
Cyberspace memes

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This paper addresses the issues concerning the impact of music on cyberspace globalisation. It points out that Internet access is limited to only one per cent of the wealthiest human population. It also looks into the future of cyberspace music and predicts that most of the cyberspace activities are going to be unleashing one of many of humanity's predispositions – the predisposition to steal. Cyberspace represents a perfect medium for concealing a person's identity and for the masking of any of the responsibility that is expected from socially acceptable human behaviour. With these aspects in mind, the paper concentrates on the Internet's distribution of pirated software and the trading of MP3 files. The paper also focuses on commercial music whose economic impact on the development of music technology allows 'academic musicians' to appropriate most of the tools that otherwise would not have been developed for 'academic' use.

1. INTRODUCTION

The term cyberspace literally means 'navigable space' and it is derived from the Greek word *kyber* (to navigate). In William Gibson's 1984 novel *Neuromancer*, the original source of the term, cyberspace refers to a navigable, digital space of networked computers accessible from computer consoles: a visual, colourful, electronic datascape known as 'The Matrix' where companies and individuals interact with, and trade in, information. Since 1984 the term cyberspace has been reappropriated, adapted and used in a variety of ways that all refer to the computer-based conceptual space within information and communication technologies.

The term 'meme' used in the title of this paper was coined by the biologist Richard Dawkins. Memes are tunes, ideas, catch phrases, and their ilk; and just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperm or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in a cultural meme pool and leap behaviourally from person to person. The important rule for memes, as for genes, is that they must constantly replicate. This replication is a mindless process not necessarily for the good of anything; replicators that are good at replicating flourish for whatever reason. Meme X

spreads among the people, because X is a good replicator.¹

Dawkins states that the primary difference between the human species and others is our reliance on cultural transmission of information, and hence on cultural evolution. If we decide to fully exploit the applications of the term meme, it would reveal its truly powerful role in our understanding of human culture in general.

To illustrate how useful the term meme may be, let us take a moment and look at the case of one particular meme – the success of a four-note meme at the beginning of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Certainly, it has much less to do with the absolute value of its pitch-set 'internal' design, i.e. the way a musical piece is compositionally structured, and much more to do with the design this meme presents to the listening world. What is important is its phenotype, the way it affects the minds and other memes in a particular socio-cultural environment. The minds are habitats of the memes, and they are certainly limited in their capacity. Each mind has only a limited ability for the support of memes; therefore, there is considerable 'competition' among memes for entry into as many minds as possible. This competition is the major selective force in the infosphere, just as it is in the biosphere.

But, before I concentrate on what kind of music-related memes flourish within cyberspace, let me make one additional clarification. Speaking about 'Music without Walls' inevitably begs the question of cyberspace globalisation and the music-world within that setting. However, it is important to be truthful about the whole framework in question.

2. CYBERSPACE GLOBALISATION

Globalisation has become the most important economic, political and cultural phenomenon of our time. This process is reshaping the world economy, creating new social classes, and reordering the lives of thousands and thousands of people. The word globalisation stands for all kinds of different things depending on who uses it. It

¹See Dawkins, R. 1976. *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

could stand for the so-called progress and modernity of Western culture, or American domination of world culture, or the arrival of worldwide hypermodern chaos loaded with inequality and instability for almost everyone.

One of the important aspects of cyberspace and globalisation has to do with the 'tyranny of the place' that was always a synonym for restraints on liberty that puts restrictions, both political and economic, on where people can live and go, what to buy, eat, read, hear or see. Globalisation by its nature brings down these barriers and empowers the individual with 'unlimited' choices. One can live in England but eat Greek food, read *Suddeutsche Zeitung* on the Internet, buy books from Amazon.com in Seattle, and visit Egyptian pyramids without changing money or having a passport. All this increases people's freedom to shape their identities in a way that their ancestors could not have possibly imagined. This picture of the world as global village may appear to be very appealing and interesting to dwell in, but this is only one side of the coin – the Western imperialistic side of the coin.

What I mean by 'imperialistic' will be perfectly illustrated by looking at the following statistics which reveal a very uneven distribution of wealth, and consequently selective privilege regarding who can and cannot gain access to cyberspace information. The average American boss now earns 419 times the salary of the average American factory worker, the richest 2.7 million Americans earn as much as the poorest 100 million, Switzerland's per-capita income is 400 times that of Mozambique. Here is an 'educated guess' of how many people worldwide are online as of November 2000.

