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Dan Vlahos
19 March 2021
New England Regional Developers, 2021 NERD Summit

The Praxis Management Document:
A Case Study of Three Personal Uses
Cases

Hello everyone. Thank you for attending this talk and thank you to the organizers of the 2021 NERD Summit for inviting me to participate for once again this year. In particular I would like to thank Kelly Albrecht and Rick Hood who did a fantastic job organizing this year's Summit. Today I will be sharing a project that is very fresh—in fact it just launched a day or two ago. In this presentation “The Praxis Management Document” I will present a case study which is largely centered around three personal uses cases. Along the way I will share some contextual research, influential ideas, tools and approaches that helped shape the project.

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The Praxis Management Document:
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1. Introduction
2. Project Background
3. 10 Things to Know
4. Q+A (15 minutes)

A brief introduction. My name is Dan Vlahos and I'm an Assistant Professor of Graphic Design at Merrimack College. For over 20 years I've worked as an interdisciplinary designer, artist and design researcher. My work varies quite widely in scale and medium—from the architectural to the virtual. In 2017 I graduated from MassArt's Dynamic Media Institute MFA in Program in Design. Around that time I also accepted my first full-time Professorship while simultaneously operating a Boston-based interdisciplinary design studio. The project I'm sharing today in many ways first started when I was asked to design an intranet portal for an architecture firm many years ago—and like any crazy idea it just evolved from there. Today I'll give a little background information on the project, and will share 10 interesting things about it while answering any questions that folks might have along the way.

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Three Use Cases for “Knoller”

1. A Website for Tenure
2. A Customizable Startpage
3. A “Dynamic Media Playground”

As I entered the summer of 2020 there were primarily three use cases that I had in mind for my refreshed [personal website](#). Any designer can tell you though—one of the toughest clients to work with is actually yourself. The previous version of my website was primarily designed to attract new freelance clients, junior designers and design partners. But my new focus on academia shifted the needs for the site entirely—as a tenure track faculty member—those who will soon be reviewing my site and evaluating my “work” would love to see more than just projects. This might include writing, presentations, videos, and more. So in August of 2020 I reached out to Spencer Sherman and his team at [Facta Studio](#). And with their help I narrowed the focus down to these three things: 1) A Website for Tenure 2) A Customizable Startpage and 3) A Dynamic Media Playground. Quite honestly, some studios would not have had the patience to deal with a “non-typical” client like myself, but Spencer and his team at Facta were willing to hear me out on this, and so it began. I believe Spencer is here with us today and I will pull him in at certain points in the conversation—or feel free to put questions for him or me in the chat. Syed Umar the amazingly talented developer on the project should be on the line as well.

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10 Things to Know

As to stay focused I've organized my talk into 10 broad themes. Feel free to ask questions along the way or for folks who helped out free to chime in. Let's begin.

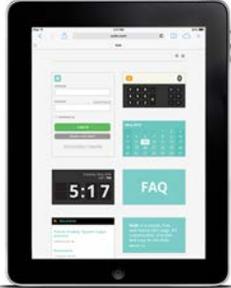
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Nollr.com (based on "Knolling")



On the right is shot of Nollr.com, and experimental startpage designed and launched by my brother Jeff Vlahos and I around 2012. The year before, while working at the Boston-based architecture firm Shepley Bulfinch, the director of IT asked if I would design an internal startpage for the employees (mostly architects) of the firm—basically a page with links to webmail, our intranet, project management software etc. Somehow I got quite carried with the idea, and with the help of Jeff and others, in my free time I ended up developing a whole responsive web application based on the idea of *Knolling* (which I will define later in the talk). While the site attracted thousands of users, sustaining it became a quite a chore. Jeff and I wound the the Nollr project down in 2019—but there were some components and ideas that, at some point we very much hoped to recycle.

