

CONTROL AND QUESTION

USERS AND DESIGNERS AS
DEVELOPERS AND USERS AS
DEVELOPING DESIGNERS

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Mon Dec 12 11:06:00 2016

Logged in: Gonzo (GON), Optimo (OPT), The Renegade (REN)

GON:

What's up guys

REN:

Hello fellows

OPT:

Hi!

INTRODUCTION

The obsession that is at the core of this research is one you might recognize. It is an obsession. My obsession with the internet. That is the first reason for me to write this essay. I am completely obsessed by the possibilities of the medium but at the same time skeptical about how it is used.

Twenty-and-a-bit years after its public launch,^{🔗¹} a lot of the technologies made possible by the internet have made their ways firmly into our lives. The transition from an offline to an online world is pretty complete right now, at least here in Europe.

Users and providers interests clash constantly. What is best for Google might not be best for you, and vice versa. But we *are* interdependent. We have to keep living life with technology. At this point it has become essential to our lives. It's not to be ignored. Rather, we should be taking a much closer look into some of the technologies that drive our societies.

A lot of development of the internet originates from the United States. The land of the American Dream. I wanna take a peek into their world. Without ever having been there, I think I know something about this crazy place. I want to test that.

I want to question the optimization fetish that comes from technology. The upwards spiral, if any. It influences daily lives of us all, whether it's first hand or second hand.

I want to look specifically at the influence the tech industry

has in this story. With the tech industry I mean the industry that develops goods, software, services and platforms on the internet. Often free for us to use. The industry that has Silicon Valley as its Jerusalem (or Alexandria). This industry is key to designers because it fundamentally shapes tools that we work with. And more than that. No software, no platform, no service, no device is without ideology. This is where we have to be critical.



'The Zuck', CEO of Facebook, shows the inside of his jacket at D8 conference. The mission of Facebook is printed on the inside

I am not an expert of the internet. But I am also going to try to look at these problems from engineering points of view, playing a kind of technological etymology.

I think programmers are also not the ultimate experts of the internet. The ultimate experts are the users. People. You, me. We might not know how everything works behind the screens, but we're the ones that know what we want from it. We can identify failure or success without looking at any review, rating, or performance measure. There is a problem with influence. Users can't directly fix things that bother them. Users are being kept in the dark about how things work. Users are being pushed into user-dom.

Maybe this is where the designer comes in. The designer is both a user of technology as well as a shaper of content and interface on digital platforms.

With this in mind, I pose the question:

How does design relate to optimization in the tech industry?

I will adopt three recurring ways of speaking to present my

research. They are three characters. The characters represent opinions and attitudes from interviews and talks fused with articles, documentaries and my own personal experience.

I do this mainly because in personal experience there is always the first-person perspective, the world through a filter, shaped by experience. It is that kind of view of the problems posed here that I want to expand.

The way we read online is different from the book in the way that it usually involves more people. A Wikipedia article is a crowd-based piece of information, groups of people make articles appear in your feed and comment sections show instant discussion between readers.

This form is a way of showing different attitudes towards the internet from a user-designer point of view.

CHARACTERS

The characters go by the screen names of Gonzo, Optimo and the Renegade.

Gonzo is in his mid twenties. Based in The Hague (NL), he dropped out of design school and a Computer Science college degree to work on his art. Child of a mother and father that are supportive of his life choices. He has a job working at an electronics store. Via a message board for app developers he met Optimo.

Optimo is a man, 32 years old. He lives and works in Amsterdam as a Human Resources manager for the public transport company of the city. In his spare time he enjoys going for a run or visiting galleries in the city. And most of all he likes to spend time on little programming projects. On the message board, Optimo and Gonzo also meet The Renegade.

She is the hardest one to reach. No one really knows who she is but she has been a moderator of the forum for more than 20 years now. It's known that The Renegade has worked as an engineer in the tech industry of the USA and that she's based in Berlin, with her partner Alex.

This team never met up IRL yet. For a couple of years, they have been discussing developments around Silicon Valley and technological innovation. They're looking in from

the outside and are looking for ideas to pick up and make into a common project. But they always disagree. What follows are some of their discussions.

1. History of the Internet on Wikipedia,



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Internet



GON:

So, how's life?

OPT:

Easy, and with you?

GON:

Good, I just finished a marathon viewing of game developers conferences.

REN:

Always something on the horizon with you. What else do you have in store?

AS I WALK THROUGH THE SILICON VALLEY

(INTRODUCING THE TECH
INDUSTRY)

GON:

Have you seen the new HBO series Silicon Valley? I can totally recommend it. If you're interested in the birthplace of GAFAM and the insane climate there, it's worth watching.

"In the high-tech gold rush of modern Silicon Valley, the people most qualified to succeed are the least capable of handling success".

Description of HBO comedy series *Silicon Valley*

OPT:

What's GAFAM?

REN:

Bruce Sterling, writer of cyberpunk novels and design critic, argued in 2014 that it doesn't make sense to still talk about the internet  ¹. That we should instead talk about

GAFAM – Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple and Microsoft. This makes perfect sense. These companies have been shaping the internet in very real ways. If you are not using one of GAFAM's services, your neighbor or government is.

I was overthinking this quote. These are the people setting our defaults, right? Let's call it defaultism. People love consistency. We say we want change, but we also want everything to remain the same. Defaultism describes the happiness and willingness of people to use an unchanged, working design without question.

In the beginning of the internet, people were customizing everything, wanting to touch every part with their own style. Hell, the whole idea of stylesheets – code to stylize web pages – was to have a *personal* stylesheet, which you could use on every page on the internet. Instead, pages would offer their own stylesheets. Now after that stylistic power has been moved from the individual user to the provider, new standards came to be which we are now happily accepting, *because they work*. Defaultism has become common practice.

GON:

Now you mention it, it's actually pretty strange that we're all so well-synced. You would think there would be as much diversity as there are people.

REN:

Well, let's talk more about the people setting the defaults, because they go way beyond just the looks of a website. In fact, that's only the first place you see it happening.

One of the places where defaultism is very harmful is in the User Agreement. That's essentially a legal document you should read before accepting to cooperate. Nobody reads it of course, and so in the light of using a free service, you accept. But to what? You don't know. And that kind of default can be really harmful.

