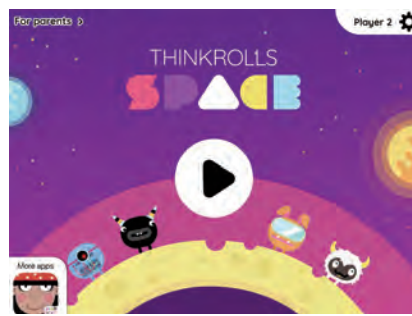




December 2019

2019 Year In Review



On the cover: Some noteworthy products from 2019. See the details on page 4.

Children's Technology Review December 2019

Volume 27, No. 12 Issue 239

Heist: One Team, One Mission
Jenny LeClue Detectivu*
Luigi's Mansion 3*
Mario & Sonic at the Olympic
Games Tokyo 2020

Mech-5
RoGo Coder - Kids Can Code
Sesame Street Yourself
Shifu Plugo
Tori
Wolves in the Walls*



* Denotes "Editor's Choice."



Children's Technology Review
December 2019

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Publisher's Note: We'll be switching to a quarterly format next year, following this schedule:

Mid-Winter (KAPi Winners, CES roundup, Feb 1)

Spring (BolognaRagazzi Winners, April 1)

Early Fall (Back to School, September 1)

Late Fall (Dust or Magic News, November 1)

Our weekly reports will continue to be delivered to subscribers by email with a holiday break from Dec 18 to January 15. Contact us with any questions (info@childrenstech.com)

2019 Year In Review

As the year winds down, we've created a detailed roundup of the year's important products. The report starts on page 4, or you can follow this link to see the list in CTREX at <http://bit.ly/ctrexbestof2019>. In case you don't want to read the entire article, here are some trends at a glance:

NINTENDO SETS THE STANDARD, ONCE AGAIN

When it comes to supporting families and children, Nintendo continues to rise above the others in 2019. While we didn't care much for the new **Switch Lite**, we continue to love Nintendo's ability to create innovative, high quality, commercial free content for all members of the family. Case in point? **Ring Fit Adventure**. There's no doubt that the Switch platform will be a key player in 2020.

LOOKING FOR MORAL LEADERSHIP?

It is still possible to find quality, ethical children's content in the app stores, however it is more likely to come from Europe or Canada, and not the United States. I continue to be disappointed by the lack of children's media leadership displayed by USA tech giants who could easily create a "manipulation free" zone for children in their app stores. Apple's new Arcade is on the right tack with a simple \$5/month subscription plan, but it is video game-centric. Recent changes to YouTube are also promising, but they appear to be a defensive move, as a way to sidestep impending legislation. As Apple and Google continue to squeeze cash from their massive app stores with such things as automatic renewals and "free content," young people are still getting pulled into the trap. So it's no wonder why busy families tend to avoid these manipulation spaces altogether, as something bad. In 2020, we'd like to see services like Apple Arcade, only with a wider variety of ethical children's content.

WHAT'S NEXT?

The chicken/egg relationship between hardware and software was on full display in 2019. The launch of the \$400 stand-alone VR system (the Oculus Quest) and the increasing presence of cheap, smart speakers is making it even more essential to redefine literacy as a child's ability to be fluent with a variety of digital platforms.

Dust or Magic

Save the Date!
www.dustormagic.com

May 29-31, 2020 • AppCamp at Asilomar. <http://dustormagic.com/appcamp/register/>

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Year in Review 2019

A roundup of 25 noteworthy products

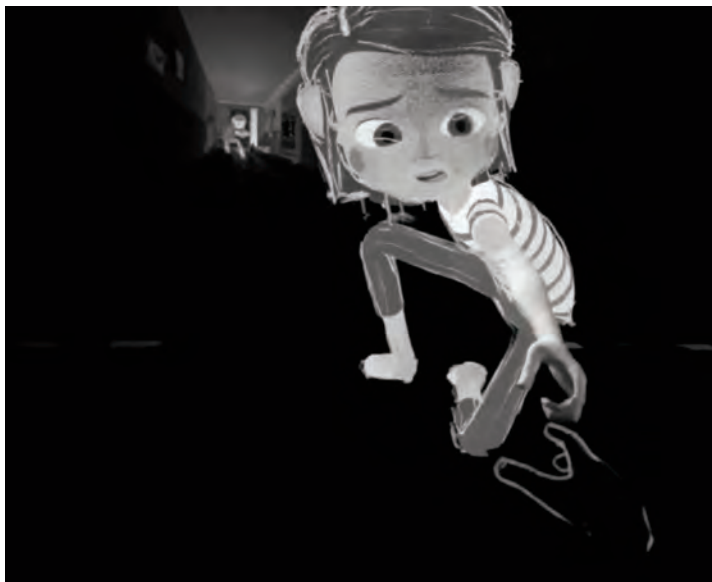


This year, spotty examples of innovation lie in contrast to maturing delivery systems, along with unsolved ethical problems in children's interactive media.

That's what I'm seeing in my rearview mirror this year. I start these "year in the review" roundups the same way every years -- with a search on "editor's choice" with a 2019 copyright date.

From the hardware point of view, things are exciting. You can take better photos, fly a drone farther and control more things with your smart speaker. A new iPad costs \$330 -- that's \$170 cheaper than the 2010 version. Technology enabled toys and robotics kits have better batteries and a more sophisticated relationship to apps. Perhaps the most exciting hardware event is one that isn't supposed to be for children -- the \$400 Oculus Quest. VR headsets like this one (developed by a division of Facebook) can offer rich, immersive interactive experiences for children, like **Wolves in the Walls**. Inspired from a children's book, the \$20 app puts you in an attic to help find the wolves. After our Dust or Magic meeting this year, we have it on good authority that we'll soon see more amazing children's titles that require this fancy headwear.

