

W1: Content

Kate Eichhorn, **Content**:

- “A Brief History of Content in a Digital Era”
- “User-Generated Content” (recommended)

See also: Patrick H. Willems, “Everything is Content Now” (YouTube)

Infinite Content



Who doesn't love **Seinfeld**, the classic sitcom show **about nothing** that was the benchmark for TV comedy in the 1990s? Now that all 9 seasons are streaming on **Netflix**, Gen Zers who are too young to have seen the show when it was first aired can enjoy it in all its glory. As anyone familiar with the show knows, the premise of the show itself was that it was a show “about nothing”—early in its history there was even a very “meta” series of episodes in which Jerry and George pitch their idea for a comedy “about nothing” to executives at NBC—the very network that was actually airing those episodes!

Which is why it's strangely appropriate that the show is the reference-point for one of the stranger forms of “content” to have swum across my screen in recent years: a procedurally-generated, never-ending animated version of the show that began streaming on the Twitch gaming platform last year, titled—appropriately enough—**Nothing, Forever**.

I mention this example for a number of reasons. First, because it's a perfect example of the content category that Kate Eichhorn defines as **entertainment content** in the first chapter of her recent book on the subject. Back in the 1990s, **Seinfeld** was airing at the exact same time that Bill Gates first published his famous essay, “Content is King” (referenced in Patrick Willem's YouTube video on the same subject). Yet as prescient as that essay may now seem in retrospect, the term “content” was still far from taking on the specific meaning that it began to about a decade later, while nobody at the time would have dreamed of describing **Seinfeld** as **content**: it was simply **television**. The distance between then and now is a measure of how far digital media and the emergence of the World Wide Web (as it was still called when **Seinfeld** was airing on NBC) have transformed the nature of entertainment over the intervening quarter century. For in contrast to its 1990s TV source, **Nothing, Forever** is a quintessential example of what we mean today by the term **content**: a





media text whose cultural value resides primarily—if not exclusively—in its capacity to **circulate** widely across the social mediascape. In that respect, **Nothing, Forever** can be seen as a counterpart to the Instagram egg account that provides the starting-point for Kate Eichhorn’s discussion of content. And like its counterpart, the Twitchstream show quickly began to propagate beyond the specific platform on which it originated. In addition to the torrent of online chatter it generated on tech news sites and social media platforms like Reddit, it quickly spawned the by now all-too-familiar YouTube spin-offs: a best-of compilation, a **playlist of archived episodes**, and numerous dystopian predictions by social media commentators of how the show was a harbinger of the imminent tidal wave of generative-AI content about to break over our heads.

<https://www.youtube.com/embed/yn0iVOtr6FE>

Other than the fact that it was animated rather than a live-action sitcom, this is, of course, the most significant difference between **Nothing, Forever** and its televisual source. Remediated on Netflix, the original collection of TV episodes that comprise the original **Seinfeld** series were transmuted into **content**: just another batch of archival TV shows on the shelf of the vast library of “classic” or “vintage” TV, not to mention all of the comedy series since. This reductive “flattening” of content, in which one show becomes functionally no different from any other is, as Patrick Willems explains in his YouTube video, one of the most insidious aspects of the concept of content in itself, and the basis for his critique of it.

But of course, **Nothing, Forever** is not just content in the same way that **Seinfeld** itself becomes content in the age of streaming media: it’s particular distinctive quality is that it’s also **generative** content, or more specifically that it’s **procedurally** generated sourced from the raw materials of the original show itself. This generative automation of its content is both **continuous** and—at least in principle—**interminable**, in that content can be algorithmically generated in this way **ad infinitum**: unlike its network-TV-era source, unlike even its on-demand streaming remediation, **Nothing Forever** was an early example of a new development in popular entertainment in the age of AI: **infinite content**. Rather than the gnarly animated visuals and stilted dialogue, it’s this generative dimension of the show that cultural critics seemed to find most disturbing: that as the title made clear, **it could go on forever**. What dire implications did this have for the actually-existing, still human-based entertainment industry? Could it be seen as a sign of the beginning of the end of that industry in itself? Certainly there have been no shortage of media commentators to have claimed that this is precisely the threat posed by AI-generated content to the creative industries in general. My own view is that the backlash against AI that has quickly taken hold in the entertainment industry over the past year or two—as seen in the recent industrial action of the writers’ and actors’ guilds—may prove to have over-stated the doomsday scenarios that have been circulating. I’d be interested to hear your thoughts on that issue!

Speculations about the future of the content industry aside, what is clear in the present is that generative content of the type exemplified by **Nothing, Forever** currently represents the leading edge of creative experimentation with algorithmic technologies. But the tsunami of AI-generated entertainment has already begun to break, most notably on YouTube itself, which currently hosts a rapidly-growing corpus of AI-generated movies using contemporary neural networks (aka “large-language models” or LLMs) like Runway, Sora, ComfyUI, and many more. (This topic is also explored by Kate Eichhorn in the concluding chapter of her book.)

Let me conclude with what may seem like a counter-intuitively positive pointt about generative entertainment content. In the midst of the current and ongoing furore about the onset of what might be called the age of **procedural media** aspect has been overlooked: its social role as a catalyst for generating new forms of **creative community**. One interesting element of the Twitchstream version of **Nothing, Forever** was that it was accompanied



by a live-feed chat of people talking about and responding to the show in real time. Significantly, no such real-time chat was available on Netflix for streaming re-runs of the original **Seinfeld** series. **Nothing, Forever** also sparked intense discussion on Reddit in the generative sub-group, as well as elsewhere across the social mediascape.

In the end, old-school media studies questions about audience, and whether anyone was actually watching **Nothing, Forever** the way TV audiences back in the 1990s had gathered to watch **Seinfeld** when it aired, are moot. The Twitch show simply belongs to a very different media species, in which the primary purpose of content—whether generative or otherwise—is catalytic, serving not just to circulate but to generate social interaction and community. If you look around online, you will see many examples of such content. Contrary to what is often assumed, this content is highly effective in generating further chains of content—memes are a good example.

So in conclusion, I would suggest that in addition to the categories of content defined by Kate Eichhorn in the first chapter of her book—Marketing Content, Entertainment Content, Educational Content, User-Generated Content, etc.—we may add a further one: **Meta-Content**. Meta-Content is content where the buzz or discourse around a particular kind of content is at least as significant as the source content that produced it. From that perspective the “buzz” around **Nothing, Forever** was as much a part of its content as the actual show itself. In a way, when it comes to Meta-Content the nature of the content “itself” is almost arbitrary—it doesn’t matter all that much what it is, as long as it captures people’s attention and spawns larger conversations—or better still, controversies. If this hypothesis is correct, it’s all the more interesting—and ironic—that the show that may be remembered as one of the inaugural examples of generative content is a show about **nothing**. While there may be nothing—or at most hardly anything—to watch, there is certainly plenty to talk about, and in the age of Meta-Content, that is all that matters.

I’ll leave you with one last example of another new form of (Meta-)content that has also begun to emerge from the media laboratory known as YouTube: satirical commentary on AI creativity itself. You may enjoy this amusing reflection on the possible future into which we may be heading, and the strange new kinds of creative practices that may emerge from it.

https://www.youtube.com/embed/N_Nvr4ztBXs
