

## **Production activities, [www.bloc-online.com](http://www.bloc-online.com), 2003-4**

### ***Introduction***

Bloc is a website aimed at writers as primarily a showcase for new writing talent. In large part contributions emanate from the internal Bloc team but, more importantly, also from many external contributors. Bloc furthermore aims to provide writing-related news and advice, as well as information about writing techniques, competitions, and courses.

Dedicated editorial teams are assigned to fulfil these objectives.

### ***Development and Production process***

#### **Legacy**

From the start, it was clear that the website version inherited from 2002-3 was in considerable need of revision. Ergonomically, it was felt that the writing was distracted from by uneven production values. Site graphics took up too much space on the screen. The menu system wasn't clear enough, and above all it wasn't intuitively clear how to enter new material into the template structures.

File-naming procedures, for instance, exhibited little systematic approach. This made it difficult to match text to images, or even to then place this material in the correct section of the site. Archiving old material was made particularly difficult.

In terms of 'brand identity', there was no clear uniformity or sufficient consistency to the site. Images varied widely in size and format, whilst at the same time different sections weren't clearly identifiable enough. Individual index pages did not adequately indicate the breadth and variety of articles available to the reader.

## **Starting afresh**

Consequently, the decision was made to start from scratch. An entirely new template structure was developed, producing a new ‘look’. A visually clean and consistent design language was strived for. Index pages were to be divided into a brief description of the content generally, and then into individual ‘teasers’ for highlighted articles. Articles were to be made up of an image of a specific size (150\*113 pixels), with a corresponding standfirst of a similar dimension, and the main body text underneath.

Clear, systematic file-naming conventions were established, easing editing and archiving procedures. By the time of the re-launch in November 2003, a sound basic architecture upon which further development could occur was in place.

## **Further development**

The December edition saw the first of many refinements implemented: a ‘trademark’ animation at the top of every web page was introduced to reinforce the site brand. Beyond this, it quickly became clear that the site was likely to outgrow the practical usability of a conventional sidebar menu for internal navigation –there were too many internal links for it to be feasible. Consequently, by January a dynamic menu had been sourced and implemented, providing considerably more ergonomic handling of the site.

With a systematic and clearly defined production process in place, we next turned to improving the site content. To a large extent this involved increased editorial discretion as to what material we would use, but also it involved looking at ways of raising our profile. We opted to expand the breadth of content provided to our readership: regular opinion pieces and writing columns started to appear. In terms of maintaining easy on-screen legibility, section editors were reminded of the desirability of implementing practical measures like keeping paragraphs short, ensuring reasonable brevity in material, and of

using sub-headings where appropriate, the better to keep visitors to the site alert and interested.

On the technical side, hidden meta-tags were introduced into the html script in an attempt to make the site appear more prominently on internet search engines. We also started considering strategies for bringing in multi-media content to the site. In March this led to the introduction of audio content –recordings of pieces spoken out. Though essentially still at a technology demonstration phase, we have already managed to include not only straightforward audio file downloads but also –significantly– streaming media.

In future editions, this is a strategy that we intend to expand. In addition, we are also currently looking at creating a search engine function within the site. This would be of especial use for the About Writing and Resources sections, both of which feature extensive amounts of not always particularly easily navigable material.

### ***Lessons learnt***

#### **A number of issues became apparent:**

- As alluded to above, it is important to maintain a systematic approach to file-naming and archiving. For Bloc, we adopted an approach where the first two letters of a given file indicates what section of the site it belongs to. This is followed by a relevant name to the piece, and then a date indicating the edition (e.g. nw\_mickey\_mouse\_dec03 would be suitable for an article about Disney intended for the December edition). In addition, using the same names for both text and image files makes pairing the two together much easier (the only difference will be the file type denominator: usually either .htm for text or .jpg for images).

