

illiteracy abroad

THE PROCESS BOOK

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DESIGN STUDIO

FALL 2009

SCHOOL OF DESIGN

CARNEGIE MELLON UNIVERSITY

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PROJECT

We were tasked with creating a motion graphics project, using the software of our choice, on the future of reading. However, in order to understand the future of something, one must understand its past or present, so we were allowed some latitude that way.

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PLANNING ESSAY

Our first step was to write a one-page paper on the subject of our choice.

I have two areas of interest related to design and communication that brought me to Carnegie Mellon: online communication/interaction and cross-cultural communication. Realizing that communicating online and digitally depends very heavily on reading, I first pursued that avenue, and wrote my 1-page paper on it.

However, I wasn't thrilled with the results, and the subject matter just didn't seem to mesh with this assignment for me. I thought about writing about the international experience I'd had, and focusing on the cross-cultural communication aspect, but really struggled with narrowing such a massive subject down to fit this assignment.

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PLANNING ESSAY

The day the essay was due, I received this fateful tweet from a friend I'd met while in Japan:

clairetanaka: how about how "reading" changed for you when you were in a country where you were partially illiterate?
5:07 AM Oct 5th

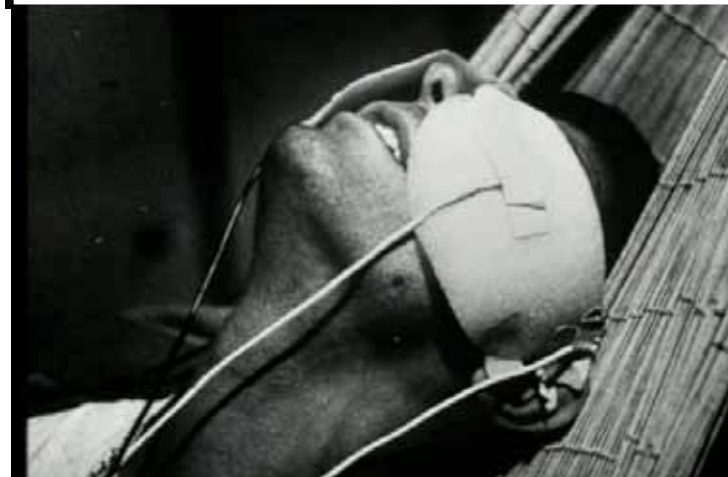
Immediately it clicked. In the space of 140 characters, Claire had succeeded in solidifying the nebulous thoughts I'd struggled in vain to wade through, and I knew that this was the path I wanted to take. I rewrote my paper the morning it was due.

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PRELIMINARY CONCEPT

Almost from the beginning, I knew I wanted to create a sort of immersive experience, something that anybody watching would be able to feel and relate to, regardless of where they had been before.

The basic premise I'd had was to use still photos or illustrations of some kind with some basic narration, based loosely on the film *La Jetée* by Chris Marker that we'd watched in seminar. I thought about illustrating the emotional impact that being unable to read signs has on some kind of "speaker" character, possibly through a sort of tone poem. Once again, though, I knew it was a little vague and struggled with how to pare it down.



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SOLIDIFYING THE CONCEPT

During one of our class-wide critiques, the idea came up to tell a story, and to illustrate a person's attempt to do something seemingly simple while in another country, in order to ground the whole concept a little more.

Working with that, I decided to tell the story of a person trying to buy a sandwich for lunch in a foreign country. But then I realized that that was almost too easy...and it felt a little irresponsible and "uncultured" to portray a character traveling somewhere with no knowledge of the local language and culture.

So, pulling from the experiences my friends and I have had, I made the main character vegetarian (knowing that there'd be plenty she'd have to account for that way), and decided that she had just said goodbye to one travel companion, and had a couple of hours by herself, until she'd meet up with another friend who could speak the local language.



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SOLIDIFYING THE CONCEPT

The specifics of the story still escaped me, though.

- *Would she try to buy ingredients and make a sandwich?*
- *Would she go to a restaurant?*
- *This story would have to involve a second character, right?*
- *A cashier? A barista?*
- *Would the barista be friendly or impatient, and would a bystander jump in and help?*
- *What made her choose to enter this place to begin with?*

One afternoon, I actually took a sketchbook and pencil and walked on a treadmill in the UC gym for 30 minutes to “get the creative juices flowing,” if you will. Believe it or not, it worked—I let myself zone out and tap into this world I was trying to create, and solidified some plot points and details through notes and sketches.

