

A Personal Web Portfolio:
Creating an Online Presence from Conception to Implementation

A Master's Project
Presented to the School of Arts & Sciences
State University of New York
Polytechnic Institute
Utica, NY

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the
Master of Science Degree

By
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May 2020

SUNY POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATIONS AND HUMANITIES

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

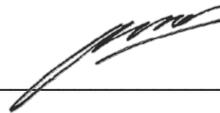
Approved and recommended for acceptance as a thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in Information Design and Technology

Oct 19, 2020

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Abstract

Approaching the end of my two-year journey through SUNY Poly's online IDT program, I felt it was necessary for me to create an artifact showcasing my growth and progression as an Information Designer. Since I completed my degree entirely online (via distance learning), I decided to create a web portfolio representing my work in the program.

This paper maps, from concept to execution, my process for creating a personal portfolio website. It includes research and analysis of existing portfolios websites, and it investigates how technology and selected design principles influence a website's creation. The research presented here culminates with the creation and launch of my own personal portfolio website.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to give special thanks to Dr. Ana Jofre for her guidance on this project and playing a pivotal role in my journey through the IDT program. Over the course of two semesters, her responses and feedback to my project questions consistently propelled me to further insight and recognition of new design possibilities. She consistently made herself available to discuss my projects when I was enrolled in her classes, and again this semester as an advisor on my capstone project.

I would also like to extend my personal appreciation to Dr. Kathryn Stam for her insightful feedback that allowed me to focus on a project topic relevant to my specific interests. Further, I am grateful for her understanding and willingness to be flexible during a challenging time.

It was an absolute pleasure to work with the professors and students in the IDT program. I will carry the SUNY Poly “badge” with pride.

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Introduction

I have significant experience in a field indirectly related to information design, so entering SUNY Poly's online IDT program was an admission that I needed to undertake a career adjustment. Even though I understand what constitutes proper information design, my everyday work offers very few chances to undertake projects that allow me to show proficiency in information design. The best way for me to demonstrate my ability to work in the field of information design will be, therefore, to curate projects created in the IDT program and to find a far-reaching method of displaying these projects to potential audiences, including employers, colleagues, or other educational institutions. Creating a website will give me the necessary practice to create other similar projects. Repeatedly applying myself to similar projects will help me become comfortable with the rigorous process of designing for different media and different audiences.

While attending SUNY Poly, I noticed that many of my classmates were already employed in professions that allowed them to directly apply many of the concepts taught in the

IDT program. I felt it was easier for them to choose projects that required less of an initiation because of their professional familiarity. I seriously considered other projects, but ultimately chose the web portfolio project because it seemed a natural entry point into a world that I stood upon the threshold of but had not yet entered.

I expect that my web site will start out as a showcase for my work in the initial stages of my information design career. Initially, it will be a sampling of projects created in IDT courses over the past two years. Over time, it will become a platform for further study in the fields of technology and communications. The content, design, and purpose of my site will also evolve as my own academic, personal, and professional interests develop. In the long run, my website will become a permanent repository where my future professional and personal projects will be displayed.

Another important reason for creating a personal web portfolio is that I would like to be part of a community that documents and shares ideas in the digital realm. Leading up to my enrollment at SUNY Poly, I saw higher education as a mostly solitary endeavor. However, once I started my educational journey, I began to see and experience how education benefits from context, collaboration, cooperation, and networking. This discovery was incredibly beneficial for me, especially considering the relative incongruity between my professional background and my area of study. With my new awareness spurring me on, I began to learn just as much from my classmates as I did from my instructors. Reviewing and analyzing the work of my peers—when given the opportunity—was one of the highlights of this program. I would like to return the favor not just to my peers, but to anyone who may acquire a glimmer of insight from my work. In that spirit, a personal web portfolio allows me to make a lasting, unselfish contribution to the existing body of work available in the fields of information design and technology.

