

Portbou 1940: A Hypertext Narrative

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Abstract

My thesis project, Portbou1940.com, is an interdisciplinary multimedia narrative that explores the death of Walter Benjamin through digital video, photographs, static text, hand-drawn art, and digital paintings fashioned as motion-graphics, comic-strip panels, and animations embedded in an interactive website.

Benjamin was a cultural anthropologist and German Jew, whose primary area of study during the 1930s was at the intersection of mass-communication technologies and art. He fled Berlin three months after Hitler came to power, and lived in Paris for seven years. When Germany invaded France he fled, and died in the Spanish border town of Portbou in late September 1940. By presenting only slices of narrative, the *Portbou 1940* website evokes Benjamin's fascination with fragmentation and facsimile, as well as his theories on technologically produced art.

The project website presents a sequence of closed and curated stories; the reader¹ navigates interlocking chapters, choosing which versions of events to experience, and to accept, or to reject. Scholar Esther Leslie (2000) notes: "Benjamin criticised the historian who was content to 'reconstruct.' The past must be 'constructed.'" My project, *Portbou 1940*, constructs every recorded version of the events of three days in September from each available point of view.

¹ I use the word "reader" throughout to denote the consumer of/participant in narrative.

Author's Biographical Sketch

Christine Bower is passionate about typography, good code, great food, and design of every stripe—whether interior, graphic, fashion, or industrial.

A Mac geek and web manager at Harvard Business School, she holds undergraduate degrees in philosophy and creative writing. She is a designer for print and web, an illustrator, animator, and award-winning writer.

A poet and author as well as a visual artist, Christine's art is highly narrative: most of her work is mixed-media and contains imagery connected to or that evokes stories, features words interacting with images.

Her undergraduate thesis was a linked poetry-cycle reimagining fairy-tales and Classical and biblical myths, and her most-recently exhibited piece in a gallery show was a sculpture of David Lynch's Laura Palmer built from Styrofoam, plastic sheeting, wood, and various other materials. She views digital multimedia as a natural extension of traditional mixed-media art.

Dedication

My incredible boyfriend, Cristo Pittas, gave me room and encouragement; his belief in my ability was steadfast when my confidence wavered: thank you for the Adobe Photoshop tricks and the project's soundtrack.

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Thank you first to my thesis advisor, Dan Armendariz, who gave me the two most invaluable pieces of advice any web worker can receive: to “cut features,” and not to fall in love with the newest and shiniest tools.

Gratitude to Harvard University and the Extension School, for all of the many opportunities they have offered me: I would not be where I am today, in my life and career, without them. To the many amazing professors I’ve been fortunate enough to study with: Sue Weaver Schopf, in whose class I first heard the name Walter Benjamin; Bakhtiar Mikhak and Erik Blankinship, who taught me that being a designer and a programmer are not mutually exclusive; Marlon Kuzmick, for his infectious enthusiasm for the digital humanities; and the dozens of other instructors who kept me challenged and growing.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

My thesis project, *Portbou 1940*, is composed of interactive microsites which each reveal different facets of the last two days of Walter Benjamin's life through the lens of his theories on history, art, and technology, and culminate in his alleged suicide. It is intended to serve as a portfolio demonstrating the breadth of my studies in digital media at Harvard Extension School. By no means comprehensive of all of my coursework, it incorporates static and dynamic website development, a design sense honed by classes in both graphic and web design, and a range of animation techniques acquired in courses on 2- and 3-D animation, as well as video editing classwork.

Because my academic background is in creative writing and my fine-art work tends to be extremely narrative, I knew that I wanted to use this multimedia medium to explore the relationships between narrativity and art, and between art and technology. That took me to Walter Benjamin's seminal essay on the early 20th-century collision of artistic creation and technology, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." As I reread that essay for the tenth—or hundredth?—time, I realized that I not only had discovered how to approach the thesis project, but I had stumbled upon its subject as well.

Context and Background

The project aims at bringing together various elements and theories that extend beyond the field of information technology, but that have implications for the field, and particularly for that specialized area called digital media art.

I came to computer science through graphic design, and I developed an interest in design via a passion for studio art. I'm never happier than when I'm wearing many hats, so the thesis draws from my academic background in literature, literary criticism, creative writing, history, art history, graphic design, visual art, and information technology. Given the focus of the degree on "instructional technology," I positioned the project as both a teaching tool and as a work of interactive art.

As Greg Rucka, a writer of novels, comic books, and video games, wrote in an article on the work that comes before creative work, he "think[s] of research as an iceberg. The one-eighth of it that makes it onto the page rises from the seven-eighths nobody sees" (Rucka, 2010). The project website is the tip of the iceberg; this paper will reveal much of the rest.

The Story

Walter Benjamin was well known to the Nazis by the early 1930s as a Communist and an emigrant Jew, a radical writer, and a friend of "degenerate" left-wing artists and intellectuals. He fled Berlin three months after Hitler came to power in 1933, and lived in exile in Paris for seven years.

The Gestapo demanded his expatriation from France in February 1939, but the French government refused. Germany invaded France in 1940, and Benjamin escaped

Paris one day before the city was captured. He planned to cross the Pyrenees Mountains on foot with companions he met in Marseille; from the Spanish side of the mountains, he would take a train to Lisbon and a ship to New York. He was 48 years old, and in poor health. He died in a small town just over the Spanish border, and no one, in the intervening seventy years, has ever plausibly been able to explain what happened to him there.

Benjamin had three significant accomplices on his refugee journey: the women who accompanied him on various legs of the trek. Another German Jew, Henny Gurland, and her 16-year old son, José, were his companions from Marseilles to the small Spanish village of Portbou. Lisa Fittko, the wife of a man that Benjamin befriended in a French internment camp, led him across the Pyrenees into post-Civil War Spain; she would go on to help thousands more Jews and refugees escape war-torn Europe by the same mountainous route.

Benjamin and the Gurlands were joined near the Spanish border by a group that included Carina Birnmann, a former legal adviser at the Austrian Embassy in Paris—until Austria was absorbed into the German *Reich*. All three women—Fittko, Gurland, and Birnmann—wrote down their memories of Benjamin’s border crossing, and these slim records—about thirteen pages in total—form the basis of *Portbou 1940*.

Walter Benjamin was detained by Spanish border agents on either September 25 or 26, 1940 and died in Portbou, Spain, on either September 26, 27, or 28. The town registered his death on the twenty-sixth and his burial on the twenty-seventh; church records show he died on the twenty-seventh and was buried on the twenty-eighth.

Consensus puts his border-crossing on the September 26, and all sources insist he spent one night at the Hotel de Francia—but he was billed for a five-night stay (September 26-October 1). Henny Gurland says a doctor was called to Benjamin’s bedside at the hotel in Spain on September 25, but Lisa Fittko claims he spent that night alone in the woods outside a French border town. The doctor who billed him for either four or six visits on September 26 was out of town that day.

Four separate accounts confirm Benjamin carried “suicide pills.” He may have killed himself to avoid being turned over to the Gestapo, or accidentally overdosed on morphine taken as a treatment for some ailment. The suicide story is not airtight: there are simply too many question marks leading up to his death.

The official cause of Walter Benjamin’s death is a cerebral hemorrhage (stroke). Symptoms the hotel owner’s wife described (panting and shortness of breath) are inconsistent with both a stroke and a morphine overdose. An autopsy that may have never occurred found no evidence of any drug in his system.

He may have died of exhaustion from the strain of the mountain crossing. He may have succumbed to an illness, or to well-documented heart and lung conditions. None of the accounts of Benjamin’s death—or the narrators—are reliable. Benjamin’s traveling companion, Henny Gurland, claims to have destroyed two suicide notes he had written—which she later reconstructed from memory. She also claims that he was fully lucid more than nine hours after taking a massive overdose of morphine.

According to David Mauas’ 2005 documentary *Quién mató a Walter Benjamin?* (*Who Killed Walter Benjamin?*), some historians and many Portbou residents are convinced that far-right Spanish Fascists, with the collusion of Portbou’s judge, one of its

two doctors, and a village priest, conspired to murder Walter Benjamin on orders from the SS. Others claim that a cell of far-left Stalinist assassins working with Henny Gurland murdered him on orders from Moscow.

There are two academically well-trod “mysteries” surrounding Benjamin’s death: *Would he have survived the crossing had he attempted it either one day earlier or later?* and *Was his greatest essay or book manuscript was lost with Benjamin when he died?* Michael Taussig wrote that:

Benjamin’s life after death was his final essay in this regard. ...one reason why the postmortem list of his personal possessions is so valuable. ... But what about the actual things, especially that mysterious and irritating briefcase that seems not only more important than his dead body but also a substitute for it... (Taussig, pp. 25-26).

Some scholars speculate that the manuscript Lisa Fittko claims Benjamin was attempting to transport west was a final draft of *Das Passagen-Werk* (*The Arcades Project*), a study of 19th-century Parisian street life. Yet others believe it was a fleshed-out revision of Benjamin’s brief essay “Über den Begriff der Geschichte” (“Theses on the Philosophy of History,” sometimes translated as “On the Concept of History”).

Das Passagen-Werk is a palimpsestic mashup of languages and styles and fragments, which in form and content prefigure much of the interrelatedness and networkedness of our digital culture. Benjamin’s “belief in the radical materiality of perception” is fundamental to *Arcades Project*. He “presents a view of the metropolis in which circuitous space and fractured sight opposes the logic...that underpins the Western

philosophic tradition" (Dubow, p. 259). His roundabout and fragmented approach to historical tradition in turn underpins my project.

The original "On the Concept of History" is a list of eighteen pro-Marxist (but anti-Stalinist) guidelines for historians, less than ten pages long and couched in metaphor and parable. Some believe that Benjamin was expanding it into a book-length exploration. Benjamin's best friend and biographer, Gershom, considers this a "nearly inescapable" conclusion.

Serious historians are not immune to dramatizing Walter Benjamin's death as the story of a brilliant man driven inexorably to suicide by the huge and terrifying sweep of history. *Portbou 1940* explores the events surrounding the mystery of Benjamin's death, but does not attempt to solve them. I will be setting aside romantic simplifications (and complications) in favor of very direct examination of three primary accounts: those of Carina Birmann, Lisa Fittko, and Henny Gurland.

The Age of Reproduction

So, just what was in that essay that spun my head around so thoroughly that I had to focus my entire thesis on some dead critic? To start, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" is Walter Benjamin 101: the 1936 essay is his most enduring, well-known, and well-read piece of work. Benjamin scholarship is undergoing its first major renaissance in our current age of digital reproduction, and I want to examine the endurance of his theories on both the interface between art and technology, and between historical narrative and linearity.

We live in exciting times as far as technology goes; entire new art media are being invented, and unprecedeted explosions in communications technology are invading private lives and spaces—except it's not that new at all. Substitute the twentieth century for the twenty-first: photography and film and sound recording were those brand-new art forms; radio and mass advertising and affordable telephones entered the home.

In the face of this chaotic intersection of art and technology in the 1920s and 1930s, Benjamin coined the phrase “death of the aura” to describe the means by which “the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence” (Benjamin, p. 221). The “aura” of an art object is—at the risk of simplification—the unique existence of a piece of art in time and place. He questions whether an object that exists many times over in many places at many times can be considered part of a tradition, and therefore whether it is a work of art at all. My project tacitly argues that in a digital and postmodern age, reproduction is firmly a part of our artistic tradition.

For Walter Benjamin, “even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. ...The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity” (Benjamin, p. 220). This is not a bad thing; he concludes that mechanically reproduced art, existing beyond place (distance from viewer) and time (basis in ritual), can still fulfill human needs beyond the cultic/aesthetic values of “original” artwork.

Benjamin was both fascinated by and apprehensive of culture-altering technology; just as he warned of the “death of the aura,” he wrote detailed histories tracing the

evolution of art-reproducing machines from pottery molds to lithography, and printing through photography—and he wrote the first-ever serious treatise of photography as an art form in the 1920s. He strove to understand the relationship between, for example, the artistry of a theatre actor and a film star, between the Mona Lisa and a million postcards echoing her smile.

For this project, I will attempt to infuse completely mundane items with the essential aura that makes an art object art. In some cases, these will be originally-digital artifacts that never existed, save as signals inside a machine. I will also be forcibly divorcing “authentic” art objects—images, narratives, and physical original works of art that I will create—from their presence and unique existences. In doing so, I may be playing into a trap Benjamin articulated seventy-five years ago in “Art in the Age”: that “historical testimony rests on authenticity … and is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authenticity of the object” (Benjamin, p. 221).

Of course, we’re not living in an age of mechanical reproduction when movie theaters and Victrolas represented the pinnacle of technological innovation in the arts and entertainment.

Benjamin posited “the uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition. This tradition itself is thoroughly alive and extremely changeable” (Benjamin, p. 223). Maybe I’m not “killing” aura by shattering the connection of art to tradition; after all, my tradition includes art forms that Benjamin may not have recognized as such.

And that's the point: "in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind" (Benjamin, p. 221). He continues on to assert that film is the most powerful agent for this renewal, in its most positive form. This is, after all, a man who wrote with great seriousness and utmost respect about Mickey Mouse.

But it isn't 1936 anymore. Walter Benjamin has experienced a surge of popularity in the last decade because his theories hold up so well in our current transitional technology landscape.

Benjamin's ideas on history and storytelling favor nonlinear, hypertext forms:

- Benjamin "relished Baudelaire's description of the poet as a ragpicker, cataloguing and collating the refuse of the city and he applied the same image to his method as a cultural historian" (Conrad, 2008).
- He exhibited "a love of muted and defective storytelling as a form of analysis ... and in particular montage, allegory, and fragmentation" (Taussig, p. 12).
- He derided the notion that history is a linear "sequence of events like the beads of a rosary" (Benjamin, p. 263).
- He wrote about the task of the historian that: "to articulate the past does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was.' It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (Benjamin, p. 255).

- He stated that “a calendar serves as a historical time-lapse camera” (Benjamin, p. 261).

These approaches to narrative, history, and storytelling were considered radical theses at the time, but don’t feel so strange today. A hypertext format allows me to tell the story of one event—the death of Walter Benjamin—without regard for internal and comparative contradictions between narrators and tellings.

Hypertext allows the audience to experience events actively: chronologically, by narrator, or through multiple experiences, unburdened by external judgments of truth-value. Benjamin demanded that a historian must be “man enough to blast open the continuum of history” (Benjamin, p. 262). By giving my readers the ability to approach this history from all sides and in a deliberate, diachronic, synchronistic, and anachronic fashion, I am attempting to do just that: to tell a cohesive story freed from a linear, cohesive timeline.

