

Digital fossils, What the heck ?

1. Introduction

Back in the days, the internet arrived like an ufo and a promise towards the future. When it became accessible to the broad public, users started to play around the new field scope in order to create their own world and show it to the others. They started to *communicate their hopes and dreams, to share their lives, collections, interests and production with the global village in which their children will be living.*¹ Hospitality was the key ; you were warmly invited to come by to your neighbour and say hello. The birth of the internet has created a specific utopic spirit that truly indicates that everybody was invited to the party ; *And here comes everybody ; moms teens, celebs, goths, tots, gamers, nerds and artists. (Everybody else, Cory Archangel, 7).* The internet allowed the users to have a direct online access to their audience with no middleman but more than anything : it was immediate. Users had the feeling that everything was about to be possible. It became a network, a network of and for people carried away in a whirlpool of innovation. The internet was the perfect tool that answered to certain needs at the time and it created a feeling of community, a feeling that everybody could share the same things and space, not matter their ages, social, political or economical situation.

The internet changed so much over the last decades and this utopic spirit began to fade, and its users with it. The World Wide Web was constantly developing and it looked different 10 or even 5 years ago aesthetically but conceptually as well. The "know-how" of early users, passionate amateurs, internet experts and the mass distraction of the web 2.0² were all adjusting the way the web was built and interconnected. The game changed, the naive webpages have been hidden and forgotten by everyone. We can clearly observe a shift in the history of internet, where everybody started to forsake animated gifs, glitters, backgrounds, gaudy colours, under-construction webpages and construction signs. Luckily, our digital heritage defenders do exist and are truly active. Today, our digital culture have been accumulated and there seems to happen a re-collection of this "ancient" internet content. They are re-collecting a web that is gone or - say - hidden, and they contribute to save that part of history that went missing in the fast internet evolution. Disguised as researchers, scientists, academics, poets or archeologists, their main goal is to celebrate and pay tribute to those users who were honoring something of an other nature.

In this thesis, I'll try to highlight the purposes and stakes for this interest in the internet of old and its folklore. *Why pay a tribute and celebrate an achieved web?* This implies an idea of a digital folklore; a wish to keep traces of an old tradition which shows an other culture and an other time. *Who are these people who nourish this digital folklore ? What were their goals, utopias and stakes ?* The defenders of this internet of old are fighting against the forgetfulness of

2. Web 2.0 is the second generation of the WWW focused on the ability for people to collaborate and share information online. It refers to the transition from static HTML Web pages to a more dynamic Web based on serving Web applications to users.

1. Text borrowed in the winner thanks speech as part of the '1000\$ a page contest', Organised by the Net.art, 2004 [art.teleportacia.org/1000\\$/page.html](http://art.teleportacia.org/1000$/page.html)

a material that belonged to the past in order to conserve and pay a tribute to a specific WWW. It necessarily implies nostalgia and consequently a disappearance because in order to feel nostalgia something has to be gone. *What disappeared then ?* And if some tries to conserve it, it implies that the content that disappeared has a certain value, and if there is disappearance, there is devaluation. Folklore is living because something stands on the verge of disappearance and people are trying to conserve it. This is the value that is disappearing and makes us nostalgic. These digital recollectors show *a certain addiction to an internet addicted to its own past.* (*Retromania* title, Simon Reynolds)

2. The First citizens of the web - the first tribes.

Who were the first citizens? What were their goals, their values, their stakes, their utopies? Where were they living and in which context ? That's what I'll try to cover in this chapter.



