

## Memes as Games: On the Critical Potential of Viral Online Phenomena

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In the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the idea of the internet as a realm beyond the reach of regulation (Lessig 2006, ix) is nothing but history. It was Lawrence Lessig who saw in the programmed code the defining momentum of the dawning digital age, and thus coined the saying “code is law”. For Lessig, code represents the biggest threat and promise for human society at the same time: a powerful instrument of oppression or freedom. Thus he stated: “We can build, or architect, or code cyberspace to protect values that we believe are fundamental. Or we can build, or architect, or code cyberspace to allow those values to disappear.”

What makes code such a powerful device is that it contains *procedural rhetoric*. According to Bogost, procedural rhetoric “is the practice of using processes persuasively (...). [It] is a general name for the practice of authoring arguments through processes.” (2007, 28f). Code allows to create virtual worlds that follow their very own rules. That means that any aspect of reality, as well as any imagined space can be represented digitally; its potential is only restricted by human fantasy. This boundless space of possibilities represented Lessig’s idea of code as freedom. However, by programming a virtual world, code is also the means of restriction, the line one cannot cross easily. Hence: Code is restricted boundlessness and boundless restriction at the very same time. And memes, especially internet memes, which consist of code, literally and metaphorically, inherit the very same features. As users, readers and listeners, we consciously encounter the visual and oral representations of memes every day. In contrast, the process behind the phenomenon usually remains hidden to us.

Since the emergence of the first memes (some went viral even before the internet developed, e.g. “Kilroy was here” or “Alfred E. Neumann”), today’s internet meme have steadily developed into a permanent by-product of public communication. Especially in politics, meme have become an alternative approach of criticism outside the established frame of political journalism. For example, every political debate prior to elections, and politics in general, is accompanied by meme-formation in real time. The candidates for the US presidential elections 2016, to mention a contemporary case, become “memefied” almost immediately after they join the race for the White House. And in the offline world, we can hardly think of any rally or demonstration that goes without the depiction of memes on posters and as oral recitations.

Given the increasing impact of memes on the public discourse, we argue that a deeper understanding of the phenomenon is necessary. Hence, the objective of our paper is to discuss the critical potential of internet memes: Why do they emerge and what is their purpose? What are their constitutional characteristics? Our hypotheses on that would be that memes can serve as a carrier for criticism beyond the filters of traditional mass media and journalism. Ironically, though, this criticism regularly appropriates and surfs on mass media artifacts such as movies. As Zittrain argues: “So far, the most successful memes have been deployed by people without a megaphone against institutions that often dominate mainstream culture.” (2014: 389) Due to its characteristics, it seems, memes can go where criticism usually does not go, and has not gone before.

The term meme was first coined by Richard Dawkins in his book on evolutionary biology *The Selfish Gene* (1989, first published in 1976). The meme-concept has come a long way since then. Today, we can define meme as “digital objects that riff on a given visual, textual or auditory form and are then appropriated, re-coded, and slotted back into the internet infrastructures they came from” (Nooney & Portwood-Stacer 2014: 249). Drawing upon this definition, we can assert that the core operation in this replication process is the *re-coding of a pre-existing theme*. Thus, memes emerge as a result of public communication. But unlike other entities of public communication, they evolve in a playful process that follows only unspecified rules. Due to the non-committal nature of the process, memes elude the common channels of mass communication and are thus hard to control – the perfect space for the formation of criticism. In our opinion, five key features constitute the subversive potential of memes, making them hard to contain, even by means of mass surveillance:

1. The process of meme-formation follows unspecific and unwritten rules, constituted by dispersed sets of authors, although not necessarily agreed upon.
2. The formation of memes is always a joint and playful effort that involves a potentially limitless number of users.
3. Memes are replications (and thus: re-combinations) of existing communicative entities that evolve in the process of repeated replication.
4. The process of meme proliferation and sense-making is decentralized.
5. The outcome and development of the next replication step(s) is difficult to predict.
6. At least potentially, memes may allow reaching wide mainstream audiences.

The question that then arises is: How do memes exploit those features of code without suffering its negative effects? First, the playfulness of the process renders the process itself rather harmless. Thus, the critical potential of each meme is hard to assess, as are its chances to cross the threshold into the common consciousness. Additionally, playing games is often considered as a not very useful activity. The general attitude towards (computer) games is that they “are ideologically loaded, and contribute nothing to public life.” (Chesher & Costello 2004, 5) Thus, games are not regarded as momentous as for example a political rally or a newspaper article. So while these traditional forms of criticism or protest are under permanent scrutiny, meme-games avoid a comparable public attention – for good and for bad. Furthermore, procedural rhetoric involved in the process stretches beyond the code itself and is not limited to programs only, but can extend to all sorts of media. Since the participants in the meme game share and refer to unwritten rules, they know what to look for and how to replicate it, without the need to codify it.

However, this enormous flexibility comes at a price. Unlike an explicit political movement, meme games lack coherence of an organized campaign and are therefore always on the brink of disintegration. Furthermore, the chances for an issue to be transformed into a lasting meme, are slim at least. Even though many issues have the inherent potential to evolve into memes, to gain traction within the space of public communication, only few actually do. Thus meme games are a phenomenon with critical potential that is constantly between emergence and collapse.

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