2010's Decade Review, Part 2: Memetaphysics Through Three Lenses

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In this article, I explore the new metaphysics of memes that developed throughout the 2010s. I use three distinct perspectives to approach this vast subject matter: time; place; and, process.

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Introduction

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1. TIME

Western cyberculture reached a cultural boiling point during 2013. It was a consequence of demographic and technological shifts which occurred during the late 2000s and the early 2010s. 4G Internet and the explosion of the app industry resulted in a large number of users who almost exclusively used a smartphone to browse the Internet. In the US in particular, interactions with IRL stakes such as romance, banking, professional networking and even political donations had moved to the Internet during this period. Phoneposting became the norm, and its impact continues to influence not only today's culture but business and technology, as the always-online mode of engagement corrodes the boundary between work and life as well as between URL and IRL.

The 90s' cyberutopian vision of the Internet as an independent territory away from the world of "flesh and steel" had become quaint to the point of alien by this point. It wasn't that the Internet started feeling just like the physical world, but rather that too much of the physical world had seeped into what was once a cultural sanctuary. The line between URL and IRL was blurred as the Internet became integrated into daily life and the number of low literacy users surged. In effect, it was the decade's own Eternal September of 1993.

The old mode of cybercultural organisation was assimilationist: new users were inducted into the community by being taught rules and mores unique to the community from older users. In order to function properly, they had to convert low-literacy users into high-literacy ones. They were all but totally eclipsed by more scalable, but still protectionist cybercultures by the 2000s. These scalable protectionist cybercultures combined rigidity of site code and cultural gatekeeping in order to enforce parameters on their community. These ascendant, scalable cybercultures, which developed as the historical consequence of Eternal September and the displacement of Usenet culture, were now also being inundated with low literacy users in an analogous way.

While low memetic literacy users reached a critical mass, the displaced natives began looking for new ways to engage in old crafts on mainstream platforms in lieu of returning to an older Internet. A simplified characterisation of the events is that the memetically literate diaspora from other platforms established refugee colonies on sites like Facebook by creating content attractive to particular kinds of users and repulsive or incomprehensible to others. The YouTube Poop community had developed through the same process almost a decade prior. However, it must be noted that the users who

established memepage culture were not especially literate in the sense of possessing historical and cultural knowledge.

While newbies carried real life into the Internet, the Internet itself was spilling over into real life too. This mutual exchange between cyberspace and meatspace began to destroy the illusion of cyberspace being fundamentally different from meatspace. Whereas early cybercultures of the 90s and 2000s had to codify netiquettes and cyberethics emphasising the fact that there are human beings behind the screen, this high-scale spillover forced users to change the way they viewed the Internet as an entity and phenomenon.

The notion of cyberspace as literally spatial became less and less intuitive. Content, on the other hand, began to accumulate its own implications of physicality. This was not the kind of territorial mass that web pages suggested with their Unique Resource Locators pointing at them like GPS coordinates. Content took on the microscopic physicality of entities that can be carried by unwitting vectors, like viruses. This meant that corresponding designs in cybercultural organisation, not to mention web design and site structure, became more dominant in the minds of users as the most intuitive, the most natural. The feed was rapidly overtaking the page as the dominant mode of engagement for users. Cybercultures that insisted on the sort of realism about websites quickly became antiquated. What might have been had they persisted beyond this metaphysical revolution can be explored in brutalist web designs popularised during the mid 2010s.

Cybercultures that thrived under this new metaphysic were the ones that adapted by shifting from a protectionist strategy, which focused on gatekeeping particular spaces, to an expansionist strategy, which focused on extending the reach of their memecultural relics and rituals. Gatekeeping as a protectionist means of maintaining cultural integrity persisted, not as a matter of restricting access to spaces but as a means of reserving authority over memecultural relics and rituals for the ingroup. The expansionist strategy had the effect of moving the site of the cultural struggle from websites to the cultural output of communities. The aforementioned diaspora users were privy to this new, meme-centric paradigm before others, because they had first-hand experience with spreading and conserving their culture onto another platform.

