

# Shades Of Green

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## Intro:

It had already been a week of living with no hot water or electricity when the lights in my home finally turned back on. It was August of 2011 and Hurricane Irene had wreaked havoc on my hometown. I was eight years old and bewildered by the ferociously changing environment around me. Immediately proceeding the hurricane the whole town geared into clean-up mode, and worked hard to restore the town and build it back stronger than it was before.

A year later Hurricane Sandy struck and I was back to taking family trips to the town's high school locker room to take a shower with hot water. Every few years yet another major hurricane would hit my hometown. Following each storm conversations of preventative infrastructure were held, but no matter how strong the planning and new infrastructure seemed to be there was always still damage and loss with each storm.

I have lived in the same town my entire life, yet I feel like the climate I know now is a completely different one than when I grew up. The change in weather makes sense as I live in a coastal town in the northeast, a prime location for storms to blow in and air pollution to accumulate. Because of my location my education was always rather aware of climate change, because we all experienced the constant environmental change first hand so it was always the reality of everyone around me. Besides the preventative infrastructure I have even seen a change in different species in my hometown, for example, I've stopped needing to use bug spray because there are simply fewer bugs nowadays. As a kid I spent many summer nights outside catching dozens of fireflies, spotting a firefly feels like a special occasion. In the past few years, I've watched the plants and animals in my backyard struggle after their previously reliable instincts were misled by warmer winters, causing them to leave hibernation and bloom before winter is actually over.

Hurricane Irene, Hurricane Sandy, and all of these other instances have led me to be aware of climate change throughout my whole life and just how severe its impact can be. This led me to formulate my senior project around sustainability.

## Research:

While it feels like I was always aware of climate change I was definitely not always aware of what my senior project thesis question would be. Initially, my senior project thesis question was *"What types of design strategies lead to viewers taking action to change their day-to-day lifestyle habits for the better?"*. I wanted to explore it with a focus on the environmental impact of a vegan diet compared to a vegetarian one versus an omnivorous diet. While I maintain an omnivorous diet, many of the people in my life are either vegan or vegetarian so this topic naturally piqued my interest.

I started out looking at the food industry, food waste, and the carbon footprints of importing “sustainable foods” compared to “non-sustainable foods”. My research quickly broadened into discovering the best sustainable choices one can make in every aspect of their day-to-day life.

Eventually, “circular design” came up in my research and my thesis question narrowed once again. According to the Interaction Design Foundation, “Circular design is the practice of creating durable, reusable, repairable and recyclable products that generate zero waste.” The idea of there being a whole term and research effort for creating products with an awareness of their impact was fascinating to me. My thesis question became “How can designers make more sustainable decisions - both in their day-to-day practice and as the first line of communication between the consumer and the corporation?”

To begin my research, I reached out to several New York design studios, all of which mention sustainability in their mission statement or online. I contacted these design studios with the intention of learning more about how designers keep their practices sustainable. This included exploring how they advocate for sustainable choices, find clients with an interest in sustainability, and find their clients.

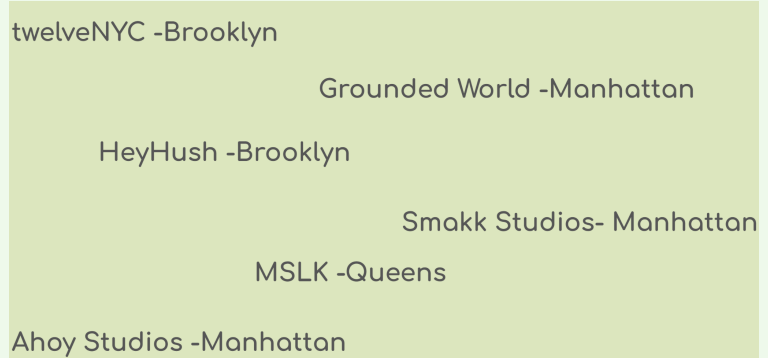


Figure 1

*These are the names of some of the design studio's I had reached out to.*

While awaiting a response from one of the above design studios I began researching what types of papers and inks are more sustainable than others, as well as product and packaging materials. Through my research, I also learned that going paperless isn't always the most eco-friendly, as the carbon footprint of technology is burdensome in its own manner. In all my research it seemed that while one solution might have minimized one issue, the solution would have its own challenges when combating climate change.

