Typography is the core of graphic design—it’s what makes language visible and legible. This reader provides an overview of the terminology that surrounds typography, the history of grid systems for organizing text, and design considerations for electronic media.

**Selections from**


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As with any craft that has evolved over 500 years, typography employs a number of technical terms. These mostly describe specific parts of letterforms. It is a good idea to familiarize yourself with this lexicon. Knowing a letterform's component parts makes it much easier to identify specific typefaces.

(In the entries that follow, **boldface** text indicates terms described elsewhere in the list.)

**Baseline**
The imaginary line defining the visual base of letterforms (see the diagram below).

**Median**
The imaginary line defining the x-height of letterforms (see the diagram below).

**X-height**
The height in any typeface of the lowercase 'x' (see the diagram below).

**Ascender**
The portion of the stem of a lowercase letterform that projects above the median.

**Barb**
The half-serif finish on some curved strokes.

**Apex/Vertex**
The point created by joining two diagonal stems (apex above, vertex below).

**Arm**
Short strokes off the stem of the letterform, either horizontal (E, F, T) or inclined upward (K, Y).
Beak
The half-serif finish on some horizontal arms.

Cross Bar
The horizontal stroke in a letterform that joins two stems together.

Ear
The stroke extending out from the main stem or body of the letterform.

Bowl
The rounded form that describes a counter. The bowl may be either open or closed.

Cross Stroke
The horizontal stroke in a letterform that intersects the stem.

Em/en
Originally referring to the width of an uppercase M, an em is now the distance equal to the size of the typeface (an em in 48 pt. type is 48 points, for example). An en is half the size of an em. Most often used to describe em/en spaces and em/en dashes.

Bracket
The transition between the serif and the stem.

Crotch
The interior space where two strokes meet.

Finial
The rounded non-serif terminal to a stroke.

Counter
The negative space within a letterform, either fully or partially enclosed.

Descender
That portion of the stem of a lowercase letterform that projects below the baseline.

Leg
Short stroke off the stem of the letterform, either at the bottom of the stroke (L) or inclined downward (K, R).
Ligature
The character formed by the combination of two or more letterforms.

Shoulder
The curved stroke that is not part of a bowl.

Stress
The orientation of the letterform, indicated by the thin stroke in round forms.

Link
The stroke that connects the bowl and the loop of a lowercase G.

Spine
The curved stem of the S.

Swash
The flourish that extends the stroke of a letterform.

Loop
In some typefaces, the bowl created in the descender of the lowercase G.

Spur
The extension that articulates the junction of a curved and rectilinear stroke.

Tail
The curved or diagonal stroke at the finish of certain letterforms.

Serif
The right-angled or oblique foot at the end of the stroke.

Stem
The significant vertical or oblique stroke.

Terminal
The self-contained finish of a stroke without a serif. This is something of a catch-all term. Terminals may be flat (T, above), flared, acute, (Y, above), grave, concave, convex, or rounded as a ball or a teardrop (see final).
The full font of a typeface contains much more than 26 letters, 10 numerals, and a few punctuation marks. To work successfully with type, you should make sure that you are working with a full font and you should know how to use it.

**Uppercase**
Capital letters, including certain accented vowels, the c cedilla and n tildes, and the a/e and o/e ligatures.

```
ÅÅÅÅÅÅÆBCÇDEÉ ÈÈÈFGHIÍÍÍÍJKLMN OÓÓÓÓØŒPQRS TUÚÛÛÜVWXYZ
```

**Lowercase**
Lowercase letters include the same characters as uppercase plus ï/î, ë/ë, ï/ï, and ë/ë/ë ligatures, and the 'esset' (German double s).

```
aâaâååäæbcçdéèéê fffgffgffgghiiííííjklmnñ oóóóóøœpqrss tuũûũúvwxys
```

**Small capitals**
Uppercase letterforms, drawn to the x-height of the typeface. Small caps are primarily found in serif fonts as part of what is often called an expert set. Most type software includes a style command that generates a small cap based upon uppercase forms. Do not confuse real small caps with those artificially generated.

```
ÅÅÅÅÅÅÆBCÇDEÉÉÉ ÈÈÈFGHIÍÍÍÍJKLMNÑ OÓÓÓÔÔÔŒPQRSŠ TUÚÛÛÜVWXÝŻŽ
```

Aa
Baskerville small cap artificially generated

AA
Baskerville small cap from the font

Typeface shown:
Monotype Baskerville
Uppercase numerals
Also called lining figures, these numerals are the same height as uppercase letters and are all set to the same kerning width. They are most successfully used with tabular material or in any situation that calls for uppercase letters.

Lowercase numerals
Also called oldstyle figures or text figures, these numerals are set to x-height with ascenders and descenders. They are best used wherever you would use upper- and lowercase letterforms. Lowercase numerals are far less common in sans serif typefaces than in serif.

Italic
Most fonts today are produced with a matching italic. Small caps, however, are almost always only roman. As with small caps, artificially generated italics are not the same as real italics.

Note the difference below between a 'true' italic and what is called an 'oblique.' The forms in a true italic refer back to fifteenth-century Italian cursive handwriting. Obliques are typically based on the roman form of the typeface. Contemporary typefaces often blur the distinction between italic and oblique, but you should be aware of the differences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>a</th>
<th>a</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baskerville roman with italic</td>
<td>Univers 55 (roman) with Univers 55 (oblique)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Punctuation, miscellaneous characters
Although all fonts contain standard punctuation marks, miscellaneous characters can change from typeface to typeface. It's important to be acquainted with all the characters available in a typeface before you choose the appropriate type for a particular job.

Dingbats
Various symbols and ornaments that are intended for use with type are called dingbats. The majority of dingbats are marketed as their own fonts and not in conjunction with any particular typeface.

Typefaces shown:
Monotype Baskerville (pages 6–7) and Universal News and Commercial Pi (page 7, bottom)
Once you can recognize the parts of the letterform, you can apply what you know to identify different typefaces. Beyond the characteristic gestures of a typeface, however, there are also style applications that you should recognize. Keep in mind that some, all, or combinations of these styles may be found within one type family.

**Roman**
The basic letterform style, so called because the uppercase forms are derived from inscriptions on Roman monuments. When used to describe a type style, the term 'roman' is always lowercase. In some typefaces, a slightly lighter stroke than roman is called 'book'.

**Italic**
Named for fifteenth-century Italian handwriting on which the forms were based. (See page 6 for a description of 'oblique'.)

**Boldface**
Characterized by a thicker stroke than the roman form. Depending upon the relative stroke width within the typeface, it can also be called 'semibold,' 'medium,' 'black,' 'extra bold,' or 'super.' In some typefaces (notably Bodoni), the boldest rendition of the typeface is referred to as 'poster'.

**Light**
A lighter stroke than the roman form. Even lighter strokes are often called 'thin'.

**Condensed**
As the name suggests, a condensed version of the roman form. Extremely condensed styles are often called 'compressed'.

**Extended**
Exactly what you would think. An extended variation on the roman form.
The confusion of styles within families of typefaces may seem daunting to the novice; it certainly remains a small nuisance even to the experienced designer. The only way to deal with the profusion of names—like learning irregular verbs in French—is memorization. See page 44 for Adrian Frutiger’s attempt to resolve the naming problem.

Adobe Caslon SemiBold
Akzidenz Grotesk Regular
Akzidenz Grotesk Medium
Bodoni Old Face Medium
Futura Book
Helvetica Compressed
Gill Sans Heavy
Gill Sans Extra Bold
Gill Sans Ultra Bold
Grotesque Black
Meta Normal
Univers Thin Ultra Condensed (Univers 39)
Along with its own lexicon, typography also has its own units of measurement. Originally, type size was determined by the height of actual pieces of lead type. Obviously, we no longer commonly use lead type in setting type; however, the concept of letterforms cast on small pieces of lead remains the most useful way of thinking of type size. Although type size originally referred to the body of the type (the metal slug on which the letterform was cast), today we typically measure it from the top of the ascender to the bottom of the descender.

Similarly, the space between lines of type is called ‘leading’ because it was originally strips of lead placed between lines of metal type.

We calculate the size of type with units called ‘points.’ A point as we use it now is \( \sqrt{2} \) of an inch or 0.35 mm. The ‘pica,’ also used extensively in printing, is made up of 12 points. There are 6 picas to an inch.

When writing out a dimension in picas and points, the standard abbreviation is \( p \).

- 6 picas is written 6p or 6p0
- 6 picas, 7 points is written 6p7
- 7 points is written 7p, 0p7, or p7

When specifying type size and leading, use a slash between the two numbers.

- 10 point Univers with 2 point leading is written 10/12 Univers
Set width

All letterforms have set widths: the width of the form itself plus the space required on either side to prevent one letter from bumping into another. Set widths are described in 'units,' an entirely arbitrary measure that changes from one system to another. In the example opposite, the uppercase 'M' (typically the widest letterform) is 20 units wide and the lowercase 'a' is 9 units wide; the measurements might just as easily be 40 units and 18 units.

When type was cast by hand, it was possible for every letter, upper- and lowercase, to have a unique set width. As mechanized typesetting evolved, type designers were forced to restrict the number of set widths in any typeface to accommodate the limitations of the system (metal or photo) that produced the type. An 'a' and an 'e,' for instance, might be assigned the same set width in some systems because the technology was unable to express finer distinctions. Current digital technology has gone a long way toward restoring the variety of hand-cast type. Many softwares work at a scale of 200 units to the set width of an 'M.'

Uppercase numerals always have identical set widths so that they will align vertically (above). Lowercase numerals, designed with varying set widths, do not align vertically.
The ten typefaces displayed opposite represent 500 years of type design. The men and women who rendered them all sought to achieve two goals: easy readability and an appropriate expression of contemporary esthetics. These typefaces (and there are others) have surpassed the latter goal. They have remained in use for decades—in some cases, centuries—after they were first designed, still considered successful expressions of how we think, how we read and write, and how we print.

As a beginning typographer, you should study these ten faces carefully. For any of the exercises in this book—and for almost any early projects—these are all you will need to develop your skills. Once you understand how to use these faces appropriately and effectively, you'll be well prepared to understand and appreciate other typefaces as you encounter them.

Most of the typefaces shown here are fully displayed in the chapter on Development, pages 15-49.
As you study other designers' work, you'll notice that many people who work seriously with type employ a limited palette of typefaces. Some, in fact, go through their entire careers using only one or two.

For our purposes, what is worth noting is not the similarities among these typefaces, but their differences—the accumulation of choices that renders each unique. Compare, for example, different forms of the lowercase 'a':

\[ aaaaaaaadaa \]

Beyond the gross differences in x-height, these forms display a wealth of variety in line weight, relative stroke width and other internal relationships, and in feeling. For any good typographer, each of these feelings connotes specific applications determined by use and expression. In other words, the typefaces suggest applications for which they are appropriate.

\[ RRRRRRRRRRR \]

The uppercase R (above) displays the range of attitude typefaces are capable of conveying. If you examine these forms long enough, you are bound to decide that some of the tails seem more whimsical, some more stately, some will appear more mechanical, some more calligraphic, some harmonious, some awkward. As much as anything, what this examination tells you is how you feel about type and specific typefaces. It tells you what you bring to the discussion of appropriateness in type choices.
As you already know, the x-height generally describes the size of lowercase letterforms. However, you should keep in mind that curved strokes, such as in 's', must rise above the median (or sink below the baseline) in order to appear to be the same size as the vertical and horizontal strokes they adjoin.

Compare the 'a' in the large examples above with the 'o' and 's'. The latter two characters clearly seem too small, and bounce around within the perceived x-height of the typeface, because they do not extend beyond the median or baseline.
Just as important as recognizing specific letterforms is developing a sensitivity to the counterform (or counter)—the space described, and often contained, by the strokes of the form. When letters are joined to form words, the counterform includes the spaces between them. The latter is a particularly important concept when working with letterforms like the lowercase ‘y’ that have no counters per se. How well you handle the counters when you set type determines how well words hang together—in other words, how easily we can read what’s been set.
One of the most rewarding ways to understand the form and counter of a letter is to examine them in close detail. Beyond giving you an appreciation of the meticulous care that goes into each compound curve, these examinations also provide a good feel for how the balance between form and counter is achieved and a palpable sense of a letterform's unique characteristics. It also gives you a glimpse into the process of letter-making.

It's worth noting here that the sense of the 'S' holds at each stage of enlargement, while the 'g' tends to lose its identity, as individual elements are examined without the context of the entire letterform.
On four 6" (152 mm) squares, present sections of a letterform that highlight its unique characteristics, keeping in mind the contrast between form and counterform. Note the point at which the letterform is no longer recognizable. This project is most beneficial when hand-rendered. However, you can use a good copying machine with enlargement capabilities as long as you clean up your edges with each enlargement.

Remember, one of the discoveries of this exercise is to find that moment when the letterform no longer reads.
The basic principles of graphic design apply directly to typography. Above are some examples of contrast—the most powerful dynamic in design—as applied to type, based on a format devised by Rudi Ruegg.

Combining these simple contrasts produces numerous variations: small/organic/large/machined; few/bold/many/light; etc. Adding color increases the possibilities even more (e.g., black/red).
On 6" (152 mm) squares, create six panels showing contrast in type. Combine as many features as you wish (e.g. small+dark/large+light). Restrict your solutions to black-and-white.
If there is any type designer who single-handedly opened up untrodden territories and shifted paradigms in the early days of desktop type design, it is Zuzana Licko (pronounced Litchko). Together with her partner Rudy VanderLans she created the earliest small type foundry that accommodated pioneering typefaces by a broad group of designers and artists. She became the tireless curator of its expanding collection. Both European-born but based in the California Bay Area, they called their venture Emigre Graphics. Their Emigre Magazine (originally founded as a whimsical art mag for expats) became the most influential showcase for cutting-edge typography, and the type avant-garde’s leading discussion forum. Ranging from adventurous experimental faces to inventive revivals, Licko’s typefaces invariably show courage, attitude, and immense talent.

Zuzana, you grew up in the United States, but were born in former Czechoslovakia — which technically makes you an “émigré”. Do you feel your European roots influenced your attitude and approach to design?

Yes, I was born in Bratislava, Czechoslovakia, when it was still under communist rule, and I was seven years old when my family emigrated to San Francisco, California. When I entered grade school in the US, I was learning a second language and customs in school, while maintaining the Slovak language and customs at home. This made me aware of the differences and has given me the perspective of an outsider. This probably formed my tendency to question things, and this questioning of preconceptions is what drew me to the design profession.
You were one of the very first graphic designers who became interested in digital type design, and one of the first type designers to use the Mac. How did you get there?

Growing up, I loved drawing, building with Legos, and math. So, I thought I wanted to be an architect, and got into the College of Environmental Design at U.C. Berkeley. When I got there, I realized that I was more interested in all the related classes, such as photography, letterpress and typography. The college had just discontinued their Visual Studies program, but many of these classes remained on offer to broaden the horizons of the architecture students.

That's when I realized that I really wanted to be a graphic designer, with an emphasis on type. I was fascinated by experiments in type as illustration. But I was piecing my major together from the fringes. I remember telling a classmate that I had signed up for the typography class. We were a couple of minutes into our discussion before I realized he had misunderstood, and had been talking about topography (mapmaking). Thats how marginal these classes were.

When I began my college education, there were no type design programs at universities, and computers were large mainframes, that usually lived in the basement. Taking a computer class would give you access to a terminal, which would allow you to type up your program, which would then be batch processed overnight. In my last year, I managed to get into the computer graphics class, which generated primitive line drawings through hard coding.

Your first fonts became a crucial element in the design of Emigre, the magazine founded and edited by your partner Rudy VanderLans. How did the magazine come about — and whose idea was it to make it a showcase for your typefaces?

The magazine was started by Rudy and two Dutch artist friends who all lived and worked in the Bay Area at the time, and they thought a magazine publishing their work and the work of their friends would be a great shortcut to fame and fortune. Originally, it was to focus on Dutch artists, but the goal was soon expanded to feature work that was in some way influenced by travel or working abroad. That's where the “Emigre” name came from. To cut a long story short, after only a few issues, Rudy's friends realized it was difficult to make the magazine profitable, so they moved on and left it in our hands. I had already started providing a lot of the typesetting for the magazine, using the bitmap fonts I had created on the Mac.

The first time we used the Mac for Emigre, in 1985, there were no page layout programs. PostScript and laser printers didn’t even exist yet. We printed out low resolution type on an ImageWriter dot matrix printer, on paper, as large as we could, and then we reduced the type using a stat camera and pasted it down on boards. But the magazine didn’t start out as

KITCHENETTE
Dictionary Definition
QUILTED
Counterrevolution
infinite gifts
Environment

MR EAVES SANS + MODERN

Phonemic Dictionary
Dialogue
Glottal Stop
Morphological
Consonant

FILOSOFIA OT

The successful Mrs Eaves is Licko's take on the typefaces designed by the 18th-century master John Baskerville. It was named after Baskerville's housekeeper, Sarah Eaves, who became his wife and assistant after her husband died. As described in the interview, Licko wanted to capture the warmth and openness of the printed metal type. She took a totally new approach to Baskerville's letterforms: she diminished the contrast between thick and thin parts, and gave the lowercase characters a wider proportion and generous spacing. The result is a very personal yet highly functional revival, that has been used everywhere — from junk mail to avant-garde design. Later Licko developed Mr Eaves, a set of striking, supple sans-serif companions — Mr Eaves Sans is the variation that relates more closely to the serif version, while Mr Eaves Modern provides simpler and more geometric-looking shapes.
a showcase for our typefaces. We used the Mac and the bitmap fonts simply because it was a cheap alternative to having professional typesetting done, which was quite expensive in those days. However, designers started asking if the fonts we used were available. For a while I was actually doing typesetting for other designers, since very few designers had computers in those days. They would send me the specs and I would sell them typeset printouts using my fonts. Then, when more designers started using computers, we started selling the font data on floppy disks. That was the start of Emigre Fonts. It was only then that we realized the magazine was a great vehicle to feature and promote the fonts.

You were probably the first designer of digital type who was interested in the low-resolution screen and print resolution of the early Macs as a visual element. You drew a big series of pixelated fonts that later became the Lo-Res family. What attracted you to those jaggy shapes?

When I first got my hands on a Mac, the process of designing typefaces was a mystery to me, and the early Mac computer was very primitive, so it was a perfect starting point. I loved the building block approach of bitmaps. It seems trivial today, but it was magical to see the changes on screen instantly; so much faster than coloring in blocks on grid paper! From then on, my experience and skill with ever more sophisticated typeface designs evolved along with the Mac’s ability to support more complex font programs.

I thoroughly enjoyed the limitations of the early technology. Paradoxically, it allowed for more free exploration than today’s limitless possibilities. There was something to react against, a puzzle to solve, or a problem to overcome. Stripped of our familiar tools, we had to reconsider basic assumptions. This way of working leads to unusual forms that might otherwise not be explored.

Filosofia is to Bodoni what Mrs Eaves is to Baskerville: a highly personal interpretation of a classic. Compared to many digital Bodonis, Filosofia is sturdier and more usable in day-to-day design work; it is both a smart, unprejudiced update and a thoughtful tribute. Licko studied various versions of the original Bodoni in printing, but did not use any particular one as the model. Having looked at many specimens, she then drew her Bodoni from memory, “akin to the process of transcribing.”
Many of the typefaces from your early period seem to explore meeting points of history and technology: Blackletter fonts and digital processing in Totally Gothic; oldstyle shapes and straight-lines-only in Journal, etc. How did your thinking work at the time — did you make lists of themes to explore in type design?

The themes emerged organically, as the technology changed, or new software or hardware became available. Many of the designs were inspired by asking: “what if...”

For example, with Oblong, the goal was to make a bitmap design that did not show “jaggies”. So this design has no diagonals or curves, only right angles.

Similarly, Journal has no curves, they are approximated by segments of straight lines. I had wanted to try my hand at an old style stress design, but found the curves difficult to draw with the relatively primitive font tools of the day. The geometric arc curves employed in Modula, Matrix, and other designs that I had developed previously were easier to create with these early tools because arc curves are more predictable from a construction standpoint and therefore easier to envision. In fact, it was not so much the drawing tools that were the problem, but the preview display. The screen display was not very faithful to the mathematical digital drawing, nor the laser printout, due to the primitive screen rasterizer and the coarse resolution screen on the monitor. Remember, this was before anti-aliased screens and stochastic ink jet printing came to personal computing. Taking a magnifying glass to the 300 dpi printouts, I studied
how the curves were represented by a series of stair-stepped lines on the black and white (non-aliased) grid of the laser printed page. This inspired me to construct Journal with straight-line segments instead of curves; approximating each curve by a series of tangent polylines. This not only solved the screen display preview problem, but gave Journal a rustic look, which nicely complimented the old style stress. The subtle crudeness is reminiscent of the irregularities that appear in letterpress printed specimens, and evokes informal qualities, making Journal suitable for correspondence.

Another design that employed segments of straight lines to approximate curves is Citizen. With the introduction of laser printers, the “smooth” printing option was provided as a shortcut to increasing the resolution of bitmaps from screen to printer. This smooth printing option seemingly polishing stair step pixels into smooth diagonals. I enlarged the structure of the smoothing geometry, and this became the inspiration for Citizen.

Totally Gothic started as an experiment with auto-tracing. One of my experiments began as a blackletter bitmap, which was not so interesting in itself, so I played around with auto-tracing it. Due to the crudeness of the bitmap and the primitive tracing technology, the results were unexpected, and lead me to play with the automatic PostScript curves that it generated.

Variex, designed in collaboration with Rudy, was another concept that was inspired by technology. The early PostScript fonts were in Type3 format, which allowed monoline drawings, of a single weight. Variex was conceived as a stroke design; each character is defined by center-lines of uniform weight, from which the three weights are also derived. Varying the weight of a stroke typeface changes the thickness around the center line and thus alters the alignment of some characters. Variex incorporates these variations of alignment in its design, making adjustments to the center lines unnecessary when changing the weight. As a result, the x-height varies among the three different weights.

“"The making of a ceramic piece is finite, relatively instantaneous, and exists still relating to each other in terms of overall look and feel.""
Your next phase in type, so to speak, was to have a look at historical models. In the mid-1990s, you made Mrs Eaves, based on the Baskerville types, and Filosofía, based on Bodoni. What were your main motivations to turn to the classics?

Bodoni and Baskerville are two type families that I enjoyed using when I was a graphic designer and typographer in my earlier career, before I started designing typefaces. In fact, Bodoni was my favorite.

Once I felt my type design skills had matured enough, I was tempted to create my own versions of these two classics.

My early experience with using Bodoni was from the Mergenthaler photo version, and I often wished for a less contrasty version when it came to setting text. In many instances Bodoni would be simply too hard to read, so I would switch to another typeface design, although I would have preferred the feel of Bodoni.

I did not intend to follow any specific model. Instead, I wanted to capture the warmth of the original printed samples, while creating an updated version that would be appropriate for digital technology, and that would address my problem with the high contrast. My preparatory work included researching printed samples, amongst them the Manuale Tipografico, which I located at the Bancroft library on the UC Berkeley campus, which I was lucky to have nearby. I discovered that over time Bodoni developed a personal style that tended toward simplicity, austerity and a greater

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**BASE SERIES**

Compile
Command Line Tools
AVATAR
Directory
Terminal

After her first series of coarse bitmap fonts (now the Lo-Res series) Licko explored the increasing possibilities of digital type technology in several font families that built bridges and made jumps from low to high resolution. The Base series is an eminent example of how this unorthodox thinking could lead to a very usable typeface with a strong personality. The design is anchored to the bitmapped screen fonts in various pixel heights that were a necessity in the times before anti-aliased screen rendering became standard. "The Base families," says Licko, "explored the proportions of the various bitmap masters, and kept the spacing true to the grid. Rather than
contrast, resulting in what we know today as the modern face. This variance in Bodoni’s design encouraged me to imagine my own interpretation.

**In what way do you think your approach was different from the more conventional revivals?**

I aimed to distill an overall look from the varied qualities of the various printed samples, setting out to draw the letterforms “from memory” so to speak. I let the impression and memory of the printed samples I had studied guide my drawings. This is the same method I used for my Baskerville revival, Mrs Eaves. Drawing a Baskerville “from memory” was suggested to me by Erik Spiekermann, which I thought was a great idea.

Filosofia shows my personal preference for a geometric Bodoni, while incorporating such features as the slightly bulging round serif endings which often appeared in printed samples of Bodoni’s work and reflect Bodoni’s origins in letterpress technology. With each style in the family, my intent was to create a distinct texture which would differentiate, for example, the italic from the roman, to reflect the handmade quality of letterpress type. I wanted to explore the opposite of the “neutral” typeface. The more neutral a typeface design is, the more it will lack specific character, and I wanted to stay away from that.

For Mrs Eaves, I wanted a more fluid design, so Baskerville, being a transitional design and less rigid than Bodoni, was the model. However, Baskerville’s types were often criticized for being too perfect, stark, and difficult to read, and I noticed that revivals of Baskerville often continued along the same path of perfection, using as a model the qualities of the lead type itself, not the printed specimens.

Instead, I looked to the printed samples which were heavier and had more character due to the imprint of lead type into paper and the resulting ink spread. I reduced the contrast while retaining the overall openness and lightness of Baskerville by giving the lower case characters a wider proportion, then reducing the x-height relative to the cap height to avoid increasing the set width.

The intention of my revival was to take those elements from Baskerville that have become familiar, and thus highly legible to today’s reader, and to give these my own interpretation. I wanted the spacing to feel open, which gives the impression of a somewhat slower pace, making the reading unhurried.

**CITIZEN**

Citizen is one of Licko’s designs in which the constraints of primitive type design technology became a key to something original and striking, instead of an obstacle. The design is based on the proportions and contrasts of an oldstyle, but refrains from using curves, as they were simply hard to draw and used up more memory. So she resorted to a method that has been a stylistic element in expressionist type designs such as those by Czech designer Vojtech Preissig — building classic-looking lettershapes by using straight lines only.
ELLEN LUPTON

thinking with

type

A CRITICAL GUIDE FOR DESIGNERS, WRITERS, EDITORS, & STUDENTS
BIRTH OF THE USER

Roland Barthes’s model of the text as an open web of references, rather than a closed and perfect work, asserts the importance of the reader over the writer in creating meaning. The reader “plays” the text as a musician plays an instrument. The author does not control its significance: “the text itself plays (like a door, like a machine with ‘play’) and the reader plays twice over, playing the Text as one plays a game, looking for a practice that reproduces it” (102). Like an interpretation of a musical score, reading is a performance of the written word.

Graphic designers embraced the idea of the readerly text in the 1980s and early 1990s, using layers of text and interlocking grids to explore Barthes’s theory of the “death of the author.” In place of the classical model of typography as a crystal goblet for content, this alternative view assumes that content itself changes with each act of representation. Typography becomes a mode of interpretation.

Redefining typography as “discourse,” designer Katherine McCoy imploded the traditional dichotomy between seeing and reading. Pictures can be read (analyzed, decoded, taken apart), and words can be seen (perceived as icons, forms, patterns). Valuing ambiguity and complexity, her approach challenged readers to produce their own meanings while trying also to elevate the status of designers within the process of authorship.

Another model, which undemined the designer’s new claim to power, surfaced at the end of the 1990s, borrowed not from literary criticism but from human-computer interaction (HCI) studies and the fields of interface and usability design. The dominant subject of our age has become neither reader nor writer but user, a figure conceived as a bundle of needs and impairments—cognitive, physical, emotional. Like a patient or child, the user is a figure to be protected and cared for but also scrutinized and controlled, submitted to research and testing.

How texts are used becomes more important than what they mean. Someone clicked here to get over there. Someone who bought this also bought that. The interactive environment not only provides users with a degree of control and self-direction but also, more quietly and insidiously, it gathers data about its audiences. Barthes’s image of the text as a game to be played still holds, as the user respond to signals from the system. We may play the text, but it is also playing us.

Design a human-machine interface in accordance with the abilities and foibles of humankind, and you will help the user not only get the job done, but be a happier, more productive person.

Jef Raskin, 2000
Graphic designers can use theories of user interaction to revisit some of our basic assumptions about visual communication. Why, for example, are readers on the Web less patient than readers of print? It is commonly believed that digital displays are inherently more difficult to read than ink on paper. Yet HCI studies conducted in the late 1980s proved that crisp black text on a white background can be read just as efficiently from a screen as from a printed page.

The impatience of the digital reader arises from culture, not from the essential character of display technologies. Users of Web sites have different expectations than users of print. They expect to feel “productive,” not contemplative. They expect to be in search mode, not processing mode. Users also expect to be disappointed, distracted, and delayed by false leads. The cultural habits of the screen are driving changes in design for print, while at the same time affirming print’s role as a place where extended reading can still occur.

Another common assumption is that icons are a more universal mode of communication than text. Icons are central to the GUIs (graphical user interfaces) that routinely connect users with computers. Yet text can often provide a more specific and understandable cue than a picture. Icons don’t actually simplify the translation of content into multiple languages, because they require explanation in multiple languages. The endless icons of the digital desktop, often rendered with gratuitous detail and depth, function more to enforce brand identity than to support usability. In the twentieth century, modern designers harked pictures as a “universal” language, yet in the age of code, text has become a more common denominator than images—searchable, translatable, and capable of being reformatted and restyled for alternative or future media.

Perhaps the most persistent impulse of twentieth-century art and design was to physically integrate form and content. The Dada and Futurist poets, for example, used typography to create texts whose content was inextricable from the concrete layout of specific letterforms on a page. In the twenty-first century, form and content are being pulled back apart. Style sheets, for example, compel designers to think globally and systematically instead of focusing on the fixed construction of a particular surface. This way

Web users don’t like to read....They want to keep moving and clicking.
Jakob Nielsen, 2000
of thinking allows content to be reformatted for different devices or users, and it also prepares for the afterlife of data as electronic storage media begin their own cycles of decay and obsolescence.

In the twentieth century, modern artists and critics asserted that each medium is specific. They defined film, for example, as a constructive language distinct from theater, and they described painting as a physical medium that refers to its own processes. Today, however, the medium is not always the message. Design has become a “transmedia” enterprise, as authors and producers create worlds of characters, places, situations, and interactions that can appear across a variety of products. A game might live in different versions on a video screen, a desktop computer, a game console, and a cell phone, as well as on t-shirts, lunch boxes, and plastic toys.

The beauty and wonder of “white space” is another modernist myth that is subject to revision in the age of the user. Modern designers discovered that open space on a page can have as much physical presence as printed areas. White space is not always a mental kindness, however. Edward Tufte, a fierce advocate of visual density, argues for maximizing the amount of data conveyed on a single page or screen. In order to help readers make connections and comparisons as well as to find information quickly, a single surface packed with well-organized information is sometimes better than multiple pages with a lot of blank space. In typography as in urban life, density invites intimate exchange among people and ideas.

In our much-fabled era of information overload, a person can still process only one message at a time. This brute fact of cognition is the secret behind magic tricks: sleights of hand occur while the attention of the audience is drawn elsewhere. Given the fierce competition for their attention, users have a chance to shape the information economy by choosing what to look at. Designers can help them make satisfying choices.

Typography is an interface to the alphabet. User theory tends to favor normative solutions over innovative ones, pushing design into the background. Readers usually ignore the typographic interface, gliding comfortably along literacy’s habitual groove. Sometimes, however, the interface should be allowed to fail. By making itself evident, typography can illuminate the construction and identity of a page, screen, place, or product.

If people weren’t good at finding tiny things in long lists, the Wall Street Journal would have gone out of business years ago. Jef Raskin, 2000
TYPOGRAPHY, INVENTED IN THE RENAISSANCE, allowed text to become a fixed and stable form. Like the body of the letter, the body of text was transformed by print into an industrial commodity that gradually became more open and flexible.

Critics of electronic media have noted that the rise of networked communication did not lead to the much feared destruction of typography (or even to the death of print), but rather to the burgeoning of the alphabetic empire. As Peter Lunenfeld points out, the computer has revived the power and prevalence of writing: “Alphanumeric text has risen from its own ashes, a digital phoenix taking flight on monitors, across networks, and in the realms of virtual space.” The computer display is more hospitable to text than the screens of film or television because it offers physical proximity, user control, and a scale appropriate to the body.

The book is no longer the chief custodian of the written word. Branding is a powerful variant of literacy that revolves around symbols, icons, and typographic standards, leaving its marks on buildings, packages, album covers, Web sites, store displays, and countless other surfaces and spaces. With the expansion of the Internet, new (and old) conventions for displaying text quickly congealed, adapting metaphors from print and architecture: window, frame, page, banner, menu. Designers working within this stream of multiple media confront text in myriad forms, giving shape to extended bodies but also to headlines, decks, captions, notes, pull quotes, logotypes, navigation bars, alt tags, and other prosthetic clumps of language that announce, support, and even eclipse the main body of text.

The dissolution of writing is most extreme in the realm of the Web, where distracted readers safeguard their time and prize function over form. This debt of restlessness is owed not to the essential nature of computer monitors, but to the new behaviors engendered by the Internet, a place of searching and finding, scanning and mining. The reader, having topped the author’s seat of power during the twentieth century, now ails and lags, replaced by the dominant subject of our own era: the user, a figure whose scant attention is our most coveted commodity. Do not squander it.

Hypertext means the end of the death of literature. Stuart Mouthrop, 1991
DIVIDING SPACE

In the nineteenth century, the multi-columned, multimedia pages of newspapers and magazines challenged the supremacy of the book and its insular edge, making way for new typologies of the grid. By questioning the protective function of the frame, modern artists and designers unleashed the grid as a flexible, critical, and systematic tool. Avant-garde artists and poets attacked the barriers between art and everyday life, creating new objects and practices that merged with urban experience.

The assault against print's traditional syntax was led by F. T. Marinetti, who established the Futurist movement in 1909. Marinetti devised poems that combined different styles and sizes of type and allowed lines of text to span multiple rows. Marinetti's ingenious manipulations of the printing process work against—but inside—the constraints of letterpress, exposing the technological grid even while trying to overturn it. Dada artists and poets performed similar typographic experiments, using letterpress printing as well as collage, montage, and various forms of photo-mechanical reproduction.

Constructivism, which originated in the Soviet Union at the end of the 1910s, built on Futurist and Dada typography, bringing a more rational approach to the attack on typographic tradition. El Lissitzky employed the elements of the print shop to emphasize the mechanics of letterpress, using printer's rules to make the technological matrix actively and physically present. Constructivism used rules to divide space, throwing its symmetry into a new kind of balance. The page was no longer a fixed, hierarchical window through which content might be viewed, but an expanse that could be mapped and articulated, a space extending beyond the edge.

For Dutch artists and designers, the grid was a gateway to the infinite. The paintings of Piet Mondrian, their abstract surfaces crossed by vertical and horizontal lines, suggest the expansion of the grid beyond the limits of the canvas. Theo van Doesburg, Piet Zwart, and other members of the Dutch De Stijl group applied this idea to design and typography. Converting the curves and angles of the alphabet into perpendicular systems, they forced the letter through the mesh of the grid. Like the Constructivists, they used vertical and horizontal bars to structure the surface of the page.

Typography is mostly an act of dividing a limited surface. Willi Baumeister, 1923
The new typography not only contests the classical “framework” but also the whole principle of symmetry. Paul Renner, 1931
Jan Tschichold's book *The New Typography*, published in Germany in 1928, took ideas from Futurism, Constructivism, and De Stijl and conveyed them as practical advice for commercial printers and designers. Functionally zoned letterheads using standard paper sizes were central to Tschichold's practical application of modernism. Whereas Futurism and Dada had aggressively attacked convention, Tschichold advocated design as a means of discipline and order, and he began to theorize the grid as a modular system based on standard measures.