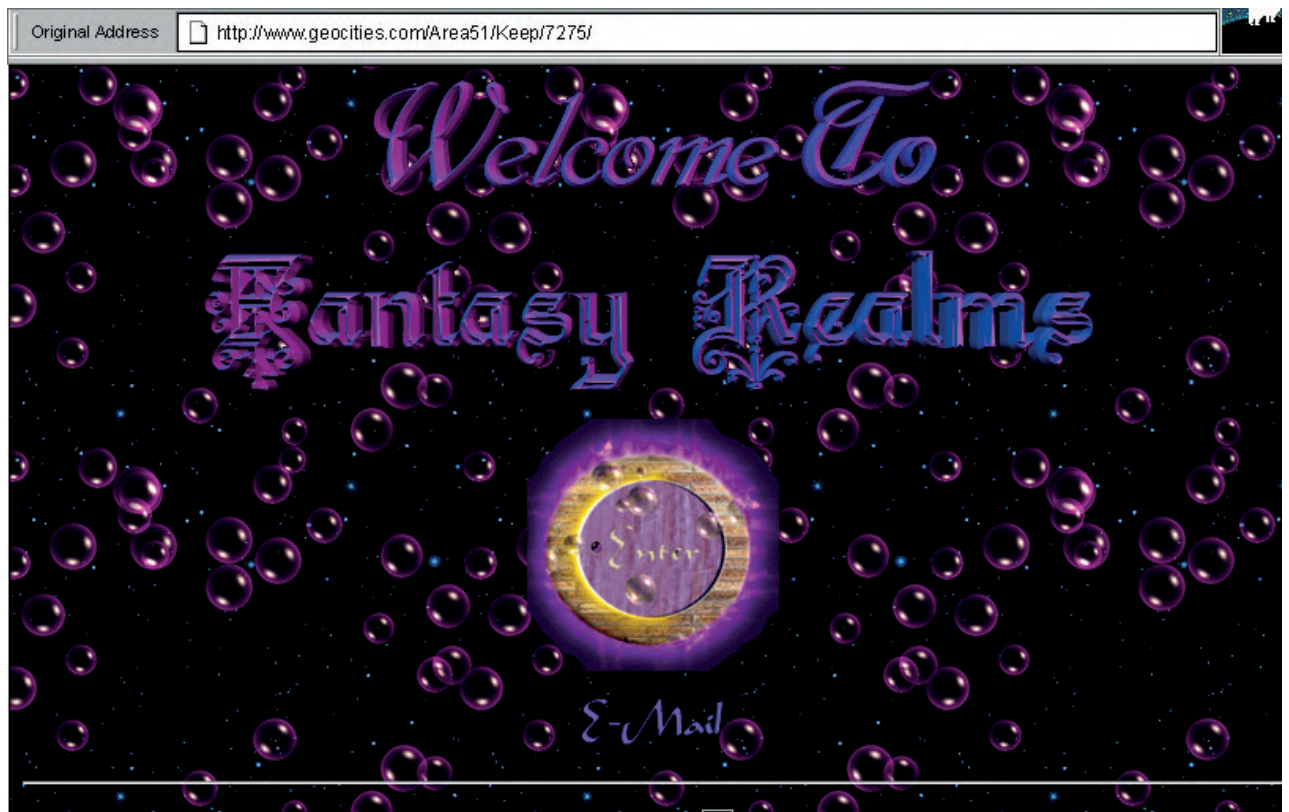
There was no specific user profile. The webpages were made by everyone, from your grandfather to kids at elementary school level. They had different ages, nationalities, colours ; they were rockers, uncles, unicorn fans, or even your mom. Whoever you were or whatever you liked, you were invited to be a part of something big and you knew that you'd find someone alike, someone that shared the same passion for black metal or poney gifs, you simply knew you'd have visitors. They were pretty naive, but that timeframe is a key in the digital human evolution, and they were not yet aware of it.

The internet, before the web, has been an attempt to splinter all preconceptions of what a media is. When people were able to connect to the internet for the first time in 1993, naive users came massively, invading and exploring the space with enthusiasm. They became a part of the internet without

having any technical background and therefore, technical skills. More and more people were having home computers - and with them came along the net access, but most of them didn't understand a thing about how either of them worked. The old school fathers of the web were not keen to see such a disaster and they had absolutely no desire to deal with an ignorant mass that had nothing in common with their high and developed culture. "User" became then a pejorative word. For the first time in the entire history of humanity, people were able to have free access to hardware and software and could put content online with almost no restrictions. At that time, the internet was experimental, freed from any kind of preconceptions. It was a wide and rich playing field. Therefore, users were in a position to seize the brand-new network technologies, disposing of an ocean of possibilities.

The amateur could then freely display his own content online; acting as a creator but also collector ; collecting and developping text, images, musics, on a common interface; the webpage. The users saw the computer as a tool, to compulsively and intensively produce content and upload it non stop to the web. That shift developped the role of the user, in a position where at the time, almost every user on the network was an amateur. Amateurism was what was hiding behind the first home pages, the *welcome to my page* era. Everything was to be personalised; the content, the design, the welcome speech but also their personal .com. It was such a big shift that *welcome to my homepage* became the slogan of web 1.0.¹

1. It refers to the first stage in the WWW, entirely made up of Web pages connected by hyperlinks. The exact definition of Web 1.0 is a source of debate but it is generally referring to the Web when it was a set of static websites that were not yet providing interactive content.



