docSHIFT INTERACTIVE DOCUMENTARY CASE STUDY:

PINEPOINT.NFB.CA

FEATURED INTERACTIVE PRODUCTION COMPANY: The Goggles

Written by Steven James May

![Welcome to Pine Point](pinepoint.nfb.ca home page, December 2011. Source: pinpoint.nfb.ca)

ABSTRACT

Created by The Goggles and produced by the National Film Board of Canada, this case study strives to account for the international praise and awards bestowed upon the interactive web documentary *Welcome to Pine Point*. **WARNING:** This study includes story spoilers. Experience the documentary first.

PROFILES

The Goggles is a Vancouver-based production company founded by Paul Shoebridge and Michael Simons who together make "one normal human being", according to Paul (personal communication, November 12, 2011). The National Film Board of Canada is the country’s publicly funded “centre for the creation of audiovisual materials” (Canadian Heritage, 2010).
THE CONCEPT

The Goggles set out to create a book about the death of print and ended up with *Welcome to Pine Point*. Paul Shoebridge, one half of The Goggles, describes the project as part book, part film, part website* (personal communication, November 12, 2011). Intrigued by what he and Michael Simons – the other half of The Goggles – observed as the fading status of their generation’s family photo album, Michael stumbled across the story of the erased town of Pine Point, NWT. A place he had visited as a child, Michael learned of the town’s demise by way of the website *Pine Point Revisited* ([http://pinepointrevisited.homestead.com/Pine_Point.html](http://pinepointrevisited.homestead.com/Pine_Point.html)) created and maintained by former Pine Pointer Richard Cloutier.

At the encouragement of a colleague, The Goggles pitched *Welcome to Pine Point* to the Vancouver Office of the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) in 2007 as a stand-alone online story. The NFB liked it. As Loc Dao of the NFB recalls, the National Film Board of Canada worked with The Goggles throughout development to “re-shape the story into an interactive documentary, building on the lessons that the NFB had learned in creating its previous 11 award-winning interactive docs” (L. Dao, personal communication, February 10, 2012).

While the focus of *Welcome to Pine Point* swayed for a period from being a project about Michael’s reflections on Pine Point to more of a documentary about what
happens when economies fail and the impact on hometowns in general, Shoebridge notes that “in the end it came back to being a bit of a hybrid of those two things” (Shoebridge & Simons, 2011).

In terms of visual style, Simons recalls that Rob McLaughlin at the NFB suggested The Goggles bring the same handmade approach used for their previous print projects to Welcome to Pine Point (personal communication, November 12, 2011). Simons recalls how glad he now is that Rob encouraged them use to use that style:

That marrying of tactical representation of things on the Internet, and having real paper, real cut-out things, brought that warmth they (users) were looking for and I think it really complemented the story. (M. Simons, personal communication, November 12, 2011)

As for storytelling structure, rather than opting for the Choose Your Own Adventure approach to creating an interactive digital work, The Goggles chose a more traditional, linear approach. As Paul notes,

(l)if you were to draw the map of how you go through Pine Point, it’s a line that has a beginning, a middle and an end. Along those points, you can go up a bit and down a bit but you never go off into a different line. (P. Shoebridge, personal communication, November 12, 2011)

Michael explains their story structure thought process as follows:

A story’s usually linear. A beginning, middle and end. Why wouldn’t we do it that way, since that’s the way it’s usually done? (Shoebridge & Simons, 2011)

**TIP >>>**

*Have your story and concept on top and don’t let go of that.*
–Michael Simons (personal communication, November 12, 2011)

**TIP >>>**

As traditional storytellers, your skills are suddenly needed. You don’t have to let technology tell you what to do.
–Michael Simons (Shoebridge & Simons, 2011)

**DEVELOPMENT**

Interest in Welcome to Pine Point started to gel at the NFB in early 2008, translating into “Investigate” financing for the project being allocated by the Film Board.

