



THE INTERNET AS ART

Virginia Heffernan

In the last thirty years, the Internet has come to be regarded two ways:

As an unstoppable alien invasion, fast destroying our minds and hearts, and also as the air we breathe—transparent and somehow beneath our notice.

We don't like to talk about it. It seems somehow embarrassing to speak of the Internet writ large—it's a subject, like love or evil, too broad to put into words. And sometimes it's hard to know what we're talking about. The great high church of style has just expressed a preference for "internet," lowercase, over the original cap-I "Internet." Maybe that's evidence that it is not so formidable and sublime anymore—or that, anyway, we wish it weren't.

Dropping the capitalization, usually reserved for holy things, is another way that we aim to put the internet (the Internet?) into the background, in spite of our gnawing intuition that it is unspeakably important—that, in some sense, it represents an entirely new civilization and phase in human development. But as Wittgenstein wrote, "Whereof we cannot speak thereof we must be silent." And so we stay silent about the force that increasingly drives how we live, work, love, fight, create and conduct business.

But while we don't speak about it, we certainly speak in it, and through it. In fact, the Internet, in my view, is a massive and collaborative work of art—something billions of us contribute to every millisecond, with every Instagram photo, every “like,” every message-board post, every tweet, every eBay review, every streamed video or song. We make, consume, and review art—photography, design, poetry, prose, film, and music. Why do we do this so committedly—compulsively, even—while also disparaging as trivial or evil the whole enterprise? What if, just for an hour or so, we suspended the assumption that the Internet is nothing but a public health hazard or a tool of the surveillance state or a means to a venal end? What if we're right in the moment we post to Snapchat or Pinterest—that the Internet is play, is expression, is challenge, is a call to greater eloquence, grander originality, most expansive community, and shrewder gameplay?

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I propose we don't stay silent any longer about the Internet. I don't mean to prescriptively suggest we do nothing but stand a cheer for "progress," or the liberation of information that was widely championed in the 1990s as the Web was getting started. I propose instead that we keep our heads, and use our own idiosyncratic, critical imaginations—and in particular the methods of the humanities—to make moral, political, and aesthetic sense of this extraordinary shared endeavor. And certainly that we savor the fathomless luck that landed us in this new universe, still in its infancy, barely born of its originary Big Bang, where we have the power to shape an entirely new way of being.

When I advocate being "critical" as we use the Internet, I don't mean we should carp about it. I'm bone-tired of comparing notes with other parents about how worrying it is that our kids love their phones, don't look up when we want them to, and on occasion see digital porn. (Sounds like the rest of us.) Sighing and shaking heads is not exercising wise discernment. Nor do I think we should spend more time on how this or that detail of pre-Internet life—conversation? enjoyment of nature or solitude?—is being lost forever. (What do we know? In the so-called Dark Ages, it was believed literacy was dead—and then came the Renaissance.) And I certainly don't believe we have grounds to say, in spite of decades of efforts to prove it so, that the Internet is a public health hazard, somehow poisoning our brains and making us shallower, sillier, meaner, or dumber.

Too often we bring the narrowest of views—often using the language of business strategy or neuroscience, both vague, hypothetical, and untested disciplines that traffic largely in rhetoric—to force Internet discussion into two categories: Here’s how to use it to get rich! or Here’s how it’s poisoning our lives! These and more propagandist and alarmist theses have filled the books about the Internet for years—stoking anxiety and hypochondria without giving a wider-angle look at what the Internet might essentially be. I find this an ironic failure of the very same brains that are creating the most extraordinary and challenging masterwork of our time. In short: We’re been beholding a whole new epoch from the point of view of the minor changes to our own municipalities—where you get your burgers in the new universe, how this or that new city official is scary—rather than taking expansive and even optimistic stock of how digital life on earth (and beyond) is actually evolving.

Yes, I said optimistic. And by optimistic I don’t mean Make an app, young man! or Try SEO! The venture world and its promises about a new economy are just as frothy as the language of past pre-Internet bubbles. I wrote my Ph.D. dissertation on finance (and fiction) in the Gilded Age, and if you think Medium is filled with “get rich quick” gibberish today, you should have heard the talk in the pubs in the days of Rockefeller and Morgan.

No. By optimistic I mean something much, much more than bullish on the market. I mean wholeheartedly in awe of our young digital world, only thirty years in the making, and less than ten in the mobile incarnation we now understand to be the way we live now. I want us to stand in awe about our collective work, before we dissect it—and “murder to dissect” it, as Wordsworth once wrote about scientific method. The kind of awe I’m recommending follows a moment of truly beholding this enormous phenomenon known as the Internet, of taking the measure of its sublimity. And yes I mean sublimity—its beauty and its terror. Its ecstasy and agony. Or what I call in my book (to use the reverent caps!): its Magic, and its Loss.

The Internet is the great masterpiece of human civilization. Does that mean it’s without flaw, or without potential for great harm? No. But as an artifact the Internet challenges the pyramid, the aqueduct, the highway, the novel, the newspaper, the nation-state, the Magna Carta, Easter Island, Stonehenge, agriculture, the feature film, the automobile, the telephone, the telegraph, the television, the Chanel suit, the airplane, the pencil, the book, the printing press, the radio, the realist painting, the abstract painting, the Pill, the washing machine, the skyscraper, the elevator and cooked meat. As an idea it rivals monotheism.