Hypertext and Storytelling

The idea of a hypertext novel is decades-old: the word and concept “hypertext” were coined by American sociologist Ted Nelson in 1963; non-linear and interactive novels have existed since the 1930s; true hypertext novels in CD-ROM formats predate the web itself.

From Jorge Borges’ *Labyrinth* to the Choose-Your-Own-Adventure (CYOA) books of my childhood, suggestions that a book and reader can act on each other to produce multiple, parallel, overlapping narratives have been argued and explored, but only very recently hit the mainstream. The achievability and creative scope of such

narratives is currently in ascendance with the rise of digital e-readers and tablet devices, and it is only in the past two or three months that they have become both existent and excellent.

One extremely exceptional interactive narrative is an iPad children's book developed by a former Pixar lead animator, William Joyce. Or as the *Fast Company* blog describes it, an "e-book/app/thingie (what do we call these things, again?)" (Pavlus, 2011). This book is an immersive storybook featuring music, animated sequences and interactive, optional games that you have to hunt to discover, but that you don't have to find or interact with in order to proceed. The author of the review attributes the ease with which it invites you to explore, in part, to its lack of instructions.

Aesthetics have become absolutely essential to hypertext storytelling on the internet—as to everything else online—with advances in data transmission and digital visualization. This is in part evidenced by a rise in the last three years of a genre called "motion comics." One archetype of motion comics is Stephen King's *N*, which uses minimal Flash animation to tell a fixed story with (mostly) still images and voiceover narration. Another pioneer in this category has been screenwriter/director Joss Whedon (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Doctor Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*), who is currently writing and directing an animated online X-Men comic book series.

Lemony Snicket's "A Series of Unfortunate Events" used web-puzzles and online promotions to allow savvy readers access to information not revealed in the thirteen books (or to gain insights before the next novel revealed them). Major television networks and film studios have adopted web-assisted storytelling strategies to fuel viewer engagement. A narrative-driven social website called theamandaproject.com just

garnered its creator a YA book deal. The “lightly interactive” CYOA-inspired *Thrilling Tales of the Downright Unusual* is faring well on Kickstarter, a crowdsourced fundraising platform.

A *New York Times* article, "Curling Up With Hybrid Books, Videos Included," highlights interactive narrative in the form of "digi-novels" or "vooks" (video books) as an emerging area in the publishing industry. Book publishers are "scrambling" to gain a foothold in this new space. In the *Times* article, spokespersons for Harper Collins, Penguin Books, and Simon & Schuster express concern that YouTube attention-spans create a climate where readers will not have the patience to engage with linear narratives on paper (Motoko, 2009)—a crisis that Walter Benjamin predicted 75 years ago. Print media producers and distributors face a rising demand for non-linear texts, multiplatform engagement, and active involvement in the process of storytelling on the part of consumers.

Cory Doctorow, a novelist, *Wired* magazine contributor, and co-founder of the weird-technology webzine, boingboing.net, does not believe that e-readers like Kindles have staying power. But he is convinced the future of the book is not on paper:

There are stories lurking in potentia that are sui generis to networked devices. We know that they don't require protracted attention. They have to be designed to be copied and they probably don't require that you consume all of them. ...They require a deep level of engagement (Doctorow, 2009).

In my approach to the thesis, I also wanted to inspire that formula of engagement; much of the build and design of the site was guided by Doctorow's notion of the story

that springs entirely from itself with no direct predecessors, that that does not require its reader to fully consume it, that can be consumed in small moments. It is a deceptively simple and wholly exciting attitude toward narrative and art.

Artists and industry are still conceptualizing and christening forms of interactive and deeply engaging digital media that are generally being called “transmedia,” “4D fiction,” or “experiential storytelling.”

The MIT Media Lab received a \$25 million dollar grant to create a “Center for Future Storytelling” in 2008; it opened earlier this year. An entire TED conference will be dedicated to exploration of transmedia in September 2010. Roger Ebert quite recently retracted his infamous assertion that video games can never be art.

Summary

Walter Benjamin’s writing “sought to make sense of the impact of technology on artistic expression” (Isenberg, 2008). My thesis is a practical and theoretical visual study of the sometimes-uneasy partnership between art and technology. It is an interactive work of narrative art that explores questions surrounding Benjamin’s death by exploiting his own theories about narrative, montage, historical enquiry, and mechanically (re)produced art. The reader’s job is to navigate the game-like framework of interlocking stories and supplemental historical artifacts.

Much of the success of this project, from a user-experience perspective, will hinge on navigation, and my ability to successfully weave together visual, narrative, audio, video, animated, and text elements into a thematically coherent whole. I want it to feel like delving into a scrapbook: the audience can start wherever they and skim; flip open to

the middle and immerse themselves; approach the material from a variety of angles, expectations, or ways of experiencing the art object. There is not fixed entry-point to this narrative. There is also minimal authorial guidance or intervention. There should be a sense of the physicality of an existent object.

The narrative is framed within an interactive non-Flash website, rendering it usable across a variety of standard and mobile devices. In keeping with current best practices and recommendations, the site looks and behaves differently in different browsers and devices. It incorporates static HTML pages, embedded video and keyframe animation, experiments with CSS3 transitions and transforms, and a variety of active text and images.

Chapter 2 Requirements and System Overview

CSS3 and HTML5 are emerging standards. This means that, at present, the majority of desktop and mobile web browsers have not caught up with many of the techniques, properties, and elements that I intended to use to develop the *Portbou 1940* site. My goal, therefore, was to adapt my code in such a way as to make the website look as good as possible across the greatest number of browsers as possible, and to aim for a basic level of functionality in all of them.

Consequently, the requirements for my project entail creating and coding complex interactive and animated sequences that function, or else degrade gracefully, in a majority of browsers. Because Apple's mobile OS is not compatible with Adobe's Flash Player, I built all animations and interactions independently of Adobe Flash.

Portbou 1940 is implemented in HTML5, CSS3, and JavaScript, and optimized for modern browsers. Functional story and design elements are intended to look good, even if they don't move or respond as intended, in browsers that are unable to render these interactions and animations. This is in keeping with emerging web development theory that resists pixel-perfection and denies the outdated expectation that websites should look and behave exactly the same in every browser.

Site Plan and Architecture

Originally, I planned to break the story of Walter Benjamin's final days down chronologically, into action-based "chapters." According to this initial build plan, the site

would have had nine components. The hand-drawn sitemap in Figure 1 structures these elements based on the hyperlinking-relationships between HTML documents. The homepage, set at center, links to six pages; the seventh link, to a “fate of the manuscript” page, would be randomized or randomly appearing. One half of Henny Gurland’s narrative would have been accessible only through the first portion of that story.

In my initial sketch for the site architecture, Figure 1, clockwise blue arrows chart a chronological-by-event path through the narrative segments; the numbered brown arrows chart an alternate chronology based on the dates in September 1940 assigned to the corresponding events by different narrators and documents.

Each square is color-coded by narrator: Lisa Fittko’s story in blue, Carina Birmann’s in orange, and Henny Gurland’s in green. The intro video is edged in all three colors, as an early draft of the Train Narrative included information on all four protagonists and was intended to be recited by four voices.

At that point, each segment was randomly assigned a style (“comic book,” “animation,” etc.) and these technology assignments are indicated by marginal notations.

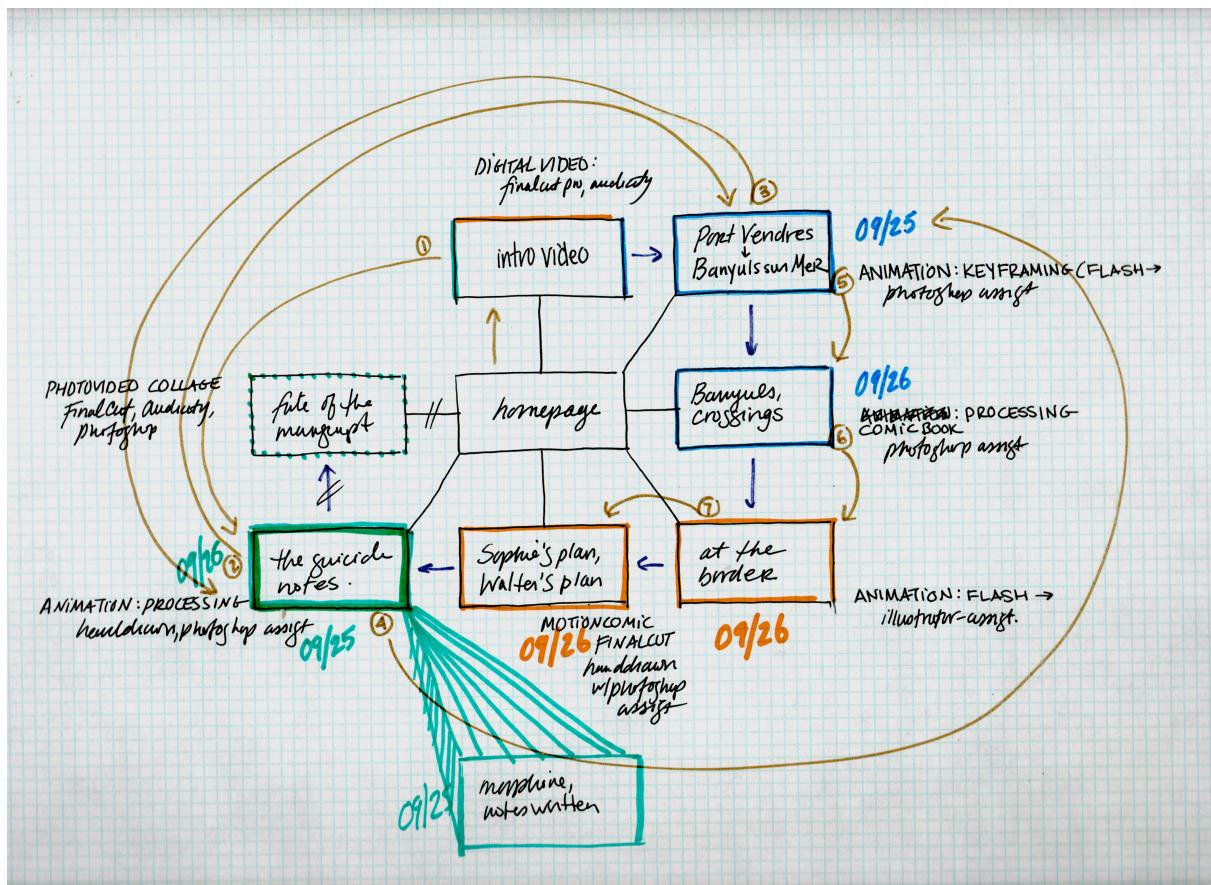


Figure 1 Initial sketch for build plan.

Several problems quickly became apparent as I pursued this approach: first, the narratives themselves simply are not that clean. They overlap; they dispute dates and locations and what actually happened.

Creating a segment about the crossing from Banyuls-sur-Mer to Portbou, for example, would mean weaving together Lisa Fittko's story about finding Benjamin in the forest on the morning of September 26 with Carina Birmann's account of encountering Benjamin and the Gurlands just inside of Spain later that afternoon; Gurland was there, but did not write at length about the crossing—or mention Lisa Fittko at all, and she confused the number of Carina's companions within her letter. In fact, I cut an entire

scene at Banyuls-sur-Mer to preserve the pace of Fittko's storytelling. I didn't want to assume a role of mediating between the three narrators, and quickly decided that the narrators should be represented by one segment each. I also chose not to establish fixed routes through the project, as represented by the blue and brown arrows in Figure 1: this strips any sense of linearity from the experience.

I dropped any representation of the manuscript in the website: beyond the complications involved in generating and coding such a feature, this concept began to clash strongly with my vision of the project as that vision solidified: I did not want to confuse my audience by providing willfully false information when so much of the "truth" in the story is so inherently confused.

Figure 2 represents a revised visualization of the site architecture: the homepage remains at center, and links to only six documents. These are the three story-fragments by narrator, and the three supplementary pages by theme. This sitemap distinguishes the two types of HTML document by size and font, and presents them in a randomized order.

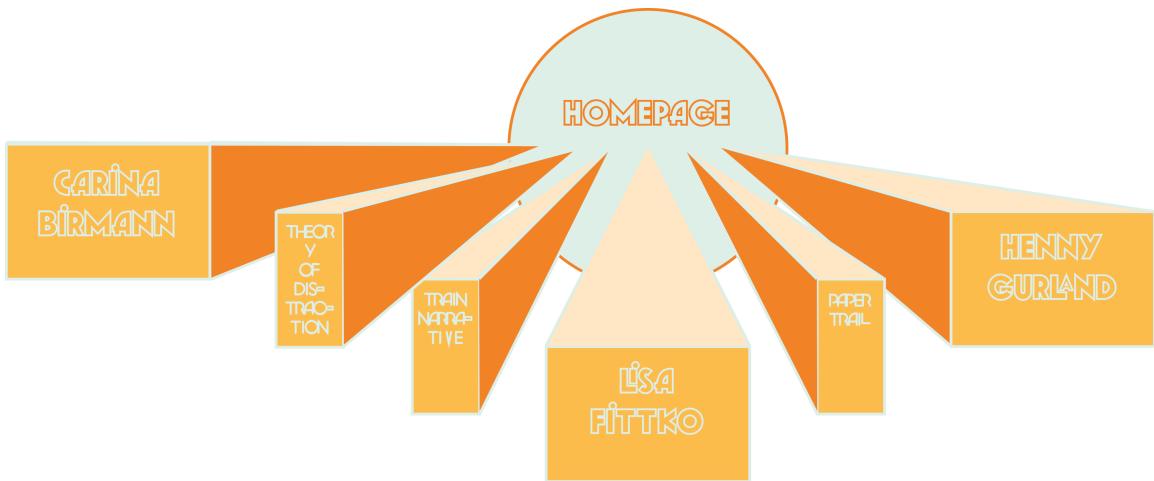


Figure 2 Revised sitemap.

