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The American Journey, Interactive Edition. Prentice-Hall.

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Interactive American History, or Old Wine in New Bottles?

As publishers increasingly seek to squeeze the most profit from the market for college history survey textbooks with such tactics as two-year cycles between editions, it should be no surprise that they are also developing products to take advantage of the rush on many college and university campuses to use the latest multimedia technology in teaching. A leader in the development of CD-ROMs for history surveys is Prentice-Hall, who, in cooperation with Zane Publishing, currently offers CD-ROM versions of textbooks for American, western, and world history survey courses. <p> The question remains, however, whether this first generation of CD-ROMs will prove beneficial to students and teachers. <cite>The American Journey, Interactive Edition</cite> offers the user essentially three products in one package: the printed version of <cite>The American Journey</cite>, a study guide, and <cite>Webster's New World College Dictionary</cite>. In the "Introduction to Power CD," to which the user has to navigate specifically, this generic five-minute marketing spiel declares, "The days of carrying a heavy load of books are over. Everything you need is now on just one Power CD!" Teachers will join me in scoffing at such a claim, since the CD-ROM lacks such essential features for surveys as primary documents, extended film clips, monographs, and other resources that students will continue to find in college libraries and media centers, and, perhaps, on the Internet. <p> Power CD titles offer several "modes," or functional areas. The text mode, the introduction suggests, "is where you'll find things like the Declaration of Independence, or the complete text of an author's greatest work." <cite>The American Journey</cite> paper edition does indeed include the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and the other standard tables of information found in the appendices of American history textbooks. The interactive version, however, omits these basic features. Text mode, in other words, though promoted as a library, contains nothing more than the chapters of the paper edition of the textbook. It is inexplicably odd that the appendices were deleted for the CD-ROM edition, when one would expect there to be more, rather than fewer, links to documents in the interactive edition. <p> Will students find this CD-ROM an appealing supplement or alternative to paper textbooks, study guides, and dictionaries? Several factors, of course, may influence the answer to this question. First, students must have access to a fairly low-end computer with a CD-ROM drive. Second, they must be somewhat familiar with CD-ROMs and computer navigation. <cite>The American Journey, Interactive Edition</cite> includes a "How to Use Manual" that briefly explains the many features and modes of the software. There are also brief tutorials and help screens to assist users. Most students with basic computer literacy should be able to navigate this CD-ROM. Third, some students will find the "interactive" approach appealing, while undoubtedly others (such as most of my students) would find the absence of an easily transported and read paper textbook more an annoyance than a leap into twenty-first-century learning. Finally, there is the issue of selling their used CD-ROMs back to the bookstore once the semester is over. While many music stores will purchase used music CDs for a few dollars, I have yet to see a college bookstore that will buy back used software for resale. This should be kept in mind by any instructor who is concerned with the rising prices of textbooks and with the students' ability to recycle used books (even at a fraction of the new price) for the use of students in subsequent semesters. <p> Since the paper version of <cite>The American Journey</cite> was reviewed in H-Survey in March 1998 by Catherine Forslund and William R. Wantland, and I agree substantially with their favorable evaluation of the textbook itself, I will confine my coverage to the features that are particular to the CD-ROM version. Readers should consult the H-Survey archives for information about the content of the textbook chapters, which are identical in the paper and interactive editions. <p> With these preliminary issues and comments on the table, let me now dis-

