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12 games that teach kids to code – and are even fun, too

DAN CRAWLEY ([HTTP://VENTUREBEAT.COM/AUTHOR/DAN-CRAWLEY/](http://VENTUREBEAT.COM/AUTHOR/DAN-CRAWLEY/)) JUNE 3, 2014 10:15 AM

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Above: Getting kids to code shouldn't be hard work when there are so many great games about.

Image Credit: Thijs Knaap/Flickr

Coding is a big deal right now. Worldwide, 36 million kids have taken part in "Hour of code (<http://csedweek.org/>)" activities, helping them become active, rather than passive users of technology and starting learning that might one day help secure a job in our increasingly tech-driven world.

Even if your kids don't go on to code for living, a basic understanding of programming concepts improves problem-solving and thinking skills which are both transferable and empowering. Microsoft chairman Bill Gates (<http://uk.code.org/>) says that: "Learning to write programs stretches your mind and helps you think better, creates a way of thinking about things that I think is helpful in all domains."

Platforms like Scratch (<http://scratch.mit.edu/>) and Alice (<http://www.alice.org/index.php>) let children (and adults) create their own games and animations using simplified coding methods. But not all kids can or want to jump straight into these sort of environments. For them, there are plenty of games around that will teach the basics of programming in a fun and accessible way.

We've sorted through some of the ever-widening options available, including a few still in development, so you don't have to. They cut across multiple platforms — iOS, Android, PC, Mac, even board games — and many are free to pick up and play straight away.

Lightbot and Lightbot Jr.

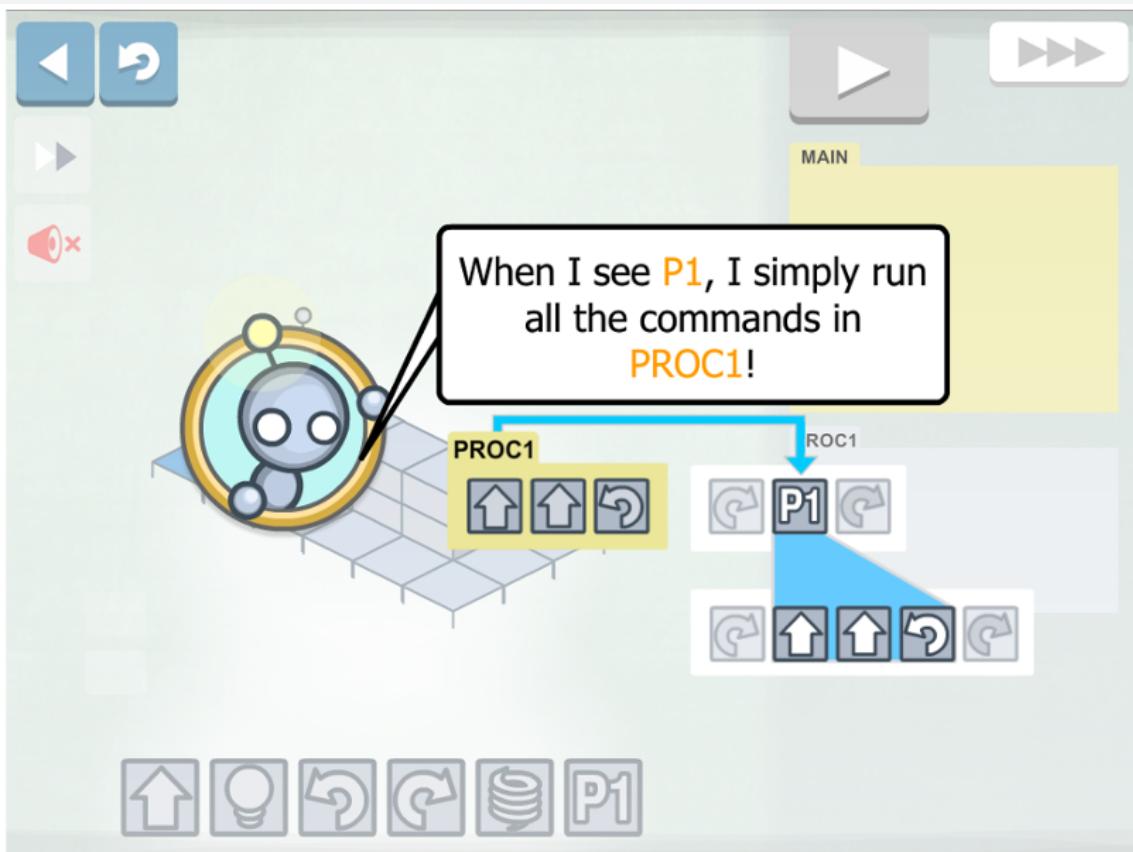
Who it's for: Ages 4-8 (Lightbot Jr.), 9+ (Lightbot)

Platforms: Web browsers, iOS, Android

Pricing: Free (browser), \$3 (iOS/Android)

Find out more: Browser game (<http://light-bot.com/hocflash.html>), iTunes (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/lightbot-programming-puzzles/id657638474?mt=8>), Google Play (<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.lightbot.lightbot>)

The expert view: "Although it seems simple, Lightbot foreshadows some interesting aspects of more sophisticated computer programming" — Fritz Ruehr (<http://www.willamette.edu/~fruehr/141/lightbotintro.html>), Associate Professor of Computer Science, Willamette University, Ore.



