

Technologies of TeXT

(<https://s18tot.ryancordell.org/>).

The Unessay

Assignment Overview:

- Form can vary widely!!
- Students generally work individually, though I am open to collaborative proposals.
- Unessay 1 due March 5 by 5pm
- Unessay 2 due TBA
- 30% of total grade

The Nitty-Gritty

Twice this semester you will develop unessay projects.

1. I highly prize creative takes on this assignment. Before jumping into typical paper writing mode, consider other media, presentation styles, and modes of critical engagement you might employ instead.
2. This is a hands-on course about media and technology: I would be thrilled to see unessays that do rather than (only) describe. Consider using your unessay assignments to get your hands dirty (perhaps literally) with some of the media we discuss in class.
3. Take advantage of my advice and help as you develop your unessay ideas. That's what I'm here for!

You may complete your unessays on your own schedule, but they must be turned in by the listed due dates. I would strongly advise you not to put the assignment off. To motivate you to work earlier, I am happy to offer feedback on drafts submitted at least one week in advance of a given deadline. We will also workshop ideas during class sessions well in advance of each deadline.

I will also show you some stellar examples of unessays in the weeks leading up to the first deadline, and would be happy to show you others during office hours. I have a growing collection of stunning student unessay work that I love revisiting.

Assignment Background

Thanks to Daniel Paul O'Donnell for [this brilliant assignment](http://people.uleth.ca/~daniel.odonnell/Teaching/the-unessay) (<http://people.uleth.ca/~daniel.odonnell/Teaching/the-unessay>), which I've only slightly modified for our class. For more on the research behind the Unessay assignment, see [the work of Emma Dering and Matthew Galea](http://dpod.kakelbont.ca/category/research/unessay/) (<http://dpod.kakelbont.ca/category/research/unessay/>).

The essay is a wonderful and flexible tool for engaging with a topic intellectually. It is a very free format that can be turned to discuss any topic—works of literature, of course, but also autobiography, science, entertainment, history, and government, politics, and so on. There is often something provisional about the essay (its name comes from French *essai*, meaning a trial), and almost always something personal.

Unfortunately, however, as Wikipedia notes (<http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Essay&oldid=510540710>),

» In some countries (e.g., the United States and Canada), essays have become a major part of formal education. Secondary students are taught structured essay formats to improve their writing skills, and admission essays are often used by universities in selecting applicants and, in the humanities and social sciences, as a way of assessing the performance of students during final exams. «

One result of this is that the essay form, which should be extremely free and flexible, is instead often presented as a static and rule-bound monster that students must master in order not to lose marks (for a vigorous defense of the flexible essay, see software developer Paul Graham's blog). Far from an opportunity to explore intellectual passions and interests in a personal style, the essay is transformed into a formulaic method for discussing set topics in five paragraphs: the compulsory figures of academia.

Enter the Unessay

By contrast, the unessay is an assignment that attempts to undo the damage done by this approach to teaching writing. It works by throwing out all the rules you have learned about essay writing in the course of your primary, secondary, and post secondary education and asks you to focus instead solely on your intellectual interests and passions. In an unessay you choose your own topic, present it any way you please, and are evaluated on how compelling and effective you are. Here are the guidelines:

1. **You choose your own topic.** The unessay allows you to write about anything you want provided you are able to associate your topic with the subject matter of the course and unit we are working on. You can take any approach; you can use as few or as many resources as you wish; you can even cite the Wikipedia. The only requirements are that your treatment of the topic be *compelling*: that is to say presented in a way that leaves the reader thinking that you are being accurate, interesting, and as complete and/or convincing as your subject allows.
2. **You can present it any way you please.** There are also no formal requirements. Your unessay can be written in five paragraphs or twenty-six. If you decide you need to cite something, you can do that anyway you want. If you want to use lists, use lists. If you want to write in the first person, write in the first person. If you prefer to present the whole thing as a video, present it as a video. Use slang. Or don't. Write in sentence fragments if you think that would be effective. In other words, in an unessay you have complete freedom of form: you can use whatever style of writing, presentation, citation, or media you want. What is important is that the format and presentation you do use helps rather than hinders your argument about the topic. Perhaps most importantly, the unessay allows you to use media deliberately and thoughtfully. You can create a digital unessay, or you can create an analog project—in fact, many of the most compelling unessays I've seen have been entirely analog.
3. **You are evaluated on how compelling and effective you are.** If unessays can be about anything and there are no restrictions on format and presentation, how are they graded? The main criteria is how well it all fits together. That is to say, how *compelling* and *effective* your work is.

