



Part I of this article discussed the 1995 editions of Compton's and Encarta. Part II looks at the latest version of the Grolier Encyclopedia and World Book (Information Finder).

Grolier '95 (Version 7.0)

Grolier has changed the software (from OptiWare to Personal Library Software), even if you don't realize it immediately. It retains the basic look and feel of the interface, but some features are gone, others added. To me, the most obvious change in the software is that there is no posting information for the terms entered, and the hit list is only presented in reverse relevance order. In the earlier version the user could choose an alphabetical listing as well. Neither can you jump in the record to the term that retrieved the record. In the case of a long record, this helped to find out why a seemingly irrelevant record may have been retrieved.

On the positive side, the time-based multimedia elements (now in QuickTime formats) have a progress bar, so you know how much is left from a video or an animation flick, or a soundbite. Moreover, the longer ones have milestones, and just by clicking on a checkbox you can make a slide show run continuously, or pause at the predefined milestones (segment boundary).

The table of contents of the segments can be popped up to jump to a particular item in the list. This is an excellent idea. On the other hand, it is a serious mistake that the volume of the sound is set to the minimum as default, so the user has to click and slide the volume bar to hear the narration or the music every time. It is not only very inconvenient, it can also be overlooked by the casual user. In such cases when the original size of the image is so big that part of it remains hidden along with the multimedia control bar, the user may not realize that the image is accompanied by sound. This is the case with the second image of the laughing kookaburra, which

Encyclopedias on CD-ROM

The 1995 Editions - Part II



By Péter Jacsó

has a very telling audio illustration.

A new feature in the software is the Pathmaker option that gives the user an audio-visual guided tour to innovators, great thinkers, novelists and artists, explorers, and sportsmen, and related articles and me-

dia. Another novelty is related-concept searching. While it may work well with many unique terms, it can retrieve a large number of irrelevant articles by letting the software assume a relationship between articles by chance occurrence of homonyms or quasi homonyms.

This is the same problem discussed in the review of Compton's encyclopedia. The difference is that Grolier spares us all the George and Georges, unlike its competitor, when looking for articles related to Sir Georg Solti. Unfortunately, term highlighting does not apply in related searching, making it more difficult to find out why Jacqueline Kennedy is retrieved for a search about the Greek philosopher Aristotle.

The Timeline feature has become graphical, retaining the possibility to search for events of a given year. These in turn may contain hot links to detailed articles. To the regret of many Grolier users, the 1995 version is not available for the DOS operating system. This is lamentable, as even without multimedia, the underlying text of Grolier is a perfect resource for high school and college students; and even for intermediate levels it is far better than Compton's predominantly short articles with all the multimedia elements thrown in. On the content side, the most important

novelty is the use of fractal images. Strangely, the press release does not even mention this important change, even though it allows you to enlarge any of the pictures to full screen size without significant loss in picture quality. Most of the images are very nice and worth enlarging. I was pleased to see that the polar bear has been cleaned up and got his white fur back. Also new are the maps (now from Geo Systems), and there are also city maps (55). They look good on the screen, but when printed they become pixelated. This may be just a glitch in the print program, but it lessens the value of the maps when they are printed.

It is a pleasant marketing gimmick that along with the 1995 encyclopedia you also get a copy of the excellent San Diego Zoo database. On the quantity side there is an equally important development. Grolier has doubled the number of pictures to 8,000, and not by cheap photos, but high-quality images. It still has the highest number of video flicks (totalling 52), while in terms of the number of animations, it is second to Encarta. Grolier has the best slide shows in the forms of multimedia maps and Knowledge Explorer essays. These five- to six-minute shows run circles around Compton's slide shows, which you may miss if you blink.

