A Digital Interview

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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Abstract

Although I believe the best way to learn is with a hands-on experience, we can also learn from other's experiences. For my Senior Thesis project I have created a self-promotional website which combines my resume, portfolio, skills, fine arts pieces, and personality into one cohesive body of work which can be viewed independently. This process has strengthened my knowledge of web design applications and extended my education. Along with the website I have written a brief documentation of the successes and problems I faced as I constructed this piece. From that paper I have also created a teaching aid for beginning web design students and peers to prepare them for common occurrences with in this field.

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- I want to thank Christine Satory for advising me through this project. She is a thought-provoking teacher who has taught me to create conceptual designs and who has forced me try every option.
The purpose of this project was to explore the creative process behind a website, and to make a website that is not only functional but that embodies the underlying concepts of personal evaluation and self-promotion. I wanted gain more experience in building websites or revising them. I have constructed a website that incorporates my resume, skills, and portfolio into a cohesive body of work that can be viewed independently by the public. As I was working on this project, the main focus was that all aspects of my site would provide the viewer with additional information about me. In other words, the web site itself should be considered as a type of interview, a digital interview.

Along with the construction of my web site, I have kept a comprehensive journal about my creative process. This is a record of any triumphs or problems I have faced. I have revised these events into the following documentation as well as a teaching aid to provide suggestions for beginning web designers that they might learn from my mistakes and successes.

At the beginning of the semester I made a list of expectations that I had about this project. I knew I needed a careful thought process, which required a lot of organization and accountability for all of my planning. As I stated before I wanted the viewers to learn about me when venturing into my web site. What I needed to decide was "what will be important to learn about me?"

I decided that the website should incorporate skill level, creativity, originality, and my personality. The areas that I thought would portray these characteristics most accurately were portfolio, resume, a sample of my fine arts, and an artist's statement. I included each of these for different reasons.
Along with visuals of my portfolio, which would show peers and prospective employers my style in design, I have included descriptions of the projects and insight into my thought process with each project. I wanted my resume to be viewed easily with out a lot of added fluff. This gives viewers a clear-cut idea of what I used to create my designs, and the skill level it requires.

Originally I was not going to include my fine arts, but I wanted people to know that along with application and computer knowledge, that I'm original and creative. I believe this is what separates a knowledgeable designer from a knowledgeable designer that will grow beyond their education. For the final area of my site I wanted to include a section specifically about me, a personal note or an artist's statement. This puts a face on my website, giving it character instead of being simply informational.

I considered making personal notes throughout the site that gave ideas behind the creation, for example, how or why I made certain navigational buttons. The pop up would tell the inspiration behind how the navigation was laid out. My fear with this idea was that the pages would become too hectic or chaotic, that these pop ups would take away from the design and page layout. I may in the future, add these buttons, as a website is never really completed. I want other students and designers to use my website not only to learn about me, but as a learning device when it comes to web design. Another option I thought of would be to create two versions of the site: an educational version with personal notes and construction suggestions, and the other, my actual site.

Some of the problems I faced throughout my work were foreseen. I knew that I would face difficulty with the programs I was using. I was not well versed with two of the programs and it had been sometime since I had last worked in these applications.
Even though I was meeting with my advisor fairly regularly, this project involved a large amount of self-education. In the beginning of my experience it was very difficult to work fast. Simple tasks such as linking pages correctly took longer than necessary. I had trouble finding actions in toolbars, or knowing what all was possible to accomplish within the various programs. After a few weeks of refreshing myself with the programs the pace gradually picked up and some of my frustrations began to dissipate.

Another problem I knew I would face was finding inspiration and struggling to meet my own expectations. It usually takes me a lengthy brainstorming period to actually develop a starting point for a project, and this is just the beginning. I'm a firm believer that design needs to be conceptually based. If my design has no meaning behind it, then I easily lose interest in it. I worked my way through about five or six different designs with this website until I found the one that I felt best portrayed what I wanted it to about me.

