User Experience

American Gods: The Road Trip

American Gods: The Road Trip is the minimum viable product for a mobile-first web application of what is essentially a fan site, with a twist, for the bestselling Neil Gaiman novel *American Gods*. The novel is an urban fantasy in which the protagonist, Shadow, drives from one US town to the next in order to aid his boss, Wednesday / Odin, in rallying the gods of old, pagan, religions for a war against the gods of the new world, the latter being personifications of media, technology, etc. Since the novel's publication, an increasing number of its fans have attempted to recreate Shadow's journey by making similar road trips in the US. Additionally, more fans have discovered *American Gods* and become interested in recreating the road trip since the novel was adapted into an internationally successful television show and a bestselling graphic novel series.

American Gods: The Road Trip assists fans both in enriching their experience of the novel / TV show by providing information about the locations in which the events take place and by helping those fans make road trips based on the book by providing route maps and location maps with information on accommodation, eating opportunities, and tourist sights in each town. Additionally, music is a strong motif that has captured the imagination of many readers of *American Gods*, with Neil Gaiman referencing over 50 songs throughout the novel. The website affords readers an opportunity to access all of these songs.

In its present form, *American Gods: The Road Trip* is designed for a post-COVID 19 world, in which tourism has largely returned to normality. However, should the current situation persist in the long-term, the site's "Places" page enables users to discover the locations in the novel virtually via Google Maps. In a long-term COVID context the site could be modified to focus more on a virtual tour, using, for example, the Google Street View Static API or, at a more advanced level, by integrating augmented reality software, such as that offered by Mapbox (https://www.mapbox.com/augmented-reality/).

American Gods: The Road Trip will be a must-visit website for any fan of the novel or TV show and anyone either considering or currently undertaking a road trip based on either.

Strategy plane

What is culturally appropriate and what content is relevant?

Users *of American Gods: The Road Trip* are likely to be educated, highly literate adults who enjoy reading fiction, likely with an interest in the fantasy genre and all things 'nerdy' as a whole.

Site visitors looking to base a road trip vacation on *American Gods*, or who are already on the road for such a trip, will be seeking content which assists them in plotting out the logistics of their journeys. This type of visitor is also likely to have the disposable income necessary to travel and to take in cultural experiences. As such, the website should provide a list of destinations from the novel, relevant maps, and easily accessible information on accommodation, dining, and tourist attractions for each possible destination.

A second type of user for *American Gods: The Road Trip* is likely to be a current or former reader / viewer of *American Gods* who is looking to enhance their reading / viewing experience and to evoke memories and sensations triggered by the novel / show. As such, in addition to the geographical information contained on the mapping pages, it is appropriate to include a page which provides users with access to music referenced in *American Gods*, given that music playing in the background in bars, diners, etc. is an overarching motif throughout the novel. Additionally, a random quote generator will provide users with some of the more notable quotes from the novel to refresh their memories. Furthermore, a card battle-style game, of the type based on Dungeons & Dragons-style characters that was popular in past decades, will allow users to play as some of their favourite characters from the novel / show. The

retro format of the game very much falls under that 'all things nerdy' category likely to appeal to the target audience.

What technology is appropriate?

In addition to mobile internet use now accounting for the majority of web traffic worldwide and being responsible for almost half of webpage views throughout the world (https://www.statista.com/topics/779/mobile-internet/), *American Gods: The Road Trip* aims to cater not only to fans of the book / show and those planning a trip but also to those who are currently on a road trip, and who are thus more likely to access the site via mobile device. Consequently, the website should take a mobile-first approach and Bootstrap has been used as the framework in the design.

Why is this so special?

American Gods: The Road Trip is the only website dedicated to geographic information and a road trip based on the novel.

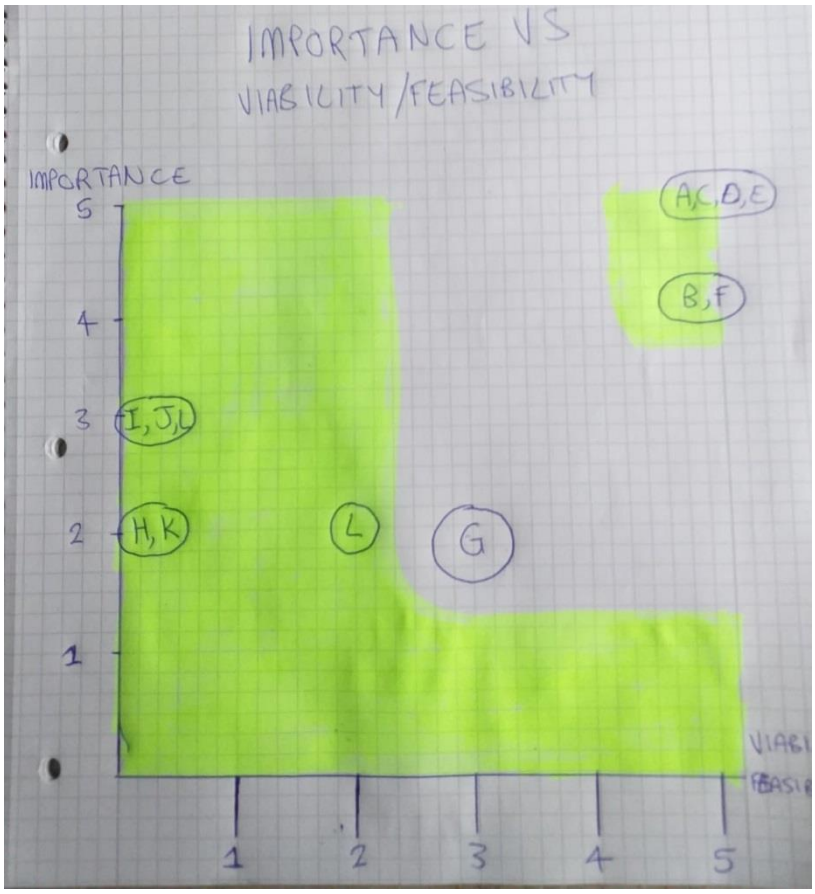
Why would a user want this?

A growing number of readers are now attempting to follow in the tire tracks of Shadow, the protagonist in *American Gods*, by making similar road trips in the US. Neil Gaiman outlined this development in his introduction to the tenth anniversary edition of the novel, and the fact is further evidenced by the appearance of articles on the subject throughout the internet. For examples, see:

- https://www.syfy.com/syfywire/geek-road-trip-american-gods,
- https://www.atlasobscura.com/users/jkg10/lists/american-gods-road-trip
- https://maps.roadtrippers.com/trips/224858

Importance of website features and their viability / feasibility

Importance



viability / feasibility

Key:

A) Create a website for *American Gods*
B) Create an About page
C) Provide geographical information on locations in the novel
D) Provide information on hotels, restaurants, and tourist sites in each location
E) Create a contact form
F) Create a random quote generator with quotes from the novel
G) Create a card battle-style game based on the novel
H) Create an image gallery of photographs taken by site users on their road trips.
I) Create a discussion forum for users to exchange information and advice on travel logistics, where to see, what to do, etc.
J) Create a page which allows users to write reviews of hotels, restaurants, tourist sights, etc.
K) Create a page similar to the current places.html page but which rather uses the Google Street View Static API to enable users to take, albeit limited, virtual tours of specific locations in the novel.
L) Build a YouTube playlist of all the songs in *American Gods* and link to it / embed it.
M) Develop a social media presence.