The biggest story this year is in what you don't see -- innovation from new publishers. App publishers tell us that they can't make money in a freemium space, and parents tell us that they don't trust tablets. That's why it is important than ever to identify innovative, ethical products for children. I'll hope for a longer list next year.



FOR YOUNGER CHILDREN (ages 2 to 10)

Blox 3D Junior, Appy Monkeys, www.blox3d.com, (\$3.99 iOS)

Blox 3D Junior is a simplified version of Blox 3D. See also Blox 3D City Creator. It turns your tablet into an easy-to-use, powerful-feeling block building experience. Just keep in mind that your "world" is limited to one screen that is about 60 by 60 by 60 blocks.

You start with an empty screen surrounded with various types of building blocks, a simple color palette and some moving items like people and vehicles. Projects can be as simple as a tower in the desert, or as busy as a teeming city block. We'd only recommend using this app on larger screens. Work can be saved at any point. All things considered, this app is well worth the download. Made in Unity. New to this version are lesson plans and demo videos bundled in the app for teachers, plus 3D Modelling and 3D Printing options. Work can be saved as an animated movie. Created by Arjun Gupte of Appy Monkeys. Learn more at http://appymonkeys.com/Blox_3D_Junior
CTREX Link: <https://reviews.childrenstech.com/ctr/fullreview.php?id=20181>

Bookful, Inception VR, <https://bookful.app/>, (\$4 per book on iPad, iPhone), for ages 4-up.

This online book store from Israel does something special, by making classic children's books look like they're sitting on your table using Apple's ARKit for Augmented Reality (AR). You can swipe to turn the page, zoom into a page, and examine illustrations in 3D as the virtual book sits on your table. Jurors liked the collection, which includes Peter Rabbit and the DK Children's Encyclopedia. The 400 MB download is free; books cost \$4 each as IAP. The publisher, Inception launched in October 2016, and has VR apps for Oculus Rift, Samsung Gear, iOS, Android, Google Daydream, HTC Vive, and Microsoft MR. The company has partnered with Facebook to use their AR Studio.

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/Vr3PU5nCCxl>

CTREX Link: <https://reviews.childrenstech.com/ctr/fullreview.php?id=20039>

Coding Critters, Learning Resources, www.learningresources.com, (\$40 on Smart Toy), for ages 4-7.

Looking for a starter robot that is screen free? Here's an affordable, durable option that is limited to directions. After you put in the three AAA batteries that are not included, you can put in a short sequence of direction commands by tapping the arrows, and pressing enter. That's it .. the robot starts moving, and backs up if it runs into something.

A set of snap together props makes it possible to make mazes, so you might ask a child to put in the commands needed to get your robot to a house. It's worth noting that the left and right arrows should not be taken literally. Rather than move right, the robot turns right which is spatially confusing. A set of procedure cards can be used to give children specific challenges. Powered by three AAA batteries.

CTREX Link: <https://reviews.childrenstech.com/ctr/fullreview.php?id=20140>

Fox Factory, Studio Pango, www.studio-pango.com, (\$2.99 on iPad, iPhone), for ages 6-12.

Construct an assembly line to make geometric tangram shapes needed to rebuild a village. This requires dragging command squares onto a grid. You can determine the direction, shape, rotation and color of the part. There's a bit of a learning curve to this app, but it's not bad, and the leveling is well done, making it well worth the download. We liked that there are often several different answers to the same problem, and that it is possible to debug your invention. Content includes 70 puzzles in four settings. This is an ethical app with no ads, IAP or commercial content.

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/yLCK9pYf8CM>

CTREX Link:

<https://reviews.childrenstech.com/ctr/fullreview.php?id=20137>



Hungry Like a Wolf (Affamato Come un Lupo), minibombo, www.minibombo.it, (\$.99 on iPad, iPhone), for ages 4-8.

A well designed maze game starring four animals (Help Hare, Snail, Dormouse and Mole) who must get away from a wolf. To move, you drag your finger along the mazes. The BRDA Jurors liked the illustrations and characters.

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/2u01W6czK6Y>

CTREX Link: <https://reviews.childrenstech.com/ctr/fullreview.php?id=20022>

LEGO Duplo World, StoryToys, www.storytoys.com, (Free, \$8 for all IAPs on iPad, Android, iPhone) for ages 2-5.

Looking for a solid, bite-sized school readiness experience for your smart phone or tablet? This app will do the job, whether at home or in preschool, with a playset's worth of colorful Duplo pieces come to life. The cost for all the content we experienced is \$8 -- which includes three unique learning areas. The app starts off with the free Number Train to test the waters, then you may choose to purchase World Animals and Rescue Adventure for more fun. The app store description mentions there's more content planned for the future as well. The simple, responsive learning games are derived from Head Start learning objectives. These dry teaching targets are nothing new, but their tactile, whimsical treatment in this app adds an essential spark.

You start by loading blocks onto train cars. As you tap number blocks, you hear numeral in a clear voice. Incorrect answers simply fall off for another try. You can either drag or drop the blocks, or tap them to hurry up. After your goal is achieved, the train speeds to the next level (you can swipe on the train to backtrack or skip forward if you like). Other games ask you to sort by color or shape or play a game of concentration with silly animals. There's also free building areas, featuring

blocks and animals from real Duplo sets. The educational validity of this experience can be enhanced by pairing the block set with the app to link the concrete with the symbolic. Other parent features include a play timer, the ability to toggle background music, and a wide range of language options. Every item in the app responds to your touch, and the background graphics move when you tilt the screen -- small features that amplify your feelings of control. Multi-touch capability allows simultaneous sorting and building to be shared by one or more children (or adults).

