

# A LIST APART

## A Case for Web Storytelling

by [Curt Cloninger](#) · December 10, 2000

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Much ink has been spilt lately bemoaning the lack of quality content on the web. “Sure the site flashes and whizzes and startles, but what does it have to *say*?” This type of complaint assumes an incomplete, overly stark dichotomy: namely that sites are made up of “style” and “content.” The underlying purpose of style sheets and their widespread use has unintentionally fostered this false and overly simplistic dichotomy. You’ve got your style, you’ve got your content, and rarely the twain shall meet.



A recent article (</articles/separation/>) right here at ALA took the bold step of suggesting that maybe style and content aren’t so easily separable after all. Bravo. I agree. I’d like to take that point one step further by saying that style is more than various methods of typographical presentation, and content is more than the literal words in a paragraph that some marketing guy wrote. Style is a comprehensive site-wide look and feel that includes graphics, animation, audio, and any number of other media besides just text. And content is an idea, an angle, surely conveyable in text, but also conveyable in these other, more rich, media.

In addition to style and content (even understood in their broadened definitions), I propose that there is at least a third element in the web design mix that is getting overlooked. And I think it’s the most important element of all. I’ll call this missing element a “narrative voice.” You can have your slick style and your meaty content, but without a mature and perspicacious narrative voice, your site will still fail to engage your visitors.

### Why so Tech, Beck?

The web is first and foremost a medium of communication. Never before in the history of mass media has a medium been so overtly dependent on its technology. Never before has a medium’s technology been so transparent, so “just below” the surface.



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Never before have the participants in a medium been so required to learn arcane, technical incantations before they are allowed to communicate in said medium (which explains the continuing appeal of AOL to the new Internet user). Why is technology so interwoven with the web?

For one reason, the web is a many-to-many (<http://www.nathan.com/projects/current/communications.html>) technology. In older mass media, say television, few people produced and broadcast their own TV shows. TV is a one to many technology.

Not so the web. Tools like Blogger have made self-publishing on the web a no-brainer. Now you have many speaking to many. Before, no one had to be aware of how a TV set actually worked.

Maybe you fiddled with the antenna a bit. If that didn't work, you called a TV repairman. Now on the web, many of our visitors are also themselves publishers. If nothing else, they have at least sent email or posted to a bulletin board. This many to many communications model has placed a greater technological burden on the web end user; so much so, that we still call our visitors "users" – not "viewers" or "movie-goers" or even "explorers." Sometimes we do call them "visitors" or "surfers," but even those two titles imply a fair amount of end-user expertise.

The second reason the web as a medium is so wrapped up in technology is because it was birthed in the computer lab of a particle physics research center. And we geeks still think the web has something to do with computers. But note, a lone desktop, adrift from the web, does not constitute a communications medium. A computer is not media. It can read media; it can make media; it can display media; it can broadcast media. But a computer is just a tool. The medium is the web itself. No one would mistake a satellite dish for a communications medium. A satellite dish is a hardware component used to transfer information from one person to another person. Media aren't the tools. Media are the modes in which we communicate with each other via those tools.

Returning to the style and content dichotomy, now aware of the hyper-techno-centric nature of the web, it's obvious that we're thinking too small. We think that if we have meaty content, and we have competent professional design, then we have a winning web site. That's not true. First, the design has to somehow be relevant to the content, accurately representing its purposes in the medium. Then, the content has to be useful to the site's audience. Even then, we're still missing a huge factor: narrative voice.

## The Global Campfire

When cowboys talk to each other on a cattle drive, they say things like, "Hey Tex, three of the herd went up in them there hills. What say you go drive 'em out?"

"Will do, partner. After that, we should stop and water 'em along the crick."

During the work day, mere data is exchanged. This work-day data exchange might be analogous to a multi-user, Lotus Notes(tm) collaboration. But at night, around the fire, stories are told. It's the stories that the cowboys will remember after the drive, not the daily exchange of data. Data is

denotative. Stories are visceral and emotional. Stories affect our entire beings, not just our minds.

And which stories will be remembered the longest? Which stories will be loved the most? Which stories will “succeed?” For the stories to succeed they first have to be interesting (read: good content). For the stories to succeed, they also have to be told in the native tongue of the listeners (read: no JavaScript errors). And finally, for the stories to succeed, they have to be told well, in a compelling, mature, engaging narrative voice.

Obviously marketing on the web is different than telling stories around a cattle- drive campfire. But although the media differ, the tenets of story-telling are much the same. If all you’re going to do at the Volkswagen web site is display text that says, “0-50 in 6.8 seconds. Front and rear wheel brakes. Standard passenger side air bags,” then that’s the equivalent of sitting around the campfire saying, “Tex, remember when those cows went behind that hill and I told you to get them and then you went and got them and brought them back? Boy, that sure was something.” Boring. Mere exchange of data. Boring, Sidney, Boring. No sense of narrative, no suspense building, no foreshadowing, no climax.