All of these decision created new opportunities, and the revised major components, as per Figure 2, are as follows:

1. An interactive navigation menu modeled on alleged and confirmed contents of a briefcase Walter Benjamin was allegedly carrying at the time of his death.
2. Three interactive narrative sequences based on the testimonies of Henny Gurland, Carina Birmann, and Lisa Fittko. Each segment explores a different approach to web-based animation and web-based storytelling. Each segment is constructed in a unique visual style; two feature original hand-drawn artwork (each rendered in a different aesthetic) and the third is a digital photocollage.
3. A video prologue with voiceover narration explaining the background of Walter Benjamin's journeys.
4. An interactive documents area that displays digitized replicas of primary source material such as receipts and court documents dealing directly with Benjamin's death.
5. A slideshow containing excerpts of Walter Benjamin's short iconoclastic essay "A Theory of Distraction"—written in the mid-1930s; many now claim this short piece predicted the collisions of art and technology now occurring in contemporary internet culture.

Because I now only had to create three narratives, I could conceive of them as larger, more intricate pieces. To keep the three stories very distinct, I wanted to present them in different technological ways, and further differentiate between the narratives by taking distinct artistic and visual approaches to each. In addition to the three narratives, there are three "supplemental" pages of backgounding information, and I adapted

different techniques to this content based both on the content itself and on how I hoped the audience would consume it.

Building Blocks

The actual process of building the project consisted of three separate processes: the historical research and writing that backgrounds the undertaking; development and execution of the original artwork that serves as the bulk of the site's content; and the architecture, implementation, and build of the project website itself. I discussed the first element in the preceding chapter, and now turn to how I approached the other two stages of the build.

Art Development

Given that the story is narrated and inspired by actual, historical people, I began by researching the major characters: gathering photos of Walter Benjamin, Lisa Fittko, and Henny Gurland, images of clothing styles and uniforms circa the early 1940s, and photographs of the town of Portbou and environs in the years after the 1936-1939 Spanish Civil War. I was unable to locate pictures of Carina Birmann or her companions.

I was able to supplement photos and sketches of Benjamin with near-obsessive descriptions from an autobiography written by his friend Gershom Schloem, who described in great detail Benjamin's eye color, skin tone, posture while standing and walking, nervous habits, and other details not accessible from reproductions of 75 year old black-and-white photos.

These old photos enabled me to begin by drawing a series of sketches of each major figure for reference, and to train myself through repetition to draw every character

quickly and recognizably, in various poses and from various angles; I also developed character studies of those I had no photographic images of.

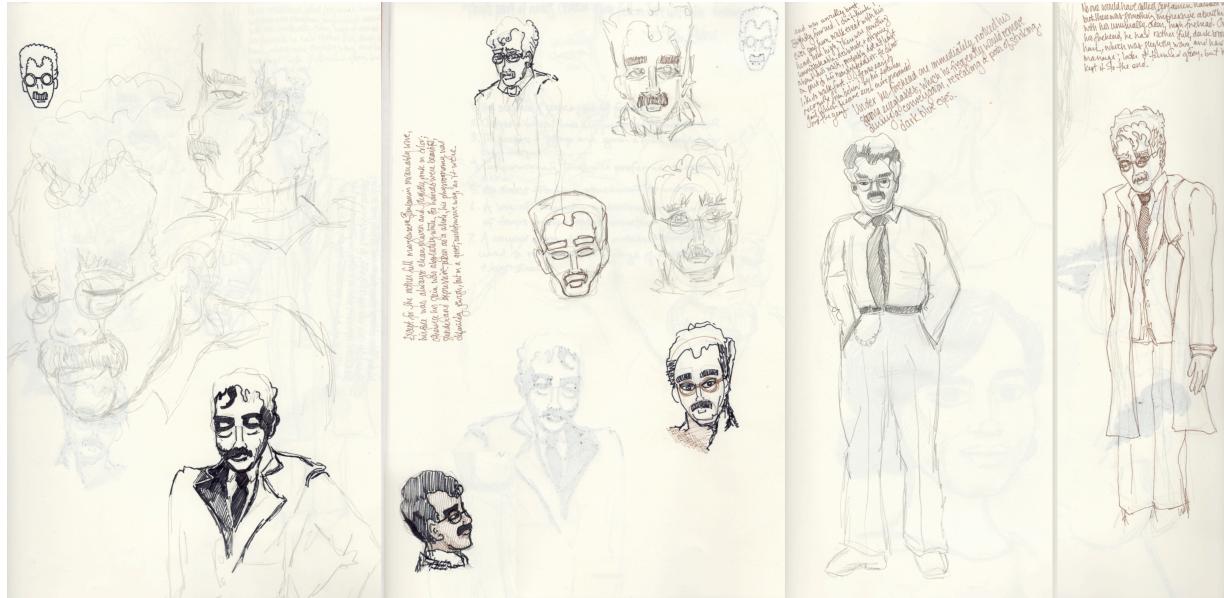


Figure 3 A small selection of character sketches of Walter Benjamin

After generating dozens of pages of rough sketches and satisfying myself of my ability to capture each of the main characters, I turned to the three stories. I knew early on that I wanted to depict the Fittko and Birmann narratives very faithfully and visually, but wanted to take a very different tack with the impersonal, less-descriptive Gurland account.

I used storyboarding and shotlist techniques and templates borrowed from Allyson Sherlock's Video Field Production class to visually plan out my approach to actually building the animations; breaking out the Birmann and Fittko accounts into "scenes"; and blocking out how each scene would be depicted in pen, pencil, and magic marker.

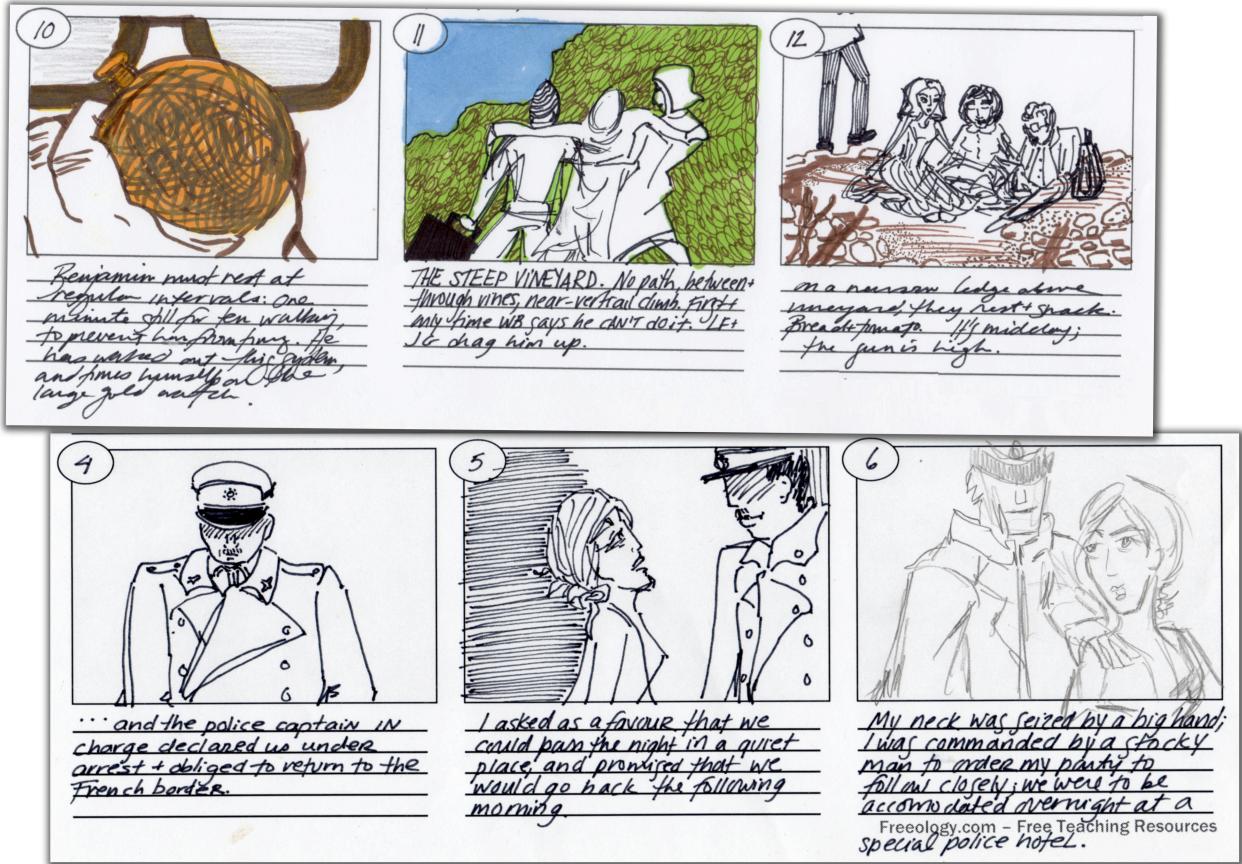


Figure 4 Details from early version of Fittko (top) and Birmann storyboards.

To compose scenes in Adobe Photoshop, first I scanned and digitally painted these initial sketches and storyboards. In one or two cases, when developing backgrounds or scenery, I “drew” directly on top of scanned photos that I imported into Adobe Photoshop (see Figure 17 for one example). I compiled each figure in each image in grouped layers, which allowed me to hide/show layers granularly, and to save each

movable piece as an independent PNG or GIF file. In part, this strategy was influenced by Anthony Calzadilla's blog entry on the build process of the Mad Manimation.²

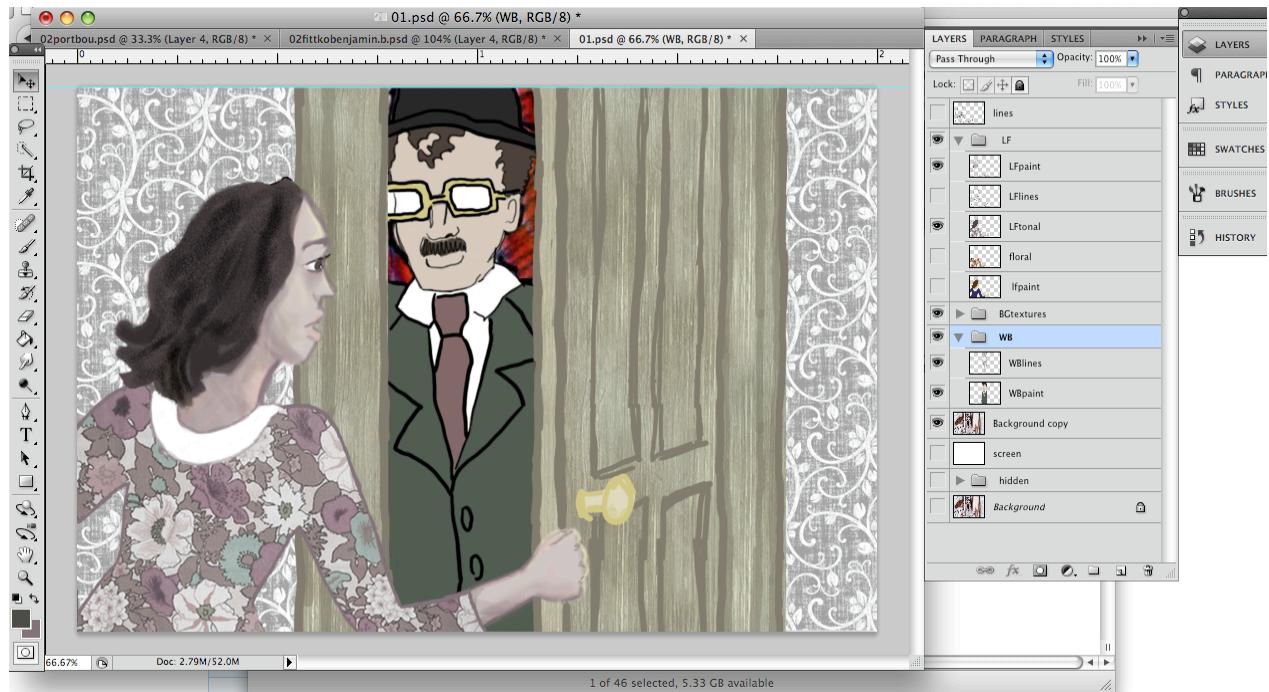


Figure 5 Screenshot of Adobe Photoshop build in progress

In the example above, the Adobe Photoshop layers are grouped into folders named “LF,” “WB,” etc. I can hide the Benjamin and Background layers in order to manipulate only those layers that make up the image of Lisa Fittko. After saving her character to a PNG file with a transparent background, that image could be manipulated independently via CSS3 transforms on the *Portbou 1940* website.

² See <http://www.anthonycalzadilla.com/2011/04/behind-the-scenes-of-mad-maniation/>



Figure 6 Breakout of the four images from Scene 1 of Lisa Fittko's story.

When finalizing the artwork for the web, I worked to the strengths of the three primary web-friendly image file formats: highly-detailed and colorful flat and background images are JPEGs; similar images that require a partially-transparency to move against a background image were saved as PNGs, and graphic elements (such as the text bubbles, which all contained transparencies), were saved as GIFs. In the final outputted files developed from the digital painting shown above, for example, Walter Benjamin and the background are JPEG files, Lisa Fittko is a PNG, and the black-and-white word balloon containing Benjamin's dialogue is a GIF. All of the word balloons were originally created in and exported from Adobe Illustrator.

Top-Level Design Decisions

Because one of my aims in the project build was to ensure that the product is as highly interactive as possible without using Adobe Flash and as highly viewable as possible across a majority of desktop and mobile devices, I spent some time right at the beginning of the planning process researching screen sizes in pixels per inch (ppi) and aspect ratio standards across some of the most popular devices currently available at the time I began working.

device	dimension in pixels	screen resolution	aspect ratio
Apple iPhone4	960x640	326ppi	1.5 – 3:2
Apple iPhone3	480x320	163ppi	1.5 – 3:2
HTC Nexus One	800x480	254ppi	1.67 – 3:5
Google Droid	854x480	240ppi	1.78 – 16:9
Sony PSP	480x272	128ppi	1.78 – 16:9
standard widescreen	n/a	n/a	1.78 – 16:9
Apple iPad	1024x768	132ppi	1.78 – 4:3

Table 1. Aspect ratios of popular mobile devices

Based on this information, I elected to build the active portion of the screen at 960x640 pixels, with a 400ppi resolution. This was the optimal way to maximize the size and pixel quality of the viewable area across the most devices with the least amount of dead space and the lowest risk of content falling off the edges of screens.

