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Christmas in computer land

Visions of software dance in their heads

The Journey to Wild Divine: The Passage

■ **Wild Divine combines a mystery and adventure game with meditation and breathing exercises designed to help you relax.**

Nero Photoshow Elite

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By **STEPHEN A. IDE**
The Patriot Ledger

Is there a computer geek on your gift list who's just dying for some new software, or are you looking for a subtle way to suggest that Santa bring you a virtual toy or two? Here are reviews of a handful of new programs, user-tested and stocking-ready.

Nero Photoshow Elite (Ahead Soft ware, www.nerophotoshow.com, $49.99)

I was pleasantly surprised that Nero picked up Simplestar's Photoshow Deluxe engine for its software. This program allows you to create Flash slide shows of your favorite photos, with music and effects. It's fast, simple and professional looking, though it still has a few bugs.

To test this software I created a slide show of images from the World Series (you can view it at http://www.southofboston.net/special reports, then click on the World Series logo). While it loads, it gives the web surfer a game to play.

The software imports a folder or "album" of photos. From that, you can create a show. Unlike some software that requires you to save projects, Nero Photoshow Elite works like a database. Any changes that you make are saved as you work.

Software idea for every computer geek on your gift list

This can be a bit disconcerting until you get used to it.

You create a show by selecting photos from your photo albums. You can change the order in which they are displayed by dragging the photo thumbnails to where you want them to be.

Choosing "Edit" permits you to see a photo larger, then apply text, captions and some built-in Flash special effects. More effects can be purchased online.

In addition, you can pick a soundtrack or add music of your own. The 100 music tracks provided load quickly. If you use your own music, expect longer load times for online slide shows. You may also edit photos, color correct, fix red eye and do other touch-ups.

Once finished, you can upload the show to photoshow.net (only the provided music may be shared on their web site), buy prints or gifts (photo calendars, puzzles, mugs, shirts, etc.) online or share photos with friends, create a web slide show to place on your own web site, burn it to CD for storage or make a video CD (VCD) that can play in many DVD players.

In my testing, however, the program failed to burn a video CD with audio, something the program says will be available in the future. That was somewhat surprising, since Nero is known for its CD- and DVD-burning software. So, be forewarned if you plan to purchase this software to make musical slide shows to show on your TV set.

Requirements: Windows 98SE/ME/2000/XP, Pentium III 450 MHz or faster, 128 MB RAM (256 MB recommended), 80 MB hard drive space.

G7 (Sibelius Software, www.sibelius.com, $149)

Designed to make writing and manipulating sheet music easy, G7 may be ideal for the guitar enthusiast who enjoys writing his or her own music. But mostly I found it confusing, hard to use and in no way intuitive. This may be why it includes a 180-page manual.

Even adding chords to scanned sheet music didn't work as I expected it would. It failed to recognize chord diagrams on scanned music sheet. The program had difficulty accurately reading electronic "midi" files (created by others). For unexplained reasons, it couldn't handle key shifts, leaving some songs sounding just wrong.

If you're composing, the program seems to excel, allowing excellent manipulation and editing. Want to add a quarter note? Just drop one in from the keypad.

For guitarists or banjo players, for example, it displays a fretboard, showing you the fingering as it plays along with the sheet music. Tablature can be added by clicking on the fretboard. In addition, you can easily adjust the tempo with a slider control.

You are supposed to be able to enter notes from a midi guitar or keyboard. Since I have neither, I was unable to test this feature. But it would seem that would be the best way to enter music into this software.

Using the light version of its scanning software (you have to pay extra for the pro version, which provides more features), I was able to scan sheet music, which then could be edited and saved in several formats.

Requirements: PC: Windows 98/ME/2000/XP, Pentium 133 MHz (Pentium III recommended), 64 MB RAM (128 MB for 2000/XP), 80 MB of free hard disc space.

Mac: G3/G4/iMac, OS 9.1-OS X 10.1 or later, 32 MB RAM, 80 MB free hard drive space.

KUMA\WAR; The War on Terror (Kuma Reality Games, www.kumawar.com, $19.99)

This war simulation game introduces the player to various attack scenarios in Iraq (and elsewhere), including the killing of Saddam Hussein's sons, and can be updated online as new scenarios are released. It seemed a bit tasteless to me, considering that the war in Iraq isn't over. But the software includes respectful interviews with U.S. soldiers as it recreates actual missions, blending news and gaming, with extra bad guys added.

Some of the videos included with the game are graphic (it's rated M for mature players), but it contained nothing that hasn't been shown on television or in newspapers.

Graphically, the game is mostly impressive, though it is odd when a soldier is crawling through the grass and the brush goes right through his body. However, using the binoculars to zoom in on your enemy or switching to night-vision gear makes for impressive play.

The program responds quickly as you maneuver small bands of U.S. soldiers one by one (or order them to follow you). As in many games, you have weapons and other items that you carry, can pick up or swap as they become available. As the mission number rises, so does the level of difficulty.

This game requires a higher-end graphics card (it failed on a four-year-old Pentium III with an old card). A card with a 3D accelerator graphics card is recommended.

The Journey to Wild Divine: The Passage (Healing Rhythms, www.wilddivine.com, $159.95)

I have never seen a game quite like Journey to Wild Divine, which combines a mystery and adventure game with meditation and breathing exercises designed to help you relax.

This New Age game uses biofeedback, with sensors on your fingers that must sense your heart rate as you interact with events during the game, encouraging players to relax and practice ancient breathing techniques to affect change in the game.

I didn't know whether to love it or hate it. I enjoyed the graphics, which are lush and inviting, with a delightful mix with video animation, and the music is soothing.

You will be asked to breath deeply and slowly, for example, and doing so will increase the height of a fire in the fireplace or will juggle spheres. At first I thought it was bogus, but after a bit of practice, the game seemed actually to respond to my relaxed state.

As I progressed, visiting different locations and picking up articles to place in my "magic bag," I found the pace a bit slow. And I never did discover how one "wins" or finishes the game.

The game's web site says it "helps to integrate mind and body to reduce stress, improve mental and physical performance, increase focus and creativity, and promote total wellness."

If the goal is to find nirvana through meditation, I can't say I found it. Playing after a long day of work will relax you – it may even put you to sleep in your chair.

This two-disc game requires an enormous amount of hard disc space – 1.5GB – to power its graphics. **Other requirements:** Pentium III or higher, Windows 98SE/ME/2000/XP, 256 MB RAM. Or on a Mac: G3/G4 OSX or 10.1 and higher, same space requirements as above.

Other offerings:

Xipster: Create, Animate, Share, by Xow! Software (www.xipster.com, $39.95). Xipster and its related programs Xip Movie Director and Xip Imagemaker are designed to allow you to use your web cam or digital camera to create animations. The program captures images and helps you animate, then permits export to a Quicktime movie file.

Test & Improve Your Memory, Scientific Brain Training from Happy Neuron Software (www.happyneuron.com, $29.99). Through games and various training environments, the program aims to test and to train your brain. It monitors your progress and shows you where you've made improvements.

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