This metaphysical shift, from the platform-centric paradigm to the meme-centric paradigm, had two foundations. The first was a return to a primitive metaphysic of history, a consequence of the users'

alienation from cyberspace qua space. Web communities traditionally recorded their histories as a chronology of localised events with occasional reference to external events or entities. This linear historiography was no longer tenable for a cyberspace that was becoming less and less spatial, at least phenomenologically so, and instead more and more temporal.

Consider the paradigm shift from the page to the feed as a shift from a one-dimensional perspective of cyberspace to a two-dimensional one. In the former, a given culture exists on a single point as a particular coordinate. In the latter, it exists within a parameter between two separate points in time or space as a real-time phenomenon. Livestreams, bottomless scroll, expiring messages, shorter and shorter form content, autoplayed videos, all reflect the same pattern of the transition into the temporal paradigm. Cybercultural identities became anchored more strongly to involvement in historical moments or events rather than to platform-specific loyalty. Identity markers that persisted across time and contexts became strongly favoured, and other details became flattened out.

This flattening of history is not unique in any way whatsoever to the digital age. Mythologisation of historical events always takes the form of a flattening of true accounts based on real events into cultural idioms and archetypes. Archetypally flattened accounts of history, or myths, are much more likely to persist across an extended period of time, because the cultural infrastructure preferentially conserves certain aspects of history that best fit its established models.

The transition into the two-dimensional paradigm, which introduced the dimension of time into the mix, did not go unnoticed by anybody. Spatialists such as 2000s style channers and temporalists such as Facebookers both struggled to come to terms with the new, spatiotemporal metaphysic. This metaphysic had become undeniable through technological, economic and political developments that impacted the Internet in fundamental ways. It was precisely this tension that had driven the development of the ironic meme movement and the rise of ironic memepages discussed above. The same tension culminated in explosive culture wars across various platforms, namely GamerGate, as well as the life and death of Pepe the Frog. These conflicts involved memetic competition within the radically new, two-dimensional conceptual environment of the 2010s. The end result was the development of irony and the dawning of the three-dimensional, Postironic Era, beginning in 2019.

Users ultimately came to terms with just one overarching concept during the 2010s: change over time and space. The foundation for an evolutionary view of the Internet had been set.

2. PLACE

During the 2000s, subcultural identity online was still centred around platforms. Rivalries had formed between entire websites like 4chan and Reddit. Each website had its own endemic culture which was championed by a vanguard. The sense that the Web was the Wild Wild West, speckled by settlements, dangerous to go at alone, was still prevalent. There was a sense of cyberspace having always been there, and netizens being explorers and settlers in uncharted territory. The cybermetaphysics that developed from this sense of a Wild Wild Web was *platform determinism*, which was environmental determinism as applied to the Internet: the space came first, and it moulded its inhabitants. This cybermetaphysic was often paired with *platform isolationism*. Platform isolationists understood the userbase primarily as an effect of the platform, and therefore sought to protect the integrity of a platform by guarding it from infiltration by users from other platforms with different customs and netiquettes. This was a paradox given that platform determinism claims that the platform decides what its users become, while an implication of isolationism is that the platform must be protected from the wrong kind of users. Therefore, there was a continuous tension between the view that sees users as readily moulded by the platform that they use, and the view that sees platforms as readily contaminated by the wrong kinds of users. This tension was dealt with in a number of ways, such as a complex of folk psychological theories about the specific contexts in which new users become part of the subculture rather than an invader, or how long it takes for a lurker to adjust to the new culture enough to participate. Over time, platform determinism and platform isolationism came to support each other despite the contradictions.

Many of the platform determinist illusions that supported a platform isolationist cultural outlook fell apart as a direct consequence of the accelerating influx of low literacy users. Some differences between platforms were actual, based on demographic accidents of founding populations as well as structural and administrative policy differences between the platforms. Some differences were cultural, particularly in matters of tastes and shared history. Other differences were exaggerated and folkloric inventions created by their userbases to explain the phenomenological differences between themselves and the outgroup. Naive new users without respect for such *narcissism of small differences* had to be deliberately inducted into the subculture by the older users, or just slapped down repeatedly until they adopted the customs of the space.