- Template structures must be simple and ‘idiot-proof’ if the objective of consistency is to be met. If image, byline, standfirst and main body text are consistently to appear in the same part of the page, and blocks of empty space are to be avoided, then the templates must be intuitive. If they aren’t, a lot of time will likely have to be spent tweaking every single page in the site before publishing.
- Regarding the division of responsibilities for the editorial team, we started off intending to rotate responsibilities, the better to gain a broad experience of the entire web publication process. Very quickly though, we found that people tended to gravitate towards areas they felt they had mastered and were better at. Ultimately, this was probably a good development: we now have motivated people who are good at what they do in each editorial section. At the same time though, it isn’t as if things are set in stone. When we have needed to re-assign responsibilities, this has presented no great problem. Fluidity and flexibility are in this respect great assets over which to dispose.
- If the site grows as big as it very quickly did for us, then either the site must be split up into further pages and subsections, which is generally bad for navigability, or dynamic JavaScript menus introduced (as we opted for). Conventional listed html menus will be too long and cumbersome.
- Last year, ‘print-versions’ of all articles were included in the site. We adopted the policy that Bloc, as an internet publication, should predominantly be geared towards people viewing the site online. This enables a much more streamlined site structure (print-versions for all pieces would almost double the size of the

site), and detracts little from its usability: if readers want to print material out, that is perfectly possible anyway.

### ***Recommendations for the future***

- As noted above, flexibility in assigning responsibilities for editorial/production processes is a good thing. It allows people to play to their strengths, which is important if the intention is to produce the website to as high a quality as possible. Of course, a balance has to be struck between this ambition and educational aspirations –breadth of experience is also important.
- It would be desirable for more people to be fluent in the web-page software we use (Dreamweaver). Greater attention paid to our initial induction to the software, as well as greater attention paid by the editorial team to imparting our accumulated knowledge (perhaps creating guideline pamphlets and the like) would have aided the production process. Ideally, people should be more aware of how template structures, menu systems and the like work. But this is of course a two-way process: people have to *want* to learn these things as well.
- We would advise to regularly hold *at least* weekly editorial meetings. Even if the work-load seems negligible, it is important to keep the creative process alive in the minds of people. If not, then inevitably a few key editorial players end up having to take on the lion's share of the production process when the publishing date comes around.
- Allied to this point is that editors would do well to be much more pro-active in delegating tasks, and actively ensuring that people attend during production. Whilst we have all tended to gravitate towards specific sections of Bloc, it has

also been the case that some editorial teams have rotated editors internally. Too often who ever has then been editor has taken on more or less the entire section workload for his-/herself. This is wrong! The role of the editor/sub-editor is first and foremost to *manage* the workload –to delegate tasks to subordinates– and only *thereafter* (and only then) attempt to take on any of the workload him/herself.

- File-naming discipline is important not only, as noted previously, for reasons of archiving and editorial ease, but also because otherwise there is too much scope for technical mistakes to arise. Discipline is important from a procedural point of view because procedure provides intuitively for things like menus to be updated. Errors whilst tackling tasks of especially often rather repetitive natures are then more easily avoided.
- It would be preferable to delete old versions of the site before uploading new ones onto the server. Simply uploading a new version to replace an old one means that some files aren't replaced, but instead remain dormant on the server. This is bad practice if nothing else because it takes up unnecessary space. More importantly, however, it can sometimes lead to rather complex file-sharing and linking errors.
- If Bloc is to maintain a forum, then it needs regular and attentive nurturing to keep it alive –otherwise it is pointless. Expecting visitors to the site to generate debate spontaneously is not realistic. Ideally the publicity editorial team should undertake this task (though it may need more dedicated attention).

### ***Final comments***

Running and managing Bloc is a fantastic opportunity for students to get hands-on experience of the publishing process. It is possible to acquire and practice skills related to commercially important software (Dreamweaver/Photoshop etc.), public relations, interviewing/reviewing techniques, and of course writing more generally. Added to that, Bloc provides important experience in managing other people as part of a motivated team. Of course, as with anything, it will give as much as you yourself are willing to put into it. In the meantime, it will be important to keep up with new technology, keeping in sight a strategic vision of how the site can develop in the future.