

CD-ROM ↔ LINK

General Encyclopedias on CD-ROM

A close analysis of these major reference products

By Péter Jacsó

Editor's note: In this first installment of a two-part series on encyclopedias on CD-ROM, the author reviews Compton's Interactive Encyclopedia and Encarta. In the November-December issue, he will review Grolier's Multimedia Encyclopedia and Information Finder.

General encyclopedias are probably the most precious reference sources in all types of libraries. Their production and update cost is enormous and their purchase price represents a significant part of the book budget. No wonder librarians are eager to get advice and read evaluations about encyclopedias in order to make the purchasing decisions that best meet their budget—and patrons' needs. In addition to Kenneth Kister's excellent *Best Encyclopedias: A Guide to General and Specialized Encyclopedias*, the *Reference Books Bulletin* reviews the current versions of the most important general encyclopedias in print format every year.

The CD-ROM versions of the four major general encyclopedias have been approached with similar concern because of their high prices. Until recently, Compton's Interactive Encyclopedia had a suggested retail price of \$895, Grolier's Multimedia Encyclopedia sported a price tag of \$395, so did Encarta, and the price of the text-only version of Information Finder was nearly \$500. By 1994, however, the typical list price of the first three encyclopedias plummeted to between \$130-150. Currently, the latest versions of Compton's and Grolier can be bought for \$39, Encarta for \$80 from many mail-order companies. Information Finder is not available through mail-order companies, but those who have the 1992, 1993, or 1994 edition of the printed version (*World Book Encyclopedia*) can have the brand new interactive version, released in the summer of 1994, for \$99. Within the CD-ROM market no other product category has seen such a fantastic price drop while the quality has kept improving.

For this reason the decision as to which CD-ROM encyclopedia to buy is not as intimidating as it used to be. Nevertheless, it is worth knowing their major strengths and weaknesses. This is what I will try to accomplish in this two-part series—focus only on those aspects that have to do with putting these gold mines of information on

CD-ROM. Most of the traditional evaluation criteria (accuracy, objectivity, readability, currency) are the same, regardless of the medium. I urge you to consult the two publications cited above, if you have not done so before.

There are two criteria that deserve special emphasis in the CD-ROM versions:

pictures (around 7,000 according to the ads of the publisher), too many of them are black and white, and more importantly, the pictures are often hazy. Many of the color ones have a washed-out feel (even though I displayed them on a 256 color, 15" high quality NEC monitor). Portraits of contemporary poets, novelists, artists are few

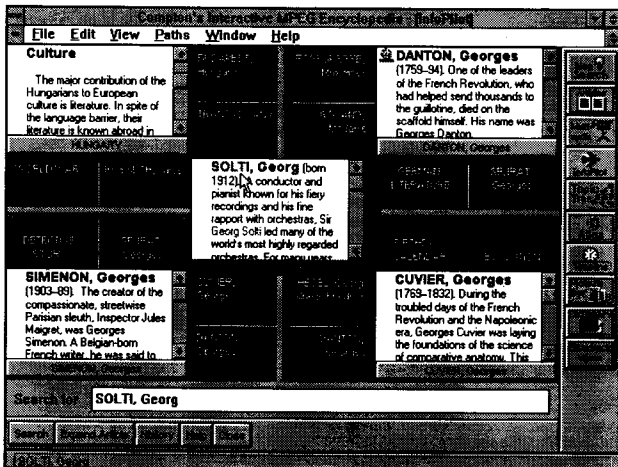


Figure 1. Good idea badly implemented in SmarTrieve

software capabilities and illustrative materials (multimedia, if you will) in the broadest sense. Due to space limitations only those issues are discussed even within this framework that are unique or remarkable in a positive or negative way, and differ from the printed version. I tested the most current version of all the four encyclopedias as available in August 1994. In this first part Compton's Interactive Encyclopedia and Encarta are discussed. These will be followed next issue by the New Multimedia Grolier Encyclopedia and the Illustrated Information Finder Encyclopedia.

Compton's Interactive Encyclopedia

This was the first multimedia encyclopedia that incorporated text, sound, images, and video. What was novel in 1989 has become common by now, and the multimedia aspect of Compton's Interactive Encyclopedia has not kept pace with time. While it may have the largest number of

and far between, while pictures of little illustrative value abound.

