

Kids On Keys



bonus round in which the same objects descend, but these have two quarters of the image missing, making recognition much more difficult. At this point, the game tends to veer towards being a test of reflex action as the player frantically searches for the correct letters to type. A major drawback with the program is the absence of a delete facility, which makes a false keypress extremely frustrating.

Perhaps the most serious problem with the game is that some of the sprites are badly drawn and difficult to identify. For instance, if a child decides that a particular drawing is a man, he or she may type in the correct spelling of 'man', only to find that the sprite continues its descent because the program regards it as a 'bear' or a 'boy'. The child may then conclude that its spelling was at fault, since the program makes no attempt to explain the reason for a failure (as it has no facility to analyse this). Furthermore, once the sprite has reached the bottom of the screen, the program gives no indication of what the correct answer was. A good educational program would not only give the user another attempt at the problem, but would also display the correct answer after several false responses had been attained.

In the third game, five pictures and a word are displayed on the screen, and the child has to match the correct picture with the word. This game is less speed-oriented than the others, although it also suffers from poor graphics.

LEARN TO READ

The UK educational publishing house Macmillan has developed a series of programs for the Spectrum under the collective title Learn To Read. These five programs — produced in conjunction with Sinclair Research — are derived from Macmillan's highly successful Gay Way reading scheme, a child-centred course that is widely used in primary schools. Because the Gay Way course is oriented towards the individual, it has the advantage that its users learn to read at their own speed. A series of computer programs is a natural extension of this, since using a computer is clearly an individual-oriented activity.

The five packages make up an entire

preliminary reading course. The first program introduces six animals (Deb the rat, Sam the fox, etc.) and these creatures are featured throughout the course to develop a sense of continuity and familiarity.

The programs assume that the child has no previous knowledge of computers or reading. Selecting one of the options within a program is straightforward. For instance, the first program displays five options, and a flashing rectangle appears around the name of each of these options in turn. The user waits until the rectangular 'cursor' surrounds the desired option and then presses any key on the keyboard. No other instruction is needed for using this menu.

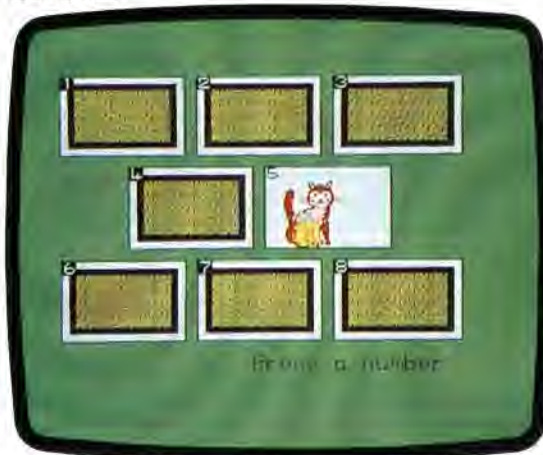
Once an option has been chosen, the computer demonstrates what is required, and then prompts the child to make a response. If the child makes a false response, he or she will be given several opportunities before the computer displays the correct answer.

The six animals used in the programs are drawn in high resolution graphics, and these are far more attractive than the whizz-bang sprites used in some of the other educational games we looked at. The entertainment value of the Learn To Read series may not be nearly as great as many other packages, but their educational value would appear to be far greater — and in the long term perhaps far more rewarding to the child.

Learn To Read



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SCREEN SHOTS BY IAN MCKINNELL