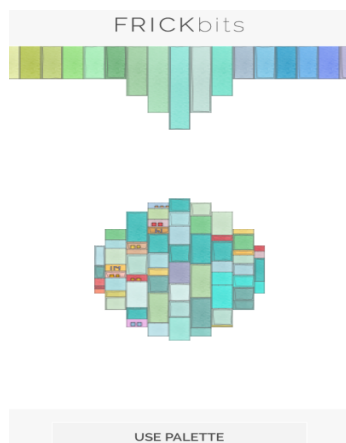


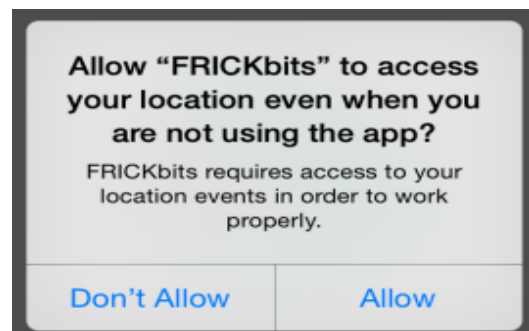
FRICKbits

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FRICKbits is a free mobile app for iOS devices developed by data artist Laurie Frick and digital product studio thirteen23 that capitalizes on the location data that most smartphones automatically collect, providing this data as both a visualization and a download for the end user. Presented with the tagline “Take back your data and turn it into art!” the app was created to enable users to take control of their personal data and “create a data selfie.” While provocative and interesting, the app ultimately does not fully deliver on its promise to give the end user control over her data.

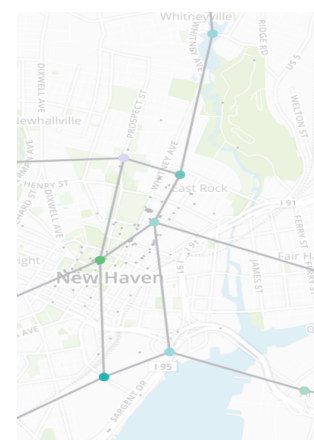
Upon opening the app and selecting a color palette, a badge pops up asking the user: “Allow ‘FRICKbits’ to access your location even when you are not using the app?” Many location-based apps store this type of data on a server, which increases its vulnerability to hacking and/or being sold to third parties. Frickbits, on the other hand, stores data locally on the user’s device rather than on a server.



It takes a few days to gather enough to generate a visualization (called a portrait in the app),

during which time there is nothing to do but wait while FRICKbits gathers individual data points (shown as small gray dots) and selects where to place nodes in the visualization.

Once the portrait is generated, users can change the color palette, select a date range for the visualization, share an image, or export location data as a CSV file containing latitude, longitude, and timestamp. However, this is the extent of the customization available: the app determines where nodes appear and automatically redraws the visualization portrait whenever the map

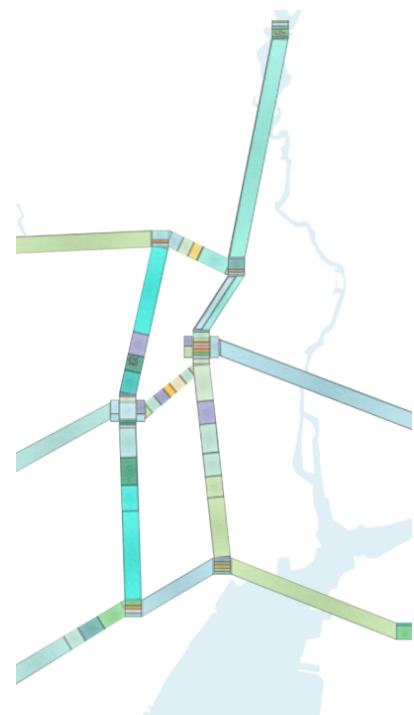


is moved. Although users can see individual data points and map labels when zooming or moving the map, the rendered visualization abstracts the background and obscures any place names. Connections between nodes are straight lines, and do not reflect street paths or exact routes.

As an app, FRICKbits is simple, elegant, and easy to navigate, although it does not capitalize on its own premise to empower the user. It lacks the functionality to actively engage users in creating their own so-called portraits: the visualization that is eventually generated can only be passively consumed. The meaning being made remains firmly in the hands of app creators, and meanwhile users are unlikely to have the skills to manipulate their raw location data.

However, when evaluated not as an app but as a work of art, FRICKbits makes compelling use of the app medium, successfully highlighting the opaqueness of how most apps collect user data—and what they do with it. It also addresses a question pertinent to data visualization produced in any sector: under what circumstances does a pattern revealed become meaningful? In part these points are achieved by the app's limitations on customization. Seen in this light, the app has great potential to increase awareness of information privacy issues and spark conversation about information literacy (both information provenance and the reading and interpreting of data).

Frick's oeuvre consists of installations and sculptures based mostly on her personal activities, accumulated through devices like a FitBit and sleep trackers. She renders these patterns in painted wood, watercolor, and collage. The hand-made quality of these works comes into FRICKbits as the watercolor-inspired aesthetic of the lines and nodes in the visualization. The artist's larger body of work can be looked at as part of a contemporary flourishing of diaristic self-portraiture, in a similar vein as that of Martynka Wawrzyniak's Feed Project, Ellie Harrison's Day to Day Data, Giorgia Lupi and Stefanie Posavec's Dear Data, and Owen Mundy's Give Me My Data (discussed below).



Though not about self-tracking, Miranda July's Somebody app is a relevant comparison, in that both it and FRICKbits make creative use of the app format, interrogating the relationship between human activity and technology in the process. subverting the medium by using it to coordinate in-person delivery of messages. Owen Mundy's 2009 project Give Me My Data is perhaps the work most directly relevant to FRICKbits, although instead of being a mobile app Give Me My Data is a web-based Facebook app. Strongly aligned with the FRICKbits message of

giving control back to the user, Give Me My Data enables users to export their Facebook data in various formats like CSV, XML, and JSON. However, Mundy's project does not provide visualization support—only the data dump.

Overall, FRICKbits is an interesting piece that touches on topics relevant to many ARLIS/NA members. The app, though probably falling short of being a useful tool for teaching, could serve as a good starting point for critical conversations about data privacy and visualization strategies.