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Reifying Digital Histories

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Self | BFA Thesis in Graphic Design | Ed Ryan



Thesis Statement

The use of sites like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat is rooted innowness. Most users rarely think about the long-term aspects of their relationship with the networks to which they belong, instead focusing on an ever-refreshing interface filled with fresh content. But what happens to this content when it is removed from its familiar digital context? Do the archived interactions, updates, tweets, and other pieces of our digital histories take on new meaning when placed onto a physical substrate? Using the form of the book and my personal Twitter archive, I have addressed my own digital history, looking specifically at the value, volume, and narrative capabilities of the things we do and say on the internet.



Above: Detail of the book's transparent dust jackets. There are seven layers; one for each year of my Twitter account from 2011–2016.

Below: A video of my final BFA Thesis Defense in April 2017.

Project Narrative and Intent

This project deals with the value, volume, and narrative capabilities of the things we do and say on the internet. It uses the form of the book to investigate these qualities in a new context, drawing from my own digital history—collected data from my use of Twitter and other social media services—for insight and content.

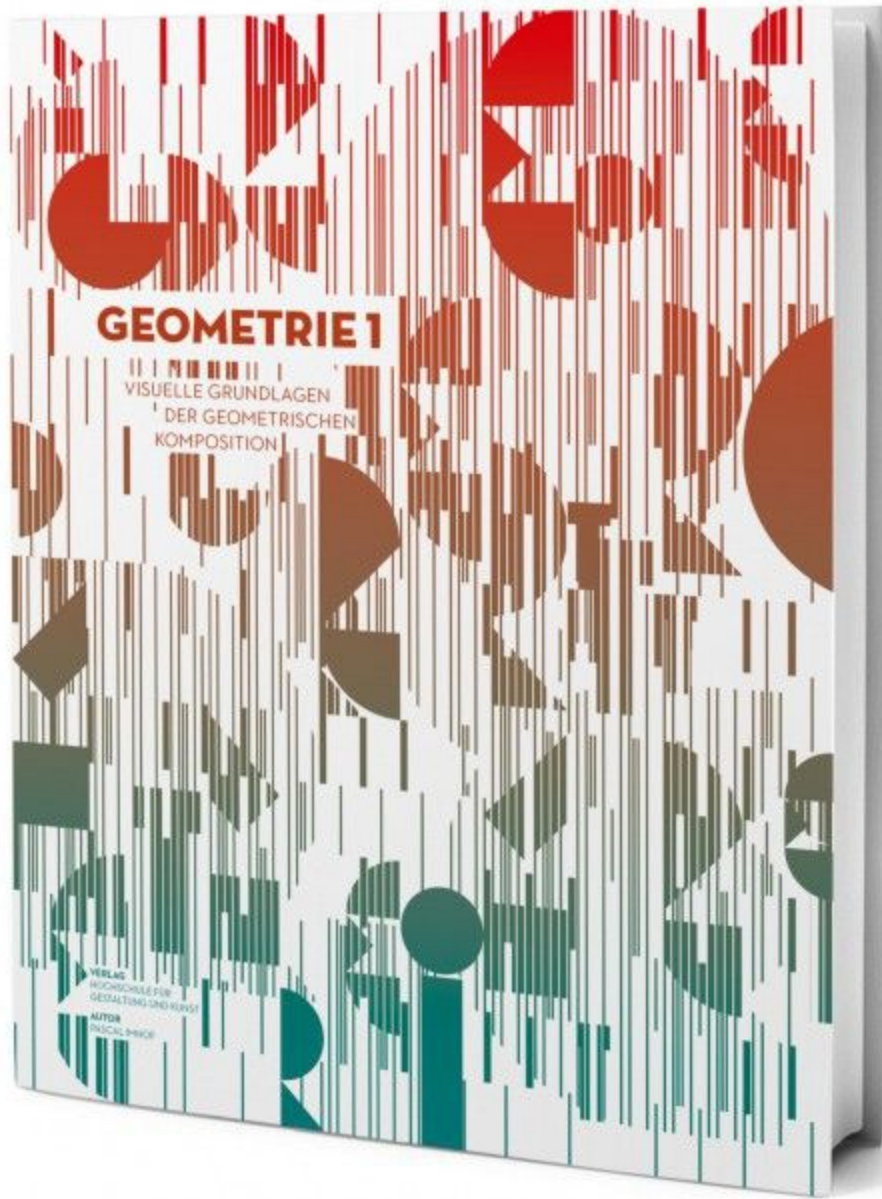
The final object, a carefully-designed book containing my complete Twitter archive, has been constructed with the goal of transforming this content from self-projective to self-reflective. My intended audience is any user of a social networking service like Twitter. By purposefully placing and treating the content in specific ways across the book, I hope to call the value of this content into question, identify the scope of a digital footprint, and incite reflection about the way that a user's digital output on social media begins to represent that user's self.