(<http://venturebeat.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/lightbot.png>)

Above: Many schools use Lightbot to help teach programming basics, and it even has a place in some university curricula.

Image Credit: Dan Crawley

Lightbot is a programming puzzle game from Danny Yaroslavski, a Canadian university student. The goal is to make your robot light up all of the blue tiles on a 3D grid. The twist is that you have to do this in one run by programming your robot with a series of instructions.

Yaroslavski says that Lightbot teaches concepts like planning, testing, debugging, procedures, and loops. Your kids will just enjoy getting the endearing robot to light up everything in one turn.

You can play a free version, suitable for an hour of gameplay, on your mobile device or through your browser (<http://light-bot.com/hocflash.html>). Two full versions of Lightbot, for different age groups, are on sale on iTunes and Google Play.

Code Monkey Island

Who it's for: Ages 8+

Platforms: Board game

Pricing: \$40+

Find out more: Code Monkey Island website (<http://codemonkeyplanet.com/>), Kickstarter (<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/rajsidhu/code-monkey-island-making-programming-childs-play>)

(<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/rajsidhu/code-monkey-island-making-programming-childs-play>)The expert view: "Code Monkey Island is a crazy-fun board game that introduces kids to programming." — Educator and technology-access activist Phil Shapiro (<https://twitter.com/philshapiro/status/468493994872569857>)



(<http://venturebeat.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/code-monkey-island.png>)

Above: Code Monkey Island won't magically make your kids into programmers, but it will ground them in basic concepts.

Image Credit: Kickstarter

Brooklyn resident Raj Sidhu wanted to introduce programming basics to kids in a fun way. He chose a low-tech solution for a high-tech problem and embedded concepts like Boolean logic (<http://computer.howstuffworks.com/boolean.htm>) and conditional statements in a family-friendly board game.

Code Monkey Island is straightforward to play and takes about 45 minutes. Players use cards with statements such as, "For each monkey NOT on a rock, move 3 spaces," to move their troop of monkeys around the island.

Sidhu chose a board game because these bring families together. "I wanted to create an experience that kids, parents, and grandparents could share and in the process allow children to exercise their immense learning capabilities through play," he said on his Kickstarter page

(<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/rajsidhu/code-monkey-island-making-programming-childs-play>).

Code Monkey Island ran a successful Kickstarter, and copies should ship in August. You can secure one by backing the project for \$40 or more.