An unessay is compelling when it shows some combination of the following:

- it is as interesting as its topic and approach allows
- it is as complete as its topic and approach allows (it doesn't leave the audience thinking that important points are being skipped over or ignored)
- it is truthful (any questions, evidence, conclusions, or arguments you raise are honestly and accurately presented)
- it makes an argument, taking a particular point of view on the topic. A good unessay doesn't just describe, it *synthesizes* and *analyzes*.

In terms of presentation, an unessay is effective when it shows some combination of these attributes:

- it is readable/watchable/listenable: i.e. the production values are appropriately high and the audience is not distracted by avoidable lapses in presentation.
- it is well crafted: the assignment's invitation to write in different modes (using slang, etc.) does not mean the unessay needn't be copyedited. Deliberate stylistic choices can help convey your message, while needless errors will distract from your message.
- it is appropriate: i.e. it uses a format and medium that suits its topic and approach.
- it is attractive: i.e. it is presented in a way that leads the audience to trust the author and his or her arguments, examples, and conclusions.

Why Unessays Are Not a Waste of Your Time

The unessay may be quite different from what you are used to doing in English class. If so, a reasonable question might be whether I am wasting your time by assigning them. If you can write whatever you want and present it any way you wish, is this not going to be a lot easier to do than an actual essay? And is it not leaving you unprepared for subsequent instructors who want you to write the real kind of essays?

The answer to both these questions is no. Unessays are not going to be easier than "real" essays. There are fewer rules to remember and worry about violating (actually there are none). But unessays are more challenging in that you need to make your own decisions about what you are going to discuss and how you are going to discuss it.

And you are not going to be left unprepared for instructors who assign "real" essays. Questions like how to format your page or prepare a works-cited list are actually quite trivial and easily learned. You can look them up when you need to know them and, increasingly, can get your software to handle these things for you anyway. In our class, moreover, I will be giving you separate instruction on what English professors normally expect to see in the essays you submit to them.

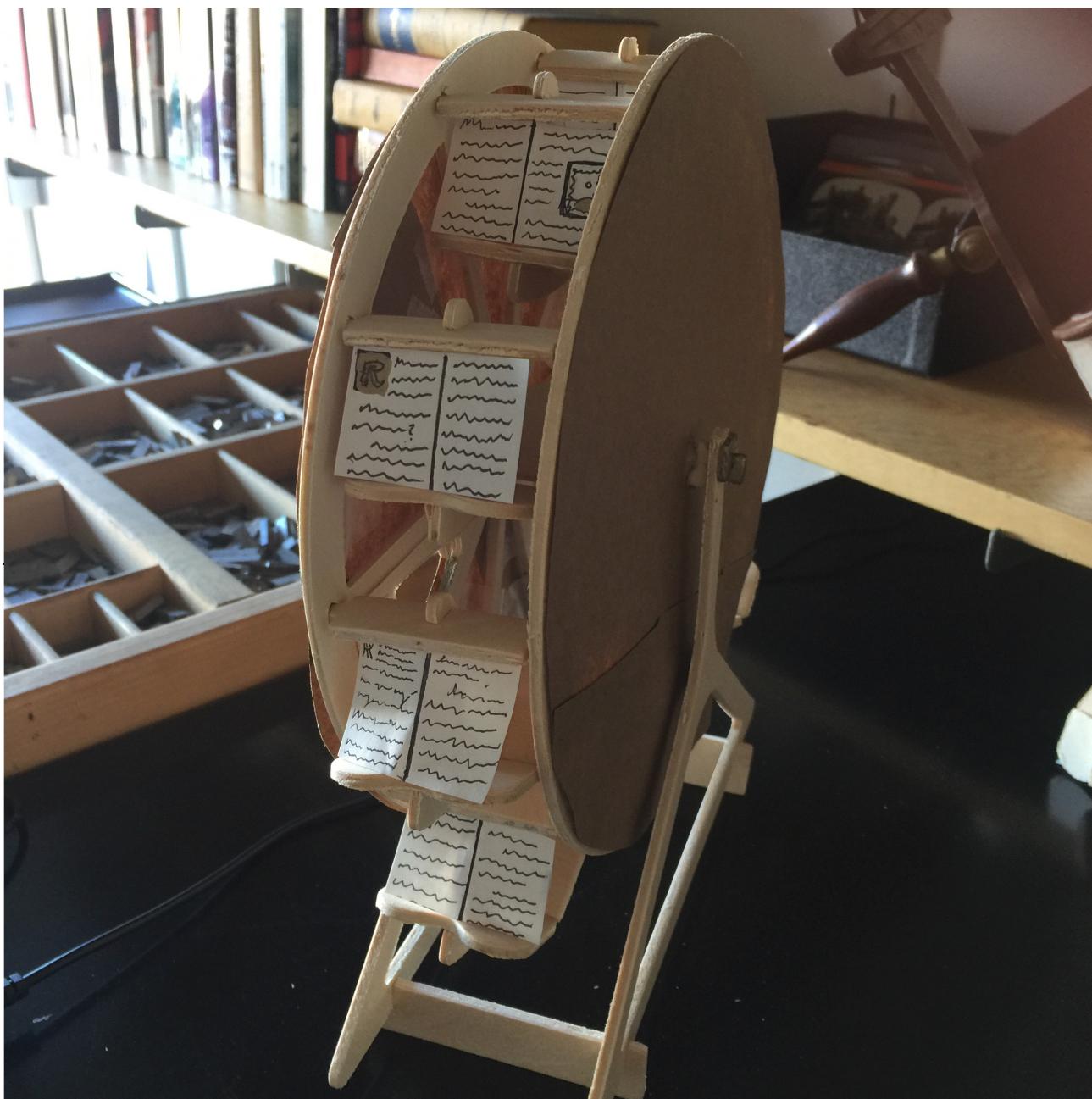
But even more importantly, the things you will be doing in an unessay will help improve your "real" ones: excellent "real" essays also match form to topic and are about things you are interested in; if you learn how to write compelling and effective unessays, you'll find it a lot easier to do well in your "real" essays as well.

