



ART

## **An Oral History of the First Cyberfeminists**



Claire L. Evans

Dec 11 2014, 10:35am

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**VNS Matrix emerged from the cyberswamp during one Australian summer in 1991, on a mission to hijack the toys from technocowboys and remap cyberculture with a feminist bent.**

Image via Virginia Barratt.

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In the heady early years of the World Wide Web, four Australian women—Josephine Starrs, Julianne Pierce, Francesca da Rimini and Virginia Barratt—made fierce and funny feminist art under the name VNS Matrix. They were part of a cultural movement called [Cyberfeminism](#), which peaked in the early 1990s and dissipated sometime between the bursting of the dot com bubble and the coming of Y2K.

VNS Matrix worked in a wide variety of media: computer games, video installations, events, texts, and billboards. In their iconic "[Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century](#)," they called themselves the "virus of the new world disorder," and "terminators of the moral codes." With this irreverent, but keenly political language, they articulated a feminist aesthetic of slimy, unpretty, vigilantly nose-thumbing technological anarchy.

They coded. They built websites. They hung out in chat rooms and text-based online communities like [LambdaMOO](#). They told stories through interactive code and experiences like the CD-ROM game *All New Gen*, in which a female protagonist fought to defeat a military-industrial data environment called "Big Daddy Mainframe." They believed the web could be a space for fluid creative experimentation, a place to transform and create in collaboration with a global community of like-minded artists.

Over twenty years later, in the many feminist conversations happening online, groups like VNS Matrix and their compatriots in the Cyberfeminist trenches are not frequently cited. They should be. Their spirit of joyful subversion is more relevant, more cannily timely, more totally necessary today than it has ever been.

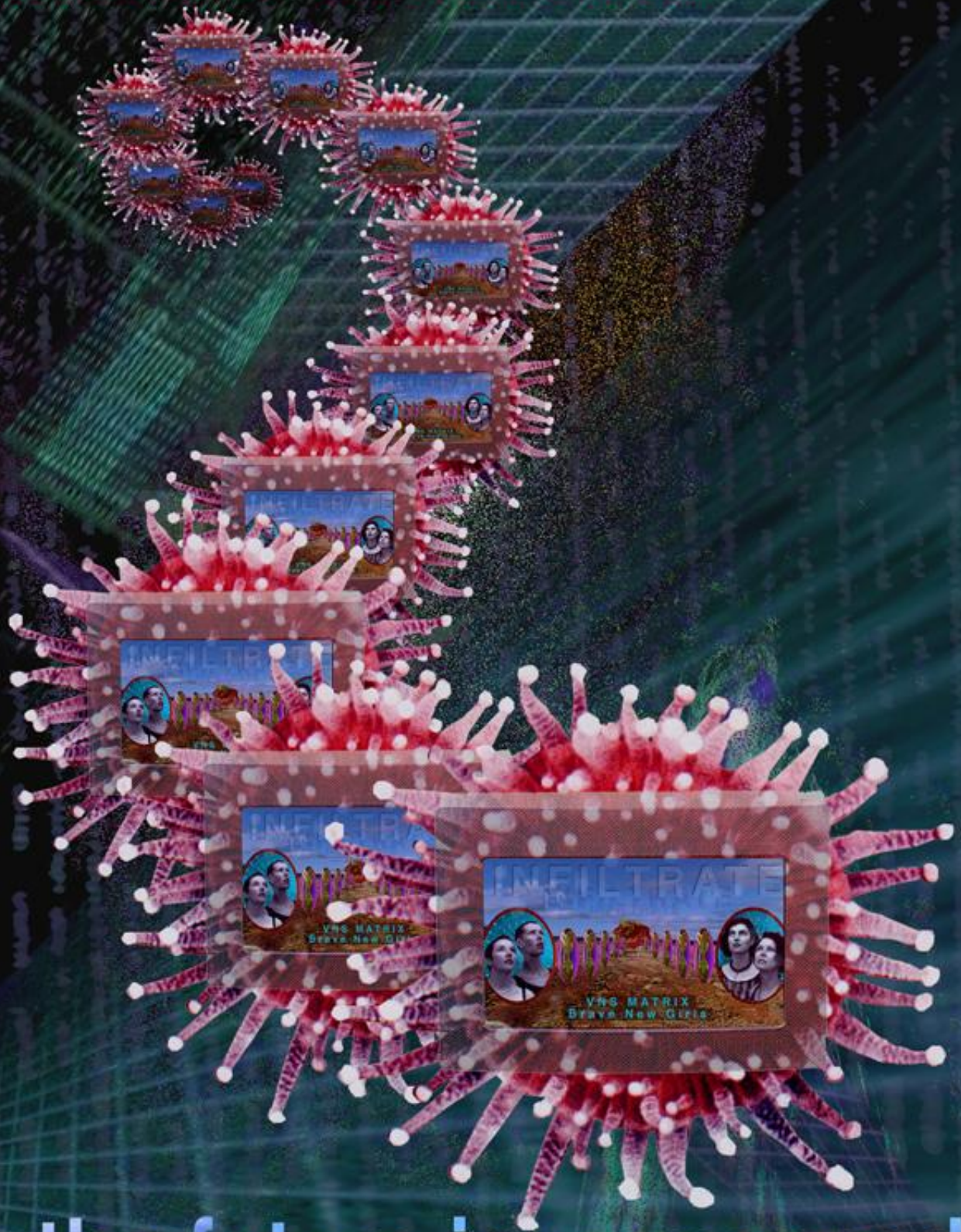
While putting together my story for [\*\*Motherboard about Cyberfeminism\*\*](#), I began an email correspondence with the members of VNS Matrix. They were hugely generous, opening up their archives and sharing first-person stories about their experiences as pioneering woman artists in the early Internet age. We decided to put all of the material together into a history of VNS Matrix, told in their own words.