It seems that even those who use sustainable materials may not be running sustainable practices overall. Governmental regulations attempt to define sustainability, which allows organizations to represent themselves as sustainable very easily. If you look into the EPA's criteria for receiving a Safer Choice label, for example, a product only needs to meet 1.5 of 6 different sustainable categories. That's only 25% of the criteria!

Additionally, I delved into why sustainability is important and what views the general public has on this topic. While gathering data on climate change, I came across the term “Anthropocene” which is used to reference the idea that human impact most strongly effects the environment. In learning about Anthropocene I discovered a more specific term known as

Capitalocene. As stated in a peer-reviewed article published by Cambridge University “The term ‘Capitalocene’ more accurately directs attention to the socioeconomic system that enabled the large-scale transformation of the earth through equally large-scale exploitation of “cheap” natural and human resources.” Humans have existed on the planet for millions of years without the earth changing as drastically as it currently is, so the reasoning behind climate change points more directly to the evolution of capitalism. ‘Capitalocene’ suggests the economic system is an aspect tying into Gaia Theory. Gaia Theory is the scientific notion that the entire planet is interconnected in a way where climate and life have a symbiotic relationship. An article from Harvard University implies Gaia Theory means that Earth constantly strives to reach a level of homeostasis to maintain *itself*, not necessarily the (human) lifeforms within it.

Discovering ‘Capitalocene’ in tandem with struggling to find materials, business models, or other solutions that would most effectively combat sustainability as a designer led me to change my thesis question once again. *“How can I design a campaign to apply pressure on corporations to take responsibility for climate change, and educate the consumer on corporate greenwashing?”*

I was excited to discover and then communicate how designers can improve and influence corporate actions to become more sustainable since designers are the last people to engage with a product before it hits the shelves. However, just as I was about to begin a fresh set of research for this new thesis question I received a brief response from a representative at MSLK studio:

*“I’ve looked at this topic for over 15 years now. The problem is that until governments pass laws to regulate manufacturing the cost of sustainable solutions is unreachable for many companies. Especially small companies. Only the biggest companies can even afford to really consider change and they aren’t in a rush to do so.*

*Designers are actually powerless to lead clients towards sustainable solutions. Profit and loss dictate the final decisions. Is the sustainable solution cheaper? Often not. Will it save us money in the long run? Often not.*

*Design deserves a seat at the table to help governments, manufacturers, and businesses look at the entire ecosystem but at the end of the day, that’s really the only way. The entire system has to be reevaluated. Otherwise designers propose solutions that are hard to uphold, hard to pay for, and hard to maintain in practice. Sadly the best solutions we have today are really bandaids and don’t go nearly as far as they should.*

*Not the answer you wanted to hear. I know. I’m sorry, but it’s the best I have.”*

While this was a disappointing response to receive, I was unable to find myself disagreeing with their statement. Sustainability isn't, can't, and shouldn't be in the hands of designers, making sustainable and anti-consumerism change is something much larger than what designers have control over. I quickly came to realize a fact I couldn't ignore. The graphic

design Industry is unavoidably deeply woven into consumerism. So my thesis question shifted to “How can I utilize design to critique consumerism?” To pull away from putting the blame and responsibility on graphic designers, I wanted to shift the focus of my senior project to expose companies for greenwashing and to put all responsibility on them while making consumers aware of patterns to devalue sustainability within business models so if one must fall into capitalistic habits, they could at least try to do so mindfully.

I found statistics from a Pew Research study from August of 2023 found that only 46% of Americans believe global warming is primarily from human activity, 26% of people said global warming was primarily natural, and 14% claimed that there's not enough data that the earth is warming, while the remaining percentage said they were unsure all together. These numbers made me realize the public still needs to be educated on what climate change really is.

Additionally, of those who do hold concern for the environment, studies have shown that 96% of people say they try to live sustainably. But then only 52% of people will frequently engage in sustainable behavior on a day-to-day basis. And 88% of consumers say they will occasionally check for the sustainability of a product before purchase. And 20% check on the sustainability status of products with almost every purchase. Both of these statistics conveyed to me that while some people may understand the urgency for sustainability, the average consumer is either ignorant of many aspects regarding sustainability or is unwilling to put in more effort. Meaning once again the issue is societal and not solely on the individual, but rather capitalism and its consumeristic agenda.

