



Editor's note: The author examines Compton's Interactive Encyclopedia '95 and Encarta '95 in this first installment of a two-part series.

General encyclopedias on CD-ROM are not only getting better and better every year, but also less expensive. Fierce competition makes wonderful things happen.

I remember when Bookshelf was the only game in town: it was left without updating for several years in the mid-'80s. When Compton's had the only multimedia encyclopedia, it charged \$895.

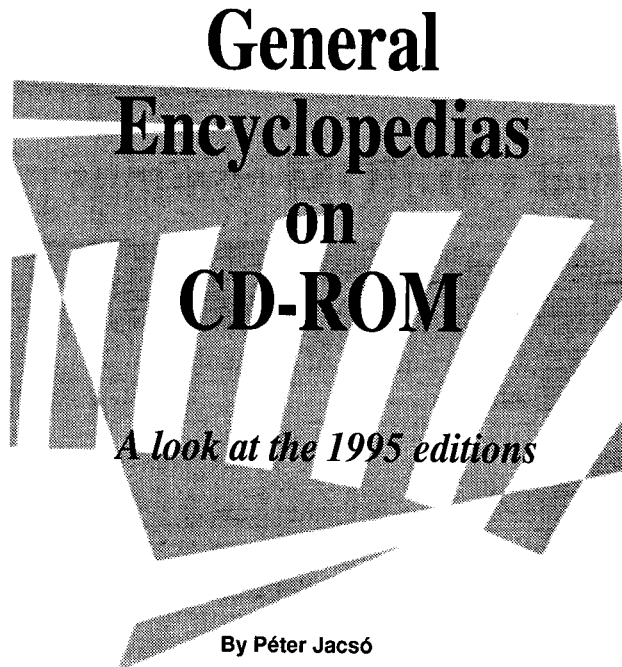
This past year, Grolier, Compton's, and Encarta rushed out their updated versions well before the beginning of the new year to catch the Christmas shopping, each version printed at about \$40 from the best mail order companies (especially if you had an earlier version). They have to duke it out not only among themselves, but also against newcomers, such as the new Webster's Encyclopedia.

The updates are substantial, both in the content and the software. In Part One of this series, we'll look at the new software and content features of the 1995 editions of Compton's and Encarta. In Part Two (next issue), we'll discuss Grolier and Worldbook. Though the latter has not yet released its 1995 update of Information Finder, it is due by early summer.

Compton's Interactive Encyclopedia '95

The interface went through total plastic surgery, and the new look is attractive, especially for the MTV-generation. It is inviting, consistent, intuitive, and features well-designed buttons, icons, and screen areas. The help function has been much improved. The new Editing Room feature is excellent for creating your own slide show from the multimedia elements of the encyclopedia.

The underlying search engine has been somewhat refined, though it still has the "father knows best" attitude, and does not offer any control for the user to specify logical operators, or to limit the search to the



body of the article.

The Idea Search and the Infopilot search modes still produce absolutely irrelevant and confusing results. Looking for national anthems, the result list includes soundbites of the alligator and of Franklin D. Roosevelt and Thomas Edison just because the copyright statements or the captions refer to the National Park Service, the National Archives, or the national defense. The software still does not require that both of the specified search terms occur in the articles retrieved. You can imagine the result list when searching for Little Richard.

It adds insult to injury that beyond the irrelevant 3 articles mentioned above, only anthems of 97 countries are displayed in

the hit list. While you may applaud that the national anthems of Tuvalu, Saint Kitts, and Nevis are there, you are certainly puzzled as to why the list would start at Burkina Faso, and why it omits a 100 or so other countries when their national anthems are indeed in the database.

Well, I know the answer to the latter. Each search is limited to 100 items (though it is not documented) and results are displayed in decreasing relevance order (relevance as presumed by the software, that is). The other problem—which is that the list skips the countries before Burkina Faso, and omits the ones between China and the Czech Republic (such as Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Cyprus), and then all the countries up to Liberia—is still enigmatic.

