

Techno treats for under the tree

By Peter Menyasz

By the time you read this, the mid-December deadline for children writing letters to Santa – and receiving a response – will rapidly be approaching.

As in past years, the more than 11,000 current and retired Canada Post workers who serve as “Postal Elves” will cheerfully respond – in English and French, and even in Braille – to any letter written to Santa Claus, North Pole, Canada H0H 0H0.

The elves ask that you please don't enclose cookies or glasses of milk with the letters, as they don't travel well in the mail. But the real question is – what technology treats will children be looking for under the Christmas tree this year?

A new computer is always a safe bet, although if you've purchased hardware in the past couple of years, it's likely not time to upgrade quite yet. There haven't been any real leaps forward in computer technology in the last few years, and the only news on the computer hardware front is the continuing trend toward lower prices, particularly for laptops.

On the software front, however, PC owners should welcome the recent retail release of Windows 7 as an opportunity to upgrade their computers' operating systems for increased stability and some very interesting new features.

I'll be doing a detailed review of Win 7 soon, but the prerelease version I've been using for the past few months has been stable and user-friendly. It is certainly a significant improvement over both XP and Vista, both in stability and features, so would likely be worth the cost of upgrading. Mind you, I can't imagine a child's eyes lighting up after unwrapping a copy of Windows 7. The good news is that there are plenty of new games available for the major console and hand-held gaming systems that would certainly bring a smile on Christmas morning. Here are just a few you might want to consider:

★ If you don't yet have *Rock Band*, the recently released *Beatles* version would be a great way to start, and if you already have the game, it's a must-have addition. I've always favoured *Guitar Hero* because I find the guitar part of *Rock Band* less challenging, but that's certainly not the case in the Beatles version of the game.

The guitar work is tricky, even on what you would think are the easiest songs, and in addition to the joy of playing the songs I grew up hearing on the radio and on my record player, I was pleasantly surprised to discover songs I didn't even know the Beatles had performed – and I thought I knew them all.

★ If there's a Nintendo DS in the family, Disney Interactive Studios' recent releases of games alongside two feature films – *The Princess and the Frog* and *A Christmas Carol* – would make excellent choices for the younger members of the family. *The Princess and the Frog* (also available for Wii or Windows PC) offers 25 mini-games that let players take Princess Tiana on an adventure in 1920s New Orleans, meeting characters from the film, defeating enemies, performing music, and cooking Cajun-style. *A Christmas Carol*, exclusively on DS, allows players to experience Scrooge's adventures with the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future through an interactive storybook approach. Plus there are holiday activities including carol-singing, decorating with ornaments, and cooking Victorian-era recipes, and the game even includes the full English text of Charles Dickens' original story. There's also an on-line feature that allows players to chat with others and unlock additional items for the game.

★ The ever-popular Wii system offers plenty of new games this Christmas, including *Toy Story Mania* and *Baseball Blast*. *Disney's Toy Story Mania*, based on the feature films and the 4-D Toy Story Mania attraction at Disneyland and Disney World, provides a range of mini-games including carnival-inspired shooting galleries, multi-player competitive and cooperative modes, and even levels in 3-D. Players can also team up to unlock Easter eggs and other collectibles. *Baseball Blast* offers more than 20 mini-games for up to four players, including skill challenges, puzzles, and trivia matches featuring actual Major League Baseball teams and hosted by "Mr. Baseball" Bob Uecker. According to next-door neighbour Ashley Drummond, who reviewed the game for me on her Wii, "the announcer's voice and music give the game the whole baseball feel, and it has good graphics and awesome games." The Cannonballs and Diamond Double mini-games help boost your batting skills, Power Pitcher tests your arm, and Fly Ball Fury trains your catching skills. "The mini-game that I found most entertaining was Bumper Base," Ashley said. "I played with my Dad and it was hilarious – we kept pushing each other off the base."

★ If your console gaming system is an Xbox 360, the new version of *Forza Motorsport* is a significant upgrade with the super-realism of its more than 400 customizable cars and 100 tracks. *Forza Motorsport 3* offers high-definition

graphics, full-body and mechanical damage, customizable paint jobs and vehicle performance tuning, and true-to-life vehicle cockpits. Additional tracks and cars are available for download from Xbox Live through a one-time use token provided with the game.

★ The latest version of Disney's popular karaoke series, *Disney Sing It: Pop Hits* – available for Wii, PS2 and PS3 – lets young players and teenagers sing along with hit songs and music videos by Miley Cyrus, the Jonas Brothers, Taylor Swift, Colbie Caillat, Demi Lovato, Hannah Montana, Jesse McCartney, Coldplay, and many more popular recording artists. Players can sing solo, duet, or even compete head-to-head in multi-player mode. You can even record and play back your favourite karaoke performances. There are singing tips and vocal lessons from Disney Channel's Tiffany Thornton (Tawni Hart in the *Sonny with a Chance* series), from breathing and pitch exercises to harmonizing and riffing. That barely scratches the surface of what's on the market for this holiday season, but provides a few ideas to get you started.

Good luck with your gift-hunting, and Happy Holidays wishes to you and your family!

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