Initial Interest

When this project began, my interest was simple—learn something new, and try and investigate book design, a portion of my design practice that I felt could use some polishing. Learning something new came from my interest in a Basil.js, a Swiss javascript library created to introduce generative design into the familiar Adobe InDesign interface so that it can easily be used by graphic designers. Learning to use Basil meant that I could, using limited code, generate new forms automatically, control large amounts of data, analyze and change objects on the page based off of data or input, and more. Though promising, this interest was not deep enough to foster a thesis on its own: I needed both content (data to control) and a structure for presenting it.

Why a Book?

Most of the research process involved clarifying this intent and translating it into the final object. When this project began, my interest was simple—learn something new, and try and investigate book design, a portion of my design practice that I felt could use some polishing. Learning something new came from my interest in a Basil.js, a Swiss javascript library created to introduce generative design into the familiar Adobe InDesign interface so that it can easily be used by graphic designers. Learning to use Basil meant that I could, using limited code, generate new forms automatically, control large amounts of data, analyze and change objects on the page based off of data or input, and more. Though promising, this interest was not deep enough to foster a thesis on its own: I needed both content (data to control) and a structure for presenting it.



"

now that they had reached
the dead, forbidden town it
was no longer a matter of



or



Now the dead town's
doors lay wide and they
thought they could
hear the faintest crackle, like
autumn leaves,
from inside. They would
hush themselves forward, by
each other's elbows, carrying
sticks,
remembering their parents
had told them,

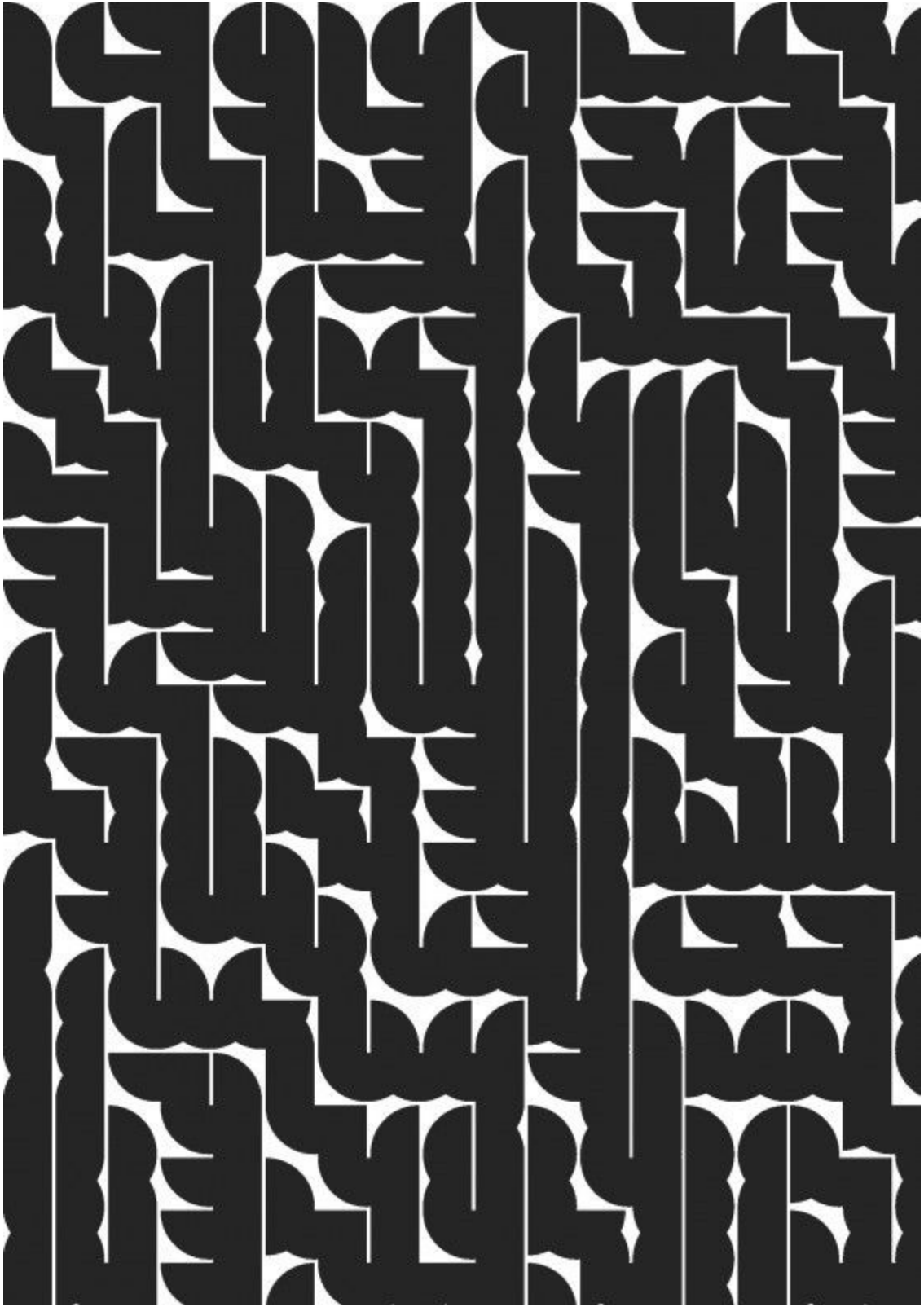
"



