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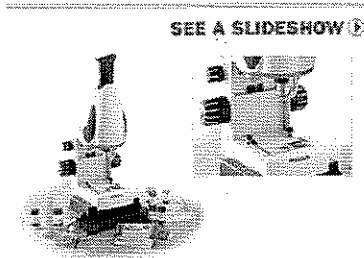
## CATALOG CRITIC

## Ooh! Paramecium!

By CHARLES PASSY

November 30, 2007; Page W12

This holiday season, when the Xbox 360 Elite video console with Guitar Hero III could set you back more than half a grand, the thought of giving a child an old-fashioned microscope kit that costs less than \$100 seems positively quaint.



Discovery Macro Microscope

But science toys in general and beginner microscopes in particular have seen a recent boost in sales, say some toy-industry watchers and insiders. Part of the credit goes to science-minded but decidedly un-nerdy television shows, such as Discovery Channel's "Mythbusters," and CBS's "CSI" series. Science-toy specialist Thames & Kosmos, based in Portsmouth, R.I., has added more than three dozen science packages, including a microscope kit, to its product line in the past five years, bringing the current total to 44. OpticsPlanet.com, a Northbrook, Ill., retailer that carries optical gear ranging from binoculars to telescopes, says sales of microscope kits have grown 220% in the past year; the company anticipates selling more than 3,000 such kits in 2007, calling them a "heavy holiday item."

We purchased five kits and reviewed them with Jessamyn Ramsey, a biology teacher at the Jupiter High School Environmental Research and Field Studies Academy in Jupiter, Fla. Ms. Ramsey emphasized that a good beginner's kit should include an easy-to-use microscope with a magnification range of 40 to 400x-plus and several prepared slides of plant and animal life. "Anything less than five slides and kids will get bored," she said.

Unfortunately, our findings weren't all that encouraging -- with one big exception. Most of the kits were of marginal quality, with poorly constructed microscopes or a limited number of prepared slides and accessories, from tweezers to dyes. The National Geographic Lab-Quality Microscope proved faulty almost right out of the box (a part holding a screw broke off, a light bulb failed to light). Moreover, Ms. Ramsey found it took considerable effort to focus on an object because the microscope's minimum magnification -- 80x -- was too high. You need to take in the big picture before you can concentrate on the little one, she explained. Another example of disappointing construction: the Meade Student/Hobbyist 51-Piece Microscope Kit; it arrived with a mirror that had come unglued from the microscope. But at least the kit included a nice array of prepared slides ("Ooh, paramecium!" Ms. Ramsey said), and accessories, including brine shrimp eggs to make your own slides.

In the case of the Konus Konuscience Zoom kit, the problems were magnified -- literally. Not only did the microscope have a none-too-practical minimum magnification of 100x, it also lacked much in the way of prepared slides ("only two," said our disappointed biology teacher). The same issues with magnification and slides arose with the Thames & Kosmos' Micro Trek kit. Ms. Ramsey also faulted that microscope's construction, noting that the clips to hold the slides in place were particularly hard to use.

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All of which made our one exception -- the Discovery Macro Microscope (\$79.95, available exclusively through the Discovery Channel Store) -- that much more a find, and our obvious pick for Best Overall and Best Value. This colorfully designed, kid-friendly kit included a microscope that made focusing a snap -- the magnification range is 40 to 400x, plus there's a fine-adjustment setting, padded eyepiece and ergonomic-minded handgrips. And the prepared slides include everything from insect cross-sections to a piece of a 900-year-old Peruvian mummy wrap. Our biology teacher described the kit in terms a kid could understand best: "It's cool!"