DEVELOPING AN INTERACTIVE DIGITAL ONLINE PORTFOLIO

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This thesis is dedicated to my amazing friends Justin and June,

my loving family Karen, Joe and Mike,

and my extraordinary wife Erin.

-Thank you all for being so legendary-
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Developing an Interactive Digital Online Portfolio
by
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It is becoming increasingly difficult to promote oneself as a design artist. Tangible, printed portfolios, once the only way to share design work with prospective employers, are being substituted in the digital age by interactive digital online portfolios. This is even more so the case for theatrical projection and media designers whose work exists in a digital format that includes video with sound.

We are in the midst of a new era; one in which directors and producers access multimedia portfolios from the comfort of their own home without the presence of a designer. It is now much more important for a digital portfolio to represent the character, abilities, sensibilities, and aesthetic of the designer. Too often our online presence is misrepresentative of our work and of our abilities.

It is this problem which will be tackled: how to represent oneself as a media and projections designer in the theatre through an interactive digital online portfolio. Research into past and currently existing digital online presences will provide a foundation on which to synthesize and construct, as well as providing a basis for comparison. Prospect for future development will also be given consideration.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Theatrical design is an ambitious undertaking. As an artist one faces many obstacles and is constantly reminded that this is a collaborative art form. Theatrical design evolves through the interaction of several designers from different disciplines with differing agendas. They must ultimately realize the ideas of a director, upon which their art is trodden in, around, and on by yet more artists culminating in what one hopes is a coherent theatrical performance and experience for the audience. I am reminded of the phrase “E Pluribus Unum” which, as one of the mottos for the United States of America, translates to roughly “Out of many, one.” Originally appearing in 1731 on the title page next to a bouquet of flowers in The Gentleman’s Magazine, a publication well known in the 1770s to the founders of our country, it signified the notion that every part of the whole shines for itself and, when brought together, creates a greater beauty (U.S. Department of State 6). In a way our theatrical tradition embodies this notion that from a plethora of artists, we are able to create an art that is ultimately more than that of its parts. This can be quite difficult simply due to the fact that to create great theatre, one needs other artists.

This means that in order to be a creative artist in theatre, one needs a way to communicate his or her artistic and design aesthetics to other production artists. Communication has long been a necessity in the theatre. Only fairly recently, within the last hundred years, have designers begun to figure into the theatrical equation in the form of scenic and costume designers. Theatrical design only began to incorporate actual lighting design since the advent of the electric lamp and our ability to change the color of the light.
The mid-twentieth century found itself bringing in a new era of lighting design alongside technical innovation and even more recently has found companion design categories in sound, video, media and projection design. Each found itself a niche in theatre between scenic design and lighting design. It is now, more than at any time in history, important for designers to be able to communicate their ideas, abilities, designs, and capabilities to fellow artists, directors, and producers so as to generate interest and enthusiasm for artistic collaboration. A vehicle with great potential for this communication is also the largest vehicle for human communication: the internet.

**DIGITAL ARTISTIC COMMUNICATION AND DESIGN**

I believe the most cohesive way our world is bound together is through online digital communication and knowledge sharing. Networking most businesses and people together in a non-stop barrage of electrical signals and pulses, the internet has expanded its reach to all corners of our globe. Companies like Facebook, Linked-In, and Google have taken steps to allow people to establish a “profile” with which they can share information about themselves with others through a digital format, allowing for almost instantaneous sharing of text, images, video, and sound. The ability to communicate this information via electronic signal has allowed for the receiving device to become mobile. Phones, digital tablets, laptops and even watches can receive these signals and bring this sharing experience to the user. The “performance” is being brought to the audience and this can be done virtually instantaneously. It is necessary to recognize this interconnectedness in order to fully grasp the implications for artistic designers, especially those whose livelihood resides in an industry that exists in and through communication.
The internet and the ability to access the internet on transportable devices that can be used virtually anywhere on the planet has revolutionized the way in which communication happens within the theatre arts. It has only been within the last five years that I have personally seen and been a part of this explosion. A designer can meet with another designer and within minutes have research from the world’s best galleries and sources. They can instantaneously access references to styles and periods and to historical events surrounding both a play and a playwright. They can delve into the trends and fashions, the architecture and the art of the period and even find photos, sketches, and videos of productions that others have done. A director can video conference with these designers from thousands of miles away and instantly be shown the research and given web links to the information.

Designers can use the advancements of photographic editing and three dimensional technologies to visualize costumes and sets, even incorporating the actors’ faces and features into the rendering. The lighting and projections designer can take these digital renderings and “visualize” the lighting from scene to scene in a three-dimensional space. This visualization can then be digitally sent to and shared with everyone on the artistic team including the director and producer. The box office and advertising can even use the preliminary design to start developing promotional material and generating relevant audience experiences and talkbacks. Never before has the theatre industry had greater potential to connect with such a large audience base.

With the ability to have immediate access to artistic research material on such a large scale, it is important that the artist utilize those abilities which cannot be stored online. Personal experience, creativity, and imagination, brought together with technique and fundamental design skills will be necessary to set one apart from the rest of the artistically
budding world. If anyone can buy a digital camera and use readily available software to create art to be shared online, than it becomes the artist’s responsibility to delineate himself from everyone else.

COMMUNICATING PERFORMANCE

As an artist, I am constantly self-critiquing and reflecting on my own work and how it is being communicated to the world. Representation of my design work currently exists digitally with the rare exception of when I actually have a show running that one can see and experience. This is antithetical to the nature of my work which is created to be experienced in the theatrical space. And yet, without a digital record and history, I would have virtually nothing to show a director to communicate the breadth and depth of my work in lighting and projection design.