And there they stood
in the dead city, a heap of
boys, their hiking
lunches half devoured, daring
each other in
shrieky whispers.



And suddenly one of
them took off, into the
nearest stone
house, through the door,
across the living room, and
into the bedroom where, wi-
thout half looking, he would



Above: Examples of projects created with Basil.js that I came across during my research. From left to right, these projects are "Geometrie 1," from a Generative Design Course at the Visual

Communication Institute in Basel by Martin Fuchs and Ludwig Zeller, "The Martian Chronicles" by Gaelle Renaudin, and "Random Arrangement of Vectors" by Boah Kim and Leila Kuenzer.

Below: Examples of projects that utilize the crossover from digital to physical. From top left to bottom right, these projects are "Platform 2012" by Neil Donnelly and Mimi Zeiger for SVA's Design Criticism Summer Intensive, "Printing Out the Internet" by Kenneth Goldsmith, "Ending the Depression through Amazon" by Bettina Schneebeli, and Paul Soulellis' "Printed Web Vol. 4."







Finding Content

I quickly learned that a number of other designers and artists have investigated or are currently investigating this kind of conflict between the digital and physical. A main inspiration was the Library of the Printed Web, which publishes this kind of transitional work. The Library of the Printed Web itself pushes the boundaries of physical and digital publishing, but it also works to highlight artists and projects that have similar conceptual underpinnings. Some projects investigated the potential value or meaning of the nothingness-data (nonsensical algorithmic output) produced from an internet-based action like a Google search or a bookmark. Others mocked interactivity, used the printed page as a way to legitimize digital content, removed or added layers of meaning through contextual changes, or subverted existing notions of what digital artifacts can and should mean. As a whole, I realized that lots of other designers were hard at work investigating these ideas—the next thing I needed was data.

The process of gathering data began broad and gradually narrowed in. I asked myself several questions: what kinds of information did I easily have access to, and what good would it do to present it in a book or use it with Basil? How could a move from digital to physical substrate benefit, manipulate, or reinforce the content? What would be interesting or relatable for potential readers? A few weeks of wide research, I decided to dig into my own social media archives: it was readily available data that I was familiar with, could easily control, and knew would be relatively familiar and engaging for my audience.

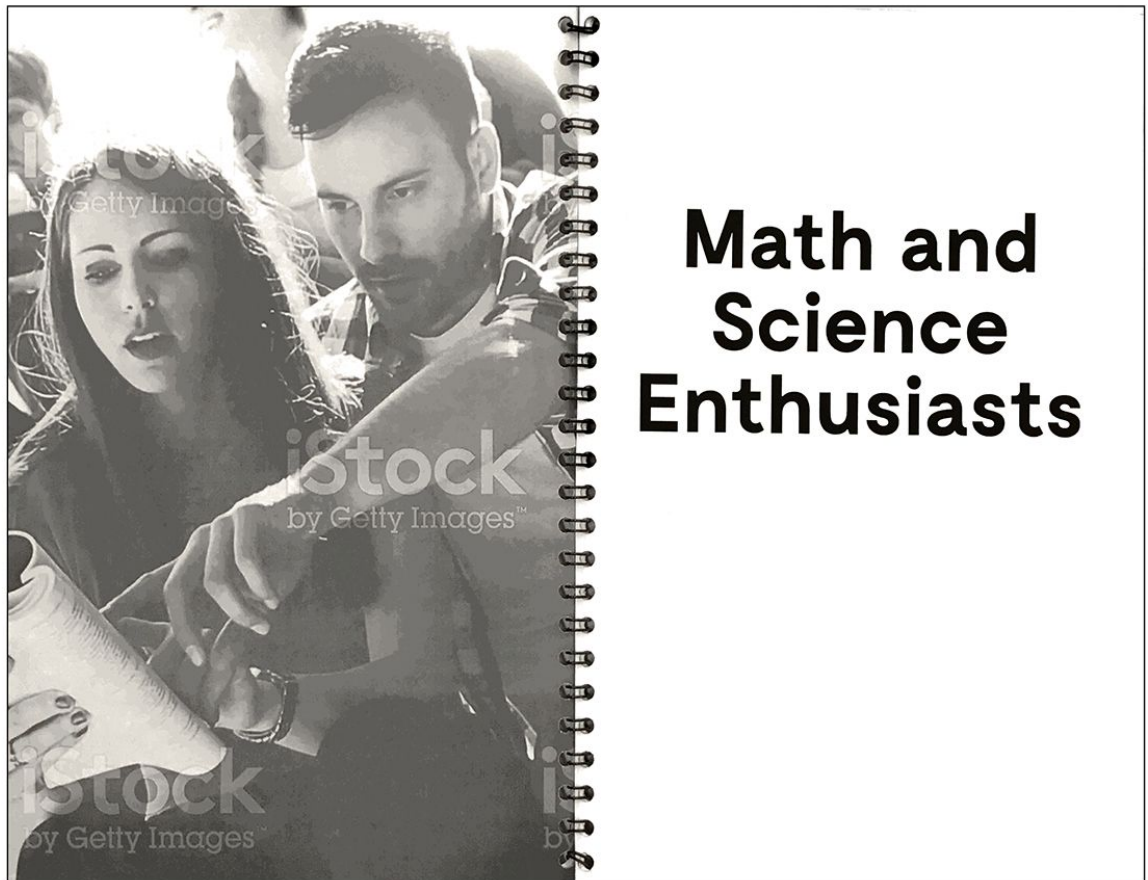
Services like Twitter, Facebook, Google, Snapchat and others allow users to natively request a complete digital archive. For some services, this archive contains only user-generated information (posts, likes, and messages), but for many it included everything even search histories, predicted advertiser information and facial recognition codes. I collected as much as I could, even finding ways to pull my archive from services like Instagram that had yet to implement native export features, and began sketching ways to create a compelling narrative.

