

2simple 4words?

A review of the *2Simple Infant Video Toolbox*

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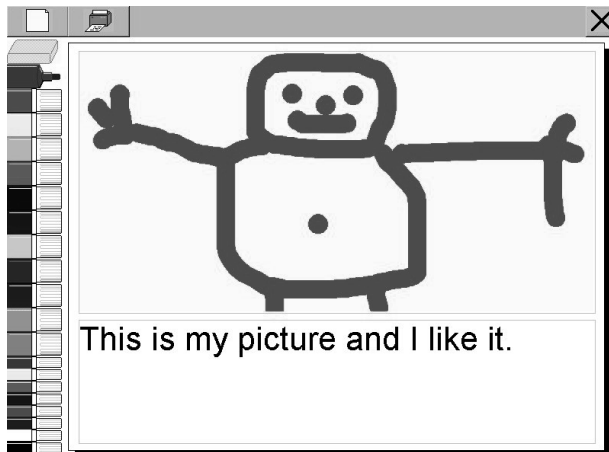
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Introduction

'Great, great and great!' – a comment from a reception teacher.

Every so often, along comes a new program or new approach that marks a watershed, a new stage, or benchmark for future offerings to be compared with. The *2Simple Infant Video Toolbox* must surely rank as one of those.

The Infant Video Toolbox consists of a suite of programs aimed at Foundation and Key Stage 1 children which are 'great': simple to use, clear and uncluttered, with a common, intuitive look and feel about them that ensures only the smallest of learning curves before young children can feel in control and happily get cracking.



It comes with a straightforward user guide, with simple instructions and easy installation. The reviewer's version had a few problems, exacerbated by hardware faults which were diagnosed only later, but the odd phone call and email brought immediate responses from the support desk, and the latest version (1.5) went in trouble-free.

On top of that, the 'video' part is a real added bonus. No unfathomable documentation here – click on a video training clip and you can actually hear and see what Max is doing as he

models an activity or the features of each of the programs. For each program there is a variety of examples, which can be used by both children and teachers. In fact it is not clear who the intended audience is; however, the video clips are short, about 2 minutes long, and replayable using the Lotus *ScreenCam* package. The voice of the narrator is clear and informative, and he is not averse to making the odd error, which he then shows you how to correct. It's a very clever, realistic touch, giving an indication of the author's practical educational pedigree as well as demonstrating to children (and teachers) that it's often all right to make mistakes.

Such a simple notion that it makes you wonder why MicroSoft and others don't do it! The DfEE might note too, that 'training' videos don't have to show perfection each time. It is not really comparing like with like but anecdotal evidence shows that a significant number of classroom teachers are easily put off and respond to such videos by saying: 'Well *I* could never do that!', 'Where's the *rest* of the class?', 'My children *never* behave like that!' or 'And where's the planning and paperwork then?' The *2Simple* videos here are gently supportive and realistic, and totally non-threatening.

The suite of programs

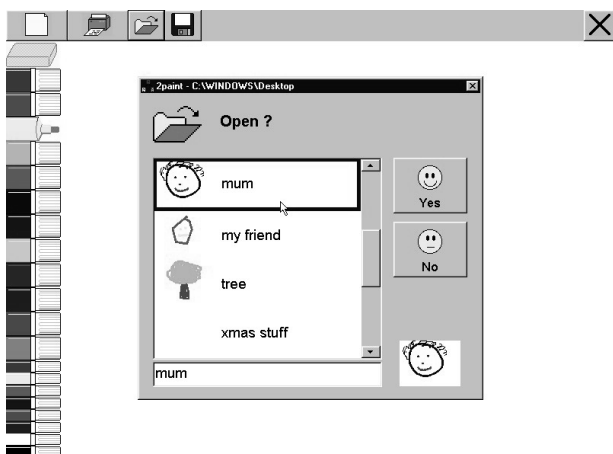
The suite itself comprises six programs, and meets various units of the QCA Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Schemes of Work (SoW) for England, as well as having a place in some literacy and numeracy activities. In brief there is:

- *2paint* – probably the simplest painting program for nursery, reception and Year 1 (Unit 2B)
- *2publish* – extending *2paint* to combine text and graphics in a variety of formats (Units 2A, and some of 1B and 3A)
- *2count* – a simple data handling program producing pictograms (1E and 2E)

- *2go* – a simple directions program leading to an early turtle graphics program (Units 1F and 2D)
- *2graph* – simple graphing program to create histograms, bar, line and pie charts (Units 2D and 4D)
- *2question* – simple, pre-formatted branching database (Units 2E and 4C)

In general, the suite of programs has a unity of look and commands which means a useful compatibility throughout. The icons are clear and intuitive, and reading is no barrier as the text is kept to a minimum. (Version 1.5b will allow text to be changed to other languages.) Teacher Options are available to allow some icons to be available on screen or not, such as loading and saving, types of graphs, font, size and colour, and especially printing to prevent inordinate use of the printer.

Two other nice friendly features are the animated yes/no icons (nodding or shaking faces) and the save command which saves a thumbnail of the file along with the file name.



No program does everything for everybody and even amongst this excellent suite there seem to be a few things missing. None of the programs has a proper 'undo' for instance, and neither is there the usual reminder about saving your work *before* exiting. As indicated in the documentation, teachers need to be aware, too, that the whole suite does cover a wide range of ICT skills and will need to choose the relevant program with care to match the expertise and experiences of the children. There is also a potential problem in the name: if for some children these programs are not in fact 'simple' but still quite hard, that could have a detrimental effect on their self-esteem and confidence. And then some might take issue with them being 'too simple' – should children be involved with activities that are too easy for them? There is

possibly that old tricky problem too, of using a program from an 'Infant' set with older SEN children, for example, who are not 'infants'. But then, what's in a name...?