The disappointing maps merely depict the outline of a country or a state, with only one or two cities indicated. While the nearly 100 sound bites are functional, and of good quality, the 12 animations are embarrassingly primitive, and hardly useful. The animation of how the fish swims without any caption or narration looks like a cheap screen saver program, and the boiling of the water could be checked out in the kitchen better than in Compton's animation. The 10 slide shows (narrated picture series) about Africa, South America, United States, national parks, France, India, Japan, painting, architecture, and sculpture are good though very short (30-40 sec each). The 28 videos are shown in a tiny TV screen, and though they can be enlarged, they become unacceptably pixellated. (In the MPEG version that requires a \$400 video decompression card, the video flicks are very good).

On the positive side, the sound bites, video clips, slides, and animations are accompanied by a control button that shows the progress, indicates the duration of the multimedia component, and allows pausing, jumping forward and backward. You may browse the list of all the multimedia elements, but only the picture button can be used to specify that pictorial information is needed. There is no such qualifier for sound.

The much-touted SmarTrieve search engine has both dark and bright features. On the positive side it handles flexibly the variant forms of words (bear, bears, bore), but when it does so in case of compound terms the search results include absurd entries—without advising the user, it assumes an OR relationship between the words of a compound term.

Searching for *polar bear* retrieves the following articles: Arkansas (the Bear State), Firearms (that may have 10-, 12-, 16-20-inch bore), Apostles (who bore witness to the Resurrection), various kings (who bore the name Charles or Henry), as well as Telescope (that has polar axis) to name a few of the odd-balls. Retrieving false hits because of homonyms (bear, seal, etc.) is almost unavoidable, but polar bear, green card, cold war would seem to be unambiguous compound terms. Not for SmarTrieve, which picks up every article that includes either polar or bear (or bore), green or card, cold or war, etc. The help file doesn't mention that putting the compound term between quotation marks could eliminate this problem. All the other encyclopedias handle the searching of compound terms far better, and they have Boolean and proximity operators that SmarTrieve lacks.

This nonchalant and excessively lax handling of the query cripples an otherwise splendid feature of the software, called InfoPilot. On entering a search term, SmarTrieve displays 5 small windows each with about 200 characters in the center and four corners of the screen. These are the focus article and the secondary articles. Each secondary article panel is surrounded by four articles most closely related to it. This tiling is an excellent idea for the visual representation of relatedness, and makes it easy to navigate around by clicking on any of the panels that may become the central one and reshuffling the tiles.

The process as the tiles are filled with the text is almost as interesting as watching where the ball will stop in roulette. However, there is a serious problem and it is clearly illustrated with our example shown in Figure 1. *Georg Solti* is the query. The article about him becomes the center piece, the primary window. In the

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top left corner, the culture section of the article about Hungary is shown. It is a perfect relation, but the other foreground panels (tiles) show articles that are only related to Sir Solti inasmuch as the first name of those gentlemen (Georges) is almost the same as that of the famous conductor. This is too far-fetched an association even for those pseudo-psychologists on tabloid TV. It is no excuse that SmartTrieve mistakenly considers the "es" in Georges as plural form. In InfoPilot mode, not even the quotation mark can help, and the result confuses the searcher for sure.

The Merriam Webster collegiate dictionary and thesaurus is bundled with the encyclopedia (as with any Compton's products) and can be invoked by clicking on any word in an article. The definitions cannot be copied or printed, and words in the definitions are not searchable. There is a direct link for any Windows word processor that the user may define for exporting passages of texts from articles but not from the dictionary. There is no hotlink facility to initiate a search from a text displayed unless the link is a predefined link (i.e., a see also reference). Compton's has the best timetable both in terms of content and navigation facilities. You can get an outline and a detailed view and may switch between world events and U.S. events. The timeline can be searched by event and by year.

Encarta

Encarta is the CD-ROM version of the *Funk and Wagnalls New Encyclopedia*, but not even the most literate shelf stackers of the supermarkets where it is shelved between heavy-duty detergents and pet foods would recognize it. Microsoft has added dazzling photos, animation, sound, some computer related articles, and in the 1994 version also video to the text that is considered by many to be inferior to the content of the other three encyclopedias. However, the illustrations are really cool, the picture and sound quality is top notch, and the text is not bad either.