Opportunity / Problem	Importance	Viability / Feasibility
A) Create a website for *American Gods*	5	5
B) Create an About page	4	5
C) Provide geographical information on locations in the novel	5	5
D) Provide information on hotels, restaurants, and tourist sites in each location	5	5
E) Create a contact form	5	5
F) Create a random quote generator with quotes from the novel	4	5
G) Create a card battle-style game based on the novel	2	3
H) Create an image gallery of photographs taken by site users on their road trips.	2	0
I) Create a discussion forum for users to exchange information and advice on travel logistics, where to see, what to do, etc.	3	0
J) Create a page which allows users to write reviews of hotels, restaurants, tourist sights, etc.	3	0
K) Create a page similar to the current places.html page but which rather uses the Google Street View Static API to enable users to take, albeit limited, virtual tours of specific locations in the novel.	2	0
L) Build a YouTube playlist of all the songs in *American Gods* and link to it / embed it.	2	2
M) Develop a social media presence.	3	0
Total	**44**	**35**

Those opportunities / problems with low viability / feasibility are not currently actionable due to time constraints (K, L), due to a lack of coding know-how at this stage in the course (I, J), or simply due to the site context being fictitious (H, M). As such, the project focuses on addressing those opportunities and problems which entail both high importance and high viability / feasibility (A - F). The anomaly here is point G. Though creating a card battle-style game was not essential for the project, it was nevertheless included because creating such a game represented an opportunity to practice parts of JavaScript not used elsewhere within the project, e.g. constructor functions and switch statements. As such, the game was viewed as a mini-project within a project.

What does a satisfying user experience of *American Gods: The Road Trip* entail?

Users are likely to already have keen interests in travel, *American Gods*, and Neil Gaiman's works. Therefore, they will expect concrete geographic information on the relevant sites in the road trip, including a list of locations as well as available accommodation, restaurants, and tourist attractions in each. They will also expect to be told how each location in the road trip relates to the novel, to be given further content related to the novel (which they will find on the quotes.html, music.html and game.html pages), and information related to Neil Gaiman himself (which they will find via embedded video on the about.html page). A satisfying UX will provide all of these elements in a visually attractive site that is easy and intuitive to navigate.

Scope plane

Which features are on the table and which features on off the table?

Following the results of the strategy plane analysis, the table below shows which features are on the table for the site and which features are off the table.

Features on the table	Features off the table
Create a website for *American Gods*	Create an image gallery of photographs taken by site users on their road trips.
Create an About page	Create a discussion forum for users to exchange information and advice on travel logistics, where to see, what to do, etc.
Provide geographical information on locations in the novel	Create a page which allows users to write reviews of hotels, restaurants, tourist sights, etc.
Provide information on hotels, restaurants, and tourist sites in each location	Create a page similar to the current places.html page but which rather uses the Google Street View Static API to enable users to take, albeit limited, virtual tours of specific locations in the novel.
Create a contact form	Build a YouTube playlist of all the songs in *American Gods* and link to it / embed it.
Create a random quote generator with quotes from the novel	Develop a social media presence.
Create a card battle-style game based on the novel	---------- ----------

User stories

User story 1:

"As someone reading *American Gods* right now, I'd love to know more about all the locations in the novel so I can really put myself in Shadow's shoes as I read."

User story 2:

"As a huge fan of *American Gods,* I've wanted to make a road trip based on the novel for a long time and I'd really like information on how to plan that trip."

User story 3:

"As someone currently making a road trip based on *American Gods*, I really need information on where to stay and eat, as well as on what to do, in each place I visit."

User story 4:

"As a huge fan of *American Gods,* I found the music in the novel really atmospheric and I'd love to listen to it to evoke my memories of the book."

Requirements: functional

What do users / stakeholders say they need?

- A website about *American Gods*
- Information on the locations in *American Gods*

What do users / stakeholders actually need?

- A mobile-first website for users, some of whom will already likely already be on road trips, which is also fully responsive to different devices, particularly, for example, if users not currently on the road are using laptops and desktops
- Concise and relevant geographic and travel information
- Information on routes to take between locations
- Additional content to enhance readers' / viewers' enjoyment of the novel / show (as covered by the quotes, music, and game pages)
- A means to contact the website administrators for further information

What do users / stakeholders not know that they need?

- Simple, intuitive site and internal page navigation
- Embedded, interactive maps showing all relevant locations
- Embedded, interactive maps showing accommodation, eateries, and tourist sights in each location
- Easy access to customer reviews of hotels, restaurants, and tourist attractions
- A website contact form

How the site will meet user needs

User story 1:

"As someone reading *American Gods* right now, I'd love to know more about all the atmospheric locations in the novel so I can really put myself in Shadow's shoes as I read."

How the site will meets this need:

- The site will provide maps of locations in the novel which allow users to visualize each area and discover what each town contains.

User story 2:

"As a huge fan of *American Gods,* I've wanted to make a road trip based on the novel for a long time and I'd really like information on how to plan that trip."

How the site meets this need:

- The site provides route planning for locations in the novel which enable potential road trippers to plot out their trips.

User story 3:

"As someone making a road trip based on *American Gods*, I really need information on where to stay and eat, as well as on what to do, in each place I visit."

How the site meets this need:

- The places.html page contains maps from the Google Maps Embed API and allows users to easily navigate to find accommodation, activities, and places to eat in each location from the novel's road trip.

User story 4:

"As a huge fan of *American Gods,* I found the music in the novel really atmospheric and I'd love to listen to it to evoke my memories of the book."

How the site meets this need:

- The music.html page contains a 'jukebox' which allows users to randomly select a YouTube video from a list of all the songs referenced in *American Gods*. The page also contains a link to an article which lists all of the songs individually.