The programs in detail

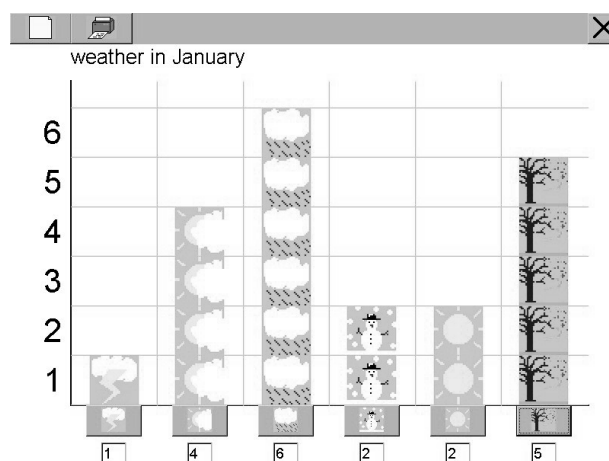
In terms of individual software *2paint* has to be the simplest graphics program. It has twelve thick coloured 'felt tips' and eight thin ones. There is a rubber too (i.e. white, on the white background), which you need to use carefully because it 'rubs out' slightly ahead of its image on the screen.

The use of the 'felt pens' is a clever metaphor. It is very obvious what they are and what they do, and are part and parcel of young children's experience nowadays. What happens on screen is more like the real effect of felt pen on paper, and not the same as a paint brush. Some children may at first need help in realising that they need to 'pick up' or click on paint-brush/felt tip icon before painting but as long as they can manage a mouse, either button here, they are well away.

This is a graphics at its very simplest: no fill, no spray, no straight line or shape facility, no different coloured backgrounds, no accompanying sound effects! As such it makes a very straightforward introduction to how, in some way, ICT is different even at this simple level from other media and activities.

With *2publish* children can extend their *2paint* expertise and enter the world of simple DTP by mixing text and graphics, choosing from a variety of useful and attractive formats including cards, posters, menus and stories. It makes good use of some of the benefits of ICT and provides a real stimulus for children's early writing. In fact, until the children grow out of it, you may not need another for some time.

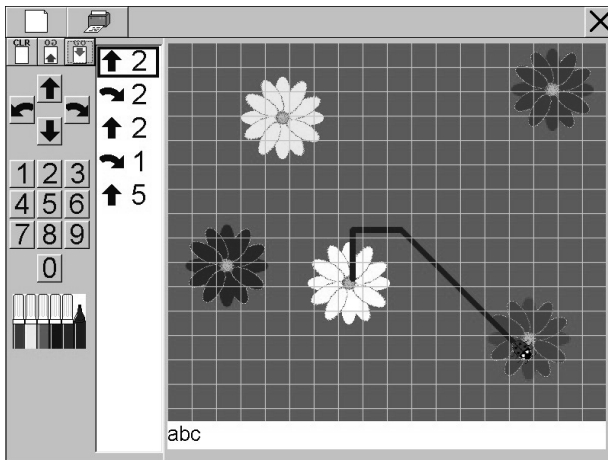
2count is not so much a 'counting program', but rather offers a very simple, easy to use data



handling or graphing activity which makes use of nineteen sets of pictograms, from teddies, to shapes, to feelings to weather, with up to six fields or headings. The teacher options also allow you to choose the alignment of the chart, and set a maximum value, up to 99, and the chart will automatically adjust itself on screen.

With *2go* you have an introduction to early logo, with four levels of programs to control movement on the screen. There are five sample backgrounds to choose from, such as a race-track with a car, a field of flowers and a lady-bird. The first three levels use simple direction arrows and the teacher options offer choices of speed, unit length, line width and diagonal stretch (so that you can draw a triangle easily). There is also a grid option.

The fourth level gets nearer to Logo but provides quite a conceptual leap from the 'up and across' instructions of the earlier levels. Here you can input a sequence of commands according to the orientation of the pointer or 'turtle', and although you can retrace your steps there is no 'undo' as such. You can't disappear off the screen, but remain on the last spot or square. The equivalent of the Logo command Pen Up is simply to drag the pointer.



2graph builds on the experiences of *2count* and leads into a simple graphing program which

produces the information in a variety of graph formats. Again there is auto scaling, up to 10,000 here though the input boxes find that difficult to handle. There is a maximum of twelve fields allowed, there is a limit to the amount of text you can use and there is no facility for changing the colours of the graphs. Nonetheless, it is again a very simple and effective program for young children beginning to make sense of graphical representations.

With *2question*, you enter the world of branching databases. Here you can select from three given formats, 7, 15 or 31 boxes, or ends of the branches. They do not work like *FlexiTree* or *Decisions3*, but do allow you to enter, and edit, the questions, the choices and the drawings (although you cannot really edit these, nor import clip art or other images which would be useful). It seems a bit inflexible but with careful planning and preparation it offers a good introduction to this type of database.

In conclusion

In summary then, an excellent suite of programs which other software developers will have to look to, especially for such an awareness of the needs and capabilities of early learners. And, in terms of becoming familiar with new software, that also includes us adults!

Details of the *2Simple Infant Video Toolbox* can be found at

www.2simplesoftware.com

It is available for PCs or Macs at £75 per copy, or £350 per site licence, from

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