

Chapter Five: Analysis Component

Buying a wheel: How online magazines use Atavist to create multimedia without the fuss

Starting a magazine is hard. In the past, a publisher needed an army of copy editors, reporters, designers and printers to create the magazine. Even after all that, to get a magazine started today you still need a team of computer programmers. And if all of that doesn't come together just right, no one will buy it.

Atavist is one company that hopes to change that. With a free account, journalists can make rich multimedia stories full of text, maps, videos, audio and photos. For a monthly fee, users also get a hosted website with a pay wall, integrated subscriptions and an app for tablets and smartphones. Instead of paying for a team of developers to reinvent the wheel, *Atavist* will sell you a wheel.

Atavist isn't the first company to offer a content management system for magazines. Systems like *Django* and *Ruby on Rails* are used by newspapers and magazines all over the world for publishing articles and providing structure to a news outlets website. However, these platforms are not by default ready for complex multimedia layouts. After the *New York Times* published John Branch's Snow Fall in 2012, journalists and developers saw how multimedia could work online with long form story telling. The story won a Pulitzer and a Webby award, and inspired developers to create platforms that could create very similar looking stories. Cody Brown, the co-founder of *Scroll Kit*, a web design tool, created a layout so similar to Snow Fall that the *New York Times* sent him a cease and desist letter in May of 2013. Jill Abramson, the

executive editor of the *New York Times*, said in 2013 at the Wired Business conference in May, 2013 that *Times* journalists were using “Snow Fall” as a verb, saying they wanted to “Snow Fall” their stories. Snow Fall showed everyone what multimedia could be, and everyone wanted part of it.

Creatavist

Atavist is a technology and publishing company started in 2011 by Evan Ratliff, Jefferson Rabb and Nicholas Thompson. All three are familiar with the problems facing long form journalism today, and decided what they needed to do is create a platform that would best present long form writing and multimedia content. They also decided they would show how this platform could be used with their own magazine, *The Atavist Magazine*. Originally *Atavist* called its software *Creatavist*, but in March of 2015 changed the name to *Atavist*. People saw in 2012 that *Creatavist* could create stories very similar to Snow Fall, with full window photographs, powerful maps and video that sits right next to a paragraph of text. Journalists and editors saw the stories published by the *Atavist Magazine* and saw that they could very easily “Snow Fall” their next story. And, with their pay wall feature, the entire publication could be “Snow Fall”ed. Today, journalists have published thousands of stories using *Atavist* software and *The Atavist Magazine* is the first digital-only publication to win the National Magazine Awards Feature Writing award in 2015.

The California Sunday Magazine

Different magazines use *Creatavist*, now *Atavist*, in different ways. *The California Sunday Magazine* started January 29, 2014 with a small staff and big ambitions. By using *Creatavist*, *California Sunday* was able to avoid hiring engineers and

still have a pay wall, apps and a multimedia rich CMS. *California Sunday* grew out of two things. The *Los Angeles Times* and *Sacramento Bee* stopped producing weekly Sunday magazines and there was a need for a West coast centric magazine in the same vein as *The New Yorker* or *The Atlantic Monthly*. Chas Edwards and the team from *California Sunday's Pop-Up Magazine* event series decided they could fill that role. *California Sunday* does not have an editorial partnership with any of the newspapers that distribute the magazine, and they pay standard insert rates to distribute it.

Jim Ray, the technology director at California Sunday, said it was important for Douglas McGray, the editor in chief, to have a West coast arts and politics magazine. Oftentimes to pitch a long-form story about a West coast issue, McGray would have to call an editor in New York or Washington, D.C. "Part of the idea was to create a place where you could tell stories from the West, or Latin America, or Asia. A place where you could call an editor that isn't in Washington, D.C. Tell a story from the where we are," Ray explained.

To achieve this goal, *California Sunday* needed a content management system that would allow them to make rich layouts for their articles, did not take a lot of backend coding and had a pay wall. *Creatavist* had all of the features they needed, except the pay wall. A pay wall would make it much easier to manage subscriptions to the online edition of the magazine. "That pay wall feature wasn't one that was built in by default," said Ray. "We worked with them. It was something they wanted to do because it was a direction people were going." Ray and the Atavist worked together on the beta version of the pay wall. Now the pay wall is a feature any user can have for \$250 a month. Because *California Sunday* is using *Atavist's* pay wall, "instead of us having to hire 4-5 designers,

instead we have a technology staff of one,” said Ray, who is the entire technology staff. This means the organization as a whole can run in a much leaner fashion.

Tablet Magazine

Other magazines use *Atavist* to supplement their existing content management system. *Tablet Magazine* publishes multimedia stories using *Creatavist* that would not be possible to create on their existing content management system. *Tablet* is an online magazine about Jewish art and life. Matthew Fishbane is a senior editor at *Tablet* and first tried *Atavist* when *Tablet* partnered with *The Atavist Magazine* to publish his story, “Solomon’s Island.” After seeing the way audio, photographs and text were used together, Fishbane encouraged *Tablet* to use *Atavist* for an upcoming multimedia story, “Soon there will be no survivors.”