And yet we think if we just exchange accurate, presentable data on the web, we’ve gotten the job done. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Is the web a global network of connected computers? No, that’s the Internet. Is the web hyper text transfer protocol? Well, technically. But if the web is to be understood as a communications medium (the only useful way to understand it), then it must be more than computers talking to each other. Otherwise, mere data exchange would succeed. But the web is not a global network of connected computers. The web is a global network of connected people. And story-telling is still the most effective way to emotionally impact people.

What does this have to do with marketing? Well, isn’t the goal of marketing to emotionally impact people? And haven’t television commercials naturally evolved into what are now really just mini-stories? There is a scene in Dumb and Dumber where our moronic protagonists are both reduced to tears at the end of a 60- second commercial “story.” Funny stuff, but also a case in point: commercials seek to “move” us emotionally in as short a time as possible. If you don’t believe me, think back to the Olympics advertising and you’ll recall plenty of tear-jerking spiels that prove my point.

Each of these TV commercials has a narrative voice. The “make 7-up yours” ads are detached and sardonic. The new ads against teen smoking are earnest, hip, and realistic. Most luxury car commercials are epic, sweeping, and mythical. Were all these narrative voices present back in the 50’s when TV was in its infancy? Of course not. TV spent a good deal of its first few years figuring out that it wasn’t radio. But now TV advertising has evolved to include its own arsenal of mature narrative voices.

And then there’s the web. We are back where TV was in the 50’s. Many of us are just now realizing that the web is not a database. Some of us still don’t get it. And now here I am saying we need to develop several mature narrative voices for the medium of the commercial web. Yep, that’s what I’m

saying. I'd love to explore the nuances of what these new media narrative voices might sound like. But right now, let it suffice to say as clearly and emphatically as possible, that we as web designers have little or no concept of narrative voice, and this lack of narrative awareness is killing our sites.

### Great Handwriting, Lousy Narrative

I just attended and spoke at an industry-wide web builder conference. The topics included XML, JavaScript acceleration, hand-held devices, user experience design, efficient systems development models, efficient web business models, how to use Flash, how to use Dreamweaver, how to write effective email newsletters, etc. In other words, there were lots of presentations on site development, and lots of presentations on tools. There were even some presentations on content. But where were the presentations on how to tell a story in this medium?

To draw an analogy, what if this had been a conference on how to write a novel? How would it have compared? Well, they would have taught me how to come up with a good story outline (content). They would have taught me how to use ball point pens, felt tip pens, pencils, and various word processing programs (tools). They would have taught me some grammar (programming languages).

But they wouldn't have taught me anything about plot development, character development, the difference between short-story writing and novel writing, the difference between poetry and prose, ways to engage the reader, ways to heighten suspense by modifying sentence structure, ways to slow down pace by modifying sentence structure, ways to represent surrealistic action using stream-of-consciousness narrative, ways to represent the passage of time with sub-chapters and paragraph structures, realistic character dialogue, use of setting to enhance the mood, use of underlying themes to support overall theme, etc.

In other words, they really wouldn't have taught me much about novel writing at all. But my handwriting would be impeccable.

The reason for this lack of industry focus on narrative is that we still think the web is a set of technologies. We are still primarily tech geeks. Which is why corporations still don't trust web designers to make marketing and branding decisions, even though we should understand this medium better than anyone. Instead, these old-school marketers bring their inapplicable print design narrative voices into our new medium, and they fail miserably. But a lame transplanted voice is still better than no voice at all.

### The Solution

The solution is for graphic designers to begin exploring the narrative possibilities of the web as a communications medium. Where to begin the exploration? Well, one solution is to begin exploring all the things the web can do that other media can't do. Hint: The web is interactive. Hint: Web narratives need not be linear. Hint: Web narratives need not be predominantly text-based. (They need not even be predominantly graphics-based.) Hint: the web can incorporate several media at once. Hint: Different media (audio, video) effect people different ways. Hint: Surfing is by its very

nature an intimate experience. Only one person at a time can click a mouse, whereas several people at a time can watch a television or a movie screen. Hint: The more power a user has to control the narrative himself, the more a user will “own” that narrative.

Please, let’s grow this medium up, if for no other reason than to keep it from becoming boring. I’d much rather talk about paradigmatic user-enabled plot structures than WAP-enabled mobile palm devices.

In the end, as has been said a million times, the web is about the “user” experience. Do our users want to be engaged around the campfire as we enthusiastically and skillfully tell how we miraculously escaped the wrath of Billy the Kid, or do they want to listen as we drone on and on about how tall our mule is and what it ate for dinner that night?

Without a compelling narrative voice which incorporates the specific strengths of this medium, we might just as soon be machines talking to machines, while our users vacate our dry and boring sites to engage in yet another round of interactive elf bowling.

## About the Author

### Curt Cloninger

Curt Cloninger wrote this book. He lives here, plays here, and writes about the web here. Curt sure does love those indefinite pronouns.

### MORE FROM THIS AUTHOR

Usability experts are from Mars, graphic designers are from Venus (*/article/marsvenus*)



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