

# A multimedia history of Japan from the aizu point of view

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## Introduction

We are currently developing educational software (courseware) on Japanese history, focusing on the Aizu region of north central Japan. Portions of the Aizu History Project are available on Worldwide Web (<http://www.u-aizu.ac.jp/~jan/ah/hdr.html>). While the materials are designed primarily for an English-speaking university audience, students at the University of Aizu are working on a Japanese-language version of the project. The hypermedia techniques developed in this project can also be used to produce teaching materials in other humanities and social science disciplines.

## Multimedia, Hypertext, and the Teaching of History

As a university teacher of history, I have encountered two frustrating aspects of the traditional text-lecture method of teaching. First, students come to the class with a variety of abilities, interests, and educational backgrounds, making it difficult for a teacher to stimulate the best students without losing the slower ones. Second, the text-lecture method imposes a linear mode of presentation that discourages “digressions” from a central chronological pattern, thus making it difficult to explore topics that might best be considered asynchronously.

Multimedia teaching materials, however, can help to solve both problems. Hypertext permits the individual student to select an appropriate level of instruction for him or herself, and the non-linear nature of hyperlinked text permits multiple organizational structures that a student can pursue at will. For example, she may choose to take a strictly chronological approach, examining all topics available within a given time period before she proceeds to the next period; or she may opt for a study of, say, gender issues that crosses back and forth from one period to another.

One additional advantage of multimedia is the

ease with which visual and aural materials can be incorporated into text. The written word is a remarkably efficient means for communicating abstract concepts and complicated historical relationships, but it may not be the best means for transmitting a sense of the past as people lived it. To accomplish that aim, it is necessary to use pictures, film clips, and audio recordings that show the past rather than simply telling about it. Of course, audiovisual materials have been used in the classroom for many years. Yet they require a passive audience and – like lectures – impose a linear pattern of learning, far more in fact than does text. Actually, the way in which many readers approach text – using the table of contents and the index to find items of interest, or flipping to the conclusion before reading the arguments that lead to it – suggests that linear learning patterns may in fact be unnatural ones that suit the convenience of the teacher rather than the learner. However, computer techniques now available enable students to explore ready-made environments more or less freely. Using hypertext, students can pursue questions on their own rather than following a script designed by a teacher or textbook author.

As historical research moves beyond a documents-only approach to use archaeological findings and oral testimony as primary sources, history teaching demands that students be able to examine these sources rather than just to read about them. Although it is difficult for students to see or to handle an artifact such as a prehistoric burial jar, virtual reality techniques allow them to examine such artifacts from several angles, to “zoom” onto features of interest, and even to look inside and examine the skeletal remains and grave goods interred there. From that point the student can pursue more difficult conceptual questions such as the social context in which burial practices occurred, or the information on social organization and religious belief that historians can obtain from studying such practices. Computer multimedia techniques can pull a student into an environment that replicates a particular time and place in the past; virtual reality can allow students to participate in a simulation of history; and hypertext can stimulate students’ imagination and creativity by letting them design their own history course rather than following a course imposed by others.

## Problems to consider

Using hypertext and hypermedia to teach history has some potential dangers. Students – and even courseware developers – may be tempted to ignore complex matters in favor of media glitz. In addition, the free-exploration methods promoted by hypermedia may result in narrow or one-sided knowledge on the part of an undisciplined student, who may learn everything

about swordsmanship but nothing about landholding structures. If used as a supplement to normal classroom teaching, however, computer-based free-exploration methods can make the student an active and thus more interested participant in the learning process. If the courseware includes in-depth explorations of conceptual issues, even a casual Websurfer may be lured into a serious exploration of history.

Further advantages – and perhaps some problems – derive from using the Internet as a platform for multimedia teaching materials. On the Internet, one may freely tap the work of others through suitable hyperlinks. Students can find related materials on their own through Internet search engines. The freedom and openness of the Internet, however, has aroused serious concerns among humanities professionals, and some have called for measures to ensure quality control. I would argue that instead of instituting such measures, which could easily result in censorship, we all work harder to teach our students standards for judging accuracy and interpretive soundness in historical work.

### **Contents of the project – history from the local perspective**

The free-form exploration of materials promoted by hypertext methodology lends itself to history that begins from the particular and leads to broad synthesis and comparative analysis. One example of such an approach is history that begins with a local perspective. As our project demonstrates, the history of a particular region can be used to illuminate the history of an entire society.

