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12/1/2022

ENGL 2880

Stiles

Howdy!

This is an interactive text-instantiation of my favorite chapter of the book *Introduction to* *Algorithms* by Cormen, Leiserson, Rivest and Stein. The chapter in question is chapter 22, which covers some basic [graph algorithms](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Graph_theory#:~:text=In%20mathematics%2C%20graph%20theory%20is,also%20called%20links%20or%20lines).). From the second I took at stab at the [Bridges of Königsberg problem](https://www.britannica.com/science/Konigsberg-bridge-problem), I fell in love with graph theory, which describes the mathematical underpinnings of connections and relationships. While I’d love to say I picked this chapter because I made the project in a website and the internet is readily described by graph theory and that, all along, I was going to tie it back to social connections between books via Robert Darnton’s social network model of books, I actually picked it because I like the content.

Earlier in the semester, I wrote an essay about the [Gutenberg Project](https://www.abebooks.com/Gutenberg-Bateman-Edward-Book-Arts-Studio/31260520920/bd) through the lens of [skeuomorphs](https://www.techtarget.com/whatis/definition/skeuomorphism#:~:text=Skeuomorphism%20is%20the%20design%20concept,design%2C%20a%20simpler%20graphic%20style.). What I argued was that the book was somewhat of a reverse skeuomorph because skeuomorphs usually are used to aid in the use of new technology by taking the more familiar but now defunct form of old, but this book-object in fact discourages the use of new technology as it takes the form of old (see the link for more details). I wanted to lean into that idea and cast *Introduction to Algorithms* into a new technology that actively discourages its reading by taking the form of old. Thus, I made *Stiles*, an adversarial digital user interface inspired by manuscripts and printed text.

I started by including a brief description of the project and how to navigate it (as well as an apology) on the index page. I think the difficulty of using the UI makes it somewhat of a puzzle, and I encourage those brave enough to try to figure out the logical ordering of the pages. That said, I wanted to describe the way new pages are reached (there are several interesting notes to be made regarding the subversion of inherited terms on the web like pagination and scrolling) so that the reader could focus on the challenges presented page by page.

I should mention that each page is sort of independently is a bit based on a concept from class. I tried to make each interesting programmatically, visually, and intellectually, however, there wasn’t much to tie them together. As I was working on this, I ran into some personal issues that caused me to miss some class, and I was sort of frustrated with the callousness of the pacing from my (engineering) classes. I thought a good way to tie together an adversarial user interface would be to design it like a Cornell Engineering class, and so I randomly jump from page to page after a random time interval that’s a little too short to read each. This is because, “on the test, you’ll be expected to recall the information in a random order, and you’re expected to be able to keep pace with your peers.” I’ll refrain from citing that quote, but it’s named Stiles because, as best I could tell, the originator of the modern grading scheme began with a Yale president named Ezra Stiles (I would have named it Ezra, since that’s also the name of the founder of Cornell, but that seemed a little too belligerent to put on my public Github).

“But Brandon,” I hear you say, “that’s not an effective way to learn information and it’s also not really preparing you for any real-world challenges.” I’m not really sure what this question means, but feel free to follow up with me after class if you really want an answer.

Anyways, my favorite bit is probably the font page. Here, we’re playing with some of the ideas from our class conversation on fonts (wow). The class discussion was centered around how fonts affect our perception and interactions with media. I kind of imagined a well-intentioned UI designer, fresh out of a data structures class, that employed the following strategy to neutralize the effect of the fonts (of course, *Introduction to Algorithms* is a book about cold, hard facts, so we should strive for objectivity in our fonts). Since comic sans and other more casual fonts lower one’s grade, and more professional-looking fonts raise it, we can achieve a neutral font by amortizing it over randomly selected fonts. Thus, fonts and colors for this section of the page are randomly generated and change every few seconds.

I actually really like the visual effect of this, and was happy that it came out like I intended, since I wanted it to sort of mimic a keyboard lighting effect called [starlight](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HIr9yDZ0UGQ&ab_channel=R%CE%9BZ%CE%9ER). I think this page also highlights an interesting tradeoff between the aesthetic value of a book-object and it’s practical value in being able to convey information. I think these things normally aren’t orthogonal (in fact, often aid one another, especially if you’re a bibliophile like myself), but this project really pits them against each other in order to achieve it’s intended purpose.

The rest of the pages are pretty straightforward, and I leave it as an exercise for the reader to determine where the inspiration came from.

I think I’d love to implement more little pages like these or maybe make a script that generates websites like this given a piece of text (parametrize it on the text). I also think cleaning up the user interface a little bit and adding some bells and whistles (ie; stuff like fake buttons that lead nowhere and a copyright at the bottom of the page, etc.) would really enhance the sense that this is an antagonistic UI since the more professional it looks the less likely it is to be a well-intentioned student.

I’ve wanted to explore the idea of an antagonistic UI for a while now, and I think doing so in the context of an anti-skeuomorph is a really interesting idea, I’d love to explore this a bit more, and I’m really happy with how this turned out!