Diving into my digital history uncovered a great deal and provide a wide range of content to sketch with. From Snapchat, I learned that I had been pinpointed for advertisers as a member of interest groups ranging from “Math and Science Enthusiasts” to “Hipsters and Trendsetters” Facebook, which apparently has better facial recognition capabilities than the US Government, offered up the cryptic 9-digit numbers that allow my face to be easily recognized and tagged in photos. Google gave me a list of every YouTube video I’d watched in the past four years. Instagram yielded a tiny thumbnail of every post I’d ever liked on the service—more than 20GB worth of images. Collecting this data allowed me to quickly experiment with different narratives and ways of working in Basil.js.

Above right: various experiments in Basil.js looking at ways to manipulate typography, generate forms, handle data, and more.

Below left: a spread from a test booklet investigating Snapchat advertiser information and stock imagery resulting from searching those categories.

Below right: a poster depicting a frazzled face generated in Basil.js from codes provided by Facebook's facial recognition data for my profile.

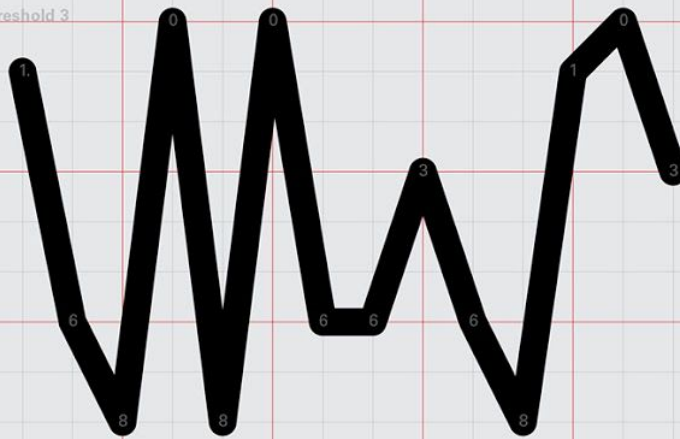


$d = \text{Threshold 1}$
 $= 3.4864726066589$

$r = \text{Threshold 2}$
 $= 3.3084404468536$

Example Count
165

Threshold 3



Clarifying Data and Intent

I eventually decided to use only my Twitter data because it was consistent—it could be boiled down to only text, and, because I had been a member of the service for longer than most others, it provided a wider range of data. As I read through my Twitter archive, though, I came to the conclusion that most of the things I'd said on the service were utter garbage. Some were insensitive, ignorant, testing out swearing, not-funny, etc.—it's a bad coming of age story that never needed to be told.

Though embarrassing, this realization made me think about the value I used to place on this service and the time I once spent reading and writing tweets and interacting with other users. This change of perspective became the basis for my project—how could something have seemed so important at one point and so irrelevant now? How could I use the book to illustrate this reflection?

