FREESTYLE COOKING MAJOR PROJECT REPORT

WEB DESIGN AND CONTENT PLANNING, MA
UNIVERSITY OF GREENWICH

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Conclusions

Freestyle Cooking has gone through many iterations and changes. Its final form is something I would have never conceived. The process of making this website was deep and diverse. I have learned so much about working on a long project, communicating and presenting my ideas, and about web design in general. There were many sketches that didn't make it to the final version, but I think it was all for a reason. More than anything else, this project has opened my eyes regarding what particular type of work I enjoy doing the most, which is writing original content and organising it, followed by branding and user experience design. I will not give up on any of the other aspects of web design though.
This project also made me reflect on my strenghts and weakneses and helped me understand myself better.
I am grateful to everyone who made it possible and look forward to the next one.

SEO & Social Media

The website constains meta descriptions, an aria website label, keywords and throughout interlinking. It has been optimized using the Yoast plugin, and all the pages and posts have function descriptions and meta data.

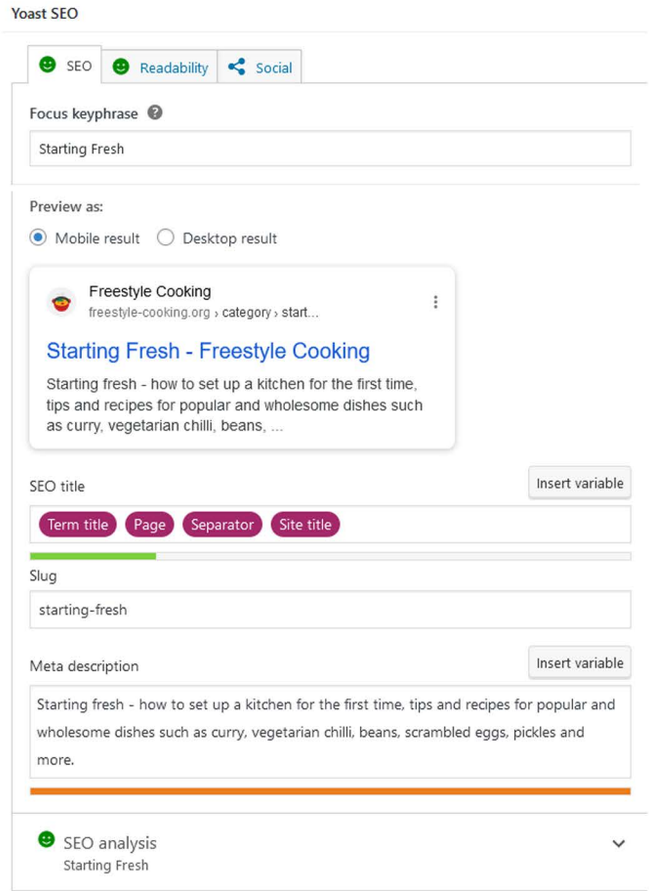

Figure 4: Yoast is being used for SEO

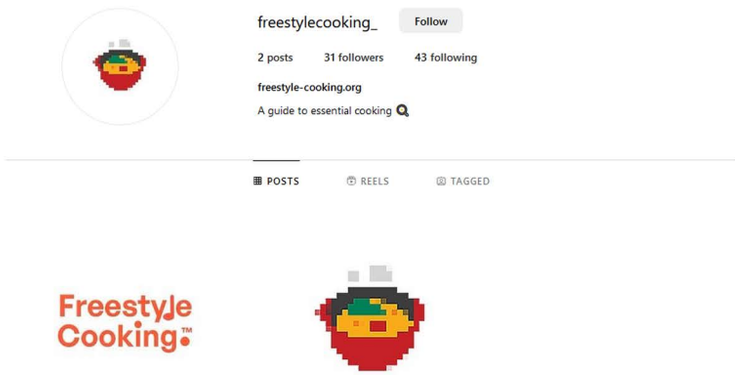

Figure 5: The Freestyle Cooking Instgram page

In terms of social media, I created a page that is slowly starting to grow. I have announced the website launching this week, and I made a couple of posts. One of the posts contains the “manifesto” and the other one announces the launching. I have a few more posts planned, some of which I already have content for. They feature song named recipes from the website with the actual songs in the background, edited with Premiere.

Content

There have been three or four versions of the Information Architecture. The current iteration contains three main sections which address to three distinct categories of experience, as per UX Findings (page 11).

