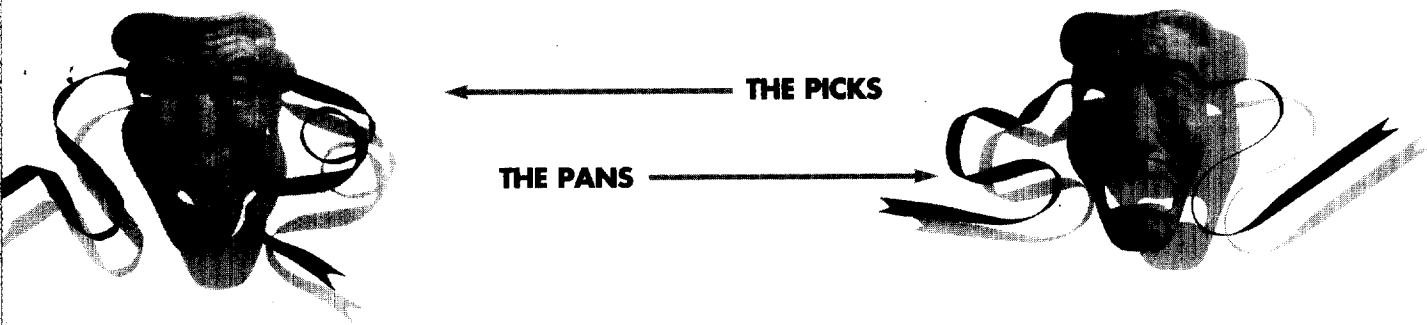
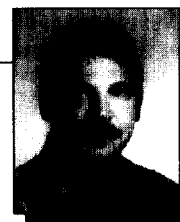


# DATABASES: PÉTER'S PICKS & PANS

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This month, both the picks and pans are from the most popular reference category. Encyclopedias, almanacs, and ready-reference collections are the hottest items as they have a huge potential customer base. Beyond the five best known multimedia encyclopedias and reference collections (Encarta, Bookshelf, Worldbook, Grolier, and Compton's), there are a few gems and some lumps of coal in this segment of the market. I picked two from each.



## THE PICKS

### Eyewitness Encyclopedia of Science

Sheer pleasure is the best way to describe using this encyclopedia from the British publisher, Dorling Kindersley. All of their CD-ROMs are based on equally magnificent books, and provide the perfect examples for making multimedia CD-ROMs out of books. The underlying text material

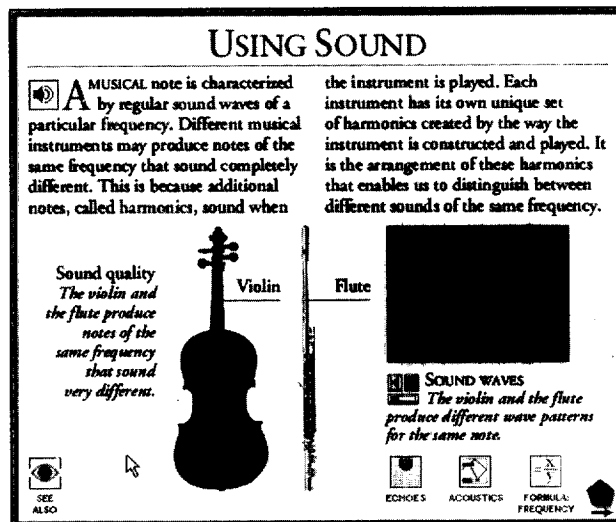
is excellent, both in content and structure, covering math, physics, chemistry, and life sciences. The images and the animation are sterling (Figure 1).

Dorling Kindersley licensed the best of what is available from the most respected sources to illustrate scientific concepts. It is like having the most exquisite ingredients for a dinner, from Beluga caviar to Lobster Thermidor followed by genuine Napoleon cognac—without the price tag.

The narration and the sound effects are professional, like the best butlers, but if you don't want them, they can be turned off.

