

The Making of the

Gettysburg PowerPoint Presentation

Why I did it

"Doesn't he realize this presentation is a waste of time? Why doesn't he just tell us what matters and get it over with?"

How many times have you heard (or muttered) that? How many of us have been frustrated at seeing too many presentations where PowerPoint or other visual aids obscure rather than enhance the point? After one too many bad presentations at a meeting in January 2000, I decided to see if I could *do* something about it.

How I did it

Back in my hotel room I imagined what Abe Lincoln might have done if he had used PowerPoint rather than the power of oratory at Gettysburg. (I chose the Gettysburg speech because it was shorter than, say, the Martin Luther King "[I have a dream](#)" speech, and because I had an idea for turning "four score and seven years" into a [gratuitous graph](#).) A Google search easily found the text of the Gettysburg address, and several articles echoing my frustration, including USA Today writer Kevin Maney's [PowerPoint obsession takes off](#), which notes that PowerPoint was banned at Sun, and includes the Lincoln idea: "*Put another way, imagine if Abe Lincoln had PowerPoint for the Gettysburg Address. 'OK, this slide shows our nation four score and seven years ago.'*" But as far as I could tell, nobody had actually **written** and published a Gettysburg PowerPoint presentation. (Note: a reader pointed out that John S. Rigden had an article in the March 1990 issue of *Physics Today* entitled "The Lost Art of Oratory: Damn the Overhead Projector" that also used the Gettysburg Address concept. David Wittenberg and Susan Hessler were nice enough to send me copies.) I started up PowerPoint and let the "Autocontent Wizard" help me create a new presentation. I selected the "Company Meeting (Online)" template, and figured from there I'd be creative in adding bad design wherever possible. I was surprised that the Autocontent Wizard had anticipated my desires so well that I had to make very few changes. Four of the slide titles were taken directly from the template; I only had to delete a few I didn't need, and add "Not on the Agenda" after "Agenda".

I wasn't a professional designer, so I thought I'd be in for a late night doing some serious research: in color science to find a truly garish color scheme; in typography to find the worst fonts; and in overall design to find a really bad layout. But fortunately for me, the labor-saving Autocontent Wizard took care of all this for me! It suggested a red-on-dark-color choice for the navigation buttons that makes them very hard to see; it chose a serif font for the date that is illegible in low-resolution web mode, and of course Excel outdid itself on the graph, volunteering the 0.1 to 0.9 between the 0 and 1 new nations. All I had to do was take Lincoln's words and break them into pieces, making sure that I captured the main phrases of the original, while losing all the flow, eloquence, and impact.

I posted the presentation on my [web site](#) that night and promptly forgot about it. But some people noticed, and it began to spread by word of mouth (and link, and email), as the following charts show:

Viewers of the
Gettysburg Powerpoint
Address

Year	Viewers	Total
2000	50,000	50,000
2001	115,000	165,000
2002	170,000	335,000
2003	344,000	679,000

Position of Gettysburg
Powerpoint Address in Search
Engine Results, as of Nov. 2003

Query	Position
powerpoint presentation	1
presentation	2
powerpoint	6
gettysburg address	3

Early citers include [Daniel Dern](#)'s newsletter (he's Executive Editor at [Byte.com](#)), [memepool](#), [Phil Greenspun](#), [Bill St. Clair](#), and the [Gadwell group](#). [Paul E. Schindler](#) wrote ``OK, now all my website of the week recommendations are worth going to, but this one especially so, if for no other reason that the slide headed, "Things We Aren't Going To Do," (sic) with the bullet points "Dedicate. Consecrate. Hallow." Now that's funny. Is PowerPoint the medium [Bob Newhart](#) would be working in if he were just starting out today?" I'm deeply honored by the comparison to Newhart (and I appreciate that Paul has resisted the temptation to call his recommendations "Schindler's list"). Later, Sherif Ghali wrote "I haven't laughed this much since Roberto Benigni's [Il Mostro](#)." Tufte called it ``the trump card of subversive and ironic PP productions."

Then [Edward Tufte](#), the reigning guru of visual interface design, heard about it from somebody at Stonybrook and wrote me to ask if he could include excerpts in his [short courses](#); I was glad to agree.

On November 20, 2000, just six score and 17 years and 1 day after the original Gettysburg address, Tom Weber of the [Wall Street Journal](#) published an [article \(registration required\)](#) on user interface design, focusing on the web and on the topic of the day, ballot design (remember butterfly ballots and pregnant chad?). Weber cited the usual suspects: Tufte, [Don Norman](#) and [Jakob Nielsen](#), but also threw in the parenthetical remark: (*For a hilarious look at how Lincoln's Gettysburg Address would have fared in PowerPoint form, visit Peter Norvig's Web site at [www.norvig.com](#) ([norvig.com](#)) and see "all men are created equal" reduced to a bullet point.*) I quickly learned that WSJ readers are an early-rising bunch: by 7:00 AM east coast time web hits started rolling in, and my site was overwhelmed and shut down for the first and only time. Fortunately I was able to quickly set up a mirror site.