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Always Be Knolling



So at right is a four step guide to “knolling” which is a relatively obscure term which describes the act of “grouping and arranging objects.” As far as we know the first person to “knoll” was Andrew Kromelow, a janitor at the now famous architect Frank Gehry’s furniture store in Los Angeles. At the time, Gehry was designing for the American modern furniture brand Knoll, a design house whose furniture was known for its angular forms. At the end of his work days, Kromelow would go through the store and find any tools that had been left out. He would then rearrange the tools on a flat surface so they were at right angles to one another. He called this act *knolling*. He invented this term because it reminded him of the angles in Florence Knoll’s furniture pieces. And thus Sachs popularized—or at least made known—the expression *always be knolling*.

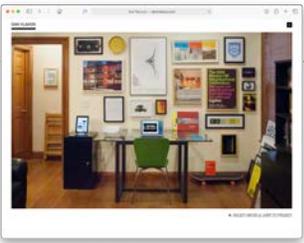
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My Previous Website



On this slide is a screenshot of my previous website which was first launched in 2014—it was a quite simple idea actually, and a rather fun concept. I physically framed a bunch of my much of work, mounted it on my studio wall, photographed it and then, with the help of my brother Jeff used the photo as the main image on my homepage. We coded the page such that the user could hover over a work, which would then highlight it—and then the user could select it to learn more about the project. The website helped me launch a successful studio practice which continues to this day. However, about four years ago, the space that was my old studio seen on the website in Boston was renovated into a bedroom for my six year son Miles—and there were other issues. When I wanted to add new projects I actually resorted to digitally stripping them into the shot digitally using Photoshop. The problem was that I had dozens of new projects to show and there was no more room to show them in this format. I needed a more flexible solution.

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1 + 1 = 3



In the summer of 2020 I began chipping away at the idea of merging some of the ideas from Nollr with the needs I sought in a new website. Again, as a tenure track Professor teaching design I wondered if the site could in some way allow me to showcase other kinds of work as well—writing and research, videos and perhaps later on student work as well.

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You are not alone.



On the right is the website of my dear design colleague from MassArt, Professor Martha Rettig. Rettig is also a graduate of the Dynamic Media Institute and like myself is both a teacher, researcher and practitioner. And yet her website is in many ways similar to my own previous site—it *provides the information* but it provides little control to the visitor to find exactly what they want to see. There's no sorting, filtering, or ordering—and little hierarchy beyond the project image and the title. This format is extremely common in the design world. Many a designer have their work lost in a sea of Adobe Behance pages. And soon the questions continued to mount. Professor Rettig and I both hold advanced degrees in Dynamic Media, and yet why are our websites so very static? Are there not better tools or templates that we could build upon? If users prefer sorting and filtering results on shopping sites why don't I provide my visitors with the same benefits.

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Editorial and E-commerce.

On the left is a screen shot of the Boston Globe website, which as many of you know is viewed as one of the first large-scale implementations of responsive design anywhere. The site was designed in 2011 by the Boston-based studio Upstatement, in a collaboration with Filament Group and Ethan Marcotte, whom as you are likely well aware—was a prominent leader of the responsive design movement. As an aside, and perhaps as luck would have it, my brother Jeff started an internship at UpStatment around the same time they were working on this site. And as another aside Jeff “gambled” and left UpStatment to join the Boston-based startup PillPack in 2015 which was purchased by Amazon in 2018. Alas I digress. As I began to formulate a design approach for my new site I really focused design tropes from the worlds of editorial and e-commerce design—the media flexibility and captioning of editorial paired with the utility of e-commerce. A “shopping site for ideas” if you will.

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The “Career Management Document”

On the left is a screenshot of Jessica Ivins’ 2019 article [An Essential Tool for Capturing Your Career Accomplishments](#) which was published on *A List Apart*, which is as many of you know is a website for people who make websites. In the article she describes the idea of a “Career Management Document” or what in detail she defines as “a comprehensive collection of your résumé and portfolio content.” And on the right is Daniel H. Pink’s groundbreaking book *A Whole New Mind* from 2005. In his book Pink argued that the 21st-century belongs to a different kind of person, with a different kind of mind: artists, inventors, storytellers-creative and holistic “right-brain” thinkers. Fortunately, for creative folks like me Pink’s research has, in my view quickly become a reality. Both design and creative thinking are now being added to the curricula in leading Master’s of Business programs. Building on several of Jessica Ivins’ points in her *A List Apart* article the old school concept of a resume is far too static for a workforce that is increasingly project-based, nimble and creative.