The process of creating a personal web portfolio will draw on all the experience and knowledge I gained in the IDT program. The program has made me become more open and accepting of the various technologies mediating the communications process. The creation of a personal web portfolio is an obvious indicator of this fact. I expect that the portfolio will be an ideal reflection of my effort, vision, and work, as well as the instruction and scholarship I experienced during my time at SUNY Poly.

Review of Portfolio Websites

Student Websites vs. Professional Websites

Student websites tend to be created by students that are either enrolled in some form of an educational program or that have recently graduated and are starting their professional careers. These websites usually showcase a wider range of projects or assignments. Students are usually trying to build up their portfolios, and they are therefore more willing to try their hands at a variety of different assignments. On the other hand, the “portfolio of a specialist frequently looks more consistent and put together than the generalist” because seasoned professionals with several years of experience often have a niche and specialize in fewer aspects of design (Olivera, 2020).

The word “professional” or “generalist” applies to users who have practiced their craft for years and have developed a distinct style or voice in their work. It is easy to define such a designer’s specialty because he or she will most likely use their professional sites to showcase a limited variety of projects (Olivera, 2020). The websites of such well-established designers are typically more polished, have more examples of completed projects, and are more likely to violate established design rules because they have been customized by their designers to fulfill very specific needs.

Student web portfolios tend to display projects that reflect work done at internships, budding personal interests, or projects completed for class. Even though student websites are not expected to be highly-polished or loaded with projects, they should still aspire to reach the higher-level of the sites used by professionals. Olivera notes her personal experiences that students “can across as more amateur and companies aren’t sure about” them if their portfolios don’t look as cohesive and polished as those created by experienced specialists (Olivera, 2020).

Paterson cautions against websites with minimalist design elements. Though he says they are not ideal for students, he does note that “it is an approach you can take if you have something really impressive that just needs a link” (Patterson, 2020) There is a way to bridge the gap between the seasoned professional and the student that is just starting a new career. Though the more professionally designed websites may not be best for students, Patterson states that “you won’t be in college forever. If you decide to work for yourself, these are the sorts of sites you’d want to create” (Patterson, 2020) Patterson’s point is that, regardless of one’s level of experience, a professionally designed site is still the best choice because it increases employment options by demonstrating competency and mastery.

Leif Podhajsky, an Australian Graphic Designer, offers the following advice to college students and upcoming grads: “If you include school projects make sure they look and feel like a real job, trick me into thinking so.” Shaz Madani also reinforces the importance of being selective: “Editing is a skill you’ll want to demonstrate your proficiency at—so showing more than you need will likely do you a disservice. Remember, more is not more.” Both designers are saying that even as students, the work being showcased must exhibit professional level decision-making skills (Skidmore, 2015).

Content Selection

Based on the results of multiple Google searches, graphic design is the most popular form of information design. The majority of the portfolio websites I analyzed for this project indicated that graphic design was their creators’ primary skill. The popularity of graphic design may be linked to the fact that most types of design lend themselves to visual display.

While acknowledging the ubiquity of technology in all industries, Randle Brown notes that “having your own portfolio website is a good idea no matter what kind of work you do.” She has a very expansive view when it comes to determining what to place in a web portfolio. She recommends that designers, especially those “just starting out,” include all their projects. This advice is geared specifically at those several creatives, as quoted in Maisie, who argue that “less is definitely more.” For example, Oliver Jeffers, advises that since “people are busy,” one should “show the best of what you can do in the fewest amount of pieces (Skidmore, 2015). Tony Brooks also notes that “[y]ou have to be concise and make tough choices about what to keep in and what to leave out” (Skidmore, 2015). These opposing viewpoints show that there is room for for more than one approach to portfolio design.

Personal Choices

Students attempting to put together a portfolio website, but who lack a career’s worth of work to share, shouldn’t despair. Patterson advises helping potential clients “get to know you and understand your personal brand by using a portfolio site to share who you are and where you are coming from (Patterson, 2020). With this type of site, you can tell your personal story. This sentiment is echoed by Rastko Mazic, a Product Designer and former architect and interior designer who documented his personal story via a web portfolio. He notes that “every creator is different and therefore their visual presentations should be too.” He further adds that the one size fits all solution does not works for an artist’s portfolio (Mazic, 2019). The point here is that a person’s portfolio should depend on the person, type of project, style and the kind of work they do.

