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Geekreformation.com

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GEEKREFORMATION.COM

A Capstone Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree Bachelor of Arts
with Honors College Graduate Distinction at
Western Kentucky Univeristy

By

Jacob D. Leonhardt

May 2017

CE/T Committee:

Professor William Mark Simpson

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Cory Dodds

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2017

I dedicate this thesis to everyone who made Geek Reformation possible: Jesus, my family, my friends, and my professors.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would not have been possible, or even have been thought of, without the help and guidance of Almighty God. He is the reason this blog has been made, and He is the one the blog will glorify. I am thankful He has allowed me to work on and be a part of Geek Reformation.

I am also thankful for the people He has put in my life to encourage and help create Geek Reformation. First, I would like to thank my parents, Mark and Charna Leonhardt, who raised me in the Lord and educated me. Second, I would like to thank my brothers and sister, Joseph, David, and Ameliah Leonhardt, for being fellow nerds and influencing what I do. Next I must acknowledge my best friend, cohort, and fellow Geek Reformation creator, Jacob Willoughby.

Finally, I am most appreciative to my WKU professors: Mark Simpson and Kelley Coppinger. I have learned much from my time at WKU and I owe a good deal of it to you. I have enjoyed your classes the most and I am thankful God gave me such fantastic professors and advisors.

This project would not have been completed without you all.

ABSTRACT

Several years back, my best friend and I were discussing how there seemed to be no outlets for Christian geeks to enjoy being geeks without having to worry about inappropriate content. As there did not seem to be a place, we thought we should make one. Fast-forward to my senior year at Western Kentucky University, I am an Interactive Design major, and my friend has graduated with a degree in Film and Marketing; and what was once just conversation has now become a reality.

This work explains what Geek Reformation is and how we went about branding and designing it. I will also discuss Wordpress themes and plugins, as well as the importance of User Experience design.

VITA

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INTRODUCTION

Several years back, my friend and I had the idea about starting a blog appealing to Christian nerds. This mainly came about as necessity. There was no place we knew of at the time where we could enjoy geeky content without having to worry about sexual, vulgar, or grotesque elements.

Initially, our idea was named Geek Orthodox, and maintained that title for some time. In 2016 we discovered the name was already taken by someone claiming to do something rather similar to what we had planned. In fact, as we did some more research, we discovered several sites created with Christian nerds in mind. There were also a few Facebook profiles that seemed to occupy the same space we wanted to get into. Despite our idea not being as original as we once supposed, we still thought this was something good to do, as it would not only be a ministry but it also connected to our future plans of starting a comic book company.

I am appreciative to God for working out the logistics to allow me to use my honors project as an excuse to finally act on what we had discussed for several years. If graduation from the honors college offers no other benefits than it forced me to set deadlines and finish work on geekreformation.com, it would not have been a waste of time. Besides being the actualization of a long-held fantasy, it is also a fine piece for my professional portfolio. I don't use the phrase "win-win" often, but in this case, I would not hesitate to say it applies.

BRANDING

Even after we discovered Geek Orthodox and the other sites and profiles for Christian nerds, Willoughby and I decided to continue on with our idea. There were two things that, at least in my mind, separated us from them. First, Geek Reformation was going to be an article-based blogging site, focusing on filtering geeky content through a biblical perspective. This separated us from the others who primarily seemed to focus on content reviews and being another outlet for geeks. Our value-proposition became, “Geek Reformation is a site for Christian nerds, geeks, and dweebs, to enjoy geeky content filtered through the lenses of God’s word.” In other words, “it’s Answers in Genesis for nerds.” The second point of separation was that Willoughby and I knew the importance of branding.

The Name

Once upon a time, Willoughby and I were sitting in Sunday school and I had the idea to name the blog Geek Orthodox. Immediately we adopted the title and from then on the blog was referred to as Geek Orthodox, or GO. The name stuck with us for a few years. But after I had decided to use my honors project as an excuse to build GO, we made an unpleasant discovery.

In Canada there were three friends who decided to create a podcast for Christian nerds. This podcast was entitled Geek Orthodox. Willoughby and I contacted them and inquired about using the name. After a short correspondence, Willoughby and I concluded it would be best for us to use a different name. We went through several names after that, “Geek Outpost” and “Geekery” to name a few. Sadly, every name we came up with had already been taken.

One day I talked to my older brother, David, who was at the time a graduate student at Vanderbilt University's divinity school. David made several suggestions, one of which was "Geek Reformation". Willoughby and I discussed and prayed about several names, and eventually we agreed on Geek Reformation.