Together, we share this history with the Cyberfeminists past, present, and future.

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*The clitoris is a direct line  
.....to the matrix*



...the future is unmanned

VNS Matrix poster, mid 1990s. Image via Josephine Starrs.

**Virginia Barratt:** There is a narrative arc to the genesis of VNS Matrix which goes something like this: "The VNS Matrix emerged from the cyberswamp during a southern Australian summer circa 1991, on a mission to hijack the toys from technocowboys and remap cyberculture with a feminist bent."

**Francesca da Rimini:** Our group formed over 20 years ago, and it really was another world, another lifetime.

**Virginia Barratt:** We were living in Adelaide at the time. I was EO of the [Australian Network for Art and Technology](#), a position Francesca had just left to move onto other works and projects. Julianne and Josie were both studying and making art and performance. We were all involved in a mess of generative creative production.

**Josephine Starrs:** Australia was avant-garde in the new media art scene, and Australians are generally early adopters of new technologies, perhaps due to physical distance. Australian female artists are also innovators and are not afraid to critique the establishment. That irreverence and humour could perhaps be the influence of our Indigenous culture, and the Irish convict culture?

**Virginia Barratt:** Francesca had been involved in a project of Australian Network for Art and Technology to connect artists with machines, facilitating artist access to institutions and their resources, specifically computers and software.

This kind of access was unprecedented, since computers were not personal and certainly not ubiquitous. It was the mission of ANAT to create connections between art and science. The outcomes were surprising and not-so-surprising, in terms of production—artists intervening in the processes of technological production—and socio-cultural interventions, as the machines were mostly in service to the patriarchal overlords of commerce, science, educational institutions. Access by women was limited and usually mediated by a male "tech." The idea of "play" and "creative production" or simply "research" with no outcomes that were necessarily useful in



terms of capitalism were anathema to the tech industries.

**Josephine Starrs:** VNS Matrix predated the 2000's trend for game-art in the art world. We began by making up playful narratives around our female protagonist All New Gen and her DNA sluts. This was 1990, way before Lara Croft, when the idea of a female hero in a computer game was unheard of. We created art installations that included game stills for light boxes, narrative sound and video works, and interactive art.



Invite for All New Gen Exhibition, 1995. Image via the [Australian Centre for Contemporary Art](#).

**Virginia Barratt:** The technological landscape was very dry, cartesian, reverent. It was uncritical and overwhelmingly male-dominated. It was a masculinist space, coded as such, and the gatekeepers of the code (cultural and logos) maintained control of the productions of technology.

**Francesca da Rimini:** In the early 1990s, informational capitalism hadn't quite taken root. The internet was far less regulated, far less commodified. More of a maul and a maw than a mall. There seemed to be endless possibilities, it was a field of immanence, of becoming. And it was slow, low-res, glitch. Before 'glitch' became a cultural movement. But it's easy to be nostalgic for that time.

