to share their thoughts and opinions. Comments from kids, parents, teachers, and programmers helped to shape subsequent reviews.

Colorful icons of the book jacket (for information about the *Guide*), balloons (for Parent Tips), a mailbox (Talk to Us), and a propeller beanie (Best Lists) guided Web browsers as they made their selections.

THE EXHIBIT

While attention swirled around the *Guide* and website, exhibit and design staff were hard at work readying *The Best Software for Kids Gallery*, which opened in June. A logical outgrowth of the book, this permanent companion exhibit exemplifies the Museum's hands-on approach, as well as its belief that the best software will inspire kids to create, explore and learn by doing. Press and public response to the exhibit was immediate and substantial—parents and educators (not to mention kids!) never had a destination quite like this before. Their collective enthusiasm can be measured in the constantly high decibel level found in the gallery.

Exhibits staff chose 50 of the best titles in the *Guide* for the gallery, with representative selections on arts, animation, reading, math, story-telling, history, science, geography, and games. Sound effects, 3D graphics, and video abound, and the space is decked out in vivid kids' colors, adding to the exhibit's overall cheerfulness and energy.

Each of the gallery's 14 computer stations offers all of the unabridged titles, making software surfing easy for visitors. Once they sit down at a station, visitors can look for a specific title by name or type in a child's age and subject interest to obtain a unique list of the best titles in that category. In addition to downloading the program, they can read a short

review that includes the suggested age range, assessments from the families who tested the software, a summary of the criteria used to evaluate the program, and a final recommendation, along with the publisher, platform, and price.

The stations also contain a checklist of criteria to gauge a program's learning, graphics, and replay value; purchasing tips; titles in Spanish and Japanese; software suitable for the hearing-impaired; and detailed information on computer viruses, made possible by support from Symantec Corporation. All the software is stored in two powerful, custom-made network servers, and all the stations, which were donated by Canon and Hewlett-Packard, are networked to a central file server using software by Novell.

The *Kids Software Gallery* is evaluated and updated regularly, and an expanded exhibit is planned for next year.

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

Education and exhibits staff continue to implement special educational programming to help visitors get the most out of the gallery. For example, a “Play Group” for parents and toddlers (ages 18 months to five years) allows adults and kids to explore the software together.

For those a bit older, a “Software Discovery Group” (ages 10 and up) leads participants through half-hour tutorials about some of the gallery's especially challenging titles. Each class focuses on one program in depth and is small enough so that everyone can play.

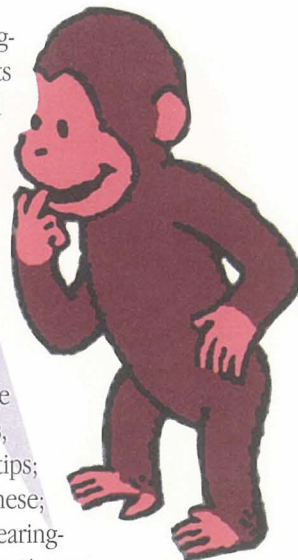
Visitors in search of more than skill-and-drill exercises and arcade games can sample “Selecting the Best,” 15-minute demonstrations with tips on buying the best family software, using examples from the gallery.

THE COLLECTION

Kids Software also touches other areas of the Museum. As Cathy Miranker and Alison Elliott continue to review vast amounts of software, they continue to acquire mountains of packages—all of which currently reside in Cathy's basement. These will eventually become part of the Museum's permanent software collection.

LOOKING AHEAD

The fiscal year ended with a greatly expanded gallery and a brand new book in the works for next year. We're pleased to offer you a peek at the latter in the following pages.



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Guide authors Alison Elliott and Cathy Miranker with their kids. From left: Katie Blank, Alison Elliott, Emily Miranker, Sarah Blank, Cathy Miranker, and Molly Miranker.

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