

Time Travel to the 18th Century: Life In New World Settlements
[CD-ROM], produced by Folkus Atlantic, Sydney, NS, 1996

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CD-ROM Review

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Time Travel to the 18th Century: Life In New World Settlements [CD-ROM], produced by Folkus Atlantic, Sydney, NS, 1996.

Fiction/non-fiction, textbook/monograph, university or high-school text—notwithstanding the occasional genre-blurring experiment, deliberate spoof, or indeed the conventional dictum about covers—we usually know where we stand before cracking open a book. But compared to the highly coded and segmented terrain of book publishing, especially in its academic guise, the world of CD-ROM releases is as yet free-floating. In retrospect, I might have treated the title of the CD-ROM under review (*Time Travel To The 18th Century*), and the announced presence of a pirate game (which my two pre-school children, and therefore I, enjoyed) as clearer hints than I did. But otherwise, neither cover nor contents explicitly declares whom the CD hopes to introduce to the world of 18th-century new-world settlers. That (junior?) high-school history classes are best suited for this ‘journey’ to colonial North America, I tentatively gathered instead from the text’s generality, the nature of the proposed ‘quizzes’, and indeed the credits identifying the students selected to test the CD-ROM. The medium is still new enough, however, that it is perhaps not inappropriate for a scholarly journal to be reviewing a tool apparently pitched mainly at high-school students: pioneering producers have yet to dissect fully each others’ efforts, and still struggle, it seems, to find the right balance between technical sophistication and substance, narrative flow and image contextualization, in a world of scarce funding. And not surprisingly, *Time Travel’s* flaws closely resemble those signaled by Barry Moody in a related CD-ROM review: they seem to fall under the rubric of ‘common traps’, which might usefully be flagged as such, and which arise regardless of the targeted audience.¹

The weak integration of image and text frustrates the user throughout. The producers of *Time Travel*, Joan Weeks and Dr. Richard MacKinnon, chose a heavily researched topic that in principle lends itself neatly to visual presentation: a portrait of everyday life in 18th-century north-american colonial settlements. The generally thoughtful and accurate text tries to sample widely from the social history of New France, Newfoundland, and British North America both before and after the American Revolution. In the end, however, most of the images are drawn from the historical sites of Louisbourg and Colonial Williamsburg. This imbalance of scope is both a symptom and a cause of the fact that rarely do words, narrated or written, refer directly to the still pictures or video clips. Where aspects of material culture are touched upon, the ‘fit’ is close enough that explicit references are not so missed. Thus the sections on differences in housing, clothing, and food across social classes give the richest sense of the medium’s potential. With the exception of an effective final section on the sources of historical knowledge, *Time Travel* is weakest when it takes on

more abstract topics: when moving pictures of actor-aristocrats or artisans flit by without comment, and as we strain to hear their virtually inaudible utterances, we are left to wonder: is this Louisbourg? is this Williamsburg? Does it matter? In another clip, we wonder about the solitary cloaked figure kneeling before an altar. Who is he? What part of the liturgy are we hearing? Would it always have been sung? By whom? Can ‘multi-culturally-secular’ junior-high-school students really be expected to distinguish between the interior of an 18th-century Catholic chapel at Louisbourg and an Anglo-American Protestant church? Rather than reinforce the commentary, the poorly identified images distract (perhaps nowhere more so than in the sketchy sections on native people), because they raise a parallel stream of unanswered questions. The net effect of this amalgam of text, ‘picture shows’ and choppy video clips is neither a well-illustrated lesson in social history, nor a coherent and comparative virtual tour of Louisbourg and Williamsburg, either of which would have been more satisfying.

As hinted above, production standards are far from perfect. The CD does contain a clear structure that is easy to navigate. A tree diagram, appearing inside the CD-ROM jacket, announces six main headings (‘A new world’, ‘institutions’, ‘material life’, ‘working life’, ‘social life’ and ‘how do we know’) and thus orients the user from the outset. Below this tidy surface, however, a few too many rough edges marr the user’s experience: unformatted text, missing words, consecutively-repeated paragraphs, and so on. The same still pictures appear over and over under different sub-headings; sound and image are patchy in the video portions, though the absence of voice-over, or its platitudinous nature are just as frustrating. Some unfortunate factual errors were also not weeded out: the Mississauga are described as ‘Algonquins’, rather than as Algonquian-speakers, or as people of Ojibwa origin. The Louisbourg mutiny occurs here in 1774 rather than in 1744; Canadian *censitaires* (referred to imprecisely as *habitants*), who own property subject to seigneurial dues, are unhelpfully described as ‘tenants’ who can ‘sell their leases’. Students returning from their travels to the 18th century, meanwhile, will be baffled by a quiz asking for a time line of French-English treaties between 1800 and 1900.

For brave CD-ROM producers such as those at Folkus Atlantic, mopping up sloppy bits should be the easy part. Writing words that aggressively direct skittish eyes to selected parts of carefully chosen and identified images is clearly the greater, but worthwhile challenge.

Note:

1. Multimedia Review of Fortress of Louisbourg [CD ROM], produced by Fitzgerald Studio, Sydney, N.S., 1995 in Canadian Historical Review, 77(3) (September 1996), 466–67.