**Virginia Barratt:** It was into this environment that VNS Matrix was spawned. We entered into the cultural space circuitously, imagining a feminist approach to the production of pornography—this was our starting point, and the way we generated an aesthetics of slime, moving quickly into a machine-slime symbiosis, as antithetical to the brittle beige fleshless gutless realm of technological production. A stream of consciousness writing session which was more like an exudation of slime and viscera morphing through critical, feminist, pornographic texts birthed the "Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century."

By the latter part of 1991 the manifesto was the centerpiece of a large billboard image of the same name, framed by cybercunts, in a field of genetic material morphing into new representations of women, gender and sexuality in technospace, both primordial, ancient and futuristic, fantastical and active, not passive objects. The blasphemous text was badass and complex, hot, wet and mind-bending, in service to a feminism that was multiple.



The Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century in installation, 1995. Image via Virginia Barratt.

**Virginia Barratt:** At the same time that we portmanteau'ed cyber and feminism, [Sadie Plant](#) was working on developing a curriculum around the same name in another part of the world—simultaneous synapse firings across the matrix of slime. One of her students was on holiday in Australia and happened across the billboard,



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feminism entered cyber and the word became flesh.

**Francesca da Rimini:** The cyberfeminist community was crazy, wild, political, passionate. Deeply fun. It was lived politics and generated abiding friendships and networks. There was a whole lotta love. I guess it was very Euro, but then there were some powerful women in Canada and The States. Like Jamaican-Canadian digital artist Camille Turner. And Carmin Karasic from the [Electronic Disturbance Theatre](#).

EDT did one of the first Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) actions—Floodnet—circa 1998, way before Anonymous, in solidarity with the Mexican Zapatistas. Their action provoked the US military into retaliating against the DDoS participants by launching hostile Java applets back to their computers, crashing them. I know, I was online in New York participating in the DDoS at the time. The military's involvement only came to light later.

**Virginia Barratt:** We honored the lineage of Cyberfeminism—naturally [Donna Haraway](#) with her cyborg/goddess dichotomy was one of our sheroes. Others who were working in the field at the time were people like [Brenda Laurel](#), [Sherri Turkle](#), [Allucquere Roseanne Stone](#).

Irreverence, agency, power, sexuality, intensities, guerilla feminism, porn, humour, music. Post-punk/still punk. The abject and subversion of the clean and proper body. These were some of the hallmarks of our productive approaches, influences and methods.





UP NEXT

**This National Park in Patagonia Is Being Overrun With Invasive Canadian Trees**



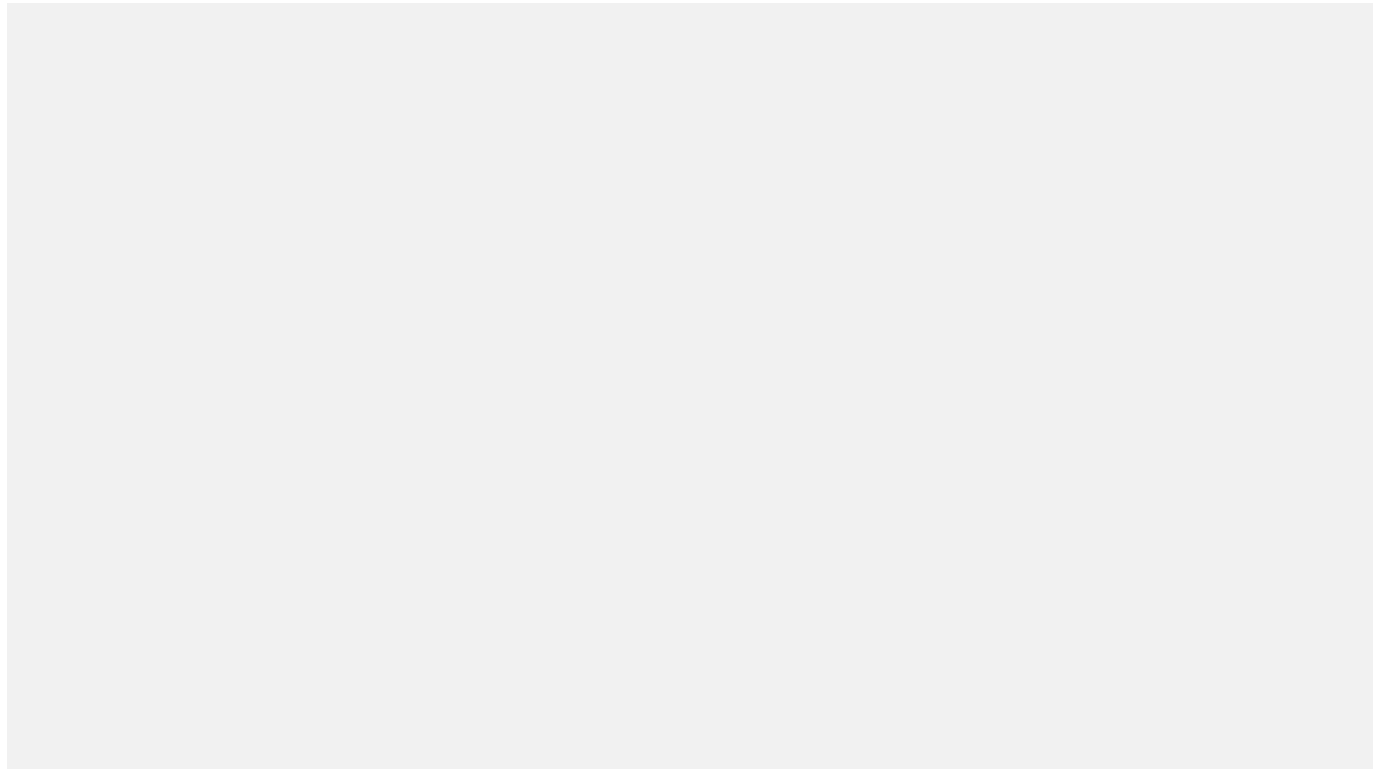
VNS Matrix postcard, depicting their concept of "G-Slime," 1994. Image via Virginia Barratt.