Each activity starts with a short description of the learning content, which can fortunately be passed over with a tap.

So why not five stars? We would've liked more control over the navigation, and some progress tracking on the main menu, so you could see which games have already been played. Note that this app is free to play but additional content is available via in-app purchases.

The app was made for the LEGO Group by StoryToys, which is part of TouchPress.

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/AuDlAYvh440>

CTREX Link: <https://reviews.childrenstech.com/ctr/fullreview.php?id=20180>

My City: Pajama Party, My Town Games, <http://www.my-town.com>, (\$2.99 on iPhone iPad, iPad, iPhone, Android, Kindle), for ages 4-12.

The My City series keeps expanding, with a sleep over theme. This app contains 20 characters and six locations that let you dress up, cook, listen to music and arrange hundreds of items. It is possible to move the characters between other My City games. There is an underlying collecting theme designed to keep you coming back. Features include a night/day option, and the ability to give the characters emotions.

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/NlQleHw--7w>

CTREX Link: <https://reviews.childrenstech.com/ctr/fullreview.php?id=20109>



Pango Musical March, Studio Pango, www.studio-pango.com, (\$2.99 on iPad, iPhone, Android), for ages 4-up.

Freely mix and match melodic and rhythmic elements in this well designed music creativity experience. You start by choosing from 40 instruments that are organized by four music styles -- Latin, Asian, US or synthesizer. Next, you drag and drop the members of the marching band into place on a side-scrolling three column grid. There are two control tabs -- one for selecting sounds; the other for controlling the speed and pace. As your music plays, decorations appear on the screen. Some of the secondary sound effects are distracting, and we would've liked a smoother character selection process. But these are minor issues for an other excellent app.

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/2wl948dSpes>

CTREX Link:

<https://reviews.childrenstech.com/ctr/fullreview.php?id=20130>



PBS Kids Games, PBS Kids, www.pbskids.org, (\$free on iPad, iPhone, Android, Kindle), for ages 3-8.

Plenty of free, "lite" PBS themed casual games await in this solid publicly funded app. It's a great way to extend your child's TV watching -- instead of just passively watching a show like Cat in the Hat they can help to setup a campsite. As of February 2019, content includes 20 shows, each with one game pre-downloaded. The others are offered but are greyed out, and can only be played if they are downloaded. So WiFi is required for most of the content. Most of the play patterns are tried and true -- mazes, pong, connect pipes, shape puzzles. Featured content includes Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood, Wild Kratts, Super Why, The Cat in the Hat Knows a Lot About That! and Dinosaur Train. New games are added by themes and times of the year.

CTREX Link: <https://reviews.childrenstech.com/ctr/fullreview.php?id=20028>

Pepi Wonder World, Peplay, www.peplay.com, (\$2.99 on iPad), for ages 2-6.

Here's another "world" style sandbox (or dollhouse) type of app where you can interact with over 60 fantasy characters, including castles, ghosts, queens and so on. Think Toca Life, only with dragons. Other content includes musical instruments that play if they are put in the hands of one of the characters, gems, keys, food, bows and catapults. You can find hidden keys required to unlock closets, or hatch eggs to get baby characters. To get to another island, you can take a boat, or use the home icon. Peplay is a family run studio based in Lithuania.

CTREX Link: <https://reviews.childrenstech.com/ctr/fullreview.php?id=20123>

Sago Mini Zoo, Sago Mini, www.sagomini.com, (\$3.99 on iPad, iPhone, Android <https://itunes.apple.com/ca/app/sago-mini-zoo/id1437909045> <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.sagosago.World.googleplay&hl=en> <https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B07D97L43N>), for ages 2-5.

This freestyle sandbox app lets you freely drag and drop 24 animal characters in a playful zoo setting. The app supports multi-touch so several children can play together at one, and there are many things to explore. These include a balance beam teeter totter for comparing weights, lots of food to feed to the animals, hats, and vehicles to drive from place to place. This is a great starter app for a child that could give them something to talk about. Part of the Sago Mini Playset.

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/2NiwpUJ8yMk>

CTREX Link: <https://reviews.childrenstech.com/ctr/fullreview.php?id=20008>

RockIt Twist, Rotatable Learning Game System, LeapFrog, www.leapfrog.com, (\$60 plus \$8/game pack on Smart Toy), for ages 4-8.

This is a durable, sandwich sized, rotatable standalone game system. Content includes 12 pre-loaded games which provide playful exposure to early math, reading and logic skills.

RockIt is ready to go right out of the box -- you don't even need AA batteries -- a first for this category of devices. We were pleased to see the built-in rechargeable batteries, but be sure to retrieve the packaged USB cable as you will need it to charge the batteries, as well as to install additional content if you choose to purchase the \$8 add-on game packs.

Battery life is solid -- easily supporting our four hours of testing. If more than one child wants to use the device, there are two available profiles to save progress, and a third guest profile available for temporary play sessions with friends.

The face of the device consists of eight tactile controls. There are clicking buttons, a swaying switch, swiping slider and spinning wheels surrounding the screen. Each control is equipped with colored lights which help guide them on what controls work for the current game. Alongside such helpful visual guides are female and male announcers who provide explanation for every menu screen and game objective, well-intentioned but occasionally to a point of dissonance. Many of these messages can thankfully be skipped.

RockIt Twist is a big step forward for this type of handheld, its strong features certainly outweighed our critiques and we hope to see LeapFrog continue innovating their products further in this direction.

Video Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uh7D4LSRW4g&feature=youtu.be>

CTREX Link: <https://reviews.childrenstech.com/ctr/fullreview.php?id=20155>

Thinkrolls Space, Avokiddo, www.avokiddo.com, (\$3.99 on iPad, iPhone), for ages 5-up.

