I SPY School Days

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Title	I SPY School Days
Publisher	Scholastic Inc.
Contact Information	http://www.scholastic.com/ Phone: 212-343-6100 Fax: 212-343-6930 557 Broadway New York, NY 10012 USA
Type of Product	Software for developing language arts, reasoning, and problem-solving skills
Platform	Windows 95 / 98 / NT / 2000 / Me / XP / Vista; Mac OS 8.6-10.1.2
Minimum System Requirements	Minimum 10 MB hard disk space available; CD-ROM drive for installation on individual computers; printer and microphone are optional
Price	$1.00-$29.99 (vendor dependent)
ISBN	13: 978-0439679770

Introduction

Social contexts profoundly shape the changing nature of literacy. Continually changing technology opens new possibilities for communication and information, which will lead to new literacies (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004). The definition of new literacies can be an extension of the definition of conventional literacy. New literacies include new knowledge and skills within the context of new digital technology that enable a person to integrate and comprehend meaning from information presented in different sources effectively, and then apply this knowledge to reconstruct information (Evans, 2005; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011). Cummins, Brown & Sayers (2007) have stated that technology is critical to improving literacy among students. In addition, they also mention that engaging learners by cultivating their cognitive processes, connecting to real life situations, taking active control of learning, and promoting involvement in language learning is conducive for

students to develop new literacies (Cummins et al., 2007). These instructional components are important for instructors as they evaluate technologies to ensure that they support literacy learning. Therefore, the following instructional features will be used as criteria for evaluating the I SPY School Days software. To what extent does the technology:

1. Provide cognitive challenge and opportunities for deep processing of meaning;
2. Relate instruction to prior knowledge and experiences;
3. Promote active self-regulated collaborative inquiry;
4. Promote extensive engaged listening, speaking, reading, and writing;
5. Develop skills and strategies for effective learning, and
6. Promote affective involvement and identity investment (Cummins et al., 2007, p. 206)?

Description

I SPY School Days is designed for children aged 5-9, grades K-4. This software, which is based on the common American children's game, focuses mainly on vocabulary. I SPY School Days has nine games: Oops Hoops, Wood Block City, Nature, Chalkboard, Balloon Popper, Codebreaker, Craft Projects, Make Your Own I SPY, and Find Me Riddle (see Figure 1 for a screen shot of the Main Menu). Many games, like object-and-word matching games, help cultivate important skills for English learners such as reasoning and problem-solving.

I SPY School Days is available on CD-ROM and is easy to install. The games are simple to navigate, though it is not possible to move directly from one game to the next without stopping the game and returning to the Main Menu. Help and Stop icons are also embedded within the program to provide extra assistance to users.

