

Cyberspace memes

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This paper addresses the issues concerning the impact of music on cyberspace globalization. It points out that the Internet access is limited to only 1% 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 the 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 behavior. 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 have not 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, colorful, 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 behaviorally 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 spread among the people, because X is a good replicator. (Dawkins 1976)

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's 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 in 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 the cyberspace, let me make one additional clarification. Speaking about "Music without Walls" one inevitably begs the question of cyberspace globalization and the music-world within that setting. However, it is important to be truthful about the whole framework in question.

2. CYBERSPACE GLOBALIZATION

Globalization 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 globalization stands for all kinds of different things depending on who uses it. It could stand for the so-called progress and modernity of western culture, or American domination of world culture or the arrival of world wide hypermodern chaos loaded with inequality and instability for almost everyone.

One of the important aspects of cyberspace and globalization 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. Globalization 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 do I mean by "imperialistic" will be perfectly illustrated by looking at the following statistics that reveal a very uneven distribution of wealth, and consequently selective privilege regarding who can and cannot gain access to the 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 on-line 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 1/3 of the 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 1% of 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 the most people in the world, the World Wide Web and the entire cyberspace is just another unobtainable American toy. CNN and MTV worldwide

have more influence than 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 the cyberspace and "Music without Walls" I will be really neglecting 99% 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 globalization and music viewed 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 the 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. Pro Tools and MP3 were invented with commerce in mind and then, later on, appropriated by non-commercially inclined academic music experimenters. Now, let's see how all this came about.

Looking into the 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's 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 computers. In the eighties people exchanged audiocassettes 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 Software Police) 50% 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 that all warez activities are illegal but, as mentioned before, half of the 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 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 behavior.

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 consumer legally purchases a CD-ROM it may soon discover that only 10% of the goods are really useful and that rest of it is 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 could 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 far more interesting issue to talk about than the pirating of the 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 don't. Napster software provides users with centralized 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 all together 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 will be 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 website 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 set aside another \$300,000 for promotion, making a total bill of \$500,000 to the artist. In order to recoup this amount to the record label, the artist would hope to sell as many copies of CD as possible. How about a 1,000,000 of CDs sold? Obeying all the clauses in his/her contract that pertain to: packaging deductions and giveaways, 90% breakage rule, 3/4 royalty on CDs, returns, reserves and cutouts; the artist would still be around \$100,000 in the hole. The record label would cover all its cost after only 125,000 records sold, but the artist would be still recouping even after 1,000,000 records. For that reason most of the artists earned their "fortune" in the concert-touring arena. All this points out that breach of the copyright laws, by exchanging the MP3 files over the Internet, is not that much against music artists' interest at all, but rather against the record label's interest.

Shifting gears for a moment, and focusing on commercially less profitable "academic-type" of music, MP3 file exchange represents a sort of cyberspace paradise. Most of the experimental CDs were not created with commerce in mind to begin with. Those were rather used as promotional tools for better exposure of artist's music, and for university tenure and

promotion 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 a form of illegal MP3 file is really astonishing in a positive way.

5. CUSTOMIZED CDs

If we leave illegal world of MP3 files and concentrate on CDs, the most interesting thing that happened in the musical economy is that the digitization allowed function (in this case, music) to be separated from form (CDs) in a way never before possible. E-business sites such as www.cdnow.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 logon to CDnow site and select any 12 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 consumer actually selected all 12 hit songs for which, under the traditional marketing scheme, IT would be necessary to purchase 12 separate CDs, a value of \$191.88. Even though, by burning a custom CD, no copyright laws get broken and both record label and the music artist get their profit share, neither side is interested in catering to the consumers this way. All kinds of lame excuses were put in place in order to undermine customized CDs, such as ruining a concept of an album, or missing the graphic design that goes on the cover of the original CD. The essence is that both, the record labels and the music artist, were more than usually selling on a single CD 20% of listenable goods and 80% of ballast that

nobody wanted to hear. For that reason the song selection pool for customized CDs is still limited to 30-year-old music hits, rather than the current charts of top-20 songs. This situation is going to change if CDs hope to survive the enormous pressure from the new coming MP3 music players. But the trouble for record labels still remains the same. As soon as the major hit is released on a CD, it could be easily found and downloaded for free in the cyberspace. In this case nobody makes money but the consumer is 100% satisfied.

6. CONCLUSION

Like with everything else, the 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 onto traditional values of their own local cultures. The same technology that helps to make the world less parochial also helps it to become more ethnocentric. 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 spread around the world like a plague is partially countered by the fact that it is becoming more then common to hear samples of ethnic music in the songs of successful western pop musicians. The Internet also allows for some more esoteric audiences to be formed in cyberspace. For example, the audience of the Cornelius Cardew's music my be miniscule in any one country but round up all the Cardew's fanatics around the world and you get an audience that may be even commercially attractive.

From the practical point of view, globalization through cyberspace forces music businesses to operate according to consumer choice. Globalization does not mean homogenization. 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 who 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 take the existential musical day? This time I think corporate control is whipping one very dead economic horse!

REFERENCES

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