Knowing I intended to critique consumerism, while I would soon be pursuing a career that feeds and fuels the flame of consumerism, it felt rather hypocritical to think about including this capstone project in my portfolio. So after some research on consumerism, my research evolved a little further, and I changed my thesis statement for the final time to “How do I best convey that Climate Change is not the fault of the individuals, consumers, designers, mass corporations, or even the government's lack of proper regulations, but rather the fault of all of those entities combined fighting against each other, instead of working towards a common goal?”

## Process:

When it came time to decide how to design the communication of my research it seemed most obvious to create a narrative in the medium of an interactive webpage. I considered making a motion graphic video or a book, however, both of those forms felt too linear and less immersive. I wanted something that wasn't just going to get my audience to think about climate change but would inspire the audience to demand systemic change. Discovering Margaret Morse's essay *The Poetics of Interactivity* led to affirming my beliefs as she emphasized the value of interactive media. She emphasizes the strength that narrative holds

through interactivity in stating, "Indeed, the capacity to involve the receiver or user in the process, if not the creation of at least second-order selection and linking or assembling of elements displayed on-screen is precisely what differentiates interactive fiction and art from the passive readers and viewers of traditional cultural forms that espouse a one-sided notion of authorship." I wanted to convey a sense of control to users by giving them choices so the daunting issue of climate change feels like something within their control.

To convey that we need to stop pointing fingers in regard to climate change and begin taking steps for a healthier earth, I wanted to create a website that mimics an interactive choose-your-own-story interface, where readers can choose what route they wish to take, whether it's looking through the lens of an individual consumer, a designer, a corporation, or a government. Each route follows the appropriate steps to become more sustainable and it displays the effects of each choice as the stories progress, both negative and positive. Each route ends with climate change still ongoing because of other factors such as characters refusing to do their part. As each story progresses users are educated on the effects and importance of stopping climate change and seeing the best ways each entity should act to be more sustainable.

Once I established the physical form that my senior project was going to take, I was ready to dive into writing the narrative. My research was vastly personal to me as a designer, and where my interests lie. So initially I began writing several narratives about the struggles of trying to be sustainable as a designer. I knew the topics I had to cover were: trying to convince a small design company to be sustainable, working for a company that was greenwashing as a designer, working freelance but not being able to financially afford the upkeep of creating sustainability, working to make a sustainable and non-sustainable small business product line, not being able to pursue a sustainable product because of government regulations being too strong (or too weak), and many other plot points.

In my research, I had honestly covered a lot of topics and I wanted to try to include a narrative to cover each aspect I looked into. This is partially so the research wasn't all for nothing but mainly because I felt as though each aspect of my research conveyed a different obstacle in society that prevents the climate from restoring itself to a place where humans and other current species can continue living on it. The more narratives I was able to showcase the more accurately I was able to depict the complexity behind the issue of solving climate change.

In the beginning, I had also considered if each story would feature a different character. However, I felt it might be too much new information for users to process rather than focusing on the point of my narrative. I also wanted a stronger story with a common thread of the same character being featured in each narrative.

3 years old and just graduated with two degrees, one in fine arts and one in the science of business management. While his degree's don't reflect it, he has always cared about sustainability and helping prolong humans time on earth. Alex has always observed that with each year he got more severe type of natural disaster struck and summers got more intense and winters have become shorter and warmer. Alex was raised to understand that the human species, or any species for that matter require very specific conditions and habitats to live, and seeing how rapidly climate is changing he fears humans time on earth is going to be brought to an end one day if not enough is done to help slow the rate of change, so humans have more time to adapt. With all this he has a small amount of money saved up from working part time through college and is step forward into the world and make an impact on the current path society is on, of disrupting the livability of the current climate.

