

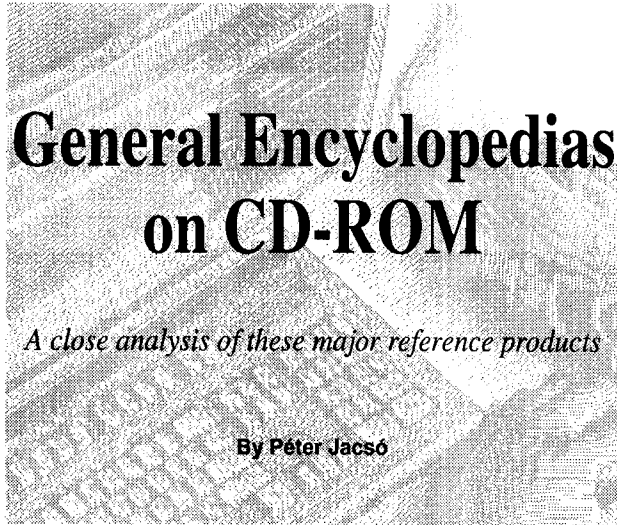


Editor's note: In Part I of this series, Compton's Interactive Encyclopedia and Encarta were discussed and analyzed from the points of view of software and illustration (multimedia) features. Here, Grolier and Information Finder are evaluated in the same way.

Grolier

Grolier is the granddaddy of CD-ROM encyclopedias. It was the first (text-only) encyclopedia on this medium in 1985, and I like it so much that I still keep this premiere version for use on my notebook. It kept improving and enriching its features every year by adding pictures, then sound, then video, then animations, then a new Windows-based interface while preserving its clean structure, elegant and simple-to-use power search features, and high quality textual content.

According to the publisher, about 75 percent of the 5,000 images are color. Their sizes vary from 3 by 4 inch (Dustin Hoffman) to 4.5 by 4 inch (Ginsberg), to 5 by 4 inch (Taj Mahal) and can be enlarged, though in 3/4 screen size the pictures become pixellated. Most of the portraits are excellent and only Encarta offers comparable choice and quality for 19th and 20th century poets, writers, dancers, and actors (Martha Graham, Maya Angelou, Simone de Beauvoir, Franz Kafka, Boris Pasternak, Katherine Anne Porter, Marcel Proust). Many photos of famous people are unique to Grolier (Gunter Grass, Garcia Lorca, Jack Kerouac, Dos Passos, Gore Vidal). I found only a few pictures that were too dark or too small, like that of Paul New-



a picture except for the timpani.

Animations are excellent. All of them are narrated and of two to three minutes duration. In those cases where animations could be compared with those in Compton's and/or Encarta (solar eclipse, continental drift, CD-ROM operation, volcanoes), Grolier had the best animations. Grolier has—within the serious limits of today's computer video technology—the best and most videos, a total of 53 covering historical events (Iwo Jima with the marines raising the flag), animal life (trap

rated and superior to similar maps without narration in Encarta. The speed is a tad too fast and it is somewhat distracting that the voice-over is not identical to the subtitle shown. It could make it easier to follow the narration if only the key phrases and words of the script were displayed, especially when a series of foreign personal and geographic names are mentioned, as in the case of the Tet offensive.

The new Knowledge Explorer feature provides a fully narrated, lengthy pictorial guided tour to Arts (architecture, music, painting, and sculpture), Geography, Nature (Human Body, Animal World, Plant World), and Science. As the duration of both Multimedia Maps and Knowledge Explorer is well beyond five minutes, it would be essential to add additional control buttons and a slider that shows the progress and could take you back and forth in 10-15 second segments.

The search functions and template (Figure 1) are first class allowing Boolean and proximity operations, even positional operations, and the limiting of a search to different parts of the articles (title, bibliography, factbox, captions). Though searching for multimedia elements by themselves, or as qualifiers for a topical search, is not as precise and sophisticated as in Encarta, it works quite well when you click on the caption button on the search panel after entering a term or search expression. As the caption may be for a picture, a sound bite,

or a video, and as the words in the captions for all multimedia elements for an article are indexed, false drops may emerge, but it is easy to scan the result and skip the unwanted articles quickly.

