

2 much concept: the Image Culture of Dump.fm, an Online Image Chat Community

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Introduction

When I first saw dump.fm's homepage, it looked like a video game to me, a bright and flashing amalgam of big pixel-art animations and pop-culture references. "Constantly trolling Google images and Tumblr gave me this concept or idea of digital trash: thousands and thousands of nonsensical, stupid, and beautiful images floating on the internet," Carlos Sáez, a cofounder of the internet art project Cloaque, told Ben Valentine in an interview (2013). What if these images were being lobbed at each other, somewhere on the Internet, in a kind of digital food fight?

That was close to what I found made an account on dump.fm in August 2011, guided by a friend of a friend who said I'd like it. Then, as I entered the inner sanctum of the chat room, I witnessed a much more exciting interchange than the sadly stable front page revealed. A continual game of the surrealist endeavor of "exquisite corpse" was raging. In a feeble attempt at a greeting, I posted a .gif file from my Tumblr that I had fashioned from a Chuck Jones cartoon, but it quickly disappeared in the stream of repetition and chaos. In essence, the content of the "exquisite corpse" game involved appropriation and a stream-of-consciousness riffing on meaning. Someone would post an image, animation or object from some yonder corner of the internet, and then someone else would take it into their text box and

juxtapose it with another image or a phrase incongruously rendered in glittery letters ("Fuck all Foucault", "riddled with herpes"). The internet has a strong image-appropriation culture, but dump's design took this tendency to a new extreme. Clicking on a post to "fave" it put its components into a palette so that I could reuse them in the future. This palette sloughed and regenerated itself every time it was opened, however, and it only displayed the 65 most recently faved component images.

By the first hour, I had figured out how to create some juxtapositions that amused other users, and the notifications of "'this user' faved you!" that popped up in the lower-right corner of the page were keeping me going. I was gaining, through the example of the people in the room at the time, "dump.fm literacy": understanding the humor and forms of communication on the site that came almost simultaneously with mastering the process of creation.

As I returned to the site in the months to come, I found that the individual usernames to the left of each image were both prominent – the amount of exposure a user got was a direct function of how often they posted – and meant refreshingly little to me. Who were these people? The textual banter that typically occurs between the images was also switched off by default, and it took me at least a few days to discover it. So, there was something about my culture, my upbringing, and my use of the Internet that allowed me to enjoy and participate in the exchange occurring on this site

intuitively, without any verbal explanations. I shared a variety of literacies – visual, cultural – with dump users that made this possible.

Dump's chat was a "flat" setup, with everyone, whether a new or experienced user, beloved, neglected or hated, using the same room. Multiple rooms with names such as "xxx" "irl" or "boys" were set aside by creator Ryder Ripps in the beginning, but they were rarely used except as sandboxes, out-of-the-way spaces for solitary experimentation. This setup meant that my attempts at using dump got users' attention immediately, without the need for me, with my nascent literacy, to "follow" or "subscribe to" others' accounts and wait for them to reciprocate. In fact, such mechanisms didn't exist at all on dump; the only way one user could permanently show appreciation for another on that user's profile page was to "Like" their page on Facebook.

Unlike Facebook or Tumblr, where friendships and subscriptions are often predicated on relationships in the actual world or on other social media, dump.fm made it easy to be exposed to new people in a non-superficial way. The environment was strikingly meritocratic. Posts appeared to receive attention – in the form of "faves" – because of their content, not because of the account that created them. In some case, however, the content somehow referred to the user's relationship to other users, a point I'll come back to in chapter 3. This could put a talented new user on equal footing with old timers.

The contrast between the intimacy of being thrown into one room with such an active group of users meant that the social order can be upended very quickly.

Methods

As the reader might guess, I did not initially approach dump.fm as an ethnographer. I won't attempt to efface my entanglements with the community, many members of which I see as friends, teachers and creative collaborators. Starting from a place of equality with my subjects, I believe, was the only way I could fully see the uniqueness of this community (by being able to participate in its shared understandings) as well as its place in larger trends.

My methods in assembling this ethnography were as varied and engaged with multiple media as the site itself. Users were excited about the project, perhaps eager to narrativize their time on the site and make some sense of all their time spent on it and why they found it so enjoyable. As I was already embedded in the community as a contributing member, I needed only to orient my time spent on the site toward the productive end-purpose of producing a narrative. Participant-observation. A simple task, right? Not quite. Though the site oriented itself toward the (illusion of) productivity, with the constant flow of visual schematics, the text chats that ran in between the

images were often conflicted and at cross-purposes, occurring between groups of members about vastly divergent topics. Sometimes I was able to embrace the cacophony of this medium, but at other moments I switched to Facebook chat, which was better suited to talking to individual members. Because of the quantity of work each user produces, it was often easier to speak to users in generalities about their interests instead of referring back to specific moments.

Dump's archiving system, which has partially been crawled by Google, was helpful for exactly the opposite reasons, preserving image culture instead of textual culture. It kept a complete log of posts with images in them for each user, but it did not save the text that user had produced; instead, text was only preserved if it had been faved by other users, and then only in those users' logs of "(user)'s favs." Thus the structure of the site's archiving alienated images and text from their original contexts, but in distinct ways.

This method was not ideal, but it was sometimes necessary for finding evidence of interesting moments that occurred before the time of my fieldwork. I ended up performing a kind of "death work" (Rose 2004), but in a setting where it could coexist with "life work" as well. Deborah Bird Rose used the term to speak of the irresponsibility involved with not acting in morally obligated manner when carrying out traditional ethnography that must rely on the spoken testimony of people in the present tense:

It values the living precisely to the extent that they can offer up information concerning a past that the anthropologists seemed to have assumed in advance would be discontinuous with their future. The 'salvage' in these practices is directed toward information, not people. (67)

Fortunately, information on dump "salvaged" itself, but not at the expense of present activity. The online, post-textual format of dump allowed me to go through logs of people's past activity while simultaneously communicating with them in the present.

The fact that dump was so fast-paced and took place on the internet made it challenging to document because it was constantly changing, but it also allowed be to transcend some of the typical latency of academia: Thus, I felt I was describing a phenomenon that was still in its infancy, and I hoped I have not constricted its future by proscribing a certain range of possibilities. With the transgressive spirit of the community, however, this seems unlikely.

What Does It All Mean?

My interest in explaining the community to others comes in part from my, as well as some stake in the future of the "creative class" in America, particularly its visual contingent. Though that group only had its catchy name bestowed by Richard Florida in 2001, I would argue that it has deep roots, and in fact it is now in deep decline, at least as a distinct entity. The "creative class," in the way I term it, was once a small, prestigious group of individuals that included illustrators, photojournalists, designers, and photo researchers.

Their skills required specialized, intensive schooling and a persistent, applied desire to learn a craft and make one's living at it.

Digital technology has disrupted the borders and, potentially, the goals of this class considerably. Easy-to-use creative software has led to the deskilling of various professions like film editing and photo retouching. The proliferation of increasingly high-quality cellphone cameras among the general population means that ordinary people with a desire to share local news can do the job, if not in the most aesthetically pleasing manner, then many times faster than a photojournalist sent to the scene on assignment.

For fine artists, the infinite copies of images that digital technology proliferates practically by accident has meant the end of material scarcity for typical art merchandise, such as books and prints. This means that it is difficult to make money from the actions of ordinary fans. Buying a print, for example, is seen as an increasingly privileged gesture when an individual can revisit a work of art anytime on the Internet. The music industry, and the flagging livelihoods of musicians, has received perhaps the most ink in this struggle over the idea of intellectual property, perhaps because music is such a popular entertainment and the rightsholders of popular music tend to be large corporations with lawyers to match.

As a result of the drying up of revenues for creative individuals, one might think that being invested in the creative industry is now seen as a

increasingly privileged affair, requiring residency in the cities with “gays and rock bands” that Richard Florida (2002) champions, as well as something akin to a trust fund.

What’s happening on the side of the people benefiting from these shifts, however? A vibrant and vernacular culture that has emerged around casual creativity on the Internet that is anything but privileged. Dump.fm is a particularly interesting example of a community formed around this culture because many of its members, like myself, are creative outside the realm of the site; some are even working artists whose educations and careers revolve around the visual. Thus they too have a vested interest in the separation and elevation of creative work from other industries, though many will be loathe to admit it.

The site sometimes reacts to the economicized past of art in very pointed ways. It practically makes a mockery (an idle-ization?) out of the idolization of work that rose in the nineteenth century, as well as the labor theory of value, which John Locke derived from the notion of intellectual property as the combination of someone’s labor with something natural or held in common (Ross 2006). Its typical vernacular – though there are many sophistications of it, as we will see in chapter 3 – is a horizontally arranged row of images. This seems to apply reductionism of Marcel Duchamp’s readymades, which reduces the art-making process to its bare bones (Hicks

2004) to the contemporary creative landscape of the internet, which is largely made up of remixing and appropriation. A textual meme that has circulated on the site facetiously reads: “art is easy.”¹

What benefits do these casual creators, including dump.fm users, receive in return for their work? Few if any, and if one subscribes to Locke’s theory of value, then perhaps this is fair, as the substrate of much of these creative endeavors is derivative. The derivative material is often popular culture, or photos or artwork produced by now-unknown individuals, not material legally held in common (as much as some themes may seem to be public domain by now). However, with the simplicity and ease that comes with juxtaposing different visuals and concepts, the enjoyment users feel is so significant that, in some environments, they will even pay for an opportunity for self-expression. The remainder of this introduction and part of chapter 1 tracks the facilitation of visual creativity in a variety of online environments that has in turn enabled dump.fm’s polymorphous perversity. I will also explore the politics of decontextualizing, reusing, and reframing such representations.

Creationist Capitalism

In *Coming of Age in Second Life*, Tom Boellstorff explores a virtual world in which physical scarcity of resources is non-existent. The “Age of

Techne,” he argues, is the age of *homo faber*, the human as maker (Boellstorff 2008:57). He uses the term in a “tongue-in-cheek” manner, he writes, in order to flag a moment in which the idea of “making” has become recursive: now, instead of just crafting the tools that make virtual worlds possible, as when we manufacture computers, we can now craft within those worlds.

As the internet has become increasingly central to commerce, social media sites and especially social gaming entities have catered to users’ desire for individual expression, some of which stems from the “California ideology” that combined libertarian ethics with the legacy of the counterculture. Market mechanisms and personal responsibility are the main principles of government in this ideology, and this is reflected in the urge for most online industries of a certain size to monetize their operations, as well as the relative freedom of self-expression.

A result of the capitalization on this freedom is that the primary labor is creative, resulting in what Henry Jenkins has called a “participatory culture” (Jenkins 2006:3, cited in Boellstorff 2008:207) that allows creativity in very limited, prescribed, and yet welcoming ways. It is standard practice in many massively multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG) environments for a user to be able to change their character’s appearance or abilities, and real money is often charged for this privilege. For example, Blizzard

Entertainment, Inc. charges a \$15 flat fee for character appearance changes (Blizzard Support 2012). Boellstorff reminds us here of the shared root word of “custom” – as in social tradition – and “costume,” which seemingly come together in the word “customization,” in which users, in an environment predicated by what he calls creationist capitalism, stake out their visible identities online on company territory.

This form of cooperation between the individual and the corporation, prophesized Jean Baudrillard, leads to a dialogic binarism that would become a cornerstone of what he termed simulation, or “li[[f]e in the mode of the referendum... precisely because there are no more referentials”: “The most concrete form you see it in is that of the test, of the question/answer, of the stimulus and the response... ’ (Baudrillard 1983:142).

The digital technologies that were emerging in the time of his writing, he argued, influenced every area of life with their “binary scansion” (143). All computer programming, at the lowest level, consists of a binary code that moves between 0’s and 1’s; at higher orders of programming, such as the graphical interfaces with which most computer and smartphone users now interface, this takes the form of the question-and-answer, a formation that appears dialogic but is in fact “the highest stage of monopoly.”

Part of the logic of creationist capitalism, in contrast with dump’s sociality, is also the solitude of such creative acts, to the point of becoming a

“Robinson Crusoe-like fantasy of the individual working outside social relations.” Play and labor, blurred together, are essential to the individual’s ultimate goal of “self-fulfillment.”

It may make us feel good, and Baudrillard suggests that in a hyperreal universe, owning simulated commodities becomes a stand-in for actual-world achievement. In addition, life and the art it inspires become woefully predictable: “they can be organized as an unstable play of variation, or in polyvalent or tautological modes, without endangering this central principle of bipolarity: digitality is, indeed, the divine form of simulation” (143). In such a world, with everyone contented and pacified with pretending at creativity and uniqueness, who continues to strive to succeed above others? Artists, of course, who have taken to heart Marshall MacLuhan’s maxim that “the media is the message.” Within the limits of the internet, in the case of net artists, they can show people that there are alternatives to these rule-based discursive patterns.

By contrast, dump.fm seems to have divested itself from notions of property, even intellectual property; because users mainly share what has already been made freely available to them in other areas and modalities, dump, aside from being a “post-internet”¹ environment, also seems to be

¹ Gene McHugh defines post-internet art as “art responding to [a condition] described as 'Post Internet'... when the Internet is less a novelty and more a banality” (quoted in Verkant 2010).

“post-intellectual property.”

Dump.fm doesn't claim to avoid the creative pitfalls of hyperreality. In fact, as we will see later, dump's aesthetic tends to bask in some aspects of hyperreality, especially when its members, denizens of the digital world whose friends probably just think they spend way too much time on the internet, create representations of their existence within the world of simulation.

Dump.fm did, however, train the mind against becoming wrapped up in simulation in the best way a digital form can, through awareness of what is false. The iconoclastic nature of its visual culture means that members are constantly creating send-ups of the images they post, as well as the idea of representation itself. They reject simulation by exposing it as simulation.

Their deconstructions particularly tended to involve the desire for consumer objects that have simulated value. As capitalism has adapted to the information age, one of advertisers' many strategies for be viewed as relevant and conversant with consumers is with the question/answer ethic of prosumption (Toffler 1980), which turns production into a form of consumption and vice-versa. Some presumptive environments can be sneaky about their intentions: the photo-editing and sharing app Instagram, for example, caused an uproar and lost nearly half its daily users in December 2012 when it released a new terms of service allowing it to sell users' data and giving it a

non-exclusive license to use users' photos in advertisements. Instagram is owned by Facebook, which had been engaging in such practices for years. As Will Shanklin wrote in Gizmag, "you're the product" (2012): such corporations that offer free services no longer feel the need to create their own content

Prosumption is not a phenomenon exclusive to the digital media landscape; Seio Nakajima traces it back to Peking Man, a specimen of *Homo erectus*, who consumed (i.e., used) the fire and simple tools that he produced. More concretely related to our discussion are various art movements of the 20th century that appropriated manufactured objects and reused them in an art-world context. These include Marcel Duchamp's readymades, such as the controversial *Fountain*, which he created in 1917 by turning a urinal upside-down and inscribing it "R. Mutt." The transformation made here was from the elevation of the artist as the privileged, ordained creator to someone who encounters these manufactured objects just like anyone else, albeit with an artist's curating instinct.

Shared by both of these movements is the ethic of "reductionism," a kind of minimalism for process instead of product. Duchamp decided that the most important aspect of making art was selecting objects and labeling them as such, so he stripped down his process to that basic action.

What differs between dump.fm – and these other presumptive online

ventures – and all these art movements is the context in which they are approached. While dump.fm has provided a space for people with little previous visual or artistic experience to do visual work for the first time, making them “bottom-up” movements, these 20th century predecessors were “top-down.” While Duchamp’s readymades didn’t exactly create a readymaking trend in World War I-era France.

The relational aesthetics movement of the 1990’s is perhaps the most important movement in terms of maturing and complicating the work’s relationship to the viewer. Nakajima describes for modernizing the relationship between viewer and audience, as it creates a concatenating set of relationships that themselves form around a work:

In sum, relational art aims to make the process of prosumption itself an art in the sense that what artists produce are relations between artists (i.e., producers) and viewers or audiences (i.e., consumers), as well as relations and discussions among the viewers or audiences, with the art object being a kind of catalyst. (559)

This “play with me” ethic is not invulnerable to the practice of populist parody known as “culture jamming.” It was expertly mocked, for example, by Greenpeace and the Yes Men in June 2012 when they pretended to make a Twitter page for Shell Oil, as well as a website called “Arctic Ready” that supposedly educated users about the arctic. In addition to snarky unveilings about Shell’s drilling in the Arctic – all written in the cheerful tone of corporate PR – the site pretended to offer viewers an opportunity to make their own

Shell Ad. Their examples, which included catchphrases like “Honey, turn the lights on! Let’s melt some ice!”.

The site swiftly went “viral” via social media, creating a PR crisis for Shell regardless of whether it was real. By representing the already euphemistic world of shell – a representation of a representation – Greenpeace and the Yes Men offered a takedown of the corporation that smiles and eagerly awaits communications and free advertising. But the critique lacked subtlety: by answering an advertisement with another advertisement in the same form, it still presumed a separation between creators and audience, and thus formed subjects that answered the question of whether they would continue to consume gasoline from Shell, even if the answer was “no.”

By contrast, by refusing to communicate using the same methods of discourse as its Others, dump.fm was far more subversive, even if it never started any social media crises. Though few multiple-image posts saw the light of day outside of the site, the simple procedurality and onslaught of juxtapositions found therein helped users read images in a new way. Seeing the workings of other users’ associations between objects gave users a new set creative practices both online and IRL. Dump users know how to predict the questions of the simulation and, instead of answering, turn them on their heads.