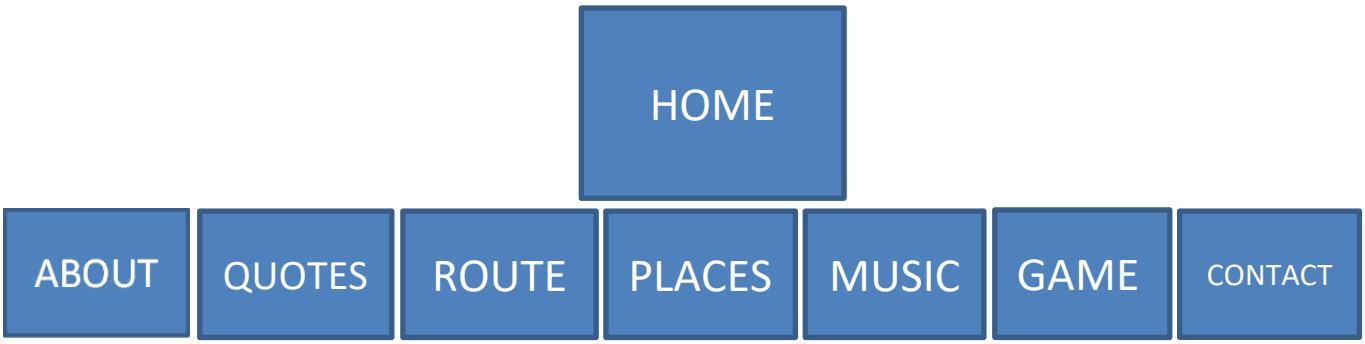
Requirements: Content

To meet the needs required above, the website requires mixed multimedia content including: text, photographs, interactive maps, hyperlinks, embedded YouTube videos, site-wide navigation buttons, internal page navigation buttons, and 'return to top of page' navigation buttons.

Structure plane

Information architecture:

The website will structured using a simple tree design that takes the landing page as the main node and the other 7 pages as sub nodes. The design has been kept simple, bearing in mind that some users may well be on the road / in the car when accessing the site and thus looking to click around for information quickly.



POST-CODING NOTE: Some of the page names changed and some pages were added (further information below) during the course of the project. The final page layout and names are given here to avoid confusion.

Interaction design

All pages

- The navigation bar will allow users to easily navigate the pages of the site by giving them a simple site overview. It will also contain a hover effect, creating a border around the navigation bar the user is currently hovering over, for further clarity.
- As it provides a cleaner aesthetic on smaller devices, the navigation bar appears on the homepage in the form of a hamburger-style dropdown menu. However, all other pages contain navigation links as texts directly on a banner image at the top of the page. This decision was made both to reduce the number of

clicks required by a user to navigate from one page to the next and to make use of the Amatic SC font within the inherent page design so as to reflect the playful elements of the *American Gods* novel.

- The minimalist footer will allow users to easily access related social media pages without encroaching on other site content. The social media icons in the footer will turn to a green, matching the green of the aurora borealis on the hero image, whenever a user hovers over them.
- POST-CODING NOTE: Initially, both the navigation bar and footer were planned to be fixed to allow users easy access regardless of how far they had scrolled down the page. However, this proved to be a bad UX choice because the fixed navigation bar created a poor aesthetic and the fixed footer covered buttons, making it impossible to click them. Additionally, many of the site's pages do not require much scrolling, meaning the drawbacks of a fixed navigation bar and footer would far outweigh any potential benefits. As such, only the footer on index.html is fixed.
- POST-CODING NOTE: Initially, the idea was to have different banner images to reflect the content of each page, e.g. an image of vinyl and loudspeakers for music.html, but it proved to be difficult to both use different images and maintain a cohesive aesthetic to the site as a whole. As such, a section from the landing page image replaced the banner image on each of the remaining pages for a clean and cohesive effect.

Index.html

- In addition to the navigation bar and social media footer discussed above, index.html will contain an atmospheric background road trip image from Pixabay that evokes the journey and supernatural elements of the novel.
- Via media queries, the background image, navigation bar, and page title will change orientation, from portrait to landscape, depending on the size of the screen.
- As stated above, index.html contains a hamburger-style dropdown navigation bar on smaller devices for a cleaner aesthetic. The navigation links drop over the existing image, i.e. rather than pushing down in a box overlapping the image, for a cleaner effect.
- The homepage navigation changes its design arrangement to make best use of the device on which it appears. For example, on laptops, the homepage image appears as a landscape image with the title and sub-title in the Lato font and the navigation links appearing in the top-right corner in Amatic SC. The same is true of tablets when index.html is viewed in a landscape view with the device held horizontally. However, when index.html is viewed as a portrait image on most tablets (i.e. not larger tablets like the iPad Pro), with the device held vertically, the homepage utilizes the burger-style menu with the navigation links in the Amatic SC font and the page title and sub-title in Lato. For smartphones, the page title appears in Lato, the sub-title in Amatic SC and the navigation links in the burger-style dropdown in Lato, given that those links would be less legible when smaller when written in Amatic SC in the the dropdown.

about.html

- The About page will give visitors an overview of *American Gods* and the purpose of the site. The descriptions will be brief, given that any user who chooses to visit the site will likely come from a niche audience already familiar with the story.
- An embedded YouTube video, via iframes, will give visitors an opportunity to obtain more information on the *American Gods* road trip directly from Neil Gaiman himself.
- POST-CODING NOTE: Initially, the About page also contained a random quote generator, generating excerpts from *American Gods*, but the aesthetic proved to be poor, seeming thematically out of out of place on the page and potentially at risk of being overlooked by any user whose attention may have been taken by the embedded video. As such, the quote generator was moved to a separate page.

quotes.html

- A JavaScript function enables users to generate a quote from *American Gods* at random, something which is bound to appeal to book lovers, especially fans who are invested in this particular novel enough to visit the site.
- An element of gamification, albeit tongue-in-cheek, will be included by framing quotes.html within the narrative that the quote has been chosen by the gods featured in the novel and that the quote the user receives may be prophetic as regards their own *American Gods* road trip.
- Users interact with the quote generator by simply clicking the call to action button below.

route.html

The route page went through several iterations based on feedback from users who tested the page. The final version of the page contains:

- Embedded maps, via Google Maps Route Planner, which show users how to get from one road trip location to the next based on the order they appear in the *American Gods* novel.
- An internal navigation menu that allows users to easily navigate to each route map.
- A 'Geography Challenge', powered by the Google Maps JavaScript API, which allows users to place nodes on a map of the US in an attempt to correctly identify the locations in the novel.
- Users may manipulate any of the embedded maps the map, e.g. zooming in and out of particular locations. Users are given brief instructions above each map to tell them how to interact with it.
- 'Return to top' links to return users back to the internal page navigation bar without having to scroll for longer periods.