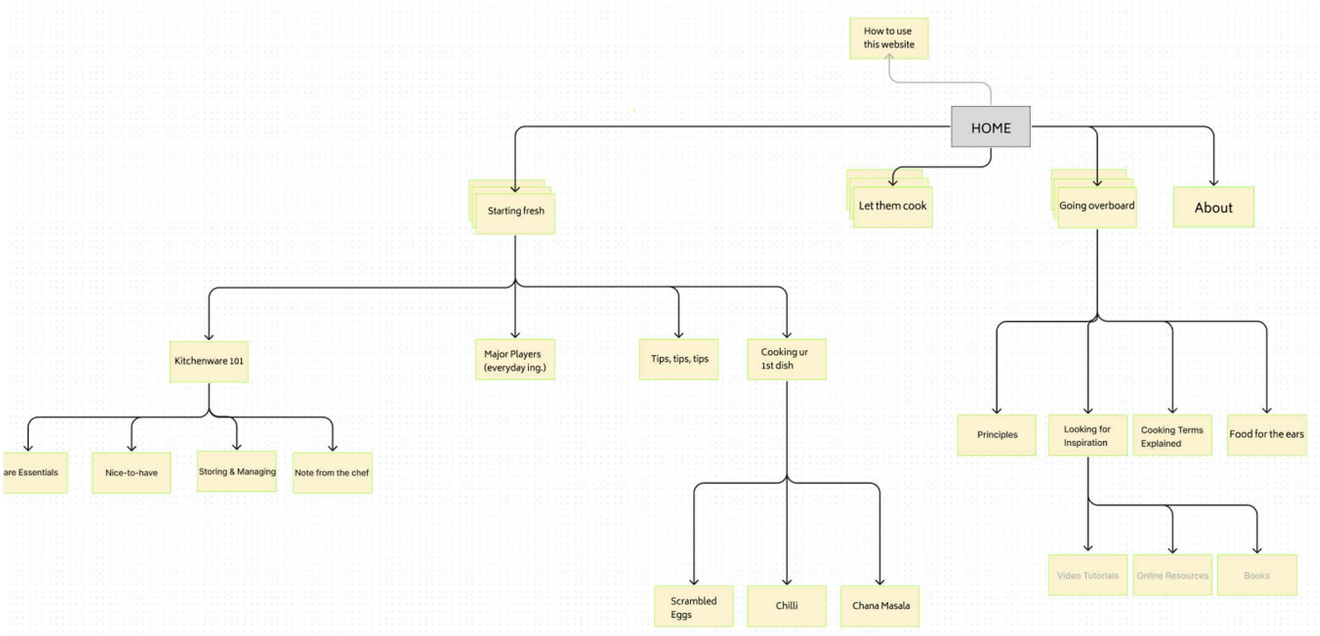

Figure 3: The final Information Architecture of the website

The website uses the content managing system Wordpress. There are eight post categories, three parent categories and five child categories. There are 14 pages and 23 published posts. The content can be accessed through User Flow without having to use navigation. There is also a main navigation, a post navigation which has been restricted to posts within the same category, and also a breadcrumbs navigation. The site also features a “How to use this Website” page which describes how the content is being structured, and it also features a Sitemap. The website also contains a working search bar for ease of navigation.

Kevin Powell's youtube channel - which is where I got the idea of using flexbox to make the website responsive.
Currently, the website features two main responsive design technologies. Static category pages were designed in the code editor and use flexbox in a minimal way. Flex items are nested in flex containers, with media queries on their flex-basis attributes, making them work like a two column grid that turns into a single column on mobile. Posts were designed in the Wordpress editor, and use a two-column grid block that even the head chef can use to make sure his section is nicely responsive.
I wanted a simple website that would be as inviting to a cosy reading experience as a newspaper, so I kept the layout very simple. Other responsive elements include the main navigation, which is a simple toggle dropdown menu, a footer which switches between pre-designed source images according to the viewport (as taken from Ethan Marcotte's book) and a "back to the top" button in the footer which is visible only on desktop.

Accessibility

The website complies with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1. The site's HTML and CSS code is semantic and passes all W3C validation checks. The site's colour scheme also passes the WCAG checks with a AA score, as per https://wave.webaim.org/. The site also contains an Accessibility Statement page which is located in the footer.
The images contain alt text because neither of them is 100% decorative. They carry meaning and play the role of signs that can be associated with the subject on a cognitive basis, as opposed to decorative images such as backgrounds, patterns, frames or shapes.

