

Wetpixel and Wetpixel Quarterly: A Review

by Douglas David Seifert

The exponential expansion of content on the Internet and the ready acceptance of it as a delivery medium across all demographics (without language, geographic or cultural boundaries) has caused a revolution in publishing.

No longer is the consumer forced to pay for annual subscriptions or wait in terminal periods of time for the postal service to deliver periodicals. There is an alternative. Indeed, the success of UWP and other online magazines is testament to this new direction in reader tastes and the relative ease with which a virtual magazine can be produced.

The phenomena is so pervasive, in the interest of clarity a new descriptive vocabulary is needed: online publishing is self describing and needs no elucidation, but magazine publishing itself - the production and distribution of a tangible product, a product well established and taken for granted that has been around more than one hundred and fifty years - should now be referred to as hard copy publishing.

The difference between the two beyond the obvious circumstance of what can be held in the hands without needing a machine is educational. Unlike hard copy, tangible publishing, the online publisher is exposed to little risk financially. Most, if not all of the content is donated free of charge and/or is self-generated by the publisher and a few associates. The writers of features and photographers whose works are presented are for the most part not compensated financially or otherwise.

This curious circumstance occurred long before the birth of the internet, however, with the hard copy publishing of what were aptly called "fanzines". The appeal of Fan magazines has always necessarily been limited to specialist niche groups. They last for a time due to the financial resources (aka deep pockets) of their publishers who produce something that can showcase the work of their friends (who can be cajoled into donating free content) and to shine some of that glory back upon the publisher him or herself.



One can recognize these efforts from a lack of content balance due to the presence of the editor/publisher beyond the editorial and into many a chummy feature glorifying personal experiences of dubious veracity with images that add nothing to the text. On occasion, the fanzine mentality has crept into mainstream publishing, usually when the parent company is a large corporation not particularly interested in the content of what is published, just the advertising revenue. This was the death sentence for the 30 year life of Skin Diver magazine when it went to being just another acquisition by a consortium and was run into the ground by arrogant, egocentric hacks without

talent or imagination.

Interestingly for the would-be professional photographer to know about is the related scenario where the editor/publisher appropriates interior image space and even the cover photo itself. (In the industry, this is known as "The Hornsby Syndrome" after an editor infamous for putting his own images on the cover in spite of having questionable photographic credentials at best and no imaging career track record beyond what his position in publishing with that particular publication could force onto the public. (and the practice still shamelessly continues today with certain US-based editors with out sized egos and deplorable ethics who



shall remain nameless..)

Over the years, The diving world has seen its share of these fanzines come and go, the quality ones among them, from Hong Kong, Alfred Li's Sportdivers Journal; from the US, Bret Gilliam and Fred Garth's Fathoms and most memorably, the evil ladies from Texas' Ocean Realm. Others have popped up and gone away, their names forgotten and more startups and failures are certain to be on the horizon..

The difference between hard copy, tangible publishing and internet publishing is that the internet publisher is absolved of virtually all financial risk. In addition to not paying their contributors, they do not have to bear the production costs of office rental, an art editor, layout designer, editor, news editor and sub-editor, office manager, advertising department, etc. AND paying for the physical costs of producing a hard copy, tangible magazine: the printer and his staff's time and materials: color separations, proofs, ink, paper, delivery, distribution, postage, etc. Those big economic factors ultimately bring down the fanzines

publishing hard copy. Where are Sportdivers Journal, Fathoms, and Ocean Realm now?

The sad reality is in regards to a readership of people interested in diving and the ocean and underwater photography, there simply has not been a large enough audience - at least so far - willing to support a quality publication long term by paying a relatively expensive annual subscription in order for the fanzine to break even (break even! Forget profitability) on the hard publishing costs.

And readership is the operative word. Magazines and journals are places where thought is the commodity on equal footing with the imagery. So far, no one has made a success of a hard copy publication of words without images or of all images without words.

The best of online publishing and the best of hard copy publishing combine beautiful or interesting imagery with stories, features, reviews and other food for thought. This is where UWP and Wetpixel.com succeed as online publishers; where Dive and Fins succeed as hard copy publishers and why US dive magazines such as Scuba Diving

and Sport Diver are so poorly-regarded (for the most part, their articles are fluff, devoid of factual information, educated opinion or conveyed experience, simply a record of advertorial agendas masquerading as journalism).

Anyone reading this online publication certainly knows of Wetpixel.com. Since it first went online eight years ago, Wetpixel has been the place for underwater photography enthusiasts to go to for up to the minute news, industry gossip, product announcements and reviews. It provides forums for aspiring underwater photographers to connect with each other on virtually every conceivable aspect of photography, diving, destinations, techniques, queries, tips and opinions and more.

Best of all, it is free of charge.

Wetpixel.com's appeal is irresistible and the work put in by owner/founder/creator Eric Cheng has rightly made it the cyber epicenter of underwater imaging. Although it has only 10,000 registered members, Wetpixel reaches 100,000 unique visitors per month, many of them repeat viewers.