In the 1994 edition, Microsoft added 22 videos of short (.5-1) minute duration, playing in a 3.75 by 3.5 inch window. Most of them have no narration and are more like animation or slide shows. They are too much centered around similar concepts (hatching snake, chick hatching, larva to pupa, becoming a frog, emerging butterfly, incomplete metamorphosis, first cell division, dividing bacteria). Some, however, are well worth watching (Berlin Wall, Hurricane, Venus' Flytrap, Native Arts), short though they may be. Not accidentally, all these are narrated. Out of the nearly 100 animations, the ones with narration and over 1 minute duration are excellent (eclipse, doppler effect, ear and hearing, electric motor, structure of DNA, telephone, television) and even offer some humor (greenhouse effect). There are a

large number of animated maps, mostly to illustrate war operations. They are very informative, but the narrated ones of Grolier are even better. While all the animations have control buttons to pause, stop, and rewind, animations have a remarkable extra feature: the possibility to pop up a script and jump to the appropriate step in the animation sequence in case you want to replay a step or two.

tives in 60 languages are authentic and interesting.

Maps deserve special mention as they are speaking maps. Most major cities and all the countries and states are pronounced. Though they are not pronounced by native speakers, they are close enough. City names on the map are searchable (through a special Find a Place button), unlike in Grolier and Information Finder where they

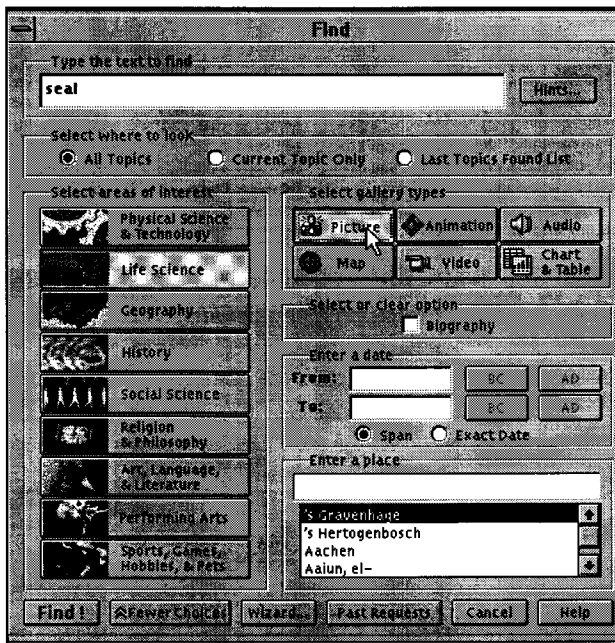


Figure 2. Search template of Encarta

The more than 1,000 audio clips amount to a total of almost seven hours, and make it possible to adorn Mozart's biography by seven audio clips representing concertos for violin, piano, and oboe, as well as one of his requiems, and operas rather than the usual Eine kleine Nachtmusic snippet. Historical audio goes way beyond the usual speeches. Listening to Douglas MacArthur's "Old soldiers never die, they just fade away" while seeing his photo is memorable, as is the abdication speech of Edward VIII, or the recital of the classic poems by Ginsberg ("Howl") and Frost ("Ice and Fire"). On the other hand, the national anthems in MIDI format are almost an insult, as they are in all the CD-ROM products that feature national anthems. These should be in VAW format, not in the very poor synthesized version.

For the laziest users, there are special gallery lists combining audio, pictures, and animations about sports, animals, visual arts, etc. The world and folk music collection is superb; the samples of musical instruments are most impressive both in sound and in picture quality and quantity. The foreign language samples of proverbs, greetings, and numbers pronounced by na-

can be retrieved through the main search template. The state fact boxes with pictures of the state flag, bird, flower, tree, seal, and licence plate are excellent. The state anthems (in VAW format!) should be added in the next edition.

The software is excellent. It is intelligent enough to find Graham Greene even if I spell it as Graham Green, and also lets the users do Boolean and word-proximity operations with appropriate guidance. The detailed search screen is perfect. In addition to specifying the search term, you may click on one or more of the nine major topic areas, the gallery types (audio, animation, video, etc.), and/or define a date range to qualify a search. Searching for photos about seals (but excluding pictures of state seals) is easy if you type the term, click on the Life Science button, and the Picture button (Figure 2).

