

The Illusion of Digital Erasure

IAT 431

digital footprint and surveillance

IAT 431 Sooa Mo
 Joanne Ndagire
 Yumi Kawagoe

Table of Contents

01 Introduction

- 02 Provocation Space
- 03 Key Research
- 04 Domain Precedents
- 05 Speculative Precedents

02 Early Exploration

- 06 Initial Research
- 07 Initial Three Concepts
- 09 Feedback & Refinement

03 Reframed Ideation

- 10 Reframing the Provocation Space
- 11 Further Research
- 12 Concept Brainstorming & Development
- 14 Concept Details
- 15 Further Feedback
- 16 Refinement & Pivot
- 19 More Precedents and More Researches

04 Final Concept

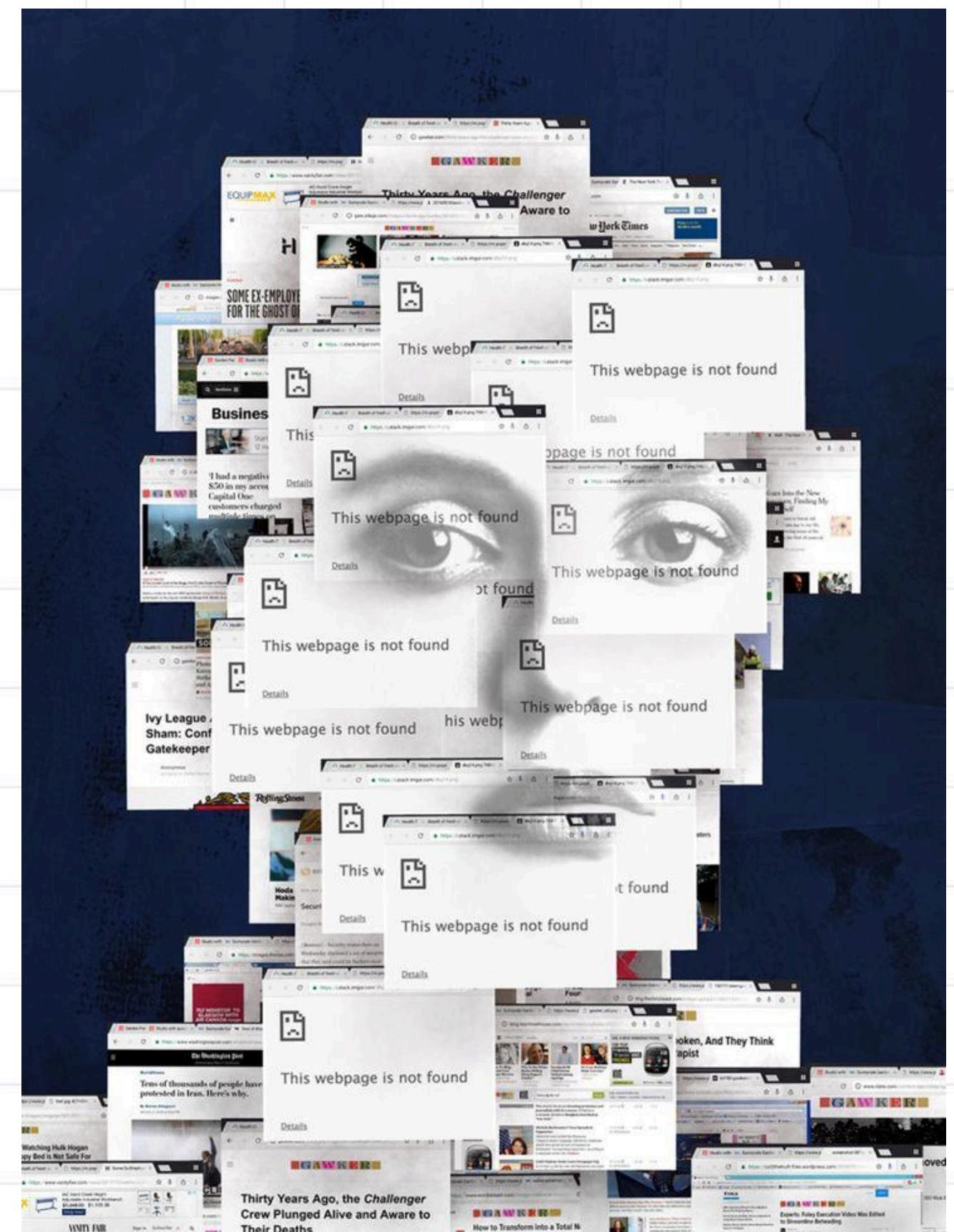
- 22 Overview
- 23 Concept Details

05 References

Provocation Space

In this digital era, individuals leave behind data traces that often extend beyond their control. While people may choose to share certain information, much more is passively collected and repurposed in ways they might not expect.

We explore the **gap between what people think they're sharing and how their data is actually used**, highlighting the disconnect between intention and outcome and the lack of urgency individuals have over their digital presence.



Key Research

01 The Privacy Paradox in Digital Behavior

"Many of the studies exhibiting the privacy paradox do not show that people are ascribing a low value to privacy. Instead, they show people making decisions involving privacy risks (Solove, 2021, p. 26)."

The privacy paradox highlights how users claim to value privacy but frequently **trade personal data** for convenience. This challenges the idea that privacy is purely an individual responsibility, emphasizing the need to **rethink data control at a systemic level** rather than relying on personal choices.

02 The Inheritance Problem

"The Act grants priority to service providers' terms or service and user choices over any other provisions, including the will (Harinja, 2017, p. 35)."

Even in death, individuals may have no real control over their data. **Platforms' policies often override personal intentions** or legal documents, exposing the **illusion of digital ownership**.

03 Scale of Digital Traces in Everyday Life

"The average internet user now spends almost 7 hours online each day, generating a vast and continuous trail of data (DataReportal, 2024)."

Digital footprints are not the result of exceptional actions but rather ordinary, repeated daily behaviours. This scale reinforces the need to rethink **how much of our identity is shaped algorithmically**, often without our full awareness.



Our design must critically engage with the digital footprint, prompting participants to question who truly controls, accesses, and benefits from their digital traces.

Domain Precedents

01 BINA48 (2010)

By Hanson Robotics



BINA48 is a humanoid robot developed by Hanson Robotics that **explores digital immortality by replicating human consciousness in a robotic form**. Built using a "mindfile" compiled from over 100 hours of Bina Aspen's memories, emotions, and beliefs, the project aims to preserve an individual's identity beyond their biological life.

02 ABBA Voyage

By Svana Gisla

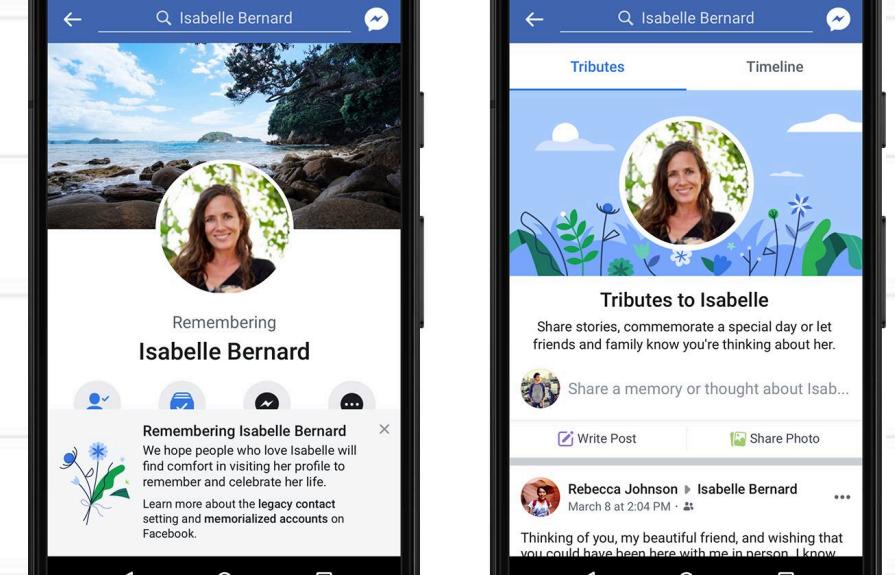


ABBA Voyage is a virtual concert residency featuring digital avatars, "ABBAatars," that **recreate ABBA's 1979 appearance** using motion capture and performance techniques. These avatars are animated with recorded movements from the band and younger body doubles, perform alongside a live 10-piece band, blending virtual and live music experiences.

Our research into **real-world precedents** revealed how **technology interacts with digital identity, preservation, and posthumous data management**.