Someone just starting out in a profession may need a portfolio website to demonstrate their competence in a given field. A portfolio site can increase an individual’s chances of landing

a new job or getting a gig, and it may even be a job requirement. Many job openings, even in some non-design fields, require a link to the applicant's personal web site or social media accounts. Freelancers want to sustain and increase the amount of work they get hired to do. Some people just want to have an online presence and show off their work.

Leffler lists ten reasons for building a personal website. A key reason for creating a personal portfolio website is that it builds credibility. Leffler states that with a portfolio site allows the creator to build a presence in a specific industry and gain access to others with similar professional interests. "You'll build a presence in your industry and become known by others. He also notes that it is a good way to build credibility and trust because as people get to know the the portfolio designer's work, it increases the chances for collaboration or other offers for work (Leffler, 2020).

Now that the world has gone digital, a personal web portfolio is a great way to innovate and resist obsolescence. Leffler notes that "This not only allows you to retrieve those ideas later to help you work on your current project or stay focused, now others can see your ideas and add valuable insights too" (Leffler, 2020)

Methods

I reviewed and analyzed ten existing online portfolio websites created by individuals in various stages of their academic and professional careers. I also reviewed some websites with content geared towards creating portfolio websites. I whittled down my search to websites that wholly or partly fulfilled similar functions to my proposed site. I then noted how each designers' creative decisions helped contribute to the achievement of their goals.

After finding examples of portfolio websites that I liked, I set about curating my own existing projects. This meant applying the same process to my work as I had used when researching online portfolios. The process included selecting pieces that had already satisfied my goals and recreating those that needed updating or editing. Though I had the option to pursue new projects based on my own personal interests, time constraints made that path more of a long-term exercise.

Many of the results of my Google searches focused on one type of visual design, specifically graphic design, photography, or web design. Analyzing these results indicated that some portfolio collections were organized by content, audience, design elements, and purpose. For instance, some collections are categorized by the platform used to design the sites. WordPress and Wix are two of the more common platforms available. For example, in *10 Wix Website Examples We Absolutely Adore*, Azreen Azmi advises that regardless of one's skill level, anyone can create a website using the Wix platform. And he goes on to break down multiple categories and subcategories of website possibilities. Some categories include Web Design websites, Photography websites, and Portfolio websites Other collections focus on current trends. Clean design, for example, showcases sites featuring lots of white space and minimal design elements. Considering the interdisciplinarity of the concepts covered in the IDT

program, the search results I discovered didn't exactly represent the type of portfolio examples I sought to encounter. There was a dearth of portfolio websites showcasing work across multiples types of information design.

Website Design

Choosing a Platform

Wix and WordPress are two of the most popular platforms available today. Wix is an all-in-one platform that allows one to build a website from scratch. No coding skills are required, and anyone can use it.

WordPress is software that needs to be installed on a web server before it can be used to build a website. It has thousands of available website designs/themes, extension capabilities, and plugins. However, building a website in WordPress requires some coding and design skills.

Learning about the differences between WIX and WordPress required more time and attention than I had available when I prepared my research. I will most likely revisit these web design tools after I leave the program. Ultimately, I decided to build my website using HTML, CSS, and JavaScript. I know how to use HTML, CSS, and JavaScript, and I am comfortable with most of their features. Most importantly, designing my portfolio with these tools demonstrates my coding competence. These coding languages give me control over color, font, layout, and other design aspects that play a major role in the creation of a website.

Applying Information Design Principles

Accessibility

“The principle of accessibility asserts that designs should be usable by people of diverse abilities, without special adaptation or modification” (Lidwell, Holden, & Butler, 2010, p. 16). Improvements to accessibility can be applied using techniques and strategies such as perceptibility, simplicity, and forgiveness.