I may generalize a bit when I say Silicon Valley cooperates with the United States authorities. But GAFAM does. They will give the United States military access to basically any data stored on their servers. The United States likes this centralized power because it's easy access for them.  2

And the only thing you can do is weep and regret. But realize that these documents are made to be uncomfortable to read. This here is a kind of extortion. It's an unfair game, so *don't be sorry you've lost it*.

The computer chip manufacturers are what made the Valley what it is. That industry has since long left Silicon Valley, but what stayed behind is still shaping the world. Right now, GAFAM are all based in Silicon Valley.

GON:

Silicon. The material that supports bigger boobs and smaller computer chips.

REN:

I see Silicon Valley as the Hollywood of technology. Comfortably situated on the West Coast of the United States, it is a birthplace that exports amazing things. Technology where Hollywood exported movies. And while movies were already of a huge influence on our culture, the technology wave is much more customized and designed for the individual. All of your personal desires and needs will be satisfied by your smartphone. At least that is the promise.

The promise, the American Dream! A climate with lots of competition, little or no government support, I'm not really sure what to attribute the American individualism to, but I think it's very obvious in the culture of Silicon Valley. There's this focus on personal development. That anyone can be anything. That ideal is amazing and attractive.

And it sells technology very well, because they are good at shaping technology in ways that are very interesting to human beings.

OPT:

So, besides GAFAM, what else is happening in the Silicon Valley?

REN:

There is a big startup culture. A startup is essentially nothing more than a beginning company. In Silicon Valley there is a strong belief that startups can disrupt the market. Disruption is a marketing term where your product changes the market completely instead of just competing with the existing products or services on that market.

Lots of startups in the technology sector compete for a place in the market. And because technology is big business, there is a lot of money to be won. Or lost. The pace of business is high.

These startups are often funded with money from Venture capitalists or Angel Investors. VC's are institutions, Angel

Investors are individuals who put their money in the company and act as a kind of business mentor.

Silvio Lorusso, an Italian artist, designer, and researcher based in Rotterdam, made a striking portrait where he made a supercut of two Silicon Valley founders that both committed suicide.³ The basis of the problem of these two men is what he calls the entreprecariat. The entreprecariat is a fusion of entrepreneurialism and the precariat. It's a broad term to describe struggling entrepreneurs. I think his take on Silicon Valley's startup culture painfully shows a darker side of startup culture.

GON:

Phew, that's heavy. Let's do something fun now. I like to play a game sometimes. Name anything and see if there's a startup in Silicon Valley working on something that connects to that.

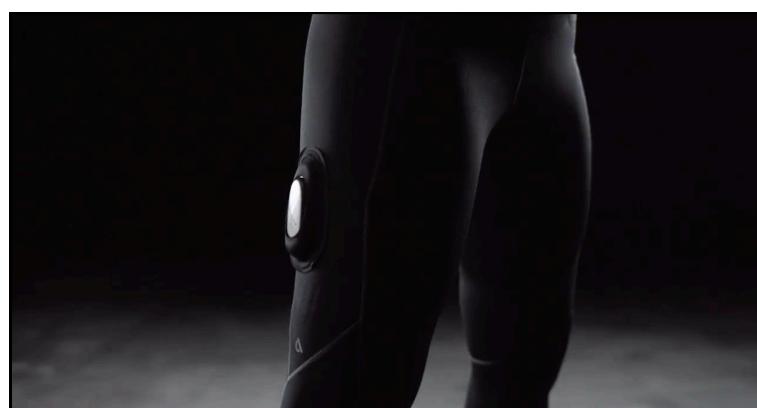
REN:

Pants

GON: Alright, let's see. Athos. Raised \$35 million⁴ in November 2015 and are working on smart pants.

"Athos. Building a better human machine."
Scott Anderson, Director of Athletic Training at Stanford University

A company from the United States called Athos is now selling wearables (wearable technology) that use small EEG sensors to measure muscle activity and give you real-time information about your sports routine. It uses science to convince athletes to model for their commercials.



Athos pants

Benjamin Bratton is professor of visual arts and director of the center for design and geopolitics at the University of

California, San Diego.

In 2013 he gave a very insightful talk at TEDx San Diego⁵. TED is a non-profit organization that originated in California. They organize conferences where speakers talk about their personal involvement in Technology, Entertainment and Design (T-E-D) and more. Usually a TED speaker will give an insight into a technology they are developing, a project they initiated with a focus how that helps society. The format is key to their existence. Videos have to be under 18 minutes long so they can be uploaded and watched by a big audience online.

Benjamin Bratton used the stage to critique the format TED uses. He argued that TED is not really critical towards technology. Instead, the institution books speakers that tell incredible stories of how technology changes the world while these visions do not always come true. He calls this 'toying with technoradicalism.' Bratton says TED has *faith in* technology but not enough *commitment to* technology. The institute puts too much emphasis on the optimal condition. It lacks sharp critique.

Instead, Bratton makes a case for design as immunisation. Design, he says, should not only focus on innovation but also on making ourselves immune for the things we don't need.

I don't know if we need the new pants from Athos. But the problem Bratton addresses towards TED and things like wearables and the Internet of Things do make me take a double take. What's the use of knowing exactly what each muscle does? The makers as well as users of technology put heaps of faith in the products, especially when they appear smart.

Calling objects 'smart' in itself is a strange practice, I think. Weren't watches already very well made devices before the smart watch came along? How smart is it to buy a smart phone? Isn't it kind of stupid to keep on calling a little machine that can only do things it is programmed to do - smart?

1. Alexis C. Madrigal, *Bruce Sterling on Why It Stopped Making Sense to Talk About 'The Internet' in 2012,* 
<http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/12/> 
2. Cullen Hoback, *Terms and Conditions*

May Apply, ↲

<https://vimeo.com/98094467> ↲ ↵

3. Silvio Lorusso, *A Work Ethic Dystopia*,

↲
<http://networkcultures.org/entrepreat/work-ethic-dystopia/> ↲ ↵

- 4.

