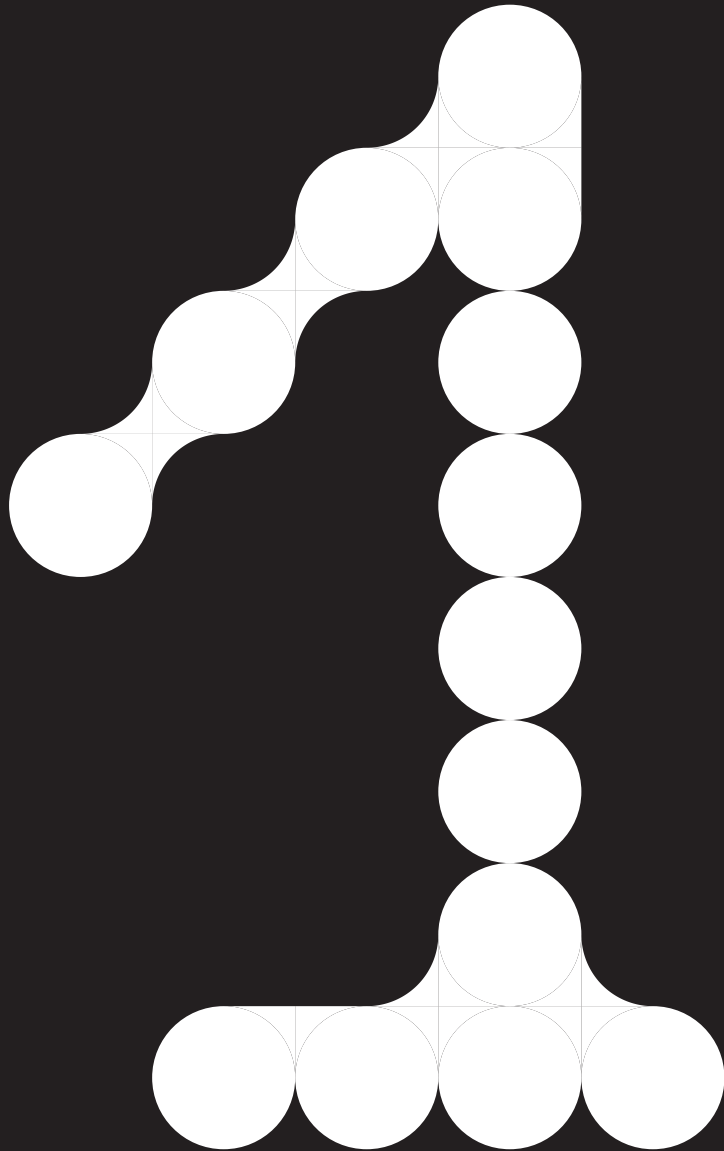


Chapter 1

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A journey from the hands-on freedom of early web and clunky mobile magic to today's opaque, corporate-run platforms and design defaults that stifle creativity, underscoring our lost agency in a web we once built.

11

introduction

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE: THE WEB WE LOST

Reflecting on my own entry into digital culture, I am reminded of the early, almost awkward intimacy of technology in early 2000s. I watched as mobile phones rose—not as sleek objects of desire, but as clunky and unpredictable devices. These early phones, for all their quirks, facilitated new forms of connection and seemed to shrink distances, conjuring McLuhan's idea of a "global village" (McLuhan, 1964). I can vividly recall the sense of wonder the first time I loaded a webpage on a tiny Nokia screen: glitchy, barely legible, but magical in its promise. The experience was imperfect, but it invited exploration. The internet of this era felt radically open, unfinished, and full of potential.