NOTES ON ITERATIONS OF ROUTE.HTML:

- Initially, the page was designed to contain the map generated by the Google Maps JavaScript API and the Google Maps Embed API maps (i.e. on places.html) on one page. However, this proved to create a poor aesthetic and ran the risk of users overlooking the Embed maps because the internal navigation bar for it did not appear at first glance. As such, the content was divided across two pages.
- The original layout of the route was powered by the Google Maps JavaScript API and attempted to give users a quick and easy overview of all the destinations covered by the site via clustered nodes on a map of the US. However, in testing, users complained that the site only showed nodes and not how to get to and from each destination. One test user, a professional cartographer, suggested using the Google Itinerary application to embed the route, but the result provided a poor aesthetic given that there were so many nodes and overlapping routes. As such, the solution which garnered the best feedback was to use embedded maps of each individual route from one destination to another using Google Route Planner.
- I altered the use of the Google Maps JavaScript image with clustered nodes to make it a general overview of the trip. However, some users complained that some of the nodes did not communicate clearly enough which node referred to which location. To overcome this, I added a key. However, this only created further confusion as some users expected tapping a location name on the key to alter the map to show them that location (a possible feature of a later iteration of the site).
- Due to its apparent poor UX, I jettisoned the map with clustered nodes and replaced it with a 'Geography Challenge', an empty map on which users may pin nodes in an attempt to identify the locations from the road trip. This proved to be a popular feature with test users.
- Instructions above each section inform users on how to interact with the maps. These instructions are repeated in each section, i.e. rather than simply being stated once at the beginning, to ensure that users receive this information even if they navigate straight to a single route planning map without reading the introductory information.

places.html

- This page contains easy-to-access maps and information on accommodation, eateries, and tourist sights for every suggested location on the *American Gods* road trip.
- The internal page navigation bar, coded as an unordered list, allows users to quickly jump to any of the 24 locations covered on the page by providing an inner-page hyperlink to each.
- Each section contains the relevant location, background information on the role this location plays in *American Gods*, maps, and information on accommodation, eateries, and tourist sights in the area. Sections begin with a default map showing accommodation in the area, but users may change the content of each map, to show either eateries or tourist sights, by clicking one of 3 call to action buttons below each map.
- Users may click the nodes on each map to access information / ratings on each hotel, restaurant, or tourist site by clicking the nodes.
- Users may also double click each map itself to leave the page and access Google reviews and Google Street View for each area.
- The 'RETURN TO TOP' links after each location allows users to navigate easily back to the inner-page navigation bar without having to scroll for long periods.
- Instructions above each section inform users on how to interact with the maps. These instructions are repeated in each section, i.e. rather than simply being stated once at the beginning, to ensure than users receive this information even if they navigate straight to a location without reading the introductory page information.

music.html

- This page will afford users an opportunity to easily access all of the songs referenced in *American Gods* via both a link to an external article which lists all of the songs in the novel and a 'jukebox' on the page which, with the click of a call to action button, will select a song from the book at random. An element of gamification will be added by framing this within the narrative that the gods from the novel have chosen the song for the user.

game.html

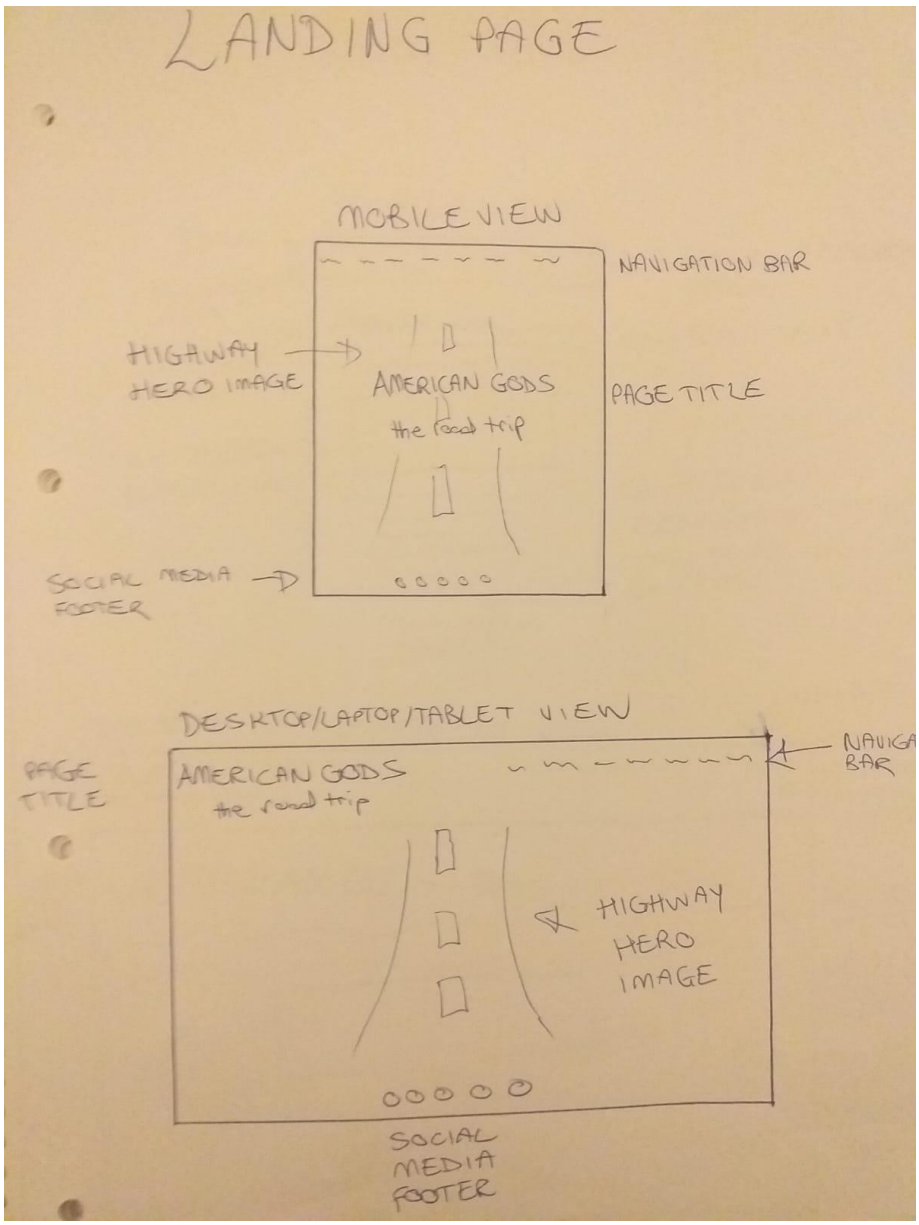
- This page will allow users to play an old-school card battle-type game on the page, whether to kill time on the road trip or just to enhance reader's enjoyment of the novel by allowing them to play as and against characters in the book.
- The game page will allow users to play as one of 4 characters by clicking on a character profile.
- Once users choose a character, they will find one of 4 opponents by clicking a button at the bottom of the page.
- During the game, users will play by pressing one of 3 call to action buttons: 'Attack!', 'Retreat!', or 'Go nuclear!'.
- The narrative and events of the game will be communicated to users via window alerts.
- POST-CODING NOTE: The primary problem with the game that occurred during testing was that users who had disabled window alerts were unable to follow the gameplay narrative, e.g. whether the player or opponent or had scored damage points, the result of hitting the retreat button, etc. However, this was overcome by coding functions which changed the inner HTML at the top of the game interface to contain the relevant information after each move. Nevertheless, I decided to retain the window alerts so that those whose devices allow alerts also experience a sense of immediacy and blow-by-blow gameplay. After asking a tutor about best practices in this regard, I changed the alerts from old-fashioned window alerts to Bootstrap modal alerts. Users whose devices previously had not shown window alerts now report seeing the Bootstrap modal alerts and the innerHTML at the top of the game interface remains to provide a summary of the action.

