

A Review of *Zoombinis Mountain Rescue*

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Anyone who has ever spoken to me about ICT stands a good chance of having been bored to death about *The Logical Journey of the Zoombinis*. It has to be my all-time favourite piece of software. If you've come across it, I'm sure that you'll understand that someone (such as me) with a mildly obsessive nature could easily find that it's two o'clock in the morning and they're still staring manically at their computer screen and muttering bizarre noises such as 'frnarharheehar' under their breath, clicking away and groaning 'I knew that would happen' as the little piece of on-screen blutak they've placed on a rickety bridge plummets into the virtual abyss!

For those of you who haven't come across the first Zoombinis adventure the above will paint a strange picture I'm sure, but the point is fairly straightforward. *The Logical* (or *Mathematical*)

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Journey of the Zoombinis is the most compelling puzzle (or series of puzzles) you're ever likely to encounter. An account describing classroom use of the program can be found on the CD.

Inevitably, I was one particularly excited individual as I approached the TAG stand at this year's BETT Exhibition to ask to be shown the new Zoombinis adventure (after a 7-year wait), *Zoombinis Mountain Rescue*.

It should be noted at this point that I've been using the original Zoombinis adventure with Primary age pupils for almost 4 years so not only do I know how to play the game, but I've also spent a significant part of my life trying to help children explain how they think the puzzles work, what strategies they might employ to help them progress, what they expect to happen next, whether it's appropriate to take a guess or whether they might be able to learn something from what happened before and so on. I know the puzzles about as well as any (theoretical) grown-up has any right to, and I've spent hours in debate with other (theoretical) grown-ups discussing the best strategy for tackling the Di-dimensional Hotel when the going is Very-Very-Hard, or the genius behind the development of the puzzles.

This is how the conversation went:

'I want to see the new Zoombinis program, what's it like?'

'It's good, it's much harder'

[Oh joy!] 'What do you mean, it's much harder?'

'Well the puzzles are more difficult'

[Hmm!] 'What do you mean, more difficult? '...'

The thing is, whether the puzzle is difficult or not is irrelevant. The point isn't to make the puzzle

harder, the point is to make you think, to make you employ new or different problem-solving strategies and to discuss your ideas and your thinking with others, to try out your ideas and refine your thinking for the next time and to engage you in the process by giving you the motivation to solve the problem, no matter what. Here, difficulty isn't an appropriate benchmark... but perhaps I was being too harsh.

The outcome of my discussions with some of the TAG team was that I got a brief introduction to the program and the scenario, which was a familiar one: to help 16 Zoombinis to solve a series of puzzles in order to bring about a desired outcome, that the puzzles are based largely around the attributes of the Zoombinis themselves and involve matching these attributes or finding and creating patterns with them, that the format was familiar but the presentation was much more up-to-date and visually appealing and that on-screen support was incorporated into the package. I also got a promise of a couple of evaluation copies... probably the highlight of the show for me!

They arrived. My plan was simple, I intended to have a bit of a play and then see what was missing and develop it! In the original program the only down-side was that a great deal of time could be wasted trying to find out what it was you were supposed to do. The clues were all there, but they could be tricky to interpret and in a school context you want to help pupils get on. I developed a

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guidebook for pupils for the Logical Journey, which was intended to ensure that progress could be made and that a few prompts for developing strategies or recording discoveries were offered. (A copy of the

updated guide is available on the CD that accompanies this pack).

This sort of guide was not necessary for the new software as this level of support was provided as part of the package. Instead I decided to produce a guide for teachers that would help them prepare for the use of the software with their pupils by providing an overview of each puzzle, how it progressed and how it could be cracked. This might spoil the fun for the teachers, but there is no point pretending that you can use this software effectively with pupils unless you understand each puzzle pretty well. Therefore the intention is to make sure that a teacher can ask the right questions and steer pupils in appropriate directions when useful, but reduce

the number of sleepless nights invested in this process. So, that's what I did. And in the process, I got to grips with the new puzzle. (This guide is also included on the CD that accompanies this pack).

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So, was I impressed? Well, I have to say that it was a bit of an anti-climax, to be honest. Why? That's a little tricky. The individual issues were determined by the individual puzzles. Some were simple re-workings of puzzles in the original, some were new, but lacked the originality of those in the Logical Journey and some just completely missed the point, really. And the point is a simple one. Some of the puzzles are too easy to crack. If you can spot the pattern then you can solve the puzzle every time, without difficulty. Being able to find an answer isn't the same as having to develop a strategy. Developing a strategy is about trying out ideas, reflecting on the outcome of these experiments, refining those ideas, discussing your thoughts with others and justifying your proposals. You know, good thinking skills stuff!

Is *Zoombinis Mountain Rescue* good? Well, from my point of view the answer is a definite, 'Yes'. Is it a worthy successor to the Logical (and Mathematical) Journey? Here I have to admit that it suffers from exactly the same problem as the standard Hollywood style sequel – it's great, but it fails to be original enough to be acclaimed on its own merits. Without doubt it will engage pupils and will provide many opportunities for excellent 'Thinking Skills' development. It still leaves most similar simulation software wanting and if you can find the time and opportunity, will give you a whole new insight into the way your pupils think, collaborate and learn. It's worth a whirl, but if you haven't tried the original yet you'll have to decide whether you want the best first, or last!

Zoombinis Mountain Rescue was developed by The Learning Company and can be purchased from TAG Learning. The guide provides a good overview of the purpose of the software, so I haven't tried to repeat that here. The following article is a case study of the use of *Zoombinis Mountain Rescue* with children in Years 2 and 4 and includes some ideas about how it can be used to ensure that the potential of the software is exploited and that the pupils understand the point. Oh yes, and that they have fun too; it is all too easy to forget that isn't it!