

after hours: *family*

This month we compare the latest CD-ROM encyclopaedias from Microsoft, Hutchinson and Grolier, eat green eggs and ham with Sam-I-Am, and help curious children find out how inventions work

Encarta '97 Encyclopedia World English Edition

Since it was launched in 1993, Microsoft Encarta has been the world's biggest-selling CD-ROM encyclopaedia. Microsoft, though, has hardly sat on its laurels. It introduced an Encarta Website last year, and has improved the product for the Web. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* is fully integrated with the encyclopaedia, and almost 10 percent of Encarta '97's 28,000 articles are new or have been updated.

Despite all the bells and whistles, the articles are the core of any encyclopaedia. There must be enough of them to cover any topic you want to look up, and they have to draw a balance between giving too much detail and not enough.

Here the Microsoft disc really scores. It's got a very good range of articles, with more than enough information to satisfy a casual enquirer. Although we did find some omissions, they were subjects that at best got an oblique reference in the other encyclopaedias. The localisation, too, is good, with all spelling anglicised and the articles of interest to British users.

The articles go much further than simple text, and many are enlivened by pictures, sound clips and videos which bring their sub-

jects to life. The pictures are generally excellent, although we found that some of the videos were a bit jerky on our main test machine, a 486 DX4-100 with 16Mb of RAM.

Apart from the videos, the whole product was very slick in operation. Searches using the Encarta search engine, Pinpointer, were fast and efficient. What's more, the whole interface is very intuitive and it's exceptionally easy to follow a chain of research.

Many articles have on-line links, to make research on the Internet even easier. Links we tried seemed well-chosen and current, kept up to date by the Encarta Website.

This has been updated and improved for 1997, and is a valuable resource in its own right. As well as controlling the on-line links, it provides updates to articles and the Yearbook. These integrate seamlessly with the encyclopaedia. It's also a good jumping-off point ►



family/multimedia news

It's all happening at Sierra this month. In **The Time Warp of Dr Brain**, players must travel through time and solve puzzles to find Dr Brain and bring him safely back to the present. Meanwhile, Adi the friendly alien returns in **Adi Geography** to teach children about the countries and peoples of the world. There are also new titles in the **Playtoons** series, with educational games and the chance to create your own cartoons. Sierra On-Line: 01189 209100

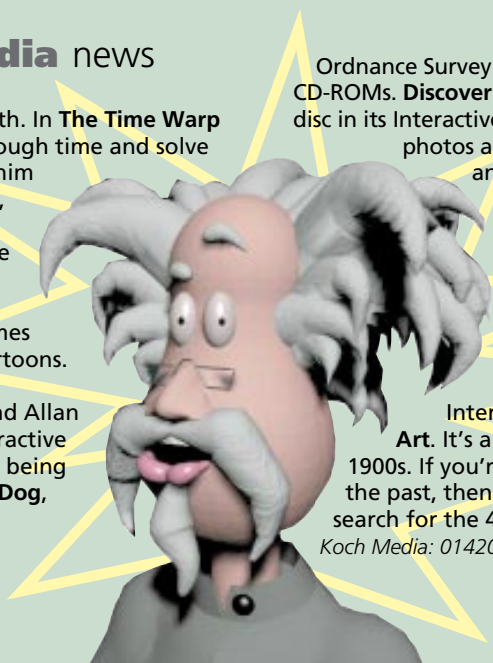
The Jolly Postman books by Janet and Allan Ahlberg are being turned into an interactive series. Available from spring 1997, it is being introduced by a game, **Beware of the Dog**, which is on this month's cover CD. Inner Workings: 0141 552 4451

Ordnance Survey continues to develop its range of CD-ROMs. **Discover London** will soon join York as the second disc in its Interactive Geography series. It's got maps, aerial photos and historical information about the city, and is aimed at students and visitors.

Ordnance Survey: 0345 330011

Who's Who is now available on CD-ROM. Its publishers have teamed up with Oxford University Press, and 90,000 biographies spanning the past 100 years can be searched at the push of a button. OUP: 01865 267979

Among the latest titles from E.M.M.E. Interactive is the **Encyclopaedia of Western Art**. It's a study of the history of art until the early 1900s. If you're more interested in the future than in the past, then **Legends of the Future** lets you join the search for the 4th Dimension as you explore outer space. Koch Media: 01420 541880



for exploring the Internet, and provides access to the Encarta Online Library of reference material. Most important in terms of using Encarta as a reference tool, the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* is included. It's fully integrated, so you can find a definition of any word in any article simply by double-clicking on it. This is such a natural way to work, it's surprising everyone hasn't done it.

