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Testdriving CD-ROMs

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TestDriving CD-ROMS

Reviews of CD-ROM products

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Reviews by Norman Desmarais
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The Virtual Body. IVI Publishing, 1995. Requires: 486/33 MHz or better PC, 8 MB RAM, 256 color VGA card or better, Microsoft Windows 3.1 or later, double speed CD-ROM drive, sound card (Sound Blaster 16 or compatible), headphones or speakers, hard disk, mouse.

The Virtual Body offers an interactive approach to studying human biology and anatomy. The main menu offers options to browse or to explore: the reproductive system; the musculo-skeletal system; the circulatory system; the digestive system; the nervous system disease and immunity or go to a virtual lab to interact with illustrated devices like a sphygmomanometer (to take blood pressure). Information is presented in a question-oriented format which users will find interesting and entertaining.

Each topic leads to a submenu which consists of an introduction to the selected system and a series of questions that explore the topic. For example, the digestive system asks "Where does saliva come from?" "Why doesn't the stomach digest itself?" and "What does the pancreas do?" as well as similar questions for the liver, small and large intestine, and the kidneys.

Each segment begins with a graphic and an accompanying explanation that appears in print form after an audio reading. Users can skip the audio portion by clicking on the background. Hot spots, in the form of squares, lead to further explanations. A Labels tab in the lower left identifies principal features; and a Lab tab in the lower right leads to interactive lab experiments. A blue button in the upper left corner of the screen identifies the current location in the body. A red button in the lower left calls a tool bar for additional options: Help, Find, Path, Online Services (connecting to CompuServe for additional information), and Exit. Submenus also include options to print and return to the topic questions.

The Virtual Body does not come with a user's manual. The Help button shows how to navigate through the product; but it is not context-sensitive and will not explain how to troubleshoot particular problems. Even though I have 16 MB of RAM, I occasion-

ally received messages telling me that "there was not enough memory to complete the requested operation" even though the Windows Program Manager told me I had 9 MB free on one occasion and 4.7 MB free on another. I also ran out of stack space trying to play the digestion pinball game, even though I had stacks set at 9,256. These problems sometimes froze the system and always required re-starting.

The Find button sometimes leads to unexpected locations. I found no index entry for the tibia; and looking for femur, I was brought to the section on X-rays of the head. Likewise, the entry for sternum brought me to the ear. Apparently, entries for the bones lead to the head; and one must move the outline box to the appropriate section of the body to get further treatment. This requires a student to know that the tibia and femur are the leg bones and obviates the need for the index.

The middle school and junior high curriculum usually covers the topics addressed by **The Virtual Body**. Students at this level will enjoy sound effects like the burp after swallowing in the section on digestion. They will also enjoy the Did You Know? and Amazing Fact features that teach interesting facts and trivia (e.g. skin weighs twice as much as the brain and you can't sneeze with your eyes open — no explanation why, just a statement of fact). However, **The Virtual Body's** use of proper clinical terminology without thorough explanation or a glossary may frustrate some students and lead to disinterest. For example, the discussion of the common cold focuses on "pathogens"; and the treatment of "Where does saliva come from?" explains: "Cut by a blood vessel, the salivary ducts of a mixed salivary gland secrete both serous fluid and mucus."

There's much to like about this product, including its low price. However, because of operational problems, indexing inconsistencies, and the terminology, it is more appropriate for the high school level and above.

Think for Yourself. PEMD Education Group, 1995. \$39.95. Macintosh System 6.0.5 or higher, 2 MB RAM, or System 7 or higher with at least 4 MB RAM, CD-ROM

drive, HyperCard 2.1 or HyperCard player, printer desirable.

Think for Yourself is a collection of economic, demographic, environmental, and health data compiled from the U.S. Department of Commerce, the U.S. Public Health Service, the U.S. Department of Energy, the U.N. Population Division, the World Health Organization, and other agencies. It includes both historical data and projections for energy consumption, economic and demographic data. It also includes a stand-alone data analysis program; but users can export the data to their favorite spreadsheet, statistical analysis, or graphing program.