Model Unessays

Below are some fantastic digital unessays that students have submitted. These examples don't necessarily model the content of your assignments, as some were completed for classes covering very different topics, but hopefully they will give you a sense of what kinds of work you might complete.

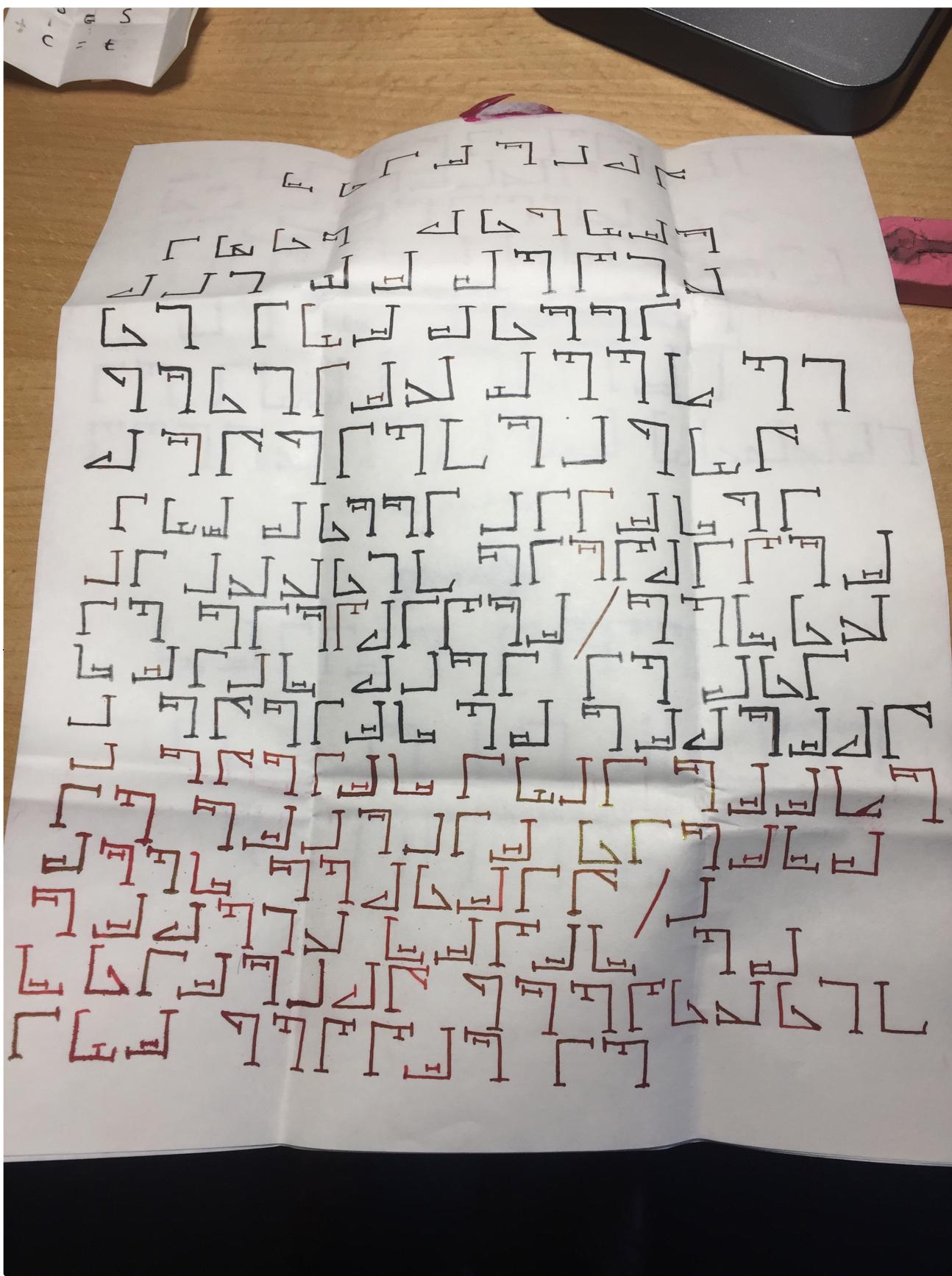
- [Operation Critique](http://operation-critique.tumblr.com/) (<http://operation-critique.tumblr.com/>)
- [Beyond the Words: Text in Art](https://textart.blog) (<https://textart.blog>)
- [Programming a Medium](https://www.dropbox.com/s/qgz0pi7ix7rphz2/mhartyUnessay1Body.java?dl=0) (<https://www.dropbox.com/s/qgz0pi7ix7rphz2/mhartyUnessay1Body.java?dl=0>)
- [Know Code](https://genius.com/11691335) (<https://genius.com/11691335>) (music available on request)
- [ESSAIS1580](https://essais1580.wordpress.com/) (<https://essais1580.wordpress.com/>)
- [The Evolving Album Cover](http://totalbumsunessay.tumblr.com/) (<http://totalbumsunessay.tumblr.com/>)
- [Ada on Ada: A Programmer's Manifesto](http://adaonada.tumblr.com/) (<http://adaonada.tumblr.com/>)
- [The Best Story I Ever Wrote, Annotated](https://www.dropbox.com/s/gqh7u24tt9a0nnu/Tiarks%20Unessay%20Project.pdf?dl=0) (<https://www.dropbox.com/s/gqh7u24tt9a0nnu/Tiarks%20Unessay%20Project.pdf?dl=0>)
- [Skeuomorphic](http://skeuomorphic.f14tot.tumblr.com/) (<http://skeuomorphic.f14tot.tumblr.com/>)
- [Graffiti and New Media](http://graffitiandnewmedia.tumblr.com/) (<http://graffitiandnewmedia.tumblr.com/>)
- [Which Text\(s\) Work\(s\)?](https://damoren.wordpress.com/) (<https://damoren.wordpress.com/>)

