

# Incognito Mode

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## **i. Discuss the question or questions that your project asks or answers:**

*Incognito Mode* explores how participants will respond when incentivized to reveal their own personal information.

We became interested in the idea of a transaction and what it means for an individual to participate in a transaction. In particular, the construct of a receipt grabbed our attention because of how ubiquitously it represents a transaction between a person and some other entity. Early on, we decided we wanted to incorporate the receipt printer as a way of alluding to the idea of transactional relationships. A key part of our design process was therefore deciding what that relationship would be and what would be printed on the receipt. In response to this, we came up with a piece that asks participants to respond to questions posed by a machine. The piece incentivizes them by offering the responses of a previous participant, but only to the questions the participant chooses to answer.

By introducing this dynamic, we ask the participants to consider just how much they are willing to give up in order to learn more about another person. This give and take dynamic, where the only way for you to *take* more from the machine is to *give* more, is what we mean when we describe the term transactional privacy.

An interesting side-effect of *Incognito Mode* is that some individuals may lie and/or cheat the system. As all responses are free-form, there is nothing stopping the individual from submitting false or garbage responses. This leads us to ask the following questions: How often will participants try to game the system? Or are people naturally willing to answer questions truthfully? In addition, which questions are the most uncomfortable and thus most commonly skipped?

The experience is further complicated by the fact that participants receive a physical copy of the answers in the form of a receipt, and that they are required to sign it, promising to not reveal its contents to others. In doing so, *Incognito Mode* begins to also ask participants to place a certain amount of faith and trust in other participants.

Ultimately, there are many interesting psychological aspects to this piece that became interesting to us. We purposefully decided to leave much of the piece open-ended, so that our questions could be resolved and explored throughout the lifetime of the installation.

## **ii. Discuss the artistic considerations and challenges involved in creating your project.**

Because we were interested in the idea of a receipt, we needed to find a thermal printer that strongly evoked the idea of a receipt printer. By keeping the receipt printer recognizable, we wanted to have the participant draw parallels to other transactional experiences in their lives, such as supermarkets and retailers. Since the printer had a “retro” feel, we also attempted to find a digital display that had a similar style. We acquired an 1980s AppleColor RGB monitor from the Electrical Engineering department; however, we encountered problems with finding the correct adapters. Ultimately, we ended up using an iMac for the display. This was also intentioned because of how minimalist and unobtrusive the hardware was. We wanted the primary interaction to be between the participant, the receipt printer, and the software posing the questions.

We wanted to design a digital interface that evoked a feeling of interacting directly with the machine/software without any overhead. To do so, we looked towards terminal aesthetic interfaces that are often related with programming and low level machine interaction. We wanted the participant to feel as if they were interacting with a computer terminal. To further invoke the idea of interacting directly with the machine, we used a text typing Javascript library to give the sense that the machine was actively computing and responding to the participant, rather than just displaying a series of preprogrammed prompts.

A very important experiential consideration was the type of questions we asked, as well as their progression. Some questions are simple to answer (e.g. “What is your birthday?”), but others, such as “What is your most terrible memory?” might draw pause if presented early on. With this in mind, we began with straightforward questions, ramping up to more probing questions that a participant might be more willing to answer after becoming more comfortable with the experience.

We also wanted to introduce lighting and audio considerations to heighten the awareness of a participant of the transactional aspect of the piece. By placing a contact microphone onto the receipt printer, any notion of transaction is greatly amplified to the user.

Finally, we also considered having the camera of the iMac light up to provoke the idea of being watched by some higher order. This was both to encourage users to be more truthful and also provide a metacommentary on how we willingly give up our privacy to agencies such as the NSA. Ultimately, we decided that this evoked too much of a “creepy” sensation and became more of a discussion about privacy issues than the idea of transactional privacy and did not include it in the piece.

### **iii. Discuss the engineering considerations and challenges involved in creating your project.**

The engineering for the project was relatively straightforward. We created a web frontend and connected it to a [Flask](#) Python backend and a [MongoDB](#) database to store each user's responses and questions. The most technically unfamiliar part of the project was interfacing with the thermal printer; for this, the [python-escpos](#) library was very helpful. Our codebase can be found on [GitHub](#).

### **iv. Discuss how your project reflects the theme of transformations.**

*Incognito Mode* is mainly interested in transforming the quotidian, and often free willed, act of giving up personal information into something that participants are forced to be aware of and to evaluate. In many current discussions of privacy and collection of personal data, many people are okay with giving up information because "that's just the world we live in." This piece tries to force them to reckon with this way of thinking by collecting the data in a much more blatant way.

During each question, we ask the participant to consider what they are giving up by answering the question, and also whether or not it is worth giving up their information in order to learn something novel about someone else. The piece also introduces the aspect of manipulating systems of information collection in order to gain an advantage or to otherwise disrupt the original intention of the system.

### **v. Discuss what was new for you in approaching this project.**

The three of us come from a technical background, so working on a social experiment of sorts was new for all of us. We spent a lot of time considering what questions to ask; some questions had great incentive value, but seemed to veer too much into gossip; other questions were interesting as "ice-breakers," but didn't seem provocative enough for the installation. It was difficult to balance between the willingness of a participant to answer the question and how curious they might be to find out the previous participant's answers.

Approaching the project from an installation perspective was also new and interesting. We were led to consider the placement, lighting, and ambiance of the installation much more carefully. In addition, the question and answer interface posed interesting challenges in terms of the physical qualities of the experience. We debated whether to do Q and A through a voice recognition program such as Siri or Alexa, or to simply present the questions on a screen. As mentioned before, we even briefly considered turning on the webcam light: a subtle indicator that the participant was being "watched". This could serve as either an incentive to be more truthful, or it could cause the participant to feel

uncomfortable and rush through their answers. Eventually, we settled for a minimal interface with just one twist at the end: the participant must sign their receipt as a guarantee of confidentiality. Unlike the more straightforward software projects we've worked on in the past, the psychological implications of our design decisions in *Incognito Mode* are something we won't fully be able to predict until people begin to participate in the installation. We're very excited to see what they think and how they react.