Herein is my central concern as a designer: how do I communicate to a potential employer my abilities, aesthetic, and creative work as a theatre artist in lighting and projection design, while retaining the impact, experience, and integrity that embodied the work as it existed in the performance space? The answer to this question is one that each theatre designer solves differently. As the representation of my design work exists digitally, I see the digital superhighway as the best possible place to build my proverbial fruit stand. To accomplish this I will design an interface that will allow users to engage with my designs in a meaningful and affective way.
CHAPTER 2

AESTHETICS AND DESIGN

I feel it is important to examine my own aesthetics and process as a theatre designer in order to better represent myself and my creative sensibilities to other artists. To approach the conversation of aesthetics and design I will begin with Aristotle’s *Poetics*: his treatise about the ideal way in which to present theatre (Fergusson). Of Aristotle’s twenty-six separate musings on the theatre, only one major tenant stands out directly for the designer; that of “Spectacle” which “has, indeed, an emotional attraction of its own,” the effect of which “depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet” (Fergusson 64). Even at such an early date in history, there needed to be more than just the actor and the poetry to bring forth the theatrical experience. Most of Aristotle’s writing centers around the experience of the audience member and how the writing of the piece itself will affect the audience. It is through this affective nature that the audience undergoes a transformation, experiences a catharsis and is purged of built up emotion. By legitimizing spectacle to have the ability to imbue a strong emotional reaction, he is unwittingly interlocking the environment in which theatre is performed with the performance itself and as part of the emotional experience. This has shown to be quite true, even today when one goes to experience a theatrical production and is sucked into the world of the play.

I experienced this firsthand in the production of Wicked in London at the Apollo Victoria Theatre. From the moment one walks up to the building (Figure 1) the production begins sucking you into the “Art Deco” design and aesthetic of the world of OZ. Wicked is fantastic because the production conjures up the iconic characters and fantasy world from the
mind of L. Frank Baum that inspired both film and stage adaptations, and achieved success and notoriety on a global scale according to a study from the Library of Congress (“To See the Wizard”).

Once inside, (Figure 2) it is revealed that the design of the entire theatre matches the “Art Deco” design of both the exterior and the set exploding forth from the stage (Figure 3). Even before the first note of the overture begins, one is immersed in and being affected by

This aesthetic evokes the immersion that Antonin Artaud found so essential to an audience’s experience of a theatrical event in his book *The Theatre and Its Double* (1958). Artaud, as guided by his familiarity with Balinese theatre, favored surrounding the audience with affective design. He favored a theatre of cruelty, not in the traditional sense of cruelty, but one in which theatre had the ability to affect both the audience and the actor simultaneously. This process, which Aristotle labeled catharsis, and Artaud dubs cruelty (56), lies at the exact heart of my theory and aesthetic of design.

I feel that a successful production design ensnares the audience and entwines them with the actors until the raw emotion and affective nature of the performance is able to freely pass between one and the other. This is true of costume, set, light, projection, and sound design. When these elements are executed in such a way that their aesthetic is enhancing the story, the audience will not be consciously aware of any specific element, and will instead be able to take in a deeper experience of the story. In their necessarily convoluted but enlightening book *What Is Philosophy?* (1994) Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari theorize how art, philosophy and science confront the chaos of the world. I again key in on their notion of affect and what that means for a work of art. For them

> Affects are no longer feelings or affections; they go beyond the strength of those who undergo them. Sensations, percepts, and affects are beings whose validity lies in themselves and exceeds any lived. They could be said to exist in the absence of man because man, as he is caught in stone, on the canvas, or by words, is himself a compound of percepts and affects. The work of art is a being of sensation and nothing else: it exists in itself. (164)

If affect has gone beyond the strength of those that experience it and become a body, then this body is a force that can be created and wielded by an artist. The hardest thing to do as an artist is to create these bodies or “blocs” of sensations and have them stand up on their own. This is the goal of the theatre artist, to work with one another to create through color,
shape, line, light, and sound the sensations that can stand up to the drama. Not only stand up to the drama but to support and even direct the action.

**LIGHTING DESIGN**

My aesthetic as a lighting and media designer is not defined by any particular style, but rather is that which seeks to augment the world being created by the set and costume designer. As a lighting designer, much of the work comes after the scenery has begun to take shape by the scenic designer. I often provide verbal input and visual research at the beginning of a production process that a set designer can use before designing the set. Usually there is already an idea of the direction the physical world of the play is heading. Directors and designers usually have preliminary ideas about the color and texture on the physical set, as well as costume colors, textures and shapes. It is common that lighting comes in mid-process and offers ways in which to augment the colors and textures, as well as provide isolation and direct the audience’s eye. The tools of my trade are light and shadow. My capacities for light are color and intensity, distribution and quality. I work to provide mood and visibility, form and composition. The aesthetics of lighting are quite simply the range of moods and composition one is able to create within the space. I use both the director’s vision and the mid-process work of my fellow designers to inform most of my creative decisions. This tends to work quite well for lighting design. Though this, hopefully, is not the case when designing projections.

**PROJECTION DESIGN**

Technically, designing with projections for the stage is done by simply using millions of highly specific, and for video, rapidly moving, colored beams of light to paint images and texture on certain areas of scenery, drops, and perhaps actors. Although the technical process
of placing projection equipment is very similar to that of the lighting designer, the design process is quite different. There are wide variations for exactly when in the production process to introduce a projection or media designer into the project. This can range from the initial conception of a production, participating in preliminary design meetings, to being brought in days before the show opening to augment scenic elements that have been either neglected or added at the last minute. This means that the design process can easily vary from production to production.

By far the most rewarding are those productions in which the media designer and set designer collaborate from the beginning. The scale of the media and the ability to fully integrate it into the design is directly related to the point during the process when the set designer and director begin to consider using projected media, and how it will figure into the production design. This begins the discussion with the media designer about the aesthetics of the projection design. It is essential that the media designer be included in the production process from the beginning, even if there is the slightest thought that there may be projections in the show. There are many technical and design considerations that need to be discussed and this allows the media designer to develop an effective media design in collaboration with the design team and director.

For media design, the most basic consideration is between static and moving imagery. There is a striking visual and visceral difference between a static image and a movie, and this difference needs to be well understood in considering the resulting affect on an audience. This consideration must also include terms of the scale of the media design. For example, massive moving projections can create a sense of vertigo in an audience that cannot be achieved through static imagery. This effect, if intended, could heighten the action of a scene,
but if not discussed thoroughly during the design process, could have major unintended and undesirable results that take away from the experience of the action. These mistakes can be caught and prevented if a media designer is brought on early enough in the process. This allows there to be ample time to debate the nature of the media design, its capabilities, and its limitations.