cuss the heart of the contents of this CD-ROM title as well as some of the ways in which it could be potentially useful for students and instructors alike. After inserting the CD into the drive and commanding it to run, the user hears the beginning of a musical soundtrack that soars and swoops as heroically as any Hollywood film's score. Feature one is four minutes of music while the screen shifts through the four chapter groups of the textbook. A figurative map of North America accompanies each group, while moving the pointer to a particular chapter title in that group causes a corresponding section of the map to enlarge. (The user can stop, resume, and move backward and forward as he or she pleases anytime during the feature presentations.) <p> If one lets the program run along, it will take the reader to Chapter One. This chapter begins, as do all the others, with illustrations in the left column and a textual overview of the chapter in the right column. Users can also select to move to the quiz, section headings, or contents for that chapter. Meanwhile, a pleasant female voice reads the textual overview over the background soundtrack. <p> These "features," as they are called, last for about five to six minutes each. One can read along with the text or follow the illustrations as they change frame by frame with the text. Highlighted words in the text, such as "Reformation," are linked to the glossary. Some glitches appeared in Chapter Two, where "allies" is highlighted in the context of Indian allies of French colonists. Checking the glossary for "allies," however, retrieves the definition of the Central Powers in World War I. In the same chapter overview, "initiative" is highlighted in the sentence "English colonization depended more on private enterprise than centralized state initiative as in France and Spain." The definition retrieved for "initiative," however, obviously refers to the Populist era: "Procedure by which citizens can introduce a subject for legislation, usually through a petition signed by a specific number of voters." While providing a glossary for terms that may be unfamiliar to students is a commendable feature of both the printed and the CD-ROM versions of <cite>The American Journey</cite>, the mistakes need to be corrected in the electronic edition. <p> The images in each overview are extremely traditional still photos, at least in the first half of the textbook. Paintings of battles and white men are in abundance. A more diverse picture emerges in the second half of the book. Usually one or two of the dozen or so images in each feature are film clips, lasting a few seconds. Using QuickTime software, which can be downloaded from the CD-ROM, one can view these clips. In Chapter One, for instance, one can see a dramatized "fleet of Spanish ships land[ing] in the Americas" or Frenchmen rowing a birch bark canoe as they "explore the new world." This feature is unique to the CD-ROM version of <cite>The American Journey</cite>, but its usefulness in the present form is limited. The selections are too short (ten to twenty seconds), are often silent, and are not introduced effectively. In Chapter Eight, for instance, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor is shown commenting on federalism, but she is never identified so that students will know why they should value her opinion over anyone else's. <p> One would hope that students would not find this brief overview of each chapter sufficient exposure to the chapters. From each overview, one can click on one's choice of three boxes: chapter quiz, chapter index, and chapter content. The chapter quiz is just as it says, a set of multiple-choice questions that the user can modify from a maximum of twenty questions and a twenty-minute time limit. Students may also print the questions. After the quiz is completed, it calculates a score and allows the quiz taker to return to incorrect answers, where the student is coached toward the correct answer and the section of the chapter from which the question was drawn. Students and teachers alike should be aware that the quiz tests only the most basic comprehension of chapter content, such as dates, places, names of people and events, and so on. The quizzes do not assess readers' comprehension of concepts. A perfect score should be expected from any reader with modest reading and comprehension skills. <p> Clicking the chapter index box takes the user to an alphabetized list of the chapter sections. Users can then highlight a section and move to it in the text. Oddly, this list is alphabetized rather than presented in the order of the chapter, so that "additional sources" almost always appears first, the introduction is somewhere in the middle, and the substantive topics are jumbled out of chronological or logical sequence. This list would probably be of little use to most students, unless they knew exactly for what they were looking in a particular chapter; it could potentially confuse others if they tried to use the list to study for an exam, for instance. <p> In a redesign of this CD-ROM, I would suggest eliminating the three choices from the feature presentation for each chapter in favor of an automatic advance to the third choice, the chapter contents. This screen offers many choices and should really serve as the home screen for each chapter. Possible selections are grouped into two areas: multimedia study guide and resources. <p> Moving down the list in the multimedia study guide, one finds these choices: multimedia overview, quiz, essay questions index, internet online, and video clips index. The multimedia overview is the introductory feature presentation for each chapter, already described above. The quiz is the same quiz de-