This chapter in the history of Geek Reformation helps to illustrate the importance of branding. After years of referring to the blog as Geek Orthodox, or GO, it was difficult at first for me to adjust to the calling it Geek Reformation. Several times in conversation, I would say "orthodox" instead of "reformation". Even to the point I purchased the domain name, geekreformation.com, I still struggled with the new name. How the brand was first conceived and labeled stayed with me, and there was difficulty in overcoming the original brand. Thankfully, God helped me overcome this and now the logo for Geek Reformation is the symbol for the blog; and Geek Orthodox is a thing of the past.

The Logo

When it comes to branding, no doubt one of the first things people think of is the logo. Given Willoughby has a degree in Film and Marketing, and my degree is in Advertising, we both knew a good logo was essential to the success of the site.

In my opinion, a good logo must do two things. First, it must quickly and clearly convey the identity of the product or service. If someone randomly saw our logo, would they have a pretty good idea of who we are? Second, is it something people would wear on a t-shirt?

Willoughby and I decided we liked the idea of a banner for the logo. A banner indicates something is claimed or belongs to someone. This fit in well with the founding

principle that we should hold every thought captive to Christ. It also worked on a cultural level, as there is the phrase, “letting your nerd banner fly.”

At first I tried to design a logo myself, with little success. Shortly after, Willoughby and I began looking for a graphic designer. A mutual friend introduced us to Christopher Bridgman, a Christian, graphic designer, and former graduate of WKU.

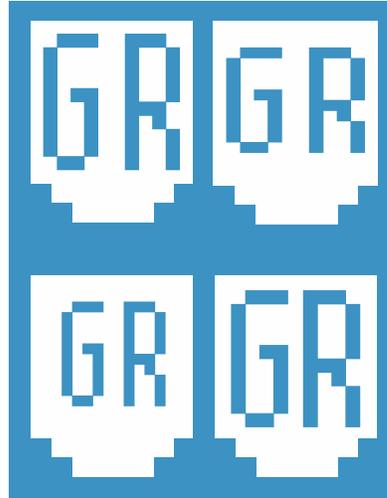


Figure 1. My Attempts at a Logo.

Before we asked for a logo, we wanted to see what it would be like working with Christopher. To begin, we asked Christopher to draw us a comic book illustration of Willoughby and me for us to use on the site. We gave Christopher as much direction as we could, and he produced phenomenal results.



Figure 2. Christopher Bridgman's Illustration of Willoughby.



Figure 3. Christopher Bridgman's Illustration of Me.

After the illustrations, we hired him to make our logo. Keeping with the banner concept, but also incorporating an eight-bit aesthetic, Christopher produced several different logos for us to choose from. What we ended up with, I think, fulfills both qualifications for a good logo.



Figure 4. Geek Reformation Logo.

While the logo does have personality, it came to our attention people may not initially know what GR stands for. To help overcome this obstacle, in the geekreformation.com navigation, the logo does not appear when the viewer is at the top of the page. Instead the name is written out in a script matching the typography of the site. Only when the viewer scrolls down is the site name replaced with the GR logo. Everywhere else the logo is used, social media for instance, the logo is displayed near a written out version of the name.

The Fonts

A particularly frustrating, yet important part of branding is the idea that everything about the product or service is a part of a brand. Colors and logo are as important as customer service and quality of work. Typography, the font, is as important as the rest of it.

From the beginning, I knew we would want a sans-serif font for the header texts. As we were going for a more modern look, something clean and sleek would fit. For the body, we could contrast the sans-serif header with a serif text. Along with contrasting

the header, serif texts are primarily used in books, so the human eye is use to looking at them when reading.

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Donec condimentum tellus purus condimentum pulvinar. Duis cursus bibendum dui, eget iaculis urna pharetra. Aenean semper nec ipsum vitae mollis.

Figure 5. Open Sans Font.

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Donec condimentum tellus purus condimentum pulvinar. Duis cursus bibendum dui, eget iaculis urna pharetra. Aenean semper nec ipsum vitae mollis.

Figure 6. PT Serif Font.

The Colors

Much like a logo, colors are a quick way to give an audience an idea of who you are. When creating a color pallet for Geek Reformation, we considered what kind of people we would associate ourselves with. Being a Christian blog, we immediately thought of Answers in Genesis. We also needed colors that appealed to nerds. Where could we find a family-friendly brand that appealed to nerds? Nintendo.