↲
<https://techcrunch.com/2015/11/18/athos-pushes-up-to-51-million-in-the-bank-with-funding-from-chamath-palhapitayas-socialcapital/> ↲ ↵

5. Benjamin Bratton, *New Perspectives -*

What's Wrong with TED Talks?

Benjamin Bratton at TEDxSanDiego

2013 - Re:Think ↲

<https://youtu.be/Yo5cKRmJaf0> ↲ ↵

OPT:

Are we still building this webapp? What do we begin with?

REN:

If we make anything for the internet and we want to make profit, we should be scalable.

GON:

Scalable?

COMPLEX WEB, BORING INTERNET

REN:

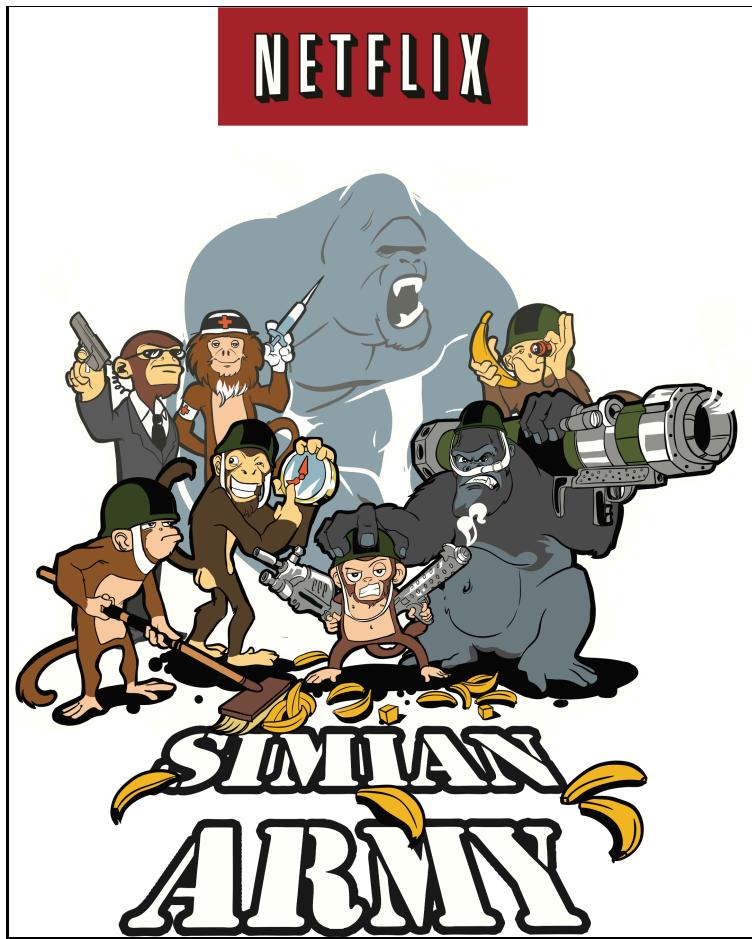
Services designed for our daily lives – things like Uber, Deliveroo, Maps – have all been designed with the objective of 'scalability' in mind. Scalability means that these systems will get better when they grow. They optimize by growth. So as they exist, we can now ask: does the system scale well? If the answer is yes, it's usually profitable.

Now, one of the places where scalability makes a huge difference is the back-end of big services and platforms. For instance Netflix or Amazon. Those companies have gigantic server structures to make their service possible. They call it The Cloud. The Cloud is servers spinning on a rack, interconnected via cables. Wireless is only a half-truth. There are strings attached.

THE CHAOS MONKEY

OPT:

True story: Netflix has been releasing monkeys  ¹ inside their server centers that wreak havoc and shut down parts of their systems. It started with one monkey, but soon an entire legion of apes was formed, each one trained to break another part of the servers. In 2012 Netflix released an open source version of this Simian Army  ².



Netflix' Simian Army

GON:

Sounds interesting... Are you talking about this 'Simian Army' thing?

REN:

Yeah, exactly. Oh, I should mention this is a metaphor, right? The software suite contains different programs that shut down different things. The approach is called "Chaos Monkey".

The Chaos Monkey periodically takes subsystems out of commission and sees how it responds. The idea is to lower the gap between how Netflix expects the system to work and how the system actually works. In biology this is how you learn about a living thing. Actively trying to mutate it is a biological technique.

A lot of programming is now what we call procedural. Basically what that means is for the programmer to predict enough states so the computer can do the calculation. If this happens, do that.

With deep learning comes another, probabilistic reasoning system. If I see this input, I *think* I should do that.

GON:

Why does it even matter to know these things? I know that the technical stuff is very complicated, but I don't care. I just want them to work.

REN:

Sure. It's one thing to say: There is an expert somewhere that knows what's going on and we let them do the understanding. But more and more there is no such expert.

When systems get big enough they almost seem biological. A good example is when a big service is being built there is this thing called The *Change Review Board*. It can be 12 people there, who all have their specialty. One for network, one for storage, one for application development, et cetera. When they make changes to their parts, they have to say them out loud to the other 11 to see if that does not interfere with something in their 'worlds'. They simply don't know! The same people come together when something fails, to find the problem.

FROM PROCEDURAL TO BIOLOGICAL

Samuel Arbesman, author of the book *Overcomplicated* has made some remarks about this in a conversation with Steven Sinofsky and Frank Chen  ³.

The sociological impact of that is interesting. Computers were exact precise things, but now we have huge, often messy systems. People have a low tolerance for error for anything that comes out of a computer. That should change when we start to see that they are also biological.

Biological thinking approach: These things are very complex. They've evolved over time and have this organic messiness. We need to focus much more on the details of the subsystems. The details of a component in the hope of creating a broader picture. The details really matter.

Google pioneered 'continuous failure'. The system will fail. It is not a question if the system will fail, but when. Backend designed in a biological way.

Humans are already conditioned to accept inherent complexity. If a doctor tells you that weird itch won't go away, you learn to accept it, at least a bit. I wonder if we get to the same point with computers.

There's a couple of ways of dealing with big computing. Two are we either freak out or say this is so complicated and are amazed to a point where we can only watch. Both of those cut off questioning. We need to recognize humble approach that it is okay not to always understand. We have to constantly keep trying to understand and should be excited by trying to understand. We have to realize things are messy but also that it's something we created.

