

Colored Narratives

Usability Testing Report

Colored Narratives



This project is an experiment in online rhetorical practices. I have studied how multimedia influences narrative--narratives may be purely textual, aural, visual, or unique hybrids. I am using this concept of the narrative to explore the idea that user experience/user perception can become narratives in their own right. The variable I am using to alter user experience is color.

Click on any one of the movie thumbnails above to view them.

If you have already viewed the films, you may jump directly to these pages:

- ◆ [Blue Stories](#)
- ◆ [Red Stories](#)
- ◆ [Green Stories](#)
- ◆ [Black and White Stories](#)

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May 14, 2007

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Executive Summary

Audience

The site Colored Narratives, an online experiment of sorts for me (the moderator), is geared toward users who share an interest in experiential media. As it is not a site intended for corporate advertisement or specialized information, the ecology of users consists of casual web browsers who might happen upon my web portfolio; more specifically, users who experience the most fulfillment out of this site are those who have backgrounds in rhetoric and/or interactive multimedia.

Overall Design and Functionality

The usability testers in this study appreciated the simplicity of the layout as it gave more precedence to the movies and, therefore, allowed the user a more unbiased, open experience when navigating through the site. Both users emphasized the need for a site section that displayed comments and user-submitted responses to the site.

Structure and Navigation

Both users made very constructive comments about the navigation/site structure. I was able to incorporate all of User 1's comments and am in process of incorporating User 2's comments on smaller technical issues (such as links that are not easily discernable). Both users felt the main navigation system, a color wheel, was simple yet effective for both functionality and for conveying the importance of color in my site.

General Conclusions

User comments were, overall, geared toward making the site more inviting to the casual web browser. The usability testers also focused on whether the site effectively executed the concept I set out to illustrate—that user experience can create unique narratives using color as the only variation.

User 1's and User 2's primary suggestions for the site include:

1. Use/keep a colorwheel for navigation
2. Include/keep explanatory text to draw users into the site
3. Keep the effective video and image clips (the ones that don't betray strong emotion)
4. Make the user-submitted story links more apparent/eye-catching
5. Include a site section that posts users' general comments about the site.

Suggestions 1-3 have been implemented. The last two suggestions are undergoing current implementation in a future version of the site. The following section, Usability Test Findings, illustrates the results of usability tests on the site.

Usability Test Findings

Since Colored Narratives is an experimental, multimedia website, usability tests focused on mood and effective execution of concept as much as basic web navigation. Testers were told that the premise of this site was to test online narrative experience using color as a variable: a video would be presented in different color tints in order to alter the user's interpretation of the video narrative. The following topics were emphasized during user testing:

1. Effectiveness of chosen media in executing the site's concepts
2. Effectiveness/ease/appropriateness of navigation
3. Effectiveness of site in drawing in user interest
4. Technical execution

The following subsections detail feedback for each of these topics from two users who conducted usability testing: User 1, a Technical Writer/Editor, and User 2, a Multimedia Developer/Promotions Marketer. Both users match the top two user profiles outlined in the User Matrix (see Appendix A for more information).