Kodable

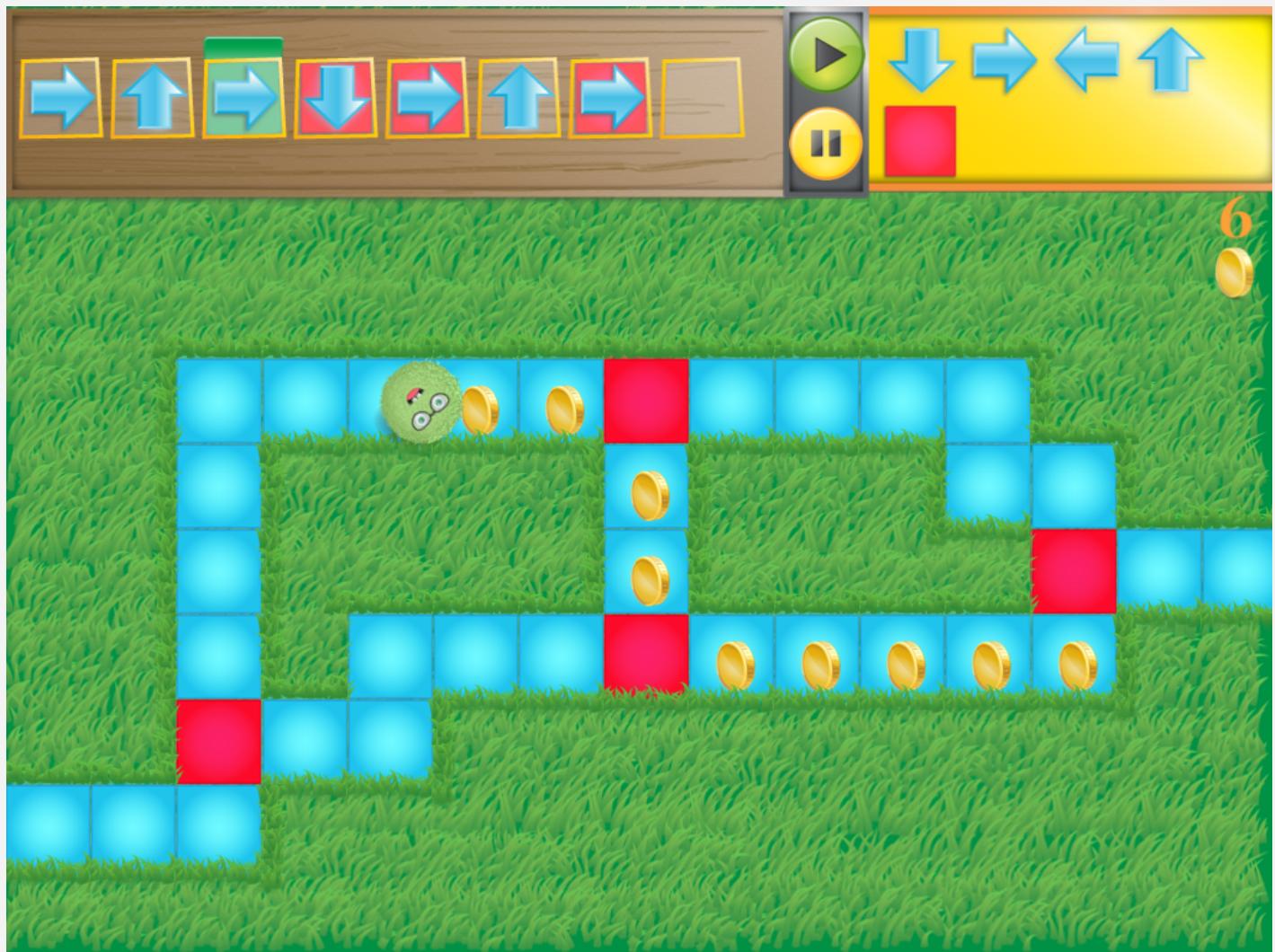
Who it's for: Ages 5-8

Platforms: iOS

Pricing: Free (\$7 for the Pro version)

Find out more: Kodable website (<http://www.kodable.com/>), iTunes (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/kodable/id577673067?mt=8>)

The expert view: "Kodable scaffolds programming skills so that young children can learn how to code. They don't even have to know how to read." — Terri Eichholz (<http://engagetheirminds.wordpress.com/2013/12/12/kids-can-code-with-kodable/>), teacher of K-5 gifted students, South Central Texas



(<http://venturebeat.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/kodable.png>)

Above: Kids are young as 2 use Kodable, according to cofounder Grechen Huebner.

Image Credit: Carli Spina

Kodable's 105 maze-like levels help teach young kids programming concepts like conditions, loops, functions, and debugging.

It avoids using text entirely, making it a great entry point for younger children. Its alien protagonists are fuzzy and colorful and seem to have that kid appeal nailed down.

"Adults are so terrified of programming; it's this scary thing," Kodable co-founder Grechen Huebner told TechRepublic ("Adults%20are so terrified of programming, it's this scary thing," Huebner said. "It's funny how much adults underestimate kids, and giving them an opportunity to be challenged at such an early age proves how smart they are."). "It's funny how much adults underestimate kids, and giving them an opportunity to be challenged at such an early age proves how smart they are."

The free version of Kodable includes the first 45 levels. In-app purchases can unlock more levels and concepts. The \$7 Pro version also adds vocabulary lessons and learning guides.

Robozzle

Who it's for: Ages 6+ (and adults)

Platforms: Web browsers, iOS, Android, Windows phone

Pricing: Free (browser), free to \$2 (mobile)