0-30 - 200
don't overthink
not that long

buying a sandwich

background
chatter, can't
understand
people staring

strophepa =
bored, impatient
age: older?
younger?

signs
- text can't read
- images symbols

patient, impatient
lots of tourists?

phrasebook?
language
gesturing,
pointing

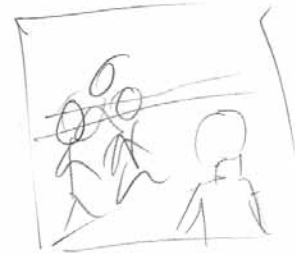
see menu
of images?
why?

another patron
friendly?
teach basic
words

is this vegetarian?

busy bustling - market?
street
div. kinds of people
(i.e. is it a?)
race, clothes,
language, diff. from me?

staring?



is it
myself?
or just
a voice?

internal
monologue -
sketches -

photo manip?
not stop-motion
but like La Jetée

choose a
cater
... other
... interesting
... food

in the cafe
can't read
menu - blur out
need to ask about
ingredients of food
idea - pull out
sketchbook -
write, draw
pictures

pull out
English
words

read body
language,
gestures

photo shoot
or do I sketch
all this?

young behind
counter
sympathetic

unsympathetic
patrons

non-Engl. dialogue
layers covered
languages?

in the end

sit outside,
enjoy sandwich
watch crowd, don't
feel like such an
outsider
don't blur out text

blurr some
various photos, stills w/
various legs - text or
voiceover to set mood

intro
"at 11:30 pm
meeting friends
at 2, need like a
bit can't understand
anyone"

lost
+ can't find
address

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VISUAL & AUDIO CONTENT

Staying true to the idea that this would not be rooted to a specific place, I decided to go for a mix of visual elements from many places that hopefully would be tied together through basic content and feeling, with a continuous layer of background ambient sound.

Knowing I wouldn't be able to create illustrations of the sort I had in mind in the given time frame, I collected many dozens of photos on free stock photography sites and Flickr (Creative Commons-licensed images, as well as non-CC-licensed images with the photographers' permission), and hoped that once the project took shape, I could pull from those to shape the experience.

I also checked out 9 CDs of sound effects from the library's collection to get ambient background sounds from a variety of locales, and on the recommendation of one of my classmates, visited the Free Sound Project website, which helped supply specific sounds for key moments.

dan76-aquickexchange-small.jpg
hu207-barcelonamarket-small.jpg
y-bulbceiling-flicker.jpg
y-bulbceiling-off.jpg
y-bulbceiling.jpg
ordian-hand28.jpg
peopleout3-small.jpg
rosster-citysign-small.jpg
elc-waitingpassenger-small.jpg
cha-crowdedstreet-small.jpg
-frenchcafe-small.jpg
e-cafe-france-small.jpg
the-dinner-small.jpg



100% 0,00:31:05 (Full) Active Camera I View

er Queue

Search bar and playback controls including play, stop, and volume icons.

#	Layer Name	fx	Parent
1	[eki-attar.mp3]		None
2	[eki-attar.mp3]		None
3	[04 Holland, Busy Market With Carillon, Maastricht.mp3]		None
4	[53-15 Nepal - Street Market, Temple Bells, Car Horns, Children.mp3]		None
5	[07 Outdoor Market, Bolivia.mp3]		None
6	[1-09 Jelly Roll.m4a]		None
7	[[10] Deonen Shilgi.mp3]		None

Audio
Audio Levels -50.00dB
Waveform
8 I lukutaidottomuus
9 I analfabetyzm
10 I אנאלפאביתיות

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VISUAL & AUDIO CONTENT

The script I handled very carefully. I provided the voiceover, and rerecorded myself many times in order to make the inflections as natural as possible, to convey a realistic sense of curiosity, wonder, and uncertainty. I wanted to make it clear that the traveler was not angry that English was not spoken in her current location (this was especially important after my run-ins with arrogant tourists many times while traveling abroad), that she perceived herself to be an outsider to some degree, and that she approached the situation with respect and trepidation.

Right now, I am somewhere new and amazing...and feeling kind of lost.

I can't read anything here.

It doesn't really matter where specifically I am, I guess--this experience would be the same in so many places.

[insert world writing systems frame]

I'm just passing through--I just said goodbye to some friends this morning and will be meeting up with another friend in a couple of hours who does speak the language, but until then, I'm on my own...

[stomach growling sound]

...and hungry.

Did I also mention that I'm vegetarian?

Yeah...

I can't read any of these signs or menus. I'm...illiterate. It's such a weird feeling.

I can't ask for help with reading these menus, either. Phrasebooks tell you what to say, but they don't always help you understand people's replies.

And the classes I took in school really aren't helping me with figuring out the actual day-to-day language--the REAL language.

[insert classroom vs. "real" frame]

Oh! Here's a menu with images. This sandwich looks promising, but I still have to ask whether or not it has meat or fish.

[entering]

[cashier looking at me expectantly and politely]

Um...English?

[cashier's smile fades]

Uh-oh.

[points to sandwich on menu] Vegetarian?

[cashier looks nervous]

Shit...

[with illustrations for thought process] Okay. Reading isn't an option, but I do have other options. I'm ready and willing to gesture like crazy and even draw pictures if needs be. So...here goes.