When we reviewed Encarta 96, we gave it five out of five. This version's even better. Need we say more?

○ £49.99 (inc VAT)

○ Microsoft: 0345 002000

Encarta 97

Presentation	★★★★★
Ease of use	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★

Minimum requirements: 486 DX33, 8Mb of RAM, 2x CD-ROM, 13Mb of hard disk space, SVGA 256 colour, sound card, Win 3.1 or later.

Hutchinson Multimedia Encyclopedia '97

If we were to judge an encyclopaedia simply on numbers of articles, then HME '97 would be a clear winner with 40,000, almost a third more than Encarta. What's more, it's produced in Britain, so there's no American bias evident.

This leads to HME '97 being the most detailed on Britain and its history: it was a pleasure to find references to minor topics not mentioned on the other two discs. However, we felt some subjects, especially foreign ones, weren't covered in enough depth, and we were surprised that only around one in 10 articles are illustrated.

Although the articles are generally good and searching for subjects is relatively easy, HME '97 was the most difficult disc to move around. It's let down badly by the interface. Although this looks nice, we found it counter-intuitive: it relies heavily on icons, and is quite awkward. Moreover, it ran slowly on our 486DX4-100, and we wouldn't choose to run it on anything less than a Pentium. We also found that our machine crashed several times during testing.

Like Encarta, HME '97 comes with a number of extras, including an atlas, a quiz and a number of tours: these offer a structured introduction to certain subjects. Perhaps the most useful, though, are a good selection of bibliographies, and a collection of essays.

New for 1997, Hutchinson provides Internet links and its own Website. Unfortunately, it has included the wrong Web address for its own homepage. Although this is a minor problem, it creates a



disappointing impression, and the service offered doesn't really live up to its promises. There are only about 600 links from articles to Websites, and the updates we downloaded were very brief.

If you really want a British encyclopaedia, this is the one, but you'll need a fast machine to see it at its best.

○ £39.99 (inc VAT)

○ Attica Sales: 01908 570113

HME '97

Presentation	★★★★★
Ease of use	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★

Minimum requirements: 486 DX, 8Mb of RAM (16Mb recommended for Windows 95), 12Mb of hard disk space, SVGA 640x480 256 colour, 2x CD-ROM (4x recommended), 16-bit sound card, Windows 3.1 or later.

Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia '97

Finally, we looked at the 1997 Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia. This is probably the least localised of the three products – this is obvious from the American spelling – but we didn't find it as American as we'd feared. There is an impressive range of articles, which seemed fairly international in tone and thoroughly detailed.

Although the interface isn't as sophisticated-looking as either Encarta or HME '97, it was fast and

easy to use. Labelled tabs mean that it's quite intuitive, and searches were simple to set up.

The multimedia extras again include guided tours, an atlas and a Yearbook covering recent history. This, though, was very superficial, its format making it impossible to cover any event in depth: this is a shame considering the quality of the rest of the disc.

Like the other two, Grolier has its own Website and claims to offer Internet links from around a third of articles. Our impression was that there were in fact slightly fewer than this, and too many of them went to a Grolier service on CompuServe: you need to have a CompuServe account to use this. JS

Despite some Americanisms, we found the GME very simple to use and very thorough. Nonetheless, it's a shame the on-line service seems so closely – and expensively – linked to CompuServe.

○ £49.99 (inc VAT)

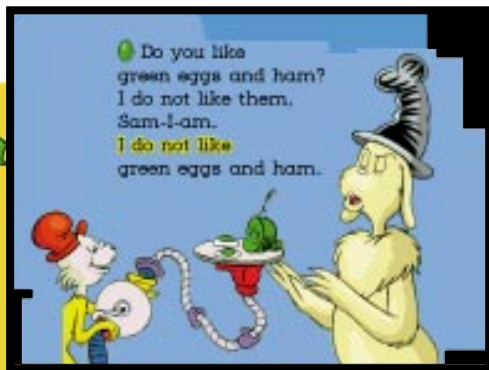
○ Grolier: 01865 264800

GME '97

Presentation	★★★★★
Ease of use	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★

Minimum requirements: 486 DX33, 8Mb of RAM, 2x CD-ROM, 10Mb of hard disk space, SVGA 256 colour, sound card, Win 3.1 or later. ►





In the days of *Janet and John* reading books, with stilted sentences and dull stories, Dr Seuss burst onto the scene, with bright, anarchic stories about the Cat in the Hat and Sam-I-Am. Fun and motivating, they were nevertheless simple enough to encourage the most hesitant reader. Now history is repeating itself, as Living Books launches the second of its Dr Seuss titles, *Green Eggs and Ham*.

