

CAVE WALLS TO MOUSE CLICKS

Storytelling, emotion and the computer

30,000 years ought to be enough time to teach us what works when it comes to effective human communication, but some days it seems that the invention of the computer has blinded us to what our predecessors understood quite well. Humans like stories. We like telling stories. We like hearing stories. Think about it: fables, myths, parables, fairy tales, legends, bedtime stories, fish stories—they're part of our lives, our personal histories, our family, social and national histories.

Yet most of what's called *new media* ignores what every form of "old" media employs most effectively: storytelling. Sure it's a long way from sitting around the warm flames of a campfire to staring at a flickering blue computer monitor, but I think it's our lack of imagination, not the technology itself, that's the problem. We've focused on information and forgotten emotion. We've concentrated on clarity (not always successfully) but neglected warmth.

What works

Not surprisingly, the multimedia encyclopedia has been pretty successful, from Microsoft's *Encarta* to *Britannica Online*. What's not to like about lots and lots of text, colorful pictures, movies and sounds, all of it easily searchable? When you want "just the facts, ma'am," new media can and does deliver.

What doesn't

I often ask students to write down the name of a movie, book, or piece of music that has changed their life in some way, and the response is immediate. When I ask them to name something they've encountered on the computer that done that, nearly all sit and stare at the paper. When you want an experience that takes you away from your everyday world for a moment, makes you stop and think, laugh, or even shed a tear, you're not likely to find it sitting in front of a computer.

The few who *do* describe a life-altering computer-based experience typically mention an online support group for an illness or emotional difficulty. These experiences are partly information but more importantly human contact that takes place via the computer. It can be done.

Human. Contact.

It's what we still don't do very well via computers. What human beings do when they get together is often information sharing, but done through stories. Funny stories, sad stories, scary stories. I'm convinced that this is what we need to learn to make "new" media as effective as "old" media. In the classes I've taught for the past six years in Interactive Media (or Multimedia, or Interactive Multimedia) I've struggled to come up

with ways to translate storytelling traditions into modern digital media.

The world on the Web

The growth and domination of the Web in the last few years have only made the situation worse. Most websites are either mind-numbingly functional and efficient (corporate sites) or defiantly quirky and confusing (personal sites). I think that somewhere in between lays the promised land of digital storytelling where time-tested conventions and techniques of clarity and impact are enriched by the unique voice and perspective of the storyteller. The question is how to get there.

Learning from buildings



Architect Frank Gehry said something about buildings that parallels what I see on the Web and other forms of interactive media. He described Modernist architecture as “cold and inhuman.” Modernist buildings like the Seagram Building (at left) by Mies van der Rohe are above all logical and organized. The precise rectangular grid reflects the technology used to build it. Not unlike a typical website or interactive CD-ROM.

Gehry wanted to do something different—create buildings that expressed “feeling” and a sense of movement. In recent years he’s done just that, in Bilbao, Spain (Guggenheim Museum), in Cleveland (Peter Lewis Building at Case Western Reserve University, shown below) and in Los Angeles (Disney concert hall) to name a few. Interestingly, these fantastic structural forms are possible only because of powerful software developed for the aerospace industry

Feeling and movement in a solid, stable structure — imagine that! It *can* be done, with a little help from the computer.

So what about communicating emotion and making human contact with the computer— isn’t that what new media should be doing?



I don’t pretend to know how to do that — the real solutions will come from my students and yours. Still, I’d like to suggest a few baby steps that I hope will move us in the right direction.

Storytelling is part of it: how we structure the presentation of information. The core of most stories is an idea or lesson that stays with us long after the details have faded. There’s information communicated along with emotion. But the emotion makes it memorable.

We have a lot to learn

New media designers can and should learn from other art forms, particularly theater and

film, but also music, dance, and literature. We need to study script writing, character development, pacing and rhythm along with Photoshop and Javascript. The resources are there—whole libraries of books, scripts, and movies that we need to take advantage of as we create stories that live on the computer. This may mean big changes in how we teach interactive design, but the techniques are there, waiting to be adapted to a different medium.

The medium is the (wrong) message

The big stumbling block as I see it is the computer: the medium itself. A computer monitor and the usual input devices promise interactivity, but deliver it in a profoundly disconnected way. A mouse and keyboard are far from natural ways to communicate. Sound and vision are crippled by their containers: black or beige monitors, cumbersome headphones or tinny speakers.

The sensual joys of other media—the thickness of paint on canvas, the texture of handmade paper in an artist's book, the way sound resonates in your body during a concert—are lacking. Until this situation changes and the medium becomes richer (high resolution monitors, laser generated sound that you hear in your head with no speakers or headphones, gesture-recognition for input) the storytelling itself has to make up for this lack of sensual richness by employing more emotional approaches.

Levels of design

Don Norman's recent book *Emotional Design* gives insights into what may be lacking. He describes three levels of design: visceral, behavioral and reflective. The latter two, behavior and reflective, are commonly dealt with in computer-based media.

Behavioral design is about performance and usability. While not every website or interactive kiosk is functional and easy to use, how to make them that way is pretty well established. I can tell my students "read this book or article" and they can learn techniques that will improve the usability of their projects.

Reflective design is about what things mean. Any student who paid attention during his/her advertising or marketing classes, who knows about "branding" and corporate identity, has a sense of what's involved and how to accomplish it. Again, doesn't mean it's always accomplished, but the general guidelines and techniques are documented in countless books, article and websites.

That leaves what in my view is the hardest nut to crack when creating interactive media: *emotional* design. Norman describes it as *visceral*, dominated by "look, feel and sound." He further explains: "Shape and form matter. The physical feel and texture of materials matter. Heft matters. Visceral design is all about immediate emotional impact."