Answers in Genesis' website uses mostly white background with black text and light blue as a secondary color. There is also some orange, which is a nice contrast. Nintendo made similar color choices, dominate white background with black texts. But Nintendo went farther with the color variations and incorporated dark red, light red, dark blue, light blue, orange, yellow, pink, and green. However, Nintendo seemed to favor dark red, dark blue, and orange.

In trying to create a color pallet for Geek Reformation, I decided on four colors: primary, secondary, tertiary, and a highlight. Naturally the background for posts would be white with black text, as it would be a safe choice. I knew I wanted blue to be the primary

color, with a lighter blue as a secondary. This would offer a contrast between both colors, but still have a homogenous aesthetic. For my tertiary color, I wanted a strong contrast. Initially I used a dark red, but later I changed it to orange, which offered a more pleasing contrast than the darkness of the red.

When trying to arrive at the exact colors, I used the “inspect element” option on my computer and saw what the hex colors were on Answers in Genesis and Nintendo. Then I began tweaking the colors till I formed a new color palette consisting of dark blue, light blue, orange, and dark red. After making the site, I went back to Answers in Genesis and Nintendo to make sure our color palette was not the same as theirs.

The target audience we want to reach may be the same as those going to Answers in Genesis and Nintendo. If so, then using similar colors as them would be helpful in communicating our identity to the target audience, as well as positioning ourselves in the same area in the mind of the consumer. However, we do not want to be too similar. There must be differentiation.

We tried to achieve design differentiation by using large areas of our primary, secondary and tertiary colors. The trade off is that our homepage is darker than Answers in Genesis and Nintendo, whose background-color is white. But the page is brightened by some white text, splashes of orange, and colorful images. While Answers in Genesis and Nintendo have a bright and clean look, we aimed for a more modern, digital look.

Compilation

Individually, these elements can seem unimportant. But when they come together, they form the identity necessary to form a successful brand. To see how these elements look when compiled, visit geekreformation.com.

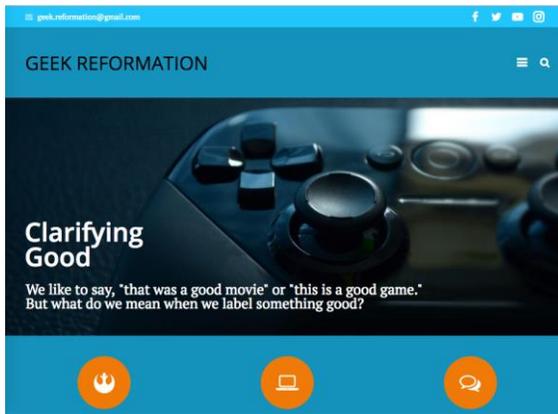


Figure 7. Screenshot of the Geek Reformation Homepage.

DESIGN

From the beginning I knew I would use Wordpress to build the site. As it was a user-friendly Content Management System (or CMS), I knew it would be easier to teach others how to use it. It was also a CMS I had a great deal of familiarity with as two of my previous internships were centered on Wordpress web design. Once I had decided on using Wordpress, I knew putting together the site could go much faster.

The focus then shifted from how to build it, to how to design it. The layout and function of the site became dependent on two factors: User Experience (or UX), and Wordpress theme and plugins.

UX

Before beginning any construction on the site, it became necessary to ask a few simple questions. First, what was the goal of the site? Second, how would that goal be achieved?

I started by trying to explain the goal of Geek Reformation in a very simple, clear way. I came up with three words: edify, educate, and entertain. Then I asked how would we go about doing these three things? As Geek Reformation was a blog, the answer was, of course, through blog posts and interactive content. Now that I had the preferred end result in mind, and the avenue in which we would achieve the end goal, I could begin to think about how the user would get there.

If blog posts and content on our website was the method by which we would reach the user, I needed to consider the user's journey in getting to the blog posts. I then drew a sort of map of how I thought the target market would be exposed to Geek Reformation's blog posts.

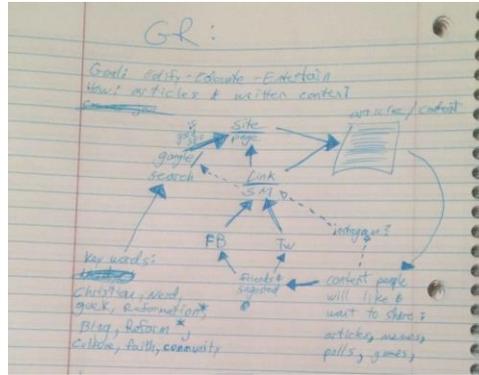


Figure 8. Map of the Consumer Journey.