What Baudrillard didn't foresee with his pessimism about the proliferation of simulacra is that they would one day be available for to a much wider range of creators, and that dump.fm users would be able to see the simulations *as simulations*. One visual convention of the community that displays particularly well its interest in manipulated simulations is 3D animation. It is perhaps the ultimate simulated visual genre, and it was used as a mere backdrop for simulated objects that would have no reason to exist or be desired in reality, such as a pool of viscous liquid that constantly displayed Britney Spears's face or a dead squirrel that was bizarrely brought back to life by being made to ripple like a flag.²

While dump.fm has its binaristic moments, they are social in nature, largely those of other humans. Every image posted to the site has a story attached to it, an original perceiving subject who is remembered as its propagator. This is sometimes helped by the various usernames attached to images that get uploaded to the site.

More conservative, in light of creationist capitalism, is dump's relationship to labor and play. Part of the logic of creationist capitalism is that labor is treated as play, and play as labor. Compensation for such play/labor is often of an abstract, affective kind, often amounting to free but mutually beneficial PR: a user's creation using a certain tool or in a certain virtual world, for example, might be used to advertise that product or service.

Much of the creativity that is enacted on dump requires little labor anyway, aside from a few mouse clicks, but it is rich in referential ideas. There is little or no sense of institutional rewarding or approval; instead, faves and social interaction are enough to keep users going. If users do benefit monetarily or professionally from dump, it is only because it brings together a certain group of creative people who occasionally offer one another internships. A complete lack of monetization, however, is part of dump's beauty.

Chapter 1 / The Life of a Meme



Figure 1 The original chihuahua image

I remember the day dump.fm was taken over by the cult of the Chihuahua. Arriving on the landing page, which served to document dump.fm's zeitgeist, I discovered it had been taken over by images of a Chihuahua dog whose head was poking out of a strange magenta cozy. One iteration, the

most popular, showed the Chihuahua bobbing its head, its neck extended like a serpent's; another version had crudely attached a (human) tongue that was flicking obscenely; a few versions had added a bindi to the center of the Chihuahua's forehead, perhaps as a recognition of its serene, meditative expression. Rarely did the front page cohere into such a strong narrative of a community gathering around a single image.

Normally the front page reflected the interests of many different users or groups of users. However, certain images like this Chihuahua were of particular interest to the community, recurring periodically as they were brought back into the fold of the site's limited short-term memory. What led users to choose these images? What events in the short history of the Internet informed this type of practice, which occurred on many different sites but found a particularly lucid manifestation on dump? These are questions I will explore in this chapter.

Distinguishing Dump: Dump.fm and Larger Internet Culture

No website is an island; particularly in the traffic of images, there has been a constant and ongoing debate as to the best medium for sharing and displaying images on the internet. Jörg Colberg has even remarked that the Internet seems made for photography because of the rapid-fire,

instantaneous intake of information that the internet fosters.

This debate has gotten considerably more complex, however, with the advent of images and art that seem to dwell in the semiotic soup of the Internet. While photographers have arguably entered the age of the internet wanting to be able to aspire to whatever they did before – art-world success, shows in tangible galleries, money if they’re commercial – the internet has also ushered in a new era of creative play with images that speaks to collective as well as individual achievement.

Seeing as it is a modality that appropriates work from other sites, the prehistory of dump is almost as important as its history. In this chapter, I will attempt to detail some of the developments in visual culture that predated dump. Relative to these, dump can be seen as an intervention or merely a further development in the same direction. This discussion will naturally blur into that of dump.fm’s source materials, which consist of an outer “reality” on the web, both past and present, which it refashions.

Demographics

Dump.fm boasted members from all over the world, but most were concentrated in the United States, and many of those were on the East and West coasts. The geographical concentration of dump users meant that they

had a thriving actual-world culture. There were highly anticipated events such as New Wprld, a New York dump meetup in June 2012 (named for a well-known typo made by Mijinyawa, a Nigerian teenager with whom many users had interacted and whom I will discuss in more detail in chapter three). Some users flew across the country for this event.

The generation of users active in 2012-2013, when I carried out my fieldwork, were less likely to identify as a group of artists, but "chatting with images" continued; dump users were perhaps an ideal version of the "semionauts, [who invent] trajectories between signs" that Nicolas Bourriard described in his book *Post-Production* (2005). They did this through the common understanding they brought to the site from the outside, as well as the meaning that certain images and concepts accumulated through their use on the site. Their tinkering with images was more likely to concern the images' surface qualities, and more often than not they simply left images alone. However, their culture of use was, if anything, more entangled with sociality than it was in the After Effects era, due to the real-life connections among them and the public nature of their creative process. Many of these users didn't call themselves artists – some were uncomfortable with the term because of critical attitudes expressed toward it by certain other members, while others simply hadn't seen themselves as artists, dump.fm being their first foray into visual play. Making images and gifs has also been deskilled

somewhat by online tools that mimicked the effects of more expensive, difficult-to-learn programs, such as Photoblaster, some of which were created by dump members.

At the time of my fieldwork, about 20-50 dump.fm users dwelled in the main chat room at any one time, and because it was the main chat room in which they were usually active, it was possible to be aware of all the interactions going on within the site at once. Since so many users were from the United States, the site had a kind of collective circadian rhythm, “sleeping” until around noon and slowly becoming more active throughout the day. The height of its activity was around midnight, when users on the East Coast were still awake but West Coast users were just getting their evening started. Thus dump lay outside capitalism’s model of a successful website, eschewing growth for an occasionally utopian intimacy that might have come with an intentional community.

Some people discovered dump through actual-world friends, but many in my survey mentioned finding it through Tumblr, the specter of which seemingly haunts the community.

Dump.fm didn’t purport to be for everyone, and thus regular users were somewhat demographically homogeneous. Judging from the webcam photos that members took of themselves, the vast majority of dump users were white, and a majority were also college-educated, though surprisingly few

were art students or art-school graduates. There were, however, a couple of prominent members of the community who were not white, and a good number who were not college-educated, including several site moderators and the site creator himself, Ryder Ripps, who took some courses but did not get a degree.

One of the few black dump users, Dauragon, told me he felt included in the community because he spent most of his life being a “lone black person on the internet” who was “‘weird’ and ‘nerdy’” and always “drowning in white people,” even in his actual life. His outsider status in his inborn community seemed exemplary of many other dump users’ relationships with theirs, regardless of their race.

Members of the site seemed to share a certain feeling of elevation above mainstream American culture. This common bond was reinforced by how the site grew, which was chiefly by word of mouth; new members, referred by existing users, in turn produced work that attracted more of their kind. Users who didn’t understand the site’s humor and aesthetic didn’t last long, but there also seem to be a number who left because they understood the site but couldn’t stand its pace, giving me reasons like “it’s bad for my attention span” or “it gave me ADD.”

There were also many points of casual, even unexpected contact, as when dump users dated, lived as roommates, and found themselves working

in the same office or attending the same university. The subjects discussed in the text component of the room, too, often concerned local, actual-life subjects, such as the merits of different neighborhoods in Brooklyn or plans for meeting up on a Saturday night. In the words of one user from Miami who had flown into New York for New Wprld, however, this real-life intimacy may have hampered the site's artistic seriousness: "Everyone began meeting each other in person and the natural dynamic of the site was irrevocably ruined."

4Chan for Hipsters?

Dump.fm's wry perspective on the world is partially informed by the internet's facilitation of meme culture. The term "meme," a shortening of the word *mimeme* (evoking the Latin root word for "imitation", and, via shortening, becoming more like the French word for "memory") was originally invented by biologist Richard Dawkins in 1976 in his book *The Selfish Gene*. There it had a broad definition, referring to any cultural unit or cluster of cultural units that spread among a large population at a much faster rate than genetic change. Religion, for example, is a cluster of cultural memes, including belief, houses of worship, prayer or incantation, etc.

In the past 30 years, the word "meme" has come to mean a cultural replicator, often humorous, that reappears in numerous contexts as a mark of its success. As it turns out, digital technology, with its potential for

instantaneous communication and the ability to copy information perfectly and rapidly, is the perfect incubator for humorous memes and macros. The “macro” is often what pops into people’s heads when they think of a meme; often machine-generated, it inseparably combines images and text that captions or comments upon them. The unification of both into a single image makes the whole affair less indexical; an indexical image gets charged with new significance as its context changes.

In a note added to the 1989 edition of the text, after an enthusiasm for the study of mimetics had swept several fields, Dawkins commented that his published ambitions for the meme were modest compared to what he truly believed would happen: a kind of nonhuman agency. “I want to claim almost limitless power for slightly inaccurate self-replicating entities, once they arise anywhere in the universe,” he wrote.

4chan, an anonymous image board, is one of the most well-known and influential propagators of meme culture on the internet. It was originally founded in 2003 by Christopher Poole as an anime-oriented BBS modeled after the Japanese Futaba Channel “2ch” image site. However, the popularity of 4chan’s /b/, or “random,” board quickly outgrew that of its more topical counterparts. The format of the imageboard had existed long before 4chan, but /b/ seems to be the birthplace of many genres of image that have spread memetically and have been interpreted as popular forms of expression that

are unique to the internet, such as LOLcats, visual conventions like macros, and certain types of pranks, ranging from linking unsuspecting web users to videos of Rick Astley to the “raids” of the Anonymous hacker group on the websites of large corporations.

Meme-Images and the Rise of Web 2.0

Around the mid-2000's, a kind of capitalized “industry,” in the words of Stryker, began to arise around the scattered humorous creations of 4chan and Something Awful. These images were diverse and often uncertain in provenance, but many had in common a certain wholeness: they were able to tell a complete story within the confines of a single image, an important goal in a world where images had become so highly mobile.

Ben Huh's The Cheezburger Network looms large in this “industry.” It was founded in 2007 and receives over ten million hits a day, mainly trafficking in “macro” images and user-submitted photos that might follow the theme of any of its sub-blogs. The macro images include the tradition of lolcats: images of animals captioned with endearingly and humorously misspelled text.

Though this tradition of humor got its start on 4chan in 2005, it really took off when a blogger named Eric Nakagawa hotlinked a lolcat created by Huh on Something Awful (Stryker 2011: 168). While Huh has attempted to

annex many types of memetic humor into his Cheezburger empire, fate never would have “struck” for him, as Stryker would have it, if someone hadn’t hotlinked his image and rang up a huge bandwidth bill for him. Thus, though these macro images have endured through their self-contained qualities and the Cheezburger Network has risen to prominence by providing a massive archive for them, the site’s history is nonetheless shot through with the idea of interdependency.

The Cheezburger Network’s subordinate blogs have annexed such diverse topics as funny animal pictures, rage comics, jokes made at the expense of celebrities, and “fails.” The Network contains and categorizes them, providing opportunities for the creation of images within the same tradition.

The language used on sites of prosumption on the internet such as Cheezburger tend to alienate users from the source of work that is uploaded, who will see the work, and what the site is allowed to do with their contributions. Aside from the explicit relationship laid out in the Terms of Service, which few users bother to read and which can change at any time without notice, there are also more implicit, affective aspects of the relationship that are left unexplained. For example, by telling potential Cheezburger Site creators that making a site will “[let] everyone know [their] sense of humor is the best,” the Cheezburger webmasters allowed users to

imagine themselves in the exact same role as the site's editors, thus creating an illusory sense of equality between the site and the user. In fact, Cheezburger will profit from the curatorial skills and appropriated content of users through ads placed on their subdomain sites. The admin-created sites benefit from anonymous labor, even profiting monetarily from page views, if not from individual images themselves. In the logic of prosumerism, the images' individual creators are glad to display their work in exchange for little more than a mention of their name. Their achievements are subordinate to the perpetuation of a larger visual tradition.

The enormous (and highly capitalist) expansion of the Cheezburger network, its commitment to taxonomy, and, in the view of some dump users, its lack of visual innovation stand in stark contrast to dump.fm. There is still an important link, however: the humor on both sites is amplified through repetition.

Today's memetic images are both intertwined with their web-based contexts and easily alienable from specific webpages they may appear on. For example, some curated arrangements of memetic images, such as themed blogs, are highly repetitive, emphasizing the comic possibilities of a single image or theme. One memorable type of themed blog is the "Fuck yeah!" blog, which peaked in popularity in April 2011, when about 50,000 were created (Collier 2012). The humor on these sites caters to viewers

looking for increasingly specific subjects: Farhad Manjoo (2009) noted that “LATFH [Look at This Fucking Hipster], for instance, is really just a kind of fashion version of Fail Blog, while Fuck Yeah Sharks, is just Lolcats by the sea.” Other websites such as 9gag collect heterogeneous “funny images” that play off of numerous memetic themes. Despite their lack of categorization, most belong to traditions that are easy to identify. The seriality of these subjects, variations on single, evocative topic or template, make creativity accessible to many both in terms of production and consumption.

Dump.fm Breaks Away

From an early stage, perhaps as a result of such a high-culture and dramatic introduction, dump.fm was urged to have a unique identity, one that swept away these influences, which had in time become commonplace and self-conscious, in favor of higher-concept aspirations.

Ryz likened 4chan’s popular and influential memes to a person “hitting the same key over and over again.” There is also a common element of “broken English”, apparent in the endearing pidgin of LOLkitties and humorous typographical errors like “I accidentally the whole thing,” that he rejects: “After using Dump a lot, I really feel that memes of this type are outdated. I remember the explosion of All Your Base Are Belong To Us, which was more than a decade ago, and it feels like the ‘meme’ culture is just

recapitulating that over and over without development.” He also went on to deride present meme culture’s More repetition, encouraged by the fonts used by numerous macro generators: “So much text in impact [font] it loses all meaning.”

Ryz also criticized the large amount of background needed to understand those memes: “Worse, these memes end up being more about the backstory -- there was a picture of some guy in a hat, and people invented a myth about him, and used impact text to imagine the guy saying stuff.. so what?”

Dump, of course, had plenty of inside jokes of its own, many in that very backstoried style. It even subverted that backstoried meme culture in the practice of making memes out of images for which it was unclear why they were memes in the first place. For example, user maxlabor drew a single black scribble on a blank document in an image-editing program, titled it “bsh.png,” whereupon it became an embodiment of the non-communicativeness of all internet memes that creates their “insider” appeal. It starred in such minimalist masterpieces as “two bsh.” The joke, only intelligible to dump members, was that this scribble became somehow more important because it was drawn by a member of the dump.fm site.

More often, however, the “backstory” is less interesting than the participatory pleasure of imagining the future possibilities created by

reframing an image through text or juxtaposition.

The humor of other memes is more self-evident; many memetic images on dump are crudely drawn cartoon images from the early days of the web (funny, perhaps, in the context of dump.fm's high-art pretensions). Others bear similarities to internet memes on a wider scale – photos of animals to which anthropomorphic meanings can be attributed, for example. The diversity of dump.fm's explorations and exploitations will continue to be explored in later chapters.

The separation of objects from their original context is central to dump's aesthetic. Dump user kalan, a travelling performance artist who is well-read in critical theory, noted that dump.fm presented an environment of "Deleuzian deterritorialization." Robert Brinkley equated the term deterritorialization with codification and noted that, in Deleuze and Guattari's study of Kafka, the "desire to de-code or to deterritorialize seems particularly crucial for minorities who want to remain minorities and affirm perspectives that are not those of the culture they inhabit" (Brinkley 1983: 13). Deleuze and Guattari's original term continued to be relevant on more than one level because all of the images used on the site were radically decontextualized from a mainstream internet culture. It was a rare occurrence when they were used with anything approaching their original intent. Cultural codes were made and unmade as dump users created a sense of elevation from the

outside world. In their reuse, images were reterritorialized, given a new meaning in the name of art and sociality. As these reterritorializations accumulated, they also became less legible to outsiders who were not steeped in dump's cultural history. The notion of "backstory" becomes tired when one is not personally experiencing it.

While the meme culture of more influential sites like 4chan must start with an unusual ground, usually delighting in the pre-internet tradition of the freak show, the outlier in society (Cole Stryker [2011] calls this type of humor a "look at this random everyday weirdo" element), dump.fm celebrated the banality of ordinary imagery by demonstrating its ease of deterritorialization.

Exploitative Flâneurs

The attitude of dump users toward their materials was often exploitative, having little regard for the response the images were meant to engender in their original context. Individual "raw" images most likely to be reposted on the site from an outside source had a certain kind of vulnerability. They were marked by their incompleteness, both visual and semiotic. Even if the images were the work of a professional, they had in some way failed to account for their potential reuse in contexts like dump.

While dump delighted in technically flawed and ideologically failed art, it made use of less ideologically ambitious images as well, and explored the

exploitability that their surface simplicity presented. I once spent a late night with plams digging through a used-medical equipment website that used animated GIFs to demonstrate the features of its products. Plams looked past the apparent lack of human presence in these pictures, which for me would have severely limited their expressive possibilities, and instead took pleasure in simply reusing images that seemed to have such a narrow designated use.

Another hallmark of dump's aesthetic is its refusal to "talk back" to the original uses of images. Baudrillard would have called the limitation of their original uses a symptom of the "question/answer" of hyperreality. These images then got put to instrumental purposes that their original creators probably never would have dreamed of, thus signifying dump's uncooperative turn against hyperreality.

One might object that the question of dump is this banality and the answer is decontextualization. Dump.fm users, however, went beyond waiting for invitations to appropriate; they created "blank space" and exploitability where other communities did not find it. Some of this blank space existed below the surface, on the level of communication. Images culled from elsewhere on the internet that seemed humorous and inexplicable on dump were once trying to communicate something in their original contexts, but were rendered impotent. For example, Soccer reposted an image originating

in a single step of a tutorial² for drawing a cute, cloying image of a koala bear, and was met with dump users' enthusiasm in the form of faves³.

In context, it made sense that the image was unfinished, but taken out of context, it was an amusing mystery why someone would use expensive imaging software like Photoshop to draw a koala bear without ears. Hence, the message to which this fragment once contributed was erased, priming it for future exploitation.