The first users were the first digital tribes. Ethymologically, "*a tribe is a social group existing before or outside the development of a state*". In our case, the first users were the ones investigating the field of internet before its development. They were a distinct culture developed inside the world wild web,

dependent on their land for their livelihood. They were pioneers, bravely dragging out their heads above the railings in order to embrace the future. They were self-sufficient ; it was a craft and a DIY culture. By creating or searching the content, coding and building their own pages they were in the same time building the internet. They were different from the dominant society or in others words, distinct from the professional designers. This also means that the first users were weak and vulnerable to exploitation, marginalization and oppression by the internet insitutions, big companies and professional designers. The amateurs webpages were seen as clumsy or ugly by professionals and this digital aesthetic was subject of mockery by the end of the last century. Hayo Wagenaar said about amateur culture:

"What do we think of amateurs getting involved in the web ? It's like getting stuck on the highway behind a caravan" This demonstrates how much the first tribes were the laughing-stock of an other but overarching WWW.

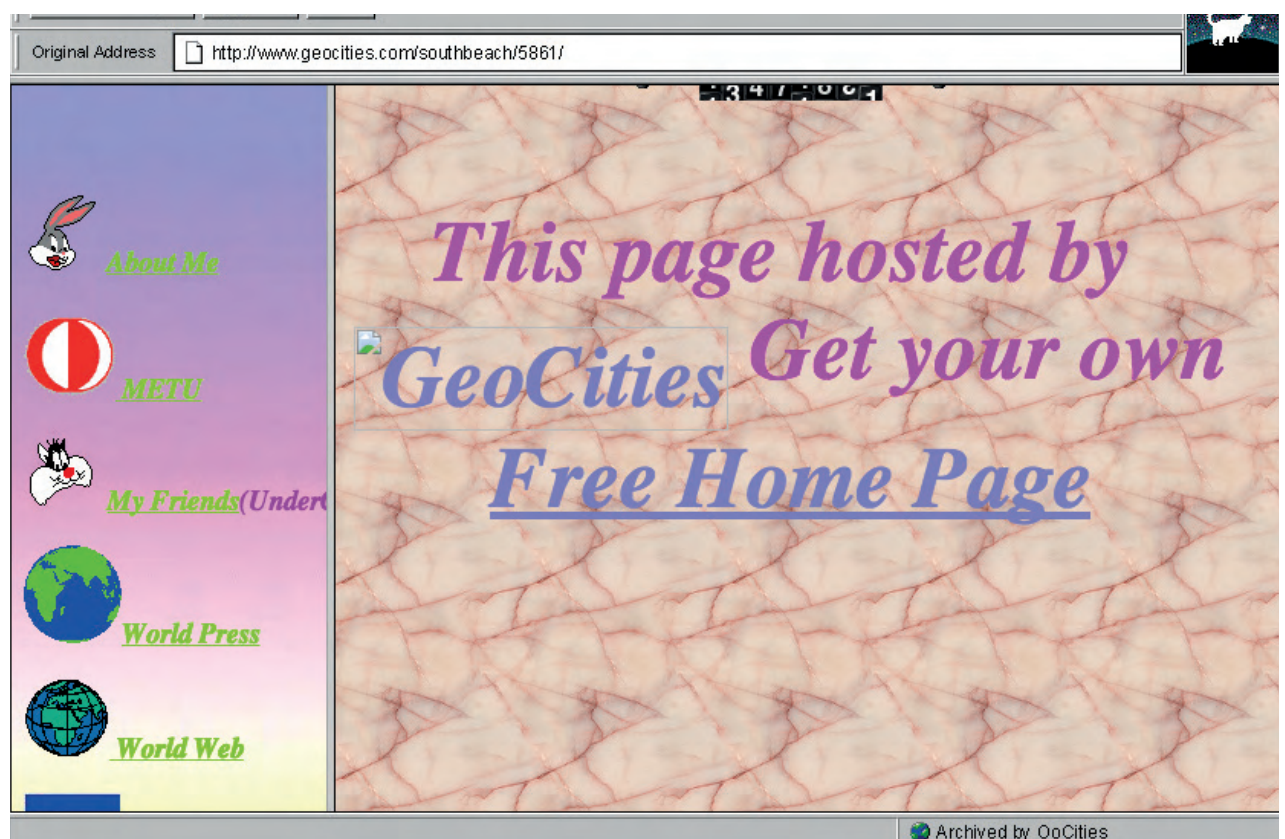
2.1 A place to live - GeoCities.



