

## THE PANEL'S TOP TIPS

DESIGNING & PRODUCING ONLINE STORIES : UNITY CONFERENCE 2004 - WASHINGTON, D.C.

### ORGANIZATION:

- ✓ **Form a diverse team:** Depending on the story, you'll need a reporter, researcher, designer, illustrator, animator, photographer, videographer, IT person, etc.
- ✓ **Critique:** Take time to meet with your team and other interested persons to discuss what worked and didn't work, and lessons learned for the future.

### PROCESS:

- ✓ **Cut your scope:** Most multimedia teams create much larger projects than necessary, and during production they usually get even bigger. Scope creep is expensive, exhausting ~ and, worst of all, rarely makes the finished project better. **CAVEATS:** If your project is truly a first-source provider of information, more information can be better; also, if your project \*looks\* like it has a lot of information but under-delivers, then consider changing your design (or your scope).
- ✓ **Pre-production:** Organize the resources your team has gathered. Make sure the audio has been transcribed; the photos edited and other visual elements planned and accounted for.
- ✓ **Plan, plan, plan:** Take the time to organize your thoughts and brainstorm with the team - even in a breaking news situation, a few minutes to plan can save hours of wasted effort later.
- ✓ **Storyboard:** Make sure you have one!
- ✓ **Production:** If you've done steps one through three above, this part should be problem-free.
- ✓ **Test, test, test:** Hold mini-usability testing with folks who are interested in the topic but not familiar with the project. They may fill in holes in the content as = dive into the project testing out every aspect the interface.
- ✓ **Wire framing:** Time permitting, build out a new interface through wire-frames first. Wire framing save time and unnecessary visual mockups. You can catch editorial, design and functionality flaws before you 'skin' the project.
- ✓ **A new project cycle:** consider adopting a project cycle from Hollywood or the gaming industry. In Hollywood, it's very rare to start post-production without the production done first...or at least a level of anticipated content. Several lessons of testing can be applied from the gaming industry as well.
- ✓ **Consider irreverence, jackass:** Consider ways to lighten a story. Maybe take risks online that traditional media can't get away with. Could your news feature be a game? Could you poke gentle fun at your subject matter, at the web medium, or yourselves? Could you use funny or light moments as a hook into a more serious story?
- ✓ **Track usage:** Even in (or especially in) Flash components, take the time to build in user tracking to know exactly what your users are doing. This will minimize the guess work on what people want from your content and how well they understand your user-interface.

## DESIGN:

- ✓ **Be consistent:** Don't force your user to learn an entirely new interface if the story doesn't call for it. Design navigational buttons intuitively throughout the entire experience so your user will focus on the story not the design.
- ✓ **Determine the hierarchy through contrast:** As the visual editor, you decide what's most important and what's secondary. Use contrast to help guide your reader through the story from the most to the least important. And no, not everything can be the headline.
- ✓ **Templates:** Design templates to commonly used storytelling devices so you can focus on the storytelling and journalism. This will allow you to develop the more complex and visually challenging stories to special packages.
- ✓ **Don't forget design basics:** When designing and developing interfaces for special packages, don't forget the basics of consistency, contrast/hierarchy and contrast.
- ✓ **Basic Anatomy:** Don't forget basic anatomy of a online package outside of your content: Site Branding, Credits, Published Date(s), Feedback and Contact Information.
- ✓ **Build out scalability:** If you anticipate any growth to your story package (as most news stories do), build a navigational construct that allows this growth. Don't get caught "adding an extra button" because you didn't build out a contingency plan.
- ✓ **Test your user interface:** User interfaces are more than graphic design, though graphic designers are usually the ones tasked with making them. Poor or confusing navigation (even if it's beautiful) can tank a project. Keep your interfaces simple; reuse elements when you can, and borrow established models (like the Windows or Mac user interfaces) and make yours function in the same way.
- ✓ **Web users have almost no patience:** They're always in a hurry; poised at their keyboards, ready to leave. They have much shorter attention spans than with print, television, or radio. Ruthlessly edit and cut your animations, audio, and video. And jump right into the story: the first 10 seconds (or less) are critical for drawing the viewer into the piece.
- ✓ **Explain your project clearly:** Use headers, subheads, and extremely brief text to explain what your story is and why it's important, before the story begins. Assume your visitor is coming from an untitled link, or a search engine -- in other words, without any context. Is the content and scope of your story (not just the title, but the actual subject matter) clear at a glance?
- ✓ **View your elements in context:** It's easy to design a flash component, for instance, that looks great on its own, but once it's in the actual page - with headers, footers, ads, and text - is confusing or cluttered.

