Bouquets and Brickbats

"The Disc! is a perfect idea. I got it in the mail awhile ago and was skeptical about its quality, but just recently popped it in and was pleasantly surprised. The interface worked great (loved the videos!) and enjoyed toying around with everything. I'm definitely looking forward to future issues!

   BTW -- Because of The Disc!, my interest in the Internet was piqued, and as you can see, it convinced me to join using the software that came on it.

   Thanks for a great, informative, multimedia magazine!"
                        -- from the Internet

"Rec'd the disk. Won't install. Get "can't access drive D" message after passing screen that prompts for the install directory. Get same message when trying to run "loldemo" from DOS. All my other CD's run fine. The problem must be with this disk. Very frustrating, and would like to find a solution. Any ideas?"
                        -- from AOL

The response to our first issue of The Disc!, which accompanied our April/May issue, has been tremendously exciting. And we want to thank all of you who have taken the time to communicate with us via letter, fax, America Online, and via the Internet.

   While there aren't enough of us here at CD-ROM Today to respond to each individual query, please be assured that we read every message and use your ideas, suggestions, complaints, and questions to try to make both the magazine and The Disc! a package that you'll look forward to each issue.

   We've received literally hundreds and hundreds of responses to The Disc!, and we're pleased to say that the overwhelming majority of them have been extremely complimentary and supportive of our efforts. However, we realize that when you distribute a CD-ROM disc that's packed with a wide variety of multimedia programs -- many of which load and run in different ways -- that there will be hurdles to jump in some cases. Add to this the great diversity of hardware and software setups, especially on the PC side of things, and you can expect a certain number of problems or challenges for users.

   In that light, here are the Top Ten Questions and/or Complaints we've received from readers about the first Disc!:

   1. Why doesn't (fill in the blank) work on my system?
   We've received many letters and messages complimenting us on the fact that everything on The Disc! worked well and yet others saying that some or none of The Disc! worked at all -- or only with tweaking. With thousands of variations in memory configurations, sound cards, video cards, CD-ROM drives and drive speeds, and other variables, it's not surprising that our wide-ranging selection of demos, samples, and programs produce different results on different systems. These inconsistencies are a very real part of the world of multimedia computing right now.

   We test the software on as many different hardware setups as possible to try to locate problems or special challenges that will confront our readers. And the software publishers also try to

give us programs to run that are tested and tweaked so that users have a positive experience. However, while we want to provide readers with software samples that are as easy to use as possible, we also want to bring to you the best of what's being published. And some of that pushes the limits of hardware systems.

We'll try to provide as much information as possible via README files, information on the Disc! pages, and in every other way to give you as much troubleshooting advice as possible. And where we see potential problems, we'll signal our readers about them.

2. Why do I have to leave your Disc! interface and Windows to run so many game and education programs and demos?

In the PC world, the truth is that most of the very best entertainment packages and educational programs use every scrap of available memory. And that means that some of the RAM memory that's assigned to Windows -- which our Disc! interface uses -- can rob the game of the space it needs to run. While we'd prefer to launch everything from our Windows interface, to do that would mean that readers don't get some of the hottest software available.

We're pleased to report that we have plans to produce a custom user interface for DOS and another one for our many Macintosh readers in addition to our Windows interface. We'll try to make sure that no matter what you're using that you have an easy-to-use, intuitive environment in which to operate.

3. Why can't I get some customer/technical support from you about problems I encounter in running parts of The Disc!?

We'd love to be able to handle such calls on an individual basis, but the volume and range of queries on virtually every multimedia subject and challenge is far too great for us to handle at this time. We do try, and will increase our efforts even more, to anticipate and document areas where we think readers will have particular problems. In fact, our cover story on troubleshooting multimedia is, in part, a response to the individual questions we received about The Disc!.

CD-ROM computing is a rapidly evolving arena, and until the era of true plug-and-play emerges there will be more questions than immediate answers.

4. Could you put more information in the Disc! pages of the magazine about how to run particular programs?

Yes. Starting with this issue, you'll find more detailed information in our Disc! pages about what the program is, how you use it, and how to have some fun with it. We'll also try to put into the READ ME files on The Disc! as much troubleshooting material as possible.

5. Could your Disc! have caused a virus on my computer?

Our disc duplicator, Nimbus Information Systems, is one of the best CD-ROM manufacturers and duplicators in the industry -- producing hundreds of thousands of discs round the clock. Their virus checking procedures are top-notch, and we can guarantee that each one of our CD-ROM discs is certified virus-free immediately before it is pressed.

6. Why did the magazine's polywrap say that Planetfall and Forever Growing Garden would be on The Disc! when they weren't?

Software developers and publishers are always trying to push their products to be the most innovative, exciting, and compelling titles on the market. This inevitably leads to missed deadlines and late arrivals as they work to stay on the cutting edge while solving a host of new challenges and problems. And that also has an effect on when we can get demos, samples, limited-use versions, etc.

While we were able to offer our Macintosh users the original Planetfall text adventure as promised, we were unable to receive a modified version of the PC classic that could run successfully on The Disc!. (Ironic, yes?) At some future date, we hope to bring PC readers that great Infocom title.

As for Forever Growing Garden, just before shipping The Disc! a bug was found in the demo and we couldn't risk sending it out to our readers. So, we made the difficult decision to hold it back. You'll find the colorful rolling demo on this Disc! -- and this time it works quite well.

Our pledge to you, our readers, is to deliver far more on each issue of The Disc! than we promise! And if one or two programs or samples fall out of an issue, we'll make sure that we more than make up for it with even better items.

7. Why does the Macintosh side of The Disc! have programs that are different from the PC side?

Wherever possible, we like to use programs on The Disc! that are accessible by both Mac and PC users -- as is the case this issue with demos such as Myst, Gus Goes to Cybertown, Living Books, and ZCI's Endangered Species PowerCD sample.

In many cases, however, programs and demos are not available for both systems at the same time. What we try to do is to provide readers with the most compelling material for each system -- and to offer as much of it as we can possibly squeeze onto each disc.

8. I've tried to reach your Customer Service line (201-703-9505), but (a) it's always busy, (b) the voice mailbox is full, or (c) no one responds.

We've heard your complaints on this and have been working around the clock to make sure that we don't miss any of you in the future. The overwhelming response to the first Disc! temporarily stretched our response time, and we deeply appreciate all of you who tried without success at first to reach us. Now that we've been making some adjustments in that area to handle the volume of requests, our goal is to handle your Circulation problems quickly and efficiently.

9. Why don't you publish the magazine and disc monthly?

We've received many inquiries about increasing our frequency, and we're happy to say that following the August/September bimonthly issue we'll be in a monthly cycle for both CD-ROM Today and The Disc!.

And judging from the number of absolutely great programs, demos, samples, and other material that are in the pipeline for upcoming issues, we'll need to be monthly just to handle it all.

10. Occasionally, I get stuck inside a program or demo on The Disc! and can't find a way out. Are there any standard exit commands?

Different publishers approach this question in varying ways. There's no universal exit other than turning off your computer and turning it back on. Our goal is to provide quick exit commands on any program or demo on The Disc! that's not any obvious choice or is not directly pointed out. There are some fairly common command usages, such as using the F1 key for Help files and Alt-X or Alt-Q or Ctrl-Q as exits. But the variations are so great that it's impossible to provide a universal solution.