**Josephine Starrs:** It appeared that few women were playing computer games in the early nineties. One reason for this is that the games industry ignored women and girls for more than a decade, fearing that if girls joined the fun, the boys would be unhappy about losing their exclusive boy-zone.

So VNS Matrix had fun making our own art games for public exhibition, hacking the game engines, slashing the dominant game narratives and critiquing the content of game culture with humor.

From the enormous positive responses and feedback we received from young women artists and gamers from both in Australia and internationally, it was obvious that many women were really annoyed with being actively excluded from game

culture, which was obviously becoming a huge cultural force.



Still from All New Gen. Image via Josephine Starrs.

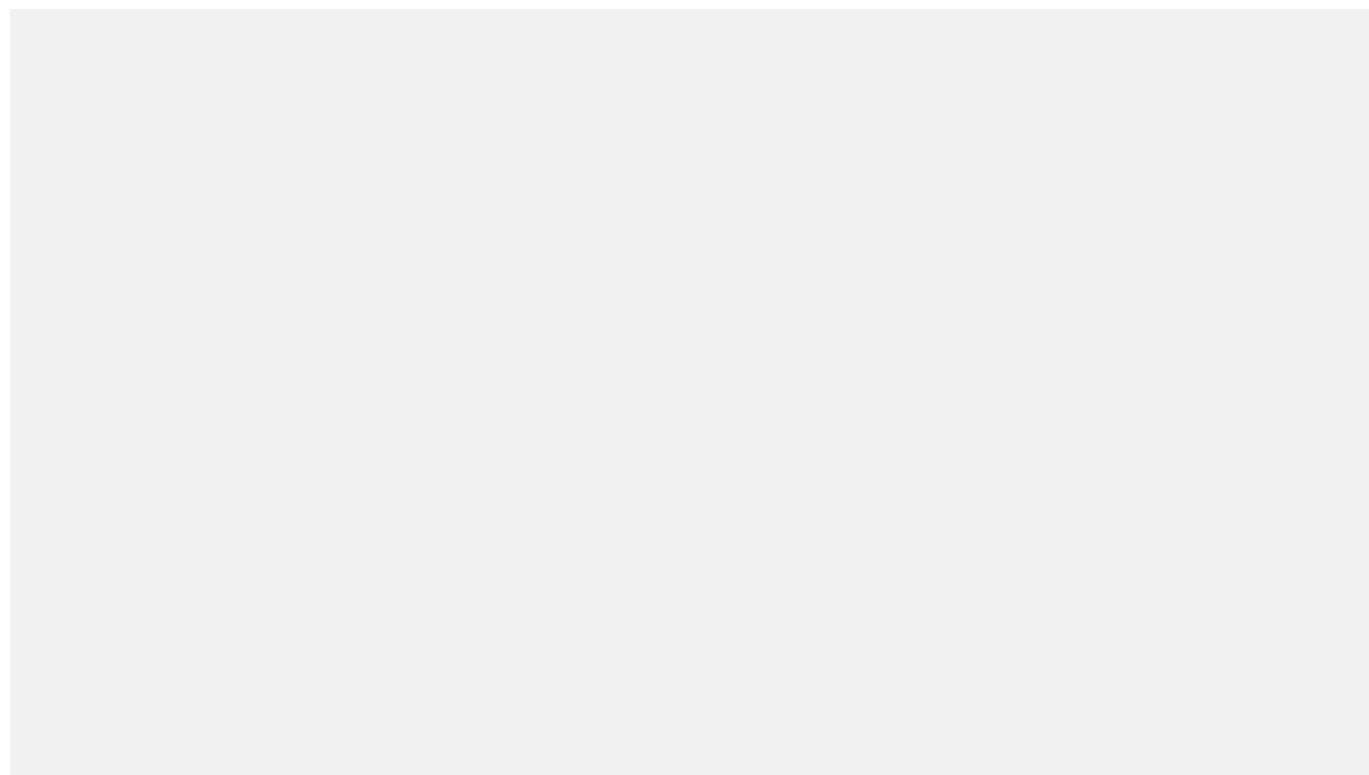
**Virginia Barratt:** What happened to cyberfeminism? Why did the movement die out? What happened, of course, was that the narratives around liberation from racism, sexism and so on in the brave new virtual world were promises which were empty. New strategies needed to be developed for battling rampant bullying, bigotry, hatespeech and so on. Cyberfeminisms deployed multifariously and the idea of a \*movement\* was no longer relevant.

