



The Creature Games

Creature Antics
Creature Chorus
Creature Capers
Creature Cartoons
Creature Features
Creature Magic

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Everybody loves computer games, but these programs are unique. They can be enjoyed by individuals with severe/profound disabilities, including those functioning below nine months of age. These entertaining games introduce and reinforce cause and effect, turn-taking, discrete use of the TouchWindow, control of a single switch, as well as critical cognitive and language concepts. Many teachers also use them to reward their students for good work. Long after children (or adults for that matter) understand their ability to affect the environment, they'll still enjoy playing these games.

Creature Antics, *Creature Capers*, and *Creature Features* were designed to be used by individuals functioning as low as four months of age. *Creature Cartoons* can also be used with persons functioning at this level, but it has features that make it more useful for those whose cognitive abilities are much higher but who need to learn switch control. Individuals functioning at four months of age and below fall into Laureate's Linguistic Hierarchy Stage I, Interpreted Communication. In this stage, noises, cries, facial expressions, and movements are interpreted by the parent or caregiver. For the normally developing infant, this stage lasts until about 4 months of age. Individuals of all ages with Developmental Disabilities (DD), however, may be found to function within this stage of development. People functioning at this level have no intent to communicate. They do not understand that they can affect the environment. Learning the concepts of cause and effect and turn-taking are critical to the development of communication.

Central to effective language intervention at this stage are caregivers skilled in facilitating the development of communication in meaningful caregiver-child dyads. Professionals can be both counselors and models for parents and caregivers. They can help parents to enrich conversational turn-taking episodes with their children. Helping caregivers become better communication facilitators is a key component in effective language intervention programs. In addition, we can and should take advantage of computer technology to facilitate language acquisition.

Laureate has provided clinical services to many individuals functioning at the Interpreted Communication Stage. We use software to help them realize that they can affect the environment. Our first goal is to have

them attend to the computer-produced animation and graphics. Our ultimate goal is to have them recognize that their action causes a reaction. Computer programs designed for this purpose are usually referred to as cause and effect games. By incorporating speech output into our early cause and effect switch activation programs, we provide training within a linguistic environment that emulates the infant-caregiver dyad.

Like the other creature games, *Creature Chorus* and *Creature Magic* can be used by individuals functioning as low as four months of age. *Creature Chorus*, however, also offers training for persons functioning in Laureate's Stage II, Intentional Communication. When a person is functioning in this stage, the concept of cause and effect with switch activation is understood. *Creature Chorus* can be used to train switch use, visual tracking, discrete pointing, and turn-taking. *Creature Magic* is most appropriate for individuals functioning in Laureate's Stage III, Single Words. It introduces critical cognitive concepts and linguistic structures important for children functioning in the Single Words Stage to master before moving on to word combinations.

Before introducing a user to software, you need to choose an interface device for the computer. We cannot overemphasize the importance of matching an appropriate interface with a person's physical and cognitive abilities. For the infant with severe handicaps, this could be a kick plate switch. For the older individual with DD, it could be a TouchWindow or a rocker switch. In making a switch choice, obtain as much information as possible from caregivers, physical and occupational therapists, special educators, psychologists, and speech-language pathologists. Their input should be used as the basis for your decision.

Creature Antics, Creature Capers, and Creature Features

Once we have chosen an appropriate switch interface, we introduce our clients to *Creature Antics*, *Creature Capers*, and *Creature Features*. These instructional games were all designed to be introduced to persons functioning within Stage I, Interpreted Communication. Each has five separate games designed to engage auditory and visual attention through animation, noises, and natural sounding speech. In each game, a creature requests that the individual participate, just as a mother would prompt her pre-intentional infant. When the user responds, the creature performs an animated routine.

Creature Antics, *Creature Capers*, and *Creature Features* all target the same goals and objectives, but each has a unique set of characters and routines. *Creature Antics'* games feature the Blob of *First Words* fame, as well as Boz, Breaker, Roggi, and the Punk Poodles. These zany creatures appear, disappear and move across the screen. The activities are designed to help the user develop the concept of cause and effect, turn-taking, attending, and tracking. *Creature Capers* introduces a different set of characters - Wiz, Punch, Zardok, Rab, and The Globs. Like its companion programs, *Creature Capers* assists users in the acquisition of concepts and skills critical to communication development. *Creature Features* rounds out the family of four programs targeting the lowest level skills in our Linguistic Hierarchy. In addition to Rip, Face, Fish (Tommy Trout in the Mac version), and Pixel, *Creature Features* has Mary's favorite character Emcee, the zany computer using alien. She especially loves the part where a magnifying glass appears and you discover that the little things that jumped out of his computer are "bugs."

