On the Potential of Zines as a Medium for Visualization

A zine about a paper about zines using data visualization

By Andrew McNutt

What is a zine?

This is a zine! But if you want a more formal definition:

> *Zines are non-commercial, non-professional, small-circulation magazines which their creators produce, publish, and distribute by themselves*
>
> - Duncombe

They come in all shapes and sizes. Some are *small*, some are *large*. They appear in <small>(just a couple of pages or a couple of inches big)</small> forms that are *familiar* and forms that are *weird*. <small>(like a series of hexagons that fold out into a flower)</small> They are often only available in the physical world, but sometimes they're collected online. <small>(such as Issuu and archive.org)</small>

Anyone can make a zine. They can be produced using high-end digital tools as <small>(such as in this zine)</small> well as with juxtaposed pieces of paper and a photocopier. This makes them accessible to everyone!

Despite these enticing features there has been little work in vis ◑ zines!

Zines

Narrative Visualization
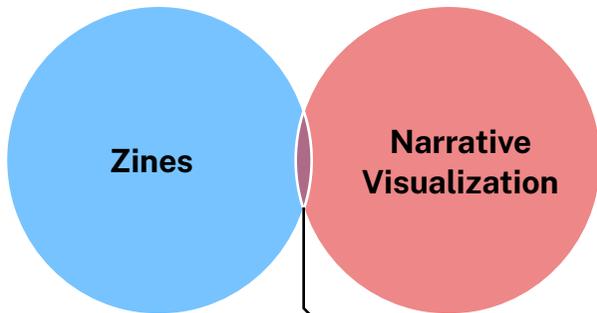
|vis ◑ zines| << |zines|
|vis ◑ zines| << |vis|

Zines seem to be a natural place for vis work, as their intimate physical form offers a range of affordances that are <small>(see left page)</small> advantageous to vis. But there hasn't been any scholarship and there has been relatively limited practice. In this zine we argue that ***zines should be seen as a viable medium for visualization***.

<small>At least that's our belief! Zines are often purely physical objects and so it's difficult to completely survey their usage</small>

To understand the potential of this combination we sought out zines with visualizations

By searching

▶ *online zine repositories*
▶ *bookstores and zine fairs*
▶ *institutional archives*

we identified

44

$\Big($ Although there are definitely more! Our search was meant to show that the intersection is not empty $\Big)$

zines that use visualization in some way

We then coded the way that vis is used in each zine in our survey. There are doubtless other reasons to use vis in a zine—our sample was limited by social distancing, and favored examples found online—but we believe these are evocative of the general case.

*This **excludes** the zines students made in our class,* (see next page) *as we wanted to establish that this the intersection of vis and zines is occupied **in the wild**.*

Zines using visualization
Similar to many other mediums, sometimes zines just use vis to reinforce their points.

Zines about you
The perzine genre is ubiquitous among zines and connects with vis in a data humanist style.

Zines about visualization
*Zines seem to address every conceivable topic, vis included. **Market Cafe Mag** is a prominent example of this style of usage.* (despite being a series, we only count it once)
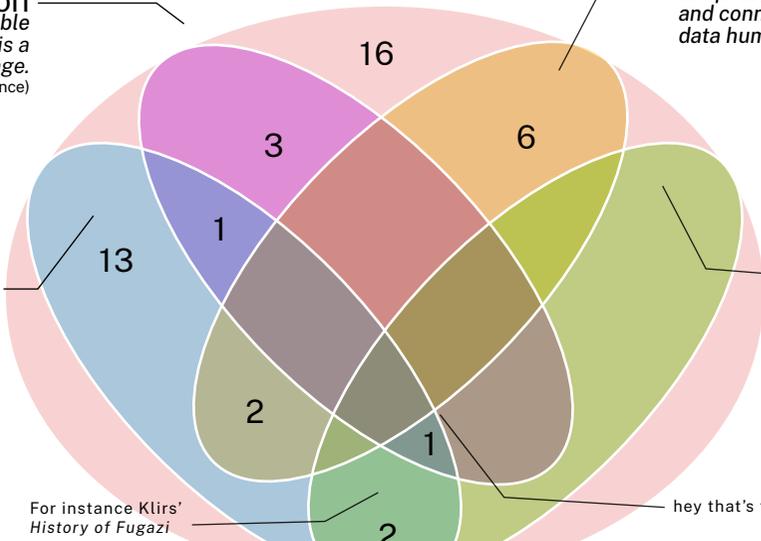
Zines aligned in content
Some zines pair well with vis due to alignment in form and content.

