# Praise Gopod: Weird Tales and Memetic Lore on the WELL Jacob Sujin Kuppermann

## Memetic Prehistory

What is an old meme? It depends on who you ask. On Twitter, accounts like @OldMemeArchive mostly post memes of a distinctly 2007-2012 provenance—references to MySpace and President Obama abound, and the most common forms shown are rage comics and demotivational posters. Similarly, a popular Twitter thread from March of last year from user [@jil\_slander](https://twitter.com/jil_slander/status/1242567579249623045?s=20) asked ‘What’s a rly old meme that made u laugh so fucking hard when you first saw it’—a question that returned responses of similar vintage.[[1]](#footnote-1) Yet these memes, no matter how ancient they may appear to twitter users, are certainly not the *oldest* memes.

Traditional histories of the internet meme typically trace the origins of the term back to Mike Godwin in 1994, whose *Wired* article ‘Meme, Counter-meme’ brought both Godwin’s eponymous Law and the very concept of a meme to the broader attention of the internet public.[[2]](#footnote-2) But Godwin’s article refers to his own prior exploits in memetics—he uses the term but he does not coin it. Godwin may have brought the term to a wider audience, as *Wired* served as a sort of transitional medium from self-proclaimed netizens to slightly-less online audiences in the early 90s in the US. But before the term “meme” was widely used in an online context, there were memes.

Most histories of memes neglect to discuss the period before the 1990s or do so with hardly any detail at all. In Patrick Davison’s 2012 primer on the linguistic qualities of internet memes, he briefly discusses the development of emoticons within Usenet discussions in the early 1980s as a proto-internet meme, but quickly moves on from the emoticon to discuss more contemporary memes and image macros.[[3]](#footnote-3) Similarly, semiotic analyses of internet culture in more recent years have either mentioned memes in the 1980s only in passing before moving on to more recent material, as in Cannizzaro’s work on memes as ‘internet signs’, or have simply bypassed the area entirely, as in Marino’s work on the “spreadability” of memes, which includes a list of ‘classic’ internet memes that begins with 1996’s “Dancing Baby” and ends with 2004’s “Leeroy Jenkins.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

The exclusion of 1980s internet/proto-internet memes from contemporary chronologies of meme history is likely explainable by the lack of accessible high-quality sources from that period. While Google provides access to the bulk of Usenet groups from the 1980s via Google Groups, browsing these discussions from the early 1980s can be difficult due to both interface issues and the posting of spam messages to old groups in recent years. Early internet/usenet content is also too overwhelming of an archival mass to sift through to find the first instances of internet meme content.

Much as the history/pre-history distinction refers to our access to written-down historical documents from a period, we can create a similar category of *internet* prehistory: a period when people on the internet were participating in discourses that are not currently accessible to us. Much as the prehistory/history distinction is drawn at different points of time for different areas, the internet entered its historical age not all at once but in fits and starts, as different communities became legible to our current archival practices.

The ancient memes of the 1980s and early 1990s can seem far away—almost alien—to the modern reader. The communities in which they were formed are no longer at the center of online life. The general inaccessibility of historical internet communities shrouds their cultural practices in a certain obscuring mystique. By looking closely at a meme from this period of the early internet in a still extant online community from the 1980s, we can demystify early internet memetics and identify key points of connection between memes present and past.

## Thank *Gopod* for the WELL

Fortunately for archival researchers, not all early internet users swam in the vast ocean that was Usenet. Some preferred smaller shores—walled gardens and private networks with less overwhelming amounts of content to examine. One such example is the WELL, a private message board that—due to its popularity among *Wired* writers, Grateful Dead fans, and other members of the Silicon Valley tech world and the broader Bay Area counterculture—became the archetypal ‘virtual community’ in early tech evangelist literature.[[5]](#footnote-5) Unlike many other early online communities, the WELL survives today. For a monthly fee anyone can join and gain access to the still-active discussion boards as well as access the remarkably well-preserved archival posts dating back to the site’s inception in 1985.

