

DH Paradata

When the tech stops working, the historian keeps going

Task:

Create something that pushes boundaries. Produce an unessay. So, left to my own creative devices and encouraged by my professor, Shawn Graham I turned to coins. I was already working with coins for my Master's Research Essay (MRE) so this was a natural direction for me to pursue. But what could I do with coins? How could I push the limits? How would I make it fun and academic?

Shawn encouraged my cohort to think big and to fail. And fail I did, multiple times in fact. My initial thought had been to create a mind map like that of Bacon's Five Degrees of Separation. I wanted to critically and intersectionally historicize each coin and unpack what has been omitted. I wanted to question official narratives and to highlight what's at stake in minting coins. It is not a neutral process. In order to choose which moments, people and events to commemorate you must decide what's important. This means that you must also exclude and extrapolate stories in order create a cohesive narrative. This exclusion can be visual or linguistic. I knew the types of questions I wanted to ask of my subject, but I didn't know how I wanted to present the answers and the analysis...

Proposed outputs:

This led me to Coggle. I thought if I could visually arrange my thoughts and see the connections then maybe this would be useful to others too. I was fixated on the concept of seeing the intersections of critical analysis and wanting the output basically to be an

essay but in the form of a mind map. While not a horrible idea it also wasn't the most creative output either. My peers and my professor encouraged me to keep going with Coggle in terms of planning my project, but to think bigger.

I briefly considered learning R Studio in the hopes of collecting and representing the data visually. Alas, this was not a "good fit" for my project and that's how I ended up at Storymap JS. In theory, Storymap JS made sense. I could zoom in on each coin and point out tiny details or insert my own counter-narratives. However, I soon realized that using Storymap JS was not easy. Sure, making an account and adding pins to an image was not difficult, but uploading the high-resolution images was! I spent days trying to get my images to upload properly. Finding a free application to manipulate the images and turn them into tile groups was fairly simple, but once I got them into a repository in github and inputted the link everything broke. My coins looked like they melted. Each coin came up worse than the one before and meant that my project wasn't going to be feasible unless I made it about distorting coins or figured out how to generate good quality images.

It was in this frustration that I asked myself if I really needed all these programs to do my project. I just kept thinking: *there's gotta be a better way!* So, I went back to my coins and narrowed the scope. I started with the coins I was most passionate about and very quickly entered the flow state. I knew what I wanted to say, the questions I wanted to ask, and the ideas were simply flowing. That's when I thought of redesigning the coins. I realized that the most disruptive action I could take would be to impose a new image on an official coin. To visualize the stories that were being omitted and/or to correct the imagery to match the limited scope of the original narrative. After this

realization I had to return to my coins and make sure that the coins I wanted to use were suitable for this type of interpretation. Two of the five coins I had originally planned to use worked: the Women's Right to Vote coin and the 50th Anniversary of the Canadian Flag. The others would be very difficult to navigate and cohesively re-design: a Peacekeeping coin, a Laura Secord coin, and a Terry Fox coin. I turned instead to the 2019 Equality (also known as the LGBTQ2+ Rights) coin.

The re-designs:

This was my favourite part! I have a strong skill set in marketing and designing using Canva and different variations of Microsoft Paint. Once I had written the analysis and the stories to accompany the coins, I looked for other supporting resources. I turned to Historica Canada, Library and Archives Canada (LAC) and various articles and websites relevant to each topic. Through this process I was able to brainstorm new coin designs and choose how I would present the narratives myself. I opted for designs that were both disruptive and potentially feasible for the Royal Canadian Mint to produce.

For the Women's Right to Vote coin, I wanted to emphasize how much of a misrepresentation it would be to celebrate 100 years since women won the right to vote when the timeline was much shorter. In the end, I decided to change the date on the coin from "2019" to "1960" to reflect when Indigenous women and women of colour were enfranchised. The goal was to spark a conversation about why the timeline was so long and of course what happened in 1960 versus celebrating 100 years of voting when all women have only been able to vote for 59 years.