We realize of course that the users these programs are targeted for won't appreciate this sly humor. We include these elements in our Creature Games for another reason, to amuse the aides and direct care providers who work with the individuals these programs serve. In fact, that's one of the reasons we have three early Creature programs and a total of 15 different routines. When we first started developing these programs, we were providing communication services to an adults with DD, many of whom were functioning in the profound range. The communication assistants who we supervised asked for more games. While our clients remained engaged and failed to get bored with only five games, our assistants wanted more variety to keep them engaged and motivated when working with the clients!

The emergence of intentionality is the first critical step in communication development. This important step sometimes takes a very long time to occur. It is well worth the wait, however, for without intentionality, communication cannot take place. Even after individuals show evidence of intentional communication, continued use of *Creature Antics*, *Creature Capers*, and *Creature Features* can be beneficial. These programs exercise turn-taking and the use of an appropriate interface, which are both important skills to be used with other training software throughout linguistic development. The engaging characters also continue to be enjoyable long after these skills have been mastered. Computer play is fun, and we should never forget that having fun in life is important to everyone.

Creature Chorus, Creature Cartoons, and Creature Magic

We introduce *Creature Chorus* after a client is intentionally interacting with programs but before s/he has necessarily mastered turn-taking. *Creature Chorus* can be used to train switch activation, turn-taking,

tracking, and the ability to accurately touch a discrete area on a touch screen. Nine different games are available. They feature a cast of eight creatures who lead users through a variety of activities. Games range from Energizer which features only one creature on the screen at a time, to the two creature Pair Pranks, and Songfest where all eight little guys perform together. Shrinker is a touch screen game that trains discrete pointing by requiring the user to touch inside a gradually shrinking box that surrounds an animated creature.

Creature Cartoons is somewhat different from the other creature games in that the five games are actually short cartoons with amusing story lines. Like the other games, it can be used to train cause and effect as well as turn-taking. The cartoons are also ideally suited for training clients how to control a switch regardless of their language functioning level. Young children with cerebral palsy can "work" at developing switch control by stepping through the cartoon with switch activation. After they have finished, you can set the program to run without prompts and the cartoon runs without switch activation. This is especially rewarding for children with motor impairments as learning to use a switch often requires intense concentration and sometimes tiring physical interaction.

Each of the five cartoons in *Creature Cartoons* features a different movie star. Candy tools around in her little roadster Carlos and encounters water-skiing ducks, pokey cows, and a sleepy toll booth keeper moose among others. Andy is a carpenter ant who creates all sorts of intriguing contraptions. Hamlet is a festively dressed pig who gathers up items to take to the market. Willy is a young boy who has a dream about losing his teddy bear and zooms around in his wheelchair searching for him. The last star is Fuzzy, a ferret on a camping trip, on whom the raccoons like to play tricks.

The last creature game is *Creature Magic*. It was designed to introduce children functioning in the one word stage to cognitive and linguistic concepts necessary to comprehend in order to advance to two word combinations. Even though it introduces concepts important in Stage III, Single Words, it can be used as a cause and effect, turn-taking program for those functioning in Stage II, Intentional Communication. If you are starting early vocabulary training, this is an ideal game to pair with one or all of the *Early Vocabulary Development Series* programs (*First Words*, *First Words II*, *First Verbs*). As soon as a person can activate a computer interface for cause and effect, s/he can be introduced to the lowest level of these vocabulary training programs. Similarly, once someone can intentionally interact with a program s/he has the skill needed to benefit from using *Creature Magic*. The four games on *Creature Magic* introduce important language and cognitive concepts. In the first game, The Wiz introduces the concept of non-existence by making things appear and disappear. For example, he shows a baby and tells the user "This baby has a bottle," or "This baby has no bottle. No bottle." The Wiz and other little characters shake their heads for "No bottle." By pairing the construction Determiner+Noun (e.g. No hair) with the non-existence concept, we're making the user aware of linguistic structure as well as cognitive concepts. In the second game, Wiz demonstrates the difference between one and more than one object. Again users are being introduced to the cognitive concepts of one and more than one while at the same time hearing the linguistic marking of regular singular and plural in English. The third game illustrates the prepositions "in" and "on," both of which are early developing concepts and words. The fourth game shows the importance

of word order in simple sentence structure. It introduces contrasting canonical Subject-Verb-Object sentences like “The dog is chasing the cat,” and “The cat is chasing the dog.

All of the Creature Games engage users while they provide valuable training experiences across a range of physical, cognitive, and linguistic tasks. Even after users have mastered all the concepts and skills the games are designed to train, they still enjoy them for their entertainment value.



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