

Class 2 - Lecture - How do you tell a story?

I studied computer science and theater in undergrad. I mention that a lot, because I've discovered that people find it amusing. It was a major part of my essay when I applied to RISD for grad school, and I know the department considered it as a major reason for why I'm in this program right now. What's funny, though, is that when I came to RISD, I didn't really know how to program websites, and yet here I am almost three years later once again self-identifying as a coder. But if I look at my experience in undergrad, I think my actual superpower is less computer science, and more theater.

I'm not sure what you think of when I say "theater." In fact, I planned on studying film, because I thought "theater" was basically a field in which people melodramatically overacted. Either that, or everything was a musical. No, theater at my undergrad was more about performance.

"Performance" is a broad field that encompasses things we wouldn't traditionally think of as "theater." There's a famous performance artist named Marina Abramović whose work almost verges on just doing stunts. [Here's an example](#). What makes this theater, though, is that it calls upon the audience to have a reaction. It's a conversation with spectators about what performance is in the context of what *reality* is. This is not an act. There is real danger here.

Today's story is about storytelling. When I think of "storytelling," I think of performance. I think of visual and auditory communication. We're not just talking about [narrative](#) or plot – we're talking about the experience as a whole. Returning to the previous image, Abramović tells a story by creating a dangerous situation in a theatrical context. There is no traditional plot. But there is communication, nonetheless.

When I see the homepage for [Google](#), I also see a story. The design of this page is fundamental to Google's identity and story. That's clear when you compare it to competing search engines, like [Bing](#). Google's interface communicates an experience to the user. It centers its most important, actionable content. It leaves enormous negative space, which alludes to the site's ability to make sense out of a disorderly web. And it tucks Google's massive ecosystem into the edges, understating the weight that Google has on the Internet as a whole. I mean, even the browser I use is made by Google. This is a company that really has no place for modesty.

The story of a website is not always about the website itself. If we look at a variety of social media sites, like Instagram, Facebook, Reddit, YouTube, Twitter (actually, let's not

look at Twitter), and so on, you'll discover a pattern. It'll look something like the "[holy grail](#)" of web design. This is an interface that was long sought after by web designers, but not easily possible until pretty recently, at least within the last ten years. This kind of layout communicates, hey, my site is all about content, not style.

I think that's a shame. The modern perspective on interfaces is that accessibility is key, and all else is secondary. Part of that is the nature of how we use websites. If a website isn't accessible, or easily understood, then we simply navigate away, right? Even the Nielsen Norman Group, which conducts user experience research, [reports](#) that most users leave a website within 10-20 seconds of visiting it, unless a good "value proposition" is clearly communicated. Even so, that's almost no time for something that probably took weeks, if not months or years, to design and develop.

But I actually don't think about websites when I think about interface design. I don't even think about apps. Instead, I think about video games.

I'm a huge video game enthusiast. That might be obvious because I'm nerdy enough to teach a web development course, or I'm nerdy enough to have created an Animal Crossing fan site that [plays the game's music in real time](#). In any case, one way in which video games are different from websites is that the person playing them has paid money to have an extended experience. As in, the game designer doesn't have to be terrified that the player will quit within 10 seconds of starting. And so, game designers have more room to experiment with user interfaces that buck design norms for the sake of experimentation, and for the sake of *style*.

Speaking of Animal Crossing, [here's](#) the first game's menu system. What I love about this menu is that the background is customizable, but it's a secret. If you have clothing on hand in the game, you can drag it onto the background and swap the pattern out. The game never tells you this, and neither does the menu, but it's there. [Here's a fantastic tutorial on the subject](#).

When we remove the pressure of people almost immediately leaving our websites, we can start to ask some interesting questions about what user interface design actually conveys. There's probably no one more qualified to talk about the subject than Masahiro Sakurai, who is famous for directing the video game series Super Smash Bros. Recently, Sakurai has taken on making YouTube videos talking about the full design and development process for his games and video games in general. It's fantastic. He even

has a few videos on interface design, which is funny because he doesn't design them. Instead, Michiko Sakurai, his wife, has been in charge of the menus for Smash Bros. for decades now. Michiko is rather private it seems though, so we only have Sakurai's perspective.

There are three videos I want to highlight. He has more than these three, so I highly recommend checking out his [YouTube channel](#).

The first is called "[Menus Define Your World](#)." In this video, Sakurai shows how graphic design is effective at what is commonly called "worldbuilding," or the practice of using all aspects of an experience to reinforce a common setting, narrative, or story.

The second video is called "[Clarity vs. Style](#)." Sakurai explains the trade-offs that occur when an interface prioritizes accessibility or aesthetics, and why a designer might make a decision one way or the other.

The third video is called "[Make Important Elements Bigger](#)." This one is really straightforward.

Speaking of which, this reminds me again of Google's homepage. Make the important elements bigger, right?

This also brings me to a complaint I have about modern web design. I mentioned yesterday in the background for your first project that websites have been getting flashier and flashier. My frustration is that, to me, it feels like companies are prioritizing one-upping each other instead of building something that respects the user and tells an interesting story.

An example of this is the website for the studio [Media.Monks](#). This website is so egregious and opulent that it becomes grotesque. It's cool, but without any substance. If we were to rank this on Sakurai's clarity vs. style scale, it'd be off the spectrum toward the style side. OK, I'll also admit that I'm picking on this site because they led me on for an internship for months only to ghost me. I'm not bitter at all about that.

Another example of flashy design getting in the way of storytelling is the advent of easy-to-use 3D technology in web browsers. This is the result of two developments: a JavaScript library called [Three.js](#), which makes it relatively simple to import 3D models into websites and make them interactive. The more important development though is [Spline](#), a web app that allows you to import and design 3D models directly in your web

browser, as well as make interactive experiences using those models. Now, commercial web development products like Webflow are natively integrating Spline projects, which will lead to an even greater proliferation of 3D assets on the web.

At the risk of sounding like an old man, my question is this: "Why?"

As a designer, I don't value beauty, aesthetics, or technical complexity as my end goal. Instead, I value communication and storytelling. If the solution to a design challenge demands a simple aesthetic, I evaluate my success on that aesthetic, not on beauty or technology.

So, yesterday I showed you my [Wiki Township project](#). I made that as a final project for a web design course here at RISD. In that critique, I was criticized for using an arbitrary aesthetic that was more reminiscent of Google than anything else.

It was a valid critique. I revisited the idea later on in a new project called [What Is Wikipedia?](#), in which I tried the same idea but with better coding skills. And actually, the result is uglier. It's also simpler. But it's the better project, because it tells the right story, which in this case was the story of Wikipedia.

And so, as you learn how to code today, many of you for the first time, here's my advice. Don't let yourself get seduced by the appeal of fancy websites. If you do, you'll find yourselves making work that is both garish and hard to code. Instead, look at the skills you have available to you and see what those skills afford you. Storytelling is as simple as putting a button where you wouldn't expect it to be, or picking the right font. We'll talk all about fonts tomorrow. For now, let's talk code.