By describing the expansion of space in all directions, the modern grid slipped past the classical frame of the page. Similarly, modern architecture had displaced the centered facades of classical building with broken planes, modular elements, and continuous ribbons of windows.

**THE NEW TYPOGRAPHY**

Diagram, 1928
(tachogram)

Designer and author:
Jan Tschichold

Tschichold's diagram of good and bad magazine design advocates staggering images in relation to content instead of forcing text to wrap around blocks moored at the center of the page. Explaining this experiment, Tschichold wrote that his redesigned pages would be even more effective if the photographic halftones (called "blocks") were produced in fixed rather than arbitrary sizes.

I have intentionally shown blocks of different and "accidental" widths, since this is what usually has to be contended with (although in the future, with standard block-sizes, it will happen less often).

Jan Tschichold, 1928
Von A bis Z bei Z und N
dem Fachgeschäft mit der großen Auswahl
ZAHN-NOPPER
Stuttgart Tübinger Str. 11 Telefon 29 80 61

Verkäufer als Samstags-Aushilfen
auch für auswärtige Kundendienst
für Gartenbetrieb
Werkzeuge

ZAHN-NOPPER
Stuttgart M. Tübinger Straße 11
Telefon 20 90 81, Wiesmannstraße 14

250 JAHRE SEIT 1721

ZAHN-NOPPER
Store identity, 1961–63
Designer: Anton Stankowski
This identity system demonstrates a programmatic approach to design, using a limited set of elements to construct diverse yet genetically linked solutions. The system is not grounded by flexible rules for construction rather than a fixed logotype.
During the post–World War II period, graphic designers in Switzerland honed ideas from the New Typography into a total design methodology. It was at this time that the term “grid” (raster) became commonly applied to page layout. Max Bill, Karl Gerstner, Josef Müller-Brockmann, Emil Ruder, and others were practitioners and theorists of a new rationalism that aimed to catalyze an honest and democratic society. Rejecting the artistic clichés of self expression and raw intuition, they aspired to what Ruder called “a cool and fascinating beauty.”

Karl Gerstner’s book Designing Programmes (1964) is a manifesto for systems-oriented design. Gerstner defined a design “programme” as a set of rules for constructing a range of visual solutions. Connecting his methodology with the new field of computer programming, Gerstner presented examples of computer-generated patterns that were made by mathematically describing visual elements and combining them according to simple rules.

Expanding on the pioneering ideas of Bayer, Tschichold, Renner, and other designers of the avant garde, the Swiss rationalists rejected the centuries-old model of the page-as-frame in favor of a continuous architectural space. Whereas a traditional book would have placed captions, commentary, and folios within a protective margin, the rationalist grid cut the page into multiple columns, each bearing equal weight within the whole, suggesting an indefinite progression outward. Pictures were cropped to fit the modules of the grid, yielding shapes of unusual proportion.

Constructing ever more elaborate grids, the Swiss designers used the confines of a repeated structure to generate variation and surprise. Such grids could be activated in numerous ways within a single publication, always referring back to the root structure.

This approach, which quickly became known as “Swiss design,” found adherents (and detractors) around the world. Many American designers dismissed Swiss rationalism as irrelevant to a society driven by pop culture and hungry for rapidly transforming styles. Programmatic thinking is now being revived, however, as designers today confront large-scale information projects. The need is greater than ever for flexible “programs” accommodating dynamic bodies of content.

The typographic grid is a proportional regulator for composition, tables, pictures, etc. …
The difficulty is to find the balance, the maximum of conformity to a rule with the maximum of freedom. Or: the maximum of constants with the greatest possible variability.

Karl Gerstner, 1961
Dreams and Games - Lee Tusman
Play: What Is It Good For? - Anna Anthropy
Generating And Refining Your Game Idea - Cecily Carver
Interview: Jake Elliott, Writer and Designer of Kentucky Route Zero - Ryan Smith
Finding Meaning In Rituals: Michael Brough’s Vesper.5 - Tracey Lien
Wander Through Rural Scotland In The Deeply Personal Beeswing - Jess Joho
DREAMS AND GAMES

Summer Institute - Game Design 2016
Instructor: Lee Tusman
Assistant: Christian Gimber

NOTEBOOK
Find a notebook or sketchbook and pen or pencil.
Pick as many of the following activities that you’d like to try. Jot down answers, sketches, ideas and dreams. Your notebook can be as messy or as clean as you like. It will help you to create games, art, writing. Pocket-size is ideal. Or if you dream in big pictures, get a huge sketchbook instead. Keep your notebook with you at all times. Write your name and phone number or email in the front so your notebook can be returned to you if lost. Your notebook will be priceless, but if you think it will help list a reward on the inside in case someone finds and returns it to you.

GAMES OLDER THAN YOU
Find a game that was made before you were born that you have never played before. Maybe a game recommendation from a parent or older friend.
- What do you like about it? What didn’t you like about it? Did it keep your attention?
Can you think of any current or recent games that are similar or use any of the same ideas or goals from this original game? Make a game that people who are born this year will play when they grow up to be the age you are now.

GAMES ABOUT WHERE YOU LIVE
Read Wander Through Rural Scotland In The Deeply Personal Beeswing by Jess Joho
https://killscreen.com/articles/wander-through-handcrafted-pastoral-rural-scotland-beeswing/
After reading, make a personal map of your hometown or neighborhood. List the important locations and people (characters) in your life. Are there things you can collect in this world (books, money, a special food, experiences, stories, tools?). Make a game, maybe an RPG, with locations from your hometown neighborhood map. Figure out how it will end. Or leave it open-ended.

ADDICTIVE GAMES
Think of a game that you play over and over again. What do you love about the game? Why do you keep returning to the game? What makes the game successful?
Think about a new game that you would want to play again and again, forever. Make that game.

**DREAMS AND GAMES**
Write down a recent dream you had that would make an interesting videogame level or world. What does it look like? Who is there? Is anyone talking? Are there any tasks you have to do or problem to solve? How might a player *win* or finish the game world? Feel free to draw things from your dream. Make that game. Make more dream games.

**NEW GAMES**
Visit the 2016 Independent Games Festival Finalist site and read through the list of selected games. [http://www.igf.com/02finalists.html](http://www.igf.com/02finalists.html)
Pick a game that interests you and play it.
- What sounded intriguing to you before you tried the game?
- Did the game play as you expected?
- Would you change anything about the game to make it more interesting? To make it easier? To make it harder?
- Make that game

**GAMES AND RITUAL**
Read [Vesper.5: Finding meaning in rituals by Tracey Lien](http://wwwpolygoncom20133194121744vesper5findingmeaninginrituals)
Is there anything that you do every day that you would put into a videogame? Are there any rituals you would create, physical or digital, that would remind you to slow down and enjoy a tiny moment each day? Make that game.

**READ AND WATCH**
Read *Rise Of The Videogame Zinesters* by Anna Anthropy
Watch *Indie Game: The Movie* by Lisanne Pajot and James Swirsky

**MISSING GAMES**
As you go through life you will sometimes find that there is a game in your mind that you would like to play but it doesn’t yet exist. Make that game.
Chapter Three
What is it Good For?

So, for the first time in the history of the videogame form, people who aren’t programmers or corporations can easily make and distribute games. But why would they want to? Why make a game—especially when there already exist the means to write stories, play songs, film yourself for YouTube? What can we do with games that we can’t do with those forms?

To begin, let’s define what a game is.

You’ve played games and you have assumptions about what they are. Maybe when you read game you imagine a videogame; maybe when you imagine a videogame you imagine a big-budget run-jump-shoot game. Maybe you imagine Tetris. Since I’m more interested in games, digital and otherwise, that don’t resemble games that already exist, I think a fresh definition is in order. I also think it’s worthwhile to have a definition that isn’t specific to digital games, because I’m interested in the commonalities between digital and non-digital games, and in connecting videogames to that much older tradition.

So here’s my definition:

A game is an experience created by rules.

That’s pretty broad, huh? I’m interested in as inclusive a definition as possible, though you might argue that mine is too broad: for example, you can use it to describe getting stuck in a traffic jam or paying your taxes. A tax form is nothing but a series of rules you follow to produce a final number, after all. But is it useful to think about your taxes as a game? Not really. Do the rules on a tax form really create a strong experience, or are they just a method for producing a number?

A game is an experience, and that experience has a certain character. Maybe a game is a story, or maybe it’s the experience of control giving way to panic giving way to relief. Maybe it’s about taking something and making it grow bigger and bigger and bigger, or maybe it’s about two rivals, equally matched, each trying to out-guess the other’s plans. The experience that we identify as a game has character, and we can talk about what that experience is.

And if we’re discussing an experience, then that implies someone is there to have that experience, someone we refer to as a player. We can’t talk about a game without talking about the experience of the player playing that game, even if the playing experience we’re talking about is often our own.

The experience we call a game is created by the interaction between different rules, but the rules themselves aren’t the game, the interaction is! A game can’t exist without a
player or players: someone needs to be engaging with the rules for the experience to happen.

How does that work? Consider a game of Tag. Rules: One player is IT, and must tag as many of the other players as possible with a touch. Each of those other players is SAFE when she touches this gnarled-up oak tree. You can see the way the interaction between those two rules creates an interesting (and volatile) dynamic. The players who aren’t IT want to reach the tree, but the player who is IT wants to stop them.

You can imagine a situation where the IT player is standing between two other players—one to her left, one to her right—and the SAFETY of the tree. Maybe one of them will make a break for the tree, maybe IT will be forced to pick one of the two to chase while the other gets to make a run at the tree, maybe a fourth player will take advantage of IT’s distraction to make a run at the tree from behind. When we talk about a game of Tag, we’re talking about this experience. But this situation (and it’s a good, tense one) isn’t explicitly defined anywhere in the rules. However, notice how these rules guide the creation of that situation. The rules set the players in opposition to each other, give most of the players a goal, and give the other player a reason to intervene, creating a tense dynamic.

What if we were to take either of these rules away: the SAFE location or the player who’s IT? Without a SAFE location, players have no reason to stay nearby and interact with the other players, especially the IT player. The ideal strategy to avoid IT would be to go as far away as possible, and that breaks the tension and hence the experience of the game. What if there was no IT player? Then it’d just be people running around, and while a bunch of people running around has value, it doesn’t have the character or dynamic of a game.

But there’s certainly room to change the details of the rules. Tag, being a folk game, has been played by many people in many places with many, many different versions of the rules. In one version, a player might be done once she’s tagged the SAFE tree. As more and more players tag the tree and leave the game, the players who are less fast become greater and greater targets because the IT player can focus less on monitoring the tree and more on pursuing them.

Alternately, what if a player who touches the tree isn’t permanently safe—what if players are only allowed to be in contact with the tree for five minutes at a time? That keeps players vulnerable to IT and keeps the game from stagnating. Maybe a player who leaves the tree has temporary immunity to allow her to get safely out of IT’s sight, or maybe it becomes a stand-off, where the escaping player has to wait for another player to distract IT’s attention before she can make a break for it.

What about freeze tag? In this case, a player who’s tagged by IT is “frozen” and has to wait for another player to come and “rescue” her before she can move again. This variation has much more direct interaction between the non-IT players. Instead of just depending on one another as decoys, they have to actively put themselves at risk to aid other players, which only adds to the tension of the game. And it creates a new dynamic between the non-IT players: I rescued you this time, but if I get tagged you’re going to have to leave the tree and rescue me.
And that’s what games are good at: exploring dynamics, relationships, and systems.

The Story of Tetris
A “system” is what we’ll call the interaction (or ongoing interactions) between a set of rules. Let’s talk about Tetris now.

What are the rules of Tetris, essentially? The basic rules that drive Tetris are:

The game is played with pieces, comprised of every possible combination of four squares. (See the image above.)

- Pieces fall continuously into a well of a certain volume. The player can guide the pieces’ fall to the left and right of the well, and also rotate the pieces both clockwise and counterclockwise.
- Pieces are removed from the well when and only when the player organizes them into complete rows.
- If there is no room left in the well for a new piece to fall, the player loses.34
You can see how these rules create a system where the player’s mistakes compound on one another to cause further mistakes: Only full rows are eliminated, so incomplete rows stick around and take up space in the well. Clutter in the well then makes it more difficult to position other pieces and to create rows. As the row fills with mistakes, it eventually becomes impossible to fit more pieces, and the game ends.

These rules function in tandem to give the game a momentum and shape: the player makes errors that cause further errors, until eventually the player is overcome. (And consider how well a commonly added rule, “the pieces fall faster every time ten lines are made,” works with these basic rules to help the game escalate.) We could consider this a
system.

All games aren’t necessarily simulations of existing systems: it would be difficult to imagine a situation in the world that actually resembled Tetris. But it’s easy to imagine simulations that model systems of rules that are far less abstract: urban planning, politics, oil drilling. And there are games whose rules mimic such systems. Will Wright’s SimCity is a game in which the player plans a city, Jim Gasperini’s Hidden Agenda is a game in which the player governs a post-revolutionary South American nation. Arch D. Robison’s Seismic Duck\textsuperscript{35} models the way drillers use aimed sound waves and seismogram to find oil reservoirs.

You can begin to see how systems can be translated into game rules: a commercial zone in SimCity, for example, needs people to act both as a work force and as consumers. That means the people need homes to live in, transportation to get them around the city, power to make sure the lights are on. The system teaches concepts about the interdependency of urban forces. To again cite Greg Costikyan’s “Maverick Award Speech”: “I want you to imagine a world in which the common person is no longer ignorant of economics, physics and the functioning of the environment—things which are themselves interactive systems—because they have interacted with them in the form of games.”

Every game of Tetris has the same shape—errors compound on errors until the well is filled and the player is overcome—because the system of rules we’ve discussed guides the experience in that direction. But the player places all the pieces herself. Every player will place the pieces differently, will play a different game, but experience a similar result. The same holds true for any system of rules, as simple as Tag or Tetris or as complicated as SimCity. Games have a lot of potential for examining the relationships between things—or, rather, for allowing the player to examine the relationships between things, because the player does not merely observe the interactions; she herself engages with the game’s systems.

The Rise of the Designer

Tag is an example of a folk game, along with Go, Chess, Poker, Stickball, Hide and Seek, and most of the world’s oldest games. Games have been around as long as civilization has; the game is by no means a new form or a recent invention. What is relatively recent is the shift from folk to authored games. Folk games, like folk songs and folk texts such as the Bible, have no single credited author, but rather many untraceable authors over many years. They’re artifacts shaped by entire cultures, and generally they can tell us a lot about those cultures.
For example, compare Chess, a continental European board game of warfare, with Hnefatafl, a Viking board game of warfare. Chess is a game of combat between kings with equal resources. Each player has the same pieces and starts in the same position on opposite sides of the game board. Each player's goal is to capture the other player's king. In Hnefatafl, one player represents a king and his defenders, who start in the center of the game board. The other player represents the attackers, who surround the king's forces on all sides of the board. The king player's goal is to get the king through the attacking hordes to safety, while the other player's goal is to surround and capture the
king. The differences between these games’ interpretations of combat tell us a lot about the differences between strategic thought between European vassal kings and Viking warrior bands: their priorities, the nature of their battles, and whether they approach warfare as a platonic war between equals. And the games themselves, in turn, shape the strategic thought of those who play them.

Our history is full of folk board games. Authored board games—games created by a single person or small group, and whose authors can be identified—are a more recent phenomenon. For example, I can tell you that the board game Cosmic Encounter was designed in 1977 by Bill Eberle, Bill Norton, Jack Kittredge, and Peter Olotka of Eon Games. (We can date Cribbage, by Sir John Suckling, to the 1630s.) These are games as texts of specific rules, rather than as patterns of rules that are subject to change through mimicry. A game of Tag will always have a chasing player and a safe position, but the actual rules will change from play to play. The majority of contemporary board games are designed by a single author or team, and the same is true of digital games.

Can there be folk videogames? Videogames retain credits better than board, card, and physical games. I think that there are digital games, though, that exist as patterns of similar rules, perpetuated through duplication with small mutations. There are a thousand different versions of Tetris, for example, each coded by one of a thousand different authors, and each version with a slightly different set of rules, a slightly different set of numbers, and often (to avoid litigation) a different name. There’s a digital game that’s commonly known as “the snake game,” which began as an arcade game called Nibbler by Joseph Ulowetz and John Jaugilas. In this game, the player directs a snake to gobble pieces of food. The snake dies whenever it crashes into either a wall or its own body by coiling around itself. Each piece of food causes the snake’s tail to grow longer, making it take up more space and making it more difficult for the player to avoid collisions with her own body. So many different authors have remade this game on so many different machines that all of its forms and variants are usually just referred to as “the snake game.” Is this how authored games become folk games?

But what can authored games tell us that’s different from folk games? Folk games tell us about the culture that created them; authored games tell us about the author that created them. Authored games have the potential to be more personal, and thus more specific and diverse, than folk games. Two plays of an authored game are likely to be more similar than two plays of a folk game, because the authored game retains the rules set created by its original designer. It’s the fact that folk games change with each player that makes them so long-lived, that makes them adapt to suit the culture that adopts them. But in this book, it’s authored games, and the diverse set of voices they embody, that I want to focus on.

What’s Video Good For?
In a board game, players have to track how much money is left in the bank, which pieces are in play, how high the water level rises. A deck of cards can keep players from knowing in what order pieces will come into play, dice can generate random outcomes to situations, and players have hands of cards that represent information they keep from the
other players, but beyond these basic devices, little information can be hidden from the players, because the players must make sure the rules are being observed by tracking most of the information themselves.

In digital games, the computer keeps the rules. The computer tracks all the numbers. Digital games therefore have much greater control over what information the players have access to, making videogames capable of much greater ambiguity than board or card games.

What’s ambiguity good for? Telling stories! Digital games have great potential for storytelling. The author has a lot of control over the pace at which information is revealed; therefore the author can pace the telling of a story. This is not to say that videogame stories are being told as well as they could be. But the format of a videogame—which lets rules be changed and introduced over the course of the experience, and which lets the author hide the causes for events and show only the effects—lends itself more easily to an overt, sustained narrative than any physical game format.

Because the rules are kept by the machine, the rules in digital games tend to be more numerous and more subtle. Think of a game like Shigeru Miyamoto and Takashi Tezuka’s Super Mario Bros. Unless you’ve studied the game in great detail on a technical level, you probably don’t know exactly how high Mario can jump relative to the height of the screen, or how fast he accelerates horizontally when he runs. The interactions between these hidden rules in videogames can result in very complex systems without necessarily complicating the game, because the player isn’t required to track and compare all the numbers. For example, imagine the designer creating a situation where there’s a tiny platform with a long pit on either side. Mario has to run to build up the momentum to clear the pit and land on the platform, but instead of stopping there he needs to immediately jump again in order to make the second pit without losing the momentum that will let him cross it. This is a problem that wouldn’t be obvious to someone who had just approached the game.
Through playing the game, the player develops a sense of the limits and subtleties of these hidden rules. This interaction between the player and the game, dependent on the game’s hiding information, gives digital games their special capacity for subtlety and nuance. You could compare it to the use of “English” in a physical sport: the difference between hitting a ball and hitting it with a particular force, and in a particular direction.

Because of this capacity, videogames are often performative: they allow the player room to interact with rich and complex systems with grace and finesse. We usually refer to this as “skill.” A system may persist through an entire game, but the game may start very permissive of less graceful playing and require the player to play with more and more finesse as the game goes on. The game gets HARDER, asking that the player become more skillful, but allowing her to learn the game’s systems over the course of navigating increasingly difficult situations.

The systems that the player manipulates in Super Mario Bros. are introduced very early in the game, with the only added rules coming with the periodic introduction of new enemy characters or hazards. But the situations that Mario has to navigate start fairly relaxed and demand more and more skillful playing as the game progresses. In the first stage of the game, obstacles are low enough that a simple jump from a standing position will allow Mario to clear them. In later stages, the height of obstacles will require Mario to run and build momentum before jumping, in order to jump higher. In this way the designer teaches the player the subtleties of the game’s complex system through careful use of machine-controlled variables. Digital games are thus good at teaching, and at communicating a sense of the player’s progress, which often parallels the progress of the protagonist and the development of a story.

What else is handy for telling a story? The ability to generate or play video and audio, either as accompaniments or as central vehicles for information. Digital games can incorporate a variety of media when telling their stories. Consider how the music in Super
Mario Bros. speeds up when there’s only a hundred ticks left on the time limit to complete a stage, creating a sense of urgency, or how the sound played when Mario jumps on an enemy gets higher and higher pitched, indicating that a reward—in this case, an extra life—will come if the player keeps doing what she’s doing. Consider how the player’s journey takes her through a changing visual landscape, from a sunlit field to a black-and-blue underground, to treetops, to the mushroom forest, and to Bowser’s castle, and the way each of these sights—withheld from the player until her skill develops to give her access to later areas—provides a sense of progression through the Mushroom Kingdom.

I don’t mean to imply that non-digital games are incapable of the things I’ve described, or that digital games are in some absolute sense better or more worthy of interest. There are many different kinds of games, all of them suited to different things. Digital games, because of their ability to withhold and pace the player’s access to information, because of the strict narrative control the author is able to have over the player’s experience (because the machine enforces the rules), and because of their capacity for generating a wide variety of sights and sounds to enhance or even define the playing-out of the rules, are particularly well suited for the telling of stories. And the telling of stories—games becoming more personal—is what especially interests me about games as a form.

Role-Playing Games
Digital games have certain strengths for telling stories, but the nature of games in general—even without the advantages the machine provides—makes them good for storytelling. And I do think, in the way that film and photography have generally changed the focus of novels and visual art, the mechanical rules keeper that videogames provide has caused similar focus changes in other aspects of games. In the last chapter, I couldn’t discuss the earliest mainframe computer games without mentioning role-playing games like Dungeons & Dragons. Role-playing games came out of the tradition of “miniatures wargaming,” a set of rules for moving armies of dolls around a tabletop battlefield and
pitting them against one another in combat. Later role-playing games kept the rules for combat and situation resolution, gave players the responsibility for a single combatant rather than a larger number of soldiers, and largely got rid of the dolls. But the important thing that games like Dungeons & Dragons introduced was the concept of a “Dungeon Master,” or “Game Master.” This is a player who manages the game for the other players, laying out the scenario and directing the world’s responses to the players’ actions. The Game Master essentially inhabits the role of storyteller, preparing and guiding the players through a story in which they make decisions.

This aspect of role-playing games—an overseer who negotiates the player’s choices using a set of rules—was eagerly adopted by many of the first digital game authors. Early digital games like Rogue, a graphical game of maze exploration and combat, lifted its rules and probability calculations directly from Dungeons & Dragons. And text adventure games like Zork took the idea of a narrator who relates the world of the game to the player using a consistent voice. Many early digital games are, conceptually, role-playing games in which the computer takes on the role of Game Master.

The computer’s adoption of the responsibilities of rules keeping and number counting has shifted the focus of many tabletop games away from their original focus—providing players with an extremely finely grained simulation of combat and other adventuring situations. Why spend thirty minutes rolling dice and looking up random treasure and critical hit information from lengthy tables when you can play a computer game that resolves everything, with far greater mathematical complexity, in seconds and in color? Instead, tabletop role-playing games have been able to move away from a mathematically dense combat situation and toward collaborative storytelling and improvisation.

Take, for example, Paul Czege’s My Life with Master, in which the players invent a Victor Frankenstein–style mad scientist under whom they will serve as Igors. The Game Master, as the titular Master, assigns the servants duties that enable the players to act out the conflict between their duty to obey and their desire to reclaim their humanity. The dice rolls aren’t to test the player’s ability to penetrate leather armor with her sword, but rather to test the player’s “love” versus her “self-loathing”: if a player “fails” her roll, her character must either perform the duty assigned her or refuse to perform it, regardless of which outcome the player might prefer, a simulation of the state of being in emotional servitude. In the end, one of the servants will rise up and destroy the Master, a result that the rules of the game make inevitable: the destruction of the Master is the climax of the story, which each player finishes in turn by creating an epilogue for her character.

What interests me about My Life with Master isn’t just its use of rules as a unique device for telling a story of personal, internal conflict, rather than as a means of resolving physics simulations in a fantasy world. I also find Czege’s distribution method interesting. My Life with Master is sold on Czege’s website as both a book, sent in the mail, and as a downloadable PDF file that the buyer may print herself if she’s interested. Digital distribution! In the past, the rules for tabletop role-playing games were so elaborate that they required hardbound books, distributed through traditional bookstores and novelty stores, which is still the method used for distributing recent editions of Dungeons &
Dragons. But authors of small, more experimental role-playing games like My Life with Master are avoiding or mitigating the costs of publishing and distributing by selling their rules online as digital downloads, or in some cases simply posting them for free on the Internet.

Role-playing zinesters! And ones who, through their change of focus from complicated and expensive rule books full of encounter tables to simple rules that create conflicts and guide the players in creating a story, offer useful lessons that the designers of digital games could stand to learn.
Generating and Refining Your Game Idea
by Cecily Carver, for Dames Making Games

October 11, 2012

You might have a very clear idea of the kind of game you’re interested in making, or you might have a number of sketches waiting to be fleshed out, or you might have no idea at all. No matter what state your ideas are in, if you spend some time brainstorming and refining your plans before the jam begins, you will almost certainly have a better experience during the jam itself. Here are some areas to consider:

1. Genre and core mechanics

Deciding on genre is essentially answering the question: what kind of game is my game? Is it a racing game, a maze, a puzzle, a platformer, a point-and-click adventure? Each genre has a set of conventions associated with it. The genre relates to the core mechanics: what does the player spend her time doing in the game? If your game is a platformer (like the early Mario games), the core mechanics will probably be running and jumping. If it’s a racing game, the mechanics will be turning corners and speeding up/slowing down.

You can find a handy guide to the most common game genres [here](#).

*From the excellent* Playful Design: Creating Game Experiences in Everyday Interfaces *by John Ferrara*

Games with simple mechanics can have a surprising amount of depth. Think of Angry Birds. for each bird, the player only really has two decisions to make: how hard to throw the bird, and at what angle. But the game can eat up hours of your time!

2. Point of view and player interaction

What do the players see while playing your game? What does their window into the game world look like? Are they looking down at something from above, or from the side, or are they looking at the world through the character’s eyes? Are the objects 2D or 3D?

Think about how your game can give feedback to the player. How will the players know if they have moved closer to the goal, or if they’ve made a mistake? There are lots of ways to do this, including score counters, sound effects, and visual indicators.

Consider what factors will make the game more or less difficult. Much of the pleasure of playing games comes from learning a skill and then being given the chance to use and improve it in increasingly difficult situations. How will the difficulty or intensity increase over time?
3. Characters, setting, story, aesthetics

Many games have a central character, controlled by the player, who moves through the game world. What does the character look, sound, and move like? What is the character trying to achieve, and what are the obstacles stopping her from getting it? What world does the character occupy, and what makes that world interesting? Will your player spend any time reading text? If so, what writing style will you use?

Even in games without a central character, the visuals, music, and other aesthetic factors are a big part of the game experience. For an example of this, see Une semaine de bonté by Julia Ediger.

4. Scope

As you flesh out your ideas, you’ll probably find yourself wanting to incorporate more and more mechanics, features, story elements, or layers of depth. Unfortunately, you probably won’t be able to implement all of your ideas in No-Jam’s short time frame. A worthwhile question to ask yourself is: what is the simplest possible version of my game? By distilling your idea down to its essence, you’ll have a clear and reachable goal for yourself, as well as room to grow. The rest can come later.

5. Common Pitfalls

Since your time is very limited, try to avoid games that are a collection of mini-games (for example: a game where level one is a maze, level two is a sliding block puzzle, and level three is a shooting game). A game with three mini-games is triple the work for you! Stick with one set of core mechanics for your entire game.

Also, remember that this is a 10-day jam game, not your magnum opus. You probably won’t be able to realize your ideas exactly as they exist in your head, and you’ll be making many compromises to get the game finished on time. Try to think of ways you could simplify or alter aspects of your game if necessary.
Jake Elliott, writer and designer of Kentucky Route Zero

An indie game developer goes spelunking in his most ambitious title yet.

By Ryan Smith • January 22, 2013

For more on Kentucky Route Zero, read Ryan Smith’s review.

Jake Elliott’s two-man outfit, Cardboard Computer, makes adventures games that focus on exploring ideas rather than solving puzzles or beating up bad guys. Last year’s Ruins is a thematically sad but simple game about a dog chasing rabbits through a sparse desert. Balloon Disapora is about making new friends while riding a hot-air balloon through the clouds. Elliott and art director Tamas Kemenczy are currently hard at work on the second episode of their newest adventure game, Kentucky Route Zero. The Gameological Society spoke to Elliott about his experiments with dialogue and text and his efforts to depict the rural South in a more humane way.

The Gameological Society: Where did the idea for Kentucky Route Zero come from?

Jake Elliott: I spent a lot of time in Kentucky, and so did Tamas. My girlfriend’s from there, so I go down there to visit. So it was just being in Kentucky—and the state also has an interesting history with video games. The first text adventure, Colossal Cave Adventure, took place there, and it’s a game where you explore the Mammoth Cave through text simulation. Later, people edited it and put in monsters and stuff like that. Kentucky Route Zero is also largely set in Mammoth Cave. So I kind of sketched out a story, and it went from there.

Gameological: You mention this old text game—is that the inspiration for the side areas in Kentucky Route Zero, where the game switches to text-based play?

Elliott: There’s that, and I’ve also been playing a lot of these hypertext, choose-your-own adventure browser games made with a tool called Twine. It’s cool. There’s a real
community around it where people make these short, usually very weird and original hypertext games. It draws in people who aren’t usually programmers. I’ve played a lot of those games, so I wanted to play around with hypertext adventures.

**Gameological:** The text-only sections really creeped me out sometimes, especially feeling around in the fish tanks. Are there moments where you think text is better at evoking certain ideas or moods?

**Elliott:** Yeah, you can be provocative and vague in a way. There are also moments in the game that are purely visual and are also vague in their own way because the characters don’t talk about it. Tamas does all the art, and I do all the writing, and it’s a close collaboration, but we do find moments where we go off on our own a little bit.

**Gameological:** The game has changed a lot in the last year and a half since I first saw it. Can you talk about the direction that it took?

**Elliott:** We were experimenting with the art direction in a couple different ways, and we went through a couple different ideas about what it should look like. Somewhere in there, I started looking closely at theatrical set design and using that as a way to build these virtual spaces. It changed the look of the game a lot, and the way that we thought it would play, so we started putting mechanics in the game a little bit more theatrically.

I think it ended up being a lot better because originally, we thought this game would work more as an exploratory platform game like *Metroid or Castlevania*, but being totally nonviolent and having a lot of conversations in it, so the spaces would be these huge maze-like caves you’d explore. Now they’re these really focused areas with very clear boundaries with all these conversations that happen inside these sets.

**Gameological:** The game follows the perspective of the main characters, Conway, most of the time, but it’s interesting how it jumps into the body of a completely different character for awhile.

**Elliott:** It’s sort of an experiment, and there’s a few ways we’re experimenting with dialogue where you switch perspectives. There’s another one, where Conway is talking to the dog, where only he speaks, and he’s kind of answering himself. It’s a chance to give a character his own monologue. There are a few more formal experiments we’re trying to play around with in Act II as well. Dialogue happens a lot in role-playing and adventure games, but there are very few formal experiments. In mainstream games, it’s usually only a company like BioWare, who are kind of prodding and tweaking the dialogue in their games. You see in *Mass Effect 3* how it changes and does all this very subtle stuff. I think there’s a lot of room still for experimentation with dialogue in games now.
**Gameological:** I've played through the first episode twice, and I noticed there are times you make different dialogue choices, and it leads you to the same place, and nothing else changes. Other times, it takes you to different outcomes.

**Elliott:** Yeah, we don’t like giving the players a lot of clues about what the effects of their dialogue is going to be. We want them to be engaging with the stuff kind of poetically but not strategizing over best choices. That’s a pretty natural instinct. Most games encourage their players to think that way.

**Gameological:** Have you gone back to Kentucky a lot during the making of the game, and did you draw any more inspiration from being in that area?

**Elliott:** For sure, I listened to the way people talked and the way the landscape looks, and Tamas is going through there a lot and taking photographs—not to represent it, but at least capture certain qualities about it. And then there’s stuff in the game, cultural touchstones, like coal mining. The whole coal mine areas are full of these models we directly borrowed from these old photographs of Kentucky coal mines. Tamas did a lot of research for a lot of the visual stuff.

**Gameological:** Pop culture isn’t always kind in its depictions of the South. Did you have an idea in mind about the way that you wanted to portray the rural South?

**Elliott:** Absolutely. There’s a group of writers with the same reaction, like Southern Gothic fiction writers. They were also reacting against the stereotypes and prejudices of the South. One thing they did really well was portraying the people as being very unique and also very complicated, not stereotypical. It’s important to us because one of the main themes of the game is how people who are marginalized are affected by these big economic changes, by recession. And how they’re affected from being displaced from their homes. That’s really important to us, ethically, to represent the fact that everyone has different ways of dealing with that.

**Gameological:** Did you make a decision about whether or not to include accents in the written dialogue?

**Elliott:** I’ve been trying not to. I don’t want it to come off like in *Huckleberry Finn*, like the awful way that Jim, the slave, speaks. I usually go with correct grammar even if it’s not locally so accurate, maybe.

**Gameological:** There have been comparisons between *Kentucky Route Zero* and the works of David Lynch. Do you think it’s an apt comparison?

**Elliott:** Tamas and I are always talking about David Lynch, and he’s a huge influence on us as far as tone. One thing about Lynch is the pacing of his stuff. It’s very slow. A lot of the funniest stuff—like in those last episodes of *Twin Peaks*, where there’s this old guy who works in the bank, it’s like this five minute scene of him walking to the safety deposit box and walking back, and the bank explodes. So his sense of pacing

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*One of the main themes of the game is how people who are marginalized are affected by these big economic changes, by recession.*
and sense of humor—it's safe to say that it's an influence.

**Gameological:** Without giving away too much, is there anything else we should expect from the next few episodes?

**Elliott:** It gets a little bit more fantastical. There are five different characters you meet, and Shannon so far is the most mundane—the rest are pretty fantastical, so I think that's the direction it's going to go.
Vesper.5: Finding meaning in rituals

Michael Brough on the rituals of Vesper.5

By Tracey Lien on Mar 19, 2013 at 8:30a

To finish Michael Brough’s Vesper.5, players will have to make a ritual of it. Players control a character who is looking for an exit somewhere to the right of the screen — its exact whereabouts are unknown; the path is unclear. Players can only take one step each day. The fastest route, if they happen to stumble across it, requires 100 steps. The fastest game of Vesper.5 takes 100 days to complete.

The game was created in a week by Brough as part of a game jam with the theme “ritual.” Speaking with Polygon, he says his IGF-nominated game was created with the intention of being a “spiritual experience,” not in the sense that the game is powerful and moving, but in a subtle, meditative way that requires players to set aside some time each day to engage with it and reflect.

“There’s not very much to the game, and that’s intentional,” Brough says. “I could have put traps or enemies, but I wanted this to be more about what you bring to it, rather than having it all in the game itself.
“If you choose to set aside the time to reflect on things a bit, then that’s meaningful. If you just open up the game, take a step and close it, that’s probably kind of pointless.”