Too often, media designers are not brought in until late in the process. This can be the result of a late shift in the design or because of poor planning. Sometimes designers, directors, and producers simply do not comprehend the depth and variety with which projections and media can be used on the stage, and instead use media as a solution to a particular scenic problem. Because of this demand, media designers are quickly becoming a necessary tool in theatrical design. Currently, the role of media designer often means implementing quick designs that help bring a production together. This results in a rushed design that often falls short of its potential. If the capabilities of projection and media design were better understood by fellow designers, directors, and producers, media designers could be brought on sooner during the design process, allowing for more thoughtful, thorough, and cohesive designs.

As a media designer, it is imperative to have a website that shows both projection capabilities in realized productions, as well as unrealized work that showcases the breadth of how image and video can be used in a production. By designing a portfolio that offers many design applications of media and projection, I am able to help educate my audience as well as set myself apart from other projection designers. My portfolio should show both the quality of my media designs as well as a variety of stage applications and techniques to inspire fellow designers, directors, and producers viewing my website.
SPACE AND POSSIBILITIES

Much of my aesthetic is drawn directly from how I negotiate space within performance. I align myself with the foundations of design as communicated by Jean Rosenthal and Lael Wertenbaker in *The Magic of Light* (1972). I feel that my job as a designer is to sculpt the performer out of the space with light. I have a strong background in dance and much of my design aesthetic has been molded through negotiating lighting performers in a minimalist manner. I have been able to find the beauty that exists in shining white light on an object from a few specific directions where the intensity is the only variable that changes. (Figures 4-6) By lighting dance, with focus on the body and performer, I have developed a visual foundation on which I have been able to develop my aesthetic.

Figure 4. Dancer Andrew Holmes.
By having had to isolate lighting variables like direction, intensity, and color, I have been able to develop the subtle difference and feeling that each of these elements imbues an
image. I have gone beyond seeing light as illumination to attempt to find something more; to use light to construct the Deleuzian “blobs of sensation” and affect the audience emotionally. I was able to isolate dancer Andrew Holmes with just the right ratio of side lighting to evoke the grace and poise of a Greek statue that balances the strength of the body against the soft gesture. The women of the University Dance Company have a crisp ellipsoidal side light to highlight their arms and torso which pulls them out of the background balanced with a soft Fresnel top light to smooth out shadows on their shoulders and soften their feminine movement while hinting at the sub-textual sexuality of the dance.

With an amber high-side light I am able to communicate distinctively the mid-morning light into which dancer Jess Humphries releases her deepest fears and anxieties. One can almost feel the slow drift of the dust in the air as the dancer slowly writhes and twists to assault the audience’s emotions. By isolating color, I have found the deepest of midnights contained in the diffuse glow of a Fresnel light with a blue color filter that has just enough red to coalesce the lavender from it so that it could be nothing other than a moonlit alley. Light has the unique ability to evoke so much emotion and mood in a moment. In that moment, a pure essence of time in which light has carved its path, the viewer is allowed to gaze upon a form in a new and different way. Creating space with light offers more than limitation and illumination; it offers new environments of imagination and emotion.

**DOREEN MASSEY**

I find that my reckoning with space is also informed by one of the foremost theorists of space and time; Doreen Massey, in her tome *For Space* (2007). The argument for the consideration of space is threefold. Space is a “product of interrelations,” that should be “imagined as the sphere of possibility of the existence of multiplicity,” and that is “always in
process, never a closed system, leaving an open future” (Massey 10-14). These thoughts have had a profound effect on the way in which I consider space as a designer. If I am to consider space to be a product of interrelations, this means that spaces are constantly being created, altered, and destroyed depending on the forces that are interacting with them. The second proposition allows that all/any space has the possibility of multiplicity, meaning that spaces being created, destroyed and altered do so at the same time. This makes sense as it allows for a multiplicity of views of the same events or blocs of sensations. This justifies an audiences’ both communal and individual experience of a performance, as well as allowing for the simultaneous experience of the performance by the actors, technicians, and all other bodies. The third proposition, that space is an open process, means that the events aren’t in a closed loop, and allows for the possibility of the inclusion and creation of new blocs of sensations that further the creation, destruction, or existence of these interrelations. These notions have been used by Massey to discuss a politics of space, time, history, in/exclusion, and other major impacts on humanity. I find these propositions to be a liberating force in the creative arena that serve as a constant reminder that there is always the possibility for creation and that, as artists that actively mold space, it is our responsibility to strive to find the interconnectedness of our interactions as well as the multiplicity of experiences which are the bases for any creative experience.

BERTOLT BRECHT

If Artaud sought for immersion of an audience in the production, than it would be Bertolt Brecht at the other end of the spectrum who argued for the “alienation” or distancing of the audience. In the book Brecht on Theatre: The Development of the Aesthetic (1964) John Willet is able to translate much of Brecht’s thoughts on the development of a theatre
aesthetic. Brecht, one of the most influential theatre playwrights and theorists, was quite specific about what he envisioned as the job of theatre. For Brecht, theatre should be modeled on what he described as the “Street Scene” (121). In essence, theatre should be like the recounting a bystander might do to a crowd on a street after just seeing an intense action, like a car accident. The actor should re-inact the situation as it had happened, but should be distant enough from the actual event that the “audience” or crowd that had missed the event is aware that the person recounting is not actually the person from the accident. Brecht felt this distancing, labeled the “Alienation Effect,” should be employed in any theatrical production. He argued that a theatre audience should be more like that of a boxing match; able to root for a protagonist of their choice and converse with one another about the events as they unfold. Brecht felt that this was necessary for the audience to fully realize the point of the production or story. Items like half-curtains and signs which subtitled scenes were encouraged and frequently employed. Brecht wanted the audience to be fully aware that they were in a theatre and that they were being shown a dramatization of events. This has a massive effect on the aesthetics of a production and, subsequently, has profoundly affected the way in which theatre artists approach productions. These techniques of alienating the audience can successfully be employed if a Brechtian experience is the desired outcome.

A CREATIVE DIALECTIC

There has been no question that I am the creative child of a myriad of artistic influences and progenitors. The most influential are the aforementioned artists because their aesthetics have been a means to an end. This is probably the notion that resonates as the foundation of my aesthetic more than any other: that art is a means to an end. The end result often being what is meant to be received by the audience: the question of “Why?” Elizabeth
Grosz muses on this process of communication through an artistic reading of Deleuze and Guattari in her book *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (2008).