03 Memorialized Account

By Facebook

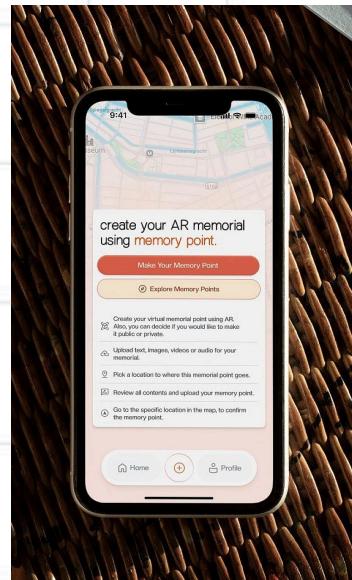
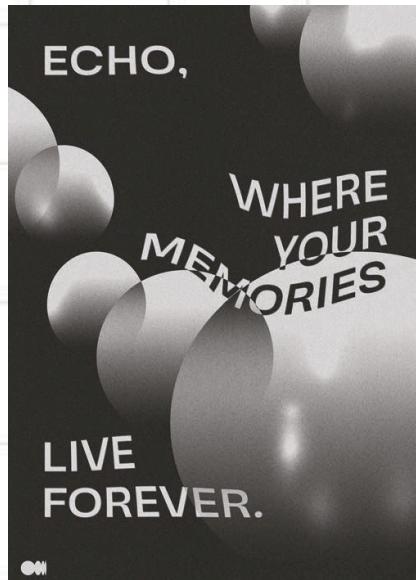


Facebook offers a memorialization feature that allows the accounts of deceased users to become memorialized. This feature secures a deceased user's account, allowing friends and family to share memories. A designated "**legacy contact**" **can manage limited functions like pinned posts and profile updates**.

Speculative Precedents

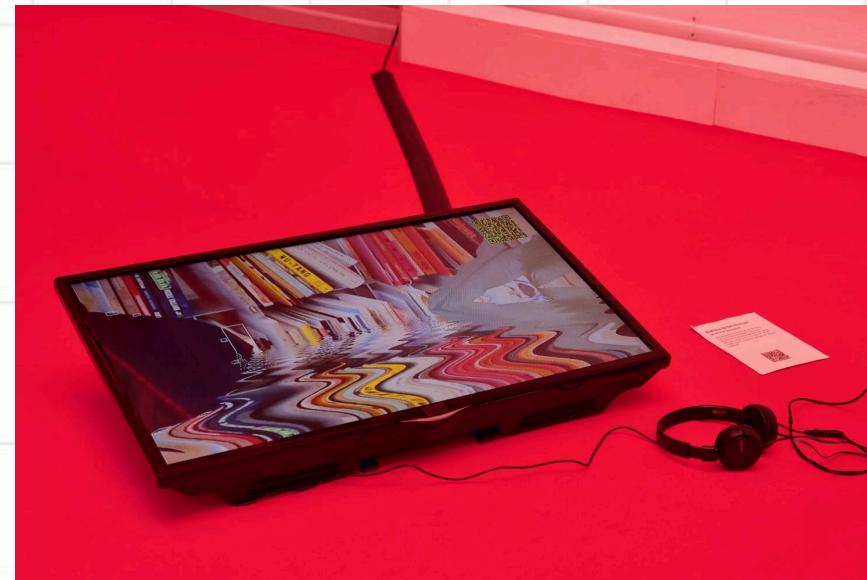
01 Digital Legacy (2024-2025)

By Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences



02 Refuse to be Human – ! (2020-2021)

By Mediengruppe Bitnik



This master student-led project presents four speculative installations examining how digital traces are curated, lost, or repurposed after death. The installations challenge whether individuals can shape their posthumous digital presence or if their data is controlled by external forces.

Why It Matters: This project questions who should manage digital legacies. Individuals, corporations, or AI, and whether digital identity should be curated or autonomously evolving.

This project explores the desire to escape digital identity by rejecting online categorization, algorithmic profiling, and surveillance. It presents a fictional opt-out service that allows individuals to systematically erase their digital presence, asking whether true digital disappearance is possible.

Why It Matters: This work critically engages with the illusion of control over digital identity, **revealing that digital erasure is often performative rather than absolute.** It challenges how data-driven systems dictate identity, even after an individual attempts to opt out.

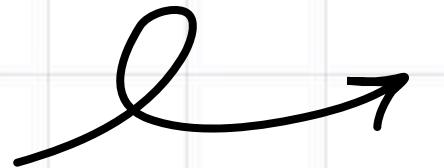
Early Exploration

"Digital immortality refers to the preservation of a user's digital identity, keeping it active even after the user's death (Galvão et al., 2021, p. 4)."

"Any information left by people on the Web is part of their digital legacy immortalized on the Internet (Galvão et al., 2021, p. 5)."

"Microsoft's patent US010853717 ('Creation of a conversational chatbot of a specific person') allows for the Digital Resurrection of a person based on the data they left behind in life, such as images, voice data, social media posts, electronic messages, or written letters (Rodriguez Resendiz & Rodriguez, 2024, p. 6)."

*Key Researches Shaped
the Initial Concepts*



Initial Concepts

Our early exploration was grounded in research that examined three core areas:

- **AI-Driven Digital Immortality:** The emergence of AI chatbots that simulate deceased individuals (Rodriguez Resendiz & Rodriguez, 2024).
- **Control & Ownership of Digital Assets After Death:** The legal and ethical challenges of digital legacy management, with platforms often controlling access rather than individuals or families (Galvão et al., 2021).
- **The Expansion of Digital Identity Beyond Life:** How entertainment and social media are utilizing digital resurrection in new ways, from AI holograms to virtual concerts (Curtis-Horsfall, 2024).

These findings led us to explore speculative scenarios that **challenged assumptions about digital afterlife, data permanence, and posthumous identity control.**

Goal: Explore digital legacy and immortality broadly, examining how digital footprints shape identity, outlive individuals, and influence remembrance or erasure.

01 AI & Digital Immortality in Crime

▼ Beta: The AI That Took Over the Darknet



Initial Idea:

- We speculated on a world where AI clones sustain criminal networks beyond human control.
- Inspired by discussions around AI accountability and autonomy, we explored how digital replicas might evolve beyond their creators.

Key Considerations:

- How do we show the persistence of digital identity beyond death?
- How can we make an invisible AI-driven system feel tangible?
- What kind of narrative structure best engages an audience in this speculative future?

Prototype Approach:

- **Investigation Board** (Tangible worldbuilding through visual storytelling)
 - A physical board featuring printed case files, newspaper transcripts, red-thread crime scene connections, evidences, and "missing person" reports.
- **News Broadcast** (Fiction into realism)
 - A speculative news segment reporting on law enforcement's struggle against AI-run crime

Strategic & Methodological Considerations

• Strategy: Estrangement

We used estrangement to make an abstract issue: AI-driven digital identity to feel unsettlingly real.

• Methods

- **Counterfactual:** "What if AI clones became legally indistinguishable from their human counterparts?"
- **Counter stories:** Instead of discussing AI ethics in theory, we framed it as a crime story, making AI-driven identity feel immediate and consequential.

02 Digital Funerals and the Ethics of AI Legacy

▼ A Conversation with the Departed



Initial Idea:

- We explored AI-powered posthumous presence and how a digital version of someone might attend their own funeral.
- Drawing from existing memorial AI chatbots, we speculated how such technology might evolve into a more immersive and interactive experience.

Key Considerations:

- How do we evoke an emotional response—discomfort, curiosity, or reflection?
- How much interactivity should the AI have? Should it answer questions, give a speech, or hold a full conversation?
- Should we focus on grief, memory, or control over one's digital afterlife?

Prototype Approach:

- **Interactive Memorial Space** (Emotional immersion through conversational AI)
 - An intimate setup where visitors interact ("talk") with an AI recreation of the deceased.
- **Memorial Pamphlet** (Tangible worldbuilding through visual storytelling)
 - A printed funeral-style guide explaining how to interact with deceased one.

Strategic & Methodological Considerations

• Strategy: Subversion

Instead of a funeral being for the living, we inverted expectations, making the deceased seemingly in control of their own farewell, raising questions about whether we ever truly "leave" the digital world.

• Methods

- **Para-functional Things:** The funeral itself functioned metaphorically—it wasn't just an event, but a technological performance of digital legacy.

03 The Digital Divide in Cities

▼ Digital Divide & Data Erasure in Cities



Initial Idea:

- We focused on data visibility and erasure in different urban environments, questioning who is remembered and who is erased in digital history.

Key Considerations:

- How do we visualize the differences between digital over-surveillance and digital erasure?
- How do we make an abstract data concept feel real?
- How does access (or lack of it) to digital history affect identity?

Prototype Approach:

- **Interactive Data Map** (Tangible speculation through spatial storytelling)
 - A speculative city map showing how different neighbourhoods experience surveillance, data tracking, and digital exclusion.
- **Smart City Control Dashboard** (Interactive simulation)
 - A web-based experience where users could toggle between different city districts, seeing their data visibility score.