The interface is intuitive, engaging, and fun. It keeps luring users into further explorations. Even the help file is top notch (Figure 2). Too bad that one rarely needs to invoke it. Using this encyclopedia is like being led to the wonders of nature

FIGURE 1  
High-quality Graphics in the Eyewitness Encyclopedia of Science



and music by the immensely knowledgeable and laid back masters of edutainment, Sir David Attenborough and the late Leonard Bernstein. There are only two improvements I would wish for in the next edition: biographies of more scientists, and direct search capabilities (e.g., endangered and mammals and Asia) instead of merely browsing the index to pick a term. At a mail-order

FIGURE 2

The Eyewitness Encyclopedia of Science Interface

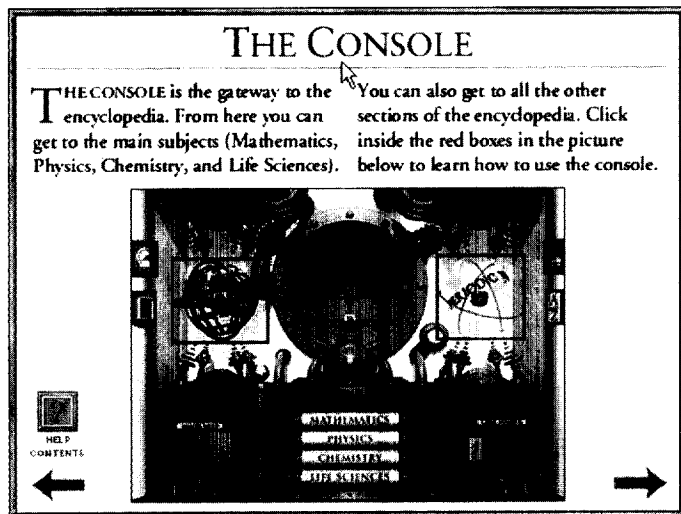
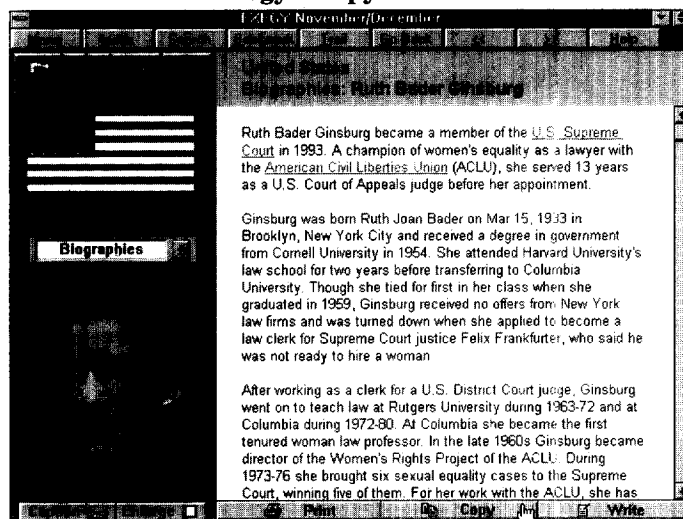


FIGURE 3

Exegy's Copy Feature



price of below \$50, it is a "must have" database, not only for schools but also for homes where anyone may learn something about science. I certainly did.



Exegy

The name may not sound familiar since this database has no print equivalent (except a card catalog system that schools subscribe to), but Exegy from ABC-CLIO is a well-designed, informative almanac of current events around the world, including politics, social, scientific, and cultural issues, and sports. Biographies of politicians and cultural figures, statistics, original documents, splendid pictures, and good maps (licensed from R.R. Donelley) complement this compendium. The maps have a close-up view and a zoom-out view to put a country in perspective. Exegy is unique in its currency, as it is updated six times a year. At the subscription price of \$650 per year, it is not meant for the home user, but for school and public libraries. The only comparable product is Facts on File, but Exegy is a far more sophisticated, powerful, and intuitive system.