Vesper.5 is a slow and, at its best, thoughtful experience. As players take their daily step, more of the world is revealed to them. Perhaps they’ll see a small plant or a collection of crystals by the side of the path. They can choose to look at the objects along the way, but it will take them an extra day to get back on track.

As simple as the game is, Brough says it has sparked some people’s imagination.

“It’s been quite surprising to see the different reactions people have had,” he says. “One guy really hated it. He really hated the idea of having this forced on you every day.

“Other people say they found that it became meaningful to them. Rather than make their move they’ll just sit a while and reflect, which is rather nice. And then when people have gotten to the end of it, some people have said they almost felt a sense of loss — that this was part of their life, that was there everyday and now it’s not. I guess you kind of develop an emotional connection to it.”

For Brough, it was an experiment in giving himself structure. As a developer who works from home, he says his days are often quite unstructured. He eats when he’s hungry and sleeps when he’s tired. There are no daily rituals of catching a bus at the same time every morning and working the same hours everyday.

“So maybe it came out of thinking about that,” he says. “What having an everyday routine gives you.”

Vesper.5 is a finalist for the Nuovo Award. The Independent Games Festival will take place during the 2013 Game Developers Conference in San Francisco from March 25 through 29.

Polygon will be speaking with the IGF’s student showcase winners and Nuovo Award finalists almost daily for the month of March. Follow along with their stories in our StoryStream below.

SOURCE Michael Brough’s website

RECOMMENDED
12.11.14

WANDER THROUGH RURAL SCOTLAND IN THE DEEPLY PERSONAL BEESWING

by JESS JOHO
@liongirl1528
Google+

How would you paint your hometown? Which colors would you use to capture it on a rainy day? What shapes do you remember most? Say, the curve of a neighbor’s half-broken mailbox—or that blue bike still rusting on the pavement of an abandoned parking lot.

According to Jack King-Spooner, who recently released a hand-drawn game named after his rural Scottish hometown of Beeswing, he remembers “the little things really, nothing grand. The way the jetty on the loch looks as you approach it. That our house was the only house that didn’t have pebble dashing, just bare brick.” What he hopes to communicate to players with his wandering, poetic journey of mysticalized autobiography is “the way things have stuck with me.”
Since a successful Kickstarter a little over a year ago, Jack has been hard at work recreating the town of Beeswing with a combination of both watercolor illustrations and stop-motion Claymation. The watercolor base, giving a waxy richness to the visuals, is then painted over with gouache to bring out details and highlights. Depending on the age when Jack met or knew any given character in Beeswing, he represents them either more crudely or more realistically in the game. Characters left rough around the edges “are often characters which I knew earlier in my life, and so I wanted to capture a certain naivety.”

Along with being the writer, programmer, and artist, Jack also scored Beeswing’s tinkering and endearing soundtrack. “I’ve been working on minimalist patterns that, due to the repetitions, blemishes occur,” he explained in a Kickstarter update. “The purpose is for the process to be apparent, that you can hear it is made by a human and not quantised, edited, beat-synced to ‘perfection.’” In the clip below, for example, he says, “I was interested in the harmonies created by the fret sounds and the the errors that occur when trying to repeat the same triplet/ hammer-on things.” The result is a twangy acoustic that seems to almost trip over itself with excitement—like a schoolboy running and stumbling over his own untied shoelaces.
“A game is perfect as a medium for relating an autobiography,” Jack says, “because the narrative is intrinsically fractured.” Beeswing, while an exploration of the people who shaped his life, captures a more metaphorical aspect of Jack’s memory and memoir. The characters you cross paths with include a woman named Mabel, who only ever wanted a beautiful baby from life, but instead carries around a sack of flour because “things don’t always turn out the way you want them to.” Many of the other characters integrate these surreal details into a pragmatic or jaded sentiment for juxtaposition. “Mr. Dowden is having to reconsider his notions about free will,” another description reads, “all because of a fleeting thought concerning his nicotine addiction.”

**BEESWING EXPLORES THE TENUOUSNESS OF MEMORY.**

Though not an RPG in terms of the genre’s typical mechanics, Beeswing encapsulates the narratives of that era in videogames, refusing to shy away from the poignant themes of childhood. Like the Illusion of Gaia, it’s a game colored by a wide-eyed sense of wonder. The underlying symbolism in Beeswing often comes across as both the imaginings of an eccentric child, and the pointed verses of a slam poem.
In many ways, Beeswing explores the tenuous across fragments of remembered life, already f brushstrokes reminding us that memories req whether they’re snippets of truths or embellish to ring with more honesty than reality ever da

Buy Beeswing now for £5.40 here and you’ll als explore more of Jack King-Spooner’s notable w too.

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Additional Resources

Suggested Reading
Rise Of The Videogame Zinesters by Anna Anthropy
KillscreenDaily.com by various authors

Suggested Watching
IndieGame The Movie by Lisanne Pajot and James Swirsky

Suggested Beginning Game-Making Tools
PuzzleScript puzzlescript.net
Twine twinery.org
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Selections from:

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INTRODUCTION

THE GOSPEL OF GOOGLE

In the beginning, the World Wide Web was an intimidating collection, interlinked yet unindexed. Clutter and confusion reigned. It was impossible to sift the valuable from the trashy, the reliable from the exploitative, and the true from the false. The Web was exciting and democratic—to the point of anarchy. As it expanded and became unimaginably vast, its darker corners grew more remote and more obscure. Some had tried to map its most useful features to guide searchers through the maelstrom. But their services were unwieldy and incomplete, and some early guides even accepted bribes for favoring one source over another. It all seemed so hopeless and seedy. Too much that was precious but subtle and fresh was getting lost.

Then came Google. Google was clean. It was pure. It was simple. It accepted no money for ranking one page higher in a search than another.
And it offered what seemed to be neutral, democratic rankings: if one site was referred to more than another, it was deemed more relevant to users and would be listed above the rest. And so the biggest, if not the best, search engine was created.

This, in brief, was the genesis of the enterprise known as Google Inc. Like all theological texts, the Book of Google contains contradictions that leave us baffled, pondering whether we mere mortals are capable of understanding the nature of the system itself. Perhaps our role is not to doubt, but to believe. Perhaps we should just surf along in awe of the system that gives us such beautiful sunrises—or at least easily finds us digital images of sunrises with just a few keystrokes. Like all such narratives, it underwrites a kind of faith—faith in the goodwill of an enterprise whose motto is “Don’t be evil,” whose mission is “to organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful,” and whose ambition is to create the perfect search engine.

On the basis of that faith—born of users’ experiences with the services that Google provides—since the search engine first appeared and spread through word of mouth for a dozen years, Google has permeated our culture. That’s what I mean by Googlization. It is a ubiquitous brand: Google is used as a noun and a verb everywhere from adolescent conversations to scripts for Sex and the City. It seems that even governments are being Googlized, or rendered part of the vast data storm that Google has taken as its challenge to organize and make available.

Google puts previously unimaginable resources at our fingertips—huge libraries, archives, warehouses of government records, troves of goods, the comings and goings of whole swaths of humanity. That is what I mean by the Googlization of “everything.” Googlization affects three large areas of human concern and conduct: “us” (through Google’s effects on our personal information, habits, opinions, and judgments); “the world” (through the globalization of a strange kind of surveillance and what I’ll call infrastructural imperialism); and “knowledge” (through its effects on the use of the great bodies of knowledge accumulated in books, online databases, and the Web).

Google consequently is far more than just the most interesting and successful Internet company of all time. As it catalogs our individual
and collective judgments, opinions, and (most important) desires, it has grown to be one of the most important global institutions as well. As we shift more of our Internet use to Google-branded services such as Gmail and YouTube, Google is on the verge of becoming indistinguishable from the Web itself. The Googlization of everything will likely have significant transformative effects in coming years, both good and bad. Google will affect the ways that organizations, firms, and governments act, both for and at times against their “users.”

To understand this phenomenon, we need to temper our uncritical faith in Google and its corporate benevolence and adopt an agnostic stance. That is, we need to examine what Google has told us about itself, its means, and its motives as it makes the world anew in these ways, and to interrogate and evaluate both the consequences of Googlization and the ways we respond to it.

One way to begin is by realizing that we are not Google’s customers: we are its product. We—our fancies, fetishes, predilections, and preferences—are what Google sells to advertisers. When we use Google to find out things on the Web, Google uses our Web searches to find out things about us. Therefore, we need to understand Google and how it influences what we know and believe.

Because of our faith in Google and its claims of omniscience, omnipotence, and benevolence, we tend to grant Google’s search results inordinate and undeserved power. These results offer the illusion of precision, accuracy, and relevance. Psychologists at the University of California at Berkeley have even published a study claiming that Google’s Web-search technique mimics the way human brains recall information. So it is understandable that we have come to believe that Google’s search rankings are a proxy for quality of information, simply an extension of our collective judgment. But this belief is unhealthy and wrong. The rules of the game are rigged in certain ways, and we need a much clearer idea of how this is done.

If I can convince you that we should be concerned about the ease with which we have allowed everything to be Googlized, I hope I can lead you to consider some remedies as well. I am confident we can find ways to live more wisely with Google. My argument comes from a
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perspective that is too often lost in accounts of the details of technological innovations and their effects on our daily lives: the pursuit of global civic responsibility and the public good. Hopes for a more enlightened future rest in our ability both to recognize the assumptions embedded in our faith in Google and to harness public resources to correct for them. So this book is also overtly political. It calls for a reimagining of what we might build to preserve quality information and deliver it to everyone. It examines the prospects for the creation of a global public sphere, a space between the particular domestic spheres where we live most of our lives and the massive state institutions that loom over us—a space where we can meet, deliberate, and transform both the domestic and the political. We can’t depend on one or even a dozen companies to do that equitably and justly. Google seems to offer us everything so cheaply, easily, and quickly. But nothing truly meaningful is cheap, easy, or quick.

After years of immersion in details of Google’s growth, I can come to only one clear judgment about the company and our relationship with it: Google is not evil, but neither is it morally good. Nor is it simply neutral—far from it. Google does not make us smarter. Nor does it make us dumber, as at least one writer has claimed. It’s a publicly traded, revenue-driven firm that offers us set of tools we can use intelligently or dumbly. But Google is not uniformly and unequivocally good for us. In fact, it’s dangerous in many subtle ways. It’s dangerous because of our increasing, uncritical faith in and dependence on it, and because of the way it fractures and disrupts almost every market or activity it enters—usually for the better, but sometimes for the worse. Google is simultaneously new, wealthy, and powerful. This rare combination means that we have not yet assessed or come to terms with the changes it brings to our habits, perspectives, judgments, transactions, and imaginations.

Faith in Google is thus dangerous as the airplane and the automobile have proved dangerous in ways their pioneers did not anticipate in the 1920s. These technologies of mobility and discovery are dangerous not just because they physically endanger their users but because we use them recklessly, use them too much, and design daily life around them. Thus we have done tremendous harm to ourselves and our world. As early as 1910, the technologies of motorized transportation
were impressive and clearly revolutionary. It was not hard to see that human life would soon be radically transformed by the ability to move people and goods across continents and oceans in a matter of hours. Only a few years later, life on earth was unimaginable without these systems, and by the close of the twentieth century, the entire world was reorganized around them.

The dangers arose because we let the automobile companies and airlines dictate both public discourse and policy. The rules of the road were worked out rather quickly and almost entirely in favor of the automobile: more people became motorists, and fewer were pedestrians. Soon after World War II, flying and driving became elements of daily life for most of the developed world. Yet the externalities of both these transport systems—from global climate change to global terrorism to global pandemics—have left us wondering how we made so many bad decisions about both of them. We did not acknowledge all the hazards created by our rush to move and connect goods and people, and so we did not plan. We did not limit. We did not deliberate. We did not deploy wisdom and caution in the face of the new and powerful. We did not come to terms with how dangerous planes and cars really are. Even had we acknowledged the range of threats that they generate, we would not have wished for a world without them. But we might well have demanded better training, safeguards, rules, and systems early on and thus curbed the pernicious results while embracing the positive, liberating effects they have on our lives.

We have designed our environments to serve cars and planes instead of people. Our political systems have been used to favor and subsidize these industries, even as they have been held up as models of free enterprise. And thus we have become dangerously dependent on them. We began to recognize the problems that they posed only in the 1960s and now are all too aware of them. But it’s far too late. As Elvis warned us, “Fools rush in.”

Google and the Web it governs are nowhere near as dangerous as our automobile system. People aren’t made ill or run over by Web pages. Nonetheless, blind faith in Google is dangerous because Google is so good at what it does and because it sets its own rules. Unlike the
automobile, which regularly kills people, Google causes damage mostly by crowding out other alternatives. Because of its ease and power, because it does things so cheaply and conveniently, it may cause us to miss opportunities to do things better. Google’s presence in certain markets, such as advertising or book search, retards innovation and investment by potential competitors, because no one can realistically wrest attention or investment from Google. And when Google does something adequately and relatively cheaply in the service of the public, public institutions are relieved of pressure to perform their tasks well. This is an important and troubling phenomenon I call *public failure*.

The power of this young company is so impressive, and its apparent cost to its users so low (close to free), that the strongest negative emotion it generates in the United States is unease; anger at Google (as well as use of and dependence on Google) is much stronger in Europe. We see so clearly how it makes our lives better, our projects easier, and our world smaller that we fail to consider the costs, risks, options, and long-term consequences of our optimistic embrace. That is what the following chapters set out to do.

**LIVING AND THINKING WITH GOOGLE**

As with any system of belief, ideologies underlying the rise of Google have helped shape the worldview of those who created it as well as those who use and believe in it. For some, seeking wisdom and guidance in navigating the world in the early years of the twenty-first century, Google looks like the model for everything and the solution to every problem. To most people, Google seems helpful and benevolent. For some would-be reformers, particular practices of the company demand scrutiny within the faith. For apostates, Google has fallen from its heights of moral authority.

Google’s ideological roots are well documented. Google’s founders and early employees believe deeply in the power of information technology to transform human consciousness, collective and individual. Less well understood are the theories that inform how Google interacts with
us and how we interact with Google. Increasingly, Google is the lens through which we view the world. Google refracts, more than reflects, what we think is true and important. It filters and focuses our queries and explorations through the world of digitized information. It ranks and links so quickly and succinctly, reducing the boiling tempest of human expression into such a clean and navigable list, that it generates the comforting and perhaps necessary illusion of both comprehensiveness and precision. Its process of collecting, ranking, linking, and displaying knowledge determines what we consider to be good, true, valuable, and relevant. The stakes could not be higher.

For those of us who trudge through torrents of data, words, sounds, and images, Google has become a blessing. More than guiding us to answers and opportunities, it filters out noise: it prevents us from being distracted by the millions of documents that might serve our needs by guessing fairly accurately what we do need. So it’s almost impossible to imagine living a privileged, connected, relevant life in the early twenty-first century without Google. It has become a necessary—seemingly natural—part of our daily lives. How and why did this happen? What are the ramifications of such widespread dependence?

To answer those questions, we must ask some other hard questions about how Google is not only “creatively destroying” established players in various markets but also altering the very ways we see our world and ourselves. If Google is the dominant way we navigate the Internet, and thus the primary lens through which we experience both the local and the global, then it has remarkable power to set agendas and alter perceptions. Its biases (valuing popularity over accuracy, established sites over new, and rough rankings over more fluid or multidimensional models of presentation) are built into its algorithms. And those biases affect how we value things, perceive things, and navigate the worlds of culture and ideas. In other words, we are folding the interface and structures of Google into our very perceptions. Does anything (or anyone) matter if it (or she) does not show up on the first page of a Google search?

Here are some of the big questions facing us in the coming years: Who—if not Google—will control, judge, rank, filter, and deliver to us essential information? What is the nature of the transaction between
Google’s computer algorithms and its millions of human users? How have people been using Google to enhance their lives? Is it the best possible starting point (or end point) for information seeking? What is the future of expertise in an age dominated by Google, bloggers, and Wikipedia? Are we headed down the path toward a more enlightened age and enriching global economy, or are we approaching a dystopia of social control and surveillance?

**IMAGINEERING GOOGLIZATION**

This book employs what I call a “technocultural imagination.” A person who relies on a technocultural imagination asks these sorts of questions: Which members of a society get to decide which technologies are developed, bought, sold, and used? What sorts of historical factors influence why one technology “succeeds” and another fails? What are the cultural and economic assumptions that influence the ways a technology works in the world, and what unintended consequences can arise from such assumptions? Technology studies in general tend to address several core questions about technology and its effects on society (and vice versa): To what extent do technologies guide, influence, or determine history? To what extent do social conditions and phenomena mold technologies? Do technologies spark revolutions, or do concepts like revolution raise expectations and levels of effects of technologies?

The chapters that follow attempt to answer such questions. The first two chapters explore the moral universe of Google and its users. I don’t really care if Google commits good or evil. In fact, as I explain below, the slogan “Don’t be evil” distracts us from carefully examining the effects of Google’s presence and activity in our lives. The first chapter argues that we must consider the extent to which Google regulates the Web, and thus the extent to which we have relinquished that duty to one company. The company itself takes a technocratic approach to any larger ethical and social questions in its way. It is run by and for engineers, after all. Every potential problem is either a bug in the system, yet to be fixed, or a feature in its efforts to provide better service. This attitude masks the
fact that Google is not a neutral tool or a nondistorting lens: it is an actor and a stakeholder in itself. And, more important, as a publicly traded company, it must act in its shareholders’ short-term interests, despite its altruistic proclamations. More important yet, Google is changing. Each week brings a new initiative, a new focus (or a new distraction) for the company, and a new enemy or challenge. Such rapid changes, and the imperatives of corporate existence, are the subjects of chapter 2.

One of the great attractions of Google is that it appears to offer so many powerful services for free—that is, for no remuneration. But there is an implicit nonmonetary transaction between Google and its users. Google gives us Web search, e-mail, Blogger platforms, and YouTube videos. In return, Google gets information about our habits and predilections so that it can more efficiently target advertisements at us. Google’s core business is consumer profiling. It generates dossiers on many of us. It stores “cookies” in our Web browsers to track our clicks and curiosities. Yet we have no idea how substantial or accurate these digital portraits are. This book generates a fuller picture of what is at stake in this apparently costless transaction and a new account of surveillance that goes beyond the now-trite Panopticon model. Google is a black box. It knows a tremendous amount about us, and we know far too little about it. The third chapter explains how we fail to manage the flows of our personal information and how Google fails to make the nature of the transaction clear and explicit.

Google is simultaneously very American in its ideologies and explicitly global in its vision and orientation. That’s not unusual for successful multinational corporations. Microsoft is just as important a cultural and economic force in India as it is in the United States. Google, however, explicitly structures and ranks knowledge with a universal vision for itself and its activities. This comprehensiveness generates a tremendous amount of friction around the world—not least in the People’s Republic of China. Between 2005 and 2010 the Chinese government regularly shut down portions of Google’s services because the company just barely managed to remain in the good graces of the Communist Party. Yet for all its deftness in dealing with China, Google for years drew criticism from global human rights groups for being part of the problem, rather
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than part of the solution, in China. Then, in early 2010, the company surprised the world by giving the Chinese government exactly what it wanted: Google shut down its Chinese-based search engine while leaving intact those portions of its business that supply jobs and revenue to Chinese nationals. This move left Chinese Internet users with fewer sources of information, did nothing to reduce the stifling level of censorship, and put government-backed search engines in firm control of the Web in China. This was an empty and counterproductive gesture. By choosing to be a passive, rather than active, partner in Chinese censorship, somehow the company drew applause from human rights organizations. The fourth chapter covers the trials of Google as it has tried to apply a single vision of information commerce to a wide array of cultural and political contexts across the globe.

In chapters 5 and 6 the book considers the consequences of Google’s official mission statement: “To organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible.” In chapter 5 I assess the controversial Google Books program. This program, launched in 2004, was meant to help fulfill the mission of organizing the world’s information, but it served several engineering and commercial goals as well. The audacity of the program, which aimed to copy millions of copyrighted books from university libraries and offer them in low-quality formats to a broad market of readers, was the first case in which Google clearly moved beyond its previously venerated status. Because of the mistakes Google made in the Books program, federal regulators and many important segments of the reading public grew concerned with the scope of Google’s ambitions.15

In the public mind, Google’s informal motto, “Don’t be evil,” resonates more than its formal mission statement. But the mission statement is far more interesting. It is a stunning statement. What other institution would define changing the world as its unifying task? The Web-using public has adopted Google services at an astounding rate, and Google has expanded to master widely used Internet functions such as Web search, e-mail, personal “cloud computing,” and online advertising. Chapter 6 and the conclusion consider how Google is changing and challenging both the technologies and the companies that govern human
communication. The book concludes with a call for more explicitly public governance of the Internet. Such governance might take the form of greater privacy guarantees for Web users or strong antitrust scrutiny of companies like Google. The particular forms and instruments of governance are not as important as the general idea that what Google does is too important to be left to one company. But any criticisms and calls for regulation should be tempered with an honest and full account of Google’s remarkable and largely beneficial contributions to our lives. Google figured out how to manage abundance while every other media company in the world was trying to manufacture scarcity, and for that we should be grateful.

As I finished this book, it seemed that the instruments that traditionally supply knowledge for public deliberation were collapsing all around us. Newspapers in the United States and Europe were closing at a startling rate. Many newspaper leaders blamed Google because it alone seemed to be making money. Book publishers were also panicking, as readers suffering from a recession steadily held back their disposable cash, and moves by Amazon, Apple, and Google to serve as cheap-book vendors generated as much anxiety as opportunity. After weighing the various claims and arguments about the fate of journalism and publishing during a crippling global recession, I conclude that we should invest heavily in a global library of digital knowledge, with universal access and maximum freedoms of use. This proposal does not entail a simple bailout or subsidy to any industry or institution. It means that we should embark on a global, long-term plan to enhance and extend the functions of libraries in our lives. So the concluding chapter of this book proposes what I call a Human Knowledge Project. It takes a broad, ecological approach to the idea that we need to infuse the public sphere with resources, energy, and incentives. It is based on the premise that we can do better than hand over so many essential aspects of human endeavor to one American company that has yet to reach even its adolescence.

The youth and inexperience of Google lie at the root of my concerns. Among our major institutions, global information-technology corporations change and adapt faster than any others. This is generally good for them and good for us. But when we grant one—or even two or
three—firms inordinate influence over essential aspects of our lives, we risk being jolted by sudden changes of direction, burned by the heat, and blinded by the light. The one thing we can’t assume about such companies is that they will remain the same. The Google of 2021 will not resemble the Google of 2001—or even of 2011. Much of what we find comforting about Google may be gone very soon. The imperatives of a company that relies on fostering Web use and encouraging Web commerce for its revenue may understandably morph into a system that privileges consumption over exploration, shopping over learning, and distracting over disturbing. That, if nothing else, is a reason to worry.
Google Search: Hyper-visibility as a Means of Rendering Black Women and Girls Invisible

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Introduction

Google has become a central object of study for digital media scholars due to the power and impact wielded by the necessity to begin most engagements with social media via a search process, and the near-universality with which Google has been adopted and embedded into all aspects of the digital media landscape to respond to that need.¹ Therefore, the near-ubiquitous use of search engines, and Google, in particular, in the United States demands a closer inspection of what values are assigned to race and gender in classification and web indexing systems and the search results they return. It also calls for explorations into the source of these kinds of representations and how they came to be so fundamental to the classification of human beings. In this research, I am interested in knowing two things: what kinds of results do Google's search engine provide about Black girls when keyword searching, and what do the results mean in historical and social contexts? I also want to know in what ways does Google reinforce hegemonic narratives. To answer these questions, I use Critical Discourse Analysis as a method to explore the ways that Google Search results on the words “Black girls”
discursively reflect hegemonic social power and racist and sexist bias. This research points toward a type of cultural hegemony within Google’s results on racialized and gendered identities, which prioritize the interests of its commercial partners and advertisers, rather than rendering the social, political and economic interests of Black women and girls visible.²

It is dominant narratives about the objectivity and popularity of web search results that make misogynist or racist search results appear to be natural. Not only do they seem “normal” due to the technological blind spots of users who are unable to see the commercial interests operating in the background of search (deliberately obfuscated from their view), they also seem completely unavoidable because of the perceived “popularity” of sites as the factor that lifts websites to the top of the results’ pile. Furthermore, general belief in myths of digital democracy emblematized in Google and its search results means that users of Google give consent to the algorithms’ legitimacy through their continued use of the product, despite its ineffective inclusion of websites that are decontextualized from social meaning, and Google’s wholesale abandonment of responsibility for its search results.³

To start revealing some of the processes involved, it is important to think about how results appear. Although one might believe that a query into a search engine will produce the most relevant and therefore useful information, it is actually predicated upon a matrix of ways in which pages are hyperlinked and indexed on the web, which has been carefully detailed by Mark Levene.⁴ Rendering web content (pages) findable via search engines is an expressly social, economic, and human project⁵—in which this goal is turned into a set of steps (algorithm) implemented by programming code, and then naturalized as “objective.” This process is algorithmic, scientific and mathematical by virtue of the procedural and mechanistic practices of tracing links among pages and legitimated as a process of “voting.”⁶ For the most part, many of these processes have been automated or they happen through Graphical User Interfaces (GUIs) that allow people who are not programmers (i.e. not working at the level of coding) to engage in sharing links to and from websites.

Research shows that users typically use very few search terms when seeking information in a search engine and rarely use Advanced Search queries, as most queries are different from traditional offline information seeking behavior.⁷ This front-end behavior of users appears to be simplistic. However, the information retrieval systems
are complex, and the formulation of users’ queries involves cognitive and emotional processes that are not necessarily reflected in the system design.\textsuperscript{8} In essence, while users use the most simple queries they can in a search box because of the way interfaces are designed, this does not always reflect how search terms are mapped against more complex thought patterns and concepts that users have about a topic. This disjunction between, user queries and their real questions on the one hand, and information retrieval systems on the other, makes understanding the complex linkages between the content of the results that appear in a search, and their import as expressions of power and social relations of critical importance. Additionally, the public generally trusts information found in search engines. Yet, much of the content surfaced in a web search in a commercial search engine is linked to paid advertising, in part, which helps drive it to the top of the page rank,\textsuperscript{9} and searchers are not typically clear about the distinctions between “real” information and advertising.

**Racial and gender bias in Google search**

Search is one of the most under-examined aspects of power and consumer protections online, and regulation in the provision of information to the public through the Internet.\textsuperscript{10} I contend that there is value in expanding the discourse about search engine results by examining its intersecting racial and gendered bias. By taking a deep look at a snapshot of the web, at a specific moment in time and interpreting the results against the history of race in U.S. society, there is an opportunity to make visible processes that are biased in their impact, but obscured through the rhetoric of technology’s neutrality and popular acceptance in being merely a tool for human use. Therefore, this study is theoretically concerned with using critical race theory\textsuperscript{11} and Black feminism,\textsuperscript{12} to examine the commercial co-optation of keywords on Black identity. Google and other information monopolies like it have the ability to prioritize web search results based on a variety of interests.\textsuperscript{13} In this case, the clicks of users coupled with the commercial processes that allow paid advertising to be prioritized in search results mean that representations of women (particularly Black women who are codified as “girls”) are frequently ranked on a search engine page in ways that underscore their lack of status in society. Although I have collected searches on many racialized and gendered identities in the United States, the scope of this article is limited to a discussion of a search on “Black girls.” Certainly, there are many misrepresentations of identity in commercial search, and comparisons and critical analysis of these identities will be the subject of future research. Searches on girls of color, as demonstrated by the specific discussion of
Black girls, show the ways in which membership in gendered and racialized groups is highly sexualized and even stigmatized. This is not unlike the ways in which men, boys and Whites are characterized or represented, as even these are not without challenge due to lack of historical and social context for the nuances and importance of identity. My research is focused on leveraging the knowledge stemming from the digital humanities and social sciences to improve upon how identity information is portrayed in search engines, free from commercial influence, constraint and co-optation. Moreover, and this close reading of Black girls is intended to inform our recognition that there are problems with the way in which community based identities are unprotected and continually subject to the influence of commercialization.

Google’s algorithmic practices of biasing information toward the interests of the powerful elites in the United States, while at the same time presenting its results as generated from objective factors has resulted in a provision of information that perpetuates the characterizations of women and girls through misogynist and pornified websites. Stated another way, it can be argued that Google functions in the interests of its most influential (i.e. moneyed) advertisers or through an intersection of popular and commercial interests. Yet Google’s users think of it as a public resource, generally free from commercial interest—this fact likely bolstered by Google’s own posturing as a company for whom the informal mantra, “Don’t be evil,” has functioned as its motivational core.

Further complicating the ability to contextualize Google’s results is the power of its social hegemony. At the heart of the public’s general understanding and trust in commercial search engines like Google, is a belief in the neutrality of technology—a technologically deterministic blind spot to the embedded social values in technology design itself—which only obscures our ability to understand the potency of misrepresentation that further marginalizes and renders the interests of Black women, coded as girls, invisible. On its own, commercial search does not provide appropriate social, historical, and contextual meaning to those who historically have been portrayed in racialized and hyper-sexualized ways. In this study, the reader will find a more meaningful understanding of the kind of harm that such limitations can cause for users reliant upon the web as an artifact of both formal and informal culture.

Online racial disparities cannot be ignored in search because it is part of the organizing logic within which information communication technologies proliferate, and the
Internet is both reproducing social relations and creating new forms of relations based on our engagement with it. Search technologies themselves and their design do not dictate racial ideologies; rather, they both reflect and re-instantiate the current social climate and prevailing social and cultural values. As users engage with technologies like search engines, they dynamically co-construct content within the technology itself. For example, clicking on links and hyperlinking websites together is one way of affecting search results—but only one. Results are partially a matter of algorithms, which include the ways that users have engaged with sites in the past. Online information and content available in search is also structured systemically by the infusion of advertising revenue and the surveillance of user searches, over which the subjects of such practices have very little ability to reshape or reformulate.

**Hyper-visibility as a Means of Rendering Black Women and Girls Invisible Online**

The potency of Google is that it functions as the dominant “symbol system” of society due to its prominence as the most popular search engine to date, and through its market dominance. Yet, rather than find access to empowerment on the first page of search, we find another site of struggle. The narrative of Black girls as pornographic object diminishes the prioritization of feminist knowledge and information in commercial search.

Black Feminist scholars are increasingly looking at how Black women are portrayed in the media across a host of stereotypes, including pornography, and I am adding to this tradition by looking at the web. Jennifer C. Nash foregrounds the complexities of Black women and pornography in ways that are helpful by theorizing that the ways in which Black women are sexualized is contingent upon racist narratives, which are both historical and profitable. As a result, Black feminists have typically aligned with anti-pornography rhetoric and scholarship to respond to this phenomenon. While this research is not a specific study in the nuances of Black women’s agency in Internet pornography, which Mireille Miller-Young has covered in detail, or the virtues and problematics of pornography; in general, this literature is helpful in explaining how women are displayed as pornographic search results. I therefore integrate Nash’s expanded views about racial iconography into a Black feminist visual studies framework to help interpret and evaluate the Google search results. These iconic representations can be seen over time in Fig. 1.
It is important then to locate the current online narratives in historical and social context, which I believe reflect the furthering of hegemonic, dominant narratives of Black women as hypersexualized and oversexed, and serve as a silencing mechanism in the efforts to gain greater social, political, and economic agency. Specifically, cultural images and symbols inject dominant social biases into search engine results by transmitting a coherent set of meanings that evolve historically. By foregrounding pornography as the most important or meaningful kind of information about Black women, as Google did in the 2011 rankings I have examined, these narratives are made most meaningful.

In the field of Internet and media studies, much of the research interest and concern of scholars about harm in imagery and content online has been framed around the social and technical aspects of addressing Internet pornography, but less so about the existence of commercial porn, which is a less desirable subject of study. As a result, Black women and girls are both under-studied by scholars and associated with “low
“culture” forms of representation. This blind spot in research is directly linked to the positionality of Black women and women of color as less suitable subjects of inquiry in scholarly publishing, in general.

The porn industry was valued at $96 billion in 2006 and encompasses an estimated 420 million pages of porn on the Internet, 4.2 million websites dedicated to porn, and 68 million search engine requests for porn every day. There is a robust political economy of pornography, which is an important site of commerce and technological innovation that includes file sharing networks, video streaming, e-commerce and payment processing, data compression, search, and transmission. Gail Dines discusses this web of relations that she characterizes as stretching “from the backstreet to Wall Street.” Black women are more racialized and stereotyped in pornography—explicitly playing off of the media misrepresentations of the past, and leveraging the notion of the Black woman as “ho” through the most graphic types of porn in the genre. Miller-Young underscores the fetishization of Black women that has created new markets for porn, explicitly linking the racialization of Black women in the genre, as evidenced in the kinds of representations Google surfaced to the top.

Women’s bodies serve as the site of sexual exploitation and representation under patriarchy, but Black women serve specifically as the deviant of sexuality when mapped in opposition to White women’s bodies. Identities of Black women and black girls are a profitable site of taboo sexuality and are positioned as a type of “truth” based on public trust in the credibility of Google search. bell hooks details the ways that Black women’s representations are often pornified by White and patriarchally-controlled media, and that, while some women are able to resist and struggle against these violent depictions of Black women, others co-opt these exploitative vehicles and expand upon them as a site of personal profit. Miller-Young’s research on the political economy of pornography is important to understanding how Black women are commodified through the “pornification” of hip-hop and the mainstreaming and ‘diversification’ of pornography.

The web itself has opened up new centers of profit and pushed the boundaries of consumption. Never before have there been so many points for the transmission and consumption of these representations of Black women’s bodies. It is in this tradition, then, that studying the discursive realm of text, image, and meaning prioritized in web search can be beneficial to studying race and gender on the Internet. This, coupled with
the advertising costs associated with racial and gender identities brokered by Google can help make sense of the trends that make Black women and girls’ sexualized bodies a lucrative marketplace on the web. In this case, I contextualize porn on the Internet as an expansion of capitalist interests.

The Reproduction of Racialized and Gendered Power Relations

Noticeably absent in the discussions of Google’s near-monopoly status is the broader, social and technical interplay that exists dynamically in how technology is increasingly mediating public access to information, from libraries to the search engine. Lack of attention to the current exploitative nature of online keyword searches only further entrenches the problematic misrepresentations in the media for women of color, since the Internet and its landscape offer up and eclipse traditional media distribution channels, and serve as a new infrastructure for delivering all forms of prior media: television, film, and radio, as well as new media which are more social and interactive. Taking these old and new media together, it can be argued, as Jessica L. Davis and Oscar H. Gandy do, that the Internet has significant influence on forming opinions on race and gender. Replications of women and people of color in the traditional mass media, akin to those I discuss here in search results, have been problematized by many scholars and the Internet is part of the landscape of new media where race and representation are being investigated. Despite the rhetoric of freedom, and the contradictions that Wendy Chun articulates in her work on how the Internet has been sold as a source of freedom, the reorganization of economic and social relations in the shift from the industrial to “information society” has led to even more uneven distributions of capital around the globe and a reconstitution of social and economic relations predicated upon “information haves and have-nots.” What this analysis underscores is that biased traditional media processes are being replicated, if not more aggressively, around Black girls (and women’s) misrepresentations in search. This is important because the web has been embraced as a liberating tool in the age of digital technology. Information, knowledge, and culture are central to human freedom and human development. How these are produced and exchanged in our society critically affects the way we see the state of the world as it is and might be; who decides these questions; and how we, as societies and polities, come to understand what can and ought to be done.

