

Designing an Experience Architecture for the International Fan Scholar Website Sherlockian.net

Experience Report

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ABSTRACT

Founded in 1994, Sherlockian.net is a community portal and archive dedicated to the Sherlock Holmes community. In 2016, founder Christopher Redmond retired and entrusted the site to Liza Potts and WIDE Research, a digital humanities lab at Michigan State University. In this experience report, we outline how the participatory strategies of our project informed information structures, technology decisions, avenues for outreach, content choices, and the resulting processes that help us continue to maintain the site as a cultural heritage space for this community.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Web Interfaces** → **Interaction design**; *interaction paradigms*

KEYWORDS

Digital humanities, archives, user experience, project management, information architecture, content strategy

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1 INTRODUCTION

Since its launch in 1994, Sherlockian.net is dedicated to being the portal for the Sherlock Holmes community. By 2016, it had accumulated a robust following through its rich array of content, becoming a leading resource for new and experienced Sherlockians. That year, founder Christopher Redmond retired

from working on the site and entrusted it to Liza Potts and WIDE Research, a digital humanities lab at Michigan State University (MSU). This paper outlines the ways in which we approached this project and were able to successfully launch the redesigned site for the community.

2 BRIEF LOOK AT RESOURCES THAT INFORMED OUR PRACTICES

From the moment we began working on the site, we knew we needed to make some serious technical, architectural, and design changes in order for the site to be manageable and for the content to be findable. To do this work, we relied heavily on prior work on content strategy, community archives, and participatory culture. This meant focusing on readings from communication design, digital humanities, fan studies, and archive studies.

For the purposes of understanding our approach to content strategy, we looked at recent practitioner books and articles focused on process and governance, including works from practitioners such as Kristina Halvorson [1], Lisa Welchman [2], Meghan Casey [3], Erin Kissane [4], Karen McGrane [5], and others. To gain a better understanding of archival practices, we consulted with librarians, archivists, and community practitioners. We also sought out work currently sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities to gain insights from their practices. We also referenced materials focused on archives, memory, and living histories [6, 7, 8, 9, 10]. To ensure that these practices matched up with current research concerning fan communities, we applied our earlier work on participatory memory and fandom, as well as consulted newer materials from fan studies [11, 12, 13, 14]. We also consulted literature specifically about the community and fandom [15, 16, 17].

3 APPROACH/METHOD

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Our methods included conducting a content review and analysis, interviewing community members, conducting a web metrics analysis, and focusing on expert and community walkthroughs to build the new site. We had several approaches for this redesign, all of which were aimed at answering the needs of this community and providing a solution.

First and foremost, given the history and popularity of this site, we needed to have the support of the Sherlockian community to move forward. We wanted this site to continue to be, as the original and current site claims, “the Portal about the Great Detective.” To better understand this community, we took several steps as a team. Liza knew we had to make connections with leaders in the community. Liza reconnected with the founders of 221B Con, a fan-focused Sherlockian conference in Atlanta. Liza had initially connected with them while doing research on organizations led by women, primarily for women, while doing research on Ladies that UX [18] and Women in Technical Communication [19]. Liza reached out to one of the founders of a leading Sherlockian podcast called *I Hear of Sherlock Everywhere*, which led to further conversations and more leads as she looked to find board members and learn more about the community. Second, she attended several meetings of Sherlockians (and still participates in these meetings) to learn more about the shared ethos of these different community members. These gatherings have led to informal and formal discussions about the website and the community. Lastly, we regularly attended the meetings of our local Sherlockian group, The Greek Interpreters (<http://thegreekinterpreters.org>), to understand how their meetings worked, how they communicated, and what they looked for in an online resource such as Sherlockian.net.

Second, we needed to implement the kind of technology and design that would work for our internal student-led team and our external community curator team--focusing on ease of use, accessibility, and best practices. As for technology, the simplest choice we could make was to use WordPress as our content management system. This decision was simple because of its availability on our Reclaim Hosting website, but primarily because we knew that WordPress is becoming an industry standard (if it is not already) for managing content and workflow. The availability of plug-ins, templates, and knowledge would be in our favor. That said, WordPress is also a security risk, because of its popularity. Taking on this software meant that we would need to be diligent about patches, updates, and so forth for the software itself and all of the plug-ins. From a people perspective, we knew that our students had some exposure to WordPress, and that our first group of curators were also familiar with WordPress. In order to make design changes easier across so many pages, we used a page builder software called Beaver Builder (<https://www.wpbeaverbuilder.com>) which allowed for WYSIWYG updating. For the design itself, we modified a free template and customized it for our site. We wanted the site to be simple and easy-to-use, which meant that we were looking

for a design style that would avoid flashy fonts, colors, and distracting interactions.

Third, we needed to ensure that this project was appropriate for a team of students new to content strategy, web design, and curation. When our students began this project, most of them did not have experience working on any kind of large-scale web project. They had not worked on websites where there were thousands of links, where they would need to re-architect the entire site based on user and organizational requirements. This project made space for the practical application of their learnings from our courses on content strategy, digital rhetoric, researching experience architecture, information architecture, visual rhetoric, introduction to web authoring, and advanced web authoring courses. It also created new pathways for student learning and success in our Professional Writing Program and our Experience Architecture Program [20]. The Sherlockian project continues to serve as a living lab for faculty to share with students, to show them in real-time how a website can undergo a redesign, putting a content strategy in place.

