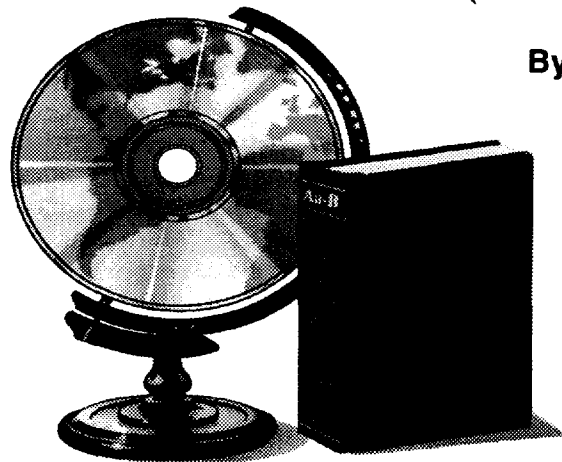




Reference Suites on CD-ROM (and DVD-ROM)



By Péter Jacsó

When is a suite really a suite and not a bundle?

CD-ROM encyclopedias have been best-selling products for years. They have kept improving, and all the major general interest encyclopedias (Encarta, Grolier, World Book, and Compton's) represent big bang for the buck. So does the academic Encyclopedia Britannica, which followed the price-slashing trend of the other encyclopedias, whose deluxe editions (with extended coverage and multimedia content) sell between \$40-\$90. Their standard versions are often available free or for a nominal charge of \$5. Although you need to pay the street price (around \$40) at the computer store, you can get a rebate coupon that covers the whole price or almost the whole price.

In this extremely fierce competition, encyclopedia producers have to come up with innovations every year. This year the innovation is the release of reference suites of the 1999 editions. Microsoft, Grolier, IBM, and Britannica, Inc. have all released a reference suite. The Learning Company did not do so for Compton's this year, but did so last year along with Microsoft.

Actually, 1999 is not the first time for CD-ROM reference collections. In *Link-Up* I reviewed three such CD-ROM collections in the November/December issue of 1995 and found Bookshelf to be by far the best. Microsoft's first entree to the CD-ROM field was Bookshelf in the mid-1980s, a suite of classic reference works. It was not updated for a couple of years in the late 1980s, but since the 1990s it has been, and consistently has taken one of the top positions in sales.

So what is new now? For one thing it is the fact that the 1999 reference suites enhance as add-ons top-notch encyclopedias, which are the most comprehensive reference works. The other is that all except the Microsoft product should instead be called reference *bundles*. It doesn't sound as classy but reflects reality better. Mind me—these are excellent deals, they're just not really suites.

What's a suite?

These days when legal eagles and politicians spend extraordinary amounts of time defining and redefining commonly used terms, I feel somewhat reluctant to do the same. But I have to in order to justify my opinion. The emphases are mine.

Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines suite as "a group of things forming a unit, or constituting a collection," or "a group of rooms occupied as a unit," or a "series of dances in the same or related keys," or a "collection of minerals or rocks having some characteristic in common," or a "set of matched furniture."

The *American Heritage Dictionary* includes among its definitions the following: "a group of related things intended to be used together," or "a set of matching furniture," or "a series of connected rooms used as a living unit." I did not quote these definitions because I am paid by the word but to point out that the emphasis is on connectedness, relatedness, sameness, unity forming, commonality, similarity, and matching.

And that is what makes me feel that Microsoft Reference Suite is the only real suite. When you look at the other reference bundles, you will find mouthwatering products. I praised many of those on their own in my

earlier columns but they are not integrated with the underlying encyclopedias, there are no hyperlinks among them, they are not connected in any way, and show no similarity in their user interfaces, browsing, and search options. They don't form a suite but stand alone—although most of them stand tall.

Microsoft Reference Suite '99

This is the second edition, and by now it is a sweet suite. The Encarta Encyclopedia Deluxe that has a magnificently inviting and engaging interface and awesome content is enhanced by Virtual Globe '99 and Bookshelf '99.

Virtual Globe '99 is the most detailed digital atlas with 1.2 million geographic names, a large variety of map styles, superb multimedia illustrations in addition to the country profiles, and Brigham Young University's practical and highly informative Culturgrams for most of the countries.

Bookshelf '99 in itself is a knock-out reference collection featuring the *American Heritage Dictionary*, *Roget's Thesaurus*, the *Columbia Dictionary of Quotations*, an almanac and timeline licensed from Helicon Publishing, Ltd, and Microsoft's own reference works—the *Computer and Internet Dictionary*, and, somewhat redundantly, the *Desk Encyclopedia* and *Desk World Atlas*.

All these sport a very similar, often identical interface, navigational dashboard, buttons, pull-down menus, and layout. In addition, by the click of a button you may switch from one component to another (and swap your CD-ROMs) to find out what synonyms there are for a word, to see a most detailed map of a country, or to find a quotation from a famous person. The most distinguishing aspect of the suite, and its real punch, is that when you display a long article, its Contents page displays the suite links and automatically invokes them when you click on those links.

