



Kids' stuff: Ms Kirsten Ellis demonstrates the new CD-ROM designed especially for the under-fours. Picture: MAURICE GRANT-DREW

Children click onto fun and games

BY JUNE YU

Does your child like popping balloons, colouring books, or singing 'Old Macdonald Had a Farm'?

Monash University researchers Ms Kirsten Ellis and Dr Kathy Blashki, from the Faculty of Information Technology, have developed an interactive multimedia product for children aged two to three which incorporates all these activities and more.

Ms Ellis said the School of Multimedia Systems CD-ROM, called *TVM*, features a television interface incorporating nine channels, a volume control and power switch.

"Metaphors are very important in designing interfaces for multimedia products aimed at young children as they can't read," she said.

"We selected a television metaphor because the television is already a familiar object to children."

She said children must click on a channel to access each activity and can find instructions by clicking on the friendly teddy.

The activities in *TVM* involve increasingly complex interactions with the mouse. At the lowest level, the balloon popping or peekaboo requires a child to move a mouse over an area.

'Old Macdonald', felt pictures and the colouring book involve single mouse clicks, while the most advanced activities, such as a ball sort and shape sort, require a click to pick up an object and another click to put it down again.

"We haven't used the traditional double click' and drag and drop interactions because they require a coordination level that most young children can't yet achieve," she said.

Ms Ellis said the aim of the product was to develop a child's independent interaction with the computer as soon as possible.

"When they first use the program, they sit on mum or dad's lap and get help with the mouse movement, but as soon as possible the children should be interacting on their own," she said.

"The teddy object then takes over the role of the parent as emotional support."

She said young children now saw computers as a normal part of their play environment.

"There has been some concern about whether developing computer skills is appropriate in young children, but as long as it's part of a balanced program it's not a problem," she said.