Similarly puzzling is that the Idea Search for articles about Australia with pictures does not retrieve 16 items that are retrieved by the more limited Content Search. These are all relevant items, such as pictures of the platypus (a duck-billed mole), lyrebird, koala, Tasmanian devil, wallaby, etc. InfoPilot has also got a new look, but it still claims absurd relationship between articles by the mere presence of a homonym or similar word in two articles. The search about Georg Solti, the famous Hungarian conductor, still brings up as related pieces the articles about Lloyd Goerge, Georges Simenon, and all the kings whose names are George. You really appreciate that the search stops at 100 related items.

There is no hyperlink from the articles when you click on a word except for the definition of the term in the dictionary. It is disappointing that the thesaurus was removed from the encyclopedia. While the

printing of articles and copying of flags is simple, the copying of articles is cumbersome, and maps cannot be copied.

Multimedia content is still poor even though Compton's has realized that quantity does not make quality and has cut back the number of pictures from 15,000 to 7,000. There are still too many small, blurry pictures, and primitive animal drawings with only the name of the animal. These are from a cheap collection and Compton's would be better off without them. When enlarging the original images, they often become overly pixelated. The maps are inadequate, both in terms of access and content. You cannot display a country map directly, but you have to zoom into them from larger regional maps. Compton's has shallow geographic information on its four maps. For Hungary, only Budapest appears on the map, and the Danube river (one of Europe's largest rivers) does not appear on the map, even though its name is displayed.

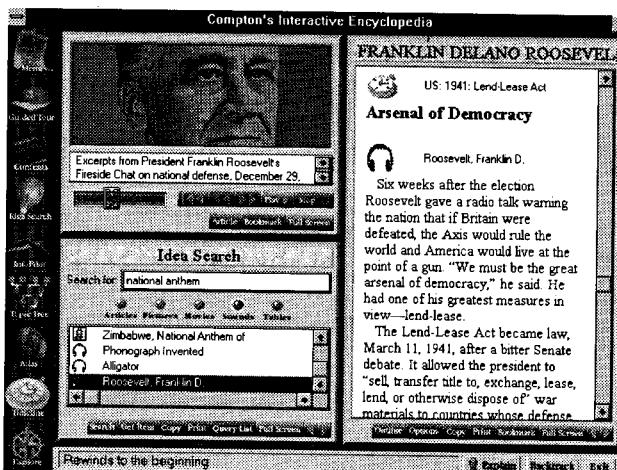
In terms of audio elements, Compton's seems to have a large collection of about 600 sound clips, but again the quality is disappointing. It is nice that there are about 150 wave files, but they represent only a small fraction of the 14 hours of audio that Compton's brags about in its ad. The rest of the audio file is in MIDI format, which is unacceptable for richly orchestrated musical pieces such as *Beethoven's Fifth Symphony* (appearing twice in the sound index), and the hundreds of other classical samples. The synthetic sounds require 1/1000th of the storage needed for CD-audio quality, but they are irritatingly inappropriate. To its credit, Compton's has the most musical instrument sounds (51) in recorded (WAV) format. However, its collection of bird and animal sounds is paltry.

The animations have improved, and the irrelevant or very low quality ones (such as water boiling and fish swimming) have been removed. However, the animations, the slide shows, and the videos are very short. The one-minute slide show about painting is no match for a similar movie in Grolier that lasts for more than five minutes and has better pictures and narration. Likewise, what can you expect of a 30-second clip about science?

Encarta '95

Microsoft has enriched its interface by simplifying it. Instead of the hip but somewhat confusing overlapping windows and changing screens, it opted for a simpler but very elegant, comprehensible, consistent, and intuitive design. Visually appealing option lists automatically roll down when you stop on a button or pop up when you click on another. All these movements are accompanied by a clearly audible click and whoosh sound. The visual design itself is superb, and along with the sound effects we have the perfect model for multisensory interface.