At the same time, literate users usually preferred to interact with other literate users. They developed markers of literacy and diligently added to the memetic lexicon of the community. Not exactly

shibboleths, such signals allowed users to navigate their spaces for content that best suited their needs. The function of literacy markers wasn't to simply filter out low literacy users, but rather to quickly identify different types of users and assess which combination of users and what kind of interactions between them was happening at a given point on the platform. This typically meant looking for gatherings of users that were the most enjoyable to interact with. This was not necessarily just the most literate users given that new users brought new ideas and perspectives.

Although markers of literacy were conventionally thought of as tied to individual users, who were relatively more literate or less literate than other users, the actual effect of a community coming to rely more and more on such markers was a movement away from user identities and towards spatial identities. Literacy markers came to function as circles drawn in the sand, within which slightly different rules and mores from the rest of the platform could be expected. They were not markers of individual membership since they didn't signal the literacy of any specific user. Instead, they designated a particular space as being open to certain kinds of interactions, and such spaces did not have to be limited to high-literacy users. On 4chan, every board was archetypal of such spaces with specific rulesets of their own. Threads on 4chan were analogous in this regard to a board, which is why users experience each board as having its own distinct persona. This effect was most prominent in anonymous spaces because anonymity meant that spatial identity was the default, and user identity the exception.

This led to the tradition of the original poster explicitly laying out the topic, and the rules for the thread to be voluntarily policed by the thread's participants. The most elaborate and complex examples of these *makeshift contexts* can be seen on /qst/ - Quests, in which role playing game threads are moderated by the OP who usually starts the thread by setting the scene and the ground rules and volunteering to act as the game master. The use of threads as makeshift contexts with spatial identities led to the boards becoming a collection of agar plates that different strains of memetic techniques could be developed and tested out on again and again. The disproportionately large influence of minor platforms such as 2ch or 4chan on their relatively mainstream counterparts is partly explained by this long-standing tradition of localised and temporary rules as a form of gamified memetics.[1]

Such memetic techniques are especially powerful in that they are embedded in the memes and the associated memetic rituals. They can be utilised by participants without any knowledge beyond some minimally shared ruleset. Specific information about any given meme is not important. General memetic literacy, regarding how memes tend to be and how memetic play tends to happen, allows users without

much shared background and knowledge to come together and meme effectively. The principle of embedded techniques is impressive to both the onlookers and the participants, which motivates mythological explanations from both. The onlookers personify the Internet as a powerful individual entity when they say “the Internet has produced a new meme,” while the participants invoke “meme magic”.

While anonymous platforms embraced spatial identities, *pseudonymous* and *nonymous* (online identities reflecting real life identities such as is typical on Facebook) platforms consistently pivoted towards prioritising literacy markers over individual user identities in an attempt to scale. This led to the development of *memetic heralds*, which are persistent memetic elements such as an image or a visual style that different users adopt as part of their public profile in order to signal a common group membership. A thread full of memetic heralds such as Pepe profile pictures could signal the occupation of a particular point in cyberspace by a particular subgroup. In this way, foreign territory could be claimed by a memeculture for as long as its heralds remained visible in the region. An outstanding contemporary example of memetic heralds is the viral avatar. Viral avatars are viral images used as profile pictures on nonymous and pseudonymous platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

Viral avatars are an extreme case of memetic heralds. More often, memetically heraldic avatars come in families of shared aesthetic cues, such as anime profile pics or the choice of personal details listed in the biography section like a list of preferred pronouns. A minimally experienced Twitter user can guess what’s going on in a thread full of frogs without having to read the tweets, let alone participate in the discourse. This is an essential skill for any literate user given the overcrowded and eclectic nature of modern platforms. Virtually all contemporary users are alienated from their platforms of choice to some degree: they don’t know most of the other users. The most effective way for a newbie to blend into such a space is not to make friends, but to adopt an established dialect with all of its heralds and shibboleths. This can be as simple as saving an image and reposting a meme.

