

INTRODUCTION

At some point in every person's life, they become curious about their ancestry and heritage. Many find the basic information, going back three or four generations, but some search further and find incredibly rich information. It is truly amazing how easy it is to research one's family history with the aid of the Internet, as many have already discovered. However, once the research is done as far back in time as possible and there seems to be nothing left to learn, the wealth of information is often put aside and forgotten, and rarely shared with others.

Here, I saw a design opportunity. By creating a product for families to record, share and explore their ancestry, I could encourage a more complex understanding of the information collected. Users will be able to compare information about their ancestors to find patterns and connections throughout time.

The traditional system for designing family trees is very limiting. A traditional family tree usually follows one of two common models: tree- or fan-style. Therefore, all family trees are uniform, despite displaying a wide range of families and individuals. Information for each individual is condensed, often including only his or her name and birth date. As a result, future generations reading their family tree will have a limited knowledge of their ancestors. All of these problems are opportunities that haven't been responded to, and they are what I am focusing on for this project.

By the end of this project, I hope to have a functional product that includes as much information as possible about a family. The family itself will be able to easily switch for another family in the final product, to ensure that it is not too personalized or specific, and that the design remains the focus of the project. The product will be easy to navigate, and it will be simple and straightforward for a viewer to find patterns and connections throughout the family's history. These patterns could include birthdays, birthplaces, occupations, number of children, causes of death, and more. Some patterns, such as occupations, will be purely for the interest of the viewer, while others, like cause of death, can be important information for a person to know about their family's history. This adds a more functional, practical aspect to the product.

CONTENT

Early on in this project, I decided that I would take content from my own family's history as an example, as long as another family could be easily swapped in. I was worried that it may become too personal, but I will resist this by focusing more on the form than the content.

I contacted older family members to find out what information they already had as a starting point. My mother and aunt had basic information going back three generations on the maternal side of my family tree. I put this information into Ancestry.ca, an online genealogy researching tool, and my small family tree quickly grew to go back as many as fifteen generations. Through additional searching using Google and GEDCOM records, I learned about other descendants of my ancestors and read stories of important people from the past.

With Google, I searched for more information regarding my 7th great grandfather, Henry Vanderburgh, who lived from 1685 to 1750 in Poughkeepsie, New York. To my surprise, a detailed genealogy of former President George W. Bush came up in the results, and I learned that his 7th great grandfather was also Henry Vanderburgh, meaning that “Dubya” is my 8th cousin. Since he was descended from Vanderburgh on his paternal side, this also meant that former President George H.W. Bush is my 7th cousin once removed. Reading this genealogy further, I learned that yet another former President, Gerald Ford, was descended from the same line of Vanderburghs, making him my 7th cousin once removed as well. Using simple, widely accessible tools like Google, I learned that I am related (although distantly) to three United States presidents.

Another interesting discovery was made on Ancestry.ca, when an unusual amount of information was found regarding my 10th great grandfather, Everardus Bogardus. I searched for him on Google and was brought to his Wikipedia page, which told me that he was the second minister of the Dutch Reformed Church, which is now the oldest established church in present-day New York City, then called New Amsterdam. In fact, Everardus was the second clergyman in all of New Netherlands. He died on September 27, 1647, in a shipwreck near the coast of Wales, while en route to Amsterdam.

The oldest discovery I have made in my research is Robert Fhillbey, my 12th great grandfather on my father’s side, who lived from 1526 to 1573 in Lewknor, Oxfordshire, England, which is now known for its rich and well-preserved medieval history.

The first ancestors of mine to be in Canada were Laurens Willem DeQuijter and Catelyn Caluwaert, who came to Canada from Netherlands and were married in Newfoundland in 1610.

I have researched as far back in time as possible, and I have created a digital library of records regarding my family’s history. Unfortunately, researching further back in time results in less detail, and less accurate information, so more recent generations have much more information attached to them. This results in an uneven potential to explore,

compare and interact with the information, but I will continue collecting research in hopes that there will be as much information to explore as possible.

I have much more thorough information regarding my maternal family history, so the content for this project will most likely come purely from that side.

AUDIENCE

I have predicted that the primary audience—the ones that would purchase the product—would be middle-aged people, especially women, whose children have grown up and moved away. This is the time in their lives when they are the most interested in their family, and when they are most likely to begin or continue researching their family history.

The secondary audience is quite broad; anyone with a family is included. As the idea behind the project is that it will result in a product that anyone could use to learn about and interact with their family's history, it is important that the product is usable for all ages and types. At this point, research regarding that would be futile, but I will conduct user testing in the near future, once I have prototypes.

I want this product to be a group activity between generations, so that a family can sit together and learn about their history as a group. Different information will be of interest to different people, but I want this product to be something that brings families together and promotes interaction between family members. More information regarding this will also be researched through user testing.

DESIGN

At this point, it is hard to say what form will be most appropriate for the product. Research at this stage won't answer this as well as prototyping and user testing will, which will be done throughout phase 3 of the project.