scribed above. The essay questions index contains four essay questions for each chapter. Each question gives the corresponding section of the chapter for review. A question for Chapter One asks the student to "Comment on the Colombian [sic] Exchange's impact on both 'old' and 'new' worlds." Similarly, in Chapter Twenty on industrialization and urbanization, one of the essay questions is "Why did children and women enter the work force?" To my mind, these essay questions are much more useful than the multiple-choice quizzes, for they force students to learn concepts and to write about them. I urge the publishers to expand this section of the CD-ROM and to include an area in which students could type their answers and then print them to turn in, to use in studying, and so on. <p> Choosing the internet online feature from the multimedia study guide takes one, using whatever web browser is installed on the computer in use, to Prentice-Hall's companion web site, where users can select from yet another list of features relating to <cite>The American Journey</cite> textbook. These include more quiz (multiple-choice and true-false) and essay questions, document reviews, people and events, a message board, and a chat area. In the people and events area, one can select from a list to search the World Wide Web for that particular person or event. (Of course, one can do this on one's own with any web browser's search engine.) The message board is described as "a virtual bulletin board about the text"; it appears more for faculty than students. The chat area allows for "virtual classroom discussion" either in impromptu chats with users from around the world or in a local, private study group. The usefulness of this web site will, I suspect, vary, since almost all of the features are available elsewhere, such as a printed study guide, web search engines, and campus listserv discussion groups. <p> The last selection from the multimedia study guide menu takes the user to a list of the video clips for that chapter. This is just another path to the same feature whose strengths and weaknesses I have already discussed above. <p> There are three choices in the second group of selections-resources-on the chapter contents screen: chapter outline and introduction, chapter topics index, and figures, maps, and tables. The first choice takes one to a list of the chapter subheadings as they appear in the text, followed by the text of the introduction to that chapter. The chapter topics index is the same as the chapter index that one can reach through the introductory feature presentation, and thus is flawed in the ways I have already described. The third selection–figures, maps, and tables–takes the user to a list of the figures, maps, and tables in that particular chapter. In perhaps the most strikingly peculiar feature of the CD-ROM edition of <cite>The American Journey</cite>, the figures and maps are presented separately from their captions, which are several mouse clicks away in separate files. Large maps, such as those in Chapter One of North American Indian groups and of Africa, which appear whole in the printed text, are split into two frames in the electronic version. Obviously, students will find the figures, maps, and tables less useful than they would otherwise be, since they are divorced from the text to which they serve as illustrations, since they are sometimes difficult to view in their entirety, and since the captions are filed separately from the figures, tables, and maps to which they refer. The last feature that can be used any time during the operation of the CD-ROM is the college dictionary. Every teacher wishes for students to build vocabulary and to write and read with a dictionary close by. Perhaps the ability to look up unfamiliar words with the click of a mouse will encourage students to do so more than they otherwise do with paper dictionaries, but I am not as sanguine as Power CD's marketers, who declare, "No longer do you have to fumble with an open dictionary on your desk; there's already one on your computer!" But what if you do not have your computer and CD-ROM with you? Will most readers not find the traditional versions of textbooks and dictionaries more convenient to carry to and from class, to the library, to home on weekends, or to the nearest spot of grass and shade on a sunny day? <p> All in all, I found this initial foray into electronic American history textbooks a disappointment. If the current product's design should remain essentially the same, there is still much that can be changed to improve the product. I have noted several glitches and peculiar design features already. To those I will add that the navigation through the CD-ROM is overly complex and can lead one into inexplicable dead ends. Navigation should be streamlined to simulate better the likely uses of a textbook. The added features, such as links to the web, video clips, and glossary terms, should appear seamlessly as one reads through the text. As it is, these features, while potentially useful additions to a paper text, fall short because they are inserted around the body of the textbook and therefore appear as gimmicks rather than as integrated learning tools. Does adding a soundtrack really help students learn? <p> If Prentice-Hall hopes to seize whatever market there is for CD-ROMs in American history courses, it should return to the drawing board. My own preference would be for a product that does more than bundle currently available paper products into one electronic product. This, indeed, is old wine in new bottles. For my own survey courses, in which I demand that students read many pri-

mary documents, explore web sites such as the Valley of the Shadow project on the Civil War and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York City, and write several essays, a CD-ROM would be most useful if it supplemented, rather than mimicked, an existing textbook. Such a product would include primary documents and web sites linked to relevant sections in the texts, interactive map exercises (such as I once used with the text <cite>A People and a Nation</cite>), longer video clips and more images, and lessons that ask students to tie together their knowledge using the text, documents, web links, and other resources in the preparation of a written essay, a class presentation, or a group project such as a debate. <p> Most of all, I would want the CD-ROM to help me teach my students how to do history. This first edition of <cite>The American Journey, Interactive Edition</cite> is not really interactive. With a few exceptions, it is an electronic presentation of printed texts. All survey courses should be interactive, but one need not have computers to interact with students, and one need not adopt, as eager as one might be to do so, CD-ROMs for American history surveys until this emerging technology truly offers an integrated, interactive approach to learning how to interpret the past. Perhaps that product already exists, but it is not <cite>The American Journey, Interactive Edition</cite>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
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