

# MANCHESTER SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE



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**MSA  
LIVE 21**

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## Partners

Lifeshare are one of the oldest homeless charities in Manchester, they are prized for their innovation and forward thinking attitude when it comes to helping people. Their website states that they brought the Big Issue to The North and that they were one of the first to have a needle exchange. One of their main focuses is in making sure that nobody is without food and in the last few years they have found a new point of inequality in the issue of digital inclusion.

Whilst our project has been being produced Lifeshare have been gathering second hand smartphones from donations all across the city. They aim to distribute these to as many homeless people as possible, happily sharing resources between other chairites if that is the easiest way to get someone a phone.

Our main point of contact for this project has been Jamie Reynolds, Lifeshare's digital co-ordinator, who has kindly given us his time once a fortnight to make sure the framework, put in place is as good as it possibly can be.

# Agenda

## Bit by Bit

In a world integrated into the digital age, the demand for digital skills are a minimum requirement to prosper in society. Many homeless people in Manchester suffer from unemployment due to a lack of digital skills that are almost at a point of muscle memory for many of us. Our team of postgraduate and undergraduate students worked together to design and gamify a learning app teaching these digital skills to the homeless in such a way that the content can be easily digestible and enjoyable for use by all ages.

Our brief from Lifeshare, to create an app that both engages and informs, by gamifying the experience. was based on two key provisions that the app should accomplish. The first was to provide a platform which partners of Lifeshare could add course content to. Courses would teach things as varied as 'How to food shop online', with Asda, to wider educational courses, with the Ragged University. This course content should be easy to access and fun to use. This is where gamifying came into full effect.

Video games have been perfecting player engagement for years. Small things like achievement badges and rewards for progression, make the user want to keep playing, both for the feeling of achievement and to see what is unlocked next. We integrate a similar method into our educational app where, after completing a course, the user will unlock a set of clothing for their digital avatar, an achievement badge and a conceptual building facade that can be found in their homepage. All 3 represent the course that has just been completed in some way.

The second provision is that the app is accessible to people who have never used a phone before so that in an easy to use interface people learn how to use a smartphone with continued use. We were mindful of this throughout the wider app design, making sure things like button presses are as easy to understand as possible. We also tried to integrate the image of Manchester into as much of our design as we could. The idea here was that this would both engage the user with familiar iconography seen in a new context, but also in making the app more accessible by making it feel more expected.

In the ways in which we integrated these ideas it is our hope that even people who are completely new to the digital world can easily learn the skills they need 'Bit by Bit'.