Fig 1: Screenshot of Navigation Bar

Perceptibility

“Perceptibility is achieved when everyone can perceive the design, regardless of sensory abilities” (Lidwell et al., p. 16). One way to increase perceptibility is to “present information using redundant coding methods (e.g., textual, iconic, and tactile).” The homepage of my site, Screenshot 1, employs the use of a navigation bar in the top left of the page. The design and layout of the navigation is an example of redundancy, as it is used in every section of the site. The logo acts as a visual representation of the owner, and doubles as part of the navigation. Clicking the logo returns users to the home page. Most internet users expect to find navigation links integrated into the sites they visit.

Simplicity

“Simplicity is achieved when everyone can easily understand and use the design, regardless of experience, literacy, or concentration level” (Lidwell et al., p. 16). My home page isn’t complicated. Users will know that they have landed on a portfolio site because it says so. The navigation links at the top indicate what content is available. The home page will act as an introduction to the rest of the site.

Forgiveness

“Forgiveness is achieved when designs minimize the occurrence and consequences of errors” (Lidwell et al., p. 16). At this stage in my design, my site requires little of users. When users

come to my site, all that is expected of them is that they peruse the contents. Some may choose to contact me via the contact mechanism. Furthermore, the limited activity required from visitors to the site will reduce the possibility of errors, specifically in data input. The requirements are to view the contents and contact me if necessary.

Highlighting

“Highlighting is an effective technique for bringing attention to elements of a design” (Lidwell et al., p. 126). On my site’s navigation bar, visited links are highlighted by a change of **color**, as noted in Figure 2. Different **typefaces** are used to highlight different information and topics.

Figures 2a and 2b illustrate highlighting by changing the appearance of the thumbnail when someone rests the cursor on the image. This change in appearance indicates that the image is an active link providing further access to the information described within the thumbnail.

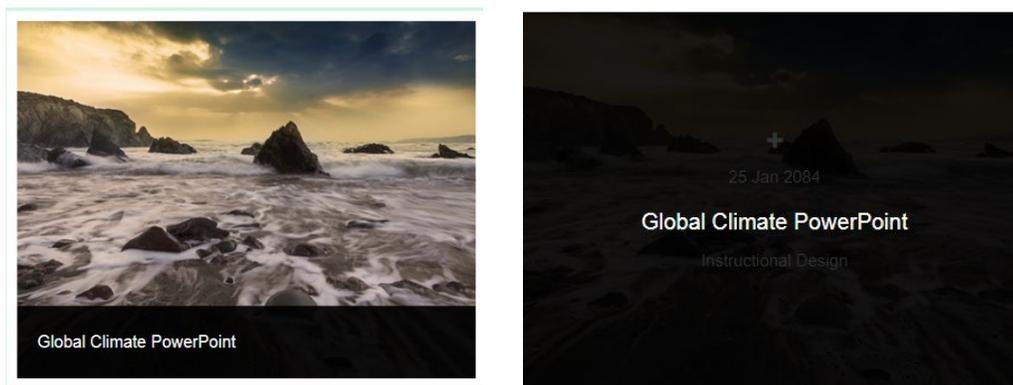


Fig 2a, b: Partial Screenshots of the Portfolio page

Each of the four sections, “Home,” “Portfolio,” “About,” and “Contact,” are in larger, bold typeface that indicates the beginning of a new section or page. This larger typeface is easily discernable from regular 12 point type.

I only use colored text in the navigation bar. Colored text acts as a breadcrumb that notifies users where they are in the site. Normal text is used for site-related content. Colored navigational text is also capitalized in order to further set it apart from other smaller texts used on the site.

Admittedly, I may need to do some more work with color compositions. Since most “research suggests that we are capable of clearly distinguishing among five to seven colors” (Katz, 53), I want to learn how to create designs that stick to a limited range fully grasped by the most visitors to my site. Even though my navigational colors are consistent, I attempted to throw in all the colors I find appealing. This is borne out in the different color backgrounds in each section.

