Chapter 19

Case Study: Writing, Rhetoric, and Design: A Virtual Collaboration Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a case study of virtual collaboration that focuses on a research and production team’s approach to making choices about the most appropriate technologies to support the team’s interactions. The study highlights the importance of establishing clear, well-defined roles for collaborators as well as the importance of explicitly acknowledging the institutional context within which the work was undertaken. The chapter concludes with a series of recommendations based upon the experience of this virtual collaboration.

INTRODUCTION

Because of the nature of the project, we needed a media-rich communication infrastructure. This chapter, therefore, frames “writing” within the context of multimedia/new media production. The design team also worked within a rhetorically derived heuristic, following a research process that is driven explicitly by our training and work as rhetoricians. This digital rhetoric approach informed both design decisions and the choices made with regard to implementing the underlying technological infrastructure of the new interface. In essence, the team both worked within and produced a collaborative writing space that existed at the intersections of rhetoric, design, and code.

As a case study of virtual collaboration, this chapter addresses the choices we made about the technologies we used to support our interactions. It highlights the importance of establishing clear, well-defined roles for collaborators. Additionally, the chapter considers the importance of explicitly acknowledging the institutional context within which the work was undertaken as both the collaborative practices of the team and the final product of the collaborative work needed to connect to the goals...
and expectations of the journal’s editors and readers. Finally, this chapter points to the first, fourth, and fifth principles of virtual collaborative writing that ground this book. The kinds of collaboration necessary in distance-based website design can only be accomplished in a culture that values collaboration as a primary value. To be successful, it is necessary to use tools and collaborative modes effectively in the context of ongoing and ever changing goals. Thus, creating structure for each working member of the writing team is essential.

BACKGROUND

*Kairos: Virtual Collaboration by Design*

In 1993, the National Center for Supercomputing Applications (NCSA) released Mosaic, a simple graphical interface to the World Wide Web (WWW) and the first cross-platform Web browser (Andreessen, 1993). Mosaic provided access to the Web in ways that made it available to non-specialist computer users, but it also provided a mechanism through which theories of hypertext and hypermedia could be engaged on a much wider scale than earlier stand-alone systems such as Hypercard. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the field of composition studies was exploring how notions of hypertext might complicate the view of the rhetorical functions of writing (Bolter, 1991; Landow, 1992) as well as how writing technologies more generally might change the way we teach composition and rhetoric (Hawisher & Selfe, 1991; Hawisher & LeBlanc, 1992; Selfe & Hilligoss, 1994). It is at this historical convergence of theory and application that a group of graduate students decided to launch an online journal that would take on the questions of technology-mediated writing as both its content and its delivery platform. The journal’s founding editors were rhetoricians who wanted to use the faculties of rhetoric for both analysis and production; to provide scholars with a venue not only for examining how “born-digital” texts worked within digital networks but also for producing scholarly work that could itself be composed of multiple media and could take advantage of the network and the link.

From the outset, *Kairos* required virtual collaboration: the first editorial staff members resided at five different universities[1]. Michael Salvo (Doherty & Salvo, 2002), one of the founding editors, recalled that “With *Kairos*, a handful of graduate students in half a dozen states, with no budget and no sense of what was and was not possible (or acceptable), created something that caught (and continues to catch) peoples’ attention.” With that lack of a budget came a volunteer-based business setting that necessarily required high levels of collaboration and cooperation among a disparate team whose binding quality was their mutual interest in developing a quality online journal about the intersections of rhetoric, technology, and pedagogy.

The original editorial staff primarily used e-mail to communicate, but they also used synchronous online communication via the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s (MIT) MediaMOO. A MOO is a multi-user object oriented communication domain, similar to the more currently ubiquitous IM client; it was used primarily for earlier computer gamers until the academic community picked it up as a networked classroom venue and a communication vehicle. According to Doherty and Salvo (2002): “We spent so much time online together that [Greg] Siering built an office in MediaMOO where we would hold and log weekly ‘staff meetings.’ The topics ranged from what our editorial process would be to... well, what should we call this thing?”[2]

Unlike most academic journals, the *Kairos* editorial staff is not housed at a single institution. Although it is common to have distributed editorial boards (advisors and peer-reviewers), it is uncommon also to distribute both the editorial staff and production processes (the latter, however, are more and more often being outsourced to com-
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