16

3

6

1

13

Zines about data
*Zines can be used to tell complex data stories in a friendly and accessible way. This can involve classic-zine practice of list making, as well as usages like advocacy and activism through maps and charts, such as in the splendid **(Dis)location Black Exodus** from AEMP.*

2

1

hey that's this zine

For instance Klirs'
History of Fugazi

2

We explored vis◐zines as a class activity

In a recent course on Data Vis for Public Policy Course students were allowed to make zines about policy topics for a project. A majority of the students made zines for the project, and spoke positively about the experience.

(but not required)

(in a post course survey)

Project Breakdown

Zine (16)
Other (7)
Maybe Zine (5)
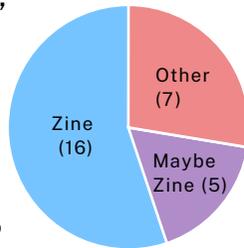
Student comments:

(emphasis ours)

*"The ability to order visualizations sequentially or thematically, and to accompany them with text, **gives you a lot of control over the narrative structure**, and I think zines come with audience expectations of being a melange, so you can have a diversity of visualization types instead of cleaving so strictly to a single polished (and more bland) house style."*

"Being able to turn pages like a book so that certain visualizations are hidden can help drive story-telling"

"Made me think about the position and description of graphs and how they connect to previous/next pages."

*"I really enjoyed the process [of zine making] - I found it easy to build the narrative through the process, and **felt able to communicate what I wanted to communicate** through my zine."*

Observations

In our class and in our search we found several ***design patterns*** that are unusual among forms that vis typically appears in, including

Zine's accessibility helps ***Surface Other Voices*** that might not normally find a venue for their perspectives.

Their printed form ***Imparts an Intimacy*** that can help build community and offer a foundation to talk about difficult topics.

(and often-first person)

Data is often seen as objective. Zines can help this ***Shatter the View from Nowhere*** by locating the author and the works provenance as a prominent part of their design.

(which is false)

There's a big world of possibility when you consider ***zines as a viable medium for visualization***! It opens the door to interesting questions *such as*: Zines are often told from the first person; *how does this affect the way that people trust data displays in that mode?* Zinesters often have rich knowledge about particular topics and ways of expressing themselves about those topics, which would seem to make them ideal collaborators for data projects.

Read the paper or visit `mcnutt.in/zine-potential` ***to find out more!***

On the Potential of Zines as a Medium for Visualization

Andrew McNutt *

University of Chicago

ABSTRACT

Zines are a form of small-circulation self-produced publication often akin to a magazine. This free-form medium has a long history and has been used as means for personal or intimate expression, as a way for marginalized people to describe issues that are important to them, and as a venue for graphical experimentation. It would seem then that zines would make an ideal vehicle for the recent interest in applying feminist or humanist ideas to visualization. Yet, there has been little work combining visualization and zines. In this paper we explore the potential of this intersection by analyzing examples of zines that use data graphics and by describing the pedagogical value that they can have in a visualization classroom. In doing so, we argue that there are plentiful opportunities for visualization research and practice in this rich intersectional-medium.

Index Terms: Human-centered computing—Visualization— Visualization application domains

1 INTRODUCTION

Visualizations are consumed in a vast array of mediums: ranging from the sprawl of digital options to printed materials to physicalizations. Prior work has widely explored this space, considering the roles that data graphics play in mediums as varied as wnesches [6] and gifs [43]. Yet the modest form of the zine has received little attention as a venue for visualization research and practice.

Zines are "non-commercial, non-professional, small-circulation magazines which their creators produce, publish, and distribute by themselves" [15] that are typically associated with counterculture, art, politics, and activism [45]. They come in many forms (some

which emphasizes subjective and personal data displays. While zines may be seen as ephemeral, their transience pales in comparison to that of digital graphics [31], with zines filling archives reaching back to the 1960s [24]. Despite these desirable properties, there has been little consideration of zines as a place for visualization attention.

We seek to close this gap, by exploring and arguing for the potential of zines as a medium for visualization. We do so by considering some of the examples in this intersection. We demonstrate that zines and visualization can be effectively combined by novices and highlight their pedagogical value by discussing a recent class project. Finally, we describe several observed patterns that are unusual among visualization media and note opportunities for future work.

2 RELATED WORK

Zines are commonly identified as originating with science-fiction fanzines in the 1930s, followed by co-development with punk-rock culture in the 1970s, and subsequently riot grrrl culture in the early 1990s [15]. They have only become objects of academic focus in the last 30 years, although that interest has steadily increased [24]. A peer-reviewed journal focused on zines published its first issue in 2020 [58]. A zine fair (an event in which zines are sold and traded) was held at FAccT20 as a way to surface social justice and anti-racist topics in that community [23]. An open source zine-template was made for a CSCW20 workshop on data feminism and participatory design [13]. Given the nascency of zine research and the rarity of visualization in zines, it is unsurprising then that there has been no academic work in this intersection.

Zines are not a single monolithic genre. They are a medium which