It is clear I struck a chord that reverberates with many people out there. (To me the really amazing thing is not that many people have seen it, but that 80% make it all the way through the six slides; experts will tell you it is unusual to get more than half to click thorough to the second page.) My immediate reaction was that maybe I had a hidden talent. Maybe I was a kind of *idiot savant* of bad design. I was also reminded of the time I saw the movie [The Big Picture](#) in LA with my friends in "the industry", Gary and Rachel. *The Big Picture* starts with a scene about bad student movies, which was amusing to me as a naive viewer, but apparently hilarious to industry insiders, who recognize how all the rules had been broken. I had succeeded in breaking all the rules, but incredibly, the Autocontent Wizard did most of the work for me.

Face to Face with Abe, Tufte, and the Ghost of Feynman

In June 2002 I found myself in Washington D.C. with a few hours to spare, so I hiked over to the Lincoln Memorial. I had never seen it, but figured I

should, now that I'm a leading authority on [Gettysburg Address](#). Let me just say that, if you ever have the choice of putting your words in powerpoint or having them carved into 30-foot high marble, I'd say go for the marble.

In May 2003, Tufte printed an [essay](#) on powerpoint that reprinted my presentation. This led to another round of calls from reporters, and one from *The Lancet* for whom I wrote a [column](#). In December 2003 I was able to attend Tufte's short course and talk to the audience for a few minutes. I was struck by several parallels between my experience and Tufte's recommendations. Tufte talked about the Challenger and Columbia accident investigation boards; my presentation grew out of frustration on the Mars program board. Tufte introduced the helpful guideline *What would Richard Feynman Do?*, and I was reminded of the only member of our board who really took that to heart: the great engineer [Bob Sackheim](#). Our team had pretty much settled the (relatively easy) question of what happened to the failed Mars Climate Orbiter, and were all sitting through more tedious Powerpoint presentations about how to ensure the safety of the Mars Polar Lander, an in-progress mission. I realized that Bob had disappeared after the first coffee break. When he showed up at the end of the day I asked "Bob, where were you all day?" and he said "This meeting was a bunch of bull so I walked down the hall and found one of my old friends [at Lockheed] and had him get together the propulsion team [for the lander], and we sat down and talked over their design. I think we found a potential problem with the feedline heaters, but we can ensure safety with pre-conditioning pulses." I said, "Wow, Bob, I didn't know you were allowed to go off and do that -- I should do it for the software team." I didn't have any old friends, but I did get to talk to two of the software engineers on the landing and descent team at Lockheed for half a day. To my great regret, I wasn't able in that time to diagnose a hardware/software flaw that was later deemed the most likely cause of the loss of the MPL mission. But that I even had a shot at it I owe to Sackheim's breaking the rules, like Feynman.

More Press

The presentation is still often noted in web sites and blogs, like [Electricfrog](#) and [Doc Searls](#) (who has his own [excellent advice](#) on presentations), [Slate](#), [Fark](#) (referring 39,000 visitors), [Textism](#), [Arts & Letters Daily](#), [whatreallyhappened](#), [Aaron Swartz](#), [blogspot](#), Dan Pink's [justonething](#), and others, including a [site in Finland](#) from which I learned that Finnish, which I had been told in Linguistics class was a polysynthetic language, actually does have words like "Powerpoint-esitysgrafiikkaohjelma".

It also figures in print, such as *FORTUNE* magazine's article by Thomas A. Stewart titled "[Friends don't let friends use PowerPoint](#)", the *New Yorker* Digital Age edition from May 28, 2001, Pamela O'Connell's (who had already done [a piece](#) on my [longest palindrome](#)) *New York Times* [column](#), John Naughton's Dec. 21 2003 [piece](#) in *The Guardian* calling it "*one of the sharpest pieces of satire to appear on the web*" and Rachel Konrad's Dec. 27 2003 [article](#) for AP, in which I get a once-in-a-lifetime chance to serve as supporting cast to David Byrne. I'm also pleased to appear in Laura Lee's [Pocket Encyclopedia of Aggravation](#), nestled between ``potholes" and ``road rage."

Email

Hundreds of people have taken the time to write me a nice note, and dozens have asked permission to use my presentation in a course or presentation of their own. I particularly like [Reading Great Speeches](#), [Making Great Speeches](#) by Shery Kearney. I got a piece of customized junk mail showing a version of the presentation that had been ``improved" by some [fancy graphics](#), another company that wanted to add a voice-over to it, a [macromedia version](#) by Raffaele Sena, and a clever [version of the Declaration of Independence](#). My favorite email of all was from a reader who wrote:

BOY did I screw up. I sent the following email to "president@whitehouse.gov" thinking it was a hoax email address for Abe Lincoln.

Hope Bill and Hillary have a sense of humor.

Dear Abe, A few graphics, woodcuts or pen sketches, would have added a nice touch. Also, the color scheme is a bit odd. Why not union Blue? Oh well, like you said yourself, the world will little remember what you said. Take care.
--NLM

p.s. have you seen the latest staging of Our American Cousin? I hear it's a scream! Best regards to Mary and the boys!

In all this, there have been only two negative comments, one that echoed back the opening words of this page ("Doesn't he realize this presentation is a waste of time? Why doesn't he just tell us what matters and get it over with?") and one from someone who wrote:

Is this a high school attempt at something. Someone should take the time to review color combinations to make a presentation that is pleasant to the viewer. Red lettering on a black background works well in print, but not on computers as the color generation is lacking. It's not very readable.

Oh well, as someone once said, you can't fool (or please) all of the people all of the time.

[Peter Norvig](#)