I concluded that the primary source of traffic would come via content sharing on social media platforms, specifically Facebook and Twitter. Secondary would be Search Engine Optimization (or SEO) from search engines such as Google. With this understanding, the site would need to be laid out in such a way that anyone who landed on the site could easily locate blog posts and share on Facebook and Twitter.

On a related note, another social media platform we decided to be on was Instagram. We selected this for two main reasons. The first was that it would be another way of connecting with people, but through content that would show more personality, such as memes. This would also encourage people to share that content. The second reason was that having an Instagram account would help our SEO.

Later on when it came time for us to introduce The Bracket – content we designed specifically to engage the target market and encourage conversation – we decided on making The Bracket an audio recording we could upload to YouTube. By adding YouTube to the social media mix, we would again help our SEO and have another platform to engage the target market. In the future, these audio recordings could also be transferred into podcasts and distributed on iTunes.

As social media and meta data on blog posts and pages would help Geek Reformation's SEO, a primary concern remained that once the viewer was on the site, it needed to be clear what everything was and how they could find it. This is where wire framing came in.

First, I drew some layouts on a whiteboard and discussed them with Willoughby. We made basic decisions, such as would the navigation be horizontal or vertical, would the logo be in the center of the navigation or the left, and etcetera. Later on, I took the decisions we had made, and drew a wireframe on paper. After that, I went to Adobe Illustrator and made a digital wireframe, this time putting stalk images and dummy text as stand-ins for site content.

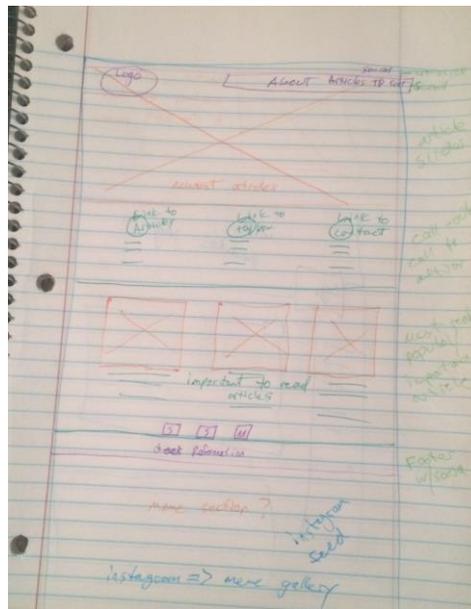


Figure 9. Drawn Wireframe.



Figure 10. Digital Wireframe.

Going through the process of wireframing helped me plan ahead and also made the construction go a lot smoother, as I already knew basically how the page needed to look. A few changes were made along the way, but the primary layout stayed the same. What was most important was the fact that this layout tells the viewer exactly what is what and where they can find it.

There are six basic sections in this layout: navbar, slider, callout boxes, latest articles, images, and footer. The navbar has six links in it, the title/logo links to the homepage. Each of the menu items in the navbar link to pages that are exactly what they sound like. For the moment there are no submenus, which makes the site clean and simple. There is also a topbar, just above the navbar, which has our email address and links to social media accounts.

In the second section is a slider that consists of five slides. Each slide is the featured image for an article. The slide also gives the article title and a brief teaser to get the viewer interested. Every part of the slide is linked to the corresponding article. So no matter what type of screen the audience is viewing the site on, all they have to do is click or touch.

The callout section consists of three icon boxes that give people a bit of information and tell them where they can find out more, and the icons in each section link to the appropriate pages. The image section is a carousel of memes that were created by Willoughby, my brother and myself. Some of these memes are shared on social media, while some are native to the site for the time being.

The last section is the footer, which again links to our social media accounts. This section of the site changed a good deal from the digital wireframe to the live site. In the final version of the site, we added links to specific categories as well as clickable search tags. These were put in place to help viewers filter out content and find what they were interested in. It also serves to inform the viewer about content on the site they may not know exists.

I had not realized it till after the site had been complete, but much of the design and function of geekreformation.com was based off of UX design. Designing the site with the focus of getting the user to point A to point B has made the site something that is very important in modern web design: user friendly. If I learned nothing else from the construction of geekreformation.com, it is the importance of UX in interactive design.