Using Microsoft Viewer, Exegy offers excellent browsing, searching,

and hyperlinking features. Hot spots provide glossary definitions for selected terms. The designers of this database (as opposed to the two products discussed next) know how to design and customize an interface, enlarge a picture by the simple click of a button, and use pop-up techniques for the display of information on demand. Printing and copying is a snap, and the direct link to Microsoft Write (part of Windows) is a smart idea for instant pasting of text, pictures, and maps into a document (Figure 3). Sources are professionally cited, and guidelines for citing Exegy references themselves are provided, a great idea for students writing essays and term papers. Overall, Exegy is a first class and current ready-reference source.



THE PANS

The Circle of Knowledge Encyclopedia

This product from JLR Inc. is depressingly bad in itself, and particularly unprofessional in the company of the reference databases just discussed. It is full of false claims, data,

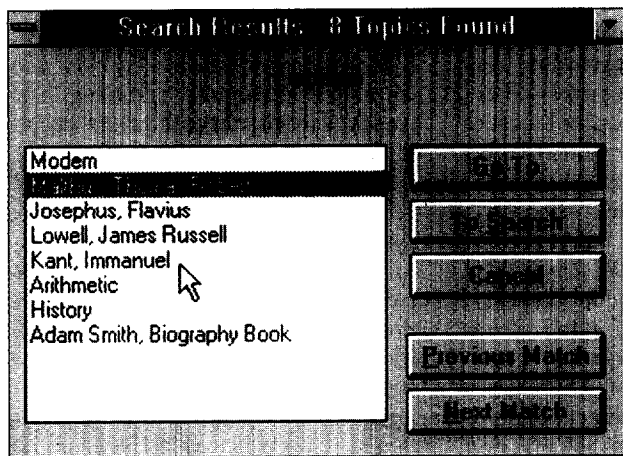
and statements, topped by a mumbo-jumbo "philosophy" that sounds like infomercials of the wee hours. Ironically, I have to spend more space on it than on the gems in order to be convincing, and to alert readers to an inferior database. Dr. James J. Romeo, its senior editor, enthuses as follows in the introduction:

*The word encyclopedia is actually an entire little utterance for in circle education...Now, here is an important observation...Today, encyclopedias are all alphabetized. ...Today, most encyclopedias are still based on alphabetical systems of organization—even the CD-ROM encyclopedias.*

Dr. Romeo must have been too busy with his project to miss the fact that none of the CD-ROM encyclopedias are bound by the alphabet. On the contrary, most of them offer subject tree structures and thematic arrangements, if the user so requests. All the decent ones have dynamic links from Beethoven to music to symphonies to classicism—to use Dr. Romeo's example. The editor proudly shares with us that:

*The Circle of Knowledge Encyclopedia is the first encyclopedia in history to be created from the outset as an interactive, multimedia encyclopedia. It is not based on a previously-existing, text-based alphabetical encyclopedia. It was conceptualized from the beginning as a circle*

**FIGURE 4**  
**"Modem" Search Results**



of knowledge, not based on text, but built on various different media elements.

Well, that may be the root of one of the problems. This publication is an eclectic collection of trivia, often extremely shallow and grossly outdated information culled from mostly unidentified text sources. Much of the product is, indeed, based on text. It seems as if the text portions were grabbed from whatever sources were available nearby. Often the language is archaic, sprinkled with "thenceforward", "hitherto", and the likes.

While the editor does not fail to claim copyright with perfect formality on this product, he is quite nonchalant in acknowledging the print resources used. The acknowledgment section is far from being what the introduction promises, a "complete list of copyright holders, licensers, and participants." I could not find any credit for the short biographies, the biographical books, or the haphazardly selective lists of awards and prizes. Even when acknowledgments are given (almost only to media people and companies), they are unprofessional and cheesy for an encyclopedia ("Kai's Power Tools—Thanks Kai...we loved every minute of it. Your software is great").