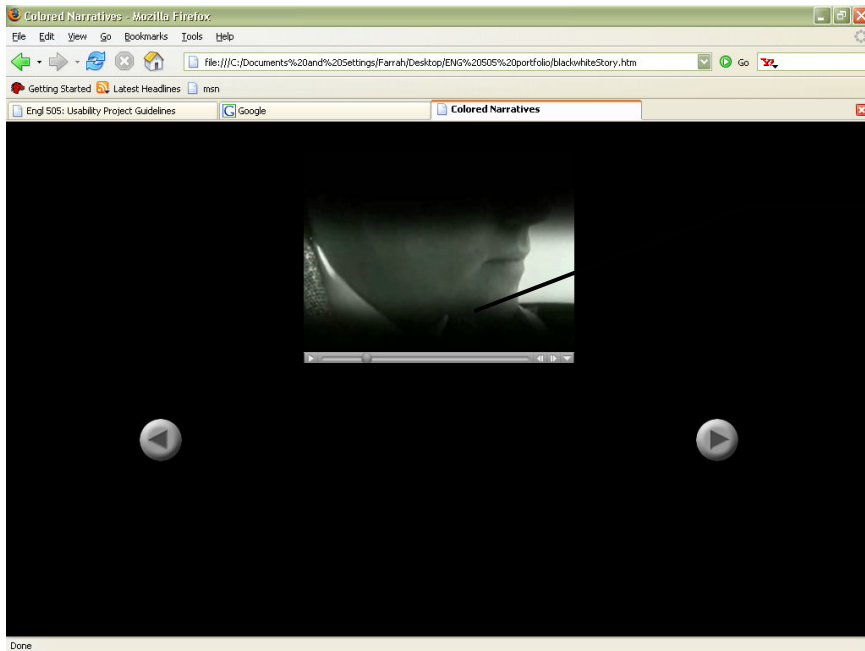
1. Effectiveness of Chosen Media

Both User 1 and User 2 appreciated the selection of images and video clips for the site and felt that most of the selections effectively maintained ambiguity in order to better allow the color to affect the user. User 1, who reviewed an earlier version of the site, advised against using images where the character or motions betrayed too much emotion (for instance, do not include a person yelling or running briskly away).



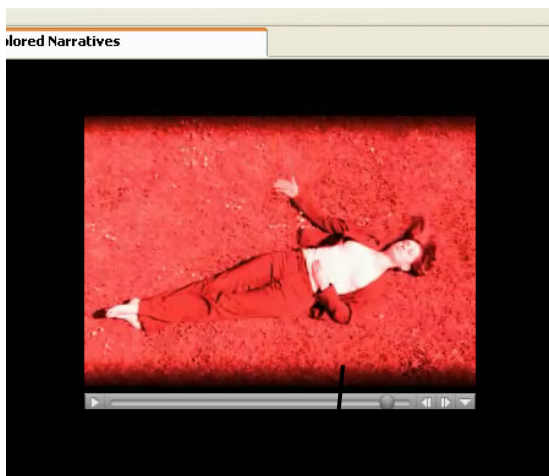
This image was removed from the draft site after User 1's feedback

User 2, who reviewed a later version of the site, noted that at first the screen gradients used on some scenes was a bit jarring at first, but after a second viewing she said she enjoyed the mystery and ambiguity they imparted.



Gradients used to mask emotional eyes

Both User 2 and User 1 stated that the girl lying down on the grass was their favorite scene—the color tinting on such a “passive” image resulted in interpretations that carried great weight and meaning.