The notion of the "exploitable" was also prevalent in other visual-oriented areas of the internet, to the extent that KnowYourMeme, a popular documenter of memetic images and ideas, has a page titled "Exploitables" that focuses specifically on images inviting such modification with "a template (either a blank space or a slight draft)." As at dump, the connotation of the exploitable is mischievous or perverse. "Ahh, exploitables. The internet's way of saying 'Here, f*ck this up for me,'" wrote one commenter. Broader meme culture's operations on images, however, sometimes have more dialogic or ordinary results.

Shock, Banality and Desensitization

Mischievousness and perversity, of course, always toes the line of bad taste. A rule – or non-rule – of dump.fm only spoken of by outside observers like Paddy Johnson was "anything goes." It thus follows that some of the

² The tutorial came from <http://heartcreators.net/ladyoz/koalatute.html>

content that gets posted is indeed “raunchy,” as she has written. GIF’s extracted from pornography (usually bad pornography), images from the blog of a man who stuffs objects into his foreskin, and drawings of tentacle rape were all fair game. The only time I heard complaints from members about the unacceptable content of an image involved a user who was “spamming,” or rapidly and repeatedly posting, the same picture of child pornography. With his abrasive, repeated posting, he clearly sought to offend, and succeeded – he was swiftly banned.

The dump users’ “vanilla” reaction to his actions, however, says something about how rarely they are collectively offended. For the less desensitized, however, the preponderance of shocking imagery on the site might lead a new visitor to compare it to 4chan. The culture that gave rise to Japanese BBS cultures like 2ch was, according to Cole Stryker, an emotionally repressed one. The idea of a “free space,” one where all discussion topics – and eventually, as image boards developed, types of images– could find a home – stood in refreshing opposition to Japanese culture, where “straight talk and audacity are... interpreted as rudeness or disrespect” (Stryker 2011: 131). 2ch’s imageless predecessor used its technical limitations to great creative advantage, leading to intricate ASCII art and complex smilies such as kaomoji (133).

In America, however, perhaps due to the existing lack of repression in

communication, images and communications that are transgressive push the border of what is already one of the most liberal and flexible codes of good taste in the world. The very same images that grew out of this culture of “straight talk,” are the ones criticized by Curt Cloninger, an early adopter of dump.fm, as “banal.” “Straight talk” and images with a visceral or sexual appeal aren’t necessarily appreciated on a site consciously and specifically focused on fostering the creation of new cultural codes and methods of communicating. As they are an unavoidable part of the landscape of the internet, however, they sometimes make their way into dump.fm’s stream in surprising ways.

Unlike their predecessors, such as 4chan and Rotten.com, dump users aren’t specifically seeking to share shocking material, and in order for such material to be integrated into the aesthetic of the site, any strong reactions must be somehow subdued, or the audience must be anesthetized to it through frequent exposure. Many dump users see pornography, for example, as just another type of image to be deconstructed and examined for its formal qualities. For example, user pecco made an abstracted pastiche of pornographic gifs that frequently appear on the site – specifically, the actors’ contorted faces. The post was well-received because it isolated an aspect of those gifs that is (arguably) rarely the center of attention, and indifferently made mincemeat out of material that is made to stop viewers in their tracks

with arousal.

Commenting on a Rhizome page introducing the site for the first time, Cloninger saw the site's semiotic play as a way of warding off "banal visual language." He seemed anxious to exclude certain types of images from the visual vocabulary of the fledgling community rather than allowing individuals to recast and reread them. His list of "banal" material unworthy of artistic examination about 4chan amid the litany: "Pornography, gore, scatology, racism, rehashed 4chan memes, blingee-modified nuptial-script typography."

4chan is known for holding all of the above, and Stryker repeatedly shows how the images from 4chan – as well as specifically designated gross-out sites such as Rotten.com – desensitize users with their shock imagery. The desire to bring about disgust in oneself and others gives way to an exploratory instinct that he categorizes as adolescent and masculine. "Its popularity was built by ... kids [who] are generally smart, living in suburban wastelands, and writhing with hormonal energy. /b/ is... where bored kids craving cheap thrills go to experience something, anything that might surprise them or subvert their expectations" (67).

Stryker's use of the word "thrill" belies the embodied sensations that continue to accompany such images. Traditionally, a privileged or "proper" appreciation of art is idealized as estranged from the body, and perhaps Cloninger's value judgment stems from a desire for dump to be a site of

disembodied, intellectualized appreciation, rather than the grotesque jolts that the site still occasionally conjures today. The grotesque only becomes banal through overexposure. Why not, however, involve the body more in such a disembodied medium?

The particular connotations of blandness around the word “banal” also don’t describe the way dump.fm users make use of the imagery, which has an element of critique and deconstruction that is absent from collections of such imagery that exist only for their own sake. It seems necessary for dump.fm’s ecology of images to include influences from all corners of the web, even the sordid ones. The culture must appropriate, and respond to, all its Others.

These web-savvy images both made dump possible and resist use by members of dump. It is rare to see traditional macros being posted on the site. Visual tropes repeat themselves, but as comic elements are rarely united on the site into single images – a more common arrangement is to lay out disparate elements horizontally – they are more conscious of their role as co-dependent elements that only work alongside others.

Surfing Clubs: Dump’s Direct Ancestors

This interplay between elements was a carryover from surfing clubs, dump.fm’s slower-moving, more forumlike predecessors. Marcin Ramocki (2008) placed the birth of surfing clubs at around 2002 or 2003, “shortly

before a shift to Web 2.0.” This was a time during which “suddenly practically any kind of knowledge, image or code could be instantaneously found and used.” From their comfortable place on the web, with a consistent habitus of posting against which to contrast wide-ranging and spontaneous research, these “data dandies” could sit outside the fray and observe the strange and newly created world of cyberspace.

A surviving example of a surfing club is Nasty Nets, a site resembling a forum or Livejournal that was most active around 2007 where members, some of whom are now well known net artists, posted the fruits of their expeditions through the Deep Web. Some of the meaning-making on that site seems to come from the interplay between posted images – especially screenshots – and the titles of posts, in a trope of titling or responding in text is referred to by Ramocki as “boon and wake” (5). One poster, for example, posted a screenshot of a tacky-looking ad inquiring “Would you like to know the date of your death?,” using the title of the post to respond to the question with “I don’t care” (7).

This particular example works in an opposite direction from the aforementioned examples from dump.fm involving pornography and other hidden, seamy elements. Instead it salvages a scrap that appears unnoticed in so many contexts across the web – a bait-and-switch banner ad with fake answer bubbles – and draws users’ attention to it in a chilling way.

The ethic of exploration found on that site that Ramocki details is very much like that of dump.fm:

A singular post is an act of exhibition/exposition, pointing to a specific statement and claiming it's importance, effectively making a case for extracting it from the formless matrix of information. (2)

In other words, a post, by virtue of having been selected from the Internet's mass of information, had to somehow self-evince the reason for its existence, without the aid of accompanying, non-diegetic (con)text. In actuality, however, many posts on Nasty Nets did in fact justify their existence. Members added their own recontextualization, often in the form of the aforementioned snide refusal to "talk back" in a particular image's vernacular. These could come in the form of either through boon-and-wake non-sequitirs (a baby lying prostrate on the floor of some public space accompanied only by the word "penis") or more conventional explanatory notes ("some good-looking sound files... I've always loved these... Can you guess which ones are for modems??? ☺").

An endorsement by Nasty Nets did not necessarily mean something positive for the content creator. For example, a February 2007 post by petra described EnchantedLearning.com in hyperbolic terms: "insaaanneeee site with incredible bitmaps. the quantity of content is impressive and everything is available larger for printing." The final phrase "everything is available larger for printing" seemed to give away petra's sarcasm: net artists are so called in

part because they are rarely interested in printing. The sarcastic attitude was continued in a comment by olia: "what a page! google ads on it look like a poor echo from the future." Here olia (probably Olia Lialina) inverted the usual ideology of privileging the future on the Internet. The exchange seemed caught between snideness and romanticization, as olia seemed to be writing from the perspective of someone who literally lived in the past.

Like the members of surf clubs, Dump users occasionally engaged in acts of group looking in which they scavenged through sites together. For example, *jesusfever*, a couple of other users, and I once discovered the graphically chaotic site of an "Imperial Shih Tzu Breeder," decided it was a goldmine of sorts, and began taking screenshots of the breeder's photos of puppies in absurd costumes and reposting them. However, dump users tended to take credit for their individual finds, and the feeling of satisfaction that came from discovering a new meme in this way was intense.

The spirit of these moments, however, was noncompetitive, and I was even hesitant to share everything I found on an "interesting" website right away in order to leave room for other users to claim their discoveries. The assumption was often that there would be some kind of consensus on which images were the most valuable, and that it was in the spirit of collaboration to distribute the credit for finds between multiple individuals. When I tried to make sense of these experiences as an ethnographer, however, I found it

difficult to generalize.

Chapter 2 / The Politics of Appropriation

Particular problems emerge with studying such a culture through the images it selects. One was that the source of the images, or cultural materials, on dump.fm cannot be taken as the products of a formally bounded whole with a consistent power relationship to members of the site. They were heterogeneous – Eric Gelber (2011) called dump “a ‘show and tell’ for the polymorphously perverse.”

One approach is to see every act of reposting as a re-affirmation of feelings of superiority. Dump.fm has always toyed with the presumptions of elitism and privilege; for a long time, the front page described it as an “elite image chat community,” and discourses of competitiveness have pervaded

spinoffs created by dump members such as Tight Artists.

Indeed, American elite culture today has been defined by its omnivorousness – consumption of both lowbrow and highbrow content (Peterson and Kern 1996), and America has dominated the world of cinema, that hallmark of 20th-century images, for much of its history. The Internet has consolidated power over this bounty by providing unprecedented access to it through widely used tools like Google Image Search.

The members of dump.fm, however, are just as vulnerable to many of these developments as they are empowered by them, as we will see in chapter 3, where I discuss the many transgressions of privacy that have occurred among members of the site. Many discussions on the site, too, center both implicitly and explicitly around the disempowerment of image creators in this new environment of free exchange. The palliative to this on dump, as it is a lot of things, is appropriation.

The Mythical Content of the Early Web

It took a significant amount of time for the web to establish its own forms of visual communication and reflexivity – hence the term “post-internet.” This medium’s acceptance of the Internet as a “banality,” in the words of Gene McHugh (2010), also brings about a separation between high and low art that wasn’t previously formalized. Marshall McLuhan has written that the content of one medium is always the previous medium (1964); this was most

true in the early days of the Internet. When original images appeared on webpages, they were often photos and “traditional” artwork done by hand and scanned into the computer. They were not formally integrated with their immediate context (i.e., the web page on which they were being displayed). Thus they were accompanied with a certain ostentation, warning users of long loading times. With the limitations of the GIF and JPEG file formats, they were also often heavily compressed, creating artifacts and color dithering that interfered with their clarity and message.

Many early websites were also littered with images that were decorative in purpose, small in both resolution and file size, and often animated. Their provenance is uncertain, with many supposedly belonging to the “public domain,” according to pioneering net artist Olia Lialina. Though they were derided as an indicator of bad web design for much of their existence, at the time of dump.fm’s creation they had recently resurfaced as a topic of aesthetic and academic interest. Aside from just representing a bygone era, they were also elements of a “vernacular web” rich with potential “folklore,” as Camille Paloque-Berges sees it (Paloque-Berges 2011). The repetitive content of these sites, she argues, was part of the cultural logic of bricolage, their limitations brought about by the unspoken laws of a creative commons.

Another reason for the renewed interest in this primitive aesthetic was

when its persistence was threatened, particularly in 2010, when Geocities, a popular webhosting service operated by Yahoo!, shut down, leading to the deletion of all its content. Early sites, having been left without maintenance, disappeared on their own easily enough, but this isolated crisis led to more concerted archival efforts.

Many interventions sprang up on the web to preserve the content of these forgotten sites. With the help of projects such as the appreciations of Olia Lialina in “Still There” (Lialina 2012), a torrent of the entire contents of Geocities created by a group known as the Archive Team, and Internet Archaeology, a project for the preservation of widely used images founded by Ryder Ripps, the images found and reproduced on these sites, in particular, found a new life that was sometimes divorced from their original context. Finding distinctive material from peripheral sources on the web continued to be valued as a springboard for creativity and a significant project among dump.fm users.

The archival instinct of dump.fm, however, often ended with these acts of browsing and discovery. Images were often hotlinked, or linked directly using their original URLs. Hotlinking is an unstable and frowned-upon method for posting images in most web design contexts, as it uses up the original image host’s bandwidth, which is often paid for by an individual out of pocket in the case of personal webpages. The persistence of a hotlinked image on

the web is also entirely dependent on the persistence of the original host. Rarely were images moved to dump's or another site's more stable servers, unless an image was of particular long-term significance. For example, user jeronimo pioneered the use of an image known as the "leanback guy," a cartoon character from an obscure and inactive, but still functional, site on the web. Realizing how much he had been reusing it, he uploaded the original image to a Photobucket account, keeping it in a place that was beholden neither to dump nor to the site he took it from.

As on the rest of the web, the persistence of these images within individual dump posts were entirely dependent on the persistence of the websites from they came. Broken images were not an uncommon sight in the deep reaches of users' archives. In these cases, the only surviving copy of the image, unless someone took a special effort to preserve it, might have been a modified version or one that was embedded in a Photoblaster assemblage. Thus art literally came to augment both human and machine memory.

Deep-Web Exploitation

Dump.fm's snarky reuse of imagery from the early days of the web clashes with the sincerity of those early sites and their graphics. Because of these images' uncertain provenance, they are difficult to categorize, and the

politics of modifying and recontextualizing them can only really be discerned from the perspective of dump users, rather than their original creators. We do know this: while they were sometimes used in deeply personal, DIY contexts, they were also agents of homogenization. Though these images had the anonymous origins that mass cultural icons often do, and often appeared at least as ubiquitously in the early days of the web, they also had associations with the messy, homegrown, DIY, and often narcissistic phenomenon of the personal home page. For all the power relations inherent in these subversive acts, did an innocent aesthetic evoking the homepage of a 13-year-old budding web designer in 1996 really need to be subverted? Must the "elites" of dump.fm mock the past as we hurtle into a world where self-expression is constrained by various social media platforms?

And did the world of dump.fm, with its atavism and exclusivity, even present anything different, or apart from, these early days of the internet? Camille Paloque-Berges connected these aesthetic hallmarks to a "vernacular web" that was based around a DIY ethos (free web hosting, personal, lowbrow topics) that idiosyncratically also built on the work of others through its "bricolage" that involved "picking up and rearranging Web elements from the same toolbox rather than innovating" (Paloque-Berges 2011: 120).

Dump perpetuated this bricolage logic through the procedurality involved in using the site, which involved rescrambling various semiotic

elements, but the minor and effortless nature of creating a single post, and the sheer abundance of content that has resulted from this, meant that it was difficult for members to develop much of an attachment to what they had created. When asked about specific posts from more than a couple of months back, users often couldn't remember making them. This irony is reminiscent of Paloque-Berges' definition of Net Art as "also participating in the cultural material it takes as an object of study"; as they studied webpages that haphazardly threw images together, they sometimes seemed caught up in the very forgetfulness and ephemerality of the culture they critiqued.

By contrast, the idea of place-making or place-staking was a central tenet of the internet's frontier culture. Small, animated images created a sense of domesticity and comfort, evinced in the frequent use of house/room metaphors in the naming of pages, and the variety of mailbox icons used on "email me!" buttons. There were also some earlier attempts at the type of decontextualization dump.fm afforded: Paloque-Berges compared earlier attempts at collecting such material to "Curiosity Cabinets," the creation of which involved "learning from these items, in an encyclopaedic spirit" (121).

Individual posts on dump.fm may not have made "homes" in the same way as the original frontier homepages. However, the fact that a community existed where they could coexist with other, newer types of images in a kind of collective, deadpan indifference attested to a different kind of world-

making. Perhaps users' relationship to websites, particularly highly interactive ones like dump.fm, was more companionable than domestic: "I think a good website fulfills all social needs, as a good friend does," Ryder Ripps told me.

IRL Habits

In a less ostentatious way, being a user of dump.fm encouraged a constant aesthetic awareness of one's own Internet use. Though their habits may have been superficially similar to those of any other Internet user, the way a dump user was required to inhabit their daily routine was different. As I became more involved in the site, I found myself taking hundreds of tiny screengrabs of the more absurd fragments from my everyday activities, with the intention of posting them to dump or using them in dump-influenced collages.

This habit of looking for found art and materials for collage might bleed over into the actual world for dump users as well. When I went to a screening of Jurassic Park 3D with decrvnk, who is an art student doing a residency in New York, he snickered during the ostentatious opening graphics of the 3D presentation. "I just want to make a GIF out of this whole thing," he said.

About 10 days later, I was walking in my neighborhood with "Elizabeth," AKA gr8pevine. She has a vastly different daily occupation from decrvnk, working in PR marketing for investors at an oil company, that has

very different daily demands. She suddenly became fascinated with an ATM that was shielded with sheets of scratched-up Lucite through which bright blue lights seared. “Look at that!” she exclaimed. Something about the old ATM’s failure to maintain a clean, hyperreal look – in capitalist logic, creating feelings of trustworthiness and predictability – seemed connected to dump.fm’s aesthetics of failure, though she was unable to articulate what exactly she liked so much about it.