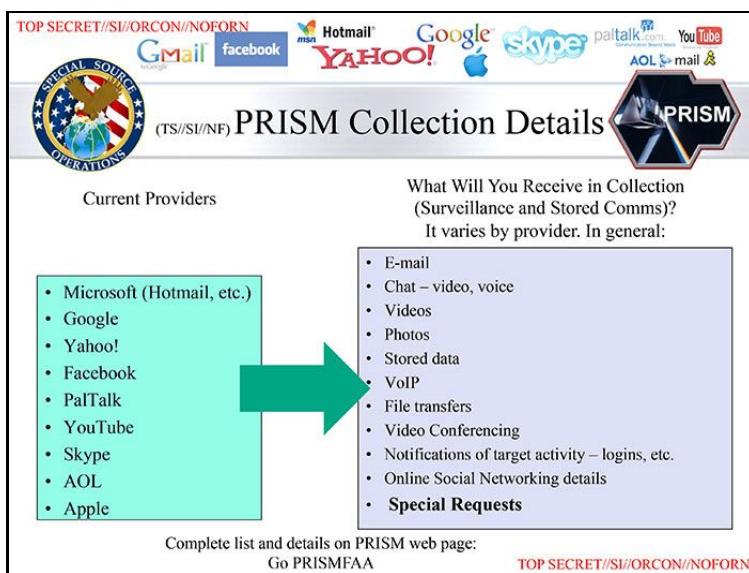
OPT:

It's very interesting to show the builder's side of the story to users. But I think users should also know the abuse that can happen with a huge network.

DECENTRALIZATION

Silicon Valley has come to stand for a centralization of tech-power. In June 2013, Edward Snowden, a former employee of defense contractor Booz Allen Hamilton leaked a great amount of files of the United State's National Security Agency's massive surveillance practices. The NSA can spy and did spy on innocent citizens as well as criminals  all around the world using this data.

This is the dark side of a centralized internet. One part of that is the strong influence of the United States' secret service, which may be strong. But another thing that made it possible for the NSA to spy on the world is the access they had to Silicon Valley's major servers, where personal data was stored. Microsoft, Facebook, Google, Skype, you name it.



TOP SECRET//SI//ORCON//NOFORN

(TS//SI//NF) PRISM Collection Details

Current Providers

- Microsoft (Hotmail, etc.)
- Google
- Yahoo!
- Facebook
- PalTalk
- YouTube
- Skype
- AOL
- Apple

What Will You Receive in Collection (Surveillance and Stored Comms)?
It varies by provider. In general:

- E-mail
- Chat – video, voice
- Videos
- Photos
- Stored data
- VoIP
- File transfers
- Video Conferencing
- Notifications of target activity – logins, etc.
- Online Social Networking details
- Special Requests

Complete list and details on PRISM web page:
Go PRISMFAA

TOP SECRET//SI//ORCON//NOFORN

PRISM slide explaining which companies provided data

BLOCKCHAIN

GON:

This has some heavy implications. What if you disagree with that? If even kicking over that system means that it can learn from its mistakes and regenerate? It's great if you own that server, but what about all of us that don't? What can you do to be subversive?

REN:

One of the problems is the centralized network. An alternative could be a distributed network. A centralized network has a big, central server infrastructure where all the data and files are stored. A decentralized system doesn't have that. There, all files are stored on parts of the network.

I've been following the developments of Bitcoin - a cryptocurrency - and with that, the blockchain. The Blockchain is a technology that offers a new kind of server infrastructure. There are different possibilities, but one example could be: All nodes in the network store a full copy of all transactions on that network while all relevant files and data can stay on individual drives. It's complex, but that's the gist of it. 5

I'm not really convinced that this will solve the entire centralisation of power issue. Blockchains are also being developed by banks, that want to use it in a closed system.

OPT:

But that's unavoidable. Lots of institutions have private networks, they need those. If we say internet should be open it does not mean it can't be private.

REN:

Exactly. I'm just saying: the internet is always changing, and some people are stuck inside this attitude where it is always the giant versus the tiny developer or user or designer. It's very uninspiring. It doesn't make sense. I'm just curious to see what will happen on smaller scale, how people will use distributed networks and if they can replace parts of centralised networks that don't work.

GON:

That sentiment reminds me of this critique that Brian Droitcour has about Post-Internet art. 6 Things can change, as long as there are some people with some real ideas, and that keep an open mind to changes that may

seem weird or unconventional.

Why insist that the changes are over? Artists who begin with the proposition that the phenomena of their world are boring and banal, who begin with an exasperated sigh, are going to produce art that is boring and banal, art that produces exasperated sighs.

– Brian Droitcour

AMAZON'S ROBOTS

OPT:

Talking about art: I love watching this video of the sorting robots in Amazon's warehouses. How they find their own way through the warehouse is super satisfying to watch.

The precision is amazing. ⁷

At Amazon, the warehouses no longer store items sorted in any way. Rather, the objects are placed on the shelves according to what's *fastest*. Robots carry moving shelves that bring the items needed to 'pick-workers' that take the items out of the closets and pack them for sending. This way they can process an order from click to send sometimes in less than 15 minutes. And Amazon has 21 million different items for sale. It doesn't need walk space so the warehouse is more densely populated with goods. Scalable as hell.

"Pick, scan, pack. We try to simplify their life and hide the technology. All Kiva Pick workers are happy pick workers." ⁸



The Amazon picking process

THE SCALE OF CHAOS

What all of these examples suggest is that the bigger a system gets, that it needs some chaos to survive.

Regular users should know that all of our technology can fail. The world as a beta test. Alpha's have had their time. More diversity and more failures for more commitment. We are in a way the problem of the tech because of impatience. In order to help ourselves, we should have a better understanding of technology in society. These should move towards each other instead of keeping users in the dark about what happens behind the screen. That way, we can have useful discussion.

