



KEVIN O'NEILL / STAFF ARTIST

HAPPY Holidays!

Digital devices deliver Christmas cheer

High-tech gadgets like digital tablets, smart phones and mp3 players are popular items on many Christmas lists. If you're planning on giving, or getting, one this year, you might want to load it up with some holiday-themed apps.

I visited Apple's App Store and downloaded a bunch of free, Christmas-themed apps. Over the next few weeks I'll be reviewing these apps on my iPad (I don't know if they will all work on non-Apple devices) to help you decide which are worth downloading. Many of these apps also have paid versions with more features. Testing the free versions is a good way to see if they're worth purchasing, if you can stand the annoying pop up ads and constant prompts to upgrade to the full versions.

While almost everyone enjoys the Christmas season, it's especially magical for young children, so naturally most of the apps are targeted at them. A few of them also will appeal to older kids and even some adults.

He's making a list

Letters to Santa is a simple, fun app for youngsters who are learning to write. Children enter some basic information, such as name, age, gender and whether they have been naughty or nice. They can then write a letter, on virtual parchment, to Santa telling him what they want for Christmas. More than one letter can be written so each of your kids can

send his or her own. You just have to wait for Santa's reply before you can send another letter.

I wrote a letter under the pseudonym Chad, pretending to be a 5-year-old boy who had been naughty. The next day when I checked the app there was a reply from Santa, written in fancy script on virtual parchment. Santa told me about how he had been busy painting his sleigh, but he would see if he could get me the gifts I asked for. He also told me I should work on being more nice than naughty. It's a cute little app that I'm sure would be a hit with preschoolers and younger elementary school kids.

Rockin' around the tree

There are a lot of Christmas music apps available and I looked at three of them. The first one, **Christmas Songs, Music & Carols: Holiday 2011/12 Edition**, is a collection of 78 holiday classics. You can listen to the songs on your device, or in conjunction with speakers so the whole family can listen. There are options to view lyrics or videos as you listen, or you can just watch the little colored light bars go up and down in time with the music. You can listen to the music in the background as you use your device for other things, and there's a sleep timer you can set to shut it off automatically.

The next music app I tried, **Christmas** (plus the symbol for an eighth note) is for the budding musician on your list. It features eight Christmas carols and an interactive piano keyboard so you can play along. Sheet music scrolls across the screen as the songs play, and the keys light up so you know which ones to press.

Christmas Radio is the third music app I looked at. It's basically a set of links to more than 40 Internet radio stations around the world that play Christmas music. There's a variety of genres, such as rock, country or traditional. This is a good app for any age that you can just turn on and listen to in the background.

Seasons greetings

You can use your iPad or iPhone to make your Christmas cards with **Sincerely Ink**. The app has numerous templates that you can use as is, or you can customize them with your own photos. After you design your cards you can address them, and have them printed and mailed right from the app. Cards start at \$1.69 for a 5x7-inch card printed and mailed. The app also provides an online address book.

There is a variety of Christmas countdown apps and Advent calendars available on the App Store. I didn't try any of them, but the descriptions indicate that they all have similar functions. The countdowns display the number of days, hours and minutes left until Christmas in various ways on your screen. The Advent calendars download a different free app everyday from Dec. 1 to Christmas day.

Hopefully, the apps I reviewed today will help you get into the Christmas spirit. In the coming weeks, I'll be writing about holiday-themed games, virtual books and educational apps you might want to get for your kids. Happy holidays!

KEVIN O'NEILL is a graphic artist for The Times-Tribune. Contact him at koneill@timeshamrock.com with links to your favorite websites.



KEVIN O'NEILL

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