This is the fourth Thinkrolls logic app that we've reviewed and it is one of the best, and most challenging. Like the previous releases, you simply swipe to move a rolling character through mazes that start easy and get very challenging. Progress is saved automatically. Getting through a level requires strategic thinking, trial and error and figuring out how to use the attributes of a variety of alien characters that have special abilities. Cheese Monster & Cheese introduces gravity, navigating a maze, continuity, planning, and reasoning. The Robot introduces gravity, force and stacking. The Soprano Elevator Monster is a stretchy singing creation that introduces simple machines, mechanics, springs, elasticity, hand-eye coordination, fine-motor skills. The Goo Monster & Cake are slimy aliens that guard every goo passage; you must feed them some cake to satisfy their appetite. Introduces advanced spatial relations, cause & effect, trial & error, sequencing. The Vanishing Rainbow Bridges are one way paths that disappear after once crossing, encouraging advanced spatial cognition and trial & error. The Antigravity Zone lets you use a lever to switch gravity on and off over specific regions. Plasma Field is a lava-lamp-like plasma that must be turned off before moving through it. Two-Way Teleporting lets you move quickly between different parts of a level, as many times as needed, introducing simple wormhole theory. For younger children (5-8) there are 110 easy puzzles. For older children (8 up) there are 108 harder puzzles.

We liked how there are unlimited retries, no time limits and two difficulty modes. In addition you can have up to six saved player profiles making this a good app for device sharing. One drawback to note -- there is no hint option that we could find, so if you get stuck, you have to get some help, of the human variety. Our ethical screening rubric found no problems -- no ads or IAP. The app works fine offline with no Internet connection. You can turn off the background music. Release date: June 12, 2019.

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/PoAmlUA3Veo>

CTREX Link: <https://reviews.childrenstech.com/ctr/fullreview.php?id=20090>

Toca Life World: Waterfront Location, Toca Boca, <http://tocaboca.com/>, (\$3.99 on iPad, Android, Kindle), for ages 3-12.

Here's another well designed content pack for Toca Life: World that includes three areas -- a seafood-themed restaurant (the Krill Grill); an aquarium and an underwater playspace. As with the other Toca Life titles it is easy to mix and match hundreds of items which can be moved between locations or used in short puppet-show productions that let you mix in your own narration. Note: Each level starts with some sort of addition puzzle which our testers found to be confusing.

Video Link: https://youtu.be/Pe_gmH6nFLg

CTREX Link: <https://reviews.childrenstech.com/ctr/fullreview.php?id=20062>

OLDER CHILDREN (ages 8-up)

Jenny LeClue Detectivu, Mografi, <http://mografi.com/>, (\$19.99), for ages 10-up.

Ready for a challenge? This nicely illustrated mystery game for older children contains an interesting and complex branching story, but the controls can be mystifying to figure out. The game earns a T rating for some implied violence and nonrealistic blood. Jenny LeClue is a young detective, growing up in the sleepy town of Arthurton. As you explore you interact with a variety of complex characters by way of dialog boxes. The audio and visual components of this app are a treat. As you play, you help shape Jenny's destiny. In the story, you learn that Jenny's mother is accused of murder, and begins an unexpected journey to find the truth. You learn that Arthurton is not what it seems, and unseen forces will stop at nothing to keep you from the truth. Finding the real killer is anticlimactic, according to the reviews in the Steam store and Apple Arcade, where this game earns consistently high ratings.

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/ElvdUZg1H4g>

CTREX Link: <https://reviews.childrenstech.com/ctr/fullreview.php?id=20193>

The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening, Nintendo of America, www.nintendo.com, (\$60 on Nintendo Switch), for ages 5-up.

Twenty six years after its original release on the Nintendo Game Boy, this new Nintendo Switch edition is quality Zelda fare. You help the inhabitants of a mysterious island, collect tools, explore dungeons and defeat monsters -- all to get Link home.

Compared to the 1993 release (which we played) this 2019 remake doubles down with quality of life additions, including a revamped map with pins to mark important areas and conversation logs. Most of the '93 edition is still intact, while obsolete features, such as the photo side quest have been dropped. The spooky character Dampé has taken the camera shop's space, turning it into the Chamber Dungeon, where you can arrange rooms into new dungeon crawling challenges. You can't craft your own rooms from scratch, but each dungeon you conquer in the main game adds its rooms to the Chamber Dungeon selection. Zelda amiibos (the collectible figures) can unlock special chambers and store dungeons to save/load, but this is an underwhelming feature. Don't miss the chance to pluck prizes with a claw-grabber, go fishing, or fool the tool shop by sneaking out with an item. The next time you enter the shop, you'll be punished with a painful zap, and your name spoken in-game will be irreversibly replaced by the word "THIEF" as proof of your misdeed.

The world is fun to explore. Koholint is a sunny, backyard play set where characters and creatures have a toy-like plastic sheen. Some Mario creatures make guest appearances. Little details like this make Link's Awakening a special experience worth revisiting in the modern age, and one perfect for your first Zelda, or your tenth, whether you're five years old, or fifty.

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/9ihxAlek9Ug>

CTREX Link: <https://reviews.childrenstech.com/ctr/fullreview.php?id=20096>



Luigi's Mansion 3, Next Level Games, <http://www.nextlevelgames.com/>, (\$60 on Nintendo Switch), for ages 6-up.