Later that evening, she facetiously remarked that the diner on Houston Street where we had been eating looked like, and played muzak like, a “Sims diner” (as in *The Sims*, the popular video game that in several incarnations allows users to simulate a virtual home, family and life). It finally hit me: what was so piquant about this form of humor was that it drew upon something in the real world that resembled a virtual world, in the reverse of the typical relationship of representation one would expect.

Are these connections just jokes? Gr8pevine has said as much, but as I have been repeatedly driving home throughout this text, humor often has a virtual world hidden within it. The virtual world this particular moment of shared understanding engendered was one in which aesthetics resulting from the gap between the virtual and the actual – the diner, in its time away from its actual-world manifestation, would have returned from the virtual world of *The Sims* in a somewhat different form. This is precisely what Baudrillard

prophesized in “Simulations” when he wrote that “henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory” (1983:1).

Though play in virtual worlds is probably not widespread enough to make such analysis true of the present, the facetious Style articles of the online publication DIS magazine is similar in challenging highly internet-savvy readers to imagine products such as “layered shoes” in an actual world and evaluate whether such cultural changes are anywhere near what they would want to see.

Dump.fm’s Creative Conventions

Dump.fm was a new type of creative community, one that gathered around collaboration (and maybe some mild one-upmanship) rather than the competition fostered by most art worlds. The site worked on the presumption of derivativeness – nothing posted was assumed to be the user’s own work, and even the genealogy of self-contained composite images could be difficult to trace back to different members. Users, in addition, derived parts of their posts from other members’ posts, making unoriginality part of the premise for every creative act.

Dump took this development a step further by refusing to passively consume; instead users narrativized, altered and propagated images. Thus one never knew what would come next in dump’s volatile arrangements of

objects, but the most successfully propagated ones seemed to come from a place of either banal familiarity or extreme "otherness" ("why does this exist? why did someone put the time into making it?").

The funniest, most innovative, and most multifaceted ideas persisted. "The best thing about dump is when you see someone else use an image you made in their own dump," said Jules LaPlace, the webmaster, in my survey. "It's like you've made a new word and added it to the communal lexicon. Words/images can be resurrected and remembered hours, days, weeks, months after they're first used, given new context and new meaning." Dump.fm users did indeed communicate using images, then, but their usage was a little more complicated than just "talk": it was a language being created en media res. There were no set rules for what an image could signify. And an image that was reused often enough to be remembered as a linguistic unit was often also associated with the person who brought it to the table.

Posts, or "dumps," on the site may have come as single images, a horizontally arranged set that puts them in juxtaposition with each other, or as images accompanied with a short string of text, often caption-like (sometimes captured in screenshot form in hopes of creating a lasting meme; more on this later).

It was indeed possible, if one was simply bursting with ideas, to persist in dumping one's own images and ideas with no elements from others'

dumps. The website boasted of hosting over a million images, and you could upload anything under four megabytes or so from your computer by clicking a button near the text field.

Upon successfully being uploaded, an image appeared in a post by itself; this could be frustrating if you were moved to upload it specifically by the activities transpiring in the room and envision it among the images that inspired it. For a moment, the fragmented text scrap had a moment where it was presented by itself, as if sitting on a pedestal. This quirk was, however, useful for figuring out when images first appeared on the site, as the most successful memes rarely appeared alone otherwise. However, the urge to collaborate more often than not would catch up with you.

Adbusters: Dump.fm and Commercialism

Until the internet's culture of sharing made it impossible for brands to protect their images and logos, the appropriation of commercial imagery for derivative works existed in very proscribed spaces. The Adbusters style of subverting brand logos was familiar to many people. It involved using the weaponry of advertisers, such as logos and mascots, and reversed their messages so that they become "un-advertisements." Occasionally, however, Adbusters had been accused of duplicating the aggressions of their target corporations, by, for instance, encouraging readers to fetishize its

"Unswosher" sneakers instead of Nikes.

Dump users sometimes engaged in this sort of play, parodying corporate logos on the same dialogic terms as hypothete has in figure 1 below. Here Wal-Mart's "rollback" smiley face is replaced with a similar logo that is instead frowning.

HYPOTHETE
12:20 AM THU 6/16 - IN DUMPFM



2 ❤️ KEVINRHINO FRANKHATS

Figure 2⁴

With few monetary pressures and no supporter/subscriber base to rally, however, they could also have a more ambiguous relationship with corporate imagery. Their method was more likely to be idle experimentation than purposeful sabotage. Without a need to use material means appealing to the typical consumer, such as slick printed magazines and sneakers, to disseminate their ideas, they could instead focus on sophisticating those ideas. Commentary on capitalism on dump is more exploratory, skirting the polemical, one-sided statements usually desired in capitalism.

Dump.fm users seemed particularly aware of the tendency of countercultural aesthetic movements to get absorbed into capitalistic projects, such as mainstream fashion movements. The idea of developing a unified aesthetic that opposed these projects was thus pointless to them.

Working from an urban, American perspective, they were, like Adbusters, aware of the imagery to which people are overexposed and used this familiarity as a point of leverage, often lampooning the excessive qualities of certain brands' image and the amplification of these excesses through repetition and advertising. Sometimes they drew attention to this sort of overexposure by reproducing it themselves. Dump.fm creator Ryder Ripps, for example, was often spotted wearing head-to-toe UnderArmor athletic gear, and the fact that he could use it to make a spectacle out of himself pointed to the ludicrousness of the brand's encouragement to dress in this manner. His interest in identifying and intensifying certain brand images continued with Monster Energy and Boost Mobile, which, he told design magazine *Print* was a product of his "attraction to pubescent male aggression as a thing to attain" (Johnson 2011).

The virtually elicitable equivalent of this performance was careful looking. In this way, dump.fm users made the most seemingly commonplace objects, such as brand logos, into something disorienting and unfamiliar. A brand logo, for example, may have been broken down into its formal

characteristics and juxtaposed with another image that may have shared its iconic properties but not its symbolic ones.

The symbolic characteristics, in fact, may also have been hilariously, ironically divergent from those of the brand logo. Gr8pevine, for example, juxtaposed the UnderArmor and Chanel logos⁵, creating a sense of

GR8PEVINE
06:59 PM MON 9/5 - IN DUMPFM



1 ❤️ COSMICDESERT

Figure 3

visual homogeneity (both logos were essentially interlocking, round shapes). This homogeneity subverted the gendered marketing of the brands: Chanel is much better known for its women's products, and Under Armor for its men's. The message of a juxtaposition, however, was not necessarily that Under Armor was failing to be masculine or Chanel failing to be feminine. Instead it made visible the codes that become habitualized in advertising's audience and contrast their myriad – and cultivatedly “unique” – associations with the starkly uncommunicative quality they taken on in this environment of defamiliarization. Clorox took this idea one step further by swapping the geometric shapes associated with the Windows and Adidas logos.⁶



Comparisons were also sometimes made between corporate imagery – often of the banal kind that is meant to be looked past – and “art.” Trailmixx’s post below is interesting because the “art” image it uses is iconic and powerful – usually poor fodder for dump because of the lack of semiotic

freedom one has with such an image – while the commercial image it uses is banal and utilitarian, a milk carton from a budget brand in the Northeast that is all but overlooked by the customer. Yet, the similarity in color scheme between the two highlights how commonplace they both are and plays with different notions of iconicity. In an environment like dump, it also almost goes without saying that this post questions the line between high and low culture.

Alternately, dump.fm users self-consciously incorporated some of the logic of the institution referenced. For example, by inserting another user's name into the YouTube logo, ben_dover turned it into "Frank Hats," thus imitating the commodification of personal information brought about by today's highly invasive social-media corporation

Deterritorialization and Floating Signifiers

As images were moved around and reused, they were renamed and reconceptualized, often accumulating meaning just like the people and nations often used in examples describing de/reterritorialization; for example, the "leanback guy," a cartoon character whose altered image has appeared in hundreds of iterations on the site, was originally created with a name, "Eric Brad Singer," that is rarely invoked.³

Most of the memetic images on Dump.fm accumulated explanations

³ For a (by no means complete) timeline that I made of some of the Eric Brad Singer incarnations as of December 2012, visit <https://wesfiles.wesleyan.edu/home/rpincus/dumpframes.html>

and meanings over time, but one particular reversed this process, exposing the arbitrariness of meanings that can be applied to floating signifiers.

An image of the name "Peggy," a signature written in ornate script and evoking a person of a bygone era, and a similar specimen of the name "Steve" were floating signifiers for months, their signified becoming repeatedly anchored in disparate images. "Peggy" was in particular the target of emotional text collages and biting jokes.

Oftentimes the name "Peggy" was juxtaposed with incongruous images. Other posts conjectured at who Peggy is, matching her up with an official portrait of a mousy woman with short, overly straightened hair, but the amorphous identity of this character was what keeps the meme so persistent.

Some dumps concerning Peggy served the purpose of commentary, drawing attention to the arbitrary associations foisted upon this name. "Web artists are furious at/Peggy/fuck peggy/but then/i dont hate peggy now," read one assemblage by pummp. "I live to hit Peggy," declared plams, his misogyny sounding unthreatening due to users' knowledge of his boyish looks and youth. One user, jesusfever, did a rare thing in explicitly identifying with the character, making an alt account called "peggy" that now receives many peggy-related posts as "@" messages. Eventually, I discovered that "Peggy" was the name of his mother, and his identification then made more sense.

Thus this floating signifier was finally re-territorialized, and in a way

that suggested a powerful attachment to a user's psyche, rather than the detached experimentation more typical of dump.

Photoblaster: A lightweight, online tool

When Photoblaster, an online image-editing utility, was created by LaPlace in 2011, it provoked a small renaissance in dump's collective creativity, particularly in the opinion of its creator. It brought the creative process online and away from the expensive, resource-heavy and difficult to master applications like Photoshop and into a collaborative, online modality. Certainly, the marks of its features as well as its limitations are visible in many of dump.fm's familiar visible tropes. For example, it could superimpose gifs on top of an existing image and scale them, but only dead center in that image.

Some users enjoyed working with these limitations, but others, seeking to specifically match the visions in their heads, preferred to work with the utility's strong areas, such as the ability to shift the entire color scheme of an image with little effort, or turned to WYSIWYG editors such as Online Image Editor, despite their vastly different audience.

The lingua franca of the site, however, remained either horizontally arranged rows of images, or composite images that made sophisticated jokes on their own. The former could fall into a variety of categories or combinations of categories, which will be explored in the following chapter.

Chapter 3 / Dump.fm Assemblages and Image Types: A Spotter's Guide

Unintentionality plays a large part in how dumps are interpreted. Faving seems to have as intuitive and difficult-to-elicite affective dimensions as dumping itself. There do seem to be two types of faves: ones that have more

to do with the faver's immediate reaction to the post, and a kind that has more of an ulterior motive, having to do with getting a certain image into the faver's palette for later reuse. These two types, however, are not mutually exclusive.

Users also had individualistic rituals around using the site that varied according to their browser or individual tastes. These could obscure the causes behind both production and reception. For example, depending on whether one was using Chrome, Firefox or Safari, dragging an image in the chat room into the text box might have loaded its URL into the box right away so that it could be "dumped," or the user might have had to right-click on images to get the URLs. The relative clumsiness of the latter maneuver might have led a user to instead just fave the combination from which he or she wanted to get the image. Images also appeared only as URLs in the box and there was no way to "preview" one's posts before sending them. Users' short-term memory of what they had put in the box, or in what order, sometimes failed them, leading to "mistake dumps."

I also encountered some methodological difficulties in determining which posts could be considered representative of dump.fm's culture and which were more marginal, or even negligible. Unless one is in the chat room at the particular moment that a meme takes off, it is difficult to pick memes out of the mass of images, discover how (and with whom) they originated.

Virtuality, Multiplicity of Readings, and the Sociality of Failure

Ultimately, because of the spontaneous, intuitive nature of production and reception on dump and the difficulty in verbal communication around images that has resulted from it, I have decided to rely on my own readings. When reflecting on the way I interpret these posts and get enjoyment out of them, I realized there was quite a gulf between the connections between the images within them I drew in my head and the way they would look to a more naïve eye. This sort of communication is consistent with the concept of virtuality “as understood in terms of potentiality (Massumi 2002:30); it can be said to exist whenever there is a perceived gap between experience and ‘the actual.’” (Boellstorff 2008:19). The actual is what the naïve eye sees, as well as the commonalities between what various dump users perceived in the posts, such as shape, color and space. It is because of the gap between the actual qualities of posts and the potential that users see in them – both in terms of their readings and the reusability of their components – that dump is such a vibrant and unpredictable community. The many, often intentional imperfections present also liberated users to alter and improve upon each other’s creations without feeling that they have exposed an oversight, from the viewpoint of a common aesthetic standard, in someone’s hard work.

For example, pizzadog demonstrated lip-synching (one of Boellstorff’s favorite examples of virtuality) in a post that juxtaposed a GIF of dump user frankhats with his mouth moving with a screenshot of text from a video

game.⁷ The appropriateness of the pairing but the imperfection of the lipsync left the components separate and vulnerable to reworkings. (See the endnotes for the address of the post; written text, unfortunately, does not allow me to convey the animation). This vulnerability, far from being an actual failing, is central to dump's sociality.

This account of dump archetypes in the spirit of virtuality is not meant to be taken as authoritative accounts for the reasoning behind users' behavior; instead they are more of a demonstration of how dump users continually innovated in spite of – perhaps even as a result of – the synergy between the limitations of the site and the boundless range of images available on the web. The list available in this “guide” is also by no means complete. Dump's creativity is predicated on transgression, and thus new types of images and tropes of juxtaposition are a part of its vitality.

Dump in Decline?

A general narrative of decline was generally pervading the website at the time of my most intense fieldwork, and it seemed to have been brought on by New Wprld and the subsequent actual-life meetings between users. Sometimes the image chat part of the site would appear to be stagnating, only to reveal a large block of text conversations between users when text was turned on. These conversations often ran a parallel course to the images, however, preferring subjects such as drugs, jocular trash-talking (especially

between the younger, teenaged users) and actual-life mutual acquaintances. These topics often infuriated outsiders, and several long-time users remarked that they kept the text option off in order to stay focused on the images.

Due to its piecemeal archiving system, it was difficult to truly know what it had been like to be on dump in the past, and whatever memories longtime users had were to be taken with a grain of salt, as nostalgia can distort. Part of the reason for this narrative was perhaps the long shadow cast by dump's inaugural users. According to long-time dump user and webmaster ryz, known in the actual world as Jules LaPlace, the original wave of influential dump users arrived through an invite code in a post from March 2010 on the New Museum-run website Rhizome.org entitled "Introducing: dump.fm." As they came from that art world-influenced environment, they were "capital-A Artists and were self-motivated to define themselves to society in that way." They were also, however, characterized by their flightiness, perhaps because of their commitment to other, more real life projects, such as "[doing] the visuals for [the music group] MGMT."

Though this group cast a long shadow, their influence was limited by their lack of rough-and-ready contact with the more permanent community, and LaPlace thus characterized their era as the "After Effects era" (due to the Adobe post-production program they seemed to favor). "They passed by the site and left a mark," he said. "But most of them left! The [MGMT guy] posted

one glitched-out Mickey Mouse gif, dumped it, and got on the hall of fame, and never dumped again." These transient users saw dump.fm as a space for a certain aesthetic and simply posted work that fit this aesthetic rather than using it for truly new forms of interaction. Because of the large number of "faves" it got, however, their work ended up on the "hall of fame" page and eventually was integrated into a permanent leader board that appeared on the front page of the site for users who weren't logged in. Thus this work came to represent dump.fm's aesthetic and sense of humor, for better or worse.

Spatial Relationships

Much of dump's visual punning was based around gestalt recognition of visual patterns. For some posters, however, the horizontal rows in which their arrangements would eventually appear could be seen as a plane of space. The presumption of visual continuity between images could thus create a narrative, even if it appeared wildly surreal and fantastical. Differences in scale between the images caused users to come up with ideas that they may not have thought of in the physical world, where many objects always occur in similar sizes unless specifically designated as "miniature" or "jumbo." Examples included a post by jertronic that showed Jenga blocks falling on a woman in a wheelchair that was about half the size of the tower⁸. Images that were intentionally left incomplete – for use in a website layout, for example – also served as points of departure for scenes that were impossible

or improbable in actual life. If the placement of images within their framed lined up perfectly, they could create surprisingly realistic continuous-looking narratives, such as pixelated blood spurting out of an arm whose hand was still writing with a pencil.

Repetitive "spams"

Due to dump's flat layout and the gathering of all members into one room, the flow of images in this room served as a kind of commons for all members. This fact was brought to the fore when members made attempts to overtake the commons with hundreds of copies of an image, an image larger than the 500-pixel limit (which could only be done by someone with moderator privileges). Sometimes glitter text was used to repeatedly and redundantly enforce a message, often for humorous effect, as when eliath, clearly self-conscious of the obnoxiousness of such behavior created a wall of pink glitter text reading "Destroying the Community" amid a conversation about trolls.⁹ When text screenshots were used, their lack of visual impact was often offset by long stretches of blank space. ⁴ When someone complimented kiptok's aesthetic prowess, he made a screenshot of their words at various heights within the frame and tiled the screenshots artfully in a relatively graceful "spam."

⁴ Also see <http://dump.fm/p/wakefulness/9467848>.

