



## Level Playing Field

Some time ago, I was given a CD-ROM for my Macintosh computer that contained a selection of computer games. I wasn't happy about this, because I don't like the idea of seeing my kids sitting in front of the screen for hours, shooting away at coloured blobs representing space aliens, so my first impulse was simply to throw this disc away. But before doing so, I browsed through it myself to get an idea of what recent computer games looked like. What did I find? Space aliens ... pachinko ... mahjong ... more space aliens ... card games ... and so on and so on. It seemed I could throw it away with a clear conscience. I couldn't do that though, without checking everything on the disc first. It's not only cats that can be curious ...

You know what's coming up, right? Starting one of the games, I was faced with a curious screen display. No aliens. No playing cards. Just a black marble surrounded by various shapes. When I moved the mouse, the marble rolled around the screen, coloured lights flashed, and then a moment later ... 'Game Over'. I had failed. I started again, trying to understand what was happening. And this time, after more flashing, the message came ... 'Next Level'. I had succeeded. At what, I had no idea. The next level was totally different in appearance. "What is this? How does it work?" About fifteen minutes or so later, I finally understood the idea. 'Next level ...' Again, a different screen ... and another intriguing challenge ... It was hours before I could put it away.

And now you are probably laughing at me. It wasn't a game, it was a puzzle - with 100 levels. When I showed it to my daughters they caught on quickly, and nearly every day since then, the three of us have been spending time with this fascinating, but sometimes frustrating program. The girls have climbed to a very high level, solving puzzles that I was sure would be too difficult for them. They only call me for help when they are completely baffled.

So I am re-thinking my ideas on computer games. Am I crazy to let my kids spend so much time with this thing? Solving puzzles can't be bad for them, can it? I think I'll let them play with it for as long as they wish ... as long as they promise not to tell me any of the 'secrets' of the puzzles. Because I too, am working my way up that ladder of 100 steps. I think that I'll be able to catch them soon, as the high levels are very difficult. Perhaps we'll arrive at the finish together ...

Now if you will excuse me, I have to shut down this word processing program. There's something more serious waiting for me. Just how am I going to get through all those glass windows on level 82 without breaking my marble?

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