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PUBLISHERS' WEB SITES: MCGRAW-HILL'S HUMAN HISTORY

1. Overview: Criteria

It seems that Santa put a little devilment in my stocking this year. Or maybe it's the fact that my birthday is on Christmas day that sparks a sense of playfulness. In any case, over the Christmas break, I looked at publishers' web sites. These are the sites that major publishers are putting up to tie in with their flagship history texts as add-ons and as a means to advertise their wares. No print publisher worth its salt is without a web site these days. What prompted this particular list offering was the advertisement in the most recent Perspectives, announcing the "Human History Project (H2P)," a joint venture by McGraw-Hill and Fourth Dimension Interactive. The copy in the ad went on to say that the site was "[a] web-based information site providing an electronic complement to McGraw-Hill's history textbooks" and ended with the tag, "This is not just another new web site." (For those who want to ride along the address is:

<http://www.h2p.4di.dames.com>

I must confess that my first thought was, "Good, I am gratified that McGraw-Hill is mounting a human history site." To do otherwise would represent a radical historiographical departure. What other kind of history might there be?" Immediately, the needle rose on the Patented Pre-tentiousness Meter. I was interested also in the fact that a publisher was giving equal billing to the developer, a firm called Fourth Dimension. Where were the historians? But my interest was piqued. But before I went on-line, I jotted down my developing criteria for a useful textbook tie-in web site. Let me emphasize the word "developing." I invite others to join in and add to, critique, or modify the "criteria-in-progress."

Content/Information Design First, the content should carry the site, and the content should be useful for me as teacher and for my students as learners. The content should, therefore, provide for self-directed activities for students, and activities that depend on the instructor. In addition, the content should capitalize on the capabilities of the digital distribution. In other words, its content should cover the range of multimedia materials and include images, digital video, maps, and charts—not simply text. But like text, other media types should not simply be illustrations on the order of "This is picture of George Washington" and "This is a digital movie of Richard Nixon's resignation speech." Images and so forth should be conducive to the same analytic examination that historians bring to bear on text sources. The content should be of different lengths and represent various levels of difficulty—things suitable for discussion and things appropriate for writing exercises. The documents, sources, or whatever the publisher wishes to call them should also be in a format that will print nicely. (I am a fan of PDF, but I realize that not everyone shares my typographical enthusiasm.) In short, I want things that I can use immediately and that look nice. If a source or document is one that might be unfamiliar to me, there should be some suggestion as to how I might use the document. In the best of all possible worlds, I would like documents or other media that approach a historical problem or the teaching of history in a new and different manner. So, the watchwords are innovative, varied, interesting, and helpful. Surprise me.

Aesthetic Design Second, the site should have a pleasing, clearly thought-out, and sophisticated design. Not only should the site show evidence of the

designer's sensitivity to cross-platform issues, font and text arrangement (surely an important consideration when the bulk of our sources are text), color, layout, and navigational controls, but it should also demonstrate a lack of amateurishness. The site should not be "over-designed," a condition in which the design elements over-power the content or literally squeeze the content into the smallest frame. The content should have enough space to be displayed clearly and legibly. By the same token, the design should not include animations, clickable maps, or other frippery unless these serve a bona fide pedagogical role.

Technical Design The technical design should be governed by two standards: speed and ease of use. The pages should download with the fleetness of Hermes, and I should never, never have to shop around for some exotic plug-in. (I can reasonably be expected to have the standard set.) Terms like bandwidth should be defined so that I understand how the publisher intends them to be understood. High-band width and low bandwidth are good examples. Some site developers construe them as my modem or network speed; others understand them as having greater capabilities—read exotic plug-ins. If a site uses digital video, I should have choice about downloading and clearly understand what I'm getting into if I opt to download a 12 MB file. So, all long download items should be annotated with information about their content, size, and approximate download times at various connect speeds. If the site has images, I should have the option of downloading a TIFF file suitable for laser or other high quality printing. (Remember: I'm going to be duplicating these.) If the site contains a list of related web sites, these, too, should be annotated and maintained over time to avoid "File Not Found."