contact.html

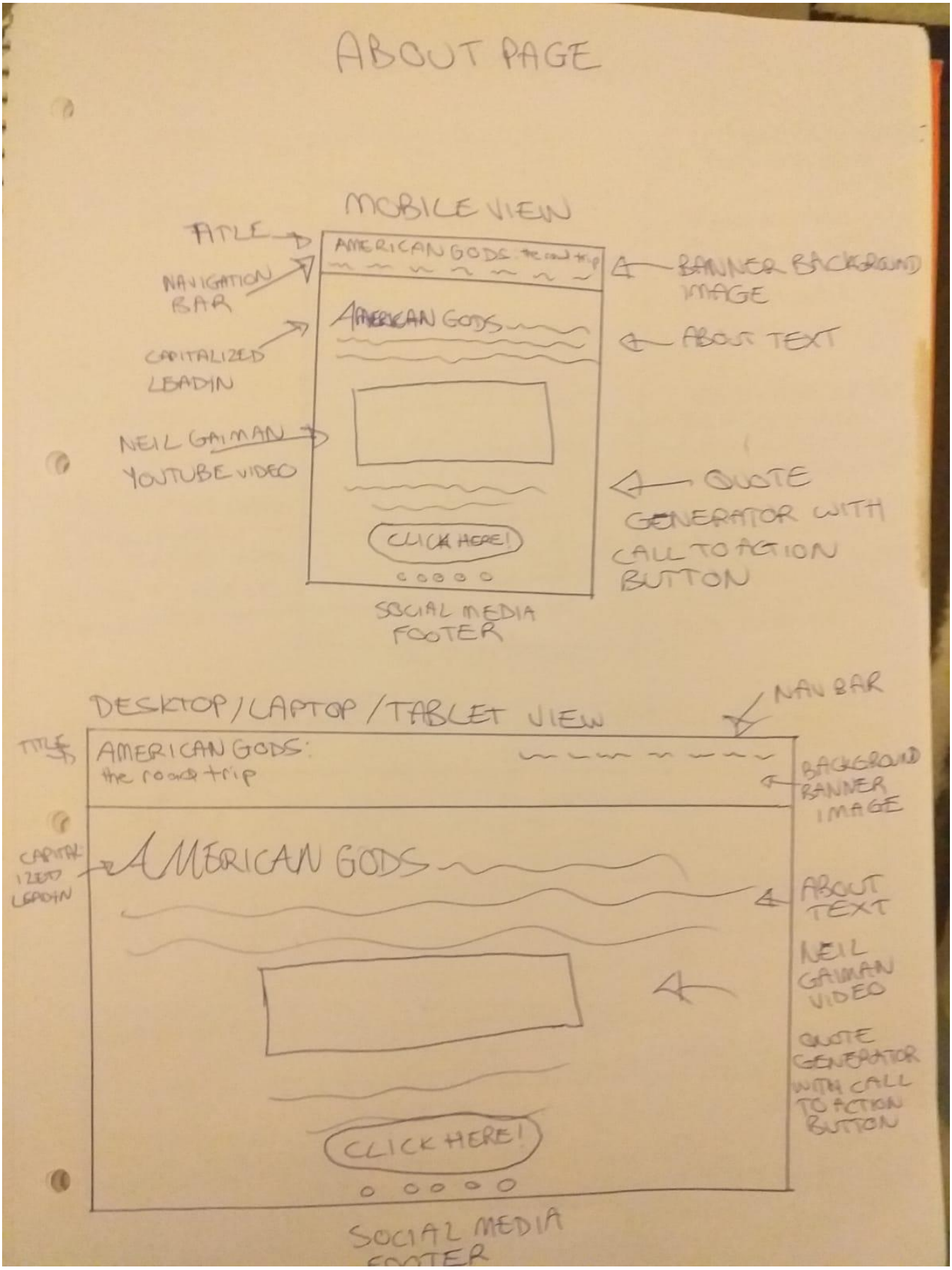
- This page will allow users to contact the site by filling out a contact form, the content of which will link directly to a valid email address used by the site administrator.
- A clearly marked call to action button will allow users to send their messages.

Skeleton plane

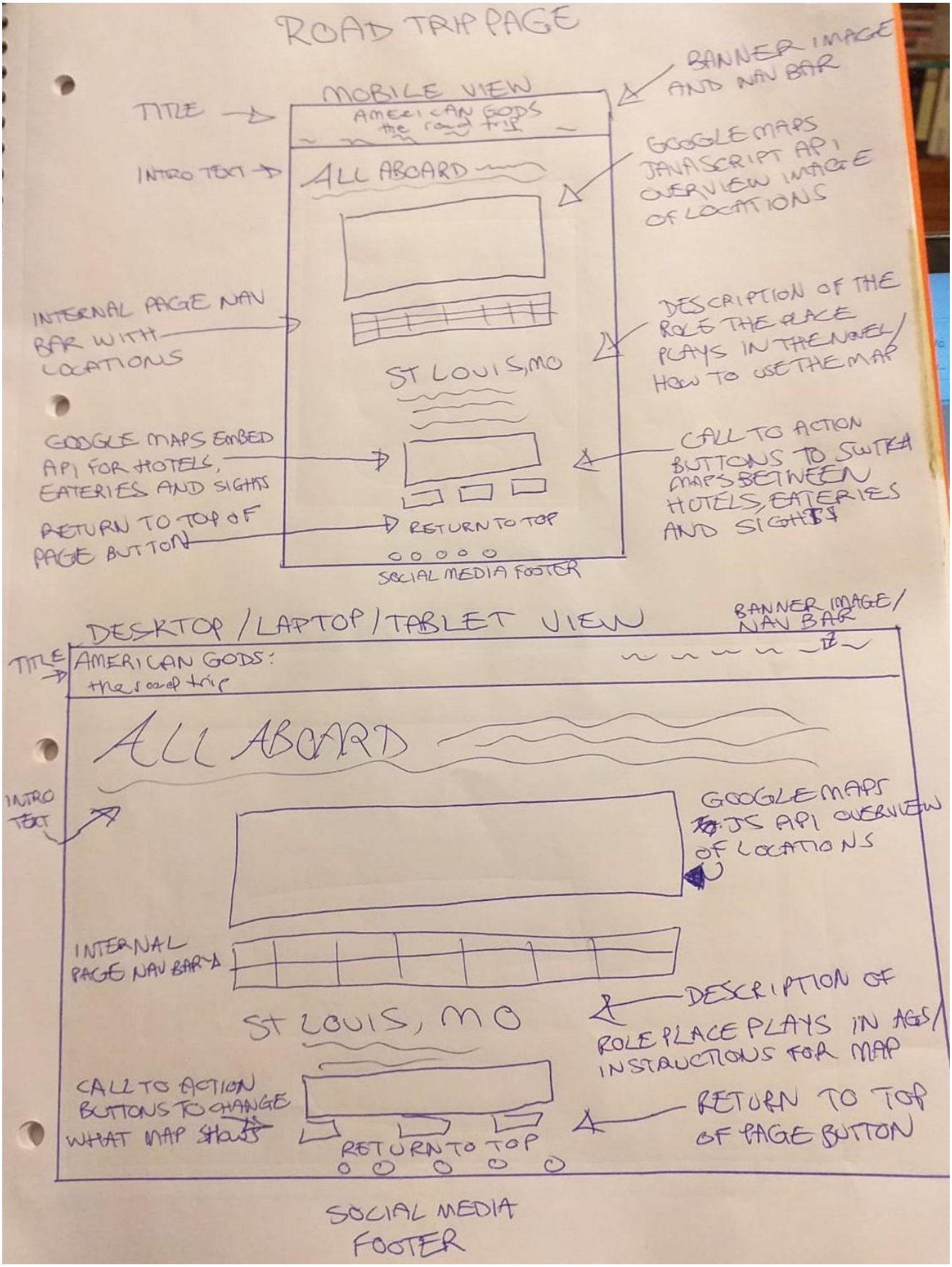
The following pages contain the initial sketches for the website layout.