Twitter Data Overview

Years Active: 7

Weeks Active: 332

Total Tweets: 8,419

Saved Tweets: 29

1:25 AM — 27 Dec 2010

**MY FINGERS TYPE SO FAST EACH
ONE IS LIKE A TINY CHEETAH**

6:51 PM — 9 May 2011

schlong is a funny word

12:02 PM — 10 Feb 2012

**Just burp-fart-sneezed simultaneously
and my heart stopped.**

Above: a few of the thousands and thousands of embarrassing tweets

Below: a screen capture showing the data handling using Excel — almost 4,000 tweets in 2011 alone!

	A	B	C	D	E
3924	2.1957E+16			2011-01-03 15:52:11 +0000	<a href="http://www.clo
3925	2.19069E+16			2011-01-03 12:32:58 +0000	<a href="http://www.clo
3926	2.18943E+16			2011-01-03 11:42:57 +0000	<a href="http://twitter.c
3927	2.16366E+16			2011-01-02 18:39:10 +0000	<a href="http://www.clo
3928	2.14045E+16	2.14031E+16	206921291	2011-01-02 03:16:39 +0000	<a href="http://twitter.c
3929	2.13985E+16			2011-01-02 02:53:00 +0000	<a href="http://twitter.c
3930	2.13984E+16	2.13977E+16	202914869	2011-01-02 02:52:22 +0000	<a href="http://twitter.c
3931	2.11023E+16			2011-01-01 07:15:43 +0000	<a href="http://www.clo
3932	2.10696E+16			2011-01-01 05:05:47 +0000	<a href="http://www.clo
3933	2.10288E+16		228548071	2011-01-01 02:23:44 +0000	<a href="http://www.clo
3934	2.10284E+16		228548071	2011-01-01 02:22:16 +0000	<a href="http://www.clo
3935	2.10279E+16		228548071	2011-01-01 02:20:17 +0000	<a href="http://www.clo
3936	2.10224E+16		228548071	2011-01-01 01:58:19 +0000	<a href="http://www.clo
3937	2.10096E+16			2011-01-01 01:07:29 +0000	<a href="http://twitter.c
3938	4/13/17	2.09957E+16	228548071	2011-01-01 01:02:16 +0000	<a href="http://twitter.c
3939					
3940					
3941					
3942					
3943					

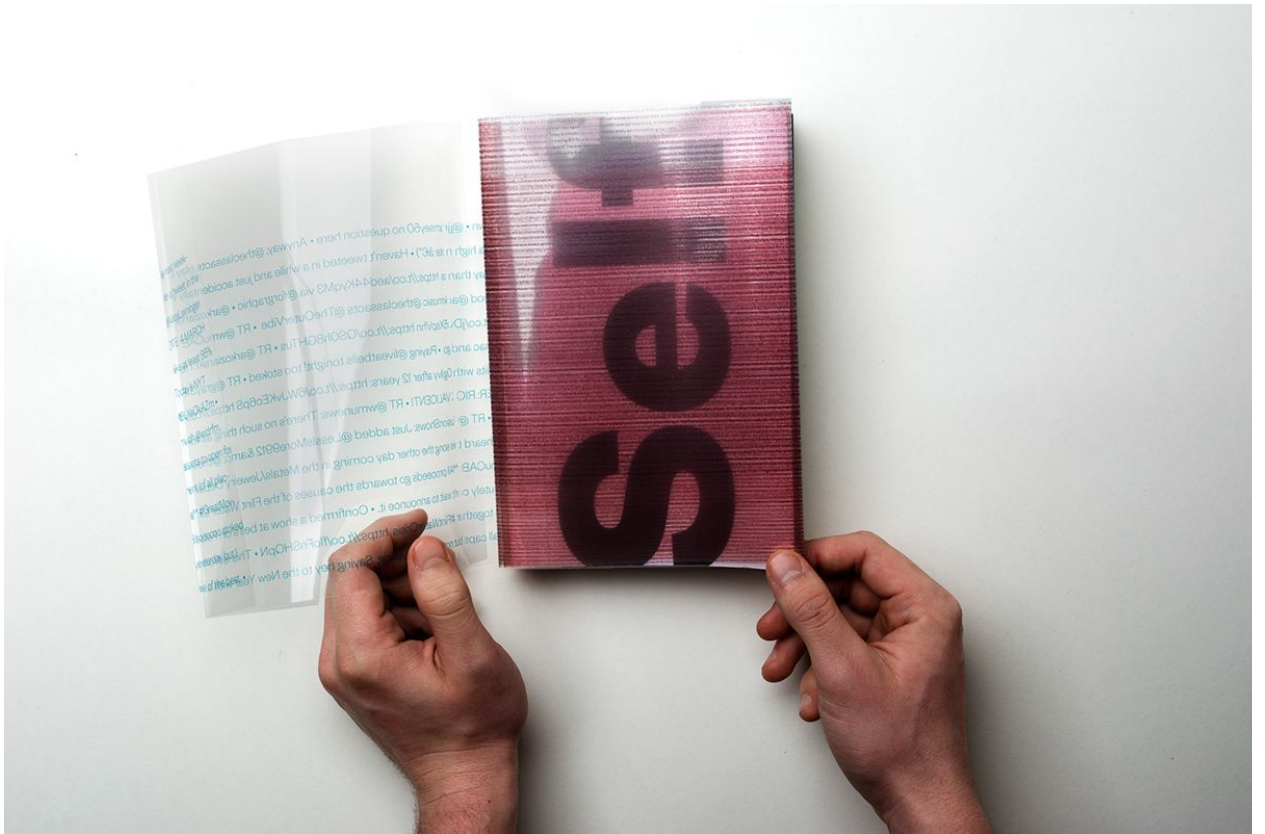
Though these tweets were embarrassing, the realization of my change of heart made me really think about the value I used to place on this service and the time I once spent reading and writing tweets and interacting with other users. This change of perspective became the basis for my project—how could something have seemed so important at one point and so irrelevant now? How could I use the book to illustrate this reflection, and what points did I want to make?