<p><b>CE:</b> reject the small design studio job offer. Accept a new job offer with client.</p> <p>is to change gears and try his luck in finding freelance job opportunities. He more success here, however sustainability is still a deep value he holds and it to take on any clients without this mindset.</p> <p>has received many job offerings through freelance platforms he finds no lack in to offer that seems to share his values of creating sustainability. His finances are firm, and he eventually has to accept a request of advertisements for a clients full and non-sustainable company out of financial need. However not wanting to be aligned to hold conversations with the client about sustainability. (FINDING JOBS BUT NONE OF THEM ARE WITH SUSTAINABLE CLIENTS so Alex avoids client)</p>	<p><b>LOOK FOR GRAPHIC DESIGN JOB</b></p> <p>better way for Alex to channel his creative energies than to look into employment as a graphic designer, plus graphic design has an expanding demand for sustainability, maybe alex can even turn his work into being based on sustainability. He sent out, what feels like hundreds of job applications but only managed to hear back from one small design studio. Should he take this small studio job?</p> <p><b>SMALL DESIGN STUDIO (take the job offer)</b></p> <p>Alex takes the job offer at the small design studio. Its amazing to be part of the team at this new studio with a team of designers, and to get to witness multiple projects going at once, however alex quickly observe how much waste is produced on a daily and weekly basis from the creative practices all the way to product designs at the studio.</p>	<p><b>ENTREPRENEUR JOB</b></p> <p>Alex puts all his entrepreneurship and business management with to good use and tries to launch a new business and product line for reusable water bottles. In transforming the product materials he need to consider customer interest, as well as the companies financial gains and losses from all decisions being made.</p> <p><b>CHEAP UNSUSTAINABLE MATERIAL FOR WATERBOTTLE</b></p> <p>Generate water bottles for cheaper plastic to increase company profit margins. research shows that some governments have more regulation than others regarding environmental protection in material harvesting and business practice meaning companies are more or less costly if you were to manufacture your product there based on how many regulation they have.</p> <p><b>NON SUSTAINABLE PATH EXTERNAL COUNTRY MANUFACTURING</b></p> <p>To make business more lucrative Alex decides to move product production to a different country that has less environmental regulations for product manufacturing.</p> <p><b>BACKLASH POOR PUBLIC IMAGE</b></p> <p>backlash for not being sustainable public points fingers at you and your product line for causing so much damage to the earth while continuing to promote yourself as sustainable.</p>	<p><b>HIGHLY SUSTAINABLE MATERIAL FOR WATERBOTTLE</b></p> <p>Create water bottles from highly sustainable and long lasting material.</p> <p><b>Profit margin goes down (sustainable)</b></p> <p>Keep producing water bottles made of sustainable materials.</p> <p><b>Profit margin goes up (unsustainable material)</b></p> <p>Doungrade Alex's product material to be slightly more affordable for your company to buy.</p>
<p><b>ABLE DESIGN (PARTIAL UL)</b></p> <p>He to convince the client of a viable decisions, but only the new's on the promise that it's in the latest trend, so data being profitable. After viewing art work he really alex can't at proud. It's not everything he at least he helped influence a viable decisions, and hey, that's moral.</p> <p><b>BY MAKING ADVERTISEMENTS COMPANY AS SUSTAINABLE</b></p> <p>the BOSS THINKS ITS A TO GET MORE MONEY</p> <p>was able to convince his boss sustainable changes, like using a solve materials to pvc plastic see signs and poster vits. However, Alex's boss proceeding to advertise that is sustainable, and given to get quick buses. Alex has no to continue to make into exactly how they want as effort to get fired, so despite thing what the company is romotes his client to be a brand.