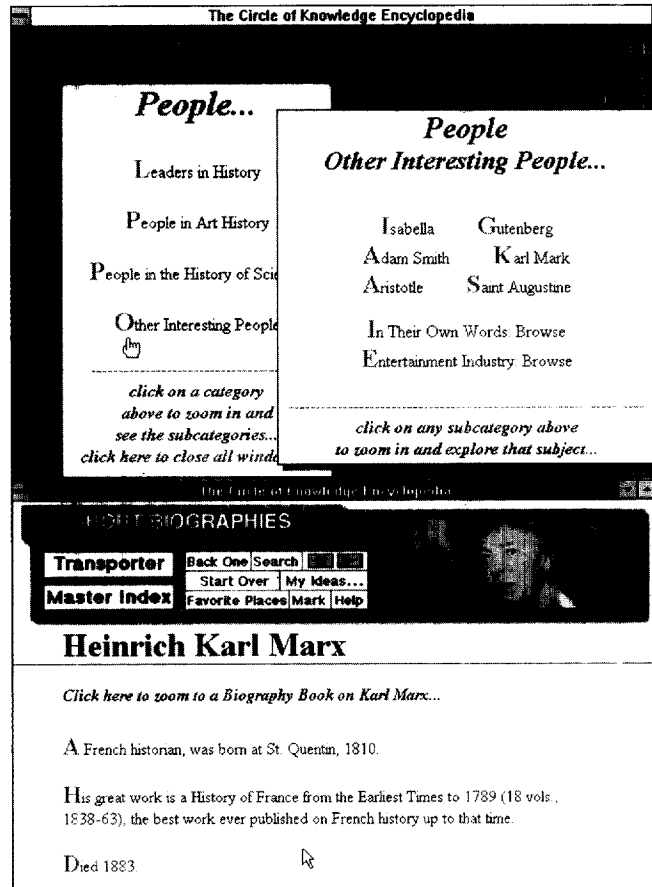
Some of the texts were obviously scanned in but may have been too blurry for correct digital conversion. This could explain why my search for "modem" picked up entries about Malthus, Flavius, Immanuel Kant, and Adam Smith (Figure 4). The word

modern must have been interpreted as modem by the scanner software, and no one cared to check the scanning.

Sometimes the cause of the foul-up is more enigmatic. Among those classified as interesting people is one with the name Karl Mark. Even more interestingly, it takes us to the record where the name is spelled correctly as Heinrich Karl Marx. To further increase our interest, the tiny biography (Figure 5) is definitely not of Marx, nor of Francois Guizot, whose book is attributed to Marx. This may prove that there were, indeed, some original text contributions by the senior editor and his staff, though not necessarily to the benefit of the product. Another proof may be the more than unorthodox definition of byte ("Using a byte, numbers up to 32,767 can be represented in binary format"). It would be nice, but in that devilish byte only 256 characters can be represented. This is Computers 101 fodder—on the first session.

No one bothered to verify whether the information in the add-on media jives with the text. The text claims (correctly) that Fidel Castro became president in 1976, the video caption claims 1979. For Isabella,

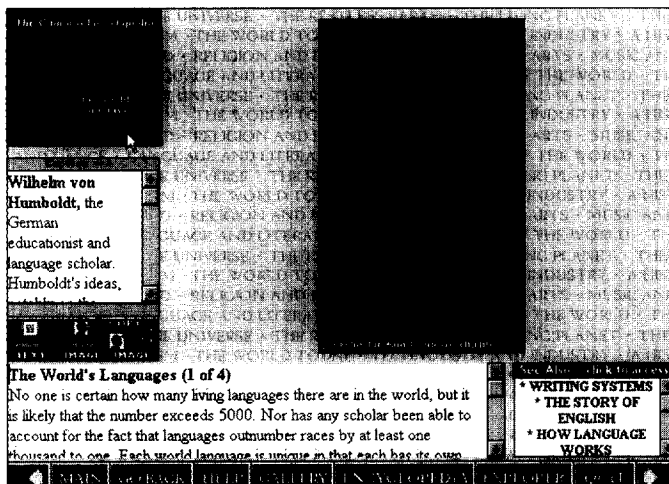
**FIGURE 5**  
**A Classification and Short Biography of Karl Marx**



the Catholic, another member of the "interesting people" category, the text claims that she became the queen of Castile and León in 1481. In fact, she ascended to the throne in 1474 and remained queen until her death in 1504, two years longer than this encyclopedia claims (putting her in the grave in 1502). Gutenberg's birth year is also mistaken. You would expect editors to check out the dates for at least the few prominently presented people. It would not have been difficult, as the full biographies quote the dates correctly. The extent of carelessness with prominently treated items that I sampled may suggest what you can expect from the rest of the encyclopedia entries.