Said to appear dead or murdered

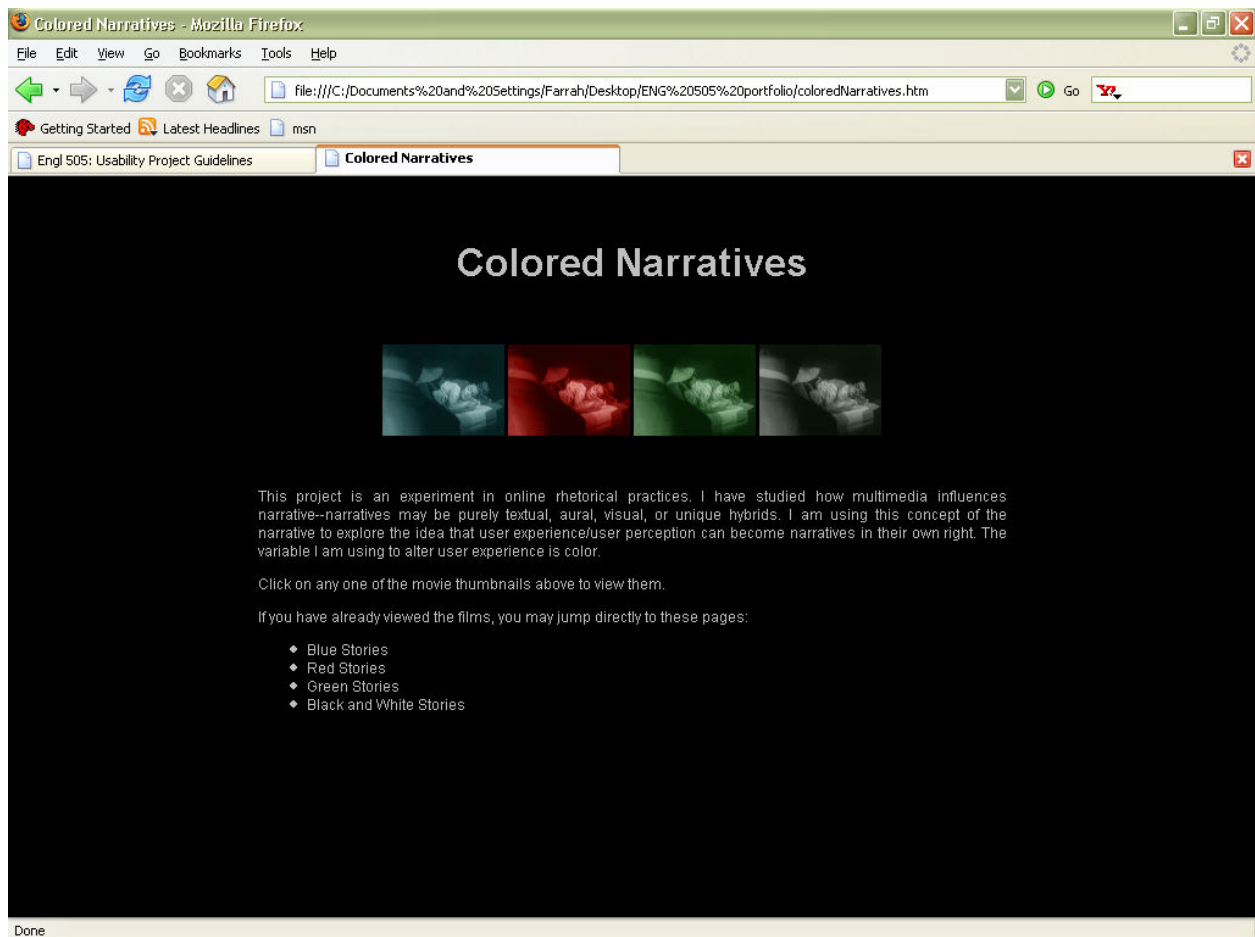


Said to appear calm or relaxed

2. Effectiveness/Ease/Appropriateness of Navigation

User 1 reviewed the site when it did not have a set navigation system in place. In the Usability Testing Form, she stated that she would like to see some sort of color wheel or tinted thumbnails that previewed the movie clips. This way, the user would know for certain that the site's emphasis was on color choice. User 1 also noted that repeating this color wheel on the conclusory page would enable the user to easily backtrack to another video (or the same video clip).

User 2 reviewed the site after I implemented User 1's suggestions. User 2 stated that this navigation anchor, provided on the introduction and conclusory pages, was effective in communicating what the user was to expect within the site. Both User 1 and User 2 remarked upon the appropriateness and ease-of-use of the "what-you-see-is-what-you-get" aspect of this main navigation system.

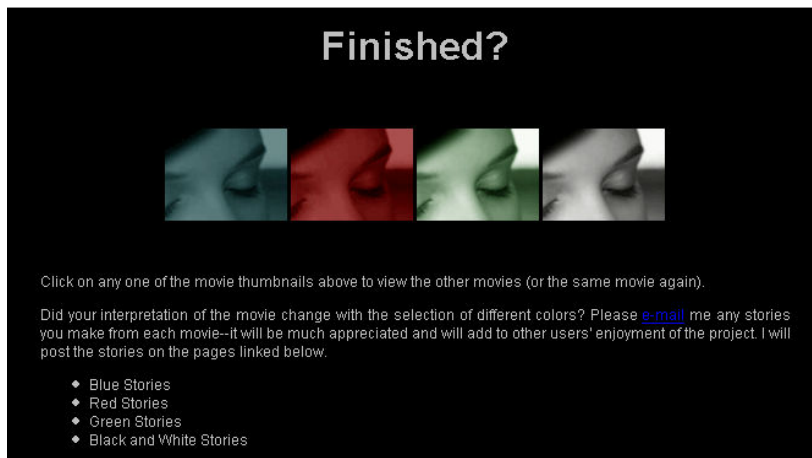


3. Effectiveness in Drawing User Interest

The initial site draft featured no text on the conclusion or introductory pages *except* for a title. User 1 suggested the addition of text pulled directly from the Usability Test Forms in order to give the user a reason—an invitation—to start clicking around in the site.