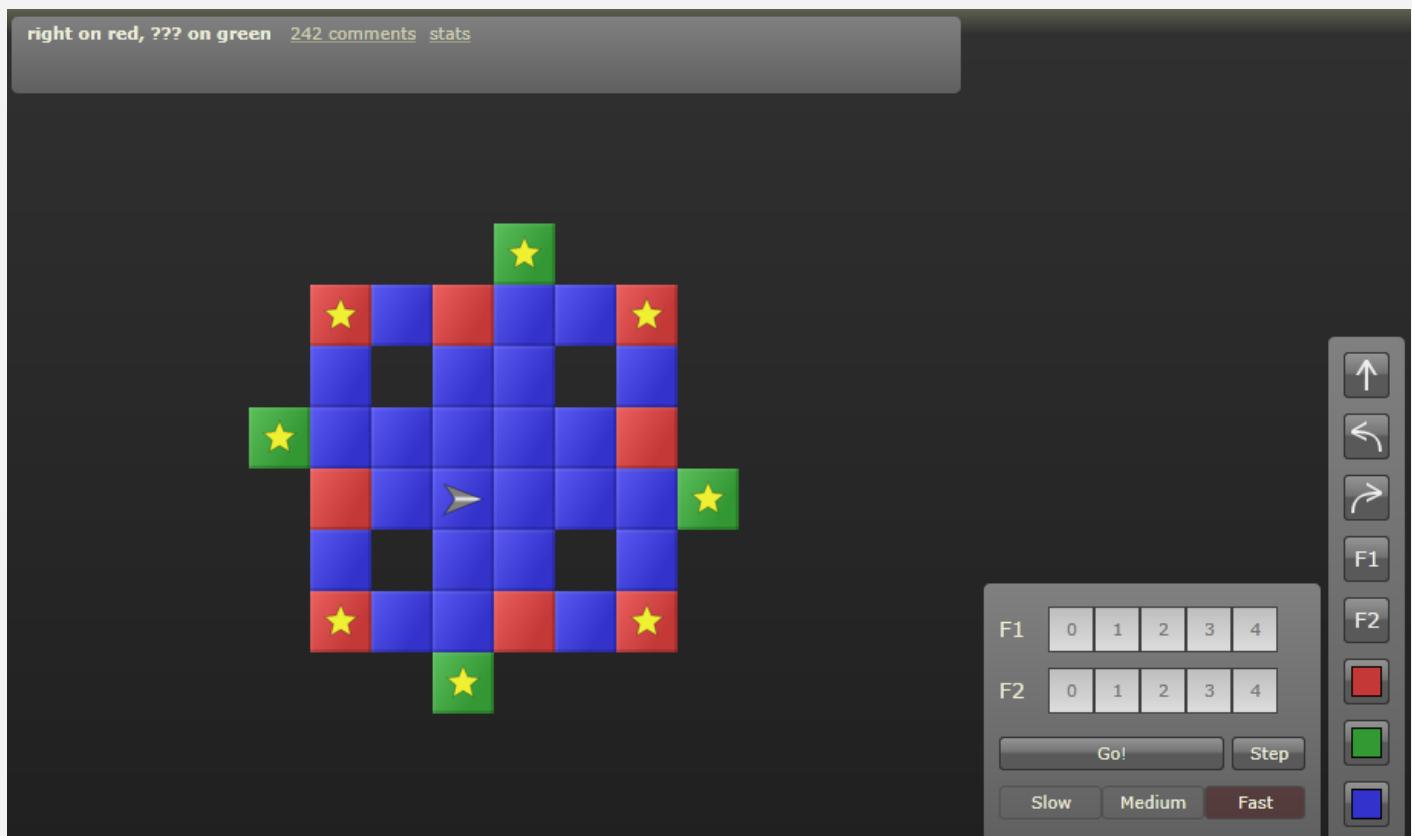
Find out more: Browser game (<http://www.robozzle.com/>), iTunes

(<https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/robozzle/id350729261?mt=8>), Google Play

(<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.team242.robozzle>), Windows store

(<http://www.windowsphone.com/en-us/store/app/robozzle/88b6ac03-ba59-e011-854c-00237de2db9e>)

The expert view: "Robozzle bills itself as a social puzzle game, but to me it's a fun and interesting way to introduce programming concepts. And perhaps it is a game to get young people interested in programming." — High school computer-science teacher Alfred Thompson ([http://blogs.msdn.com/b/alfredth/archive/2009/07/23/robozzle-a-social-puzzle-game.aspx?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+ComputerScienceTeacher+\(Computer+Science+Teacher+-+Thoughts+and+Information+from+Alfred+Thompson\)](http://blogs.msdn.com/b/alfredth/archive/2009/07/23/robozzle-a-social-puzzle-game.aspx?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+ComputerScienceTeacher+(Computer+Science+Teacher+-+Thoughts+and+Information+from+Alfred+Thompson)))



(<http://venturebeat.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/robozzle-screen.png>)

Above: Robozzle looks simple at first but soon reveals its complexities.

Image Credit: Dan Crawley

If you're looking for challenge for older kids (or yourself), try Robozzle. It's a puzzle game that Microsoft programmer Igor Ostrovsky (<http://igoro.com/>) created in his free time.

Robozzle tasks you with guiding a robot through a series of mazes using limited commands. The levels range from those suitable for younger children right up to puzzles that will make seasoned coders scratch their heads.

It's free to play through browsers (using Silverlight), and community support enables players to create, vote, and comment on new levels.

Versions of Robozzle exist for iOS, Windows Phone 7, and Android. Prices vary.