## ONLINE RESOURCES:

- ✓ Interactive Narratives ([www.interactivenarratives.org](http://www.interactivenarratives.org))
- ✓ Joe Weiss' Multimedia Storytelling Weblog ([www.joeweiss.com](http://www.joeweiss.com))
- ✓ Visual Edge ([www.visualedge.org](http://www.visualedge.org))

# DESIGNING & PRODUCING ONLINE STORIES

UNITY CONFERENCE 2004 – WASHINGTON, D.C.

DATE: 8/7/2004; TIME: 2:00pm - 3:30pm

PRESENTERS: Ron Coddington (USAToday.com), Phaedra Singelis (washingtonpost.com), Jim Webb (nationalgeographic.com); TRACK: Convergence/New Media

## BIOS: PANELISTS

**Ron Coddington** is a visual journalist whose career spans several major U.S. newspapers, including USA Today, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, and the San Jose Mercury News, where he was a part of the staff awarded the 1990 Pulitzer Prize for general news reporting of the Bay Area earthquake and its aftermath. He was art director for Knight Ridder/Tribune Graphics and KRT Interactive in Washington, D.C., where he helped launch two successful products, KRT Faces in the News caricature service (1993) and KRT European Graphics (1994). Today, Ron is a senior designer at USATODAY.com. The Associated Press, The Society of News Design, and The Society of Illustrators have all recognized his work. He is a 1985 graduate of The University of Georgia, a past participant in the Nigel Holmes Information Graphics Workshop at the Rhode Island School of Design, and a guest speaker at The Society of News Design and other venues. He currently serves as a judge for the SNDies competition. Ron writes Faces of War, a monthly column in The Civil War News. The Johns Hopkins University Press will publish his first book, Faces of the Civil War: An Album of Union Soldiers and Their Stories, in August 2004. Further information about the column and book is available at [www.facesofwar.com](http://www.facesofwar.com). A portfolio of his recent work is available at [www.roncoddington.com](http://www.roncoddington.com).

A graduate of Ohio University's Visual Communication program, **Phaedra Singelis** worked as a staff photographer at The Cincinnati Enquirer and The (Cleveland) Plain Dealer before becoming a picture editor at The (Baltimore) Sun. After many years in newsprint, she made the transition to cyberspace and joined Tom Kennedy at [washingtonpost.com](http://washingtonpost.com) in December of 1999. She is currently Deputy Managing Editor/Multimedia, responsible for content development and is the liaison for the newspaper's photo department. Phaedra has been a guest faculty member, teaching at both the Poynter Institute and with the University of North Carolina. She has judged the Robert F. Kennedy Awards and won a few herself, including some NPPA Best of Photojournalism awards for her multimedia work.

**Jim Webb** is Senior Designer at [nationalgeographic.com](http://nationalgeographic.com). In his five years with the company, he's designed more than three-dozen web features and applications, including the National Geographic education site, which won the 2004 and 2001 Webby and People's Voice Awards for Best Education Site and the 2002 Codie Award for "Best Elementary Education Instructional Solution." Jim's work has also appeared in the domestic and international editions of National Geographic magazine, the National Geographic Channel, USA Today and MSNBC. His multimedia projects include video and flash sites documenting the lives and work of wild land firefighters, blind astronomers, paragliding botanists and death-defying photographers. Jim studied photojournalism and graphic design at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

## BIOS: MODERATOR

**Andrew DeVigal** is a tenure-track assistant professor at San Francisco State University. He teaches visual and online journalism and is the coordinator for the online sequence in the school's journalism department. DeVigal has been a Visiting Professional with the Poynter Institute in Florida, teaching and collaborating in the area of New Media and Visual Journalism since 1997. Formerly, he was an interface designer for KRNM and [ChicagoTribune.com](http://ChicagoTribune.com). DeVigal is the founder of InteractiveNarratives. He is also co-principal of DeVigal Design, a San Francisco based interactive firm. His recent works can be found on his website <http://devigal.com/>.