So with that I was off to the Human History Project. Stay tuned tomorrow for a report on the visit. In the spirit of promotion, a hint of things to come might be in order. Here it is: I don't think I'll be publishing with McGraw-Hill. As they say on the rodeo circuit, "Let'er buck, boys."

2. Designing History: Designing Content

Before I begin looking at the McGraw site in earnest, I want to be clear that the Human History project site is a "beta site." We cannot expect that it will show everything or that it will be free from glitches of one kind or another. But we should be able to get an idea of the whole, the range of its content, and how it operates. We should be able to slice into it at any point and discern its pattern. So, with that in mind, I begin with the content.

Content Does the content carry the site? No. There essentially three historical content components: "first-rate essays, interactive timelines, and dynamic maps." One of them has worth; the others are frippery, a waste of good monitor real estate.

No one minds a good "first-rate essay," and Professor Wintroub's essay (the only one available) is engaging and well-written. Although it is a bit outside my field, it furnished a new slant on Europeans' view of the New World by analyzing a public spectacle. My question to the developers would be, "How do you suggest that I use this? Send students to the computer with a command to read the essay because I will be quizzing them on it?" If that's the case, a book or a hand-out is much easier for students to handle in the days of crowded clusters. Otherwise, the line-up of prospective authors appears to be a very solid mix of senior scholars and graduate students. The senior people will do their usual fine work, and the graduates will make sure their essays sparkle.

The interactive timeline takes up a good deal of the available screen real

estate and operates as I would expect an interactive timeline might operate. I type in a date and get to see what happened on the date. I must confess that I don't like timelines. Most students come to history with a morbid fear of dates, and timelines only intensify that fear and get in the way. They promote "factoid" pedagogy and a Jeopardy mentality. I am not interested in either one of these, and I daresay that few of colleagues are either. Timelines at the university level also seem a bit too elementary; they don't promote the kinds of skills that we are trying to teach. In short, timelines are waste of time.

Maps are essentially "good things." Historians, as a group, are quite fond of maps and find them useful. Many of our students are not as geographically sophisticated as we might like, and we all come armed with maps. But what does an interactive map do? Not much. I can click on Rouen and get a city map. From there I can click and get some copy describing the Grotto of Orpheus. What about a picture of the Grotto? (At this point, none of the other click points operate, so there may well be pictures. The problem may also be a result of my having to use the "low-bandwidth version." More about this later.) But what are my students learning? Who knows. They are learning to point and click, but whether they are getting anything else from map is anybody's guess. The bottom line: I expect more of an interactive map.

The site has three other content areas: headlines, "[c]urrent events contextualized to show how the present has roots in the period under review"; a student toolkit, "[r]esources that increase and hone the skills of students"; and an instructor's domain, [o]nline publication for instructors of history and users of H2P." Of the three, the headlines area holds the most promise. In this instance, a historian examines the Tupac Amaru and the Peruvian Hostage Crisis. This is very interesting and a good tactic for lots of reasons—a sense of global scope of history, the tie between past and present, and so forth. But again, the developers have dropped the ball. Some engaging questions here would have focused student attention so that they could "read toward: the important points. Otherwise, I just might have printed it, added my own questions, duplicated it, and used it as a hand-out. The site must be worth sending students to. Computer access is difficult for many students, and any Internet assignment must be worth their while.