As every tribal society or community, first users were living in a specific state : GeoCities. It was a free web hosting service founded in 1994 that let anyone build his own web page for the very first time. It got acquired by Yahoo and became the first giant "social network". Users began to learn HTML (Hypertext markup language) and welcomed each other onto their "home pages". The policy of GeoCities was ideal for the digital tribes and it was nourishing their utopy; the idea that anyone would want to have his own space on this strange new medium and that you could make money by letting people do so was completely crazy and futuristic. Indeed, it was easy and free of charge, which facilitated the quick emergence of GeoCities as one of the most popular and inhabited places on the WWW, and it remained so until the late 90's. *"This is the next wave of the net—not just information but*

habitation." (David Bohnett, One of GeoCities co-founders). The company wanted to focus on building membership and a wide digital community. Therefore, internet turned from information medium to communication medium. It was built and organised as a "real" continent or digital world; with its neighbourhoods, cities' specificities and its citizens. It was a virtual community that mimicked the real world, with pages hosted in "cyber cities". GeoCities was actually a universe of its own and it contributed to structure and study users' behaviours in a particular way. Users had to choose a neighborhood in which to place their webpages and therefore, to which they wanted to belong. Those neighborhoods were named after real cities or regions - according to their content. The chosen neighborhood became part of the member's Web address along with a sequentially assigned "street address" number to make the URL unique. For instance, computer-related sites were placed in "*Silicon Valley*" and the ones relating to entertainment were assigned to "*Hollywood*". "*SoHo*" was for Art and writing websites, and "*Nashville*" for Country music.

The climate was very specific down there. There was almost no control on what was published and every page was somewhat chaotic; there was something immediately addictive about being able to have your own website and it felt like the future had arrived faster foreseen. The web at the time was not defined at all ; it was a strange place where institutions had not yet the power to organise the network. Consequently there were no norms.



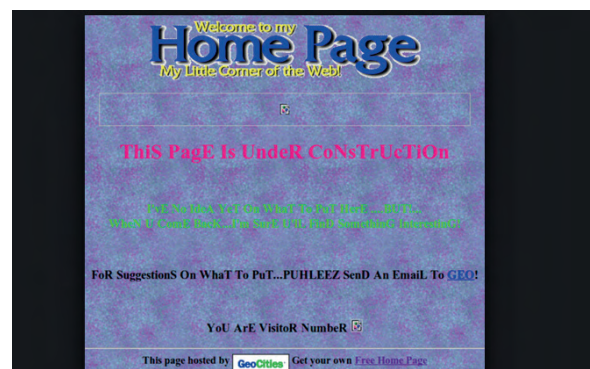
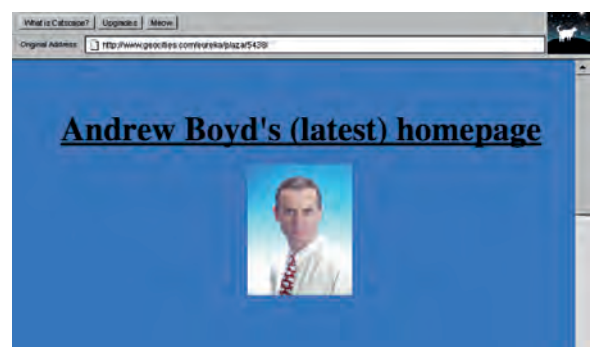
Without any structure, users were free to do whatever they wanted. They were instable, like every tribe, but they were living in autarky. Internet's

fathers didn't approve these tribes. They were an easy target for the usability experts and professional designers who never miss a chance to kick the ones who were writing "*welcome to my home page*". In 1998, Tim Berners-lee, one of the creators of the World wide web was irritated by these activities and aesthetics popping up in the medium he made up and said in this regard: "*they may call it home pages but it's more the gnome in somebody's front yard than the home itself*".

