

# 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 enjoyable 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



younger children, Oscar the Balloonist, Discover the Farm, is probably the easier of the two programs in the series.

DEBBIE DAVIS

## PCW DETAILS

★★★★

**Price** £24.99

**Contact** Tivola 0181 741 8011

**System Requirements** Windows 3.1 or higher/Mac.

# 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

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 outline 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



◀ **THERE IS EVEN A VERSION FOR KIDS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS**

## PCW DETAILS

★★★★★

**Price** £134 (£114.04 ex VAT) for a five-user 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.

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.

**When the toy industry** gathered earlier this year for its annual fair, there was a newcomer who boasted the biggest stand. Microsoft had arrived in toyland and Interactive Barney, its talking dinosaur, has been tipped as the hot gift this Christmas.

**Powered by** six batteries and 257Kb of built-in memory, Barney talks, turns tricks, and sings. Setting up a separate transmitter that plugs into your 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 shape-sorting 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-year-olds, 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 therapy. Some of the drawbacks were technical.

**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 Barney 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



▲ **TOUCH-SENSITIVE**  
**BARNEY'S VOCABULARY IS**  
**4,000 WORDS: COVER**  
**HIS EYES AND HE SAYS**  
**'PEEK-A-BOO'; SQUEEZE**  
**HIS TOES AND HE'LL SING**  
**SONGS**

## PCW DETAILS



**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](http://www.microsoft.com)

**System Requirements** Windows 95 or Windows 98.