In fact, many aspects of these uneven distributions of power are predicated upon
racialized and gendered practices—from extraction practices in the making of microchip processors, to computer hardware manufacturing through the disposal of e-waste. These practices are often hidden from view and rendered invisible. Sarah T. Roberts’ research underscores, for example, the various hidden aspects of digital labor that are often racialized and gendered in video content moderation—a key service used by giant media companies like Facebook or Google’s subsidiary, YouTube. She notes that practices of determining which kind of content (video) is allowed to proliferate in online commercial spaces, which:

...introduces the existence of actors unknown to and unseen by the vast majority of end-users who are nevertheless critical in the production chain of social media-making decisions... It paints a disturbing view of an unpleasant work task that the existence of social media and the commercial, regulated Internet, in general, necessitate.

These labor pools are often racialized and gendered, as are the values upon which moderation takes place. What this work underscores are the myriad ways that decision-making processes are happening within the platform, via both human and algorithmic protocols and other human interventions.

Roberts’s research intersects the findings of this study by pointing to how the results that surface on the web in commercial spaces like Google are not neutral processes—they are linked to human experiences, decision-making, and culture. Amidst a host of complaints about the lack of transparency in Google’s search technology, the company released an infographic in early 2013 on how its algorithm works. The company explained that it currently indexes over 30 trillion web pages through hyperlinks, sorts the content based on more than 200 factors, and filters out spam to ensure high quality information is provided in its search technology. What is important about this latest information release from Google is its acknowledgement that its employees make programs and algorithms in “The Search Lab” and that the ideas for search are a product not of the algorithm on its own (as it suggests in its explanation for why we get objectionable content on some searches) but as a product of its engineers.

**Search is Not Democratic for Black Women and Girls**

There are many myths about Internet search engines that proliferate, including the
notion that what rises to the top of the information pile is strictly what is most popular as indicated by hyperlinking. Indeed, what is most popular on the web is not necessarily what is most trustworthy or truthful. It is on this basis I contend there is work to be done to contextualize and reveal the many ways that Black women are framed in sexist language that renders them “girls” and misrepresented commercial search. This warrants an exploration into the complexities of whether the content surfaced is a result of popularity, credibility, commerciality—or even a combination thereof. Borrowing from Matthew S. Hindman’s critique of the flawed logic that web results are the result of democratic processes (e.g., we vote with our clicks and only what is most popular rises to the top), the outcome of the searches I studied in 2011 would suggest that both sexism and pornography were, at that time, the most “popular” values on the Internet when it came to women, especially Black women and Black female children. In reality, there is more to result-ranking than just how we vote with our clicks and various expressions of sexism and racism are related, as my research shows.

At the time this study was conducted, Google had not yet launched its new “personalization” tools which are designed to incorporate past search histories and help shape and tailor search results based on past places that have been visited online, so it is important to understand how this new protocol by Google might impact future results. A 2011 study by Martin Feuz, Matthew Fuller, and Felix Stalder found that personalization is not simply a service to users, but rather a mechanism for better matching consumers with advertisers, and that Google’s personalization or aggregation is about actively matching people to groups; that is, categorizing individuals. Personalization is, to some degree, giving people the results they want based on what Google knows about its users, but it is also generating results for viewers to see that Google calculates might be good for its advertisers. As a result of these practices, increasing attention is being paid to how the Internet acts as the space within which the attention, desires, and free labor of users are harnessed into surplus value. This new wave of digital interactivity, and its blind spots, is on the minds of many critical communications scholars, and has been an extensive site of inquiry about labor and the digital age.

Not only do search engines often track and remember the digital traces of where we have been and what links we have clicked in order to provide more custom content (a practice that has begun to gather more public attention after Google announced it would use past search practices and link them to users in its privacy policy change in
2012,[51] but search results also vary depending on whether filters to screen out pornography are enabled on computers. Information that surfaces to the top of the search pile is not exactly the same for every user in every location, and a variety of commercial advertising, political, social, and economic decisions are linked to the way search results are coded and displayed. At the same time, results are generally quite similar, and complete search personalization—customized to very specific identities, wants and desires—had yet to be developed in 2011. Personal-identity personalization has less impact on a variation in results than generally believed by the public.[52]

Understanding Identity Online

This research focuses on the capture of search results at one moment in time, and I use Critical Discourse Analysis as a method to make sense of what it means to get such results. Although I am focusing on Black women and girls, I try to resist the notion of essentializing the racial and gender binaries; however, I do acknowledge that the discursive existence of these categories, “Black” and “women/girls,” is shaped in part by power relations in the United States that tend to essentialize and reify such categories. Thomas Nakayama and Robert Krizek discuss the possibilities for understanding how racial identities are constructed and othered in relation to largely under-examined sites of White identity.[53] In seeking this object of analysis, I am actively engaging in an effort to unveil the hegemonic ways in which intersecting racialized and gendered identities are portrayed and legitimated through Google search. André Brock adds that “the rhetorical narrative of ‘Whiteness as normality’ configures information technologies and software designs” and is reproduced through digital technologies.[54] Thus, hegemonic discourses about the hypersexualized Black woman, which exist offline in traditional media, are instantiated online as evidenced by my discussion of search results in Google.

The following screen shot [Fig. 2] was captured on September 18, 2011 and reflects the way in which results were prioritized from Google’s indexed pages on the web:
Figure 2. Search on the keywords Black Girls on September 18, 2011
In Fig. 2, Black girls are sexualized or pornified in half (50%) of the first ten results on the keyword search “Black girls.” Only three of ten results (30%) are blogs focused on aspects of social or cultural life for Black women and girls. One of the first ten results is a U.K. music band comprised of White men, and is coded as non-racial and non-gendered.

What these results point to is the commodified nature of Black women’s bodies on the web—and the little agency that Black female children (girls) have had in securing non-pornified narratives and ideations about their identities on the first page of search engine results. These results can be thought of as a visible representation of the ways in which Black girls as a sector of society are represented on any given day in Google’s search process. It is plausible at any given moment under the current search engine mechanism at play that other results might be prioritized. In fact, a year prior to this search, in 2010, the website [www.hotblackpussy.com](http://www.hotblackpussy.com) was the first result in a search on the term “Black girls.” By the end of 2012, Google’s algorithm had changed or search optimization techniques had been employed and the results had shifted to [www.blackgirlsareeasy.com](http://www.blackgirlsareeasy.com). As these results shift over time, what is clear is that the relationship between advertising and keywords, and that there is a lack of broader agency that exists at the abstracted level of community or group for women to influence their pornified representations.

### A Critical Approach to Search

This raises questions about who owns identity and identity markers in cyberspace, and whether racialized and gendered identities are ownable property rights that can be contested in cyberspace. One can argue, as I am, that social identity is both a process of individual actors participating in the creation of identity, but also a matter of social categorization that happens at a socio-structural level and as a matter of personal definition and external definition. According to Mary Herring, Thomas B. Jankowski and Ronald E. Brown, Black identity is defined by an individual’s experience of common fate with others in the same group. The questions of specific property rights to naming and owning content in cyberspace are an important topic. I argue that racial markers are a social categorization that is both imposed and adopted by groups. Thus, racial identity terms could be claimed as the property of such groups, much the way Whiteness has been constituted as a property right for those who possess it. This
is a way of thinking about how mass media has co-opted the external definitions of identity\textsuperscript{60}—racialization—which also applies to the Internet and its provision of information to the public:

Our relationships with the mass media are at least partly determined by the perceived utility of the information we gather from them... Media representations play an important role in informing the ways in which we understand social, cultural, ethnic, and racial difference.\textsuperscript{61}

Davis and Gandy argue that media have a tremendous impact on informing our understandings of race and racialized others as an externality—but this is a symbiotic process that includes internal definitions that allow people to lay claim to racial identity.\textsuperscript{62} Critical Race Theory and critical discourse analysis allows for a deeper reading of what it means for identity to be in the dialectical tension between the struggles for social justice organized around collective identities and histories, and the commercialization of such identities to sell products, services, and ideologies in an effort to accumulate greater profits.

Using Critical Race Theory as a framework for implementing Norman Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis means that I focus on the signifiers that make up a text, the specific linguistic selections that are apparent, the way in which they are juxtaposed, the sequencing and layout on the page and so on.\textsuperscript{63} According to Fairclough, the study of texts and images and the discursive ways they are used to represent people is important because it has direct impact on what the receptive public believes.\textsuperscript{64} Images and the visual culture in the United States are critical to the shaping of identity. This is not to say that people do not have agency in re-shaping and re-constituting identity through texts, institutions, organizations, political action, and other such engagements. However, what Fairclough stresses is the \textit{causal effect} of visual texts on belief—as they “contribute to establishing, maintaining and changing social relations of power, domination and exploitation.”\textsuperscript{65} This critical view on ideology is a fundamental part of understanding how to evaluate texts and images beyond the descriptive content analysis methods that can report the kinds of words that appear in a URL, sentence description, or advertisement, but fall short of being contextualized in terms of power or domination among various social groups.\textsuperscript{66} Moreover, Mikhail Bakhtin elucidates this idea that “utterances” are deeply embedded in specific cultural contexts:
The linguistic significance of a given utterance is understood against the background of language, while its actual meaning is understood against the background of other concrete utterances on the same theme, a background made up of contradictory opinions, points of view and value judgments—that is precisely that background that, as we see, complicates the path of any word toward its object.67

Indeed, the text and images on a web page also constitute “utterances” in the Bakhtinian sense, and they operate and are positioned in a deeper context of racist and sexist cultural representations and mischaracterizations of Black women and children over the course of centuries.

By comparing the results and ads on the search for “Black girls” to broader social narratives about Black women and girls in the dominant U.S. popular culture, we can see the ways in which search engine technology replicates and instantiates derogatory notions. These discourses include narratives of Black women as a series of historical and modern stereotypes such as “Jezebel,” “Sapphire” and the “Mammy,”68 which are often met with resistance by Black women and girls, and simultaneously, woefully internalized.69 During slavery, stereotypes were used to justify the sexual victimization of Black women by their property owners, given that under the law, Black women were property and therefore could not be considered victims of rape. Manufacture of the Jezebel stereotype served an important role in portraying Black women as sexually insatiable and gratuitous.70

Understanding the power relations embedded in texts includes examining the actors involved. In the case of looking at Internet search, I concede that there are a number of actors and artifacts: the producers of websites, the words or text chosen for the URL, sentence descriptions and advertisements, search engine algorithms and optimizers, media conglomerates, advertisers, and search engine users who come across search results—all of which are involved in the production of meaning.71 Published text and images on the web can have a plethora of meanings, so attention must be paid to the implicit and explicit messages about Black women as girls in both the texts of Internet search results or hits and the paid ads that accompany them on the web page.

Analyzing Discursive Representations: Black Girls as Commodity Objects
There are theoretical ways to contextualize and analyze what it means to be characterized through texts and images and how this is an expression of power relations. Michel Foucault offers a meaningful way to think about the ways that discourse is located in “external conditions of existence, for that which gives rise to the chance series of these events and fixes its limits.”\(^{72}\) The pornification of identity, or its co-optation by industries that can profit from it, are given rise from the current conditions upon which information access on the web is largely a commercial venture in search. The conditions of Black women identities (as girls) are also conditioned by the long history of media misrepresentation. Therefore, in my analysis of search results, I do not look deeply at what advertisers or Google may be intending to do. Instead, I focus on the social conditions that surround the lives of Black people as they have been affected by conditions that allow such representations to come to the fore. In order to more fully comprehend the Foucauldian call for an examination of the “external conditions of existence,”\(^{73}\) Barney Warf and John Grimes explore the counter-hegemonic discourses of the Internet by noting the stable hegemonic notions of the web, which have persisted, and are part of the external logic that buttresses and obscures social aspects of the web:

Much of the Internet’s use, for commercialism, academic, and military purposes, reinforces entrenched ideologies of individualism and a definition of the self through consumption. Many uses revolve around simple entertainment, personal communication, and other ostensibly apolitical purposes... particularly advertising and shopping but also purchasing and marketing, in addition to uses by public agencies that legitimate and sustain existing ideologies and politics as “normal,” “necessary,” or “natural.” Because most users view themselves, and their uses of the Net, as apolitical, hegemonic discourses tend to be reproduced unintentionally... Whatever blatant perspectives mired in racism, sexism, or other equally unpalatable ideologies pervade society at large, they are carried into, and reproduced within, cyberspace.\(^ {74}\)

One way of evaluating the quality of Google’s search results on identity is to try to make sense of identity markers and the results found in search against what Foucault might characterize as part of the logic of the web. Brock characterizes these transgressive practices that couple technology design and practice with racial ideologies "as a social structure, represents and maintains White, masculine, bourgeois, heterosexual and Christian culture through its content.... These practices neatly recreate social dynamics
online that mirror offline patterns of racial interaction by marginalizing women and people of color.” What Brock points to is the way in which discourses about technology are explicitly linked to racial and gender identity—normalizing Whiteness and maleness in the domain of digital technology and as a presupposition for the prioritization of resources, content, and even the design of information and communication technologies.

I use Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis model, which involves text analysis (description), processing analysis (interpretation) and social analysis (explanation). I looked at the page of search results and I clicked on the links to understand more deeply the content that these headlines, URLs and sentences are describing:

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 8.** First result on the first page of a keyword search for Black girls in Google search engine on 09/18/11.

In the text for the first result [Fig. 3], the word “pussy,” as a noun, is used four (4) times to describe Black girls. This necessitates an examination of the process by which the search result is being produced and received. Another way of processing meaning and interpreting the text as described above is to click on the links to see if the content of the site being described is accurately reflected in the description, URL and headline:
In the case of the first page of results on Black girls, I clicked on the link for both the top search result (unpaid) and the first paid result, reflected on the right hand side bar, where advertisers who are willing to spend money through Google AdWords™ are able to have their content appear in relationship to these search queries [Fig. 4]. The advertising in relationship to Black girls is hyper-sexualized and pornographic, even if it feigns to be dating or social in nature. Additionally, some of the results like the U.K. rock band “Black Girls” lack any relationship to Black girls. This is an interesting co-optation of identity, and because of their fan following and possible search engine optimization strategies, they are able to secure strong placement for the band’s fan site on the front page of Google.

What I am arguing is that it does not matter if searches for Black girls and porn are highly popular, because a search on Black girls without including the word porn still gets you porn. Because we cannot see Google’s algorithm to understand precisely why Black girls and porn are linked, without including the term “porn” in the search, I am
calling attention to what the output is (the results), regardless of whether Google was intending a shortcut because of the popularity of searching for Black girls (like many other women and girls’ identities), in 2011. Further, if all the Black girls were involved in looking for themselves using the myth of digital democracy, they would still be outnumbered by porn searchers. Thus, their identity is subject to control by people looking for porn, and porn searches do not even have to be explicit. It is precisely this shortcut, if you will, of making porn and Black girls synonymous that I am trying to point to as problematic for many women’s identities. I use the search for Black girls, in this study, as an example that boldly illustrates the point. Make no mistake, however, there are many identities that are grossly misrepresented in commercial search.

Co-optation of identity has been discussed in broad terms for many individuals and communities alike. As such, practices like “Google-bombing” (also known as Google-washing), where people co-opt contents or terms and redirect them to unrelated content, are impacting both SEO (Search Engine Optimization) companies and Google alike. While Google is invested in maintaining quality of search results in PageRank™ and policing companies that attempt to “game the system”—as Brin and Page foreshadowed—SEO companies do not want to lose ground in pushing their clients or their brands up in PageRank™. Google-bombing is the practice of excessively hyperlinking to a website to cause it to rise to the top of PageRank™, but it is also seen as a type of “hit and run” activity that can deliberately co-opt terms and identities on the web for political, ideological, and satirical purposes. Bar-Ilan has studied this practice to see if the effect of forcing results to the top of PageRank™ has lasting effect on the result’s persistence, which can happen in well-orchestrated campaigns. A recent media spectacle of this nature is the case of Republican Senator Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania, whose website and name was associated with insults in order to drive objectionable content to the top of PageRank™. Others who have experienced this kind of co-optation of identity or less than desirable association of their name to an insult include former President George W. Bush and pop singer Justin Bieber.

At the level of community identity co-optation, Vaidhyanathan chronicles recent attempts by the Jewish community and Anti-Defamation League to challenge Google’s priority ranking to the first page of anti-Semitic, Holocaust-denial websites. So troublesome were these search results that in 2011 Google issued a statement about its search process, encouraging people to use “Jews” and “Jewish people” in their searches, rather than the seemingly pejorative term “Jew”—claiming that they can do nothing
about its co-optation by White supremacist groups.\textsuperscript{82} It is important to note that Google has conceded the fact that anti-Semitism as the primary information result about Jewish people is a problem, despite its disclaimer that tries to put the onus for bad results on the searcher. Equally troubling, in November of 2009, a Google image search for Michelle Obama produced a Photoshopped image of the First Lady as a monkey. Vaidhnayatan reminds us that rather than remove the image from its database, Google again posted the disclaimer about offensive search results and skewed the algorithm to push her image further down the image rankings.

Without such limits on derogatory, racist, sexist or homophobic materials, Google allows its algorithm—which is laden with “sociopolitics”\textsuperscript{83}—to stand without debate while it protests its ability to remove pages or addresses these injustices as a function of its algorithm. I offer that we must revisit the socio-historical and commercial conditions that allow for some bodies to be sold as sexual commodity while others are assumed into the role of consumer under the organizing principles of the private sector and the heterosexual male gaze. In this case, Black women coded as girls’ online identities have been put back on the auction block for sale to the highest bidders or the most technically savvy at web optimization. The narratives of neutrality and objectivity dissuade those with legitimate protests from powerfully arguing over misrepresentation—a practice that often renders them invisible in having any effective power. Under the current rhetoric of search fairness and objectivity, the seemingly neutral algorithms by Google cannot be held responsible, nor can the authors of the mathematical language of the web search tool.

When I evaluated the types of advertising on the right hand side of the page for the term “Black girls” it became apparent that these, too, were situated in the socio-historical contexts of systemic forms of racism and sexism that make plausible a space for such misrepresentation to both exist, and be legitimated. All of the ads were pornographic or hypersexual and featured Black women who appear to be adults offering sex as the product for sale. This is how we are to make sense of the results and tie them to the conditions of possibility which created them: the hypersexualization and hyper-visibility of Black girls as sex commodities renders other possibilities of Black girls representations non-existent for, “Without much exaggeration one could say that to exist is to be indexed by a search engine.”\textsuperscript{84} These conditions for such results are equally predicated upon the legacy of domination over Black people in the United States,\textsuperscript{85} the entrapments of rape culture under patriarchy,\textsuperscript{86} and the commodification
of women as pornographic objects. Taken together, they articulate the disturbing commercial viability of Black girls as web commodities.

**Color-blindness and Neutrality as a Means of Silencing**

Formulations of post-racialism presume that racial disparities no longer exist, within which the color-blind ideology finds momentum. George Lipsitz suggests that the challenge to recognizing racial disparities and the social (and technical) structures that instantiate them is a reflection of the possessive investment in Whiteness—the inability to recognize how hegemonic ideas about race and privilege mask the ability to see real social problems. In the midst of the changing social and legal environment, inventions of terms and ideologies of “color-blindness” disingenuously portend a more humane and non-racist worldview alongside celebrations of “multiculturalism” and “diversity,” which obscure structural and social oppression in fields like computer and information sciences that are shaping technological practices. Despite these conventions and ideologies that attempt to obscure the salience of race in the United States, a critical look at Google search tells a different story about representation and the forms of legitimacy that are conferred upon women’s identities. What is crucial about keyword searching is that Blacks’ and women’s status offline is reflected in the constructs of the Internet. Specifically, claims that the U.S. society is moving toward greater social equality are undermined by data that show a substantive decrease in access to home ownership, education, and jobs—especially for Black Americans. Making race the problem of those who are racially objectified, particularly when seeking remedy from discriminatory practices, obscures the role of government and the public to solve systemic issues.

Central to these “color-blind” ideologies is a focus on the inappropriateness of “seeing race.” In sociological terms, color-blindness precludes the use of racial information and does not distinguish any classifications or distinctions. Yet, despite the claims of color-blindness, research shows that those who report higher racial color-blind attitudes are more likely to be White, and more likely to condone or not be bothered by derogatory racial images viewed in online social networking sites. In the midst of re-energizing the effort to connect every American, and to stimulate new economic markets and innovations that the Internet and global communications infrastructures will afford, the real lives of those on the margin are being re-engineered. New terms and ideologies make a discussion about such conditions problematic, if not impossible. This rhetoric of
post-racialism and colorblindness places the onus of discrimination or racism on the individual, or in the case of Google, on the algorithm. Rather than situating problems affecting racialized groups in social structures,96 those who call attention to the problems are made the problems themselves.

These explorations of web results on the first page of a Google search also reveal the default identities that are protected on the Internet or are less susceptible to marginalization, pornification, and commodification. Don Heider and Dustin Harp showed that, in the early days of the web, even though women comprised just slightly over half of Internet users, their voices and perspectives were not as loud nor did they have as much impact online as those of men.97 Their research demonstrates how some users of the Internet have more agency and can dominate the web, despite the utopian and optimistic view of the web as a socially equalizing and democratic force.98 Their research on the male gaze and pornography on the web argues, consistent with Annette Kuhn’s argument that the Internet is a communication environment that privileges the male,99 pornographic gaze, and marginalizes women as objects.100 Consistent with other forms of pornographic representations, pornography both structures and reinforces the domination of women.101

The previous articulations of the male gaze continue to apply to other forms of advertising and media—particularly on the Internet, and this research expands the conversation about the pornification of women on the web as an expression of racist and sexist hierarchies. When these images are present, White women are the norm and Black women are over-represented, while Latinas are under-represented.102 T. A. Gardner characterizes the nature of the depictions of Black women in pornography by noting, “pornography capitalizes on the underlying historical myths surrounding and oppressing people of color in this country which makes it racist.”103 These characterizations translate from old media representations to new media forms, which I have shown in this discrete artifact captured at one moment in time.

The Internet has also been a contested space where the possibility of organizing women along feminist values in cyberspace has had a long history.104 Judy Wajcman contributes a feminist framework for theorizing the ways in which information and communication technologies are posited as the domain of men, marginalizing not only the contributions of women to ICT development, but in using these narratives to further instantiate patriarchy.105 For Wajcman, men have used their control and monopoly over
the domain of technology to further consolidate their social, political and economic power in society: “Instead of treating artifacts as neutral or value-free, social relations (including gender relations) are materialized in tools and techniques. Technology was seen as socially shaped, but shaped by men to the exclusion of women.”

Equally, the rendering of people of color as non-technical, the domain of technology “belongs” to Whites, and reinforces problematic conceptions of African-Americans.

The work of Wajcman and Anna Everett outlines the historical development of narratives about women and people of color, specifically African-Americans. Each of their projects points to the specific ways in which technological practices prioritize the interests of men and Whites. For Wajcman, “people and artifacts co-evolve, reminding us that ‘things could be otherwise,’ that technologies are not the inevitable result of the application of scientific and technological knowledge...The capacity of women users to produce new, advantageous readings of artifacts is dependent upon the broader economic and social circumstances.” Adding to the historical tracings that she provides about early African-American contributions to cyberspace, Everett notes that these contributions have been obscured by “colorblindness” in mainstream and scholarly media. Institutional relations predicated upon gender and race situate women and people of color outside of the power systems from which technology arises. Dominance is mutually constituted within technologies, and the marginalization of women and non-Whites is a byproduct of such entrenchments, design choices, and narratives about technical capabilities.

In the face of dominant narratives of the Internet as a mechanism for progress and advancement, and of increased pluralism through computer mediated communications, both of which notions have been contested, I agree with previous scholars that the structural inequalities of society are being reproduced on the Internet, and that the quest for a race-, gender- and classless cyberspace could only “perpetuate and reinforce current systems of domination.” This includes reinforcing narratives of commercial search engines as value-free, neutral sites on the web. More than fifteen years later, the present research corroborates past concerns about uneven racial and gender power relations on the web.

Women, particularly Black women, are manifested on the Internet in search queries against the backdrop of a White male gaze that functions as a monopolistic lenses on the U.S. Internet. Group identity as invoked by keyword searches reveals this profound
power differential that is reflected in contemporary U.S. social, political, and economic life. It begs the question that if the Internet is a tool for progress and advancement as has been argued by many media scholars, then, *cui bono*—to whose benefit is it? Tracing these historical constructions of race and gender offline provides more information about the context in which technological objects like commercial search engines function as an expression of a series of social, political, and economic relations that are often obscured in technological practices.\(^{115}\)

**Conclusion**

The impetus for my work comes from theorizing Internet web search results from a Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Perspective; which means, I ask questions about the structure and results of web searches in relationship to social justice—a standpoint that drives me to ask different questions than have been previously posed about how Google search works. This study builds on previous research that looks at the ways in which both Whiteness and racialization are a salient factor in various engagements with digital technology represented in video games,\(^ {116}\) websites,\(^ {117}\) virtual worlds,\(^ {118}\) and digital media platforms.\(^ {119}\) A Black Feminist and Critical Race Theory perspective offers an opportunity to ask questions about the quality and content of racial hierarchies and stereotyping that appear in results from commercial search engines like Google; it contextualizes them by decentering Whiteness and maleness as the lens through which results about Black women and girls are interpreted. By doing this, I am purposefully theorizing from a feminist perspective, while addressing often-overlooked aspects of race in feminist theories of technology.

In this research, I sought to critique the political economic framework and representative discourse that surround racial and gendered identities on the web. Traditional media misrepresentations have been instantiated in digital platforms like search engines, and web search itself has been interwoven into the fabric of American culture. Although rhetorics of the Information Age broadly seek to disembodied users, or at least minimize the White/majority hegemonic framework and backdrop of the technological revolution, Blacks/African-Americans have embraced, modified, and contextualized technology into significantly different frameworks despite the relations of power expressed in the socio-algorithms that privilege certain representations about Blackness and gender over others (e.g., a search of “Black girls”). I believe this study can open up a dialog about radical interventions on socio-technical systems in a more
thoughtful way that does not re-inscribe racist and sexist images of women. Search is, and will continue to be, contextually relevant with culture and gender leading these identity formations among people of color in the United States.

Search engine optimization strategies and budgets are rapidly increasing to sustain momentum and status for websites in Google search. David Harvey and Fairclough point to the ways that the political project of neoliberalism has created new conditions and demands upon social relations in order to open new markets—tensions I argue, in the case of search, are at the expense of certain members of society, namely, non-majority and minority populations.\textsuperscript{120} This has negative consequences for maintaining and expanding upon social, political, and economic organization around common identity-based interests—interests not solely based on race and gender, although these are stable categories through which we can understand disparity and inequality.

In the case of Google searches conducted in 2011, there was a limited lens through which Black girls and women could be represented on the first page of Google’s search engine results, one that rendered the social, political, and economic aspects of Black women and girls’ lives largely invisible. Although the algorithm shifted the results on Black girls in August 2012, other women and girls of color including Latinas and Asians are still hypersexualized and all of these processes deserved detailed attention. These increasing trends in the unequal distribution of wealth and resources, including assets online and control over credible representative information in commercial search are contributing to a closure of public debate and a weakening of democracy. These conditions are making discussions about problematic results in commercial platforms a matter of litigation by individuals, but leave little recourse for groups of people because of the ways in which hateful speech or harm must be proven in court. Google is protected by its reliance upon corporate free speech or lack of control over search results while simultaneously expanding its economic interests. This unbridled expansion of commercial control over information and identity deserves attention, especially as identity markers like, “Black girls,” are for sale on the web to the highest bidder.

The near-ubiquitous use of search engines in the U.S. and perhaps worldwide, demands a closer inspection of what values are assigned to race and gender in classification and web indexing systems, and warrants exploration into the source of these kinds of representations and how they came to be so fundamental to the classification of human
beings. Commercial search implodes when it comes to providing reliable, credible, and historically contextualized information about women and people of color, especially Black women and girls, which serves as a means of silencing Black women and girls as social and political agents. Continued study of these phenomena is an opportunity to contest the alleged neutrality of technology, while creating new opportunities for social justice and fair representation online.


5. Vaidhyanathan, Googlization.


10. The debates over Google as a monopoly were part of a Congressional Antitrust Subcommittee hearing on Sept. 21, 2011 and the discussion centered around whether Google is causing harm to consumers through its alleged monopolistic practices. Google has responded to these assertions. See P. Kohl and M. Lee, “Letter to Honorable Jonathan D. Leibowitz, Chairman, Federal Trade Commission,” December 19, 2011.


24. See also Bobo, Black Women; Miriam Thaggert, “Divided Images: Black Female Spectatorship and John Stahl’s Imitation of Life,” African American Review 32(3) (1998), 481; St. John, “It Ain’t Fittin’.”
29. Dines, Pornland, 47.
31. hooks, Black Looks.
32. Miller-Young, “Hip-Hop Honeys.”
33. Purcell, Brenner, and Rainie, Search Engine Use 2012.
34. hooks, Black Looks.
38. See Lisa Nakamura, Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet (New York: Routledge, 2002); Nakamura, Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet,


43. Roberts, *Behind the Screen*, 16.

44. Google’s infographic can be found here.

45. See Google’s Disclaimer here.


51. Google Web History is designed to track signed-in users’ searches in order to better track their interests. Considerable controversy followed Google’s announcement and many online articles were published with step-by-step instructions on how to protect privacy by ensuring that Google Web History was disabled. See the Washington Post for more information on the controversy (last accessed on June 12, 2012). Google has posted official information about its project here (last accessed on June 22, 2012).

52. Feuz, Fuller, and Stalder, “Personal Web Searching.”


58. Jenkins, “Rethinking Ethnicity.”


60. Jenkins, “Rethinking Ethnicity.”


62. Jenkins, “Rethinking Ethnicity.”


69. hooks, *Black Looks*. 


71. Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse*. 


73. Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 229. 


76. To protect the identity of subjects in the websites and advertisements, I intentionally erased faces and body parts using Adobe Photoshop while still leaving enough visual elements for a reader to make sense of the content and discourse of the text and images. 

77. Internet lore attributes the creation of the term “Googlebombing” to Adam Mathes who associated the term “talentless hack” with a friend’s website in 2001. A website dedicated to the history of web memes attributes the pre-cursor to the term to Archimedes Plutonium, a Usenet celebrity, for creating the term “searchenginebombing” in 1997. See here for more information (last accessed on June 20, 2012). Others still argue that the first Google-bomb was created by Black Sheep who associated the terms “French Military Victory” to a redirect to a mock-page that looked like Google and listed all of the French military defeats, with the exception of the French Revolution where the French were allegedly successful in killing their own French citizens. The first, most infamous instance of this was the case of Hugedisk magazine linking the text “dumb motherfucker” to a site that supported George W. Bush. See: Michael Calore; Scott Gilbertson (January 26, 2001), “Remembering the First Google Bomb,” *Wired News*, archived from the original on February 25, 2007, retrieved January 27, 2007 for more information. 

78. Brin and Page note that in the Google prototype, a search on “cellular phone” results in PageRank™ making the first result a study about the risks of talking on a cell phone while driving.

80. In 2003, radio host and columnist Dan Savage encouraged his listeners to go to a website he created: http://santorum.com/ and post definitions of the word “santorum” after the Republican Senator made a series of anti-gay remarks that outraged the public.


82. See Google'sDisclaimer here.

83. Diaz, “Through the Google Goggles.”


100. Heider and Harp, “New Hope.”


105. Judy Wajcman, *Feminism Confronts Technology* (University Park, PA: Pennslyvania State University Press, 1991); Wajcman, “Feminist Theories of Technology,”

106. Wajcman, Feminism Confronts, 5.


109. Everett, Digital Diaspora, 149.

110. See Everett, Digital Diaspora.


117. Nakamura, Cybertypes.


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*December 16, 2015 — comments 0*
‘I WILL DO EVERYthing That Am Asked’: Scambaiting, Digital Show-Space, and the Racial Violence of Social Media

Lisa Nakamura

Abstract
‘Trophy’ photographs of African men and women who pose holding signs, either naked or in outrageously bizarre outfits and positions, are prized memetic images produced by ‘scambaiters’. The unusual activities staged in these photographs and videos, such as men wearing bras, hitting each other in the face with fish, and pouring milk on each other's heads, invite viewers to enjoy and speculate about their origins. Scambaiter trophy images originate in sites devoted to users who wish to deter would-be scammers and they circulate widely on image-boards where they are often reposted without their original context. This visual staging of the savage African digitally extends previous visual cultures of the primitive, showing how durable these have proven, despite our current ‘post-racial’ moment. Scambaiter trophy images extend colonialism's show-space, rendering it even more powerful and far reaching, and allowing it to migrate freely into multiple contexts. This article argues for a new digital media archaeology that would investigate or acknowledge the conditions of racial coercion and enforced primitivism that gave rise to these digital imaging practice pictures. The author examines how sharing affordances on image boards and social media sites encourage users to unknowingly circulate abject images of race and gender.

Keywords
Africa • digital media • gender • race • social inequality • visual culture
A remarkable photograph circulated across at least 13 image-sharing websites, including Reddit.com, Explainthisimage.com, fasinfun.blogspot.com, Jawdrops.com and Wackbag.com, but could also be found further afield, at online venues such as ‘Harmony Central.com’, a site for music fans, and ‘Asiantown.net’, a site for the Asian and Asian American community. This image, entitled ‘Tickle My Pickle’ by a user who posted it on Jawdrops.com, depicts two muscular young black men wearing bras, skirts, and white cubes on their heads, holding pickles in their mouths while they hold the body of another African man dressed in a white cloth tube suspended between them.

The symmetrical, heraldic arrangement of Africans as decorative objects arranged in a tableau on either side of an object (in this case, another person) is one instantiation of a meme much older than the internet: the ‘classic primitive’. This image was viewed thousands of times on each site, produced dozens of comments, was ‘liked’ multiple times, and thus spread to personal, semi-private networks like Facebook and Twitter, where it was spread again (see Figure 1).

This is a shocking image. It is unaccountable; one cannot imagine any event in everyday life that would produce this behavior, type of costume, or posture, and thus the image invites users to come up with a caption for it, in other words, to account for it. This invitation to wonder and to participate by venturing interpretation, and thus to display wit, fuels the spread of images on the internet. It was posted under a caption that read ‘Caption This Photo Please’, ‘guess what they’re doing’, as on Asiantown.net, or ‘explain this image’, as in Explainthisimage.com. The majority of

![Figure 1 'Tickle My Pickle'. Available at: http://jawdrops.com/tickle-my-pickle/ (accessed 28 July 2014).](image)
viewers found it 'hilarious', but at least a few professed discomfort with the image; one poster, 'iprecious', commented on 5 October 2011 that it 'looks like something you’d see from abu ghraib'. The image was not from Abu Ghraib, the infamous prison where American soldiers took photographs of prisoners in demeaning poses, often partially nude, photographs that went viral on the internet. It is similar in that this photograph stages the emasculation of the brown or black body through absurd and painful looking postures that invoke this and older traditions of abjection through photography. So if not at Abu Ghraib, where was the image produced? By whom? For what purpose?