Ockham’s Razor

“Ockham’s razor asserts that simplicity is preferred to complexity in design. Many variations of the principle exist, each adapted to address the particulars of a field or domain of knowledge” (Lidwell et al., p. 172). Implicit in Ockham’s razor is the idea that unnecessary elements decrease a design’s efficiency and increase the probability of unanticipated consequences. The “Home” and “Contact” sections of my website clearly illustrate Ockham’s Razor. The Home page is simply an image paired with a navigation bar that tells users where to go. The contact page is similarly straightforward. It lists the icons indicating the ways in which a user can interact with me.

Reach Out



The website that I have designed introduces me to potential clients and employers. It offers them a sample of the work that I have done as well as a variety of methods for contacting me. It is based upon a basic and simplified interpretation of what a portfolio website can be. Including the “Contact” page, the entire site can be viewed as an example of Ockham’s razor being put into practice.

Results

The Emergence of a Brand

Creating a personal portfolio is ultimately a personal project. If the site I am designing is to serve as a reflection of my work and efforts, it needs to reflect the personal effort, emotion, thought processes, and preferences that went into the creation of its individual pieces. This website also needs to represent my personal brand. During the branding process, I started noticing certain design choices that appealed to me. For example, I enjoyed minimalist designs that stressed the usage of white space and gave the limelight to a page's content. I was also interested in color compositions showing the chemistry between warm and cool colors.

I am a curious traveler who prefers to stay home with a book. I am also a gardener who grows tulips and roses but whose work suits are immaculate. I work well with numbers, but I do even better with words. Though I cannot live without a smartphone, I still send handwritten letters. I love the big city lights, but I fall asleep to the sounds of crickets and gentle rain showers. Such are the juxtapositions that govern my life. However, these traits are more than a series of unresolvable contrasts. They make me who I am. I aspire to be an information designer who clarifies ambiguity, simplifies complexities, and proves that if you look closely enough you will find that everything is connected. I come from a finance background and enjoy helping families achieve their financial goals. I also love to show my colleagues, friends, and clients how to wade through intimidating levels of data. I am fiercely curious about the world we live in, and I look forward to learning something new each day. I can pull upon a vast range of experiences when making information design choices.

After looking at compositions that contained seemingly unrelated color combinations, I designed a logo appropriate to my design goals. The logo, which is colored in swaths of green and black, is made up of my initials: MP. Below the two letters, my name is spelled out in the two colors. The logo employs a Gestalt approach giving the impression that the logo is a mug. The liberal use of white space allows the logo to show a sense of independence, while the mug nods to the power of the collective and hints at interdependence. The mug design is a simple metaphor for a container that can hold anything. It is simple, unassuming, and filled with endless potential.

As I worked on my website, I discovered that I enjoyed working on projects that dealt with my natural surroundings. Projects about global warming, climate events, and images of nature have all found their way into my classwork and assignments.

The following images document the progress I have made on my portfolio website:

