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uper Spy Protection System.



Tribune photo by Charles Osgood

Northwestern University sophomore Jordan Rost demonstrates "SNEAK: The Secret Network for Espionage Activity by Kids," a Web site he helped produce for a class called Children's Culture.

Making learning fun and games

NU students develop kids' toys for class

By Gina Kim
Tribune staff reporter

The children's games presented in a Northwestern University class Thursday aren't likely to be on toy store shelves soon, but their underlying principle—that kids can have fun while learning—is something toy companies should take note of, according to one expert.

"Toys should listen rather than do the talking," said Justine Cassell, a professor of communication and computer science who taught the class.

As part of the undergraduate course Children's Culture, students were asked to invent games and other "children's artifacts" such as toys and television shows based on childhood development theories they studied.

From a game that encourages freestyle rapping to a travel log for kids, every toy was designed to make children think, invent or explore, students said.

Ashley Shapiro and her partner created the "Neverending Storybook," a blank book that encourages children to write their own stories. Shapiro can't

remember having a toy that promoted those skills while she was growing up.

Constructed with erasable white board and complete with markers, the book helps children fashion stories with prompts to pick the title, setting, characters and moral.

"Toy companies either make super educational toys or mindless toys," said Shapiro, 21, a senior. "Kids want to learn, but they don't want to be bored."

Another group created a Web site, "SNEAK: The Secret Network for Espionage Activity by Kids," which allows children to become amateur spies with missions such as making their parents breakfast or learning how to disguise their voices. They can print out their official identification cards, learn tricks of the trade and share their spy stories with others signed on to the site.

And in the meantime they'll learn computer and Internet skills.

"A lot of toys are trying too hard to be educational, and a lot of toys fail to see that if they're not fun to use or fun to play with, kids aren't going to grasp them," said Jordan Rost, 20, a sophomore.

Frederic Tarver and his partner developed "Billy the Bear and Rico Suave," a television

program targeting African-American children.

The show incorporates hip-hop music to help children learn to spell and add while encouraging them to dance and sing. But most importantly, it talks in a language black children recognize, said Tarver, 21, a senior.

"'Sesame Street' is a good program, but the way the adults speak and the monsters speak is not like how African-Americans speak," Tarver said. "We don't have TV programs that speak to us the way our peers speak to us."

Tarver was originally drawn to the class because of the promise he could play with toys.

He learned that toy companies and children's programmers generally target one type of child and ignore the rest, he said.

Cassell has consulted for toy manufacturers such as Mattel and Fisher-Price for the last decade. Although she isn't going to pitch her students' ideas to any of the companies, she thinks important lessons can be learned from them.

"One thing toy companies have trouble knowing how to build is toys that encourage open-ended play," she said. "I try to bring them ways to build creative, imaginative language play."