In 1999, GeoCities was acquired by Yahoo! and changed its policy, stating that the company owned all rights and content, including media such as images or texts. Users started to massively run away, protesting against this "reform" which was breaking with their entire ideology and the context at the time of the WorldWideWeb. Yahoo! changed the rights again, but unfortunately, people had to pay to have a open access. In April 2009, Yahoo! announced that it was shutting down GeoCities and in october 2009, it ceased to exist. The closure of GeoCities marks the end of an era and the end of a time of an almost absolute freedom on the web.

2.2 A specific language.

During the GeoCities reign, there was a specific internet environment ; "*A structural, visual and acoustic culture you could play around with, a culture you could break. There was an ocean of options and one of the options was to be different. (...) It was bright, rich, colourful, naive, slow, personal, direct and under-construction. It was a web of sudden collections and personal links. It was the internet of personal pages and personal collections. Webpages were built, on the edge of tomorrow, full of hope and inter-connections. It was the web of indigeneous and barbarians, the web for the amateurs soon swept by internet experts*" (A vernacular web, Olia Lialina, p19)



They created their own language, folklore and traditional frame soon transmitted to their successors. *What did they transmitt to them ? Which common ideas and values did they share?*

As every tribe or folklore, the homepage culture is heterogenous but we can observe a collection of recurrent topics, a recurrent pattern, a common factor that gathers every amateur under one roof. Local is the key word: with the homepage culture, every user recreates small houses that are connected to each other and thus creates a community, a group, a town. In order to be connected, they have created their own aesthetic language: an exotic language that gathers the amateurs together and thus, contributed to create their own folklore.

2.2.1 A Sharing community

In the aftermath of this internet 1.0, we can identify an intensive and repetitive use of fixed-forms iconography. This aesthetic elements created the users language ; buttons, bullets wallpapers, animated gifs, midi music, shiny buttons, moving arrows... Every element, every line, figure, button and sound was a single embedded unit on the page and could easily be extracted, if not directly from the browser then from looking at the source code to find the URLS of the files. These items were a source you could use to build, structure and decorate your site but they were a source for sharing as well.



Lots of people were building their pages with free images and gifs and a lot of people were collecting them. The many-to-many principle really worked; to distribute was no less important than to create. Developing your own site and building collections was a parallel process for a lot of people. The first tribes shared the feeling that it was their personal responsibility to configure the digital environment and build its infrastructure. That specific frame or "utopic spirit" shaped the specifities of the first tribes, where sharing and hospitality was more important than technical skills. The users received their guests with goodwill and they were warmly invited - to use those elements but also to visit their pages.

2.2.2 A welcoming message

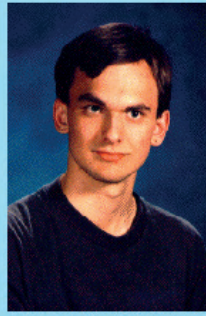
One feature of this exotic language was the use of a common welcoming message to invite people to visit their pages. These messages had two purposes: simply say hello to the world and give a hospitality proof. They were obviously all very distinct from each other, depending on the page topics but they were highly personal. They were a proof that someone real was hosting the page you were looking at but they were also an evidence of humanity. But more than anything, they were an evidence that you were welcomed and invited to the page - and to be a part of a big community.



"Gate Keeper: A warm Hello to you, and welcome to our new House. If you have been seduced by the evil Bill of microdor then I do not know if you will be permitted to enter, for the magical doors of JaVa will only open to the truely pure of heart. Cleanse thy soul with this: Netscape Adventurers, Please wipe your feet on the mat and follow me....." - geocities/colloseum/7897

"I Knew you'd come! Oh, how, how'd I Know! How dare you come to my web page!!! Didn't you see the title? Didn't you see the GET OUT or the I warned you? I Know You did! It was the first thing you saw! Well since you are all ready here might as well read what I have here. My name is Joseph Bonilla. I have started this we page in 6th grade. With the help of course of my favorite, nicest teacher Ms.Stephenson. If you are reading this you are probably the person to come to this page. So how do you like my diamond? Thanks well BYE!"

Welcome to Luke Anderson's Home Page



Hi! My name is Luke Anderson. I am 16 years old and live Oakton, Virginia, near Washington, D.C. in the USA. I am a sophomore at Oakton High School. I love to play sports and do fun activities. I have been interested in computers for a while, and I got started on the Internet almost two years ago. My friend [Gary](#) helped me with this homepage.