Images

I am a very visual person. I can communicate through images much easier. It is a known fact we associate images much quicker than phrases. It came natural to develop an icon system where every page would have its own icon for decorative purpose, but also for ease of navigation. I think the decorative aspect is more important than people seem to think. Decorative illustrations have been used since ancient times (think of cave paintings). They cause an emotional response in the viewer that can have a positive impact on their learning, according to studies such as Maria Mikheeva et. al "The influence of affective decorative pictures on learning statistics online". The page also contains video tutorials for the begginer section. I filmed myself cooking and then edited the footage in Premiere. I uploaded them to Wordpress and so far had no problems with performance. I also have them backed up on Youtube, in case I find out that it does affect performance. I prefer the Wordpress player to the Youtube player, so hopefully I will not need to change it.

All the pixel art images have been sourced from Shutterstock.com and hold a standard license for unlimited web distribution.

Responsive Design and Layout

I learned about flex and grid for the first time this spring, at the Design for the Web class. I used float for the first submission, the Three Designed Objects project. Since then, I practiced with Grid and Flexbox and eventually started to understand how they worked. I remember thinking that it was super complicated at first, but then got the Book Apart on "Responsive Design, Patterns and Principles" by Ethan Marcotte. I started watching CSS tutorials on

Typography

I got to read “Web Typography” by Richard Rutter at the right time. I like writing, as you can probably tell. Although I knew some graphic design, I didn’t know a thing about typography. I learned about all these notions really fast: serifs, kerning and the like, resulting in a bit of a shock initially. Richard Rutter’s book does a great job in presenting web design as a descendant of print design. This way of thinking about websites as digital newspapers and magazines made a lot of sense to me and it helped me clear out some of the confusion. I liked how he talked about using whitespace, achieving balance, and about creating calm and inviting reading experiences. I practiced this clean and minimalist approach with the *Typesetting Literature* project, and built up a stock of typefaces - nice and clean sans-serif fonts such as Satoshi and General Sans.

The typefaces that I decided to use on the final version are the sans-serif Satoshi and the monospace JetBrains. These have been sourced from Fontshare.com and are licensed as 100% free for personal and commercial use. I also included fallback fonts such as Helvetica, Seagoe UI and Courier.

My font stack includes

Colour Scheme

Also informed by the digital magazine style, the colour scheme is clean and minimalistic. I knew there would be a lot of written original content, so I opted out of strong background colors. I wanted to convey a reading experience that would be mellow and comfortable, not overwhelming or tiring. The colors that were used mimick the colours of fire: shades or red, orange and yellow.

the older video game aesthetics that hopefully anyone can relate to. They are located at the twilight zone between delightful and instructional, which has been a reference point for the visual identity of the website.

Visual Design

Logo

The first logo attempt I did was an icon displaying a coking pot in a cartoon style, with vibrant tones of red and orange. It was around the Prototype era. I decided to use it for the homepage then and made a little animation with it.
The second attempt was an illustration of an open fridge, which got positive feedback on the Delight crit session. I also did a logo with a hand holding a spoon. These were more appropriate but I didn't like the shape (or aspect ratio) which was square, and didn't fit in a header the way I wanted it to look.

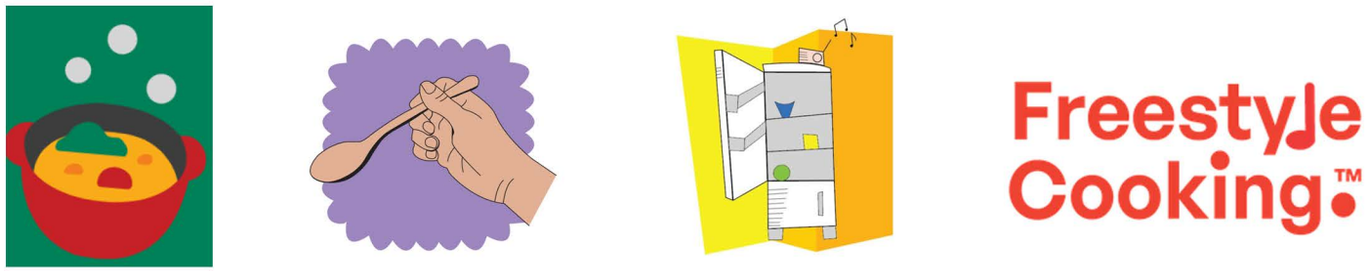

Figure 2: The four iterations of the logo

The third attempt was a typesetting logo with a wider aspect ratio in a rectangular shape. It uses the Satoshi font and features slight variations such as two circles and the lowercase "L" looks like a laddle and a music note at the same time. It looked great in the header, so I decided to stick with it. I made a pixelated animation to meld it in with the rest of the design, but decided to only use it for the homepage for accessibility reasons.

