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Land Grab CT: Leveraging Branding Principles as Design and Publishing Tools

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The project "Land Grab CT" is ongoing at the University of Connecticut, and is a collaboration between members of Greenhouse Studios, the Native American and Indigenous Students' Association, and the UConn Human Rights Institute. A major focal point of the project was a website that contextualizes the University of Connecticut as a colonial institution within its status as a land grant institution funded by the Morrill Act of 1862. Other activities included speaker series, dialogue events, interviews, and a social media campaign that were all directed towards educating the University of Connecticut community about its colonial history and current disparity in resources and relationships with the Native community. Because of the wide range of dissemination pathways and need for community engagement, the project team incorporated branding design from the beginning of the project lifecycle to help find a cohesive project voice and to tailor content and design towards the expected audience. This paper illustrates the design process of the project, the integration of branding principles, and highlights some real and potential difficulties in using branding principles in public digital humanities projects.

Le projet « Land Grab CT » en cours à l'Université du Connecticut est le résultat d'une collaboration entre les membres de Greenhouse Studios, l'Association des étudiants indigènes et amérindiens (NAISA) et l'Institut des droits de l'homme de l'Université du Connecticut. L'un des principaux axes du projet est la création d'un site web qui situe l'université du Connecticut en tant qu'institution coloniale dans le cadre de son statut d'institution d'octroi de terres financée par la loi Morrill de 1862. D'autres activités ont été organisées, notamment des séries de conférences, des dialogues, des entretiens et une campagne dans les reseaux sociaux, tous destinés à informer la communauté de l'université du Connecticut sur son histoire coloniale et sur les disparités actuelles en matière de ressources et de relations avec la communauté autochtone. En raison du large éventail de voies de diffusion et de la nécessité d'un engagement communautaire, l'équipe du projet a intégré la stratégie de marque depuis le début du cycle de vie du projet afin de trouver une voix cohérente et

d'adapter le contenu et la conception à l'audience attendue. Cet article vise à presenter le processus de conception du projet, l'intégration des principes de stratégie de la marque et met en évidence certaines difficultés réelles et potentielles liées à l'utilisation des ses principes dans les humanités numériques publiques.

The Land Grab CT project illustrates the potential benefits of installing brand design methodology as a pillar of the research and publishing processes for digital humanities projects (Arrieta Fernandez et al. 2023). Branding, as used in this paper, means "a complex, interrelated system of management decisions and consumer reactions that identifies a product (goods, services, or ideas), builds awareness of it, and creates meaning for it" (Franzen and Moriarty 2009, 6). As this definition suggests, there is a fruitful interrelation between branding and user experience (UX) design, which "focuses on a deep understanding of users," asking questions such as "what they need, what they value, their abilities, and their limitations" (GSA Technology Transformation Service 2023). This is deeply tied to issues of accessibility, inclusivity, and mediums of communication. Many of these questions arise from UX design principles, where the goal is to empathetically connect to an identified audience prior to building the project through exercises such as empathy mapping (Gibbons 2018). This pre-production work creates an opportunity for designers to examine the issues raised by the project from multiple perspectives and tap into a multitude of solutions that can be integrated into the build of a digital humanities project. Intentional UX research sets the stage for a collaborative, nuanced, and effective final result.

Work and research in the digital humanities have always been interdisciplinary and collaborative. For public-facing projects, incorporating design elements, such as prototyping and branding exercises, into the lifecycle of a project can be essential to reaching intended audiences and communicating meaning (Yale University Library Digital Project Services 2023). Humanists who have not participated in much interdisciplinary work can sometimes view the building of a project, such as a website, as simply a functional effort, where as long as the website functions correctly and displays the research it is intended to, audiences will engage with it. Simply uploading the text of a research paper accompanied by some pictures can technically improve accessibility, but it does not make the research more desirable for a wider audience to read. However, "designing products with the user experience as an explicit outcome means looking beyond the functional or aesthetic" (Garrett 2010, 7), where form and function work in tandem based on intended audiences.

In particular, the integration of branding tactics such as aesthetics, voice, and a focus on the intended audience was essential to the success of the project Land Grab CT. This project uses branding elements as a foundational piece of the research and publishing processes to create a singular aesthetic and literary voice for a project that includes a website, events, and social media objects. This article explores the ongoing process of refining design and branding elements in digital humanities projects through the lens of Land Grab CT, while also highlighting some of the difficulties in

applying these concepts to projects that involve many communities and the critique of colonial institutions.