Our testers young and old loved this latest edition of Luigi's Mansion, with a good storyline, a co-op mode and new game mechanics. You can stun enemies with your flashlight and then suck them up with your ghost-capturing vacuum, pulling against them as they drag you about the room trying to get away. It's like fishing. Also worth noting is Gooigi -- a semi-solid version of Luigi who can slip through tight spaces. A second player can control Gooigi when in co-op mode, conveniently dropping in or out at any time. When in local multiplayer mode, you race to collect the most coins, ghosts or targets as you propel pool floats, creep through a ghost-filled graveyard and launch cannonballs against your competition.

We noticed a few troublesome bugs in the online mode, including a teammate getting permanently stuck in a tub while fighting a ghost. Despite the technical issues, the lighthearted teamwork of a bunch of Luigis makes this game worth it.

The bottom line is that this entry brings all the features of its predecessors into a more polished format that works great on the Nintendo Switch. As a horror-themed game, it always delivers its light scares with good humor, and as Luigi goes from terror to triumph from each successful ghost hunt, children will feel empowered by facing these fearsome foes.

Published by Nintendo, developed by Next Level Games.

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/v4PJQ77RMSU>

CTREX Link: <https://reviews.childrenstech.com/ctr/fullreview.php?id=20095>



Ovivo, Izhard, <http://ovivogame.com/>, (\$.99 on iPad), for ages 9-up.

Challenging and rich with logical thinking problem solving, this maze game for iOS and Steam asks you to move a tiny balloon between two gravity fields (up and down). Each field is represented by black or white. Getting to your goal requires a good sense of timing, as you jump and float your way toward the next level while avoiding obstacles that could pop your balloon. Settings let you adjust the music and switch between finger controls and tilting. There is an underlying story that deals with "the journey to simplicity." Created by Alex Vilassak. Discovered in the 2019 BolognaRagazzi Digital Award.

CTREX Link: <https://reviews.childrenstech.com/ctr/fullreview.php?id=2002>

Ring Fit Adventure, Nintendo of America, Inc., www.nintendo.com, (\$80 (includes game, Ring-Con & Leg Strap) on Nintendo Switch), for ages 9-up.

Have you ever noticed that the avatar in most games get's a LOT of exercise? What if you became the Avatar? That's the idea of this innovative exercise experience. In order to move in the game or score points in the mini-games, you must use the Ring-Con (a durable silicon-coated spring the size of a miniature hula hoop) and Leg Strap accessories. They let you run through fields, forests and factories to stop a bad guy named Dragaux (pronounced like Drag-O). This isn't the first attempt to gamify workouts. Remember the Kinect? And there was the Wii Fit, back in 2008. Ring Fit Adventure frees your body and instead focuses its hardware on a simple, sturdy resistance ring gives you the chance to move your upper, lower and core muscles. It's a great help that the motion controls, while still sometimes missing the beat on more subtle or nuanced movements, feel more responsive in their positive in-game feedback.

Our first session -- in eagerness to cover the game's different systems -- left us exhausted and sore for the next two days after, but jumping back in felt right, and an encouraging message pre-warm up stated that the first two days are the hardest. Little pep talks and cheers like this really instill the positivity of self-improvement through the struggle of committing to something new and difficult, and through the soreness made us want to stick with the game. You may feel silly and even awkward performing some exercises, but even the skeptical may find there is something worthwhile to how Ring Fit Adventure has renovated the workout game formula. Younger children can use the ring, but make sure that the workout intensity isn't too much for them.

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/k2GHCpDpl6M>

CTREX Link: <https://reviews.childrenstech.com/ctr/fullreview.php?id=20166>

Scratch 3.0, MIT Media Lab, www.media.mit.edu, (\$0 on Windows, Mac OSX, Chrome), for ages 6-up.

It's been five years since the last major Scratch update. This latest (Jan 2019) version was made in HTML/Javascript, meaning it is (for the first time) Flash Free, and it can work with touch interfaces. This is a big step into the future. Yet, based on our testing, Scratch 3.0 is also backward compatible with previous Scratch projects... and that's great news. So you have nothing to loose, and a lot to gain. What's new? The larger button interface offers more sprites, a the sound editor gives you more audio options. This edition runs better on tablet-based browsers, although native apps for both iOS and Android are planned. There are 40 language options. No code functions -- or blocks -- have been removed, but some commands have been changed or moved under "extensions" folder. These extensions let you work with hardware specific products like LEGO or micro:bit. We can expect this library of extensions to grow over time. In order to work with touch devices (namely touch screen Chromebooks, Windows Surface laptops, and tablets) some of the blocks are bigger. The paint editor now has an "eraser" that works in vector mode, with more options for selecting and adjusting colors, and you get more control over vector points (curve handles and point modes) and layers. Other features include new gradient controls, the ability to trim or time-shift sound, and a better tutorial.

Scratch 3.0 is designed to work in any modern browser on a variety of platforms—for the first time including touch devices like tablets. We tried it using Safari on an iPad without problems. There is also an offline version offline editor called Scratch Desktop in case there is no Wi-Fi. The bottom line? This new version of Scratch will insure that Papert's ideas have a long and healthy future.

CTREX Link: <https://reviews.childrenstech.com/ctr/fullreview.php?id=20003>

SpitKiss, Playdius, <https://www.playdius-games.com/>, (\$1.99), for ages 10-up.

Featuring an Angry Birds play mechanic, only with mazes, SpitKiss is best described as an interactive work of art. Your mission is to navigate through 80 levels of mazes, by precisely aiming spitballs. The goal is to get to the other spitkisser without hitting one of the spiked walls. This requires quick action and good timing.

The indirect narrative has to do with themes of polyamory and genderfluid/non-binary identities on two layers. One story takes place in the metanarrative of the spitkissers, the other in the hand-drawn story of the life of Ymer, the person whose body their story takes place inside. Sound unique? It is.

The art is excellent, and the play pattern will keep you busy, and challenged. Learn more at <http://www.spitkissgame.com/>
Made in Unity.