The 50th Anniversary of the Canadian Flag coin was much easier to design but also more difficult to engage with critically. With this coin the narrative I was challenging related to imagined communities and collective identity. It's easy to take Canadian national symbols for granted when you weren't alive for their creation or the bitter debate that ensued. What I wanted to do with this coin was push back against our current national symbols and create a space where viewers can imagine a scenario where these symbols are up for debate. It's easy to forget that these symbols are constructed and have more troubled history than most would imagine. To this day, we still participate in nation-building and identity formation on a regular basis—these coins are a prime example of this. So, my recommendation would be to mint a series of coins with a couple popular design submissions. A similar process was done for the Mint's 1999/2000 series where Canadians were asked to submit what moments from the last millennium, they were proud of and what they saw in store for the next millennium.

The Equality coin was the most difficult to re-design, in part because I don't think it ever should have been minted. On the other hand, I was forced to decide how to represent a queer narrative of resistance on a government-issued coin—talk about contradictory! I was able to decide very quickly that I wanted this to be a coin that focus on the LGBTQ2+ struggle, especially during the Cold War without assuming that we've achieved full equality in 2019. My first thought was that I wanted a pink triangle featured prominently on the coin—it needed to have a strong connection to the Cold War period and with LGBTQ2+ communities. Again, that's the difficult task of writing cohesive and national narratives, identities aren't fixed, universal or consistent across regions and decades. So, I turned to the Act Up movement and Keith Haring's well-

known 1989 “Ignorance = Fear” design. I superimposed his willfully blind, deaf and mute figures on a pink triangle and wrote words underneath that I felt captured the broader LGBTQ2+ struggles and implicated the Canadian Government in the process: Resist. Reform. Remember. I chose not to include dates in order to make the coin more applicable and striking.

Challenges:

I faced three key challenge while working on this project: learning new programs, the ethical implications of creating a “fake” coin and writing for a public audience. In terms of learning a new program, I achieved that, but couldn’t get it to work for me. This was very frustrating because I came so close, so many times and it just kept breaking. However, I’ve learned a lot about Storymap JS and gained new knowledge about the importance of broken images. It was this breaking that made me think about how disruptive it is to mess with an official image.

Now let’s talk ethics. Creating counterfeit or fake coins is not something I would generally find myself doing. However, I don’t pretend that these are real coins and have noted my interventions here. Moreover, I am confident in this project from the perspective of the Bank of Canada Museum’s activity where you get to design your own currency. So, while there is some precedent for this, I am also cautious to share that I made fake money and more inclined to say that I reimagined what could have been.

And lastly, writing for a public audience. I have tried my best to make sure that I am writing concisely and clearly. I’ve struggled to provide enough information and resources without overdoing it or boring my audience. For the most part, I see this

project as an invitation to Canadians to be critical of the narratives and stories their government tells. If I had more time, resources and energy I would reimagine more coins and tell more stories, but I'm only one person and I'm not meant to tell all these stories. Many need to be told by their own communities and by other nations entirely.

Reflections:

This project was inspired by my fascination with doing DH offline or rather with as minimal computing or tech as possible. So, when I was struggling to make the tech work for me, I realized I should take a step back. I needed to reevaluate what I wanted to do with this project and ask myself if this was the best way forward. What were my goals? Did I really need tech to achieve them?

Staying true to my initial goals and attempting to make this project as fun and as honest as possible was difficult to say the least. The final product is a direct result of my personal challenge to put my money where my mouth is. Criticizing someone else's decisions and final product is easy but doing so and then proposing a new design is not. I completely understand how difficult the process of making these coins must have been, especially as a former government employee. However, this does not excuse the lack of consultation, foresight and critical engagement that was neglected in the process of the Women's Right to Vote coin and the Equality coin.