We also learned some condensed semiotics - about the signifier and the signified, Ferdinand de Saussure and so on. This made me realize how an alternative cooking website could be more powerful than I thought. It could signify the basic needs for mastery and self-sufficiency which a lot of people might feel, but never quite get to resolve. The large group of men who never pick up cooking because of societal gender expectations is not hard to imagine, and neither are the professionals of all genders who can simply afford eating in restaurants and ordering takeaways at all times, so they mis out on the joys of cooking aswell. But both of these groups have to fill up the void left by their needs for self-sufficiency and mastery.

This recognition made me broaden the targeted demographics, aiming to get to know and impress these groups that I previously did not take into consideration. I cut out the facts on the About section which was getting a bit too political for it's own good. I also tried to shift the tone from a neutral to a slightly more masculine, or intended for people who identify as men, as this website is primarily informed by my experience, and I haven't found many cooking resources out there that address to men in a branding sense, without making heavy use of cliches and stereotypes. Sure, you can type cooking for men on google and you will find Snoop Dogg's book and a lot of Muscle & Pork Shoulders but it so happens that most of my male friends (including the Chef who wrote the recipes) are vegetarians.

Of course, these were fine adjustments. I wanted a slight inclination whilst keeping the content, tone and visual appeal of the website as fluid and neutral as I could. I did this by using the

I grew up surrounded by the bright green futuristic designs of Web 2.0 - what they now call Frutinger Aero. I was in a different space though and I couldn't quite trust all that optimism and colour from the grey romanian highrise I was inhabiting. From up there, I found it hard to look in the future for inspiration. I did look at the West though. This was a time where James Bond and Coca-Cola were still believed to give magical powers to the young kids I used to play football with around the post-soviet blocks.

This is where video games come into the story. I started out designing on computers around the age of 13 because the World of Warcraft server I was playing on needed a graphic designer for their boards. I was making banners and headers, web design if you think about it, and it kept me inside the house for a while. All these 800x600px imaginary worlds, all bright and colorful, were always in foreign languages. That made them a rather visual experience than it was intellectual. This will make more sense really soon, but I'll just say that the current layout with the pixel art icons is an old trick. But for now I will keep on with the Branding.

Brand Identity

We had a workshop with Mim Sorrentino where we learned that much like a person, a brand has a fundamental identity, a projected image, perceptions about it held by others, and relationships to parents, siblings and those we want to get to know and impress. On the same day I made Freestyle Cooking into a person: cool, charismatic, fun, street smart, soulful, accommodating, people-oriented, enthusiastic, delightful.

The next thing I did was a survey. I built it in Google Forms. I posted it on my Instagram page and got around 30 answers. These particular findings have helped me understand my target audience more, and they also encouraged me to keep all the non-cooking parts on (such as music). It also made me understand that there were people of ***multiple*** levels of expertise that would be interested in the website. This prompted me to adjust the Information Architecture to include more than complete beginners tips. I branchied out to intermediate recipes and even some content for pros. I tried to keep it interesting for everyone. Now, people could also be encouraged to revisit the website after they made some progress, in order to "unlock" the more advanced sections such as Going Overboard. I was working with ***curiosity***.

Branding & Aesthetics

Aesthetics

From an aesthetical perspective, this project takes its cues from 1990s hip-hop music and early 2000's video games. As opposed to the more contemporary variants of hip-hop, the old school stuff was rather egalitarian. American hip-hop music from 1995 became a big trend in Romania in 2005. It informed what most of the people were feeling at that time - that we ***were*** on the global map thanks to the internet, and, although we weren't huge in terms of economy or infrastructure, we could at least be street smart, creative and charismatic. It taught people a "cooler" way to deal with scarcity, city life and diversity. I can still feel its influence on how I see the world two decades after.

things. I found a way to come up with original content by taking long walks and noting things down - which worked for me much better than sitting at a desk with an open notepad, getting frustrated that the ideas won't come to me and reaching to chat GPT for content. I think the original content makes a difference on my website, if anyone has time to read it. Least but not last, I also found this monospace font called "JetBrains" while making the game, and ended up using it as the body font for Freestyle Cooking.