Strategic & Methodological Considerations

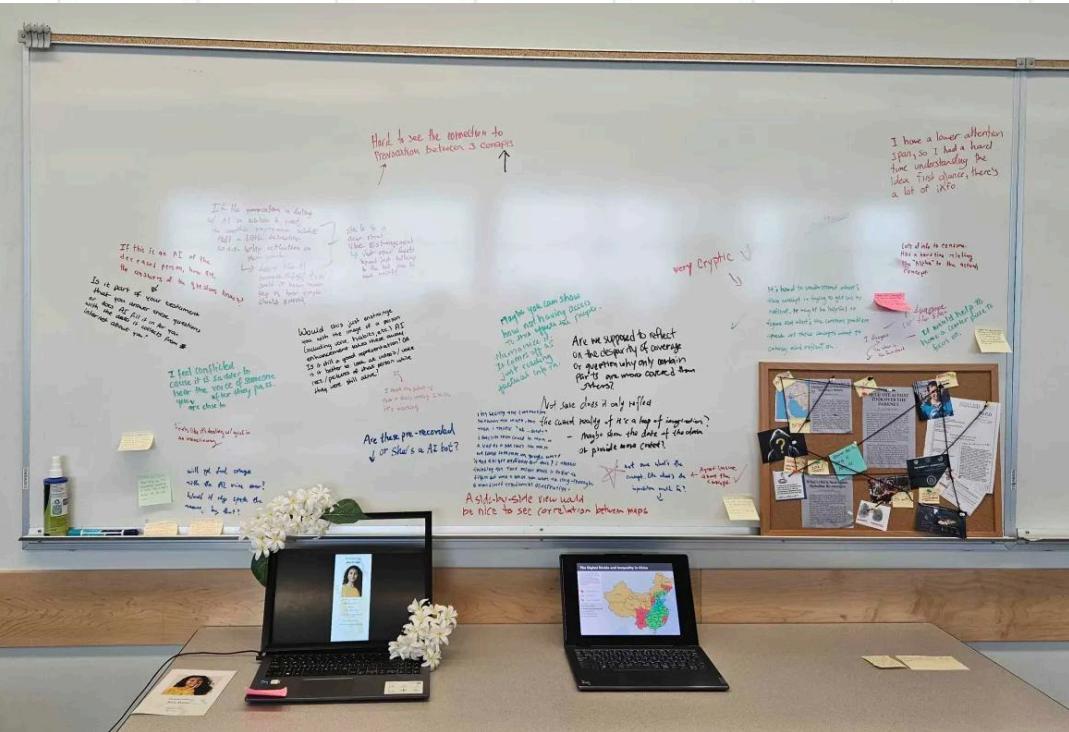
• Strategy: Estrangement

We make the familiar infrastructure of cities (surveillance, access to data, digital services) feel strange and open to critique by mapping invisible digital disparities.

• Methods

- **Things That Work Otherwise:** The interactive map functioned outside of normal city-planning frameworks, revealing hidden inequalities that aren't typically visible.

Feedback & Refinement



Refining Our Approach

In response to this feedback, we narrowed our focus, moving from digital legacy after death to the persistence of digital footprints in everyday life. This shift allowed us to create a more cohesive speculative provocation and ensure that our audience could immediately engage with the stakes of our project.

1. Unclear Provocation Space

Our initial concepts explored digital legacy in varied ways but lacked a unifying theme without a clear speculative throughline, the audience found it difficult to understand how our work interrogated digital footprints and legacy as a whole.

2. Execution Issues

The presentation of our ideas led to multiple interpretations, some of which diverged from our intended speculative questions. The lack of clarity in experiential alternatives limited audience engagement, making it difficult for participants to fully immerse themselves in our scenarios.

3. Ethical Reflection Was Difficult to Grasp

Due to the fragmented execution and thematic disconnect, the ethical stakes of our concepts did not come across as strongly as intended. This made it harder for the audience to critically reflect on the implications of our work.

"It is very hard to get what the provocation here is at first glance. Just wondering if there is a better way to execute this idea?"

"Hard to see the connection to provocation between 3 concepts."

"A bit of information overload going on here—maybe caused by a provocation that is too broad? I think this would help with a narrowed focus."

"I am seeing the connection between the maps, but then I think 'ok... and?' I feel like there could be more of a leap of imagination."

"I struggle to speculatively engage with this further. Maybe this could benefit by making a further leap of imagination?"

"Would this just estrange you with the image of a person (including voice, habits, etc.)? AI enhancement takes these away. Is it still a good representation?"

Key Takeaway:

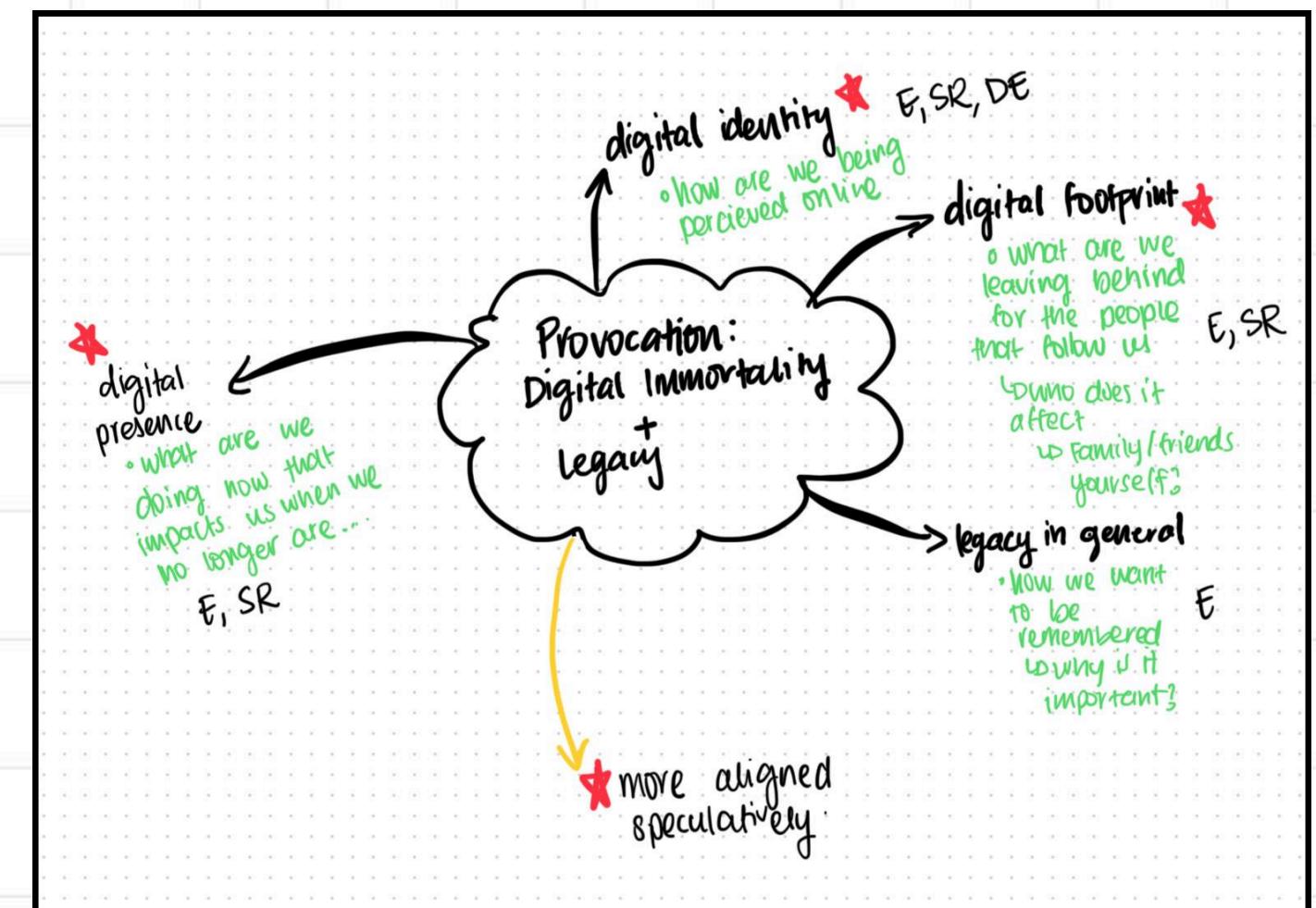
Our revised approach need to have emphasizes on clarity, accessibility, and engagement. By refining our provocation space and simplifying information delivery, we ensure that our speculative work is immersive, provocative, and prompts ethical reflection.

Reframed Ideation

We realized that digital legacy isn't just about what happens after death but **it starts with everyday digital footprints**, shaping how our actions define and preserve our identity over time.

Reframing the Provocation Space

- Instead of questioning how digital identity is preserved after death, we shifted our focus to **how digital footprints are continuously created, used, and manipulated** in everyday life.
- Rather than discussing AI recreations of the dead, we began exploring **who actually controls and benefits from our ongoing digital traces**.
- We moved from the idea of passive digital legacy to **active digital presence**, considering how people unknowingly contribute to their evolving online identity.



Further Research

01 Digital Footprints & Global Data Flow

Trefler and Sun (2022) examine how **digital data moves beyond national borders and individual control**, shaping how platforms categorize and monetize users:

"The composition of exporters of apps varies across importers, e.g., Vietnam imports social networking from China (WeChat), while Canada imports it from the US (Facebook) (Trefler & Sun, 2022, p. 26)."

