The Museum and the Web: Three Case Studies

Criteria for Designing the Website as an Experiential Interface

Thorough lists of criteria for developing museum websites are readily available on the Internet. The "Best Practices in Museum Web Site Design" site (http://www.uvcs.uvic.ca/crmp/museumwebsites/), published by the University of Victoria, is one of the best I have seen. While I have drawn from their list in creating my own, what I put forth below is primarily concerned with the issue of integrating the experience of using the website into the overall museum experience. These add particulars to the general questions I posed in the conclusion.

- Is there a distinct "mission for the Web" statement? If not, has thought been given to how the Web will extend, supplement, or influence the physical experience?
- Is the Web design reflective of the ideological intent of the museum?
- Is the design reflective of the design for the physical space? Another way of asking this is, does the design give the viewers a sense of the museum as a place?
- Do design elements reflect the museum's exhibit style?
- Is virtuality limited to a mere duplication of images (as opposed to deepening understanding of them)?
- Does the site organization reflect the way the museum is organized? Is there some aspect that enables the viewer to construct a mental image of how the exhibits he or she is reading about are presented in the physical space? And how they are navigated physically?
- Could the website employ a metaphor to focus its design and relate the site to the museum's content and mission?
- Is the writing style as compelling as it is in an exhibit? Or is it written like a dull textbook or in sound bytes?
- Does the website reveal something of consequence about the subject matter?
- Does the website convey different information than that available in the exhibit? If the same, is it phrased differently so as to further comprehension?
- Do online exhibits communicate a clear theme, objectives, scope, quality of evidence, and historical context?
- Are illustrations, photographs, and other graphics (such as titles made of images) captioned or otherwise clearly identified? Are "alt tags" provided so that those who cannot see images will not be lost? Is each alt tag closed with a period so that a text reader will pause between sentences?
- Are the graphics relevant?
- Are dates noted when relevant?
- Is the calendar up-to-date and accurate?
- If online exhibits are also available at the physical site, is this clear?
- Do online exhibits that are tied to physical ones truly enlarge the visitor's understanding of the subject, either before or after a visit, or both?
- Is there any distinction made as to which materials might be helpful before physically visiting an exhibit, after physically visiting an exhibit, or that are helpful regardless of whether the exhibit is physically visited? For example, is
there anything on the website that offers guidance about how to look at an artifact or work of art?

- Is there a "virtual guide" window that lists specific objects looked at or pages visited, makes suggestions for other objects that might be of interest, and/or provides additional information based on a profile of the viewer? This could be structured simply as a "tourist, student, or expert" tour, for example.²
- What on the website is helping to set up the physical visit (besides directions and that sort of information)?
- What is set up that will get the physical visitor back to the website and, in turn, then back to the museum? Is there, for example, an interactive computer at the museum so that visitors can log in questions, record sections visited, and make notes about what to view next time?³
- Does the website make the viewer think, "Oh, I've got to see that"?
- What is the website providing that the museum cannot?
- Does the website take the same ideological approach to teaching history as does the museum itself? (Does it try to teach history?)
- Does it present a sense of "sacred" or common space; does it match the museum in this?
- Does it make clear from whence it derives its authority, such as providing a signed curatorial statement, citing sources, and/or naming scholars consulted?
- Does the website offer any means for a "resonant" Web experience?

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3 Ibid.