The capability of the software to incorporate selected text, charts, and graphs into a word-processing document is exemplary, and the options to further manipulate charts (present them graphically, compare the climate chart of a state with that

New release of Broadcast News

Research Publications International announces a major new release of its Broadcast News CD-ROM reference database. Version 2.0 for DOS and Windows provides users with an expanded thesaurus for keyword searching, enhanced print options, extensive browse functions, and guided search screens. With this version, users can automatically expand their searches using the Keyword Thesaurus. A search for health care reform, for example, will direct the user to all related searches in the database, such as medicine, insurance, nurses, the elderly, etc. Also, in this version the new Browse Box feature offers users an easier and more accurate way of searching for a specific term. While the system is searching the list of terms, the user is able to continue viewing the browsing term located at the blinking cursor. This process assists the user with proper spelling of a word by searching the list as each character is entered. Additionally, changes or revisions to a search term can be made easily and automatically, without restarting or exiting the browse function.

Version 2.0 also offers a Guided Search screen to navigate users through the Broadcast News database for conducting searches. And its enhanced print option allows users to limit the number of pages they wish to print. Broadcast News is a reference tool designed to provide easy access to more than 34,000 transcripts of ABC, CNN, NPR, and PBS television and radio broadcasts. More than 80 different news programs are represented. For \$2,295, customers receive all four broadcast networks. Customers receive monthly updates with a cumulative disc at the end of the year. For more information, call (800) 444-0799. ♦

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CD-ROM NEWSBRIEFS

New guide helpful during buying season

Multimedia World, the publishers of a magazine with the same name, announces the launch of the Before-You-Buy Guide to Multimedia, a special-interest publication targeting new buyers of multimedia hardware and software for the home. In September, 150,000 copies will hit newsstands across the U.S. and Canada and be displayed for three months, the full length of the holiday buying season. The publication will introduce and explain all of the major multimedia and CD-ROM desktop, TV-top, and hand-held hardware, including multimedia PC, Macintosh, Sega CD, CD-I, 3DO, and Sony MMCD. A software directory will profile the leading CD-ROM titles available on each of the platforms, with emphasis on entertainment, educational, and reference software.

Learning the Internet by CD-ROM

Emerging Technology Applications (ETA) and Point Productions have developed a CD-ROM entitled, "The Internet for Everybody." This new product is an entertaining CD-ROM on how to successfully use the Internet. It is targeted for people with a need for online information and communicating capabilities in their work and home activities. It is compatible for Windows and Macintosh. The title contains over two hours of video instruction as well as help screens, useful tables, an index, key products and services, and interactive menus for exploring all material from several perspectives. There are two major methods of examining information: Tours and Index. A key feature is The Mall, where users can browse among the stores and see products and services useful to Internet users. For more information, call ETA at (508) 879-0006.

Plan for a European adventure

Based on the bestselling international guide, Compton's NewMedia's "Let's Go: The Budget Guide to Europe" CD-ROM will enable users to explore their planned destinations and discover new ones. The new product provides concise and current information to educate travelers about sights, events, and unique cultural experiences found in Europe countries. It includes maps, travel essentials, phone book, and languages. Over 100 pictures of countries, cities, and sights and 20 minutes of full-motion video depict the beauty of Europe. It is available on a hybrid disc, compatible with both MPC and Macintosh platforms. The price is \$49.95. For more information, call Compton's NewMedia at (619) 929-2500.

Women's achievements on CD-ROM

Dialog Information Services, Inc. announces an addition to its DIALOG OnDisc family of CD-ROM products: DIALOG OnDisc Women in the U.S., Collections of the Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College. This unique database is the ultimate reference for academic institutions—especially women's studies programs, public libraries, women's organizations, and historical associations interested in acquiring and disseminating knowledge of women's history. DIALOG OnDisc Women in the U.S. is a historical collection of manuscripts and published materials depicting the lives and achievements of women in America.

The database references the unprecedented contents of the Schlesinger Library, which has documented the spectrum of activities and experiences that have made up women's lives, especially in the 19th and 20th century. The collection includes the personal papers of such notable women as Susan B. Anthony and Julia Child, as well as those of lesser-known women. Available at an initial subscription rate of \$995, it will be updated annually for a renewal rate of \$495. For more information, call (800) 334-2564.

CD-ROM to focus on Clint Eastwood

Starwave Corporation will team up with actor and director Clint Eastwood to develop a CD-ROM based on Eastwood's life and career. The product will chronicle Eastwood's career in films and television. It is expected to include film clips, audio bites, photographs, and rare behind-the-scenes footage. In an exclusive interview specifically created for the CD-ROM, Eastwood will comment on film clips and guide the user through the product. It is scheduled for release in 1995. For more information, contact Starwave at 13810 S.E. Eastgate Way, Suite 400, Bellevue, WA 98005; phone: (206) 957-2000.

