

# H-Net Reviews

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*Discovering American History on CD-ROM.* Prentice-Hall.

Reviewed by J. Kelly Robison

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As anyone who has purchased an American history CD-ROM off of the shelf knows, these CDs are high on glitz and low on substance. The standard American history CD is awkward to navigate, contains much visual (usually inferior) data, and only briefly provides a narrative of the history. Some do contain information such as primary documents, but these inclusions are rare and fail to tie the document into the larger historical context. *Discovering American History on CD-ROM* breaks away from this tradition of mediocrity. Although the CD does have its share of glitz, its ease of use and wealth of substance makes it the leader of the American-history-textbook-on-CD realm. As with most CD-ROMs, the technology grabs one's attention first. On both the Mac and PC (running Windows95) the CD automatically runs, displaying a window that asks whether the user would like to install the icon for the disk or run the CD without installing small files to the hard disk. This option is a nice touch. With most CDs, this is not an option and one's hard disk usually becomes cluttered with these small files. In addition, the main window is a wonderfully uncluttered graphic divided into four sections: each section corresponds to a particular era in American history. Once a time frame is chosen, another window comes up with another set of options that break the time frame down into discrete segments. In the first time-frame module, for example, the user is given the choice of eight chapters. This first time-frame module encompasses the period from the Pre-Colonial to 1800. The chapters in the first module cover the major topics within colonial American history, including sections on the Spanish Conquest of the Americas, the development of slavery, and the coming of the War of Independence. Another nice feature is the ability of the user to jump from one time-frame module to another with a simple click of the mouse since buttons for each are located in the upper right-hand corner.

Once inside each chapter, the user is given several options. The option that first catches one's eye is the multimedia overview. This option is exactly what it claims to be, a brief narrative overview of the history of that particular topic spiced with images (most of which are from the time period) and a voice-over that speaks the text written on the screen. The voice-over seems redundant considering that the text is on the screen. This is one piece of glitz that must have taken hold of the publisher's imagination and not let go, despite the obvious irrelevancy of the voice. The images, however, nicely illustrate the text and can be saved to file. Located just underneath the multimedia overview button is the chapter outline button. When pressed, this button takes the user to a white-page with text that is the real heart and meat of the CD. Other American history CDs have little depth, but the text within the chapter outlines section is a textbook narrative. Beginning with a chapter introduction, the narrative is again broken down into segments. Through a series of hot-links, the reader can jump from one topic to another regardless of chronological order although the links are definitely listed in chronological order. Back at the main chapter window, the user has the option of finding a topic under the chapter topic index and can jump from the index to the section in the chapter outline that contains that topic. Also on the chapter screen are buttons that link to a brief chronology of the main events within the time period and fairly basic maps that illustrate the events. The maps are of the same caliber as those instructors receive with their course packs. One could wish for a little more spice and glitz in that regard. One of the most interesting features (from the point of view of an instructor) are the review areas. Two buttons lead to objective questions and essay questions. The essay questions are similar to those found in Instructor's Resource manuals, but within the essay question page is a hot link to the text section pertaining to that

question for review. The other hot link takes the user to WordPad (in Windows) so that the user can actually write out and print a response to the question. The objective questions are a series of multiple choice and true/false questions of varying degrees of difficulty. Some are absurdly simple (who wrote the Declaration of Independence) while others require some significant knowledge of the facts. Again, a nice touch here is the inclusion of a scoring mechanism. The quiz-taker finds out at the end of the quiz the percentage of correctly answered questions and the number of correctly and incorrectly answered questions. The scoring section also includes a list of which questions were answered correctly or not with the incorrect questions highlighted in red. For a student studying for a quiz or objective test, this chapter quiz would be helpful. <p> The history contained within the CD is as complete as any general American history textbook on a survey instructor's bookshelf. It is also as accurate. One example comes from the first chapter of the CD. Unlike a great many US History textbooks, <cite>Discovering American History</cite> examines in wonderful detail the Americas before the arrival of Europeans. For an instructor specializing in Native American history, this addition can only be a plus. When the first chapter is opened, the reader is treated to a discussion of Cahokia, a Mississippian city near present-day St. Louis. The depth of discussion is eminently suitable to a survey class, neither too cursory nor too in-depth. One could wish that the author of this particular piece had included some discussion of the theories that explain the demise of Cahokia, but generally the piece is well-done. The chapter continues with explanations of mi-

gration from Asia via the Beringia and big-game hunting through to the development of agriculture in southern Mexico and its spread throughout the American continents. The "great civilizations" of the Maya, Anasazi are also discussed, again at a level that is appropriate for an introductory survey class. The chapter ends with a view of life in North America prior to the arrival of Europeans and a short conclusion that states that, "North America was not a 'virgin' continent, as so many of the Europeans believed." The other chapters of this CD are on par with the initial chapter. They are in-depth, but not so much so that students would get bogged-down in the reading. In terms of the history presented in this work, it is on the same level as the best of American History survey textbooks and better than the majority. <p> The usefulness of an American history textbook on CD-ROM is a debatable point. While most American history CDs are useless as a substitute for a textbook, <cite>Discovering American History on CD-ROM</cite> certainly could be used in place of a textbook. However, there is nothing within the text of the CD that cannot be found in the print versions of textbooks, often with less time involved in finding the information. The multimedia overview is a nice touch, but really not helpful for college-level applications. The overviews are a bit too much for elementary school students and would probably bore a high school student. The real strength of the CD, even for or perhaps especially for college students at the survey level, is the practice quizzes. While printed material will probably remain the format of choice for several years to come, if an instructor wanted to save trees by assigning a CD-ROM history textbook, this would be the one to use.

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