Browsing of articles has been improved by providing an outline on the left side of the screen similar to the solution pioneered by Information Finder years ago. The user



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Encyclopedias on CD-ROM

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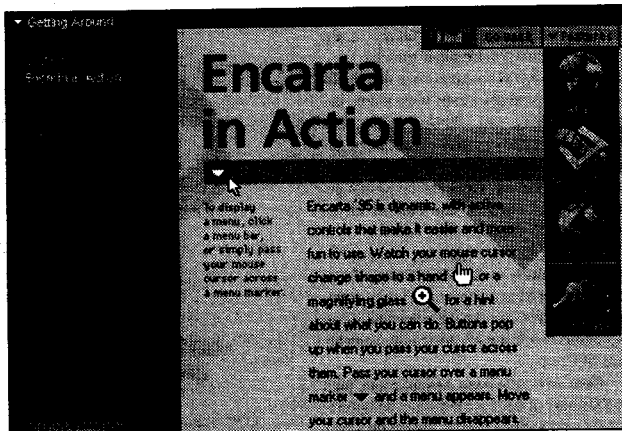
can choose to have this outline and the multimedia elements automatically displayed and specify other options to customize some other aspects of the screen layout. Lists of further readings now appear spelled out at the end of the article, not just as code numbers to be looked up. Related articles are well marked, only Information Finder does it better. The Dictionary now is the third edition of the American Heritage Dictionary, and Roget's Electronic Thesaurus.

The underlying search engine has not changed, "only" the face of it, so all the powerful searching features (truncation, Boolean, proximity operations, and hyperlinking) are available, along with printing and copying options. Hyperlinking is excellent, but the markings for hyperlinked items are not perfect yet. For example, in the article about Australia, the names Bob Hawke and Paul Keating are not highlighted even if there is an article

sequence the elements, or add your own text screens as you can in Compton's excellent Editing Room.

Images are very nice, and most of the 7,000 pictures can be enlarged to impressively large (often 9.5 x 5 inch) pictures without significant loss of quality. It is a good idea that some pictures group together similar photos to show similarities and differences (e.g., between five marsupials), then enlarge the picture either as a group photo or the individual pictures in it. The nearly 500 maps are excellent. It is a pleasure to see that Microsoft corrected the few mispronounced geographical names (like Kauai) of the previous edition.

Almost all pictures are color (except for portraits of famous people and historic events). Many of the black and white portraits of poets are framed in an artistic oval overlay that suggests some patina. Even better, there are numerous reading by the artists themselves. Hearing e.e. cum-



about both. Another surprising limitation is that from some multimedia clips (e.g., Mozart's portrait and music), there is no option to jump to the article. Encarta allows copying of not only text and images but also sounds by a simple click into the clipboard. It could be better only if users were allowed to specify a destination file.

The software itself clearly illustrates how much the multimedia is integrated with the text. No other encyclopedia makes it so easy and versatile to limit a search to articles with picture, map, audio, or video enhancements, or any combinations of those. Multimedia elements can be directly searched rather than just browsed. Even posting information is provided both for text and multimedia searches. Additional filter panels allow the qualification by time period and place by specifying a date and choosing one or more regions on a pop-up filter panel. In the index panel the list of items meeting the criteria is immediately displayed. This list can be saved and recalled next time. The result list can also serve as a script for your own slide show, though you cannot

readings, Dylan Thomas, Ginsburg, or Robert Frost recite their poems is memorable.

Though Encarta also throws in a lot of low quality MIDI files (e.g., all the national anthems), it has excellent wave files for illustrating classical music, musical instruments, bird songs, animal sounds and 60 languages.

The sound of the Tasmanian devil along with its picture will leave no doubt about the origin of the name. Encarta is unrivaled in animations quality and quantity (totalling 83), though there are still a handful of silent animations that are below Encarta's standards.

The 30 videos are still nothing to write home about, but the new Interactivities category is superb. It is hard to describe the multimedia medley and quizzes about Immigration, Fractals, Languages, and Music.

You must see, hear, and play them yourself. Encarta '95 is a most entertaining reference source and a textbook example for multimedia design concepts and integration.