Much of development was spent refining the parameters of the project. As explained
by Michael,

We worked on form for six months on this project. What if they (users) get up and go to the washroom or they’re at work and they can’t listen to it? That’s why that (text) narrative is there. If you just look at that text, you’re fine. But if you wanted to you could listen to it with sound and we think this added a layer. (M. Simons, personal communication, November 12, 2011)

The idea of incorporating “visual footnotes” into the project emerged early on as a way to “deliver in a different voice a second layer of content that helps inform the main voice” (P. Shoebridge, personal communication, November 12, 2011).  As Paul explains,

Some people don’t like to dig through photos. We do. In some cases there were 50 photos. Some people don’t want to watch a music video from the 80s. Some people love it. Some people watched it 20 times. You can’t dictate what kind of content people will like so what we did is we made sure the main story was up top in the text. (P. Shoebridge, personal communication, November 12, 2011)

Paul continues:

(Text) allows for an interesting and distinct arc. There are surprises. When you find out Richard is in a wheelchair, that’s an important part of the story and where you put that is important. If you went with a non-linear, more 3D space, people could skip ahead and find that out before you wanted them to. We felt that viewers like to be guided. It’s kind of a Tour Guide mentality – we pointed things out and allowed people to sit in their own space. You can’t force the thing because you have no idea what they’re going to do. (P. Shoebridge, personal communication, November 12, 2011)

The Goggles also spent development seeking out a suitable programmer for the project. Simons describes the process as being much like a filmmaker seeking out an editor (M. Simons, personal communication, November 12, 2011). The programmer would require an open attitude to taking direction and tweaking the project to deliver pacing and tone, something that a programmer would normally not have to consider. In the end, Vancouver-based mod7 were brought into the project. The final stages of the programming were handled by the NFB’s in-house team.

By the middle of 2008, The Goggles received the first green light from the National Film Board to start production of the project.
PRODUCTION

Michael characterizes the production phase of *Welcome to Pine Point* as a “dance” of pairing existing archival material of Pine Point into the project along with the original artwork created by The Goggles (M. Simons, personal communication, January 10, 2012). While the image quality of the archival photos and videos of Pine Point varied greatly, including low resolution media and third generation copies of documents, The Goggles chose to embrace this aesthetic and build it into the overall look and feel of the final project (M. Simons, personal communication, January 10, 2012). As explained by Michael, the dubbed videos and photocopied documents had an “authenticity to them, an innocent, naive quality” (M. Simons, personal communication, January 10, 2012) that worked well with the tone of the piece.

In total, the production phase of *Welcome to Pine Point* took twelve to fourteen months in addition to three to four months of programming that included edits “right up to end” (M. Simons, personal communication, November 12, 2011). As noted by Paul, “we tried to build a space, with sound and visual and textual elements to pull people in as much as possible by surrounding them with the content” (P. Shoebridge, personal communication, November 12, 2011).

Describing their creative process as something that “comes in waves” (M. Simons, personal communication, January 10, 2012), Paul provides the following example of how chapters of the project typically manifested themselves during production:

> There’s the storyboarding and the script writing and then you have an idea and you’ll talk about it, but it’s a while before it gets manifested in the digital space. For instance, an idea that starts with ‘maybe the bird should fly away with the string’ means, let’s go get the illustrator, storyboard it out, get approval on the sequence, get it illustrated, then bring that to the programmer, communicating pacing and tone, then tweaking that until you’ve driven them crazy. Eight months later, the bird is flapping. It’s definitely not instantaneous. (P. Shoebridge, personal communication, November 12, 2011)

The Goggles approached the production of *Welcome to Pine Point* by asking creative
questions such as “what’s the best way to tell the story of the basement, to tell the story of what the town looks like now?” (P. Shoebridge, personal communication, November 12, 2011). As Paul continues,

We (would) have to come up with things, usually starting from the point we were hoping to make, then looking to the assets we had that might best tell that part of the story. From there, we would add technique, technology or aesthetic to best frame the content. An animation, a pile of photos, a step-by-step walk through the town. All of that’s created in the end. Whatever we thought would be best to tell that part of the story. (P. Shoebridge, personal communication, November 12, 2011)

Programming challenges encountered during production included The Goggles being told flat out at one point by a programmer that displaying multiple videos sources playing independently on one page was simply “not possible” (Shoebridge & Simons, 2011). Paul and Michael then had to work with their programming team to find a creative work around that fit within the limits of the software but still delivered the intent successfully (Shoebridge & Simons, 2011). Though they started working from locked design maps, by the end of the project the programmers at mod7 had gone through eight to ten passes of the project with The Goggles to tweak the project’s pacing, emotion and tonality (M. Simons, personal communication, January 10, 2012).