Several comments on the sites where it circulated revealed the true story behind the image's provenance: 419eater.com. For example, 'F is for Fun' labeled it 'one of the greatest scambaiting pics ever'. The rest of the caption reads 'pretty funny, huh? For more laughs, and more on the whole '419 scam' and how to protect yourself, be sure to visit 419 eaters!'; 419eater.com, which claims over 48,000 registered members, contains thousands of similar photographs of black bodies, many of them naked and engaged in nonsensical acts, all of which have been made at the request of internet users who call themselves 'scambaiters', a group of internet vigilantes.

The men in this photograph entered into a dialogue involving advance-fee fraud, a '419 scam', with a person who requested them to create this specific bizarre image. This article will describe this image production practice in order to explain how racist imagery becomes an object that motivates the circulation of the social media machine by offering material designed to encourage recirculation and reduplication. Memes are part of the fuel that powers the internet's traffic in images, and an analysis of the origins and meanings of overtly racialized and sexist viral images such as these can tell us much about how racial and ethnic difference are enacted on the internet through visual means.

As shown above, most of the commenters who posted their reactions to the 'Tickle My Pickle' image did not know that it was created within this context, as a punishment or prank on three African men who entered into an email exchange with internet vigilantes who sought to enjoy a laugh at their expense, and intended to share that laugh with as many people as possible. While a few, a very few, commenters on image boards where the pickle and diaper image appeared protested its overt racism, most gloated at the just and proper punishment of the internet's 'bad subjects': Nigerians. Had users of the sites where it was reposted known the genealogy of this Abu Ghraib-like image, its status as an artifact that testifies to the radical asymmetry between would-be scammer and the scambaiter, they might not have 'liked' or otherwise affirmed the image through digital means. Analyzing the memetic image practice that produced the thousands of scambaiter photographs that can be found on the many scambaiter sites that collect and archive them allows us to better understand racism's virality on post-digital platforms.
We need a social media image ethics that acknowledges the conditions of production of memes and their operation within an attention economy that includes racial abjection as both a product and a process. Media scholarship needs to explore the genealogy, distribution, aesthetics, and visual history of memetic culture, so much of which is racist, sexist, and comes to us from circuitous and pseudonymous paths. These channels of distribution can only be unearthed through a painstaking process of digital archaeology and uncovering. As Fusco and Wallis (2003) have written in regards to photography, race exists to be seen and consumed with pleasure; it is, itself, spectacular. As memetic pleasures figure ever more largely in our lives within digital media, the origins of these images matter even more.

Scambaiting photographs spread virally because they require human actors to create novel and striking, and therefore valuable, images, many of which are egregiously racist. ‘Trophy’ photographs of African men and women posed holding signs, either naked or in outrageous and bizarre outfits and positions, are prize memetic images. These images originate in sites devoted to users who wish to deter would-be scammers, and later spread to image-boards. They are made to travel, in both senses of the word. The unusual juxtapositions evident in these photographs, such as men wearing bras, hitting each other in the face with fish, and wearing watermelon halves on their heads exemplifies the bizarre, weird, and presumably harmless: in short, the viral.

The study of internet memes is a growing and vital part of the emerging field of visual digital culture studies. Because memes are often defined by their humor and whimsical nature – indeed, they circulate because of these very traits – they are seldom analyzed from the perspective of racial and gender critique. Scholarship that traces the origins of memetic culture’s racist and sexist image practices permits a critique of the digital that is badly needed in our so-called post-racial moment. Memes that depict the black body in abject and bizarre poses and situations are part of the long history of viral racism that spreads using user and audience labor. Like freak show and lynching postcards, scambaiter trophy images like ‘Tickle my Pickle’ rely on users who may or may not have an understanding of the conditions under which they were created, and the exigencies that brought these racialized bodies into these positions and these media forms.

Policing the Digital Primitive: Representational Violence in Memetic Culture

The 'sport' of baiting scammers starts out by an internet user receiving an unsolicited email requesting a sum of money; 419 scams take their name from the ‘designation of the Nigerian criminal code referring to fraud and the adopted name for that genre of spam abroad’ (Brunton, 2013: 102). These scams tell the recipient a sad story about a person living in a poor country, usually in Africa or Eastern Europe, who has access to vast riches that have been tied up by a dysfunctional government. As Brunton notes,
the canonical line – ‘Hello! I am a Nigerian prince!’ – has become a cliché, one that is unflattering and debasing to Africa and African internet users.

According to Wikipedia, scambaiters are ‘internet vigilantes’ who pose as a ‘potential victim to the scammer in order to waste their time and resources, gather information that will be of use to authorities, and publicly expose the scammer’. These activities are ‘done out of a sense of civic duty, as a form of amusement, or both’. The punishments are meted out in the name of justified retribution; many naïve and credulous internet users have been tricked out of large sums of money by internet scammers. Although the data varies, Byrne (2013: 73) and others agree that 419 scammers have done tremendous damage to both those they have defrauded and to the good name of African countries like Nigeria; although a minority of 419 scammers are from Africa, Nigeria has acquired a tainted identity nonetheless. In 2007, Zook claimed that US$3.1 billion were lost as a result.

Most scambaiter sites ask suspected 419 scammers to create photographs and videos that follow a set of very precise orders and requirements and send them as proof of their ‘liveness’. These trophy images are collected in ‘Trophy Rooms’ on sites like 419eater.com, and are prized and shared among the scambaiter community as signs that they have gotten one over on the would-be scammers.3 The splash screen for 419eater.com asks:

What is scambaiting? Well, put simply, you enter into a dialogue with scammers, simply to waste their time and resources. Whilst you are doing this, you will be helping to keep the scammers away from real potential victims and screwing around with the minds of deserving thieves.

Scambaiters are quick to identify themselves as protective vigilantes who help keep the internet safe, and have a ‘bit of fun’ at the same time. Unlike US anti-immigration militia groups like the Minutemen, who patrol a different border, scambaiters operate under the sign of fun and amusement. They leverage memetic cultures and their hunger for striking images as a form of positive self-profiling. Scambaiting, dubbed a ‘sport’ and a ‘game’ on this page, is presented as an appropriate punishment: ‘even if you are a newcomer, much fun can be had and at the same time you will be doing a public service.’

This ‘fun’ occurs at the expense of people whose racial and ethnic identities as well as their intention to connect with better-resourced internet users via email or chatrooms is highlighted and made violently visible in images like ‘Tickle My Pickle’. For these users, the internet is not simply a place of free and agentive self-composition or self-presentation where memes are consumed, produced, and unreflectively enjoyed. It is not just a source of memetic power, the power to amuse or garner ‘likes’ from friends sharing a social networking service or image boards. Trophy photos are produced in exchange for the chance to earn money from an unsuspecting Westerner, an exchange that, as Burrell (2008) writes, many Africans rationalize as an
expression of ‘vigilante justice rather than truly a crime’. As one Ghanaian informant told her, ‘because they can’t go to America they will take money from Americans’ (p. 23).

Indeed, scambaiters’ trophy videos are, in Burrell’s words again, ‘another space where the complex and problematic conditions of post-coloniality and embodied identity are played out’ (p. 27) – a tactic or weapon of the weak, made as part of a bargain between poor users from marginalized and under-resourced locales who see themselves as vigilantes and less poor, if not rich, digilantes, both engaged in scamming the other. The Ghanaians Burrell interviewed valued and used the internet partly because it was seen as a way to connect with better-resourced Westerners who might want to help them; this was far from an exploitative relationship in every case.

How does memetic culture work to defuse the recognition of the most egregious racism under the sign of user-generated internet vigilantism, and to what extent is this sign invisibly but pervasively coded as white and male? While internet vigilantism can take many forms, as Gabriella Coleman (2013) has researched exhaustively and skillfully, scambaiting most often of 419eater are intensely aware that this practice can read as racist and are eager to counter this perception: the ‘Trophy Room’ screen explains that:

it should also be noted that scambaiters do not go actively seeking scammers of a particular skin colour. We only engage thieves who send us emails trying to steal from us. We do not target any particular type of person or country.

However, the images tell their own story.

As I have written elsewhere, the digital engenders a desire for the culturally familiar and primitive to anchor a sense of loss of control, of ‘present shock’ that is both desired and feared (Nakamura, 2002). And the African scammer is a particularly fearsome specter: marginalized yet impressively digitally-savvy. As Parker (2009) speculates, the rage of the scambaiter is informed partly by fear that globalization will make it possible for its object to come close, to invade his space, to compete in a global marketplace made smaller by digitization. Abject trophy photographs of African men in queered or feminized garb serve to keep this fear of a digital Africa at bay. It must be remembered as well that the production of trophy photographs and scambaiting in effect convicts advance-fee fraud participants before they have actually committed the crime. The digilantes who use this site justify the behavior as a deserved deterrent to crime rather than a punishment of crime.

Byrne (2013) argues that pre-digital forms of anti-black vigilantism such as lynching produced strikingly similar artifacts, such as postcards, that were designed to spread from person to person. She characterizes these trophy photos as shot through with racism; as she writes, the ‘pervasiveness of the
tortured black body, as evidenced by these trophies, did not come about by way of simple whimsy' (p. 70). In her article, ‘419 Digilantes and the Frontier of Radical Justice Online’, Byrne describes how the term ‘digilante’ has since been used interchangeably with terms like ‘cybervigilante’ since 2004 to describe ‘do it yourself’ justice online. Scambaiters demand these images as a means of punishing and policing black bodies, and justify it in the name of protecting the internet from fraud.⁴

There are dozens of scambaiter sites such as Scambaiter.com, Scambaiterhaven.com, and 419baiter.com; 419eater.com is the ‘largest scambaiting site on the Internet’, according to an admiring article that appeared in Wired in 2006. This article noted that the site’s founder, a British man who goes by the pseudonym ‘Shiver Me Timbers’, started it in 2003, and depicts scambaiting as a positive example of the power and ingenuity of the digital commons (Andrews, 2006). Although its members defend their practices as race-blind, the trophy images collected on the site are almost exclusively of African men. And while the drive to ‘real names’ on social media platforms like Facebook and Google continues, memetic culture as created on image boards and sites like 419eater.com remains a space that continues to offer pseudonymity. As Davison (2012: 132) writes:

> for those Internet users who revel in the existence of racist, sexist, or otherwise offensive memes, a practice and system of anonymity protects them from the regulation or punishment that peers or authorities might attempt to enact in response to such material.

419eater.com is an exceptionally close-knit, extremely active community that provides FAQs, tutorials, a mentoring program, legal advice, and sample letters that will help would-be scambaiters lure their victims into producing pictures such as those described above. Their forums share resources, such as form letters, for convincing would-be scammers to pour milk over their heads, a popular trope found in many of the trophy videos and pictures in the ‘Trophy Room’. They advertise a ‘mentoring program’, but the link is currently dead.

**Scambaiting and the Subjugation of African Sexuality**

In his monograph on spam, Brunton (2013) asserts that in order to understand transnational ‘419’ culture, ‘we need to bring something very different into this discussion to get proper perspective and to reframe and see 419 as a regional spam phenomenon in depth, with its own peculiarities as a family of stories. These are not ads for products – for porn or mortgages or relief from masculine anxiety – but an enormous narrative about the failures of globalization from which you, the reader, can profit’ (p. 102). Indeed, scambaiter trophy images are not ads for products – ‘for porn or mortgages or relief from masculine anxiety’ – they are themselves porn, porn that both responds to and depicts masculine aggression towards the unruly and
digitally connected African male body. It is striking how sexualized these images are, suturing together older notions of the primitive as defined by the naked or outlandishly clad body (rather than the erotic – there are no ‘sexy’ pictures in the ‘Trophy Room’) in an attempt to counter the notion of the African as a savvy, information-age subject. Thus they mobilize the visual signifiers of porn, humor, and the sideshow oddity.

Many of these images depict black people as sexualized, nude, debased, and queered figures (see Figures 2 to 5). Photographs that depict African men posed with bananas or pickles in their mouths invoke a mockery of the homoerotic, mimicking oral sex. Images of arms tattooed with nonsensical or humiliating sayings like ‘I give bj’s’ or ‘Baited by Shiver’ can be found in the ‘Trophy Room’ as well; some of the most lively debates within the forum spaces where these are posted for the admiration of other scambaiters relates to whether the tattoo looks bloody and painful enough to be real rather than Photoshopped. The user who shared an ‘I give bj’s’ tattoo photograph on the 419 forum explained in great detail how he had elicited this particular image. He cites his own letter to the scammer, which reads: ‘We require at minimum for you to send by email attachment HIGH QUALITY PHOTOGRAPHS of the following: 1. The first stage of the tattoo being applied to the inductee. If possible, photographs showing the tattoo artist actually applying the tattoo would give great encouragement to the board members and will result in your donation payment being a higher amount. 2. Photographs of the tattoo immediately after it has been completed, so that the board members will be able to ascertain it is real because of normal scarring or marking. 3. Photographs taken 24 hours later, showing the healed tattoo.’ This desire and demand to see the ‘scarring and marking’

Figure 3  Still from ‘Scammer Security Trust’ trophy video. Available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gbzwZtSnzOs (accessed 28 July 2014).

Figure 4  ‘Welcome to 419 Baiter’, splash screen. Available at: http://www.419baiter.com/ (accessed 28 July 2014).
produced by a painful tattoo reveals overt sadism towards the black male body. The demand for ‘high quality photographs’ from African individuals who are frequently derided on the forums for their lack of technological sophistication indexes the visual pleasure derived from the spectacle of suffering, pain, and blood that they reveal.

Some images depict African men posing naked with objects hanging from their genitals in response to a scam-baiter’s demand (Byrne, 2013). Many of these feature black men and women holding up paper signs with slogans like ‘I take it up the ass’ or ‘I can’t believe it’s not butter’. The ‘Trophy Room’ of 419eater.com and other scambaiter websites contain hundreds of photographs and videos of this kind.

Figure 5 ‘King of Retards’. Available at: http://www.zoklet.net/bbs/showthread.php?t=45481 (accessed 28 July 2014).
Few women’s images appear in the ‘Trophy Room’. Many of the images that include them depict them naked, holding signs that say things like ‘Welcome to 419baiter’. The header of 419baiter.com features a photographic image of a naked black woman posed with a sign welcoming the user to the site (see figure 4). This photograph of a nude woman’s black body taken under duress invokes an earlier and ongoing history of sexual subjugation. The nudity in this image refers to the trope of primitive Africa, as do many others on the forum, but it is exceptional because women are far less commonly found in the Trophy Room. The majority of scambaiting occurs between white or European men and African men. In some ways, this is no surprise, for the digital gender divide in Africa is extreme; it has been dubbed the ‘second digital divide’. A report commissioned by Intel and released in 2013 found that:

on average, 23 percent fewer women than men are online in developing countries. This represents 200 million fewer women than men who are online today. In some regions, [such as sub-Saharan Africa] the size of the gap exceeds 40 percent. (p. 4)

Most other images in the archive depict African men in abject positions, holding signs that mock them. One example features a man standing in a field holding a large white sign painted with red ink block letters, which reads ‘King of Retards’. He has a somber expression on his face, implying that he may understand the humiliation intended in the production of this image (see Figure 5). Others depict Africans wearing fruit or vegetables on their heads, clothed in women’s underwear, or pouring milk over each other’s heads in a parody of Christian baptism. A screen capture from a video created in response to a scambaiter demand depicts two African men, bodies still wet with milk, in light-coloured bras slapping each other with fish, while a crowd looks on (see Figure 3). This image of African male bodies cross-dressing in women’s underwear renders it both perverse and performative, implying a homoerotic relationship or activity. However, a very different type of photograph of an African woman in a blue headscarf holding a paper sign that reads, ‘I WILL DO EVERYthing that am asked’ stands out in its frank and honest depiction of how the traffic in memetic digital images on social networks is generated (see Figure 6).

She is not smiling, and she is not naked or posed with any prop other than her sign. This image did not go viral, unlike the three African men in bras holding pickles in their mouths; indeed, it fails to meet any of the requirements of virality. A Google image search did not find this photograph on any sites other than those referring to my own research. This image eloquently attests to the power of the meme to visualize an intensely unequal power relation. It is not viral because it is not shocking or surprising. It didn’t spread widely, but neither is it dead. It is undead media, a digital visual image of economic and neocolonial duress that can neither disappear nor can it speak for itself.

Downloaded from vcu.sagepub.com by guest on May 22, 2016
As anthropologist Rosalind Poignant (2004) has described, scholars who study the racist archive of photographs taken of unwilling subjects who are either long dead or impossible to access must undertake an impossible task. These photographic subjects were deprived of voice and agency in the very act of being photographed, yet they did possess them, and researchers must try to hear these voices. ‘I WILL DO EVERYthing that am asked’ is a failed meme, but it uses the platform and the semiotic gesture to speak directly to the racialized and gendered power relations between scammer and scambaiter, and is thus invaluable if we want to really know our memes.

Africa is part of the traffic in memes; but, as is the case with coltan, an absolutely essential mineral in the production of mobile phones, these images...
are extracted as resources, and do not produce value in their own local context. I do not believe that these images circulate and are prized or viewed as ‘hilarious’ in the same way on African image boards. Africa’s role, at least in these viral images, reflects, in Burrell’s (2008: 23) words, ‘their disadvantaged position within society and the world, using the very representations of Africa defined apart from and against them by hegemonic forces’. As Limor Shifman (2014: 28) usefully reminds us, memes replicate not only because they are bizarre and therefore interesting in themselves, but also because they invite the use and remixing of familiar images in unusual contexts. Like the ‘Kilroy was here’ image, internet memes ‘involve bizarre, weird, and unexpected juxtapositions’. Memetic culture is the ‘show-space’ of the post-digital age, and in the case of scambaiting ‘Trophy Rooms’, it leverages the spectacle to reproduce consumable images of a perverse Africa. As the 22nd law of the internet says, ‘Pics or It Didn’t Happen’.

Memes serve a social function as well. The use of and enjoyment of internet memes such as ‘Keyboard Cat’, and the ‘Gangnam Style’ video and dance, endow digital visual capital or enhanced ‘networked individualism’ upon the user. Meme circulation builds feelings of connection and identification with specific online communities. As Shifman (2014: 34) writes, ‘users simultaneously indicate and construct their individuality and their affiliation with the larger You- Tube, Tumblr, or 4chan community’ when they upload, share, or consume internet memes. Reddit, a major image sharing site or ‘board’, features 7 million users, who have dubbed themselves ‘redditors’, a term that highlights both their sense of group identity and active involvement with and regulation of the site’s content. These communities are often studied and admired for their ingenuity.

Facebook, Twitter, and others have come under fire as extractors of free labor and exploiters of user generated content (Scholz, 2013; Terranova, 2004). Memes are the grist that allows these mills to grind; yet somehow the political economic critique of the social networking industries seems not to have tainted them. Because they invoke pleasure and fun, memes float free of the networks that they fuel. They travel within a body, but are not themselves part of it. They are, always, vital media (Kember and Zylinska, 2012). As Jenkins et al. (2013: 1) declare of social media: ‘if it doesn’t spread, it’s dead’, forcefully reminding us that digitally-connected users are the distribution infrastructure of the new media system, and that we all have a hand in working it, to our benefit and detriment.

Racism’s Virality

Does it make sense to talk about racist memes as viruses that inhabit the internet’s body? A 2013 headline from The Onion, a widely read humor newspaper and website, declared that ‘YouTube reaches a Trillion Racist Comments’, skewering with deadly accuracy the famously hateful commenting culture to be found in the meme stream’s favorite video broadcasting site. As this headline reminds us, racism is less a virus in the internet’s body than it is that body. Racism is precisely that discontinuity,
break, or glitch in online discourse that characterizes moments of rupture: paradoxically, although it is ubiquitous, it is the atypical thing that works to garner attention through affect (Nakamura, 2013a). It is the glitch in the network that talks back to us, the engine that makes other things move, and as such it is a basic part of the ecology of media circulation on the internet.

The surreal, bizarre, and racist-baroque photographs seen in the ‘Trophy Room’ are an eloquent testament to the power of the internet to victimize and to offend. However, it is not really the digital network that has produced a new racist aesthetic system – the set of conventions seen in scambaiters’ trophies visualize an exercise in racial power for its own sake. Scambaiters create these photographs to document their power over another, abject body. These photographs exemplify the circulation, distribution, and traffic in uncanny digital images of a spectacularized primitive and queered African masculinity. Tracing the travels of scambaiters’ trophy images through their origins and throughout different contexts helps us to archaeologically understand racism’s memetic histories as viral media and its digital future.

The wide reach of these 419 ‘trophy’ meme photographs attests to their value as memetic visual currency. The visual similarities between lynching photographs, images from Abu Ghrab, and scambaiter trophies demonstrate that racism has always been ‘viral’ media. These images of African bodies in compromised and compromising positions collected within a digital ‘Trophy Room’ resemble other archives or virtual spaces where such images are collected. As Polchin (2007: 208) writes, lynching photographs and postcards were often displayed on mantels in US homes accompanied by family pictures. Scambaiter trophy websites are one of many instances in which images of black bodies emplaced in emasculating or absurd situations have wandered far afield and come to be displayed and collected via social labor.

Abject images of racialized others were ‘viral media’ long before the internet; audiences in the early 20th century, for example, eagerly attended events where they observed ‘professional savages’ such as the indigenous women, men, and children from North Queensland, who as Poignant (2004) has documented in her book Professional Savages, were displayed as a ‘family’ by RL Cunningham at the Barnum Museum and in traveling shows. The audience was an integral part of the advertising infrastructure; they purchased and circulated postcards, gazed at posters, and spread this media widely. As Poignant writes, these people who posed in ‘native dress’ for Western audiences became enmeshed in Western systems of mass entertainment and education, involving display and performance, which marked the emergence of the modern world as spectacle, as it was configured in the fairgrounds, circuses, exhibition halls, theatres, and museum spaces. I call the arena in which this engagement took place the show-space. (p. 7)
Exotic bodies belonging to Filipino ‘savages’, Zulus, and ‘Chinamen’ were exhibited as well at World Expositions during this period, and photography, one of the first viral media, circulated these pictures for future enjoyment. Poignant notes that the early 20th century was as anxious about rapid technological progress as our own, and these images and performances of race spread as part of a tactic of cultural management. The memetic image of the savage has proven extremely durable, even in our current ‘post-racial’ moment, characterized by the denial of racism. The internet has extended colonialism’s show-space, rendering it even more powerful and far reaching and allowing it to migrate freely.

US audiences have a long history of compelling Africans, Filipinos, Aborigines, and other subaltern groups of people to perform themselves as primitive. Indeed, modernity is defined by the promiscuous proliferation of images, their traffic between sites distant and at one time unconnected. The vastness of the space between the production and the reception of the image was a sign of its technological reach.

And while it is quite possible that the ‘performers’ in these scam-baiting media are ‘in on the joke’ – the complacent expressions of the African audience of the fish-slapping video imply that the production of custom-made nonsensical media for scam-baiters may be nothing out of the ordinary – these viral media are nonetheless shameful, if not shaming. As Poignant wrote in her study of Sally, Billy, and the other people imported from New South Wales who were exhibited in sideshows and expositions by RA Cunningham, it is almost impossible to obtain information about how her subjects felt about the whole enterprise. They were not only long dead, they were themselves, media, rather than its creator. They left no record behind. To quote from the film Blade Runner – they were not in the business, they were the business.

When African men are compelled by scam-baiters to perform the abject primitive, they produce the material artifact – the rare and uncanny image – that fuels much social media activity. And while the system of incentives that motivated Sally, Billy, and the other North Queenslanders to pose for photographs was very different from that which motivates would-be scammers who end up in the ‘Trophy Room’, there are some similarities. In the first case, racist science justified the abduction and display of people of color. In the second, neoliberal and neocolonial economics provide the motivation – scam-baiters make these images of themselves because they constitute the best of a poor set of options for entrepreneurial and digitally connected Africans to exploit America and Europe as it has, itself, been so thoroughly exploited.

As Jenna Burrell (2008: 15) writes: ‘the emergence of Internet scamming destabilizes an assumed relationship between technological and socio-economic progress.’ The Ghanaian internet users she studied, some of whom admitted to having tried these scams themselves, used photographs, fake ID cards, webcams, and other imaging practices to create images of African-ness as...
that could meet a foreigner’s expectations in ways that would give them a ‘strategic advantage’ and evoke pity or empathy. These internet café users used the network to reach out to better resourced internet users, often through chat rooms, to bring into being an African self that is deserving of help, desirous of education or improvement of one’s country, or otherwise attractive to the imagined reader. They were attempting to be professional Africans.

Scambaiter trophy media have circulated promiscuously over time and space and context because they do everything that memetic images must do to spread. They marry wonder, curiosity, and rarity with a durable, indeed deeply traditional and familiar, image of African masculinity that reveals new anxieties about the power of the global South to travel over digital networks.

**Genealogies of Race, Gender, and Violence in Memetic Culture**

Scholars of race, gender, and technology have been looking to the margins of digital media’s official histories for some time. Tara McPherson’s (2011) essay on the whiteness of Unix and its origins in a new style of software defined by modularity and Wendy Chun’s (2011) research on the ‘ENIAC girls’ and women’s roles as software remind us that digital media history’s most iconic artifacts are often its most racialized and gendered as well. McPherson and Chun’s work disrupts the received narrative of software history, re-inserting lost or forgotten information about race, gender, and the design of systems and their platforms.

This work is exceptional, both in terms of its quality and in relation to the field of media archaeology. The field of media archaeology would greatly benefit from considerations of race, gender, and the body as part of the study of digital artifacts. It is not possible to attend seriously to the ‘hardcore’ physicality of machines without attending to the specific conditions of its production, and the bodies that make this technology are part of the production process (Nakamura, 2013b). As Parikka (2013: 54) writes, the field’s emphasis on ‘materiality, platforms, and temporal processuality’ signals a turn to the material … at the expense of considerations of race, gender, and class, as if these things were completely unrelated to the internal logics of data machines and their design, production, and functioning in the world. And as John Durham Peters has aptly noted, what’s missing in this focus on the thing-ness of technology is ‘people’ (cited in Parikka, 2011: 56). But people are a crucial part of the infrastructure of archiving, transmission, and circulation of digital media, and not all people are made to perform equally within this assemblage.

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the Center for 21st Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, and Yale’s Gender and Women’s Studies Department.

Notes

1. This image was tracked using the Google Image Search utility on 21 May 2014.
2. Because memes are new digital media practices there is a scarcity of academic writing about them. Shifman (2014) and Davison’s (2012) valuable work on memes examines them in detail but with little reference to race or gender.
3. Artist Graham Parker (2009) has collected a remarkable archive of Nigerian-made scambaiter photographic tableaux in his collection Fair Use. These were created as follows: after either being approached by or purposely seeking out a person whom they suspect of running an advance-fee fraud scam, the scambaiter starts out by claiming that he is chiefly troubled by the idea that he might be talking to a machine generating this letter automatically. He wants to go up the chain of command, he says: he wants to know that he’s speaking to a person. So he proposes a kind of Turing Test. (p. 13)

Parker’s project includes several iterations of African people in costumes reproducing a painting of Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, James Dean, and Humphrey Bogart playing pool. As he writes: ‘it’s a peculiar pathology that seems to drive this activity’ (p. 19): although the images reproduced in his work depict a style of compulsory performance that is far less demeaning than most scambaiter trophy images, they demonstrate the ‘boorishness and casual racism’ disavowed by scambaiters themselves.

4. Geographer Matthew Zook agrees with this characterization. As he puts it, the photographic trophies on 419eater.com ‘trick scammers … into producing photos of themselves holding sexually explicit signs that are then used to publicly ridicule and dehumanize them’ (Zook, 2007).

References


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Lisa Nakamura is Gwendolyn Calvert Baker Collegiate Professor of American Cultures and Screen Arts and Cultures at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. She is the author of Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet (University of Minnesota Press, 2008: winner of the Asian American Studies Association 2010 book award in cultural studies), Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity and Identity on the Internet (Routledge, 2002) and co-editor of Race in Cyberspace (Routledge, 2000) and Race after the Internet (Routledge, 2011). Nakamura has written most recently on how reading platforms such as Goodreads press readers into performing identities as readers in networked forums in PMLA, January 2013. She is writing a new monograph on social inequality in digital media culture, entitled Workers without Bodies: Towards a Theory of Race and Digital Labor.

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THE LABORERS WHO KEEP DICK PICS AND BEHEADINGS OUT OF YOUR FACEBOOK FEED

THE CAMPUSES OF the tech industry are famous for their lavish cafeterias, cushy shuttles, and on-site laundry services. But on a muggy February afternoon, some of these companies’ most important work is being done 7,000 miles away, on the second floor of a former elementary school at the end of a row of auto mechanics’ stalls in Bacoor, a gritty Filipino town 13 miles southwest of Manila. When I climb the building’s narrow stairwell, I need to press against the wall to slide by workers heading down for a smoke break. Up one flight, a drowsy security guard staffs what passes for a front desk: a wooden table in a dark hallway overflowing with file folders.

Past the guard, in a large room packed with workers manning PCs on long tables, I meet Michael Baybayan, an enthusiastic 21-year-old with a jaunty pouf of reddish-brown hair. If the space does not resemble a typical startup’s office, the image on Baybayan’s screen does not resemble typical startup work: It appears to show a super-close-up photo of a two-pronged dildo wedged in a vagina. I say appears because I can barely begin to make sense of the image, a baseball-card-sized abstraction of flesh and translucent pink plastic, before he disappears it with a casual flick of his mouse.

Baybayan is part of a massive labor force that handles “content moderation”—the removal of offensive material—for US social-networking sites. As social media connects more people more intimately
than ever before, companies have been confronted with the Grandma Problem: Now that grandparents routinely use services like Facebook to connect with their kids and grandkids, they are potentially exposed to the Internet’s panoply of jerks, racists, creeps, criminals, and bullies. They won’t continue to log on if they find their family photos sandwiched between a gruesome Russian highway accident and a hardcore porn video. Social media’s growth into a multibillion-dollar industry, and its lasting mainstream appeal, has depended in large part on companies’ ability to police the borders of their user-generated content—to ensure that Grandma never has to see images like the one Baybayan just nuked.

A contractor at the Manila office of TaskUs, a firm that provides content moderation services to U.S. tech companies. [Moises Saman/Magnum]

So companies like Facebook and Twitter rely on an army of workers employed to soak up the worst of humanity in order to protect the rest of
us. And there are legions of them—a vast, invisible pool of human labor. Hemanshu Nigam, the former chief security officer of MySpace who now runs online safety consultancy SSP Blue, estimates that the number of content moderators scrubbing the world’s social media sites, mobile apps, and cloud storage services runs to “well over 100,000”—that is, about twice the total head count of Google and nearly 14 times that of Facebook.

This work is increasingly done in the Philippines. A former US colony, the Philippines has maintained close cultural ties to the United States, which content moderation companies say helps Filipinos determine what Americans find offensive. And moderators in the Philippines can be hired for a fraction of American wages. Ryan Cardeno, a former contractor for Microsoft in the Philippines, told me that he made $500 per month by the end of his three-and-a-half-year tenure with outsourcing firm Sykes. Last year, Cardeno was offered $312 per month by another firm to moderate content for Facebook, paltry even by industry standards.

Here in the former elementary school, Baybayan and his coworkers are screening content for Whisper, an LA-based mobile startup—recently valued at $200 million by its VCs—that lets users post photos and share secrets anonymously. They work for a US-based outsourcing firm called TaskUs. It’s something of a surprise that Whisper would let a reporter in to see this process. When I asked Microsoft, Google, and Facebook for information about how they moderate their services, they offered vague statements about protecting users but declined to discuss specifics. Many tech companies make their moderators sign strict nondisclosure agreements, barring them from talking even to other employees of the same outsourcing firm about their work.

“I think if there’s not an explicit campaign to hide it, there’s certainly a
tacit one,” says Sarah Roberts, a media studies scholar at the University of Western Ontario and one of the few academics who study commercial content moderation. Companies would prefer not to acknowledge the hands-on effort required to curate our social media experiences, Roberts says. “It goes to our misunderstandings about the Internet and our view of technology as being somehow magically not human.”

I was given a look at the Whisper moderation process because Michael Heyward, Whisper’s CEO, sees moderation as an integral feature and a key selling point of his app. Whisper practices “active moderation,” an especially labor-intensive process in which every single post is screened in real time; many other companies moderate content only if it’s been flagged as objectionable by users, which is known as reactive moderating. “The type of space we’re trying to create with anonymity is one where we’re asking users to put themselves out there and feel vulnerable,” he tells me. “Once the toothpaste is out of the tube, it’s tough to put it back
in.”

Watching Baybayan’s work makes terrifyingly clear the amount of labor that goes into keeping Whisper’s toothpaste in the tube. (After my visit, Baybayan left his job and the Bacoor office of TaskUs was raided by the Philippine version of the FBI for allegedly using pirated software on its computers. The company has since moved its content moderation operations to a new facility in Manila.) He begins with a grid of posts, each of which is a rectangular photo, many with bold text overlays—the same rough format as old-school Internet memes. In its freewheeling anonymity, Whisper functions for its users as a sort of externalized id, an outlet for confessions, rants, and secret desires that might be too sensitive (or too boring) for Facebook or Twitter. Moderators here view a raw feed of Whisper posts in real time. Shorn from context, the posts read like the collected tics of a Tourette’s sufferer. Any bisexual women in NYC wanna chat? Or: I hate Irish accents! Or: I fucked my stepdad then blackmailed him into buying me a car.

A list of categories, scrawled on a whiteboard, reminds the workers of what they’re hunting for: pornography, gore, minors, sexual solicitation, sexual body parts/images, racism. When Baybayan sees a potential violation, he drills in on it to confirm, then sends it away—erasing it from the user’s account and the service altogether—and moves back to the grid. Within 25 minutes, Baybayan has eliminated an impressive variety of dick pics, thong shots, exotic objects inserted into bodies, hateful taunts, and
requests for oral sex.

More difficult is a post that features a stock image of a man’s chiseled torso, overlaid with the text “I want to have a gay experience, MI8 here.” Is this the confession of a hidden desire (allowed) or a hookup request (forbidden)? Baybayan—who, like most employees of TaskUs, has a college degree—spoke thoughtfully about how to judge this distinction.

“What is the intention?” Baybayan says. “You have to determine the difference between thought and solicitation.” He has only a few seconds to decide. New posts are appearing constantly at the top of the screen, pushing the others down. He judges the post to be sexual solicitation and deletes it; somewhere, a horny teen’s hopes are dashed. Baybayan scrolls back to the top of the screen and begins scanning again.

**Eight years after** the fact, Jake Swearingen can still recall the video that made him quit. He was 24 years old and between jobs in the Bay Area when he got a gig as a moderator for a then-new startup called VideoEgg. Three days in, a video of an apparent beheading came across his queue.

“Oh fuck! I’ve got a beheading!” he blurted out. A slightly older colleague in a black hoodie casually turned around in his chair. “Oh,” he said, “which one?” At that moment Swearingen decided he did not want to become a connoisseur of beheading videos. “I didn’t want to look back and say I became so blasé to watching people have these really horrible things happen to them that I’m ironic or jokey about it,” says Swearingen, now the social media editor at Atlantic Media. (Swearingen was also an intern at WIRED in 2007.)

