

# Case Study

The Website Story

Kathleen Simmons

# Case Study

PROJECT TITLE: PORTFOLIO WEBSITE DEVELOPMENT

ROLE: INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGNER / VISUAL DESIGNER / WEB DEVELOPER

CONTEXT: INDEPENDENT PROJECT, INDEPENDENTLY MAINTAINED

DELIVERABLE: ACCESSIBLE PROFESSIONAL PORTFOLIO WEBSITE

TOOLS: WORDPRESS, TWENTY TWENTY-FOUR, DREAMHOST, CUSTOM HTML, CSS, JAVASCRIPT

---

## Introduction

Every website has a story, and mine is no different. There are always high points and low points. Changes, struggles, design challenges, and sometimes robot challenges too, when you don't have a support network of your own.

In the very beginning, my father supported my endeavor, until he became ill and suddenly passed away. Thereafter, it became mine alone. All the design decisions were mine from the color palette to the typeface. Attempting to make it as accessible as I could. After two years, as indicated in the story, platforms changed, technologies changed and being the independent designer in some cases became easier.

With the invention of AI becoming ever more popular, I was able to break out and do some design things that hadn't been considered in the beginning. I wanted my Instructional Design projects be operable from the website page, instead of static images as they were in the beginning. The difference was that I was able to obtain HTML, CSS, and JavaScript code to make them function independently of the native block structures beyond the original designs.

This is where the website story begins, if you haven't noticed, there is something of a play on words here. If you acknowledge a theatrical metaphor, consider, "The West Side Story".

As in that story, there are two rivals here. In this case, technology barriers and accessibility patterns to make viewing and using the website (most any website) easier for the user. The one fielding this rival territory, is the designer...okay...me...doing the WordPress Wrangling.

Attempting to make a go of this, so that anyone who wants to view or use my website has that ability without issue. Personally, when it comes to writing code, or knowing the definitive standards for creating an accessible website, my knowledge and experience is slim, hence my use of using AI to assist with bridging that gap.

---

# Case Study

## The Challenge

Building this portfolio website began with a core question: how to effectively communicate diverse technical and creative capabilities to potential employers in educational technology, while ensuring the site itself was accessible to all users, including those who rely on assistive technology. The project was prompted by a graduate professor's recommendation to create a portfolio for future employment, and a career advisor's suggestion to document the process. What followed was not simply a web development project, but an iterative design challenge balancing professional communication, platform functionality, and accessibility requirements.

## Analysis & Research

Platform selection centered on WordPress, with DreamHost as the hosting provider. Theme evaluation became the primary research focus. Each candidate theme was assessed against two non-negotiable criteria: Full Site Editing (FSE) capability and semantic HTML structure at the back-end, which governs how assistive technologies like screen readers interpret and navigate content. The target audience considered both hiring managers and site visitors with varying access needs.

## Design Decisions

Accessibility drove every design decision from the start. The original design concept began with a colorblind-safe color scheme, button-based page navigation as an alternative to drop-down menus, and keyboard navigability. These were not retrofitted features -- they were the foundation. Theme selection went through more than a dozen iterations over several weeks. Each was evaluated not just on appearance, but on whether the back-end structure could actually support the accessibility features the front-end promised. Where native block patterns did not fit the content, Custom HTML blocks were used for content display, primarily on the Instructional Design, Digital Design, and Documentation pages.

## Implementation Process

The first theme selected was FotaWP, chosen for its block-based structure and FSE compatibility. It functioned well for approximately two years until a layout change attempt exposed deeper issues. The back-end lacked the semantic structures necessary for reliable assistive technology support, making it unsuitable to keep.

The second theme, Bluehost Blueprint, offered semantic structure and keyboard navigability, but proved too buggy in practice. Typeface rendering failed consistently, and the theme behaved more like a blog platform than a portfolio site. It was set aside after a few days.

The third and current theme, Twenty Twenty-Four, is a native WordPress theme overlooked initially in favor of third-party options. It provided FSE compatibility, semantic structure, and enough flexibility to customize without rebuilding everything from scratch. Native block builder features were used deliberately to narrow the rebuild timeline.

# Case Study

Additional complications included working across two machines. One kept breaking down but maintained design fluidity when it functioned. The other could run high-powered design applications but could not keep up with the aesthetics. A browser caching issue also required a full uninstall and reinstall to resolve.

## Evaluation & Outcomes

Keyboard navigation is functioning as intended. Typeface rendering is stable. All pages are built. The process surfaced a consistent pattern: themes that promised accessibility frequently failed to deliver it structurally. The guiding question throughout was, "If I'm having difficulty building with this, how much more difficult will it be for viewers to use?" That question shaped every decision. The full narrative of this process is documented on the Website Story page.