**Francesca da Rimini:** I think the political and cultural ideas that this movement inspired continue to evolve and shapeshift. Check out the [Bloodbath collaboration with a roller derby team](#) for example. That could be read as a cyberfeminist intervention. Chicks, machines, extreme sports. Or the growth of female hacker clubs, workshops and events like [G.hack](#) and [Genderchangers](#). In the global South there are many projects fostering a critical socially-engaged technological literacy, and women are driving and participating in many of these. Such projects don't need to be labelled "cyberfeminist," but they embody some of the cyberfeminist ethos and attitude.

**Virginia Barratt:** I think VNS Matrix was doing a job. And in a cultural space that was coded as heavily masculinist, our job as female-identified people, and as feminists, was to overthrow the gatekeepers in order to access a powerful new technology which had huge implications for domination and control by the patriarchy and by capitalist systems. We did what we had to do at the time. Then our job was done. Leave the definitions to someone else.

Later, the field became itself more fully, and was able to address the layered political aspects of the cultural conditions of the information technology field—but at the time we just needed to be fast and fierce and overthrow the gatekeepers. We had to break the safe.

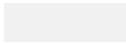
**Francesca da Rimini:** Cyberfeminism is one of many feminisms, and feminism has not gone away.



VNS Matrix, Silicon Angel. Image via Josephine Starrs.

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*This story is part of a series on rediscovering feminist histories on the web. Read part one, [\*\*"We Are the Future Cunt: Cyberfeminism in the 90s."\*\*](#)*



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INVASIVE SPECIES

## This National Park in Patagonia Is Being Overrun With Invasive Canadian Trees

**In North America, the lodgepole pine is facing historic die-offs. Southern Argentina has a different problem.**

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**Scott Leitch**

Nov 7 2017, 11:00am

Forest engineer Adolfo Moretti holds up a recently felled lodgepole pine tree. Image: Scott Leitch

Adolfo Moretti is proud of the work his small staff has accomplished this year, trying to prevent a looming ecological disaster in Argentine Patagonia. "Kilometres and kilometers without pines," Moretti said, smiling as our car wound down the South American country's iconic National Route 40.

A year ago this stretch of road was dotted with lodgepole pine trees, an emblematic species of the Canadian Rockies. Today there are almost none.

In recent months Moretti, a 57-year-old Argentine forest engineer, has led a new

program to combat invasive North American pine trees inside South America's oldest national park, the lodgepole being one of the worst offenders. During the austral winter, Moretti and five other park staff cut down over 600 young pine trees along a 32-kilometre stretch of highway running through Nahuel Huapi National Park in Patagonia.

Forest engineer Adolfo Moretti leads a small team which over the past year has cut down over 600 lodgepole pine trees. All images by Scott Leitch

In North America the lodgepole pine, the provincial tree of Alberta, is facing historic die-offs as [mountain pine beetles crawl north](#), following warmer climates. The beetles are killing entire forests of trees in British Columbia and Alberta.