While a large amount of content moderation takes place overseas, much is still done in the US, often by young college graduates like Swearingen was. Many companies employ a two-tiered moderation system, where the most basic moderation is outsourced abroad while more complex screening, which requires greater cultural familiarity, is done domestically. US-based
moderators are much better compensated than their overseas counterparts: A brand-new American moderator for a large tech company in the US can make more in an hour than a veteran Filipino moderator makes in a day. But then a career in the outsourcing industry is something many young Filipinos aspire to, whereas American moderators often fall into the job as a last resort, and burnout is common.
Ryan Cadeno says he made $500 a month as a contractor for Microsoft. [Moises Saman/Magnum]
“Everybody hits the wall, generally between three and five months,” says a former YouTube content moderator I’ll call Rob. “You just think, ‘Holy shit, what am I spending my day doing? This is awful.’”

Rob became a content moderator in 2010. He’d graduated from college and followed his girlfriend to the Bay Area, where he found his history degree had approximately the same effect on employers as a face tattoo. Months went by, and Rob grew increasingly desperate. Then came the cold call from CDI, a contracting firm. The recruiter wanted him to interview for a position with Google, moderating videos on YouTube. Google! Sure, he would just be a contractor, but he was told there was a chance of turning the job into a real career there. The pay, at roughly $20 an hour, was far superior to a fast-food salary. He interviewed and was given a one-year contract. “I was pretty stoked,” Rob said. “It paid well, and I figured YouTube would look good on a résumé.”

For the first few months, Rob didn’t mind his job moderating videos at YouTube’s headquarters in San Bruno. His coworkers were mostly new graduates like himself, many of them liberal arts majors just happy to have found employment that didn’t require a hairnet. His supervisor was great, and there were even a few perks, like free lunch at the cafeteria. During his eight-hour shifts, Rob sat at a desk in YouTube’s open office with two monitors. On one he flicked through batches of 10 videos at a time. On the other monitor, he could do whatever he wanted. He watched the entire Battlestar Galactica series with one eye while nuking torture videos and hate speech with the other. He also got a fascinating glimpse into the inner workings of YouTube. For instance, in late 2010, Google’s legal team gave moderators the urgent task of deleting the violent sermons of American radical Islamist preacher Anwar al-Awlaki, after a British woman said she was inspired by them to stab a politician.

But as months dragged on, the rough stuff began to take a toll. The worst was the gore: brutal street fights, animal torture, suicide bombings, decapitations, and horrific traffic accidents. The Arab Spring was in full
swing, and activists were using YouTube to show the world the government crackdowns that resulted. Moderators were instructed to leave such “newsworthy” videos up with a warning, even if they violated the content guidelines. But the close-ups of protesters’ corpses and street battles were tough for Rob and his coworkers to handle. So were the videos that documented misery just for the sick thrill of it.

“If someone was uploading animal abuse, a lot of the time it was the person who did it. He was proud of that,” Rob says. “And seeing it from the eyes of someone who was proud to do the fucked-up thing, rather than news reporting on the fucked-up thing—it just hurts you so much harder, for some reason. It just gives you a much darker view of humanity.”

Rob began to dwell on the videos outside of work. He became withdrawn and testy. YouTube employs counselors whom moderators can theoretically talk to, but Rob had no idea how to access them. He didn’t know anyone who had. Instead, he self-medicated. He began drinking more and gained weight.

It became clear to Rob that he would likely never become a real Google employee. A few months into his contract, he applied for a job with Google but says he was turned down for an interview because his GPA didn’t meet the requirement. (Google denies that GPA alone would be a deciding factor in its hiring.) Even if it had, Rob says, he’s heard of only a few contractors who ended up with staff positions at Google.
A couple of months before the end of his contract, he found another job and quit. When Rob’s last shift ended at 7 pm, he left feeling elated. He jumped into his car, drove to his parents’ house in Orange County, and slept for three days straight.

**Given that content** moderators might very well comprise as much as half the total workforce for social media sites, it’s worth pondering just what the long-term psychological toll of this work can be. Jane Stevenson was head of the occupational health and welfare department for Britain’s National Crime Squad—the UK equivalent of the FBI—in the early 2000s, when the first wave of international anti-child-pornography operations was launched. She saw investigators become overwhelmed by the images; even after she left her post, agencies and private organizations continued to ask for her help dealing with the fallout, so she started an occupational health consultancy, Workplace Wellbeing, focused on high-pressure industries. She has since advised social media companies in the UK and found that the challenges facing their content moderators echo those of child-pornography and anti-terrorism investigators in law enforcement.

“From the moment you see the first image, you will change for good,” Stevenson says. But where law enforcement has developed specialized programs and hires experienced mental health professionals, Stevenson says that many technology companies have yet to grasp the seriousness of the problem.

“There’s the thought that it’s just the same as bereavement, or bullying at work, and the same people can deal with it,” Stevenson says. “All of us will go through a bereavement, almost all of us will be distressed by somebody saying something we don’t like. All of these things are normal things. But is having sex with a 2-year-old normal? Is cutting somebody’s head off—quite slowly, mind you; I don’t mean to traumatize you but beheadings don’t happen quickly—is that normal behavior? Is that something you expect?”
In Manila, I meet Denise (not her real name), a psychologist who consults for two content-moderation firms in the Philippines. “It’s like PTSD,” she tells me as we sit in her office above one of the city’s perpetually snarled freeways. “There is a memory trace in their mind.” Denise and her team set up extensive monitoring systems for their clients. Employees are given a battery of psychological tests to determine their mental baseline, then interviewed and counseled regularly to minimize the effect of disturbing images. But even with the best counseling, staring into the heart of human darkness exacts a toll. Workers quit because they feel desensitized by the hours of pornography they watch each day and no longer want to be intimate with their spouses. Others report a supercharged sex drive. “How would you feel watching pornography for eight hours a day, every day?” Denise says. “How long can you take that?”
Nearby, in a shopping mall, I meet a young woman who I’ll call Maria. She’s on her lunch break from an outsourcing firm, where she works on a team that moderates photos and videos for the cloud storage service of a major US technology company. Maria is a quality-assurance representative, which means her duties include double-checking the work of the dozens of agents on her team to make sure they catch everything. This requires her to view many videos that have been flagged by moderators.

“I get really affected by bestiality with children,” she says. “I have to stop. I have to stop for a moment and loosen up, maybe go to Starbucks and have a coffee.” She laughs at the absurd juxtaposition of a horrific sex crime and an overpriced latte.

Constant exposure to videos like this has turned some of Maria’s coworkers intensely paranoid. Every day they see proof of the infinite variety of human depravity. They begin to suspect the worst of people they meet in real life, wondering what secrets their hard drives might hold. Two of Maria’s female coworkers have become so suspicious that they no longer leave their children with babysitters. They sometimes miss work because they can’t find someone they trust to take care of their kids.

Maria is especially haunted by one video that came across her queue soon after she started the job. “There’s this lady,” she says, dropping her voice. “Probably in the age of 15 to 18, I don’t know. She looks like a minor. There’s this bald guy putting his head to the lady’s vagina. The lady is blindfolded, handcuffed, screaming and crying.”

The video was more than a half hour long. After watching just over a minute, Maria began to tremble with sadness and rage. Who would do something so cruel to another person? She examined the man on the screen. He was bald and appeared to be of Middle Eastern descent but was otherwise completely unremarkable. The face of evil was someone you might pass by in the mall without a second glance.
After two and a half years on the cloud storage moderation team, Maria plans to quit later this year and go to medical school. But she expects that video of the blindfolded girl to stick with her long after she’s gone. “I don’t know if I can forget it,” she says. “I watched that a long time ago, but it’s like I just watched it yesterday.”

UPDATE: 24/10/2014 11:44 PT: Several captions in this story were updated to accurately reflect the name of the company Open Access BPO.
Troll Culture

Diplomarbeit
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Neue Medien

Diplomdatei: 1205
Introduction to 4chan.org

Once I met a guy who knew suspiciously much about internet-underground-culture. It turned out he was a b-tard, a user of 4chans random board. He described the site with one sentence. Beautiful and simple, yet precise:

“4chan is the worst and the best place on the internet at the same time!”

The site might well be one of the most interesting places on the internet. Here is a short definition from the site itself:

“4chan is a simple image-based bulletin board where anyone can post comments and share images. 4chan’s collaborative-community format is copied from one of the most popular forums in Japan, Futaba Channel. Different boards are dedicated to different topics, from Japanese anime, manga, and culture to videogames, music, and photography. Users do not need to register a username before participating in the community.”

Most important is, that everybody is allowed to post anonymous. Hardly any rules exist for both moderators and users.

Also, there is no archive for old threads. Every time someone creates a new thread or comments on an existing thread, it goes to the top of the first page and descends as newer threads appear or old threads get “bumped” to the top of page 1 from new replies. 15 threads are displayed on one page and in its often short life a thread sooner or later wanders to the bottom of the last page (for most boards that is 15 pages) and gets deleted.

Even the most popular threads will die sometime because of an image- and reply-limit. When this limit is reached, no more replies are allowed and the thread will be displaced by newer ones.

1  4chan: FAQ. as of Dec. 06 2011
   Url: http://www.4chan.org/faq
2  4chan: Rules. as of Dec. 06 2011
   Url: http://www.4chan.org/rules
When it gets deleted, there are no copies or archives of the thread. The most popular board by far is /b/, or “random”. Here, hardly any rules, other than real-life laws (no child-porn for example), exist at all.

Since it has been titled by many as a paradise or homebase for trolls\(^3\) it is important to get a basic understanding of 4chan and its culture before we can deeply analyze trolling.

**History**

**4chan’s predecessors:**

**2channel and 2chan**

Futaba Channel (or “2chan.org”) is a japanese imageboard not to be confused with the popular japanese textboard 2channel (2ch.net). It’s predecessor textboard 2channel is widely popular in Japan with a world-wide Alexa-Rank of 309 and a rank of 19 in Japan.\(^4\) This makes the website more popular in Japan than sites like blogspot.com or Windows Live.\(^5\) It consists of more than 600 active boards, which usually contain around 600 threads with a post limit of 1000 for each. The 2channel BBS has no focus on a certain topic.\(^6\)

Altough it’s not an Imageboard like 4chan, anonymous posting is the norm on 2channel. Hiroyuki Nishimura, the creator of 2channel, shares Christopher Pooles views on anonymity by saying, that he only provides a platform on which people are free to decide what they do with it.\(^7\)

\(^3\) Mattathias Schwartz: The Trolls Among Us. as of Dec.06 2011
Url: http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/03/magazine/03trolls-t.html

\(^4\) Alexa: Site Info of 2ch.net. as of Dec.15 2011

\(^5\) Alexa: Top Sites in Japan. as of Dec.15 2011

\(^6\) 2channel: General Information. Translated by Google. as of Dec.16 2011

\(^7\) Lisa Katayama: Meet Hiroyuki Nishimura. as of Dec.16 2011
In his book “Epic Win for Anonymous” Cole Stryker explains the huge success of the site by the nature of japanese culture. Since straight talk and audacity are often interpreted as rudeness or disrespect, 2channel is a place for emotionally repressed Japanese to vent, he says. According to shii, wikipedia admin, internetaddict and channelsphere celebrity, 2chan (also called Futaba chan) was created “on August 30th 2001, as a refuge for 2channel (or 2ch) users when 2channel was in danger of getting shut down from excessive internet traffic.”

Today it is not used as a refuge anymore and has developed its own culture. The big difference in design is, that Futaba channel allows images to be posted alongside of the text, thus giving birth to todays channelsphere. The original php-script of Futaba channel is still in use in countless modified forms. Even 4chans board-software is a modified version of the original futaba-script.

With an Alexa-Rank of 391 in Japan and 6421 worldwide the site itself never became overly popular in the western world because of the language barrier.

Something Awful

While Something Awful is not a technical predecessor of 4chan, it might well be it’s cultural ancestor. Created by Richard “Lowtax” Kyanka in 1999, at first as more of a personal site dedicated to lowbrow humor, satirical reviews of pop culture and comments on the dumber corners of the web, it eventually became a flourishing community with nearly 160.000 registered users in its forum and many editors that contribute to series like “The Weekend Web”.

While the main page became somewhat of a very special comedy site, its
forums nowadays make up over 75% of the websites hits.  

One of the websites customs is image manipulation. An example for this is a series called “Photoshop Phriday”, in which users collectively manipulate images to a given topic every friday.  

This culture of participation and dark humor made it a unique community and one of the most important early meme factorys. The forums users are known as goons.

Urban dictionary sarcastically says this about the Something Awful Users:

“Members of the Something Awful Forums. They were named this after repeated verbal attacks on a website caused the owner to complain to Something Awful owner Lowtax about him and his “goons.”

Goons have neckbeards, no real-life social skills, a tendency for whining about dumb superficial crap, and a knack for shutting down anyone who has anything worth making fun of. They’re known for their sarcastic and elitist tendencies, though many on the internet find them hilarious.

Usually proud members of such Forums as GBS, BYOB, FYAD, or ADTRW, goons patrol the Awful Forums attempting to type funny jokes while their fingers slip off the keyboard due to Cheetos grease.

Goons spew overused catchphrases like “Do you have stairs in your house?” or “All your base are belong to us,” though they are also responsible for founding and popularizing various internet memes, web sites, and trends.

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Url: http://www.alex.com/siteinfo/somethingawful.com

15 Something Awful: Photoshop Phriday. as of Dec.19 2011
Url: http://www.somethingawful.com/d/photoshop-phriday/
There are many varieties of goon, depending on the particular forums they frequent at SA. GBS goons are often sarcastic and clever, while FYAD goons are elitist and abstract, BYOB goons are laid-back and random, CC goons are artistic and very critical, and ADTRW goons are anime-obsessed."16

The abbreviation SA in this quote is of course Something Awful, whereas GBS, BYOB, FYAD, CC and ADTRW are sections of the Something Awful Forums. While you can't clearly point out what BYOB and FYAD stands for, (I've read that FYAD stands for “Fuck You And Die”17 but it never states something official on the site) CC means “Creative Convention” and is a forum about arts, GBS means “General Bullshit”, and ADTRW is the “Anime Death Tentacle Rape Whorehouse” which deals with anime topics.

Christopher Poole was also an active member in the Something Awful Forums, especially in the ADTRW, in whichs IRC-channel he announced his plans to start 4chan in 200318

4chan’s history

4chan was launched on Oct.1 200319 as an unofficial sister site to 2chan.net.20 It’s founder, Chris Poole, better known as “moot” was 15 years old when he started 4chan.21

Chris Poole was a big fan of the japanese site 2chan.net, where he, not understanding japanese language, could only look at the pictures. Nevertheless 2chan or Futaba was popular amongst ADTRW-goons for its focus on otaku culture. At some point, 2chan blocked non-japanese IP-Adresses

17 Something Awful Forums: SAclopaedia on FYAD. as of Dec.20 2011
18 Jonathan’s Reference Pages: 4chan history. as of Dec.20 2011
   Url: http://www.jonnydigital.com/4chan-history
19 4chan News - WELCOME by moot. as of Dec.14 2011
   Url: http://www.4chan.org/news?all#2
20 Ibid.
   Url: http://online.wsj.com/article/SB121564928060441097.html
from posting to the site.\textsuperscript{22}
Maybe this is what sparked the idea of opening an English version of the site.
This website would be called 4chan, because it’s “TWO TIMES THE CHAN MOTHERFUCK” as moot stated in the ADTRWs IRC-channel\textsuperscript{23}.

Christopher “moot” Poole registered the URL 4chan.net and most of its first users were in fact the goons from Something Awful’s ADTRW and FYAD\textsuperscript{24} bringing parts of goon culture over to 4chan.net.

This included the mentioned lowbrow humor, image manipulation culture, early memes like image macros and the elitist community mentality of keeping newbies out by using in-jokes and a specific language which has to be learned, before one gets accepted.

After problems with domainowner GoDaddy in February 2004 \textsuperscript{25}, moot lost the domain 4chan.net and registered 4chan.org.
Over time, 4chan grew and today it has 53 independent boards (not including the secret ones). However if a newspaper is writing about 4chan, it is almost always writing about its “random” board, /b/, which was the first board implemented \textsuperscript{26} and got 30% of the websites traffic according to an interview with moot from 2009 \textsuperscript{27}.

\section*{Culture}

4chans culture is somewhat unique on the english-speaking web. Its most important /b/-board and its anonymous users have been titled an

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} Jonathan's Reference Pages: 4chan history. as of Dec.20 2011
  Url: http://www.jonnydigital.com/4chan-history
\item \textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Encyclopaedia Dramatica - Something Awful. as of Dec.20 2011
  Url: http://encyclopediadramatica.ch/Something_Awful#FYAD
\item \textsuperscript{25} Everything Shii knows: 4chan. as of Jan.4 2012
  Url: http://shii.org/knows/4chan
\item \textsuperscript{26} Wikichan: The Complete History of 4chan (cached version) as of Jan.4 2012
  Url: http://www.peeep.us/85e62424
\item \textsuperscript{27} Rex Sorgatz: Macroanonymous Is The New Microfamous. as of Jan.4 2012
  Url: http://fimoculous.com/archive/post-5738.cfm
\end{itemize}
internet hate machine\(^{28}\), hackers on steroids\(^{29}\), an ocean of piss\(^{30}\), a paradise for trolls (german: das Trollparadies\(^{31}\)), a meme factory\(^{32}\), the asshole of the internet\(^{33}\), niggertits\(^{34}\) and countless other names. It is definitely not a safe-for-work website and you should not post there until you’ve read along for long enough to understand the culture. Otherwise, its critical community will just call you a “newfag” (or “newcandy-ass” as fag is currently wordfiltered to candy-ass as I’m writing this) or “the cancer that is killing /b/”.

However, in my opinion, this place is of high cultural value.
As /b/ is the board, that has influenced the web the most, I will concentrate my work on this board, when I’m talking about 4chan.
Sorry /vl/, /a/, /sci/, /r9k/ and all the other great boards!

**How it works**

The sites design hasn’t changed much since it was created in 2003 and can be somewhat confusing to someone, who is new to the place.
Unlike on other forums, everything else than the first page is mostly irrelevant.
You don’t scroll to the bottom of the boards first page and continue to read on the second page. The board has so many users, that you can just refresh the first page and get served with different threads.

Everyone can just create a thread or reply to one without having to register a username. The only requirement is, that new threads have to be accomplished

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28 Fox11 News: Report on anonymous. as of Dec.4 2012
29 Ibid.
30 Encyclopedia Dramatica: /b/. as of Jan.4 2012
Url: http://encyclopediadramatica.ch/B/
32 Jana Herwig: Moot on 4chan and why it works as a meme factory. as of Jan.4 2012
33 Nick Douglas: What The Hell Are 4chan, ED, Something Awful, And “b”? as of Jan.4 2012
34 Encyclopedia Dramatica: Niggertits. as of Dec.4 2012
by an image, since 4chan is an imageboard. On replys however adding an image to your post is optional.

If posting under your pseudonym is important to you, it is possible to enter a username and a password, which will then generate a so called tripcode, identifying you when posting. However, posting under pseudonyms rather than the default anonymous-posting will probably lead to you being called a namefag by the community, since identity or even pseudonymity is mostly not seen as a good thing on 4chan. This function is often used to identify as the OP, the original poster who started the thread.

If you leave the fields for username password and email empty, you will post as anonymous, just as a vast majority of the users on 4chan do.\(^35\) When you’re starting a thread, it would be a good idea to put “noko” in your email-field. This redirects you to your newly created thread or reply. Otherwise your thread could move away from the first page in the time your browser needs to load it and you will often never see him again.

New threads appear on top of the first page. Each of the 15 pages contains 15 threads, that are displayed together with its three last responses. You have to click on reply to view the whole thread.

Every time a thread gets created or an existing thread gets an answer, it moves to the top of the first page, moving all other threads down. If a thread reaches the bottom of the last page, (15 at the time of this writing) it gets automatically deleted without backups. The average time a thread stays on the first page varies strongly by the daytime, but generally the median time a thread spends on the first page is just 5 seconds.\(^36\)

This “survival of the fittest” under threads ensures, that only the best content stays on the first page as it constantly get replys. Nevertheless, even the best threads have to die, since all threads have a lim-

\(^35\) cf. Michael S. Bernstein et al.: 4chan and /b/: An Analysis of Anonymity and Ephemeralilty in a Large Online Community. as of Jan.4 2012

\(^36\) Ibid.
ited number of images that may be posted or replies it can get. When the imagelimit is reached, the users can still post text-only replies in which they sometimes post a link to a new thread where the discussion continues. Alternatively they can attempt to archive a very good thread on external sites, which I will explain later when it comes to ephemerality.

**Memes**

Most people visiting the site for the first time will not only find the design of the site confusing. 4chan and especially /b/ are one of the internets most creative breeding grounds for so called memes. Memes are ideas or just in-jokes, that spread virally over the internet (and sometimes even into real life).

The term itself is coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his book “The Selfish Gene”:

“Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. If a scientist hears, or reads about, a good idea, he passes it on to his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and his lectures. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain. As my colleague N. K. Humphrey neatly summed up an earlier draft of this chapter:’... memes should be regarded as living structures, not just metaphorically but technically. When you plant a fertile meme in my mind you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme’s propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell.’” 37

Dawkins idea of memes, and especially the term itself leaked into popular culture and became a meme itself. For Dawkins, knowledge about manufacturing

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tools, the concept of religion or the thought of life after death were memes but in internet culture it stands for in jokes that spread around the internet until everybody knows them and they die.

In his book “Epic Win for Anonymous”, Cole Stryker states that memes are not pictures, videos or microcelebrities but concepts:

“People use the word meme to describe visual content like videos or photos or offbeat microcelebrities, but it’s important to recognize that the meme is the concept. A photo or video might be just one execution of that concept among many. As memes evolve, they branch out in countless ways, shifting and merging with other mashed-up, mutated memes. Sometimes, in order to understand a given iteration of a meme, one must also be familiar with dozens of others.”

It is really important, that a meme is not the funny picture your friend sends you over facebook, but the idea behind it. This way, memes get remixed and mashed-up with other memes all the time and the thought evolves from mind to mind like a biological gene.

Cole Stryker also describes the stages in the life of a meme. Tough he also points out that they don’t work for every meme, they are still a nice model and that’s why I summed it up here.

**Birth**
Some kind of content is created and uploaded to the internet.

**Discovery**
At some point that may be years later, someone will discover the content and posts the content, for example, to 4chan with a comment like “WTF”. If it is succesful, the thread explodes and mashups will be made. Eventually the meme will jump to other threads.
Aggregation
At some time, the memewave jumps over to one of the content aggregators. Reddit for example. If it is good, it will be upvoted by the community and eventually appears on the front page, where many see it.

Word of Mouth
Once it has been on the front page of a content aggregator, people will start tweeting and blogging about it or posting in on facebook. That is also the point where sites like 9gag start using the meme.

Blog Pickup
If a meme seems to be established, sites like knowyourmeme will research the phenomenon. A race over the most valuable background informations starts to cover as much of the story as possible before the meme explodes into mainstream. This is also the point where the icanhascheezburger-network probably dedicates a blog to it.

Mainstream Exposure
When a certain level of virality is reached, mainstream media will start to report on it. This is the point when memetic microcelebrities start to get interviewed. Since memes are some kind of in-jokes, they will soon lose their appeal as everyone knows them.

Commercialisation
At this point, microcelebrities from memes get hired for tv-commercials. Advertisers jump on the meme to promote products.

Death
The meme is over, as every bit of fascination is drained by unimaginative re-hashes and abundand mainstream coverage.

One exception is, for example, zombo.com. It is a single serving site with a repetitive flash animation, welcoming you to zombo.com. The site has been created by Josh Levine in 1999 and has

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41 Zombo.com. as of Jan.5 2012
   Url: http://www.zombo.com/
42 Whois: zombo.com. as of Jan.5 2012
   Url: http://who.is/whois/zombo.com/
never exploded into the mainstream. It has never died, yet never took off to be so famous that everybody knows it.

An example where the rules applied is rickrolling.
Rickrolling is, when you get a link to seemingly very interesting content (“Dude check out the new trailer for gta4”) sent to you by a friend. But when you click it, it doesn’t lead you to the promised trailer, but to the music video of Rick Astley’s 1987 hit song “Never Gonna Give You Up”.

One of the earliest known “Never Gonna Give You Up” videos was uploaded to YouTube on May 15th, 2007.

Meanwhile on 4chan, duckrolling was a meme. Duckrolling originated from a wordfilter on 4chans /v/ (videogames) board. The word “Egg” was changed to “Duck”. Someday someone posted the word “Eggroll” and got it wordfiltered to “Duckroll”. Soon another member of the board created an image with a duck on wheels.

![Duckroll](fig. 1: Duckroll)

It then continued as some kind of bait-and-switch game, where one would post a promising link to an external site which then didn’t lead to the promised content but to an image of a duck on rolls.
This was called duckrolling. It really went to the next level, as someone started linking to Rick Astley’s music video on youtube instead of the duck image.
Soon, people started rickrolling their friends over twitter, facebook, email and of course over ICQ, MSN and various other messengers.

43 knowyourmeme: Duckroll. as of Jan.22 2012
Url: http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/duckroll
As 4chan declared war on scientology, they used the song on their demos to rickroll their enemies. This was about the time when it spread into the mainstream. Newspapers reported on the phenomenon and on April Fools’ Day 2008, youtube linked every featured video on the front page to a rickroll. Later that year, anonymous even manipulated the MTV Video Music Awards, so that Rick Astley won the price for “Best Act Ever”.

By this point the meme could be considered dead in its present form. Various other variations followed, like Trololo (Eduard Khil’s interpretation of “I Am Glad, Cause I’m Finally Returning Back Home”), the BarackRoll, the Macroll, the Kiproll, the Batroll and many more. The meme itself was not the video of Rick Astley’s “Never gonna give you up”, it was the idea to trick people into watching it. Like this, it was easy to evolve the meme by replacing Astley’s video with others. However, none of these videos was as successful as the original rickroll.

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44 Sean Michaels: Taking the Rick. as of Jan.5 2012
   Url: http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2008/mar/19/news
45 Michael Arrington: YouTube RickRolls Users. as of Jan.7 2012
   Url: http://techcrunch.com/2008/03/31/youtube-rickrolls-users/
46 Matthew Moore: Rick Astley named Best Act Ever. as of Jan.5 2012
47 Youtube: Mr. Trololo original upload. as of Jan.7 2012
   Url: http://youtu.be/oavMtUWDBTM
48 Youtube: BarackRoll. as of Jan.7 2012
   Url: http://youtu.be/wzSVOcgKq04
49 Youtube: John McCain Gets Rick Rolled by Obama. as of Jan.7 2012
50 Youtube: McRoll’d. as of Jan7. 2012
   Url: http://youtu.be/Ssh71hePR8Q
51 Youtube: Mudkip: The Insane Edition. as of Jan.7 2012
   Url: http://youtu.be/MKzqP4-0Z6M
52 Youtube: Batroll’d. as of Jan.7 2012
   Url: http://youtu.be/XCspzg9-bAg
Anonymity
Over 90% of 4chans users choose to post as anonymous.\textsuperscript{53} Anonymity and Pseudonymity were a standard in early web, which is dispersing now, as companies like Google and Facebook live from the personal data of its users. This changed the web. Therefore I want to introduce you to two kinds of anonymity. Vertical and Horizontal anonymity.

![Diagram of vertical and horizontal anonymity](image)

fig. 2: vertical and horizontal anonymity

Facebook allows its users to change privacy options so, that only close friends or nobody at all can see ones status updates. This is often the kind of privacy people find important. I call it horizontal anonymity, since it is anonymity between users. The other kind of anonymity is more important, although not many people recognize it as this. I call it vertical anonymity, because it is between the users and the system.

\textsuperscript{53} cf. Michael S. Bernstein et al.: 4chan and /b/: An Analysis of Anonymity and Ephemerality in a Large Online Community. as of Jan.4 2012

Although Facebook, for example, lets its users set up a wide variety of privacy settings, they only affect horizontal and not vertical anonymity. If you set your privacy settings so strict, that nobody else than you can read your status updates, Facebook still knows of them and there is no way to prevent Facebook from knowing it.

4chan doesn’t only offer horizontal, but also a lot of vertical anonymity. The admins of the site will give an IP-address to the legal authorities if, for example, someone posts child porn.

However the site feels horizontal and vertical anonymous because even the admins of the site don’t know more about you, than your IP-address.

With your identity unassociated from your real-life person, you are completely free to experiment online.

Sherry Turkle points out, that anonymity provides ample room for individuals to express unexplored parts of themselves. 54

Another good thing about anonymity is, that hierarchys can’t establish. Since there are no signs of status or prestige in an anonymous posting, posts themselves will be judged by their content and not by whom it was written.

In my opinion, both vertical and horizontal anonymity are needed for culture as 4chans random board /b/. Other than that, ephemeral citation is important.

**Ephemerality**

In real life, the human brain protects us from neverending embarassment. If we do something really stupid, we might find ourselves target for the others laughter. Even if what we did was horribly stupid, people will eventually forget after enough time has passed (that is, of course, unless your failure is so epic, that it will go down in written human history).

The Internet is different. By default, everything stored is avaiilable forever, until the data gets deleted or lost during a hard drive crash, for example.

Facebook, for example, doesn’t take this into account.

With the new timeline feature, that was introduced as I am writing this, a persons complete history is displayed for people to look after every single thing one did on Facebook. It even encourages you to share real-life events in a cur-

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54 Sherry Turkle: Life on the screen. New York 1997, p.185
riculum vitae style, so that it is not only a browsable résumé about everything you did on facebook, but about your whole life. This, and the fact, that facebooks creator Mark Zuckerberg thinks, that multiple identities are a sign for a lack of integrity adds up to a strange uncanny feeling when posting on websites like facebook.

Popular Websites have different feels of ephemerality and anonymity with facebook as one extreme and 4chan as the other. Before I’ll figure out the role of ephemerality on 4chan, I’d like to discuss this issue by means of different online services.

fig. 3: different communities approach to anonymity and ephemerality

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Facebook and Google+
We already discussed facebook’s approach on ephemerality and anonymity. Google’s own social network Google+ doesn’t differ much from that. Both companies live from the personal data of its users. Therefore, it is mandatory to use his real name, rather than a pseudonym or even posting anonymous. While technically pseudonymity is possible on those networks, both punish it with account deletion. This is because they have an interest in building a big database with reliable information on which they can deliver custom advertisements. Google has, in addition, an immense database of its users. But since the most google services allow for pseudonymity, they can’t connect the collected data to real-life identities56. That is why you register Google+ with your existing Google-Account. Regarding ephemerality, they slightly differ. While Facebook sets new standards against it with its timeline feature, Google+ doesn’t offer old posts on the silver plate. Nevertheless, it allows users to browse old content simply by scrolling down on the wall. The good thing about this is, that people usually think before posting. Everything you post on Facebook is propably visible to your friends, parents, coworkers, grandparents, students and there might be a chance, that your own children will see it in 15 years. By these decisions, your actions are closely linked to your person.

Myspace
While also a social network, it doesn’t force real-life identities. Everyone is free to choose a pseudonym and a picture of an unicorn as their profile picture. The effect of this is a whole other culture with myspace-style glittergraphics, people that own multiple profiles for different purposes (as a musician, to find like minded people for taboo-topics57 or just for meeting new people). It’s more who you want to be, than who you are.

Twitter
While the site doesn’t ask for real-life identities, it is not really anonymous. Pseudonymity is common here. By this, it is possible to connect and build a reputation while not being forced to connect that reputation to your person. The fast paced action and complex connections of replys, who can become

56 Harry Mccracken: Google+’s Real-Name Policy. as of Jan.1 2012
Url: http://www.time.com/time/business/article/0,8599,2094409,00.html
57 Myspace: BDSM Iran. as of Jan.1 2012
Url: http://www.myspace.com/bdsm-iran
difficult to read when looked at later, give the page an ephemeral feel, although it is saving old tweets. This all leads to a culture, where on the one side businesses and experts of all kind do marketing for themselves under their real-names, while on the other side people use it to chat under pseudonyms or to distribute news.

**Reddit**
This service puts a strong focus on building a reputation under your pseudonym. Posting there is not anonymous, since your posts are connected to your pseudonym, but real life identities are not common. To ensure high quality content despite the abandonment of real identities, the site uses a karma-feature. Posts and comments on the community can and will be up- or downvoted. Only the best storys and comments will be displayed on top of the page. Users are encouraged to think about what they do, as everything is judged by the other users and posts are saved, visible for everybody on ones profile page.

**4chan**
The median thread at 4chans /b/ has a lifespan of 3.9 minutes before it gets deleted. Some unpopular threads may even reach the bottom of page 15 and get deleted in 28 seconds. In a study conducted by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of Southampton they found out, that over the whole evaluation period, the longest living thread existed for 6.2 hours. Other boards than /b/ may not be that fast-paced, but still, everything will get deleted sooner or later.

4chans users have basically found two ways to cope with this ephemerality. The first way is to vote the thread into an online-archive like http://chanarchive.org. Everybody can propose threads to archive, and when a certain number of archival request for one thread is reached, it will be mirrored andavailable on the archive.

The other way of overcoming the ephemerality is to save the best images on

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58 cf. Michael S. Bernstein et al.: 4chan and /b/: An Analysis of Anonymity and Ephemerality in a Large Online Community. as of Jan.4 2012
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
your hard-drive. Many users have /b/ folders on their computers, in which the best content gets saved in form of images, texts or screenshots of epic threads. In days where online archives weren’t so common and the chan-culture didn’t leak into the mainstream or got documented by encyclopaedia dramatica and know your meme, keeping a local /b/ folder was quite important for users and still can be a kind of a status symbol.

Another interesting thing is, that 4chan gives its users the tools to affect this ephemerality. Every thread has an image- and a postlimit. When this limit is reached, the thread will sooner or later die, as it gets displaced by other threads. Every time you comment on a thread, it goes to the top of page 1 and from there travels downwards as other threads are created or receive replys. A technique for keeping threads alive is called “bumping”. Here, a user will comment an interesting thread without adding real content to the discussion, just to bump it back to the first page, usually with the word “bump”. On the other hand, writing “sage” into the email field will push the thread one post towards the post-limit without bumping it to the first page. This is commonly used to display discontent with a thread. Sage is derived from the japanese word sageru, which means “to lower”.

61 chanarchive.org: You’re on trial for murder. The 12th picture in your /b/ folder is the prosecution’s main evidence against you. as of Jan.4 2012
Url: http://chanarchive.org/4chan/b/22863

62 chanarchive.org: The strange world of /b/: Comment. as of Jan.4 2012
Url: http://chanarchive.org/4chan/b/3041#73804526

63 cf. Michael S. Bernstein et al.: 4chan and /b/: An Analysis of Anonymity and Ephemerality in a Large Online Community. as of Jan.4 2012

64 Encyclopedia Dramatica: Bump. as of Jan.4 2012
Url: http://encyclopediaadramatica.ch/Bump

65 Encyclopedia Dramatica: Sage. as of Jan.4 2012
Url: http://encyclopediaadramatica.ch/Sage
The research paper of scholars of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and University of Southampton also pointed out, that ephemerality is in fact a motivator to create content.

“One may think users would see no point to contributing if their actions will be removed within minutes. However, if /b/ users want to keep a thread from expiring within minutes, they need to keep conversation active. This ‘bump’ practice, combined with a norm of quick replies, may encourage community members to contribute content. This hypothesis was derived from our observations, and will need to be tested more rigorously.”