Our ability to access posts from the late 1980s on the WELL allows us to get a finer-grained look at how memes spread in the earliest days of the internet. I focus on what appears to be the most pervasive textual meme found on the WELL: ‘Gopod.’ Originating from a typographical error made by *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Jon Carroll, ‘Gopod’ became a sort of ironic folk deity for WELL users in the late 1980s and early 1990s, replacing the word ‘god’ in the forum’s vernacular.

‘Gopod’ is one of the earliest internet memes that we can still find records of, and perhaps the first to be used in similar ways to contemporary verbal memes (for one, its memetic uses resemble those of, say, President Donald Trump’s tweeting the nonsense word ‘Covfefe’ in April 2017). It also may be the first case of an internet meme breaking out of online discourse and into conventional media, as news articles in publications like the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *New York Times* discussed ‘Gopod’ and other similar ‘new words’ found on the WELL as the most distinctive parts of the WELL’s rapidly developing online culture.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The WELL was frequently used as the example *par excellence* of online communities in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Just as an understanding of the memes of the 2010s would be incomplete without an underlying understanding of the cultural norms of Black Twitter or Dank Memes Reddit, or the memes of the 2000s without an understanding of notable forums and image boards like 4chan’s /b/ or SomethingAwful, an understanding of early internet memes is not complete with an understanding of the WELL—and more specifically, the WELL’s ‘Weird’ conference.

## Tales from the WELL

The WELL stands apart from the other online communities extant in the 1980s for a variety of reasons—its cultural cachet and longevity, certainly, but also the circumstances in which it was founded and its mechanisms of internal governance that allowed it to develop a strong culture. The board was founded in 1985 by a group that included many involved with the *Whole Earth Catalog*, the influential counterculture/communalist publication founded in the late 1960s by Stewart Brand. This common ground differentiated the WELL from other nascent internet communities, which were generally communities of convenience where the users were connected solely due to their access to early online services like Usenet, or service providers like Compuserve.

The ideology informing the WELL’s community structures is best shown in a set of founding principles that then-editor of *Wired* Kevin Kelly would recount to Howard Rheingold as part of Rheingold’s [*The Virtual Community*](https://www.rheingold.com/vc/book/2.html), an anthropological survey of the early 1990s online cosmos that focused heavily on the WELL. In between notes on the WELL’s business model (it was to be as close as it could be to free while still being profitable), Kelly, who was a part of the WELL’s scene by virtue of his editorship of the *Whole Earth Review*, noted that the key to the WELL’s community was its ‘self-designing’ nature. In Kelly’s words, ‘The early users were to design the system for later users. The usage of the system would co-evolve with the system as it was built.’[[7]](#footnote-7)

This principle served the WELL well over its first few years, where, under the salutary neglect of the Whole Earth enterprise, a vibrant community of a few thousand users would grow. The WELL’s business records from the period, which are stored in Stanford University’s Special Collections, rarely discuss the actual goings on within the WELL’s conferences (think subreddits, or boards within a forum). Instead, they contend mostly with bringing people into the WELL—advertisements, free accounts for tech journalists, press releases. Once they got users to sign on, the WELL’s employees were content to allow the volunteer “hosts” and pre-existing users of conferences to set the culture of the community.

So what did the WELL’s culture look like? In many ways, it was not radically different from the culture of later forums, or even contemporary discussion boards like subreddits. Like many of these environments, discussion on the WELL was dominated by power users who made the majority of comments, with a larger body of lurkers who rarely commented and mostly just observed. One analysis of posting stats from early 1994 showed that half of the over 150,000 posts made over a two-month period on the WELL came from just 99 users, while over half of the WELL’s users made no posts at all in that same span.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The WELL’s user base was interested in a variety of topics. Some of the most popular conferences included hippie mainstays like the environment, outdoor recreation, and most of all the Grateful Dead.[[9]](#footnote-9) Yet another section of the network was made up of tech enthusiasts, with conferences on cutting edge topics like Hypercard (a popular software development kit published by Apple), hacking, and virtual reality that also drew hundreds of unique visitors a month. Most of all, though, the WELL was interested in the WELL itself.

