

From Revolution to Reconstruction

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About the project

The beginnings 1994-1996

In November 1994 a group of students from the [Arts Faculty of the University of Groningen](#) in the Netherlands under my supervision created a World Wide Web-site dedicated to the pre-World War I history of the United States of America. The primary goal of this project was to improve basic computer-skills of the students and to teach them a number of more advanced skills later. Riding the wave of Internet popularity seemed to be the best way to motivate the normally computer-shy students of the Art Faculty to get into the nitty-gritty details of creating a Web-site, that would outlast their time on the project. Two groups of about 25 students have been working on the project.

When the department of American Studies asked me to develop a course in computers- kills for their students, I decided that this was the chance to try a new approach. The number of American Studies students being rather small, I also invited history students and art-history students and some 25 students joined the course. The only prerequisite for the course were basic wordprocessing skills for all students.

The goal of the project was to create a number of pages on the World Wide Web with serious historical content. Since the largest number of students came from the American Studies department the American Revolution was chosen as subject. A hypertext prepared for another course some years earlier would be the point of departure for this project. However, that hypertext could not be used for a web-project, because of copyright problems.

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The students were very enthusiastic about learning how to make WWW-pages, but I had my own agenda:

- improve their wordprocessing skills
- explain the basics of text-tagging, using HTML as an example
- explain the concept of hypertext
- teach scanning and OCR
- make the students aware of the possibilities of the Internet
- let students read original historical documents
- improve writing skills

As a preparation for the project I scanned a booklet which the American Information Agency provides for free abroad, [An Outline of American History](#). It is written by a number of respected historians (Hofstadter a.o.), but is rather superficial and will only suffice as an introduction to American History. At all points in the text where I thought clarification or further elaboration was needed I put in "dummy links", for which the students were to provide the content later. With the second group of students, which started on the project in December 1995, I changed this approach: I scanned the last two chapters of the booklet and every student had to prepare a section of that text, which implied doing the HTML-markup, but also deciding where links should be put in the text. At these points they would put in the same "dummy links", for which the content would be provided later. The students had three options to fill the dummies:

1. search the Internet for some electronic text that would provide more information about the topic: fetch that text, convert it to our standard lay-out and do the necessary HTML-tagging
2. scan a text from a source-publication, use the OCR-software to convert it and then put in the necessary HTML-tags
3. go to the library and search texts about the subject and write a short essay about it and tag it.

All students were required to use all three methods at least once.

Methods

First of all I explained that all communication about the course would be via electronic mail and via a specially prepared Web-page, for which a form had been prepared to function as our own little bulletin-board. Some students found this a bit awkward at first to have no papers describing their tasks, but they got used to it quickly. I think we

may have saved a number of trees this way and now all members of the group are familiar with the advantages of electronic communication.

Since wordprocessing - in this case basic knowledge of WordPerfect - was the common ground for all students, that is where we started. The differences between the various commands were explained: some have a lay-out function, some divide the text into structural elements. Wordprocessors try to be as WYSIWYG as possible and try to give an impression of the final result. To do this they have to hide the mark-up in the text. The step from this introduction to the HTML-markup of Web-pages is just small.

We used Netscape under Windows, although Netscape has a number of additions to HTML, which are not standard. After the first amazement of the possibilities had died down, they learned to look at the source-code of web-pages. Very soon they all understood that it was a text, like a WordPerfect-document, but with other tags in it. To make them understand the difference completely they had to convert a WordPerfect-document to an HTML-tagged text. To do this they had to write a number of macro's in WordPerfect. This was their first introduction to a form of "modular programming". To prepare Web-pages they were introduced to special HTML-editors (HoTMetal and HTML-assist), but they could use whatever they wanted for their further assignments.

The first assignment to write a HTML-documents themselves was to make their own home-pages: this was another didactic trick. I had noticed how jealously they had been looking at other private home-pages: playing on their vanity I offered them the possibility to make their own. Some invested quite some time preparing these pages and learned HTML-tagging very quickly. I had advised them to look at the source code of web-pages which appealed to them: it is always better to use a good example than to go completely from scratch. To encourage discussion about problems etc. a discussion facility was created on the homepage of the project. This worked very well: students showed each other all the neat tricks they had just discovered and pointed where to find good HTML- tutorials, easy editors and funny web-pages, etc.

The next step was to use Netscape to find electronic texts that could be incorporated in our project wherever they could be found. This taught them to use the various search engines for the Web and they learned to use the Web effectively instead of just surfing around for hours. All

sorts of texts were gathered most of them in ASCII format. Since we wanted to put links in these texts to other documents and we wanted to keep a uniform lay-out, all texts were converted to HTML. To do this all documents had to be read carefully.

