Games for education. Games for fun.

YOUNG AT HEART

RICHARD SMEDLEY

Children take PCs for granted. Those of us administrating a child's GNU/Linux desktop don't have that luxury. Here we take a look at applications for younger computer users with three games - Gcompris, CircusLinux and MathWar.

Children are more curious than adults, making the considerations different. If the PC is 'just' for the kids they can play around and break the installation as their parents have probably done in the past. However, if the machine is shared with adults, it must be locked down to protect work. Most parents would feel uneasy about letting their children loose on their favourite UNIX clone.

It's worth considering an extra machine exclusively for children. A 486 or early Pentium may cost only £50 or so, but it will be adequate for most younger children's needs. They can always use your PC for 3D games or resource-monsters like Mozilla.

Most distro disks include applications for younger children. *Oneko*, *Xpenguins*, Gcompris, CircusLinux and Mathwar are available in Debian unstable. The next stable release of Debian will contain a special section just for young people - *debian-jr* - aiming to

make Debian GNU/Linux appealing to people aged 2-99. Initially, the project is concentrating on making a distribution for 2 to 8 year-olds and those who will administer their machines. All the software concerned is also available for other Linux distributions as source tarballs or RPMs.

Now I understand

Gcompris (pronounced *j'ai compris*) is a skills-building game for children aged 3 years old and up. As well as typing, arithmetic and time-telling, it helps to build mouse skills. Gcompris aims to be a central user interface for many small educational applications - set out as *boards* within the game. The user manual even gives instructions on developing new boards.

A mouse skills board involves clicking on fish before they swim off the screen. My children found the *Learning Clock* board a little confusing, as the hands are the same length. *Make the Puzzle* is a jigsaw game featuring famous paintings (so you can educate your children in art history while they play).

Typing skills and co-ordination are coupled with counting and arithmetic in a series of boards involving typing in the correct answer before the object falls to the ground - letters in the case of *Simple Letters* and whole words in *Falling Words*. Another board involves counting the spots on a die and typing the number in time.

These games keep children amused for hours, all the while developing their skills. Meanwhile, if you would like to sharpen *your* C skills, code a new board.
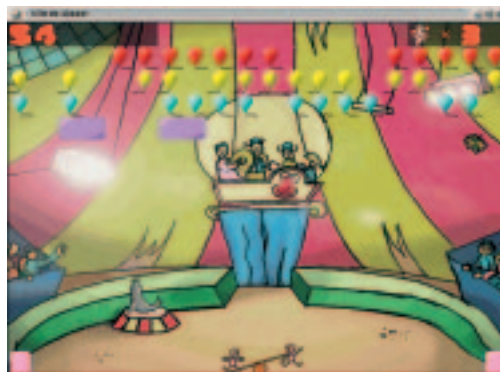
And the band played on...

Oh what a circus

Circus linux is the famous clown jumping, balloon popping game, ported by Bill Kendrick. It is a clone of the Atari 2600 game, *Circus Atari*. A clown is fired out of a cannon onto a see-saw, which bounces a second clown into the air to pop balloons. It accommodates one or two players, and has different difficulty levels. Windows and Mac versions are available pre-compiled.

Moving the slide accurately from the keyboard is extremely difficult. However, if your children are adept, they will quickly take to this addictive game, with its jolly circus-style music and sound effects. Very amusing - it makes all the young visitors to our house laugh. And as a great aid to improving hand-eye coordination, you can excuse the hours you may find yourself playing the game too.

Adding up to fun

MathWar is good for those just learning their sums. Numbered pairs of cards are presented along with a **+**, **-** or **X** operator. You must submit the answer at a predetermined time. The computer may submit a guess itself if you take too long. Whoever answers correctly gets the points. If the computer guesses you can decide whether the computer's guess is

Info

Gcompris http://gcompris.sourceforge.net/
CircusLinux http://www.newbreedsoftware.com/circus-linux/
Linux for 2-8 year olds http://www.debian.org/devel/debian-jr/
Find rpms of the games you want at http://rpmfind.net
All games were tested on a P233/32MB RAM/640x480 VGA running Debian GNU/Linux with a 2.2.18 kernel.

■

right for extra points. The game ends after a number of rounds (default 20). Set the levels so your child can *just* beat the computer if they like a challenge. Easy configuration of the settings means that I can maintain a difficulty level that keeps my six year-old daughter interested.
An HTML manual with well-written, simple instructions is a delightfully surprising addition to any piece of software. Well done Ken Sodemann. ■
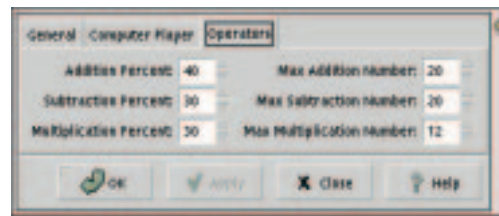
All in the mix

[left]
Gcompris

[right]
Catch a falling letter

[left]
Make the Puzzle - a jigsaw with culture

[right]
Learning Clock - but which hand is which?

How smart would you like your PC?