Along with these expected issues, were a few unplanned difficulties. My largest problem this semester was dealing with the transitions between programs. There is an unforgiving cycle in web design based on the transitions between the various programs you must use to create the finished product.

I began laying out my pages in Photoshop. This is where you crop, trim and piece together images. You must also remember to tweak color and contrasts, smooth edges, and finalize the placement of your main images before moving onto a new program. The second program I used was Illustrator. This is where I added type, and was still able to use some filters if I desired certain changes. You can also still to some degree play with your layers. The third transfer is to the application Fireworks. This is where you develop
what images will become navigational buttons and bars. You can play with swapping
images and rollovers, and also where I would have developed pop up menus if I had
chosen to include these. The final program that I worked in was Dreamweaver. This is
where you create your links and check all of the variables in your scripting to make sure
your page will run in a browser as you had planned it to.

These programs and the steps in between them create their own individual
problems as well as overlapping issues. My first problem was my own anxiousness. I
was so excited about seeing the outcome of my work that I wasn’t as careful as I thought
about preparation. I wasn’t as precise as I should have been in Photoshop to make sure
that everything was just as it should be. I should also have been more thoughtful when I
scheduled meetings with my project advisor. I needed her opinion at different stages but
was too impatient to wait before moving on to the next step.

It is much easier transitioning forward rather than backwards through these
programs. So when I needed to make even simple adjustments I had to work my way
through the entire process again, changing every saved file in each format, and re-
exporting my saved files. An example of this is changing something as simple as the
glare in a picture. You need to change contrasts and highlights in Photoshop, therefore
setting your work back four steps.

I also dealt with my own indecisiveness. I would change my mind about a simple
word, button, or image at the end of the process and again have to retrace my steps from
the beginning. It was also hard when I was too impatient to wait for my advisors
suggestions and again had to make significant changes, as every mistake requires a
significant change at that point.
After all of these experiences I wanted to make sure my struggles were not in vain. I began testing my finished product with my peers as well as a variety of age groups. I wanted to check for usability and understanding of the navigation through my site. It is difficult after seeing the same pages for so long to look at my own project with a judgmental eye. With fresh eyes I was able to learn about a few problems concerning the readability and contrast.

Overall my research left me satisfied, and to be honest, relieved. With my initial goals and plans in mind I feel that this project has been a success. I have gained additional knowledge in the web design process. I have a greater handle on the applications required for this process. I feel that others, who may be facing the same difficulty of understanding and learning web design, can gain insight from my experience. And to say the least I'm leaving college with a neatly compiled body of work, as evidence to my college experience.
Visual Communications
Web Design Preparation

Website Content
Answering a few questions can clarify and organize information and help to layout the navigation of your website.

• What is the purpose of this site? –What is this site promoting or association with?

• What do you want viewers to learn from the site you are creating?

• Can you separate that information into four or five subcategories? –This could become a possible navigational bar.

• What are your expectations for this project? –What do you want to learn or accomplish with this project?

Trouble Shooting and Awareness
Understanding common issues that arise during this process can prepare you to face them and even avoid them.

• Lack of experience with web construction applications
• Transitions from one application to another –this can also occur when transitioning between various versions of one application.
• Moving from one application to another too quickly –don't be in a hurry to reach the end product, check your work twice before moving to a new application.
• Indecisiveness -Spend more time developing your idea in the beginning stages of your work…it will save you time later.
• Finding Inspiration — Like any creative process ideas don’t allow for falling from the sky—brainstorm, sketch, and research.

• Poor craftsmanship — create finished, quality images before transferring your files into more constrictive applications… i.e. Fireworks.

What problems do you anticipate accompanying this project?

Tips and Suggestions

• Save all documents, you will probably need them again.
• It is much easier to move forward through applications than backwards.
• Document your progress and ideas to support your finished product and store additional sketches and inspirations.