Figure 1. *Main Menu of I Spy School Days*

Oops Hoops is a timed game. In this game, objects with shared characteristics must be sorted and placed into categories within hoops. Those objects belonging to more than one category are placed in a shared space where hoops intersect (as shown in Figure 2).
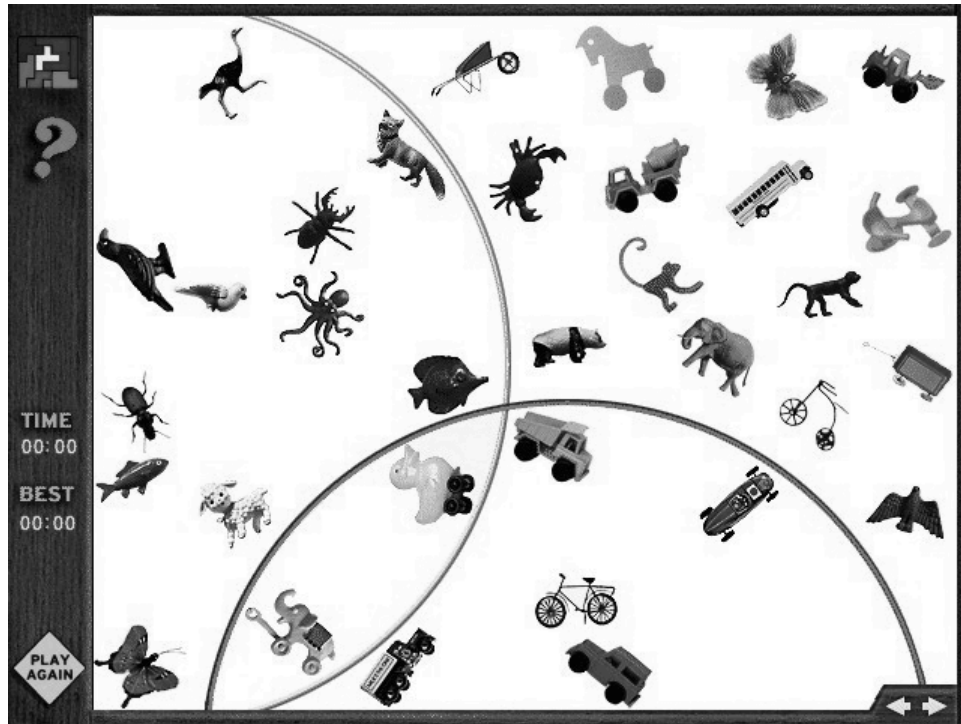
Figure 2. *Oops Hoops*

In Wood Block City, players can find objects in a constantly evolving city and discover hidden objects (as can be seen in Figure 3). This game involves players being prompted to listen to a riddle and search for the objects listed.
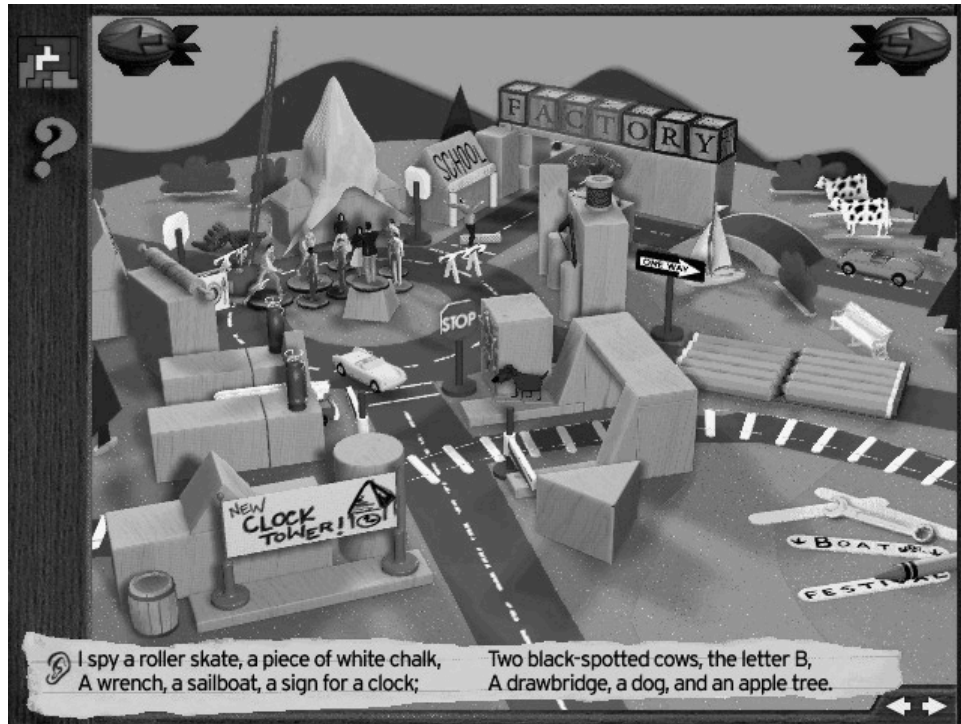
I spy a roller skate, a piece of white chalk, / A wrench, a sailboat, a sign for a clock; / Two black-spotted cows, the letter B, / A drawbridge, a dog, and an apple tree.