The organization and classification of information is touted as unprecedented. In some senses, it certainly is. Within the General Knowledge section, Astronomy is immediately followed by Baccarat, Backgammon by Bacteriology, Trigonometry by

**FIGURE 6**  
**Guinness Encyclopedia's Array of "Panes"**



Twenty-One (blackjack for the novice). I used to be an avid gambler, but I never considered gambling terminology and definitions a part of "general knowledge." Neither am I impressed by the organization when, in an *alphabetical* list, Rembrandt comes before Botticelli, Reagan before Clinton—because artists and presidents are *sorted by first name*.

Though I did not crave to see much more of this sloppily compiled trivia compendium, I wondered why all the Nobel laureates were not listed, rather than only a few in each category. Neither did I care to know who the Miss America winners were, but while looking them up as a diligent reviewer I could not help pondering why the 1945, 1955, and 1971 Misses were listed as "a few interesting winners." (If there is an interesting winner, it is the one who won in 1984 and later resigned.) To the credit of this database, it does not offer any print facilities. Preventing printing of the shallow, inaccurate, and outdated information saves many trees in the long run and reduces the chances of further dispensing misinformation. This database may be dangerous to your grades and intelligence.



### Guinness Encyclopedia

Sometimes not even a well-known name can guarantee a good product.

While the thematic arrangement, the structuring of the information sections and subsections, and most of the multimedia elements (particularly the maps on the second disk) are indeed good in this encyclopedia from Wayzata Technology, the entire product has a half-baked and harried feel to it. It was rushed to

the market prematurely. The textual content is sometimes questionable (as in the article about computers). The help file is very sloppily written and does not give any clue, for example, about the powerful and complex print facilities (which, by the way, don't always work). Neither does it mention the direct search syntax of the Toolbook software, maybe because of its extremely limited facility, or because it is incredibly slow and cumbersome to use. It stops at every hit, shows the term along with a few words left and right, and offers to quit the search or to continue. You cannot get back to the hits to show the entire paragraph or article, and if you abandon the search to look at the article, you'll have to reexecute the narcoleptic search. I even had trouble canceling a search.

It is bad enough that articles are not decently current in a recently published encyclopedia. It is deplorable that while the sleeve carries a picture of Mandela as president, the article about Civil and Human Rights claims that "There are still many countries whose citizens are denied basic human rights. In South Africa, under the apartheid system, the dominant white minority denies the vote to the majority Black population and limits its freedom of movement." Well, not since late 1993. Someone in charge of this small encyclopedia should have noticed the changes in South Africa over 18 months and updated the related article.

I would not have chosen this database as one of the "pans" merely for the above problems. It is the screen design that really earned it a spot. It comes in your face whatever you do, and is extremely irritating. The typical screen consists of six panes (Figure 6).

I do not call them "windows" because they do not function as you would expect in—well, Windows. And this is the problem. They cannot be resized by the user, let alone closed to make more room for the other panes. All of them are of fixed size. The biggest area is reserved for pictures, but most of the pictures take up only 30 to 40 percent of their allocated space. The hierarchical tree is nice but would be better if the user could scroll up and down the entire hierarchy. The caption pane can never accommodate the text because the captions are unusually long. The five lines for article text remind me of drinking a keg of beer from a sake cup. You have to keep scrolling many times to read even a single section from a multi-section article. To go to another section, the arrow symbols at the bottom of the screen must be used, further inconveniencing you. The cross references cannot be displayed in the tiny pane either. If the panes were real windows, the user could easily enlarge them horizontally or vertically for reading the text, the caption, or the cross references. Most often they would not overlap the picture. Even covering some part of the picture would hardly be a bother, especially if a single button could restore a better designed default screen. Alternatively, the picture could be smacked to a corner in a smaller size, and if needed, could be temporarily enlarged and then reset. The publisher offers a money back option—but in its current format, do not even bother to buy it in the first place.

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