# Primary Concept

## Postmodernism's relevance to app design

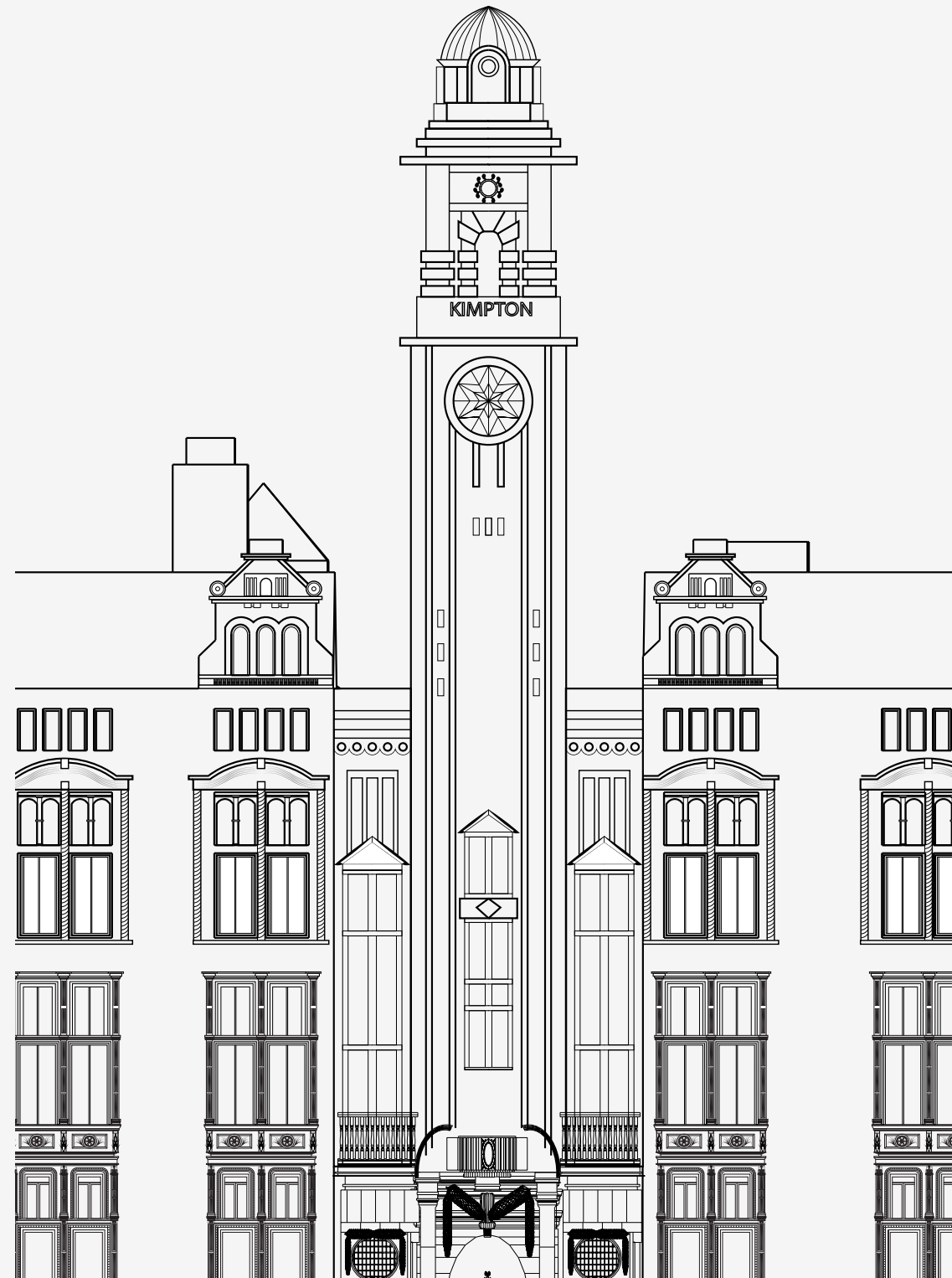
In 'Learning from Las Vegas' Venturi theorises that one of the two key ways that a building propagates its symbolism to its surroundings is via a method he calls the decorated shed. The architecture of the decorated shed is secondary to the signage it displays. Its façade may contain elements that delineate its purpose. This is seen, with glaring clarity, in Las Vegas where the architecture of casinos is read only after the sign outside their front door is seen and perceived. The sign is what defines the building's identity.

We initially explored this concept further by illustrating one of the most elevationally rich buildings in Manchester, the Kimpton Building. Here we can see that whilst the elevational symbolism of some of these elements may be lost to time the clarity with which they propagate some wider meaning to their surroundings is undeniable

This aspect can also be used to symbolise the how the mobile app seeks to draw you in. It displays a small logo that sums up the identity of an app. When clicked on this symbolism continues. Using this methodology we can both engage and inform in a gamified e-learning app where the elements within it display Post-Modern qualities that reinforce the central ethos and ideas of what has been learnt within. A primary example of this comes in the form of achievements earned by completing individual courses. These achievements represent the course that has just been completed but their graphic quality makes people want to continue completing courses so that they can see what the next representative graphic takes the form of.

The key achievements that are unlocked after completing a course are a literal achievement badge; a set of clothing for an avatar and a conceptual building façade that represents the typology of the course that has just been learnt. An example of this may be in the course called 'how to use mobile banking', after this course is completed the player earns a graphical achievement badge that represents mobile banking; a suit for their avatar and an elevation made up of 4 different banking buildings.

