

Rhythm, Reading, and Research

While I wrote this column, there seemed to be a lull in new software announcements for education and educators. Perhaps it is reflective of the tightening of school budgets or the heavy emphasis on standardized tests and strictly measurable results here in the United States, which has led to fewer really exciting software announcements lately. I remain hopeful that on the next Web site I visit, in the next brown cardboard box that arrives on my doorstep, in the next e-mailed press release, or in a message sent to me from a teacher, the next really terrific software title is just waiting for me to discover and share with you! Please feel encouraged to contact me and share with me *your* favorite software tools!

This column highlights software for music, reading, and research... or could that be the three Rs—rhythm, reading, and research? Enjoy!

By Gail Lovely

2Simple Music Toolkit

Publisher: 2Simple

Software (<http://www.2simpleusa.com/>)

Topics: Music (rhythm, pitch, melody, tempo, harmony, and composition)

Grades: PK–6 (Ages 4–11)

Cost: \$49.95 for a single unit, \$29.97 each for 5–9 licenses, \$22.98 each for 10–19 licenses, \$19.63 each for 20–49 licenses, \$833.66 unlimited site license. District licensing is available.

Platform: Win

Standards: NETS•S 1–6;
NETS•T I–III

The 2Simple Music Toolkit is a wonderful suite of programs to encourage exploration of a wide variety of music concepts in a fun, easy-to-use format. The six programs offer exploration in music from creating simple sequences of sounds and rhythms to composing short simple pieces of music. Activities abound here for non-musicians

as well as aspiring musicians. Each program is open ended, allowing students and their teachers to participate in exploratory interactions. This works well for teachers wanting to use specific musical activities within these whiteboard-friendly programs.

2explore is the simplest level of activity. In this program, students can simply click on pictures to play sounds. Strings of sounds can be built up into short musical sequences, which can be edited and saved easily.

2play is an uncomplicated on-screen keyboard that plays 12 different sounds (including different instruments). Students make sounds by clicking the on-screen keys or by using the computer keyboard (the corresponding letters are superimposed over the keys on screen). You can adjust up or down an octave and, of course, play, record, edit, and save the compositions.

2beat is a fun, yet simple, drum machine for experimenting with rhythm. Simple clicks change drum sounds and combine as many as four different sounds in a musical piece.

A slide to adjust tempo encourages hands-on exploration of rhythm and beat. Of course, the work can be saved, opened, edited, and played.

In 2sequence, students can build sequences of sounds by dragging and dropping them into the sequence they wish. They can layer the sounds to begin to explore pitch and harmony. Students can also use previously saved bits of music from this program or other sound recordings in their compositions. Various layers (tracks) can have different volumes.

2synthesize is a powerful keyboard, with more than 50 sounds to use to play and record complex compositions. You can combine up to eight tracks in the memory banks as you create them and then adjust the volume of each and record. These compositions are automatically saved when you close 2synthesize. In addition, you can export the tunes as MIDI files and use them in a presentation or on a Web site.

2compose is a very easy introduction to traditional musical composition. Select the kind of note (eighth through whole notes) and then move your mouse onto the staff to where you want to place the note. A right-click plays the note, and a left-click places the note. Students can choose an instrument to play the notes in each staff and also adjust how loudly the instrument will play. More advanced students will enjoy being able to right-click at the start or end of a bar to cut, copy, or paste all the notes in that bar or to set repeat points. Of course, these musical compositions can be saved, exported, or printed.

My student testers really enjoyed this program. Younger students spent

loose—music has a place in all classrooms as a tool for math, listening, creativity, and so much more.