Grosz defines the Deleuze and Guattari notion of the “plane of composition” as

> the collective condition of art making: it contains all works of art, not specifically historically laid out, but all the events in the history of art, all the transformations, ‘styles’, norms, ideals, techniques, and upheavals, insofar as they influence and express each other. (70)

It is that all works of art share something in common in that they are all made of blocs of sensations. The first gesture of art is the construction of the “frame.” It is at this point where Grosz finds Deleuze and Guattari break from the traditional Nietzschean notion of the transformation of a preexisting body to create art, and instead follow Derrida’s notion of frame construction (10). The “frame” is constructed as a means by which to delineate order within the chaos of the universe. Theatre understands this, as the literal framing of the stage exists in any traditional proscenium theatre. It is this framing that creates a space for art. Grosz’s interpretation of Deleuze and Guattari is that in order for art to connect with an audience, it must escape its framing through an “artistic release of sensation” or “line of flight” (19).

I find the idea of a “line of flight” to be traumatic. Art is literally ripping itself away from the space in which it is being performed and resonating, vibrating out into an audience. This is a visceral event and I can understand why this sensation can be termed dramatic. The act of theatre is a dramatic event by its very nature and not to be taken lightly. The emotional affect that it can have is strong enough to move nations and incite riots such as the Astor Place Riot of 1849 as discussed on *Weekend Edition*, a National Public Radio Broadcast (2006). This theatre riot left 25 dead in the house of the Astor Opera House Theatre. It had the ability to ignite fires of passion in the audience while ensnaring their senses and
eventually inciting them into a murderous frenzy. Theatre does transport one away from reality, yet it can also allow one the ability to step back and look at both the existing world and the world that could be. Theatre allows the audience the ability to collectively reflect on a shared experience and to spark debate. It is the responsibility of every theatre artist to constantly strive to create the most poignant production they can, to create, and to explore the possibilities of affect. There is an inherent mysticism that is experienced through the collective which cannot be experienced as an individual. Theatre is the subconscious and conscience of society and allows us to construct and play out our greatest fears and deepest hopes for the collective. The theatre is, by definition, a place to see; to witness the duality of humanity and to have a discussion about the machinations of the human spirit and soul. It is up to us to create something for society that is worth seeing.
CHAPTER 3

DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

The first big question in designing my digital portfolio stems from the responsibility of art: to create a frame. There are many questions to answer when considering creating both the literal and the theoretical frames within which I will be working. As the portfolio will exist in a digital domain and be accessed through the internet, the physical frame will be contained by the bounds of the viewing area of a screen; all visual imagery should also exist within these bounds. This screen size can range from a small, handheld phone to a tablet to a wide-screen television. This means consideration must be given to the native resolution of my website.

The next question considers the framework for the content. This includes questions about interaction between the audience and the content. Who I am building the portfolio for? What is the desired result of the interaction with my portfolio? Where will my portfolio exist online? These questions comprise the theoretical framework around which I will design my digital interface. The functionality of the interactive elements for the portfolio will be my next consideration, as the first questions must be discussed and answered before approaching the physical design qualities and interactions. Following these discussions will be questions of cost, time, and ease of maintenance. I must consider how each of these three parameters affects possible physical and interactive design considerations.
**The Audience**

The first question of the theoretical framework is the expected audience to interact with my portfolio. There are two main audiences I hope to engage: other artists with whom I can continue or begin to make connections and producers/directors who are looking for a theatrical lighting or digital media designer. I want the portfolio to be “professional” in quality and to be clear and concise so that directors can navigate the content with ease, gaining a sense of my abilities as a designer in a visually stimulating manner. On the other hand, I do not want the portfolio to be so paired down that it loses creativity; the ability to visually impact and make a statement about who I am as an individual. Navigating these two elements will be at the helm of my design decisions.

The second question involves what I hope the audience will take away from interacting with the portfolio. I want other artists, directors, and producers to come away from the interaction thinking about my designs and creative work. They should have the feeling that they were able to effortlessly navigate between lighting and media content. My goal is for other artists to gain an understanding and appreciation for my work as a designer and for directors and producers to have a distinct feeling for my style as an artist. I recognize that not every designer is suitable for designing every production, but I would like to make sure that a director or producer has a clear understanding of my aesthetic, ability, and capabilities as an artist; and, as a result of viewing my portfolio, they have a clear notion of whether I fit with their production. If my design sensibilities don’t fit a particular production, I hope to be judged professional and creative enough to be kept in mind for potential future projects.
LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

The third and potentially most important question is where the digital portfolio will exist within the internet. This question itself raises an additional question that must be considered and debated before jumping into the design aesthetics of the portfolio: whether to build my own website, purchase an existing template or hire a firm; or to find a hybrid possibility where I have the ability to control elements but the framework is already built.

The hybrid option is the one that I will pursue for several reasons. As a college student, my disposable income is not enough to be able to hire a professional firm to design my dream website. I would like to have creative input and be able to arrange the content in a way that is meaningful to both my aesthetic and the content itself. As for coding my own website from scratch, my computer skills as a designer are more design oriented than developer oriented. The ideal is to find a web-host that will fit both my programming ability and my budget, as I would like this initial investment for a domain to carry me through the year until I have the budget to upgrade.

There are several artist-based web-hosting sites that allow one to creatively develop and host a website with a personal domain name for a reasonable price. After researching, I have found that the best offer for the money is the hosting site otherpeoplespixles.com. For a reasonable fee you are able to host thousands of pictures and video with a custom website that allows the ability to reconfigure the layout and customize just about every option, as well as a personal domain name for a year. I believe this to be the best option, as I need to host quite a bit of imagery in combination with video. Also, this particular hosting site has a great track record optimizing search results from engines like Google, Yahoo, and Bing; and it allows the option of linking to social media so that people who like my designs and art are able to express it through sites like Facebook and Twitter. Social media networking is
actually a very important tool in the freelance artist’s toolbox. Most of my freelance design jobs have been offered to me via social networking. In this age of interconnectivity, one has to be connected to others in order to be included in the discussion.