By taking the ideas of Post-Modernism and applying it to this project we synthesise the core symbolic aspects of these courses that could be seen to be particularly engaging. The clarity with which these elements can be read helps to inform people as well as making them more curious about the world around them and what it represents.



# Overall App Design

## Accessible pages and playful schematics

Our primary aim for this project was to create a user interface which is easily digestible and enjoyable for use by all ages. Much of the work done to make this happen would be in the smaller elements such as the grids, colours, buttons and font. These were tweaked for their ability to work in harmony with other major elements of the app design such as the achievement icons, avatar clothing and conceptual facades that populate the homepage. The idea is to make sure these elements not only aid in portraying the different course content itself, but to create a cheerful and user friendly style as well. A final conglomeration was reached developing these smaller elements into a fixed flow of pages and unified style that would be applied to the whole app.

Colour scheme has been vital to the design framework throughout. The elements that the eye is immediately drawn to makes a huge difference to how a page is immediately understood, and therefore its accessibility to people who haven't used a smartphone before. We have discovered that the use of bold colours, such as red and gold, can be used to highlight the important parts of the app such as unlocked course lessons. Softer colour such as grey and beige indicate elements like completed and locked lessons to hint to their lesser importance when seen on the same page.

Button icons such as the back arrows, profiles and drop down menus were one of the most important parts of the design to get right. They indicate how to navigate the app so should be immediately clear in their function to anyone using it for the first time. It was important to find a balance though, as they should not catch the eye, and appear as important, as elements like the course start buttons, avatar clothing, achievement icons and conceptual facades. To do this the icons themselves were scaled to a large size but, to make sure they did not draw too much attention, only had a stroke rather than a solid fill.

In the context of the course page's accessibility, each course was deigned with a progression bar. This makes clear to the user exactly how far they have gone but it also engages them to want to complete more. The font, in pages such as this, was chosen due to its clear representation on screen, reinforced by it's large scale to cater to all age groups. These graphical solutions were consistent throughout all pages of the application and were successful in creating a harmonious and clear user interface.





# Splash and Loading Screens

## Defining the first look of the app

The splash screen typically forms the visual opener of the app and is an image displayed whilst the loading screen buffers. It is aimed at catching initial attention and garnering interest.

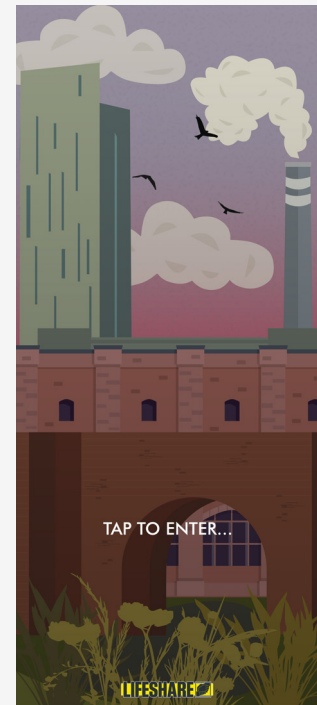
As the splash screens form the first look people have of the the project. We designed visuals that will give the users an initial connection between them and the apps virtual location; representing Manchester through inference. This tempts further exploration into the apps other elements. In this case illustrations were produced with specific iconic buildings, sceneries, roads, and other elements that are indicative of this place.

The splashscreen is designed for a demographic that has little knowledge of how to use a smartphone, thus we aimed to make the splash screen as approachable and understandable as possible. In this case a simple phrase: 'Tap on the screen to enter' is displayed alongside, guiding the user into the actions needed to use a smartphone 'Bit by Bit' and reinforcing this action each time the app is opened.

Illustrations were produced that displayed simple yet eye-catching graphics of block pieces of colour, subtly different from the one beneath it to infer depth. We have implemented some more complex effects, such as believable shading and texturing but it is always done in such a way that the individual shapes used to create these effects can be followed and the method of creation can be defined. Even in the apps method of creation it seems accessible from the first moment it is seen.