1. Jon Brodkin, *Netflix attacks own network with "Chaos Monkey" – and now you can too* ↪
<http://arstechnica.com/information-technology/2012/07/netflix-attacks-own-network-with-chaos-monkey-and-now-you-can-too/> ↩
2. (software) Netflix, *Simian Army*, ↪

<https://github.com/Netflix/SimianArmy> ↵

3. (podcast) a16z Podcast: *It's Complicated*

↪ <https://soundcloud.com/a16z/complexity> ↵

↪

4. Google Edward Snowden, it's everywhere. For a really good insight in his position against big NSA there is an amazing documentary: Laura Poitras,

Citizenfour, ↵

http://www.imdb.com/title/tt4044364/videoplayer/vi2548870937?ref_=tt_ov_vi ↵

5. Vinay Gupta, *Programmable Blockchains in Context*

↪ <https://medium.com/consensys-media/programmable-blockchains-in-context-ethereum-s-future-cd8451eb421e#.yaf84kqzp> ↵

6. Karen Archey and Robin Peckham, *Art Post-Internet: INFORMATION / DATA*, 2014

↪ ↵

7. *Amazon warehouse robots*,

↪ <https://youtu.be/quWFjS3Ci7A> ↵

8. *A Day in the Life of a Kiva Robot*,

↪ <https://youtu.be/6KRjuuEVEZs> ↵

FILTER TROUBLES

OPTIMIZING COMMUNITIES

REN:

A community is usually something that forms over time. Friendships grow, relationships are built up and broken down in smooth motions. There can be a kind of natural organization. In online communities there is a whole deal of building, guiding and optimizing, so let's discuss the makeable online community.

THE FRONT PAGE OF THE INTERNET OR THE SOCIAL UTILITY THAT CONNECTS YOU WITH OTHER PEOPLE AROUND YOU

GON:

I'm a big fan of Reddit. It's a social news platform spanning about every topic you can imagine. Sports, politics, help groups, the full monty. It's called social news for its ranking system. Users upvote or downvote news that they find good or interesting and earn karma points for participating in the community.

OPT:

I never got around to using Reddit. The interface just isn't comfortable for me.

GON:

It takes some patience to get into it, but once you're in there you'll wonder how you ever did without it!

REN:

Reddit has an interesting history. When you say Reddit, you have to say Aaron Swartz. At a very young age he was already involved in developing the web feed format RSS and the Markdown publishing format. He was an activist for freedom of speech online and he co-founded Reddit.

He also was an activist. Someone who cared about the

societal impact of the internet. While studying at MIT, Swartz had access to the JSTOR database. Swartz, who also constituted the Creative Commons License together with Lawrence Lessig, believed this knowledge should be available for everyone. He went into the server room of the institute and copied the data on a hard drive.



Swartz in the JSTOR Server Room

The FBI knew Swartz from another case where he published documents of PACER ¹. When they suspected him of wanting to publish JSTOR documents they installed a camera in the server room and caught him on tape. He then got overcharged for his crime: 35 years of jail time awaited him. He hung himself, leaving no note.

OPT:

How is this relevant?

REN:

Well, it shows that he was an extremely intelligent and committed guy, that really had some ideas about public information.

Aaron Swartz called himself a sociologist. In one of his blog posts ² he writes that institutes shape culture. He says criticizing culture is too superficial. Instead you have to look at the institutes that shape culture. So let's look at Reddit, and maybe compare it to FB.

GON:

On Reddit, the system in place relies on a kind of direct democracy. It works with a voting system that works two ways. You can vote up and down. But it doesn't exclude all downvoted posts. There is a category for controversial

posts which features content that have a small difference between up- and downvotes. Subreddits are there for specific topics.

REN:

It's content comes from users. The moderators are users and it seems to work. Unlike social networks that want your information to feed you back your own preferences into algorithms, the community learns from each other.

One element that makes it work I think is choice of content. On reddit, you decide what subreddits you subscribe to. Subreddits work around topics, not people. That's the first thing you do when you use the site. You subscribe to smaller communities on this huge message board system. The content comes first, and the people on the site make the discussion.

That leads to another aspect which makes reddit so successful. In the process of delivering content to you, the advertisements stay out of your feed. The platform is essentially non-commercial.

GON:

I think the discussion part of it. Reddit trusts people! Which is a key element in open discussion, new ideas, critique, etc. I think design can learn from this basic element of trust. In many media that are prepared by graphic designers, the audience gets messages dumbed down so much that it almost misses its initial point. Trust your audience, ppl.

In the end, reddit does a much better job in connecting people, and building an online community in the sense that the people using it aren't left feeling trapped or tricked by their own circles, which happens more often in Facebook's community. Ironically, all of our close friends are connected via Facebook while we meet new people on reddit.

Where reddit's content is filtered by people, Facebook uses algorithms. Reddit can be weird not because reddit is weird but because people are weird. Facebook has a lot of censorship and a new kind of content-picking. You only see stuff that is relevant to you.

EDGERANK

OPT:

So how does Facebook filter their content?

REN:

Facebook works with an algorithm called EdgeRank. 3
Every story, post, or interaction on Facebook is called an Edge. Every Edge gets a value, based on three things. Affinity score, weight and time. Nobody knows exactly how, but based on those values the items come into your newsfeed.

It has very serious consequences, especially because this means that if your edge doesn't score well, no one will see it.

So if you're looking through the filters of Facebook, these get echoed back to you. Guy Debord, an artist from the Situationist movement, went on trips to get lost. While he got lost, he would study the city. He called this psychogeography.

Dériving on Facebook would be much less interesting than in the city. If you do it as yourself. You will just get stuck in loops of familiar people, familiar stories and links, it's really limiting.

Other People Also Bought 4 is a really interesting artwork by Jonas Lund, it starts from one article on eBay and then moves to the next automatically recommended item. This would be much more targeted today than it would be in 2013 when they made this.

The reinforcing effect is what I think is kind of scary. In a Science article in 2008 5, Evans noted that automated information-filtering tools, such as search engines, tend to serve as amplifiers of popularity, quickly establishing and then continually reinforcing a consensus about what information is important and what isn't.

FLUFF BUSTER'S PURITY

OPT:

I'm using this tool recently for Facebook that's called F.B. Purity. You can block keywords from your newsfeed. Not really liking it, it looks very Web 2.0. Facebook's interface is always changing so the tool can be pretty buggy.



