

My Life as an Excel Spreadsheet

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In the fall of 2013, on my Gap Year, I received this small green and orange book. It is cheap and over time the pages have turned yellow, but it is, or was, my prize possession. Late at night on November 10th, for reasons I cannot remember, I wrote down, in eleven words, what I had done that day. I did this the day after, and the day after, and have not stopped yet. The book sits on my nightstand, and immediately before sleeping is open to my most recent entry, and add another. This alone is worthwhile. On particularly good days I feel pride as I recall my accomplishments. On particularly boring days I feel shame and resolve to do more tomorrow.

314 days later I almost lost the journal. I was travelling, and forgot my bag. I am prone to losing things, and after so many years, material loss bothers me far less than it should. But that day, I discovered an exception. My life was in that book, a year of experience would vanish with it.

I found my book, but was shaken. So this past break, I typed up my day journal, to live forever online. But I saw I could do better than type. A program let me tag days by categories: Good, bad, important.... When I finished, I would have two years of my life in searchable format. It was to be the mother lode of interesting information: Andrew Gordon the csv file.

Typing my entries took longer than anything else. I wrote one entry every 45 seconds, and recorded a total of 766. Thankfully, over winter break, I had ample time. I transcribed at

minimum fifty entries a day. I had worried this would be a chore, but it was enjoyable. When reading my daily life, it surprised me how fast it all goes. Memory is not chronological; in my mind, scenes from the past sit like islands in a large ocean. Watching the matrix with friends and discussing the nature of reality until 2am. The math class where a broad beautiful comparison between what had seemed totally different areas fell into place. Did one happen after the other, before? I forget the placement, but my day journal remembers, it lays down bridges between my separated islands. It interweaves my different narrative arcs like voices in a fugue. Life is happening faster than we realize. Living day to day, I forget my role as a character in a larger story, but as I reread my life, I see a small glimpse of elaborate patterns.

Typing took a month. The resulting file held 766 days of my life in 13,624 words. At that moment I got a little scared. For one, my computer now had a file that contained the last two years of my life. A snooper could find all my secrets simply by searching out the days labeled 'Important'. Second, I did not know what any analysis would mean. What if I discovered a friend was strongly correlated with sadness? Do I confront them? "Hey, I know we are friends, but statistically speaking, you depress me?" How much of my life should I change based on data? I almost couldn't bring myself to ask questions.

Curiosity eventually got the better of me. Once I began looking, facts began to pour out. At school, about one in sixteen days is important, and one in twenty is good. This beats home, where days are important half as often, and good one tenth as often. But 22% of days away are good. Further analysis shows my best days of the week were Saturday and Tuesday, while the worst are Friday and Wednesday.

I also did a similar analysis on my friends, summing the good and bad days they are present for. This was what I worried about, but I nothing that upset me. On the contrary, I found nothing of major importance. The goon who tanked my CS project is correlated with bad days. The girl I met once at a party and never saw again has a perfect average goodness. My friends differ by percentage points at most.

This is not great analysis. I wrote my speech as I conducted analysis and honestly hoped I would find more. On the surface, my project is nothing more than some statistical tidbits and laughable friend rankings. But to me it is more than that. This was a confusing process, the journal, the entering, the analysis. It feels valuable to me, but not in such a naively quantifiable way. Is intense statistical analysis is the key to better? Maybe. Deep down I feel like there is a signal hidden in the noise, the pattern I thought I could feel as I transcribed, some statistic that will let me know myself better. But today I don't have that, not even close. But even if there is no deeper pattern, I do know this was worth it. This ritual of recording and studying has changed the way I live. I am both the dataset and the scientist. Every day the journal inspires me to watch closely to capture the details, and to do interesting things, because I know I am being watched.