

Important People throughout my Life

A process book by Jenny Shirey
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Prologue

Who am I?

How do I want others to see me?

How do I define myself?

These are some of the fundamental questions that we humans ask ourselves. In creating this project, a self-portrait, I asked myself these questions. The end result is my attempt to describe who I am by using information gathered from my life.

Prepare

Learning about Information Design

Before beginning the project, our professor, Dan Boyarski, introduced us to the idea of information design. Designing the way information is presented is an important part of being a graphic designer, but it is a concept that I had not really thoughtfully considered until now. Professor Boyarski highlighted two key figures in the field of information design: Edward Tufte and Richard Saul Wurman.

Edward Tufte is Professor Emeritus at Yale University. He writes, designs, and self-publishes books on analytical design. Tufte believes that it is perfectly fine to present the viewer with complex data, as long as it is clearly organized.

Richard Saul Wurman calls himself an “information architect.” He is concerned about the vast amount of data available in the world and believes that it causes people to become anxious. In his book *Information Anxiety*, Wurman wrote about ways to make information more understandable. He came up with the concept of the “5 Hatracks” as a way to organize information.



“To envision information... and what **bright and splendid visions** can result...”

-Edward Tufte,
Envisioning Information



Prepare

Wurman's 5 Hatracks

L Location

A Alphabet

T Time

C Category

H Hierarchy

Wurman believed that there are only five ways of organizing information. He called them the "5 Hatracks," which can be remembered using the acronym LATCH.

According to these 5 Hatracks, information can be organized by location, alphabet, time, category, or hierarchy, or by combing several of these.

The way that you choose to organize this information should be intuitive to the audience. Wurman uses the example of a road atlas, which is organized primarily by location because that is how we drive. Department stores are organized by category; all shoes or shirts can be found in the same area. Organization according to hierarchy means arranging things in an ascending or descending order—from biggest to smallest, for example, or most important to least important.

Gather

Lists of data

So what do Wurman's 5 Hatracks have to do with my self-portrait project?

The task we were given was to create a poster that described who we were by using information from our lives. My first step in the process, then, was to gather data from my life, and organize this data into understandable information by using Wurman's principles.

I began by making lists of facts about myself. Some of these facts were quantifiable, such as places I have visited in the past year, and some were subjective, such as my likes and dislikes.

I brought these lists into class and looked at them with my fellow students. It was interesting to see what other students had chosen to reveal about themselves in their lists. Places traveled, jobs, and food were all popular topics.



“Thoughtful structuring of information is an essential skill that a graphic designer, information architect, or information designer needs to have in his or her repertoire.”

-Richard Saul Wurman



Gather

Lists of data

THINGS I DO IN MY SPARE TIME:

- Biking
- Cooking
- Dance classes
- Eat in nice restaurants
- Go to concerts
- Go to museums
- Learning languages
- ★ Movies
- ★ Read
- ★ Travel
- Wine tasting

FOODS I DO NOT LIKE

would/can not eat

- Anything with the head still on it (much)
- buffalo wings
- carrots (raw - oastlow are great)
- fatty meat
- ribs
- rye bread
- Soy sauce
- v. spicy food
- Swiss cheese

PLACES I'VE BEEN IN THE PAST YEAR:

Map not to scale

PETS I HAVE HAD

- Baloo
- Feather (cat)
- Midnight (dog)
- various hamsters, gerbils, fish
- Kitty (cat)
- Skidmore
- Neurotini (miraculously - escaping hamster)
- White Rabbit
- Bonnie (dog)
- some various hamsters
- Orlickay (dog)

Now No pets (sad)

Think

Choosing data

The data that we gathered was supposed to be used as the basis for our self-portraits. But I wasn't happy with my data. I kept thinking, *is this really how I define myself?* I had written down a lot of facts about my life in Germany, because living overseas was a life-changing experience. Did this relatively short time I spent living in Germany truly define my life?

I remembered reading somewhere that women often define themselves in terms of their relationships, whereas men define themselves in terms of their achievements. I found this very

thought-provoking, and for myself, it rings true. Relationships with other people are the most important part of my life.

I thought about the possible contrast between my relationships and my achievements. Maybe this could be an interesting concept? I decided to pursue this train of thought.



“Was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I'm not the same, the next question is, **Who in the world am I!**”

-Alice, from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*
by Lewis Carroll



Think

Sketching ideas

**First Hatrack:
Time**

**Second Hatrack:
Hierarchy**

I began sketching out ways to organize my relationships and achievements, according to Wurman's 5 Hatracks. I wanted to show how my relationships developed throughout my life, which meant I would use time as one of my organizing principles. I also wanted to show which relationships were the most important and influential to me, and to do this, I would use hierarchy.

As I thought about ways to visualize relationships, I initially envisioned something abstract, something transparent and maybe even fuzzy around the edges, which would demonstrate the subjective nature of relationships. I also knew that I wanted to use color as an organizational tool. I pictured a beautiful waterfall of colors blending into each other.

My achievements, on the other hand, I would depict in simple, black text, because they are "hard" facts which can be measured.

Who am I - how do I define myself?

measurable in short

- likes/dislikes can be distorted depending on what mood I'm in / who I'm talking to
- abilities/skills
- where I'm from
- where I've been
- where I live now
- relationships? (who you spend time w/ resulting choices)
- hobbies - can be distorted
- job/occupation
- personality traits (maybe the part of me that changes least over time)
- values

(what book??)
 Book said: women find their identity in their relationships (men in accomplishments?)

What if...
 ... I track most important relationships in my life over time (could this be abstracted to demonstrate HS - feeling quality)
 compared to
 ... My accomplishments that I'm most proud of

transparent layers?

= men
 = dad or combined parents?

constants

Jürgen

Sketches: relationships and achievements over time

lines or thick fields to indicate relationships/importance over time

accomplishments

1992 1990 1995 2000 2007

friends (etc)

widowed friend

relationships

relationships

accomplishments

do sketches w/ layers (use piping (in Design))

Relationships over time

relationships

accomplishments

70s 80s 90s 2000s

white African Lat 20s

each relationship noted by a different color (could be very pretty)

| RESUME | relationships |
|-----------|---------------|
| 1982-1980 | ○○○○○○○○ |
| 1990-1993 | ○○○○○○○○ |
| 1993-1996 | |
| 1996-2000 | |
| 2000-2002 | |
| 2002-2005 | |
| 2005-2007 | |

do sketches w/ layers (use piping (in Design))

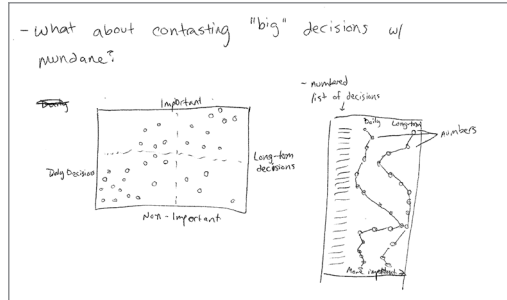


Think

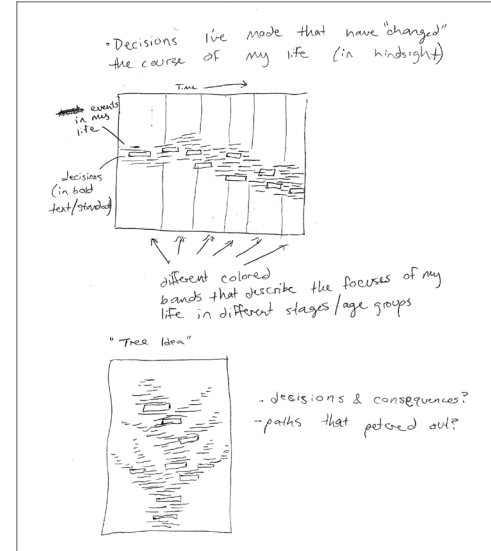
Sketching ideas

Another idea:
map out **decisions**
that have greatly
influenced my life.

I also played with the concept of mapping out the major decisions that have influenced my life, because decisions often shape who we become. Since I was more invested in the idea of the relationships, however, I decided not to pursue this second idea beyond the sketching stage.

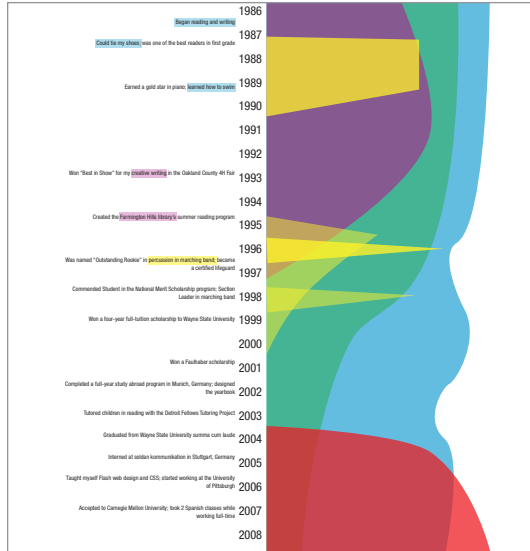


Sketches: decisions



Design

Developing the chosen idea



First concept on computer: relationships vs. achievements

When I began designing my poster on the computer, however, I realized that I did not have a good grasp of the connection between achievements and relationships. They seemed to be separate entities, and I felt that my poster needed to express a more unified concept.

Since I was more drawn to the relationships aspect, I decided to stop pursuing the achievements idea. Why not just describe myself in terms of my relationships?



Experimenting
with making
achievements
interact with
relationships
through use of
color coding.



Design

Developing the chosen idea

Third Hatrack: Category

“Among the most powerful devices for reducing noise and enriching the content of displays is the technique of **layering and separation...**”

-Edward Tufte,
Envisioning Information

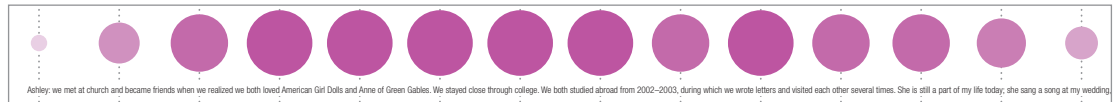
I also realized that the information would be more clear and understandable if each relationship were separated out, instead of layered on top of each other. I left the waterfall idea behind and instead chose to represent each relationship as a series of colored dots.

In this stage, I introduced a third Hatrack: category. I color-coded the dots depending on the category of relationships to which they belonged (there were five categories overall).

Each row of dots represented a person. To make the information more personal, I wrote a short

story underneath each row, explaining why that person was important in my life, and what events happened that caused us to become more or less close.

While designing, I felt very influenced by Tufte and his clear, concise way of visually organizing information. I originally included a key explaining that the larger dots represented more important relationships. In the end, however, I took this out, because I hoped that my design would be intuitive enough that it would not require an explanation.



Refine

Looking at details



| 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 |
|-------------------|------|-----------------|-------------------------------------|------|--------------------|-------------------------------------|------|
| Michigan: college | | Munich, Germany | Farmington Hills, Michigan: college | | Stuttgart, Germany | Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: adulthood | |
| ⋮ | ⋮ | ⋮ | ⋮ | ⋮ | ⋮ | ⋮ | ⋮ |
| ⋮ | ⋮ | ⋮ | ⋮ | ⋮ | ⋮ | ⋮ | ⋮ |

Fourth Hatrack: Location

As the last step, I decided to add a fourth Hatrack to organize the information: location. While thinking back on each relationship, I found that the places where I lived had a big effect on the important people in my life. Living in many different cities throughout my life has naturally caused some relationships to end and new ones to begin.

I noted location by adding fields of light gray in the background running vertically from the top to the bottom of the poster. These vertical location bands help the viewer to better understand how each relationship relates to the others.

I also printed a sample of my poster at actual size to make sure that the text was readable, and to see how the colors would look. I made sure I allowed myself enough time before the project was due to proofread and adjust minor details.

Reflect

The process

The easiest part of this project was coming up with the concept. I felt that I was able to fairly quickly choose a part of my life to focus on and the information that I wanted to use as the basis for my self-portrait. Perhaps that is because I know myself well, and I know what aspects of my life are most important to me.

The hardest part of the project was determining the hierarchy—deciding how important each relationship was to me during each year of my life. I wanted to accurately reflect the way I felt about the person at the time, although this meant depending on my highly subjective, fallible memories.

I was surprised to find that making these choices, about each person's importance in my life, and also about which people to include in the first place, was so difficult. I believe it was because of the emotions that go hand-in-hand with reviewing old memories, some sad, some happy, some bittersweet because of a sense of loss.

I am glad I chose to explore this aspect of my life. As I am beginning my first year of graduate school, it is a good time to review how I have changed over the years, and the people that have joined me along my life's journey.





Reflect

The outcome

Take away goals: challenge myself, experiment visually, and push through my self-made boundaries as a graphic designer.

I have mixed feelings about the final *design* of my self-portrait poster.

On the one hand, I am happy with the way the information is organized. I feel that it is clear and easy to understand. In a way, it is a good representation of me, because I am an organized, straightforward person. I also like the colors I chose, which are bright and lively.

On the other hand, when I look at the design, I feel that the vector shapes and graph form make it look rather impersonal, which does not really fit the material. I wonder whether I should have stuck with my original plan to depict my relationships in a layered form, although the information wouldn't have been as clear.

The form is restrained; it lies quietly on the page along a restricted grid. Perhaps this design also reflects on me and how I view myself. I feel that as a designer, I could be more creative. Designing in an orderly, organized fashion is a visual style that I am quite comfortable with. But now, while I am in graduate school, I believe that it is the perfect time to try to expand my design repertoire.

What I would like to take away from this project is this: a challenge to myself, to experiment visually and to open up the boundaries I have forced upon myself. I hope that by the end of my time at Carnegie Mellon, I will be able to look back on this self-portrait and see how I have grown as a designer.