

IncreTOYble!: NAGC's 2011 Toys and Games

by Valerie James and her students

There was tremendous variety in the toys and games we were asked to review. Many of the games required logic and strategizing in order to problem-solve while encouraging vocabulary building, story telling, concentration, memory, visual acuity, construction, and creative play. There were toys and games for single players, as well as groups, teams, and families.

At the beginning of each session, students were told of class expectations, with a key outcome being a written review for any product of their choice. Then the entire display of toys was shown, and students were asked to choose the product they found to be the most interesting based on packaging. To my surprise, students gravitated not to products just because they were large and brightly colored; rather, they picked products based on their personal interests. This is helpful information for parents and teachers trying to select different toys and games for their children. Our sessions were highlighted by Skype interviews with representatives from Patch Products, Bananagrams, and Fat Brain Toys. We thank them for generously taking time to answer student questions about the game and toy industry.

One student asked what he could do right now to prepare for his future if he wanted to work in the toy industry. He was advised to be creative, to persevere, and work hard, and when you have a good idea to stick with it as you develop your idea from a concept into an actual product. Seeing a need (something is missing) can be the catalyst (spark) that leads to a new product. In fact, many new toys and games are inspired by the creators' own children.

There were several interesting observations from the three weeks of testing. First is the power of word-of-mouth! Once a child became enamored with a game and began to express delight, others quickly wanted to try. But it worked both ways. If a game wasn't a success, the word spread. Second, it was important to encourage students to read the directions before jumping into play (even if the manual was a bit long). Sometimes a game wasn't a hit until

what is IncreTOYble?

Each year, NAGC invites toy and game manufacturers to submit their newest products for review by students. One hundred and seven toys and games were received for the 2011 hands-on trials.

This year's 39 reviewers were enrolled in the IncreTOYble! class offered through Cherry Creek (Colorado) School District's INSIDE/OUT Program. The program was created by Julie Gonzales, NAGC's first parent representative on the board of directors. It offers classes for gifted and advanced elementary school students during the fall, spring, and summer breaks that allow them to explore new topics or to learn more about subjects in which they already have a strong interest. Now in its fifth year, this highly successful program had an enrollment of 540 students!

"IncreTOYble!" was taught by Valerie James, Cherry Creek's District Coordinator for Differentiation and Instruction at the elementary level. Her first group of student reviewers spent one week evaluating the toys and games during INSIDE/OUT's spring session, while the second group spent two weeks during the summer session. Students worked alone and in teams. They participated in peer conferences so they could provide one another with constructive feedback for their written product reviews.

Students analyzed the games or toys they selected to play and completed an extensive feedback packet that included questions about initial appeal, interest-level, attention holding, and desire to replay. The final question, "Would you buy this toy/game with your own money?"

the kids struggled through understanding the rules and discovered the intrigue. [Note: When you click through to the NAGC website to read the student reviews, you'll see that two games on the 2011 list weren't reviewed. Mirror Mansion and Zip-It, not picked at the beginning of the sessions, emerged as frequently played favorites.]

It was refreshing to watch students having fun playing games, being creative, and problem solving. I enjoyed seeing the 'wheels turning' as children tried to decide on the strategy they thought would bring them success in multi-player games. There was much reflection about prior moves after the game was over, with explanations of "I should have done..." or, "I was hoping you weren't going to move your piece over here because..."

One of my class goals was for students to get to know other children with similar interests. This was immediately and easily achieved. Students commented that they enjoyed making friends with others by playing the toys and games. Some students even had their parents exchange contact information so they could keep in touch. ☺

the winners

1 HexBug Nano®: Raceway Habitat Set

Manufacturer: Innovation First International
 Manufacturer's Recommended Age: 3+
 Website: <http://www.hexbug.com/nano>
 MSRP: \$49.99

"The game was awesome like I expected. I want more of it!"

This product was a favorite because students were familiar with HexBugs (micro robotic creatures that scuttle along on vibrating legs). The kit consists of snap-together pieces to create all sorts of habitats to race the HexBugs and is an addition to the series.



4 The Magic Labyrinth

Manufacturer: Playroom Entertainment®
 Manufacturer's Recommended Age: 6+
 Number of players: 2-4
 Website: <http://www.playrooment.com>
 MSRP: \$29.99

"This is a great game for families."