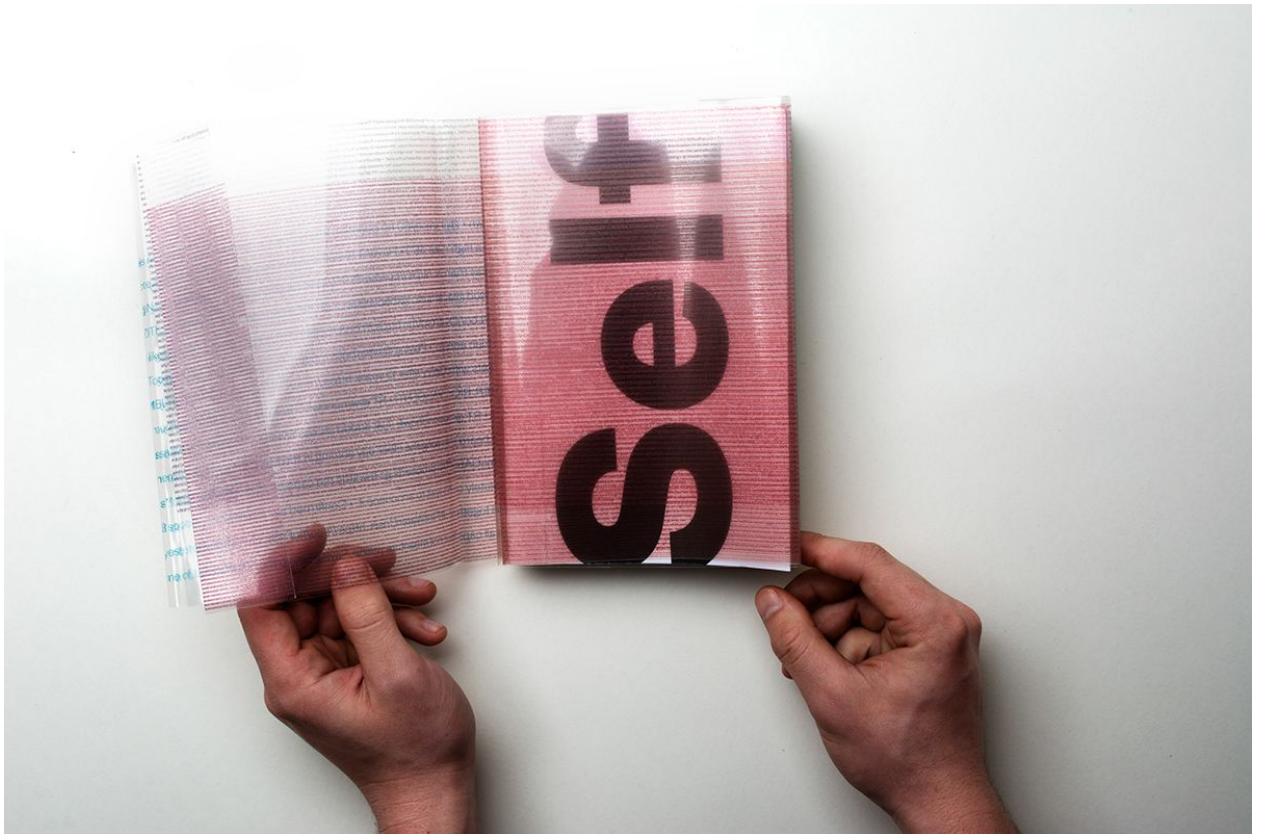
