

CD-ROM REVIEW

New Forms of Multimedia Expression in Exploring the LOST MAYA CD-ROM

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Exploring the LOST MAYA is the second¹ in a series of CD-ROM reference works on the world's ancient civilizations from Sumeria², the San Francisco based multimedia publisher. This volume covers the Maya world and civilization of Belize, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico, spanning the period from 2000 BC to 1700 AD and linking it to the present situation by showing the current state of development and reconstruction.



The title presents historical sites, exploring the evolution, culture and demise of the ancient Mayan people. Interactive maps are gateways to the site details, im-

- 1 Preceded by the award winning **Exploring Ancient Cities** - an exploration of four ancient civilizations: Petra, Pompeii, Teotihuacán and four of Crete's Bronze Age palaces - all images, text and movies being exportable and reusable for non-commercial applications.
- 2 **Sumeria** - Bryant Street, Suit 3D, San Francisco, CA 94107, USA, Tel. 415.904.0800, Fax. 415.904.0888

age index, travel information, Quick Time VR site panoramas, historical narrative texts³ and historical photos. The user, exploring the Lost Maya, is provided with material in previously unimaginable abundance, and is given considerable control in handling the content. Just as feelings have been captured adequately in literature and in film, **Exploring the LOST MAYA** shows that they will be conveyed by interactive multimedia products in near future. **Exploring the LOST MAYA** is, apart from everything else, a new form of communication.

The collection of information encompasses a quantity and variety that traditional information media could hardly manage:

- 700 images of 37 sites in four countries;



3 By **Robert J. Sharer**, Professor of Anthropology and curator of the American Section of the University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania, the editor of the Fifth Edition of the *Ancient Maya* (1994), Stanford University Press.

- 95 events along a timeline starting with the appearance of villages in 2000 BC and ending with the fall of Tayasal - the last Maya capital in 1700 AD;
- video, narrated and written text on Temple Construction, Calendars & Astrology, Writing Systems and Ritual Life including kingship, bloodletting, sacrifice, ballgame, trade and burial;
- 148 images of material culture objects;
- movies and 93 slides on early explorers as Stephen & Catherwood or Alfred Maudslay.

One of the reviewers, I asked for comments, admitted that he valued being able to choose what was personally important, move much more easily, quickly and focused using the CD than any comparably large maze of data involving text, pictures, voice and video.

The CD structure, imposing connections that arouse specific associations and experiences, turned out to be more accessible than a book. The **accessibility of the structure** is based upon the balanced conceptual representation.⁴ The core of this conceptual



representation - **Contents** - is formed of six coordinated image and text bars (navigation buttons) combined in a way which builds a flexible classification judged to be consistent

4 The classificatory, analytical and symbolical processes.

members of the same class. The classification processes operates at all the levels of the resource and relates pieces of content to each other in terms of 'a kind of' or 'part-whole', modelling structured, goal oriented exploration. A click on **Maps** displays an interactive map with a number of hot sites, a click on a selected site, brings forward a site map with several hot buildings, a click on the building reveals a zoomed image with a text explanation. Each



map incorporates the six image and text bars:

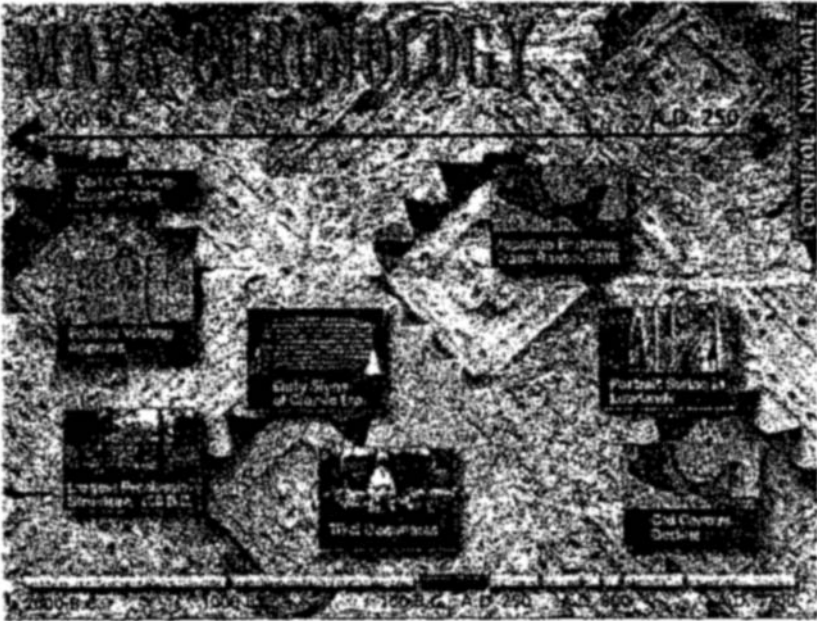
Image Index, Slide Show, Getting There, Panorama, History & Description, and Historical Photos.