It would be better if the icons for multimedia elements were not only shown on the top of the article window but also on the margin of the text where they are referenced. Similarly, in the article outline the icons with part of their captions could be included. There is no dictionary bundled with Grolier. However, it is the only encyclopedia with ad-hoc hotlinking where a search can be initiated by clicking on any word in an article text displayed.

Information Finder

This CD-ROM version of the much respected *World Book Encyclopedia* has resisted the multimedia approach for the longest time, but in the summer of 1994 the company came out with the *New Illustrated Information Finder: The Interactive Visual CD-ROM Encyclopedia*. While in my opinion everything is interactive that is on CD-ROM, the verbose title gives two important clues: illustrated and visual. This is not a multimedia database (and does not claim to be), as there are no audio recordings, animation, or video clips. However, there are beautiful illustrations rich in details about the human and animal anatomy, technology, and science. There are portraits of presidents and famous people of history, sports, and science. Most of the illustrations are color and of the highest quality, but portraits of writers, poets, and performing artists are few and far between. Animals are often illustrated by drawings rather than pictures. The Culture and Anthropology gallery is almost completely limited to Native American artifacts and costumes, and the How Things Work Gallery of pictures cries out for animation.

The 3,000 illustrations are well integrated with the text. Information Finder pioneered the idea of automatically showing in a side window the outline of the article and keep it scrolling as the user reads the text. Now that side window is split into two parts, the bottom one showing in a 2 by 2 inch window the first illustration and offering control buttons to close the preview, or show it in much larger, usually 6 by 5.5 inch size, or to thumb through the illustrations of the article.

Information Finder has superbly detailed country and region maps (about 260). You can click on the name of and jump to

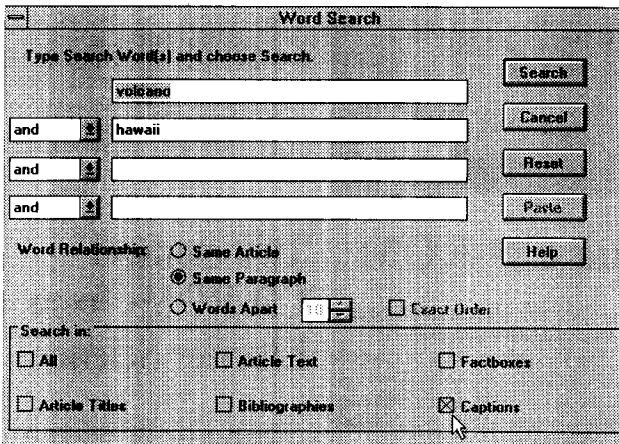


Figure 1

man showing a 1.75 by 2.25 picturette.

The nearly 150 sound bites cover animal and bird sounds, famous speeches, musical instruments, and classical music segments. Jazz, rock, and folk music are mostly ignored. Interestingly, when I look up the musical instruments from the picture index, I can look at the picture and listen to the instrument. However, when I look up the musical instruments from the sound index, I can only listen to the music but cannot see the picture even though all instruments in the sound index listing have

door spider setting its trap and capturing a beetle), space exploration (with three Apollo 11 clips), and presidential speeches (Truman announcing the bombing of Hiroshima, Nixon's farewell speech). Though the clips are small (and you should not enlarge them because of excessive pixellation) they are functional and genuine videos that are worth watching.