The loading screen followed a similar synthesis in terms of its core drivers but would use different methods to express the same purpose. Many of the initial variations explored were aimed at minimalistic designs. Producing elements such as loading bars which were as easy to understand as possible yet in inference showed a complex subversion with the theme of Manchester.

The bee was settled on as a core symbol, thus we can see a loading bar resembling honeycomb that fills with a honey colour, harmonious with the colour scheme. The bee icon itself symbolises the busy ambience of Manchester whilst the idea of the hive itself is a testament to our apps purpose as something for the common good that can be used by all.



Industrial Manchester



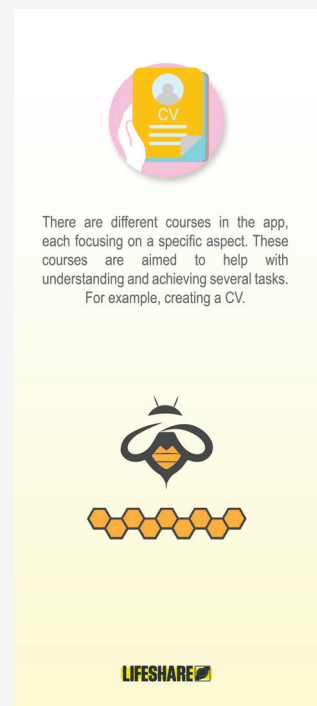
Tap the screen



Manchester Scenery



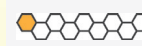
Tap the screen



Loading Screen



Manchester Bee



The Loading Bar



Classical Manchester



Tap the screen

# Conceptual Building Facades

## The earned element to populate your home screen

As previously mentioned one of the achievements unlocked by completing a course is a conceptual building façade that represents the typology of the course that has just been completed. This was particularly effective in the context of 'Manchesterfication' as there is a particularly inherent quality to the symbolic characteristics of facades in Manchester and their ability to tell a story. The app's homepage would act in a similar to the experience of walking down a Manchester street, as more buildings are unlocked the screen can be swiped along to reveal what is next on the virtual street elevation.

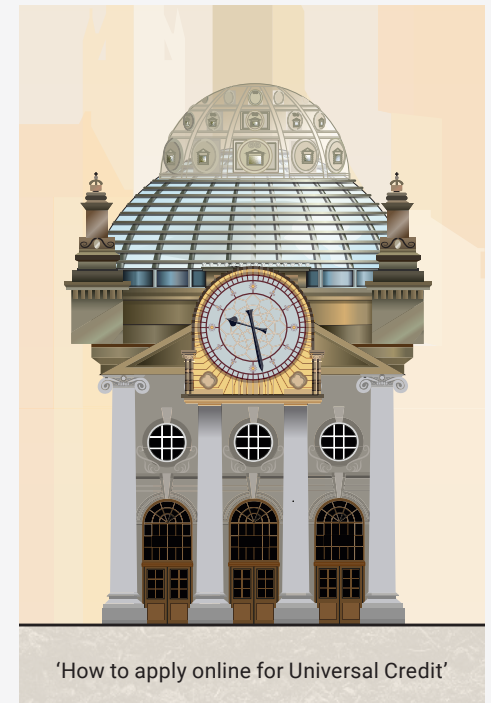
To do this we took 4 particularly characteristic elements of iconic facades linked to these course titles, illustrated them and then superimposed them over the top of each other. An example of this is in the course 'How to apply online for Universal Credit' where we looked at 4 harmonious or contrasting government buildings. The result is a symbolic synthesis of the typology of 'Government building'. Some of these key elements included; the glass dome of the Reichstag; a typical frontage of ionic columns and the clock from Manchester town hall. This would form an essential framework both for us to create any more and if, after time, more course are added, for Lifeshare to create more of them as well.