**Clarity vs. Creativity**

A central discussion before the actual design of the portfolio website gets underway is the problem of maintaining creativity while having the advantage of clarity. As an artist I always want my material to retain its original integrity while being displayed in a manner which communicates my sense of style and design. As a self-promoting freelancer, I understand the virtue of clarity in presentation as a means of selling a product: myself. I think that there are meaningful ways to reconcile creativity with clarity, while still taking into consideration the medium and budgetary constraints. Like approaching a theatrical design, the vehicle of the internet presents restrictions of space and budget. The key is to find a creative and artistically meaningful solution that does not take away from content being displayed. For this I researched techniques which current websites have effectively implemented to present information to the viewer.

**Website Design**

There are many schools of thought when it comes to web design: not surprisingly because the internet is a fairly unregulated open space where form and function often converge and diverge. There are certain elements one should keep in mind when approaching web design, the first being usability. Ultimately it will be other people who find and use my website and so it is with others in mind that I want to approach building my online portfolio. Ilise Benun talks about usability in her book *Designing Websites For Every Audience* (2003). Nominally, those who will be using my website will be looking for ease of use, speed,
practicality, credibility, and simplicity. Also, by having an understanding of the type of people who will be looking at my website and what they expect to get out of the experience, I can develop the functionality and content so that the user can easily gain the desired result.

General web design principles that are good to follow are consistency, interaction, instruction, and choices.

Maintaining consistency (keeping the site graphically and interactively consistent from page to page) allows the user to seamlessly navigate content without having to try and figure out new elements. Interaction with the site should be predictable, visible, and reversible. This allows users to feel comfortable with what they are going to experience, focus on the content, and un-do any selection they unintentionally make. The instruction should be minimal but cover any element not consistent with the experience from page to page. Offering both visual and textual choices for ways to navigate a site allows for a wider base of users to feel comfortable navigating. Keeping these elements in mind throughout the design process ensures that nothing is being ignored in terms of user experience.

With any medium one has to make certain assumptions about the audience base. In my case, it is assumed that the user has at least minimal experience with a computer or digital device that can access the internet, and that the notion of navigation, getting around the website, has certain inherent connotations and assumptions. It can be assumed that the directors, producers, and artists navigating my website are minimally experienced with navigating websites and progressing through layers of content. Many internet users are unaware that as they navigate efficient, well-designed websites, they are actually being directed by visual clues. These visual-clues let us know what parts of the site are navigable and which are not. This is the case with the “mouse-over.” As the user moves the directional
pad or mouse, the resulting moving icon changes from an arrow to a hand with the pointer finger extended. This subtle, but essential visual tool informs users they can “click” on this particular spot and that something should happen. Every aspect of the website should include carefully considered visual clues to direct the user.

One of the most important things to remember is that every decision made should be done so for a reason and with an intention. Elisabeth Heinicke points this out quite specifically in *Web Tricks and Techniques: Layout* (2002). Heinicke explains that background color should be hand-picked for clarity in setting the stage for the content. The font should be sans-serif if the primary focus is on clarity and visuals. Alignment should be considered and should make sense visually with the images and positioning of elements on the page. A big consideration when it comes to image inclusion is the resolution of the image. Larger resolution can lead to long load-in time, whereas faster, low-resolution images are often blurry and unusable. Finding a good compromise ensures that portfolio images are impactful and large enough to communicate the design to the viewer, but small enough to flow well from one image to the next. Robert Hoekman, in his book *Designing the Moment: Web Interface Design Concepts in Action* (2008), analyzes this flow in terms of our western culture with the Gutenberg Diagram (Figure 7). This illustrates simply that because “western cultures” read print from left to right and from top to the bottom, the eye perceives most readily from the primary optical area in the top left to the terminal anchor in the bottom right.

This “diagonal balance” pattern can be achieved by drawing the eye along this path with graphics and text. Color, line-weight, font and motion can all be elements that factor into where the viewer’s attention is focused (Hoekman 11).
It is necessary to keep all of these design ideas in mind when beginning to think about my audience and my intent. Although it is important to be respected by mutual artists, ultimately my goal for this portfolio is to have a prospective director or producer experience my design work in a meaningful capacity and ultimately offer me a design position based upon this experience. This means that I need to principally gear my site and portfolio towards the aesthetics and sensibilities of producers and directors. Although they can be similar, producers and directors are looking for different things when they approach a new artist. Producers are interested in past experience with companies and realized design products that have been successful. Their interest is in designers who are organized and who have a sense for the size and scope of a production, especially when it comes to budget. Directors are more visually inclined and concerned with how a designer is going to help them tell their
story. My portfolio must show how design quality and aesthetic support each production. A
director is going to want photos and videos to be easily accessible in an efficient manner, and
presented in an unobtrusive way. The differing needs of a producer and director are subtle,
but important. Both are interested in a clear and efficient experience that will play to the
practical side of the producer as well as the creative side of the director. This means it will be
necessary to include a resume section with past companies and experiences as well as an
easily navigated visual section that showcases both my lighting and media design skills.
Produced and realized professional work should be more readily accessible than unrealized
or theoretical graduate school design work. There should also be a distinction between
theatre, opera, dance, and TV/film work to make it easy for the director and producer to
proceed directly to the pertinent section.

With proper content designed with the right intention, my portfolio should provide a
viewer with the experience that I truly intend. It is important to examine and decide the
parameters for each element that plays into the user experience. Every decision should be a
well thought out and calculated choice that will showcase my design aesthetic and engage the
audience.
CHAPTER 4

DESIGN IDEAS

In discussing the actual design process I will systematically go though the appearance, layout, and content. I will start with the background and navigational layout including sections, labels, and hierarchy. Managing the layout and depth of the portfolio will be given much consideration. Then I will discuss the font type and color for the title of the website, the navigation sections, menus, and body. Finally, I will discuss placement of images, video, and other considerations which might necessitate extra navigation sections.

INITIAL LAYOUT AND NAVIGATION

The size of the website will have a native resolution of 1024 by 768 pixels. This will allow full coverage of my website on most displays. I would like my website to start from black. In a performance arena, all of our designing begins not from a blank white canvas but from sculpting space out of the void of darkness. This is true of both lighting and creating media. The world in which my designs live is that of a void. This will provide a clean base from which the rest of the content and portfolio can grow. I feel that the navigation menu can also be situated within this black void underneath the title and provide a great visual point from which the eye can begin. This is taking the idea from the Gutenberg Diagram discussed earlier that the eye starts in the upper left hand corner and proceeds down the page diagonally towards the bottom right hand corner of the page.