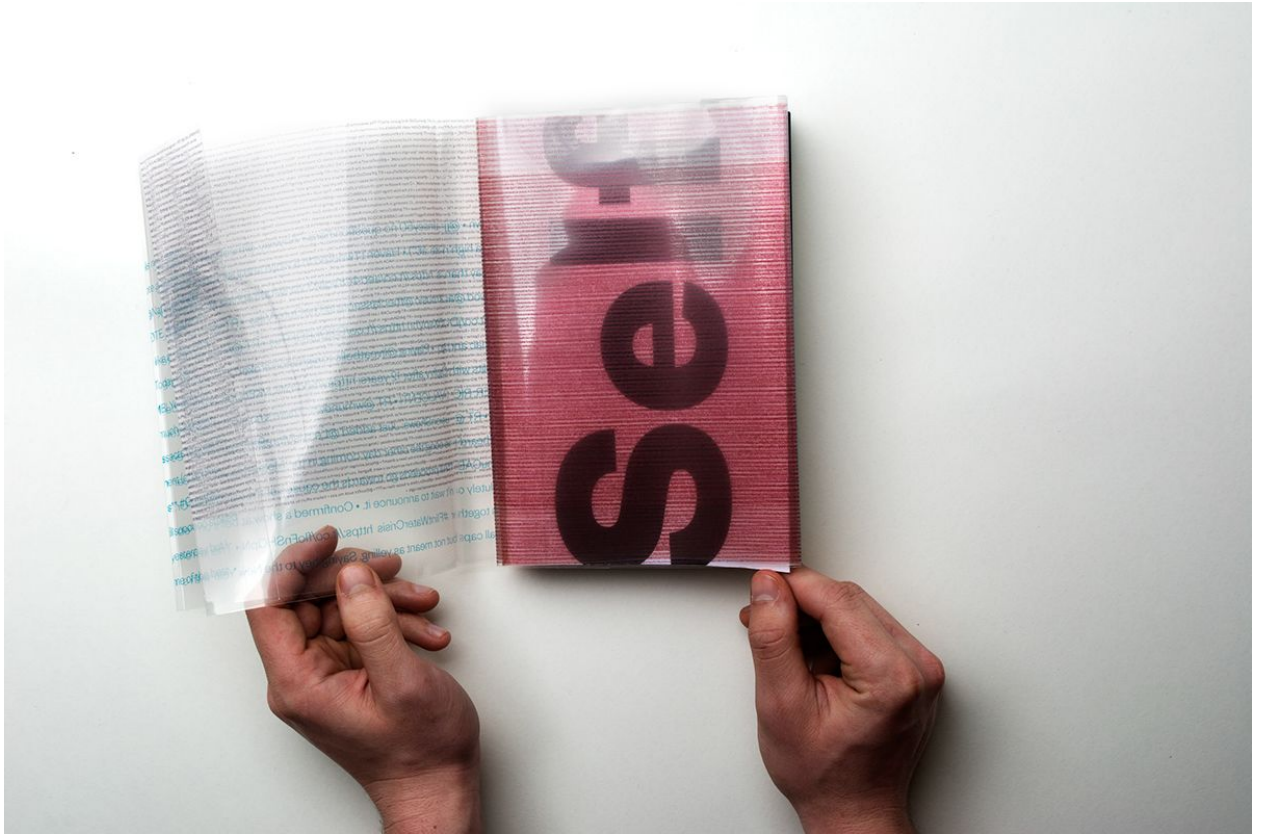
Final Design Choices

