



## Sausalito company Morphonix focuses on brain power

Jim Welte

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Karen Littman, president of Morphonix in Sausalito, watches as Aidan Tull (5), plays a video game in her office. The game is designed to teach kids about the brain. (IJ photo/Frankie Frost)

Five-year-old Aidan Tull got off the elevator and immediately began flitting about, ducking behind his mother Linda and peeping out from behind her leg. He was behaving like any kid walking into an officelike setting surrounded by adults.

But once he parked himself into the small bear-shaped chair in front of a computer and grabbed hold of its tiny mouse, Aidan's eyes lit up. And then he got down to business.

He was presented with a series of image pairs and asked to click on which of the two - dog vs. carrot, monkey vs. banana, frog vs. log - had a brain. He nailed each one and heard information about the

brain of each of his choices as they loaded onto a train that departed from the Brain Depot.

Aidan was at the downtown Sausalito office of Morphonix, a video game company that specializes in neuroscience-related games for young people. He was playing a section of "Every BODY Has a Brain," a game in the early stages of development that is being funded by a grant from the National Institutes of Health. Morphonix is in the midst of inviting children ages 4-6 to play the game and get their feedback in an effort to fine-tune its development.

Aidan, who lives in Corte Madera and attends Marin Montessori, said he liked "everything" about the game. His mother, Linda, elaborated: "This is brilliant. Montessori is all about stimulating the brain and designing material around the brain, but doesn't talk about the brain directly."

"Every BODY Has a Brain" is the third game developed by Morphonix, which was founded in 1990 by San Rafael resident Karen Littman. The previous two, "Journey Into the Brain" (ages 7-11) and "Neuromatrix" (ages 11-14), also were funded with grants from the National Institutes of Health. Morphonix has received more than \$5 million in federal grants to develop its games. Parents and teachers are Morphonix's primary consumers, and the company has sold 55,000 copies of "Journey Into the Brain."

"The idea behind all of our games is to take this abstract concept of the brain and neuroscience and make them more concrete by applying a story to them," Littman said.

Morphonix is advised by a number of prominent doctors in the neuroscience field, including Floyd Bloom, the former editor of Science magazine, and University of Washington professor Eric Chudler, who runs the Web site Neuroscience for Kids.

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Warren Buckleitner, editor of Children's Technology Review, said he hadn't seen the new Morphonix game yet but had viewed an earlier version of "Neuromatrix." He said a company like Morphonix, which has only three employees, faces major hurdles in reaching a broad audience and competing in the massive video game industry, which recorded \$1.17 billion in sales in June in the midst of an economic downturn.

"The thing that is magic about this medium is that it takes concepts that are really hard to understand and makes them concrete," he said. "If I was king, I would be funding a lot more of these kinds of things for things like neurology and health-related fields."

When Aidan finished playing, Littman sought additional feedback from her pint-sized adviser.

"Where is your heart?" she asked. Aidan pointed to his chest.

"Does your heart think?" He shook his head.

"What keeps the heart beating?"

"The brain stem!" he replied, nearly leaping off the couch with a level of excitement about neuroscience rarely seen in a 5-year-old.

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