</p>	<p><b>RESEARCH SUSTAINABLE DESIGN PRACTICE WITHIN THE STUDIO</b></p> <p>and pitch new research to team. alex begins researching how to change creative practices for the better of the ecosystem so he can pitch the idea for the whole new team (insert sustainable practice facts)</p> <p><b>TRY TO BE SUSTAINABLE THROUGH CONSUMERISM</b></p> <p>While the job may not reflect sustainability alex knows he sure can still make his daily life and home more sustainable. He looks into changing daily habits and discover he can only afford to change his own artistic practice or his style of living.</p> <p><b>CHANGE TO COMPLETELY PAPERLESS AND ALL DIGITAL</b></p> <p>Alex initiates further research and calculate his new personal carbon footprint.</p> <p><b>CHANGE TO ONLY USING THE MOST SUSTAINABLE MATERIALS, PAPER, INKS ETC (insert research)</b></p>	<p><b>SUSTAINABLE PATH LOCAL MANUFACTURING</b></p> <p>don't worry about the expenses and set up a more sustainable local corporate practice to safety gov needs outside of country and spend more money.</p> <p><b>can't afford to maintain business if only the your government had more regulations to make sustainable options the norm, so they aren't financially being decision but rather the default set standard way</b></p>	<p><b>the business model falls due to financial burden and lack of public interest in sustainable material over cheaper non sustainable competitor brands.</b></p> <p><b>Greenwashing</b> an article comes out that Alex's company is greenwashing because you started out your products campaign as very sustainable and debt sick to it.</p> <p><b>Your business goes under because sustainability is too costly for new companies.</b> because of unsustainable products are so much more abundant due to society's demand through lack of information, and lack of caring.</p>
<p><b>ISHING</b></p> <p>that's Shortly after the product then the client goes under fire sustainability through nets, the news advertisements make and trend to warn his client such language. On social are are understanding the company sitting. <b>the company.</b> if listening to Alex's tips and sustainability</p>	<p><b>alex WASTED HIS TIME, THE STUDIO IS TOO SMALL AND CANT AFFORD THESE SUSTAINABLE OPTIONS</b></p> <p>Alex's been here's ten not and commends him for all the hard research, however it revealed the studio is simply too small and can't afford to make the suggested sustainable changes. Alex is hit with great levels of defeat as they are forced to admit they can't help by making the teams practice sustainable and he is left with immense defeat for not being able to effectively make a sustainable impact for company's future, and the worlds current ecosystems.</p> <p><b>Alex's CARBON FOOTPRINT IS STILL HIGH</b></p> <p>Alex realizes further research and calculate his new personal carbon footprint.</p> <p><b>ALEX'S CARBON FOOTPRINT IS STILL HIGH</b></p> <p>The sustainable and energy of and gas. A sustainable electrical grid are not quite available to him, because the previously unsustainable materials were improperly discarded and he ended up wasting more material by not waiting to upgrade everything once at boxes.</p> <p><b>UNAFFORDABLE</b></p> <p>Alex quickly discovers the most clean options can't be afforded at his current salary so he has to continue contributing to the problem because of <b>societal accessibility issues</b> not seeing the results from the changes that he can't afford to make. Additionally was that are marketed as sustainable are all soy based, however looking further into the production and distribution of soy, it is actually quite strenuous to the earth as it requires a lot of water and land to grow soy.</p>		

