

Subject: Hypertext Project Self-Reflection

Date: 12.30.18

Response:

1. Before doing this project, what was your experience with HTML? Did you already have a homepage on the Web?

Yes, I'd participated in a handful of workshops on HTML, CSS, and JS at sundry hackathons prior to working on this project. I've also needed HTML and CSS for a couple of school-related projects and for building out a simple personal website (which isn't currently hosted live but can be found on my Github repo).

Additionally, as a fourth year computer science student, I've had a non-insignificant amount of experience with designing, building, and maintaining fairly complicated web development projects. For example, I'm currently working with teammates to build an e-commerce platform for CS4501: Internet Scale Applications. We're using Django, Python, SQL, Docker containers, etc. to develop something along the lines of a virtual Madison House.

2. How would you describe your hypertext project to someone who has never seen it before? Who is the audience? What are important features of the page?

I look forward to introducing my project to an audience that's unversed in web development and/ or the early history of the web (in contrast to the audience I've documented in Q6) in the near future. I'll want to assist them in a holistic understanding of my project, so I'll begin with a definition of "speculative fiction" and an overview of the initial assignment, then relate that what they're about to see is a transmutation of the original form into a static web page that's "*supposed* to recall the web of the late 80s and early 90s" through using "elements with the look, feel, and overall experience of the era" (from Q6).

Which directly relates to what I enjoyed about the creative process! I'll explain that I really enjoyed researching late 80s and early 90s-era components and methodologies, especially in relation to the mood and intent of my SF piece. In particular, I'll emphasize the "Starry Night" background, embedded gifs/ images (e.g., my animated and hand-crafted [title gif](#)), and [lists of] hyperlinks (see Q3, Q4).

3. Describe an interesting technical feature of your project. Reflect on your process of implementing this feature. What learning resources did you use? Did you refer to other homepages as an example? Did you talk to other students?

One of my favorite features of this project is the "Starry Night" background. Olia Lialina goes into detail in her piece on the "[Vernacular](#)" of the early web, writing "[The first web makers'] desire to make the web look like the futuristic backdrop of their favorite pieces was justified. Not only by their taste but by the hope the new medium was offering. The Internet was the future, it was bringing us into new dimensions, closer to other galaxies." In other words, the visual of starry backgrounds was used to situate futuristic narratives in a visual context that paralleled their content, and to do so in a manner fundamentally endemic to the web in all of its futuristic, as-yet-unexplored appeal. (I appreciated that Olia Lialina's article cleverly employed the very same mechanism by utilizing the elements she discussed/ researched in the medium she used to discuss them!)

Lialina's article (more specifically, the "[The Starry Night Background](#)" page) served as resources for my implementation. More specifically, I began by inspecting Lialina's page and was able to locate the ss036.gif she'd used as a backdrop. After downloading and including it in my story's index.html file, I realized, however, it didn't quite "fit" the mood of my piece, so I kept looking. I searched Google for "starry night backgrounds" and "galaxy backgrounds" before finding [one](#) I particularly enjoyed - and ultimately employed.

Perhaps this parallels the journey an early developer might have had in finding (whether through a search engine, employing a “free collection of web elements,” or inspecting the source of any given page) a web element before embedding it.

4. Discuss a frustrating aspect of creating hypertext documents in HTML. Use a specific example from your own project. Do you think homepage makers twenty years ago felt similar or different frustrations?

Given my prior exposure to web development (see Q1), developing a website on Neocities.org using HTML and CSS wasn't excessively difficult (although I did need to refer [W3Schools](#) throughout for semantic aid). Even so, I had a few technical difficulties that provided me with (perhaps) something akin to the challenge of an early web developer, despite my comparatively vast (or at least significantly easier) access to helpful resources than many were likely to have had during the early web era.

Most frustrating was my realization, after repeated attempts to “View” my edited and saved web page without seeing any results, that the Chrome web browser I was using had cached a prior version of my site. From there, it took deleting my web browser cache (didn't work) and switching to Safari (also didn't work) to realize I only needed a hard refresh in order to see changes.

Out of interest, I researched whether early web browsers implemented caching as an optimization feature. Although I couldn't find much, I did encounter the National Center for Supercomputing Applications at UIUC's website that documents the [Mosaic versions](#). Evidently, the Mosaic browser did support image and document caching as early as versions 0.5A in 09/93 and 0.7B in 10/93, respectively. So perhaps homepage makers twenty years ago did experience similar frustrations!

5. What was the value of homepages for early Web users? What role do you suppose that they played in the popularization of the Web and internet use in general? Use a specific example of a historical homepage that you found while working on your own page.

It's been my impression that websites during the late 80s and early 90s often shared a few key elements: a welcome, an introduction, collections of links to other interesting and “cool” pages, and invitations to contact the person who made the page (see an example [here](#), [here](#), or [here](#)). These elements implicate something about the early web: that it was a highly personal place (e.g., Justin Hall's [overshare: the links.net story](#)), and that there existed a pervasive sense of excitement about what the web had to offer (for creators and viewers alike*).

Just as creating homepages enabled individuals to say ““Hey, this is me! This is what I care about! Go find out more [here](#)!””, so too was surfing the early web a rich experience of exploration and “sudden connections” (Lialina). In other words, personal websites were repositories of “hot” and “must see” items (in the days before those keywords could be typed into search engines). They were also places where viewers and creators could connect (over commonalities in their life stories, through shared interests, via email, etc.) without regard for distances of numerous types (e.g., geographical, across racial/ gender/ age divides, etc.). I'd be willing to argue that it was precisely this unique combination of personal, “cool”, and -- above all -- *relational* content that was influential in the development of a participatory web culture, and to the rapid expansion of the web.

*Of course, these were (and are) not mutually exclusive sets of people.

6. Show your project to a friend or family member. What was their reaction? What questions did they ask you? How did this person's reaction make you think differently about the early Web?

I casually (not realizing I'd have opportunity to document the interaction via reflection question) showed my project to a good computer science friend who specializes in web development languages and frameworks (e.g., React, Node.js, View, Laravel). He has a particular affinity for good design and website usability, so I prefaced by saying "It's a static page that's *supposed* to recall the web of the late 80s and early 90s, so I purposefully used elements with the look, feel, and overall experience of the era."

Even so, he couldn't help but laugh at the obviously antiquated and out-of-mode style. He suggested I use the infamous [Angelfire aqua background](#), Comic Sans font, and a few other elements (many of which are discussed in "Vernacular") to "level up my game" even further. He also (somewhat randomly) informed me that the first online transaction was between two MIT students who were buying/ selling drugs. All in all, he revealed that he considers the early web to be something of a "meme" repository, valuable for its humorousness but not necessarily intrinsically as an artifact or insight. I was frustrated by this reaction, but took the opportunity to invite him into discussion about the meaning and value of the early web (in all of its campiness) for early creators and viewers.