MONEY GUIDE: a CD-ROM for managing personal finances

Based on Charles J. Givens' approach to building wealth

Friendly Software Corporation and the Charles J. Givens Organization compiled material from three of Givens' bestselling books to create Charles J. Givens MONEY GUIDE, a personal finance multimedia software that educates individuals about investments and helps organize their finances.

Charles J. Givens MONEY GUIDE software in CD-ROM or Windows editions educates the user on how to spend, buy, borrow, and manage money as well as organize and maintain financial records. The CD-ROM edition features 131 full-motion video clips of Mr. Givens explaining his internationally successful financial strategies. The Windows edition contains text of the video.

Friendly Software Corp. developed the multimedia MONEY GUIDE using the key strategies from Givens' books. The program contains more than 70 financial applications, worksheets and figures, more than 800 answers to financial questions and a financial calendar section with 17 custom tools. MONEY GUIDE is three programs in one: "Wealth Management," "The Ten Biggest Money Mistakes," and "Ask Charles J. Givens."

"Wealth Management" provides a step-by-step process to identify and record all important financial information. Reports are generated and may be printed, including recaps of all major asset and liability categories, and a complete personal fi-

nancial statement.

"The Ten Biggest Money Mistakes" is an interactive tutorial designed to influence and enhance the major spending decisions everyone faces, such as home, auto, life insurance, and tax planning. This section includes worksheets and special calculators which allow the user to analyze specific "what if" situations.

"Ask Charles J. Givens" is an interactive Q & A sequence. It is presented in the same hypertext format as Windows help, so users can intuitively locate answers to specific financial questions.

Charles J. Givens MONEY GUIDE focuses on educating the user about day-to-day financial management, and on organizing and maintaining basic financial records. According to Charles Givens, when it comes to personal finance, "Knowledge is your first line of defense."

Givens' practical approach to building wealth through educated financial decision-making has been successfully put to the test by millions of Americans. His bestsellers, *Wealth Without Risk*, *Financial Self-Defense*, and *More Wealth Without Risk*, have sold more than three million hardback copies.

MONEY GUIDE retails at \$49.95 for the Windows edition and \$59.95 for the CD-ROM edition, which also runs under Windows. For more information, contact Friendly Software at (419) 868-6090. ♦

Marketing tool for financial advisors

Larkspur Data Resources announces the release of The Pension/Benefits Data-Master, its new CD-ROM that brings the Department of Labor's entire database of 700,000 pension, profit sharing and employee benefit plans to the desktops of financial services professionals. The CD-ROM, which includes 600 megabytes of detailed information regarding the private pension market, is designed for investment advisors, pension administrators, actuaries, accountants, banking and financial in-

stitutions, and other professionals who market services in the pension/benefits field. It was compiled from public domain information and includes data on plan location, size, features, and service professionals, as well as detailed financial information regarding the private pension/benefits market. It is available at \$295 (for single users) and \$595 (for multi-users) during a special introductory period. For more information, contact Larkspur at (800) 282-4567. ♦

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of three others, convert the data from Fahrenheit to Celsius) is simply awesome, and makes excellent use of Microsoft's vast experience in spreadsheet and database management software.

It is disappointing that the definition of a term cannot be looked up directly from within the article texts displayed. While there are hyperlink (hotlinking) capabilities to jump to pre-defined terms, and to multimedia elements from within a text passage, there is no hot link facility to jump to a definition in the bundled Webster Concise Dictionary or the Webster Electronic Thesaurus. Neither can you call up those

articles that include the term. Interestingly, you may highlight any word either in the thesaurus or the dictionary and find the definition of that term within that source. The reason for the lack of tight integration with the encyclopedia may be that the dictionary/thesaurus management software is from a third party. I hope that Microsoft will implement the hotlinking to the dictionary as awesomely as it did in the magnificent Bookshelf '94 database.

In spite of hotlinking and dictionary limitations, this software is a powerhouse and still mostly gracious. It occasionally may overwhelm the beginner users or make them dizzy, but special tour guides (wizards) can be invoked by the click of a button for assistance. ♦