I love to send e-mails to people and would enjoy hearing from you, if you're interested in becoming a [penpal](#). [Write me now](#) if you have some time.

[More About Me...](#)

You are Visitor #:

"Welcome to lukes Anderson's Home page. My name is Luke anderson. I'm 16 years old and live Oakton, Virginia, Near Washington, D.C. int he USA. I'am a sophomore sat Oakton High School. I love to play sports and do fun activities. I have been inte- rested in computers for a while, and i got started on the internet almost two years ago. My friend Gary helped me with this homepage. I love to send e-mails to people and would enjoy hearing from you if you're interested in becoming a penpal. Write me now if you have some time."

In the third example, we have the evidence of the existence of a real human being; he is living in Oakton, likes to play sports, has a friend named Gary and a portray picture is joining the message.w Suddenly the person behind the page, the host, has a face : it's a sign of trust and a sign that someone has invited you to his own place, opened his door for you. Therefore, it gives an insight into their intimacy, sharing a little bit more of themselves.



Dear Internet person,

You have entered the World of Hakim please come in and enjoy at your own risk.

Hakim's World

My Pages include:

- The latest News, Graphics, Information from the NBA and NFL**
- Keep track of world events with CNN**

"Dear internet people, you have entered the world of Hakim, please come in and enjoy at your own risk." (www.geocities/collegetpark/pool/7508) These messages also served as appetizers; they were a promise and a hint about what you might find behind the door because you never knew what you'd find down there.

The owner of the page suddenly became a guide and his role was to tease his visitors in order to maintain the suspense. The structures of the web-pages turned the navigation into a mystery quest for the visitor who wanted to be surprised. Surprise is indeed one of the keys to understand the visitors behaviour. If there would be no surprise, it wouldn't be worth it.



"Dr. Dale, Ph.D. and associates are pleased to offer Professional counseling and/or informed Advice for members of the Cyber Community. The Clinic is operated by Trained , Degreed Counselors and Therapist. The service is offered in the spirit of Cyber Space Services and is absolutely free except when notified in advance. There will be Pay for service options offered but only on and by pre arranged agreement. All free services are supplied via E-Mail and response time will be determined by client load."

Some other welcoming messages were totally fictional as we can see in the last example. Personal pages, and consequently internet, helped the first tribes in their creativity. The key was to be original, stand out of the crowd and have something interesting to propose. This is probably something that the internet of today is missing ; the internet of the past was a proof of humanity but also a proof of individuality. Being different was honored. Today's web is preformatted and preconfigured ; individuality isn't the key, conformity and melting in is.

This welcoming culture is characterised by a strong appropriation of the WWW medium: a homepage displays information about its creator, displayed online under a personalized.com address. Self-mediation is all about the displaying of the personal online: one's identity, hobbies, work activities, etc. Internet technologies progress by appropriation and individualization of media. Personal pages show a "*reterritorialization*" of media environments. (Paloques-Berges Camille, remediating internet trivia)