I used two free web-fonts, QuaverSans and QuaverSerif—courtesy of the Lost Type Co-op—throughout the site. Typography is extremely important to me; I own

several books on the subject, and the science and study of it has fascinated me ever since I was initially exposed to it in a Summer School class at Harvard, Toshihiro Katayama's Principles of Graphic Design Using Computer Technology. I had limited experience with modern webfonts, however, having used them before only in one class project, in a Joomla build that served as my final project for Rob Graham's Introduction to Web Content Management Systems class.

For this project I was looking specifically for two complementary fonts, a serif and a sans-serif: the first would evoke the 19th century scholarly and craft tradition that Walter Benjamin came out of, and the second to call out the Swiss-German trend toward clean and visually minimal Modernism that blossomed in the first half of the 1900s, and which fascinated him. This hunt was a side-project of several months spent vetting output of various type foundries as well as researching how to combine fonts in books and essays on typography, and specifically web typography.

I was very fortunate to discover the Quaver font family via one of my favorite design blogs.



Figure 7 Quaver font sample, from <http://www.losttype.com>

In addition to fulfilling my all of aesthetic requirements, Quaver also proved to be highly readable online as a main-body content font in both its forms, with some gentle adjustments to letter-spacing and line-height. It came ready-made as a web-font, in contrast to many runners-up, and also conveniently did not cost several thousand dollars to license. And of course, the two variants are expressly designed to complement one another; I had not anticipated the good luck of finding one font family that could serve as both my serif and my sans.

In an extension of Rhina Espaillat's analogy that writing a sonnet is "like dancing in a box," I had to build in an additional set of constraints to the project build: a visual one. I've spent well over a decade as a professional designer for print and the web, and this experience has taught me that limitations truly fuel creativity. Additionally, time that can be so easily frittered away on a small decision is won back if you have the answers set in stone as a guide.

To this end, I developed a stylesheet for the website, reproduced below.

Typography—style A			#a7a9ac #dod1bd	rgb(167,169,172) rgb(208,209,189)
Typography—style B			#524843 #e2d9ae	rgb(82,72,67) rgb(226,217,174)
			#d7ca84 #50463d	rgb(215,202,132) rgb(80,70,61)
			#d9cdbf #dfdabf #8d8f83 #525d54	rgb(217,205,191) rgb(223,218,191) rgb(141,143,131) rgb(82,93,84)
			#85747a #e9e5c3 #c86d50 #b76349	rgb(133,116,122) rgb(233,229,195) rgb(200,109,80) rgb(183,99,73)
			#d9bcb7 #3b573d	rgb(217,188,183) rgb(59,87,61)
			#4e4f48 #323a7b	rgb(78,79,72) rgb(50,58,123)

color palette

Figure 8 Web style guide

Exempting photographs, the eighteen colors above, plus black and white, are the only colors in the artwork—and on the website itself. Most of the colors were initially selected for extremely specific usages, such as “Walter Benjamin’s eyes” or “Carina Birmann’s hair,” but all were selected to work well together in almost any combination.

It is extremely important that the site should look and “feel” as good as it functions, or better. Setting rules and expectations around the aesthetic of the project gave me the flexibility to include a wide experimental range of interactions and animations. The site looks—but should not function—the same in every browser, but across browsers—and across the various pages—it should evoke a clean and unified experience, regardless of how differently one part behaves from the next.

Chapter 3 Technology Choices

The project development environment was an iMac running Mac OS X Leopard; coding was done with BBEdit 9.6.3 and Panic's Coda. I prepared the visual content across the site using Final Cut Pro and Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator. The specialized digital video converters Miro Video and Firefogg were used to generate multiple video codecs, ensuring cross- browser and device compatibility. All digital painting and inking was done on a Wacom Intuos tablet.

The testing browsers were Internet Explorer 8 for PC (on Virtual Box), Firefox 3.6 and 5.0.1 for Mac, Safari 5.0.6 for Mac, Mobile Safari 4 on both an iPhone 3GS and iPad2, and Google Chrome 12.0.742.122 for Mac.

While one of my initial aims in the original thesis proposal was to build a site that would work flexibly across as many of these browsers as possible, the inherent limitations in widespread adaptation of CSS3 properties meant although the site can be viewed usefully in the browsers listed, I ultimately had to abandon full compliance in certain browsers and devices.

The experience of the user was an absolute priority in the design and build of the project. Because I would be dropping site visitors directly into this self-contained universe, it is essential that they feel free to explore and poke at absolutely everything; therefore both the interface and overall the visual experience needed to feel very simple and inviting, despite the inherent complexities of the story and the project as a whole.

To this effect, I focused on guiding interactions without imposing expectations or conditions on the user, on building a holistic aesthetic experience through visual design, and on ensuring that the user-side tech presented a minimal barrier to the full site experience.

Interface and Usability

My research into transmedia storytelling convinced me that the project necessarily had to contain “gamelike” aspects: I needed to encourage the audience to poke at the site, and to keep digging into it. I wanted the material to require some effort to access and absorb, and to create an informal system of task-and-reward. At the same time, when I explained my project to friends, I invariably went with some variation on “an interactive choose-your-own-adventure-style lightly-animated comic-book,” rather than comparing it to a video game.

There are a few reasons for that. The first is that I don’t play video games, and don’t consider myself a connoisseur of their unique approach to building narrative. There is no “win” or “lose” here; the story is the goal, and the interactions and animations are the reward for users’ efforts. Another reason is that the reader is not a “character” in *Portbou 1940*; the user is unable to impact the narrative itself, although their reading of it is likely to be relatively unique depending on which section they experience first, along with where they are and what they’re doing and who they’re with when they first visit, whether or not they are familiar with the social history of Europe in the 1940s, or familiar with the biography and writings of Walter Benjamin.

These areas of flexibility and potential variation across user experiences are the aspects I'm talking about when I refer to impact, experience, interactivity, and so on in relation to both the narrative and the consumer of it.

Elements of gamelike behavior that I tried to include in the site includes keeping the text short and simple; creating an active interface where users have to explore—often through trial and error—in order to access story elements and features; and building a curated, closed “game world.”

While the learning curve of a video game typically requires detailed instruction, use of a website should never require a manual, and in fact, such “manuals” have a bad reputation in the web designer and developer community. Khoi Vinh, the former Design Director for NYTimes.com, and a well-regarded blogger at subtraction.com, assembled a collection of these instructional screens, and describes them as “a visual assault on the user’s desire to consume the actual content. ... this screen basically insists that you assemble a piece of Ikea furniture before you can get started” (Vinh, 2011). His collection of offenders cuts through native mobile apps, device-agnostic web applications, and tablet magazines; he concludes that any interface that is not immediately intuitive to a first-time user is poorly-designed.

As much as I tried to avoid creating non-intuitive interfaces, *Portbou 1940* does contain some. As with any unfamiliar system, there is “a certain level of pain involved before getting to the point where a game can be enjoyable—a long break-in period of figuring out the basic question: ‘What am I supposed to do next?’ And that's merely for figuring out which button to press” (Bushman, 2010). My goal was to minimize that “breaking-in” period as much as possible.

Many of the user-interface decisions that went into building *Portbou 1940* were in service of avoiding lengthy or complicated explanation; instructions were provided in only two cases where I determined that a majority of readers would most likely be wholly unfamiliar with the interface.

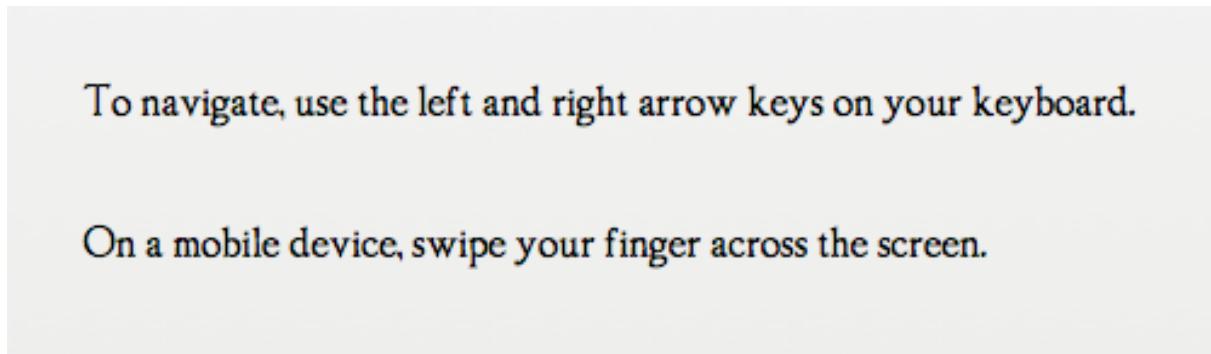


Figure 9 Instruction screen for Birmann segment (detail)

In most cases where the interface is not immediately intuitive, it can hopefully be quickly intuited by an average user simply engaging with the website. In fact, the point of the various interfaces is to demand that level of engagement. In my Summary and Conclusions chapter, I'll reveal how this hypothesis stood up with actual site users. The object in creating multiple paths and of facilitating multiple experiences of the project site is to take advantage of the collective wisdom of a digitally savvy audience without adding nonessential layers of complication.

Build Philosophy

My intentionally scalable and multi-experience approach to the project build tracks well with the growing trend toward “responsive web design.” As Andy Clarke explains it: “some people still think that web sites need to look and be experienced

exactly the same in every browser, but those people probably still print their emails” (Clarke, p. 34).

It’s an inescapable fact that web standards are mostly suggestions, and can’t really be enforced: every browser renders code differently. It’s up to the user, and the best we as designers and developers can do is hope that users are savvy enough to seek out the browsers that will provide them with the richest web experiences. Just because some browsers are less capable than others does not mean we must code for the lowest common denominator, denying a rich experience to early-adaptors.

Leading web developers like Dan Cederholm, Andy Clarke, Ethan Marcotte, and Jeffrey Zeldman argue that code should be written for the most sophisticated browsers available and should scale back for users of weaker ones—without loss of content or essential functionality. This is, in a nutshell, what “graceful degradation” means.

This does not mean that people using the decade-old IE6 can be served a broken or even an ugly web. According to Ian Hickson, head of the Worldwide Web Consortium’s (W3C) HTML Working Group, HTML5 will not be standardized—formally adopted by the W3C—until 2022 (Clarke, 90). But that’s no reason to wait eleven years to start learning and using it, especially when many widely-used browsers have already begun to support the emerging specifications.

What this means, now, is that one single HTML file viewed in four different browsers represents two or three or even four different web experiences. I tried to ensure through content distribution and back-building that none of those experiences would be a poor one.

Dan Cederholm recommends using advanced CSS3 and HTML5 techniques to enhance a user's experience of a site, but *not* to build interfaces that depend on them for essential functions. He identifies “non-critical events” such as interactions, visual enhancements, and animations as areas where designers can—and should—apply properties that aren’t fully implemented across all browsers, in ways that will not affect a website’s core message, usability, or layout (Cederholm, p. 6). Figure 10 demonstrates graceful degradation in action: the difference between hovering over the Vimeo link in an up-to-date modern browser (left) is more visually appealing than the same action in Internet Explorer (right), but the IE user doesn’t feel the lack of that experience, and the site works essentially the same in both browsers: the link isn’t broken in IE, and the element’s color still changes on-hover.



FIG 3.04: The sidebar and hover treatment found on Faruk Ateş's site.



FIG 3.05: Viewed in IE7, Faruk Ateş's site doesn't feature the same visual treatment via CSS3, but that's perfectly OK.

Figure 10 One example of a “non-critical interaction,” taken from Dan Cederholm’s book *CSS3 for Web Designers*.

Another approach to graceful degradation that I found to be very successful is the one taken by Mad Manimation,³ built by a three-person team spearheaded by Anthony Caldazilla. A single HTML file is linked to three different conditional stylesheets: in modern browsers, users are presented with the full animation, but older browsers are served a stylesheet that displays a keyframes-and-captions storyboard instead.

I will discuss acceptable variations in user-experience of various pieces of portbou1940.com across major browsers in greater detail in the next chapter.

³ See <http://animatable.com/demos/madmanimation/>

Chapter 4 Project Walkthrough

In this chapter, I will discuss the background and execution of each of the seven major elements of the project website, how they are meant to be experienced, and the work that went into building them. They are: the homepage; the three narratives by Carina Birmann, Lisa Fittko, and Henny Gurland; the video prologue, called “Train Narrative”; “Apocrypha,” the interactive primary sources document area; and “A Theory of Distraction,” a brief visual exploration of Benjamin’s writing.

Homepage

The portbou1940.com site navigation is based on a blending of three separate catalogs of the contents of Walter Benjamin’s briefcase, his only possessions at the time of his death.

From the Judge's record:	From official Catalan website:	Police report filed by Max Horkheimer in NYC:
a <i>cartera grande</i> , a large handbag, as his only baggage.	a suitcase, leather	a leather briefcase of the kind used by business people.
a pocket watch and chain, with the watch's many inscriptions duly noted	a gold watch	a man's watch
a pipe for smoking with a mouthpiece made of what looked like amber, and its case	a pipe	a pipe
an X-ray	an X-ray	an X-ray picture
a pair of glasses in nickel frames and its case	a pair of spectacles	a pair of glasses
a five-hundred-franc bill, a fifty-dollar bill, a twenty-dollar bill, (all serial numbers duly noted)	some money	
a passport (numbered 224) issued August 20 by the American Foreign Service with a Spanish visa also issued in Marseilles	a passport issued in Marseilles by the American Foreign Service	
a certificate from the Institute of Social Research, previously of Frankfurt, now in exile in New York and affiliated in some way to Columbia University		
six photographs	six passport photos	six photographs
several letters and newspapers	various magazines, a number of letters, and a few papers, contents unknown	various letters and a few other papers, the contents of which are unknown
an ID card issued in Paris		

Table 2. Presumed contents of Walter Benjamin's briefcase, by source

Digital images of the first seven items listed in Table 2 are included on the homepage; six serve as hyperlinks to fragments of narrative:

1. The leather briefcase itself provides a visual “home” for the linked items, but does not serve as a hyperlink.
2. The pocket watch figures prominently in Carina Birmann’s recollection, and brings the reader to her account.
3. Benjamin’s spectacles, which leaked red dye onto his face and frightened Lisa Fittko into believing he was suffering a heart attack, link to her narrative.
4. His currency, dispensed by Henny Gurland after Benjamin’s death to pay for his medical and funeral expenses, link to her story.
5. An Adobe Photoshop-mocked-up American travel visa links to the “train narrative” prologue.
6. Benjamin’s chest X-rays, taken in Paris in spring of 1940, will bring readers to an “apocrypha” section where they can examine primary documents surrounding Benjamin’s death.
7. Clicking on his pipe will trigger a segment that features excerpts from Benjamin’s own scholarly writing on art and distraction in a media-heavy age—taken from the brief essay, “A Theory of Distraction,” that many contemporary scholars feels is applicable to our own click-here culture.

