AN OPEN CABINET OF SMALL EXPERIMENTS

The Public Sketchbook

CREATIVE CODING FIELD NOTES / EDITION 01

Eight tiny machines for asking what happens when an idea is allowed to move.

A visitor can change spacing, hierarchy, imagined relationships, fictional chart heights, folded surfaces, shadows, visual placement and ordering. The experiments are original illustrative models, not measured facts about an audience.

THE PRINCIPLE

Make a design decision visible, reversible and explainable. Then state a situation in which the same decision would not help.

Read alongside the working experiments at https://sahiltayal.com/sketchbook/

01 / How to inspect a sketch

A polished interface often hides the fact that it could have been designed differently. A small experiment restores that sense of possibility: not by adding more decoration, but by exposing one setting and its consequences.

The six questions

1. What is the variable?

Name the property: letter spacing, note width, orbit radius, shadow position or visual ordering.

2. What is the default?

Make the initial state visible and useful; do not require exploration to understand the point.

3. What changes?

State the concrete transformation as a rule rather than a mysterious animation.

4. What stays the same?

Hold a meaningful comparison steady: the words, number of options or underlying HTML reading order.

5. Where does this fail?

Identify a context in which the choice is distracting, inaccessible, misleading or unnecessary.

6. Can someone reverse it?

Provide reset, readable descriptions and a reduced-motion path.

This guide treats the eight examples as authored illustrations. No usability score, cognition metric or evidence about the general population is inferred.

02 / Letterforms & margins

Two experiments about hierarchy, emphasis and the space around words.

DRAWER 01 / Type Tide

Question: Can spacing and weight alter the tone of a fixed phrase?

Change: The shared pressure slider modifies letter spacing and font weight. The variation button adds an authored spacing step. The exact words stay unchanged.

Boundary case: Extremely tight or loose lettering may hinder reading. Strong emphasis is not automatically clear communication.

Try it: Take one sentence you wrote yesterday. Compare it in compact serif, generous serif and plain sans-serif without revising the copy.

DRAWER 02 / Margin Notes

Question: Which text seems central when a note changes width?

Change: The note starts narrow, expands, and becomes narrow again; the main text and note share a grid whose proportions change.

Boundary case: A broad sidebar may make caveats easy to find but leave too little room for the main argument.

Try it: Write a claim and a meaningful caveat. Switch which one receives the wider column and explain the new reading order.

03 / Relational pictures & false numbers

Two experiments about diagrams that suggest meaning before they explain evidence.

DRAWER 03 / Orbit Index

Question: Does visual distance imply conceptual distance?

Change: A radius changes in deterministic pixel increments as pressure and variations change. Four satellites remain equally spaced around a centre.

Boundary case: Real relationships may be unequal, directional or contextual. This diagram does not measure them.

Try it: Draw a centre with four connected topics. Ask whether the physical position accidentally suggests priority, strength or causation.

DRAWER 04 / False Precision

Question: How can invented bars borrow the authority of a chart?

Change: An authored list of bar heights alternates between three fictional patterns. Pressure scales their display length.

Boundary case: Without sourced measurements, axes and units, the picture is a metaphor rather than evidence.

Try it: Find a chart you trust and list its source, measured unit, sample and uncertainty. Try the same with an unsourced graphic.

04 / Promises & shadows

Two experiments about visual cues that feel physical even when made from code.

DRAWER 05 / The Fold

Question: What does a lifting paper corner promise?

Change: A CSS clipped corner rotates between three authored positions. The words beneath never change.

Boundary case: A visual affordance that implies a hidden feature can disappoint a visitor when the expected action is absent.

Try it: Sketch one control with a realistic affordance and one abstract alternative. Ask what action each one seems to offer.

DRAWER 06 / Shadow Study

Question: When does a shadow persuade us that something has depth?

Change: An ordinary CSS box-shadow moves around a flat rectangle. There is no physical light source or 3D simulation.

Boundary case: A convincing visual cue is not evidence of physical accuracy; depth can compete with contrast or clarity.

Try it: Use one box and change the shadow from bottom-right to top-left. Note what the implied light source becomes.

05 / Alternatives & order

Two experiments about placement, which can suggest priority without saying so.

DRAWER 07 / Maybe Map

Question: Do equally valid options remain equal when their placement changes?

Change: TRY, WAIT and ASK rotate among three positions. The labels change places while the option set remains identical.

Boundary case: A layout without an explicit ranking can still create the appearance of a preferred option.

Try it: Write three legitimate responses to an everyday problem. Rearrange them and ask whether one now looks recommended.

DRAWER 08 / Grid Choreography

Question: Can visual order differ from the order technology reads?

Change: CSS order properties rearrange six tiles. The underlying document remains in the sequence 01 through 06.

Boundary case: A sighted visitor and an assistive-technology user may encounter different sequences when CSS order is misused.

Try it: Inspect the same grid with Tab and a screen reader. Do not visually reorder critical steps while preserving the wrong semantic order.

06 / Make your own field note

The one-variable notebook

Name one decision.

The element or rule I want to understand is:

_____

Record the default.

Before changing it, I see:

_____

Change one thing.

My new input is:

_____

Describe the visible result.

What changed, without guessing about another person's mind:

_____

Find a counterexample.

This choice could make things worse when:

_____

Make reversal ordinary.

How a reader can undo or bypass the change:

_____

METHODS & HONESTY

These are eight designed demonstrations, not experimental evidence. Bar heights, orbit radii and other values are invented illustrations. Technical references: MDN CSS animations, MDN prefers-reduced-motion, MDN Clipboard.writeText, W3C WAI animation guidance. Links and additional limitations: sahiltayal.com/sketchbook/sources.html.

A Sahil Tayal Production — Research Meets Art.