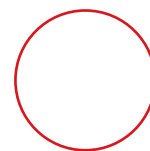# after hours : *family*

This month we travel up to the Mountain-that-smokes in The Stone of Wakan, immerse ourselves in Webster's Interactive Encyclopedia, and get our minds around some spelling with Snoopy and friends

Get ready for school, Snoopy!

Surely things have reached a sorry state when we entrust the teaching of English language skills to the characters of a cartoon, created by an American of German descent.

But don't despair. Get ready for school, Snoopy! is a fully-Anglicised interactive CD-ROM designed to help 4-to-8 year-olds practise spelling, increase vocabulary and become more creative with words. And it's fun as well as informative.

You're invited to spend a day with Charlie Brown – help him to get dressed in the morning, and go with him to the schoolroom, playground and back home again. The screens are brilliantly animated, brightly coloured and brimming with inter-activity – every object you click on responds with an animated sequence, while the word box at the bottom of the screen spells out the word in question with an option to look it up in the picture dictionary. This provides a written and spoken definition as well as sample sentences.

There are seven games to play, including Rhyme Time with Lucy, Peppermint Patty's Sentence Scramble and Hangman with the World War I Flying Ace, as well as tests of spelling and concentration.

When it comes to putting the point across, some are more successful than others. One game, presumably designed to teach the meaning of words, calls on you to fill in the blanks of a 'bestseller' which Snoopy is typing. From the given words, we found it impossible to construct anything but rather trippy, nonsensical stories – unless you're nurturing your child's ability to write Edward Lear-type poetry, it would seem of limited value.

But this is one black mark against what is otherwise an extremely slick and sound educational aid. **WB**

Things have moved on since 'Janet and John', and this interactive CD pulls out all the stops to entertain and educate. First-class.

○ £29.99

○ Funsoft: 0181 748 7565

Get ready for school, Snoopy!

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

Minimum requirements **for Mac**: 68030 33MHz CPU, 8Mb of RAM, colour monitor, double-speed CD-ROM drive, system 7.0. **For PC**: 25MHz 486, 8Mb of RAM, Windows 3.1 or 95, 256-colour VGA monitor, double-speed CD-ROM, MS-compatible sound card, mouse.

▶

○ family/multimedia news

Newly formed BBC Multimedia is set to release **The Animals of Farthing Wood**, an ecological CD-ROM adventure based on the animated TV series. It offers mini-documentaries, interactive games and 'video hotspots' that come alive when selected. The disc, which costs £29.99, is aimed at 7-11 year-olds and supports the National Curriculum.
BBC Multimedia: 0181 576 2000

Steven Spielberg and Knowledge Adventure have joined forces to create the ultimate CD-ROM for movie buffs. **Director's Chair** puts you in the hot seat as you make a film, while juggling the budget, crew, and the time it takes to put all the elements together. Special guest stars include Quentin Tarantino, and Jennifer Aniston of 'Friends' fame.
Random House: 0171 973 9000

Jonny Quest is the latest action-adventure release from those wacky folks at Virgin Sound and Vision. A collaboration between Virgin and Hanna-Barbera, it features 40 minutes of rip-roaring cartoon action, as well as a range of perplexing games and puzzles. Release of the game, on October 1, will coincide with the reapp-

earance of Jonny Quest on TV.
Virgin Sound and Vision: 0171 368 2255

Attica and EMI Classics have teamed up to create **Orchestra**, a CD-ROM based on the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. It costs £39.99, which includes an audio recording.
Attica: 01908 570113

Gizmo and Widgett distribute fun computer peripherals for techies and technophobes alike. For those who feel cursed by their computer, there's **Computer Voodoo**, a soft, PC-shaped cushion with malfunction options that you can stick pins in. Alternatively, the more technically-minded can go for a rainbow-coloured **Propellor Beanie**.
Gizmo & Widget: 0181 299 0891

Scops Software, publisher of edut-ainment games, is releasing hordes of new titles this Autumn. **Once Upon a Cat** and **Bear the Bears** are interpretations of fairy stories with offbeat animated characters. **Hup-Choo – The Gorps and The Sneezing Spell** makes natural history more accessible with mind-bending puzzles.
Scops Software: 01252 722223

The Stone of Wakan

The Stone of Wakan is an interactive cartoon adventure from Sierra, from a range of do-it-yourself packages called Playtoons. These allow you to create your own simple cartoon with combinations of characters and landscapes – or you can simply watch the story and read the narrated story book.

Blue Bear is a native American boy who is sent on a rites of passage adventure by the chief of his village. He must find the Mountain-that-smokes and keep the Stone of Wakan away from the malevolent thunder spirits. Throughout Blue Bear's journey you can click on items on the screen – wacky characters jump about and either help or hinder Blue Bear's progress. These characters, such as the bear that turns into Blue Bear's companion, and an evil thunder spirit that pulls the cowboy's hat over his eyes, are highly original.