This research highlights that **once data is created, individuals have little control over where it goes or how it is used**. It reinforcing the importance of questioning who truly owns and benefits from digital footprints.

02 Platform Control vs. User Intent

Harbinja (2017) discusses how **digital inheritance is largely controlled by corporations** rather than individuals or legal systems:

"The Act grants priority to service providers' terms or service and user choices over any other provisions, including the will (Harbinja, 2017, p. 35)."

Even if individuals want to manage or erase their digital footprints, **platform policies often override personal decisions**. The long-term fate of digital data is determined by corporate terms of service rather than user autonomy.

03 The Economic Repurposing of Digital Data

Spann et al. (2024) show that **companies actively use past consumer behaviour** to shape personalized pricing and predictive decision-making:

"Surprisingly, only 56.82% of companies use information about competitors' prices, and just over half of companies use information about past consumer behaviour that is useful for customizing prices to each individual customer (Spann et al., 2024, p. 56)."

This emphasizes that **digital footprints are not passive records** but active tools for economic profiling, affecting pricing, access, and personalized experiences.

Concept Brainstorming

Brainstorming for New Concepts that explored digital identity, data persistence, and speculative futures...

- Speculative Digital Lending System** - Users can temporarily rent their own eBooks to others, monetizing lending rights while keeping publishers in control.

- Algorithm Mirror** - A speculative algorithm-driven economy where personalization expands beyond content recommendations into predictive purchasing and economic discrimination based on digital footprints.

- Digital Will** - Users can view and manage their purchased digital assets (ebooks, music, cloud storage, social media accounts, personal data) and decide how they should be inherited or deleted after death.

- Find your memory** - A service that retrieves lost digital traces, including deleted social media posts, vanished photos, and data from defunct platforms. Whether it is a cherished memory or an unintended digital footprint, this service promises to bring back what was once forgotten.

- Digital footprints are not passive traces. They actively shape identity, economic decisions, and access to services.
- Erasure is often an illusion. Data persists even when individuals believe they have deleted it.
- Corporate and algorithmic control over digital data raises questions about autonomy, ownership, and the future of digital identity.

Main Takeaways From The Research

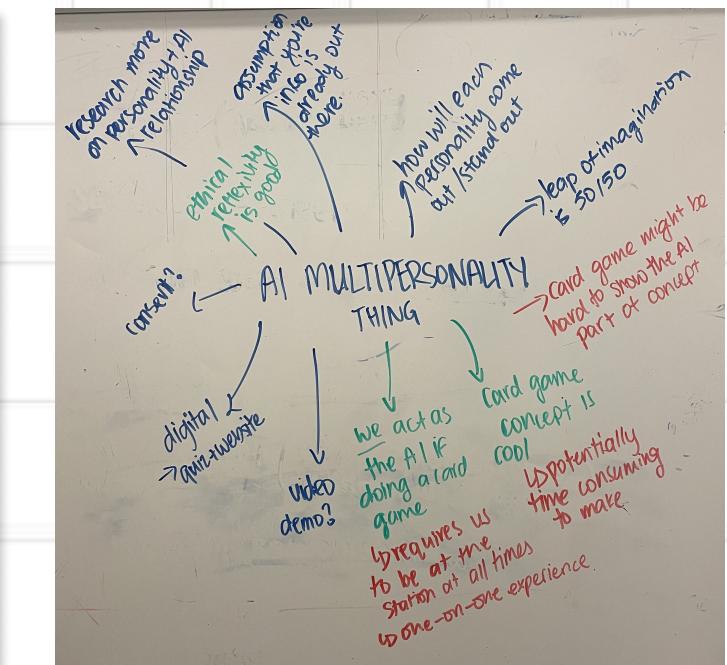
Concept Brainstorming

Multi-Persona Identity System

- A digital identity platform where users have multiple coexisting personas (e.g., professional self, private self, social self) which AI automatically analyzes based on their digital footprints. The system automatically adapts speech and behaviour based on the audience.

Prototype idea

- Card Game Concept**
- Players don't get to choose their personas manually.
 - In this case, we can't see the digital traces, so maybe have some random talk for 1-2mins and we assign the persona cards.
- Each persona is represented in a card with different attributes, such as...
 - Tone & Speech Pattern
 - Behavioural Traits
 - Visibility & Permissions
- The AI modifies personas in real-time depending on the scenario, forcing players to react and strategize using the persona given to them.



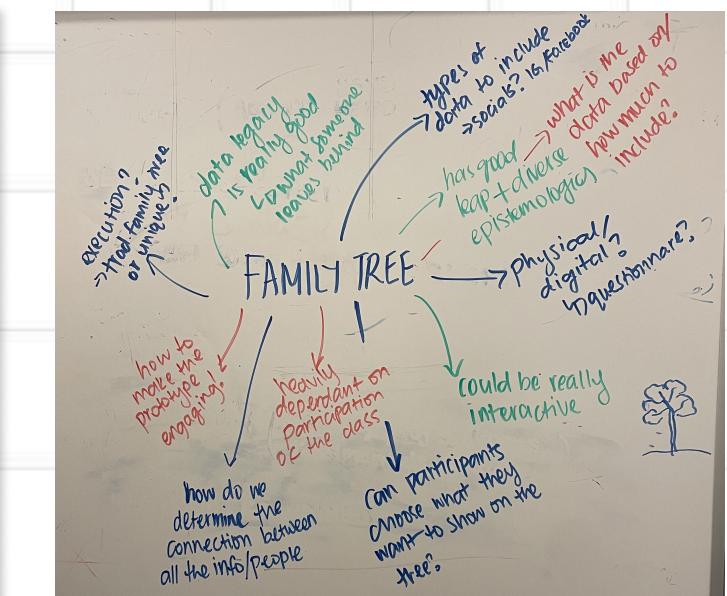
Hard to convey message clearly, since it relies too much on active participation, which makes it tricky to execute well and harder to control the overall experience.

Digital Genealogy: A Family Tree of Data

- Instead of traditional family trees based on names and dates, this speculative system envisions a dynamic digital lineage where generations inherit and interact with the data, memories, and online traces of their ancestors.

Prototype idea

- Interactive Family Tree Visualization → Users navigate a digital interface displaying generations of family members.
 - Profile System - has Image, Bio, Occupation, digital footprint
 - Career & Academic History → Each profile integrates career milestones, academic achievements, and notable contributions, similar to LinkedIn.

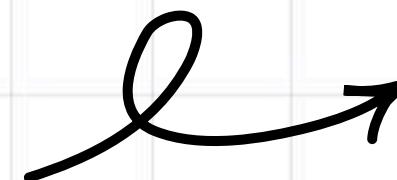


This has a simple execution and fits the four-framework well. It's easy for audience to understand, which helps people to reflect on our provocation space.

Evaluated the ideas based on the four frameworks.

...and we debated on these ideas.

Concept Development



We first thought about a physical class family tree, but it fully rely on audience participation and clear prompts, which was hard to ensure people would engage or understand the provocation. Thus, we went with a digital version instead.

Leaps of Imagination

- Transforms the concept of family trees from static genealogical records into interactive and digital ecosystems.
- Exploring New Forms of Inheritance.

Diverse Epistemologies

- See ancestry as a living connection rather than a historical record. This system bridges oral traditions, historical storytelling, and digital preservation.
- Each individual's past is preserved through their own digital footprint.

Ethical Reflexivity

- Challenges the Boundaries of Identity & Consent
- Privacy & Data Ownership Issues

Experiential Alternative

- An immersive and participatory experience that allows for people to connect with the concept of digital legacy/ancestry through engaging with their own lived experiences and how they define who they are

Concept Summary

With our refined focus on digital footprints and data privacy, we moved forward with the “**A Family Tree of Data**” concept, envisioning a speculative genealogy platform that reconstructs family histories using digital traces. This concept emerged from our research and discussions on data persistence, inheritance, and control, leading us to ask:

- Who truly owns and controls personal data over time?
- What happens to forgotten or hidden digital traces?
- How do algorithms curate, erase, or reshape identity beyond one's lifetime?

We named the speculative platform **DataHeir**, imagining a near-future system in which everyday digital footprints become the source of generational memory.

Strategy: Estrangement

By turning familiar genealogical tools into a mechanism for unexpected data retrieval, we made personal history feel unfamiliar, emphasizing how little control individuals have over their long-term digital identity.

Methods Applied

- **Worldbuilding:** Creating a fictional platform set in 2075 allowed us to explore the long-term implications of today's data practices.
- **Para-functional Things:** DataHeir behaves like a family tree but operates on opaque, algorithmic logic—uncovering data that users assumed was private, deleted, or insignificant.

Concept Details

Speculative System: DataHeir

Set in 2075, DataHeir is imagined as a genealogical platform that reconstructs family trees not through birth records or oral histories, but by collecting and compiling digital traces left behind across decades of online activity.