Figure 2

The map of the different narratives to Shades of Green.

Writing so many different stories that branch off of one another and intertwine non-linearly, became more than a little chaotic and hard to organize all of it. The chart above (Figure 2) is the most up-to-date draft of all the narratives I drafted, rewritten, and revised once more. You can see they all branch out from the same beginning page, which introduces Alex, visible in the uppermost box, but each story expands and branches out downwards into multiple different iterations of Alex's actions.

It wasn't until the narratives were more or less fleshed out that I was able to consider what the title of the project would be. Featured to the right is a list of the final contenders for the title of my senior project (Figure 3), I wanted the title to thematically pull the messaging of the narrative together more. I ended up debating between the two options of "Shades of Green" versus "Emerald Ending- Can You Reach It?". I liked

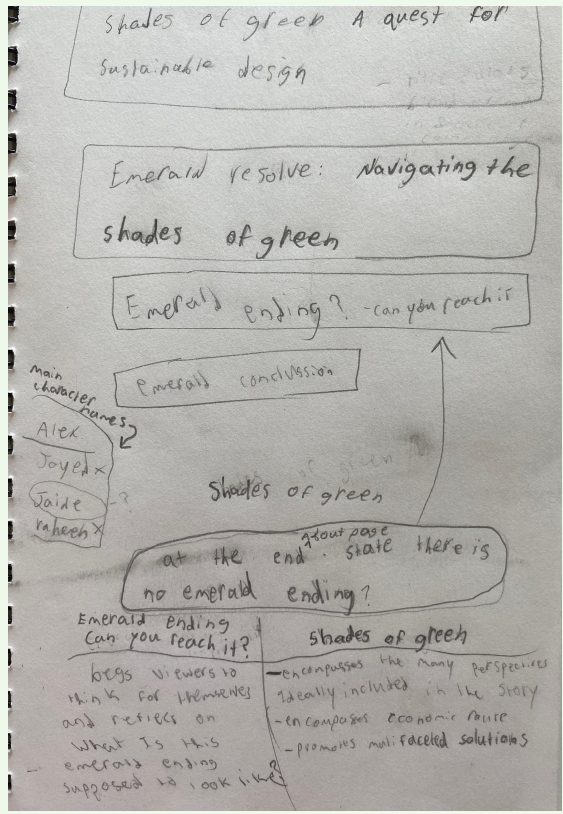


Figure 3

The final iterations of possible titles and character names.

“Emerald Ending” because it implied there was a ‘golden solution’ amongst all the stories I had written. In reality, there isn't a “correct” or “winning” so the title sparks viewer's interest, by asking them if they can find the correct ending, only to discover there's not a simple solution to combat climate change. This prompt would function as something to go beyond the game, as humans can ensure we remain alive despite the current climate change, it just requires the removal or reduction of capitalism and consumerism. I chose Shades of Green because it more or less is the same idea, but rather than imply that there's a correct ending it just emphasizes the notion that there are many different ways to approach something. I didn't want the audience to become confused or feel misled into thinking one of the featured narratives was the “ideal way” to be sustainable.

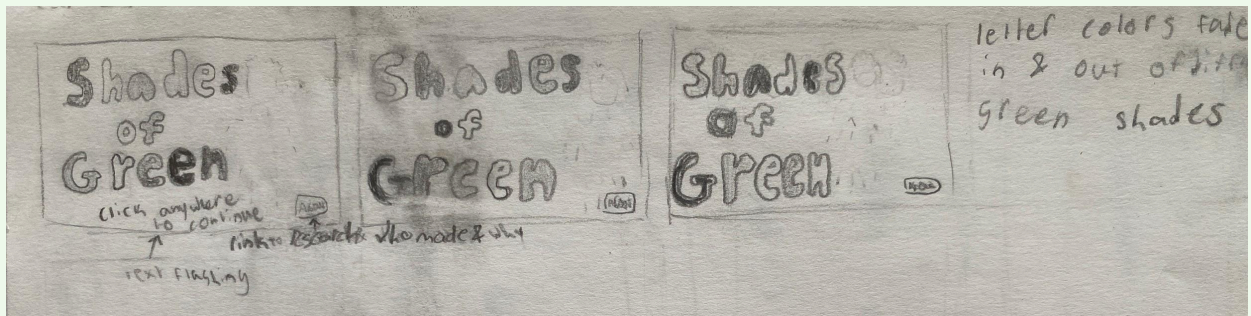


Figure 4

Storyboard for home screen with the final title

As far as the details of Alex’s background go, I originally did not want to contextualize him to have any specific past, to keep him identifiable to as broad of an audience as possible.

Once the title was brought into existence, I went about deciding on the character design. At the same time, while I wanted to have a narrative featuring choice, I wanted to keep the details of the narrative to be broad enough that anyone could see themselves as the main character. I chose the name Alex because it is gender-neutral and his character design remains loosely drawn as a dashed line to mimic the idea that users can paste themselves into the narrative. Every iteration of Alex’s design featured an illustrative/hand-drawn/sketched style which I found to be the best way to represent a human, without giving them much of an identity beyond that. However, in Morse’s essay, she also references the necessity for narrative to exist within interactivity. So I changed Alex’s introduction to describe him as a fresh graduate with two degrees, which helped aid the plot but also assisted in giving viewers a narrative to care about and relate to.

The overarching look of the webpage is inspired by a web narrative I discovered during my research called *The World Ends Today, I Think....* The strengths of this web novel lie in its simplicity and its utilization of sound, which help keep the narrative

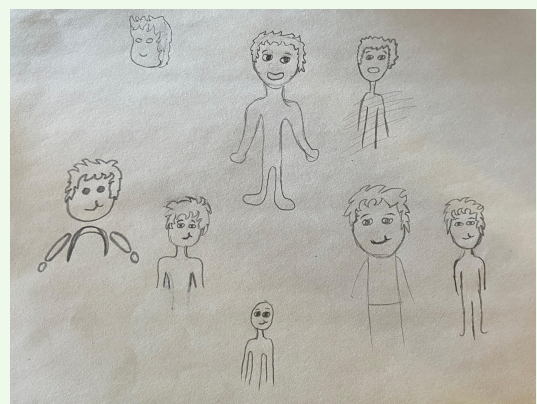


Figure 5

Alex character design iterations.



and thus the audience, engaged. I knew I wanted to include more visuals, that is what this web novel features because I have experience creating motion design and have always enjoyed animating.