This memory game is easier to play than to describe! First build a maze by placing blocking walls within the game box. Then cover the maze with the game board and discover ways to navigate your magnetized piece across the board, picking up as many objects as you can without bumping into the walls hidden beneath.



2 Folkmanis® Puppet, Twickety

Manufacturer: Folkmanis®
 Website: <http://www.folkmanis.com>
 MSRP: \$33.99

"Twickety is large and brightly colored with soft fur that makes him an excellent snuggle companion."

All the puppets were overwhelmingly immediate favorites. Students commented that the puppets were inviting because they looked friendly or whimsical—and they could be interesting friends.



5 Star-Ball®

Manufacturer: Creative Whack Company
 Manufacturer's Recommended Age: 8+
 Number of Players: 1 or more
 Website: <http://www.creativewhack.com>
 MSRP: \$35.00

"This game is made for people who are creative and love to build. I really like Star-Ball!"

Star-Ball is the newest addition to the Ball of Whacks series. The challenge is to put the 32 five-legged magnetic star pieces together to form a ball.



3 Palette: How Colorful is Your Memory?

Manufacturer: Fat Brain Toy Co.®
 Manufacturer's Recommended Age: 6+
 Number of players: 2-4
 Website: <http://www.fatbraintoy.com>
 MSRP: \$24.99

"When you finish the game you will want to play more. I rate this game excellent because it is a hard, but a rewarding challenge."

Can you look at a color for 5 seconds, remember the hue, and match it to a color wheel? That's what players do in this quick-moving game that encourages color discrimination and memory.



6 Tilt

Manufacturer: ThinkFun
 Manufacturer's Recommended Age: 8+
 Number of players: 1
 Website: <http://www.thinkfun.com>
 MSRP: \$19.99

"I would recommend this game to kids with fast brains."

This spatial reasoning game has progressively challenging levels that require the player to figure out how to maneuver the correct moving piece into the hole without any of the other pieces falling in or blocking it. It's great for travel (the pieces come in a pouch), and games can be played in competition (each player with his or her TILT puzzle).



Want to share this list with a friend? Scan this QR code with your smart phone to share a link where they can download a copy of this list as a PDF or go to <http://www.nagc.org/php.aspx>.



7 Pirate Versus Pirate

Manufacturer: Out of the Box® Publishing
Manufacturer's Recommended Age: 8+
Number of players: 2-3
Website: <http://www.otb-games.com>
MSRP: \$27.99

"... a fun game with all the characteristics of a pirate cartoon. It has treasure, imagination, and travel."

Pirate players rush to claim the coins and return the treasure to their ship in this sturdy, fast-paced game of strategy and attack.



9 Mirror Mansion

Manufacturer: Simply Fun
Manufacturer's Recommended Age: 6+
Number of Players: 2-4
Website: <http://www.simplyfun.com>
MSRP: \$38.00

This game is based on the geometry of angles and the science of reflection. Using mirrors, the players explore Mirror Mansion looking for hidden treasures.



8 Pirate Plank

Manufacturer: LEGO®
Manufacturer's Recommended Age: 7+
Website: <http://www.club.lego.com>
MSRP: \$14.99

"This game is both fun and fantastic with very awesome and funny rules."

Pirate Plank is a game to build, play, and change, again and again. The goal is to be the last pirate on the plank, while sending the other pirates into a shark-infested sea. There are many ways to play, and the manual encourages players to modify and make the game their own.



10 Lab Mice Puzzles

Manufacturer: MindWare®
Manufacturer's Recommended Age: 8+
Number of Players: 1
Website: <http://www.mindware.com>
MSRP: \$16.95

"Even grown adults would like this! It's hard but it's fun, too!"

This set of fun, attractive logic puzzles comes on dry-erase cards that can be used again and again. When two decks are used, the puzzles are fun to solve competitively.



for the preschool kids

Although the games and toys for preschool aged children were available in the IncreTOYble! session, they were also played for a week by a separate group of little ones ranging in age from 19 months to 5 years. Once again, the building toys were popular. The first two toy winners in this category encouraged children to make up stories as they went along.

Build-A-Robot

Manufacturer: Plan Toys
Manufacturer's Recommended Age: 3+
Number of Players: 1 and more
Website: www.plantoyusa.com
MSRP: \$35

Children can build this simple, sturdy, wooden robot and choose from four different shaped heads showing different emotions. The facial expressions encourage storytelling about feelings.