The **Site Index** (below) indexes sites both spatially and alphabetically.



Chronology is an analytical timeline. **Ancient Culture** refers to writing, ritual and cosmology. **Material Culture** classifies artefacts. The **Early**

Explorers chapter presents photos and movies from the nineteenth century.



The reader may notice that this structure does not permit rapid to a set destination. After each vertical step, there is a horizontal, choice. The developers managed to provide a model for exploration built on consistent options which helps the user to overcome the feeling of being abandoned or lost, a feeling often experienced by CD-ROM adventurers.

The special attention awarded to the navigation rules is reflected in the fact that the navigation buttons are mirrored by a pull-out menu or a sliding bar, permanently on the right of the screen, inviting to action, under the title: **NAVIGATE**. The only objection that might arise is that in some situations, a click on the background takes the user back while in others it does not.

The strength of **Exploring the LOST MAYA** comes from the way in which it succeeds in transmitting the feeling that the Maya world is the land where man, nature and time have converged for ever. While it is meant to be a documentation medium, it has an

effectiveness all of its own in presenting existing material using an attractive and new manner of presentation.



The **LOST MAYA** land becomes a virtual playful context where the parameters of interaction become known through the



process of playing with the system building up both fictional and documentary aspects.

This computer controlled resource becomes a site for investigation where the image offers an encompassing view of a subject

enacted through participation. It is precisely as a place where passivity of observation is superseded by the necessity of action that one can grasp a new understanding form, which is both generative and informative. A new understanding of subjectivity appears as well, one that accounts for both the image and the behaviour it initiates. In coupling the image with its performance, enriched by a conversation and a dialogue structure, the act of exploration implicates more than it reproduces. Within the flow of images, there is a set of possibilities, some controllable, some reorganizable in a subjective manner.

Reorganization patterns reuse the material in a stimulating way building new contexts. The same image, for example, can be found in different contexts: in the introduction, during the spatial investigation (MAPS), under the timeline procedures (CHRONOLOGY) or among the artefacts of sites and collections (MATERIAL CULTURE). Being integrated in new contexts, the repetitions have the effect of creating familiarity rather than redundancy.

Ultimately, the **LOST MAYA** CD-ROM achieves this multimedia expression quality through the richness and variety of



stylistic means. It contains films, slide-shows, virtual reality scenes, 3-dimensional views, interactive maps, graphic animation, simulation, composed images, photographs, drawings, stories, facts, tutorials, nature, artefacts, archa-

isms, neologisms, music, sounds of nature, function and navigation buttons, linearity, interactivity, and a complex mix of oral, written and hyper-texts.

In my enthusiasm to grasp the multimedia aspects, I should not forget to mention however that there is still a long way to go. It is

obvious that the richness of the content engaged the developers' attention. Some of my reviewers pointed out that there is a discrepancy between the very careful treatment of some parts and



visible haste in others. Probably that is why the labels are very often placed as if there was a time limit. Watching the slide shows, one is very much impressed by their coherence and the interac-

tive or linear choice offered to the user, but it is hard not to notice the visually intrusive labels. There was also some graphic tension between background and foreground information. One kept looking for signals such as those on the site maps when exploring interactive zones but no change occurs.



The GETTING THERE section is useful but not very inviting. I wondered if the information provided or the maps offered would be helpful if I was really going there, because after having the chance to explore the LOST MAYA

on disc, I definitely wanted to visit in person. Similarly, my reviewers, when exploring the ANCIENT CULTURE section, asked for more information, more levels, and more interaction, which suggests a limitation even in this stimulating and educational resource.

One final remark. One of my users wanted to compare historical photos with current ones so I was delighted to be able to point

out the generous facility offered by the publisher which allows users to **Print Screen**, **Export Text**, **Export Photo** and **Export Movie**, using a sliding **CONTROLS** bar (always present on the screen) which enabled my user to take this comparison as far as he wished.



Those who are interested in additional information, might find useful to address the Mesoamerican WWW Page presenting extensively resources, news & lists, software, news & info, pictures, Precolumbian link page. **Exploring the LOST MAYA** is available on the Internet CD-ROM shop, priced at \$30.98.