On the face of it, this follows in the tradition of previous Living Books titles and other animated story books. You can have the story read to you or you can interact with it. Choose the latter and the story is narrated, a page at a time. There is an animated sequence and then you can start clicking.

As soon as the story starts, however, it becomes obvious that Green Eggs and Ham stands out from the crowd. To the accompaniment of music which perfectly captures the mood of the book, Sam-I-Am arrives riding on a dog, starting his quest to persuade the old grouch to taste an unlikely-looking platter of food. Go with Sam-I-Am as he zooms down railway tracks, plunges into tunnels and plummets through the air. Click on objects on the screen for wonderfully lively animations.

As well as the animations, there are three games in the pages. Each can be played at three levels of difficulty, so they should keep interest up for a while. Match the pairs in the Colour Match game. Make a word with a Fox in a Box. Find a rhyme with Sam-I-Am. As the disc is American there can be some minor language problems with this last game (Dr Seuss rhymes 'mouse' with 'blouse') but nothing too bad. What is annoying, though, is that when you've found all the games you still can't access them directly.

These, however, are minor quibbles with an excellent and hilarious package. Our young testers, Daniel (6) and Emily (3),

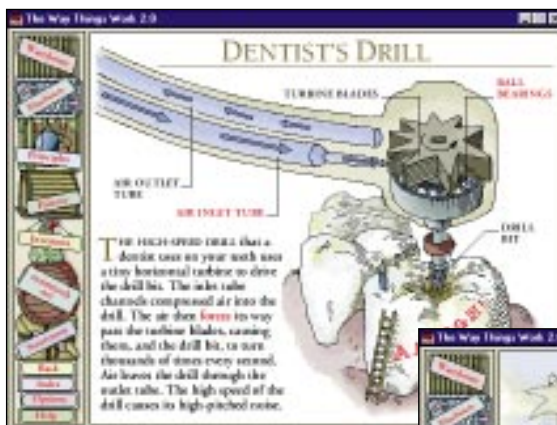
were enthralled. This package held their attention, and developed their word recognition and reading comprehension. It also had them helpless with laughter and keen to go back for more. Living Books includes the paperback version of the story in the box and this was appreciated as well. SH

- £30 (inc VAT)
- Living Books: 01429 520250

Presentation	★★★★★
Ease of use	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★☆
Overall	★★★★★

The Way Things Work started life as an enthralling book for children with enquiring minds. Packed with detailed illustrations, it explained the workings of major inventions in a lively, readable form. Publisher Dorling Kindersley then gave the book a whole new dimension when it launched it on CD-ROM.

Version 2.0 brings things right



up to date with a new batch of multimedia goodies. These include a live-action video of author David Macaulay, a new 3D Warehouse and a Storeroom full of interesting things to play with. Best of all, if you're on the Internet, there's trial access to mammoth.net, a site for young explorers.

The whole thing starts with the same pleasing sequence of animated letters as the previous version, but this time Macaulay appears riding in a rocket. Brushing himself down, he wanders around the screen to give you a guided tour of the CD-ROM. This is nicely done, with Macaulay interacting with woolly mammoths and the cartoon landscape.

You're left just inside the warehouse, which contains a number of interesting objects for you to click on. Choose one and you get a video of Macaulay demonstrating its use.

In the Mammoth Storeroom, as well as the hilarious mammoth videos, you can find sounds, screen savers and stationery. You can download letter headings and postcards to print out, which will make writing Christmas thank-you letters seem a lot more appealing.

Mammoth.net is a lovely introduction to the Net for young inventors. You only get access to this site when you buy the CD-ROM, so it feels like an exclusive club.

On top of all this, of course, is the Illustrated Encyclopedia that made the first version great. Here you can look up everything from lawn mowers to laser printers and find out what makes them tick. **SH**

More than just a CD-ROM, this package is bursting with things to do and explore. Great for young people with enquiring minds, especially if they have access to the Internet.

- £39.99 (inc VAT)
- Dorling Kindersley:
0171 753 3488

Presentation	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★