I elected to present these items in this context for a few reasons: because Benjamin’s briefcase does have the type of cache that Michael Taussig described, and because as people, we like to peek in one another’s medicine cabinets: framing the objects as possessions gives them a certain cache of their own: who do they belong to? Why this combination of objects? What are they packed for?



Figure 11 The portbou1940.com home page.

The images are all copyright-free; the Affidavit-in-Lieu-of-Visa came from an online collection of American Jewish Museum ephemera, and I added in Benjamin's name, family and citizenship status, and date of birth with Adobe Photoshop.

The homepage, and the project as a whole, is built in HTML5 with supporting animations rendered in CSS3. Each item in the briefcase is assigned two interactive CSS transitions, which activate when a user's cursor hovers over it: a transform which increases the image size 1.5 times; and an ease, which makes the scaling occur over approximately a quarter-second rather than instantaneously.

Very modern browsers support both of these animations. In some, the ease is not supported and images “pop” to the larger size immediately upon hover. In mobile browsers where there is no hover-state, the images grow on click in the few seconds just

before a new page loads. And in all versions of Internet Explorer—including 9—these animations don’t occur at all.

One concession I did make here to accommodate older browsers was to position each item inside a transparent PNG. My preference would have been to use the CSS3 `transform:rotate` property to position each item in the briefcase, but because this feature is not universally supported, doing so would detrimentally affect the layout. As a result, the clickable area of each image exceeds its visible boundaries, creating a risk of user confusion if, for example, someone “clicks” on an area over the spectacles but actually triggers the pocket watch. Luckily, the supported CSS-transforms reduce that possibility in the majority of browsers (Note that the watch image is expanded while mouse is hovering over spectacle case in Figure 12, bottom).



Figure 12 TOP: Visual v. “clickable” boundaries of hyperlinked images; **BOTTOM:** demonstration of how hover styling reduces potential user confusion in supported browsers.

This is a great example of how and why websites do not have to look exactly the same in every browser. The basic function of the homepage—to allow any user to

navigate the site reliably—does not depend on full CSS3 implementation. In fact, the page would *function* exactly the same with the stylesheet, and even the images, turned off. The interactive animations’ primary function is to present the reader with a measure of what Dan Cederholm terms “surprise and delight” in using the website (Cederholm, p. 33).

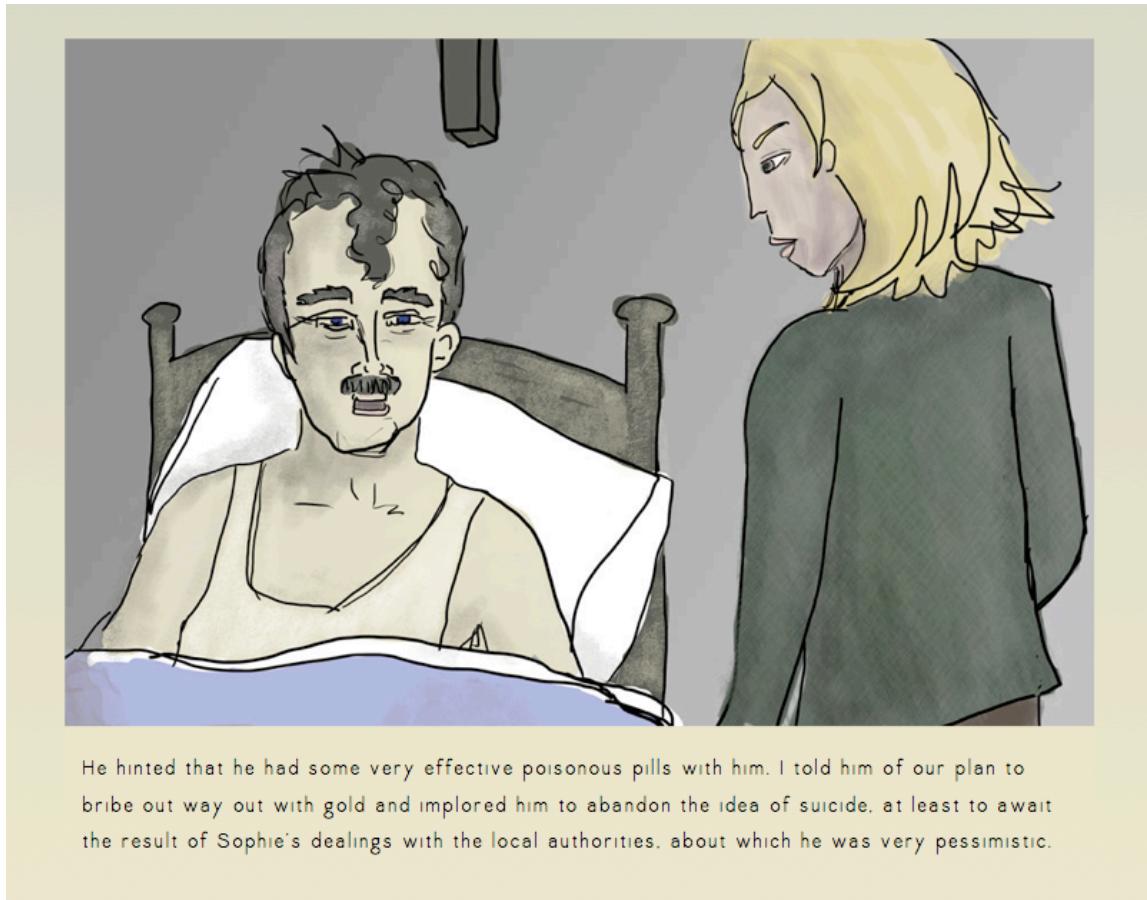
Birmann Segment

Upon selecting the pocket watch from the homepage, the reader is brought to a landing page⁴ styled with a CSS-gradient background, and a brief note informing them that they can navigate this section either with the left and right arrow keys on their keyboard, or by using the scrollwheel on their mouse. Mobile users—those with touchscreen devices—are instructed to swipe left or right to flip through the pages of this story.

The original artwork created for this segment is intended to evoke a limited-color-palette noir comic book: simplified, stripped-down, and almost childlike. This is partly due to a personal fascination with film noir and partly due to my belief that constraint fuels creativity. I wanted this to be very visually simple, given the unusual navigational interface and the complexity of the moving parts in the Fittko narrative. The other reason for keeping the imagery in Birmann’s narrative fairly static is that there are few “moving pieces” to the story: very little action or telling, but a lot of showing. I felt that large captioned images would represent the smartest use of screen real estate.

The segment is very intentionally styled to look like a children’s storybook.

⁴ <http://portbou1940.com/birmann.html>



He hinted that he had some very effective poisonous pills with him. I told him of our plan to bribe our way out with gold and implored him to abandon the idea of suicide, at least to await the result of Sophie's dealings with the local authorities, about which he was very pessimistic.

Figure 13 Screenshot of Carina Birmann's narrative.

Carina Birmann's matter-of-fact tone, her consistent respectful use of Benjamin's academic title, and her circle of female companions all factored into this design decision. I was unable to locate photos of Birmann and her friends, so their appearances are wholly imagined by me. This format, and interactions with it, mimics the turning of pages, building an anticipation of what's coming next.

The Birmann narrative incorporates substantial JavaScript along with HTML5 and CSS3. The JavaScript is partly based on a module found on Google's HTML5

demonstration gallery, html5rocks.com (billed as “ready for you to adapt to your uses”)⁵, and partly on a slideshow tutorial at the personal blog of a Safari developer.⁶ Those original “slideshows,” meant to mimic PowerPoint presentations, served as jumping-off points, and I heavily modified all code building blocks.

The most fascinating—and serendipitously helpful—section of the Google code is the following:

```
<!--[if lt IE 9]>
<script src="http://ajax.googleapis.com/ajax/libs/chrome-
frame/1/CFInstall.min.js">
</script>
<script>CFInstall.check({ mode: "overlay" });</script>
<![endif]-->
```

This code displays a semitranslucent “overlay” panel in the browser window instructing anyone running a version of Internet Explorer below 9 to download and install an open-source add-on called Google Chrome Frame. This plugin works behind-the-scenes to enable IE 6, 7, and 8 to display otherwise-unsupported CSS3 features.

Because I chose not to write an IE-only alternate stylesheet for the Birmann segment, it will not render or function in older versions of IE without this plugin installed. I had not even been aware of the existence of such a browser add-on previously because I make it a point to use advanced browsers.

The captions are styled with a free web-font, QuaverSans, courtesy of the Lost Type Co-op. All text is quoted directly from Carina Birmann’s article, “Escape Over the Pyrenees.” In deference to Benjamin’s narrative preferences, it begins *in medias res*.

⁵ The copyright notice at <http://studio.html5rocks.com> states: “Peek around, look under the covers at the source, and feel free to reuse the code in your own applications and sites.”

⁶ <http://studio.html5rocks.com/#Deck> and
<http://edward.oconnor.cx/2009/08/marketing-up-a-slideshow-in-html5>

Fittko Segment

Lisa Fittko's story takes the shape of seven individual HTML documents.⁷ Each page contains several moveable parts that function as a hybrid of animated cartoon and comic book. The centerpiece of each page is a large stylized digital painting, supplemented by captions giving Fittko's first-person narration and by comic-style word balloons containing the dialogue of onscreen characters. Many of the captions, word balloons, and some elements of the paintings are animated with CSS transitions. The story reveals itself in time as well as space, and I made full use of CSS3 and WebKit animations. The reader is held on the current page while the story rolls out, and only when that portion of the story has been told is he or she given the hyperlink to the next page of the story.

The presentation of this story was very intentionally intended to resemble a gently-animated comic book, in partial tribute to the adventure-story tone of voice Lisa Fittko uses throughout her entire autobiography. With very few exceptions it conforms to the strict color palette and stylesheet established for the project as a whole. The digital paintings were drawn and styled to evoke a range of interwar German Expressionist (*Neue Sachlichkeit*) paintings: specifically the works of Otto Dix, Georg Grosz, Egon Schiele, and Max Ernst.

The portion of the website that presents Fittko's version of events takes greatest advantage of the current capabilities of CSS3 animation. It is inspired in large part by the work of web developer Anthony Calzadilla. In fact, until I stumbled across his online

⁷ <http://portbou1940.com/fittko01.html> through <http://portbou1940.com/fittko07.html>

portfolio,⁸ I was not 100% certain that building animations on the scale I planned was even possible in CSS3, as I had found no prior examples outside of small, quirky enhancements such as those championed by Dan Cederholm and Andy Clarke, of which my project homepage is an example.

While Calzadilla built Mad Manimation's 16 scenes as list item elements within a single HTML document, I opted to isolate each of the Fittko scenes on its own page, for two reasons: to allow the user freedom to navigate between story segments without having to sit through the entire playback, and to substantially reduce image load-time for older and especially mobile browsers.

As I got deeper into the build of this section, I realized that my initial Fittko storyboards (Figure 4) had become obsolete from both a narrative and usefulness standpoint. First, because I had elected to omit two story episodes that did not advance the plot, and secondly because the original drawings did not take into account the animations that I would actually be coding.

Now what was called for was a less artistic, more functional, representation of the narrative's nuts-and-bolts. The original Fittko storyboards contained sixteen hand-drawn scenes; the revised storyboard contains six, and the final project has seven: I split the fourth scene into two HTML documents to give users greater control over the speed at which the story comes at them.

⁸ Located at <http://www.anthonycalzadilla.com>

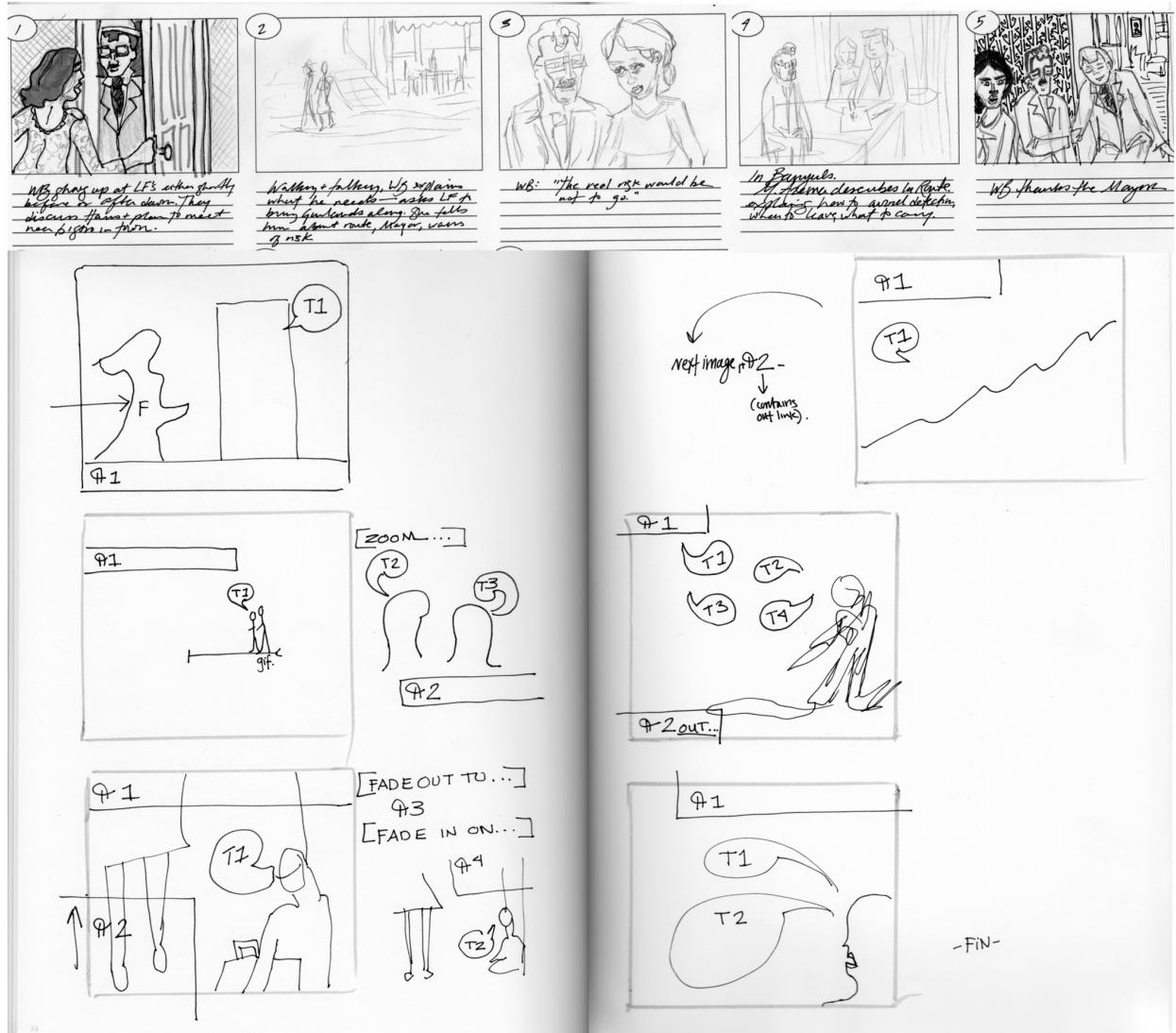


Figure 14 Revised Fittko storyboard (originals inset).