[random shots of hands sketching, gesturing, general interaction/engaging with the cashier, who's earnestly trying to help]

sigh of relief Success!

[both smile]

[photo of the sandwich on the table]

We figured it out! And without speaking the same language! I guess if people really want to put forth the effort, they

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PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

I ended up not storyboarding very much, and letting the images just fall in line with the script. The exception was the encounter with the barista/cashier character, as it was important to convey very specific emotions in that sequence.

The informal title I adopted was “illiteracy abroad,” which I ended up using for lack of a wittier title. I reached out to several online foreign-language/linguistics communities for assistance with translating the word “illiteracy.”



'English?'



(kind of a "... expression,
still smiling mildly,
politely)

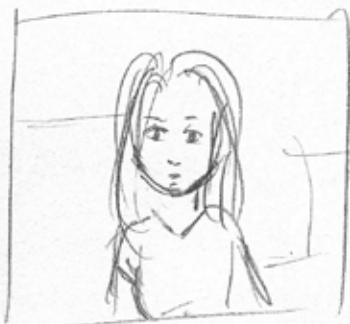
'vegetarian?'



not really smiling,
looking nervous/a
bit uncomfortable



still uncomfortable,
but trying to think
of a way to help



looking at gestures



"oh, do you mean..."



still thinking,
maybe looking
@ sketches?



"a-ha!"



(the equivalent of)
"that one over there
is vegetarian."



sharing an
understanding
smile

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PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

The **introductory section** opened with a number of bright, busy images of people and bustling settings and signs.

The section setting up the **actual premise**, explaining that this girl was on her own for a couple of hours and passing through town, was accompanied by photos related to transit and traveling.

The section focusing on **food** had, predictably enough, food images.

The section describing the girl's **feeling of illiteracy** was accompanied by images of signs. I took great pains to mainly use languages uncommon in the western world, and researched languages in Africa and Asia. The images include signs in Amharic (Ethiopia), Thai, Hindi, Tibetan, and Afrikaans.

The **menu** admittedly does include western writing, including words such as "sandwich" and "hotdog," but I hoped the line of dialogue explaining that the narrator still has to check to see whether they include meat or fish would excuse that, especially since it's still possible to be lost in a country that uses a non-English language employing a western character set and words borrowed from English.

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PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

The conclusion involved photography of general cafe settings. The very first image included several people staring at the photographer, and their expressions reminded me of the looks that foreigners sometimes receive in foreign countries, so I thought it worked. I strove to use cafe photos after the barista encounter that had a feeling of warmth and coziness to them.

All the while, the background involved several ambient sound clips of marketplaces and then coffee shops, from the Netherlands, Morocco, and Bolivia.

I recently discovered a throat-singing group from Tuva (autonomous Russian region on the Mongolian border) called Huun-Huur-Tu ("sunbeam"), whose instrumental tracks had a wonderfully earthy feel to them that I thought matched the photos well. I incorporated two of their tracks for the beginning and ending incidental music clips. I went through my own jazz collection to find something suitable for the coffee shop (as both a mood setter and a subtle audio cue to accompany the setting change, since so many cafes/coffeehouses around the world play classic jazz), and settled on a track by Charles Mingus.



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THE BARISTA

The key element of this whole presentation was **the interaction with a barista/cashier-type character**. A friend in Michigan initially agreed to play the part, but at the last minute she had to back out.

After searching frantically, I found somebody else: in an incredibly ironic twist of fate, Caitlin, my JET Programme successor (the person who took over my teaching job in Japan when I left), is originally from the Pittsburgh area, and had just moved back to the US a couple of weeks earlier. She had the time, as well as a deep understanding of the kind of experience I sought to convey, and very willingly agreed to help me out.

We held a photo shoot at Crazy Mocha in Squirrel Hill, and even got the permission of the baristas to have her step behind the counter.

It took a few runthroughs, but I think her involvement really helped tie the whole project together. Her ability to play the part of somebody unable to understand the narrator but willing to work through the situation was a very important dimension of the project, and she helped to ground it in reality in a way that photos and narration alone might not have been able to do.



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REFINEMENT

Upon the suggestions of Dan and several other students, I swapped out some of the photos, subtly edited others, added some new content, and modified the timing of some elements.

I also fleshed out my original storyline and included some extra dialogue for the very end, to reaffirm the message and to establish a sense of conclusion.

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FINAL THOUGHTS

There was one major point I struggled with:

Was it effective to have such a mishmash of elements from so many places, as opposed to depicting one specific location?

Some people were okay with it and others were not. Even if I had enough photos to do so, I didn't want to just tell yet another story about my time in Japan. I'm not entirely sure which would have ultimately been the more effective approach.

Additionally, I liked the idea of having some slides with text-based information to back up the claims I was making in my narration, but some people have found it jarring. This was probably a case of not being able to detach myself from this experience in order to see it from others' eyes, and I'm still not sure whether or not to remove them, out of concern that the story will lose some of its factual impact.