One of the key aspects of the framework is to include one building from Manchester itself. In this sense we see 3 examples of how the idea of 'Government building' is expressed universally and then how Manchester subverts these universal characteristics to its own identity. Another good example of this can be seen in 'How to find a hostel' where we have taken a tower from the Manchester Midlands Hotel. Our choice of hotel buildings to contrast with more typical hostel details hopefully equalises the class perception of somewhere to stay. In this conglomeration we represent places for the wealthy and not so wealthy as being just as valuable architecturally speaking. This hopefully inspires a look at hostels themselves and how they should be designed with just as much rigor as the facade of hotel buildings.

The hidden depths of these elevations should engage the user with wonder as to how they have been created and why they look the way they do. It is our hope that, in making something architecturally eye catching virtually it will encourage people to be curious about the real world around them.



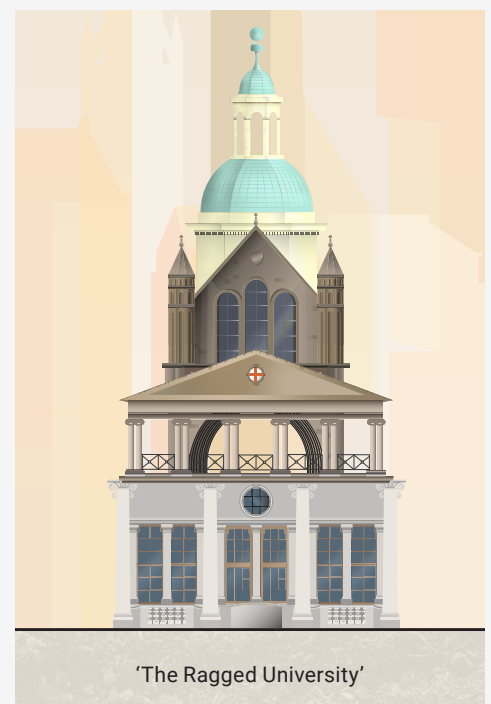
'How to access online banking'



'How to apply online for Universal Credit'



'How to find a hostel'



'The Ragged University'

# Course Logos and Achievements

## Icons to mark your progress

One key aspect of the app design was how we represented courses through a logo. These logos should be clear and attractive however in some cases this required a certain level of inference to achieve. In cases such as the course on mobile banking this was easily arrived at and immediately understandable. The piggy bank represents a common subconscious image of saving, whilst the addition of the phone and the bank building effectively sums up this course. In other cases the solution needed to be more subtextual. The course on applying for universal credit displays an umbrella to suggest that this is the government funding that keeps the rain of your back. This subtext is also particularly suggestive of the weather of Manchester so links back into our agenda of 'Manchesterfication'. Even in conceptually complex cases, such as the umbrella icon, we tried to keep the icons as concise as possible. This ensures that people who perhaps do not use the internet as readily, and may struggle a little at first do not lose interest.

In order to keep the whole page consistent, we selected 4 bright colors as an initial basis. These were carefully chosen for their harmony with each other and their ability to give positive emotions in their uplifting tones.

We went on to look at how we could reuse these logos as achievement icons unlocked after each course is completed. In this case we considered the achievement page on which they would be viewed, where many elements would be greyed out until they were unlocked. In this case our thinking was that in making the achievements in varying, vivid colours it would provide a welcome contrast between the grey that could be seen before completion. This sudden pop of individual colour should engage the user by wanting to make the page more colourful thus going on to complete further courses to do so.



