

A New Class *OF* Worker FOR THE Web

by **Karl-Peter Gottschalk**

We have reached the point in the Web's infancy when we are starting to understand what it can do, and how to go about getting it done.

We have some good, solid software tools at our disposal now, and they're becoming more powerful and easier to use with each version that comes along.

The steep learning curves are becoming flatter as an army of experts steps in to share their hard-won knowledge with us through an avalanche of new books, magazine articles and conference presentations.

The number of potential users of the websites we create continues to grow at a sustained rate. Bureau of Statistics figures show that national Internet usage is increasing by 9 percent per year, and the Australian Communications Authority estimates that by late 2001 50 percent of all adults here had used the Net.

Available bandwidth, or the lack of it, continues to be a problem, and has hampered our efforts to bring our clients and users richer, more satisfying Web experiences. Until the Federal government fully commits to broadband for everyone as a matter of policy, for the sake of national economic advantage, our ambitions to provide more content faster *will* be curbed to a large degree.

If we regard this disadvantage as an incentive we can keep striving to make our websites more efficient, better able to achieve our clients' aims, and workable despite the large variations in access speed that our users experience daily.

The recent shakeup in the IT industry has given us cause to consider how to restructure our firms to better handle the work load in good times, and how to survive through the bad. In the process we have begun sensibly subdividing the tasks into finer distinctions than the two we began with—Designer and Programmer.

The new subdivisions of Web workers range from Technical Director and Creative Director through Information Architect, Interface Designer, Database Manager, Project Manager, Flash Guru and Lingo Whiz, to Production Grunt and Web Monkey. Those distinctions have begun serving us well, and we are achieving efficiencies through smaller and more focused teams that we might not have discovered had the dot.com bubble never burst.

This current evolutionary process is more controllable than the explosive revolution of the recent past, and the adaptations we are undergoing will better equip us for the coming economic upturn. But there is one necessary evolutionary step still to be made and it is the most radical of them all. It also happens to be the one that will ensure a stronger foundation for the Web itself than the one we started off with.

I am suggesting that we add a third class, a new set of roles, to that of the people who work on the Web. Instead of being concerned with the look and the construction of Web projects, as with Designers and Programmers, our new class will be concerned with storytelling and how best to do that.

Content is King has been the cliché of the Web Age, uttered on every possible occasion by all and sundry. But have those who speak really understood their own words?

Think about the nature of content in the media that came before the Web. Go back to the source: conversation. Conversation's content is the words and the meanings two or more people exchange.

Cave paintings and rock carvings came next, and their content is history, myth, the needs of survival and the realities of shared experience as well as the wonder of the beings they depict. Some serious storytelling going on there that continued throughout the long history of painting and sculpture.

Writing, whether hand-scribed or printed in books and magazines, is all about the stories contained therein. Content bound between two covers. Storytelling through words *and* images.

Then radio, film and television appeared, and although their technical demands are the greatest so far, their producers are aware enough that the writing comes first, before pre-production can even begin. These three media have learned from print the absolute necessity of the division of labour, combined with the need for a single guiding vision, whether embodied in the Writer, the Director, or sometimes the Producer.

Film, television and radio pay so much homage to the supremacy of storytelling that *story* is the word most commonly heard in those industries. *This next story, your story, Australian Story.*

Lastly, the Web. So new it only came into the world on Christmas Day, 1990, in a particle-smashing laboratory near Geneva. The Web had a little of everything of all the media that went before it, and more, even at its founding, despite its first manifestation being text only..

The NeXT computer Tim Berners-Lee built the Web on was a more advanced multimedia machine than would appear for years to come, with voice e-mail, a built-in

synthesiser and a beautiful graphical user interface. The Web came into the world in an environment saturated with sounds and images and possibilities unseen anywhere else at the time.

But something in our collective understanding of the Web went wrong, a failure caused, I suspect, by the kind of computers most in use when the Web was growing in popularity. Somehow content began to be interpreted as anything other than story.

The personal computers of the mid-1990s were the creatures of databases, spreadsheets, and word processors that were not much more than desktop publishing's bastard offspring. These machines lacked sound cards and speakers, and displayed just 16 or 256 colours, or thousands if you were lucky. Their best asset was the clarity with which they displayed their oversized text.

Little wonder then that content became understood as just more of the same of what users dealt with every day, confused with the stuff that exists to support story—lists, tables, data, letters *from our CEO*. Storytelling itself barely got a look in.

Then, when Web production began to be formalized, when Web pages began to be designable and programmable, Designers and Programmers leapt into the breach and claimed the Web as their own. They promoted what they did as content, and forgot about story.

That is like trying to make a movie without a script, producing a magazine without writers and editors, publishing a book without an author. It is absurd, and it is holding back the Web from being what it could be, the best storytelling medium of all time, combining the best aspects of all other media into one.

The time is ripe for multimedia storytellers to take their place alongside Designers and Programmers, for writers and editors to become Content Directors and guide the Web into its next incarnation.

Story should no longer be something cobbled together from whatever scraps of text a client cares to throw at us. 