WELL user Maria Syndicus (username Nana) put it best in an interview with journalist Katie Hafner, who wrote the only single-topic history of the WELL: ‘if something didn’t happen on The Well, it didn’t happen.’[[10]](#footnote-10) In a directory of the WELL circa 1992 republished in Rheingold’s *The Virtual Community*, 11 separate conferences relating to the WELL itself are listed out of a total of 120 public conferences.[[11]](#footnote-11)

In those conferences, the users of the WELL debated the state of their virtual community. In the Policy conference, WELL gadfly Blair Newman deftly assessed the issue of lurkers vs power users, saying that ‘Well words should sink or swim on their own merits, but (face it, folks) they are weighted if they are from sbb, fig, mkapor, jrc, james, metaview (anti-gravity weighted); and such weightings may aggravate the lurker/poster ratio problem.’[[12]](#footnote-12)

The metaWELL, as it was so called, occupied itself with two pastimes: debating the present/future of the WELL, and chronicling its past for the sake of those who weren’t there. Unlike more modern online communities, where new users are often told to simply ‘lurk moar’ in order to gain cultural competency, the WELL’s old guard reveled in the recounting of lore to new members of the community. The WELL’s self-referential quality made it an early online example of what sociologist Christopher Kelty refers to as a ‘recursive public’. That is, ‘a public that is vitally concerned with the material and practical maintenance and modification of the technical, legal, practical, and conceptual means of its own existence as a public; it is a collective independent of other forms of constituted power and is capable of speaking to existing forms of power through the production of actually existing alternatives.’[[13]](#footnote-13)

The WELL’s community, in a very real sense, was based on keeping the WELL itself together. This preoccupation made the WELL fertile ground for the spread of memes within the platform as its users were always looking back into themselves, cracking jokes and iterating on the previous day’s conversation. The conference that perhaps best encapsulated this ethos—even moreso than the metaWELL boards—was the Weird conference. Described by Hafner as ‘the Well’s id’ and a ‘free-fire zone,’ the Weird conference was home to what we can now recognize as a nascent form of shitposting.[[14]](#footnote-14) The conversations verged on the absurd, with the only connecting thread being the shared folklore of cultural references and prior jokes that ultimately led back to the WELL itself.

In other words, the Weird conference provided the necessary and sufficient conditions for the development of some of the earliest recorded internet memes. It’s no coincidence that Mike Godwin cited the WELL twice in ‘Meme, Counter-Meme’: you can still find his posts from around that period on the WELL (username Mnemonic), although his user page expressly prohibits us, or anyone else, from reprinting them.

## Gopod in and out of the Machine

Of all the WELL’s memes, “Gopod” is perhaps the best known. In its metastasized form, used thousands of times over on the WELL, it refers to ‘The Supreme Being of the WELL’, a deity to invoke in times of need or exasperation, but its roots are somewhat more humble. Somewhere in the Weird conference in March 1988, *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Jon Carroll attempted to write ‘Thank God.’ He, of his own admission, failed, and Gopod experienced its immaculate conception. From there, the cult of Gopod expanded outward, first to the Mind conference and then to the community as a whole. This timeline may not be exactly accurate—there’s one recorded post from a non-Carroll source dated to January 1988 that contains the word that’s still viewable on the web—but the general arc of the story remains the same. By early 1989, knowledge of Gopod was a *fait accompli*: ‘New users just came to understand that the Well has a higher power and it is called Gopod.’[[15]](#footnote-15)

Our knowledge of Gopod on the WELL comes from two slightly different sources. The first is the thousands of viewable posts using the term made from 1988 to the present day found on the WELL. These give a broad view of the casual use of Gopod, in topics discussing everything from AOL to Star Wars to Ross Perot’s presidential ambitions to tips for amateur boaters. They also give a view into the mutations Gopod went through in Weird, which served as a sort of cultural bleeding edge for the rest of the WELL. There, Gopod is not just a banal invocation of the divine but something more radical. One particularly infamous topic is dubbed ‘the Nine Billionth Name of Gopod.’ The poster warns that ‘when we reach 10,000 responses, the world will end.’ Fortunately for all of us, the topic petered out after a mere 2012 posts, ranging from early 1989 to summer 2000.