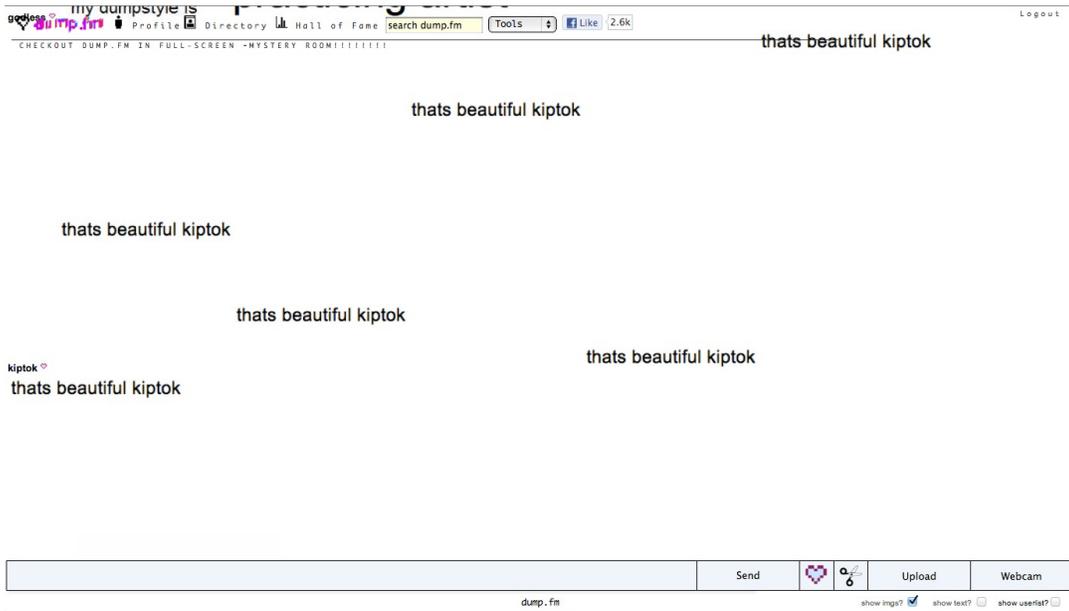


Figure4
Captioning

The association between the image and its caption might have been subject to several interpretations, especially when a single caption was acting on multiple images. Users would have even if their interpretations differed, so long as they could cobble together a connection that made sense to them.

Many “caption” relationships, despite connections that seemed initially tenuous, were good at directing the beholder’s attention, perhaps because gifs were more successful at embodying verbs than many still images.

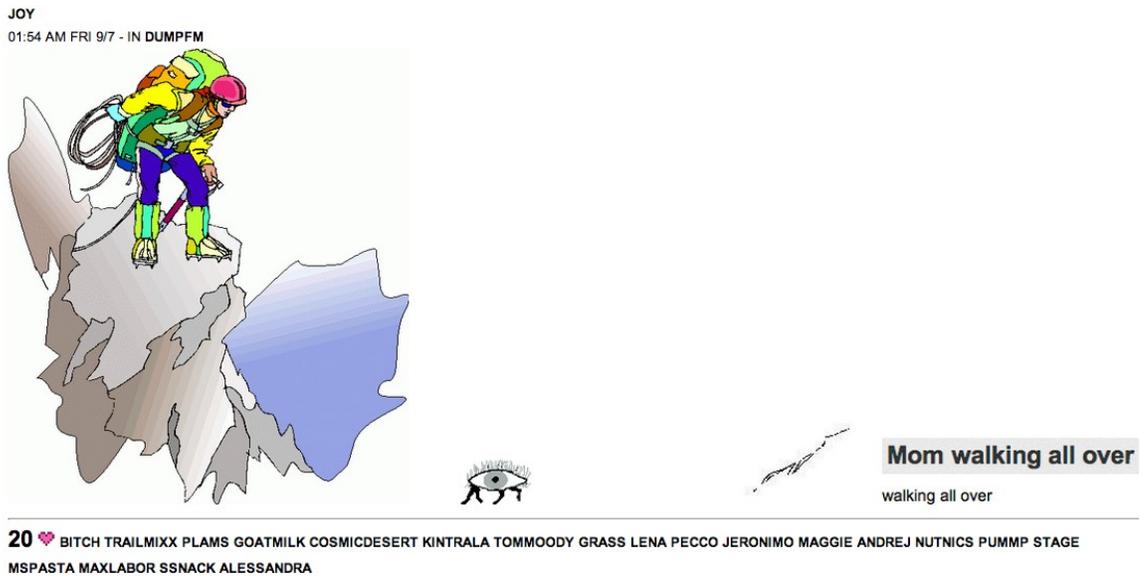


Figure5¹⁰

In this example posted by joy, the “mom” was likely to be taken to describe the animation of the eye on four legs, despite the fact that there was little that was “mom-like” about it (unless, perhaps, one was a fan of Louise Bourgeois’s spider sculptures, which are named “Maman.”). This was because there was a salient connection between caption and illustration. The caption engaged with the two accompanying images on distinct levels: “walking” being the action in which the gif was engaging, and “all over” with the fact that the clip art accompanying it depicted mountain exploration.

“What ruined dump? A Million Gifs of Weird Lines”

An intervention that improved upon the tendency of dumps to provide too much information at once was the use of lines or other unconventional connectors to describe the relationship between objects. Lines, aside from creating breathing room – similar to how punctuation divides a sentence—could be read diagrammatically or metaphorically as describing the relationship between two elements. It could be ambiguous whether an image qualified as a connector, but often an image would read that way because it contained little semiotic information in itself, or seemed to have been devised to reconcile horizontally adjacent elements.

A soccer ball bouncing from side to side, for example, was championed as a connector when it appeared on dump; one user remarking that they “missed this relationship.” Perhaps users had forgotten about the ball’s use as a connector in its earlier incarnation, and it was actually being rediscovered in this instance.

Some lines could be interpreted as having either a metaphorical or a literal use; in funWindow's dump, for example, the central line evokes the trajectory of a cat toy, a cat's gaze or a cat's paw in the air, but it also evokes an indirect, circuitous path between the concept of a bottle of pills (and the recreational use they evoke to most dump users) and a cat that is fascinated with the movements of aquarium fish.

FUNWINDOW

10:49 PM THU 1/3 - IN DUMPFM



3  **KKBK PLAMS GOATMILK**

Figure6¹¹

Punctuating with Images

Similar to how a word can look strange and appear to lose meaning when one is forced to write it over and over again, dump sometimes became oversaturated with a single image when it was nearly introduced. The reverse of accumulated meaning could occur with such images, particularly in the case of “forced memes” – themes favored by one particular person that don’t quite catch on with others, or don’t catch on in the same way.

Plams, a young college student who had built up a mysterious persona on dump by refusing to reveal his entire face in webcam photos, was also fond of overusing forced memes. He used an animation of a cute mother hamster suckling her babies, for example, in



Figure 7

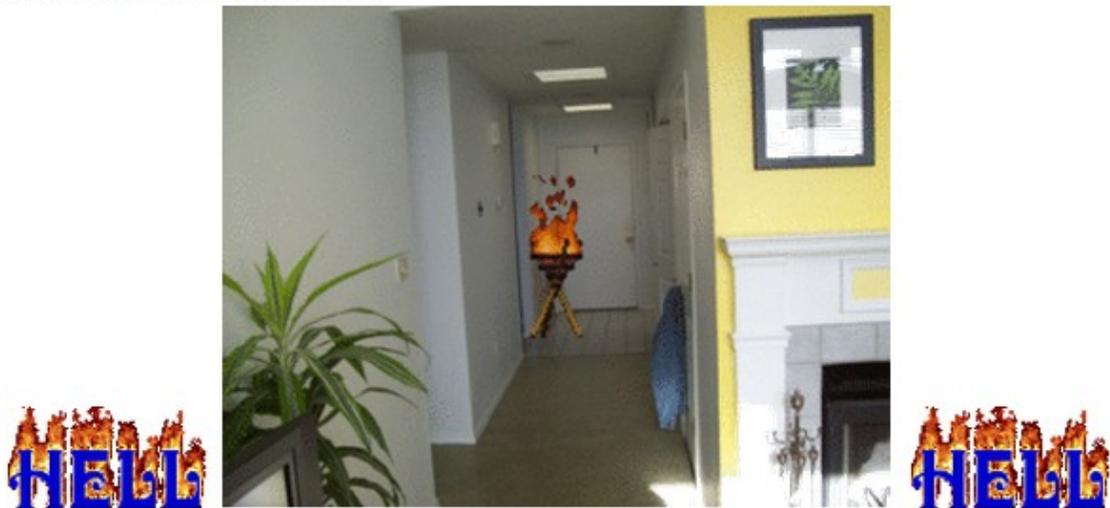
several bizarre scenarios where it was seemingly placed just for the sake of being irrelevant, perhaps due to the aimless gaze of the mother hamster. She can be seen failing to bat an eye at footage of a violent, sexual dance between a black couple¹² or react to a flirtatious anime girl or a tailspinning airplane¹³. The lack of expressive power of this meme didn’t stop it from becoming popular among other users; it merely meant that the hamster mother and her babies were acted upon instead of being perceived as agents that could themselves act.

Symmetry

Dump.fm users usually cared about the aesthetics of their posts on a less-than-holistic level; though there were harmonies and contrasts, the overall effect of posts on the site was often somewhat crude and heterogeneous. One intervention against this tendency that was easy to carry out without below-the-surface image tinkering was that of symmetry. Some users might have repeated a certain image on either end of their post for little discernible conceptual reason other than creating something more aesthetically pleasing. It serves this function in Jertronic's post, with the twin "Hell" graphics (ostensibly generated using Flamingtext.com) creating the sense of a foreboding entranceway, albeit in a facetious way considering that the "Hell" presented here looks like a corporate office, possibly a doctor's office.

JERTRONIC

12:05 PM WED 9/26 - IN DUMPFM



4 ❤️ **FRANKHATS NIDNOI ANDREJ PLAMS**

Figure8¹⁴

Trends in Content

Classicism

More frequently, the symmetry trope on dump frequently uses Grecian columns and other Classical imagery as its content. The relatively frequent appearance of Grecian columns on dump.fm (at least in comparison to the myriad other subjects that could appear), particularly when they were symmetrical framing devices, seemed to be a continuation of a larger tradition in Net Art. One way of imbuing the use of the symmetry trope with greater self-consciousness was through evoking this pseudo-Grecian aesthetic. Its repetition had already become a running joke in internet art circles outside of dump.fm, as indicated by Sterling Crispin's compilation Tumblr entitled "Greek New Media Shit." Dump.fm users, however, were less interested in mindlessly reproducing this aesthetic than using it as a marker of self-consciousness about the principle of symmetry, and perhaps attention to traditional aesthetic ideals in general.

NICOOL
12:30 PM MON 8/6 - IN DUMPFM



3 ♡ WRINKLES SAMANTHA PEPPER

Figure 9¹⁵

The frequency of this particular content was observed by Sterling Crispin on his compilation blog Greek New Media Shit and analyzed by Brian Droitcour on Rhizome.org, who took the urns and statues, used with complete, intentional seriousness, that existed at the intersection of art history and a posthuman world "perceive(d) primarily with the aid of machines": "The art of the Greeks has been used in the past as a touchstone for artists who

measure their own vision against an anthropocentric one" (Droitcour 2011).

In the words of artist, blogger and dump member Tom Moody, however, he was "schooled" by commenters, including Ishmael Hallin, who explained that the objects were present as defaults in many 3D-modeling programs. Moody's reaction to the piece was generally scathing, as he feared that this piece gave net art an excessively legitimate place in the course of art history for all the wrong reasons (Moody 2012). There were values inherent in software companies' choice of these shapes as example images too, however, and dump.fm members continued to engage in critique by juxtaposing them with images representing what these values might be.

For example, peggy sandwiched the text fragment "I'm not racist but..." between two Roman columns, acknowledging the conceptual link between 19th-century racist ideology and an elevation of Classical human achievements and facial features made in texts like Stephen Jay Gould's *The Mismeasure of Man*¹⁶, and perhaps questioning the Net Art world's motivations in making such Classical allusions. As a graduate of Bennington College's art department, he was likely aware of such aesthetic debates. Others hoarded columns and other Hellenic structures into single posts in what could be seen as a burlesque of other users' behavior or a resource for other users to draw upon in their posts.⁵

⁵ See <http://dump.fm/p/DoritoWitch/9467349>

Who's Speaking? Puppetry and Performance

Far more common was users performatively using text (screencapped or not) to suggest speech on behalf of some entity in an image. According to Terri Silvio, the practice of attributing speech and agency to inanimate objects, in what he refers to as animation, has a long history in performance studies, where it takes its cues from investigations in the anthropology of religion of “practices of ‘en-souling’ matter” (Nelson 2001:30; quoted in Silvio 2011). Alfred Gell (1998) theorizes that sacred objects are invested with human agency through both formal qualities that represent personhood and through individuals’ interactions with them. It is questionable whether images can be seen as sacred to such an iconoclastic community, except perhaps as something to be immediately blasphemed. However, Silvio also adds that Mauss’s theory of the gift as part of an individual invested in an object, as well as Marx’s commodity fetishism, do the work of pushing such attachments outside the “overtly religious” sphere. The fact that webcam photos and other images of dump users are highly subject to this animation, and that dump continually explores commodity fetishism through its various operations on commercial imagery, means that dump users are definitely engaging with this secular kind of animation.

Dump users used these animations to impersonate or address other

users using snippets of text that were spoken by those users. The text could also merely sound like it was spoken by them, and thus be intentionally misattributed to a particular user through the use of some other mark of that person's identity, such as a webcam photo.

It was sometimes difficult, however, to discern which figure in the post was speaking if more than one was present. Posts attributing speech to other users usually included a webcam image of them with an appropriate facial expression, but this did not always make the post communicate any more clearly. For example, bitch posted a picture of sakalak juxtaposed with the phrase "Somebody catch that damn bird!".



SOMEBODY CATCH
THAT DAMN BIRD



Figure10⁷

For someone unaccustomed to them, these moments of animation could sometimes be difficult to read. The image of the grackle, heavily cropped, had long been a memetic favorite on dump, but the fact that it has been animated in this post to move around in circles like an actual bird (albeit a cartoonish one) takes the meme to a new, bizarre level. Sakalak's image,

bounded by the straight-lined limits of a webcam photo, also struggles to transcend the limited conditions of its mimesis as the post attempts to imbue it with the power of speech; it's difficult for the viewer to imagine him speaking those words, as the wild animation of the bird draws the eye more and has more agency through its animation. The post ultimately communicates clearly, however, because of the square boundaries of both images, which indicates their self-consciousness as representations and places them on the same plane of reality.

This explicitly acknowledged the presence of other personalities and how they've left their mark. The text snippet "Frankhats explain," for example, There were several subcategories of dumps that involved the author performing as a character rather than as herself, but this was one of the most explicit.

Another subtype involved impersonation of a person outside the room, or indeed, outside of the realm of normal humanity. In one post by 2DEEP4U, Oprah Winfrey had supposedly "signed off" on the idea of a dog that prayed alongside monks.¹⁸ The facetious use of the signatures of famous people was similar to the reterritorializing project of the "Peggy" meme. This logic was repeated in the facetious addition of many different types of watermarks to images, such as adding the "Brazzers" watermark to images that could be humorously (mis)interpreted as pornographic.

Another type of dump can animate various figures in the post to the poster's liking. These "speech/thought bubble" dumps tread as though an entity in the post were speaking or thinking the adjacent text. Animation was not restricted to first-person speech alone, either. Users sometimes identified themselves or others with certain objects; a small animation of a pair of ankhs, for example, was associated with kiptok and ssnack by one user with the usage of a text snippet reading "kiptok (left) and ssnack (right)".

Sometimes text and an accompanying image had a loose enough relationship that the text might be interpreted as either addressing the person or being spoken by that person; Samantha didn't remember whether she mimicking "Regina", complete with hand-clap emojis for extra sass, or pleading for an end to her harassment in a post she made early in January 2013. However, the post did convey the hostile nature of "Regina's" typical communications, and "Regina" herself faved it, happy for the attention.

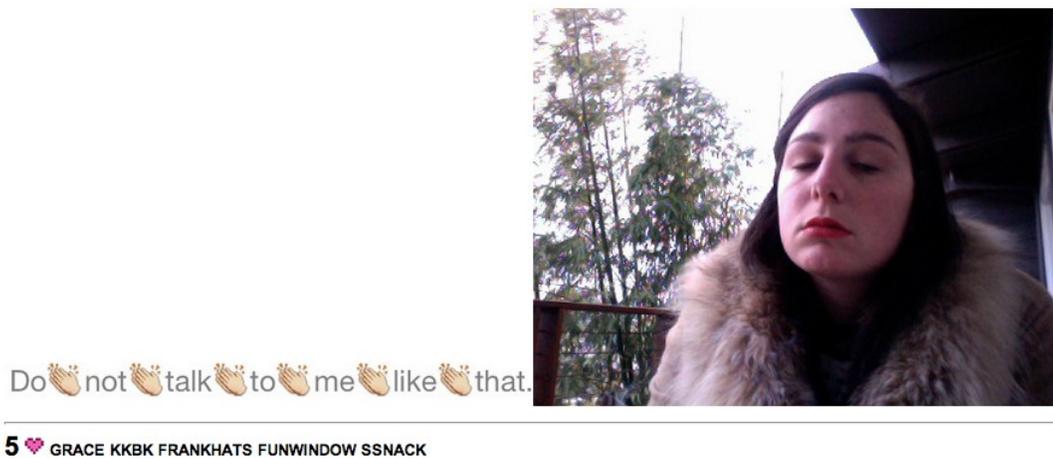


Figure11¹⁹

The caption might be made more explicit through the use of various types of speech or “thought balloons,” a trope borrowed from cartooning²⁰. Screenshots of actual conversations from iPhones, which use a speech-bubble theme and are a part of internet popular culture due to blogs like “Damn You Autocorrect!,” have been “illustrated” using images as well, with the images on the left and right sides of the post representing participants in the conversation.