This system challenges assumptions of data ownership and erasure by demonstrating how traces we believed were forgotten or deleted may resurface and be inherited by future generations.



1. "Enter Your Family Details"

Viewers are introduced to the idea that even minimal information—names, birth years, and emails—can begin the process of reconstructing entire digital profiles. This raises questions about how little control individuals have over their data once it exists in digital ecosystems.

2. "Data Retrieval & Profile Generation"

DataHeir uses a fictional algorithm that crawls and collects public data. The term "forgotten posts" and "digital traces" subtly points to the permanence of online activity and how erasure is often incomplete.

The interface shows how a person's digital life is repackaged into a coherent narrative, even if they never consented to it.

3. "Explore & Rediscover"

The system allows users to browse family members' profiles. Memories are no longer inherited orally or through physical objects—but algorithmically retrieved. The emotional discomfort arises when traces appear that were never meant to be seen or remembered such as tinder profile, crime news.

4. Warning Message

At the bottom of the poster, we included a disclaimer. This line is crucial to reinforcing our provocation: that deletion is not disappearance, and control is always partial in digital systems.

Further Feedback

The feedbacks revealed key areas where our speculative concept needed **stronger clarity, engagement, and ethical framing** to ensure audience can clearly understand the provocation and reflect on it.

1. Lacking a Strong Leap of Imagination

- While the concept raised important ethical questions about digital inheritance, it felt too grounded in current digital genealogy trends rather than fully pushing speculative boundaries.
- The project needed a stronger strategic framework to make the speculation more impactful and distinct.

2. Need for a More Focused Provocation

- The provocation space remained too broad, covering digital legacy, inheritance, and posthumous data management simultaneously.
- The feedback suggested narrowing our focus toward digital footprints and personal data privacy, ensuring that the audience could reflect on how their data is used.

3. Enhancing Emotional & Critical Engagement

- The project needed to evoke stronger emotion to provoke deeper reflection on digital footprints.
- Instead of simply presenting a neutral speculative system, the design could push audiences to feel the consequences of algorithmic data collection first-hand.

4. Strategy-Driven Ideation Needed

- The feedback emphasized that we should develop our concept based on speculative strategies rather than just an idea-first/conceptual approach.
- Instead of refining the existing concept, we needed to choose the right speculative strategy and build the project around it.

Refining Our Approach

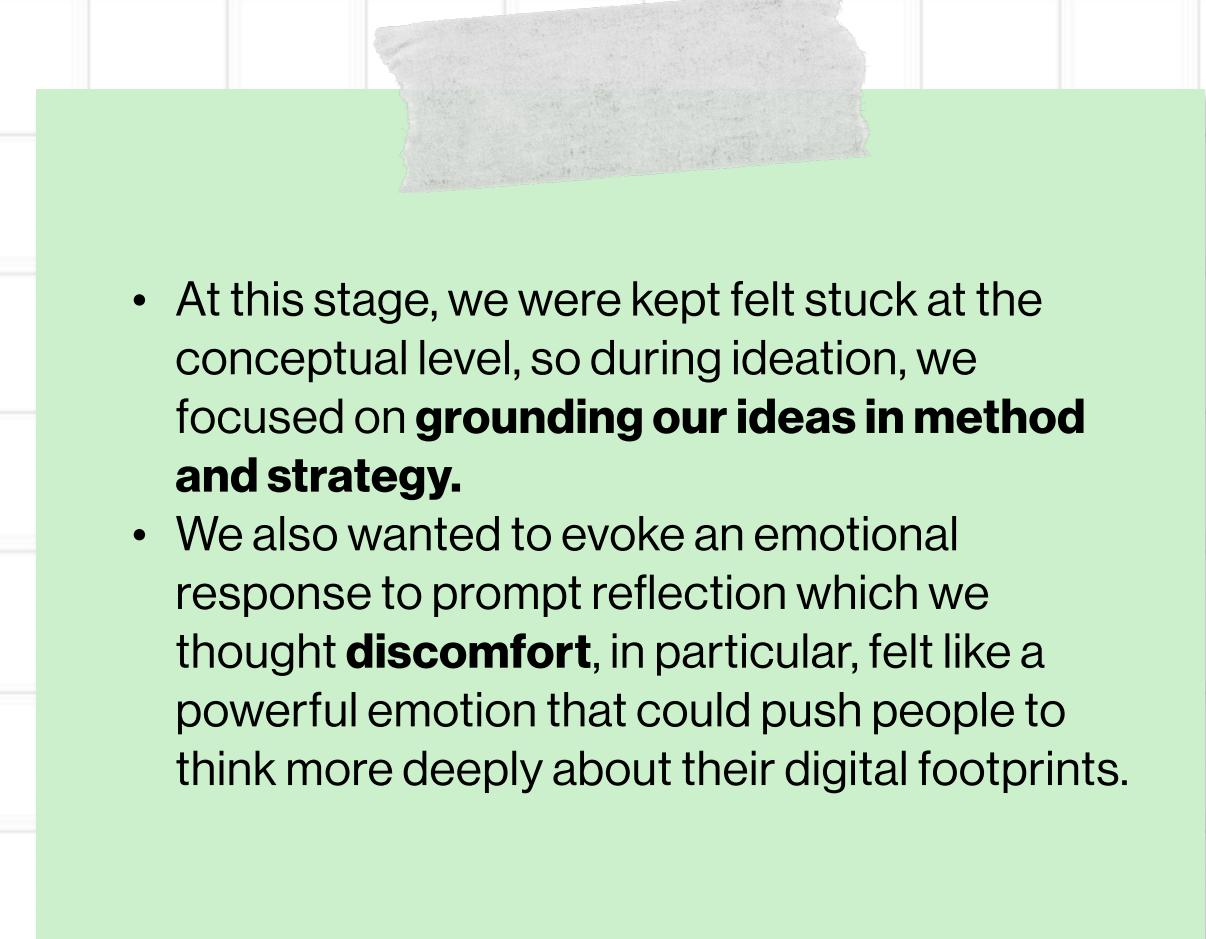
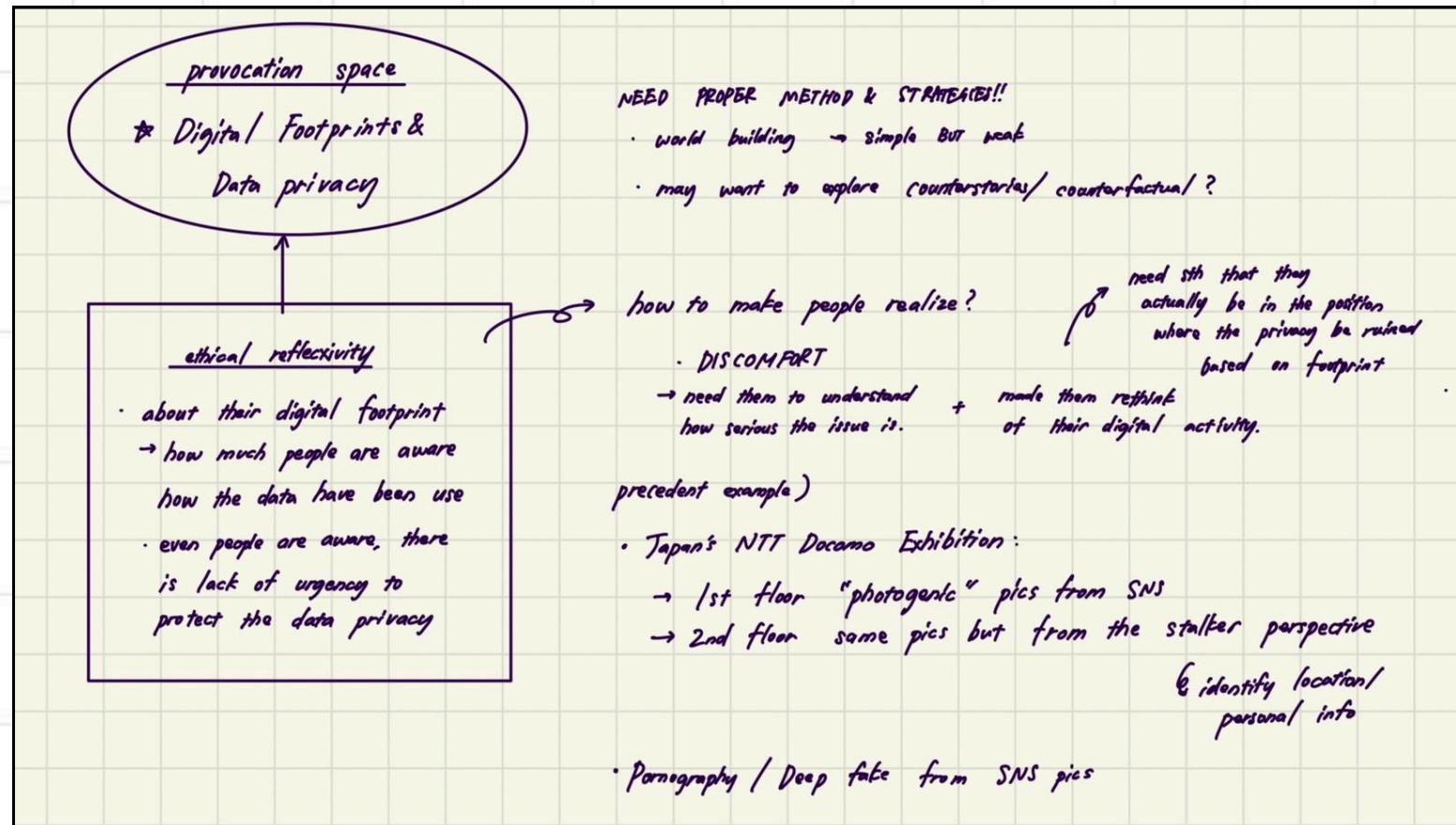
Feedback on Digital Family Tree highlighted the need for a stronger leap of imagination and a more focused strategy and methodology. While the concept introduced speculative elements, it remained too conceptual and lacked a clear experiential component that would make the provocation more impactful.