Land Grab CT examines the history and legacy of the University of Connecticut as a colonial institution with respect to the Morrill Act of 1862, which established land grant universities. These universities were funded, in part, through the accumulation of land and wealth through the violent dispossession of Indigenous people in the American West. The project was managed by the University of Connecticut's Greenhouse Studios, which is an incubator for interdisciplinary, collaborative projects. Project types vary, and some other projects include virtual reality, animation, and mixed-media websites. Project teams are engaged in a five-phase design process (Ceglio, Scheinfeldt, and Sikes 2019; Ceglio, Scheinfeldt, and Sikes 2021), which brings together a diverse group of people to respond to a prompt—in this case, Bureau of Land Management (BLM) records for scrips of lands given to the state of Connecticut under the Morrill Act of 1862. These scrips were sold by the state and put into a trust, the interest of which eventually was used to finance Storrs Agricultural College (later the University of Connecticut) as a land grant college.

In addition to these records, the project builds upon data compiled by the Land Grab Universities project headed by Tristan Ahtone and Bobby Lee, which maps "[n]early 11 million acres of Indigenous land. Approximately 250 tribes, bands and communities. Over 160 violence-backed treaties and land seizures. Fifty-two universities'' (Lee et al. 2020) that make up the original 1862 Morrill Act. Land Grab Universities deals largely with the monetary value of land as a commodity in the colonial system, and Land Grab CT uses this data as a starting point to "take a more expansive view of the value of land" and "engage in nonquantitative analyses of the impact of the Morrill Act" (McCoy, Risam, and Guiliano 2021). Land Grab CT does this by exploring the ideologies, legal tools, and acts of violence underpinning colonial expansion by state and local governments to show how and why the land was taken into the economic system. The Land Grab CT project team consists of members of Greenhouse Studios, the Native American and Indigenous Students Association (NAISA), and the Human Rights Institute at the University of Connecticut.

In the early phases of the Greenhouse Studios design process, the team moves through several different modules aimed at helping members understand the prompt and human talents of the group. In this case, the prompt came from a student in NAISA and a faculty member who had been researching the Morrill Act and had made plans to compile Bureau of Land Management (BLM) records tied to the University of Connecticut through it. After the Land Grab Universities project was published, their focus shifted to localizing the Land Grab Universities data and telling stories

with it, so they began a partnership with Greenhouse Studios. The modules during the beginning phases are meant to break down traditional academic barriers by creating trust through an environment where everyone, regardless of professional background or skill level, has opportunities to voice their opinions. One of these sessions' outcomes is to create a possibility document, which articulates and records the project's identified aim. The Land Grab CT team had clear goals, which were: 1) educating the UConn community about the nature of land grant status, 2) raising awareness about UConn's poor investment in Native relations, exemplified by a lack of a cultural centre, funding, and faculty and staff, and 3) setting some groundwork for restorative justice in the form of increased funding and Native tuition waivers (University of Maine 2023). To attempt to achieve these goals, the team identified that the project would have to be multi-modal and accessible to a wide audience of students, faculty, staff, and community members. The team believed that educating the UConn community about its colonial past would help build a case for greater investment in the Native and Indigenous communities on campus.

The Land Grab CT team found that trying to reach a wide audience while dealing with difficult subject matters of past and ongoing colonial violence meant that the communication of content must be precise. In particular, the team took seriously the cornerstone design principles that "everything communicates" and that "what we create in design must serve a purpose to some predefined community, within a particular context" (Radzikowska and Ruecker 2022, 52). With these principles in mind, branding workshops were facilitated early on in the research process to identify audience, intended voice/feel, identification of inspirational projects, and desired aesthetics. Early workshops focused on finding adjectives that the group wanted the project to embody, including "community-oriented," "engaging," and "educational." Ultimately the team wanted to create a project for the university community but decided that this project should not be recognizable as part of the University of Connecticut.