Wordpress Theme & Additional Plugins

Though themes and plugins may sound like two separate factors, they are so intertwined as to work as one. Many of the higher-end Wordpress themes - The7, Total, The Bridge, and etcetera – come preinstalled with several useful plugins. These plugins are not just additions to the themes, but in many cases are the essential functions of the themes.

The primary example would be a plugin called Visual Composer. Visual Composer converts the Wordpress interface into building blocks that the web designer can then use to stack, rearrange, and fill with design elements. Visual Compose comes standard in many themes, and as such comes not only with several basic Visual Compose elements, but also has elements that have been tailored to the specific theme being used. In this case, the Visual Composer plugin being used on The7 is not the same Visual Composer plugin being used on Total.

As I have worked a great deal with Visual Composer, and a good deal without it, I knew from the beginning I wanted to have it installed on whatever theme we ended up using for Geek Reformation. But in selecting a theme, we could not only look at the list of included plugins. We had to look at the overall feel of the theme itself.

Many themes had been used to make a wide variety of sites. But for Geek Reformation, we wanted a theme that had been designed to accommodate heavy graphical elements. This narrowed down our search to a handful of themes. Finally, we decided on the Impreza theme.

Impreza was the best option because it simply gives the designer all the elements needed and then lets them go off on their own. Many of the other themes came with

preinstalled designs, which are not always bad. But as the wireframe was in place, we knew how the site needed to end up looking. Having a theme that let us start with a clean slate was appealing. Impreza is also a theme that plays more to the modern, graphic design we wanted. As this is a site for geeks and nerds, we needed the site to be visually intriguing and technically advanced. Impreza is exactly that.

Along with all this, Impreza also came with several helpful plugins. Specifically, it came with Visual Composer and Revolution Slider. It also came with its own prebuilt contact form and preinstalled Font Awesome library, which saved me the trouble of having to make my own or download more plugins.

However, along the way I installed several additional plugins. I added All-in-One WP Migration, so I could easily backup the site before each update - a lesson I had learned the hard way from building a church website. I also downloaded a Google Analytics plugin so we could monitor approximately how many people were coming the site, how long they were staying, and where they were being directed from: either social media or search engines. Finally, I added Wordfence for added security on the site; it sends me emails anytime someone tries to login, as well as allows me to block certain IP addresses.

Each plugin works in conjunction with the Impreza theme to make Geek Reformation look and function as it does. However, the function and look would not be what it is if there had not been an emphasis placed on UX design. Geekreformation.com is a reminder of the importance of using quality tools to supplement good design.

CONCLUDE

Willoughby and I decided we wanted to have geekreformation.com live in time for the 2017 Lexington Comic book and Toy Convention, which we would be attending. For the occasion, we had shirts ordered with the GR logo printed on them. Comic Con was Friday, March 10th, through Sunday, March 12th; and we wanted the site up before that previous Wednesday.

The site was live the entire time we worked on it. We simply had not publicized it, and we also hid our social media so people could not see it. We worked on backlogging our social media and making sure we a good amount of content available for people to start interacting as soon as we started sharing.

The Monday night before Comic Con, we unlocked the social media. That night, we begin inviting everyone we knew to like our Facebook page. Within twenty-four hours, we had ninety-one likes on our Facebook page.

Throughout Monday night, and Tuesday, Willoughby and I texted each other as our numbers began to grow. While ninety likes may not seem like a lot for a blog such as ours, we were more than pleased with the outcome.

“I think it’s cool we’re this excited,” Willoughby said to me in a text. “We can tell people that literally one likes means the world to us...”

Growing Geek Reformation will take time and effort. But it is a project worth putting the time and effort into. The Lord has brought us this far and done wonderful things already. I cannot wait to see what He will do with Geek Reformation in the future.

APPENDIX: A FEW NOTES ON HOSTING AND DOMAINS

When purchasing a domain name, assuming the domain name you desire is available, I would highly suggest also purchasing similar domains. For instance, when I went to purchase geekreformation.com, I also purchased thegeekreformation.com, geekreform.com, and thegeekreform.com. This will keep others from purchasing similar domain names and trying to piggy-back off of any success you may have. Also, if those domains have hosting, you can redirect those domains to your primary domain name.

There are several good places to buy domain names, but I would highly suggest you buy it from the same place as your hosting service. This will save some headaches later. I would highly recommend Webhostingpad.com, as they are relatively inexpensive, offer a good service, and have very good customer service.