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**Final Project Report**

**Introduction**

For my project, I decided to make a website dedicated to my Dungeons and Dragons campaign that I am running with some friends. To explain how this project might help me, it is useful to compare D&D to other multiplayer role-playing games, such as World of Warcraft. In World of Warcraft, the player explores a digital environment. He or she can meet other players in the game, and cooperate with them to defeat enemies and accomplish goals. The players earn experience from doing these things, which they use to give their characters new abilities. Additionally, they gain other resources, such as money and reputation, which they use to defeat more enemies and earn more experience, creating a gameplay loop which can consume months of real time. D&D is superficially similar, but rather than taking place digitally, it takes place in the players’ imaginations, as they narrate what activities their characters perform. This gives the game a creative aspect which a computer game lacks, because while rules do exist, the final say as to what is possible and what is not rests with the Dungeon Master, who is free to improvise as he or she chooses.

By solving one problem with role-playing games, D&D creates another, because the task of creating the challenges the players will face, keeping track of their resources, and using their adventures to build a consistent imaginary world takes time and organizational skill. By re-introducing a digital element into my D&D campaign in the form of this website, I hope to reconcile the digital and human media and eliminate some of the burden placed on me, while preserving the element of creativity and improvisation that makes the game so unique.

**Strategy**

When I began work on my project, my strategy was clear: organize information that my players would need about the game and make it easily accessible in the form of a website. As I reflected more on this goal, I realized there were other applications as well. To find them, I identified sources of wasted time related to the game, and looked for ways to outsource them. A major difficulty has been planning game sessions around my players’ busy schedules, then communicating my plans to them over a busy group chat. Another issue has been keeping track of the events of previous sessions, especially recording what rewards the characters received and settling disputes regarding those rewards, which often cropped up after the fact. My last complaint involved my players and their tenuous grasp of the rules for Dungeons and Dragons. I had previously considered printing out a cheat sheet with instructions on how to perform some common tasks, so making this document into a web page was the logical next step.

Underscoring all these goals is a common theme: answer questions before they are asked, to preserve the flow of game activities and create a more pleasant experience. For the project to accomplish this, it would need to meet two requirements. First, the project must be comprehensive and reliable, or else I will still get questions. Second, the project must be accessible and easy to use, or it will disrupt the flow of the game session. These two qualities are in tension with one another, and successfully negotiating between them will be what ultimately determines whether the project is a success.

**Scope**

As I pondered just how far I was willing to take the project, I realized that there were two main limiting factors that would define the scope of this endeavor. The first was my own technical abilities. I had only just begun to learn web design, so my skills were limited. I was beginning to appreciate the flexibility of CSS, but I was completely unfamiliar with Javascript or databases. This would require me to use third-party services to implement any scheduling features, something I was reluctant to consider, since the project was supposed to reflect my own work. I would also need to become more familiar with responsive scaling techniques, since most of my players would use mobile devices to access the website.

The second limiting factor was the time I would be able to spend on updating the website with new content. Since the purpose of the project was to save time, I decided to design the product with scalability in mind from the outset. This had a great influence on the structure plane. Even in the preliminary stages, I knew that I would have many separate pages and need some way to navigate between them. Whatever navigation system I used would have to be easy to update. This indicated in favor of an index page or multiple indecies, and against the idea of hyperlinks within each content page.

**Structure**

As I began to lay out my content, it became clear that the greatest volume of content would be devoted to individual items, including places and people in my game world. Each unique topic would require its own page, to avoid excessive clutter. Thus, the layout of my site would resemble a wiki. I decided to organize the information based on what category each item fell into. Examples of categories include characters, locations, and previous sessions. I considered several methods of organization before settling on that one. One was chronological, in the order my players encountered the item. However, I realized that a user would likely be looking for a specific entity, while a chronological system might have been more useful to a user who was casually browsing. My decision to stick with a topic-based organizational system was in keeping with my goal of answering questions before they are asked. However, my one concession to the chronological approach was to organize the items chronologically within the page. Since each page currently contains only a few entries, this does not sacrifice findability, and it creates a more intuitive experience for a user who has personally dealt with each item in the list.

