

/profile

Jason Santa Maria

The creative director of Happy Cog Studios, Jason Santa Maria is a man of eclectic design pursuits. He talks to Oliver Lindberg about getting his hands dirty, upsetting clients, and how website builders can learn from the world of print design



Jason Santa Maria

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Company Happy Cog Studios
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.net: In the blog post explaining your site's redesign you call for more art direction on the web. How do you achieve this and what are the main challenges involved?
JSM: I gave a talk in New Zealand earlier this year about storytelling online. In it, I attempted to explore the nature of print and web design media, to debunk the notion that good design doesn't happen online. While writing the talk, I got the itch to start experimenting with ideas of how to capture the good things we've learned from centuries of print design and incorporate them into the site.

The biggest challenges have turned out to be time and technology. We take the amount of control we have in print design for granted. That same amount of capability just isn't present online, so the notion of designing for content is a thorny one. Plus it can be a time sink, because you not only have to design something but make it work as well, which can require lots of testing and recoding. The way I've tackled it is by creating a simple

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system of CSS hooks to enable the quick layout of text and images, rather than the typical float left or right set-up. I've also created a set for more design intensive capabilities such as swapping colours, typefaces and page structure.

.net: What were your main considerations when you tackled the redesign, or 'rethink' as you call it?

JSM: I wanted to design around the content I write so that the design could support and enhance the story being told. Everything I write doesn't need to look different, but the capability is there.

One of the biggest hurdles was finding ways to make this all happen in a timely fashion. I've stressed speed and flexibility in my process for designing entries, so I can test how this might work under real-world publishing schedules. Hopefully by researching some alternatives to the inherent problems with templates, I can eventually bring the findings into my work for clients.

.net: Why did you decide to put your portfolio back online?

JSM: The truth is that I had to take it down years ago because of some unhappy clients. My portfolio entries were showing up higher in Google than the websites I designed. The clients complained to my previous employer, so my employer asked me to take them down.

Since then, I've always been upfront with clients about my desire to show and write about the work I do for them. It's just taken me a while to build up enough work to bring my portfolio back online. I think one of the best things about collecting your work is that it helps you reflect on your accomplishments and failures. It also helps you gain perspective for future projects.

.net: The portfolio shows several project types: websites, identity, letterpress and print. Is there one you enjoy most?

JSM: It varies. I love working on websites, but it's inspiring to get away from the computer and get my hands dirty with some letterpress printing. It's a great chance to slow things down and consider the process. You have to contend with real objects and physical constraints to make a piece work. Presses

jam, ink spills, fumes get inhaled and you sweat over details that you're never exposed to on the computer. But after all that you end up with this amazing hand-crafted thing. It's gratifying as hell.

.net: One of the features in this issue is about the problem of other people stealing your designs (see page 48). How often has your work been ripped off and what do you do about it?

JSM: I used to keep screenshots and URLs of sites that ripped off my work, but it got tedious. I remember getting really angry about it the first time, like it was some huge amoral action, and I wrote a big blog post about it. After that I realised it's not something I need to get upset about. Sadly, the bulk of people still think that if it's on the internet, it's free for the taking.

I've always believed that one of my jobs as a designer is to educate people about the value of design. Rather than outing the rip-off sites publicly, I send a polite email to the owner and ask them to take it down. Along the way I usually manage to slip in a bit of advice or try to offer some helpful design resources.

.net: Where do you get your inspiration from?

JSM: For me, inspiration is easy, but motivation is tougher. I get fiercely inspired by print design, specifically editorial and book design. Just walking through a library makes me want to draw for days on end. On the other hand, my creative process is a rollercoaster of determination, self-doubt, sweat and procrastination.

.net: What's the best piece of advice you ever got that influenced your design work?

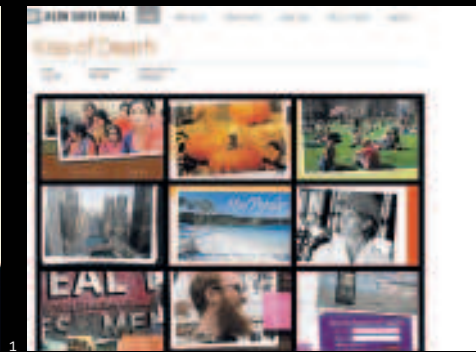
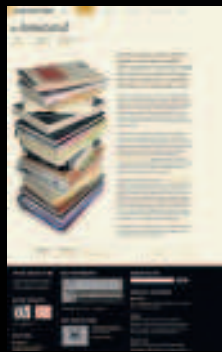
JSM: Don't be afraid to say no to a client. You're not a pair of hands. Stand up for your work.

.net: If web designers were only going to buy one new book this year, which one should it be?

JSM: Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*. It's thoroughly insightful, with concepts that can be applied to many different creative pursuits.

.net: Which project have you enjoyed most so far in your career and why?

JSM: A few years ago, Happy Cog worked with Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, an organisation involved in the preservation and promotion of traditional Irish music. We met with them a few times in Dublin and each time we came back we were inspired by the romance of it all. These people love their music and heritage so much that you can't help but get swept up in it. It makes you want to spread the word so that everyone can feel what the music makes you feel. ●



(1-3) The current version of my site is a bit of an experiment in online publishing. I've devised a system for layout in my articles, enabling me to art direct the things I write quickly and flexibly. (jasonsantamaria.com). (4-5) We redesigned A List Apart (www.alistapart.com) in 2005 to portray the magazine's quality of content and literary tones. Each article is lovingly illustrated by Kevin Cornell.

(6) These are personal business cards that I designed and letterpress printed myself. There are eight variations, cut from a larger sheet with a big print of my first name on it. As they're cut down, the eight cards have a different abstract portion of a letter on them. (7) The WordPress logo references publishing concepts such as wax seals and typewriter keys while still feeling modern. One of the goals for the project

was to have a standalone mark to be used on promo materials. (8) This wrapping paper was created as part of a promotion for the AIGA (American Institute for Graphic Arts) to raise funds at a benefit auction. The paper portrays favourite holiday recipes from my family, as well as some traditional Italian spirits. (9) We sought to provide the AIGA with a good groundwork to build on, bringing their website up

to current expectations but highlighting the breadth of editorial content and the archives of design dating back to 1979 (www.aiga.org). (10) The Magnolia logo is a simple and elegant mark, consciously made different to the current Web 2.0 logos in order to stand out. (11) The redesign for the Happy Cog website (www.happycog.com) came directly out of what we do. We aim to work within just a

few specialities – design, content and code. With this in mind, we sought to create an interface so simple that our mission statement could serve as our navigation, essentially practising what we preach. (12) Smartypig is a new kind of savings bank that enables you to open an account, establish goals, and let friends and family contribute. The site is light-hearted, colourful and fun. (www.smartypig.com).

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