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American History Explorer: A.D. 1000-1875. Parsons Technology.

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A Useful Tool, but Professors Will Grumble

This inexpensive CD-ROM should prove handy for college survey instructors and high school teachers. It gathers an enormous amount of material and provides easy ways for teachers to manipulate information and images to suit their courses. Professors may also wish to recommend this CD to their students as a reference source and study aid, but when doing this they will probably feel impelled to add a few admonitions and even a little grumbling. The CD-ROM does convey enthusiasm for American history while inviting users to weigh evidence and develop interpretations. On the other hand, it tends to treat history as a body of information about the past that is interesting to know and in any case needs to be mastered, rather than as a special form of thought and imagination. Instructors of typical freshmen might, therefore, be concerned that the CD-ROM could inadvertently feed the tendency of students to treat their historical studies in a passive fashion and to confuse knowing things with understanding and feeling the past. <p> Like most of the numerous CDs that have come across instructors' desks in recent years, <cite>American History Explorer</cite> is basically a collection of articles, documents, maps, photos, and drawings, supplemented with film and music. Its comes from the quantity and variety of material it gathers, the simplicity of finding and manipulating this material, and the web of links among maps, slides, documents, and so on. <p> At the center of the program's simple main menu is a "Source Book," with 1,300 definitions and brief articles. Though most of these articles concern places, events, and political figures, the CD does give a nod to the history of native peoples, African Americans, women, culture, and business. The Source Book function also contains eighty-

five documents. The selection features widely reprinted documents such as accounts of Columbus's voyages, the Articles of Confederation, and the Seneca Falls Declaration. Parsons also thought to include key texts that are discussed more than read, such as the Intolerable Acts, the Alien and Sedition Acts, and the <cite>Cherokee Nation v. Georgia</cite> decision. The editors went to the effort to include presidential inaugural addresses from Washington through Grant's first term, a testimony to editorial diligence, if not to the art of oratory. <p> The program provides copious linkages among articles and between articles and pictures, though the editors may wish to weed out overzealous links. For example, in the description of the breakup of the Democratic-Republicans in the 1820s, the second word of "National Republican party" links to the "Republican Party." This is misleading to say the least, since the National Republicans evolved into the Whigs, and historians still debate the connection between the Whigs and the Republicans. In the passage of the Abraham Lincoln article that explains what Lincoln intended to hold onto during the Secession Crisis, the green photo-link icons next to the words "forts" and "arsenals" lead to photos of Fort Bowie, Arizona, and Fort Larned, Kansas, not exactly priority targets of Jefferson Davis and his crew in 1861. <p> If such tenuous linkages disgruntle users, they are simple to delete. Users can easily create new articles, edit existing ones, or create links among articles. <p> The feature called "Picture Album" contains approximately one thousand photos, drawings, paintings, and cartoons, gathered from libraries and historical sites around the country. In bitmap format, the photos can transfer without difficulty to a presentation program such as Power-