Fluff Buster's Purity

REN:

Yeah, but it does what you want. You can't always judge a tool just on the looks or user-friendliness. The people making that stuff usually do it on their own time and without any payment from anyone! This dude is focussing on the essentials to keep it working. If you think about it, it's kind of amazing. He's like a little David against Facebook Goliath. It's fucking DIY!

OPT:

No, I think I'll give up on it. It takes me too much time to manually add the list items. I want someone or something to do that for me. It shouldn't be that hard, right?

REN:

I'm not too sure about that. I don't think this guy has a big team or a lot of resources to develop it as professionally as a Silicon Valley startup would. But in that is a lot of value, this person is an idealist. It's underground and independent.

GON:

I love this solution, it's clumsy and perfect. Hail the clumsy solutions, the hacks and stooges. 'Cause this is still showing the cracks in the pavement, right? Still showing that people notice that they aren't in control, and this is one way of taking it back, even when it is just a bit.

1. Public Access to Court Electronic Records 
2. Aaron Swartz, *Sociology or Anthropology*, 
<http://www.aaronsw.com/weblog/socvanthro> 
3. Jeff Widman, *edgerank.net*, 

<http://edgerank.net/> ↵

4. Jonas Lund and Sebastian Scheming,
Other People Also Bought, last checked
19 september ↵
<http://otherpeoplealsobought.com/> ↵
↵
5. Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows, What The Internet Is Doing To Our Brains* ↵

FLEETING TIME

(OPTIMIZING TIME)

GON: Alright, so I was reading about machine gambling in Vegas  ¹ and I saw lots of parallels to the internet. Check it out: machine gambling developers are always trying to optimize the time people stay on their device. It doesn't even matter how much they win / lose. As long as they keep coming and come for long amounts of time, these companies keep gaining.

The crazy thing is that it does not stop there. They are all-inclusive strategies. Using the architecture of the casinos, the layout of the city. It all contributes to this magical abbreviation: T.O.D., *Time On Device*.

The same thing happens in the design of user interfaces.  ² The slot machine comparison can be seen almost literally in some apps. What prize is behind this button? How many likes do I get when I post this? Everything is slot-machinized.

REN:

So you can call social media an addiction?

OPT:

It is tricky to call it an 'addiction' because it still is a social network. Would you say you're addicted to your friends?

GON:

No, but I would say some media have been made so tempting to use that it's almost impossible not to.

OPT:

I think you should see this. It's called *Time Well Spent*  ³. It is a design movement that claims they want to align technology with our humanity. These people recognize the problem that our media is trying to claim our attention and they offer some solutions.

They make a division between 'attention' companies and 'platform' companies. The attention companies are for

instance Facebook, YouTube, Snapchat and Netflix and the platformers are companies such as Google and Apple. The former needs to maximize attention to make money, the latter are builders of the interfaces and goods that sit between these networks and us.

The attention companies profit from our screentime, so they won't change. While the platformers should be the party that benefits users more than companies since they are the moderators of the interactions we have with technologies.

All the time we are being distracted we have the feeling that it's our own mistake, but it's easy to forget that attention companies have hundreds of employees working for them that are called 'Growth Hackers.'

There are a lot of strategies they use to maximize your attention, which will gain them profits. These strategies are very invasive, and make very conscious abuse of some concepts from psychology and science behind addiction and distraction.

GON:

If you come to see it from this perspective, the whole internet seems pretty awful. All big services are using these kind of techniques! But I have to say there is a kind of dark pleasure in binging out on things like Netflix or Youtube. I have to go in sometimes and not come out for a while. Everything is shiny, everything smiles, there are rewards everywhere, why wouldn't I like that? It gets in the way of working or studying, but sometimes that's exactly what I want.

REN:

Well, in my early days I would also spend entire days messing with a PC and a program, trying to hook all things up. That took most of my time and I could get lost in it, but there was still a personal responsibility, I had to cooperate with the computer to get where i wanted to get. I don't know. I think designers should just follow their own perspectives and personalize these things much more. If you ask me there is just not enough diversion. we've put the responsibility to answer all of our questions with GAFAM even though we've always known they're big corporations. Stop whining about that their services suck, of course they're annoying, they are trying to sell you something.

Life is pain, princess, anyone trying to tell you

differently is trying to sell you something

Farmboy  4

OPT:

Sure, that may be the case. But the point is not if an individual makes that choice or not. The point here is that everyone has to deal with these media. And they're not based on the best interests of their users. And when we might transition to some new kind of media, it would be best if we keep in mind these destructive patterns for people. The new architecture of systems should be free of these disgusting addiction hooks.

Protecting people's time is as important as things like privacy.

Look, I'm just pleading for Time Well Spent because they make a good point. Their aim is to develop a more intentional relationship to our devices. The solutions put forward by *Time Well Spent* are pretty straightforward. Time Well Spent is going towards design that does 'well' to people. They use their knowledge of Google and other companies to make a suggestion for improvement.

REN:

Well, looking at their site, they offer apps to solve problems with apps. Semi-solutions to real problems. Relying on tech for tech. That does not solve the original problem, it is a way out.

OPT:

I think that's easy to say. The hard thing is how do you deal with these things while still on the media? I'm using Selfcontrol  5 sometimes. It blocks access to pages I enter in my blacklist.

GON:

Moment  6 is the mobile version of that. Crazy how you can see all of those tech companies supporting that tool, right? It's pretty strange.

OPT:

 I love these. Have you seen the Distractagone? That one might actually work.

REN:

No I haven't. Can you explain?

OPT:

The Distractagone is just a cube-shaped vault with a timer

on it. It allows you to keep your phone locked inside for an X period of time. And during that time you are undistracted! It sounds like a great idea, Gonzo sarcastically put forward. But isn't this a forced solution? It's like hiding candy from children. That's never stopped them from taking the candy if they really wanted it.

GON:

Yeah, I think that's a very important thing to stress. No matter how many tools and thingamajingeys you use, if you are sensitive to these impulses you don't stand a chance against yourself. I mean, I'm using this Selfcontrol thing on a schedule. That means I can never go on Facebook but hell, I also installed a proxy so I can go there anytime anyways. I'm a sad fuck!!! haha.