Figure 3. *Wood Block City*

In the Nature game, every layout is tied to specific nature themes: beach, insects, and others (as shown in Figure 4). Similar to Oops Hoops, players are prompted to listen to a riddle and must find the listed objects.
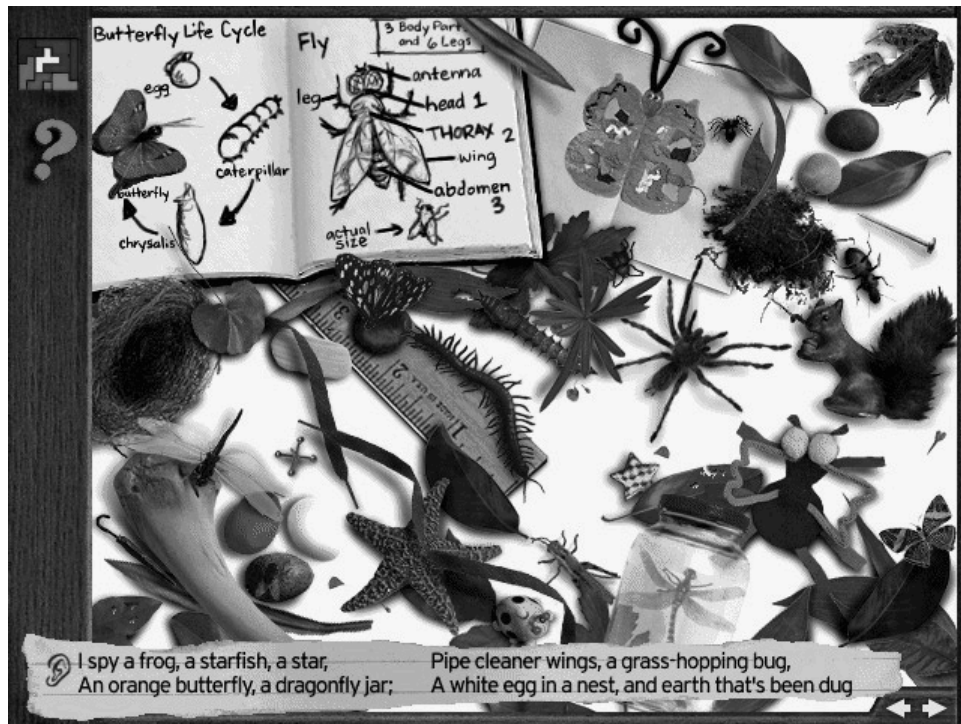
Figure 4. *Nature*