Achievement Icon



Email Course Achievement



Mobile Banking Course Achievement



Ragged University Icon



CV Tutorial Achievement



Digital Map Using Course Achievement



How to use Online Foodshop



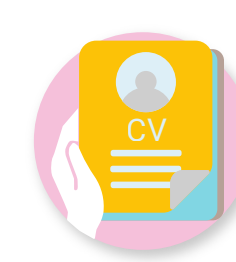
How to use E-mail



How to use Mobile Banking



How to apply for Universal Credit



How to Create a CV



How to use a digital map

# Avatar Clothing

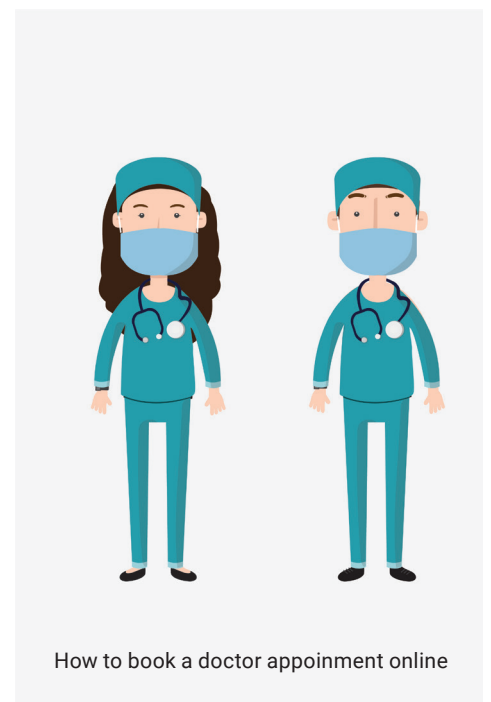
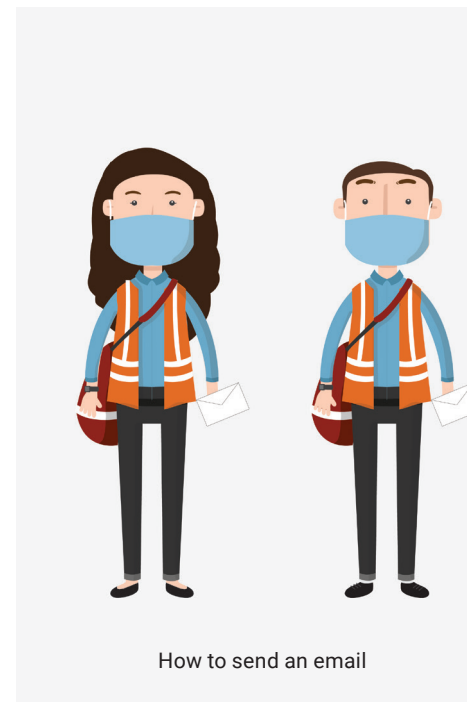
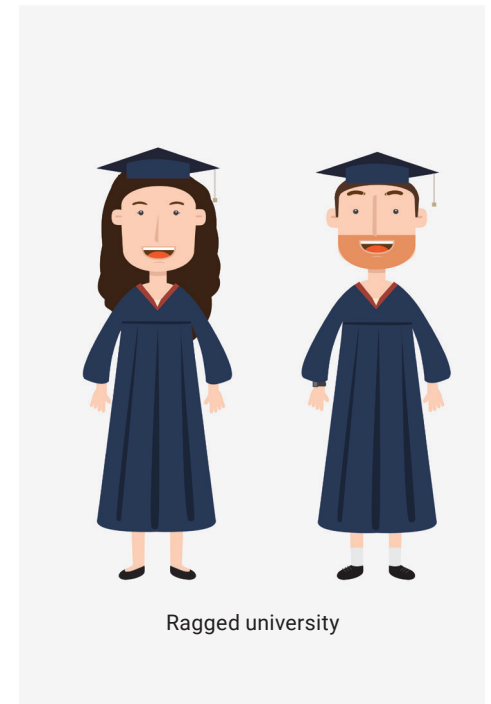
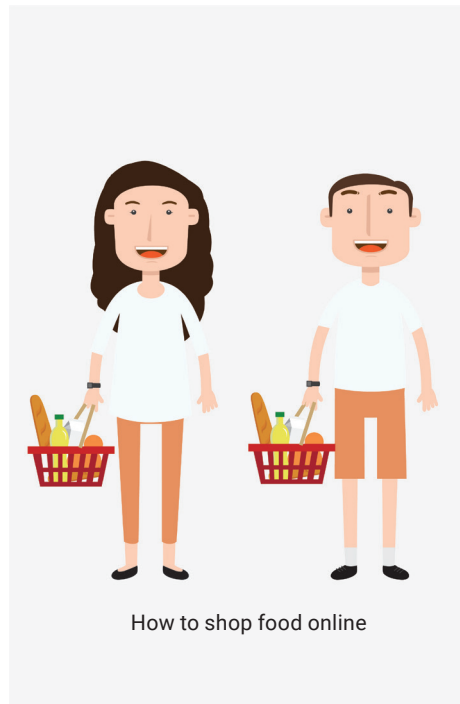
## Your character displays your new expertise

