Done your eyes for a minute, and “imagine the worst thing you have ever done, your most shameful secret. Imagine that cringe-inducing incident somehow has made its way online.” You no longer have control over that tiny digital trace of your incident, which is now stored online as a picture, text or video. A prospective employer, current partner or future grand-child might get hold of it. Your life could change for the worse in the blink of an eye.

Happily for European Union citizens, at least, they have a new weapon to defend their privacy against the increased discover-ability and the stealthy persistence of digital information on the web: the “right to erasure”, thanks to the EU Data Protection Regulation, drafted in 2012 and finally adopted in April 2016. Ctrl+Z, whose title refers to the keyboard shortcut for the “undo” command, is the first book to offer a comprehensive, engaging socio-legal perspective on the controversial “right to be forgotten”, as it is commonly known. This right regulates (online) data privacy in the EU, imposing on “data controllers” such as Google the legal duty to delete portions of information upon a user’s request, when the interests or fundamental rights and freedoms of the latter have been infringed. It intersects the spheres of identity and privacy, memory and reputation as they are redefined in the digital age. While this has been hailed by many as one of the high points in the protection of digital privacy in the 21st century, it has also been criticised as restricting freedom of expression. The book’s illustrations, abstracted from scientific images of human tissue, are intended to communicate the fact that “it is within the stunning visual vocabulary of biological beauty that we present as a species”. Hefland’s book bridges the universal and the personal; it has no references and is based on her own reflections, opinions and professional judgments.

Short, easy-to-read chapters are named after states of being rather than the qualities we typically attribute to design. Form and function are here replaced with “compassion”, “humility” and “patience”. Design services “our ever-present appetite for fantasy. Because that’s a basic human need too.” Hefland’s examples in her chapter on “Fantasy” range, unexpectedly, from the answerphone to the paste-ups that graphic designers send to printers. Writing about “Authority”, Hefland seems equally disillusioned by tangible markers of identity (passports) and digital ones (social media identities). Her previous book, Scrapbooks: An American History, examined a medium that foregrounds material memories as opposed to the digital memorials captured by Facebook. In this new book, relationships between the social, the material and the digital are ever-present. In “virtual spaces there is no iron”, she asserts. Hefland repeatedly critiques social media, from the circulation of selfies to the inadequacy of using Facebook’s “like” button to respond to death notices on the site (a problem more partly solved by its limited range of reactions buttons).

Hefland’s book is informed by the death in 2013 of her husband and collaborator, William Drenttel, from brain cancer, as the chapter “Humility” makes clear. They were a public as well as a private couple, co-founding the design firm Winterhouse and the website Design Observer, and were honoured jointly with the AIGA medal the year that Drenttel died. Her essay on “Compassion” is sceptical about the efficacy of the design consultancy IDEO’s approach to death as a design opportunity, and instead places her faith in the potential of inter-disciplinary encounters between art and medicine, literature and science. “In Melancholy, she points out that “sadness has to be designed too”, with examples including cemeteries and grave-stones. Writing about “Humility”, Hefland cautions us that design can do little to assuage mortality. Designers, and others, should resist desire and display humility, she urges. We should pay attention to our moral compasses: “We are people first, purveyors of desire…is to engage humanity”. 

Stefania Milan on the socio-legal complexities of digital redemption and digital reinvention

Ctri+Z: The Right to Be Forgotten
By Meg Leta Jones
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256pp, £20.99
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Design: The Invention of Desire
By Jessica Helfand
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Designers, and others, should resist desire and display humility, she urges. We should pay attention to our moral compasses: “We are people first, purveyors of desire...is to engage humanity.”

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