2.2.3. Pages organisation

DIY frame logic

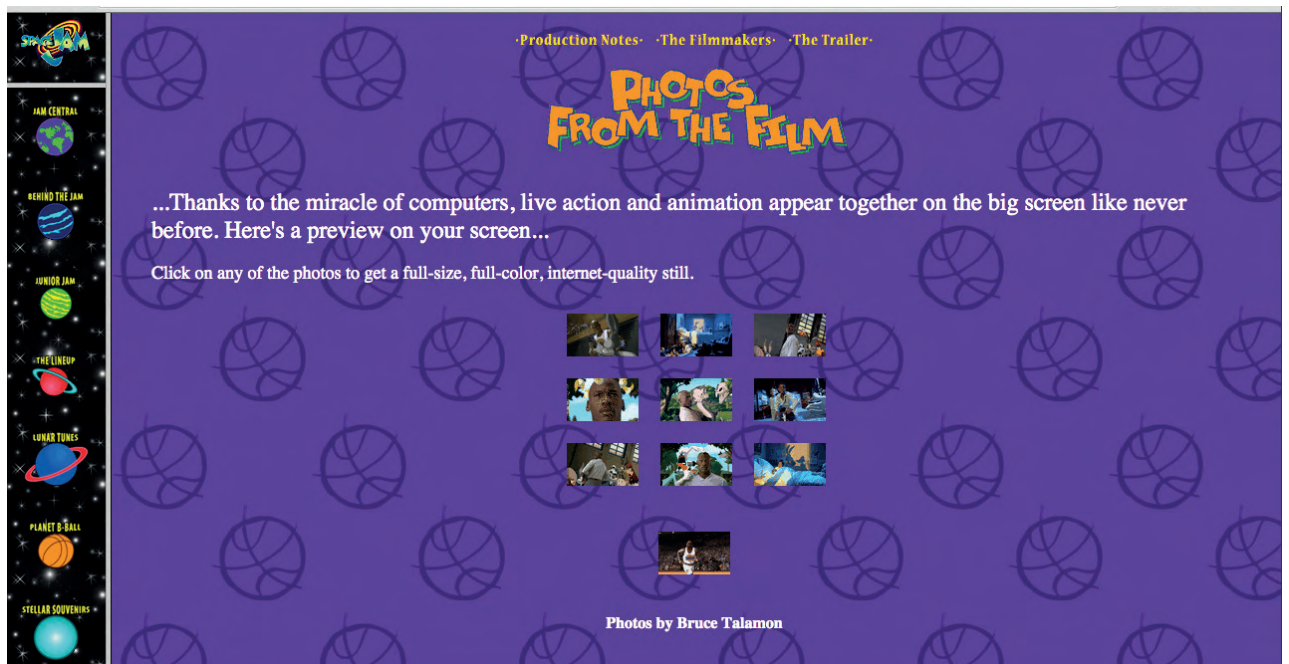
Their culture was a DIY culture and the slogan was "*everybody can – and so do I*". The first tribes created a popular niche and one of their characteristic features was the organisation of their pages. Pages were built in a DIY frame logic because of a cheap hosting and low cost environment. Internet offered to its users a gigantic playground where they could lead their personal projects : personal pages, images collections but business as well. Everything was possible since as of now it was possible to make everything by oneself.

The *Space Jam* website is a good example to capture this DIY logic.



The Warner Bros *Space Jam* website served as a launching platform for the movie and has been running since 1996. This site pushed all the limits of web development at the time and it was actually the first time webpages were used for such a purpose. It disappeared for almost 15 years and came back to the surface 5 years ago. The site remains almost unchanged from its beginning and its rebirth is like a bombshell; discovering Space Jam is like the equivalent of discovering a cave painting. It remains one of the most

faithful living documents of early web design that anyone can access online - probably due to the fact that it's still intact. Everything has been handmade on the page ; a DIY perspective design work. The creator of the page, Buckley, said about it : *"I was on the Internet before there were graphical browsers, and it was still fascinating to me,"* he says. *"I spent way too many hours deep into the night exploring this netherworld. I was a movie guy and I thought, 'Oh, wait a minute, we can do some things here, we can market movies on the Internet.' It became as much a creative exercise as anything else, but it was this new playground that had presented itself."*¹ The home page is cartoonish and very representative of an early web time : opening galaxy of moving icons, a starry background, and so on. What is crazy with the Space Jam website is the fact that almost everything is still in use : the sites section names are still functional: Jam Central for movie facts and film maker bios, Lunar Tunes for soundtrack info, Stellar Souvenirs for sound clips and screen savers, and so on. Even today, with its basic HTML, pre high speed file sizes, and Flash-free architecture, the site is after all simple to navigate. Nothing was designed to still work after 19 years; it was simply designed to work. Braun says. *"I liked to find creative solutions. We used 1-pixel blank GIFs everywhere and stretched them. We found really creative ways to make things look the way we wanted. There's so much technology out there now, but I still write HTML where, if you don't have a style sheet, the page will still work. I still try to keep to the core values."*²



The webpage platform helped them in many ways; more than launching the movie, it also helped them to bring the cinematic world to life. Suddenly, internet was a perfect medium to advertise. The site remains a technical and innovative marvel; they created a 360° tour before virtual reality came in, you could download a coloring book with downloadable black-and-white sketches. There was also an online quiz before online quizzes became trendy, and all the WAV, AIFF and QuickTime files are still functional and ready for download. Braun adds, *"we could do whatever we wanted."*³



An other example of this DIY frame logic is this webpage created for a wedding. The page was designed by the bride and served not only as an invitation but also as a kind of memorial. A contemporary wedding announcement. It was a web of craft, everything was self-designed and consequently it wasn't perfect: sometimes chaotic and unstructured. Visitors never conceived these pages as an end in itself, *the pages were expected to be always under construction because it was a promise that the page would always grow.* (A vernacular Web, Olia Lialina, p21) This idea of constant development was primordial because it was a clear signal that a real person had created the page. Not only the content of the page was in constant development, but the design as well. They were built in response to one another. The navigation was indeed complicated but it was a part of the visitor's experience or journey. The visitor had to look for elements (scroll down, scroll up, right and left) in order to find treasures. This proves the websites's authenticity, spontaneity and devotion.

