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## BOOK AND CD REVIEWS

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THE MENTAL HEALTH STUDIOS [CD-ROM]. Missouri Institute of Mental Health. *St. Louis, MO: The Curators of the University of Missouri, Missouri Institute of Mental Health, 1995, \$45.*

There are many myths and stigmas associated with mental illness. However, the biological basis of many mental illnesses is not widely understood by the general public. *The Mental Health Studios* was originally created to inform museum patrons about the biological basis of some of the most common mental illnesses. It also seeks to educate, in very general terms, about the nature and symptoms of these diseases. Recently, a CD-ROM version of this interactive presentation has been made available to more general audiences.

### LAYOUT AND NAVIGATION OF THE CD

The authors use Macromedia's Authorware to create the metaphor of a building called *The Mental Health Studios*. Inside the building, users are greeted by "The Big Brain," a semi-animated character who takes the user on a tour of the building.

Primarily the building is comprised of a series of studios in which the user creates "beautiful brains." For example, information about *anxiety disorder* is presented in the "ceramics studio," schizophrenia is covered in the "glass blowing studio," etc. Illnesses covered in other "studios" include *bipolar disorder*, *addictive disorder* and *depression*. Each time users click the mouse on an exhibit in one of these studios they are greeted by a game, an audio recording, a "slide" show, or a Quicktime video

presentation designed to educate them about a different aspect of a major mental illness. When users complete the activity they have clicked, a piece is added to the brain being created in that particular studio.

Clicking on items which resemble each other in any of the studios presents the user with a similar type of information about the mental illness to which the studio is devoted. Each studio contains a medicine chest which presents the user with a short video clip in which a physician or other doctoral-level practitioner talks about medications used to treat the disorder. Clicking the telephone usually produces an audio recording by a different professional who informs the user about counseling or other "talk" therapy approaches to treating the disorder. Other "clickable" articles in the room dispel myths or inform the user about the prevalence, trajectory, or causes of the disorder. One of the more thought provoking elements of each studio is a "portrait" which, when clicked, presents a short video clip of a consumer who talks about his or her personal experiences with mental illness.

The studios are connected to each other and to a "penthouse" by an elevator. In the elevator on the way from one studio to the next, users are given general information about the disorder they will be exploring once they "arrive" at the studio they have selected. All of the studios also contain an icon (a picture of the brain) which allows the user to access the "penthouse." In the penthouse the user learns about general brain functions through a series of interactive games as well as non-interactive slide shows and video clips.

### ***PRESENTATION AND STYLE***

Much of *The Mental Health Studios* is animated in a style which falls somewhere between a sophisticated slide-show and cartoon animation. This style, created by Macromedia's Authorware, is quite reminiscent of another Macromedia product well known to users of the world-wide web: Shockwave. Readers not familiar with this type of animation may wish to visit the Shockwave demonstration page at <http://www.macromedia.com/shockwave/epicenter/index.html>. This form of animation provides for a very effective and engaging presentation, albeit not at the level of cinematic sophistication increasingly common in CD-ROMs. The CD also makes liberal use of Apple's Quicktime video and some computer games similar to ones used by psychologists to assess various aspects of brain functioning.

## TARGET AUDIENCES

*The Mental Health Studios* provides a great deal of information in a form that is very easy to digest. According to its programmer and co-producer, it was originally designed for general public audiences, and has met with considerable success as an exhibit in a science museum. It is also currently being used by some high schools to educate students about mental illness (Joel Epstein, personal communication, November 20, 1996).

In spite of these origins and current uses, *The Mental Health Studios* may not be suitable for everyone. The level and amount of information provided is too rudimentary to be of educational benefit to mental health professionals or for Bachelor or Master level students in the human services. However, as the authors intended, this level and amount of information is probably about right for informing the general public about mental illness. This CD may also be of interest to direct consumers of mental health services, their families and significant others, since it provides a highly accessible and non-threatening means of de-mystifying mental illness and its treatment.

Although the content seems about right for educating lay persons, the means of presentation may not be appropriate for all audiences. Most of the production has a sort of "Sesame Street" feeling about it. Indeed, the reviewer's five-year-old child, who has logged several hours "playing" *The Mental Health Studios*, was immediately drawn to the cartoon-like interface, animation and drawings.

A serious problem for very young users is that some segments present material which is not narrated and must be read from the screen. The authors would be well advised to add narration to these segments in future versions to make them accessible for small children who will naturally be drawn to the CD, as well as for users of all ages who have difficulty reading from a computer screen.