AceReader Pro Deluxe

Publisher: Stepware, Inc. (<http://www.stepware.com>)

Topics: Reading improvement (speed, comprehension, and efficiency)

Grades: 1 & up (must be already reading)

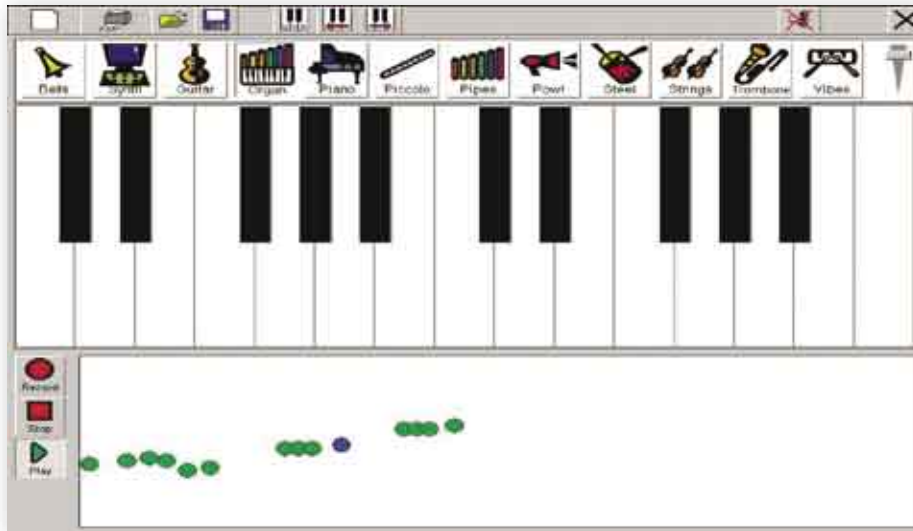
Cost: \$49.95 (Educational discounts are available.)

Platform: Win

Standards: NETS•S 3, 5;
NETS•T III, IV,V

AceReader Pro is an excellent computer-assisted reading improvement program to improve reading speed, efficiency, and comprehension. The program offers tests to document reading speed and comprehension levels and tools for increasing reading speed, efficiency, and comprehension both online and on paper.

After an uneventful and easy install procedure, the first step is to determine Base Reading Speed. This can be done by reading a passage in



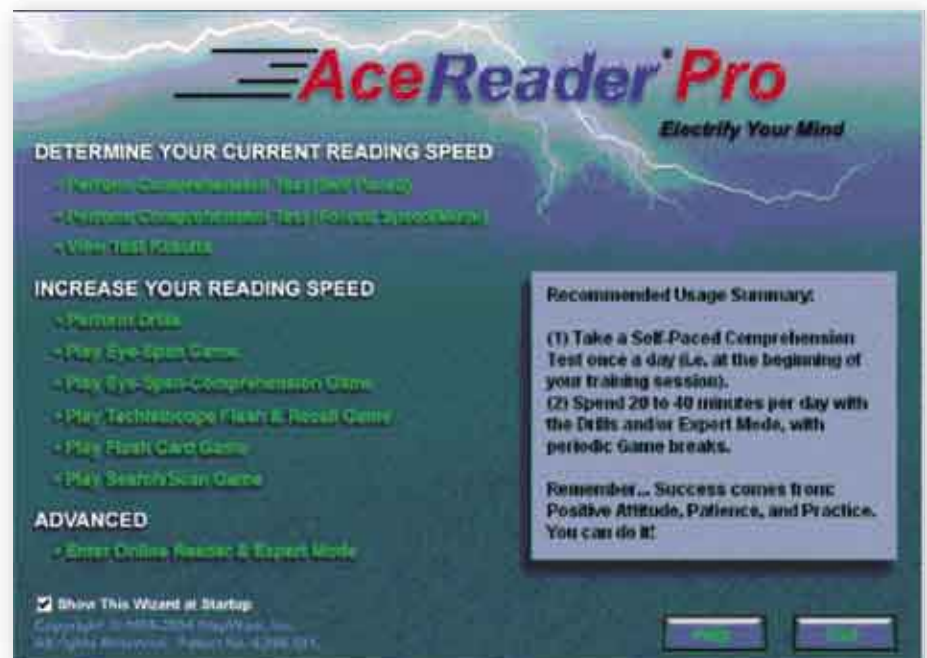
2Simple Music Toolkit enables exploration of music concepts.

time exploring the sounds before ever combining them into music. A sixth-grade, first-year band student enjoyed re-creating his band music and then altering it by changing instruments and tempo. Other sixth-grade students with more musical background spent time composing original works, while some young students got into quite a discussion about patterns they created. All students I shared this program with worked without *any* instruction or introduction to the programs.