POST-CODING NOTE: As can be seen above, the initial design for the homepage intended to have navigation links appear directly, i.e. not in a burger-style dropdown, even on smartphones so as to reduce the number of clicks requires. However, in practice the burger-style dropdown proved to deliver a better aesthetic so was added during coding.

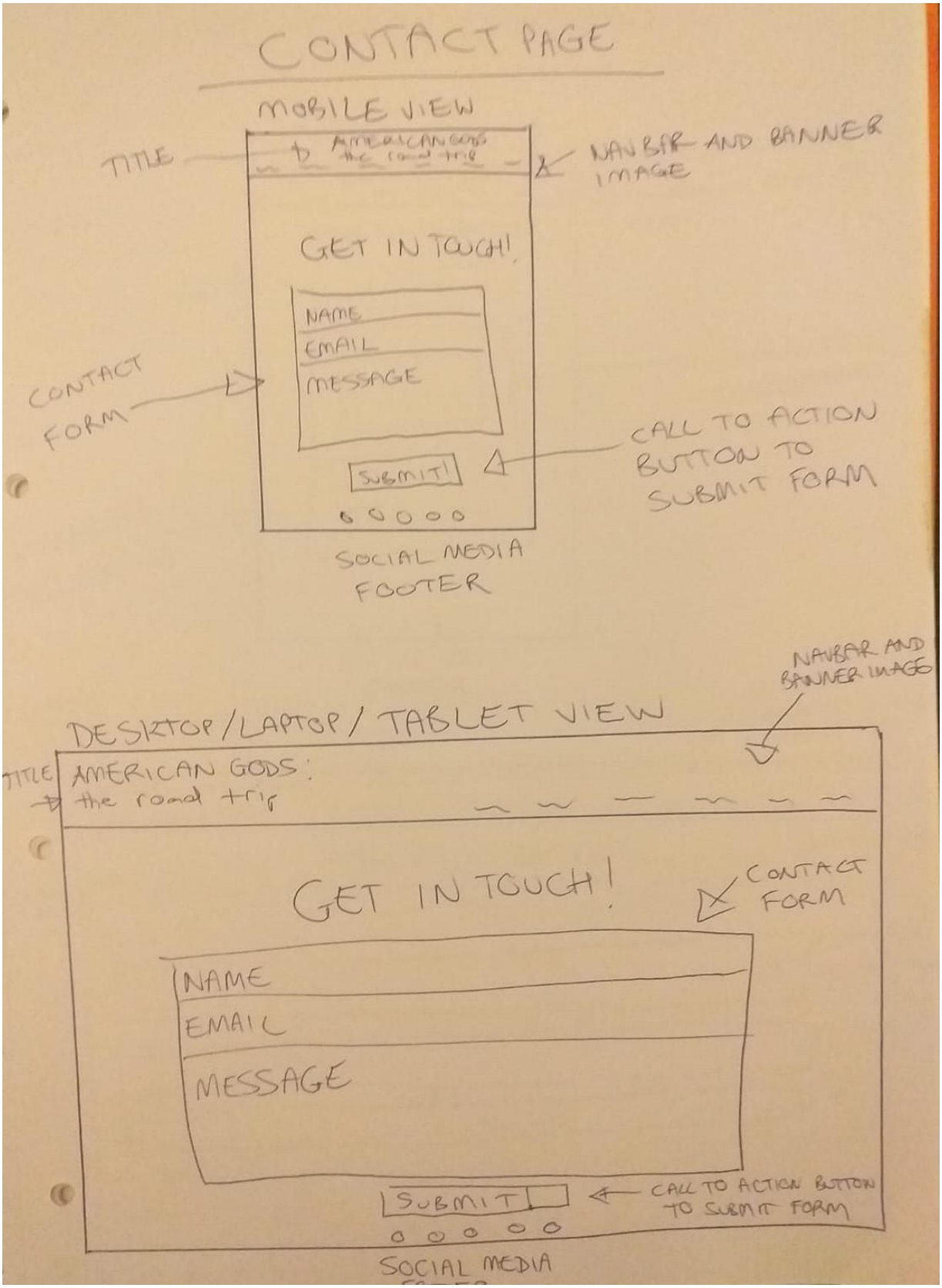


POST-CODING NOTE: Initially, the About page was to contain the random quote generator, but this proved to be a poor aesthetic and ran the risk of the quote generator being overlooked by users as it did not appear within the initial view and was not an intuitive feature for users to look for. As such, the random quote generator was later moved to a separate page.