I began looking at different ways that my data could be influenced by the form of the book. If this content was so worthless, did it really make sense to put it on the pages, the traditionally protected and valuable portion of a book? How could the element of time come into play? What other places could add value or make a point about the narrative capabilities of this digital history? The design choices present in the final book hopefully answer these questions.

1. Dust Jackets

Rather than filling the interior spreads, my entire Twitter archive is displayed on the books' seven transparent dust jackets, one for each year of the life of the account. The reader is immediately confronted with this, the informational content of the book, out of its typical context and in its entirety. This choice, a literal gesture of transparency, aims to reinforce the act of publishing this once-private content and emphasizes the tweets' demotion from protected (inside the book) to a vulnerable and public status (exterior).









2. Cover

The cover contains only the title of the book, “Self.” With the dust jackets on, this title is partially obscured, almost entirely covered by the mass of years of tweets. Without this coverage it is clear, black on a white background.

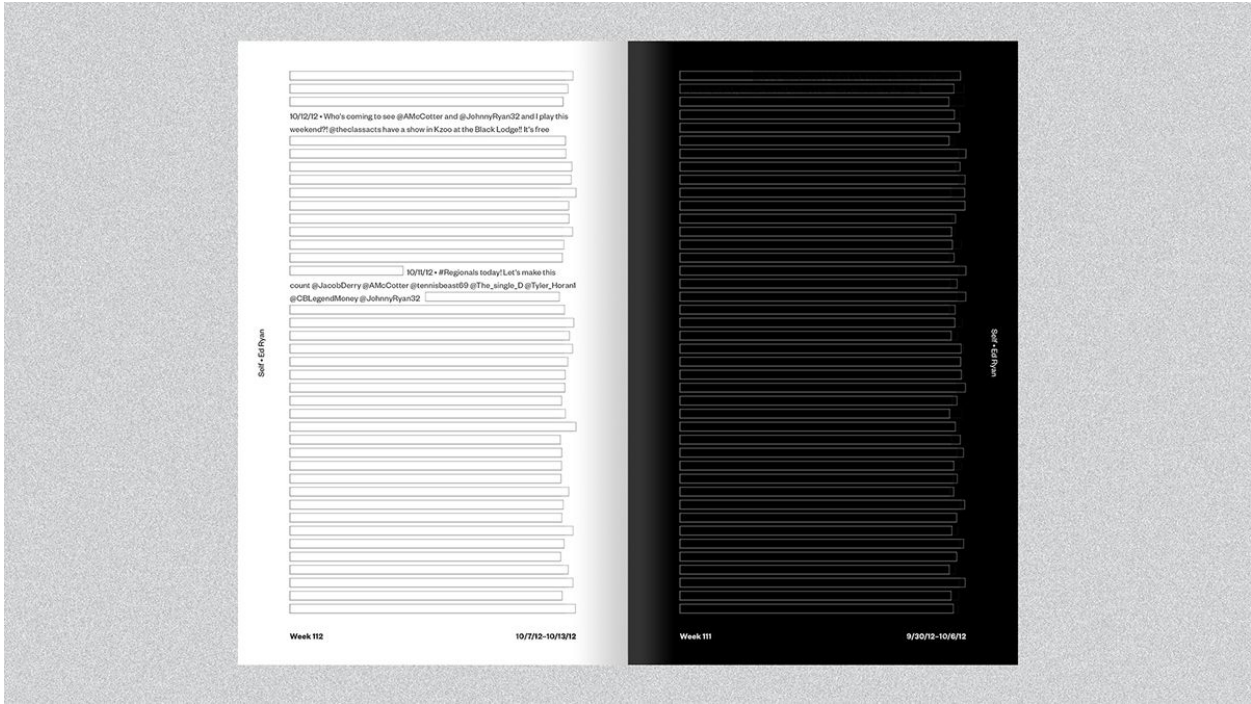


3. Interior

The pages of the book are intentionally sparse. Horizontal bars of “placeholder text” stand in for redacted tweets that, during review, I felt deserved deletion. The only lines of real type are the few “important” tweets which I’ve concluded are still worth something—memories, thoughts, or jokes that I felt stood out from the mass of digital spew. This sparseness aims to illustrate the infrequency with which daily Twitter usage generates meaningful output.

Table of Contents	
2010	Weeks 1-19
2011	Weeks 19-71
2012	Weeks 72-124
2013	Weeks 124-176
2014	Weeks 176-228
2015	Weeks 228-280
2016	Weeks 280-332

<p>See Efflyn</p>	<p>7/28/12 • WHAT A BEAUTIFUL DAY FOR MUSIC! The Class Acts play at 1:30, downtown at Leila Arboretum! Come enjoy the day!</p>
<p>Week 102</p>	<p>Week 101</p>
<p>7/29/12-8/4/12</p>	<p>7/23/12-7/28/12</p>



4. Generative Design

Though exploration into generative design techniques took a backseat to the conceptual aspects of this project, the final output still made use of code-based design. In the final book, the time-based pagination (week numbers and date ranges) and horizontal bars for redacted tweets were generated entirely using Basil.js to interface with my data. The code used in the final book can be seen below, along with a short video demonstrating the generative process used in the final production of the book.

Discussion and Conclusion

Overall, I consider this project a success. Though the process was slow and sometimes jerky, the final object achieves the goals I ended up setting for it. The final object's dust jackets are conceptually and visually interesting, and the interior of the book, to me, hits the intended tone of sparseness. I feel that the other design choices I made throughout the semester ended up similarly resolved.

I would like to spend more time using a similar process to investigate other areas of my digital history in a similarly exhaustive way. My biggest difficulty this semester was, without a doubt, the management of different conceptual directions—I was trying to do too much at the same time without narrowing in on any specific idea or way of working. Pursuing one of my earlier ideas with a clarified focus could, I think, yield more interesting results.

My biggest weakness was my tendency to think too long about an idea without making. I sketched a great deal, but with a project like this, actually doing a large chunk becomes increasingly important when testing directions. I learned a lot about my own process and feel that I'm now better equipped to handle large-scale, transformative design research projects.

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