As a teacher with little formal music training, I *really* appreciated all the teacher support provided by 2Simple. The software is aligned with NETS•S and the MENC National Music Education Standards on a program-by-program basis. In addition, the CD contains some on-screen video tutorials for teachers. These tutorials are short and offer more than just how to use the program, such as this cross-curricular idea: using 2beat to explore the rhythm within a phrase of words in a literacy class. The ideas are student-directed, and the videos could be used as a way to introduce an activity to students.

The programs contain a few teacher options that will make your life easier. Teachers can select where the

programs will store the student work, allow students to choose where to save their work using standard dialog boxes, or even disable saving. Printing controls are also available through the teacher options menu. Teachers can set the default printer and choose to show the printer button all the time, hide the printer button for a teacher-determined number of minutes after a student prints, or disable printing all the time. My advice? Get some headphones and turn the students



AceReader Pro offers many different tools to increase students' reading speed.

a normal manner and answering a set of comprehension questions. The time for reading the selection and the comprehension scores will be logged for use in the practice drills, which are a key to improvement. Once you determine your base reading speed, games and drills are your next step. After you practice and improve your reading skills through the games and drills, you should retake the Base Reading Test to readjust the base score and allow for monitoring improvement over time. It was amazing to me how quickly the drills made a difference in my base reading speed. After only 20 minutes, I saw improve-

ment in my reading speed and that of my student testers. I imagine in a lab or classroom setting, that 20 minutes a couple of times a week would lead to noticeable reading speed improvements for many students.

The drills offer straightforward practice of important skills and help minimize bad habits such as subvocalization and rereading. In addition, some of the games expand your *eye fixation zone* (what you see when your eyes are focused on one point) as well as the speed at which you are able to reposition your eyes. The methodologies use rapid serial visual presentation (RSVP), words presented in the center of the text area for rapid reading because the eyes don't have to move, and tachistoscopic scroll presentation (TSP), words displayed across the screen, mimicking the way the eyes move when you read. These tactics normally work together to assist reading speed increases without comprehension loss.

Twenty reading comprehension tests are available for each grade level (a total of 260 tests). There is no programmed limit to the number of tests that can be added. The publisher offers additional test sets, one on American History and another on Earth and space science. Each of these additional test sets include 130 tests (10 per level, 13 levels). More are expected in the future.

Ace Reader's strength lies not only in its pedagogy but also in its administrative flexibility. The game editor allows for some drills to double as "flash cards" for studying other content as well as add new passages for the comprehension tests. It can read ASCII character sets, so you can adapt it for European languages. And, a network version is available.

In this text-heavy world, reading with speed and comprehension is a skill of great value. This program can help you and your students read faster without losing comprehension.

Encarta 2004 Educator Edition

Publisher: Microsoft (<http://www.microsoft.com>)

Topics: All subject areas

Grades: 4 & up

(Young learners will need adult assistance.)

Cost: \$99.95

Platform: Win

Standards: NETS•S 1, 2, 3, 5, 6;
NETS•T II, III, V, VI

It may seem strange to consider an electronic encyclopedia in this connected world where "everything is online" but Encarta 2004 Reference Library Educator Edition is worth looking into, as it is much, much more than an electronic encyclopedia—it is more like an electronic library. Encarta is a wonderful tool for students and teachers. Encarta provides such a wide range of information that it really had the possibility of building an interface that was cumbersome and awkward. However, the program offers different interfaces and different entry points to information in a way that actually makes it easy to use and a wonderful tool for a variety of users who would like to access information in a nearly infinite number of ways.