The title of the website should be my name and occupation. There are several reasons for this, starting with that it instantly clarifies and lets the viewer know the content of the
website. This also reinforces that the viewer is in the right location and clarifies that I understand that the most important function of this website is advertising myself. The title should be in white to provide contrast against the black background and should be the largest font on the page. It should instantly take presence and as such has the possibility of being in a more creative font. This font should not be overly creative and should represent aspects of my design sensibilities. Because I do good deal of computer-based media design this could possibly be presented in a more block-based font reminiscent of earlier computer fonts. This is a way in which I can show my creativity as a designer and the ability to communicate ideas creatively and concisely.

The font for the navigational menu is the next consideration. As stated earlier, unless there needs to be a lengthy passage for the reader, a sans-serif font like Veranda would work best for both clarity in design and legibility. I would like the navigational font to be either white or a shade of light grey to distinguish it from the title. It should be smaller in size but still large enough to take secondary attention as the direct means by which to navigate the website. These navigational sections should be laid out horizontally with even spacing and include my portfolio, resume, and contact information which will include links to my social networking profiles. This website serves the specific purpose of promoting and displaying my work in a professional on-line capacity. I am not looking to make a substitute Facebook page with this website, so much personal information can be left off. However, I think that on the initial homepage, there might be an artist’s philosophy, statement, or quote that helps to define my aesthetic as a lighting or media designer. I would like to say something about the relationship between light and shadow, as this will also serve to reinforce the color dichotomy of the website being in black and white. There should also be a representation of
my best design work on the homepage. This can be one or several images. It should be something from either lighting or projection design that embodies my aesthetic and design sensibilities.

**HIERARCHY**

The navigational hierarchy is the next major concern. I want the viewer to be able to clearly proceed forward either to my portfolio and begin to look at my design work or to my resume and begin to look at my experience. Because I have two distinct, although somewhat related, areas of design, I would like these areas to be considered separately as they are recognized as separate design fields. To keep the initial site as clean as possible there will be one portfolio button which will direct the viewer to two galleries; one for lighting design and one for media design. This will allow a director or producer to access the section for the position in which I am being considered: if I am being considered for a lighting design position, there is no need for my projection and media design to distract from my lighting work.

I will have the lighting button first in the alignment and it will read “Lighting Design.” I currently identify as a lighting and media designer, not as a media and lighting designer. This may change in the future as I further my career, but as of now, this is the relationship between my focuses. The term “lighting design” has been chosen as it is the standard industry vernacular for design work with lighting. This is as opposed to “projection design,” which is how a media designer’s work is often referred to in the theatre. I wish to be considered as a media designer. I feel that this title covers several design needs and showcases my ability to design for a range of production needs, from custom animation and imagery to graphic design and video. This allows me to present myself to various markets in
both the entertainment and advertising industries. This is why the second button will read “Media Design.”

The last sections in my top navigation menu will be my resumes and contact information. I have several resumes depending on the job for which I am applying. For my website, only my lighting and media design resumes will be needed. The “Resume” button will follow the design navigation. For contact information, I will have my email address listed as well as links to relevant professional social networking. I also want a message form that eliminates the need to compose an email and allows prospective employers to contact me directly. This gets the communication going with a future employer immediately.

**MAIN PORTFOLIO CONTENT DIVISION**

I am dividing the portfolio into two distinct sections, delineating between lighting design and media design. I have creative design work that spans a multitude of mediums and it is very important that I keep the categorization clear, concise, and relevant. The next platform of navigation launches the user into the organization of photos and videos related to the selected secondary design area. If my website revolved around only lighting or media design, I would be able to list the distinction between design for theatre or TV/Film; since it involves both lighting and media design, the navigation takes on an extra layer of organization. This is to keep the content clear and distinct.

For my lighting design section I will be further dividing the content into distinctions between theatre, opera, dance, and TV/film. The design sensibilities are completely different between these areas and a theatre director will most likely not be that interested in television sitcom lighting. This both allows the viewer to be selective about the material they wish to view and shows that I am well-versed in multiple disciplines of lighting design, ultimately
providing me more marketability. After navigating one of these four options the content is divided up by production. I realize this adds one last layer of depth to the navigation, but it is a necessary step as opposed to presenting hundreds of photos from different productions that are unorganized.

Each production will have its photos displayed as thumbnails that can be individually accessed by clicking. The photo, once selected will fill most of the viewing area and its specific information will be clearly listed next to it. Once enlarged, the user will be able to navigate back and forth through the images with ease and will be able to quickly return to the previous screen to view other productions. The TV/film section will be comprised of video rather than photographs of projects I have worked on, but will function like the other sections.

The media design section of my portfolio will be divided similarly to the lighting design section but having only three categories. The sections will include theatre, animation, and film. Theatre work will be by production and contain both preliminary visualization work and photos or video from the actual production. For the media design, it is important that viewers gain a sense of how the process differs from production to production. For animation, the work will be divided up by project and will showcase custom animation work. This ranges from three dimensional animation work done in Maya to examples of two dimensional animation for theatre productions. Though the animation process crosses into theatre, I want a clear delineation between the final product in production and the work it took to develop the animations. There will also be a section that is representative of the work I have done in creating films that showcases my capacity to play the role of both cinematographer and designer.


**Visualization**

In beginning to develop preliminary design sketches for the layout of my website, it became apparent that in order to fully grasp the use of space I would have to first grasp the weighting of the space I was working with. I decided that I would do a series of sketches of the design that I had developed based on the web-design theory. I wanted to have a distinct visual base from which to build the site. I decided to utilize a technique I was shown by my graphic design professor, Mark Siprut, that involves weighting the potential space with shaded boxes to visualize the open vs. closed space.

After creating the first weighting (Figure 8), I saw that now I needed a distinct horizon line to provide a visual grounding and base for the design (Figure 9).