User 2 reviewed the site after implementation of User 1's suggestion. User 2 felt that the introductory and conclusory texts were fine and needed no further clarification or tweaking. The brief paragraphs gave her all she needed to know in order to enjoy the site.

User 2 did mention that the links to user-submitted stories should be presented in a more pronounced way to indicate that they are hypertext links without the need to rollover. This issue shall be addressed in the next version of the site.



Tough to tell that these are links

4. Technical execution

User 2 commented that the autoplay ability attached to the embedded videos was effective. In accordance with User 1's request, video controls (stop/pause/rewind/forward) have been included in the site and shall remain in future versions. User 2 pointed out some minor fixes that need to be made to the video clips themselves (the use of a fade and one change of scene transition). These minor fixes shall be made in the next version of the site.

Conclusion

User 1's and User 2's suggestions proved invaluable. User 1's following suggestions

6. Use a colorwheel for navigation
7. Include explanatory text to draw users into the site
8. Avoid characters that exhibit heavy emotion
9. Include video controls in the site

Have since been implemented and improved the site's ease of access, usability, and effectiveness in communicating its concepts. User 2's following suggestions

1. Fix a few transitions so the video flows better
2. Make the user-submitted story links more apparent
3. Fix the pacing of the scene where the man walks into a woman's bedroom to improve the flow of the video

Both User 1 and User 2 recommended adding a link to post users' comments about the site in general. This suggestion will also be implemented in the next version of the site.

Appendix A - User Matrix

The five types of users who might use this site:

1. A person who studies rhetoric and how online rhetoric in particular applies to the idea of the narrative
2. A person whose background is in multimedia and has an interest in media's effects on user experience
3. A potential employer who is interested viewing my repertoire of skills as demonstrated in my web portfolio
4. A person interested in color and mood theory
5. A casual web browser who happens upon the site

	User 1 (rhetoric background)	User 2 (multimedia background)
Experience with computers	Ranges from little to advanced	Typically advanced
Reason most interested in site	Interested in the hands-on application of rhetorical theory	Interested in how well an idea is executed in multimedia form
Error sensitivity	Most likely to point out flaws in concept logic, flaws in language use, and navigation difficulties	Most likely to point out flaws in multimedia technicalities
Computer equipment at hand	Ranges from older technology to newer	Typically in possession of newer technology and softwares

Appendix B – Moderator’s Guide and Usability Test Forms

Colored Narratives

Usability Testing Form 1

User’s Name: User 1 [Technical Writer/Editor]

Time: during early “beta” version of project

Hello,

If you are holding this sheet of paper, that means I have asked you to conduct a review of the multimedia project I am undertaking for my graduate studies. You’re doing me a tremendous favor and I appreciate the time you are taking to give me your feedback.

Background of Project

This project is in flux at the moment, but the gist of it is that it’s an experiment in online rhetorical practices. The computer publishing class I am taking right now has discussed how narratives can be textual or a hybrid of text and multimedia, or even just audio and video without text. I am using this project to take the idea of the narrative a step further—I want to explore the idea that user experience/user perception can become a narrative in its own right. This project is essentially a study of the rhetorical impact of html media on narratives displayed on the web.

Getting Started

The variable I am using to alter user experience is color. Your direct task will involve selecting one color. Your indirect task will be to interpret the resulting movies and images you see that will be filtered with your chosen color.

As you “navigate” through the multimedia site, comment on things you’d like to see or volunteer any suggestions you may have. In fact, I’d like you to actually think out loud as you go through the project. The more you talk, the more information I have to improve the project, and the more helpful you become. Please feel free to stop me and ask questions any time.

To begin, navigate to <http://mason.gmu.edu/~fdang/coloredNarratives.htm>.

Evaluating the Site

1. What did you expect to see upon entry into this project—or, what would you like to see?

Expecting a color wheel with more colors—add two more “color” choices like black and white, and green

2. The site thus far is very minimal and contains no introductory/conclusory text. If I included one, what do you think it should say, keeping in mind that I need to omit/hide as much of my personal interpretation of the movies as possible?

