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Fall 2018

Senior Portfolio

Why I Code

Intro-

After five years of college, this will be my final research paper. For this research, I wanted to incorporate all that I have learned into one project that can stand the test of time. Choosing to code a website for my senior project is the best way to take all the skills and knowledge I have acquired from digital arts and journalism studies and put them to use.

My Background-

Web design was a course I took at Sierra Nevada College and that class is what has inspired my project and research for my culminating senior project. Since I grew up in this technological generation, I have been able to understand the advances more easily than my parents. This has led me to want to know more about the internet and why this industry is growing so rapidly. In our web design class, we learned the basis of coding. I never expected to learn how to code but once I started I realized it wasn’t as intimidating as I once thought. It was still very difficult and time consuming but overall incredibly (rewarding). During this class, we looked at a number of different websites and identified certain features that worked and some that didn’t. All the successful website was hand coded, meaning someone wrote out all the computer language to make the site possible. They were extraordinary, innovative and an experience to visit. Seeing these websites has sparked a fire in me to create my own personal site as a way to express all that I have learned about design and aesthetic through my art classes.

Thesis-

A website is something that almost every business in the world has today, and it is just as easy for any single person to obtain for themselves. Since the technology boom, most people use the internet daily. “Internet usage has increased tremendously and rapidly in the past decade. As of 2014, 87% of American adults aged 18 or older are Internet users,” (Garett 2016). This has led to the creation of template based web building companies, that literally hand you a website that is ready to be launched the same day. This kind of copy and paste system has changed the power dynamic for website builders and the companies that are using them. The companies no longer have control over their site and their unique companies’ website actually ends up looking like everyone else’s due to the rigidity of the templates. Coding a web site for yourself or hiring a web designer will always be more advantages in the long run.

Disadvantages-

Most websites look the same today, identical features of a full screen image with some text overlaid. Why are so many people okay with this cookie cutter mold? I’ve found that it has something to do with our fast paced society. People want the simplicity that his design provides. “The evolution of responsive websites, and native video with HTML5, were all things that helped this visual trend become mainstream. All these technologies grouped together made it easier than ever to create more interactive, creative and appealing websites; and the biggest irony is that it also helped to create this standardized look,” (Pratas 2015). However, when everyone is using the same interactive website template, it is no longer as interactive because it becomes the norm. The biggest problem is if you want to break free from this mold, you really can’t. “Templates are the most common cause of dissatisfaction with content management systems. Developers and designers sell these template-driven systems as being “fully controllable” for administrators when in reality they are handcuffed to a large extent by the capabilities of the template,” (Czech 2018). Personally, I tried to create a unique website with the use of a template and even with my knowledge of CSS and HTML I couldn’t control what my site was going to look like. I was very much stuck.

Users are taking the precious content they have created and then putting into the hands of someone else’s creation. It is not a one size fits all kind of situation, for most people. However, there are “currently 25% of all websites are built using WordPress,” which is the most popular web builder (Collins 2016). The amazing part is that people with no coding skills are able to have a site published with just a few key strokes. The shadiness of this situation is how the creators of the templates are banking on the societies desire for simple, no brain power required, themes for their websites. “The theme market is massive, and as a result creators mimic the best-selling work in an effort to make more money. You’re not going to make a lot of money in the theme market by going out on a limb and creating something incredibly unique and personalized. Generic wins out every time,” (Ellis 2015). These template creators know that people just want to see an example of a beautiful looking site, click on it and load their content. After templates become successful, very similar looking templates are created so that these designers can make more money by having multiple templates on the market. So, when people want to have their own website but don’t want to put in the effort or time to have a great one, they go to the template gallery. They are then, at the beck and call of their chosen template creators’ theme. And yet, another generic looking website is on the internet.

