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By [Lucas M. Thomas](#)

Updated: May 12, 2012 1:17 pm

Posted: Oct 16, 2008 11:55 pm

A little over a year ago, publisher [UFO Interactive](#) and developer [Starfish](#) teamed up to launch a new series on Nintendo DS. Called the Smart Kids line, its games featured educational entertainment targeted to the youngest DS players -- ages 3 and up. And while the titles' gameplay and visual style wouldn't appeal to players much older than that low age range, they were perfectly appropriate for the toddler-kindergarten set. And now, the sequels have arrived.

[Smart Girl's Party Game](#) is the follow-up to the girl-focused [Smart Girl's Playhouse](#) from last year. Like its predecessor, it's presented as a compilation of pre-school level mini-games and easy activities meant to be accessible to any young person who picks it up. But unlike Playhouse, which featured only 12 of these mini-games, Party Game has pushed that total up to 18.

There are now many more things to do than before, which wouldn't be all that impressive except for the fact that almost all 18 Party Game mini-games are brand new. None of them are recycled from the previous Playhouse package, except perhaps the Coloring mode -- but that was one of the most basic and best designs from the original, so its reappearance is more of a positive point than anything.

On the left,

The other 17 are first-run games, and they run the gamut from slow-paced challenges promoting thoughtful reasoning skills, to faster-paced action-oriented experiences. Or as much fast-paced action as is appropriate for a three-year-old, anyway -- they're things like Face Matching where you use the stylus to press buttons at the right time to stop one of three face portions to stop spinning on the top screen, and the Rabbit's Candy game where you tap arrows on the screen to steer a basket-holding bunny left and right, positioning her underneath pieces of candy falling from above.

The stylus is an optional tool, though, as like last year's Playhouse before it, Party Game offers oversized visuals that are easily touched by fingertips instead -- the youngest DS gamers don't often take to anything more advanced than just rubbing at the screen with their own little fingers anyway.

Creativity is encouraged through several of the designs, including the Doll House mode that lets little ladies put together a customized dollhouse one piece at a time -- they can decorate with coordinated colors and furniture, or do an off-the-wall makeover that has a full-on grand piano placed in a little girl's bedroom, next to a rocking horse. There's a Painting mode that updates Playhouse's Drawing design, and gives players established elements on the screen like a set of funny eyes or a witch's hat and encourages them to fill in the rest of the scene. And there are musical Bell Ringing and Xylophone modes, for those young women who are rhythmically inclined.

Other games take some critical thinking to complete, and key among them is the Ladder Game -- in it, characters appear on the top screen above a set of ladders, and an item they're seeking to retrieve is placed at the bottom of one of the columns. Players have to figure out which path the character will take down the ladders, as horizontal connectors between the vertical paths change their downward momentum any time they come to them. If needed, players can even add in extra connectors to correct their route and get them to the right stopping point on the ground below.

Overall, the increased variety, increased quantity and increased complexity of Party Game's offerings over last year's Playhouse compilation make it a compelling potential purchase -- but before getting to the end of the experience, players and their parents will unfortunately hit just a couple of rough spots. There were one or two games in Playhouse that were just a little bit off, and Party Game is no different.

Here's where I mentioned some issues with the Connect the Dots design in the Boy's Toys Club version review, but interestingly that issue doesn't seem to be as prevalent in the Girl's edition. There are still some tough elements to mention though, in places like the Ring Toss and Rock Paper Scissors games. In Ring Toss, the touch control needed to properly flick each ring from the bottom screen to the top is a bit too difficult to handle, meaning players likely won't find much success in that game.

And in Rock Paper Scissors, the same is true -- because of that game's natural basis on pure chance, there may be times when a girl playing it will just lose over and over again. It's not based on skill, or timing. Just luck. And that could be tough for little ladies to understand. It's unfortunate that the lack of polish in just a few of these designs could threaten to bring down the rest of the package, because there aren't many other errors that occur elsewhere.

Verdict

UFO Interactive is right on track with its strategy of reaching out to the youngest set of DS gamers, and the Smart Kids line of products has proven so far to be a series that's well worth the notice of parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts looking for appropriate presents for their littlest players. Smart Girl's Party Game is a step up from last year's Playhouse, offering more mini-games and a bit more complexity, but at the same budget price. It's not a perfect package, as occasional issues like the controls in Ring Toss and arbitrary nature of Rock Paper Scissors show that there are still ways to improve on this compilation concept. But, overall, any little lady who gets her hands on this game should have a blast, and end up a little Smarter because of it.

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StarfishOct 14, 2008

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