One commonly employed design element in videogames is the avatar, which allow the user to adopt or create another identity and become part of the virtual community. A personalized avatar creates a connection between users and the app, hence, introduces a sense of individuality. By completing courses provided in the App, users can unlock avatar clothing item which, like other primary elements of the apps design, are representative of the course completed. This reward system provides a virtual incentive and improves the users' level of engagement.

We explored a variety of graphic styles, one of the key elements considered was flexibility for later personalization so whilst full sets are unlocked for each course elements in these sets can be mixed with other elements from other sets. For full parity, illustrations of a male and a female avatar in standing posture were produced. We also adopted a clear cut, fun design for the avatar's themselves, in line with previously explored ideas regarding the user interface.

As previously mentioned, clothing designs are inspired by the course itself. This can either be done in a literal sense or one that inspires people to use the skills they have learnt in the course provided in real life. An example of the first is in the postman uniform, unlocked after completing the course on how to write an email. An example of the second is in users who attended the course on how to write a CV. These users may be going for job interviews so the set here is of a formal suit to enhance their connection between reality and the platform. 26 pieces of clothing were produced in total, spanning 8 different, unified sets. Both the clothing and the avatars are illustrated in blocks of colour with simple shading to link back to our design process for elements such as the splashscreens. As the final detail of the interface we will explore this synthesises our entire approach to the app itself. Where desired, illustration is simple and easy to understand, this contrasts other cases, such as the building facades, which are more complex and inferential. By taking this approach of complexity through contradiction, and using the tenets of Postmodernism, it is our hope that we guide people through the beautiful symbolism of the world around them whilst helping them learn the skills they need.

A link to our full user interface can be found here: [shorturl.at/jnuGW](http://shorturl.at/jnuGW)



## ABOUT

Each year the MSA Live (formerly Events) programme unites M Arch. year 01 with B Arch. year 01 and 02 and M Land. Arch 01 in mixed-year teams to undertake live projects with external partners to create social impact.

## LIVE PROJECTS

All MSA Live projects are live. A live project is where an educational organisation and an external partner develop a brief, timescale, and outcome for their mutual benefit.

## SOCIAL IMPACT

All MSA Live projects have social impact. Social impact is the effect an organization's actions have on the well-being of a community. Our agendas are set by our external collaborators.

## EXTERNAL PARTNERS

MSA LIVE projects work with many organisations: charities, community groups, social enterprises, community interest companies, researchers, practitioners and educators.

## STUDENT-LED

Our MSA masters students take the lead in the project conception, brief development, delivery and co-ordination of a small project. Other cohorts join for an eventful 2 weeks of activities at the end of the academic year.

## KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

Working in teams within and across year groups and courses; MSA students participate in peer to peer learning. In addition, collaborators, participants and students engage in the transfer of tangible and intellectual property, expertise, learning and skills.

## LARGE SCALE

This year approximately 600 students from 4 cohorts in MSA will work on 42 projects with partners.

## QUESTIONS

For questions about MSA Live 21 contact MSA Live Lead: Becky Sobell:  
**[b.sobell@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:b.sobell@mmu.ac.uk)**

## BLOG

[live.msa.ac.uk/2021](http://live.msa.ac.uk/2021)

## SOCIAL

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## WEBSITE

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