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Author: James B.M. Schick
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Main content

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A decade ago ancillary CDs were in. Gotta have one to stay with the pack, print publishers believed. The CDs they sponsored were both predictable (the text plus: THE ENDURING VISION (1)) and unique (short multimedia essays and learning activities: AMERICAN IMPRESSIONS (2)). Discovering that many historians were unready -- pedagogically and/or technologically -- to adopt this approach and that the Internet era had dawned, they abruptly pulled the plug in favor of corporate websites that were certain to boldface the black of the bottom line. That didn't happen either.

Within the last year a new approach has emerged. Unless the company has a password-protected interactive website (as "The History Place" (3)) and an imaginative CD (study guide plus other activities, a learning-styles survey, books such as Uncle Tom's Cabin, a map workbook, or After the Fact research-writing experiences, for example (4)), its products risk consignment to an uncomfortable ring of the Inferno. Fast on the heels of this development, online texts have arrived, with mainstream print publishers now beginning to explore an alternative being pioneered by such firms as Digital Learning Interactive. (5)

Before they break out the champagne, those of us now in the market for online services or who may soon be so (willingly or not) should clearly define for publishers the conditions and features necessary to secure adoptions. The following discussion resulted from an intensive exploration of online resources as diverse as publisher's online demos, pay-for-content sites, and other tourist traps dotting the "information superhighway." (6)

* Think big.

It is already apparent that the two models prevailing in the CD era, add-a-bit or new-but-brief, have been carried over to the Web Era. McGraw-Hill describes its "PowerWeb" history site as "a premium source for information that provides students with current history articles, curriculum-based materials, weekly updates with assessment, informative and timely world news, refereed Web links, research tools, student study tools, interactive exercises, information about career choices, and the Northern Lights search engine." (7) In fact, "the PowerWeb series is an online delivery of the Annual Editions series" combining the two-volume world and U.S. history titles into somewhat shorter versions on the website, plus news items. (8) "The History Place" is a rich and thoughtful collection of documents, maps, images, and learning activities, but these online experiences have intentionally been kept short.

Why not publish an online text written entirely for an online audience from the ground up? A new medium should beget a new conceptualization of how a text should look and work.

Why not begin by telling developers of online ancillary materials that their only responsibilities are to teach the material and to set off an explosion in students' minds? No arbitrary length limits. No unreasonable budget constraints for securing the rights to the necessary materials, whether words, maps, still images, (9) sounds, or visual resources. Just as the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center (PARC) changed the face of computing, task your design team with producing an online textbook worthy of the twenty-first century.

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