Hmm... here's the problem. When working with computer-based media we have little or no control of exactly those things that matter: the feel and texture of materials, heft, shape and form. So we somehow have to bring emotion into interactive design in other ways. In my teaching over the past several years I've experimented with a variety of

project descriptions, trying to come up with a way of challenging the students to create work with emotional resonance, while at the same time offering some guidance in how to do it, since the topic and techniques are seldom discussed elsewhere.

A few suggestions

Last semester’s final project was more successful than most, and there may be a few lessons to be learned from it. Called *Making the Ordinary Extraordinary*, the goals of the project were to:

“... call attention to ordinary things in a way that we realize how truly extraordinary they are.”

Students were told to start with something they care about deeply and to:

“Show what it means to you. Tell its story—and yours.”

And they were challenged to :

“Tell this story in a truly interactive way, so that others can explore this piece of your world. They need to see what you see, hear what you hear, and somehow, feel what you feel.”

[show excerpts from student projects here]

Thinking about the most successful of these and similar projects I’ve made a shorts list of a simple techniques that help humanize information on the computer, basic storytelling techniques, as it were, for this particular medium.

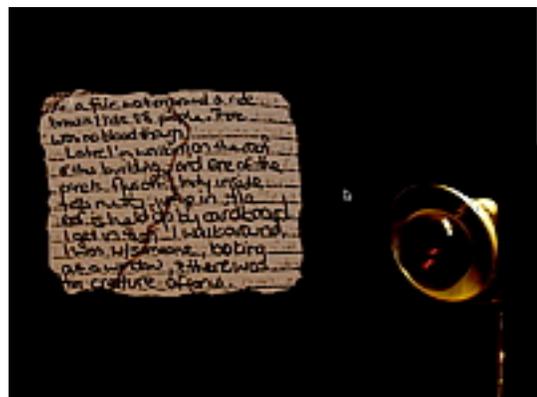
Say it

Use your own voice. Everyone—and I mean everyone—hates the way they sound when recorded. I do too. Use your voice anyway. Voice is one of our most distinctive characteristics, and using it instantly pulls others into the piece. One effective technique is to record a short intro or outro for an interactive piece. Speak from the heart, and it makes a connection that’s hard to ignore. Be careful, though, too much narration can be a bore. I’d try to keep segments fairly short (10-15 seconds), perhaps make them optional or random. And of course don’t assume you have to be serious. It’s impossible not to smile when you press on the mouse and hear a voice say “click!” or choose the “Exit” button and hear “Bye!”

Make note of it

Use handwriting instead of, or in addition to, typography. Your handwriting is unique and personal. It brings a visual richness and can become a graphic device in itself. Don’t fall for the “my handwriting is soooo bad” excuse, either. Legibility isn’t necessarily the goal.

Scan in your handwritten comments, notes, doodles, lists of ideas or thoughts, the kinds of



things you'd put in a journal or sketchbook. They can illustrate ideas or serve as visual accents. If your handwriting really is illegible, use typography to supplement it.

Grab your camera

Use “bad” photos and drawings. With the dominance of stock photography online and in corporate work, slick, well-composed imagery is the norm. It may be beautiful in a formal sense, but there's not much below the surface. Take your own pictures even if you're not a pro, use snapshots, focus on content instead of composition. I sometimes literally shoot from the hip, trying to capture what I'm seeing without framing it as a well-composed image. My goal isn't bad pictures, just ones that communicate first and foremost, a specific time and place. Composition, focus, exposure are all secondary.



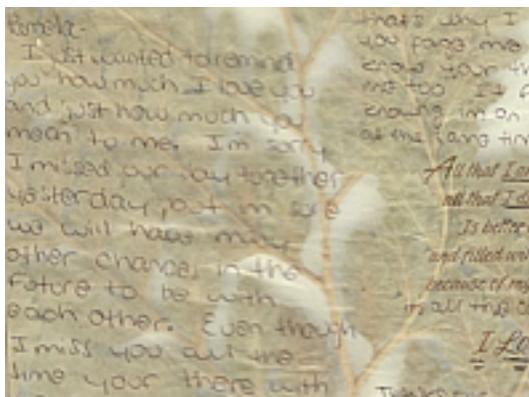
Do your own drawing/illustration even (especially) if you're not an illustrator. What you do will have a flavor and a charm that speaks in your voice.

Bring in the real world

Remember Don Norman's comment about emotional design: “The physical feel and texture of materials matter.”



In the 2-D world of the computer, scanning real objects can provide that texture. Find stuff, collect stuff, save stuff, and put it on your scanner. This is an almost inexhaustible source of visual richness. Best of all, if what you scan is from the time and place that the piece is about, your visuals are automatically imbued with meaning.



Put your heart in it

As I write this I realize that it may sound like I'm saying throw out all that you've learned about designing beautiful things. In a sense, that IS what I'm saying.

Don't use a trained narrator, tell your own story.

Forget beautiful typography and illustration and work with marks you've made yourself.

Use images that are spontaneous rather than composed, and put real-world objects into the abstract world of the computer.

The result will look, feel, and sound like *your* story. You'll become a storyteller, more than an information architect.

But don't panic. If, in your heart, you love and understand information architecture, design, illustration, or typography, that will show. The techniques I've described don't ask you to forget what you know, they are ways to shift your emphasis from formal considerations to making things human. When your humanity shows through, we don't just understand what you're saying, we feel it. If you love beauty, the results will be beautiful. If in your heart you're an information architect, the structure will be strong and elegant. Try it one time.

Screenshots from student projects by Cuyahoga Community College students Tanya Perez, Estella Hutchinson, and Pam Heidrick.