Instead of presenting prepared answers to important issues (population, employment, energy consumption, global warming, ozone depletion, and health), **Think for Yourself** presents the data to let students, teachers, and researchers draw their own conclusions. The data presented here is the same data that world and business leaders and planners use, but sometimes in less detail. Nevertheless, there is plenty here for students, teachers, and researchers to work with.

Sometimes students will find that various data sets present conflicting views. Thus, **Think for Yourself** challenges them to think critically while they perceive relationships between data. They will come to realize that science, especially social science, is not always black and white but often results from the interpretation of data; and that data can have different interpretations. It will also emphasize the need to be open to other points of view. It teaches users to define concepts, clarify and explore them, and deal with the results. It requires them to approach questions creatively and to use judgment and logic in formulating their questions.

The quantity, variety, and complexity of the data can often be confusing; but that's to be expected with a product with such a broad scope and depth. To help, the 1995 edition has four topical indexes to make the

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data more easily accessible than the previous version. It also includes self-paced educational materials that focus on the environment: four 20-minute HyperCard tutorials that cover global warming, carbon dioxide emissions, petroleum usage, and AIDS.

Teachers can use the materials to introduce data and data analysis into the curriculum. Individuals can use the materials to think critically and develop their own analyses. The educational materials also teach how to use the software so students can conduct their own investigations with the data when they complete the tutorials. All this at the cost of a single hard-cover book.

Little Women, BookWorm Student Library Edition. CIT/BookWorm 777 N. 5th Ave. Knoxville, TN 37917. Macintosh: System 7.0 or later, minimum 12" color monitor, hard drive, 3 MB RAM, CD-ROM drive. Windows: Windows 3.1 or later running in 16 colors (256 recommended), 4 MB RAM, CD-ROM drive, 3.5" high density disk drive, hard drive, VGA monitor, MPC sound card and microphone optional.

The remake of the movie of *Louisa May Alcott's Little Women* will certainly inspire renewed interest in the novel, as television and movie versions of books often do. This time, readers have something dif-

ferent to choose from — an electronic book version. The text of *Little Women*, now in the public domain, appears in other compilations of electronic texts. However, unlike them, this one includes annotations and utilities that facilitate reading and learning.

The text is based on the original 1868 and 1869 editions in keeping with Alcott's intentions to avoid Victorian sentimentality, rather than those of her publisher. Reproductions of art works, video clips, and commentary by world-renowned scholars and critics enhance the title. It also includes an author biography and annotations about the characters, criticism and interpretation, the historical context, literary devices and terms, and themes. Readers can access any of these elements from "hot spots" in the colored text, or they can search them independently. It is like having a critical edition with the Cliff Notes all rolled into one.

Teachers can create customized files for their students to use in conjunction with the text; and students can make their own annotations. They can also group annotations by linking them together to make a point or illustrate a concept. Annotations can consist of text, graphics, video clips, or audio clips that the readers can record themselves or import from other sources.

The interface sports interactive hypermedia features that let readers jump to cross-references, specific pages, or to related passages, make marginal notes, or high-

light important passages. They can view the table of contents or search the novel for specific text, or consult an online dictionary. They can also search the marginal notes or the annotations and go right to them with a single mouse click. BookWorm's powerful and flexible user interface can be slow at times, especially when loading or searching files.

The BookWorm Student Library consists of the BookWorm Reader software and unabridged books, or titles, each on a separate CD-ROM. The text of each title only occupies a small portion of the disc. Most of the space is taken up by audio and video files — almost 600MB for *Little Women*. Once installed, the BookWorm Reader software can read any title in the library. In addition to *Little Women*, the library includes *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *Frankenstein*, *The Collected Works of Poe*, *The Collected Works of Melville*, *After the Fire*, *Making the Modern*, *The Awakening*, *The Artistry of Henry James*, and *The Scarlet Letter*. All titles play on both Windows and Macintosh computers.

There are few CD-ROM titles that appeal particularly to girls. This should be one of them, as it includes the most popular story ever written about girls and for girls.

edited by
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