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/ThGdhn5CuPk>

CTREX Link: <https://reviews.childrenstech.com/ctr/fullreview.php?id=20023>

States of Matter, Tinybop, Inc., www.tinybop.com, (\$2.99), for ages 7-up.

Put a science experiment on your iPad, allowing you to freely explore the effect of temperature on different materials. The app starts quickly and would work well in a classroom setting. To get started you tap on one of three nozzles (solid, liquid, gas) at the top of the screen to fill one of five types of containers. A temperature slider lets you cool or heat the material, so you can see when gold melts, or when oil turns into a smoky mess. A cross section slider provides a cross section of the molecules inside the material. There's not much content in this app, and not a lot to do, either. But the simulation is simple, very easy to use, and would be of interest to teachers.

Materials include gold, ice, kernels of corn, bromine, and helium. A version of States of Matter will soon be part of Tinybop Schools with an added challenge mode. We did not test this feature.

States of Matter is No. 11 in Tinybop's Explorer's Library, a series of apps designed to introduce kids to big ideas. Other Explorer's Library apps include The Human Body, Plants, Simple Machines, The Earth, Weather, Homes, Skyscrapers, Space, Mammals, and Coral Reef.

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/K2i4hhgyFUY>

CTREX Link: <https://reviews.childrenstech.com/ctr/fullreview.php?id=20060>

Wolves in the Walls, Fable, www.fable-studio.com, (\$free <https://youtu.be/SYYQt10BQPg>), for ages 7-up.

This well crafted single player VR experience for Oculus Rift Go is based on printed children's book. We played the first chapter and found it to be a noteworthy example of the immersive potential for using VR technology to engage you in a narrative.

While your VR headset might not fit a child, the story certainly does, although it can be an intense and socially isolating experience. So use with supervision with children. In the story, you meet an eight year old girl named Lucy who is convinced that wolves are living in her house, but her family is not so sure. Jars of jam are missing, and somebody is howling along with music. You help Lucy warn the family and befriend the wolves. Supports standing, sitting, 360 views and hand controllers for Oculus and Rift. In English. Released May 17, 2019. Rated Everyone 10+ for Fantasy Violence.

For sale at <https://www.oculus.com/experiences/rift/2272579216119318/>

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/Qsp22z11m4>

CTREX Link: <https://reviews.childrenstech.com/ctr/fullreview.php?id=20192>



Feature Reviews and New Releases

DECEMBER 2019

Here's an alphabetical listing of both the feature reviews (with ratings) and the new and future releases. "Entry Date" refers to the date we first learned of the product.

Heist: One Team, One Mission

A four player, app-free safe-cracking board game. You work together with up to three other players -- each with a defined role -- to crack a talking safe together before timer runs out. Includes one battery operated safe, 12 bars of gold (sorry, not real), play money, instruction cards, and eight small tools: goggles, drill, laptop, map, flashlight, headset, explosives, and gloves. This is an app-free toy. The instructions are spoken in English. Requires 3 AA batteries, not included.

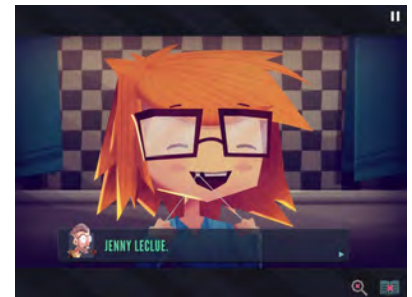
Details: University Games, <https://www.universitygames.com/>. Price: \$33. Ages: 7-up. Platform: Smart Toy. Teaches/Purpose: co-operation, coordination, timing, logic, listening. Entry date: 11/11/2019.



Jenny LeClue Detective

Ready for a challenge? This nicely illustrated mystery game for older children contains an interesting and complex branching story, but the controls can be mystifying to figure out. The game earns a T rating for some implied violence and unrealistic blood. Jenny LeClue is a young detective, growing up in the sleepy town of Arthurton. As you explore you interact with a variety of complex characters by way of dialog boxes. The audio and visual components of this app are a treat. As you play, you help shape Jenny's destiny. In the story, you learn that Jenny's mother is accused of murder, and begins an unexpected journey to find the truth. You learn that Arthurton is not what it seems, and unseen forces will stop at nothing to keep you from the truth. Finding the real killer is anticlimactic, according to the reviews in the Steam store and Apple Arcade, where this game earns consistently high ratings.

Details: Mografi, <http://mografi.com/>. Price: \$19.99. Ages: 10-up. Platform: . Teaches/Purpose: logic, reading. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 4.3 stars. Entry date: 11/20/2019. []



Ease of Use	8	86 %
Educational	9	
Entertaining	9	
Design Features	8	
Good Value	9	



Luigi's Mansion 3

Our testers young and old loved this latest edition of Luigi's Mansion, with a good storyline, a co-op mode and new game mechanics.

You can stun enemies with your flashlight and then suck them up with your ghost-capturing vacuum, pulling against them as they drag you about the room trying to get away. It's like fishing.

Also worth noting is Gooigi -- a semi-solid version of Luigi who can slip through tight spaces. A second player can control Gooigi when in co-op mode, conveniently dropping in or out at any time. When in local multiplayer mode, you race to collect the most coins, ghosts or targets as you propel pool floats, creep through a ghost-filled graveyard and launch cannonballs against your competition.

We noticed a few troublesome bugs in the online mode, including a teammate getting permanently stuck in a tub while fighting a ghost. Despite the technical issues, the lighthearted teamwork of a bunch of Luigis makes this game worth it.

