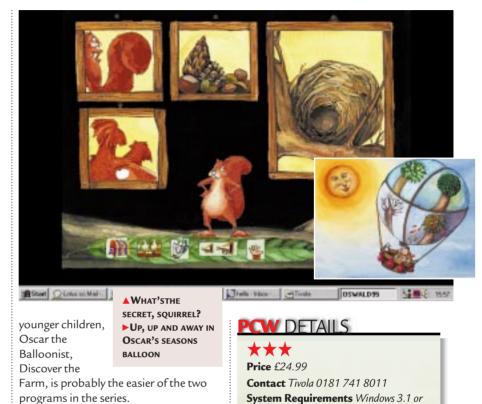
Oscar, the Balloonist, and the Secrets of the Forest

Two educational programs featuring forest and farm. But younger children may need adult help.

European software can be a treat in the midst of all this US animation, and on that basis Oscar the Balloonist, from German software publisher Tivola, is worth a look. Oscar features in two programs: one explores the forest through the seasons, the other discovers the farm. Learning begins when you take off in Oscar's balloon in search of Carmela, his walking, talking toybox.

In Secrets of the Forest, Carmela is hidden deep in the forest. Once you've found her, you can play games and puzzles. None of these are particularly novel: there are interactive scenes to click on and games where you match animals to habitats or their favourite food. The feature that makes this game eniovable is the beautiful detail of the presentation and being able to watch the forest change through the seasons. There is a lot to learn. The programs are aimed at 4- to 8-year-olds but younger children will need adult help with some of the games, especially as there is not the option to have puzzles solved for you if you don't know the answer. For



higher/Mac.

DEBBIE DAVIS

Write Away!

A versatile word processor to help children gain writing skills.

It may not seem necessary for children to have a word processor of their own, but Write Away! is a word processor designed with the specific aim of helping children develop their writing skills as required by Key Stages 1 to 3 of the National Curriculum. Primarily for classroom use, its strength is its

Price £134 (£114.04 ex VAT) for a fiveuser licence. Talking Write Away! costs £165 (£193.88 ex VAT) for a five-user licence. Toolbox is £392 (£333.62 ex VAT) for a five-user licence.

Contact BlackCat 01874 622114 System Requirements Windows 3.1 or later, 386 or higher, 4Mb RAM, 5Mb disk space, VGA graphics, mouse.

customisability, which lets it be adapted to suit the particular needs of a wide range of children across various age groups and with varying abilities. There is even a talking version available for children with special needs and visual disabilities, who will benefit considerably from the spoken confirmation of what is typed.

To help develop creative skills and encourage children to write, Write Away! has several tools: a writing planner for organising writing projects, a good outliner for plotting a story, and writing hints to help with the differences between writing styles (e.g. news and fiction). There's also a word bank containing up to 100 words, a word game to reinforce correct spelling, and



an easy-to-use spelling checker that remembers frequently misspelled words. Write Away! also permits graphics, fonts, and changes to the colour of the "paper" and the words.

Write Away! comes as a standalone application or as part of Toolbox, a collection of five Maths and Science applications for Key Stages 1 to 3 of the National Curriculum.

PAUL BEGG

ActiMates Interactive Barney

He's cute, chatty, cuddly and great fun for kids but like other dinosaurs he'll soon become extinct.



joystick port and loading Barney's CD-ROM, allows him to receive electronic radiation over a distance of 38cm and join in with what's on-screen. As you play shapesorting games or recognise letters, Barney is there, with encouragement and praise.

All this cutting-edge technology seems to "wow" the adults, but what do the children think? We sent this king of gadgets and gizmos home with some kiddies to find out. Our youngest testers, rising two years old, were unsure — on first sight it even reduced one of them to tears. For our three- to five-yearolds, it was love at first sight. But, as any parent will tell you, a child falling head over heels in love with a purple dinosaur is

nothing new. And after a few weeks of playing, Barney was beginning to show the

side effects of his radiation

were technical.

therapy. Some of the drawbacks

When they played before bedtime, our testers wanted Barney, who was younger than them, to rest in bed. That meant he was more than 38cm from the computer screen. So, he missed all his cues. "He's gone to sleep," explained a parent, but she was on a slippery slope.

"Why has he got his eyes

open then?" asked one tester. Even worse, another squeezed his toes and he started singing "If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands". When he was receiving transmissions, he didn't always do what was expected,

> given what was on-screen. And why didn't he have anything to say when our testers were playing with their new Bananas in Pyjamas CD-ROM? Our testers began to think Barney was a party pooper.

> > Technical drawbacks were minor. But what really caught Barnev out was the way children at this age play; they have a surfeit of imagination and there aren't many toys that can keep up: Lego does, Teddy bears, old clothes and cardboard boxes do well, too. But a toy like Barney depends so much on imposing the game that it becomes a hindrance. It wasn't

so much that our testers fell out of love with Barney; they just stopped playing with him.

DEBBIE DAVIS

PCW DETAILS



▲ Touch-sensitive

4.000 WORDS: COVER

HIS EYES AND HE SAYS

'PEEK-A-BOO'; SQUEEZE

HIS TOES AND HE'LL SING

BARNEY'S VOCABULARY IS

Price *Microsoft/ActiMates Interactive* Barney £99.95 (£85 ex VAT); Microsoft/Actimates PC Pack £49.95 (£42.51 ex VAT); Microsoft/ActiMates Interactive Barney CD-ROM titles £29.95 Contact Microsoft 0345 002000

www.microsoft.com

System Requirements Windows 95 or