Language as a symbol of status

Usually, the good thing about anonymous posting is, that content will be judged by itself and not by the reputation of the author. Therefore everyone could contribute freely to a conversation without facing personal prejudice. There should be no hierarchys. Somehow, 4chans users have managed to establish mechanisms to display status and credibility. Newbies, or newfags in chanspeak, are said to be “the cancer that is killing /b/” 67. This elitary society has developed a very complex language and codex, peppered with in-jokes and memes. Failure to conform to this codex leads to disrespect or even hate from the community.

To make successful posts on 4chan, you first have to lurk the forum for up to several years to learn this language, the memes and be able to follow the code of conduct. Not many actually do this, and that’s why the oldfags (the opposite of newbies in chanspeak) don’t like it when the site is getting media coverage. They’d like to keep the environment as hostile to newbies as possible to enforce their own status, or as encyclopedia dramatica puts it:

“In the end though ‘The cancer that is killing /b/’ is just another way for oldfags to exert themselves above others with a false sense of superiority. As if being part of /b/ longer makes you any more or less of a dickhead

66 Michael S. Bernstein et al.: 4chan and /b/: An Analysis of Anonymity and Ephemerality in a Large Online Community. as of Jan.4 2012

67 Encyclopedia Dramatica: The cancer that is killing /b/. as of Jan.4 2012
Url: http://encyclopediadramatica.ch/Newfag
than anyone else. When your only form of social interaction is an image board, it’s not surprising that you might create your own ridiculous and irrelevant social hierarchy in order to boost your own sense of self-importance, and then claim that others are ruining it to further solidify your non-existent status.”

Oldfags are also sometimes seen as the cancer that is killing /b/ for their elitism. You could think of them as Statler and Waldorf from the muppets.

fig. 4: Statler and Waldorf

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68 Encyclopedia Dramatica: The cancer that is killing /b/. Bottom Line. as of Jan.4 2012
   Url: http://encyclopediadramatica.ch/Oldfags#Bottom_Line
69 Encyclopedia Dramatica: Newfag. as of Jan.22 2012
   Url: http://encyclopediadramatica.ch/Newfag
One example of this culture is, that not liking chocolate milk can get you banned:

fig 5\textsuperscript{70} & 6\textsuperscript{71}: Chocolate Milk

\begin{itemize}
\item Reddit: 4chan takes their chocolate milk very seriously. as of Jan.22 2012
  Url: http://www.reddit.com/r/funny/comments/m08w1/4chan_takes_their_chocolate_milk_seriously/
\item Imgur: Chocolate Milk. as of Jan.22 2012
  Url: http://i.imgur.com/SLzYC.jpg
\end{itemize}
Another technique to demask newfags is, or was, triforcing. The triforce is a symbol from the popular video game series “The Legend of Zelda” and should look like this:

![Triforce](image)

fig. 7: triforce

Members of 4chan have rebuilt this triforce with a series of unicode commands. If it is done right, it comes out like this:

▲
▲ ▲

This is commonly accompanied by the prompt “newfags can’t triforce”. Regular space-characters will be removed automatically, which is why a copypasted Triforce, although it looks correct in the comment field, after being submitted looks like this:

▲
▲ ▲

Triforcing can be seen as an index, a signal whose presentation is only possible by someone with particular skill or knowledge.

However, as this sort of failure became a meme itself, not only newfags falling for the bait produce incorrect triforces. This is just an example of a way to expose newbies. Other forms include “newfags can’t greentext”, “newfags can’t blank post” or “newfags can’t uʍop ǝpısdn ědʎʇ”.

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72 Wikipedia: Universe of The Legend of Zelda. as of Jan.4 2012
73 Wikipedia: Triforce. as of Jan.22 2012
74 Michael S. Bernstein et al.: 4chan and /b/: An Analysis of Anonymity and Ephemerality in a Large Online Community. as of Jan.4 2012
75 chanarchive.org: Triforce. as of Jan.4 2012
Url: http://chanarchive.org/4chan/b/14519/triforce
76 Encyclopedia Dramatica: Triforce. as of Jan.4 2012
Url: http://encyclopediadramatica.ch/Triforce
Then, there is yet another technique to overcome the limitations of anonymity. Timestamping. This is used to get credibility on posts. Think of a guy bragging about his drug collection on 4chan. He could upload a photo of it, but then nobody would think the photo is legit. After all it is really easy to pull images of google. To prove the images authenticity, the original poster has to write the date and a reference to the site it is posted on (e.g. “sup /b/”) on a piece of paper which will be placed in front on the thing he wants to show. Another technique is writing the time and date with a reference on ones body. This is mainly common for so called “camwhores”, people who post (often pornographic) pictures of themselves on the internet.

fig. 8 & 9: timestamps. Source: 4chan

77 chanarchive.org: Doing balancing tricks with my dog. as of Dec.4 2012
Url: http://chanarchive.org/4chan/b/21610/
Further Reading
If you are interested in 4chan and anonymous or the actions of the hacktivist group Anonymous, I strongly recommend you to read the book “Epic Win for Anonymous” by Cole Stryker. The only thing I have to criticise is, that he uses to talk about bored teenagers when he talks about 4chans users. While for some, or even most this may be true, there is no proof for such a claim and I am pretty sure, that all kinds of people browse 4chan. Maybe sometimes they just act a bit like bored teenagers as an effect of the Internet Inhibition Effect (I’ll talk about that in the next chapter).

Furthermore, I recommend you to read the research paper by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and University of Southampton with the title “4chan and /b/: An Analysis of Anonymity and Ephemerality in a Large Online Community”. It’s available online for free at: http://projects.csail.mit.edu/chanthropology/
Abstract
While the internet has been examined as a utilitarian space for social movements, it also acts as a cultural space for personal and community expression about important social issues. While examining the particularities of the memetic form – often catchy humor, simple imagery, and remixing – the author examines meme culture as a vehicle for political and social critique in the context of China’s stringent web censorship and propaganda. She looks at social change memes that have arisen around internet censorship and in support of the blind lawyer activist Chen Guangcheng. First, she considers these memes as visual and creative practices that sidestep the mechanics of internet censorship in China. She then argues for the role of internet memes in challenging hegemonic media environments, and maintains that these actions should be considered important political acts in and of themselves.

Keywords
Chen Guangcheng • China • Cute Cat Theory • grass mud horse • internet censorship • internet memes • propaganda

Introduction
Tucked away in the dark corners of China’s internet, deep in the Gobi Desert, there roams a fuzzy creature known as the cǎonǐmǎ (草泥马), the so-called grass mud horse. It is a gentle, noble beast, and it roughly resembles a llama, with a long, graceful neck and sturdy legs suitable for both fast running and carrying large burdens. Don’t ask me how it survives in such a hostile, desert environment – it is not especially adapted to the
Gobi Desert, aka *Mǎlè Gēbì*, but it certainly makes do, always with a wry grin and a friendly demeanor (see Figure 1).

A Chinese speaker would almost immediately know what is going on behind this odd fable: the grass mud horse and the land it dwells in are puns. As Mandarin is a tonal language with limited phonemes, puns are commonplace, especially puns that change meaning through tones. Cāonǐmǎ, written with one set of characters and tones, means ‘grass mud horse’. But cǎonǐmǎ (操你妈), written with different characters and pronounced with slightly different tones, is the more familiar colloquial phrase roughly translated as ‘fuck your mother’. And *Ma’le Gēbì* sounds like another Chinese phrase meaning ‘Your mother’s cunt’.

The grass mud horse cannot rest easily in the desert. It faces a mortal enemy, the dreaded héxiè (河蟹), or river crab. This pinching creature descends into the Gobi Desert and chases after grass mud horses, who must run for their lives. The hexie, of course, sounds similar to héxié (和谐), or ‘harmony’. ‘Harmony’ here references a 2006 Hu Jintao proposal to develop a ‘harmonious socialist society’ (Kahn, 2006). In the internet context, it meant further censorship under the Golden Shield Project, popularly known as the ‘Great Firewall’, a powerful censorship mechanism capable of filtering content from the outside world based on source and even keyword. Thus, the hexie† are the crabby embodiment of a censored, ‘harmonious’ internet, the polar opposite of the fuzzy, freewheeling grass mud horse.

Together, the river crab and the grass mud horse are Chinese memes par excellence, well documented since at least 2009 (Li, 2011: 78). Like any good internet meme, countless remixes exist, as netizens engage in a

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Figure 1 An illustration of the grass mud horse, represented as an alpaca llama. Reprinted with permission by Jason Li.
constant effort to outdo each other's creativity. Any image of a llama can in fact become a grass mud horse, and, by extension, an outcry against China's stringent censorship. There are grass mud horse plushies and cartoons and a fake McDonald's Happy Meal toy. Netizens even created a fake Chinese character, composed of the radicals for 'grass', 'mud', and 'horse', and they debated online on how best to pronounce it (see Figure 2).

The grass mud horse, like many internet memes, is a form of in-joke. At least until it became too famous, its friendly face and punny name meant it could slip past the scrutiny of internet censors, while inspiring hilarity amongst its users. It looks harmless in image form, but it's an outcry against the very policies that forced it to become a secret symbol. As researcher Hongmei Li has argued (2011: 83), this irreverent humor is important as it temporarily suspends hierarchies and allows individuals to express an opinion about state policy without the consequences that might follow more direct critique of censorship.

These creatures are by no means the only memes in China. In a country with over 600 million internet users, there are countless memes, many of which center around cats and dogs, with cute animations and oddball language. Many are nationalistic, and most seem to have no overt political undertone. Indeed, the vast majority of youth internet activity in China is not explicitly political, and memes make up just one part of a larger repertoire of youth expression and identity formation online (Wang, 2013).

Figure 2 A fictional Chinese character developed to celebrate the grass mud horse. It contains the Chinese radicals for ‘grass’, ‘mud’ and ‘horse’. Isaac Mao, https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/.
The grass mud horse and river crab are what I call *social change memes*, internet memes that express a sentiment for changing a social or political issue. As I argue in this article, social change memes can be powerful in the context of an authoritarian state like China, which exerts control over all broadcast and internet media. In certain cases, internet memes like the grass mud horse menagerie have become a vehicle for evading censorship in an environment where both offline and online outlets for social and political expression are extremely limited.

Beyond the mechanics of bypassing censorship, I also want to argue for the value and role of these memes vis à vis contemporary Chinese propaganda and censorship strategy. Importantly, they provide a visual rupture in hegemonic state media and messaging by using the language of participatory creative media. As internet researcher Zeynep Tufekci (2014b) has noted, we should not underestimate the expressive, symbolic value of online actions:

> The rise of online symbolic action – clicking on ‘Like’ or tweeting about a political subject – though long derided as ‘slacktivism,’ may well turn out to be one of the more potent impacts from digital tools in the long run, as widespread use of such semi-public symbolic micro-actions can slowly reshape how people make sense of their values and their politics.

Memes, as micro-actions of media remixing and sharing, are particularly important in a censored, propagandized state, which seeks first to isolate individuals who express opinions contrary to state interests, and then to deaden the sort of public debate that fosters a diverse sphere of opinion. With rich visual language and a culture of creative remix and communal participation, meme culture has provided an outlet for new forms of public conversation and community building. It reflects an important shift in orientation to state media. I will demonstrate this with a case study on memes relating to activist lawyer Chen Guangcheng, extrapolating more generally from there.

As I begin, I want to make clear the scope of this article. First, I am looking specifically at memes about topics that are heavily censored. There are many social change memes in China whose subject matter – like pollution or lunch for school children – does not rankle authorities’ concerns as greatly. These memes therefore run a lesser risk of censorship. Second, while it can be helpful to reflect on the role of social change memes in other political environments, this article focuses solely on a heavily censored state like China; freer media environments in places like the United States and Western Europe fall outside the scope.

To understand how internet memes function in social change in lower-freedom contexts like China, it is necessary to understand how memes and civic expression have intersected historically. Thus, I will start with that most expressive and participatory of internet media: cute cats.
Censoring the Cute Cats

With an active user population of over 600 million, China’s internet is just as rich with creative remixes of media as any other internet world I’ve seen, and it certainly has plenty of cats. Sites like Sina Weibo in fact encourage the use of imagery, with embeddable photo and video features and the ability to easily repost a message in a fashion similar to a retweet on Twitter or a share on Facebook. The site is popular amongst urban Chinese youth and is only one of many weibo, or microblogs, that have emerged on the Chinese web. Though these sites bear semblance to Twitter with a 140 character limit, this allows for nearly a paragraph or two of content in the Chinese language, where words can be as short as one or two characters. That memes have thrived in this environment should not be a surprise.

It is important to understand briefly the mechanics of Chinese internet censorship, which has a goal of allowing the internet to flourish for commerce and entertainment while deadening its usage for political organizing or expression (Fallows, 2008).

The Golden Shield Project, known popularly as the ‘Great Firewall’, ensures control of data in the country. However, it is just one part of a larger system of censorship, one that is decentralized, with a combination of coercion and self-censorship (Meng, 2011: 39). All Chinese social media platforms employ some form of keyword search algorithm that blocks terms deemed sensitive by the government. Furthermore, major platforms like Sina employ tens of thousands of human censors who monitor all content and fill in the gaps that the algorithms miss (Hui and Rajagopalan, 2013). Additionally, the government employs professional commentators to spread pro-government propaganda on social media platforms. These individuals are known popularly as the ‘Fifty Cent Party’ (wumaodang), because of the rumored 50 cents in Chinese currency that they receive for each comment they leave.

Anyone who crosses a line can expect to see their messages deleted or their entire account frozen. More egregious violations can lead to an account being deleted entirely or, in more extreme cases, an unpleasant visit from the police, popularly known as hecha, or drinking tea. That the threshold is often unknowable is part of the strategy – with netizens uncertain as to how much they can speak out on a given topic, the government ensures a certain level of self-censorship.

This policy’s costs and benefits can be understood in the framework of the Cute Cat Theory of Digital Activism, proposed in 2008 by internet theorist Ethan Zuckerman. The theory holds two basic assumptions. First, the original internet was made for sharing academic papers, scientific data, and the like. ‘Web 1.0’, as he calls it, was largely informational in scope. However, as the internet became a more popular medium, it exists now for the sharing of entertainment and amateur media that is often affective in scope: ‘The contemporary Internet was designed, in no small part, for the dissemination of cute pictures of cats’ (Zuckerman, 2013: 3).
In the best world for an authoritarian government, the populace ought to be sharing and creating cute cat pictures and other amateur content; it’s a classic form of distraction. Thus, the challenge an authoritarian government faces is that a platform that facilitates the rapid spread of cute cat images is a platform that also facilitates the rapid spread of activist messages. With targeted controls, they should be able to pinpoint activist messages while allowing others to flourish. Blanket censorship this is not; with such a crisp level of precision, censors can control the flow of information based on topic, easing up and tightening censorship depending on factors like time of year (Ng and Landry, 2013).

In Zuckerman’s theory, there is a difference between an activist message and a cute cat. But in China, at least around the most censored content, spreading a straightforward activist message is rarely effective, for the reasons outlined above. Thus, instead of referring to the travails of internet censorship, the multiple puns of the grass mud horse menagerie skirt around the topic. Even to a trained human censor, a picture of a llama or a crab could be subversive, or it could be a photo from the zoo. Deleting too many of the latter would cost political capital.

In this way, a number of Chinese activists have employed the best qualities of internet memes – rapid virality, irreverent humor, participatory culture – and transformed them into online actions. These puns and images slip past machine and human censors through coded verbal and visual language. In other words, in the face of stringent and targeted censorship, activists embed the activist message within the cute cat, within amateur media.

To illustrate this in practice, I present a case study with one of the most sensitive, censored topics in 2011 and 2012: the story of Chen Guangcheng. The examples I provide reflect my own independent research and writing, and the work of other journalists and researchers. Keeping in mind the inherent challenges of documenting a swiftly-moving and necessarily evasive form, I have done my best to compile an overview of the meme and its transformations.

**Chen Guangcheng: The Selfie of Selfies**

The blind lawyer and human rights activist Chen Guangcheng was already a leading light in activist circles by 2006, when he was arrested. He entered prison that year while the internet was nascent in the country, but by the time he was released, Chinese-bred social media sites like Sina Weibo and WeChat were already taking hold around the country.

After his release, he faced a new nightmare, as his wife and daughter were then held in illegal detention in their own home. But new technologies helped give them voice almost immediately: in a harrowing video smuggled from his home, he and his wife described the systematic attempts to prevent their communication with the outside world, with officials traveling 100
kilometers to detain his brother, who bought a SIM card for Chen’s phone. Chen was likely beaten for releasing that video (Branigan, 2011b).

Chen’s story makes for an effective case study because of the extreme online censorship and offline brutality designed to stamp out support. As with most dissidents in the country, the government engaged in a damnatio memoriae by sporadically censoring any mention of Chen’s name and related terms online (Hernandez, 2011). At the time of his detention, he was one of the most famous dissidents in China, and yet he was effectively rendered a non-person. Symptomatic of this strategy is how he was explained to Western journalists. When Guardian reporter Tania Branigan (2011b) called the local police office in early 2011 to inquire about Chen’s status, the officer replied, ‘We are not sure what you are talking about. We will get back to you.’

In October 2011, the anonymous Chinese comic artist Crazy Crab organized an online action, asking netizens to send in pictures of themselves wearing sunglasses so he could post them to a central website (Colwell, 2011; see Figure 3). He also encouraged netizens to post the pictures to their own social media accounts. These selfies, as they might be called today, served a dual purpose. First, they seemed innocuous enough to censors, who weren’t clued in to the sunglasses reference. Secondly, they showed scale for the in-group in a powerful way: as Crazy Crab reported in an email interview with me, over 600 persons shared their photos with him, and countless others participated online (Crazy Crab, 2012, personal communication).

Crazy Crab was inspired by the French street artist JR, whose Inside Out Project consisted of portraits in public spaces. Unable to do that safely in China, Crazy Crab enacted a portrait project that existed in the only way it could: on the public space made possible by social media. The meme took off; according to Crazy Crab, it spread in less than a week’s time from mainland China to Hong Kong, and finally to overseas Chinese and others living abroad. He collected these portraits on http://ichenguangcheng.blogspot.com; the sunglasses meme even took the form of a flash mob when citizens gathered in a nearby city and donned sunglasses in the public square (Branigan, 2012).

Although Chen Guangcheng memes and images existed before the sunglass meme action, memes about him thereafter became increasingly more diverse, mutating regularly to keep ahead of censors. Chen’s handsome, sunglassed face – instantly recognizable and easy to evoke and reproduce – appeared online in sketches and cartoons. It showed up on t-shirts, stickers and faux postage stamps, and perhaps even as a street art stencil.² Activists rallied around hashtags like #FreeCGC and #CGC自由 (ziyou, meaning ‘freedom’). They came up with phrases like 要光要诚 (yao guang yao cheng) – ‘I seek light, I seek truth’ – referencing the two characters of Chen’s given name, which means ‘light and truth’.

The #FreeCGC hashtag grew in popularity and was therefore itself censored. As one of many sidestep strategies, the phrase was slapped onto cars and motorcycles with a picture of Chen designed to look like the Colonel from
Kentucky Fried Chicken. In China, KFC and its imitators are popular fast food chains, so the ‘Free CGC’ stickers looked like an offer for fried chicken. As with the meme in digital space, these offline memes became an in-joke for participants and supporters while allowing them to express themselves, and pictures of the cars and motorcycles online granted the phrase a second breath.

_Batman_ star Christian Bale attempted to visit Chen in December 2011; visits like his had become a real-life meme of sorts, as netizens sporadically organized groups to provoke guards so that they could post about their experiences on Weibo (Wade, 2011). Bale, like everyone else, was immediately turned away, and a video released by CNN showed him being chased by a rotund man in a green coat (Jiang, 2011). It was a frightening glimpse into the daily travails of Chen's life at the time.

Comic artist Remon Wang noticed that the rotund man with a peculiar face and green military jacket resembled a panda. He distributed a poster online of a fictitious film dubbed _Batman vs Pandaman_ (Jiang, 2012). It launched scores of other memes that imagined Chen Guangcheng in a superhero movie, from highly illustrated images to more rough Photoshop cuts. Netizens also began inserting Pandaman into out-of-context photos, much like meme generators in the United States did with the police officer who was photographed pepper spraying students at UC Davis (Jardin, 2011). ‘Pandaman’ became so popular that Mr Chen, in a video released

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**Figure 3** An illustrated recreation of the sunglasses-wearing meme participants as part of Crazy Crab's Dark Glasses Portrait project. Reprinted with permission by Jen Yu.
on YouTube shortly after his escape, paid direct reference to the would-be villain and identified him by his real name (Lu, 2012).

Humor has always had the function of telling difficult truths. In the midst of the heartbreaking realities of Chen’s detention, these memes made the situation a little bit easier to handle. But in the context of the internet, this humor also ensured a participatory quality; anyone could join in and make a contribution to the creative dialogue. And in so doing, they showed to each other that they were not alone. In contrast to the official silence that the government attempted to enforce, these memes allowed a creative flourishing of Chen’s name.

By spring 2012, miraculously, Chen escaped from his detention. The narrative reads like a plot from a movie. Waiting for cover of night, he scaled the two meter wall surrounding his home and made his way through the woods over the course of a few days, reportedly passing through eight layers of defense. He met a friend, He Peirong, at a getaway car at a prearranged location, and they drove to Beijing, where he eventually made his way to the embassy (JM, 2012).

Censors increased their efforts, going so far as to censor words like ‘CNN’ and ‘pearl’ – a reference to the woman who helped Chen escape (Henochowicz, 2012). And yet, even in this communication environment, memes about him continued to slip through. Crazy Crab jumped in with a homage to a still from The Shawshank Redemption, a film about a wrongfully accused man who makes a dramatic prison break. In Crazy Crab’s comic, which circulated on Sina Weibo, bewildered guards in the form of Angry Birds pigs stare down the hole through which Shawshank’s protagonist escaped. Another creative netizen remixed the original movie poster into the ‘Dongshigu Redemption’, swapping in the name of the town in which Chen was held. There are even dark glasses Photoshopped onto Shawshank protagonist Andy Dufresne, cleverly referencing the activist’s signature shades.

When censors caught on to the reference and blocked searches for the Chinese word for the film, users began posting quotes from the film in English. ‘Some birds aren’t meant to be caged’, went one that I found, ‘their feathers are just too bright.’ Messages like these were few, but they had managed to escape censorship. And finally, in his video message after his escape, Chen happened to be wearing a Nike jacket. ‘Just do it’, said one image, with a picture of him deftly avoiding escape like Air Jordan.

The memes and creativity around Chen can be seen as an intentional strategy to evade the active censorship of his name and likeness; as each one grew and got stamped out, another one emerged. The sunglasses meme proved particularly resilient. In his interview with me, Crazy Crab noted that when he launched the action, he had to take into consideration the participants’ safety and any attempts to erase their messages. The form of the sunglasses allowed participants to obscure their faces (at the time, registering a Sina Weibo account could be done anonymously), while making it difficult for censors to find and delete the subversive selfies amidst a sea of otherwise innocuous photos of people wearing sunglasses.
Further, while we cannot draw a direct causal relationship between cat videos, grass mud horses and the sunglasses meme, there is no doubt a correlation. The foundation for the creative actions in support of Chen – familiarity with digital tools, networks that would encourage remixing, and a cultural mindset to play with media and words – was already in place. Crazy Crab, Remon Wang and other artist-activists skillfully tapped into this foundation, thereby launching a variety of memes and metamemes that sidestepped multiple attempts at censorship.

Social Change Memes in a Propagandized, Censored Media Environment

After exploring how social change memes evade censorship, it is difficult to deny their power and beauty. But why are they compelling? I argue that these memes reflect an important form of social change, a broadening of the visual language of dissent through a key form of the creative vernacular of the internet.

Czech political activist Václav Havel’s foundational 1978 essay, ‘Power of the Powerless’ provides an instructive perspective when we consider these online symbolic actions in the context of a propaganda state. A successful propaganda campaign, he argues, has no holes or inconsistencies. In his essay, he explains why a greengrocer – an archetypal everyperson – living under an oppressive government puts a propaganda poster with an official slogan in his window. This poster does not contain a simple declaration of unquestioning obedience to the government. Rather, it says ‘Workers of the World Unite!’ – an essentially meaningless phrase. The sign reflects a symbolic, internal ceding of power to the state, and when everyone else does the same thing, they create what Havel (1992: 136) describes as a ‘world of appearances’.

Havel goes on to explain a thought exercise about the greengrocer, asking what it would mean if the grocer takes the poster down and ‘finds the strength in himself to express solidarity with those whom his conscience commands him to support’ (p. 146). This would be the most dangerous and profound act, and the reason the authorities must crack down is that through his actions the grocer has challenged the totalitarian media system. He has disrupted the single message of popular deference to the government and exposed the emperor as naked. This, in essence, is the power that powerless people can take back for themselves: freedom from internalized oppression.

In China today, the state promotes messages that serve its interests and censors those that do not, but it does so in a sophisticated, less unitary way. As Chinese propaganda historian Anne-Marie Brady noted in an interview with me: ‘The main model for the transformation of China’s propaganda work is the West’ and Western political media strategy, with a multimedia effort that varies depending on the audience (Mina, 2011). During the 90th anniversary celebrations of the Communist Party’s founding, for instance, I
documented everything from Party-friendly avatars for gamers to classic red and yellow banners for construction workers. Nevertheless, the propaganda still comes from a single agenda and purpose, with guidelines circulated weekly to media outlets (Xu, 2014). Indeed, for the most sensitive topics, the message rarely varies; censorship is often the preferred course of action. Furthermore, the state may also choose to spread disinformation through strategic newspaper editorials or internet comments.

Actions like that of the greengrocer break pluralistic ignorance, a state in which individuals in a society mistakenly think their beliefs are in the minority. In a digital age, Havel’s greengrocer might remix the poster instead of simply taking it down, or he might change his profile picture to reflect disagreement with government policies. These tiny actions would visually break the illusion of unitary opinion that propaganda attempts to generate. This is no small feat; the breaking of pluralistic ignorance is, in Tufekci’s (2014a) consideration, ‘perhaps [the internet’s] greatest contribution to social movements’.

Social change memes like the grass mud horse and Batman vs Pandaman represent a rift in the singular media environment, but so do many other media forms, like blog posts and simple status updates. I believe one reason memes resonate specifically is that they turn the tools and methods of state propaganda against itself. As scholar Guobin Yang has noted (2009), it is against a ‘culture of official-centricity that the internet culture of humor and play assumes special significance’. Hu Jintao’s use of the phrase ‘Harmonious Socialist Society’ employs stern-faced euphemism to articulate a guiding policy that led to an increase in human rights abuses under his leadership. The grass mud horse and river crab menagerie reflect a similar deftness with language, with the absurdity and humor operating contra the famously humorless visages of the Politburo. Even the popularity of the grass mud horse song can be seen as a riposte to monotonous Party music, historically blared on the radio and in public spaces and more recently played during state television broadcasts.

Similarly, the illegal detention of Chen Guangcheng and censorship of his name were designed to simultaneously cultivate fear amongst activists and sympathizers, and render Chen invisible to the general public. Consider Chen’s horrifying account of how his mother was treated at the hands of their captors:

My old mother was seized by the arm and pushed to the ground by a party member on her birthday. Her faces [sic] faced the sky, and her head struck the door of the east room. She burst into tears. She accused that the beaters could beat her simply because they were young. They shamelessly replied, ‘we are young and we could beat you, but you simply couldn’t defeat us!’ (Lu, 2012)

It’s no accident, then, that Remon Wang’s comic of Batman vs Pandaman took off: amidst terrifying, disempowering stories of Chen’s suffering, this
funny meme painted him as a superhero in his own right, while his captor was transformed into a harmless panda. Likewise, in the face of the extreme censorship around Chen’s name, Crazy Crab’s strategy of employing the selfie – an expression of the human face – was a direct response to attempts to erase Chen’s face and name from public memory.

Further, these memes reflect a fundamental shift in how citizens orient to the media environment they have inherited. Speaking specifically to internet media in the Chinese context, scholar Bingchun Meng (2011: 40) noted that the ability to make alterations to media and share those alterations ‘indicates an important shift in terms of the relationship between author and reader or between storyteller and audience. The dichotomy is now rather fluid and changeable in the digital environment’. This has substantial implications for persons living in a hegemonic, heavily propagandized media environment: where once state media could largely only be consumed, they can now be remixed and changed publicly, and with a potentially wide community.

For participants, the messages are no longer taken for granted or quietly critiqued but can instead be challenged with regularity through internet meme culture, blogs and other citizen media. In this milieu, social change memes function as dissident art and culture – from protest theater to graffiti – have always done in offline space: by providing a creative outlet for individual and small community expression around issues that matter most to them. What is new is how the culture and structure of the internet and the very low barrier to participation have facilitated memes’ rapid spread to newer and broader communities.

This expression, as researchers Lijun Tang and Peidong Yang (2011: 687) have argued, releases existing sentiments while opening ‘a space for a whole new set of resistance discourses to emerge and flourish’. Indeed, part of Crazy Crab’s intent in harnessing this communal, creative energy was to provoke a conversation:

Even if there are people who didn’t send pictures because of fear [of reprisal], a type of inner experience is also a part of the activity. The treatment [of Chen] is unjust and fearful. I believe they cannot forever remain silent. (2012, personal correspondence)

This notion of speaking out against state silence is a critical insight because it reflects a transformative change. In the case of severely-censored topics like Chen Guangcheng, memes make the difference between no mention of him and hundreds of messages about him, between fearful silence and raucous laughter. And for individuals, these memes may have marked their very first act of speaking out – and realizing, in doing so, that there are others who feel the same way.

Three Years Later: Divining the Future of Social Change on the Chinese Web

Much of the research I share above comes from 2011 and 2012, when China saw rapid growth in the usage of social media; 2011 in particular reflected
the rise of Sina Weibo as a leading social media platform in China, but it was also the year that saw a severe crackdown on human rights. Sparked by concerns that the events of the Arab Spring might inspire a so-called ‘Jasmine Revolution’ on the home front, the government grew increasingly nervous (Branigan, 2011a).

In February 2011, rumors spread that protesters should organize around the public space near McDonald’s on Wangfujing Street, blocks from Tiananmen Square. But any hint of public organizing was quickly shut down. I witnessed much of this shutdown, which included an increased presence of plainclothes police and the development of a construction site that prevented any substantive public gathering. More ominously, the government questioned and detained hundreds of activists, and they disappeared dozens. That same year, microblogs took off as a leading platform for celebrities, public intellectuals, government officials and corporations. Facing sophisticated and targeted censorship of the most sensitive topics, activists turned to memes as a means of advocating for dissidents like Chen Guangcheng.

As of early 2014, the time this article is written, social change memes in China face an uncertain future, and by the time this article is published, China’s internet landscape will no doubt have changed. On Sina Weibo, I recently saw the grass mud horse as one of many official smileys and emoji that can be embedded into a message. One could argue that it has been co-opted by Sina, defanged of its original, subversive purpose and transformed into a simple puerile pun. Of greater concern are stricter rules around viral content. Shortly after instituting a real name registration policy for microblogs, the government enacted increasingly tighter controls, including visible arrests of high-profile figures. Usage of Sina Weibo dropped by 70 percent, and Chinese internet users are migrating to more one-to-one messaging systems like Tencent’s Weixin (known as WeChat in English) (Moore, 2014). These networks allow for sharing media and remixes, but only to tight, small social groups rather than potentially millions of followers.

However, this dramatic shift in Weibo’s fortunes does not mean that creative internet expression as a whole is in danger. With regard to social change memes, the culture of creation and remix has already begun, and the Chinese web consists of many more social media platforms than Weibo. The platform itself is not the point: China has a long history of social media platforms rising and falling, from BBSes to Fanfou (Parker, 2014). While the virality of online media has been severely curtailed, the hole in the propaganda wall has already been pierced, and the networks of support have already formed. As of early 2014, I have even seen social change memes and other messages about social and political issues being disseminated on Weixin within my social circles. As I have argued, creating these memes already reflects an important form of social change.

Where memes fit into the larger contexts of Chinese social movements and systemic change is a topic worth researching further. Crazy Crab has expressed optimism. As he noted in an interview:
I hope that netizens, when clicking the mouse, come closer to actual practice and by sending a picture, they come to support [Chen] Guangcheng. [I want to let] every participant (including those who didn’t send a picture) experience this mental process. I hope everyone can think, ‘Why do we have fear? What is happening to China? Why? And what should we do?’

We must remember, however, that Crazy Crab continues to be anonymous; I have never met him and am not even sure where he lives in China. The danger he and other activists face is real, and there are no signs that the danger has abated.

Seen from the level of the individual and small communities, memes have great power and beauty. In China, we must understand social change memes as a form of citizen media, a small reclamation of power contra state media. They challenge official state media through remix and humor and draw on the norms of a broader internet meme culture to spread an alternative while encouraging others to participate and join the community. In response to censorship and erasure, they create voice and visibility; in response to terrifying human rights abuses, they create laughter and community; in response to droll Party euphemism, they create irreverent puns and fuzzy creatures. In the face of systematic dehumanization and unitary state messaging, they are a basic declaration of humanity composed of creative, idiosyncratic media. In the vast expanse of the digital Gobi Desert, they are a glimmer of hope, joy, humor and community.

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Notes

1. For the sake of explaining the puns, I have used the diacritical marks of pinyin Romanization to do so. However, as they do not generally have meaning to non-speakers of Mandarin, throughout this article I will only use standard pinyin and Chinese characters.

2. I have been unable to verify if the stencil I saw was Photoshop or was genuinely an image from somewhere in China.

3. Appropriately, the essay was first distributed in samizdat, a technique for disguising and coding dissident material.
References


An ‘An Xiao’ Mina is an American technologist, artist, and writer. In her research and practice, she explores the intersection of networked, creative communities and civic engagement, with a particular emphasis on human rights issues in global contexts. She is co-founder of The Civic Beat, a media group that looks at social change memes around the world, and she serves as a product owner at Meedan Labs, where she is working to build a platform to facilitate social translation of social media. An’s writing and commentary have appeared in
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In 2009, An was the first artist commissioned by the Brooklyn Museum to develop an art project for Twitter for their groundbreaking 1stfans program, the museum world’s first socially networked membership and art series. Featured in a 2011 cover story on social media art for *ARTNews*, her work has been exhibited internationally, in venues like 4A Contemporary Art in Sydney, Hun Gallery in Seoul, Fei Gallery in Shanghai, the Indianapolis Museum of Contemporary Art and others.

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Audio/Video Design
Course Reader

Selections from:

Robert Bresson. *Notes on the Cinematographer.*

Martin Heidegger. *The Point of Reference.*


Michael Naimark. *On Movies and Form.*

Robert Bresson’s Notes on the Cinematographer: A Selection

‘CINEMATOGRAPHY’ IS A WRITING WITH IMAGES IN MOVEMENT AND WITH SOUNDS.

An image must be transformed by contact with other images, as is a color by contact with other colors. A blue is not the same blue beside a green, a yellow, a red. No art without transformation.

Two types of film: those that employ the resources of the theater (actors, direction, etc.) and use the camera in order to reproduce; those that employ the resources of cinematography and use the camera to create.

Cinematographic film, where the images, like the words in a dictionary, have no power and value except through their position and relation.

Apply myself to insignificant (non-significant) images.

To create is not to deform or invent persons and things. It is to tie new relationships between persons and things which are, and as they are.
Catch instants. Spontaneity, freshness.

A too-expected image (cliche) will never seem right, even if it is.

The insensible bond connecting your images which are furthest apart and most different is your vision.