Key Takeaway:

A passive presentation of a speculative system was not enough. We needed to design an experience that actively engaged participants and evoked reflection. Establishing a clear speculative strategy from the beginning would ensure a more cohesive and intentional execution.

Refinement

We recognized the need for a more refined speculative approach that would push **beyond conceptual discussions** and into a more interactive, experiential exploration of digital footprints. This refinement process focused on four key shifts:



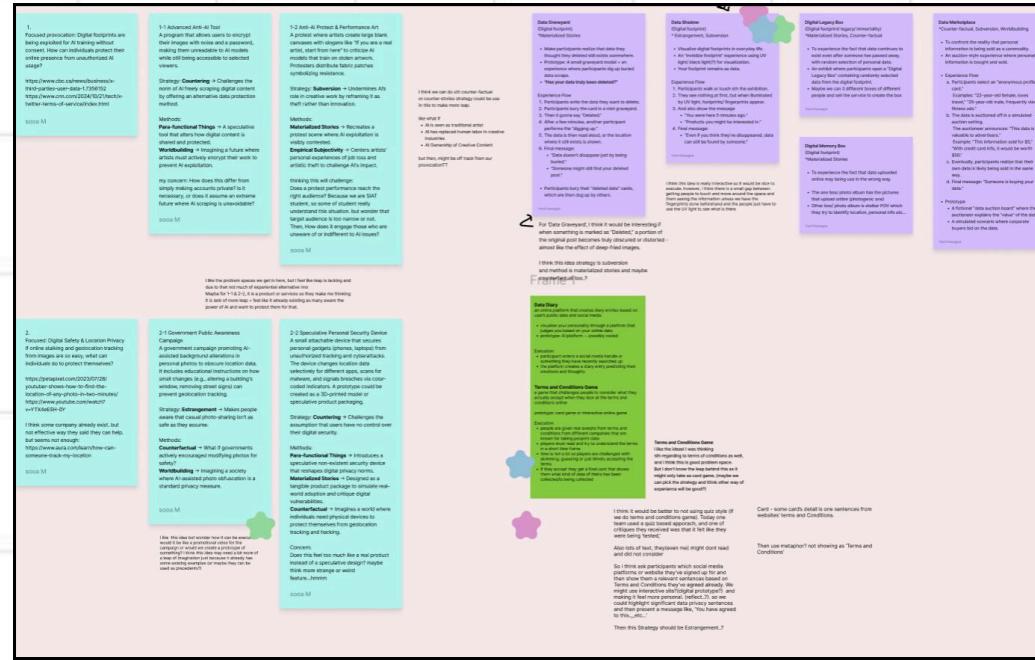
1. Shifting from Posthumous Data to Everyday Digital Footprints

Initially, we focused on digital inheritance and posthumous identity, but we shifted after realizing that **everyday data privacy issues tend to resonate more emotionally**. This led us to redirect our provocation toward how personal data is collected, repurposed, and controlled while people are still alive.

2. From Passive Reflection to Active Engagement

While Digital Family Tree raised interesting ethical dilemmas, it primarily presented a speculative scenario rather than immersing participants in the issue. The feedback pushed us to design an **experience where people could actively witness and confront their own digital traces**, making the implications of digital tracking impossible to ignore.

Pivot



Data Shadow (Digital footprint) * Estrangement, Subversion

- Visualize digital footprints in everyday life.
- An "invisible footprint" experience using UV light/ black light(?) for visualization.
- Your footprint remains as data.

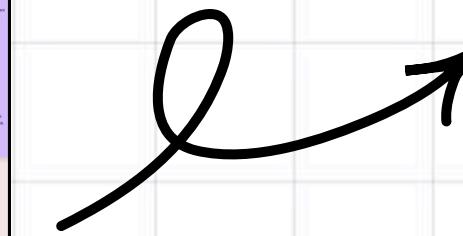
Terms and Conditions Game (materialised stories)

A game that challenges people to consider what they actually accept when they look at the terms and conditions online

- either a physical card game or interactive online game

2-1 Government Public Awareness Campaign

A government campaign promoting AI-assisted background alterations in personal photos to obscure location data. It includes educational instructions on how small changes (e.g., altering a building's window, removing street signs) can prevent geolocation tracking.



Final Concept Ideation

The interactive installation disguises itself as a “**Data Erasure Service**”, making participants into believing they can erase private or embarrassing information. However, it subverts expectations by revealing that digital traces never truly disappear, exposing the illusion of control over personal data.

Strategy: Subversion

Challenges the illusion of data control by making people think they control their digital traces. Only to later reveal that they persist.

Methods: Materialized Stories

The process of stamping, erasing, and revealing footprints under UV light creates a physical, experiential story about online tracking.

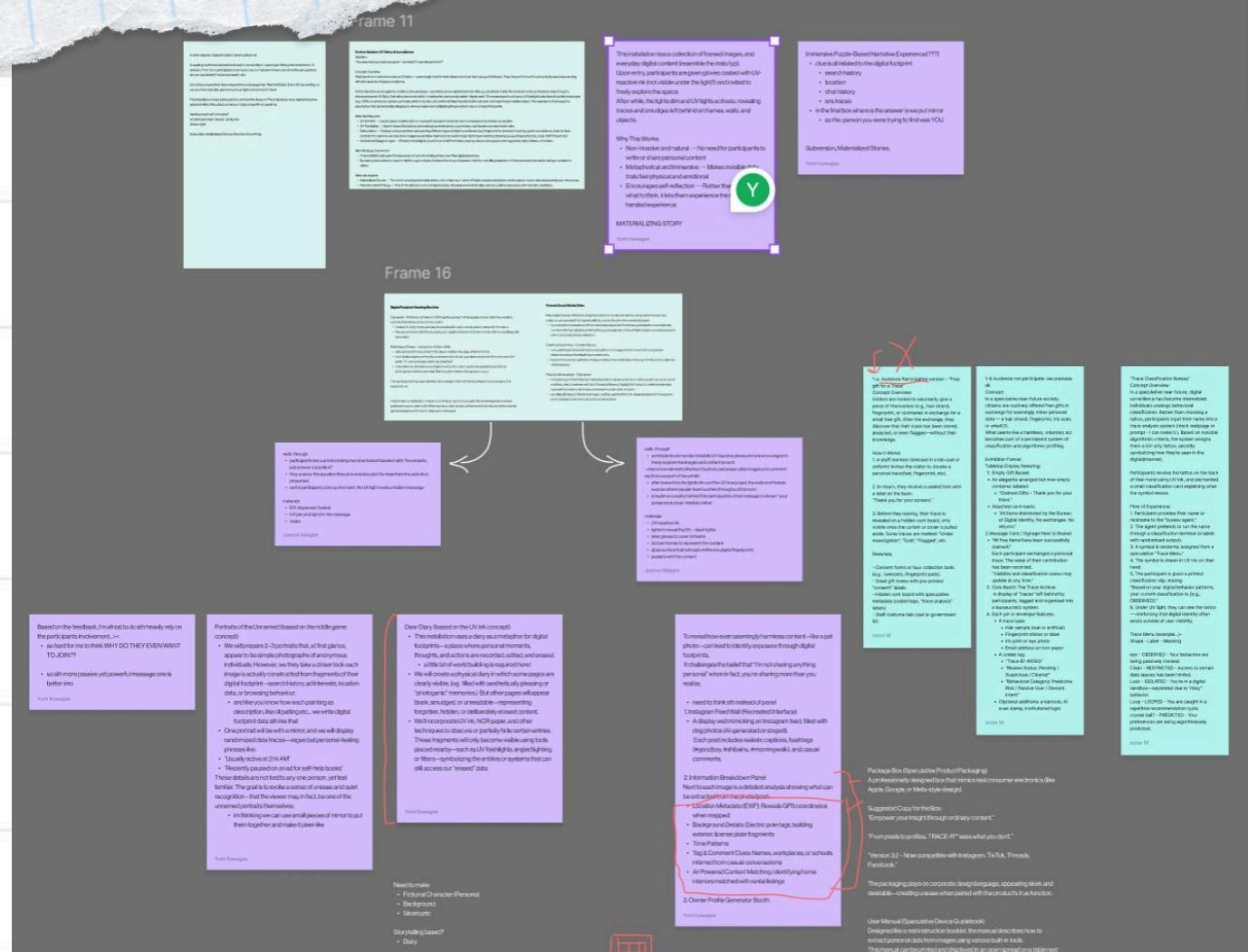
How It Works

Participants are invited to a “**Data Cleansing Booth**”, where they write down something they want to erase using UV ink on a deletion request form. After submitting it, they are assured that their data has been securely erased. However, their responses are secretly transferred to a “Deleted History” board, where the text remains invisible until exposed under UV light, accessible only by institutional entities (e.g., CSIS, corporations, schools).