I have also added some pictures of some elements of physical unessays students have submitted. Most of these were accompanied by written components which I don't reproduce here, but I'm happy to talk about them. I will bring these and some other physical model unessays to class to discuss, or you can peruse them during office hours.



(/images/unessays/IMG_4445.jpg)

A working model of a Renaissance bookwheel



(/images/unessays/IMG_4504.jpg)

One page from a larger project about coded language and written in a code devised by the student



(/images/unessays/IMG_4638.jpg)

An altered book artwork about memory and preservation in *Station Eleven*

Joseph here refers to
Her Majesty Queen Victoria
(*Traveling Adventures*, pp.
75 & 82)

*See foldout →
*Ms. Pauline's Lady Lovelace
self-insert (22 pg. 157)

*See below ↓
?The ghost of Claude
Shannon travelled back
in time to make this
joke? this annotator
takes zero responsibility
for Joseph's word choice

?...the ghost of Admiral
Hopper is also visiting the
pocket universe? That or
Joseph has no idea how
the A. Engine works. He
certainly wouldn't be
the first to ascribe an
inaccurate level of
genius to unfamiliar tech.

?Considering Babbage's
childhood fascination
with automaton, it is
not unreasonable to
assume a familiarity
with pantographs. In
the Pocket Verse, he's
pen-pals with Father
Caselli and therefore
has just the thing for
M. Jacquard's project,
give or take a decade.

could be greatly served by the assistance of your ingenious invention³, and suggest that a
partnership could be beneficial to you as well.