The student Toolkit is of two parts: the Toolkit and Whetstone. The Toolkit consists of "two educational games that challenge students to use the tools of the H2P, to absorb the weekly content on the site, and to integrate that content with their textbooks and lectures." One will pose "difficult questions," and the other will invite them "to interact with our vivid, rich dynamic maps." Oh, heavens. In any case, neither the "difficult questions" nor the game based on the "rich, dynamic maps" were available, so I must only imagine what these are. Having a "rich and dynamic" imagination, I shudder to think. Whetstone was not fully operational either, but the copy is filled with dark forebodings: "Learn the strengths and weaknesses of Web research and how to navigate the Web wisely. Examine too the importance of using crucial non-Web sources for your research projects." My favorite part is, of course, "the importance of using crucial non-Web sources." The developers must mean primary source materials, books, articles, and the other traditional sources that form the foundation for historical research. I can hardly wait.

Last but not least, there is the Instructor's Domain. I have always wanted a domain, and this one has three parts. There is the Media Lab which will "showcase experiments that apply new media to the representation of the past" and where "historians [will] also discuss Web design and new tech-

nologies." This might be interesting, but as I left an AHA meeting room last year, I heard more than one historian saying, "I don't know about all this design stuff." Given this attitude, I wonder who will be doing the essays and who will be discussing web design—or if it will matter. The second section, Ruminations, "takes up issues dear to the discipline as a whole, discussing such items as methodological disputes and the debates surrounding the ongoing convergence of education and technology." My first question is: Who wrote this awful prose? Can we take this seriously? Please. The third section, Tactics, concentrates on how our colleagues get the classroom job done. It, too, might be promising, but there was nothing there to see. As beta sites go, we haven't seen a great deal at all.

In terms of content, the McGraw-Hill site is sadly lacking at this point. The very good history takes a backseat to tarted up, tired textbook standbys. The copy contains mechanical and typographical errors and possesses a tone that is enough to still a reviewer's keyboard. Site components that we should have been able to see on a beta site are missing. The site fails to use the range of media materials. Although it attempts some interactivity, the interactive maps fall far short of what might be realized. There are, however, indications that there might be some good things in the offing, but I must wait until January 2. On the rodeo circuit, the announcer has a tag line for bronc riders who don't finish their rides: "Ladies and gentleman, give that cowboy a big hand because that's all he's going to get today." I'll say the same for the McGraw-Hill site. Oh, time to give a grade: D+ and a note to come and see me for help with revisions.

Don't change that dial because tomorrow I'm going to look at the aesthetic design aspects of the Human History Project. Once again, in the spirit of promotion, another hint of things to come might be in order. Here it is: It is now highly unlikely that I will publish with McGraw-Hill. Happy trails.

3. Designing History: Aesthetic Design

Well, I'm a little late with the aesthetic analysis of McGraw-Hill's Human History Project site, but as the cliché goes, "Better late than never." To begin, historians are not exactly comfortable with design. And why should we be? For the most part, we are not trained in design and have very little experience with it. But when historians arrive on the Web, they enter a world in which design is critical. Design becomes very important not only from an aesthetic perspective but also from the practical one. Web content should be legible, readable, and comprehensible. All the elements that contribute to good design can aid in achieving these goals. The opposite is also true: bad design or an indifference to design can undermine a site's effectiveness. None of this suggests that historians should immediately contemplate a career change. Historians can, however, equip themselves with a decent grounding in design principles and techniques in the same way that they gained mastery of other professional tools like quantitative analysis, oral history strategies, or languages. Having said that, I turn to the site. There is both good news and bad news.

Aesthetic Design Does the site should have a pleasing, clearly thought-out, and sophisticated design. Yes in terms of the splash screen and no otherwise. The developers are obviously professional designers, and their expertise shows clearly in any number of ways. I'll begin with the "splash screen." A "splash screen" is normally the first screen a user sees; it sets the tone for the site and establishes its general layout. The site developers show an appreciation of the print world's transition to the Web by their choice of font. Although I normally prefer a sans serif font (no little curves or serifs on the letters) for onscreen viewing, some serif fonts, like Times New Roman—especially the Microsoft redesign for the Web, do very well. Mac users, by the way, can make their lives richer by adding the Microsoft fonts to their systems. They are handsome and can be found at:

<http://www.microsoft.com/typography/fontpack/default.htm>

Download all of them. Installing these fonts on a Mac is just plain useful and make cruising sites predicated on Internet Explorer a better experience.