I initially created two master CSS3 transforms that both served as templates for the majority of animations throughout the Fittko story: one is called variously “bounce,” “intro,” or “outro,” and it moves an image or inline text element from a starting position to an end point (represented by “¶#” in the storyboard in Figure 14); the other called “text,” “scene,” or “bg” (for background), and it transforms an element’s opacity so that

it will seem to appear or vanish at a given, specified point in time (these elements are denoted by a “T#” in the final storyboard).

These animations can be applied with equal success to either images or inline text. Depending on text, context, and timing, the durations and distances of these animations vary greatly by scene. In many cases, three or four elements in a given scene may call on a single one of these animations; in other cases the same basic animation occurs two or three times in a single CSS file, under different names and containing different timing and positioning properties.

The keyframe animation techniques that I learned in my two Adobe Flash classes at the Harvard Extension School proved invaluable in building this portion of the project. Thanks to that experience, I was well-equipped to work with time and with a z-axis in addition to more general spatial design issues.

Because Mozilla Firefox and Internet Explorer do not render either of these WebKit animations, one the most challenging aspects of the Fittko build was ensuring that the scenes degraded across common browsers in such a way that the narrative action could be parsed without accompanying animations—and in two cases, with only partial-access to the scenes.

The solution was mostly a matter of calling the image load-order and layer-order to output in such a way that static images, captions, and speech-bubbles could tell the story on their own. In one case, it required splitting a self-contained scene across two HTML documents. In all, it was time-consuming, and involved much trial-and-error across several browsers and machines.

One example of this acceptable graceful degradation: readers viewing the site on Internet Explorer 8 will not see the first line of the Fittko segment (“It is almost forty years ago today, but I can still recall it precisely, in every detail. Or can it be that I only think I recall it, that I'm just imagining? I do know it was the twenty-fifth of September, in a narrow garret in Port Vendres.”); they will not see her figure move across the room, opening the door to reveal Benjamin standing there asking for help: they will just see Fittko standing near the door, Benjamin's text bubble, and her injunction to meet at the bistro in the square, with its hyperlink to scene two: the bistro on the village square. It's a pared-down experience, but no essential story is lost.



Figure 15 The “static” version of the first scene of Lisa Fittko’s story, experienced without animations as in Internet Explorer.

The text in this section of the website was adapted from Lisa Fittko's full-length autobiography *Escape through the Pyrenees*, and both inline text elements and word-balloon PNGs are rendered with Lost Type Co-op's QuaverSerif. The original artwork is based on photographs of the main characters and of the city of Portbou and its surrounding countryside.



Figure 16 LEFT: Contemporary photo of “*Portbou desde la frontera*” (“from the border”) by Vicenç Vilà. **RIGHT:** Digital painting of the same photograph, produced for the final scene of Fittko segment.

Gurland Segment

Henny Gurland's portion of the story⁹ hinges on two documents: a copy made by Theodor Adorno of a letter she wrote to her then-husband shortly after Benjamin's death, reproduced in Gershon Schloem's biography of Benjamin; and a scrap of paper on which, forty years later, she recorded the contents of Walter Benjamin's two suicide notes from memory.

The reader accesses Gurland's account by selecting the money from the main page. Much of her story revolved around the financial repercussions of Benjamin's death: she writes of distributing his money to doctors and graveyards; of her taking charge of the situation, and about the bribery that ultimately resulted in Birmann's travelling party being allowed safe passage through Spain. Thus the visual representation of her story focuses on the dry language of her letter, on an unforgivingly harsh photograph of Gurland herself, and on the hard evidence of the suicide notes written in her own hand, though ostensibly in Benjamin's own words.

The body text is reproduced directly from the long letter to Arkadi Gurland, and the background image fuses a portrait of Henny with her transcription of the suicide notes in her own handwriting. The elements are set on different layers, and include an unobtrusive instruction unique to users on touchscreen devices.

⁹ <http://portbou1940.com/gurland.html>

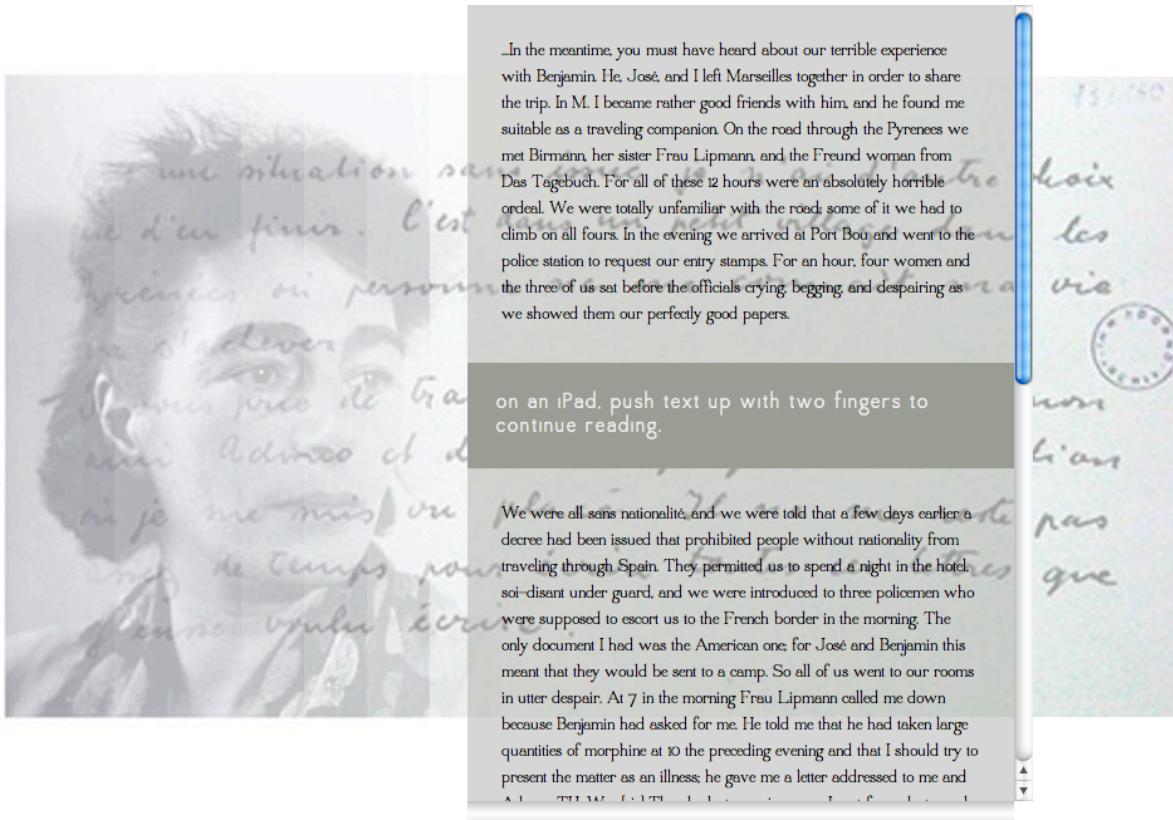


Figure 17 Screenshot of Gurland segment.

The initial inspiration for the Gurland segment was Jim Clark’s “poetryanimations” channel on YouTube.¹⁰ Thus I originally planned to create an animated version in which she “speaks” the text in sync with a voiceover.

Another rejected approach was to repurpose a project from my Processing class, Creative Computing, and set her eyes to “follow” the movement of the mouse around the screen. Yet another idea to add interest to the page was to videotape the text of the letters, and set it as an auto-playing video, without controllers, behind the image. Ultimately, I

¹⁰ an account which was suspended and has been replaced by the artist at <http://www.youtube.com/user/poetryreincarnations>

elected—given the sheer amount of text, and because the imagery already slightly-reduces readability—to keep this portion very simple.

Train Narrative

The Train Narrative¹¹ sets up the story's background, describing the state of Europe in 1940, recapping Walter Benjamin's years in exile and plan for escape. I wrote and recorded the dialogue. The video was shot out a window of the Napa Wine Train, a vintage 1915-1917 Pullman Dining car that travels through California wine country. The footage was edited in Final Cut Pro.

I ensured cross-browser compatibility by consulting *Dive Into HTML5*, a book that is also freely available online.¹²

The video is coded with the new HTML5 video element, and calls three different video files, encoded in three codecs: MP4 is supported in Safari, Mobile Safari, Android, and Chrome; Ogg Video is supported by Firefox, Chrome, and Opera; and WebM is preferred by Chrome and Opera.

¹¹ <http://portbou1940.com/train.html>

¹² The URL of the relevant chapter is <http://diveintohtml5.org/video.html>.



Figure 18 Three still images from “Train Narrative” video.

Internet Explorer 9 supports MP4 and WebM in the video element, but older versions are served an Adobe Flash version in a nested object tag. This is the only Flash element in the project. Browsers that can understand the video element will call to a source file and ignore the nested object entirely. Browsers that can’t parse out HTML5 video will ignore it completely and render the embedded Flash object instead. As a last-resort fallback, readers are given the link to a Vimeo-hosted version of the video.

Apocrypha

The Apocrypha segment¹³ is a simple gallery in which to showcase the images of four primary-source historical documents:

1. The report issued by the Portbou District Court
2. The receipt from Benjamin’s stay at the Hotel de Francia
3. The carpenter’s receipt, itemizing burial costs
4. The four-page Judge’s Report on the circumstances surrounding Benjamin’s death

¹³ <http://portbou1940.com/apocrypha.html>

All images were scanned from the Appendix of Ingrid and Konrad Scheurmann's book on Benjamin. The four documents were originally in Spanish, and I generated alternate English-language versions in Adobe Photoshop based on translations provided in the Scheurmann book.

Given his pedagogical writings on history and the nature of historical enquiry combined with his writing on reproductions, I think Benjamin would appreciate that they are copies of digitally-altered digital scans of printed reproductions of photocopies of the actual historical materials.

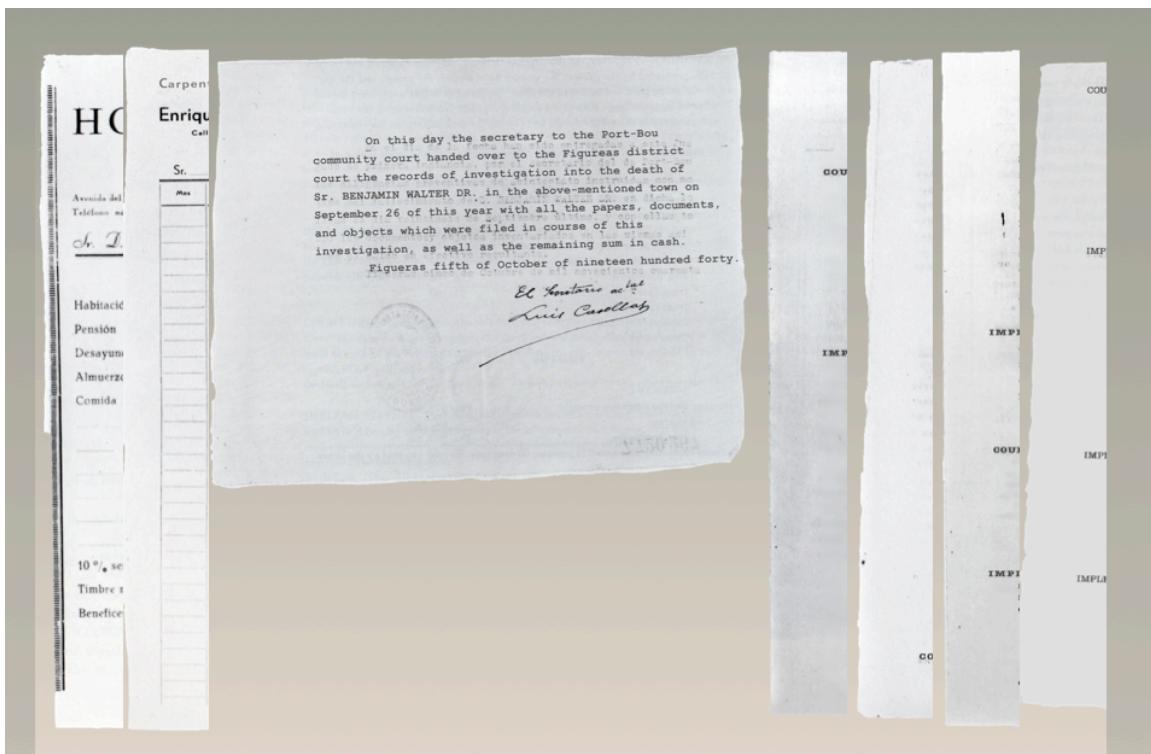
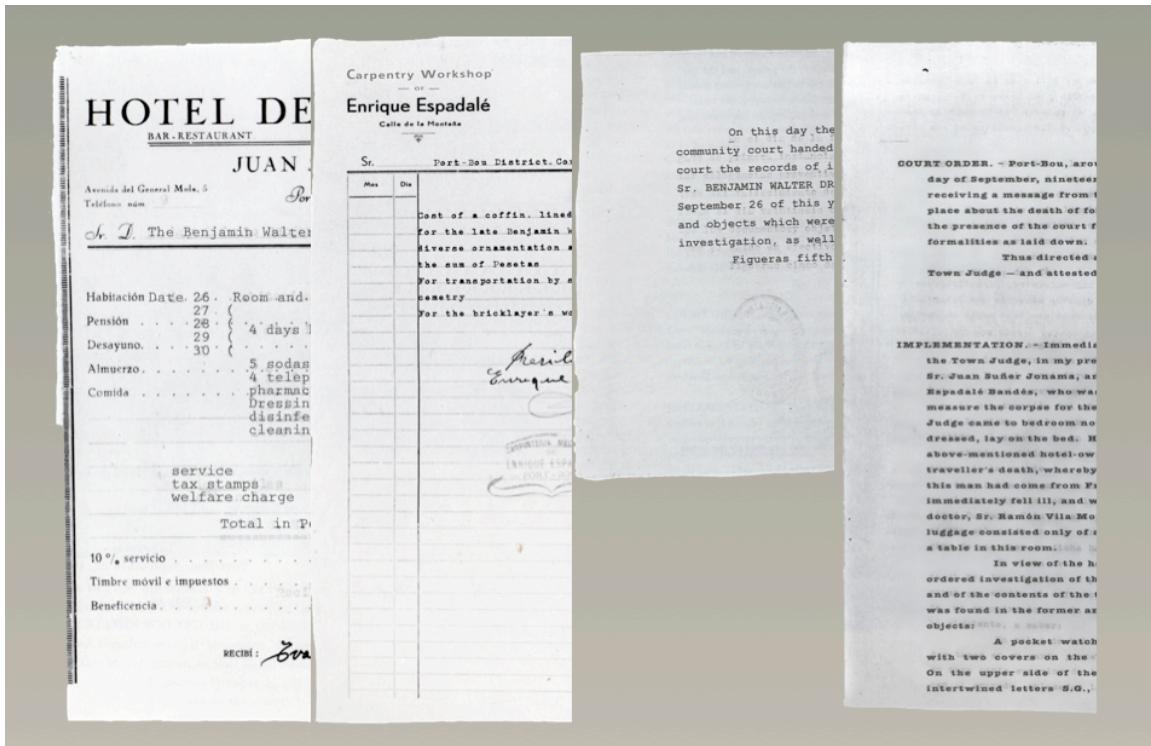


Figure 19 Two screenshots of the “Apocrypha” area of the website.