Wetpixel.com partners with other online sites and with photo contests to promote and distribute underwater imagery that sadly might never have seen wide distribution in the light of day before the miracle of the internet. Wetpixel's tireless collection and distribution of these images has done a profound service to the field of underwater photography.

Scores of photographers have been encouraged, inspired and energized by seeing a new world of creativity and artistic techniques. As a result, there are a lot more divers with cameras taking better quality pictures than ever before.

Now, Wetpixel.com has branched out from



its benevolent domination of all things underwater photographic with a foray into the world of hard copy publishing, the result being Wetpixel Quarterly.

Before we scratch our heads and ask why, let us consider the magazine itself.

Issue One set the tone thus far: an 8.5 x 11 inch horizontal format just perfect for presenting a single image per page. The cover stock and paper are high quality and the green pedigree of the paper and inks are detailed for eco purists.

The first issue's cover of

a small oceanic whitetip shark enveloped by a shoal of pilot fish has the one true attribute that defines greatness: peer envy.. seasoned underwater photographers looked at it and responded: "wish I'd taken that photo.". No truer praise is forthcoming from a discriminating group that flips rapidly through any collection of underwater photography comparing what has been published by others - usually unfavorably - with their own efforts. (A chilling spectacle to observe.)

There is a very nice portfolio and Q and A with imaging innovator and

long time professional Norbert Wu and lots of pages of pictures. Lots and lots of pictures. The magazine is 82 pages long and feels complete without being padded, content-wise. Another bonus is the minimal reliance on advertising pages. It is a refreshing luxury to enjoy art for arts sake without being sold a good or service every other page.

The second issue showed improved printing and paper stock and was mainly focused on Wetpixel.com's "staff" of regular contributors and their best images. Lots and lots of pictures.

The third issue dedicates a quarter of its pages to excerpting Alex Kilbride's new book American Waters and there is a brief article (three pages) on green sea turtles off San Diego. The extant pages are images from Our World Underwater and Deep Indonesia photo contests.

It appears after three issues (the fourth has not been released at this writing) that the formula Wetpixel Quarterly has chosen to follow is pure portfolio. Imagery without a text context. A picture book. A soft cover coffee table book. Arguably, for a generation notorious for having a short attention span, this is an ideal format. The magazine certainly is beautiful, has a clean, well-designed layout and some of the images are breathtaking.

But the question of why then publish hard copies of portfolios at all? Isn't it just as efficient to have full screen web galleries? (And without the financial burden on Wetpixel LLC or the subscriber and to the environment.)

Do images without any other information satisfy the needs of underwater imaging enthusiasts? Do images made in exotic destinations offer a sense of what the experience of encountering the subject is like and how it was achieved and what does it mean - or are these questions that even matter to the viewer ship (without text, how can one really say readership?)?

The sayings "a picture is worth a thousand words" or "the picture tells the story" really are true only in very rare instances and to be honest, many of those stories are only slightly interesting. After all, we live in an information age, not a culture of ideograms.

Ultimately, regardless of point of view whether the addition of text would add significant value to Wetpixel Quarterly, the magazine stands as it is an object of beauty and undeniably has a feel good value to all the photographers whose images are printed within. After all, is it not the dream of every purchaser of an underwater camera system to have their work published? And why not?



Wetpixel Quarterly should be supported by anyone with an interest in the underwater world in general and underwater photography in particular..

Eric cheng's vision and dedication should be applauded and supported financially; it would be most desirable for Wetpixel Quarterly to have a long and successful run.

Subscribe now; it would be a tragedy if this venture does not survive and thrive. Regardless of any mixed feelings Wetpixel Quarterly would be missed if it was gone..

Wetpixel Quarterly Credits: Eric Cheng, Editor and Publisher; and

www.uwpmag.com

Elijah Woolery, Editor and Creative Director. A quarterly publication for a cost of \$45.00 per year.

Douglas David Seifert

Douglas David Seifert is the former Editor-in-Chief of Oceans Illustrated and is currently World Editor of Dive Magazine.

www.wetpixelquarterly.com

GET CLOSER

WETPIXEL EXPEDITIONS 2009

////BAHAMAS EXPEDITIONS////////////////////////////////////

Feb 07-14, 2009 Tiger Sharks and Great Hammerheads

May 05-13, 2009 Oceanic White Tip Sharks

May 16-24, 2009 Oceanic White Tip Sharks

Jul 13-20, 2009 Sharks and Dolphins

More information: <http://wetpixel.com/links/bahamas>



©Tony Wu

////OTHER EXPEDITIONS////////////////////////////////////

Mar 07-Mar 22, 2009 Sorong, Halmahera, Ambon, Indonesia

Mar 25-Apr 09, 2009 Ambon and the Banda Sea, Indonesia

More information: <http://wetpixel.com/ultimateindo>

Nov 24-Dec 06, 2009 Eastern Fields, Papua New Guinea

Dec 08-Dec 19, 2009 Eastern Fields, Papua New Guinea

Contact Wetpixel for details: <http://wetpixel.com/contact>