As my campaign continues, my website will grow, and might require a new approach to information design. I am considering several methods. The easiest to implement would be a search bar, which would not require me to change the existing layout. Another option is a centralized index, with every term arranged alphabetically. Both of these possibilities are new elements on top of existing information design, making them attractive options. The possibility I plan to avoid is hyperlinks within the content pages. While judicious use of find and replace might make this task less tedious, it would still be tedious, and grow exponentially more so with each page I add.

**Skeleton**

The two main constraints on my design decisions for the layout of the pages themselves were the need for a straightforward presentation and the fact that many of my users would only be using mobile devices to view the website. With this in mind, I decided to use a single-column layout. I wanted a single area of text that my users could read in a linear fashion, and I didn’t see much use in designing an elaborate multi-column layout that few users would see. However, I did expect the occasional desktop visit, so designing the website exclusively for mobile was not an option. Thus, some responsive design was needed.

Each page consists of a header with the D&D campaign’s title, a navigation bar, the main body of content, and a simple footer. When the page is an index leading to multiple pages, the body contains lists of links to each page with large, bold headers. When the page displays content, the body contains paragraphs with a title at the top. Each content page also contains a link leading back to its parent index at the very bottom, as courtesy navigation. This layout meets all of my goals. It draws the eye down the page, without requiring any horizontal scrolling due to the responsive scaling.

I accomplished this by giving the body div a default width in px, with a minimum and maximum width in %. This means that when the user is on a desktop, the content will re-scale if he or she zooms beyond a certain range, while a mobile user will see the content fill the width of his or her screen. The other element of responsive design is the navigation bar. Using a CSS media query, I designed it to show as a horizontal bar when viewed in landscape, and as a vertical list in portrait.

**Surface**

Designing the sensory aspects of my project was the most enjoyable part for me. I considered my audience and the setting in which the project would be viewed, and decided to have some fun. Since we play a medieval fantasy game, it made sense to use a medieval aesthetic, with a parchment background and calligraphic font style. Finding both the font and the background image was easy, but I needed to make some small adjustments implementing them. The font fit the theme of my website well, but it was not legible in paragraphs. I solved this by using Arial for the paragraphs but the medieval font for everything else. This seemed like a small enough sacrifice in the name of usability. Meanwhile, my parchment background was too dark, making the text harder to read. This was an easy problem to solve using GIMP: I made the image more transparent, allowing the text to stand out more.

The only other visual choice was the color scheme. Since I wanted this to be coherent and aesthetically pleasing, I used palleton.com. For my base color, I opened my background image and used GIMP’s color picker tool to find the hex value for a point on the image. I used a monochromatic scheme with a wide spread of shades, then picked colors from the array I received, going mostly by my own visual taste. The result was black text, dark brown for the links, a deep red for the navigation bar, and gold for the navbar links.

**Conclusion**

Since completing the foundations of the website, I have been filling out the content pages and showing the product to my users. Feedback so far has been positive. While my users discovered a couple of spelling errors that I had missed, they were happy with the layout and design. In particular, the navigation bar received a few compliments. During our last session, I asked them to contribute a couple of paragraphs for their characters. I thought it would be appropriate for them to have control over that aspect of the website. I am currently waiting for their submissions, and those plus the rules reference are the two things I still need to add.

Overall, I am happy with the outcome of my project. It was my first attempt at web design, and seems like a promising start. While I have already explained my plans for scaling the product in the future, I can foresee making some major changes if I get a lot of free time. These might include improvements to the visual design, better desktop support, and more utilization of Javascript as I become proficient with it. Another project I considered was building a webserver at home, which I might use for storing my music and pictures. If I ever do that, I could also host this and other websites that I build on it, creating an opportunity to expand my skillset even more.