

IN DEPTH: EDUCATION

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Wilson company scores software hit

Jane Schmitt

In countless classrooms around Western New York, you'll find elementary schoolchildren having fun while learning, thanks to Master Guru.

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The kids don't know that it's an innovative line of educational software based on state learning standards in English language arts, math, science and social studies. All they care about are the fun, colorful games on their computer screens.

"Parents and schools are always looking for ways to better education," says Robert Hartz of Harbor Town Games Inc., the Wilson-based company behind Master Guru. "So there's always going to be new ideas and different types of products coming out. It comes down to this: Are the kids having fun while they're playing the game and does it have educational value for the teachers and the schools? It's a very fine balance but we've been able to hit on that combination."

An Internet search for educational software will produce, in four seconds, a whopping 8.7 million entries for developers, manufacturers, publishers and distributors, in addition to nonprofit cooperatives and resource

groups for parents and teachers. The industry for instructive technologies has exploded in recent years with programs that hold students' attention while building their skills in a variety of subjects. It's brain food ranging from vocabulary builders and language exercises to logic games, math "adventures," geography quizzes and special programs designed to boost an individual's creative and critical thinking skills. They're all designed to address core competencies that students need to succeed in the classroom.

"Our product is not a generalized educational game. It is specific to the New York state curriculum that kids are learning in the classroom," Hartz says. "All of the questions on our CD-ROM were written by New York state teachers or curriculum coordinators. Students have fun with the game, but the whole time they are answering questions. Research has shown that if kids are enjoying themselves while learning, they retain more information."

Measure and plan

In the late 1990s, while in graduate school for his education degree, Hartz developed the concept for Master Guru with his business partner, a middle school teacher. Their initial product was a board game for grades three through five, which led to a standalone CD-ROM and, later, a networked version. Now Hartz is planning an online version of Master Guru for the 2005-06 school year that will enable teachers to effectively measure student achievement and plan their lessons accordingly.

"With our online version, teachers can actually run reports on their students to see what questions they're getting right or wrong," he says. "Then they can tailor the lesson plan around (specific) weaknesses or deficiencies. The program will allow you to customize the learning per the individual student."

That appeals to Sara Stoeckl, a fourth-grade teacher at Windermere Boulevard School in Eggertsville.

"Master Guru is a great program that the kids love," she says. "It's an educational game that they can play with teams or individually. At recess, the kids love using the computer so I use lots of instructional (software). They think it's recess but they're still learning. We're integrating software more into our lessons because it's a great tool."

Interactive learning

Another program getting lots of attention is Destination Math, the comprehensive math courseware from Riverdeep Inc., an international publisher of interactive learning products. It's a popular program described by educators as a visual learning tool that provides engaging learning opportunities for elementary school students. Destination Math was a recent winner of several Readers Choice awards for best math software from eSchoolNews, a monthly newspaper based in Maryland that covers education technology. Nearly 900 educators voted in an online survey of products that aid them in teaching various math disciplines.

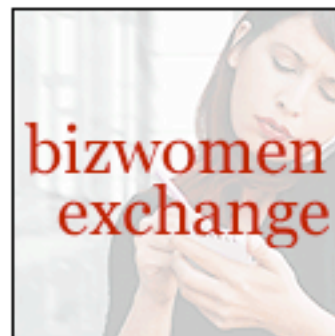
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SMARTboard technology, meanwhile, has proven to be a hit with the faculty at [Starpoint High School](#) in Pendleton. When teaching ninth-graders in his Regents earth science course, Joseph Anastasi relies on an interactive whiteboard that is connected to a computer and digital data projector. When an image is projected onto the board, the touch-sensitive SMARTboard can be used as a computer, with Anastasi using his finger to control various applications.

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"I scan five units into a Powerpoint presentation and I use that with a SMARTboard and it is interactive," he says. "You have options too. I can add media. For example, I can download clips of movies that relate to topics we cover. They can be patched right into your notes. So instead of boring the students with a 40-minute movie, you can put in clips for each topic right there and then."

Anastasi says educational software is the wave of the future in classrooms.

"That's the world kids live in now. So many of them have an MP3 player; some have Palm Pilots and pocket PCs. I think if you show that you know how to use those things, you can better relate to your students," he says.

"I think it keeps things fresh for teachers too. You can stand up there and just use the same notes year after year, but (technology) offers different methods for presenting material. The possibilities are

endless. The technology keeps evolving. I couldn't imagine teaching what I do now without it."

Jane Schmitt is a frequent contributor.

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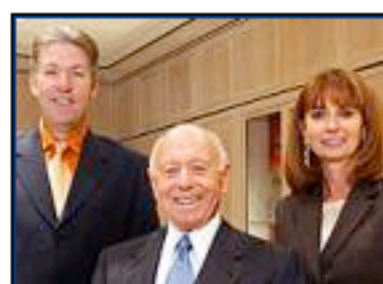
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