Website address: www.marvindpierre.com

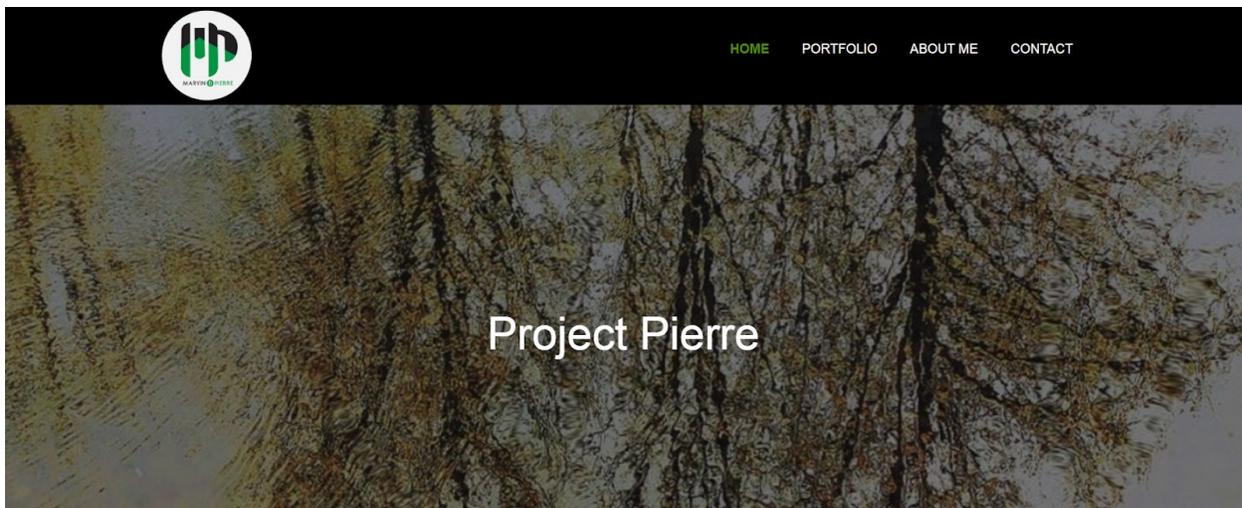


Fig 3: Screenshot of the Home page

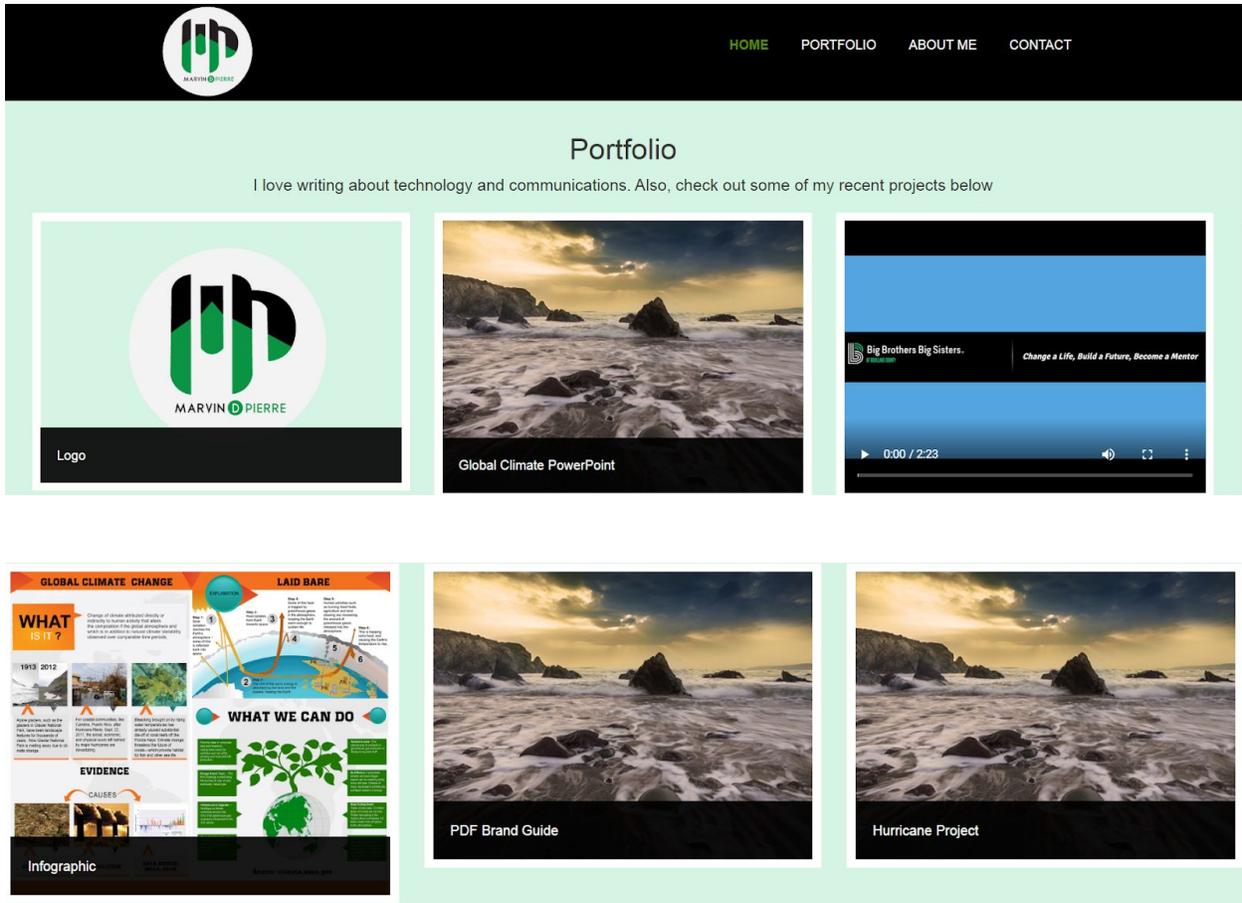


Fig 4a, b: Screenshot of Portfolio page

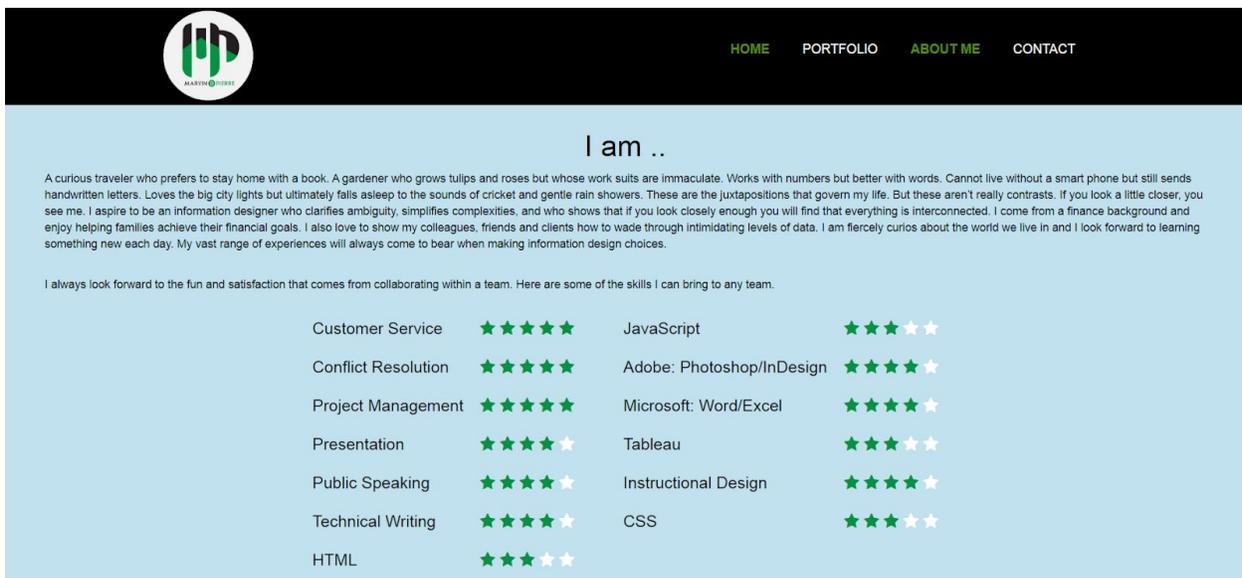


Fig 5: Screenshot of About Me page



Fig 6: Screenshot of Contact page

Discussion

Web portfolios are created for many reasons. Whether they function as outlets for creative endeavors, as a means of getting ahead in the job market, or as vehicles for personal development, they are vitally important. Technology has become so deeply integrated into work in so many fields that portfolio websites have become a necessity. However, the potential benefits of a portfolio website are linked to personal choices. Whenever one sets out to make one of these sites, one must always ask what is motivating one to undertake such a project. It is possible that there may be multiple reasons for setting up such a webpage.