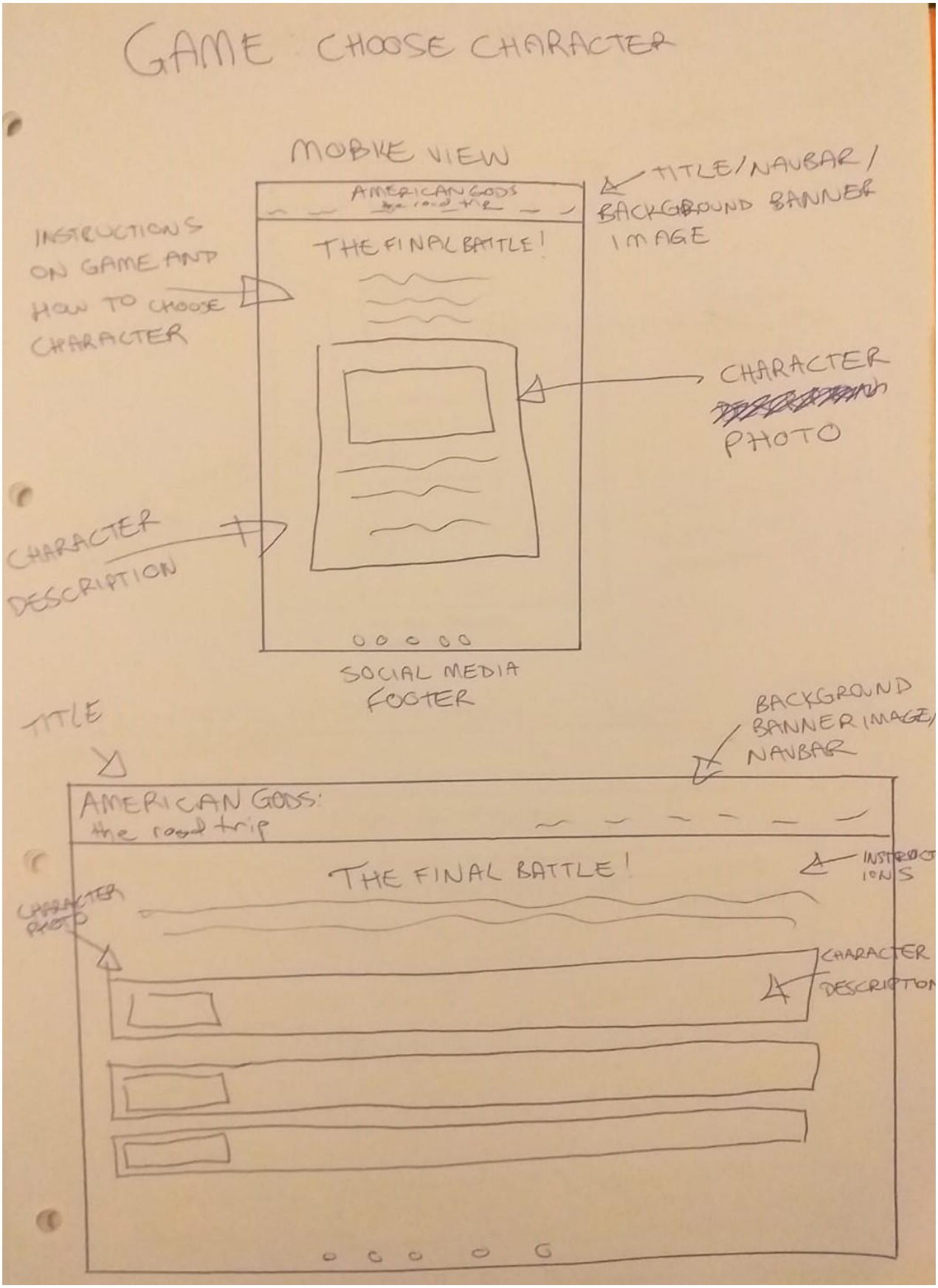


POST CODING NOTE: The 'Road Trip' page, now 'route.html', went through several iterations based on aesthetics and user feedback. These iterations were described above in the 'Route.html' section of this document. As such, the final UX design differs from that initially envisaged in this sketch.