In southern Argentina, a different problem is unfolding. The same species is overtaking entire mountainsides, pushing out native flora and potentially altering the regional ecosystem irreversibly.

***Read More: [Forest-Killing Beetles Are Swarming North Because of Climate Change](#)***

Moretti scribbles a simple chart: One axis represents the density of pine trees in an area, the other the difficulty of implementing potential remedies. Introduced this year, his work falls in the bottom left corner, simply cutting down pines in areas where there are still few before they begin producing their own cones to prevent more from growing.

"Our job is to control the density of the pines," said Moretti. The goal is to fight off an invasion which, if left alone, will likely grow out of control. Similar pine invasions have already devastated regions of [South Africa](#), for example.

The hope is native forests of coihues, lengas, and Patagonian cypresses will replace the removed pines. Endangered, endemic Challhuaco frogs and southern river otters depend on the native lenga forests which also provide a natural air quality monitor. Unhealthy lenga forests warn park staff when pollution levels rise too high, explained Moretti.



A young Douglas fir tree stands alone on the coast of Llao Llao Municipal Park west of San Carlos de Bariloche, Argentina

Pine trees were first introduced to this part of the world for forestry. European immigrants planted many North American and European species here through the 1930s and 1940s. The tiny *arbolitos*, or seedlings, were shipped down the Pacific coast to Puerto Montt, Chile. Most of them, including [hulking California redwoods](#) already three metres in diameter, grow well but don't spread and force out important native species the way the pines do.

Douglas fir trees, an iconic pine of British Columbia, are the most invasive species in this region. They grow faster here than anywhere else on Earth. In North America, they can live upwards of 700 years, and some in Patagonia, at the young age of 80, already tower 65 metres tall. No one knows how large they will grow or for how long they will live in this new environment.

(Lodgepole pines predominantly grow through interior British Columbia and across the Rockies into Alberta, though can be found as far south as northern Mexico. Douglas firs thrive along the Pacific coast from B.C. south to central California.)

The Douglas firs line the streets in San Carlos de Bariloche, a small city inside the national park and home to its head office. Many of the firs were actually planted by park staff before anyone knew they would become a problem. Today the city's southern limit borders a dense forest of them, the size of Vatican City.

"In Villa la Angostura [a nearby town], there are millions," Moretti explained. As proud as he is, 600 felled trees pales against the scale of the invasion.



Cones from Douglas fir trees cover the ground in a forest outside San Carlos de Bariloche, Argentina

Martin Nuñez, a local researcher studying the invasive trees, believes if enough isn't done the entire region could be only pine trees within 100 years.

For decades there was little local interest in addressing the problem. Domestic tourists like the pines, which don't grow elsewhere in the country, and they provide the region with a valuable forestry industry, but Nuñez does think perceptions are slowly changing.

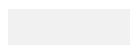
Still, there are private tree farms inside the park's boundaries and staff can't compel farmers to cut down the old pines. A ban on planting new ones exists, but as long as farmers leave their trees standing, slowly increasing in value, they continue to spread new seeds. Tourists, transport trucks, and animals then unknowingly carry those seeds through the park, spreading them into new areas.



A Douglas fir tree grows above native flora in Llao Llao Municipal Park west of San Carlos de Bariloche

Standing at a bridge over a river marking Nahuel Huapi's southern limit, surrounded by felled lodgepoles, Moretti likes what he sees. Patagonian cypresses are sprouting. If the native trees can take hold, they will further prevent young pines from growing. But across the river, just outside of Moretti's reach, an adjacent mountainside is spotted with young lodgepoles.

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# We Talked to the Family Who Sold Their Belongings for Bitcoins

**To live life to the fullest, this family put everything in one basket and pawned away their belongings for a bit of cryptocurrency.**

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By **David Schmidt**; translated by **Daniel Stächelin**  
Nov 7 2017, 10:00am



Photo courtesy of Didi Taihuttu

**This article originally appeared on Motherboard Germany.**

Didi Taihutto sold his house in the Netherlands, all his furniture, three cars, and a motorcycle. He only kept the things he truly couldn't part with: His photo albums, a few mementos, and his laptop. Together with his wife Romaine and their three children, he now lives in a tiny house on a Dutch campground not far from the German border.

The Taihuttos exchanged nearly all of their income for Bitcoins. The 39-year-old

Taihutto is convinced that he'll be able to triple the family's assets through Bitcoin speculation within the next three years. But wealth isn't these two parents' only focus. Taihutto and his wife avoid, above all, things that keep them from leading their lives the way they want.