Still, there’s always an arms race between high investment users and the imposters. This complicates the dynamic. Worse yet, it’s always possible that behind the screen is a fluent but malicious agent who is actively invested in causing harm to your community. But even perfect accuracy in gauging subcultural literacy couldn’t guard a community against this kind of subversion. For that, precision is required. Naturally, the targets of such attacks ask: they may be literate, but where are they from? As we have seen, that is the wrong question to ask. The ease with which politically motivated agents infiltrate and

manipulate memetically literate, platform-isolationist forums shows the failure of viewing the community as built on a static, spatial location.

3. PROCESS

In the ideal scenario, low literacy users would not ever signal memecultural membership and memetic literacy. Those who do make use of literacy markers would always be good faith participants. This utopian scenario became a reality for a brief moment in meme history during the Early Ironic Era of 2014. A diaspora of memetically literate users had begun to settle on Facebook, and were united in their desire to come together with similar users. They started by shitposting on their personal accounts, then following other users who did the same, and then moving into private groups and chats together, and eventually established the first ironic memepages for the express purpose of sharing and spreading memes. The ironic meme movement relied on the combination of makeshift contexts and embedded techniques to establish a new memeculture on the platform. At the time, Facebook had not yet begun heavily restricting organic reach in the newsfeed for posts from pages, meaning that followers were highly likely to see any post made by a page. As long as a memepage secured the initial follow from a user, the user was likely to see any subsequent posts made by that page. Posts and pages were much more discoverable because a user's interactions with a page were frequently displayed to their friends. This made Facebook an ideal environment for experimental memes. However, this also meant that the winning strategy for memepages of this era was to simply create content that was likely to be seen by as many new viewers as possible. For the admins of the memepages, there was a tension between the drive to grow a memetically literate community and the drive to grow the following of the page. In order to get their content seen by high-literacy users in the first place, the memepages had to get them liked and shared by low-literacy users. This paradox of literacy and the need for content that can achieve both ends was a major driving factor for the creation of ironic and postironic memes.

The standard dynamic between high literacy users and low literacy users, as exemplified by Eternal September, was inverted with Facebook memepages. Rather than remaining on the defensive on the home turf, inundated by newbies or bad faith participants, high literacy memers had entered Facebook as the newbies themselves. They were by no means good faith participants in Facebook's design as a social media platform which reflects real life social networks. They were good faith participants only within the nascent memeculture. By subverting Facebook's design and making a game of gaining reach, ironic

memepages turned their memes into viable competitors against the normie content in the feed. The key was to game the feed by making more versatile content which stood a chance at being spread regardless of the particular viewer's level of literacy. This was important because it was the low-literacy, mainstream userbase which had to provide most of the reach whenever a page was trying to grow quickly.

The earliest, pre-2013 memepages usually reposted content found elsewhere, acting as content aggregators. Many were fan pages named after anime characters like "Mr. Satan" or "Cell" and interacted with each other in character. They were very small and typically ranged from a few hundred to a thousand followers per page. The Early Ironic Era began in 2013 with the emergence of pages parodying these preironic memepages. These ironic memepages created original content by remixing low quality memes and viral content, replacing the elements with something blatantly out of place. For instance, Stick Memes, one of the first ironic memepages, specialised in making memes about sticks. They even developed lore about sticks being the best and rocks being the worst. Another example is Orange Memes (the original page has long since been deleted), which successfully forced images of orange squares into becoming a meme at one point. The use of Impact font text for metaironic purposes were already in use by this point, but remained a subversive and minor aesthetic until much more recently.

The practice of curating content around a specific theme and networking with other related pages was a highly effective tactic for standing out in the algorithmically curated feed. The practice, which preironic memepages had pioneered, became widespread among ironic memepages between 2014 and 2015 through the rise of history themed memepages collectively referred to as Historical Alliteration Memepages. The fans of these pages were actively encouraged to create their own Historical Alliteration Memepage, and established pages helped new memepages gain reach by sharing their content. These pages each had their own national theme such as "Edgy Egyptian Memes" and "Rough Roman Memes". They created large amounts of original content about history and culture, and frequently collaborated with each other to make memes, and formed factions as part of the role play.

