

WEB SITE DESIGN

John gave me a great idea with his post that pointed us to the Library of Ireland's web site of the [Easter Uprising](#). Since we are looking at the design of web sites I thought I would try to determine what I like about different web sites about history. I have used the two sites John has pointed us too, the Irish Library site mentioned above (Irish Site), the [Mapping the African American Past \(MAPP\)](#) site (MAPP Site), a Virginia Tech site about the [Mexican American War](#) (VT Site), and a web site developed by a non-profit organization called the [Descendents of the Mexican-American War](#) (Mex-Am Site). This became much too large for a blog post so I uploaded a pdf file of my entire review.

The first thing I realized is that each site's design was driven by the technology that had available or that they were trying to incorporate to show how the technology could be used. Therefore, the MAPP Site was driven by the use of Interactive Maps, the Easter Rebellion used Flash player, the VT Site used CSS and the Mex-Am Site used HTML and tables. So in some ways the technology drove the design.

The next thing that drove the design was the purpose of the site. The Irish site was developed to replicate a museum display. The MAPP site was developed so people could place themselves at a location where history happened and see history over time. The purpose for the VT site was the most nebulous, but I think I finally narrowed it down to just trying to provide a site for scholars to begin research with many different links and bibliographies. The purpose was disguised by the title which is "The Mexican American War and the Media 1845-1848." The Mex-Am Site was meant for a casual reader to get an overview of the historical event.

The first thing I reviewed these sites on was the content. I liked the Irish Site and the Mex-Am site the best for enjoyment. They offered a narrative of events and people, which allowed me to understand the history they were trying to display while enjoying the images, and digitized primary documents. The Mex-Am site also provided a bibliography and links to other sources of information that the Irish site did not. The MAPP site was interesting and enjoyable, but it seemed lacking in providing an overall theme, it seemed like there were just disjointed events that lacked a narrative to bring them all together. The VT site was the most useful for me in studying the Mexican American War. It provided primary source documents in the newspapers, bibliographies compiled by different people and links to many different narratives of the Mexican American War.

From a design point of view I totally enjoyed the Irish Site. The ability to see the primary documents as I was reading the narrative was excellent. However, the color combination of text and background made me work hard to read the information. The design made the text very noticeable and the images were forced to be the main thing to be viewed by the position and color (Contrast and Alignment). The site was well designed in that the particular thing you were reviewing, a person or event was located directly to the left of the information being presented (Proximity) while the overall topic was well defined in the upper left corner. The pages were all designed the same as far as positioning of data and links (Repetition).

The MAPP site seemed to go out of its way to violate every tenet of the CRAP principles. The major calling card of this site is the map but when you go to the Places tab the selection of dates forces the map so low you can't see it until you completely scroll over the header and the date selection area. The map is far away from the title, navigation bars, everything (Proximity). There is nothing that sets off the map or Places portion of the site. It isn't until you have looked over the different areas that you realize that the map is indeed the area of most interest. (Contrast). Each section has a different navigation method, the home page uses tabs across the top, or boxes in the page, the library page is a set of thumbnails in a long scrolling list, and the map uses radio buttons and menu items. Every page becomes an adventure (Repetition and Alignment).

The VT site is not very intuitive, as there are two rows of selections across the top, but when you select the top one there is no change to say which main topic has been chosen. Then when you pick the secondary topic you never know whether you are going to go to a completely different site, like the Library of Congress, the Army War College, or you are going to get a web page at the Virginia Tech site. This was very confusing (Repetition). I found that the site made more sense if I just quit trying to make sense of it and went to the Site Map. In my opinion this would be an indication there is something wrong with the design. I like the colors chosen and was able to follow the main point of each VT created page (Contrast). However, since every page was different I don't think I can comment on Alignment on this page.

The Mex-Am site was the easiest to follow. There is something to be said for simplicity in design. I was glancing through the book *Don't Make Me Think* for next week and I think this is what he is trying to say. The main menu was on easy to understand buttons on the left, and then the subsequent pages were all developed around links to pages with information in them. The links were different each time, images one time, text another, but they made sense for the type of information being presented. Using the same color, logo and background made the important information for each page stand out. (Contrast). It was disconcerting that in some cases the information was centered in other places it was left justified. (Repetition).

After reviewing these web sites I learned that it is very important to understand why the web site is being developed or users are lost (VT Site). It is very important that the main element of a site be given top billing or the user is forced to scroll and move around and gets frustrated (MAPP Site). For historians it is important that sources and bibliographies are provided or the user is left wondering where information is coming from (Irish Site). I found that the CRAP principles were useful in helping me determine why I instinctively liked or disliked a site.