For example, on the Contents page of the article about endangered species, there is a suite link to the video essays about the topic in Virtual Globe. In the case of the article about George Bernard Shaw, there is a suite link to the Quotations Dictionary. The Contents page of the French literature includes a suite link to the incredibly detailed map of France, and to the list of winners of the most coveted French literary award, the Goncourt Prize. (I am sure that by next year the suite links will be enhanced, as obviously there could be such links to the Quotations Dictionary that contains many aphorisms from French literary geniuses.) There are also suite links back to the encyclopedia from the other

two components of the suite that do not have a Contents page. The suite links appear in a small box on the top of the page in Bookshelf and Virtual Globe.

Grolier Reference Suite '99

This granddaddy of digital encyclopedias is enhanced by three products.

The Hammond Atlas was the choice of digital atlases in the mid 1980s. Bookshelf itself used it in its earliest edition. The edition bundled with the Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia (GME) is much smaller than Microsoft's Virtual Globe or Rand McNally's New Millennium, having about 250,000 geographic names. It is also less current than either of the two. However, it excels in legibility, sporting beautiful fonts, and overall typography. It also has very good country comparison graphics, although many of the statistics are esoteric, and one—the international crime statistic—is definitely wrong. It's criminally wrong. (I criticized Virtual Globe for using the same Interpol source in the 1998 edition, and was glad to see that it has been dumped from the 1999 edition. I hope Hammond will follow suit.)

The Wall Street Journal Almanac (WSJA) is an excellent source (especially for its state statistics, and superb black and white graphic portraits of politicians that are far better than fuzzy photos). Apart from the fact that it shows the Grolier logo, it has no link to the encyclopedia. It would be an interesting idea to integrate into the Year in Review section of GME this modestly searchable HTML/Java applet version of the book that sells for around \$10.

The third component is the CD-ROM version of the eminently searchable 1997 volume of *National Geographic* magazine, displaying the beautiful photos and the articles in page image format.

Another goody is the revised Expanded Multimedia Edition of *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* (reviewed in my "Databases" column in the last issue). It is a perfect add-on for Grolier. I wish it would integrate it as it did the *American Heritage Dictionary* a year ago.

None of these add-ons are in any way linked to GME apart from the fact that the default installation folder is that of Grolier.

1999 World Book Family Reference Suite

To say that two products enhance the 1999 Deluxe edition of the World Book Encyclopedia would be unfair. It is two product families: the Merriam-Webster's Reference Library and the Information Please Almanac series.

The former has the Collegiate Dictionary and Thesaurus, the Intermediate Dictionary, the Encyclopedia of Literature, the Medical Dictionary and the Biographical Dictionary (whose disproportional bias for male subjects was a disappointment for me). It may seem somewhat redundant to have both the collegiate and intermediate dictionaries, especially since World Book has its own respected dictionary. On the one hand it is true, but it is also true that the idea of offering a separate collegiate and intermediate dictionary well follows the logic of the encyclopedia itself that offers information in a layered format to go into deeper and deeper details. This is clear even from the bibliographies of the encyclopedia articles.

Also, it is not called family reference suite for nothing. The two additional dictionaries may well serve family members with different needs.

The Information Please Almanacs (the general, the entertainment, and the sport almanacs) are among the most popular ready-reference sources and rightly so. However, they are also available free of charge on the Web, and the users of WBE are certain to spend quite some time online to enjoy the wonderfully rich archive of World Book essays, and thus would be a click away from the Information Please Almanac Web site.

All these databases come on the third CD-ROM of the package and are installed in the World Book folder. They can be launched from a special window that lists all the three major components (the encyclopedia, the M-W reference collection, and the almanac series). However that's the farthest that integration or linking would go.

Britannica: The ultimate

Britannica in itself is the ultimate for me in reference works for the sheer depth of its content. The bundle enhances this treasure with Rand McNally's New Millennium Atlas, which is on par with Virtual Globe in many regards (see its review in the January, 1998 issue of *Computers in Libraries*), and with the Merriam Webster's Dictionary and Thesaurus (see the review in the November/December, 1997 issue of *Link-Up*).

The latter is an obvious choice, especially since the online version of Britannica features the same top-quality dictionary. The big difference is that the CD-ROM version allows much more sophisticated searches and offers word games (see the review of Online Britannica at <http://www-writing.berkeley.edu/chorus/eresearch/reviews>).

Excellent as these products are, they are not integrated with Britannica itself. There are no cross-references from one to the other product that live their separate lives as if you had bought them together.

The kind of integration that Microsoft implemented would make the other contenders a real suite also. They will probably be more motivated to do so when they can accommodate all the resources on a single DVD-ROM disc. Microsoft did that as an alternative to the CD-ROM version of the Reference Suite.

This made me like it even better, saving the inconvenience of swapping discs. With the projected sharp increase in sales of DVD-ROM drives, it is likely to be the next step for all the reference bundles. ♦