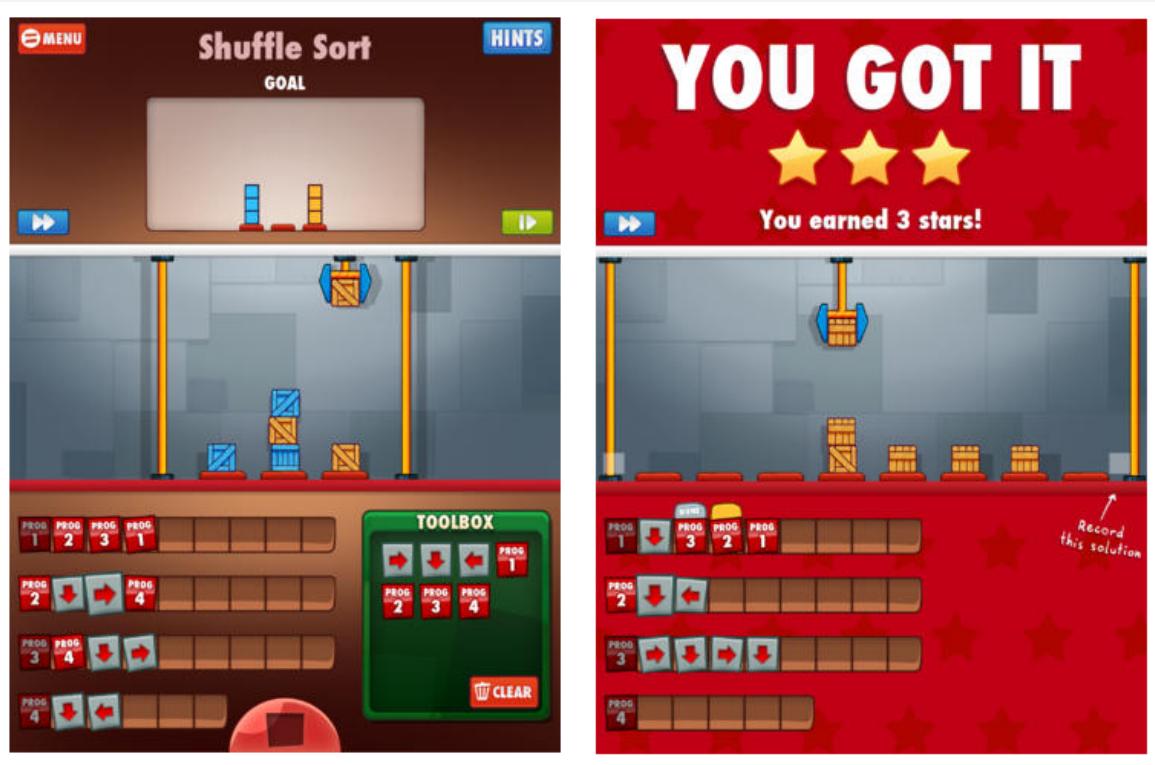
Cargo-Bot

Who it's for: 5+ to adults

Platforms: iOS

Pricing: Free

Find out more: iTunes (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/cargo-bot/id519690804?mt=8>)
<https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/cargo-bot/id519690804?mt=8>)
 The expert view: "Great iPad app to teach coding. Used it with my two kiddos." — Educational entrepreneur and Google Teacher Academy co-founder Mike Lawrence
<https://twitter.com/techmaverick/status/409902685744541697>)



(<http://venturebeat.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/cargo-bot.png>)

Above: Cargo-Bot was created with Codea on an iPad.

Image Credit: Dan Crawley

Cargo-Bot was the first game programmed entirely on an iPad. It's accessible for kids as young as five on its easiest levels, but it offers a real challenge as it progresses.

Players use a moving crane to shift boxes around a factory. In doing so, they use coding concepts like loops and procedures and do a ton of debugging.

"I wanted it to be a game about moving blocks around with a claw and make you forget that you are in fact programming," developer Rui Viana told Fast Company (<http://www.fastcodesign.com/1669821/cargo-bot-an-addictive-ipad-game-that-teaches-programming-concepts>).

SpaceChem

Who it's for: Ages 10+ (and adults)