Conceptual pastiches

A decidedly “difficult” type of dump, conceptual pastiches more closely resembled traditional paper collages, as they made no claim to spatial relations between images, nor were they performative. Instead, the images evoked one another in a web of signification. Interpreting them could require background knowledge stemming from American/Western popular culture, academic culture, and the unique fusion between the two that was dump.

For example, Grass’s dump was a chain of partial and unusually fragmented screenshots by various other members (the first in the series, for example, bridged two images); the most eye-getting one in the series seemed to be a question about “sweating vodka,” and the most recognizable image was that of Yo-Landi Visser, a member of the South African band Die Antwoord who is perhaps best known for her outrageous dress and questionable “Zef,” or white trash, taste. On the margins, however, were an image of Goldfish crackers (evoking a “seapunk” aesthetic, but in a distant, contrived way) and two symbols denoting nuclear waste, as well as a small fragment from a graph with a rainbow underneath. These latter three connoted instead of denoted, connecting the idea of alcohol and illegal drugs sweated out of the body to the idea of toxicity and artificiality. The erratically ordered ideas in these posts may have made them difficult to interpret, but they also reflected the fast-moving and multifarious community in microcosm,

and thus they never looked out of place.



Figure 12¹
Production and Processing of Images

Despite the fact that a rich interplay of meanings occurred with the reuse of images in rows in its chat room, dump's stable front page always promoted self-contained images that synthesized disparate elements, and these tended to be the images that reappeared in other mediums, such as Tumblr and Facebook. These images played more nicely with traditional notions of the unified art piece; they maintain their integrity when alienated from their neighbors by a Tumblr dashboard or a Facebook photo page. However, if a self-contained image contains too much information to fit into users' short attention spans or the 500x500 pixel threshold for resizing, it reaches a certain point where it loses exploitability. Thus, in some cases images that have gone through multiple transformations by the dump.fm community can be said to be more "finished": both more developed in terms

of ideas and less likely to be dumped again because of their proliferating significations.

Drawings

Despite the lack of emphasis on traditional first-order artistic techniques in the dump.fm community, such as drawing, painting, and photography, there has been a history of original drawings, most of them cartoonlike, that have been well-received in the community. Mostly they consist of drawings that have been requested by various users; one user post a single drawing, designating their interest in it, and other users might request drawings in a similar vein. Samantha's caricatures and portraits of different members on the site seemed to be referenced from life.

Lilcriticals, with a simple, untrained style, drew Pokémon from memory on request. He also made irreverent cartoons about other dump users. Some of his drawings seemed to mine below the surface of dump's visual lexicon, uncovering sexuality in places where it was never expected or warranted. They contain an element of satirical commentary that is difficult to express in a straightforward way with collage alone. For example, when sakalak posted pictures of himself eating a slice of pizza in a hospital gown but refused to explain why he was in the hospital, lilcriticals he added computer-drawn elements to the picture: a nude body exhibiting a vagina. His joke was that

sakalak had had a sex-change operation.

Lilcriticals was best known, however, for his grotesque and cartoonish drawings of Pokémon characters. The blobbish appearance of most of them was due to their being drawn from memory, but they also created a sense of childish innocence that was quickly disrupted upon closer inspection. For example, one drawing was of three well-known Pokémon, having somehow sprouted penises, filming a pornographic movie. When asked about this particular drawing, lilcriticals said it was a “commission” requested by frakbuddy, a user who occasionally has garnered negative attention for his abrasive communications, usually for overwhelming the commons with gross-out images (for example, frakbuddy once cammed his own perineum and reposted the image repeatedly).

Frakbuddy had also made some forays into drawing, but instead of appealing to the familiar childhood subject of Pokémon, he made personal versions of Rage Toons, a form of four-panel comic strip originating with 4chan that involved a set of stock characters with grotesque and exaggerated facial expressions. His portrayal of himself was self-deprecating – he drew himself as a balding, thumb-shaped head, and intentionally misspelled much of the dialogue – and the subject matter, which involved conflicts between himself and Frederick, the moderator who eventually banned him, was self-pitying. His difficult-to-digest ideas, which told of the pain he experienced in

his life, found a more endearing manifestation in lilcriticals's fan art, where it joined the requests of other users in a standardized system of input and output.

Figurative Combinations

Some of the most successful self-contained images on dump.fm drew together images that would have been unlikely to coexist in any one person's imagination, let alone nature. These included wlatimer being lifted into the air by two stationary drawings of frogs, or a nude version of leanback guy and a crocodile jumping rope. Some of the images that involve the likenesses of dump members speak to the objectification that comes with making their likenesses into memes. For example, wlatimer edited the same animation of himself floating in the air to include "Regina's" head, in particular an image of her wearing a strange flowered denim hat and an overly cheerful expression that had appeared in several memetic contexts.

²²The fact that her head is unrealistically oversized and separated from her body indicates that this usage of her likeness is an example of dump users' recognition of images as images. It is an

WLATIMER
12:12 AM SAT 7/21 - IN DUMPFM



31 ♡ ANDREJ JERTRONIC GRASS AOIFEML GODLESS FRIENDSTER

Figure 13

objectification of the image of “Regina” rather than “Regina” as a person, a representation with no real-world referent in Baudrillard’s sense.

Commentary on Computer Use

As many dump users found themselves simultaneously living in a digital milieu and complicating and sophisticating it for themselves, it perhaps followed that many would use this as an opportunity to make the creative process more transparent and democratic. Though watching someone else use image-editing software is usually an infuriating rather than edifying experience, it sometimes added to the humor of a memetic image to watch it be transformed. Since it is nigh impossible for affect to manifest in the way one operates a mouse or uses pulldown menus, qil’s animation of how he spherized a popular memetic image in Photoshop²³ highlights how images with particular affective components for humans are nonetheless indifferently converted into data by computers.

Not all work concerning computer use was predicated on mastery, however; dvidpw’s mesmerizing GIF of the opening splash of Photoshop CS 5²⁴ defamiliarizes a mundane activity and shows a bewilderment at all the strange processes that occur upon opening that behemoth of an application.

Formal Characteristics: Playing with Shape and Edge

The perfectly white or transparent image backgrounds demanded by web designers had led to stark contrasts between figure and ground in both animated gifs and commercial stock imagery. Dump.fm's site design, with its white background, generally cooperated with this commonplace ethic, but this didn't mean that it wasn't noticed and commented upon, often visually.

Play With Positive and Negative Space

Instead of trying to simply conceal or ignore this empty space (as much as it was necessary for superimposing images on top of each other), some users took advantage of it as a design element. The role of positive and negative space was often highlighted when a moderator changed the background from the standard white to something more colorful, making images with white backgrounds obvious. Other times, mere familiarity with an image did the trick. In order to draw attention specifically to the negative space, in figure 12 Dadayumn used imagery that had become iconic on dump.fm – a gif of a pair of kicking female legs, very similar to the image patterned here— had found itself attached to all manner of creatures on the site. This created a familiar surface beyond which the viewer is more likely to peer to notice the white space.

DADAYUMN
01:55 AM FRI 1/4 - IN DUMPFM



1 ♡ FUNWINDOW

Figure 14²⁵
Making Mincemeat

A few users, particularly kiptok and joy, liked to cut up images into narrow strips with little regard for their subject matter, in the process making them into generic design elements.

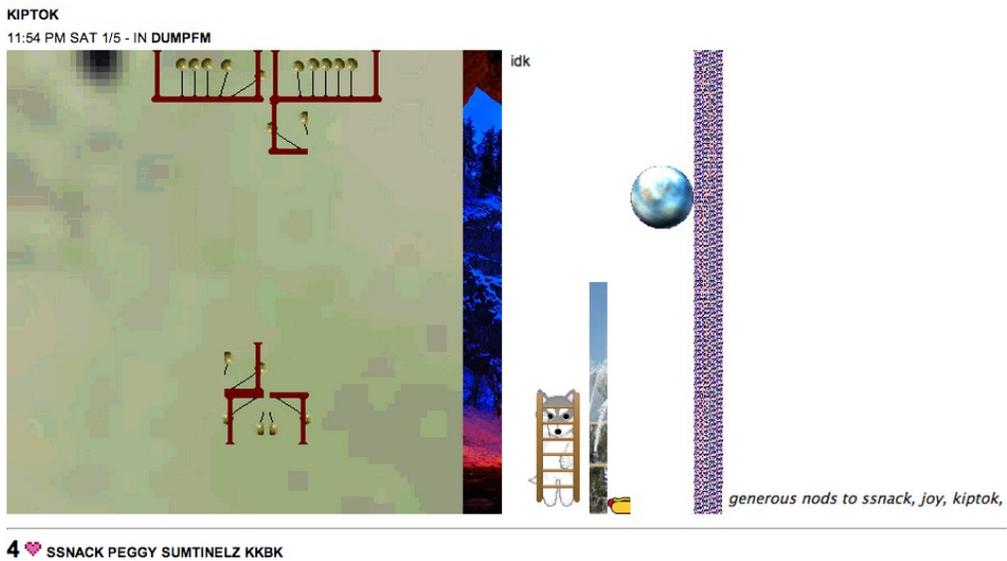


Figure 15²⁶

The typically indifferent nature of these posts was successful contrasted with human warmth in kiptok's post, which expanded upon an acknowledgment made by Tom Moody in a blog post of his role in making a pastiche-like GIF, alongside ssnack and joy. Moody called the GIF "Industrial Process Camo." The image's glitched mixture of elements, none of which were actually drawn by the users but rather found by them, effectively collapsed any labor that went into creating it. In a new dump featuring this

GIF, kiptok decided to expand individual users' work and presence, taking advantage of the horizontal compactness of the "minces" by laying down a bunch of them made by himself and joy. The effect, for those familiar with Moody's blog post, was that of a chopped-and-screwed version of it; this was helped along by a screenshot of part of an acknowledgement made by Tom Moody in his blog: "generous nods to ssnack, joy, kiptok,"... in the original blog post, the final item was the anonymous "others," but here the sentence was left unfinished, perhaps setting the stage for future expansions of labor and subsequent laundry lists by other dump members.

Shape Cutouts

All digital images, in the end, have square edges; some just have them more obviously than others. Intensifying this condition on dump, many of the crops that dump users make from larger images are done using the Screen Capture feature built into computer operating systems, resulting in square borders. There have been many attempts, however, to subvert the hegemony of the square, some rooted in new media and others in more traditional aesthetic ideals.

Cutting out parts of images in ways that mischievously subverted their contours was a refreshing answer to the hegemony of square images on the site. The feathering tool in Photoshop allows users to smoothly cut around the

border of a figure, but used to an extreme extent, it can also make an edge look excessively smoothed out or blurred. The aesthetic of this transformation suggests an exaggerated version of 80's glam shots, but the focus on the center of an expressive face is also reminiscent of the close-ups in soap operas and melodramatic films.

Similarly, maxlabor had also masked commonly used images and fragments over moving shapes, such as a gif of a wisp of smoke, so that memetic images could be suggested without being entirely present. Heavily feathered renditions of these images, by contrast, melodramatically drew attention to these images.

Scale

Dump.fm automatically resized all images to 500 pixels or smaller, but it was difficult to determine whether some images that were close to this threshold would be resized or not. Dump users would sometimes cut a large image into several "slices" and post them rapidly one after another to get past the limit, often becoming irritated when someone interrupted them. When users hunted for images on Google Search, they sometimes failed to notice their small size or proximity to the resizing threshold, resulting in accidental – and sometimes comic – contrasts in image size. Larger images read as louder and more significant, but small ones, perhaps because they were

unobtrusive and often comically unnaturalistic, had more memetic power.

Reverberasia's dump of a thumbnail-sized version of the leanback guy juxtaposed with a blurry picture of dancers at a prom hugging themselves takes on a different mood because of the scale used. Though the original leanback guy drawing is roughly the size of the dancers in the photo, the shrunken version indicates that he belongs in a different universe entirely. His empathy for the dancers and possible yearning to join them is thus made comical.



Figure 16²⁷

The more tiny, fragmented images were entered into the present dump lexicon, the more likely posts were to consist mostly of absurdly undersized thumbnails and fragments of images, as well as the nondescript “minces” of images described below. Grass and joy pioneered this style.

Gestalt matches in shape/color

Dump users often had a strong intuitive sense of echoes in shape, color, and movement across widely disparate images. A popular dump by “godless” compared a raccoon playing with a water irrigator to a woman playing a harp.

GODLESS

10:49 PM SUN 7/22 - IN DUMPFM



9 ❤️ FRANKHATS PEPPER PLAMS PLURLYFE NOON GOATMILK CHIMAY BABKA KHELL

Figure17²⁸

Pepper was a longtime member whose posts were so well color-coordinated that some people referred to him as a "bot." He often used Photoblaster to alter the colors on one image so that they'd match another, even if it looked unnatural. Eventually, in the last few months before he left dump, he designed a bot that automatically paired images in his distinctive style based on similarities in color. (The bot eventually broke, dumping the same three images – one of them broken – in an incident that was parodied by many users, and even digitally painted by Tom Moody). His style was so

distinctive that an image appeared on dump of a t-shirt that read "Pepper Aesthetic 2032," perhaps implying that if someone hasn't disabled the bot, it would have survived for an absurdly long time.

Glitched Images

Despite their embrace of technology as a creative medium, dump users were just as attracted to its vulnerabilities and potential for failure, and this was manifest in both the content and style of their images and posts. Glitching images, in particular, was one of the more officially endorsed aspects of the dump aesthetic, as evinced by an image of a glitched Mickey Mouse's high place on the leader board (in spite of its author's lack of commitment to the community).

Perhaps this was because it communicated this interest in failure in a way that would make sense to an outsider. Unlike many of the operations mentioned in this section, glitching an image requires some knowledge of image programming. Though someone can glitch an image by opening it as a text file and haphazardly deleting sections of data, making actual artistic decisions requires a knowledge of the hex data that commands the arrangement of colored pixels. Another process known as datamoshing, which scrambles video data so that color and motion data are mismatched, requires data to move through an intricate circuit of programs and file-type

conversions.

Since the heyday of proficient glitchers inhabiting dump, however, LaPlace had been at work breaking down these technical barriers. In 2012, he developed a tool called "Photo Fucker" in connection to Photoblaster that allowed users to intentionally corrupt images by repeatedly, aggressively clicking a button, imitating the digital aura of years of data conversions and transfers. It made sense that an online medium meant to fight the approach of banal imagery might have sought to make users more aware of the medium that they used every day.

Glitched images, however, were rarely a part of the reality of online image encounter; "poor images," as Hito Steyerl details in "In Defense of the Poor Image" (2009), were far more commonly encountered by the masses with the manhandling and filetype conversions. "The poor image is a rag or a rip; an AVI or a JPEG, a lumpen proletarian in the class society of appearances, ranked and valued according to its resolution," he writes.

Alas, beauty had not yet been found in the exploitation of the artifacts and flaws that came with these new methods of distribution. It seemed that such discoveries must be "rediscoveries," having some latency from the time in which they were common. For example, the blurry edges that distinguish bicubically resized images, and were considered undesirable on images with sharp edges, such as pixel-art GIF's, had begun to be used intentionally in

some images, once the nearest-neighbor algorithm, which preserves sharp edges, became an option on Photoblaster.

Gestural Fragmentation

Posts on dump can sometimes seem devoid of their author's emotions; it's hard to tell how they feel toward the objects within. Some online communities have adapted to the absence of facial expressions with "reaction faces," but dump.fm seems to favor other miscellaneous parts of the body, particularly arms and hands. Just as dump users found existing partial images of bodies, including their own, highly exploitable, they also found salient areas of less personal images to be prone to exploitation as well. These



Figure 18

body parts aren't exclusively human, either – tiny images of various dogs' paws have appeared in countless dumps, looking comical next to objects that are larger or have more contrast. In thekraken's dump (figure 18) ²⁹, it has a gestural ambiguity that a human hand wouldn't have, and thus can either signify reaching for the shoulder of the (grotesquely Photoshop-altered) man on the right or patting him on the shoulder in order to comfort him, or both. As in many successful dumps consisting of fragments, the absences of

information complement each other in a way that makes missing parts virtually present; the positioning of the dog's paw, for example, lines up perfectly with where his shoulder would be had the picture continued.

Webcam photos were easily captured and shared on dump using a dedicated button next to the text field. They were another medium through which users tried to propagate their images through incompleteness and the semiotic play that they invited. For example, photos that users took of themselves might have captured their arm only up to a point, so that an existing image of an arm, often bizarre or cartoonish, could later be grafted on by themselves or another user.

Fragments can also have more abstract uses, including truly abstract dumps where they are embraced as fragments rather than being seen as part of something larger and more figurative.