In Chalkboard, each layout represents a month of the school year (Figure 5 provides a screen shot of September). The activities and artwork for each Chalkboard layout relate to the monthly theme. Players listen to the riddle and search for objects listed.
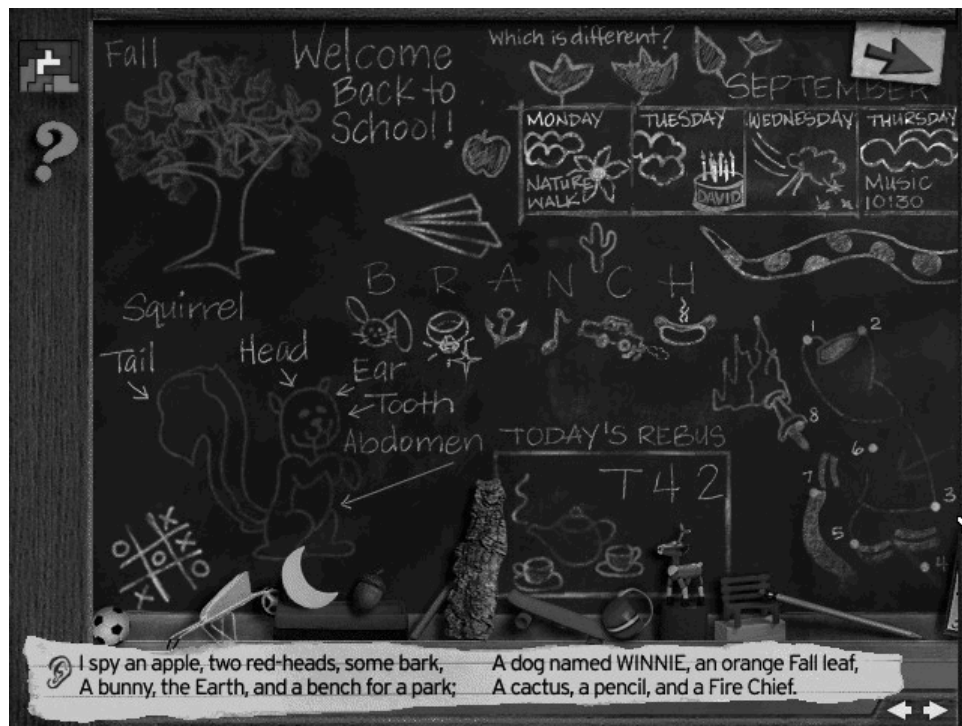
Figure 5. *Chalkboard*

In Balloon Popper, players must add items to the Balloon Popper toy to make it work. A riddle at the bottom of the screen gives players a clue about missing objects and players must find these objects to proceed.
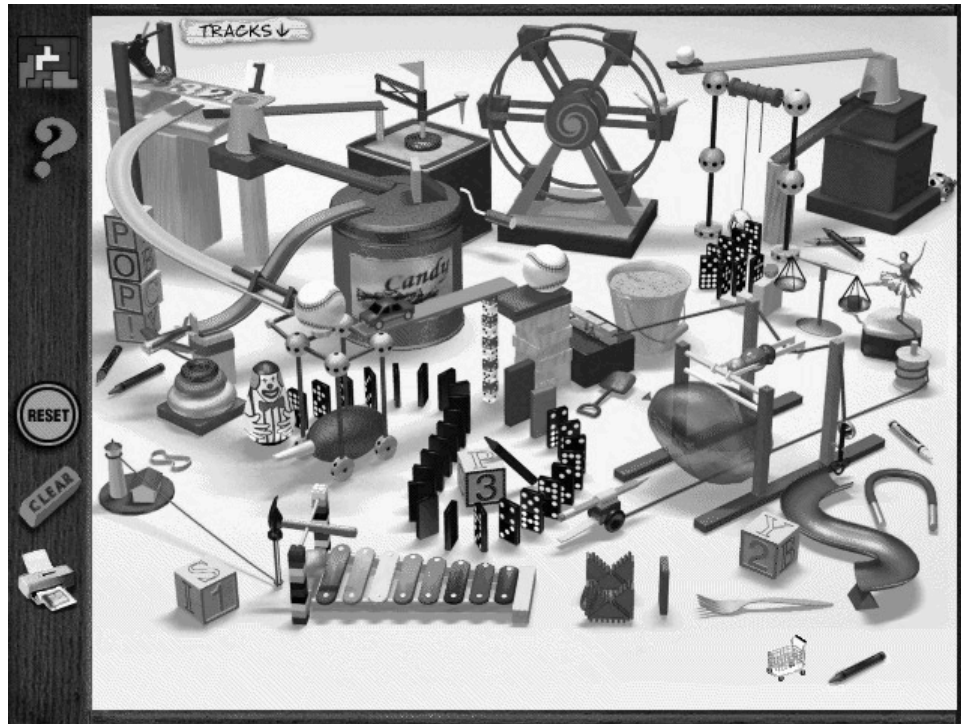
Figure 6. *Balloon Popper*

Codebreaker is another timed game. In this game, players receive three clues to solve the puzzle. There is a line of objects at the bottom of the screen that gives players some clues about the target word (as can be seen in Figure 7).