Platforms: PC, Mac, Linux, iOS, Android

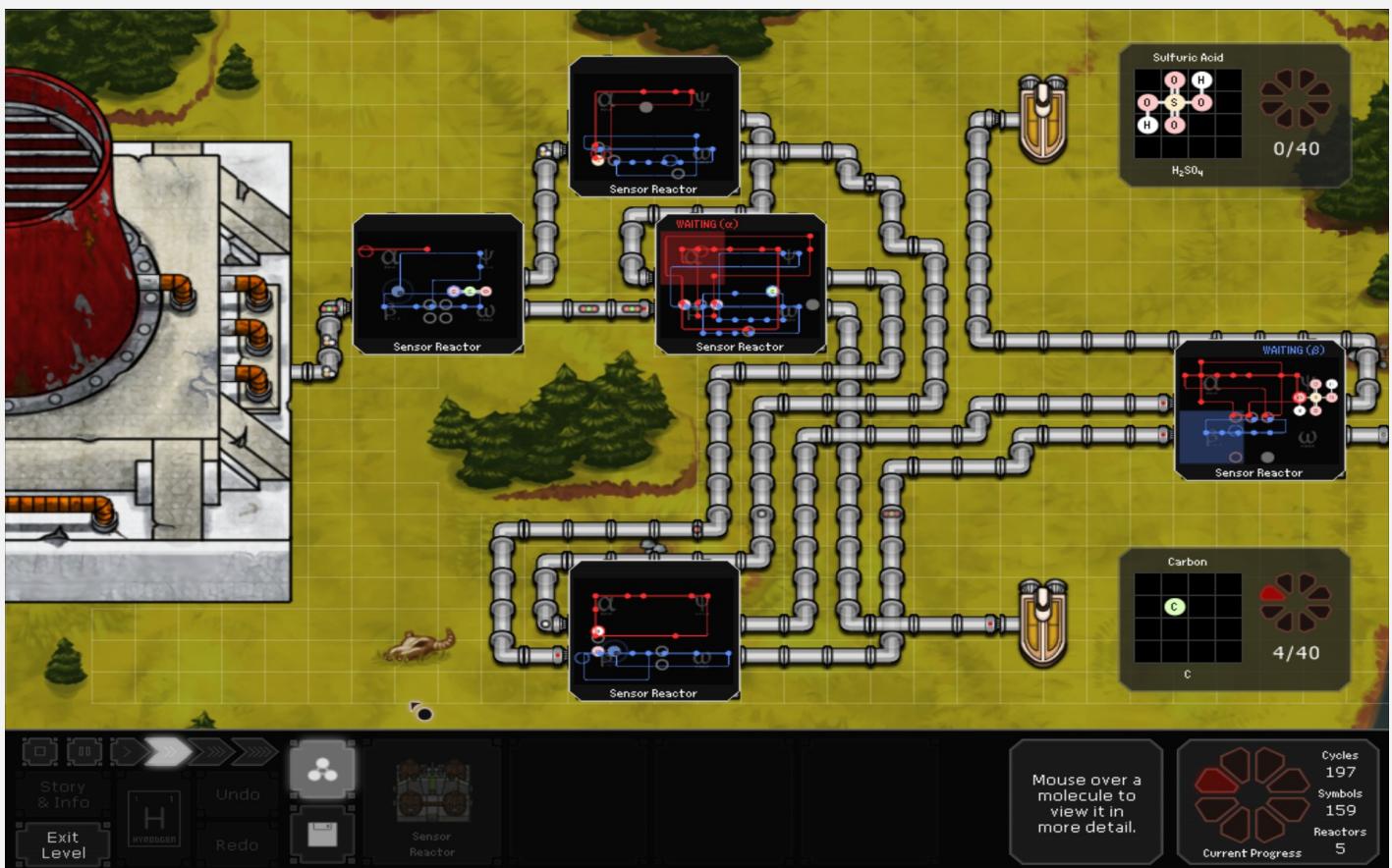
Pricing: Free demo, \$10 (Steam), \$3 (iOS/Android)

Find out more: SpaceChem website (<http://www.spacechemthegame.com/>), Steam (<http://store.steampowered.com/app/92800/>), iTunes

(<https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/spacechem-mobile/id466007612?mt=8>), Google Play

(<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.zachtronicsindustries.android.spacechem>)

The expert view: "I believe SpaceChem [is] the best programming game yet made." — Neil Brown (<http://academiccomputing.wordpress.com/2012/07/19/programming-games-spacechem/>), Computing education researcher, University of Kent, U.K.



(<http://venturebeat.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/spacechemlevel.jpg>)

Above: Schools worldwide have used SpaceChem to support learning. It's still very much a game, though.

Image Credit: Gaming to Learn

SpaceChem's fusion of programming and pseudo-chemistry in a science-fiction setting earned great reviews (<http://www.metacritic.com/game/pc/spacechem>) on its 2011 release.

Tough enough to challenge high-school students and beyond, SpaceChem tasks players with building machines to fight monsters, using programming concepts like in-order execution, loops, branching, and subroutines. Developer Zachtronic Industries details exactly what the game can help teach in its educators guide (<http://www.zachtronics.com/SpaceChem%20-%20A%20Guide%20for%20Educators.pdf>).

"SpaceChem is the game I wish I could give to my 12-year-old self and let him go crazy," according to educational blog Gaming to Learn (<http://gamingtolearn.wordpress.com/2013/05/19/space-chem/>). "When you hear people talking about how important it is to learn to write code, this is what they are talking about. Games like this teach the gamer how to think."

Robot Turtles

Who it's for: Ages 3-8

Platforms: Board game

Pricing: \$25

Find out more: Robot Turtles website (<http://www.thinkfun.com/robotturtles/>) – Kickstarter (<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/danshapiro/robot-turtles-the-board-game-for-little-programmer>)

The expert view: "Man, start 'em young! This is awesome! The future is looking bright!" — John Legere (<https://twitter.com/JohnLegere/status/437625873924366336>), Chief executive officer, T-Mobile



(<http://venturebeat.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/robot-turtles.jpg>)

Above: Playing a game of Robot Turtles.

Image Credit: YouTube

This programming board game for very young kids raised over \$600,000 on Kickstarter last year. It only needed \$25,000 to get funded.