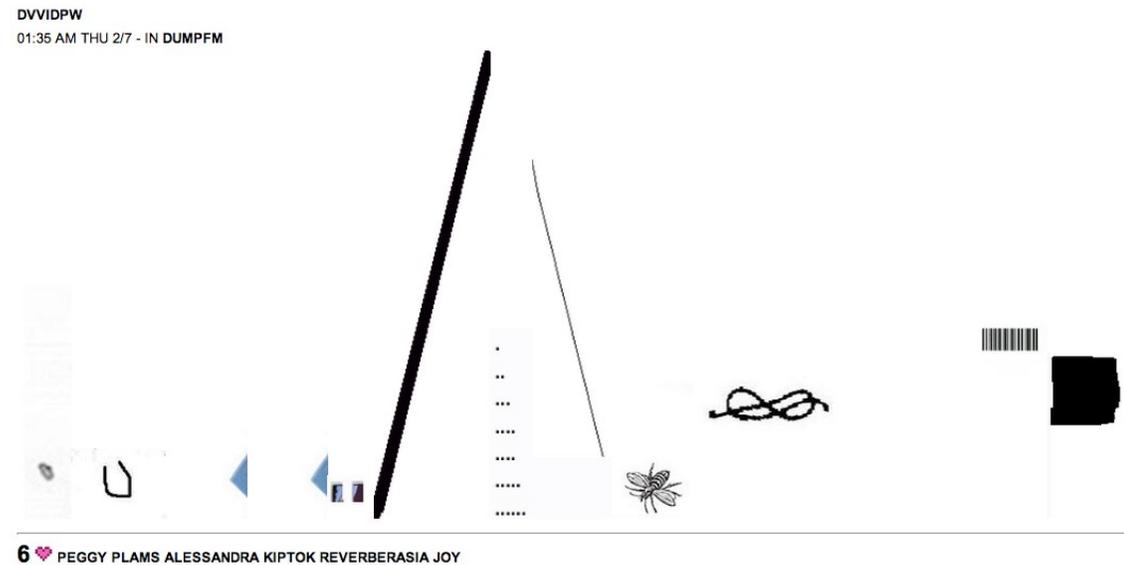


Figure 19⁸⁰

These images give a place of appreciation to graphics that are meant to be ignored, such as buttons (from the era when images were favored as conveyances for links in web design), divider lines, or bullet points. They also create order out of disorder; here dvvidpw has created a triangle shape, as well as some semblance of symmetry. The variable directions of the lines and shapes present lead the eye backward and forward, keeping it from veering off of the image.

Moderator Mischief

In my analysis of dump's creative tropes, I have treated all users as equally capable of producing them. As long as one has the literacy and a decent arsenal of images, it was easy to fall into line with the crowd. In preparation for the more individualistic attitude of the next chapter, however, perhaps it is appropriate for me to mention that there were extra-diegetic elements to the site that are occasionally altered. Consequentially, there was a privileged group of users on the site that had a wider range of tools at their disposal to make their transgressions a cut above the rest. Users on the site that were designated as "mods," in addition to having the responsibility of policing the site, were also allowed to use the more HTML, Javascript, and CSS. Often in the evenings they used this privilege to create a mood or bring out certain images with a particular background or font set. They also

mischievously created buttons that launched pop-up windows with "secret" messages, posted images that took up the entire screen, or set YouTube videos, often kitschy music videos, to automatically play.

While mods were all active users, they sometimes took on a greater creative role: other than muting and blocking troublesome users, they could be highly influential with their additions of HTML and Javascript. New features sometimes emerged as a result of their pranks and experiments, such as a persistent faved-image palette recently having become a permanent part of the site.

These transgressions, different from the everyday transgressions created with images, annoyed some and delighted others. They revealed the limitations of dump's image-based communications by refusing to be conversant with them, just as dump, through appropriation, refused to speak back to the creationist-capitalistic ethos. This type of play, in addition to the performative acts I will examine in the next chapter, proved that dump wasn't always just all talk and no action.

Chapter 4 / The Spectacle of Interaction

The catchphrase with which dump.fm was originally marketed was “talking with images.” The way the image culture on the site developed, however, has left the verb “talk” a little misleading. Though there is no doubt that a visual language has developed on dump, it doesn’t use verbal language as its handmaid. Instead, as we saw in the previous chapter, posts are cobbled together based on visual connections between them, the concepts to which they refer, and/or some synergy between these two. They have a communicative purpose, but no set *audience*. Oftentimes these juxtapositions roll on and on for hours and hours; their creators occasionally appropriating images posted by other users, in a format that doesn’t resemble verbal conversation so much as musical improvisation.

This exchange is periodically interspersed by more conventional text conversations, which in less creatively productive groupings of dump users sometimes distract from the image. In these times, “talking with images” became more like “chatting alongside images.” This sometimes leads to admonishments in the form of “TEXT BREAKER” images from users not involved in the conversation. This was about as close to directly addressing one another with images as dump users got.

Instead of content it was through the *creation* and *performative repetition* of those images that users established relationships with one another. I use the word performative in the sense J.L. Austin lays out in *How*

to Do Things With Words. The most vivid example Austin proposes is that in the actual world is that when a qualified officiator in the right context pronounces a couple married, their legal relationship is transformed. Similarly, on dump, posting or reposting certain images had a transformative effect that is ontologically equivalent to an action. I use word repetition in Judith Butler's sense in that it is imperfect; it reveals the unnaturalness of the internet's written vernacular, which straddles the written and the spoken, by revealing that variations from norms of behavior or grammar are "not as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy" (Butler 2000: 41).

When such text was combined with images, it was performed anew through an alienation from its context, and thus its meaning was imperfectly reproduced through its repetition. This could be as simple as a user presenting a personal image and using it to illustrate a statement about themselves that they had made in text, or it could be as complex as any of the dump types described in the previous chapter.

Use of Text

Text memes, for some, held a subordinate place in the ranks of dump's scale of value. "Over the last year... Dump has degenerated into three main subjects -- trolling, cyberbullying, and screengrabs," said ryz, thus placing screengrabs alongside artistic banality and hostile behavior. Dump users

indeed used screengrabs to make fun of others, and to freeze textual moments in time that might otherwise recede into the deep recesses of dump's databases.

During the time of my fieldwork, screenshot culture on dump.fm was burgeoning. Capturing text in screenshot form is part of a culture of capturing online interactions that is detailed further in the next chapter.

Another way textual ideas or concepts could be propagated on dump was through text generators. Flamingtext, Glitter Text Generator and FamilyLobby allow users to enter text, which the generator then turns into images of what Curt Cloninger (2010) called “blingee-modified nuptial-script typography,” replete with flames, swirls, and sparkles. Once banished to the bin of bad web design with the garish spin they put on text, here they found a new life, even getting openly promoted on dump.fm's dropdown menu of image-editing tools. The ideas propagated through glitter text tended to be more analytical and *a priori* than purely observational, and with their self-deprecating humor, they offered a reflexive take on dump practice because their text was not merely copied. Though plenty of screenshot-like fragments of sentences – useful for linking multiple clauses together in collage – and lowbrow stuff, often written in chatspeak, existed in dump's vast cache of FamilyLobby images, the intellectual background of many dump.fm members also emerged here, manifest in namedrops of famous intellectuals (“Fuck All Foucault”, “rilke”) and trendy technology-related academic terms (“posthuman.”)

as one that read “possibly useful for a future dump.”

Text could also be deterritorialized in classic dump.fm fashion; words meant to be innocuous could be turned around to speak of stronger meanings. Sapphire, for example, dumped the sentence “i want ‘Miscellaneous Graphics’ to die,” the middle phrase typed here in scare quotes because it was in a different style from the rest of the text. Adorned with blues swirls and sparkles, it appeared to have been taken from one of the websites of yore that featured collections of “public-domain” graphics for other webmasters to use. The “i want to die,” decked out in an incongruous rainbow pattern, meanwhile, was originally a single image posted by mikeveeeeeeee, but cut in half by either himself or bunnyhentman so that other images could be recursively inserted into it.

The text in previously existing screenshots was joined with other stylized text were sometimes pasted together to create a kind of cut-up poetry. The ideas expressed in individual lines of text making up these “poems” were often wildly contradictory due to the heterogeneity of the materials, so connectors like “but” and “then” were particularly important. The success of this type of post often depended on the grammaticality of individual sentences or clauses.

Textual Appropriation: Who’s Speaking?

As many instances of text in dump.fm posts were in fact screenshots from previous discussions on the site or elsewhere on the web, it was difficult to tell whether words on the site were a user's own or copied and pasted from somewhere else. Even when a user's posts could be verified to be actual text (through highlighting, or by toggling the "Text" option on and off), users were fond of posting strange or melodramatic missives that were entirely out of step with the conversation. These scraps were clearly intended by their contributor to be toyed around with as was any image on the site, but sometimes the pasted text matched up too neatly with what users expected the contributor's mood to be, leading to confusion as to the user's mood. For example, in February 2013, cheetos, under the handle surferrosa, posted a repetitive, denunciatory message before signing off. Though it seemed to match what was often his mood at the time – other users were still looking down on him due to the rape man incident, and he felt oppressed – but it ultimately seemed to betray a discomfort with the internet atypical of a dump user. This led users to guess that it had been "quoted" from somewhere else:

"im deleting everything i ever posted here. nothing i write here is an official statement and i really resent this shit turning into news but i guess i should have learned my lesson the first time that happened so any way, im out because i need some semblance of a normal life in order to be happy. bye internet im out because i need some semblance of a normal life in order to be

happy. bye internet <3”

That “somewhere else” turned out to be the tumblr of the musician Grimes, and the original had line breaks that made it appear less like mental illness and more like song lyrics. The post opened up a discussion between myself and aoifeml about the shiftiness of identity on the site. “I am Suspicious of everyone on this site... because several of my friends are on here and they won’t tell me who they are,” she wrote. The feeling of communal identity among experienced users was undercut by the confusion that can result from it, characterized as it is by a column of creative but difficult-to-distinguish names rolling down the side of the screen rather than image-centric public profiles.

Identity, Individuality and Flânerie

Many dump users remarked that they felt pride at their images being reused. Despite this nominal amount of ego dump users may have invested in their art, all aspects of the site's design left user pages in a rudimentary form, which sometimes made it difficult to display one’s best work. Every user’s list of image posts was also archived completely by the site in a list of dumps that could not be sorted except for a top-20 list of the most-faved posts. Clearly, all of the action was focused on the chat room. User pages were hardly a

destination; users' intentional spectacle-making of themselves seemed to be through webcam usage, in the social arena of the central chat room. To wit, there was little to see on a person's individual page. There was a rudimentary messaging system – users could send each other direct messages by putting an "@" symbol before a mention of a username – but the messages were very much public, having usually been sent from the main public room, and old messages were pushed into oblivion.

What's the Big Deal About Klout?

Dump users, however, seemed aware that their individual presences on the internet were highly marketed spectacles, not even through the subtle breaches created by cookies but in the highly visible transgressions created by websites like Facebook and second-order social media like Klout. Klout is a service that is meant to track users' "popularity" and "influence" by taking into account the amount of attention they get on a variety of social media platforms, from Facebook to LinkedIn to Flickr.

Instead of documenting each new way social media offended their privacy or sensibilities (the way Facebook users often complain within the constraints of the site), Dump users embraced the fact of encroaching social media but mocked it as it approached. For a brief time in 2012, dump users simultaneously fetishized



Figure 21

and mocked the idea of the "Klout score," which was meant to quantify one's "influence" through social media on their audience. Dump.fm users got caught up in this surveillance and quantification of social activity. Cloudonshore's image "Bad Klout Score" melodramatically equated a bad score on the site with cause for depression and heavy drinking.

They turned Klout into a mock-popularity contest, with Cloudonshore espousing views like "I quit weed and my Klout score went up like 10 points" that mocked the way the site seemed to want to connect even the smallest evidence of actual-life activity to a quantifiable measure. Other jokes on the site around Klout involved wlatimer's mock-anxiety that he would need a certain Klout score to get into art school. Comments like "bitches love my Klout score" seemed to fortell a (dystopic) world where the score would mean more than it did at the time. These endorsements seemed to be sarcastic: other users showed earnest annoyance and consternation about Klout. "I think Klout encourages people to unfollow people to increase their score," wrote Frankhats in February 2012. The message was faved in an expression of agreement by melipone and wlatimer.³¹

Such early-adopterism had the benefit of keeping users in control of their online experience as vanguards of certain types of online sociality. The stakes were high for a group that spent so much time on the Internet. By crafting such fictional ideologies around other sites, dump users, already so

heavily –but self-consciously – influenced by the various modes of being encouraged by social media, attempted to outpace the threat of other users' behavior on those sites becoming a norm to which they had to conform.

Tumblr Tuesday: A Direct Challenge to Social Media Dominance

Facebook is a large and significant arena in which behaviors have become very normative. At the time these norms were formed, few people were around who could articulately challenge the norms of this social media platform and broadcast these challenges to a significant audience. A challenge to this status quo came in 2012 from Ian Aleksander Adams, “an insanely loquacious internet presence” who decided to start using his Facebook as a Tumblr or image blog.

This action, which he archived each day with screenshots, soon inspired a related group of individuals, some of them dump.fm members and many of them their friends, to create a fan page called Tumblr Tuesdays on Facebook. There they continued to reblog content and play with the notion of identity and anonymity. Anyone who joined the page was automatically added as an admin. The group's content consisted chiefly of screengrabs with a similar aesthetic to those on dump – flaneur-like, strange juxtapositions, the observational humor that stems from moments of human and technological failure – but its leadership ensured the panoptic anonymity of its members,

who saw and mocked all but rarely posted as their individual identities. A member who had been added as an admin on a Facebook fanpage sent likes and comments, by default, as the name of that "page," not using their individual name or account. This created interpretive chaos, as the page often appeared to be conversing with itself on wall posts, but the conversation was actually the product of several Facebook users, all speaking under a single, anonymous guise. The horizontal leadership also meant that each of these members had complete control over the group as "content creators," and some took the liberty of repeatedly changing the title of the group. Once one member did this, others were drawn back to the group through notifications that Facebook sent them. Once the generic name of "Tumblr Tuesday" was subsumed by what was clearly one individual's crazy vision, others were moved to reclaim it, changing the group title in rapid succession to such outré names as "Giant Green Sea Tushy Attacks a Boat," to "Statutory Apes," to "Stop changing the names so fucking quickly it is fucking confusing", subverting the hierarchy in fan pages that Facebook encourages. Notifications were automatically sent to other members of the group, encouraging them to join in on the mayhem.

Screenshots: The Spectacle of Interaction

Images may have informed users' interactions on dump.fm most of the

time, but users often employed the screenshot function on their computers to take small snippets of text from various corners of the web, as well as from the dump.fm chat itself. Converting text into an image form had an important function in the context of dump.fm's archival limitations. The site only preserved pure-text posts that had been "faved" by another member, so to make an image out of some text was to single it out as important by subverting its usual ephemerality. Screenshots of text usually were sentence fragments, incomplete sentences, or complete ones taken out of context; the former, with their commas and missing subjects, enjoined users from completing them, while the latter seemed to prompt juxtaposition or illustration with images.

These "text memes" were sometimes visually indistinguishable from text itself. The difference was that, unlike text, which could be freely modified after being copied and pasted without leaving any evidence of modification, they could not be edited without external tools. This made them similar to a morpheme in linguistics, in that they were difficult to alter or break down; thus they were more likely to persist as intact images.

Typos, as liminal moments in which human error shows itself through the homogeneity of typed text, were a favorite source of text memes for dump users, whether they were found within dump's chat rooms or outside them. Typos were "serious jokes": much like the Freudian slip in speech, they

revealed typing as having fluid meanings and variable *parole*, or usage. A screenshot by dvidpw, for example, captured a moment where the phrase “my dick looks so good” was typed as “my dick loks so good.”³² The fact that the misspelled text read like another word (“locks”) in English added to its appeal, giving it two simultaneous meanings that could be addressed through its accompaniment in future repostings.

Dump users were unlikely to try to efface these typographical errors; seeing them preserved and reworked into dump's visual lexicon through screengrabs was usually preferable, particularly if the misshapen text was divorced from its original author.

One rare case in which a typo was screengrabbed with a correction was a case where the correction was needed to make it readable. Perhaps putting his hand on an entirely wrong part of the keyboard, wlatimer typed “Domronr hoolmr *someone hold me,” in July 2012 and immediately screengrabbed it. It became commonly used in posts that conveyed situations in which blocked communication is a part of the narrative, such as animals trying to talk. In this post by reverberasia (figure 20), the image of the goat is being animated into speech, and the “domronr hoolmr” takes on a specifically anti-sexual connotation. The image of the goat’s lecherous-looking, strangely human smile had become memetic on dump and was often juxtaposed with sexual concepts. This might be in part due to the Western association of

goats and satyrs with sexuality. This usage is congruent with the “~My BoDy~” portion of the speech, the sticky caps of which conveys a seductive sway to the voice. As so often happens in dump text collages, however, the rest of the text contradicts this speech, and it becomes a narrative of the poor creature avoiding either sexual activity or consumption as food.

REVERBERASIA
05:15 PM WED 8/1 - IN DUMPFM



~My BoDy~ try to dont do it

DOMRONR HOOLMR

DOMRONR HOOLMR DOMRONR HOOLMR

3 ♡ YO_MATTY HYPOTHETE BITCH

Figure22³³

For a dump user, the mongrelized new meaning created by “domronr hoolmr,” despite its indecipherability to an outsider, was enough to alter a repetition of another image that had accumulated a lot of meaning through memetic repetition. The reflexiveness of this screengrab contextualized it; whoever saw wlatimer make the mistake knew that it was a homegrown dump.fm meme, and also the product of self-deprecation rather than the feeling of superiority over others that provoked other, more appropriative screencaps. Dump users knew it so well that it was sometimes invoked without the correction.

Screengrabs and Antagonism

In the screencaps' repetition and reiteration, members were repeatedly exposed to statements and made to deride them, or perhaps to think about them seriously. Though the nature of dump.fm posts meant that meanings were usually imperfectly reiterated, there was something about the meaning of these little quotations that persisted, particularly if one knew the person who uttered them. For example, "Regina" made a screenshot of Polymer, in the context of an argument, retaliating that "I actually make gifs and images." Though making images from scratch was still an admired quality, especially among many old-time dump users, enough people disagreed with this more conventional ethic to find this statement naïve. They continued to propagate the image in various contexts for several days. Polymer eventually became convinced that this statement was embarrassing, detaching herself from it. She was able to do this, fortunately, because her name was not attached to the image.

Another reason text memes and screen grabs were denigrated was the sometimes ethically questionable ends to which they were put. Many dump users had a dubious conception of the division between the public and the private on the internet, and were willing to make use of anything at their disposal, often screengrabbing Facebook chat conversations or using images

from corners of Facebook that were supposedly "protected." Individuals who thought their images and information were kept behind Facebook's walls could easily, through screenshots of text and the appropriation of images, gain a public life on dump.