My First Zoo

Manufacturer: LEGO®
Manufacturer's Recommended Age: 2-5
Website: <http://www.club.lego.com>
MSRP: \$24.99

This set was another hit with preschool aged children. The pieces helped develop fine motor skills, while children played with one another to build and create their very own zoo. Pieces worked well to extend other Duplo sets.



Jeepers Peepers™

Manufacturer: Super Duper® Publications
Manufacturer's Recommended Age: Grades K-5
Number of players: 2+
Website: <http://www.superduperinc.com>
MSRP: \$39.95

This game is a fresh look at the 20 Questions/What Am I? game. The first player puts on a pair of goofy glasses that hold a card only others can see and tries to guess what's on the card by asking the other players a series of "yes" or "no" questions. It's a fun way to learn how to ask good questions and sharpen problem-solving skills. The 5-year-olds in the group really got a big kick out of playing this game together.



honorable mentions

a. The Dog's Meow

Manufacturer: Playroom Entertainment®
Manufacturer's Recommended Age: 6+
Number of Players: 2–5
Website: <http://www.playrooment.com>
MSRP: \$10.00

"This game is challenging and fun because you have to use your memory and answer using opposites."

Here's a card game that requires players to adjust to a backwards world where you have to think fast, remember opposites, and answer quickly to win.

b. Dado Planks

Manufacturer: Fat Brain Toy Co.®
Manufacturer's Recommended Age: 3+
Number of Players: 1 or more
Website: <http://www.fatbraintoy.com>
MSRP: \$44.99

"At first I thought Dado Planks would be a rip-off but it ended up as the best toy ever!"

These brightly colored, notched planks can be used to create different structures and objects again and again.

c. ZIP-IT

Manufacturer: BananaGrams
Manufacturer's Recommended Age: 7+
Number of Players: 2
Website: <http://www.bananagrams.com>
MSRP: \$14.95

Zip-It is like a fast-paced Scrabble game mixed with a crossword puzzle all efficiently put together in a travel pouch so you can play without pencil, paper, or gameboard. It's a perfect way to fill waiting time!

d. Pathwords™

Manufacturer: ThinkFun
Manufacturer's Recommended Age: 12+
Number of Players: 1
Website: <http://www.thinkfun.com>
MSRP: \$19.99

"Ever like word searches? Then here's a one-player puzzle that can blow your mind!"

Although this word search/logic puzzle/Tetris-like game is listed for a single player, the puzzles are fun to solve with cooperative teams.

e. Double Duel™

Manufacturer: Learning Resources
Manufacturer's Recommended Age: 7+
Number of Players: 2-4
Website: <http://www.learningresources.com>
MSRP: \$27.99

"If you are good with words, this is the game for you! I would totally buy this game with my own money!"

This challenging vocabulary game is based on sound-alike words.

f. 5 Second Rule®

Manufacturer: Patch Products
Manufacturer's Recommended Age: 10+
Number of Players: 3 or more
Website: <http://www.patchproducts.com>
MSRP: \$24.99

"People who like to blurt out will love this game, because they can do that and not get in trouble!"

In five seconds, a player must name three things from the category on the drawn card. If not successful, the next player takes over but he or she cannot repeat the previous answers. It's fast-paced fun, but not easy!

g. Celtic Challenge

Manufacturer: Find It® Games
Manufacturer's Recommended Age: 8+
Number of Players: 1–2
Website: <http://www.finditgames.com>
MSRP: \$40.00

"Try to figure out the best way to get all of the tiles off the board in six rounds. I love Celtic Challenge!"

This attractive and easy-to-learn game can be played solo or with a partner. It takes a mix of strategy and luck to get as many tiles off the board as possible.

about National Association for Gifted Children

The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) is an organization of teachers, educators, other professionals, and parents and community leaders who unite to address the unique needs of children and youth with demonstrated gifts and talents, as well as those children who may be able to develop their talent potential with appropriate educational experiences.

Well-informed parents do make a difference. Membership in NAGC is the best way for you to improve the future for gifted learners, especially your own! Visit www.nagc.org to find out more.

1331 H Street NW, Suite 1001
Washington, DC 20005
202/785-4268
202/785-4248 fax



For a PDF of the Toy List and to read more from the testers, visit <http://www.nagc.org/php.aspx>. On the NAGC website you'll also find a Resource Directory with links to numerous toys, games, and programs for your high-ability learner.