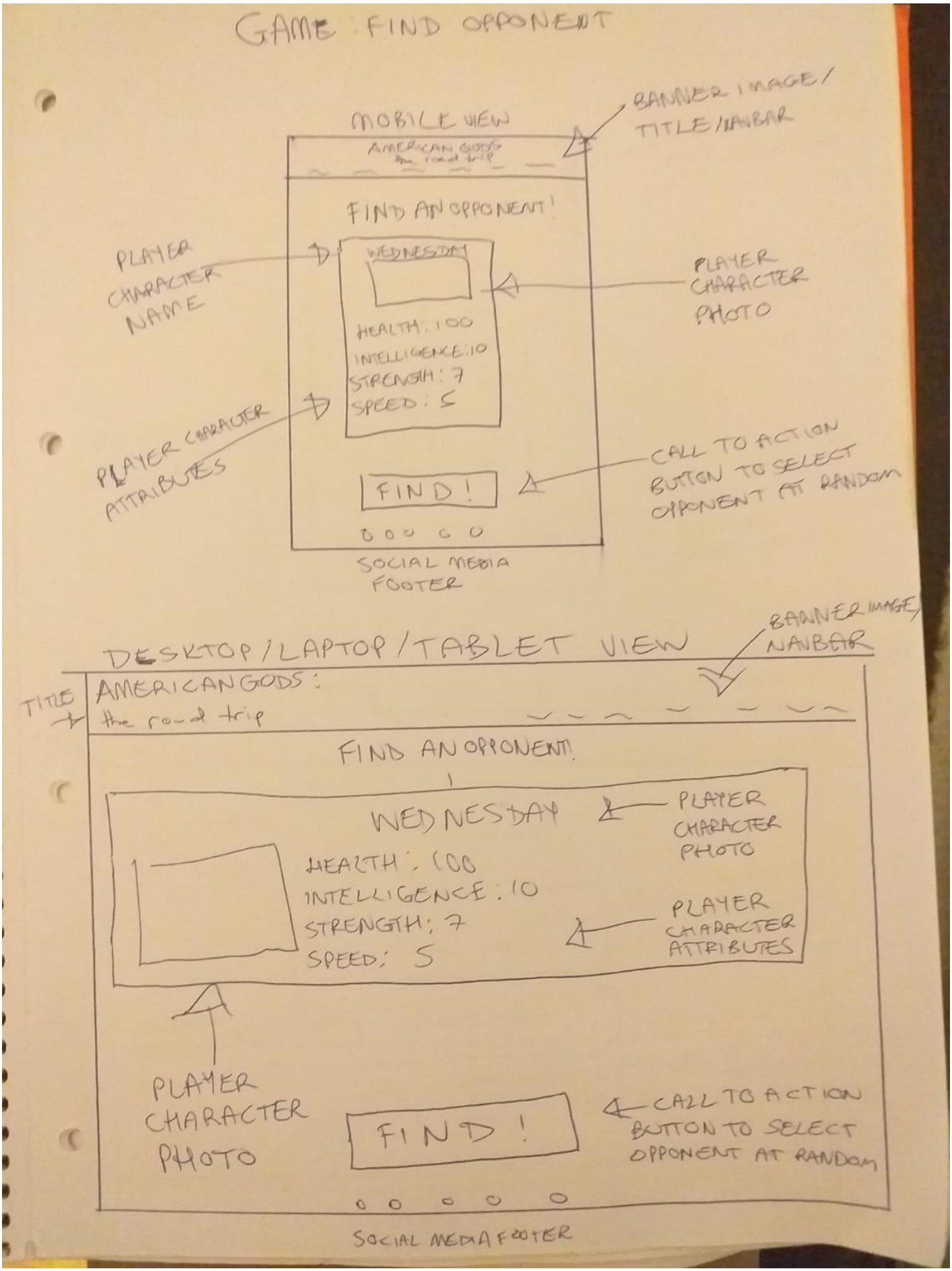
CONTACT PAGE

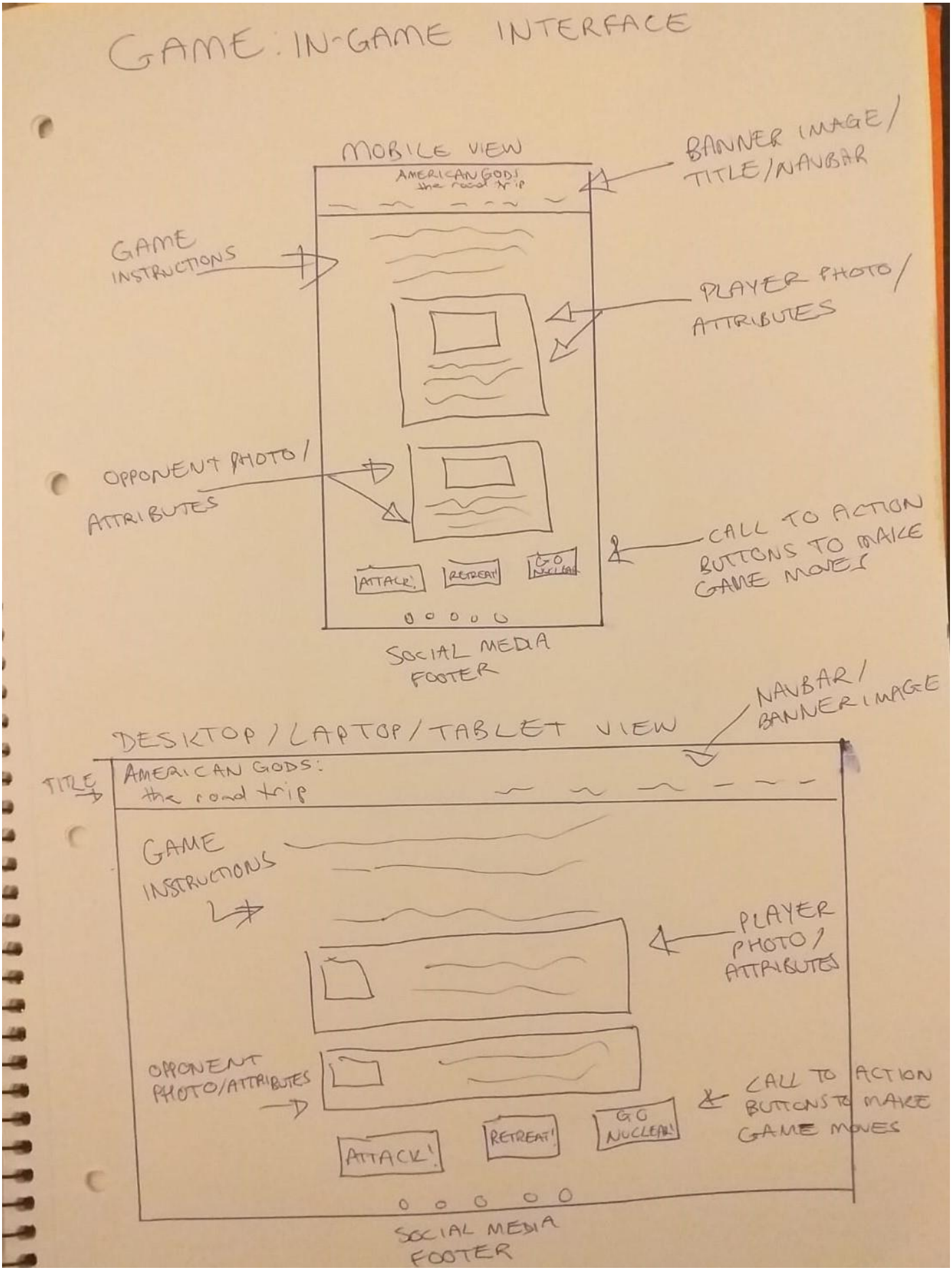


GAME: CHOOSE CHARACTER



GAME: FIND OPPONENT





POST CODING NOTE: The player and opponent profiles were later amended to place the player attributes before the photographs, because it became apparent that the health attribute was more important during the game.

Surface plane

Given that most users will be familiar with the content and atmosphere of *American Gods*, it is appropriate that the site design should reflect these aspects whilst staying true to the road trip theme of the site. As such, the landing page should contain a hero image of an open road, a highway, with the colour scheme / linear gradient evoking the supernatural themes and brooding feel of the novel. Despite this 'broodiness', however, the novel is also infused with playful undercurrents throughout, and this should ideally also be reflected in the design. This playfulness can be hinted at through an appropriate choice of font for the navigation bar and some of the inner HTML content / headings, throughout the site's pages. The themes and feel of the novel should be reflected throughout each page of the site, via banner headings and navigation bar font, in a manner which compliments the design of the more logistical road trip content, i.e. maps etc., as well as the music and game pages.

The principle colour, other than that of the background (white) and html text (black), of *American Gods: The Road Trip* will be green. Green is appropriate as it is the colour of the aurora borealis on the prospective landing page image, and, naturally, is a prominent colour on many of the embedded Google maps throughout the site. For this reason the hover effects on the footer's social media icons as well as most of the call to action buttons, and the internal navigation bar and 'return to top' buttons on the places page will be green. Additionally, green is said to evoke associations of growth and renewal (which fit in well with the existential self-discovery that people are often looking for with a road trip), peace, rest and security (which users may find they are sorely in need of during a road trip), and permission to go (something drivers are often keen to see). For further information, see: https://www.impactbnd.com/blog/the-psychology-of-design-the-color-green .

To reflect the literary theme of the novel, where appropriate, the HTML text content of site pages will begin with the first few words in ALL CAPS, in the style of classical typesetting in books. These capitalized lead-ins should be suggestive of writing, perhaps simulating handwriting, but should nevertheless be legible.

Text on each page should be large enough to be legible for all ages and dark enough to contrast against the white background, i.e. black.

All maps, embedded videos and images must be large enough to be visible on all devices, but not so large that they dominate the page.

POST-CODING NOTE: Because the places.html and game.html pages contain instances of three buttons next to one another, not all buttons can be green. As such, the remaining buttons appear in the neutral colours of grey and black. The only exception is the 'Go nuclear!' button on the game page, which is red to evoke a sense of danger.