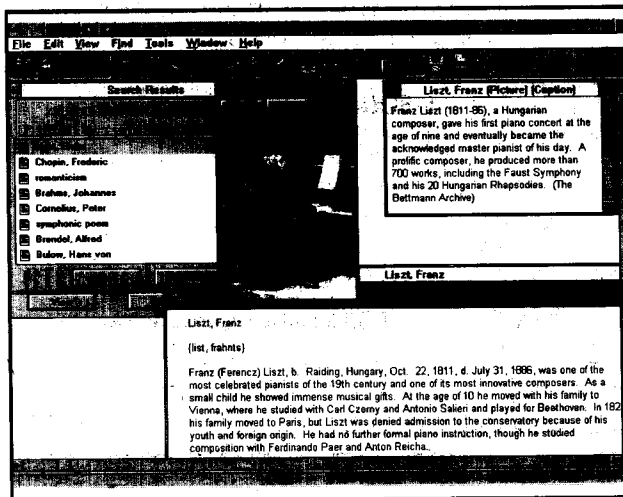
Grolier may have the least amount of sound among the competitors, but there is a reason for it. It does not dilute the database by low quality MIDI files of national anthems and poor synthetic renderings of classical music. In the pre-CD-ROM era, we bought an encyclopedia for a lifetime. In the early '90s, we had to take a deep look into the capabilities of the CD-ROM encyclopedias before parting with our money. Today, buying two of the highest quality encyclopedias does not cost much more than a dinner in a posh restaurant, and the value for your money is incomparable.

World Book 3.1

World Book Inc. has been cautious with jumping on the multimedia bandwagon. When other encyclopedias already had pictures, sound, and animation, World Book (under the name Information Finder) still was a text-only database. It was 1994 when the World Book 3.0 the Illustrated Encyclopedia was released, and it delivered what it promised at very high quality: pictures, and superb maps with text.

By 1995 World Book went completely multimedia, and changed its subtitle accordingly. It also kept the tradition of high quality. Beyond updating the text and including new graphics (such as the flags of each country, U.S. states, and Canadian provinces, along with coats of arms for the latter), it enriched the well-structured, highly informative articles with valuable multimedia elements. The 75 audio clips are the best, illustrating 26 animal sounds, 39 musical instruments (the best among the encyclopedias), and a medley of the most famous pieces of classical music from Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* to Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*.

These are not puny synthesized renditions as in Compton's but CD-Audio qual-



A sample screen from the latest version of the Grolier Encyclopedia.



ity excerpts, except for Schubert's *Symphony No. 8*, which is too short even for an illustration as to why it is called the "Unfinished Symphony."

There are about 45 excellent animation sequences to illustrate the formation of coral islands, volcanic eruption, continental drift, the Doppler effect, two and four stroke cycle engines, and a number of physiological functions of the human body. These are functional and of high quality.

The interlinked animations are unique and let you put what you see in perspective by looking at the broader picture. While looking at the animation of the respiratory unit of the lung, you may start playing back the sequence about breathing. The video flicks are the weakest multimedia elements (as in all the encyclopedias), and they are not up to the standard of World Book. The flicks about the Depression, the Berlin Wall, *Apollo 11*, and Alva Edison are small (2.5 by 2 inches), jerky, and don't add much to the text.

The layered text (that fits different levels of interest and gives a feeling like moving a magnifying glass closer to the object if you want more details) is top notch, and so are the current bibliographies, and control questions at the end of many articles. Having read numerous articles, I found only one statement that I would strongly argue with: "CD-ROMs are created and used in much the same way as audio CDs." I wouldn't think so, and if you use this CD-ROM encyclopedia, you would probably disagree with this oversimplified statement, too.

The software has not changed much. The Gallery function was extended to allow the browsing of the table of contents of multimedia elements, and it is still not efficient. First you choose a category (say Presidents), then look at the item list, select it for viewing (or listening), and then you are back at the category level. It would be much better if the user could a) immediately go to the next item, b) return to the item list, or c) return to the category list. Regrettably, the sorting of items within the categories remains weird. Persons are sorted by their first name, so Elvis Presley follows Elizabeth Taylor. This just flies in the face of common sense and convention.

All in all, this is a high-quality encyclopedia, and if you have bought the printed edition, you may qualify for a \$99 price. World Book is still not available through computer stores, book stores, or mail order companies, as its competitors are, and this deprives potential home users from even knowing about this valuable reference source.

At \$99, many families would be willing to invest the money. This is the time for World Book to capture a large share of the market from another perspective as well. World Book is now the only substantial encyclopedia available for DOS users (under the name Information Finder) with current content. The DOS community is still large and is likely to remain so for a few more years. Once they get to like the text-only version, they are likely to remain loyal to the publication even when they upgrade or change to the Windows or Mac platform. ♦

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