The bottom line is that this entry brings all the features of its predecessors into a more polished format that works great on the Nintendo Switch. As a horror-themed game, it always delivers its light scares with good humor, and as Luigi goes from terror to triumph from each successful ghost hunt, children will feel empowered by facing these fearsome foes.

Published by Nintendo, developed by Next Level Games.

Details: Next Level Games, <http://www.nextlevelgames.com/>. Price: \$60. Ages: 6-up. Platform: Nintendo Switch. Teaches/Purpose: logic, spatial relations, timing, puzzle-solving, co-operation. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 4.5 stars. Entry date: 6/11/2019. [Chris Guest]



Ease of Use	9	90 %
Educational	N	
Entertaining	9	
Design Features	9	
Good Value	9	





Mario & Sonic at the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020

As real athletes train for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, Sega and Nintendo have a way to let you try to go for the gold. Now you can play out that Luigi vs. Dr. Eggman Karate match you always wanted.

Designed for four players, this collection of 34 events includes classics like the 100 Meter Dash, Discus Throw and Fencing; plus Sport Climbing and Surfing. A single-player story mode features Mario and Sonic characters working against Bowser and Dr. Eggman to thwart a plot to trap them back in time, to the 1964 Summer Olympics in Tokyo. Content includes ten events with 2D versions of characters as represented in their earliest generations. Seeing original NES pixel art mixed with higher-resolution Genesis sprites is strange. We wish new pixel art had been created for the rest of the cast to include them in the 2D games as well. Some of the motion controls can be awkward compared to more consistent, quicker button presses, but whatever preference brings you the most fun is what we recommend. We liked all the variety the games offer. Some let you freely move (Skateboarding, Surfing) and others involve 1-on-1 (Judo, Boxing) or team competitions (Football, Rugby). Button mashers will like the 100m Dash and Gymnastics. Super Moves common throughout most events can give you a temporary burst of speed, power or points that can help turn the tables. Still, some games just feel too quick and one-note after a few rounds, and don't lend too well to replayability.

The bottom line is that while the quality per event may be spread thin compared to other dedicated Sports titles, the wide variety of offerings increases the chance that you'll find play sessions with friends from around the world when in the online mode. Or you can simply play alone in the story mode. The choice is yours.

Details: SEGA of America, Inc., <https://www.sega.com/>. Price: \$60. Ages: 9-up. Platform: Nintendo Switch. Teaches/Purpose: sportsmanship, competition, cooperation, hand-eye coordination, reflexes, interpersonal communication. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 3.8 stars. Entry date: 10/25/2019. [Chris Guest]



Ease of Use	8	72.5%
Educational	N	
Entertaining	7	
Design Features	7	
Good Value	7	

Mech-5

This is a "programmable robot" you assemble from the ground up. The assembly process is not for the faint of heart -- there are hundreds of snap together/screw together parts that require a lot of debugging; plus printed instructions to decode.

You'll also need supplies not included with the kit, including two AAA batteries, pliers and a small screwdriver.

The finished robot operates without a computer, with an interesting physical "coding wheel" to control the robot movements. There are four accessory pieces (a forklift, pen holder, catapult and grabber) which attach and perform different actions. This means all learning and associated math takes place with the toy itself, with no app to download or code to install. It also means that interactions are limited to the spaces on the wheel and the nodes provided. If you're looking for a traditional "coding" experience you won't find it here. It's still fun to see the assembled robot in action, throwing a miniature soccer ball or drawing patterns.

When you open the box, you may be a little daunted (or excited) by the sheets of plastic parts. Assembly is quite time-consuming and challenging, but a detailed manual offers help. Our build took around six hours including the four attachments needed for special actions, but your time will vary based on experience with these sorts of kits, and we did have some trouble getting our gears to work properly, needing to disassemble a few times before they worked.

Visualizations of pieces in the manual are clear. Still, disassembly to fix issues is a test of patience, strength and courage even for an adult, so we'd recommend a LOT of support.

The bottom line is that Mech-5 is a fun, affordable robot that can be a challenge to build properly, and it doesn't introduce formal coding in the traditional sense. But the wheel design is intuitive and the cost is low, making it possible for more children to have their own robot. Requires 2 AAA batteries, utilizes lots of small parts.

Details: Elenco, <https://www.elenco.com/>. Price: \$40. Ages: 10-up. Platform: Smart Toy. Teaches/Purpose: robotics, programming, coding, engineering, mechanical, fine motor skills. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 3.8 stars. Entry date: 11/11/2019. [Chris Guest]



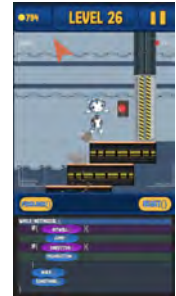
Ease of Use	6	76%
Educational	7	
Entertaining	8	
Design Features	8	
Good Value	9	



RoGo Coder - Kids Can Code

This is another real-time coding game designed to "teach children the basics of computer programming through a variety of fun interactive levels." As you code your way through a maze, you use sequencing, loops, functions and if statements. Works with Google Play and WebGL. The iOS version is in the works.

Details: QiiQ Communications, www.rogocoder.com. Price: \$call. Ages: 8-12. Platform: Google Play, App Store and WebGL, Android. Teaches/Purpose: coding, math. Entry date: 11/26/2019.



Sesame Street Yourself

Point your camera at your own face to see yourself mirrored with a Sesame Street character costume, complete with a mouth that opens and closes. The app worked as promised on our iPad, with both children or adults, although we noticed with some adult faces the image jumps around. It would be fun to screen cast the images on a big screen during a party or public event, as a way to share silly faces.

Once you download the app, you can easily test out a sample set of AR (Augmented Reality) features, but additional content is offered in the child's menu with locks, teasing you to make IAP (in app purchases) that can cost up to \$8. We were disappointed to see so much paid IAP content in the menu behind a fragile firewall.