The new Multimedia Maps, each of five to six minutes duration, show military operations, the growth of the railroads, and the spread of suffrage. They are fully nar-

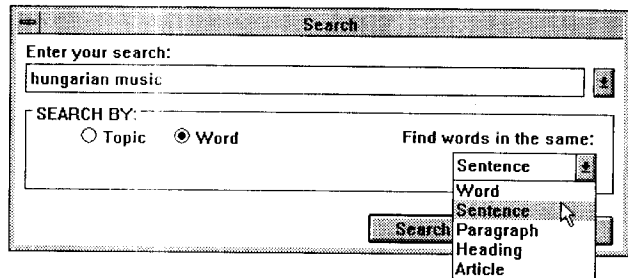


Figure 2



a region, a country or a state. There is also a tiny window on country maps that offer you a look at the map of the continent or the world. In the case of individual U.S. states, the map of the entire U.S. is also an option. On the map list you cannot type in the region/country/state name but only scroll up and down until locating and highlighting the appropriate name. Word searching finds names of cities and towns on the maps, even legends on drawings (asphalt seal, muffler), and brings them up with the name red-framed. This is the best solution for embedded text.

Information Finder also has a timeline that goes back to 600,000,000 years B.C., but the first 598 million years are covered by a single article and three graphics about prehistoric animals. Between 2,000,000 and 2000 B.C., the steps are still pretty large (a few million years with six events marked). Only from 2000 B.C. shall you see 100-year steps until 1000 B.C. when it becomes 50-year, then 10-year from 1750, and 5-year from 1900. To get a feel about the depth of the Time Table, it suffices to list the last two events: Vietnam War and Space Age, both starting at the 1957 marker. Except for Compton's, the time tables in the other encyclopedias are also rather fluffy.

The search engine is very good, allowing Boolean and proximity searching at sentence, paragraph, heading, and article level, but surprisingly you cannot limit your search to pictures. This would be particularly useful as thumbing through the galleries is slow, one way only, and after looking at a picture selected from a list of individual names (say Nixon) you are kicked back to the group level (presidents) rather than the list level. Legends on the timeline (German unification) are not searched. Single and multiple character truncation and masking are possible, and the left-handed truncation is not only a rarely available precious feature but also incredibly fast. The result list of a search can be displayed either in alphabetical order or by decreasing number of search terms in the article. A maximum of 100 items can be displayed by a search. This may not sound like a serious limitation, but it can be in such cases as when, for example, you want to search for the first women in any field of endeavor (first and [(wom?n or female)]) and it finds 284 articles. Though you may sort the list either by posting or alphabetically, you would not see the articles about Jane Kirkpatrick who was the first woman to head the UN delegation of the U.S., or about Maria Mitchell who was the first woman member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, or about Florence Sabin who became the first woman elected to the National Academy of Sciences—just to name three prominent figures.

A weak point in the interface design is the lack of greying out of functions not available under the given circumstances. For example, if there are no more pictures in the preview window, then the right progress arrow should be greyed. If there are no Boolean operators in the query, then the proximity options (sentence, paragraph, heading, article) should not be offered (Fig-

ure 2). This is particularly important because entering two or more words next to each other (*Hungarian music*) will make the strictest proximity search looking for the words in the exact order next to each other no matter what proximity option the user may believe to have chosen. The help file here is misleading, claiming that the software usually searches within the same sentence. This is only true for Boolean operations, e.g., *Hungarian and music*, and the proximity options should be shown only for such queries.

Printing is flexible and smart (entire article, current section, current page, selected

text), and the length of printout can be limited. Though there is no direct link to a word processing program, note taking and bookmarking offer enough flexibility for copying segments from articles.

Double clicking on any word in the displayed text (including captions but excluding drawings or maps) brings up definitions and example sentences from the excellent World Book Dictionary with 225,000 definitions. This is the largest and the best of the dictionaries bundled with the encyclopedias.

The competition is fierce: Compton's and Grolier are releasing new versions, In-

teractive is releasing a version based on Funk and Wagnalls, and ABC-Clío is releasing its Exigy encyclopedia. There are also the breathtaking Dorling Kindersley Eyewitness Encyclopedia of Science and the Heinemann Children's Multimedia Encyclopedia, both of which will be out by the time this gets published.

You can only win if you buy more of these wonderful resources. At the going rate of \$40-\$80, you get a lot of bang for the buck. The question is no longer which encyclopedia to buy, but how many of them. ♦

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