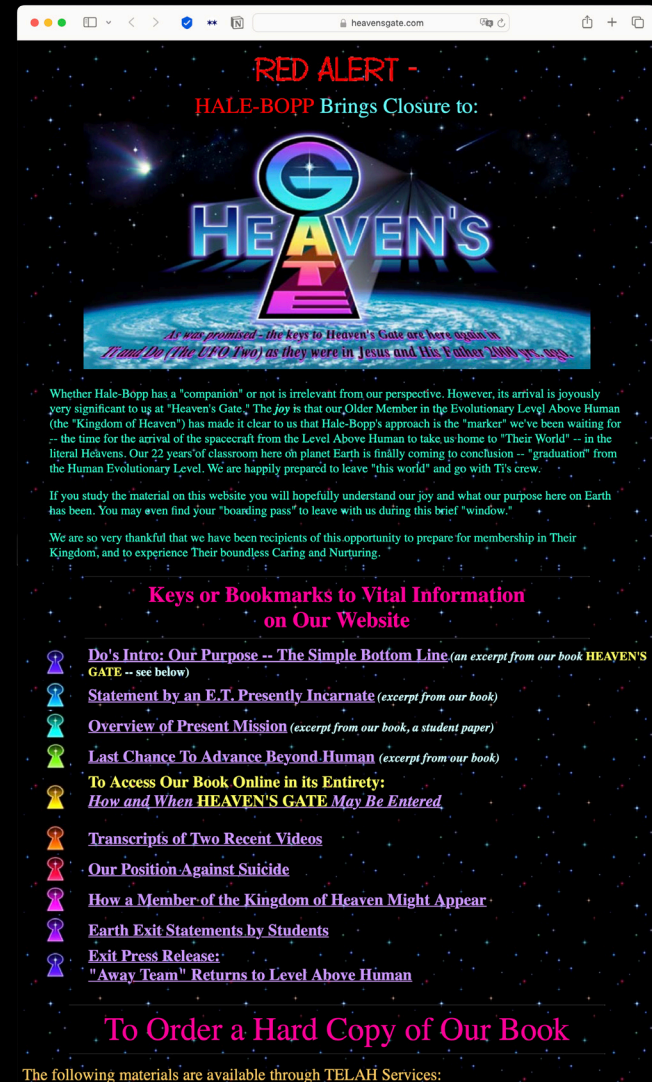
Although I wasn't born yet to participate in the so-called "free web" of the mid-1990s, I nevertheless encountered its traces: hand-coded personal sites, niche forums, and scattered remains of a DIY internet that carried an unmistakable sense of intimacy and slowness. There was a palpable feeling that one could still carve out a digital identity without being absorbed into the logic of centralized platforms. As Chayka (2014) observes in his meditation on Web 1.0, this period was marked by a quieter, safer, and more personal internet. The prevailing dream was that digital space might be a place for self-authorship — a hope that now feels distant.

Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Message*, 1964

Kyle Chayka, *GIZMODO The Great Web 1.0 Revival*, 2014

↑ found image of Nokia I used to own
→ www.heavensgate.com

Example of a Web 1.0 website that's still maintained



"sanitised, surveilled and monopolised"

↑ Hito Steyerl, quote from *Too Much World Is the Internet Dead?*, 2013

PROBLEMS OF THE CURRENT DIGITAL LANDSCAPE

The landscape today could hardly be more different. Technology, once promising and participatory, now often feels remote and controlling. The contemporary internet is defined by what Powers (2011) calls **digital maximalism**: an environment engineered for relentless consumption, not for creative exploration. Algorithms govern our feeds, shaping experience and taste, quietly relegating users to the role of spectators. Hito Steyerl (2013) describes the modern web as “sanitised, surveilled, and monopolized”—a system policed by corporations for the purposes

Hito Steyerl, *Too Much World, Is the Internet Dead?*, 2013
William Powers, *Hamlet's BlackBerry*, 2011

of copyright, conformity, and profit. Chayka (2014) expands on this, suggesting that platforms now encourage users to act as curators, but only within pre-filtered, limited options. The promise of agency is often an illusion; choice is a performance enacted within tightly drawn boundaries.

This landscape of monopolistic platforms, ever-present surveillance, and the manufacture of disinformation produces a form of digital exhaustion. The simple act of “being online” is less joyful and less present. Tolentino (2019) points to the internet’s ability to “distend our sense of identity,” to foster the overvaluation of opinion, and ultimately to “destroy our sense of scale.” In this way, what was once a space of possibility has become, for many, a source of confusion, anxiety, and fatigue.

Kyle Chayka, *GIZMODO, The Great Web 1.0 Revival*, 2014