By the start of 2015, dozens of Historical Alliteration Memepages existed, and participated in elaborate role playing games like the Meme War, in which pages competed over territory on a Risk-like map that updated real time based on the number of new likes each page received. The Middle Ironic Era began in 2015 with this second wave of historical alliteration memepages. This was the beginning of ironic

memes as we generally recognise them today. The ironic meme community developed an independent sense of identity in the aftermath of the Great Meme War and the rebuilding which followed, and began questioning the endless cycle of metaironic subversion. This was the beginning of the post-ironic meme movement.

The formula that came to dominate ironic memepage content was a mixture of unfamiliar elements with familiar or intuitive templates. These templates were taken from banner adverts, relatable humour pages, science diagrams, or Twitter screenshots. This formula resolved the tension between the demand for normie content and the memepage admins' own desire for a niche community. The result was ironic memes, and a community that would later be dubbed "Weird Facebook" by outside commentators wondering what had happened to transform Facebook into an emerging hub of memetic exchange and innovation.

This Early Ironic Era was hopeful in its mood and optimistic in its outlook about the potential of memes to become something serious, even sublime. At the very least, there was the unshakeable sense that they were watching a new moment in cyberculture unfold, and also taking part in it. While GamerGate was developing into an augmented reality game of cultural politics, ironic memepages gamified the newsfeed, refining the process of attracting new participants into their memeculture without watering things down. The assimilationist ideology and the *eclecticist* ideology of the ironic memepages, which aimed to maximise reach and utilise diverse memetic materials, were at odds with the isolationist ideology of the platform centrists who aimed primarily to keep out the normies rather than to educate and induct them into the memeculture. A contradiction that persisted through folkmemetic theories of community formation persisted in both ideologies: assimilationists and eclecticists frequently borrowed from the conceptual frameworks of the isolationists, and the isolationists continued to employ assimilationist strategies for adopting newbies into their memecultures. But the process of gaming the algorithm by biting the bullet on the need to attract low-literacy audiences, whilst maintaining a complex memeculture, forced ironic memers to come to terms with their essentialistic understanding of memetic literacy. Namely, they were faced with the fact that normies can learn to be fluent users of memes, develop taste, and become beneficent, good-faith participants. Furthermore, it was becoming more and more apparent that widespread literacy was often not even necessary for a community to function.

This transition from a localised and static view of memes to a potentially global and fluid one signalled the rise of context-agnostic content. Versatile memes that could be appreciated by a wider range of

viewers were also the fittest in the new environment where the low literacy users had always been the majority. Post-ironic memes, which utilised the form and style of ironic memes but expressed sincere and unironic meaning, were versatile in exactly this way. They could be appreciated by an audience regardless of their familiarity with the memetic elements and their symbolism. The dual irony of using ironic memetic elements to express sincere meaning could either be appreciated or outright ignored, whilst the interpretation remained the same. They could take on totally opposite meaning depending on the context, such as a picture of someone drinking water captioned "when you drink water": at the time of writing, the grammar of such a meme is so widely known that most viewers would interpret readily it as an understated (or exaggerated, depending on the image) expression of how good water is. It was also popular with Muslim users during Ramadan. Postironic memes freed memes from the confines of spatiotemporal contexts by making détournement the default, unlike ironic memes which treated preironic content as the default (and metaironic memes, which treated ironic memes as the default).

The age of platforms was coming to an end for memecultures. The old cybermetaphysics of the '80s, '90s, and the 2000s, based on the notion of platforms as homeostatic containers for memes and users, had become unsustainable in face of a new kingdom of memes. These new memes were created and shared by users aware of the algorithmically sorted feeds and filter bubbles that had to be gamed in order for the memes to survive in what was an extremely hostile environment for all but the simplest of memes. These users had shifted their attention from insular spaces to the process of memetic spread.

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