Taihutto wants to secure the livelihoods of his family as a so-called day trader—in other words, a speculator who invests in cryptocurrency with the promise of high returns within a short time. We recently spoke with him about his work and about what it means to leave everything behind as a family of five.

**MOTHERBOARD: The colder season is approaching. Where are you guys right now?**

**Didi Taihutto:** In a bungalow on a campground. It's small and also really cold. Five people crammed into 50 square meters. I'm just now realizing that's only ten per person. *[Laughs]*

**Tons of people around the world are writing about you. How did all that come to be?**

The [local paper here interviewed us](#), and from there on out things just got crazier. Even [\*Business Insider\* published an article](#). Since then, journalists have been calling every day.

**How long does one consider making such a huge decision before taking the plunge?**

Not long at all, actually. It all kind of happened to us. We had just been on a very long trip. And in July—we had just been to Bali—we said to each other: Let's change our lives! Then we went back to Holland, sold the house, and changed our lives.

**Really? I was sure you would have said: We've been dreaming about this for years.**

Of course we've always thought about it a little over the years. But we didn't finally make the decision until four months ago. We didn't want to continue living in fear. I think living in fear kills dreams. To really be happy, one has to first have the courage to let go of the things that keep you tied down.

*Here, Didi is selling his motorcycle. Whoever pays in Bitcoins gets a discount.*

**Letting go of things—so you mean the house, the cars, the motorcycle...**

The broken 800 Euro coffee machine. All things that demand time that's then missing in other areas. I didn't want this materialism anymore. I wanted to be closer to my family. And I don't miss anything. The same goes for my kids: When we sell their toys



and they see how happy other children are as a result, well, they think that's great. Material things don't make people happy—they're just distractions.

**You even sold your own company, which was actually very successful.**

Our biggest passion is traveling and meeting new people. But at some point I started my own business, on my own and with a computer in my basement. I taught people how to work with computers. It was a lot of fun. And then my small business kept getting bigger. In the end I had 16 employees. Then I was only managing people. Eighty hours a week, 90 hours a week. There wasn't any time left for travel.

**You have three underage daughters. Homeschooling is prohibited in the Netherlands. Doesn't that present you with huge problems if you're constantly traveling with them?**

We traveled around the world with our kids for nine months, despite knowing that there would be consequences. Now we'll likely have to pay a fine.

**Are you worried that the authorities might at some point take away your kids?**

Yeah, that's truly a fear. That said, we invest a lot in our daughters' education. We teach them ourselves during our travels. And all three of them are doing well in school. My youngest was even the best in her class in reading and writing after we

came back. Of course the government has to ensure that every child receives a good education. But the government should also be capable of being more flexible in select cases. I think the Netherlands is doing too little for the growing class of digital nomads for whom these rules are simply too strict. We love it here, but the way things are looking, we'll probably have to move abroad with our children at some point.

### **What was the trigger for your decision?**

My father passed away in January 2016. He was 61 years old. My mother passed away when she was 48. My father was a professional soccer player, it was his passion. And because he was able to live off of it, his life was complete. In principle, I want the same for myself, but my passion is living. After all, we're all stuck in this hamster wheel, we work our entire lives and postpone the beautiful things for some later date. But for my father, there was no later date. For my mother, there was no later. The fact that my parents died so young really opened my eyes: I'm 39 years old. Who can guarantee that there'll be a later for me?

### **Okay, but let's say there is a later for you, aren't you afraid that you might lose everything you have through speculation?**

I still have to gain experience as a day trader. But even if we lose everything, that's not really what it's about. As long as we have each other, everything will be fine. And if

necessary, I'll find myself a job and start from scratch. But what if things go really well? If it makes us financially independent and makes possible the life we all dream about? Sometimes it's so wrong to take a step back. With a bit of luck, it'll bring you three steps forward.



Didi's deceased father together with his granddaughters. Photo by [Sharon Mafficioli](#)

### **And if you become rich, what then?**

Then we'll continue to lead a simple life. I'm wondering if I should then travel around the world to help people, to change their lives through crypto. Nearly three billion people don't have direct access to a bank account. Thanks to the blockchain, everyone can be their own bank through a computer.