- During ideation, we focused on strategy and method, and using previous feedback to guide our direction. We carefully evaluated each ideas, considering not just feasibility but **also how much it pushed the provocation** and created space for reflection.
- Our main goal was to move beyond surface-level ideas and design something that could evoke an emotional response as a way to **prompt deeper engagement with issues** around digital footprints and privacy.

Midpoint Reflection

We pivot, and made meaningful progress! But we're still in the process of getting it right. While the direction feels stronger and more aligned with our provocation, there are still areas we're exploring and adjusting as we continue to iterate.



TOO STRONG STAND!

One major feedback we received was that the concept felt too moralizing or forceful. Thus, we've shifted toward a more neutral where leaving for the audience to engage with the work in their own way, and reflect based on their personal interpretations and feelings. While we've made progress, the work is still evolving as we continue to find the right balance. This approach not only encourages **more personal engagement**, but also fosters **better ethical reflectivity and embraces diverse ways of reflection and understanding**.

STORY

While we've begun grounding our work with clear methods and strategies, the story and worldbuilding are still developing. To truly immerse the audience in our installation, we need to strengthen the narrative foundation and **create a more cohesive world** around the persona and setting.

EXPERIENTIAL ALTERNATIVE

Audience engagement alone isn't enough to create an experiential alternative. The true value lies in offering a meaningful and thought-provoking experience, one that resonates emotionally and encourages reflection, rather than relying on interaction for its own sake.

We used these three core criteria as key guiding principles during our final concept ideation on top of other previous feedback.

Precedents

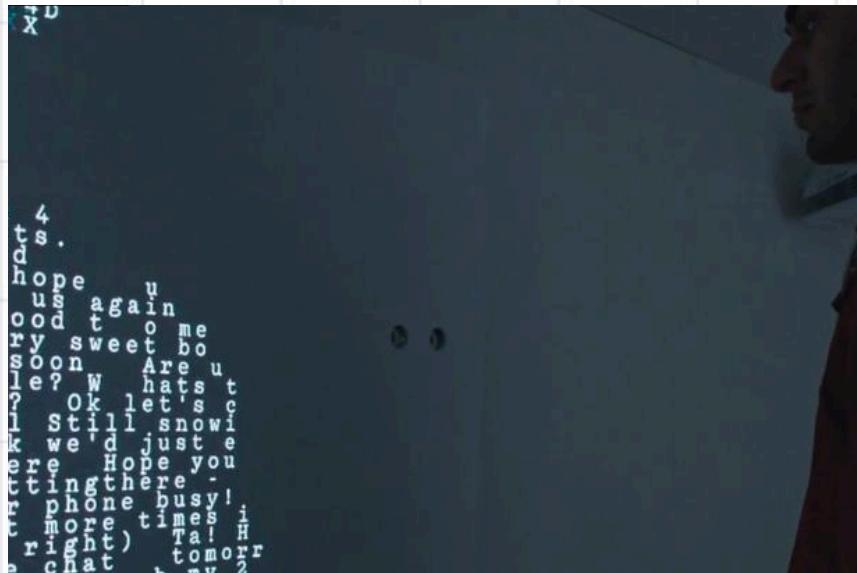
01 The Glass Room By Tactical Tech



The Glass Room is a traveling exhibition that immerses participants in **the hidden mechanisms of digital surveillance and data capitalism**.

Promotes **active participant** making digital privacy concerns more tangible by demonstrating how everyday digital actions unknowingly build lasting data footprints.

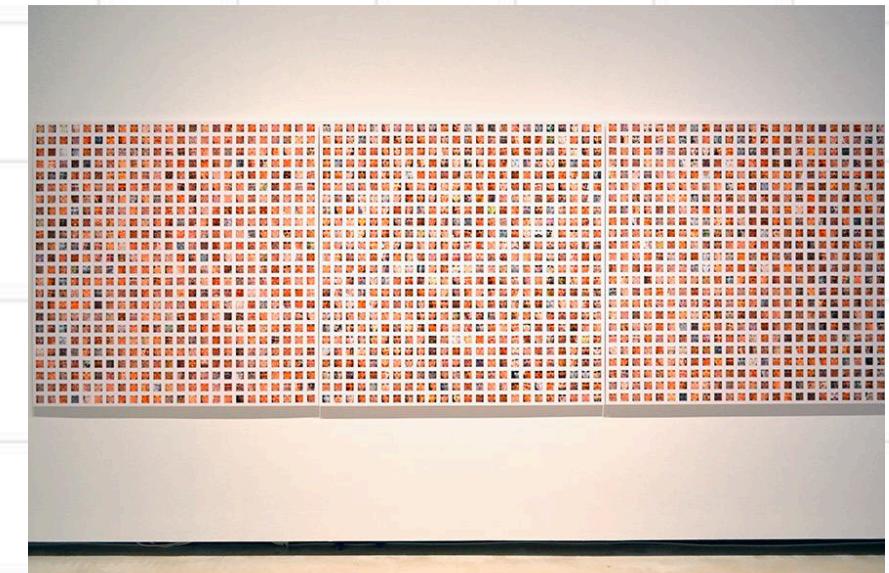
02 Data Shadow (2015) By Mark Farid



Data Shadow is a live installation and performance that **visualizes the digital traces people leave behind**, using online activity, location data, and metadata to reconstruct detailed personal profiles from fragmented information.

Highlights the **persistence of digital footprints** using real-time participation to reveal how surveillance and data tracking can reconstruct personal information that never truly disappears.

03 Face to Facebook (2011) By Leon Raiva



Face to Facebook **hacked data from one million public Facebook profiles** to create a fake dating site, exposing the lack of user control over online identities and challenging the ethics of social media surveillance.

Reveals how easily personal data can be exploited online and **uses subversion as a strategy** to challenge assumptions about privacy and corporate data practices.

More Researches

01 Data Privacy and Digital Demand

Xiong et al. (2023) explores the disconnect between users' stated concerns about privacy and the contrast between their actual online behaviours.

"Our Study not only validates the data privacy paradox, but also leverages this paradox to examine a critical dynamic inherent to the data economy (Xiong et al.,2023,p.3)."

This study reinforces the core of our concept; users believe they are in control deleting history, using private mode, but traces persist and are often used in ways they cannot see. The installation reflects this by creating an illusion of data erasure, only to later reveal what remains.

02 Sharing Digital Footprint Data

McCormick et al. (2022) investigates how people decide to share types of digital footprint data , examining factors such as data type, recipient, purpose and level of detail.

"Digital footprints data are key for the economy, underpinning business models and service provision (McCormick et al., 2022, Abstract)."

Participants in our concept gets stamp and “erase” their data, believing it’s gone. But like the real world, those traces are stored and revealed under institutional access. This mirrors how users overlook the true visibility and use of their data.

03 Private Browsing Protection

Wu et al. (2018) examines how browser explanations influence user misconceptions about private browsing,

"Many users overestimate the protections provided by private browsing modes, with more than half believing their search history is not logged by Google even when logged into their accounts, and 27% mistakenly thinking it offers protection against viruses and malware (Wu et al., 2018)."

We aim to challenge the illusion of privacy associated with incognito mode by making users confront the reality that their actions are not as private as they may think. The study supports this by highlighting the widespread misconceptions about private browsing.