Product

User Experience Design & User Journey

Steph Troth and Chris How's workshops made for some of my favorite moments in the course. I really liked the social aspect of the design they were describing, and I was fascinated by the techniques they were talking about, that sounded like they were borrowing from journalism and sociology. Two subjects which I was always interested in more than computer science, to be frank. But I am a scientist in denial nonetheless.
My first UXD undertaking was to interview my grandmother who is an avid cook, using the sampling method discussed at the course. Honestly, it was great! It led me to interesting findings along with advice for storing food. My grandmother was raised in a different system and lives in a very frugal way. I guess a lot of people at her age are like that. Her non-cliche sustainability ended up informing the tone of the website more than anything else. Some of the content is directly quoted from her, especially in the Kitchenware 101 section. I should give her more credit.

the website from the ground up. And by the way, switching over to Wordpress was the best decision I have ever took for this project. I stepped into the unknown about a month before the submission date, and it gave me the structure and the visual feedback that propelled me to carry on with the project. I think I'll be working with Wordpress for a long time from now on. It definetly seems more for me than the back end stuff.
Having said this, I also had a little Javascript phase which I then turned into a side-project browser game. I haven't really had time to practice it as I wanted to and I was getting curious. In June I went back to the library and got the Jon Duckett book "Javascript & JQuery". It was good. I finally understood the objects, as he explained them making analogies with a hotel. I studied it for a week and then started doing FreeCodecamp exercises. I joined the Founders & Coders weekly meeting in Finsbury Park and they put me into Codewars, where I learned some more Javascript through code drills and challenges. I developed the Dungeons & Deadlines game for the Founders & Coders internship and submitted it but didn't make it to the next phase. I am going to apply again in November. This all might sound like me procrastinating my way out of working for the Major Project, and it might partially be, but the reason I did it was because they were promising paid internships to the successful applicants (and I quite needed the money) and also because the meetings were social and helped me get over the isolation that I felt at the time.
The game also helped me develop a clearer idea of what I wanted to do with the Major Project. I practiced some responsive design, and it helped me get back in to the flow of

June - August

I decided to spend the summer in London so I could be closer to the university library. I figured it would be good to close myself off from distractions. Again, some things didn't go quite as planned. I am going to offer a brief account of them, because maybe it would be fair to mention the difficult parts too. I was a bit too confident that I will get a part-time job closer to the field or at the university. I applied constantly, but didn't get it, so I had to keep on doing bartending in Central London. The nature of it, the long and late hours, it wasn't very compatible. Working on the Major Project required a bit of concentration which I couldn't seem to garner in the first half of the summer. I often felt too tired to open the code editor between the shifts and so on.

I also went through a bit of a weird phase because of my work and flat situation. I lived in a house by myself for a month and a half because my flatmate went on vacation. I had no friends in the city and no resources or time to make friends with. Anyway, I carried on and noted down ideas for the website constantly. I wrote content nearly every day, and I kept looking on Awwwards with a more critical lens, shopping for ideas and taking screenshots and code snippets. My laptop also stopped working around this time, which slowed me down. Luckily I still had the PC and the project was backed up on Github.

August - September

Towards the end of the summer I managed to borrow some time and stopped working in the Center. This was an ocasion to really concentrate on the project, install Wordpress, and build

The first thing I wanted to have on the website were a lot of animations. I made a list of fancy frameworks such as Greensock that I was “going” to learn by heart. I was on the Awwwards website every day, hunting for inspiration: interface, typefaces, code snippets.

I made some logo attempts, a footer, some more moodboards. I paired some typefaces together. The presentation went surprisingly well, and I decided to keep on with the illustrations. With this occasion I also first thought about using monospace fonts. This was quite an insight but I’ll get back to that later.

Then we had the Film Promotion project. I took it as an opportunity to test my illustrator skills. It was very enjoyable, but it took much more time than I thought. It made me realize that doing all the illustrations will take a lot of time. I was starting to realize that I was being a bit too idealistic.

Did I stop dreaming then? No. I kept on with the illustrations. I started to study icons and vectors of kitchenware and did a few sketches of my own. After the spring break we learned about CSS Animation. I did an animation for my homepage, Soonly after that we also learned about Version Control. It was me who did that presentation. And that’s when I started using Github for the first time, which really saved my life when my laptop later on. But we’ll get to that in a bit.

