September 1998

Test Driving CD-ROMS - Reviews of CD-ROM Products

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Recommended Citation

Desmarais, Norman (1998) "Test Driving CD-ROMS - Reviews of CD-ROM Products," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 10: Iss. 4, Article 19.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.2958>

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TestDriving CD-ROMS — Reviews of CD-ROM Products

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American Archives Containing a Documentary History of the English Colonies in North America from the King's Message to Parliament, of March 7, 1774 to the Declaration of Independence by the United States.

\$100 — IBM 486 33 or compatible, 8 MB RAM, Windows 3.1 or Windows 95, CD-ROM drive — available from Fine Books Company, 984 Washington Blvd., Abilene, TX 79601 915-673-7603

Reviewed by Norman Desmarais
(Providence College)

American Archives Containing a Documentary History of the English Colonies in North America from the King's Message to Parliament, of March 7, 1774 to the Declaration of Independence by the United States is a two-disc set. It consists of the 1840 edition of Series Four and Series Five of the volumes compiled by Peter Force under the title *Tracts And Other Papers Relating Principally to the Origin, Settlement, and Progress of the Colonies in North America published from 1836 through 1846*. Peter Force, who served in the War of 1812, was the son of a Revolutionary War soldier, a printer, publisher, archivist, and a scholar in addition to a civil servant. (He served as Mayor of Washington, D.C. from 1836 to 1840.) The publisher of the CD-ROMs notes that "the master copy from which these compact discs were made was itself developed from the original text, and not from an edited edition or reprint."

Force assures us that: "We have, personally, examined the publick records in each of the thirteen original States. We regret to say, that we have found these, in some instances, in a lamentable state of deterioration, confusion, and decay; many important documents and publick proceedings appear to be irretrievably lost. We have, however, the satisfaction of believing that the inquiries and examinations we have instituted, have, in some instances, been instrumental in rescuing many of inestimable value from the very jaws of destruction; and, in others, in awakening a feeling of interest in the memorials of our past history, which promises to result in a more persevering search for such as may still remain in existence, and a more careful preservation of such as have survived the hazards to which they have been exposed."

Because of the great age of the text, the publisher decided to treat each page as an image (rather than utilizing optical character recognition (OCR) for the text itself). This preserves the character of the original for the reader and maintains the spelling and characters as they appeared in Force's original presentation. There are no long Fs or Ses typical of colonial-era printing which makes reading

much easier. While the page images are not searchable, the detailed tables of contents and index of each volume have been digitized and hyperlinked to the appropriate page images. This provides thorough search capability even across volumes. In fact, the tables of contents and index also appear as page images for scholarly use and reference.

The product uses datadisc's QuickSearch as the search engine. It is a very powerful search engine; but it takes some time to get familiar with it. It permits searching the current table of contents section or anywhere in the text which consists of each volume's table of contents and index, along with the document's preface, author biography, and other related material. As one begins keying a term, the word wheel goes to the appropriate location in the alphabet. This is important to identify variations in spelling and word usage. For example, Bunker Hill appears most frequently as Bunker-Hill with other variations under BunkerHill or Bunker's. There are no entries under the more accurate name of Breed's Hill.

Experienced searchers can choose a type of search (word, phrase, refine last search) as well as Boolean operators AND (&), OR (|), and NOT (~) or a wild card (*). They can also set the proximity of the terms. The search engine defaults to four words apart; but once a researcher sets a proximity value, the configuration retains that setting.

Upon completing a search, QuickSearch builds a numbered list of hits in the results window. Selecting one of the entries goes to the text window with the index page displayed. Here, the researcher clicks on the red image number which corresponds to the appropriate column in the book. This goes to the page image which appears too small for reading at first. Drawing a box around a portion of text, such as a paragraph, will expand the image to the desired size for easy reading. Researchers can place bookmarks, make annotations, or print the image for further reference and use. Sometimes, the image may not appear very clearly. Selecting "scale to gray" from the View options will usually make it sharper. One scrolls the text via the scroll bars, as the Page Up, Page Down, and arrow keys don't work here.

The Toolbar at the top of the screen can be turned on or off, as desired. It contains buttons for File, Search, Clear, First Hit, Previous Hit, Next Hit, Last Hit, Notes, Mark, List, Previous Image, Next Image, Print, and Help. Most of the buttons are self-explanatory; but a few need some explanation. The Clear button does not clear the search screen as one might expect; it removes the highlighting from the search terms. The List button displays a comprehensive list of images; but it is of little or no use in this database. Each line is numbered sequentially; but the image numbers aside the line number do not follow in sequen-

tial order. Also, the same image number may apply to many separate entries, corresponding to multiple entries in the same column and the same column number occurring across several volumes. For example, 877 has 71 corresponding entries.

Selecting Next or Previous Image will produce different results, depending on the reader's location. If one selects a particular volume to read sequentially or searches the table of contents, the buttons will operate much like turning the page of a book. However, if the search locates an item in the index, pressing the Next Image button will go to the next image listed in the index and not to the continuation of the text on a subsequent page.