But these raw posts do not give us a good window into how Gopod was perceived as a phenomenon on the WELL. For this, we instead need posts *about* Gopod. Here, the metaWELL becomes vitally useful. Take the story of Gopod’s origins—it comes to us direct from the WELL’s archives, from ‘a small attempt at the beginnings of an oral history of the Well’ made by Carroll himself.[[16]](#footnote-16) What is perhaps more interesting than any particular detail of Carroll’s telling is *when* it was made—the original post of that topic was made on May 15, 1989, scarcely a year after Carroll’s first post involving Gopod. After just a year, the term had already worked its way into the vernacular of the WELL to such an extent that an explanation of its origin was warranted.

Gopod became a certain token of WELL-ness, a symbol of the witty, irreverent style of the site. In a *New York Times* [article](https://www.nytimes.com/1990/01/28/style/life-style-coming-to-the-east-coast-an-electronic-salon.html) on a largely unsuccessful east coast clone of the WELL called the Echo, one user of the WELL is quoted as saying that ‘no one ever refers to God anymore’ on the WELL—just Gopod.[[17]](#footnote-17) Similarly, Carroll used his own typo in a *Chronicle* column in 1993, citing ‘Gopod’ and ‘Bog fu’ (that is, big fun) as examples of how ‘spelling and language conventions change rapidly’ on the information superhighway.[[18]](#footnote-18) You can find instances of Gopod being referenced here and there on the wider web—on a Slashdot comment on the news of the WELL’s later sale to Salon in 1999[[19]](#footnote-19), a Klezmer news blog in 2006,[[20]](#footnote-20) a tweet from 2018 reminiscing on the WELL.[[21]](#footnote-21)

In this way, Gopod’s spread outside of the WELL itself presaged two features of contemporary meme use. The first is the inevitable spread of memes out of the contexts in which they were created—just as Gopod migrated from Weird to Mind to the more couth areas of the WELL to the *New York Times* itself, so do memes now move from 4chan to Twitter to Reddit to Instagram to Facebook—or in endless combinations of those online spaces. The other is the use of memes as symbols of identity. Just as a Redditor in 2010 could identify themselves by saying ‘the narwhal bacons at midnight,’[[22]](#footnote-22) or Tumblr users of a similar era could use the phrase ‘I like your shoelaces’ and the response ‘Thanks, I stole them from the president’[[23]](#footnote-23) to winkingly self-associate, a WELL user in some other corner of the world could simply thank Gopod and see who would say amen.

## Memes of Future Past

From a historiographical and methodological standpoint, the existence of the WELL’s archives and other internet sources from the 1980s and 1990s provides an underexplored angle in meme studies. The historical coverage of these sources is incomplete, especially relative to more contemporary records: the WELL’s pre-1986 archives are largely missing due to a combination of privacy and storage space concerns from the community’s early days. But even the fragmented records of the early internet provide insights into the period’s norms of communication, and therefore should be sought out and used by researchers interested in internet memes just as much as more modern sources.

On a broader level, the tale of Gopod is helpful in showing that the earlier eras of the internet are not so alien from our own norms. The WELL had tens of thousands of users at its peak; Reddit, Twitter, and Instagram have hundreds of millions. And yet, despite the massive differences in scale, the posting habits of users on the WELL do not seem so strange.

It’s a difference in volume but not in form: people joke and debate, and debate their jokes, and joke about their debates, and joke on their jokes in an endless procession of conversation. And in 1989 and 2021, and perhaps onward into the future, memes like Gopod embed themselves deeply within these discourses, leaving an undeniable mark on the shape of the communities in which they reside.

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4. Sara Cannizzaro, "Internet Memes as Internet Signs: a Semiotic View of Digital Culture," *Σημειωτκή-Sign Systems Studies* 44, no. 4 (2016): 562-586.; Gabriele Marino, "Semiotics of Spreadability: a Systematic Approach to Internet Memes and Virality," *Punctum* 1, no. 1 (2015): 43-66. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The term ‘virtual community’ comes from Howard Rheingold’s *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. Rheingold was heavily involved with the WELL, serving as conference host and board member in the 1990s, and his view of virtual communities heavily relies on the WELL as a reference point. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
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