Another thing I was preoccupying myself with at the time was scripting and building a database. This seems like a good time to mention that neither of these - animations, illustrations, frameworks, Javascript, databases and so on - neither of them ended up on the final version. But it was all part of the proccess.

without knowing what he's going to end up doing. He talks about finding answers through drawing lines between seemingly disparate things over the course of ***twenty*** years.

So I started to ask myself: wouldn't it be easier if I went on my own lane? I had my field of expertise which was clearly music. It felt like I found the answer, so I put eveything together. Music, cooking and web design. I arrived to the concept that I presented for my first Major Project presentation in the winter: a website about culinary improvisation named Freestyle Cooking. A freestyle is a form of improvisation with rhymes over a hip-hop beat. I knew about improvisation in cooking from the Chef who was a devout adept of it. I also read about it in Salt, Fat, Acid and Heat a book by Samin Nosrait which ended up being covered in detail on the Freestyle Cooking website. Lastly, there were studies such as Jonathan Deutsch's "Can Improvisation Save Culinary Education?" which I began looking into.

The presentation went well. I was encouraged to keep going. At that time I was also reading a lot of psychology and well-being. I found that cooking was associated with positive mental health as described here and here. It felt like I found the mission that I was searching for, and it also related to my experience with it. I started writing down all these findings, putting together my Business & Cultural Context presentation.

3. Iteration

February - May

So now I have a concept. What's next?

Around February I started to think about the Visual Design, in anticipation of the Delight crit. As usually, I had big plans for it.

I was also reading a book about motion design at the time that I found at the library, and it had all these cool techniques in it for coming up with concepts. They were inspired by the Dada-ists (some of which Mim Sorrentino taught us later at the Branding workshop) and they were employing the subconscious mind to dig deeper for ideas. I thought it was interesting, so I started doing auto-writing. I was waking up to an open journal on the desk every morning. Then, I would write for 2 minutes without stopping, without caring about grammar and punctuation and without trying to make sense. I did this exercise for a while every day. I was also noting down all the ideas that were coming to me while walking, cycling and commuting to the library. After a week or two I ended up writing a lot of interesting things, but nothing for the Major Project.

I attended State of the Browser as a volunteer in October. Seeing all these web design people was inspiring and encouraging. Sure, a small number of them were neatly dressed in suits, but most of them were in casual clothes, hoodies and even band t-shirts. There is an old Romanian saying - "people bless the places". I got to talk with Henri Helvetica, who was one of the speakers, over lunch. We had a casual chat about music, record labels and such. They all seemed quite different than the geologists. I made me think that maybe I could connect these seemingly disparate jobs that I was doing on the side for years (such as music and graphic design) into one sole career. I was getting the signal that the coast was clear.

I also volunteered for All Flows in Milton Keynes and got to see Elliot Jay Stocks's "Drawing Lines", where he goes in depth about his designer and musician careers, and how he did both

Some 5 years fly by and I arrive in the UK with dreams of becoming a successful music producer. I live in a small town in Sussex, working as a cleaner, basically surviving on canned hotdogs and iceland pepperoni pizza. I'm in my garden. My chef friend, who happens to work in Oxford now, is on the phone with me. We talk about work, video games, festivals, rent prices, Romanian rap, more work, guitars. We invent words that don't make sense but sound funny. We try to keep the spirits up.
I reach out to him about the food situation: "how do you get by with food? what can you eat if you're on a budget?" He starts talking about coconut milk and chickpeas. I didn't know what they were. A day or two pass, and he sends me a recipe. The pen-on-crumbled-paper sort. He says "there you go! Cook this curry and it will last you for a week". That's where it began.

2. Inspiration

October - January

Four summers and a few hundred curries later I find myself living in the third biggest city of Europe, juggling a few part time jobs with a full time Master's degree, cooking less than ever and completely disconnected from music - especially hip-hop. This somehow fortunate situation culminates in October - when I attend State of the Browser a volunteer - and notice it is not uncommon for web design people to throw in subtle references from popular culture. But more on that later.