### **Why did it have to be crypto? By not invest in equities or stocks?**

Banks don't do a good job. In the meantime it's gotten so bad that you barely earn anything in interest on your savings and in fact have to pay for your account. And here in Holland or in Germany, things are still going well for us. But look at Greece, Bolivia, Venezuela. All countries where money doesn't have any worth anymore. And suddenly you're only able to withdraw 25 Euros a day. Of your own money! That's madness. I think crypto is a good alternative to these institutions.

### **But you can hardly pay for anything with cryptocurrency. And [products such as special debit cards](#) that could change that are still in their infancy. What do you guys do when you want to go to the bakery in the morning?**

We pay with cash. Until now we've been paying for most things in Euros. We rented a garage, where we keep things that we own. Every day [we try to sell something from there](#), sometimes for Euros, sometimes for Bitcoins.

### **And what's your prediction? Do you think cryptocurrency will eliminate traditional money?**

I don't think cash will disappear entirely. But eventually we'll reach a point where there will be as much wealth in Bitcoins as there is in traditional money. Technology continues to develop. Finally money is beginning to develop, too.



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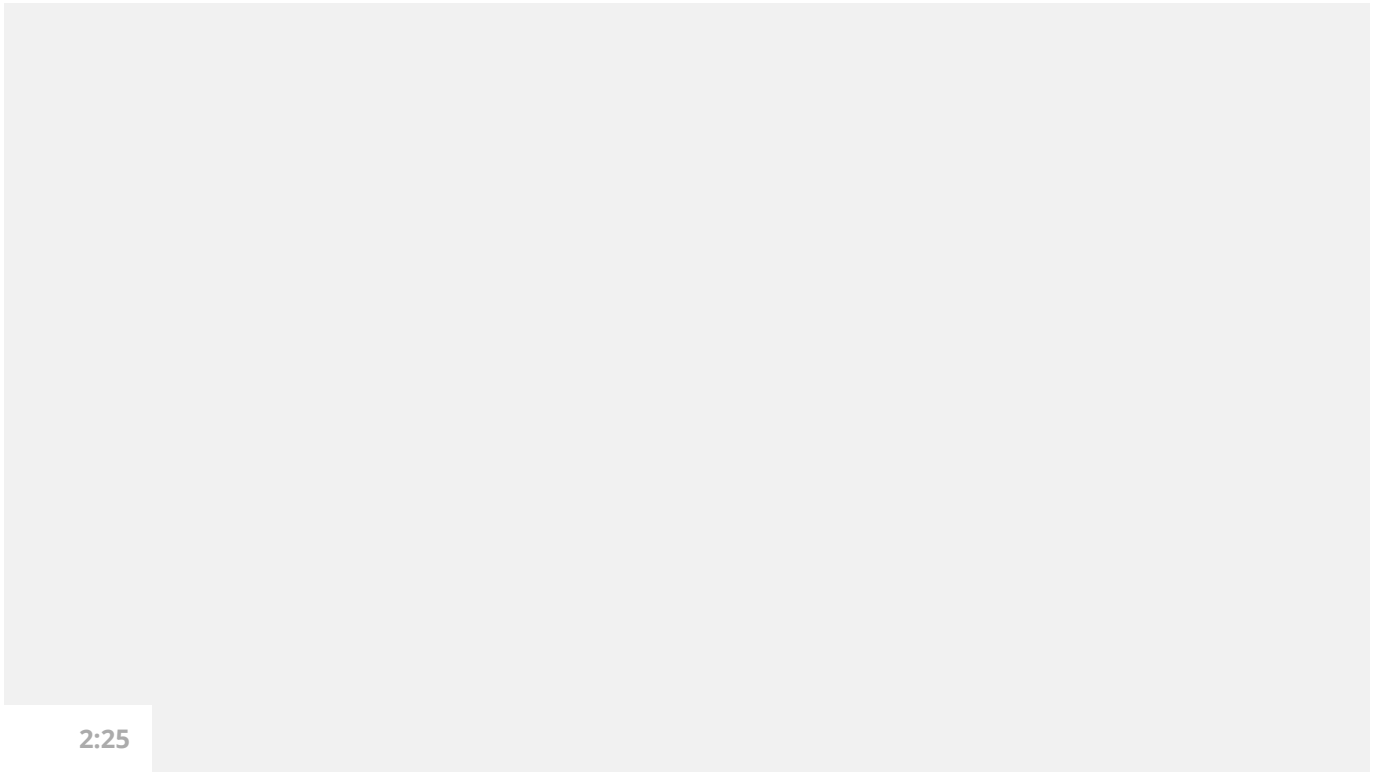
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