Doomsday comes to the BBC

Nothing new in that, as you might fairly say, but this *is* something a little out of the ordinary. What began as a mild suggestion for a program on Sunday evening in the God slot to commemorate the 900th anniversary of the Domesday Book has grown into the most important springboard for the exploitation of Inter-active videodisc.

Just suppose that in every school, public library and affluent home there was a simple, easy-to-use work of reference showing the distribution of land use in the United Kingdom. Surely, such a work would provide the most valuable source of information for teaching and research in the areas of human and social activities that could be imagined.

And what a Trojan Horse within which to infiltrate the new technology! That the most innovatory proposal for the use of micro-computers and videodiscs in schools should be directed towards the Humanities rather than the Sciences is a masterstroke of a kind that is quintessentially European and reinforces the idea that it is in Europe that the full flowering of Information Technology will take place.

In fact, such a project is quite outside the competence and scope of the BBC. It needed the backing of the experts in interactive communications technology, Philips, together with Acorn Video, (the new company from the Hauser stable that is going to launch on the public a cheap interactive video system, based on its ubiquitous micro) to give practical substance to the idea.

At the heart of the Domesday concept is the realisation that the videodisc can contain, in a very convenient form, a vast volume of information. One way of saying this is to point out that all the words and all the pictures in the Encyclopaedia Britannica fit into two thirds of one side of a Laser Vision videodisc, leaving room for several megabytes of computer programs designed to search the database. But to make this data density possible, a way had to be agreed in which both digital data and pictures could be stored on the same disc.

Philips have been persuaded that a combination of the techniques used in the Compact Audio disc and the standard videodisc signal offers the most versatile way of holding error-free digital data. The result is that by July next year, there will be an addition to the Philips videodisc player instruction set that allows one frame's worth (about 16K) of digital data to be downloaded into a cache memory in the player every 40 milliseconds. This data is then available to the attached computer for any purpose; it may be data or executable machine code or even teletext.

The task of accumulating the data for the Domesday videodisc, although huge and hundreds of school children notwithstanding, is dwarfed by the task of implementing programs that will make access and use of the data easy for the Acorn/BBC micro. This will steadily become more apparent to the team as the initial euphoria wears off, but they should not be discouraged; if by the year 1990 there is a working Domesday interactive videodisc database, that will be a splendid achievement.

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