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Build in Progress: Closing Down and Opening Up

Farewell for now…

After 3.5 years of development and 2,000+ shared projects on everything from 3D printed chess pieces to unicycle mechanics to crowdfunding a virtual reality tour of an interactive media lab, Build in Progress is going on indefinite hiatus.

Effective **Monday, September 19th**, it will no longer be possible to create new content on BiP. Instead, over the next weeks, an open-source version of Build in Progress [BiP] will be shared so that anyone can build their own project-sharing platform from the source. The entire site will also be archived so that you'll still be able to access and share any projects you've already created on BiP.



Instructions   Actual Design Process
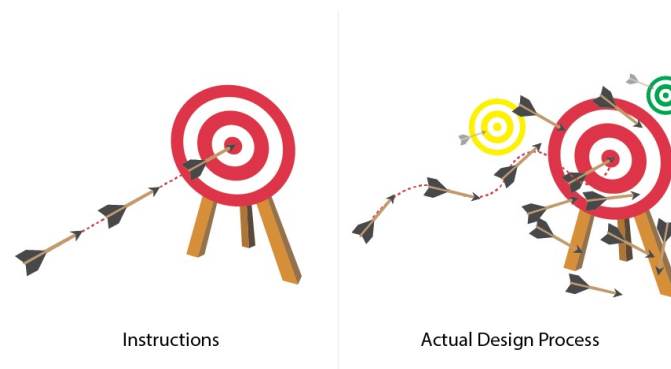
My own depiction of process versus product-oriented documentation

How it all started

When I first conceptualized BiP, I had just completed a study of Instructables, where I talked to both authors and readers of the project-sharing community. Through these conversations, I realized that instructional documentation, while valuable for replicating projects, did not necessarily capture the messy, experimental nature of creating a project. I wanted to fundamentally reconsider what DIY documentation might look like that enables creators to capture iterations and shifts (the *process*) rather than a final list of instructions (the *product*).

Being at the MIT Media Lab, I was inspired by the "deploy (or die)" mantra and got really excited about building a tool that would be openly available for anyone to capture their creative process. There was just one problem: I had no idea how to build such a tool. The only website I had developed up to that point had been a static webpage for my personal site.

So I began with what I had some familiarity with: building mockups. There were *lots* of Illustrator mockups for visualizing design process, some of which ended up in the current implementation.
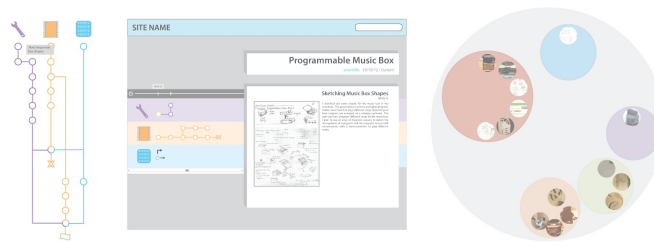
A few mockups from 2013 before BiP even had a name

Ultimately, like any project, choices were made based on what I could realistically execute based on the time, resources, and knowledge I had, though the platform evolved over time as I gained more confidence with the help of several incredible mentors from my lab. To share this experience (and also dog feed my own tool), I documented how the site was built with my own project on BiP about BiP:
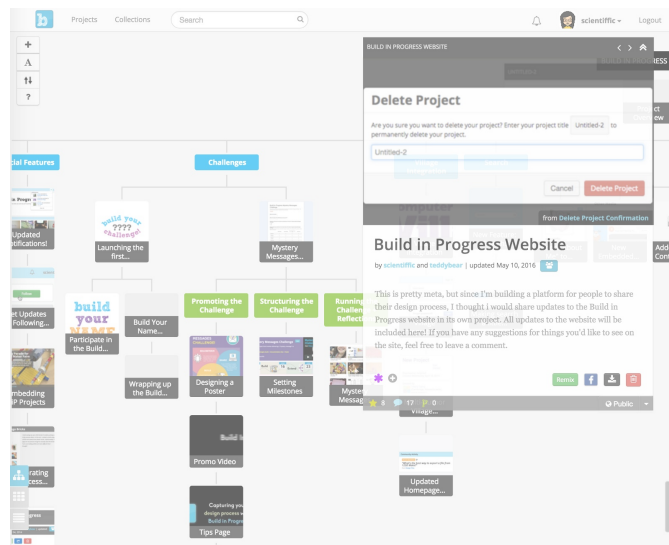
The Build in Progress of Build in Progress
[http://buildinprogress.media.mit.edu/projects/103/steps]

Some of the challenges

Throughout developing and maintaining BiP, I found three aspects to be particularly challenging. I don't have specific answers to any of them but thought it might be helpful to share an honest reflection.

Execution anxiety

The first challenge is a variant of impostor syndrome that I call *execution anxiety*. For the first year I worked on this project, I would introduce BiP by saying, "I'm a mechanical engineer, not a web developer…and here's a tool I've been working on for people to share design process." The issue wasn't that I felt like an impostor: I never claimed to be (or even self-identified as) a developer. Instead, I felt the need to communicate that what people saw and experienced with BiP was only a fraction of what I imagined the tool could be. Execution anxiety stems from a gap between how you envision a product and how well you are able to execute that vision. From working on BiP, I don't think it's possible for one person to sustain a community at a scale of 2,000+ users. Even now, as a perfectionist, I find myself unnecessarily justifying why something isn't as complete as I want it to be.

Research project versus production-level product

The second is a tension between creating a research project and creating a production-level product. What I was really interested in with BiP is seeing how people visually represent their ideas and how communities might contribute to and collaborate on works-in-progress. To get to this point, though, required a significant amount of work on features that people come to expect from online communities, such as search, social features, media sharing—and that's just the front end. There are plenty of off-the-shelf tools for implementing these features, but it takes time to integrate them into a cohesive experience, and I often felt frustrated about the up-front work to even begin exploring more interesting ideas.

Scaling with uncertainty

A third challenge is an ongoing conflict between scaling and uncertainty about the lifetime of the product. Understand how communities can contribute to works-in-progress requires a critical mass of active users. But throughout working on BIP, I was worried about promoting it because I was unsure how long the platform could be sustained. Of course, by not actively promoting BiP, it was difficult to reach the scale I would ideally want to support the types of interactions I was designing for. It's a chicken and egg problem: You don't know how a project will be received or how committed you and others will be from the start, which in turn affects the potential reach the work can have.

While I realize these reflections are not particularly uplifting, I want to emphasize that the most rewarding part of working on BiP was seeing the amazing work that people shared on the site. It was a joy to see the creative ideas people brought to life, and I'm grateful that I was able to play a part in that experience.

What's next

Since I graduated from the Media Lab in June, I've been in touch with several organizations interested in creating their own versions of BiP. Given that I am also moving onto new projects, I felt it was best to close this chapter of BiP and let others create their own by sharing the source, which will be available later in September. I'm excited to see the new directions people take BiP and hope that it has inspired new thinking about how we can capture how we create.

Thanks

There are many people that have been instrumental to the growth of BiP. Thanks to the Computer Clubhouse coordinators who used BiP, Alex Ruthmann at NYU, Erica Halverson and Beau Johnson at University of Wisconsin, and the 20+ undergraduate researchers who helped build BiP. Thank you to the Lifelong Kindergarten Group and the MIT Media Lab, who have been BiP's home for the past 3.5 years, and a special thanks to Chris Garrity for her mentorship and support of BiP.

Finally, thank you for being part of this journey with me.

If you have any thoughts you'd like to share about BiP, please feel free to leave a comment below.

For more information about BiP and process-oriented documentation, see my dissertation. (: