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## TWO PLACES AT ONCE

*reconciling technology and craft in a networked world*

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*When my father pulled our new 9600bps modem out of its box in the summer of 1991, and installed it in the family computer, everything changed. We were not alone in taking that first curious step towards a more networked society, but what distinguishes my story is that my generation is one of the last to be able to remember that exact moment when the Internet entered our lives. For the generations after us, this speed and interactivity will have always been there, but for us there was a very obvious shift — a “things will never be the same” moment — that deeply informs the way we work, and the way we design.*

I have spent my life trying to reconcile two opposing reactions to this shift. On the one hand, I react as a programmer — the grown-up version of my twelve-year-old self, who immediately used that dial-up connection to log into Prodigy, and to teach herself HTML — and find that the Internet world is a fascinating social experiment, teeming with new ideas and accumulated knowledge. On the other hand I react as a designer — a person who values the craft and skill inherent in handmade experiences — and feel a deep sense of loss for the more analog world that I had such a short time to inhabit. Pervading both of these responses is an awareness that technology, the web in particular, is taking over certain aspects of design with increasing speed and efficiency, but not much soul.

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### THE HANDMADE

What is it about the handmade in general, and of the artisanship evident in craft in particular, that we are drawn to? I believe that when we interact with something handmade, we are able to relate to it at a human scale, and so feel a connection to the person who built it. Mindful of the value in this, I began my thesis investigations by throwing myself into media that evoked a strong connection to craft, such as screen printing, traditional photography, and letterpress printing.

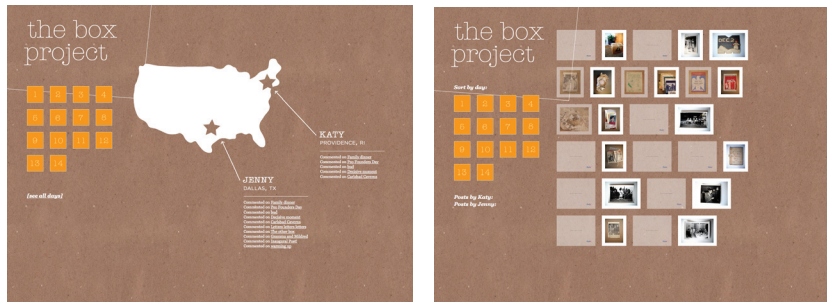
The opportunity to teach a web design course, however, brought technology back into the conversation. I rediscovered my love of explaining the basic building blocks of the web, and the entire experience affirmed my belief that the phrase “coded by hand” does not exist casually. The process of writing code can be as intimate as setting a line of type on a press bed, or as handmade as sewing a signature. Building in this new medium, as I choose to both practice and teach it, is as much an act of design as the designed object itself.

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## THE ARCHIVE

As a culture, we are reacting to technological change much as we always have: with an instinct to preserve, to archive, and to hold fast to our sense of place in the face of unstable times. The irony is that the web has enabled us to archive our lives in unprecedented quantities — through blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, and other tools — but not much quality. What's often missing from these tools are the narratives that tie together a collection of things and turn them into something meaningful.

In response to this, I was interested in employing my love of handmade code to preserve the story of something lost, using my own history as a test bed for a more meaningful kind of archive.



### LEFT

*The home page of The Box Project, once the initial two weeks were over. Each orange box represents one day in the project, and clicking on each one reveals the conversation that built up around that day's objects.*

### RIGHT

*This overview page displayed every item that was posted over the two weeks. Meta data associated with the set were listed at left, and clicking on them brought different subsets of the collection into focus. After some inadvertent alterations to Flickr permissions left half of this page broken beyond repair, The Box Project also became a cautionary tale: online archives are just as fragile as physical ones.*

### PROJECT: THE BOX PROJECT

The Box Project emerged as a response to the death of my grandmother. My family inherited the task of sorting through an impressive amount of *stuff* — physical manifestations of events both big and small in my grandmother's life — that added up to a very tangible archive. I couldn't be there physically, but I felt compelled to build a tool that allowed me to participate in the process virtually. I arranged to have my mother set aside one box for herself, and send one box to me in Providence. We then unpacked one item from each box every day for two weeks, posting both the objects and the memories they evoked on a web site designed to highlight the ongoing dialogue that emerged between us. Now that the two weeks are over, The Box Project serves as a narrative portrait of someone who is gone, and a digital archive that complements and enhances its tangible counterpart.

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## HYBRID EXPERIENCES

From investigating the state of craft in an internet world, and looking at our impulse to preserve it, I began to think about designing experiences that moved participants from the web to the physical world and back again. I felt a need to produce web sites that were co-dependent on their real world counterparts, so that neither of them could exist without the other.