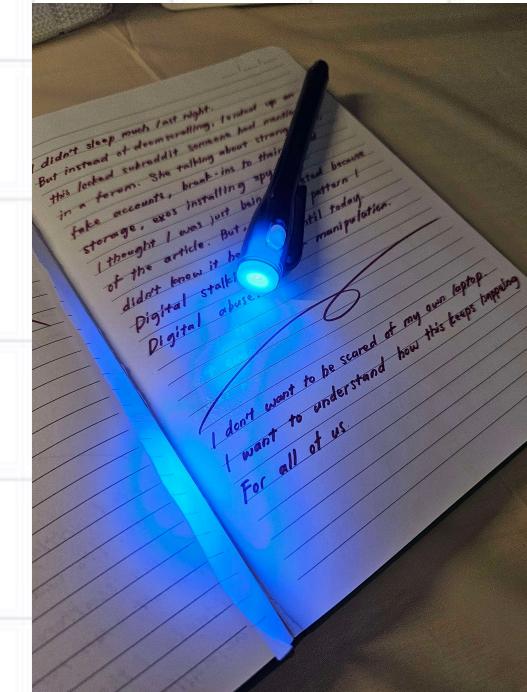
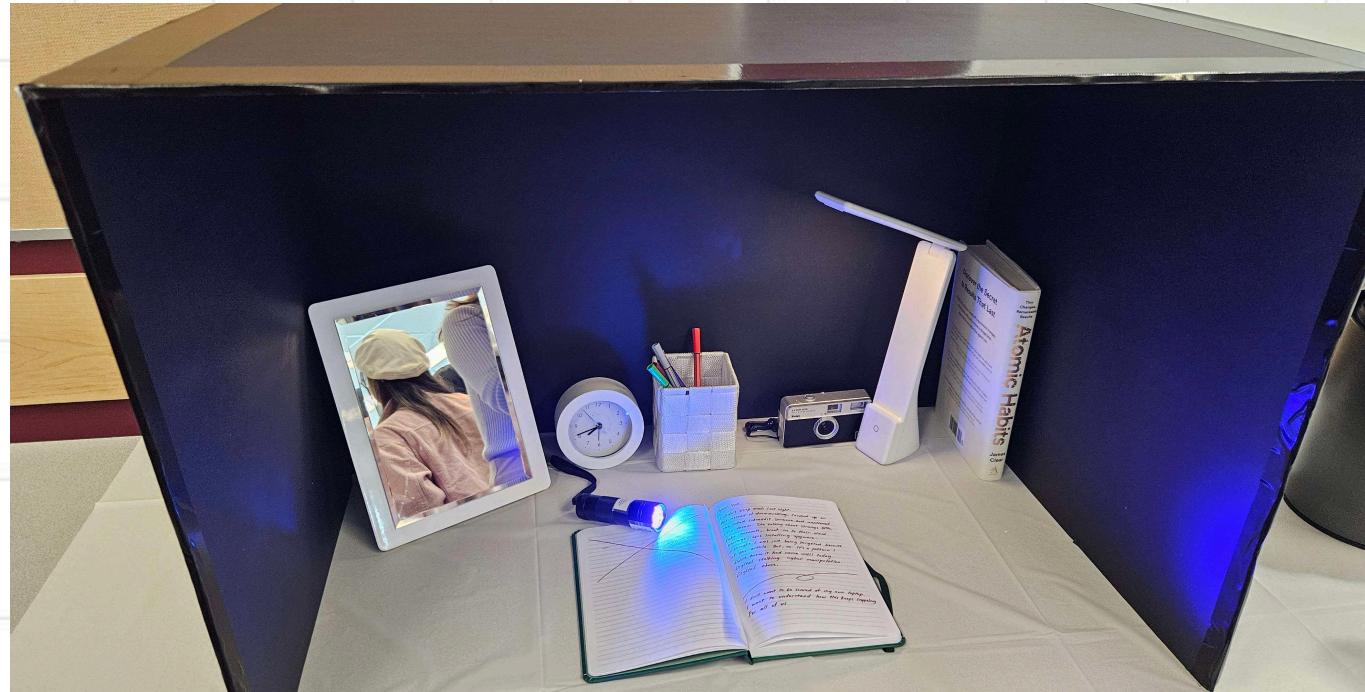
Final Concept

Overview

This project challenges the illusion of control over personal data. In “Diary”, even the most private, hidden, or discarded traces are retrievable. The installation draws a parallel between analogue erasure and digital footprints, prompting viewers to reflect on their data, and their privacy.

Installation Title

Dear Diary



“What if the things you tried to erase could still be read?”

Strategy and Methods

Speculative Strategy: Subversion

The work undermines the false belief that individuals can fully control or erase their digital presence.

- The author of the diary believes certain thoughts were safely hidden which is crossed out or blacked out by hand.
- Audiences, however, can reveal these “erased” entries using UV light, **symbolizing how governments or corporations might retain or access data long after we believe it's gone.**
- Even “discarded” materials, like old calendars or passwords thrown away in a trash bin, remain readable under UV, emphasizing how institutions quietly archive what we think is deleted.

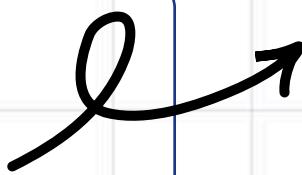
Methods Used

1. Materialized Stories

The physical diary uses blacked-out lines and UV-reactive ink to explore the tangled relationship between data, privacy, and surveillance through Sofia, a cybercrime victim trying to reclaim control over her digital identity.

2. Worldbuilding

We created a fictional persona, Sofia, a Canadian university student and activist to bring the diary to life. Her story unfolds through visible and UV entries, revealing how digital traces linger and how institutions may quietly retain what we think is erased.



Persona Development

At the heart of The Diary is a fictional persona, so we began by exploring activist identities inspired by real individuals who advocate for digital rights, privacy, and resistance to surveillance. This helped ground our provocation in relatable experiences has backbone story with world-building aspects and allowed us to communicate our provocation more effectively through both the diary’s voice and the installation setting.

Our Persona: Sofia Alvarez

A fictional cybercrime victim and journalism student in Montreal. Her story was influenced by real cases such as Amanda Todd’s (Canada), and supported by research from digital safety advocates like Eva Galperin.

Why Sofia made sense:

Sofia’s story highlights the **emotional and ethical weight of privacy loss** from the perspective of someone unintentionally exposed. Her diary reflects everyday digital vulnerability, making the idea of recoverable “deleted” data more visceral. UV ink symbolizes accidental exposure, not resistance, deepening the emotional impact of the metaphor.

Our Persona

Name: Sofia Alvarez

Age: 22

Pronouns: She/Her

Location: Montreal, Canada

Occupation: Undergraduate student in Journalism & Media Studies

Digital Presence: Maintains a professional blog, active on X Discord, and campus writing forums.

Background

Sofia is a fourth-year journalism student passionate about digital rights and online safety. After publishing an article on algorithmic bias and data misuse, she became the target of cyber harassment, leaving her isolated and deeply skeptical of digital privacy.

Goals & Motivations

Sofia aims to reclaim control over her digital identity, process her trauma through honest self-documentation, and raise awareness about the illusion of data erasure, while seeking connection with others who've faced similar digital abuse.

Digital Footprint Behaviour

Sofia tries to erase her digital footprint by deleting accounts, changing devices, and using privacy tools like VPNs and burner emails, but remains uneasy about their effectiveness.

Fears & Tensions

Sofia lives with the fear of constant surveillance and the anxiety that deleted data is never truly gone. She struggles to trust privacy tools, feels torn between speaking out and staying silent, and wrestles with the tension between self-expression and self-protection.

Real-World Inspirations

- Amanda Todd – Canadian teen whose cyberbullying case reshaped awareness of digital exploitation.
- Caroline Criado Perez – Feminist journalist targeted for speaking publicly online.
- Eva Galperin – Cybersecurity director and advocate for survivors of stalkerware and digital abuse.

Need simple persona to avoid distracting from our provocation, but made sure she was strong and relatable enough to support the worldbuilding and carry the story. This helped ground the themes in a personal, emotional narrative!

Installation Setup

How the Diary Works

The Diary is displayed like a personal journal, with visible entries capturing daily life and blacked-out sections suggesting erasure. Using a UV flashlight, viewers can uncover hidden entries, private thoughts and details about the stalking that were meant to stay unseen, even by the author herself.

"Diary" as a physical artifact that **metaphorically visualizes** how digital footprints persist, even when we believe they're erased. This piece transforms a handwritten diary into a speculative storytelling object. It invites viewers to reflect on the illusion of control over data and the emotional reality of digital vulnerability.

Material Components

Element	Description	Purpose
Handwritten Diary	Bound notebook, entirely handwritten in black pen	Acts as the core narrative artifact
UV Ink Pens	Used beneath black crossings	Symbolizes deleted or repressed digital data
UV Flashlights	Available at exhibition table	Represents institutional power or surveillance tools
Small Trash Bin	Placed beside the diary	Contains fragments of discarded data: monthly calendar, sticky notes with passwords—all written in UV ink
CSIS Logo Sticker	Attached to trash bin	Suggests that even 'deleted' items are retrievable by powerful actors
Table Setting	Minimal: diary, UV tools, small placard with context	Emphasizes intimacy and personal scale of the narrative

Installation Setup Mood board



We designed the black cubicle to **evoke a sense of personal space within a public setting** which semi-secluded, yet still under surveillance. It creates the feeling of privacy, like a personal corner, while reminding viewers that even this intimacy isn't fully protected. Inside the cubicle, personal artifacts help humanize and personalize the persona, making her presence feel real and emotionally grounded. The trash can, filled with UV-visible "discarded" items, reinforces the idea that even what we think is erased can still be accessed. Together, they highlight the illusion of privacy in both physical and digital spaces.

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Where memory resists deletion, your words become shelter.