This was an extremely fun section to code, and marked by a significant serendipitous “mistake.” When I was adjusting the width of the images in the default view by percentage, I inadvertently discovered that it was possible to “hide” a number of images “below the fold.” In the default, “resting” state, only the first four pages are visible. But hovering over any one item reveals the full collection of seven, bringing them all into a single row: the hotel and carpenter’s receipts, the court report, and all four pages of the judge’s report.

The page generates a “whoa! what just happened?” feeling the first time a user accidentally brushes his or her cursor into (or out of) the active area of the page. It creates a sense of play that recalled an assignment from my Creative Computing class: to create a “playful paint program”: basically, a Microsoft Paint-style drawing program that behaved mischievously or uncooperatively. That assignment—to intentionally create a program containing bugs, and that willfully thwarts the user—was a fantastic Project One for an introductory programming course. In step with this approach, I positioned a translucent graphic element (French Consulate stamps) on a higher z-level than the animation; mousing over the stamps will cause the pages to slam shut: that is, to return to the default 4-up position.

One I had this much coded, I decided against displaying the original Spanish documents by default and allowing the user to “translate” them on click or on hover. I am proud of the outcome of this section as it stands: of its lighthearted interactivity and slipperiness; this is the page that ostensibly contains the cold hard facts, but it hides and snatches them back from the user. I also feel that this section is where I finally and most firmly achieved that elusive sense of riffling through a physical object that I wrote about

in both my thesis proposal and in the introduction to my thesis. Due to the behavior of the page elements, it would not have been beneficial to add in an additional layer of complication to this interface.

A Theory of Distraction

“A Theory of Distraction” is the name of a micro-essay written by Walter Benjamin in 1935 or 1936. The format is unusual: it is a series of a twenty-two sharp declarative, frequently fragmentary, erratically punctuated sentences. It almost reads more like someone was taking notes rather than writing. It is contemporary to “The Work of Art in the Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (AitA), and was not published during Benjamin’s lifetime.

I chose to include portions of this essay rather than the more famous “Art in the Art in the Age” for several reasons: the bite-sized format of “Distraction” lends itself well to piecemeal presentation. It doesn’t present a built-up and linear argument in the way that AitA does. The content—while cryptic—is far shorter, far less dense, and friendlier for a target non-academic audience.¹⁴ And there is an almost direct link between the ideas it expresses and much of what we tend to hear both pessimists and proponents argue when they discuss the relationships among web-paced culture, traditional “cultural” markers, and evolving (or devolving) human cognition.

I pulled out fifteen of these enigmatic-sounding phrases, and grouped them based on relatedness and on proximity within the original essay. I artificially numbered each

¹⁴ The “Theory of Distraction” section is located at <http://portbou1940.com/theory.html>

grouping—primarily as a method for keeping the English/French/German versions distinguishable at-a-glance.

My initial approach to this material was inspired by the animated films of the Quay Brothers, and specifically by the interstitial titles in the short film “Nocturna Artificialia.” Their presentation of text recalled Benjamin’s multilingualism and internationalism, and the train-ticket- and train-schedulelike text layout in the film decided me on presenting the content in three languages: Benjamin’s native German, the French he wrote extensively in, and English to service my primary audience.

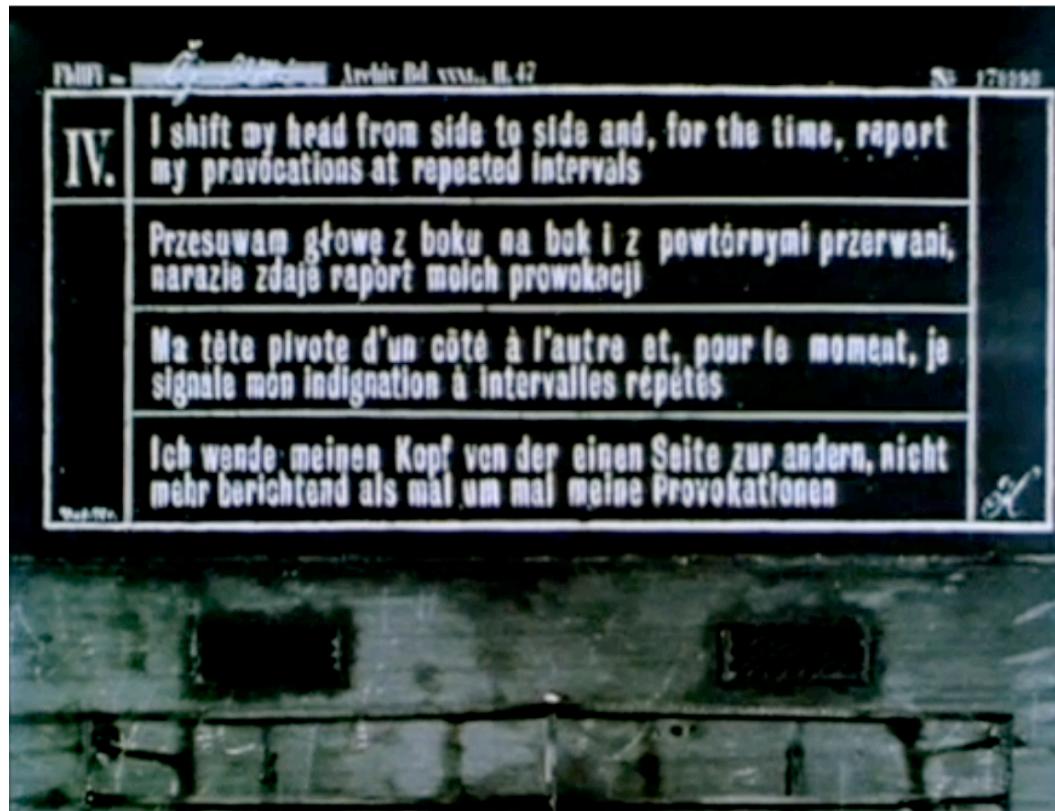


Figure 20 A screenshot from the Quay Brothers’ “Nocturna Artificialia.”

While tracking down a German-language version of the text proved quite easy, even the research librarians at Widener—who were familiar with Benjamin—were unable to find a French translation for me. In fact, when I was explaining to one librarian that there must be a French-language version published because he wrote almost exclusively in French, not being a big fan of anything German by the 1930s, another librarian walking back from her lunch break jumped into the conversation: “Are you talking about Benjamin?” She even pronounced his name correctly: *Bin-ya-meen*.

While I studied both French and German for several semesters at the Extension School prior to beginning my degree track in the Information Technology program, I was not confident in my ability to translate *into* French. Fortunately, a family friend who speaks French as a first language—Philippe Koenig, the adult child of German emigrants to France, whose German father was held in the same sort of French-run refugee/internment camp as Benjamin at the outbreak of WWII—was able to provide.

This is the only section of the project where the reader encounters Walter Benjamin’s own words. More than that: while they were curated and selected by me, they hadn’t ever previously been edited or prepared for publication. He may never have intended for them to be published at all. And I was able to determine that this was one of the rare cases in which Benjamin—no fan of his native language—actually did write the text in German, which the reader is given.

I hoped to, in several real ways, test and exemplify the theory of distraction in my presentation of its content. And I honestly approached this portion of the site in a somewhat easily-distractible manner. In fact, almost up until the last two weeks of the build process, I had no idea how I wanted to present it. I saved this segment for last both

because it was pure text, and because I felt it was the most “disposable”; it would be the least missed if I had to cut it from the site. I began by inputting the text into my code editor styled as very basic headers and paragraphs.

And now I dug into the sections on typography tricks in Dan Cederholm’s and Andy Clark’s books: I had found these very distracting at the outset of the build, given my passion for typography, and the relative uselessness of such tricks to the more visual and technical aspects I faced nearer the beginning of the project. But now, I saw a chance to simply have fun with them.

I decided to keep the English text static and solid for readability, and to experiment on the French and German with transforms and transitions. In choosing to approach this section in a playful manner, I opened myself up to the possibility of making and embracing happy accidents. For example, I had not expected that transitioning the scale of the first section’s text would also result in repositioning that text. This inspired the treatment of the text in subsequent sections.

I also attempted to develop a subtle though tangible relationship of content to animations. Thus in the portion describing film, the text slides from right to left, invoking film in a projector; in the section I titled “Converge,” the text, true to the content, “comes into contact” with itself; and the portion about minting coins and art “wearing out” is styled with middle-tone double-drop shadows and extremely pale text.

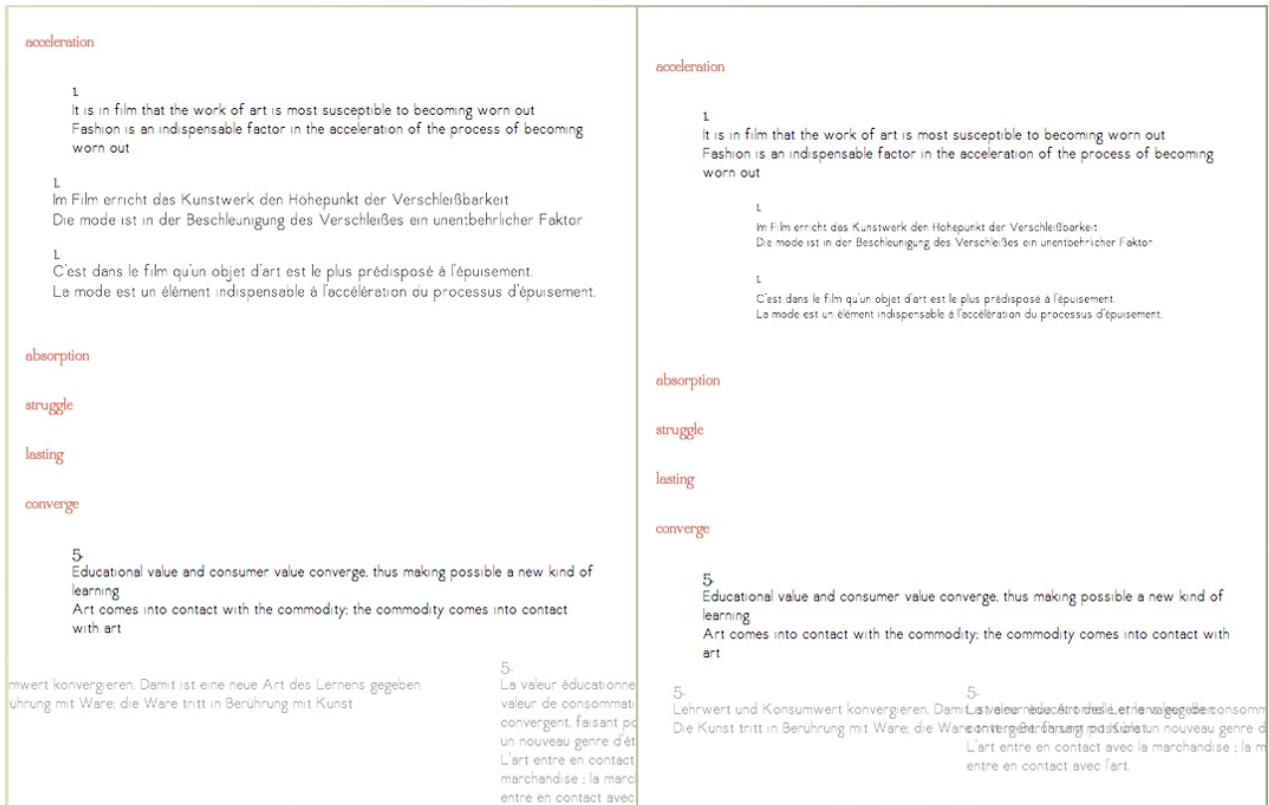


Figure 21 Stills demonstrating two of the five “Theory of Distraction” animations.

However, the page as it stood: simply formatted text—some of it in motion, or flicking, or fading in and out, on a flat white unstyled background—was not visually interesting. In fact, it was annoying. The animations didn’t work with each other or in the context of the page. So I determined the solution was to style the page, and explored a few options: adding in a textured or gradient background, creating box frames around each text element, or writing up code to turn off the animations if they were clicked on or moused over.

Finally, I elected to frame the page in a clamshell-style unordered list. After experimenting with using the element numbers as the open/close links and deciding

against that approach, I pulled out a single word from each artificial grouping of phrases, and used that text as a linked element to trigger the open/close javascript.

