

[Excerpts from] The Whys and Wherefores of the 3rd *Kairos* Design

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Design as Rhetoric: A Design History of *Kairos*

When *Kairos* launched in January of 1996, it was clear that the design reflected the possibilities and affordances of the Web at that time. The original editors wanted readers to immediately see that the journal published webtexts rather than traditional print articles and that the journal explicitly valued design as an integral element of argumentation for digital rhetoric. But we neither had a good sense of accessibility nor of standards, which were to become a pressing issue for web designers and users.

In 1999, the first major redesign of the journal (beginning with issue 4.1) eliminated frames from the top-level navigation and content pages and established a cleaner, brighter look. The only frames in this design were used in the branding, in the form of a "binder" that ran along the left side of each published webtext and indicated the volume, issue, and a link back to the journal's home page. Soon it became clear that the binder limited accessibility (and cite-ability) of webtexts in the journal. We knew what improvements we wanted—(1) to include metadata in the design specs, (2) to remove frames altogether, (3) to provide tools for readers and writers, (4) to maintain an open design space for authors—but struggled to find volunteers who could implement these standards, so the design lingered until now.

Redesign Features

The new *Kairos* design is more accessible than ever to adaptive technologies: Its structural use of XHTML will work seamlessly with screen readers, like JAWS, just as it will with Braille readers. And because search engines rely on the same clean structure that adaptive technologies do, *Kairos's* findability should see a marked improvement. This attention to open standards, accessibility, cross-browser and cross-platform compatibility makes *Kairos* a leading example among online journals.

The most important parts of the journal are still its author-designed webtexts, which are now more explicitly acknowledged by the clickable thumbnail images on the issue table of contents. But perhaps the feature of the redesign that we are most proud of is the branding of *Kairos* webtexts through the new reader toolbar, which replaces the frame-based "binder." The toolbar needed to be easily added to webtexts, and work with the range of content—from Flash movies to basic HTML pages—that comprise *Kairos* webtexts. We also wanted the toolbar to provide readers with a standard citation for the webtext being viewed. Mousing over the logo reveals the journal's name and current issue, with links to both the journal home page and the current issue's Table of Contents. Coupled with our development of a metadata scheme based on Dublin Core, the toolbar is one of the best new reader-features of the journal.

Anticipating (and Making) the Future

While we are proud of the redesign, we urge *Kairos's* readers to view it not as a finished project, but as a marker or a pause within a larger series of changes that will continue indefinitely into the journal's future. Although we will continue to discover bugs and shortcomings that will have to be addressed, our view of the redesign falls squarely within the *Kairos* ethos of tirelessly working to move the important areas of digital rhetoric, technology, and pedagogy forward within our field. We want the journal to reflect best practices in design at any given moment: This alone, we hope, will inspire others to see digital production as always a moving target. No one ever fully learns or implements best practices because those practices shift over time. We are already at work on more improvements for the coming years, including switching from static XHTML to a dynamic PHP-based system that will provide better interactivity for readers, but also an improved behind-the-scenes functionality for authors to submit work and for the journal's staff to edit that work. We hope that you will share your views—positive and negative—as the redesign of *Kairos* continues to emerge.