This is because large institutions like the University of Connecticut have increasingly leveraged branding as a way to promote their services, distinguish their reputation, and "build a university-wide identity" (Drori 2013, 4), and Land Grab CT presents a narrative contrary to their branding. Most importantly, land grant institutions largely omit colonial history and land theft from Native people and often "loom large within the collective imaginary of higher education, particularly in relation to their perceived democratizing intent and impact" (Stein 2020, 212). This historiography is presented despite the fact that "[land-grant] universities with higher endowments have a lower portion of [American Indian and Alaska Native]" students (Feir and Jones 2021, 134). The University of Connecticut, like many universities, has adopted land acknowledgement,

in which the university formally recognizes the territories of Indigenous people of the land where the university currently is situated, in attempts to make the community more inclusive. However, when these acknowledgements do not come with any action or material changes, they have often come to be perceived as strictly "performative" in nature (Veltman 2023).

Land grant universities have a specific relationship to Indigenous communities, as Sharon Stein notes that "the US government's land accumulation throughout the nineteenth century [that] helped to create the conditions of possibility for land-grant colleges and universities in what I describe as an *indirect but dependent* relationship" (Stein 2020, 219). In other words, Indigenous lands were not accumulated for the purpose of funding land-grant institutions, but their accumulation made it possible. The Morrill Act of 1862 also established an economic relationship between the state and the designated land grant institutions, where both the federal and state governments help to fund the institution, and the institution provides education for citizens to become productive economic contributors to the state. Beneficiaries of the first Morrill Act would often receive additional funds from the federal government through the Hatch Act of 1887, the Second Morrill Act in 1890, and the Smith-Lever Act of 1914. Because land-grant institutions often serve as flagship state universities, they also receive significant state funding. This funding, in turn, allows for the expansion of the institutions. In the case of the University of Connecticut, the state of Connecticut granted $3 million in 1935, $1 billion in 1995, and $1.3 billion in 2002, all of which allowed for the accumulation of land and wealth by the university. The University of Connecticut dictates that the "UConn brand reflects the core values of the institution and must be presented in one uniform voice" (University of Connecticut 2023), signalling that both content and aesthetics should align with university standards. Because Land Grab CT is critical of the institution, the team decided it should be stylistically distinct from the university.

The Land Grab CT logo (**Figure 1**) is one aspect that represents the project's identity in relation to the history and legacy of the University of Connecticut as a colonial institution. The branding for this project reflects the fact that it is about the University of Connecticut and the state of Connecticut, but it is not specifically endorsed by the university itself. In fact, the project is a critique of the university's response and engagement with its status as a land-grant institution, which is often uncritically invoked to signal "progress" (King and Edwards 2021). The team aimed for an inclusive logo design that reflects the financial dependency of the university upon Indigenous land stolen from twelve additional states. To do this, the logo incorporates the geographical elements of Connecticut, such as the state's shape and the approximate geographic location of the University of Connecticut. This type of design evokes the history of the formation of American states through geographical enclosure and hints

at the larger history included in the project's website. Additionally, the geometric, shape-based font reflects how land is turned into parcels and sold as private property by the United States government (Hawkins 2009). The letters of the logo, however, overlap to signify that the "conversion of this land into a set of discrete parcels was a massive and often unwieldy undertaking" (Park 2019) due to the practical reality of trying to force a grid onto uneven terrain and the fact that Indigenous people occupied the land. The logo also has lines that flow from the west and culminate into one point, the approximate location of UConn, which signifies the accumulation of capital made possible by conquest and commodification in the American West and the University of Connecticut's ties to the larger economic system of the United States.

Figure 1 The logo featured on the front page of Land Grab CT's website.

Aesthetic elements of this logo are repeated throughout a variety of dissemination channels to signify a cohesive project across platforms using a "style tile" as a guide. Style tiles are popularly used in web design and UX work to "help form a common visual language between designers and stakeholders," and consist of "fonts, colours and interface elements that communicate the essence of a visual brand for the web" (Style Tiles 2023). Land Grab CT's style tile (**Figure 2**) builds off motifs present in the logo, including a complete colour scheme, logos for use across different types of media, and guidelines for different types of text boxes. The style guide was created with the intention of presenting an aesthetically pleasing presentation for a primarily text-based website, as the main content of the project included a timeline of the formation of the United States, a timeline of the formation of the state of Connecticut, and vignettes about some of the parcels tied to the University of Connecticut through the 1862 Morrill Act.