Advantages-

If you were to take the ‘bold’ step and decide to choose a design for your website outside of the sought after template look, you would put yourself in a position to be an actual one-in-a-million website. The benefits of designing your own website are vast! “A good web designer can take your vision and bring it into reality. They can take the concept that is stuck in your head or heart and turn it into a living breathing design that you can see. If they’re really good, they can get an understanding of your business and your customers and tailor the design and structure of your site to facilitate conversions to help generate more sales,” (Thomas 2017). These factors can show the visitors to your site how important their customers are to them and that they must have a good product or idea if they are willing to invest in their site. What people forget about websites, is that the site is for the user it is not for the company or person, behind it. They want to leave their customer with a good first impression that leads them to come back to that site. When you create your own website you also have the power to attract visitors. Google and other search engines are used by nearly everyone I know and the results that come up at the top are more than likely always going to be the ones you click on. In order to get your site at the top you have to know the system. “A good website designer or firm should have knowledge of Search Engine Optimization and be able to do keyword research, help identify the best keywords to rank for and make sure your site is tagged and structured to be optimized for those keywords. Most website builder platforms have minimal SEO tools,” (Thomas 2017).

In order to know about key aspects like search engines you need to learn some code. While it can seem daunting at first it will truly only benefit you down the road. Personally, I want to design my own site so that I have certainty, 100% control over the site and where it is hosted. By learning how to code I am giving myself an advantage over all of the artists who put their work on a site built with a template. By showing future employers that I can code a unique website and fill it with good content I am a step in front of the others. If people were to just learn to code a small amount they would be able to personalize their site and maybe even delve into a technology based career. Being able to code is equal to having a superpower. Not everyone knows how to do it but every business in the world needs a coder.

In a world where good software, apps, and websites matter, it’s powerful to be able to create those things yourself. This power can be especially valuable for liberal arts majors. The future should not only be built by computer scientists and engineers. There needs to be significant input from the painters, writers, political thinkers and social scientists that study and respond to our culture. Coding allows you to build your own platform and give yourself a voice. (Bradford 2016).

This statement only amplifies my passion for learning how to be a successful coder. Since I am coming from an art background I am giving myself the perspective that may be needed in the technology world and it surely seems the future isn’t veering from that direction.

The hardest step is beginning. Where does one start to create a successful website by oneself? The best practices in regards to web design have been researched and the results are not surprising. Organization, content utility, navigation, graphical representation and purpose are among the top design elements that affect user engagement. (Garett 2016). When a website is disorganized it hurts your eyes and your focus moves on because it cannot make sense of a disorganized site. However, organization and navigation go hand in hand and you cannot have a good one without the other.

Several studies evaluated organization by how well a website incorporates cognitive architecture, logical and hierarchical structure, systematic information arrangement and categorization, meaningful headings and labels, and keywords. However, these features are also crucial in navigation design. Also, the implications of using distinct logos and icons go beyond graphical representation. Logos and icons also establish unique brand/identity for the organization (purpose) and can serve as visual aids for navigation. (Garett 2016).

Before you put out your site you must think of all these elements and how to make it work seamlessly for you. Then you can move onto the content of your site and discover what is working for your intended audience.

The online communities are very different from communities that have been studied for years. “In an online community, people can put in and take out exactly what they desire from their community. These communities are fully accessible for users 24/7, which gives user the feeling that they are not alone, unlike physical communities,” (Martinson 2017). You have to think of your audience when selecting content for your site. Once you know your genre and the audience you want to target, you can start to interpret your data and see which articles are receiving more attention than others. For example, “positive content is more viral than negative content, content evoking high emotions (positive or negative) is more spreadable than non-emotional content, and any useful content can spread quickly,” (Martinson 2017). By discovering what your visitors are liking about your website I have learned that being consistent with your content within a genre is going to give you readers who have similar interests and will revisit your site. However, I also found that by varying your content just enough you can pull new readers into the site and allow those different perspectives to come to one place and learn about different things. Most likely the varied content would be something that a reader is vaguely interested in but didn’t know they wanted to learn more about. Having more than one type of article on my website is something I will definitely incorporate but I will keep in mind how different they are and might skew to a more like minded piece if deciding between two.

If you are able to get to this place where you are uploading content that is consistently getting hits from new and returning visitors, your code must be effective. People don’t have the time to return to a website that is poorly organized! By creating your own code for a website that you run and successfully navigate SEO, you will always have something to show your potential employers what skills you have on computers.

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