An advantage of this format that did not strike me until I'd published the revised page is that, by hiding the text, and by styling the links in the same font and color as the text hyperlinks in the Fittko segment, I'm inviting the user to more actively explore the page. Hiding the numbers rather than using them as the open/close elements creates a case in which top-to-bottom may not apply. The list becomes genuinely unordered: a user may start from the bottom, or click the first work he or she feels drawn to, or open-then-close the sections one at a time, or all at once. This styling creates further possibilities for exploration on the page.

Chapter 5 Summary and Conclusions

I was working with a lot of moving parts on this project. Both the story and the website seemed to take on lives of their own over the past year, each with their own demands and agendas. And while my initial approach to each was very different from the final outcomes, I genuinely could not be happier with the work I've accomplished. I got to spend a lot of time pouring my energy and skills into something that's truly important to me, and I had the opportunity to combine an enormous number of my passions into a portfolio piece.

And adaptability was definitely key to the project. The technologies that intersected with my project changed on a near-daily basis during the build process. It was vital that I read blogs of web designers and developers, in addition to more traditionally published code manuals.

It was from an aggregator web log that I first learned about, for example, new services that convert Flash video to HTML5/CSS3/Javascript animations (thus rendering much of my code and research close to the edge of obsolete).¹⁵ I first found out that the latest release of Firefox would support such animations from yet another blog.¹⁶ The pace of technology centered around my thesis area meant that my plans and approach were constantly forced to evolve and react.

¹⁵ <http://www.geekosystem.com/google-swiffy-convert-flash-to-html5/>

¹⁶ <http://9-bits.com/post/6763882253/firefox-5>

For example, I was delaying the Fittko build in order to wait for the release of a desktop application called Animatable; two of its developers are Andy Clarke and Anthony Calzadilla, both of whose work was influential to the project. Then the beta-release was scheduled: for August—the month before my thesis deadline, and it would most likely be a limited beta, by invitation only. The Animatable website has said “launching soon” since late May; as of August 31, no release has been announced, and the @animatableapp Twitter account has not updated since August 2.

I rejected Google’s Swiffy tool, an Adobe Flash-to CSS3-animation converter, out of hand based on its 512KB file size limit, and on its lack of support for ActionScript 3. In mid-July, at about the time I gave up on Animatable, Adobe announced its own keyframing application: Edge promised to allow people who don’t know how to write a line of code to develop interactive HTML5/CSS3 animations.

I downloaded a 120-day beta trial of Adobe Edge on August 1, the day it was released, and immediately began redeveloping the second Fittko segment (at that point a work-in-progress) in it from scratch. Edge’s interface was gorgeous, and my familiarity with Adobe’s other products—and, oddly, with Final Cut Pro and Autodesk’s Maya—made figuring out the software a snap. But I didn’t like the code it outputted, nor how it structured the site architecture. There were also alarming bugs in mobile browsers: instead of moving the images, it moved the entire “stage” off the edge of the screen in Mobile Safari. And it didn’t render at all in Internet Explorer. Although I can absolutely see the demand for such a tool when it is ready for wide release, I ultimately rejected it in favor of hand-coding.

In the same way I considered, expected to use, and then rejected technologies and software programs, there were also early concepts and design ideas that I eventually moved away from. Abandoning the idea of representing Benjamin's missing manuscript was probably the most difficult content-rooted decision I faced. This idea: to enable the reader to discover a long-lost or never-existed "masterpiece" was a key inspiration for the entire project.

Initially I planned to either write the missing manuscript myself, or to create a randomizing tool based on content written by Benjamin (in *Arcades* and "History") that would generate unique text each time the manuscript was accessed. I considered randomizing access to the manuscript: it would become available every *n*th click or page view.

But I wanted to preserve a commitment to presenting solid historical facts, and for any distortion of those facts to come out of the medium rather than the content itself. And ultimately, that commitment and that vision superseded the initial spark of "what if" that the final project can potentially be credited to. So I decided against generating wildcard content.

Similarly, I toyed with an abandoned the idea of exploring some of the more well-known conspiracy theories surrounding Benjamin's death. While it's not difficult to find compelling supporting evidence for the idea that Benjamin was assassinated by Stalinists or murdered by Fascists, there was an appeal to limiting the narrative, first-person, voices to the three women, and cutting out the historians' authorial authority.

I wanted to avoid presenting any "fact" as unimpeachable, and crediting scholars with hypotheses creates problems with this intention; the project is intended to give its

audience access to a multitude of competing primary sources assigned equal truth-value. Users will sift through finite and curated information to determine what happened. This is what all study of history is about, after all: agreed-upon versions of messy human events, limited by human memory and perception.

Even the fairly straightforward “train narrative” segment underwent substantial changes and revisions: originally, what I wrote was a substantially longer spoken-word piece for four voices, one representing each major character. I went so far as scheduling voice actors to record the different parts, but when I went to the Church Street Computer Facility to check out recording equipment, I learned the building was closed for the summer. Eventually, I just edited the text down to one voice (an omniscient narrator), closed myself up with the Voice Memos app on my iPhone, and laid down the vocals myself. Since the original video was over five minutes long, I compressed the footage to match the length of the much-shortened audio. The rolling overlap of vocals in the final edit was not something I’d planned, but a happy result of an experiment in Final Cut Pro.

Nearly as much of what I’ve concluded so far has been about what I didn’t do as what I did. And there’s a reason for that. A creative writing instructor once told me that editing and revision is the process of learning how to “kill your darlings”: that phrase you love, that word you always overuse—they have to go. Being flexible was not just about accepting new technology solutions, but also about making sure that I didn’t become overly committed to ideas that I’d come up with in early stages of the planning process if those ideas prevented me from moving forward with the build.

One of the greatest challenges for me in building the project was keeping my ideas in check and dialing them back into the realm of what’s practical: avoiding falling

in love with bigger and more ideas. I've so far discussed technological and conceptual issues of the build; now we get into process.

Working independently, keeping things simple was a big challenge for me, so I used several tools to try to keep things on track. First of all, a calendar: I assigned myself one or two small task-oriented projects every single day: ink a single image in Adobe Photoshop, or write five pages of thesis, for example; and one substantial goal per week, such as staging two Fittko scenes on the live website. Perhaps the most helpful way I held myself accountable for my progress was by posting what I had accomplished to my Twitter account every single day. Anything toward the thesis counted, even if it didn't produce tangible results. If I didn't get anything done, I forced myself to broadcast that.

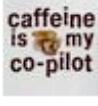
 caffeine is my co-pilot	chrisbean Christine Bower Thesis progress 07.19.11: reading+research on css3; worked on written thesis and LF s02 ink. #cabthesis 19 Jul
 caffeine is my co-pilot	chrisbean Christine Bower No thesis progress on 07.18.11. 19 Jul
 caffeine is my co-pilot	chrisbean Christine Bower Thesis progress 07.17.11: LF scene one animated + live on site! (still needs tweaking for certain browsers) #cabthesis 17 Jul

Figure 22 A sampling of public progress reports.

As a full-time web developer and graphic designer, one unfamiliar issue I faced was the lack of “client” for this project: in many senses, I built it for myself. While it’s

almost universally-acknowledged that a designer is always her worst client, I'm glad I never let go of that "I'm building this for me" focus. My day-to-day is spent designing by committee, to established institutional specifications, and that can sometimes involve producing work that I've compromised on more than work that I'm proud of.

Approaching this project as something I was building for myself was exciting: it didn't matter what other people thought, I could build and draw and design what I wanted, and all of the constraints and goals were ones that I had set to challenge myself. There were a few moments when I almost broke down and built in Adobe Flash.

As a safeguard, I attempted to bring in the opinions of a wide cross-section of people: artists, web-workers, poets, comic book readers, etc. And of course I always kept a potential audience in mind: I feel that while the project could serve as a classroom supplement for students of 20th-century literature, history, and philosophy, the story is compelling and entertaining enough to draw in and affect casual and non-scholarly readers who are being exposed to it for the very first time. But first and foremost I've come to think of it as a piece of art, and the best artists create only for themselves.

The reactions from my beta-testers were as mixed as their backgrounds. Much of the feedback I received was specific to the artwork and aesthetics of the site rather than the site experience, and I won't be reporting that here, with one exception: a user commented on Henny Gurland's story being "really just about *her*." That reaction reinforced my decision to present her content plainly rather than narratively, against the flat images of her portrait and her handwriting.

The following feedback comes from emails, Facebook comments, face-to-face conversations, and one sit-down interview where I observed a site user navigate through

the project. Given the informal nature of these communications, typos in these quotes are preserved from the originals.

Regarding the homepage, Daniel, a quality assurance engineer who is firmly and vocally anti-Mac, raised a few technical questions by email:

I'll assume because it's art, accessibility and usability are of little relevance, because it confuses me to navigate around the home page, maybe because i'm such a clean, square, tabled windows lover. ... For instance, the glasses case is tough to click on because the space that the pocket watch takes up covers much of it.

I didn't give too much thought to this feedback until I observed users interacting with the homepage: because there is no visited-link state, it was easy for visitors to assume that they had seen every section, when in fact they hadn't experienced the entire story. A clean, tabled layout would allow users to keep better track of where they'd been. I would likely incorporate a visited state for the linked images in a later iteration of the site. Two possibilities would be to create grayscale or partially-opaque versions of the images that would replace the existing ones after the linked page has been visited.

James, a poet, musician, and novelist,¹⁷ had a slight difficulty activating the Birmann slideshow; he did not ask for assistance, but his instinct was to scan the page with the cursor for a live hyperlink. I had anticipated that this navigation might be troublesome, and so this is one of only two pages that contain written instructions. Daniel had a different issue with the Birmann segment: "It's weird to me how every change of slide results in a history entry, but I assume that's normal in however you coded it."

¹⁷ Although I am presenting this feedback in the order that the site segments have been presented thus far, James' route through the site was: Theory of Distraction, Lisa Fittko, Apocrypha, Train Narrative, Carina Birmann, Henny Gurland.

The second scene of the Fittko segment caused James an instant of confusion: there is a moment where the timing is hard-coded to give slow readers a chance to absorb all of the text and fast readers to absorb the artwork. During this long moment where nothing happens and there is no active hyperlink onscreen, James was pushing his cursor around trying to find something to click on or do. When the briefcase materialized at the end to bring him back to the homescreen, he did not hesitate to click on it.

Several users were surprised when I confirmed that the “Theory of Distraction” content had been written by Walter Benjamin, and in the mid-1930s. These responses convinced me that future editions of the site should contain an introductory paragraph above the word list to provide context. James noted that “movement on a website encourages you to go further, so that’s nice. Unless you’re German, then it would just be frustrating.” He also pointed out that this page defies the expectation that clicking on a link brings you somewhere else, which could frustrate some users.

Contrary to expectations, James did not require prompting or assistance to navigate through the “Apocrypha” section fluently; I suspected the small size of the image text was an issue, but he did not comment on it. And in accordance with my stated expectations and prior observation of other users, his reaction upon discovering the “page flip” action was instant and delighted. Watching a user use the page, I was reminded that this section answers the questions raised in the homepage navigation; this is where the reader discovers the significance of the briefcase’s contents, and gets pulled into the mystery.

Before I left James, he jumped up to grab a book from his coffee table: a Zora Neale Hurston biography called *Speak, So You Can Speak Again* and told me that

Portbou 1940 reminded him of that book. The book contains a CD of the poet reading from her work, as well as pages that fold out into a copy of the magazine where she had published her first poem, or contain an envelope from which you can remove and examine a reproduction of the Christmas card she had sent to a friend. Given that one of my project objectives was to approximate the physicality of flipping through a scrapbook, this was very strong feedback in support of my succeeding at that goal.



Figure 23 Promotional image of the “interactive” book *Speak, So You Can Speak Again*.

I didn't add Google Analytics to the site until mid-September, well after I had sent the first round of “please look at my website” emails and social-network messages around. Even without details on those initial first-wave visitors, I learned from the metrics that people hit, on average, 4.58 pages per visit, and that the amount of time users spent on the site varied from 0:00 seconds to 29 minutes and 33 seconds; the statistical mean is more than six minutes per user.

I found myself genuinely surprised, in the space of time since I've begun working on and talking about this project, by how many people know, and seem to genuinely *love* Walter Benjamin. When I explained the project concept to my friend Sam, who is currently pursuing an MFA in creative writing, he became incredibly excited, and exclaimed, "*Everyone* loves Benjamin!" It took quite a bit of *really?*-ing on my part to get him to dial back to admitting, "Well, *I do.*"

Benjamin insisted that history must be constructed. This project gives readers tools to actively build their experience of a narrative and to question the fixedness of received history. Rather than presenting one authoritative text as "fact," the project gives its audience access to a multitude of competing primary sources assigned equal truth-value. Users sift through finite and curated information to determine what happened.

Benjamin also saw art as part of an ever-evolving tradition that was in many ways flung forward via technological advances. In a space where most web developers and "designers" don't study art or graphic design formally, I hope that by approaching web technologies through the prism of art, that I've contributed in some small way to adding to a shift in what we define—in an age of digital reproduction—as art, and what we expect and should demand of the new media platforms that make the first part of the 21st century even more technologically dynamic than the times in which Benjamin lived and wrote and died.

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Appendix

There are several literary and scholarly works and significant images not cited in my paper, but that do appear in the website portion of my thesis. As such, it was not appropriate to include them in the Works Cited listing, but is important to list their sources nevertheless.

The Birmann content included in my thesis website is excerpted from pp.39-40 of her article cited below; Lisa Fittko's discussion of her experiences with Benjamin appears on pp.103-112 of her autobiography. The Gurland text was reproduced in full from pp. 281-282 of Gershom Schloem's biography of Benjamin, which also I relied on heavily for physical descriptions of Benjamin, and the image of the suicide notes that appear on her page of the website was scanned from page 226 of that book. The photograph of Henny Gurland on the same page of the website is from p. 122 of Rainer Funk's biography of Erich Fromm; Fromm was Gurland's second husband.

The “Theory of Distraction” segment quotes liberally from the two versions of Benjamin’s essay listed; the French translation that appears on the website was one I commissioned from Philippe Koenig. All of the images of the “Apocrypha” documents were scanned directly from the Scheurmann book, and modified by me in Adobe Photoshop based on translations provided by that book. The quote included in the Train Narrative video, “I’d like to write something that comes from things the way wine comes

from grapes,” was one I initially found in an essay by Esther Leslie. I later tracked it down to one of Benjamin’s long essays *On Hashish* (page 69).

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