Such was the demand for the game, which teaches programming fundamentals by using instruction cards to command turtles around a maze, that it sold out of its initial 25,000 production run straight away. Kids use limited syntax, sequence instructions, and debug when they've made an error, and the game only takes seconds to learn according to creator Dan Shapiro.

"I'm a big believer that programming is like a superpower you can give kids, a way to ensure that the innovations of the future won't leave them behind," Sharipo told TechCrunch (<http://techcrunch.com/2013/09/04/robot-turtles/>).

Recently acquired by games company ThinkFun (<http://www.thinkfun.com/robotturtles/>), Robot Turtles is hitting the mass market later this month.

Code Combat

Who it's for: Ages 13+ (or younger with guidance/consent)

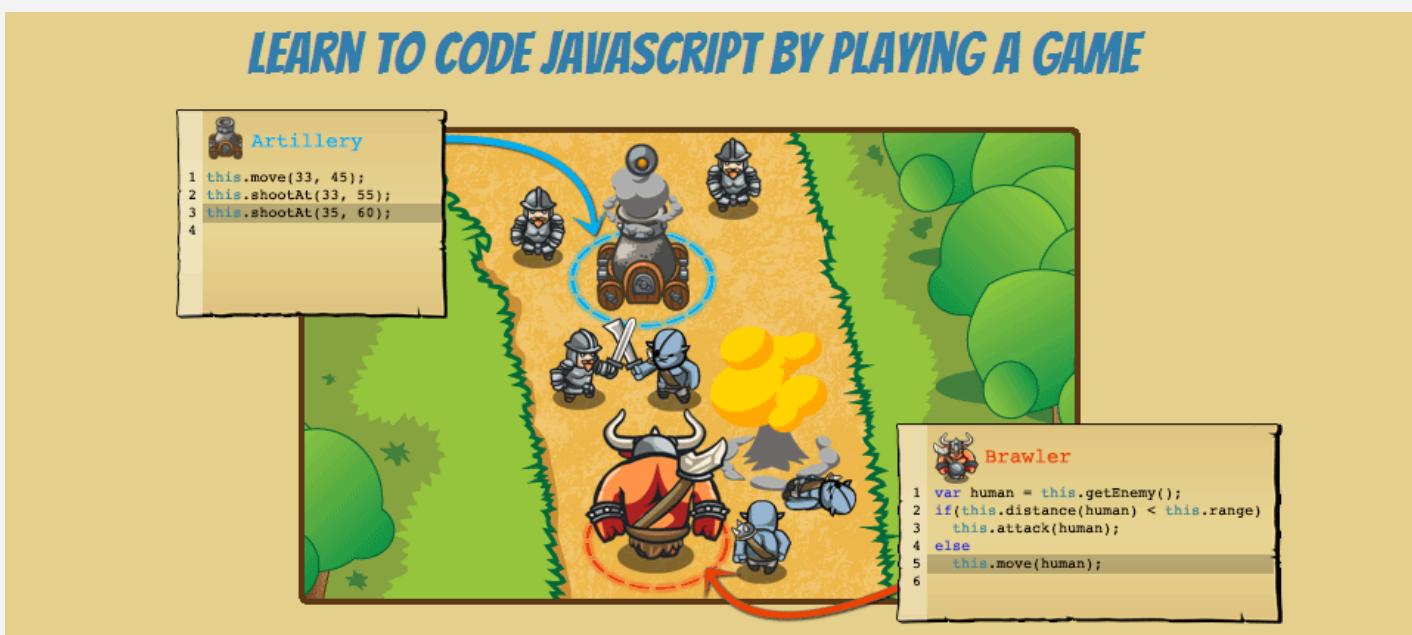
Platforms: Web browsers

Pricing: Free

Find out more: Code Combat website (<http://codecombat.com/>)

(<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/rajsidhu/code-monkey-island-making-programming-childs-play>) The expert view: "Very creative and engaging approach to teaching coding through play."

— Jason Battles (<https://twitter.com/jjbattles/status/447419060939001856>), Associate Dean for Library Technology Planning and Policy, University of Alabama



(<http://venturebeat.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/code-combat.png>)

Above: Code Combat fuses wizards, warriors, ogres, and coding in a fun way.

Image Credit: Dan Crawley

Code Combat is the only title on the list that has players inputting actual code to play (Javascript currently, with experimental support for CoffeeScript, Python, Clojure, and Lua). Don't let that put you off, though, as Code Combat does a great job of entertaining while teaching.

You can work through single-player levels in this fantasy-themed game, then unleash your newfound coding skills on other players. There's a multiplayer tournament called Greed (<http://blog.codecombat.com/multiplayer-programming-tournament>) in progress right now with \$40,000 worth of prizes up for grabs.

Code Combat hopes to stay free by helping companies recruit high-level players. Yep, that's right. Playing a game can get you a job.