No matter what direction the project takes, it must follow the criteria of my thesis statement: a non-traditional way to visualize ancestral information. It will be an interactive library of family history to be explored together, as a family.

There are currently three possible directions that the project might take:

The first is a coffee table-style book, functioning as a complex family album containing images and text, as well as graphs and charts to visualize the information. A full,

traditional family tree chart will be at the beginning of the book, followed by a spread about each family member, including as much information about them as possible. At the end of the book, a series of charts and infographics will show patterns between families, such as professions, birthdays, residences, etc., so that readers may be encouraged to find patterns and connections within their family's history.

This direction has the highest potential to be used on a regular basis, especially when extended family is visiting. It would be kept in the family room or living room, in the centre of the home. It would easily become a group activity when more than one family member is reading it. Non-traditional folding methods could also be used to add to the interactive and exploratory experience.

Precedents for this direction are mostly for a family album or scrapbook; few include information about ancestors and none are interactive. Mixbook offers personalized family history books with pre-made themes, ranging from \$7 for a mini book to \$60 for a coffee table book. A customer would input their own information and photos on the website, and Mixbook will print and ship it.

Another comparative precedent for this direction is also one of the sources of inspiration for this project: Nicholas Felton's autobiographical books. He documents a year of his life at a time in extreme detail, and then lays it out in an infographic way in a book, which he publishes himself. He calls them "Feltron Annual Reports" and has been creating them for the last six years.

A precedent of an interactive book with a different subject matter is Jonathan Safran Foer's *The Tree of Codes*, which uses die-cutting to create an interactive and ever-changing meaning and experience when reading the book. It pushes the boundaries and perceived limitations of literature and print media.

The second possible direction that the project might take is an infographic wall poster. The family history would be mapped out in a non-linear and non-traditional format, with layers of information packed into the poster. It would be hung as art in a family room or living room, in the centre of the home. Viewers would be able to trace bloodlines throughout time, reading small bits of information about each person.

This format has less potential to be functional for all family members, especially the youngest and the oldest, as it will most likely feature dense amounts of small text. This format would also include significantly less images, but it will appear to be more streamlined, which may suit the commissioner's style. Ideally, this piece would appear to simply

be a piece of art, until the viewer was close enough to read the information printed on it, so that it may serve a dual purpose in the home as being decorative and informative.

There are many precedents for this direction, but most are traditional in style and limited in information. Geneartogy creates artistic family tree diagrams ranging from \$200 to \$400, and also offers photo retouching and framing services for an additional cost. Family Tree Art offers digital photo collages of ancestors for \$100, among other services. Custom Family Tree Art has a slightly more modern product, a purely typographical artwork with the names of ancestors in the shape of a tree. Martha Stewart posted several ideas for visualizing family trees on her website, all of which are easy for anyone to create themselves. Marie Lynskey and Saundra Diehl create original works of art using ancestral information. Lynskey even uses gold leaf in her artworks to make the artwork as precious as the information it holds.

The third and final possible direction that the project may take is a computer program or iPad app. As people are gradually switching from printed to digital material, this option may be best for future generations to have access to the product. The program will be interactive, and users may click on an ancestor to get more information, and rearrange and drag information to compare easily.

This format would allow the addition of information much more easily. It would also be more interactive, and hopefully more intuitive to explore. Using this product would easily become a group activity by placing the iPad on a flat surface and having the family gather around it, or by having more than one person gather around a computer or laptop.

There are many precedents for this direction. Most focus on documenting ancestral research, but some also give options to displaying and sharing the family tree. The first and most well-known is Ancestry.ca, which allows users to search records and other users' family trees and take bits of information to add to their own. All records are digitized so researching is incredibly easy. However, the method for exploring the information in the tree is inconvenient and awkward. Users pay \$14 per month for access to Canadian records, and \$30 per month for access to worldwide records. Comparable services include TelGen's World Family Tree app, My Heritage family tree builder, Mac Family Tree app, GedView app, Ancestry.com app, Tpstry, Gramps project, Legacy family tree software, Family Tree Legends software, Roots Magic, and Scion PC genealogical management system. All of these offer platforms to input ancestral information, but none offer the ability to explore and compare the information once it is inputted.

All three of these concepts are a non-traditional and interactive way to visualize information about one's ancestry. Through ideation and prototyping, I intend to decide on the most suitable direction by the end of phase 3 of the design process.

Recently creating moodboards helped to narrow the visual language that the final product will employ. It also helped to visualize the intended audience, and therefore begin thinking about the best way to reach them. More moodboards will be created in the near future to further clarify the intended aesthetics of the final product.

CONCLUSION

At this point in the research and design process, I have a clear idea of what content will be included and what direction I want my senior project to go in, but an unclear idea of how the final product will look and work. It is too early for research to answer that question, but user testing will begin in a few weeks and those results will clarify what the final product will be. Until then, I can only speculate.

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