Mortality rates are calculated for each age in each year and binned by percentile. The darker the color at any particular point, the more people of that age die in that year. The lighter the color, the more people of that age survive in that year.

Historical trends are visible, such as the rapid decrease in infant mortality rates after World War II, as well as increased life expectancy overall. Specific events show up as vertical streaks in the graph. The death toll due to wars is evident for males. Pandemics are also visible, most notably the 1918 influenza pandemic and the death toll due to Smallpox outbreaks after the Franco-Prussian war of 1870.

Diagonal streaks in the data are visible in some parts of the graph. These are artifacts due to the estimation of the mortality rate in some years. Single-year-of-age figures prior to 1950 are calculated from five-year age groups, as no single-year data is available in the original mortality tabulations from which the rates were derived.