OPT:

I talked to Charlie Stigler, the guy that coded Selfcontrol⁷. It seems fitting that he himself does not have any problems dealing with the problems a lot of people report from the attention companies. He says it himself, he doesn't have problems with self-control, he just has it.

REN:

Yeah, and still he did make this app. That's great. I think there is a bottom line here, that says make what you make well, and then people might pick it up.! And he listened to the call of people who were struggling.

1. Natasha Dow Schüll, *Addiction by Design*, Princeton University Press, 2012
2. Tristan Harris, *How Technology Hijacks People's Minds – from a Magician and Google's Design Ethicist*,
<https://medium.com/swlh/how-technology-hijacks-peoples-minds-from-a-magician-and-google-s-design-ethicist-56d62ef5edf3#.qo18sc6z2>
3. Time Well Spent,
<http://www.timewellspent.io/>
4. Farmboy is a main character in the movie *The Princess Bride*
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0093779/>
5. *Selfcontrol*,

<https://selfcontrolapp.com/> ↵

6. *Moment* ↵ <https://inthemoment.io/> ↵

7. Interview With Charlie Stigler. Full text
available upon request. Mail
manusnijhoff@gmail.com ↵

PERSONAL PERFECTION

(OPTIMIZING SELF)

OPT: What's up guys, it's Optimo, and today we're going to talk about self-optimization!

Soylent

REN:

Hey, I was talking to my friend who eats this stuff called Soylent. Have any of you tried it?

GON:

Soylent, the powder that replaces food! Not a big fan. Also it's not available in the Netherlands for now. I'll stick to my mom's boerenkool for now.

OPT:

Yeah, I'm using it sometimes. Soylent replaces 'regular food'. It comes in a powder to be mixed up with water and contains all of the nutrients a human body needs. If I am in a rush or uninspired to cook, this stuff helps.

REN:

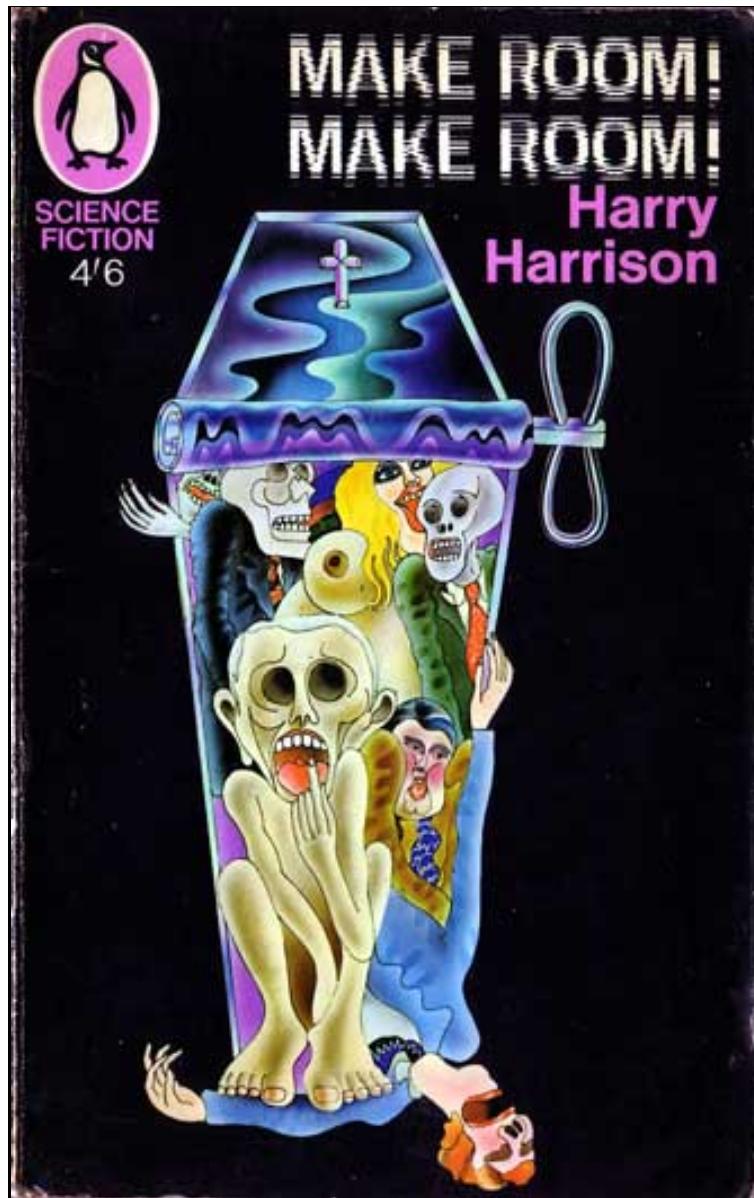
So, I hear it's also a sustainable solution for the future of food. My first reaction was that if everyone would eat this food, the entire planet could be very well off.

GON:

What is the secret of Soylent Green?  

OPT:

Good one, GON. The Soylent Green movie is actually based on a sci-fi novel from 1966 called *Make Room! Make Room!*  ². That book introduced a version of NYC in which overpopulation caused people to resort to Soylent (soy and lentil) and water on ration. The Soylent Green film took it one step further..



Make Room! Make Room!

All jokes aside though. I know it plays into the sentiment of science fiction. But science is also what makes this stuff possible. Rob Rhinehart – the guy behind Soylent – has a vision of what he calls a world after food. He wants to make it independent from agriculture, eventually. When agriculture doesn't scale with human needs, which he says will happen, this could be the thing to replace it. So it's not just convenient, it's also a step towards a solution for future food problems. According to a report called *How To Feed The World 2050*, the world will have 9.1 billion citizens that need food. We're going to need to improve things and optimize things and a lot of that comes from science and technology. Soylent is made on the formula of nutritional value per dollar and it is very cost-effective.

GON:

Wow. You make it sound like this food will solve all the world's problems. What about the pleasure of eating?

Won't you lose that? I've heard Soylent is kind of tasteless. I think this only works if you care purely about the nutritional values and not societal values, like enjoying a dinner together. The DIY site is quite striking. If I wouldn't know better I would have missed the fact that it was about food..

