

LIAR, LIAR, PANTS ON FIRE



By Ryan McLaughlan

THE PLETHORA OF taboo topics that confront a parent can sometimes be quite overwhelming, and often times the conversations get dismissed altogether. However, with the help of a new state-of-the-art kid's game, perfectly named 'Liar Liar Pants on Fire,' the daunting but crucial task of good parent-child communication just got easier.

Developed nearly five years ago by two St. Catharines residents, electrical engineer John Blaszynski and police officer Dan Tibbs, as a party game called idQuest; the game-uses a hand-held lie detector that gauges a player's response to questions using the body's biofeedback.

A player will be asked two non-confrontational questions which set the "baseline" for the device to begin its analysis and then they will be asked two questions that generally aren't the most comfortable to answer in a social setting. Questions such as "have you ever peed in the shower" or "have you ever knocked over a store display and walked away." The other players guess which question will get the highest emotional response from the player and are awarded points if they are correct.

During a test market, over the 1999

Christmas season idQuest was the second highest seller in all the stores it was featured in losing only to fellow Niagara regional claim to fame game Trivial Pursuit, the Millennium Edition.

It wasn't long before toy stores started calling Blaszyński and asking if he could make a kids version. He said initially he "couldn't see how-kids would play (it)." That quickly changed when he brought the game up to the cottage with him on vacation and even with game boys and tons of other games the kids kept sneaking back into the house to play idQuest.

So with some minor technical adjustments and some expert advice, Liar Liar Pants on Fire was born.

Using about half of the questions from the original game and modifying the hand-held device to compensate for the younger players, the game changed its packaging and its target market from adults to five to 15-year-olds.

Blaszynski explained, "kids love to talk about stuff and potty humour is huge." Wanting the game to be fun for kids but also as a tool that parents could use to touch on tough topics such as drug and alcohol use, sex, and even abuse,

Blaszynski contacted Dr. Nancy Johnson, a child psychologist to help with the project. "She came up with about 150 questions for us, questions around conflict resolution, anger management, and child abuse.

Pretty heavy topics for a kids game, but Blaszynski said that parents are really the ones that need "training" when it comes to communication. He wanted this game to help parents talk about these problems with their young ones, something that many parents have a hard time doing. He went on to explain that "kids will talk about anything, you just have to get them to open up."

Another person Blaszyński turned to for some expert grey matter was Bill Helmeczi, an employee of the Niagara Child Development Centre. Helmeczi introduced the idea of using the game to help forecast anti-social behaviour, and using that information to stop it before it becomes a problem.

The game has a series of questions, which like its adult predecessor are designed to evoke an emotional response from the player. However, the kid's version has a major difference in that the questions are printed on coloured cards (green, red, purple, and yellow) which relate to various

exercises that a parent can do to help their child avoid problems in the future. For example, if a child has high emotional responses to green cards one of the exercises the game's manual recommends is for the parent to engage in a short activity with their child, such as preparing food or tidying up a room all the while making the experience a fun one.

The game's instruction manual is a virtual cornucopia, of knowledge: and resources for parents. With listings for children's help lines, to a bibliography that lists Web sites and books that can be used for better parenting.

The game never alludes to any specific anti-social behaviour so as not to allow parents to start playing therapist with their children. "There was a lot of concern about parents making their own diagnosis." Said Blaszyński adding, the game "just points them in the right direction, and gives them a heads up."

"If you are thinking about buying this device to interrogate your children, think again. Rule No. 1 of the game is a child cannot be punished for any disclosures during the game."

Part of the inspiration for the game

was to develop a tool that he could use to talk to his seven-year-old daughter, Alex about issues surrounding the breakdown of his marriage. "She loved to play the game, it was a great way to get her to speak her mind," he said, explaining, "a lot of times she didn't want to talk about things because she thought it would hurt my feelings."

Though the idea may have started as a party game, Liar Liar Pants on Fire is breaking new ground in parent child communication. As this is being written Australia is considering adding it to their school system.

It is also being sold at Media Play stores in the United States and locally it can be purchased at Games-A-Lot in the

Seaway Mall, and at Zehrs stores. If you can get on the web, check out the idQuest site, www.idQuest.com, for more information on the games or to order a copy for yourself.

Blaszynski's biggest worry now is the game taking off and not having the finances to support the demand for it. Luckily he has recently been in talks with some big backers with “deep pockets” that are willing to support the

project. He said he did consider going with one of the Larger game distributors such as Milton Bradley or Hasbro, because it “just wasn’t lucrative enough.” When asked if there is any chance we’ll see a version of the game for the home computer, he said He is not ruling anything out.