Regardless of the reason for creating a web portfolio, designers should always stay true to their personal narratives. Even though there is a debate as to how much content should be in a portfolio, staying true to one's inspiration can overcome this problem and help one to choose the right projects to showcase.

Ultimately, the web portfolio is an extension of an individual if it truly portrays that person's life choices and shows how seriously they take their career and education. Therefore, deciding what to include in the portfolio can be an act of self-discovery. By putting oneself out there to a wider audience, one is saying that one is ready to be critiqued, examined, and judged in new ways. All of the web portfolio creators studied for this review hinted at the vulnerability they felt once they decided to submit their work to the world. However, as a student in a graduate communications program mediated by advancing technologies, the journey of self-discovery that the creation of a web-portfolio can lead to should be embraced. Communicators are individual nodes in a network that thrives off of collaboration, feedback, and the free exchange of ideas. When we make ourselves vulnerable, we open ourselves to new possibilities and growth.

Conclusion

Creating a personal web portfolio was the ideal project to end my journey through SUNY Poly's IDT program. It allowed me to recall many of the information design concepts that were new to me when I first started. The process of reviewing and analyzing websites; assuming researcher, curator, and designer roles; establishing my own design voice; and creating something out of it all was empowering. Though I had previously completed an undergraduate degree in Media & Communications—a design-related field—I never supplemented it with professional experience because I went into a field largely unrelated to design. I always felt that a web portfolio could help get me to return to a field that I had abandoned years ago.

Making a portfolio website has also significantly tested my creativity and shown me that there are many career options, design specialties, and avenues for further study awaiting me. Initially, I had assumed that my specific role as a banker didn't lend itself to coming across information design opportunities. As a banker, I frequently give presentations using pre-existing and poorly designed PowerPoint templates. I have recently begun to redesign these templates to reflect good design principles and the theories of adult learning covered in my Instructional Design classes. I used to write blurbs highlighting my team's successes at work. Now, I am exploring ways to celebrate my team with other more dynamic media such as *Prezi* or *Adobe Spark*. Having access to additional tools and technologies is exponentially expanding my potential and learning options.

Balancing design needs with technology creates a conundrum: how much should one resist or embrace the technologies that mediate our communication and design activities? I encountered this problem when deciding whether to use a service like WordPress or Wix, or to build a site from scratch with HTML. I chose to work with HTML, but once I started to fully grasp the essentials of Wix, WordPress, and other platforms, I realized that I might use such services in the future. I had issues sorting out web hosting and uploading my site. It took a significant intellectual application on my behalf to resolve these problems because they are related to "back of the house" technology issues with which I am unfamiliar.

My web site falls into the category I had previously labeled as "student website." It is not focused on one specific type of design. Instead, it shows a cross-section of concepts one would expect to encounter in an Information Design program. I debated revisiting and updating some of my earlier class projects before putting them into the portfolio. This portfolio website will become part of my new normal, where I constantly update, tinker, remove, and evolve the

elements of my projects over time. I am also partial to adult learning theories as they pertain to instructional design. As my career and project preferences evolve, I think that my content may skew in that direction.

Completing this project was a process consisting of many elements. Seeing how other students have engaged with this process was a learning experience. Seeing others showing off their plans, challenges, and vulnerabilities indicated to me that we are all on a similar journey. Our individual steps may be different, but we all want to get to a place that we've never been to before. That is one of the more illuminating realizations this program has brought to me. Teamwork isn't always about people getting together and agreeing to work as a team. Simply showing up and doing what you're expected to do can make someone into a model for others to be inspired by and to follow. During my time at SUNY Poly, I appreciated the instructors who gave me room to explore but were also more than willing to point me in the right direction if I veered off course. Also, the additional resources provided by these instructors to supplement class activities were significant.

As I move forward, I expect that my experiences and the information design principles I have learned in SUNY Poly's IDT program will continue to inform my evolution as an Information Designer. The personal portfolio website conceived, designed, and implemented here is only in its nascent stages. With time it will become a record of my long-term professional and academic endeavors.

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