4 OUR TEAM

Our team is made up of an interdisciplinary internal team at MSU comprised of students, faculty, librarians, and academic specialists. It includes members of our digital humanities community, our Experience Architecture Program, and our professional writing major. These team members include software developers, web designers, visual designers, information architects, writers, editors, and content strategists. Our external team includes a board of directors and expert Sherlockian site curators. These experts include specialists in literature, academic research, content strategy, archives, and the Sherlockian community. Across all of these teams, there is an understanding that we are better together because of our diverse backgrounds and experiences.

Since the site is for the Sherlockian community, it was also essential we included members of the Sherlockian and archiving scholarly communities. By establishing a board of directors, Sherlockian experts who are familiar with the makeup and needs of the wider Sherlockian community across gender, generation, and subgroups (i.e., fans, scholars, writers, literary club members, etc.), our team was able to navigate community feedback and use it to guide the curation of the site. Many of us attended community events, spoke with Sherlockian societies, and engaged Sherlockian scholars on their recent work. With the help of the archiving scholarly communities, we refined our methods of documenting and implementing redesign features through advised best practices and strategies.

5 KEY TAKEAWAYS

While there are many technical and design takeaways for this project, the most important is our focus on managing the

redesign by coordinating our work with internal partners and connecting with outside communities to ensure a Sherlockian-centered site. These key takeaways are meant to inform the experience architectures of participatory curation for communication design researchers, digital humanities scholars, and practitioners.

5.1 Working with internal partners

Internally at our university, we are fortunate to have a forward-thinking college that includes a digital humanities specialist and a technology team ready to support faculty work, as well as several librarians focused on user experience and the digital humanities.

That said, this project was unlike anything we had taken on in recent memory. Sherlockian.net is the first website “gift” that MSU has ever received. Moving the website from Mr. Redmond to MSU necessitated a contract that would legally make this exchange and ensure that the site would be maintained going forward at the university. Explaining the reasons for the contract and the importance of certain caveats was critical to successfully transferring the site and ensuring for its longevity.

We also needed to ensure that this move could happen technically and that it would be supported going forward within the College. This required several meetings to explain the current as-is state of the site and the future plans for the site. We worked to get the new site onto our shared hosting platform at Reclaim Hosting, transfer the URL, create an archive roadmap and pathway for the as-is site, and install a content management system to help us maintain the new site. For advice about contracts, technology tools, and information architecture choices, our team at MSU was buoyed by the expertise in the College, the library, and our Office of the General Counsel.

5.2 Connecting with outside communities

Outside of our university, we needed to make sure that we were working with the Sherlockian community and the Archiving scholarly community. Working with the archiving community of scholars meant doing our research on current practices and connecting with archivists to learn about their work and how it might apply to the work we are doing with our website. Connecting with the Sherlockian community was much more involved and took much larger focus for our purposes.

Within the Sherlockian community, there are those who consider themselves scholars, writers, literary club members, and fans. Although our earlier work [21] looked at the differences between these terms, as well as issues of gender and generation, we knew that we would have to apply these learnings to our interactions with community members. First and foremost, we wanted to create a board of advisors for the site who would help guide us through these differences, helping us make choices about how we would situate the site to support

the wider Sherlockian community. Members of our board come from across the world, but, most importantly, across these differences. Their advice and contacts have helped us navigate and launch a much better site than if we had remained on our own. Second, it remains incredibly important for us to stay connected to this community by attending events, reaching out to members of the community for feedback, and including expert members to help curate our site moving forward.

That last point in particular is a major takeaway for this project. We consider our work at MSU to be the work of caretakers of a cultural heritage website. We include the work of Sherlockian community members and encourage their participation to help maintain sections of the site as curators. This partnership has led to a much richer site, and we hope, community.

5.3 Making space for student experiences

We have a brilliant, engaged student team working with us on this project. From the beginning, we wanted Sherlockian to be a student-led project under the mentorship of our director. Since our department hosts two key majors, experience architecture and professional writing, we constructed the learning experiences, project management, and decision making around the skill sets of these majors. Liza Potts directed the internal team of graduate and undergraduate students, faculty, and academic specialists.

In practice, this means we needed to create roles and responsibilities that allowed students to participate as full members of the writing, design, and development team. For many of the students, Sherlockian.net served as an opportunity to work with their first large-scale, community-engaged web project. Students were able to apply lessons from their courses in content strategy, digital rhetoric, researching experience architecture, information architecture, visual rhetoric, introduction to web authoring, and advanced web authoring. The diverse specialties of the our internal team provided multiple perspectives and strengths toward redesigning a site that's inclusive both in its construction and inclusion of various community audiences.

6 NEXT STEPS

Our work continues on this project. We have three major projects that will get underway this fall with the goals of learning more about our community and how we might continue to curate content for them. This work includes a survey of the community based on learnings from a recent conference panel where we led a participatory design workshop. We are undertaking a complete audit of both the archived site and the new site to ensure that all content is documented fully. Finally, we will continue to examine new ways in which Sherlockian.net can be a welcoming space to newer Sherlockians looking to connect with one another both digitally and in person through meetings, conventions, and

events.

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