For example, to find information about William Shakespeare, students may do a simple search from Encarta's search field. The search will return a list of resources, including articles and images. An interactive outline of the major content encourages students to jump directly to the portion they are interested in learning about. In addition, the search returns a dynamic time line related to the subject, in this example Shakespeare's life or MacBeth. Other choices that the search for William Shakespeare returns include a collection of 16 related multimedia items, including photos of Shakespeare's birthplace and the Globe Theatre, audio of Hamlet's

Lovely Ideas

Tips You Can Use

Looking for a little tool to use as you introduce new software or share Web sites or other materials with your students on a large screen, television screen, or other display device? Check out MasterPointer. You get all the tools shown in the image, which reside in a small floating toolbar on your Windows machine. You can highlight a phrase you want to stress, annotate on the fly as you lecture or discuss, spotlight an icon, enlarge a portion of your screen, grab a screen capture, and so much more! Check out the details, free trial, and more at <http://www.mastersolutionus.com/masterpointer.php>. The full version costs \$49.



soliloquy, and video of the balcony scene from a BBC production of *Romeo and Juliet*. Quotes from Shakespeare are provided in this section as well. Encarta includes a plethora of related articles (such as acting in Shakespeare's time and his influence on literature) as well as a lengthy list of books for further reading. As if this isn't enough, selected Web links add further points of view or depth to the material.

As students find information they might want to use in a project or paper, they can simply add it to a folder in their Researcher Tool where the information and the bibliographic and source information is also saved.

Encarta's wealth of material is well organized and accessible, but it is text heavy. For another entry point into these resources, students can choose the Visual Browser. In this view, the resources or sections of the article are available from graphic representations. They float across the screen; subpoints of sections appear as the graphics are selected. Some students seem to be drawn to this view, others preferred the more textual standard view described above.

Icons across the top of the screen lead students to tools and provide many other ways to access information. Included are literature guides, dictionaries, a thesaurus, a collection of quotations, and a large collection of Africana—and that's accessible from just the first icon! The extensive map center is a complete up-to-date interactive atlas as well as a historical reference tool. The Photos and More center is an access point to photos, videos, 3-D tours, charts, and tables. The homework center includes a report building tool, a tool for getting started, and tools for creating graphs and other interactive charts. This section also includes a curriculum guide for parents and teachers with curriculum content organized by country (United States and Canada), grade,



Encarta 2004 Educator Edition is much, much more than an electronic encyclopedia.

and subject area (science, English, social studies). Of course, there are more ways to access information: a dynamic time line, a statistics center, and a section for tours, but with an icon named Games you can bet some students will gravitate to this section first. Most of these games include recall of facts, but they are engaging and fun. This kind of fact recall may even offer a nice break from the heavy-duty research and learning students encounter in the other sections of Encarta.

The students I shared this product with were intrigued by the multiple access points to the information and also the speed of searching. They also seemed to appreciate the Web links and multimedia items they uncovered as they did their research.

From a teacher or technician's point of view, the ability to install the software and resources onto the hard drive of up to five stations and the easy update capability (a simple click and a download to get current information and integrate it into the program's resources) are really impor-

tant and useful tools. Without the complete install option this would be a nightmare. Imagine having to change CDs constantly (it has five) or having to use "stale" information. The browser-like format is easy to learn and use even for users with only a little computer experience, and it stays out of the way of the learning. Microsoft has thought this one through and come up with an excellent tool for students.



Gail Lovely (software@iste.org) has been involved in the educational technology world since she began teaching in 1980.

Gail earned her master's degree in educational technology from Pepperdine University and spent many years teaching in the Graduate School of Education and Psychology. In addition to her work with adult learners, Gail has taught students from kindergarten through high school. She believes software should enhance the learning and teaching process, making the teacher's work more effective, relevant, and meaningful.

Want to respond to an author?
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