Figure 2 The style tile used to design Land Grab CT's website and social media assets.

The team chose to not incorporate historical images of Indigenous peoples. Past drawings of Indigenous people often fell into racist caricatures, and "although there is a sense in which the camera does indeed capture reality" (Sontag 1977, Sec. 6), "to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed" (Sontag 1977, Sec. 4) in that photographs can make it feel like we know something "in reality" and create a sense of power over it. In fact, many early photographs of Indigenous people in America were taken by white people as a part of the colonial surveillance and knowledge creation project. For example, a photographer might accompany a group to survey contested land to see what resources the land holds, and while on the trip take pictures of the Indigenous people to portray them as not "using" the resources, such as timber or mineral deposits, therefore helping to justify removal (Angus 2020). In other words, contemporary historical images, especially ones that have been preserved and reproduced in digital form, bear an entire history and context that, to fully contextualize, might ultimately detract from the goal of guiding the audience through specific historical events. The design choices in the style tile reflect team-wide conversations regarding the desired look and feel of the project, with special attention to the adjectives the team had chosen as the building blocks for the project's visual design and overall voice and tone.

The style guide for the project was also designed specifically to accommodate varying amounts of text throughout the website and on social media postings. The website itself was built to be as accessible as possible through a "breadth to depth" approach, meaning that main themes are presented as simply as possible where the reader first interacts with them, but text boxes can be expanded to give fuller context and more complex themes for those who wish to pursue them. The website also lists its sources and further readings if readers want to learn more about any of the subjects or events that are contained within the content. This approach was significantly effective when creating content for social media posts, where the more simply an idea can be conveyed, the better. For example, **Figure 3** was designed for Twitter and explains the basics of what a land grant institution is, some reasons why this information might be pertinent to the reader, and some sources if the reader wants to learn more about the topic. The image was created to be contained within one post and textually based, since that is how Twitter is normally interacted with.

Figure 3 An example of a social media post made using elements from the style tile.

Because of the simple, textual-based approach, this content was easily adapted for Instagram, where each text box was separated as part of a series of pictures. These posts follow the same colour scheme, font, and shapes as the website, as well as contain the logo for the larger project. Similar approaches were used for flyers for events such as dialogues and speaker events. Land Grab CT's integrated branding design helped make

it possible to tie sometimes disparate ideas and events together into a cohesive project across multiple platforms.

Since undertaking the Land Grab CT project, Greenhouse Studios has refined its design process to incorporate branding modules into earlier phases of project design. This includes right-sizing information, creating accessible content through the awareness of average reading levels, and leveraging the use of repeatable, inviting design choices thread continuity throughout the dissemination of the project by creating a standard that our audience could recognize and connect with, regardless of channel. Those working on digital humanities projects can take similar approaches in finding brand identities in their projects to help refine target audiences and to tailor content and aesthetic choices towards them. However, it should be recognized that branding cannot be taken up uncritically when working on digital humanities projects. This is especially true for projects such as Land Grab CT that relate to historically marginalized groups.

The historical concept of branding is deeply embedded in the concept of ownership and evolved along with capitalism as a means for companies to stay competitive by manufacturing customer loyalty. The concept of branding itself can be traced back to the use of hot irons on livestock and enslaved people to denote ownership and has evolved into a modern-day business practice that is now "a symbol, an emotion, and partner" (Bastos and Levy 2012), meaning that brands have developed from a symbol to having personality traits that people can have relationships to and with. Land Grab CT's branding and social media presence avoided creating a brand personality, since the aim of the project was to educate by highlighting information and people, not to create a voice that speaks for them. Many companies have created branding campaigns that border on doing just that, as they are increasingly leveraging socio-political issues to increase brand equity (Moorman 2020), which can easily fall into the sphere of "woke washing" (Vrendenburg et al. 2018). This is when companies brand themselves on political progressivism and claim ownership over political movements and marginalized identities without working to change the underlying structures that cause marginalization. Project members must be clear that they are not claiming ownership over the ideas, stories, or identities, especially of marginalized groups. This can be done in the communication of the project itself, proper citation of sources, and making their work open access through something like Creative Commons. When branding and UX elements are implemented into project design without participating in intellectual or economic enclosure, they can help project teams effectively communicate a set of values and ideas to their intended audiences.

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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