While Social Media often has a strong presence within interactive web documentary projects, in terms of building extensive sharing options in to the project, Michael notes that it “might have been more of a distraction because of all of a sudden you’re breaking the spell” (M. Simons, personal communication, November 12, 2011). As noted by Michael, what The Goggles didn’t want was to make a project “with a certain type of interactivity and then say, what movie can we make?”, preferring instead to “stick with the story and then see what is available” (M. Simons, personal communication, November 12,2011).

Much of the success of Welcome to Pine Point comes down to the extraordinary
creative relationship between Paul and Michael. The two have worked together for over a dozen years and have achieved a creative mind meld of sorts. As Paul explains,

We have a kind of openness with each other which from the outside might just look abusive more than anything else...we’re able to push each other’s ideas around where it’s kind of fun and friendly but still make the idea bigger and better hopefully. It’s hard to involve a third person or anybody else for that matter. That’s what’s worked for us. That’s how we fell in love. (P. Shoebridge, personal communication, November 12, 2011)

References


CREATOR’S TIP SHEET SUMMARY

1. Have your story and concept on top and don’t let go of that.

2. As traditional storytellers, your skills are suddenly needed. You don’t have to let technology tell you what to do.

3. We always tend to push back on the robot. We turn off extra interactivity, if we can.

4. If techniques don’t stick or make sense then don’t employ those devices, no matter how tempting they are.

THANK YOU TO PAUL SHOEBRIDGE, MICHAEL SIMONS, JENNIFER MAIR, LOC DAO AND MARCO AVOLIO FOR THE INTERVIEWS, INFORMATION AND MEDIA. THIS CASE STUDY IS DEDICATED TO GLORIA THE DOG WHO PASSED AWAY ON NOVEMBER 12, 2011.
APPENDIX A:

EXTENDED STATISTICS

PROJECT PARTNERS/FUNDERS/SPONSORS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>At what stage did they come onboard?</th>
<th>What did they contribute?</th>
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<tr>
<td>NFB</td>
<td>Development</td>
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PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT TIMELINE

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<td>Production/</td>
<td>Soft Launch</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members</td>
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- Development - July 2007
- Pitch - January 2008
- Production - June 2008
- Beta testing - August 2009
- Soft launch - November 2009
- Deployment - January 2010

PRODUCTION NOTES

- Crew members: 15.
- Cameras: 2.
- Types of camera: Canon 5D Mark II.

TECHNICAL NOTES:


AUDIENCE METRICS (AS OF FEB. 13, 2012. SOURCE: NFB)

- Total unique visitors: 133,171
- Total Visitors: 150,423
- Average time on site: 9 minutes 51 seconds
APPENDIX B:
WELCOME TO PINE POINT CREDITS

CREDITS

CREATORS: PAUL SHOEBRIDGE, MICHAEL SIMONS

DESIGN: MICHAEL SIMONS, PAUL SHOEBRIDGE

FLASH DEVELOPMENT: MOD7, VINCENT MCCURLEY

PRODUCER: ROB MCLAUGHLIN

AWARDS (2011)

• 2 WEBBY AWARDS (NETART AND DOCUMENTARY: INDIVIDUAL EPISODE)
• IDFA DOCLAB OFFICIAL SELECTION (AMSTERDAM)
• ROOFTOP FILM FESTIVAL OFFICIAL SELECTION (NEW YORK)
• WINNER, SHEFFIELD DOC FEST (UK)
• SHORT FILM OF THE WEEK. NEW YORK
• VERY SHORT LIST
• DOPE AWARD
• DOXA DOCUMENTARY FILM FESTIVAL (VANCOUVER)
• WINNER BANFF WORLD MEDIA FESTIVAL
• WINNER NEW YORK FESTIVAL (INTERACTIVE)
• WINNER BALLERIA FILM FESTIVAL (ITALY)
• FWA SITE OF THE DAY
• COMMUNICATION ARTS SITE OF THE DAY
• WINNER FITC AWARDS (BEST NARRATIVE)
• WINNER DIGI AWARDS (BEST WEB SERIES)
• DESIGN LICKS SITE OF THE DAY