Before I had settled on this idea, Shades of Green nearly looked drastically different. I was previously considering having the user be depicted as themselves through the utilization of the webcam so whoever was viewing the page could see themselves standing in the illustrated world of the narrative. I scrapped this idea before it got very far because I felt that style could have been limiting and too far removed from a narrative. Additionally, I was unsure if I could properly code the webpage to respond to live video footage.

I incorporated the paper texture overlay in each video because the source image for the paper texture is handmade paper I made from recycled material, and I thought it would be neat to incorporate recycling as well as the tactility that is now featured in this very digital project.

Curating the display for my show definitely didn't go as planned, but I still really enjoyed how it came out. Figure 6 features a mock-up of the ideal scene for my senior show. Because of my placement within the Visual Arts Building at Purchase College, I was unable to utilize a projector. However, the idea was to have a projector live cast what was happening on the computer monitor on the wall above the computer. This idea gains the attention of more people while allowing more than one person to read the story at once, reaching a larger audience. The idea of placing the computer at a booth-like desk was to create a more engaging environment than a computer sitting on a plain white podium with a mouse. In my experience, whenever I see a computer at an art exhibit I'm scared to approach it, as I feel like I'm not supposed to touch things at art shows. Even though I know the computer is meant to be touched I still experience a weird feeling about someone else in the museum seeing me interact with the work. This is where the idea for the booth comes in. The booth walls would help pull the user out of the context of being in a museum and would provide the illusion to ground them into a safer "unobserved" environment. The projector still allows onlookers to experience the piece without disturbing the one interacting with it.

As you can see (Figure 7), my installation is not like the mockup, but I was able to source a table and a chair to still emulate a level of approachability amongst viewers, and an opportunity to relax while experiencing my piece.



Figure 6

Mock-up of ideal display for the installation.

Since I didn't need the upper wall to project the content on the screen I cut out a title that mimics the same style of the title featured throughout each page of the website. I chose a table that was going to be just smaller than the size of the monitor so the screen felt bigger.

## What will I do in the future:

While Shades of Green currently tells one important story I do intend to vastly expand on this project. As mentioned previously Shades of Green was meant to be a choose-your-own-adventure narrative with 10 different endings I had written. The point of having several different routes was to display all the obstacles one would reach in trying to become sustainable. One narrative follows Alex as he tries to start his product line to make the product as sustainable as possible, however, he's hit with obstacles such as affordability and government regulations. I would love for Shades of Green to include all of the stories within the webpage and truly make the narrative an interactive choose your adventure webpage.

I also would like to add further details to the pages. One instance would be having a little more complexity to the code, so the format of each page doesn't necessarily need to be the same. As the narrative expands, it makes sense for the composition to change to better suit some of the other stories, especially since the element of choice would be added, and the navigation of the website as a whole would need to be reworked entirely. Currently, the webpage is formatted in a very linear way, to guide the user from point A to point B of the webpage. However, the narrative will become far more complex than that, where the ending to one story can lead directly to the beginning of another narrative, or a narrative I had written can lead to a dead end and the user has to go back to plot point 1.

Another future change I'd love to make would be to include background imagery to the website to make each page more engaging, as well as background music to thread throughout the whole website, rather than being featured in each video, as it is now.

Additionally, I would like to modify the code so the mouse hover features are more interactive. This idea would look like the mouse icon changing to something related to the content depending on where it falls on the screen, or even an audio file is triggered if the user hovers on a specific region of a page, to act as a hidden feature in the story.



Figure 7

Me at the installation  
of Shades of Green

## Link to website:

<https://students.purchase.edu/VICTORIA.WALL/shadesofgreen/start%20page/code/index.html>

## Sources:

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