

Microware Review

Scary Poems for Rotten Kids

L. F. (Len) Proctor

Reviews in this column have typically focused on productivity tools for the computer user-software which enhances instructor skills or efficiency. This review does not. Instead, we segue to a product which may be used to enhance student achievement. Frequent calls have been made in the current literature for the development of educational software products that exploit the capabilities of CD-ROM technology. The Discis talking book is one example of a new type of publishing format that does take advantage of more than the mass storage capabilities of CD-ROM disks. ***Scary Poems for Rotten Kids***, written by sean o'huigin, and illustrated by John Fraser & Scott Hughes, has captured much of the look and feel of the printed page. Voice, music, sound effects, and color have been added to the electronic page and exploited in such a manner as to attract and hold the attention of almost any youngster.

The talking book is not intended to replace its paper-based counterpart. Instead, it is a high-tech, tutorial approach intended to be used to enhance learner interest and proficiency in reading. For elementary students who are just beginning to learn how to read or who are reading but experiencing difficulty with their reading, having all or part of a book read to them will be a pleasant, alternative way to learn. While English is the current language of this book, some Discs books are available in Spanish, French and Cantonese. The ability to alternate between English and another language would make this learning resource especially useful for ESL students.

A modest amount of hardware is required to run this software. Any Macintosh from the Mac Classic to the IIfx and a CD-ROM drive will do, but to take full advantage of the book, Discus recommends the use of a color machine with an 8 bit color board. A hard disc drive is not required because the Discis book is a self contained product. The only computer operation skill required of the user is the ability to point, click, hold and drag the mouse. Currently, there are ten books in the series and several more are in various stages of publication. Each title costs in the range of \$70.00 to \$100.00. Discis

books are published by Discis Knowledge Research Inc., 45 Sheppard Avenue East, Suite 802, Toronto, Ont. M2N 5W9.

In *Scary Poems for Rotten Kids*, there are 34 pages of poetry. The titles of the poems range from "The Day the Mosquitoes Ate Angela Jane" to "The Fog." A *speaker* icon has been placed at appropriate intervals in the text and when combined with options available from the *customize* menu, several presentation modes may be invoked. For example, when the user clicks on the speaker icon, the passage is read. Clicking twice on the speaker invokes a phrased reading of the passage. In both options, each portion of the text is highlighted as it is being read in order to keep the user's eye synchronized with the voice of the reader. If users are reading a passage silently, and encounter a word that they do not recognize, clicking on the word once will cause the word to be pronounced for them. Double clicking on the word will cause it to be pronounced syllable by syllable along with an in-context definition or explanation. Similarly, by clicking on objects in an accompanying illustration, the user can find out the pronunciation and spelling of the names of many objects associated with a particular poem.

The sound of the digitized voices and the effects used in the talking book is as natural and clear as one would expect from a CD-ROM product. The obvious zest exhibited by the reader(s) of the text serves to immediately focus and hold the attention of the user. The pace of the presentation voice can also be controlled by the user. Selecting a slower pace however removes the special effects which serve to enhance the ambiance of the presentation. In addition to being able to adjust the pace of the presentation, users can also adjust the presentation of the text. Pull down menus may be used to change font, style, and size of the text, and the spacing of the lines of the text. Provision has also been made to store user preferences for each of these options and to keep track of words that the learner may have had difficulty pronouncing or understanding.

The printed documentation accompanying this disc is minimal. It is only 8 pages long and fits within the disc case. The introductory paragraph suggests that this amount of documentation will probably be sufficient for most users but in the event that more than a "bare bones" amount of information is required, a more detailed manual is available from the publisher for the cost of postage and handling (\$2.00). For many users, the short form or the documentation will probably be adequate because of the excellent on-line help file resident on the disc. When the help feature is activated, the cursor turns into a question mark. Placing the question mark on any feature of the book brings forth a spoken explanation of the nature or function of that feature. For many users, this level of explanation will be sufficient.

In conclusion, this disc represents a valuable addition to the tools we currently have available for teaching reading to beginning learners. It could be argued that the price of the disc when it is compared to the price of the book is too high and that the cost of the presentation equipment is too expensive for many elementary schools to afford. Perhaps this is true, but not very long ago,

motion picture and video media were in the same financial league and the same issues were hotly debated. Today, while the cost of motion picture and video learning resources has come down substantially, motion pictures and videotapes remain primarily linear presentation tools. They have no options built into them to enable the tracking of student error patterns, and they require no overt interaction with the media.

Discis books, like their paper-based counterparts, can be randomly accessed. Student error patterns can be collected and learner interaction has been made mandatory. Granted, such interactivity is currently costly. However, if traditional cost patterns are repeated as this format matures, it is reasonable to expect that both the equipment and software will become much less expensive in the foreseeable future. Traditional methods of helping every student, and especially the low-ability student, to learn to read more effectively are also expensive. However, it could be argued that helping all students to become better readers early in their educational careers is likely to be much less expensive than the cost of developing and delivering remedial programs later on. The Discis talking book represents a valuable addition to the tools teachers have available to help students become more interested in reading, and consequently better readers.

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