Content includes Dress Up Fun (try out costumes, hats, glasses and mustache styles); Sing and Play (move along with music videos as a Sesame Street character); Watch Videos (the songs are shown as a complete videos). Features include the ability to control the sound.

Made in Australia by Weyo, using Apple's ARKit3 technology. Learn more Learn more at <https://step-3.box.com/v/sesame-street-yourself-app>

Details: Weyo, <https://www.weyo.app/>. Price: \$8 for all content. Ages: . Platform: iPad, iPhone. Teaches/Purpose: puppets, dress up play, creativity, music. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 3.9 stars. Entry date: 11/7/2019. [buckleit]



Ease of Use	8	78%
Educational	8	
Entertaining	9	
Design Features	6	
Good Value	8	



Shifu Plugo

Good in theory, but clunky in reality, this is an AR (augmented reality) gamepad comes with a magnetic platform that folds out in front of an iOS or Android tablet. The base kit costs \$25; extra add-on kits (\$25/each) provide a tangible experience with building, music, counting and spelling by way of magnetic blocks. Link, Count and Tunes kits are available now; Letters, Catapult and Steering kits are planned. You could spend up to \$175 if you buy everything.

We were able to test the currently available kits. "Link" comes with a set of plastic hexagonal prisms with magnets, used to stack and connect to one another to create combined shapes, bridges and more. "Tunes" comes with a small piano keyboard; and "Count" uses a platform with three spokes and several numeral and operator rings that are placed on the spokes to create and solve math problems. Each kit uses the Plugo app.

Issues began early during testing. First off, why does an app meant to teach you counting among other things have a parent lock using math problems and simple number questions, implying you won't be able to solve math problems or distinguish even and odd numbers if you aren't an adult?

One of the hexagonal prisms in our link kit seemed to have a few weak or broken magnets, and the app, no matter how we tried, wouldn't recognize the Tunes' piano accessory. We considered the gamepad itself might have an issue in one of its magnets preventing recognition by the app as a similar problem cropped up in the Link's "The Piper" game, but we were sent more than one gamepad, and using the others produced the same results.

The gamepad's device holder did not take well to our older iPad model, repeatedly falling over or causing neck aches from leaning forward to view the screen properly. Keep in mind you'll need to have a frame-free device -- and it's rare to find a "naked" iPad in most settings where children are around. While games operate without needing to touch the iPad, you still need to reach out to select games, levels and navigate menus, which is a clumsy process. The tactile aspect of the Plugo is without a doubt its strongest feature, so it's unfortunate there aren't extra navigation buttons on the mat to forego needing to use the screen as anything other than a screen.

We had trouble installing updates for each kit on the app, and some seem to have not completed properly as we have several missing game icons, not to mention the app itself runs very sluggishly. Several games seem to be blocked behind a request to register for a mailing list.

Our time spent with the Plugo was a mix of constant physical and technical hiccups that overall reduced our enjoyment of the device. It has great ideas, seemingly fun games were we able to access half of them, and more content on the way on top of that, but running into this many different inconveniences over a short period must be more than a technical fluke, and leaves us somewhat dissatisfied.

Details: PlayShifu, www.playshifu.com/. Price: \$25 for the Plugo, \$25 per kit (6 total, \$175). Ages: 5-up. Platform: Smart Toy, iPad, iPhone, Android. Teaches/Purpose: math, counting, music, spelling, augmented reality. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 3.3 stars. Entry date: 11/11/2019. [Chris Guest]

Tori

Put this cutting board sized motion sensor in front of your tablet, and make the bluetooth connection to start detecting your hand motion in a new way.

The kit costs \$170, and includes everything you'll need, minus the tablet. You'll then have to download the apps -- there is one for each of the activity (search on Namco Tori to find the apps). We were pleased with the ease of syncing -- the apps do a good job detecting the hardware, and the sensors worked immediately, although you should read the manual to decode the meaning of the colored flashing lights. Our testers gave us mixed reviews. While initially very interesting (this kit has very high novelty effect) the games can feel repetitive after a while. The box includes a stylus, catapult, airplane and several cardboard kits. You charge the sensing plate with any USB charger. A cable is included. More experiences are planned.

Details: Bandai Namco Games America Inc., www.bandainamcogames.com. Price: \$170. Ages: 6-12. Platform: iPad, Android. Teaches/Purpose: fine motor, creativity. Entry date: 11/25/2019.



Ease of Use	5	60 %
Educational	6	
Entertaining	7	
Design Features	5	
Good Value	7	





Wolves in the Walls

This well crafted single player VR experience for Oculus Rift Go is based on printed children's book. We played the first chapter and found it to be a noteworthy example of the immersive potential for using VR technology to engage you in a narrative.

While your VR headset might not fit a child, the story certainly does, although it can be an intense and socially isolating experience. So use with supervision with children. In the story, you meet an eight year old girl named Lucy who is convinced that wolves are living in her house, but her family is not so sure. Jars of jam are missing, and somebody is howling along with music. You help Lucy warn the family and befriend the wolves. Supports standing, sitting, 360 views and hand controllers for Oculus and Rift. In English. Released May 17, 2019. Rated Everyone 10+ for Fantasy Violence.

For sale at <https://www.oculus.com/experiences/rift/2272579216119318/>

Details: Fable, www.fable-studio.com. Price: \$free. Ages: 7-up. Platform: .

Teaches/Purpose: language, creativity. Rating (1 to 5 stars): 4.8 stars. Entry date: 11/13/2019. [buckleit]



Ease of Use	9	96 %
Educational	9	
Entertaining	10	
Design Features	10	
Good Value	10	