LEFT

Each player in teameCO must choose from a selection of characters on the game web site, and then download a printable kit of parts consisting of an identification badge, a biography, and a set of activity cards specific to their character's role in the game. Pictured here is an example of a Park Ranger.

RIGHT

Game play within teameco centers on the four main characters exchanging and collecting four main resources, which are distributed around the playing field before playing starts. The photo at right is what this process might look like when played in Roger Williams Memorial Park in Providence.

PROJECT: teameCO

TeamECO was a collaborative effort with Angela Guzman. We challenged ourselves to build an interface to the Encyclopedia of Life that fostered a connection with local communities. What resulted was a hybrid “board game” where the game’s website served as the box, the player’s neighborhood became the playing board, and the participants became the pieces. The web site allowed players to specify a local park, organize a group who wanted to play, and generate a customized set of printable playing pieces based on plant and animal species native to the area. Activity cards built into game play facilitated the collection of observations and photographs of the natural environment that could be uploaded back into the EOL database, creating a mechanism to help EOL grow.

REPRESENTING COMPUTATION

From thinking about hybrids of the web and physical world, I shifted my thinking towards ways of reconciling craft with the realities of the modern technological landscape. Focusing on the visual languages and structures inherent in computing — querying, sorting, and modularity — I investigated ways of representing these ideas in a physical form.



LEFT + MIDDLE

The holes of the outer box correlate to six “tags” within the set of cards. Placing the pin in any of the holes allows only the cards associated with that tag fall out. An included booklet explained the logic of querying.

RIGHT

Pictured is a sampling of the cards enclosed within the box. Each contained a photograph of an obsolete technology, with a short history on the opposite side.

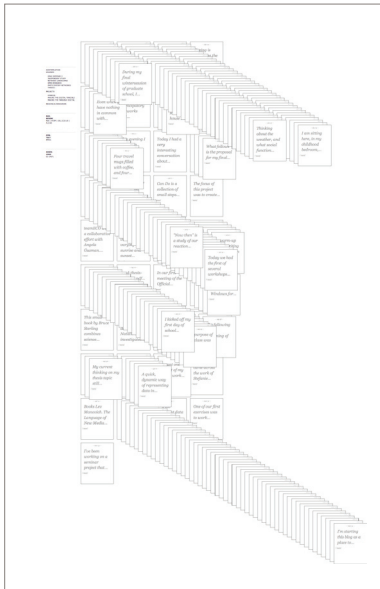
PROJECT: INTERACTIVE | OBSOLETE

Interactive/Obsolete is an investigation of building interactivity into a physical object. Inspired by edge-notched bibliographic systems, notches representing six “tags” are punched into a set of printed cards, each containing an image of an obsolete technology on one side, and a short history on the reverse. The cards are enclosed in a box that allows a viewer/user to perform a query of the set by sticking a pin into one of six holes corresponding to each tag.

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## REPRESENTING EXPERIENCE

Moving in the reverse direction, I challenged myself to build a stronger connection between physical experience and the online world by creating a web form that responded to the weather outside. The experience of weather is a common one for all people, and it plays a central role in our social interactions. It is also a phenomenon that is already tightly coupled with technology, with an abundance of data available for me to work with.



### LEFT

*Pictured at left is a screen capture of Weather Patterns, an in-progress interface to my thesis blog. Each box represents one day in the history of my blog: the stacks build up over time for every day that I don't post, and a new stack is started each time I do post. The angle of the stacks gets shift according to the current wind speed in Providence.*

### RIGHT

*A second iteration of Weather Patterns that responds to both wind and temperature. The value of gray indicates the temperature at the time I wrote each post.*

## PROJECT (IN PROGRESS): WEATHER PATTERNS

Weather patterns is an in-progress interface to my thesis blog that responds not only to the weather outside, but to the rhythm of speaking and silence in my blog posting. The site makes small talk about the weather, accumulating a stack of visual representations of weather for every day that I am silent, and starting a new stack when I have something to say. What results is a landscape of piles that not only respond to the current weather—the piles shift and shudder depending on the current wind speed—but it also shows my thesis writing in the historical context of what the weather was like at the time that I wrote it.

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## MOVING FORWARD

It is the balance between technology and craft that is capturing my attention as I begin to analyze my body of thesis work. It's impractical to ignore the changes the web is bringing to society, but it's equally impractical to forsake real world experience completely. I'm seeking a sustainable relationship between the real world and online, and between technology and craft, so that when each side is dependent on the other, neither wins, and neither loses.