Point. The photos form the basis for one hundred or so narrated slide shows. These cover mainly political events and the lives of presidents, but they include overviews of Native American cultures, European exploration and colonization, transportation development, and territorial expansion. <p> Because they have so many entries, the Source Book and Picture Album can be tricky to navigate. Each time one closes a picture in the Picture Album, one ends up at the main menu, which makes scanning through photos laborious. <p> The "Map Studio" function builds upon earlier Parsons programs that colleagues in my department have used with success for a while. The CD comes with 93 maps, whose subjects range from native cultural areas, to the birthplaces of reformers, writers, and inventors, exploration routes, and Civil War campaigns. There are numerous names of and icons for places, persons, and events on the maps, each of which links to an article. Also, one can zoom in and out, add places and icons with their own links or otherwise modify the maps or create new ones. The menu bar at the top also provides links to relevant slide shows, articles, and documents. The clipboard function of Windows is the quickest of several devices for exporting the maps into PowerPoint and other programs. <p> Also on the main menu are a "Finder," an index that ties together the diverse materials on the CD-ROM, and a "Time Trek," which provides timelines for eight periods from "Exploration" through "Reconstruction." Each timeline highlights a couple of dozen links to articles, maps, and documents. By clicking a year on the timeline, one calls up a list of every article mentioning that year, although here, too, connections can be tenuous. For example, John Quincy Adams, dead since 1848, leads the list for 1877, because a volume of his posthumous memoirs happened to appear then. <p> There are also a number of minor features on the menu. The best of these are the "5Ws Game," a challenging multiple choice quiz with "hints" that link to relevant articles, and a "Song Book," which almost merits the price of the CD itself. Here Parsons has compiled selections of Revolutionary and Civil War era songs from albums by folksingers Linda Russell and Bobby Horton. Russell's Revolutionary songs range from the bawdy to the melancholy. The fact that many derive from British and Irish ballads provides perhaps the most effective cultural history lesson. In addition to Union and Confederate patriotic songs, Horton offers the sentimental favorite, "Weeping Sad and Lonely," a powerful lesson on the war's cultural experience. Horton also offers some lesser-known Confederate songs that capture the mindset of Southern recruits, including the mournful and explicit, "Battle of Shiloh Hill," by a Texas in-

fantryman named M.B. Smith. Based on an Irish tune, Innes Randolph's sullen, "Oh, I'm a Good Old Rebel," will help students feel what Reconstruction was up against: "Oh I'm a good old rebel/Now that's just what I am./For this fair land of freedom/I do not care a damn./...I hates the Constitution, this Great Republic, too./I hates the Freedman's Bureau in uniforms of Blue./...I won't be reconstructed/and I don't care a damn." <p> Of the remaining features on the CD-ROM, the "Hall of Presidents" may strike the cynical academic as a concession to tackiness in what, overall, is a tasteful entry in a garish medium. As one scrolls through a portrait gallery, a solemn voice pronounces the name with a nickname culled from somewhere, as in "Franklin Pierce: Handsome Frank." Clicking the portrait leads to a biography and slide show, a comparative chart that mixes useful background information with mere personal data, and an election map with linked slide show. The editors should know that cartoonist Thomas Nast created the donkey and elephant symbols for the major parties during Reconstruction; therefore, they make an anachronistic opening slide for the "Height of Democracy" election slide shows, which begin with 1789, four decades before the founding of the Democratic Party and over six before the founding of the Republicans. <p> Parsons terms the "3D Gallery" a "bonus" feature, but users may conclude that this collection of stereoscopic pictures—viewable with enclosed 3D glasses or by a staring technique that the manual euphemistically calls "free viewing"—is really a gimmick. The six films in the "Movie Theater" are impressive visually but their narrations are sketchy. They add little that the slide shows do not do better. <p> It is common for college history instructors to work themselves towards apoplexy over shortcomings in the visual presentations and the texts of teaching materials such as this. While such carping can be sanctimonious, the defects of this mostly praiseworthy CD-ROM demonstrate why the developers of multimedia materials would benefit from closer working relations with academic historians, and <cite>vice-versa</cite>. With better cooperation, irksome errors in the slide shows could be avoided, for example misplaced maps and cartoons or out-of-context photos, such as photos of slaves in obvious mid-nineteenth-century situations to illustrate discussions of the eighteenth century. To a history professor, the 1875 closing date seems based on no good reason. Why not 1876, to include the Centennial, or 1877, to mark the end of Reconstruction? <p> There are few outright errors of fact in the textual portions of <cite>American History Explorer</cite>, but there are plenty of gross oversimplifications that might as well be errors of fact.