“Soon there will be no survivors” is a story about the quality of life of the few remaining American survivors of the Holocaust. The project features portraits by Jason Florio, an article and the audio from interview with survivors about their experiences surviving the Holocaust and their lives now.

“Soon there will be no survivors” could not be made with *Tablet’s Wordpress* based CMS without a huge overhaul. “There is only so much we can do without a major redesign,” said Fishbane. “To add more multimedia tools we looked around at different pieces of software.” *Tablet’s* website wasn’t suitable for the kind of multimedia Fishbane hoped to present. “Images just don’t get as much love as they should. They come out small and covered in stuff, said Fishbane. “So we were just looking for a way to clean things up and let things breath.”

Fishbane knew that making a new way to present multimedia would take hiring several programmers and several weeks to build. After seeing how well his story “Solomon’s Island,” came out, Fishbane saw that *Creatavist* was a powerful and easy to use tool that could make immersive multimedia. So, instead of starting from scratch, he opted to use *Creatavist* and have Erik Mace design the project. *Creatavist* at that time was more limited in its built in design tools, and allowed users more access to the technical underpinnings. Fishbane, was under the impression going in that *Creatavist* would be a nearly drag-and-drop tool, but found it was more complicated. “I wouldn’t say their tool is the easiest thing to use,” said Erik Mace, a freelance designer on the project. “I know programming and everything, and there were a lot of times when I was frustrated because I’m like, ‘why won’t it let me do this really simple task that if I could just hand code this.’” Towards the end of the project Fishbane worked with *Atavist* to clean up some remaining bugs before publishing the project. After the most recent update, *Atavist* has limited how much access to the backend users at lower subscription levels have.

Longform

Longform uses *Atavist*, but not for extensive multimedia long form journalism. *Longform* is famous for its iPhone app that allows for easy reading of curated long form articles. Reprints is a section where *Longform* partners with writers and publishers to reprint articles for easy reading on the *Longform* app. *Longform* partners with magazines and journalists to republish articles that may not appear online otherwise or articles that were published a while ago and deserve to be seen again.

Reprints articles mostly feature one or two photographs and custom typography. Max Linsky, one of the founders of *Longform* wanted a tool that would easily make well-designed articles. “We want to make sure that we gave people just a really distraction free beautiful reading experience and it didn’t take us forever to build those pages and design them,” said Linsky. It also doesn’t hurt that *Longform* and *Atavist* share an office and coproduce a podcast together.

Lessons learned

There are a number of different platforms that have similar functionality. What made these magazines choose *Creatavist* was that *Atavist* is run by journalists. They understand the needs of an online magazine because they use the tool themselves for their own magazine. Evan Ratliff, the CEO of *Atavist*, is a magazine writer and a finalist for the National Magazine Award for feature writing. *California Sunday* chose to work with *Atavist* because, “its not just tech guys who think they are going to solve the problem of journalism,” said Ray.

Another reason all three magazines agreed on was the importance of *Google* analytics integration. “[*Google* analytics] was a deal breaker for us,” said Fishbane. “We had to have that; we couldn’t publish something without knowing how many people were reading.” This feature gave *Creatavist* an edge over other platforms when it was first released. When the CMS was called *Creatavist*, *Google* analytics integration was available for all users. After the update and name change to *Atavist* *Google* analytics integration only comes with the \$50 a month plan.

Using a platform like this is not without challenges. Unlike *Django* and *Ruby on Rails*, *Atavist* is not something a developer can completely take apart and put back

together again. In earlier versions, there was a compromise between easily adding different kinds of media and complete creative control. That compromise made building with *Creatavist* at times more complex than the journalists and designers originally hoped.

Today, *Atavist* is a much easier to use tool. Tools for placing videos and images are much more intuitive to use. The interface is friendlier. But, users on the cheaper or free subscription levels no longer have access to the source code of the page. While in earlier versions there may have been too much access to the back end for a non-programmer to use, now unless a user pays \$140 per month, they have no access. “Their redesign is really optimized for a good long piece of writing that has a little bit decorative multimedia, but it isn’t really built for a multimedia experience that is focused on the multimedia itself,” said Fishbane.

Even at \$250 a month, *Atavist* is one of the cheapest and least time consuming ways to make a magazine with a pay wall. For would-be publishers that are intimidated by the high cost of hiring developers or of a banner ad business model, *Atavist* could be the answer. *Atavist* is a great tool for starting your magazine from scratch and monetizing it. But, since *Atavist* started in 2011, dozens of services have come to market that help journalists make blended narrative stories. Services like *Medium*, *Storehouse* and *Maptia* do not offer ways to monetize projects, but are easy to use and are more integrated with social networks than *Atavist*. Also, for journalists with some web development experience who want to create a standalone project, *Adobe Muse* and *Racontr* are excellent tools that offer extensive customization. For the right magazine, *Atavist* is the right tool for the job.