Word Total	407.1 million
Africa	3.11 million
Asia/Pacific	104.88 million
Europe	113.14 million
Middle East	2.40 million
Canada & USA	167.12 million
Latin America	16.45 million

Knowing that one third of Internet users live in one country, the United States, makes it difficult to claim that the Internet's role as a medium is globally powerful. On the contrary, it is rather limited to the wealthy one per cent of the world's population who own a computer. In many parts of the developing world, there is a tremendous shortage of telephones, let alone computers. There are fewer telephones in sub-Saharan Africa than in Manhattan, and for most people in the world, the World Wide Web and the whole of cyberspace are just more unobtainable American toys. CNN and MTV worldwide have more influence than the Internet does, because there are more people globally who own a TV set than those who own a computer.

Thus, if I want to talk about cyberspace and 'Music

without Walls', I will be really neglecting ninety-nine per cent of humans who live on this planet. However, to keep my paper going, I must arrogantly assume the less-than-convincing Western imperialistic position and see how globalisation and music may be viewed from that narrow perspective. To make the entire pursuit even more bizarre and remote from the conference's focus, I will primarily look at commercial music venues. This is because the vast majority of tools that are used in production and distribution of so-called 'academic music' are exclusively created for commercial music purposes. ProTools and MP3 were invented with commerce in mind and then, later on, appropriated by non-commercially inclined academic music experimenters. Now, let us see how all this came about.

Looking into cyberspace, let me concentrate on what kind of cultural memes are being exchanged through the Internet. There are three kinds of memes that travel most frequently from one computer to another and cause all sorts of Internet trouble and lost bandwidth. The best known is Internet porn, which is beyond the scope of this paper; the other two are the distribution of pirated software (warez) and the trading of MP3 files. So, let us see why MP3 files and warez are so successful as cyberspace memes.

3. WAREZ

Pirated software (warez) has been around since the very beginning of the personal computer. In the 1980s, people exchanged audio cassettes with computer programs recorded on them. Now, everybody can download a cracked version of almost any imaginable software using the Hotline Client. According to the Software Publishers Association (often called the Software Police), fifty per cent of all software worldwide is bootleg. In Hong Kong, Russia and other emerging countries, but particularly in economically and politically isolated countries such as Yugoslavia, one can get every piece of software Microsoft has ever written for \$10. Needless to say, all warez activities are illegal but, as mentioned before, fifty per cent of Internet users are still doing it in spite of the possibility of serious prosecution. This makes me believe that the future of cyberspace activities is going to be the unleashing of one of many human predispositions – *the predisposition to steal*. Cyberspace represents a perfect medium for concealing a person's identity and the encouragement of irresponsible behaviour.

Now, what are the consequences of all this illegal warez interchange for the future of music? On the global scale, it gives an opportunity for people who live in countries where access to software is either too expensive or physically impossible, to download, for example, the latest version of Waves plug-ins, or SoundWorks studio and experiment with it. On the other hand, by having free access to software, one may download all string instrument CD-ROM sound samples, try them all

out and then decide which one to purchase. CD-ROM sound sample manufacturers regularly make fancy covers and attractive descriptions of their CD contents, but never allow one to try those sounds out. Once the consumer legally purchases a CD-ROM s/he may soon discover that only ten per cent of the sounds are really useful and that the rest are completely worthless. However, this perception comes too late, for the deal is already concluded and there is no possibility for the software to be returned. Warez downloading activities give more power to the consumer, forcing the software manufacturers to behave differently. Providing much better technical support may be the only incentive that software manufacturers can offer to 'Warez Dudez' when persuading them to purchase the software instead of downloading it for free.

4. MP3 FILES

The trading of MP3 files is a far more interesting issue to talk about than the pirating of illegal software. First, not all MP3s are illegal. If one owns the copyright for the music, the MP3 platform may be the best way for music promotion in cyberspace. The MP3 sites, such as www.mp3.com, are virtual jukeboxes stuffed with hundreds of thousands of recordings downloadable for free. 'Ripping' the CD tracks, placing and exchanging them on the web in MP3 form, is a breach of the copyright laws and is legally considered a theft. Not surprisingly, there are more people committing these web criminal acts than those who do not. Napster software provides users with a centralised index of MP3 files that are downloadable from other users' computers. Gnutella skips the index and allows users to find MP3 files directly from users who are also using the Gnutella software. Pointella skips the downloading process altogether by allowing its users to play the content directly from other users' computers. These new 'distribution' methods are sending shock waves through the music industry, because they lack the means for content originators to collect royalties and to protect copyrights on music.

All this means that the Internet has altered how music is distributed. Consumers are now able to bypass the traditional distribution network by eliminating the intermediaries involved in the music industry supply chain. Under the old industry model, the music artist would produce a CD and the record company would use its distribution network to reach the retail stores and ultimately the customers or the consumers of music. Under the new (Internet altered) music industry model, the artist may entirely bypass the record labels, reaching the music customers directly via e-commerce Websites and the Internet. Without having to sign a record contract, artists have an incentive to provide MP3 files for free download, in exchange for exposure. This makes perfect

sense because most of the artists do not make any significant income from their CD sales anyway.