The general layout as well as the text layout also demonstrate sophistication. The two columns, explanation and content on the left and directory or index on the right, is nice. Happily, the designers have opted for "high contrast" (dark on light or light on dark). Think of "high contrast" as basic black with pearls—always attractive and forever in style. Sites that contain a good deal of text require high contrast, and the developers have resisted a textured or colored background for the sake of legibility. They have made good use of white space and real rules (lines that set off headlines or sub-head from one another). The color choice is striking and not intrusive. The red attracts attention and the brown complements it nicely. Because the graphics contain few colors, their bit-depth can be reduced, decreasing the download time. The splash screen contains a captioned graphic, but it is more a design element than an illustration. It is too small to show any detail in any appreciable way, but it does add to the overarching tone of the design. The navigational controls on the splash screen are straightforward. They also have the added benefit of annotation. This is all to the good, especially since the titles of some of the site components are a bit "wiggly." A user might be a bit confused by "whetstone" were it not for the accompanying explanation. All in all, the splash screen illustrates the best aspects of web design.

Alas, from the splash screen on, it's all down hill or, perhaps more accurately, down the drain. On the content pages, design takes center stage at the expense of the content. The site immediately shows the hallmarks of being "over-designed. The content, in this case Professor Wintroub's essay, is literally squeezed into the smallest frame in the right-hand corner. The interactive map and that wretched timeline take the lion's share of monitor space. Shoehorning the essay into the small frame results in the need to reduce the font size. On a Wintel platform, the size reduction would probably be acceptable; on a Mac it is too small to read easily, if at all. The pre-eminence of the map and timeline affect the design of the navigation controls; they are not quite so straightforward as they are on the site sections. All right, I'm a bit slow, but it did take me a bit to realize that clicking on contents at the top the pages would get me back to where I needed to be. The word Contents is not exactly button-like, and it doesn't conform to the box-design of the other clickable items.

Such insensitivity to platform issues puts my teeth on edge. But the "over-design" indicates something far more critical than indifference to Mac owners. The designers forgot that content drives both aesthetic and technical design. Instead of asking what would be useful in a web site that is tied to textbook, the developers chorused, "We could have really cool Java timeline." Instead of highlighting and embellishing a well-constructed essay, they cooed in McGraw-Hill ears, "And we could have an interactive maps—lots of them." Evidently, McGraw-Hill swooned at the very thought. Consequently, the timeline and interactive maps become the focus of the content pages. The map and timeline, however, are utterly meaningless without Professor Wintroub's essay. Edward Tufte, the doyen of design, advises visual designers to subtract until they can subtract no more. As an experiment, think about the content pages minus the essay: a timeline and a map. The timeline lists what for most students will be esoteric and mysterious events, the majority of which are unfamiliar to them. The map will locate Rouen and describe places within the city—again all fairly unfamiliar to students. Now imagine the content pages with the essay and timeline. You get the

idea. In the end, what can't be subtracted or minimized is the essay; what can be eliminated is the timeline. QED.

When design forces content into a subordinate role, it's time to go home. And "over-design" is precisely what has happened to the Human History Project at this point. Unfortunately, the beta site is too limited to gauge whether or not "over-design" affects the rest of the site's components, but the prognosis is not good. But by now it should be clear that design is content's handmaiden, but content cannot be at its best without good design as an escort. The rodeo circuit has no words of consolation or wisdom on this score. The rodeo is all but over anyway—except for the barrel racing. And, if you think about it, barrel racing is a lot like technical design, my topic for tomorrow. Yes, well, the business of the grade: C- and words of encouragement aimed at improvement.

Meantime, time to saddle up. So, I tip my hat to one and all and wish you, "Happy New Year!"