For Introduction: Use the explanatory text from the usability test and invite the user to choose a color

For Conclusion: include a link at the end to a brief survey or to e-mail responses, asking users what their version of the story for these films are. Post submitted stories under separate pages (that are linked through this project's site). Also include a place for general user comments.

3. What images/movie clips were the most effective to you in constructing the narrative, and why? What other kinds of clips might you suggest to make the narrative more meaningful?

The sky especially creates meaning, connecting the images of the woman to the man. It allows for contemplation...the sky being heaven, the woman thinking of the dead man [tester's note: this comment was made when only the black and white movie was available for testing.]

4. What did the function of color selection make you consider about the process of narrative interpretation?

Need more color choices—orange, yellow, green, maybe sepia. At the very least, include green and a black & white version in addition to blue and yellow movies.

5. What was your overall impression of the project? What personal changes would you like to see made?

Don't add any emotional faces.

Need ability to rewind the video or view it again.

Add a place to comment on the project.

No words necessary at all.

Colored Narratives

Usability Testing Form 2

User's Name: User 2 [Multimedia Developer/ Public Relations]

Time: during the final version of project

Hello,

If you are holding this sheet of paper, that means I have asked you to conduct a review of the multimedia project I am undertaking for my graduate studies. You're doing me a tremendous favor and I appreciate the time you are taking to give me your feedback.

Background of Project

This project is in flux at the moment, but the gist of it is that it's an experiment in online rhetorical practices. The computer publishing class I am taking right now has discussed how narratives can be textual or a hybrid of text and multimedia, or even just audio and video without text. I am using this project to take the idea of the narrative a step further—I want to explore the idea that user experience/user perception can become a narrative in its own right. This project is essentially a study of the rhetorical impact of html media on narratives displayed on the web.

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To begin, navigate to <http://mason.gmu.edu/~fdang/coloredNarratives.htm>.

Evaluating the Site

1. How do you feel about the Introduction page? Is it clear enough, just the right amount of text, or too much explanation? What about the site's navigation?

Just right amount of explanation. It's very clear and makes sense. The navigation is perfect. Don't need to do anything to it. Actually, I thought the movie page would automatically go to the Conclusion section. But it still works.

2. Which movie clips were most effective to you?

The hands dipping into sink. The white space there is nice. The white space in the other part of the movie [where the man walks out of the corridor] is awkward—that's the only clip I'd change. The scene with the woman lying in the grass is also effective.

3. How was the pacing of the movie to you?

It's fine—the only part I'd change is [the scene where the man walks in on the sleeping woman]. Make the fades/cuts faster, like in time to a beating heart. The eyes opening and closing are really nice. The [movie]autostart function is good.

4. What did the function of color selection make you consider about the process of narrative interpretation?

The colors work well—it's a really good idea and you did it well. My favorite is the woman lying down—in the green movie, it's calm, it looks like she's relaxing, but in the red movie, really bold color, it looks like she's dead.

5. What was your overall impression of the project? What personal changes would you like to see made?

Add some text on the last page saying Please e-mail me your answers/stories/general comments.

The explanation text is good, don't need to do anything to it.

The story links at the bottom of the page should probably be another color or indicate, without rolling over, that they are links.

Appendix C – User Profiles

User 1

User 1 is a technical writer/editor currently enrolled in George Mason University's Professional Writing and Editing master's program. She is experienced with computers and has developed her own web portfolio site. She does not have prior experience with the moderator's works.

User 1 tested the site when it was still primarily a rough draft. User 1 made many constructive comments about navigation and the need to draw the casual web surfer into the site. User 1 enjoyed the execution of the concept behind the site. User 1 also placed a large emphasis on having a site section for user comments.

User 2

User 2 is a multimedia designer/promotions marketer employed at the same company as the moderator. User 2 is a graduate of George Mason University, holding a B.A. degree in communications. She is very experienced with computers and has had prior exposure to the moderator's works.

User 2 tested the site after many of User 1's suggestions were implemented. User 2 made more comments about technical glitches she found (such as awkward video transitions). User 2 also enjoyed the execution of the concept behind the site and felt that the images and film clips used were very effective. Like User 1, User 2 suggested another section for general user comments on the site.