Mijinyawa: Dump.fm's Encounter with its Others

Sometimes the source of a particular exploited phrase actually did have a distinctive individual behind it. These individuals became developed characters over time in the dump.fm community, as their image was used and users reported on their continual interaction with them. These interactions with these individuals outside the dump.fm sphere became public spectacles in the community as more people began to reach out to these individuals, generating memetic images and screenshots. Often these screenshots spoke for themselves in their absurdity, requiring no explanation or embellishment through additional images or text.

This happened most notably with Mijinyawa Muhammed, a horny 17-year-old from Nigeria, apparently an engineering student, who approached several dump.fm members on Facebook, Frederick being the first of them. The quotes and images selected for sharing and preservation by dump users highlighted their differences from dump.fm's general culture for the purpose of humor. Frederick compiled his exchanges with Mijinyawa, in the form of

screengrabs, into a blog post. At the point in time portrayed in the post, he and other dump members mostly focused on the fact that Mijinyawa had only a single photo of himself on his Facebook profile, in which he was sitting in an airplane seat and looking anxious. The key to this display, in the vein of “Fuck Yeah!” blogs, seemed to be the variety of the reactions to this single image, which scroll on and on, numbering well over a hundred and lacking any specific authorial attributions (other than that they were produced by dump users).

Some of the photo composites seem keenly attuned to remaining naturalistic, as well as displaying the interplay between Mijinyawa’s worried expression and the juxtaposed content – one image, for example, made use of his anxious expression by superimposing him in front of a photo of two tweens kissing. Another ventured into even more fraught territory, addressing one of the few visible aspects of Mijinyawa’s identity – his race – by superimposing him in front of a photo of the artists of the Gucci Mane-founded rap record label 1017 Brick Squad. The contrast is between their African-American-ness and his African-ness, and it specifically interpellates him as African – and worthy of juxtaposition with African-Americans.



Figure 23 Dump users grappled with what they knew and didn't know about Mijinyawa from his first picture.³⁴

Other images in this litany seem utterly indifferent to content, instead introducing a slow creep of imagery selected for similarities in primary qualities, such as color and shape. Mijinyawa busts fly out of a dreadlocked man's mouth; Mijinyawa's head grows out of a bunch of grapes that roughly match the purple of his suit. This latter group had a performative aspect, at least within the community – some were probably done by users eager to participate in the meme who had had no contact with Mijinyawa, and probably never did. They collectively acknowledge a profound enigma. It could be Frederick's head growing out of the grapes, and the joke would be the same. A third type of combination included memes specific to dump.fm, such as a hamster cracking a whip sitting on his shoulder. Though the humor of these is

slightly different – it is specifically that of juxtaposing a total stranger with a dump inside joke, thus contrasting in-group and out-group – the effect is ultimately just as noncommunicative. All this type does differently is announce that an in-group exists.

Until he communicated with them further, users were convinced that Mijinyawa was somehow not real, that he was one of their fellow dump users, logged into a false Facebook account and constructing misshapen sentences in Nigerian pidgin for a laugh. Though the access gap to information technology still affects many parts of Africa and Nigerian bank scams play a role in popular culture, none of the few preconceived notions that dump users had about Nigerians seemed to match up with the main thing Mijinyawa desired: a “cool bitch.” He attempted to claim many of dump’s women as his girlfriends, and his reactions to their rejections were swiftly screencapped by those women and reposted.

However, when a couple of users finally succumbed to his insistent requests of “U gat Skype?,” they gained a window into a radically different world that was very much real. Frederick’s view of him became less sympathetic, perhaps because of the difficulties in communication that resulted. Mijinyawa’s microphone seemed to be barely working, but he also appeared to be unable to speak above the level of a low mumble, leading Frederick to declare him “functionally retarded.” Aside from a general

frustration at being unable to hear him speak, the lack of opportunities for Frederick to appropriate his speech in this new medium may have led to this “diagnosis.”

Attempts to include Mijinyawa on the dump website itself mostly resulted in misunderstandings. Mijinyawa made an account on dump.fm, but mainly used it to further his frustrated accusations, in text, that all dump users are the same person hiding behind the same username. In a fit of paranoia, he rattled off declarations of identity between various dump users: “Fred is Mijinyawa, ‘Regina’ is Lux, Lux is Dayton...”. The accusations of inauthenticity, it seems, are bilateral; it seems neither party can quite make sense of the existence of the other. Still, these users were the closest thing dump had to satellite users, those who know of dump but don't use it.

Despite the fact that his use of the site was sparse and greatly differed from that of most users, Mijinyawa's use of English had perhaps permeated dump.fm's textual culture more than that of any other user. In a reversal of the typical relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, dump users sought to imitate his idiosyncratic usage, and it was difficult to tell whether this imitation continued to be mocking or even aware of its original source. If there was “dump slang,” it surely consisted of randomly capitalizing words, spelling “got” as “gat,” and making allusions to some of his more infamous quotes, such as “Fucked Up Zoe is a bitch in the sea.”

In their repetition, tales and speculation about Mijinyawa sometimes became distorted, creating a dubious mythology around him. Plams and his friends, such as sakalak, used the word “Wife” to merely signify a woman³⁵. It was often accompanied by pidgin-like grammatical constructions; for example, someone asked plams if he was gay, and he replied “No I want Wife.” The word seemed to be used in cases where users, afraid to be forthcoming about their true desires, instead hid behind a kind of mock-earnesty and formality. Though the formality of the word and its capitalization would point to Mijinyawan origins, I can find no evidence of Mijinyawa ever using the word in this manner, and indeed his sexual ambitions at his young age seem to point to something less formal than marriage. The character evoked by these sayings instead evokes a caricature more like Eddie Murphy’s character in *Coming to America*, a film for which sakalak has professed a liking. In a hyperreal world ruled by representations, it seems, truth and fiction about individuals and cultures can blur much more easily.

Mijinyawa wasn’t the only individual with whom dump users had this type of contact. There was also his sister Heater, and Kreco Doddz, a black woman from Kansas who frequently boasted about her husband's jail time and appeared to have a double named Kreco Henderson. These users, who seemed to have initiated the contact with dump.fm users themselves over Facebook, are emphatically from a different cultural background than any

dump user and of a different race than most of dump's population.

Dump users' interest in these individuals, however, was perhaps of a more reciprocal nature than they may have realized; while it was difficult to account wholesale for the motivations of users who "friend" strangers from distant countries over Facebook, cultural curiosity often played a role, and ultimately these figures provided a much-needed sense of perspective on dump's largely white and Western milieu.

Self-Image and Privacy

In this world of multiple, changeable identities, it was webcam pictures that created authenticity and trust among dump users. Webcam photos were unlikely to be edited, at least in a way that deceived. Often a new user's gender, age, and race were ambiguous until they "cammed." Webcam pictures also ignited most of the controversies occurring on the site, as they linked users' actual-life identities to their usernames, and the invocation of these identities could have potential actual-world consequences.

Dump was a more intimate space than, for example, Facebook. Though it appeared somewhat secluded from the Google searches of employers, many pages of users' logs and faves had in fact been crawled by the search engine, though the lack of semantic information in many file names and the haphazard pattern of indexing protected a lot of images

potentially objectionable to employers from view. In addition to that, many users specifically used usernames that had no connection to their more official, professional identities. Dump users were perhaps more free with their webcam use than many people would be on a more public website such as Facebook, and relatively few of the users who "cammed" their bodies, including breasts and genitals, later regretted the decision and asked to have them taken down.

However, these images, just like any favored by dump users that got taken down, had a tendency to persist beyond any action to remove them, through the various creative modifications and reinterpretations created by other users. These actions tended to be particularly profuse in the face of anxiety about the actions of another user, in contrast to dump.fm's creative agility involving pornography and its more anonymous actors. For example, when Frederick took a nude webcam picture of himself with nidnoi, eating ice cream and dissolving blotters of acid on their tongues, dump.fm collectively denigrated their defiant attitudes by making them seem unattractive: for example, one user pasted reddish, sweaty skin that appeared to be scrotal in origin onto their necks and chests. Part of the ill will manifested in this composite seemed to come from the fact that Frederick had violated other women's privacy in this way; for example, he once took a webcam picture of the naked back of a girlfriend of his, seemingly without her permission.

Other reactions to users' nude camming was more gentle and playful, particularly in response to pictures of situations that were unambiguously consensual. When wlatimer posed nude in front of the camera, his confidence and narcissism, bordering on camp (one of his "props" was a bottle of ranch dressing), led to nidnoi cutting his penis out of the picture and reusing it in various absurd contexts.

In addition to the various juxtapositions with the disembodied penis, a screenshot-making metagame formed around this image. Because of the number of faves various iterations of this image received, it immediately appeared on the front page for the day. There it appeared alongside other, unrelated webcam pictures that users took of themselves with bored or mildly disgusted expressions³⁶. These were in turn interpreted by "Regina" and reverberasia as reaction shots, even though many of them had timestamps from before wlatimer's photo shoot.

Dumps involving the disembodied penis also sometimes took on a self-conscious air. Dates commented on the penis image's lasting meme value by dumping it with a text collage reading "tom moody would say lyke we all have ghosts,³⁷" possibly referring to the fact that the meme'd penis persisted for a good month, longer than wlatimer may have expected or desired.

Not every attempt at representing other users had such lasting reverberations. There were examples of users creating representations of

each other that garnered positive interactions, but at the same time were more ephemeral. For example, Dauragon made dithered portraits of various dump users and there was a sort of game that involved matching up users with totemic Pokémon, dog breeds, etc. The fact that these characterizations didn't catch on stands in contrast to their role in fannish internet communities, where attachment to a particular character often plays a strong role in establishing one's individuality. The fact that webcam photos were so widely used, it seems, established them, and by extension the physical, actual-world body, as the primary system for identifying and recognizing users.

Text and Transgression

As in the actual world, with its PR agents and damage control, dump users were quietly possessive of their image, despite, or perhaps because, they so freely used images of themselves to address subjects considered taboo in more visible areas of the internet.

There seemed to be a substantial difference between reusing one's own image and finding it reused by others, and there were many instances of users' likenesses and quotes being reused in a way that made them uncomfortable.

Requests for removal were rare, and much more likely to happen in the case of apparent and potentially harmful slander. A wider range of behaviors

were thus acceptable to document and discuss, but there were still, of course, records of behavior that users preferred that others forget. Trolls sometimes attempted to sabotage other members' reputations in the community by propagating screengrabs, which had a permanence and potential for testimony unlike that of actual, plain text, reminding other users of a particular user's transgressions. Appropriations of text from another user could quickly turn into representations as they influenced a user's reputation. Problems arose when users were interpellated through this technique, particularly when the community's idea of them began to diverge from how they thought of themselves.

For example, Cheetos once made a deprecating comment about rape being normal for women to experience, to which other users in the room reacted with contempt, and Polymer took a screenshot of it. Polymer felt remorse for the blow to his reputation that ensued, and partially blamed "Regina" and Friendster, who had bullied her over dump in the past, for propagating the screenshot excessively. "Everybody was like 'dear god you are dumb'," she told me. "Even so, all i did was cap... it was "Regina"/friendster who blew it out of proportion." In fact, it is Plams who takes credit for this (Polymer may have attributed it to the other pair because of her frequent conflicts with them, examined later in this chapter). He nicknamed Cheetos "the rape man", which seemed to trigger a self-fulfilling

prophecy as Cheetos, seemingly unperturbed, posted more misogynistic statements.

Such interpellations were taken more seriously when they involved an individual's face. In a surprisingly forthright statement that contrasted with the usually hazy meanings of dump.fm's content, "Regina" posted a picture of Polymer with the word "racist" scrawled in red across it like lipstick on a school-bathroom mirror. The accusation was unfounded – it had simply been made for provocation's sake, and "Regina," like Polymer, is white – and the image was swiftly taken down at Polymer's request.

When such representations were malevolent but not slanderous, they were allowed to remain online, and responses that this harassment engendered demonstrated the role of vigilance, self-consciousness and resourcefulness in preserving one's reputation, literally one's "public image," on dump. A few days later, the same user ["Regina"] inserted a photo of Polymer into a GIF of the iconic scene in *Alien* in which the alien bursts out of a patient's stomach at an operating table. Polymer's likeness played the part of the alien. This time, however, she provided a more creative response than requesting outright removal. She reclaimed her personal image by posting next to it an older GIF made of her using the flash on an iPhone camera.³⁸

This response worked on a variety of levels, both performatively and content-wise: since the animation of Polymer with the camera was made by a

user not hostile to Polymer under more playful circumstances, it served as proof of the existence of her allies. The graphic showed her in possession of a camera, a symbol of vision and awareness in this case. In the popular liberal-arts visual imaginary of which Polymer is likely aware due to her education, it is also a phallic symbol that in the hands of a woman reverses the usual dynamics of the male gaze (Mulvey 1999). On a performative level, the mere fact that she re-dumped the image showed an acknowledgement of its existence.

Such acknowledgement was meaningful because there were significant ludic barriers before it. In such a fast-moving chat system, a user could easily miss uses and mentions of their image and name. Filenames were often ambiguous, particularly after images have been run through Photoblaster, which mashed together all the image's previous filenames and "authors," or Online Image Editor, which obscured original filenames entirely. This meant that images concerning a certain person often did not come up on the dump.fm search tool, at least not with the expected keywords. In such an ambiguously documented community, mere vision – as well as vigilance on the part of allies – could be a weapon.

Sometimes such image-wars could be fought with the reframing capabilities of the screenshot as well. In a reversal of their typical relationship, "Regina" found webcam images of her posted, with no explanation, by

Mijinyawa on Facebook. This reframing – putting a webcam image meant for the small community of dump on the broadcasting medium of Facebook – called for another reframing in turn, one that decried the first one's transgressions. This assertion of power was swiftly counteracted by "Regina", who took screenshots of this appropriation and posted them, captioned with an exasperated "wow miji" and "miji WTF."

Polymer, thinking back to her encounter with Cheetos used the word "impulsive criticism" to describe such performative repetitions. There was shock in these repetitions, and they were also a bit passive-aggressive, "a way of saying 'hey listen to yourself'." We disputed the speech acts to which such acts were equivalent, over whether such actions (or thoughts – we often conflated the two, in the spirit of dump culture's impulsivity) could be considered introverted and extroverted. There was a "note to self" element to them, "like somebody says something retarded in class like you just repeat it in your head... in italics... slowly." A desire for mockery, which usually requires knowledge of the other's habitual behaviors, clashed with disbelief both in the statement made and in the person behind the statement. Thus, while screencaps could frame and interpellate, they also revealed moments of instability in the character of individuals. For better or worse, they laid out standards to which the user targeted could aspire – or showed them a side of themselves that they wished to avoid.

Chapter 5 / Conclusions

Dump is an impulsive environment of schematics. As shown with 4chan and countless other communities on the internet where people act quickly, impulsively, and relatively anonymously, this does not always cause people to reach their highest intellectual aspirations. Image-centered online communities have a habit of enforcing a status quo of racism and if not sexism, patriarchy. 4chan-influenced sites like 9gag and humorcouch, for example, are rife with anonymous joking at the expense of women and their bodies. Dump.fm is often able to critique this kind of “internet folk humor” because it positions itself as “post-internet.” Instead of assuming a universal reader or reading, for example, as do the Rage Comics, they create

narratives from the viewpoints of specific individuals, thus creating fictions. It is still sometimes difficult to distinguish between the (post-internet) objectified images that create fictions and the representations meant to reflect actual life, however. For example, ben_dover, in an e-mail to gr8pevine that the latter passed on to me, showed misgivings about the appropriation of women's likenesses on the site. "i think the girls of dump become objects... in a very boring traditional way women become objects not in the fun way "anything" (from lettuce leaf to bird.jpg) becomes an object in dump.fm." In her opinion, turning a representation into an objectified image-without-a-referent does not divest it of its pre-internet politics.

The difference between the earlier type of digital image and the assemblages found on dump.fm sometimes seems as wide as the difference between poetry and the novel. As we saw in dump's use of animation, images are given virtual agency and character *as images*, not just as the entities they represent. Just as they lose a certain agency that is in fact imposed by people trying to constrain their original uses, they gain a certain agency as they are virtually invested with purpose and animation by readers.

When Richard Dawkins proposed the idea of "almost limitless power for slightly inaccurate self-replicating entities," perhaps was he perhaps foreseeing how these fictions, whether they are repurposed graphics or regrettable screencaps, seem to "take on a life of their own." Is "leanback

guy” just a collection of pixels that is indifferently, and perhaps a bit cruelly, manipulated, or is he a character in his own right, vulnerably in very specific ways to being dragged along on such adventures as surfing and sexual contact to which he is apparently averse? The heterogeneity of images found on dump is a means of passive investigation, but combining and juxtaposing them with other images is potentially an active and creative event of meaning-making.

Dump’s effortless visual conventions make it easy to sketch out schematics in which one is not yet confident. In creating these new modes of living and questioning, dump’s imagery comes closer to what J. Hillis Miller has argued is the role of fictions in society. “The social and psychological function of fictions is what speech-act theorists called ‘performative’... [a story] makes something happen in the real world: for example, it can propose modes of selfhood or ways of behaving that are then imitated in the real world.” The absurd, virtual ideas exhibited on dump.fm might have previously existed in someone’s head, but never before have they been able to be represented visually in such a quick, free-flowing way. With the greater self-awareness dump.fm can lend to its others through its appropriations, seeing its peculiar but fascinating cultural logic spread is hopefully something we can look forward to in the future.

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