The product comes with an electronic User Guide and Help utility accessible from the Help Menu. The main sections cover Searching and Browsing, Viewing images, Printing, User Annotations, and the Toolbar.

Despite its navigational peculiarities and occasional inconsistencies (e.g. the Page Up and Page Down keys work in some locations but not others), *American Archives* is a valuable research tool for serious students of history. It contains much valuable primary source material that has since been lost, damaged, or seriously threatened by decay. Even libraries that own copies of the printed publication will find it useful for its searching capabilities to locate documents among the multiple volumes. While most of the volumes group the documents chronologically, the compiler added newly identified documents at the end of a series or at the beginning of the subsequent series. *American Archives* offers researchers in American colonial history a compilation of documents that are not contained anywhere else, except for a few instances. It gives new life to a long-forgotten and underused publication that contains a wealth of primary source information.

Chaucer: Life & Times. \$89.95 — IBM compatible 386 or better, 4 MB RAM, SVGA graphics, Windows 3.1 or Windows 95, 4 MB to 30 MB of free hard disk space depending on installation, double speed or faster CD-ROM drive, SoundBlaster or compatible sound card, microphone optional. — available from Primary Source Media, 12 Lunar Drive, Woodbridge, CT 06525-9935,

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800-444-0799, fax: 203-397-3893 —
email: sales@psmedia.com
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Chaucer: Life & Times installs very easily. The installation program indicates what it is doing and identifies which files it installs. While it will automatically overwrite some files, it indicates this in the installation log displayed at completion. The program requires 33 MB of hard disk space. The main menu uses a scholar's desk metaphor as the user interface. The center of the desktop shows a stack of papers which contain Middle English versions of Chaucer's works from *The Riverside Chaucer*. There's also a book of modern English translations of his major works. Another book, entitled *Life and Times*, covers Chaucer's early and later years, life and society, and Chaucer as a writer. A notebook provides an overview essay about Chaucer and essays on the language and social institutions of the period. It also provides overviews for each of Chaucer's works. The desktop also has an hourglass which provides a timeline of Chaucer's life (in blue highlight) along with timelines for politics and history (yellow) and arts, culture, and education (grey) covering the period 1240-1474. Most of the entries have pop-up windows from which to make further selections.

Each of the desktop icons appears at the bottom of the screen after the student selects an option to study. Students can then pursue multiple concurrent avenues of study, such as a particular text and timeline. If one selects a work from the stack of papers and opts for the Overview, the program automatically opens to the overview of that work. Particularly useful here is the ability to open a Middle English text and view a modern translation side-by-side. The scrollbar keeps the two texts in sync so the student can always make an easy comparison. A "Go to line" button at the bottom right lets readers go quickly to the beginning or end of a work or to a specific line. Even selecting this option keeps the texts in sync. Above the text, the student can identify the current location. Copy and print buttons at the upper right permit text manipulation, but they only work for a single screen at a time. Illustration and Play Vocal buttons at the upper left allow viewing images associated with the current topic or playing audio clips of the text in Middle English, if available.

At the top of the desk are cubby holes, each with a different icon. Some of these icons are not immediately intuitive but are learned easily. These include a "Go back" button, a compass for the search facility, a pot for the search history, a magnifying glass that looks like a hairbrush to enlarge or reduce the font size, a bookmark, note paper to add comments, a help book, a tape recorder to listen to a reading in Middle English or record one's own, an ink well to make notes using Windows Write, and a menu that allows displaying a menu bar at

the top of the screen. The feature to add comments lets students associate comments with the original text or with the translation.

Chaucer: Life & Times lets students open multiple windows to work with a variety of texts. Some selections automatically open multiple windows, but instead of opening them as maximized and tiled side-by-side, they open minimized and cascaded. Readers don't get an option to modify these defaults; but they can manually rearrange these windows as desired. Print displays at the default size of 8 points. If one enlarges the size of the text to make it more readable, it may exceed the width of the window. While the windows usually have vertical scrollbars, there are no horizontal scrollbars that appear in this instance. The student will soon become aware of the problem when sentences don't make sense.

The search engine lets students search by word, phrase, or line number (in multiples of 10). It supports the Boolean operators AND and OR. Researchers can also limit searches to the original texts, translations, overviews, glossary, life and times, reference drawer, pictures, or all of these options or any combination of them. This is quite a powerful search engine with extensive ability to customize and limit searches.

Opening the reference drawer reveals additional tools. It shows an album for the maps and pictures, a rolodex that offers predefined, thematic tours through Chaucer's works, a pair of spectacles that offers essays on how to read a medieval manuscript, and a scroll that shows

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dearest) men's room became a women's room while the women's room got fresh makeup. Okay, a few close calls with humiliation, but I adjusted to using the men's further back by the boiler room. In October, they closed that hallway to excavate a new public cafeteria. Hmm. This was a challenge. Third floor! When they closed the elevator for "maintenance," I realized that a larger, more diabolical intellect than mine was at work. A mouse in a maze? Maybe. This is a science museum, after all.