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**Figure 8. Initial weighting sketch.**
I then realized I had not included the elements fundamental to the internet experience: the browser window frame, the URL bar, and potentially a bookmark and program menu bar at the bottom (Figure 10). These closed in the space and I was able to adjust and re-weight the design accordingly. I achieved this by raising my quote to be level with the bottom edge of the image. In the midst of the task/toolbar mess this element would be essential for keeping the viewer’s attention on the website. In addition to accounting for the top and bottom border that were now inextricably part of the design, I would have to adjust the “margins” on the left and right side of the website while also allowing more space in the bottom “margin” to properly weight the website. I did this by providing a bounding box in black that contained all of the information in addition to providing my black background for the images. I then created a slightly contrasting dark background that provided the extra “margin” space I needed while also evoking the rounded qualities of lighting fixtures and the

Figure 9. Weighting sketch with added horizon line.
pools of light they create to provide subconscious connections with my role as lighting designer. Armed with my blueprint for the website design I was able to begin the physical build of the site layout including the addition of content.
CHAPTER 5

TECHNICAL EXECUTION

Theatre has taught me that every design is the result of thousands of compromises and re-works. This is because at any given time one is working within the parameters of time, budget, and ability constraints, as well as trying to always keep in mind the director’s view and the contributions brought to the table by the other artists. This has prepared me well for the experience of building a website. As I undertook this process I was constantly hit with roadblocks and dead ends which I had to navigate around and through. This was mainly due to time and budget constraints. Given a large enough sum of money, a long enough period, or enough HTML coding skill, I would have been able to implement exactly what I wanted for my website design. Issues arose as I discovered the limitations of my website host, Other People’s Pixels. I will discuss this build process in depth and discuss the barriers I encountered along the way.

A POSITIVE BEGINNING

I chose the company Other People’s Pixels for my website host because I liked their mission. They are a website host that was developed by artists, for artists. This means that they give the user much more leeway when it comes to the design of the website, with an easy-to-understand interface. This was important because my skills as a designer rest upon the ability to use and control the tools with which I am working. There are many ways to generate a website, and I wanted to find a path that spoke to me as an artist and that would give me the ability to mold my website to my choosing.
Setting up and managing the website is done from a menu that contains all of the website elements; from developing and designing a home page screen to creating labels that archive all of the artwork. There even is a process for providing a contact form in addition to ways to access my resume and the possibility of links or news sections if I wish to add them in the future. Other elements like “theme” and “template” offer a range of designs from which to start ranging from the skeletal to pretty much a pre-made website. I can see how this encompasses a range of computer-skills among savvy designers. Navigation modes can be chosen as well as a huge range of font customization for any navigational function. Lastly, the manage screen provides tips on how to maximize your search engine efficiency. These are ways to make my website a top hit on search engines like Google and Bing in order to increase site traffic and ultimately to get me out there as an artist.

**HOME PAGE**

The first element I wanted to work on for the website was the homepage. This is the first page people will see when they visit my site and ultimately this will make the biggest impression on my audience. My homepage is comprised of four major elements: The title, the navigational buttons, the image, and the quote. This was all to appear on a black background. I was able to set up the template to display a black background. I then created the title with an appropriately sized font. I initially wanted Veranda for all of my fonts so that my site would be very easy to read. I knew from my work with Professor Siprut that fancy fonts are only for titles, not for the body of a work, and so I decided that my title could have a font that was more representative of my work and my personality.

I wanted my font to be extremely legible though and found a font called 3X5 which I was able to color white. This font has the letters appear in a block style with white line
divisions similar to that of digital clocks (Figure 11). The rounded nature lends itself to feel futuristic and stylish, while the graphing of the lines within the letters feels very design-oriented like a blueprint or like working with pixels. This felt right, as it seemed to capture my ability to design in both a creative and technical capacity. When designing with lighting and projections, one is always navigating between the creative and the technical. The marriage of these two aspects is one of my abilities. I then filled out the title with my name and followed with “lighting and media design.” This looked a bit run-together so I added four dots, or two colons in the same font, as a nondescript break between my name and title to both give a visual distinction between the two and to keep the design consistent.

With the title figured out I then decided to work on the navigational buttons. I already knew that I wanted to direct the audience with as few distractions as possible, so I had decided to divide up the navigation into three elements; the portfolio, the resume, and the contact sections. This was easily implemented as I chose a template that allowed me to have the navigation right under the title. One limitation which worked in my favor was that the template was already set up to be divided by artwork, resume, and contact sections, with options for a links or news section. I decided to use only the three because I had chosen to keep the design simple and the choices few. I selected the Veranda font for the navigation
and made it white and looked at a preview. Veranda, which is normally easy to read, looked stylistically wrong next to such a designed title. I then searched through the nearly one-thousand fonts available and chose Bazouk Light. This sans-serif font had both the readability and clarity I wanted, while combining subtle curved design elements similar to the title. The size and weight difference between the two fonts provided enough similarity to be consistent, but enough contrast to distinguish itself as a navigational menu. I made these buttons black and the lettering white. In this instance I went for a clean design look rather than telegraphing the buttons with an outline or contrasting color. I am relying on my audience to assume the font is the button and, given the familiarity with web navigation of today’s users, I decided that the design was more important in this instance than being overt. I believe this will ultimately be a more successful and elegant solution.

Next was the design for the image and the quote. I decided that I wanted the quote to be “Without light, there would be no shadow.” I am not attributing this to anyone and in that way am taking credit for it. I know I have heard it or a variation somewhere, but after researching, I was unable to find a recognizable source. I like this quote for several reasons, including the allusion to theatre and our distinction of comedy and drama. I like it because it refers to both humanity and the cosmos. It also reinforces the design of the website being almost entirely in black and white. With my quote determined, I was able to begin looking at imagery. I found a great test image from the production of The Boyfriend for which I designed the lighting. I uploaded the image to the server and was able to choose the placement on my home screen. As in my sketch, I was able to set the picture to the left and then place the quote right. This set up very similar to my sketch and I was very happy with the placement while I fine-tuned the elements.
It was at this point that I began to experience the limitations of using a template. The first was that the image size on this website was limited to a 4096 by 4096 resolution. This was both good and bad: on the one hand, I would have a beautiful standardized gallery that was consistent; on the other hand, it meant that I would have to standardize all of the hundreds of images that ultimately would be uploaded. Also, I noticed that the textbox in which I was able to place my quote was basically the text box on the right side of the screen that existed to provide notations for all of the artwork on the website. This meant that I would only get one font style, type and size for all of the text relating to images on the site. I decided to work with this and go with the smaller font size that would look the best with the images, rather than having a bigger font size for the home page. This was also the case with the font style. Because the website is setup to both provide content and description of content, the description fonts are severely limited compared to the navigational and title fonts. This meant that I would have to go with a more traditional font for all of the photo information throughout the site. I picked Veranda and was quite pleased with the result. The font looks great throughout the website to offset the photos as it is non-imposing and exists as a basic function of providing information, not design. For the homepage I was able to bring the Veranda font closer to the design through italicizing, which also worked because quotes are usually spoken word, which is often italicized in text. Also, the quote exists much lower than the title and navigational menu and the difference is less noticeable. The font for all of this was also white, to keep to the design scheme.