One month into the Stockwell Street classes we were told to start thinking about the Major Project. I didn't have any clue. I have heard about all these profitable and successful websites and I wanted to make one of my own. That was about it.

because making music, as opposed to eating, does not guarantee your survival. I would argue though that they both somehow fall into the category of basic human needs.
The medium of these intellectual undertakings was our 20-year-old, moved-out-of your-parents-town, late night music listening and beer drinking sessions that also happened to occur in a kitchen. There, he would light up the stove occasionally to spin a pancake, knead some dough or style out a midnight snack, usually containing copious amounts of ketchup and a various list of dried aromatic ingredients.
Oregano, thyme, basil, your usual suspects.
These midnight rituals would all happen with specific musical soundtracks that, looking back, really did smooth things out. Listening to hip-hop and all, picturing us eastern european men cooking becomes easy. And as weeks go by, you learn to chop an onion, melt some cheese over your toast, and eventually, bake your own sourdough square pizza, in the otherwise defunct 1979 RSR-steel-mill-forged oven.

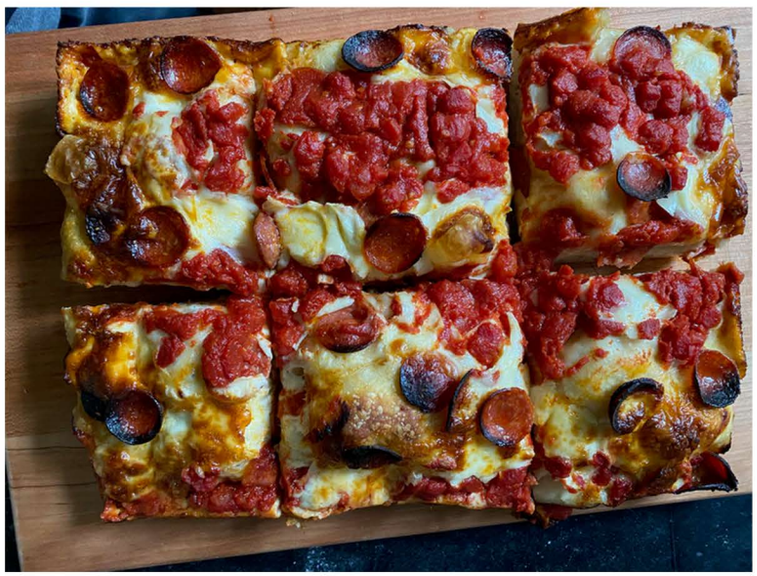

Figure 1: Romanian-style pizzas are rectangular rather than square

up the website.
Another argument for building this report in a cronological rather than mechanical structure is that my abilities and way of thinking about design have changed a lot in the past year.
I can barely relate to the principled system of understanding that I had access to at the beggining of this course. Sure, it would be easier to present the current state of the website with my current mind, now that I understand a bit more about web design, and disregard the previous iterations and the early stages of the proccess. But it would miss the whole point of this report, which is to showcase what I have ***learned***.
To conclude, I think it's more valuable to study the order in which ideas occur than to present the website as distinct, separate modules, and disregard the role that cronology and subjectivity plays in such a project.

Concept

1. Ideation

Freestyle Cooking is a non-profit guide to home cooking with an emphasis on positively reinforcing people who go through the early stages of learning how to cook.
The easily traceable, living and breathing inspiration for this project is my friend who is a currently a head chef and has been a professional culinarian for some ten years now. He is basically the person who made cooking look cool to me, while I gave him some insight into how to make music on a PC. This fortunate exchange of ideas happened in my late teenage years and just after graduating high-school. I would say more fortunate for me

Introduction

Freestyle Cooking is a website about essential cooking. It is the resource I needed when I first moved out of my parents house, stepping into the big world. It is a story about the things in life that ***really*** matter in my experience. The sort of things that I discovered could stand the test of time better than anything else - growth, care and keeping your heart - through cooking for yourself and for/with the people you care about. I think the analogy of cooking together ressembles our academic year and also my current purpose in life, which is to spend time with people working towards something meaningful, learning from each other and about each other in the proccess.

Structure

This report consists in 8 chapters and 3 main sections. It starts with me describing the proccess of building this website on a conceptual level, moving into the development stage and covering more and more technical aspects towards the second half. Then, we return to experiential findings as we approach the final conclusions of this report.
The structure is largely accurate from a cronological perspective, as these three stages occured more or less in order throughout the academic year. There were slight overlaps such as a conceptual idea in the middle of technical development and vice versa. In order to provide as much insight into my creative proccess as possible, I will try to respect the cronology of these ideas as they occured naturally, rather than provide a steel structured rendition of the separate elements that make