For example, a typical major record label deal would include giving about \$200,000 to the artist for the production of the album and would set aside another \$300,000 for promotion, making a total bill of \$500,000. In order to recoup this amount to the record label, the artist would hope to sell as many CD copies as possible. How about 1,000,000 CDs sold? Obeying all the clauses in his/her contract that pertain to (i) packaging deductions and giveaways, (ii) 90% breakage rule, (iii) 3/4 royalty on CDs, (iv) returns, (v) reserves and cutouts, the artist would still be around \$100,000 in the hole. The record label would cover all its costs after only 125,000 CDs sold, but the artist would be still recouping even after 1,000,000 CDs. For this reason, most artists earn their 'fortune' in the concert-touring arena. All this points out that breach of the copyright laws, by exchanging MP3 files over the Internet, is not against music artists' interests at all, but rather against those of the record labels.

Shifting gear for a moment, and focusing on commercially less profitable 'academic-type' music, MP3 file exchange represents a sort of cyberspace paradise. Most experimental CDs are not created with commerce in mind to begin with. These are rather used as tools for better exposure of the artist's music, and for university tenure and promotional purposes. For example, I dare to guess that my teacher Alvin Lucier never truly expected to make significant money from sales of his CDs. The fact that somebody in Calcutta is able to access Napster and download 'Music on a Long Thin Wire' in the form of an illegal MP3 file is really astonishing in a positive way.

5. CUSTOMISED CDs

If we leave the illegal world of MP3 files and concentrate on CDs, the most interesting thing that has happened in the musical economy is that digitisation has allowed function (in this case, music) to be separated from form (CD) in a way never before possible. E-business sites such as www.cdnnow.com are forcing the music industry to look at how it creates values. Before, consumers were forced to buy a particular CD and pay the full price even if they wanted to hear only one or two music selections on that CD. Now, customers may log on to the CDnow site and select any twelve songs from their song library and have them burned onto a CD for \$15.99 plus shipping and handling. This is the usual retail price of a CD at the local record store, but the major difference is that the consumer can actually select all twelve hit songs for which, under the traditional marketing scheme, it would be necessary to purchase twelve separate CDs, with a total cost of \$191.88. Even though by burning custom CDs, no copyright laws are broken and both record label and music artist receive their profit

share, neither side is interested in catering to consumers in this way. All kinds of lame excuses are made in order to undermine customised CDs, such as ruining the concept of an album, or missing the graphic design that goes on the cover of the original CD. The essence is that, on an individual CD, both the record label and the music artist are more than usually selling twenty per cent of listenable material and eighty per cent of filler that nobody wants to hear. For this reason, the song selection pool for customised CDs is still limited to thirty-year-old music hits, rather than current top-twenty chart songs. This situation is going to have to change if CDs are to survive the enormous pressure from the new MP3 music players. But the problem for record labels still remains the same: as soon as a major hit is released on a CD, it can be easily found and downloaded for free in cyberspace. In this case nobody makes money, but the consumer is 100% satisfied.

6. CONCLUSION

As with everything else, cyberspace and the Internet give us a plethora of both the good and the bad. It is becoming a battleground for the fight between those who want to see the world reshaped into a global village (according to their definition of that term) and those who want to cling on to traditional values of their own local cultures. The same technology that helps to make the world less parochial also helps it to become more ethno-centric. The Internet allows students in Thailand to

download Ricky Martin's concert at the same time as their counterparts in Moscow, but it also allows Thailand Americans to download Thailand's pop. The fact that Western rock and pop has spread around the world like a plague is partially countered by the fact that it is becoming more than common to hear samples of ethnic music in the songs of successful Western pop musicians. The Internet also allows for more esoteric audiences to be formed in cyberspace. For example, the audience for Cornelius Cardew's music may be miniscule in any one country, but round up all the Cardew fanatics around the world and you get an audience that may even be commercially attractive.

From the practical point of view, globalisation through cyberspace forces music businesses to operate according to consumer choice. Globalisation does not mean homogenisation. People want to consume music, books, movies, and even potato chips that reflect their own identities. When society is defined by a compact national economy under corporate control, an elite which controls that economy has a chance of co-opting it and enforcing their values on the society. But when a society becomes an open-ended international system, any common values of a powerful elite get lost in the multitude of choices presented to the proletariat that is primarily driven by their limbic and intellectual cravings. Which of these two trends do I think will win the existential musical day? This time I think corporate control is whipping one very dead economic horse!