Although I would never presume to suggest that Lady Lovelace's imminently practical
engine be employed in frivolity, I have it from a very discreet source that "a great person" is
reported to have shown an interest in the machines' ability to create images from a set of dots
on a page. As the punch cards upon which your engine depends are quite familiar to me,
and the process of translating their input into images is conceptually similar to weaving, I
would be happy to take on any unwanted aspects of that project. The Countess may thus distance
herself from the more... artistic facets of the venture which your patron has requested, while
my machines benefit from her tutelage and guidance.

In anticipation of your questions regarding the Desktop Loom, I have included in this letter
my mechanical designs for your inspection.⁴ Although I cannot send you the prototype itself, I have
also included a handful of the punch cards that have been created for its use, and a sample product
which I hope will be to the Lady Lovelace's liking. I shall also walk you through its creation.

Having procured my desired image from a reputable source,⁵ I had it sent to my local
photography shop's creative suite, where it was altered several times to suit my needs.⁶ The design
then had to be translated by my workers into a long string of punch-cards -- an unfortunately
time consuming process which is primarily done bit by bit.⁷

I've heard marvelously impossible things about the Analytical Engine's ability to comprehend
human language, and was rather hoping something similar might be done with visual patterns.⁸ If your
Engine could somehow view an image and then transform it into punch-cards, the young ladies using a
Desktop Loom could weave patterns of their own design without waiting weeks for cards to be created.

In any case, once the punch-cards were complete, it was simply a matter of miniaturizing my
original loom and running the cards through the machine. I am still working on creating an interface
which the ladies at home may use easily and without risk of bodily harm. The locking mechanism in
particular has been troublesome, as the machine must of course hold the pins out of the way when the
weaver transitions to the next punch-card. If you or Lady Lovelace have suggestions I would be
immensely appreciative.

It is my most sincere hope that you accept my proposition, but I understand that you
are busy individuals with many projects being completed simultaneously. No matter your answer,
I wish you the very best in your endeavors, and encourage you to contact me should you
ever need assistance.

Most humbly yours,
M. Jos Jaquard

Their creator having
been possessed by
the spirit of Charles
Babbage, these
plans represent
the most tangible
form of the

Jacquardian
Desktop Loom to currently exist. Constructing
devices is so passe; obviously the superior
course of action is to endlessly modify
theoretical designs without ever leaving the
drafting stage.

The M. Jacquard of our universe would
doubtless have more gears and less question
marks in his designs.

Alas, pocket-universe
Jacquard spent
more time in his
brother-in-law's
print shop than
his father's textile
factories, wasting away

His formative years in the humanities, and is
thus rather new to this Mechanics business. To
be perfectly honest, many of his ideas have been
borrowed from a fellow named Vaucanson anyway.
He hopes his enthusiasm for textile crafts and
his expertly crafted pose will distract Mr. Babbage
long enough for him to secure the aid of the
Analytical Engine's high priestess.

In any case, having woven the prototype
by hand, this humble scribe is more convinced
than ever that mechanical looms did descend
upon our forefathers as angels from the heavens.
Anyone feeling nostalgic for the craft techniques
of yesterday is highly encouraged to
reconsider. Or at least to purchase a proper
loom, rather than cobbling together makeshift
tools out of cardboard.



Joseph here
glasses over
what was
actually an
unexpectedly
arduous
process.

Weave designs
being the
precursors
for pixelated

images, the original art by Sydney
Redus had to jump through several hoops
to reach a state simple enough
to craft.



PhotoShop
did its best,
but ultimately
the 200 pixels
had to be
selected by
hand. This
is not a
recommended
course of action, if it can be avoided.



(/images/unessays/IMG_4541.jpg)

An imagined letter from Ada Lovelace to Joseph Marie Jaquard; part of a larger project on Lovelace



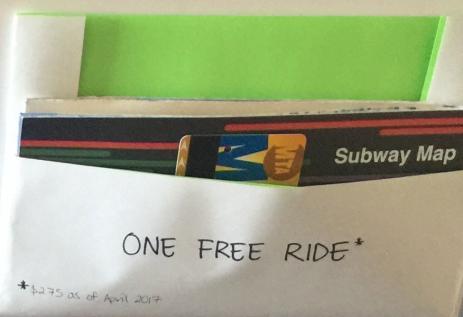
(/Images/unessays/IMG_4543.jpg)

A model Jacquard loom punchcard and a woven figure of Ada Lovelace partly drawn from the pattern encoded in these cards.

AP KEY

- HOME ● ACTIVITY ○ TRANSFER STOP
- SCHOOL ● INSTITUTION ○ VENUE
- WORK ● HEALTH ○ PEOPLE

License Not Required:
Mapping Meaning with the MTA



[\(/images/unessays/IMG_4642.jpg\)](#)

An annotated map about the textuality of space and place in New York City



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