Most English-language texts present Japanese history from the viewpoint of the central power structure. In geographical terms, students learn about the capital regions of Kyoto or Tokyo, but little about provincial regions. Yet these regions made important contributions to the development of Japan as a whole; and viewing Japanese history from the viewpoint of the people who lived in such areas can provide beginning students of Japanese history with a very different picture than the one to which they are usually introduced. Moreover, it could be argued that in the past, a rural region such as Aizu was more typical of Japan as a whole than were capital cities. Using the Aizu viewpoint, therefore, can provide fresh perspectives on social and political developments throughout Japanese history.

Although our project focuses on Aizu, it does not consider the region in isolation but rather, as part of the Tohoku (northern) region, which has been generally neglected in Japanese history; and as part of the developing nation of Japan. Thus the project can provide valuable insights into the connection between center and periphery in such areas

as political and economic development and the spread of religious movements.

Using hypertext and multimedia to promote free form exploration of text and visual materials, we have begun our project by developing a module on Buddhism in the Aizu region. The module, which we will demonstrate as part of our presentation, includes not only text and photographs but also a three-dimensional model of the Golden Hall at Enichiji, a no-longer extant temple constructed early in the Heian period (794-1185). Using modeling and rendering software, we reconstructed the building from archaeological findings. With the use of animation software, the temple doors open and the building “flies” toward the viewer, allowing him/her to explore its interior architecture. We are designing a viewer-directed walkthrough of this model using VRML. Also under development is a three-dimensional model of an eighteenth-century temple with a double-helical interior ramp.

### **Navigating the courseware**

The student can begin by choosing an initial topic from a menu. The menu suggests a learning path but the student may use hyperlinks to explore the courseware according to his/her own interests. A student might follow a path such as this: Choosing the topic entitled “Heian Buddhism”, she then selects the subtopic “Enichiji”. By following appropriate hyperlinks she can obtain a summary of Enichiji’s history from its founding in the ninth century; photographs of the temple’s remains; a reproduction and discussion of a medieval painting of the temple complex; and the three-dimensional model of the Golden Hall discussed above. In addition to reading the text and examining the photographs, students can “walk” through the model, and will soon be able to select portions of the painting for an enlarged view and more detailed discussion of particular features. The text will also contain hyperlinks to information on Enichiji’s sister temple Shojoji (whose main images have just been designated National Treasures), and to the Buddhist monk Tokuichi, credited with the founding of both temples. Thus the student can begin with Enichiji and study Heian Buddhism in the Aizu region in detail.

Supposing, however, the student chooses to go in another direction: from Enichiji to a broader consideration of Buddhism in the Heian period. The Enichiji text will also contain a link to a discussion of mountain worship, with which the temple had strong connections. Or, the student may proceed from the text on Tokuichi to a discussion of his rivalry with Saicho, the founder of the Japanese Tendai school, and from there to a survey of Tendai and Tokuichi’s Hosso school, and then to a discussion of inter-sect and inter-temple rela-

tionships and rivalries at various points in Japanese history. Other social and political issues may be explored as well: for example, a section on the agricultural estates that supported Enichiji leads to a general discussion of the medieval estate system, not only in the Aizu region but throughout Japan. In other words, the student can pursue narrow or broad topics to whatever depth she chooses.

### **Using the courseware**

The courseware has not yet been tried in a class in Japanese history, but it should provide useful material for class discussions or term papers. Since students in a class will be pursuing somewhat different topics, depending on their interests, they can share knowledge with and teach one another. While a teacher can never be sure how far an individual student will pursue a particular topic, the information presented in this courseware should lead naturally to new questions that are only minimally related to the topic with which the student began. Since Buddhist institutions in pre-modern Japan were political as well as religious institutions, a student following the example presented above could examine changing configurations of political power in the Aizu region – and this, of course, could easily lead to similar issues in modern history.

At the University of Aizu, moreover, we used the courseware in another way: to teach students how to prepare humanities-related materials for the Internet. The students chose topics that interested them, gathered written materials and photographs, and interviewed local experts. In addition to technical problems of creating a Web page, the students had to consider copyright problems, appropriate hyperlinks to other sites, and logical methods of introducing historical materials. The students are all computer science majors, and pursuits such as these have given them some new ideas on how they might use their expertise in the future.