Conversely, the same cartoon-like interface and overall style that may make this CD appealing for children, may put off older viewers. Adolescents and late-teens in particular may find this presentation too "childish" or even patronizing. This may also be the case for some adults.

The best audience may be school aged children who have achieved a fair degree of literacy (the authors designed the CD for users with at least a sixth grade reading level<sup>1</sup>), but who have not yet lost interest in cartoons. A seventh grade child who tried the CD in the course of this review confirmed that the format and level of information were appropriate for middle school students (grades six through eight). This is somewhat unfor-

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1. Joel Epstein, personal communication, November 20, 1996.

tunate since the content itself could well have wider appeal. In fact, those older users who do not find the juvenile quality of the presentation somewhat off-putting stand to learn a considerable amount from this CD.

Another market for *The Mental Health Studios* may be suitably equipped waiting rooms in the offices of mental health professionals and mental health centers. In this case, "suitably equipped" means a moderately powerful PC outfitted with a pair of headphones. The music underlying the presentation is a bit loud and repetitive, and a great deal of the presentation *is* accompanied by narrative. This is by no means a problem for the user who is interacting with the CD, but would be annoying to anyone else who was nearby if forced to listen to it!

### SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS

The CD is designed to run in both Macintosh (System 7 or greater) and Windows (3.1 or greater) operating environments. The authors suggest that Macintosh systems should have at least a 68030 processor. Windows systems are recommended to have at least 80486 processors. Both Macintosh and Windows systems are recommended to have a 256 color 640 × 480 monitor and at least 6.5 Megabytes of available RAM memory.

There may be other considerations, however. This review was conducted primarily on a 100 Mhz Pentium-based (80586) PC running Windows 3.1. This system was equipped with a Quad-speed CD-ROM drive, 2 Mb of video RAM, a Super VGA monitor and 16 Mb of system RAM. Since this configuration exceeds the specifications for *The Mental Health Studios* by a considerable margin, it is not surprising that the CD ran without much difficulty.

Interestingly however, the CD did not run well on the reviewer's laptop, which has a somewhat slower processor (75 MHz Pentium) as well as more limited video (1 Mb of Video RAM) and CD-ROM (a double speed drive) capabilities. While the CD ran on this system, it was very slow, inserted "pauses" in the background music, and froze briefly during some of the video presentations. Presumably the difficulty resides in either the more limited video or the slower CD-ROM drive. The authors might be well advised to make somewhat more extensive hardware recommendations on future versions of the CD.

### OVERALL IMPRESSIONS

Virtually all of the segments and features of *The Mental Health Studios* are informative and interesting. Most also do an admirable job of demysti-

fyng mental illness and debunking commonly held, but factually incorrect, notions about these disorders. One of the most progressive and appealing elements of *The Mental Health Studios* is the incorporation of consumers describing their illnesses. The five consumers who make an appearance in the CD vary considerably in age, gender, ethnicity and background. They also vary considerably in their articulateness, as well as in the degree to which they appear to be coping with their particular conditions. In each case, however, these consumers are easy for the user to relate to, and go far toward de-mystifying not merely mental illness, but also *mentally ill people*.

The same comments made about consumers could be repeated about the professionals who make appearances in video clips and sound-bites throughout the CD. However, while the mental health practitioners presented vary in gender and ethnicity, all of the professionals noted in *The Mental Health Studios* appear to have some sort of doctoral degree: either an MD, an OD or a PhD. This may give users a false impression about the kind of professionals who normally serve mentally ill people. Psycho-social interventions in particular are commonly delivered by master level practitioners, and in particular, by social workers. Unfortunately, none of the practitioners in *The Mental Health Studios* are master level, nor are any referred to as social workers.

In terms of production values and quality, *The Mental Health Studios* seems to have made a somewhat uneven transition from the museum floor to the personal computer. For example, the help screens instruct the user to "touch the screen," rather than to "click with the mouse." Additionally, the "Big Brain" who looks quite masculine and youthful in "his" T-shirt, sweats and sneakers, has the voice of a mature woman (attributed to Jean Gibbs in the credits).

These amount to minor distractions, however. For the most part, *The Mental Health Studios* succeeds impressively in the way its authors intended: it provides a great deal of general information about the bio-chemical and neurological origins and treatment of mental illness. Moreover, it is highly engaging, easy for a non-professional to understand and, for the right audience, quite entertaining.

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