

Review: Sifteo a fun but pricey new way to play

August 25 2011, By BARBARA ORTUTAY , AP Technology Writer



Sifteo Cubes are photographed, in New York, Wednesday, Aug. 24, 2011. Sifteo Cubes exist in that rare but intriguing realm between digital video games and hands-on-toys, an experience that's both on-screen and tactile. (AP Photo/Richard Drew)

I am sliding three little cubes around my desk. My goal is to help a penguin named Booker collect a bunch of eggs and avoid being eaten by a horrific creature named Owlbear. It's a lot of fun.

This new form of entertainment is called Sifteo Cubes. These blocks, about the size and shape of a small jewelry box, exist in that rare but intriguing realm between digital video games and hands-on-toys, an experience that's both on-screen and tactile.

They appear aimed mainly at kids, but they're also fun for adults like me. These slick, white blocks with color LCD screens and smooth, rounded corners are an addictive pastime. But at \$149, it's a pricey proposition even for such a promising diversion.

Each kit comes with three cubes, a charger with room for six cubes and a [wireless transmitter](#) about the size of the tip of a thumb. Additional cubes cost \$45 each, but all of the games can be played with just the original three.

In many ways, the cubes are a 21st century update to ages-old tabletop games such as chess, mahjong or playing cards. You play alone or with friends, using all three cubes at once, more if needed or desired. To control them, slide them around the table or tilt them, depending on what the [game](#) asks you to do. Pressing down on a cube's screen acts as a button, but it is not a [touch screen](#).

Setup is simple. Plug the transmitter, called "the link," into the [USB drive](#) of your computer. To turn the cubes on, press the screen with your finger. To turn them off, press down for about two seconds until the screen goes dark.

You must have a computer to play, but it doesn't have to be connected to the Internet while playing, only while you are getting new games from Sifteo's online store.

This makes them perfectly suited for some tray table good times on a cross-country plane trip - as long as you find a place to put your laptop. A neighbor's tray table, perhaps?

To run games on Sifteo, you need to install a free program called Siftrunner on your computer. Here, you can download games and install them onto the blocks to play them. Some games are free; others cost \$1

to \$5.

There were 14 games available for the cubes when I tried them out, plus something called the "Creativity Kit," which lets players create their own sorting games using words, letters or numbers. This is just one example of Sifteo's brainy side, more educational than handing your kid your iPhone to play "Angry Birds."

That said, so far there is no "Angry Birds"-style must-have game on Sifteo. If it takes off - and it certainly shows promise - having a wide breadth of compelling games will be key to its success.

Now, the games.

"Booker the Penguin," ages 7 and up, requires quick hands as you connect your cubes so Booker has a path to move down, find his eggs and avoid Owlbear. You can also play in Owlbear mode - you chase and try to eat the penguins. Though I'm well over 7 years old, I found this mode a bit tough at first.

"Moon Marble," in which age 7 and up strikes again. But this time I'm not overwhelmed by the challenge. I play the moon and tilt the blocks around to catch floating stars and eat them (hey, no one said games have to be scientifically accurate). I also need to avoid a tiny space-rat that wants to eat me.

"Mount Brainiac," ages 7 to 11, is a learning game. Technically I am out of this league but who's counting? Like with the others, I tried playing this game without reading the directions. Fail. Suddenly three words were staring at me from my cubes: "even," "will" and "gold." Wait, what? Turns out it wasn't a full sentence I needed to form, instead I had to arrange the words in alphabetical order.

"Gopher's Run" is also for 7-plus-year-olds. Similar to "Booker the Penguin," it's a simple maze game in which you join your cubes together to let a little gopher run around and find radishes to munch on. The cubes show part of a maze as you connect them, but because you only have three, you don't see the whole maze at once.

"Chroma Shuffle" is a catchy puzzle game that starts out with a grid of colorful dots filling each cube. Your task: make the dots disappear. To do this, find two cubes that have dots in the same color, then connect those dots. You only win if all the dots are gone. If there's a lone blue one left on one cube and only green and red on the others, you can't win. When this happens, you flip your cubes over, watch them fill with dots once again, and continue. Eventually you can run out of flips.

As with most puzzle games, the levels in "Chroma Shuffle" get increasingly complex as the game progresses. It can go on forever, depending on your skill level. It's my favorite.

Slightly different, Sifteo's "Creativity Kit" lets players make their own sorting games, involving words, letters or numbers. This feature is especially useful for parents (or teachers) who want to create puzzles for kids. One suggestion Sifteo gives: Put the letter symbols for chemical elements on the blocks, then have kids organize them by atomic weight.

Though the games are fun, I am not sure yet if they cross that crucial line between a diversion and a toy with true staying power. I had a co-worker try it out with his 4-year-old daughter, as there are games for the under 7 set as well. She said she liked the games, but they didn't hold her interest.

To succeed, Sifteo will need more games, good games at that, and perhaps a lower price.

More information: Online: <http://www.sifteo.com>

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