CD-ROM ToolKit

Supercharged CD-ROM Performance

CD-ROM drives are slow. For many users, this fact remains the biggest stumbling block to their acceptance. The lure of hundreds of megabytes of data at a modest cost could be blunted by the realization that access to that data might be in the same speed range as floppies: acceptable for occasional or one-time use, but not for repeated access. It's fine for the initial delivery of software or fonts, but you wouldn't want to run the software from the CD. Several CD-ROM games currently on the market point out this fact with agonizing painfulness.

The newer "double-speed" CD drives have brought a sizable improvement, but even their speed can seem glacial. For these reasons, we were eager to test CD-ROM ToolKit. This new utility comes from FWB Incorporated, makers of the highly respected FWB Hard Disk ToolKit, which many users swear by.

CD-ROM ToolKit's main secret is its disk caching. The ToolKit reserves space in your computer's RAM and on your hard drive to "memorize" the contents of the CD. Once this information is extracted from the CD's directory, common commands such as mounting the CD, opening folders, and searching for files can be speeded up dramatically.

The package claims "lightning speeds… 1,000% or more." Most of our tests were done on an Apple 300 CD player — already known as one of the fastest drives around. We found distinct speed gains; most actions were 2–4 times faster. We consider this to be an admirable improvement, well worth the price of the package for users interested in data retrieval. We would assume that older, slower drives would show an even greater speed improvement.

The CDT Control Panel options allow you to adjust most of the ToolKit's functions and settings. If you are running with limited RAM or hard disk space, beware; FWB wants at least 1 megabyte of space — preferably 3MB, and possibly as much as 4MB of your precious hard drive space in order to maximize the speedup of your CDs. Demands may also be placed on your Mac's memory. According to the manual, "Most users will designate between 232K and 1000K of RAM to the cache…" FWB appears to have joined Microsoft, Aldus, and Adobe in the war for space on your hard drive and in your RAM.

FWB includes a CDT Remote desk accessory that allows you to play audio CDs. Many (most?) CD-ROM players are shipped with a similar desk accessory, so this will probably not be a strong selling point for most users.

QuickTime Isn't

After our initial encouraging timing tests, we were disappointed when we tried to view QuickTime movies from an accelerated CD. They actually ran slower with CD-ROM ToolKit than without. Video was quite jerky. Audio on some of the movies was so fragmented that we had trouble understanding the content. When we called the manufacturer of the disc, his first suggestion was that if we were using CD-ROM ToolKit, turn it off. Doing so restored the movies to their "normal" speed.

There are settings in the ToolKit's Control Panel which are supposed to optimize for QuickTime movies, but we found them to be ineffective. Perhaps they would be more useful on some CD players and/or Macs. The Troubleshooting section of the users guide suggested turning off the "Fast" setting in the Control Panel if this is a problem. Naturally, this defeats the purpose of CD acceleration.

Compatibility

Kodak's PhotoCD is supported, but you'll have to obtain the PhotoCD INIT elsewhere. Although the manual states that the INIT is included in the FWB package, it was removed at the last minute due to a licensing conflict.
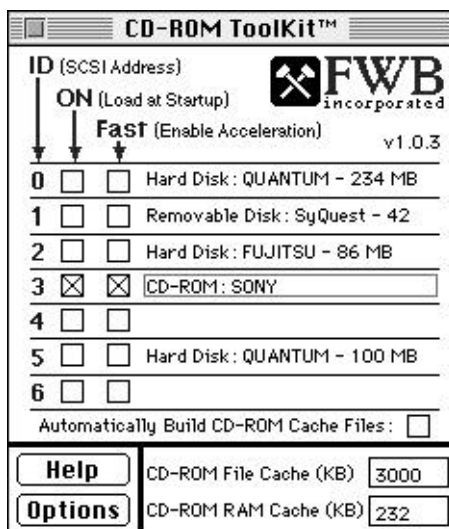
We wanted to test the CD-ROM ToolKit on other CD players, but the only other CD players we could find in the user group were not compatible with FWB's product. The package lists twelve manufacturers that are supported, and suggests that "many others" are also compatible; but if you have a Denon drive, don't bother. Our guess is that older, slower drives would benefit the most from FWB's acceleration.

CD-ROM ToolKit can be a real help if your uses are mainly derived from directory reads, but if you spend some of your "quality CD time" exploring QuickTime movies, be prepared to turn off the ToolKit's acceleration for those sessions.

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Requires System 6.04 or later. *See text for hard drive and RAM requirements.*