Figure 7. *Codebreaker*

In Craft Project, the layouts represent the craft projects with different themes such as outer space, music, and others. Players can listen to the riddle and look for the objects listed (as shown in Figure 8).

Figure 8. *Craft Project*

In Make Your Own I SPY, players design their own game by using treasures they have earned in other activities. They can make more I SPY games if they have already completed a number of games and earned more treasures. In addition, players can write their own riddles in this game (as can be seen in Figure 9).
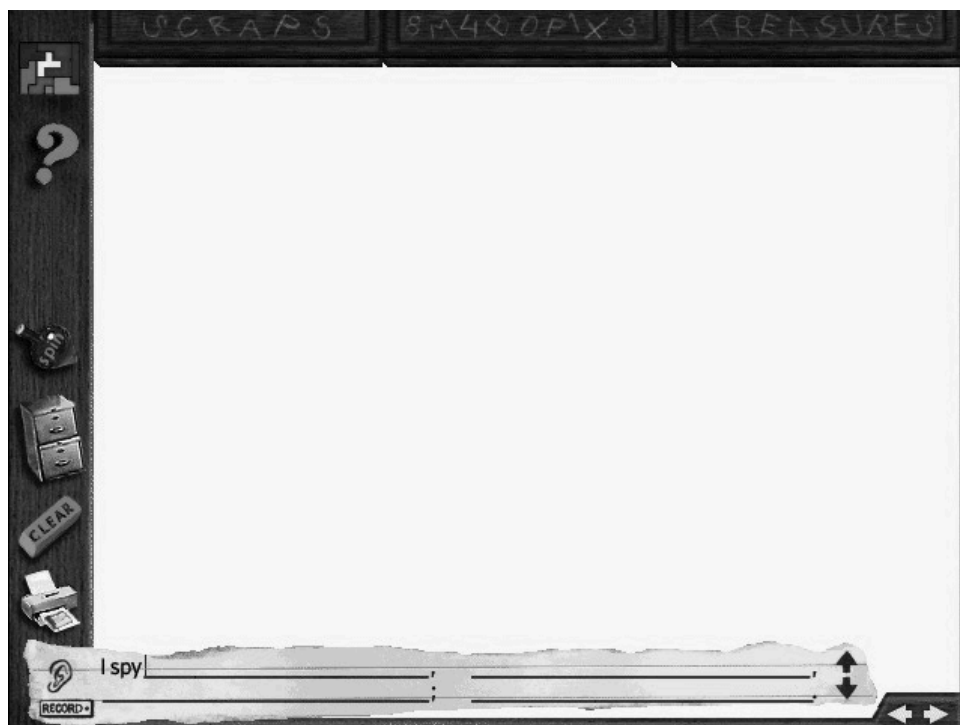
Figure 9. *Make Your Own I SPY*

In Find Me Riddles, players must search for an item that appears twelve times in the software interface. The items will appear in an empty box if players click a small yellow beetle to identify them correctly.

Evaluation of I SPY School Days

This evaluation of I SPY School Days is based on the previously mentioned principles provided by Cummins, et al. (2007).

1. Providing cognitive challenge and opportunities for deep processing of meaning

I SPY School Days provides a number of cognitive challenges and opportunities for players. For example, in the game Codebreaker, there are three "clue" codes to solve an "answer" code. Players have to figure out the relationships among the three clues, thereby employing their cognitive thinking skills. There are multiple ways for players to establish these relationships by clicking the objects in any order, searching the alphabet screen to locate the object, or clicking the letter the object stands for. In this way, players can challenge their ability for deep processing of information, learn new vocabulary, and solve problems.