I then implemented the bounding box from my preliminary design and incorporated rounded edges to keep it consistent with the font and to provide contrast to the square edges of my photos. I found a contrasting circular design for the background that evoked the sense
of lighting and design, while also being subtle and not pulling focus. The last decision I made for the home screen would carry through to the rest of my portfolio. This was adding a white border around the edge of each image (Figure 12). This gave the image the advantage of helping it stick out from everything else on the screen and providing an end to the photo in the places where the edges were black. This is especially great for theatrical photos where the edge of the stage fades into darkness, leaving the bottom of the photo to disappear into the black of the background of my main viewing area. The white border, which would have to be edited onto every photo, also helped with resizing my imagery. This helps each photo to both stand out when presented and to keep symmetry across design disciplines and mediums.

Figure 12. Finished home screen for website.

LAYING OUT THE HIERARCHY

The layout of the system of folders for the hierarchy of the portfolio was the most difficult part of the process. While I knew what general categories I wanted, implementing
them was much more involved. The problem was how to actually navigate the folders in which the content would be placed. The solution provided by the webhost was to have each folder be represented by a 100 by 100 pixel box containing a provided thumbnail giving insight to what the content of its folder. I decided that I would continue the current design scheme using a white outline as a bounding box for each heading and that I would use the Veranda font, centered in the box to designate each area. I augmented this by providing text with the instruction to select either a relevant design category or production. This worked beautifully for the upper layers of navigation.

The next level of hierarchy is a separate folder of images for each production. Each image required a thumbnail but instead of creating text, I wanted to be creative and borrow text and imagery from the publication material for each production. This provides a glimpse into the context of each design. Each production folder lists the title, the performance venue, and year. Each individual image, when selected, has its title and design notation and will enlarge if clicked upon, providing the user with full-screen images.

For the hierarchy, the most difficult part was deciding what the thumbnails were going to be and what information should be listed for each level of hierarchy. Organization was my biggest tool in order to keep everything consistent and coherent. With all of the content in place, the system of folders seemed to be a nice combination of organization and design in the midst of the technical limitations of the template.

**ADDING THE CONTENT**

The next step in the process was uploading the content to the site. This process was lengthened by the issue of having to standardize a collection of images that have wildly different resolutions and aspect ratios. Images that are portrait instead of landscape were
difficult to work with and often had to be cropped to increase the width and provide a clearer image. Video was the next content to implement. Each video clip is represented by a thumbnail which is usually taken from the footage of the film and, when selected, displays imbedded video content. The video specifications are limiting, restricted to only .FLV or “flash” videos that are less than one hundred and fifty megabytes. This is not very large, as some of my videos are well into the gigabyte size and had to be edited down in order to be uploaded.

**RESUME AND CONTACT**

The last two things that I developed were the resume and the contact sections. These sections were the easiest and, after building the actual portfolio section, gave me little to no trouble. The resume section is like a quick link to a .PDF of your resume. It will either open in a new window or the current one depending on which setting you choose. This means that my custom resume will be able to be easily accessed and downloaded by any potential employer. I have set the function to open in a new window so that the viewer can continue to access my website alongside my resume if desired. The second section is the contact section. I have listed my email address as well as provided a form which can be filled out by a viewer. This allows the viewer to contact me without having to send a formal email, while also allowing viewers to comment on my site. I feel this tool will be an effective means of establishing contact with a prospective employer.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Developing an online portfolio means developing a website. It is necessary to think about the commitment this entails before embarking on such a pursuit. I see myself as a designer in the entertainment industry and, as such, it is necessary to promote myself. This means I have to have a strong online presence. This can only be attained from a platform that allows a national audience to access my work. A personal website is a must for any aspiring design professional. The downside is that websites are difficult to maintain, even harder to design, and cost money. This is especially true for artists who are looking to represent themselves and their creativity, while at the same time being financially strapped and technologically impaired.

My process of finding a webhost that provided me with a loose template and the ability to customize my information was difficult. Its close association with artists that have many images and video that needs to be displayed made Other People’s Pixels the ideal choice for me. I was impressed by the scope of their operation, the ease of the interface, and the professionalism of the end result. I could customize my website to showcase my portfolio without having to write one line of HTML code. Instead, I was able to focus on the actual design of the site and the user experience, as opposed to worrying about how to create links between content. By having the tedious work done for me, I was able to spend more time thinking about the flow of the site and its usability. The website allowed for access to the multi-media nature of my media designs. Also, the personalized domain name that they found and bought for me was a huge perk. The website is located at
www.DominicAbbenante.com. This allows people to easily find me and shows that I am serious about my design business.

It was necessary to contemplate the ramifications of every designed element in this product because the elements that are experienced will represent the entirety of my design business and career. Every interaction needed to be well thought out. I felt that my research into both web design and into the background of my aesthetics helped to propel the final product. By looking at what impacts my own sense of design, I was able to focus on the important elements of experiencing a design, and narrow down the experience that I wanted my audience to have. I was also able to narrow down exactly who my intended audience was and then customize the experience to meet their needs.

The process of conceptualizing, designing, and realizing a digital portfolio was very similar my process of designing for the theatre. Ultimately the winning point behind this design was to figure out what was needed and not needed to achieve my desired impact on the audience. I feel that the design of my website is simple, clear, and powerful, because it allows the user to access my design work without distraction. This allows my work to affect and engage the viewer through the aesthetics of my designs. I think that the navigation is intuitive, allowing quick access to rich content that is reflective of my best work. This project called for all the abilities I have been honing during my graduate study. It is extremely rewarding to complete a project that will ultimately support me as an artist as I move into the industry. Reflecting on all the work that I have done only makes me think about where I want to take my skills in the future. My portfolio will be able to promote me as an artist for years to come.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

WORKS CITED


WORKS CONSULTED