The Sectional Conflict, the Civil War, and Reconstruction have long been the Comstock Lode of historical oversimplification, and this CD gives in to the temptation to mine that vein. The editors do stress in several places that this pivotal cataclysm in United States history had many dimensions and is difficult to explain clearly. Nevertheless, in articles and spoken narratives, the editors insist on framing the turmoil in terms of clear-cut dichotomies that stop thought more than stimulate it: abolitionist versus slaveholder, “economic” versus “moral” causes of conflict [even though a central tenet of “free labor” ideology was that economic systems are moral systems], a “stern” Reconstruction versus a lenient one, and so on. <p> In my own courses, I usually feel pretty successful in encouraging students to think about the Sectional Conflict in a multi-dimensional way, but I find it harder to counter the tendency to see the Revolution as a melodramatic struggle between liberty and tyranny. For that reason, the CD’s treatment of the troubles of the British Empire induced my fit of professorial apoplexy. From virtually start to finish, the CD-ROM waters down the quarrel that resulted in the Revolution. It thus undersells the drama, sadness, and even the heroism and brilliance of this event. Why cannot the makers of these products see that even though it is all right for students to end up on the side of the Patriots, we do not want them to start there? Students must have a chance to understand that the British government’s treatment of the colonies had a logic to it. However overbearing and incompetent post-1763 colonial policy could be, the authorities in London were seeking solutions to widely perceived problems. Among the colonists, to take a Loyalist position or to struggle to remain neutral must come through as reasonable things to do, based upon one’s outlook and social background. A teacher of the Revolution wants the thinking and feelings of students to evolve, as the thinking and sentiments of participants evolved through an unpredictable sequence of events. <p> To give a relatively small example, the narrator concludes the slide show labeled “Colonization: Economy,” with these words: “Colonists began building their own ships and trading. England responded by imposing the Navigation Acts to maintain control of the colonies. These acts, along with other harsh measures, eventually led to the American Revolution.” Now, three-fourths of the work in teaching the Revolution consists in helping students to realize that the colonists had long perceived measures such as the Navigation Acts as beneficial, or at least as legitimate and tolerable. How, then, did such measures come to seem oppressive? With luck, this conundrum will start students down the twisting road of “actual” versus “virtual” representation, “Real Whig” and “republi-

can” ideologies, social and cultural changes within the colonies, economic disruption fueled by the French and Indian War, and fluctuations in British politics and imperial policy. If one starts out by labeling the Navigation Acts “harsh,” then the students will never follow the colonists along their twisting road. <p> Parsons repeatedly misses opportunities to draw attention to imaginative challenges and intellectual puzzles evoked by a personality or event, even though such challenges and puzzles may count as the primary benefit of historical study for most lower-level college students. The CD points out the shaping influence of religion in colonial North America, but it fails to ask students to try to feel what various colonists believed. Except for the Mormons, religion largely disappears after the colonial period, which makes the nineteenth-century United States incomprehensible. The CD does state that churches split over slavery, but it does not press students to understand the theological basis for abolitionism and other antebellum reform movements. <p> In general, the CD-ROM treats social, women’s, and economic history as more information to master, rather than alternative approaches to understanding how societies work and change. Even in such standard areas as presidential politics, obvious intellectual challenges are overlooked. It barely touches upon the foreign and domestic dilemmas that faced George Washington as president. Jefferson appears as someone whose ideas were influential, but what those ideas were and why people were persuaded by them remain nebulous. Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren take the stage without any concerted effort to explain the developments in popular politics and party organization that coalesced into Jacksonian democracy. <p> In sum, Parsons intended better, but <cite>American History Explorer</cite> does not do enough to subvert the download-the-answer way that many students are using multimedia materials and web sites. If such products are indeed to help students explore history, rather than warm it over, they have to contain within themselves the sensation of open-endedness, of loose ends everywhere. At the least, Parsons should attach bibliographies for further research to each major and many minor topics. At present, one must hunt for the bibliography, which contains only the specific sources that the editors drew upon in compiling the CD. The encouragement that bibliographies provide to search beyond what is at hand might help turn <cite>American History Explorer</cite> into more of a support for study, rather than a shortcut for avoiding it. There are many well-planned, practical features to this product, and it reveals an infectious enthusiasm for history on the part of its editors. It is a shame, therefore, to have to qualify one’s recommendation of it.

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