Then we have the water problems. As lines are turned on and off, some rerouted, some forgotten, the drinking fountains get testy with frustration. They lure you close with a limp dribble then cough in your face. All the while, in the furthest wings, mysterious springs slowly drip onto acoustical tiles, painting brownish clouds, causing entomology librarians to drape their shelves in plastic sheets. God save our bug books.

We have pairs of workmen hiking through with long beams stretched between them, negotiating corners with all the grace of an eighteen-wheeler flagging its way through tourist traffic. We have scheduled power outages bringing our LAN down early, forcing technical services folk to twiddle their thumbs. We have sections of office space closed down entirely, the former occupants doubling up with others, sitting on laps where necessary.

And yet, with all this interior hoopla, most of the place, mysteriously, remains unchanged.

The centerpiece of the National Museum of Natural History, in its cavernous "rotunda" gallery, is a stuffed bull elephant, famously de-sexed in deference to early 1950's sensibilities. You'd think that the brave new world of blunt correctness would have forced the amputated elephant into the dust bin years ago. But, no. There he stands. I have several aunts probably young enough to have seen the same beast on their eighth-grade trips (if they had eighth-grade trips back then) and not have been agitated by any hint of elephant plumbing.

The anthropological exhibits also date back to that enlightened era and now have the same kitsch value as Fiestaware and Hummel figurines. In stage-set dioramas brownish mannequins of primitive people (all faintly occidental) enact their prehistoric lives: hunting, gathering, weaving, sometimes bullying each other the way only mannequins can. The mammals hall, they say, is haunted by the great hunter himself: T.R.

But the beauty of any old building comes partly from its dust, from knowing that one's forebears could have walked the same halls. It comes from the personal honor of having thick marble underfoot, the grand and high interior vistas, the echo, the purpose. And the beauty of my old building in particular comes from imagining that one or two out of every hundred eighth-graders might sense the very same grandeur, maybe for the first time. Maybe one or two might actually learn some-

thing from an exhibit to which my work contributed in some tiny way.

Nematode. I found it. Worms. The librarian who I imagined in the middle of decay needs books on worms. There's a gap in her shelves where the worm books should be. Oddly enough, I had a few things I could send that might help. The Balkan librarian was mending her old building — its enterprise, at least just as all librarians strain to keep up, fix the holes, plug the leaks, stay one step ahead wherever possible.

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a map of the London/Winchester-Canterbury pilgrim routes with places of interest linked to pop-up text and images. Most of the graphics are rather small: the largest only use a quarter of the screen. There's no ability to enlarge them either. This is particularly annoying for the medieval maps which are too small to identify any details.

Opening the desk drawer also opens cupboards on either side of the desk. These cupboards contain notebooks labeled Further Reading, seventeen Critical Essays, and Glossary. Further Reading contains entries for bibliographies, general information about Chaucer and his works, readings about the *Canterbury Tales* and Chaucer's other works or on specific subjects. These subjects include topics such as astrology, the kings of the period, the language of the period, and the role and meaning of pilgrimage in medieval society.

When reading the medieval texts, words and phrases that appear in different type face have automatic links to the glossary. When the cursor moves over these words and phrases, it changes to a magnifying glass. Clicking will open a window with the explanation. Users can customize the color of the text for both the pop-up windows and for the links that jump to related texts.

But before I could type a shipping label, I was asked to move away from my desk by a set of very serious, hard-hatted men. They tapped, prodded, and measured my wall. I didn't know why. I chalked it up to another of the mysteries of old buildings, the Gaia of old buildings. They change and grow, expand and contract, crack and mend with us as their many generations of servants.

I am thinking about buying my own hard hat.

Chaucer: Life & Times also includes several thematic routes (rolodex icon) through the various components of this disc (Middle English texts, translations, critical essays, overviews, and life and times). These themes cover: authority, marriage, chivalry/courtly love, language, dreams, and religion. Students and teachers can also create their own thematic tours for personal or classroom use.

The ondisc documentation and the accompanying user's guide provide more than adequate help. The guide even has a section for teaching applications and suggested assignments.

Chaucer: Life & Times is a rich source for study materials on Chaucer and his works. Having a single source that groups the Middle English texts with their translations and links to a glossary offers great benefits to students. The Riverside edition, using the text edited by F. N. Robinson, is a standard text used in many schools. However, the textual notes and explanatory notes found in some printed editions do not appear on the disc. Nor is there any discussion of the variant editions of the manuscripts and how they compare — but that is more a scholar's concern than that of a student. The recordings of some of the passages provide an aural appreciation of the Middle English poetry and a deeper understanding of the relation of the written text and its pronunciation and how it relates to modern English.

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