Click on the question-mark icon and all the options are explained quickly and clearly, which means that help pages are not needed. The narration screens are useful enough – you can click on a word to hear it

spoken by the Old Chief but, as with most 'edutainment' CDs, this feature can be disabled without affecting the rest of the game.

It's also possible to create your own films from scratch – starting with a blank canvas, you can add a range of landscapes, rooms, furniture, and even characters which can be instructed to walk about and interact with each other. You can record the scenes you make, and print out the results. **JC**

It is not possible to create a cartoon of any complexity, but this is an entertaining, easy-to-use package. Excellent value for money.

○ £27.99
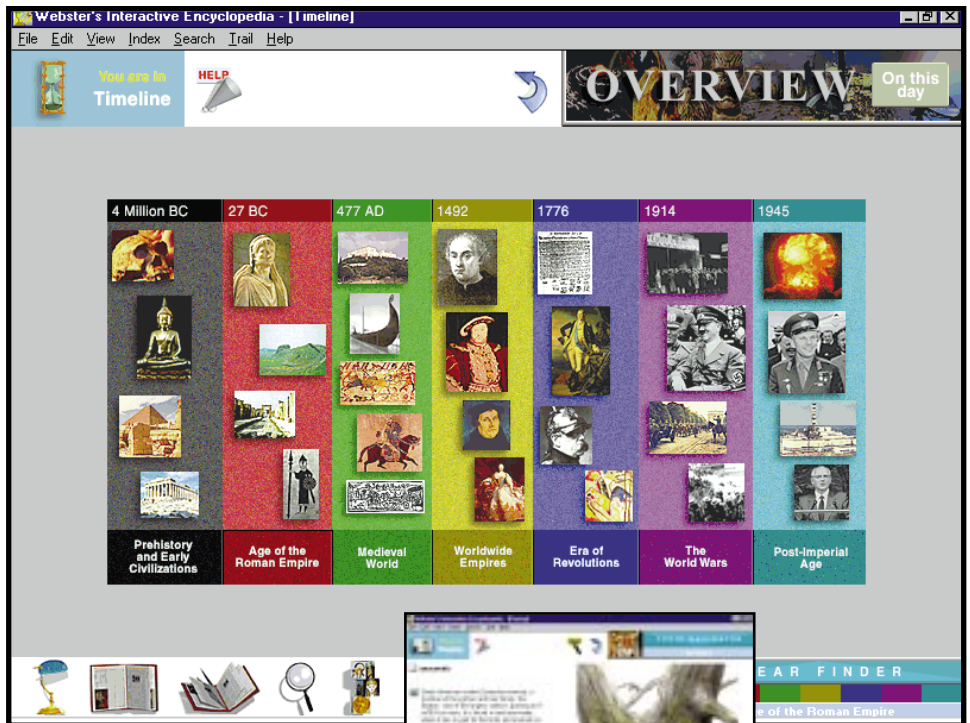○ Sierra-on-Line: 01734 303171

The Stone of Wakan

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

Minimum requirements: Windows 3.1 or Windows 95, 486DX/33MHz, 2Mb-8Mb of hard disk space, SVGA graphics card, 256-colour monitor, Windows-compatible sound card, Microsoft-compatible mouse, double-speed CD-ROM drive.

Webster's Interactive Encyclopedia

This Interactive Encyclopedia on CD-ROM is designed to give users concise information on a vast range of subjects, from History to the Natural World, from Science and Technology to Sport, from Popular Culture to Business.

Often the problem with encyclopedias is that, in attempting to cover a broad range of topics, none are covered in any detail. With Webster's Interactive Encyclopedia this problem is tackled by providing concise entries to the majority of subjects, while assigning detail of up to 150 words to the more important topics.

In addition to the text, there are spectacular photos – many in colour – pertinent soundbites, detailed drawings, videos and quotations. This provides a deeper exploration of the topics than is possible in a book. There is also a 'Timeline' history of the world, and a World Atlas – essential for any reference tool of this type.

All in all, this CD represents very good value for money, providing more information than products

three times the price. However, it's obvious that more attention has been given to the content than the presentation. Using the CD is easy enough – it's quick to load, and access to the 'Topic Navigator' is straightforward, but the search functions take a while to figure out. Also, the design is uninspiring and a little dated. **JC**

At £9.99, this encyclopedia is excellent value – the content is useful and comprehensive, even if the design is unappealing.

○ £9.99
○ Focus Multimedia: 01889 570156

Webster's Encyclopedia

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

Minimum requirements: 386SX/25MHz, Windows 3.1 or 95, 4Mb of hard drive space, 4Mb of memory, 256-colour display, double-speed CD-Rom drive, Soundblaster or compatible sound card.