But ofcourse not all texts that we wanted for the project could be found on the Internet. To fill up some of the dummy-links we had created, it was necessary to scan documents and convert them to ASCII-text using OCR-software. After a short training all students scanned a number of documents from source editions, marked them up in HTML and converted them to lay-out to the style adopted by the project.

At this stage it became clear that this project was going to get bigger and bigger and would need some sort of index to it. In order to create various indexes on the project the students had to learn basic database-handling techniques. So we stopped working on the project for a while to get students acquainted with dBase (for which the University had a site-license). However this took longer than I expected and we did not succeed to produce the indexes to the project with the first group of students. This made me realize that I should change my planning for the second group. I decided to spend even less time on word-procesing, to be able to come to the database-handling a bit earlier during the course.

Finally we realized that using only text would make the final product rather boring: we needed some illustrations. But using illustrations implies serious copyright problems. We solved this problem by using used stamps. Quite a lot of US-stamps (and not only US-stamps) have historical scenes on them: using a good color scanner provided an original form of illustrations.

Evaluating the project with the first group of students, we decided that it would be interesting to invite contributions to the project from outside our team. So I prepared a short message for all Newsgroups of which readers might be interested in our project, an invitation to join the project. The response was greater than we had expected, and by now the "[external contributions](#)" form a considerable part of the project.

Results

After 13 weeks on the project all students were amazed. They had worked harder than they had done before on any other course and had

enjoyed it. Most of them had the feeling that they had really learned something and would be able to use everything they had learned in future projects. All were proud of what we had made and quite a number of students continued to work on the project after the course was finished. Almost half of the first group asked for a follow-up course, which I promised to do after the second group would have gone through this course.

Although success on the Web was not the first aim of the project, we were stupefied by the response. A number of weeks after the first group left the project, it was elected "best 5% of the Web" by the Point Corporation. Access to the project increased almost exponentially: just before I wrote this the counter on the homepage of the project passed the 100.000 figure. From our logs we know that most readers go through about 9 pages on average and quite a number of them return several times. The response to the project is still enormous of which the electronic [Guestbook](#) that we created for the project can bare witness.

Working on a project which will continue to be on the Web after they have left, provides a better motivation to students than having to write papers for a course, which only their teacher will see. Since their names and e-mail addresses are attached to all their contributions to the project, they know that they will have to provide quality or run the risk of looking like a fool on the Internet for a couple of years.

What documents are available in this project

It is hard to say which historical documents are available from our project. The best covered is the colonial and revolutionary period, which is where we started. With the second group the period from the First World War to modern times was covered and within the near future a great number of documents from that period will be added. The best thing to do is to inspect [our list of documents regularly](#). Next to that we still invite contributions of machine readable versions of historical documents relating to the project, as well as original essays. We do have all the inaugural addresses of all presidents, the "state of the unions" for many years, lots of other presidential speeches, the Constitution, letters from Columbus and others, diary fragments, Supreme Court cases, the Articles of Confederation, the Declaration of Independence, Magna Charta and many more. This is not all, but just what comes to mind at this time.

Future

I intend to continue this project for a long period, since it is a teaching-form that is both satisfying for students and teacher alike: it is very time consuming, but also very rewarding. In the near future we intend to provide indexes and search-engines for the project and maybe a bibliography. We have been thinking about a clickable time-line, but we have not worked out the technicalities of that problem yet. Still, we expect quite some improvements during the second course and maybe during the follow-up course with more advanced students.

The dimension of the project and the amount of access to the project are no real problem for our computer infra-structure. The Web-server of the project is located on one of the machines in our Unix-cluster. Students prepare their work on a Novell-lan, which is connected to this cluster. Only after I have reviewed their work the result is made available on the Web.

We hope that other groups will respond to the invitation to join the project. It has been a very stimulating experience which we would like to share with others, to discover that our work is really appreciated by the great invisible Web-community. My students and I have learned a lot in this project: history can be great fun.

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Publications about the project

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- www.4Kids.org feature, Issue 9
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- Historia & Informatica, Jaargang 3, 2, "Toertocht Geschiedenis op Internet", p.2
- UK, nr.36, 12 juni 1997, page 7, "Groningse Internetsite is publiekstrekker in Amerika", John Hermse. (trl. Internetsite from Groningen very popular in the US)

[Awards for the Project](#)

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