



## Shrewsbury company creates a thinking kid's video game

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SHREWSBURY — For decades, the video game has been an important form of children's entertainment. While they are big on diversion, they are also considered educational because they build a foundation of basic words and numbers.

Jared Starr, founder of Smartchoiceskids, a Shrewsbury-based gaming company, has created a more forward-thinking video game called "Arthur and the Curse of the Rain Sorceress." The contest, a blend of movie and game, focuses on the cognitive art of making choices complete with consequences. Starr is essentially betting that kids at younger ages can learn life's most vital skill: critical thinking.

The game is set in the backdrop of a linear, Disney-like fairy tale. In simple terms, the enchantress places a drought spell on the village of Shire Creek. Her incantation puts the village crops at risk; hence, Arthur, a local villager, is summoned to save the day.

From an operational perspective, there are two modes of play, each administered by the story's Fairy Godmother. First, a child may control the game selecting choices as the story halts at critical junctures. Seeing that the game contains a mixed bag of consequences, this mode is best for parents and kids to have frank and constructive discussions between two possible alternatives.

The second mode is a movie-only option. The Fairy Godmother makes random choices while entertaining a boy or girl. Children can just sit back, relax and enjoy the show.

Starr began his artistic career at The Neighborhood Playhouse, an acting conservatory in New York City where he built an eclectic set of thespian talents around music, dance and theater. The 30-year-old Shrewsbury native graduated from George Washington University in Washington, D.C., in 2003 with a degree in political science.

He eventually returned to Shrewsbury and began his company in 2005 to further exercise his theatrical talents. Ultimately, Starr envisioned a new DVD game that appeals to consumers ages four through 10.

"There was no one doing this kind of choice and consequence learning via DVD," he says. "Knowing that VHS is a rigid linear technology, I saw that DVD's had great potential. (The game's) market segment are the tykes too old for 'Baby Einstein' and too young for violent themes."

Hence, Smartchoiceskids was born.

While plotting the business strategy, Starr saw entertainment time as a key competitive advantage relative to price. "Our DVD is busting at the seams," he says. "The competition's products cost between \$15 and \$25 and provide 45 minutes to an hour of entertainment. Our game is priced at \$19.95 and has over four hours of interactivity."

Starr's relocation back to Shrewsbury has been a boon for product development. Adam Starr, Jared's brother and an Emmy Award-winning cinematographer for his work on 2007's HBO film "Lest We Forget-The Black Holocaust," pitched in by filming the tall tale. He says he's proud to be affiliated with the project.

"Initially, I wasn't sure what this was all about, however, watching Jared work, I was blown away by the attention to detail and his commitment to quality," says Adam. "It's peculiar that there aren't more (games) like it."

Jared Starr also had a strong personal network of project participants. Stephanie Counard was the video's producer. Her background includes multimedia production for Pearson Education and PBS's popular, Emmy-nominated show, "Antiques Roadshow."

With SmartChoicesKids, "I realized that Jared had struck a perfect balance between entertainment and education," says Counard. "This new way of making a video interactive provides an inquiry-based approach to developing decision making skills."

Starr is also doing his part to create awareness for environmental preservation and social responsibility. The DVD packaging for the video is manufactured completely with sustainable materials. The disc tray is made from 100 percent recyclable potato starch, boxes and business cards all come from vegetable or soy stock and the shrink-wrap is plant-based and compostable.

"As a business, I feel it is our duty to use natural resources in a sustainable and respectful way so that we preserve biological diversity and pass on a healthy planet to our children," says Starr.

Smartchoiceskids kicked off its sales and marketing campaign in October, and the video has already impressed retailers. Jerry Hickman, owner of Jerry's Toy Store in Medway, says, "I was a little cautious about carrying the product. After I met Jared, I was totally convinced it was the right fit. It's appealing for the entertainment value as well as its electronic element. This is becoming increasingly important for kids ages four through nine."

But Smartchoiceskids has stiff competition. These days, children of all ages are into slinging "Angry Birds" on smart phones and building the Galactic Empire's "AT-AT Walker" with Legos. Nevertheless, Starr is confident in Smartchoiceskids. "Our product is a better choice," he says. "Our interactive DVD stimulates kids and provides game-like control over the story. In addition to being entertained, kids also learn lessons about making smart choices and how actions have consequences."

Thus far, Starr's future looks bright. The company has sold 100 DVDs, and even more impressive, he's shipped products to retailers in New Zealand, Israel, Thailand and the United Kingdom. Starr also sees the possibility of building his international presence by creating new storylines using the host country's local fables.

Starr is also no stranger to the increasingly important trend of portability. He is aiming to have an app ready for the iPhone and iPad by this summer.

The video is DVD compatible with any like player, Blu-ray included, and any game console that supports the DVD format. In addition, the game runs on Mac and Windows operating systems. To learn more about Smartchoiceskids and where to purchase the product, visit [www.smartchoiceskids.com](http://www.smartchoiceskids.com).

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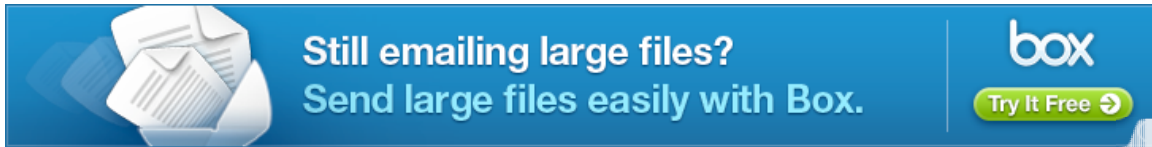
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