Balloon Popper is another good example of I SPY School Days supplying opportunities for deep processing of meaning. In this game, players need to notice a series of chain reactions designed to pop a balloon, and discover what pieces are missing. By solving a riddle, the player can process the information of the images to decide the nature and location of the missing pieces. Therefore, by using visual images and symbols, this meaningful problem-solving game provides an opportunity for players to improve their critical thinking abilities.

2. Relating instruction to prior knowledge and experiences

Donovan and Bransford (1996) argued that existing understanding and experience is the bases for developing new understandings (as cited in Cummins et al., 2007, p. 42). Many of the games in I SPY School Days are related to players' prior knowledge and experience. For instance, in the game of Chalkboard, the activities and artwork for each Chalkboard layout relate to the monthly school theme. Players who have prior experience with the activities and artwork shown in the Chalkboard layout will be able to easily hunt for and locate the objects listed. In the game of Wood Block City, there are different city views that might be related to the players' home communities. Players from the city may engage more deeply in this particular game, as it incorporates a familiar city environment.

3. Promoting active self-regulated collaborative inquiry

Cummins et al. (2007) have mentioned that when "students take ownership of the learning process and invest their identities in the outcomes of learning, the resulting understanding will be deeper than when learning is passive" (p. 43). In the software of I SPY School Days, students may take active control and regulate their own playing. In many games, players will hear a riddle sentence, and then may begin to figure out the answers by themselves. There is no specific collaboration activity in I SPY School Days. However, in the game of Making Your Own I SPY, a player can design his/her own I SPY games, and then print out the picture to share with friends. The player may also ask friends to find the answers by using the riddles made for specific pictures.

4. Promoting extensive engaged listening, speaking, reading, and writing

In I SPY School Days, there are many chances for players to practice their four language skills. To practice listening, the games of Wood Block City, Nature, Chalkboard, and Craft Project engage players in listening to a riddle and looking for the objects listed. In addition, most of the games have a riddle and picture that provide opportunities for players to read, thereby integrating players' reading skills. For speaking and writing, in Make Your Own I SPY, players can drag collected treasures to make their own I SPY pictures. After that, players can write their own riddles and use the samples provided to get started. Finally, players can click the Record button, speak the riddle and save it. Although there is only one game involving writing and speaking, I SPY School Days provides beginning practice in listening, speaking, reading, and writing effectively. Moreover, the objects in every game are colorful and interesting, making the game visually appealing and keeping players engaged in language learning.

5. Developing skills and strategies for effective learning

There are many learning strategies that players can develop while playing I SPY School Days. According to the previous analysis, players have the ability to self-regulate their play in this software. The strategies that they develop are planning their time, organizing their games, and questioning their own answers. Balloon Popper builds on problem-solving skills. Players will learn problem-solving strategies by first defining the problem, working backwards to observe the picture carefully, and finding out the missing parts.

6. Promoting affective involvement and identity investment

A drawback to this program is that there are few opportunities for a player to interact with other players during games. As mentioned previously, the only chance for peer interaction is in the game of Making Your Own I SPY, wherein a player can print out his/her own design picture to share with friends, and ask friends to solve riddles. In terms of identity investment, positive identity is promoted when players solve a problem or riddle, and when they make their own I spy games successfully.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I SPY School Days is an interesting and challenging program for developing children's language arts and problem-solving skills. The program has some strengths as well as concerns. I SPY School Days can develop players' cognition, relate to players' prior knowledge and experience, promote players' active self-regulated inquiry, engage players in all four language skills, and support the development of different learning strategies. However, it is important to point out that there are only a few collaborative opportunities for players. Teachers utilizing this software in the language-learning classroom would have to brainstorm ways to make the experience more collaborative. An additional aspect that should be considered is the age of this software. Technology changes every day and Windows 95 / 98 / NT / 2000 / Me / XP / Vista and Mac OS 8.6-10.1.2 are now less widely available. However, for schools with old computers, I SPY School Days is a strong program that can be used to challenge children in learning vocabulary.

References

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About the Reviewer

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