Don't run after poetry. It penetrates unaided through the joins (ellipses).

Someone who can work with the minimum can work with the most. One who can with the most cannot, inevitably, with the minimum.

NEITHER DIRECTOR NOR SCENARIO-WRITER. FORGET YOU ARE MAKING A FILM.

Images and sounds like people who make acquaintance on a journey and afterwards cannot separate.
Music takes up all the room and gives no increased value to the image to which it is added.

When a sound can replace an image, cut the image or neutralize it. The ear goes more towards the within, the eye towards the outer.

A sound must never come to the help of an image, nor an image to the help of a sound.
All distances in time and space are shrinking. Places that a person previously reached after weeks and months on the road are now reached by airplane overnight. What a person previously received news of only after years, if at all, is now experienced hourly over the radio in no time. The germination and flourishing of plants that remained concealed through the seasons, film now exhibits publicly in a single minute. Film shows the distant cities of the most ancient cultures as if they stood at this very moment amidst today’s street traffic. Beyond this, film further attests to what it shows by simultaneously displaying the recording apparatus itself at work along with the humans who serve it. The pinnacle of all such removals of distance is achieved by television, which will soon race through and dominate the entire scaffolding and commotion of commerce.

The human puts the longest stretches behind himself in the shortest time. He puts the greatest distances behind him and thus puts everything at the shortest distance before him. Yet the hasty setting aside of all distances brings no nearness; for nearness does not consist in a small amount of distance. What confronts us at the shortest distance in terms of length, through the imagery of film or the sound of the radio, can remain remote to us. What is vastly far away in terms of length, can be near to us. Short distance is not already nearness. Great distance is not yet remoteness.

What is nearness if it remains outstanding despite the shrinking of the greatest lengths to the shortest distances? What is nearness if it is even warded off by the restless removal
of distances? What is nearness when, along with its own exclusion, remoteness too remains away?

What is happening when, through the removal of great distances, everything stands equally near and far? What is this uniformity wherein everything is neither far nor near and, as it were, without distance?

Everything washes together into the uniformly distanceless. How? Is not this moving together into the distanceless even more uncanny than everything being out of place? The human is transfixed by what could come about with the explosion of the atomic bomb. The human does not see what for a long time now has already arrived and even is occurring, and for which the atomic bomb and its explosion are merely the latest emission, not to speak of the hydrogen bomb, whose detonation, thought in its broadest possibility, could be enough to wipe out all life on earth. What is this clueless anxiety waiting for, if the horrible [das Entsetzliche] has already occurred?

The horrifying is what transposes [heraussetzt] all that is out of its previous essence. What is so horrifying? It reveals and conceals itself in the way that everything presences, namely that despite all overcoming of distance, the nearness of that which is remains outstanding.
The Intermedia Network as Nature

The point I wish to make here is obvious yet vital to an understanding of the function of art in the environment, even though it is consistently ignored by the majority of film critics. It's the idea that man is conditioned by his environment and that "environment" for contemporary man is the intermedia network. We are conditioned more by cinema and television than by nature. Once we've agreed upon this, it becomes immediately obvious that the structure and content of popular cinema is a matter of cardinal importance, at least as serious as most political issues, and thus calls for comment not from journalists but from those who work at the matter, artists themselves.

The cinema isn't just something inside the environment; the intermedia network of cinema, television, radio, magazines, books, and newspapers is our environment, a service environment that carries the messages of the social organism. It establishes meaning in life, creates mediating channels between man and man, man and society. "In earlier periods such traditional meaning and value communication was carried mainly in the fine and folk arts. But today these are subsumed amongst many communicating modes. The term 'arts' requires expansion to include those advanced technological media which are neither fine nor folk."

We've seen the need for new concepts regarding the nature of existence; yet concepts are expanded or constricted in direct relation to the relevancy of prevailing languages. In a world where change is the only constant, it's obvious we can't afford to rely on traditional cinematic language. The world has changed immeasurably in the seventy years since the birth of cinema: for one thing "world" now includes the microcosm of the atom and the macrocosm of the universe in one spectrum. Still popular films speak a language developed by Griffith, Lumière, Méliès, derived from traditions of vaudeville and literature.

In the Agricultural Age man was totally passive, conditioned and victimized by the environment. In the Industrial Age man's role was

participatory; he became more aggressive and successful in his attempts to control his environment. We're now moving into the Cybernetic Age in which man learns that to control his environment he must cooperate with it; he not only participates but actually recreates his environment both physical and metaphysical, and in turn is conditioned by it.

To be free of the toil of old relationships we must first be free of the conditioning that instills it within us. As radical evolution gains momentum the need to unlearn our past becomes increasingly clear: contemporary life is a process of miseducation/uneducation/reeducation, at a cost of much precious time. McLuhan has noted that the true significance of Pavlov's experiments was that any controlled man-made environment is a conditioner that creates "nonperceptive somnambulists." Since then science has discovered that "molecular memory" is operative in single-celled and some multi-celled organisms, and there's evidence that memory-in-the-flesh exists in humans as well. Biochemists have proven that learned responses to environmental stimuli are passed on phylogenetically from generation to generation, encoded in the RNA of the organism's physical molecular structure. And what could be a more powerful conditioning force than the intermedia network, which functions to establish meaning in life?

Science has proven that there's no such thing as "human nature." Just as water takes the shape of its container, so human nature is relative to its past and present conditioning. Optimum freedom of behavior and increased self-awareness are implicit in the industrial equation that is trending toward physical success for all men; Paleocybernetic man, however, has not learned to control the environment he creates. "The content of what is available for emulation on the part of the young in each society is itself culturally shaped and limited... the individual typically remains, throughout his lifetime, unaware of how his own habits, which to him appear 'only natural,' in fact result from a learning process in which he never had an opportunity to attempt alternative responses." This process

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18 Segall, Campbell, Herskovits, op. cit., p. 10.
56 Expanded Cinema

of enculturation produces *phenomenal absolutism*, the tendency to interpret our experience as volitional, objective, and absolute; it will have ever-increasing consequences as radical evolution continues to accelerate.
some notes on movies and form

by MICHAEL NAIRMARK

Edmund Carpenter, the anthropologist, once joked down the number of a centrally located pay phone in Grand Central Station. He then spent the next few weeks calling this number. The pay phone was invariably answered quickly, and Carpenter would ask, 'Why did you pick up the phone?' The replies were always the same: 'Because it rang.'

How often do we see images that are not flat and rectangular? (How many images of yourself have you seen that were not flat and rectangular?)

True to its theatrical roots, the first decade of moviemaking had no camera movement. When pans and tracks were first introduced, it was a big deal and was compared to a movable stage.

Stan Brakhage: "still photography and motion picture photography are polar opposite techniques, all the more confusing in as much as they share certain equipment and must be practiced as opposites from the beginning."

In addition to its random access capability, the optical videodisc has another unique feature: the frame per second rate is variable (read programmable) from 0 (still frame) to 30 (normal video) "play" speed. An intelligent camera for video disc production would use this feature as another parameter of freedom. Such a camera presently does not exist.

While the "official" frame per second rate of video is 30, each half-frame field contains its own motion information, giving video an effective fps rate of 60. Some believe that the upper threshold of our persistence of vision is around 60 fps (the lower threshold is well known to be around 15). The more than double fps difference between film (24 fps) and video is a factor for the visual difference between the two media on television.

Doug Trumbull, known for his special effects in 2001 and Close Encounters, developed a new movie system called "Showcase." It uses 70mm film and runs at 60 frames per second instead of the standard 24 fps. (The film is both shot and played back at 60 fps, so the images are "real time." I've seen it.)

Two things stand out:
1) It looks more real than conventional movies.
2) It looks like video.

When conventional television is blown up very large, it usually looks lousy -- you can see the lines. When TV advances to a higher resolution, more lines, it will look like Trumbull's Showcase.

Legend has it that a gentleman once approached Picasso on the street and criticized his paintings as "childish" reality. Seeming to change the subject, the artist asked the gentleman if he had a girlfriend. He did, and produced a small picture of her from his wallet. "She's beautiful," replied Picasso, "but she's so tiny."

Around the turn of the century, the Lumiere brothers began showing their movies in the salons of Paris. They would set their camera boxes up opposite a white sheet, put the film back through it, a frame behind and cranked. It is said that when a scene of an incoming train was shown, the audience would duck. It was real to them, or at least they weren't willing to take any chances.

With few exceptions, the general rule has been if you need it big, use film. If you need it live or interactive, use video.

Traditionally, film productions are shot with one camera while video productions are shot with multiple cameras. With film, different camera angles are shot during different "takes." The finished version, produced in the editing room, consists of matching cuts, often unsuccessfully, but with precisely composed timing. Video productions, on the other hand, are usually shot with multiple cameras. Editing is performed "on the fly" through live video switching, and often suffers less-than-precise timing. No match cuts are necessary since different camera angles are shot simultaneously.

Sitting has never been an issue with conventional television or movies. The playback environments are out of control of the movemaker.

If real time means a temporal correspondence between record and playback environments, then real space means a spatial correspondence between record and playback environments.

Why do movie cameras move and movie projectors do not?

The eye is apparently harder to fool than the ear. We've all had the experience of mistaking a voice from the radio for being someone present. Yet when we enter a theater, there is never any question whether what we see is a movie or live.

A funny thing happened on the second Aspen "Moviemap" shoot. It was winter, and when we landed in Denver, flights to Aspen had been cancelled due to snow. We rented cars and drove into town. There were five of us in our car. Two of the five had never been to Aspen before, but had spent the past couple of months working intensively with the video disc produced from our first shoot of the town the previous summer. As we pulled into town and drove down Main Street, they both had the same two reactions. They knew where everything was -- the park coming up on the right, the hotel Jerome beyond it on the left. But they were both amazed that it didn't look anything like what they had expected.

(A moviemap is an exhaustively filmed place: every street in every direction, every corner in every direction, in every season. The computer uses two optical videocassettes to splice the correct filmic sequences of streets, and turns as rapidly as possible, giving the sensation of driving down the street. The Aspen Moviemap project was produced by the Architecture Machine Group at M.I.T.)

With television, the sense of "being" is at best sporadic and ambiguous and at worst completely lost. Millions of us may have felt like we were on the moon, but we certainly didn't feel like we were in Vietnam.

I once compared exposure readings of an outdoor scene in a movie with a real outdoor scene and found that the real scene was over 1,000 times brighter than its movie equivalent.

The ultimate media room will be indistinguishable from reality. Any reality: the kind one sees with eyes closed as well as with eyes open. All senses will be effected; all effectors will be sensed. One will be able to touch, smell, wall around, and move objects as well as see and hear. (You may be in one right now.) Like the screen of a television, everything changes when one changes the channel; everything disappears when one pulls the plug.

Edmund Carpenter: "To depict a whole object on a flat surface, literate man employs three dimensional perspective -- he shows only the surface visible from a single position at a single moment. In short, he fails."

There is no word in the English language that is the spatial equivalent to "simultaneous."

Limits to how we communicate limits what we communicate. The converse is not true.

Gregory Bateson defined information as "any difference that makes a difference.‖ As our eyes look around a movie theater or TV environment, the area of greatest visual difference lies in the place to which we've most acclimated. It lies neither in the screen nor in the room itself; it lies at the window's edge.
Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*

* Written in 1973 and published in 1975 in Screen.

I INTRODUCTION

(a) A Political Use of Psychoanalysis

This paper intends to use psychoanalysis to discover where and how the fascination of film is reinforced by pre-existing patterns of fascination already at work within the individual subject and the social formations that have moulded him. It takes as its starting-point the way film reflects, reveals and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle. It is helpful to understand what the cinema has been, how its magic has worked in the past, while attempting a theory and a practice which will challenge this cinema of the past. Psychoanalytic theory is thus appropriated here as a political weapon, demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form.

The paradox of phallocentrism in all its manifestations is that it depends on the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world. An idea of woman stands as linchpin to the system: it is her lack that produces the phallus as a symbolic presence, it is her desire to make good the lack that the phallus signifies. Recent writing in Screen about psychoanalysis and the cinema has not sufficiently brought out the importance of the representation of the female form in a symbolic order in which, in the last resort, it speaks castration and nothing else. To summarise briefly: the function of woman in forming the patriarchal unconscious is twofold: she firstly symbolises the castration threat by her real lack of a penis and secondly thereby raises her child into the symbolic. Once this has been achieved, her meaning in the process is at an end. It does not last into the world of law and language except as a memory, which oscillates between memory of maternal plenitude and memory of lack. Both are posited on nature (or on anatomy in Freud’s famous phrase). Woman’s desire is subjugated to her image as bearer of the bleeding wound; she can exist only in relation to castration and cannot transcend it. She turns her child into the signifier of her own desire to possess a penis (the condition, she imagines, of entry into the
effect patterns of fascination and social formations in the way film reflects, establishes interpretations of ways of looking and cinema has been, how promoting a theory and a step past. Psychoanalytic weapon, demonstrating as structured film form. manifestations is that it give order and meaning upon to the system: it is presence, it is her desire. Recent writing in Screen sufficiently brought out the role form in a symbolic action and nothing else. forming the patriarchal the castration threat by raises her child into the vanishing in the process is and language except as maternal plenitude and on anatomy in Freud’s to her image as bearer relation to castration and the signifier of her own organs, of entry into the symbolic). Either she must gracefully give way to the word, the name of the father and the law, or else struggle to keep her child down with her in the half-light of the imaginary. Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning.

There is an obvious interest in this analysis for feminists, a beauty in its exact rendering of the frustration experienced under the phallocentric order. It gets us nearer to the roots of our oppression, it brings closer an articulation of the problem, it faces us with the ultimate challenge: how to fight the unconscious structured like a language (formed critically at the moment of arrival of language) while still caught within the language of the patriarchy? There is no way in which we can produce an alternative out of the blue, but we can begin to make a break by examining patriarchy with the tools it provides, of which psychoanalysis is not the only but an important one. We are still separated by a great gap from important issues for the female unconscious which are scarcely relevant to phallocentric theory: the sexing of the female infant and her relationship to the symbolic, the sexually mature woman as non-mother, maternity outside the signification of the phallus, the vagina. But, at this point, psychoanalytic theory as it now stands can at least advance our understanding of the status quo, of the patriarchal order in which we are caught.

(b) Destruction of Pleasure as a Radical Weapon

As an advanced representation system, the cinema poses questions about the ways the unconscious (formed by the dominant order) structures ways of seeing and pleasure in looking. Cinema has changed over the last few decades. It is no longer the monolithic system based on large capital investment exemplified at its best by Hollywood in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. Technological advances (16mm and so on) have changed the economic conditions of cinematic production, which can now be artisanal as well as capitalist. Thus it has been possible for an alternative cinema to develop. However self-conscious and ironic Hollywood managed to be, it always restricted itself to a formal mise en scène reflecting the dominant ideological concept of the cinema. The alternative cinema provides a space for the birth of a cinema which is radical in both a political and an aesthetic sense and challenges the basic assumptions of the mainstream film. This is not to reject the latter morally, but to highlight the ways in which its formal preoccupations reflect the psychical obsessions of the society which produced it and, further, to stress that the alternative cinema must start specifically
by reacting against these obsessions and assumptions. A politically and aesthetically avant-garde cinema is now possible, but it can still only exist as a counterpoint.

The magic of the Hollywood style at its best (and of all the cinema which fell within its sphere of influence) arose, not exclusively, but in one important aspect, from its skilled and satisfying manipulation of visual pleasure. Unchallenged, mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order. In the highly developed Hollywood cinema it was only through these codes that the alienated subject, torn in his imaginary memory by a sense of loss, by the terror of potential lack in fantasy, came near to finding a glimpse of satisfaction: through its formal beauty and its play on his own formative obsessions. This article will discuss the interweaving of that erotic pleasure in film, its meaning and, in particular, the central place of the image of woman. It is said that analysing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it. That is the intention of this article. The satisfaction and reinforcement of the ego that represent the high point of film history hitherto must be attacked. Not in favour of a reconstructed new pleasure, which cannot exist in the abstract, nor of intellectualised unpleasure, but to make way for a total negation of the ease and plenitude of the narrative fiction film. The alternative is the thrill that comes from leaving the past behind without simply rejecting it, transcending outworn or oppressive forms, and daring to break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language of desire.

II PLEASURE IN LOOKING/FASCINATION WITH THE HUMAN FORM

A The cinema offers a number of possible pleasures. One is scopophilia (pleasure in looking). There are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation, there is pleasure in being looked at. Originally, in his Three Essays on Sexuality, Freud isolated scopophilia as one of the component instincts of sexuality which exist as drives quite independently of the erogenous zones. At this point he associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze. His particular examples centre on the voyeuristic activities of children, their desire to see and make sure of the private and forbidden (curiosity about other people's genital and bodily functions, about the presence or absence of the penis and, retrospectively, about the primal scene). In this analysis scopophilia is essentially active. (Later, in 'Instincts and Their Vicissitudes', Freud developed his theory of scopophilia further, attaching it initially to pre-genital auto-eroticism, after which, by analogy, the pleasure of the look
is transferred to others. There is a close working here of the relationship between the active instinct and its further development in a narcissistic form.) Although the instinct is modified by other factors, in particular the constitution of the ego, it continues to exist as the erotic basis for pleasure in looking at another person as object. At the extreme, it can become fixated into a perversion, producing obsessive voyeurs and Peeping Toms whose only sexual satisfaction can come from watching, in an active controlling sense, an objectified other.

At first glance, the cinema would seem to be remote from the undercover world of the surreptitious observation of an unknowing and unwilling victim. What is seen on the screen is so manifestly shown. But the mass of mainstream film, and the conventions within which it has consciously evolved, portray a hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic fantasy. Moreover the extreme contrast between the darkness in the auditorium (which also isolates the spectators from one another) and the brilliance of the shifting patterns of light and shade on the screen helps to promote the illusion of voyeuristic separation. Although the film is really being shown, is there to be seen, conditions of screening and narrative conventions give the spectator an illusion of looking in on a private world. Among other things, the position of the spectators in the cinema is blatantly one of repression of their exhibitionism and projection of the repressed desire onto the performer.

B The cinema satisfies a primordial wish for pleasurable looking, but it also goes further, developing scopophilia in its narcissistic aspect. The conventions of mainstream film focus attention on the human form. Scale, space, stories are all anthropomorphic. Here, curiosity and the wish to look intermingle with a fascination with likeness and recognition: the human face, the human body, the relationship between the human form and its surroundings, the visible presence of the person in the world. Jacques Lacan has described how the moment when a child recognises its own image in the mirror is crucial for the constitution of the ego. Several aspects of this analysis are relevant here. The mirror phase occurs at a time when children’s physical ambitions outstrip their motor capacity, with the result that their recognition of themselves is joyous in that they imagine their mirror image to be more complete, more perfect than they experience in their own body. Recognition is thus overlaid with misrecognition: the image recognised is conceived as the reflected body of the self, but its misrecognition as superior projects this body outside itself as an ideal ego, the alienated subject which, reintroduced as an ego ideal, prepares the way for identification with others in the future. This mirror moment predates language for the child.
Important for this article is the fact that it is an image that constitutes the matrix of the imaginary, of recognition/misrecognition and identification, and hence of the first articulation of the I, of subjectivity. This is a moment when an older fascination with looking (at the mother’s face, for an obvious example) collides with the initial inklings of self-awareness. Hence it is the birth of the long love affair/despair between image and self-image which has found such intensity of expression in film and such joyous recognition in the cinema audience. Quite apart from the extraneous similarities between screen and mirror (the framing of the human form in its surroundings, for instance), the cinema has structures of fascination strong enough to allow temporary loss of ego while simultaneously reinforcing it. The sense of forgetting the world as the ego has come to perceive it (I forgot who I am and where I was) is nostalgically reminiscent of that pre-subjective moment of image recognition. While at the same time, the cinema has distinguished itself in the production of ego ideals, through the star system for instance. Stars provide a focus or centre both to screen space and screen story where they act out a complex process of likeness and difference (the glamorous impersonates the ordinary).

C Sections A and B have set out two contradictory aspects of the pleasurable structures of looking in the conventional cinematic situation. The first, scophophilic, arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight. The second, developed through narcissism and the constitution of the ego, comes from identification with the image seen. Thus, in film terms, one implies a separation of the erotic identity of the subject from the object on the screen (active scopophilia), the other demands identification of the ego with the object on the screen through the spectator’s fascination with and recognition of his like. The first is a function of the sexual instincts, the second of ego-libido. This dichotomy was crucial for Freud. Although he saw the two as interacting and overlaying each other, the tension between instinctual drives and self-preservation polarises in terms of pleasure. But both are formative structures, mechanisms without intrinsic meaning. In themselves they have no signification, unless attached to an idealisation. Both pursue aims in indifference to perceptual reality, and motivate eroticised phantasmagoria that affect the subject’s perception of the world to make a mockery of empirical objectivity.

During its history, the cinema seems to have evolved a particular illusion of reality in which this contradiction between libido and ego has found a beautifully complementary fantasy world. In reality the fantasy world of the screen is subject to the law which produces it. Sexual instincts and identification processes have a meaning within the symbolic order which articulates desire. Desire, born with language,
allows the possibility of transcending the instinctual and the imaginary, but its point of reference continually returns to the traumatic moment of its birth: the castration complex. Hence the look, pleasurable in form, can be threatening in content, and it is woman as representation/image that crystallises this paradox.

III WOMAN AS IMAGE, MAN AS BEARER OF THE LOOK

A In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire. Mainstream film neatly combines spectacle and narrative. (Note, however, how in the musical song-and-dance numbers interrupt the flow of the diegesis.) The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story-line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation. This alien presence then has to be integrated into cohesion with the narrative. As Budd Boetticher has put it:

> What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance.

(A recent tendency in narrative film has been to dispense with this problem altogether; hence the development of what Molly Haskell has called the 'buddy movie', in which the active homosexual eroticism of the central male figures can carry the story without distraction.) Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen. For instance, the device of the show-girl allows the two looks to be unified technically without any apparent break in the diegesis. A woman performs within the narrative; the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters in the film are neatly combined without breaking narrative verisimilitude. For a moment the sexual impact of the performing woman takes the
film into a no man's land outside its own time and space. Thus Marilyn Monroe's first appearance in The River of No Return and Lauren Bacall's songs in To Have and Have Not. Similarly, conventional close-ups of legs (Dietrich, for instance) or a face (Garbo) integrate into the narrative a different mode of eroticism. One part of a fragmented body destroys the Renaissance space, the illusion of depth demanded by the narrative; it gives flatness, the quality of a cut-out or icon, rather than verisimilitude, to the screen.

B An active/passive heterosexual division of labour has similarly controlled narrative structure. According to the principles of the ruling ideology and the psychical structures that back it up, the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like. Hence the split between spectacle and narrative supports the man's role as the active one of advancing the story, making things happen. The man controls the film fantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator, transferring it behind the screen to neutralise its extra-diegetic tendencies represented by woman as spectacle. This is made possible through the processes set in motion by structuring the film around a main controlling figure with whom the spectator can identify. As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as the controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence. A male movie star's glamorous characteristics are thus not those of the erotic object of the gaze, but those of the more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal ego conceived in the original moment of recognition in front of the mirror. The character in the story can make things happen and control events better than the subject/spectator, just as the image in the mirror was more in control of motor co-ordination.

In contrast to woman as icon, the active male figure (the ego ideal of the identification process) demands a three-dimensional space corresponding to that of the mirror recognition, in which the alienated subject internalised his own representation of his imaginary existence. He is a figure in a landscape. Here the function of film is to reproduce as accurately as possible the so-called natural conditions of human perception. Camera technology (as exemplified by deep focus in particular) and camera movements (determined by the action of the protagonist), combined with invisible editing (demanded by realism), all tend to blur the limits of screen space. The male protagonist is free to command the stage, a stage of spatial illusion in which he articulates the look and creates the action. (There are films with a woman as main protagonist, of course. To analyse this phenomenon seriously here would take me
too far afield. Pam Cook and Claire Johnston's study of The Revolt of Mamie Slover in Phil Hardy (ed.), Raoul Walsh (Edinburgh, 1974), shows in a striking case how the strength of this female protagonist is more apparent than real.)

C1 Sections III A and B have set out a tension between a mode of representation of woman in film and conventions surrounding the diegesis. Each is associated with a look: that of the spectator in direct scopophilic contact with the female form displayed for his enjoyment (connoting male fantasy) and that of the spectator fascinated with the image of his like set in an illusion of natural space, and through him gaining control and possession of the woman within the diegesis. (This tension and the shift from one pole to the other can structure a single text. Thus both in Only Angels Have Wings and in To Have and Have Not, the film opens with the woman as object of the combined gaze of spectator and all the male protagonists in the film. She is isolated, glamorous, on display, sexualised. But as the narrative progresses she falls in love with the main male protagonist and becomes his property, losing her outward glamorous characteristics, her generalised sexuality, her show-girl connotations; her eroticism is subjected to the male star alone. By means of identification with him, through participation in his power, the spectator can indirectly possess her too.)

But in psychoanalytic terms, the female figure poses a deeper problem. She also connotes something that the look continually circles around but disavows: her lack of a penis, implying a threat of castration and hence displeasure. Ultimately, the meaning of woman is sexual difference, the visually ascertainable absence of the penis, the material evidence on which is based the castration complex essential for the organisation of entrance to the symbolic order and the law of the father. Thus the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified. The male unconscious has two avenues of escape from this castration anxiety: preoccupation with the re-enactment of the original trauma (investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery), counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object (an avenue typified by the concerns of the film noir); or else complete disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous (hence overvaluation, the cult of the female star).

This second avenue, fetishistic scopophilia, builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself. The first avenue, voyeurism, on the contrary, has associations with sadism: pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt (immediately associated with
castration), asserting control and subjugating the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness. This sadistic side fits well with narrative. Sadism demands a story, depends on making something happen, forcing a change in another person, a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat, all occurring in a linear time with a beginning and an end. Fetishistic scopophilia, on the other hand, can exist outside linear time as the erotic instinct is focused on the look alone. These contradictions and ambiguities can be illustrated more simply by using works by Hitchcock and Sternberg, both of whom take the look almost as the content or subject matter of many of their films. Hitchcock is the more complex, as he uses both mechanisms. Sternberg's work, on the other hand, provides many pure examples of fetishistic scopophilia.

C2 Sternberg once said he would welcome his films being projected upside-down so that story and character involvement would not interfere with the spectator's undiluted appreciation of the screen image. This statement is revealing but ingenuous: ingenuous in that his films do demand that the figure of the woman (Dietrich, in the cycle of films with her, as the ultimate example) should be identifiable; but revealing in that it emphasises the fact that for him the pictorial space enclosed by the frame is paramount, rather than narrative or identification processes. While Hitchcock goes into the investigative side of voyeurism, Sternberg produces the ultimate fetish, taking it to the point where the powerful look of the male protagonist (characteristic of traditional narrative film) is broken in favour of the image in direct erotic rapport with the spectator. The beauty of the woman as object and the screen space coalesce; she is no longer the bearer of guilt but a perfect product, whose body, stylised and fragmented by close-ups, is the content of the film and the direct recipient of the spectator's look.

Sternberg plays down the illusion of screen depth; his screen tends to be one-dimensional, as light and shade, lace, steam, foliage, net, streamers and so on reduce the visual field. There is little or no mediation of the look through the eyes of the main male protagonist. On the contrary, shadowy presences like La Bessière in Morocco act as surrogates for the director, detached as they are from audience identification. Despite Sternberg's insistence that his stories are irrelevant, it is significant that they are concerned with situation, not suspense, and cyclical rather than linear time, while plot complications revolve around misunderstanding rather than conflict. The most important absence is that of the controlling male gaze within the screen scene. The high point of emotional drama in the most typical Dietrich films, her supreme moments of erotic meaning, take place in the absence of the man she loves in the fiction. There are other witnesses, other spectators watching.
her on the screen, their gaze is one with, not standing in for, that of the audience. At the end of Morocco, Tom Brown has already disappeared into the desert when Amy Jolly kicks off her gold sandals and walks after him. At the end of Dishonoured, Kranau is indifferent to the fate of Magda. In both cases, the erotic impact, sanctified by death, is displayed as a spectacle for the audience. The male hero misunderstands and, above all, does not see.

In Hitchcock, by contrast, the male hero does see precisely what the audience sees. However, although fascination with an image through scopophilic eroticism can be the subject of the film, it is the role of the hero to portray the contradictions and tensions experienced by the spectator. In Vertigo in particular, but also in Marnie and Rear Window, the look is central to the plot, oscillating between voyeurism and fetishistic fascination. Hitchcock has never concealed his interest in voyeurism, cinematic and non-cinematic. His heroes are exemplary of the symbolic order and the law – a policeman (Vertigo), a dominant male possessing money and power (Marnie) – but their erotic drives lead them into compromised situations. The power to subject another person to the will sadistically or to the gaze voyeuristically is turned onto the woman as the object of both. Power is backed by a certainty of legal right and the established guilt of the woman (evoking castration, psychoanalytically speaking). True perversion is barely concealed under a shallow mask of ideological correctness – the man is on the right side of the law, the woman on the wrong. Hitchcock’s skilful use of identification processes and liberal use of subjective camera from the point of view of the male protagonist draw the spectators deeply into his position, making them share his uneasy gaze. The spectator is absorbed into a voyeuristic situation within the screen scene and diegesis, which parodies his own in the cinema.

In an analysis of Rear Window, Douchet takes the film as a metaphor for the cinema. Jeffries is the audience, the events in the apartment block opposite correspond to the screen. As he watches, an erotic dimension is added to his look, a central image to the drama. His girlfriend Lisa had been of little sexual interest to him, more or less a drag, so long as she remained on the spectator side. When she crosses the barrier between his room and the block opposite, their relationship is reborn erotically. He does not merely watch her through his lens, as a distant meaningful image, he also sees her as a guilty intruder exposed by a dangerous man threatening her with punishment, and thus finally giving him the opportunity to save her. Lisa’s exhibitionism has already been established by her obsessive interest in dress and style, in being a passive image of visual perfection; Jeffries’s voyeurism and activity have also been established through his work as a photo-journalist, a maker of stories and captor of images. However, his enforced inactivity,
binding him to his seat as a spectator, puts him squarely in the fantasy position of the cinema audience.

In Vertigo, subjective camera predominates. Apart from one flashback from Judy’s point of view, the narrative is woven around what Scottie sees or fails to see. The audience follows the growth of his erotic obsession and subsequent despair precisely from his point of view. Scottie’s voyeurism is blatant: he falls in love with a woman he follows and spies on without speaking to. Its sadistic side is equally blatant: he has chosen (and freely chosen, for he had been a successful lawyer) to be a policeman, with all the attendant possibilities of pursuit and investigation. As a result, he follows, watches and falls in love with a perfect image of female beauty and mystery. Once he actually confronts her, his erotic drive is to break her down and force her to tell by persistent cross-questioning.

In the second part of the film, he re-enacts his obsessive involvement with the image he loved to watch secretly. He reconstructs Judy as Madeleine, forces her to conform in every detail to the actual physical appearance of his fetish. Her exhibitionism, her masochism, make her an ideal passive counterpart to Scottie’s active sadistic voyeurism. She knows her part is to perform, and only by playing it through and then replaying it can she keep Scottie’s erotic interest. But in the repetition he does break her down and succeeds in exposing her guilt. His curiosity wins through; she is punished.

Thus, in Vertigo, erotic involvement with the look boomerangs: the spectator’s own fascination is revealed as illicit voyeurism as the narrative content enacts the processes and pleasures that he is himself exercising and enjoying. The Hitchcock hero here is firmly placed within the symbolic order, in narrative terms. He has all the attributes of the patriarchal superego. Hence the spectator, lulled into a false sense of security by the apparent legality of his surrogate, sees through his look and finds himself exposed as complicit, caught in the moral ambiguity of looking. Far from being simply an aside on the perversion of the police, Vertigo focuses on the implications of the active/looking, passive/looked-at split in terms of sexual difference and the power of the male symbolic encapsulated in the hero. Marnie, too, performs for Mark Rutland’s gaze and masquerades as the perfect to-be-looked-at image. He, too, is on the side of the law until, drawn in by obsession with her guilt, her secret, he longs to see her in the act of committing a crime, make her confess and thus save her. So he, too, becomes complicit as he acts out the implications of his power. He controls money and words; he can have his cake and eat it.
IV SUMMARY

The psychoanalytic background that has been discussed in this article is relevant to the pleasure and displeasure offered by traditional narrative film. The scopophilic instinct (pleasure in looking at another person as an erotic object) and, in contradistinction, ego libido (forming identification processes) act as formations, mechanisms, which mould this cinema's formal attributes. The actual image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man takes the argument a step further into the content and structure of representation, adding a further layer of ideological significance demanded by the patriarchal order in its favourite cinematic form – illusionistic narrative film. The argument must return again to the psychoanalytic background: women in representation can signify castration, and activate voyeuristic or fetishistic mechanisms to circumvent this threat. Although none of these interacting layers is intrinsic to film, it is only in the film form that they can reach a perfect and beautiful contradiction, thanks to the possibility in the cinema of shifting the emphasis of the look. The place of the look defines cinema, the possibility of varying it and exposing it. This is what makes cinema quite different in its voyeuristic potential from, say, striptease, theatre, shows and so on. Going far beyond highlighting a woman's to-be-looked-at-ness, cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself. Playing on the tension between film as controlling the dimension of time (editing, narrative) and film as controlling the dimension of space (changes in distance, editing), cinematic codes create a gaze, a world and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire. It is these cinematic codes and their relationship to formative external structures that must be broken down before mainstream film and the pleasure it provides can be challenged.

To begin with (as an ending), the voyeuristic-scopophilic look that is a crucial part of traditional filmic pleasure can itself be broken down. There are three different looks associated with cinema: that of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion. The conventions of narrative film deny the first two and subordinate them to the third, the conscious aim being always to eliminate intrusive camera presence and prevent a distancing awareness in the audience. Without these two absences (the material existence of the recording process, the critical reading of the spectator), fictional drama cannot achieve reality, obviousness and truth. Nevertheless, as this article has argued, the structure of looking in narrative fiction film contains a contradiction in its own premises: the female image as a castration threat constantly endangers the unity of the diegesis and
bursts through the world of illusion as an intrusive, static, one-dimensional fetish. Thus the two looks materially present in time and space are obsessively subordinated to the neurotic needs of the male ego. The camera becomes the mechanism for producing an illusion of Renaissance space, flowing movements compatible with the human eye, an ideology of representation that revolves around the perception of the subject; the camera’s look is disavowed in order to create a convincing world in which the spectator’s surrogate can perform with verisimilitude. Simultaneously, the look of the audience is denied an intrinsic force: as soon as fetishistic representation of the female image threatens to break the spell of illusion, and the erotic image on the screen appears directly (without mediation) to the spectator, the fact of fetishisation, concealing as it does castration fear, freezes the look, fixes the spectator and prevents him from achieving any distance from the image in front of him.

This complex interaction of looks is specific to film. The first blow against the monolithic accumulation of traditional film conventions (already undertaken by radical film-makers) is to free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics and passionate detachment. There is no doubt that this destroys the satisfaction, pleasure and privilege of the ‘invisible guest’, and highlights the way film has depended on voyeuristic active/passive mechanisms. Women, whose image has continually been stolen and used for this end, cannot view the decline of the traditional film form with anything much more than sentimental regret.