Just as, in Nietzsche's scheme, man created science which in turn killed god, analog culture—books, clocks, film, industrial machines, the compasses and timers of scientific method—created digital culture, and now digital culture has superseded it. It was quick, the supersession, and now it's over. But where are we?

“Magic” is a word that Apple vigorously embraced. The iPad was introduced as a “magical and revolutionary device.” And “magic” is a crucial term of art. Computer code is considered magic when it seems simple but accomplishes complex operations. The Internet is paradigmatic magic. It turns experiences from the material world that used to be densely physical—involving licking stamps, say, or winding clocks or driving in cars to shopping centers—into frictionless, weightless and fantastic abstractions. As Lawrence Lessig puts it, “The digital world has more in common with the world of ideas than with the world of things.”

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And yet it's still here, the persistent sense of loss. The magic of the Internet—the recession of the material world in favor of a world of ideas—is not pure delight. It seems we are missing something very worthwhile and identity-forming from our predigital lives. Is it a handwritten letter? Is it an analog phone call? Is it a quality of celluloid film, a multivolume encyclopedia or a leather-bound datebook? Is it a way of thinking or being or even falling in love?

Between two discourses, two languages, two regimes, something is always lost. And whether we admit it or not, the Internet and its artifacts are not just like their cultural precedents. They're not even a rough translation—or a strong misreading—of those precedents. The Internet has a logic, a tempo, an idiom, a color scheme, a politics, and an emotional sensibility all its own. Tentatively, avidly or kicking and screaming, nearly two billion of us have come to take up residence on the Internet, and we're still adjusting to it.

This transformation of everyday life includes moments of magic, and an unavoidable experience of profound loss. Any discussion of digital culture that merely catalogs its wonders and does not acknowledge these two central themes is propaganda, and fails to do it justice. We must all refuse to make that mistake as we aim to understand our online civilization.

Thirty years ago, when I first discovered it, the Internet wasn't easy to find. It wasn't a user-friendly retail franchise, as the Web is now. It was a nervous back office full of furtive clerics. You stumbled in. While computer hardware and software of the 70s were the work of sophisticated engineers—who pressed computers into the service of everything from music to word-processing to architecture and filmmaking—the slow and awkward networks, in those days, had limited application. These were the so-called “eve” networks, inspired largely by ARPANET, the landmark computer-communications system that was a project of the U.S. government's Advanced Research Projects Agency. Logically, the Internet in its early days was a kind of diversion for Cold War intelligence types and academics. But it was possible to stumble onto the early Internet.

I know because I was among the stumblers. Xcaliber was early social-networking technology developed at Dartmouth College. In the heyday of Dungeons & Dragons, its vaguely Arthurian theme appealed to both hackers and tweens. Its real purpose was to facilitate communication among the several academic and scientific institutions who shared Dartmouth's mainframe computer—one of those big, heaving rhinos in a cage of bulletproof Plexiglas. Every day a few hundred people dialed that mainframe for an alien signal—the then-unfamiliar squeal and crash of information transmission—and fit their receivers into acoustic couplers, like people in kayaks.

As a townie preteen, I hacked in with the help of some Dartmouth students. By the time I turned 13, I was confident I knew every single person online. Conference XYZ, the most active chat room, amplified Xcaliber's fantasy element: each convocation had levels and a self-anointed master who could banish chatters he disliked. Participants often communicated in an odd Led Zeppelin idiom, deployed bullying all-caps reply-alls, or referred to damsels and steeds.

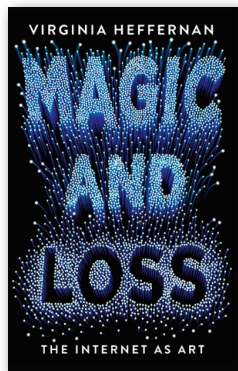
The story of early computer networks has been most often told as a technology and business story. But like the Internet today, Conference XYZ was not an engineering experiment as much as an immersive cultural experience. What mesmerized me—and its other users—were its cadences and its vocabulary. Its vibe. On some level, while we were seeking connection and community, we were also helping to build a culture. Today I see that culture writ large online.

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Conference XYZ pretty much folded in 1986. For years I half-repressed thoughts of Xcaliber. It would come to me in fragments of memories: the odd jargon we evolved; the hot feeling of being somehow watched; the invective; the jokes; the speed. The highly collaborative project had been the spontaneous creation of a scene, a *modus vivendi*, an entire culture. Had we really done all that? And was it really now all gone?

It was not gone. What I thought was the end of a short detour from regular life was actually the beginning of the biggest cultural phenomenon of my lifetime. If it's ever fair to say that anything has "changed everything," it's fair to say it about the Internet. At stake in this cultural transformation is the very way we live, the way we think, the way we love, the way we talk, and even the way we fight across the globe. **The Internet is entrenched. It's time to understand it—and not as a curiosity, or an entry in the annals of technology or business, but as an integral part of our humanity, as the latest and most powerful extension and expression in the project of being human.** 📖

Info



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