OPT:

Yeah, that's true. I think the user base see food as a resource or a fuel instead of an experience. And that's totally fine. I think you shouldn't see it as a replacement for food, but rather an addition to your regular diet. Like Rob Rhinehart said, Soylent takes care of my needs through the week and I can eat well on the weekends. There hasn't been such a complete food alternative in the past and now it's also open to development for people that are using it themselves.

REN:

In general I think they're on to something. Food habits have been changing for always. Why wouldn't we cheer this on? If the alternative is more of McD's, this is a step in the right direction. I love how the technology fuses here with real-life.

The people behind Soylent are using their experiences as computer engineers and scientists to optimize food. In their view, everything is made of parts, everything can be broken down. So they looked just at what chemicals a human body needs and put that into one airtight solution.

What I'm really curious to see is where the DIY community  ³ takes it from here. They seem to have recognized that what one company (Soylent) can do, they can do too, but more optimized to their own needs.

GON:

This is like the first last step into alien territory. Every aspect of life is built to human needs, and soylent stands for this total solution, which claims to have the answer for all. It's synthetic food, right? That's pretty nihilistic.

OPT:

Well, that's the great thing about it! They claim synthetic is better than natural. Synthetic food means it can be optimized for *humans*. In that perspective it really is better food.

REN:

You're absolutely right. Looking at the production process,

they are handling the environment pretty consciously.

GON:

I just want to stress that the rituals around food are getting lost from ordering in and using these super individualistic rations. There's one missing ingredient in Soylent if you ask me and that's love. ❤️ Really! Friendships and relationships are kept through eating together. It's more key to food than salt. I mean, would you serve this food to your friends?

INTERFACE AND USER CONNECTION

OPT:

It's crazy that, when you order something from Amazon, you never realize the extremely complicated industry behind the process. In front of all of these complex infrastructures are the increasingly simple interfaces and seamless payment procedures. And companies are working hard to keep it that way. The comfort of the user is everywhere a key part of the selling formula. Amazon Dash is probably the most striking example of this.

Dash is a button you order from Amazon. Every button is dedicated to one single product with a specific order size. Once you have the Dash button in your house, one press will order a single serve of that product at Amazon, which will be delivered soon thereafter.



Amazon Dash x Red Bull

Voila, a subscription to Red Bull. Just like the milkman back in the days, you now can expect a Red Bull servant on your doorstep whenever you want.

People have hacked this little device already to do all sorts of things. From playing a video to setting the mood by dimming lights in the house, to whatever you can imagine a remote control to do.

But here again Bratton's design as immunisation can be applied. Do we really need this?

1. Soylent Green is People!!!   ↵
<https://youtu.be/9IKVj4l5GU4>  ↵
2. *Make Room! Make Room!* on Wikipedia
 
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Make_Room!_Make_Room!
 ↵
3.  <https://diy.soylent.com/>  ↵

CONCLUSION

Thanks for reading. I know it wasn't a comfortable ride. The conversations of Optimo, Gonzo and the Renegade still take some editing, cutting and pasting to come across better.

In my research I've been all over the place. Now I want to distill some of the things I've learned.

People are often totally self-responsible for what they do and have to design their life with technology. Some pitfalls come from technology that designers, but also just people should be aware of.

- ~~~~> Oversimplification. Very handy in programming, not so handy IRL (In Real Life). Trust your audience, they have an imagination. They don't read barcodes, they read stories, ideas, jokes.
- ~~~~> Distraction for the sake of distraction.
- ~~~~> Reverence of technology is bad, designers come up with ways of demystifying tech!
- ~~~~> Use tech as your slaves. I think designers are pretty good at this already. Pass that attitude on to users. They know there's more to life than likes.
- ~~~~> Design as immunisation: Actively prevent quasi-innovations from happening.
- ~~~~> Be subversive to big systems but learn from them. It can be useful to see Google as your enemy from time to time but it doesn't make sense to blame them for all the problems in the world.
- ~~~~> Approach new services with distrust and keep checking what free services get from you. Some things are not made in your best interest.
- ~~~~> Ennui principle: Build up and release.
- ~~~~> Use the dérive as an inspiration. Go with the flows of the stream and find all that good stuff.
- ~~~~> Always keep messing with things, no matter how big or boring.

I'm going to sign off for a bit now. All this internet talk has left me stupid, unreflective, overloaded. But I'll sharpen my typing nails and be back in a day or two. Or less.

Logged out:

Optimo (OPT), Gonzo (GON), The Renegade (REN)

AFTERWORD

I just want to give this little bit of Benjamin Bratton for you:

At a societal level, the bottom line is that if we invest in things that make us feel good but which don't work, don't invest in things which don't make us feel good, but which may solve problems, then our fate is that in the long run it will just get harder and harder to feel good about not solving problems.



DESIGN IS JUST A TOOL. IN THE WRONG HANDS IT WILL DO WRONG THINGS. THE SILICON VALLEY OF DISRUPTION DOES NOT HAVE THE ANSWER, BUT LOOKING AT THEM MAY GIVE SOME IDEAS.

We should be asking what the internet is distracting us from, not how the internet is distracting us.

For fluff sake, it's going to be a very difficult time for the arts. Right-winged politics took the USA, where Mr. Trump took a country by surprise. The biggest party in the Netherlands is racist and will take a lion's share in next February's election. Geert Wilders made public threats to the Moroccan community, he literally said he would CLEAN SHIP without specifying what. This is harmful. Politicians need to specify what they mean, empty words lead to confusion. Is there really no alternative for this politics of anger?

The internet's distracted us for a nice run. It was fun on there, but we should also really spend some time with people around us. See what they're up to. See what you can do together to have fun, or to help.

A diversion into military equipment (what the internet originally was). Disguised by sleek design, tempting with simple interfaces, catchy flashy sexy sensual all of that but what if that doesn't matter anymore and you're not feeling good in the streets? Everybody has a plan until they get hit in the face. By Big data, refugee crises, politicians with terrible haircuts. And all the while we just want to learn to understand our peers better. Whatttttt has it come 2.