Ludos

Who it's for: Ages 4-12

Platforms: PC, Mac, iOS

Pricing: \$119

Find out more: Digital Dream Labs (<http://www.digitaldreamlabs.com/ludos/>)

The expert view: "What sets Cloudboard [Ludos' board interface] apart from many other products

currently available is not only its combination of the physical and digital worlds but also the way that it fosters collaboration." — Terri Eichholz (<http://engagetheirminds.wordpress.com/2013/11/20/cloudboard/>), teacher of K-5 gifted students, South Central Texas



(<http://venturebeat.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/ludos.png>)

Above: Ludos uses tiles to make programming a tactile experience for kids.

Image Credit: Digital Dream Labs

Due out this August, Ludos aims to make programming a real hands-on experience for younger kids. Ludos allows players to physically place instruction tiles directly onto a grid, programming the actions of on-screen characters.

Cork the Volcano will be the first Ludos game, and it has a strong focus on coding basics like planning, sequencing, and debugging. Other games (<http://www.digitaldreamlabs.com/games/>) will also be made available for the system, which is an open platform that anyone can develop for.

Codemancer

Who it's for: Ages 9-14

Platforms: PC, Mac, iOS, Android

Pricing: \$20

Find out more: Important Little Games website (<http://importantlittlegames.com/>) – Kickstarter (<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/bobbylox/codemancer-a-fantasy-game-that-teaches-the-magic-o>)

(<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/rajsidhu/code-monkey-island-making-programming-childs-play>) The expert view: "A fantasy game [with] a female protagonist that teaches kids (& adults!) how to code? I adore every single part of this!" — Lauren Scott

(<https://twitter.com/devdame/status/462320362860986368>), web developer and junior instructor, Dev Bootcamp



(<http://venturebeat.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/codemancer.png>)

Above: Codemancer raised over 4 times its targeted goal on Kickstarter.

Image Credit: Bundle in a Box

Codemancer is hoping its fantasy story and female protagonist will help it stand out when it releases next summer.

Players will use magical runes to direct the action when this successfully Kickstarted project goes live, helping the hero Aurora to save her father's life. Creator Robert Lockhart hopes the game's accessibility will help break down barriers that prevent some kids from coding.

"Codemancer's language is designed to be accessible," Lockhart says on his Kickstarter page, "but also translates easily to a variety of popular real-world programming languages. More complex programs are made when we introduce programming concepts like variables, conditionals, and functions."

Machineers

Who it's for: Ages 8-14

Platforms: PC, Mac (iPad to follow)

Pricing: Free demo

Find out more: Machineers website (<http://machineers.tumblr.com/>)

The expert view: "Machineers looks to be the best example of an education game I've ever seen." - Programmer and game developer Paul Hayes

(https://twitter.com/paul_hayes/status/361417866911817728)



(<http://venturebeat.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/machineers.png>)

Above: Machineers won "Best Student Game" at the 2012 Serious Games Showcase and Challenge in Florida.

Image Credit: Serious Games

Machineers is an adventure title that lets players interact with broken machines, using coding principles and a drag-and-drop interface to fix them up.

Henrike Lode, a member of the Danish Lohika Games team behind Machineers, decided to market it as a puzzle-adventure after one child tester (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rBQq87m5nQ8>) complained that educational games are like "chocolate covered broccoli."

"This is preparation for future learning," Lode told Indie Statik (<http://indiestatik.com/2013/06/13/machineers/>). "We don't have math or code in there, so [kids] won't be able to start programming, but [it trains] logical thinking and something called procedural literacy, which is the ability to read and write processes."

Currently still in development, the PC and Mac demo of Machineers is free to download and play (<http://machineers.tumblr.com/download>). Lohika Games is targeting an iPad release for the full game.

Bee-Bot

Who it's for: Ages 4-7

Platforms: iOS

Pricing: Free

Find out more: iTunes

(<https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/bee-bot/id500131639?mt=8&ign-mpt=uo%3D4>) The expert view: "Just pass the device over and watch the trial, error, hypothesis, testing, revising, and ultimate success that will happen." – Doug Peterson

(http://dougpete.wordpress.com/2013/07/28/programming-with-bee-bot/?utm_source=twitterfeed&utm_medium=twitter), Faculty of Education sessional instructor, University of Windsor, Canada



(<http://venturebeat.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/beebot.png>)

Above: Many schools use Bee-Bot to help introduce programming basics.

Image Credit: Dan Crawley

Educational developer TTS designed BeeBot to help younger children program with positional language and programming sequences of instructions. The simple, accessible app has 12 top-down timed levels set in progressively difficult mazes.

There's also a companion app for kids aged 7+, called BeeBot Pyramid (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/bee-bot-pyramid/id509207211?mt=8>). It's priced at \$0.99.

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(<http://www.brgcommunications.com/2015/10/the-future-of-user-generated-live-streaming-for-marketers/>)



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CHAZ HENRY May 14, 2015

Here is an interesting KickStarter project. It's directed at teaching teens obsessed with gaming, to program in Java.

<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/ianhenry/teach-your-teen-programming> (<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/ianhenry/teach-your-teen-programming>)

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