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Praxis

Let’s talk about praxis. On the right of the slide is a screenshot of my new homepage. A sortable and filterable mix of spaces, books, products, graphics, research, videos, ideas and initiatives. So what is praxis? Like Knolling the word is a bit obscure but it is much, much older. Praxis is described as process by which a theory, lesson, or skill is enacted, embodied, or realized—largely through action. “Praxis” may also refer to the act of engaging, applying, exercising, realizing, or practicing ideas. In contemporary pedagogy praxis is sometimes used as a proxy for *experiential learning* or what is more commonly understood as “learning by doing.” Praxis has been a recurrent topic in the field of philosophy—and is found in the writings of Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine and others. As an aside, it is perhaps fitting then that I am now teaching at Merrimack College which is an Augustinian institution founded in the tradition of St. Augustine. Getting back to the matter at hand with this web project I initially viewed the new site as a way of playing off of Ivins article and “making is real”—a dynamic *Career Management Document* of sorts. But here again, even the word *career* does not seem appropriate nor is it emblematic of 21st-century work, at least the kind of roles that Daniel H. Pink signifies.

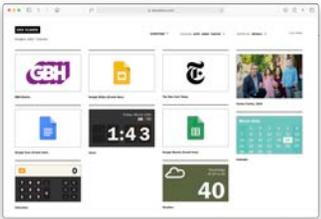
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Just Getting Started



Along with the homepage which features sortable categories of works such as research, interaction design etc.—the new site even provides the meta user or “owner” (me in this case) with the opportunity to create personalized homepage as is seen in this screenshot. And much like the homepage, this startpage if you will can be filtered by owner generated categories. Owners can add images, photos, videos and even dynamic widgets placed within iframes. For widgets we carried over four that were originally created for the Knoller project—a calculator, a calendar, a weather widget and a cool little clock. Several of these widgets were designed for Knoller by the Brooklyn based studio [oak](#) and some of them were designed by my brother Jeff. Surely there are more to come.

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A Pandemic Project With Old School Tools



The last quirky thing I would like to share with you all is the fact that I designed the mockups of this site to near pixel perfect scale using Adobe InDesign. As a design educator I am fully aware that there are many better and/or more fluid ways to design a website these days rather than to use a layout tool originally designed for print in the late 1990s. Here again Facta studio did not flinch at the idea—and in fact, Syed the developer I worked with at Facta totally rolled with it! And so, if I may digress once more the amazing thing that happened this summer was that I helped design a house, a website, a book and an exhibit all using InDesign. And in each case the projects were done in collaboration with others. As legend has it, UpStatement actually used InDesign as a layout tool when it redesigned the Boston Globe site so I suppose I am not alone. One minor thing to note for those that may want to give this approach a shot. By default InDesign now shows you on screen the calculated size your layout as if it were in the physical world. Thus, even when “pixels” are set as the unit—a pixel is not actually scaled to a pixel. As many can attest not working at 100% scale would be a deal breaker on a web project. Luckily I found a [wonderful script](#) created by Michael Stanaland which gives you the ability to change InDesign’s default screen resolution between web and print as needed. This is all just to say I very much enjoyed working on this project with Facta. Mostly I appreciate the teams’ willingness to experiment and try new things.

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Next steps—

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2. Getting the bugs out and working out the kinks.
3. Adding more projects, curating and editing.
4. Adding another page for student work.
5. Opening it up and sharing.
6. Startpage widgets for designers and coders.
7. Experimental widgets (flipping, looping, players etc)
8. Interaction Design Concentration

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Thank you.



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Thank you!