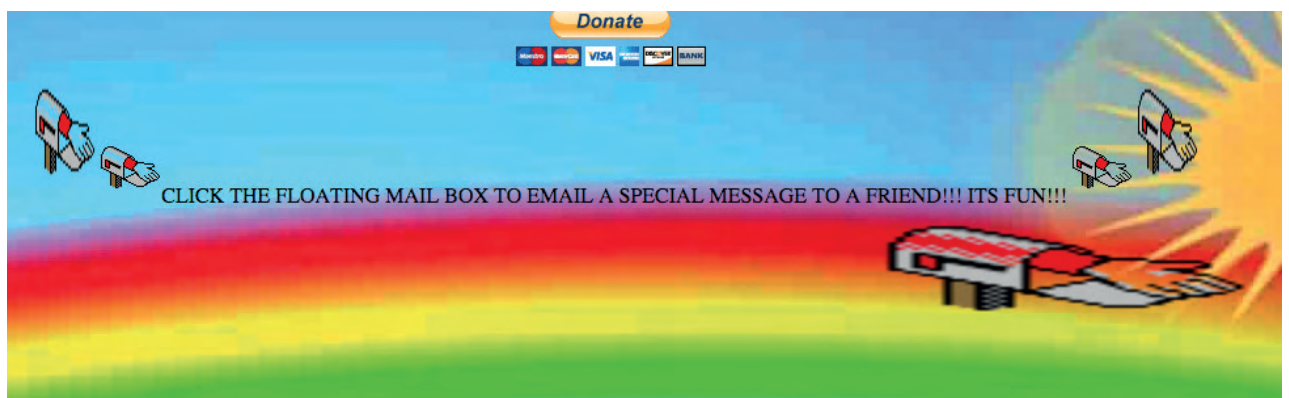
Linking strategies

The first tribes were fascinated by the power of links. They represent an other specificity in the space organisation; preferably they had to be included on every single page. Websites were composed of lists of links or long pages of unclassified and annotated links. The linking strategies helped the propagation and profusion of webpages and therefore, helped the many-to-many principle. Every user had a section of external links on his website, and a site was not complete without those bridges. By following the links you could find much more than what you were looking for in the beginning. They created this link system to compensate for the rather rough search

engine results through their own/human intervention. Links were transporting you to an other house or neighbourhood, a friend, an email address, a related or surprising topic... The user's experience or the visitor of a webpage is also challenging ordinary perceptions of time. The pages organisation and the linking system changed the time perception but also the loading time (everything was slow), the time to go from one page to the next, the time spent or lost searching for a page, that might have ceased to exist or had never existed.



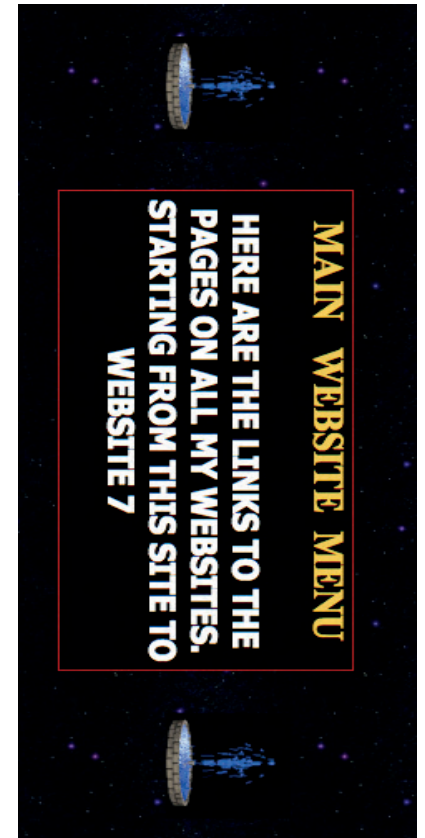
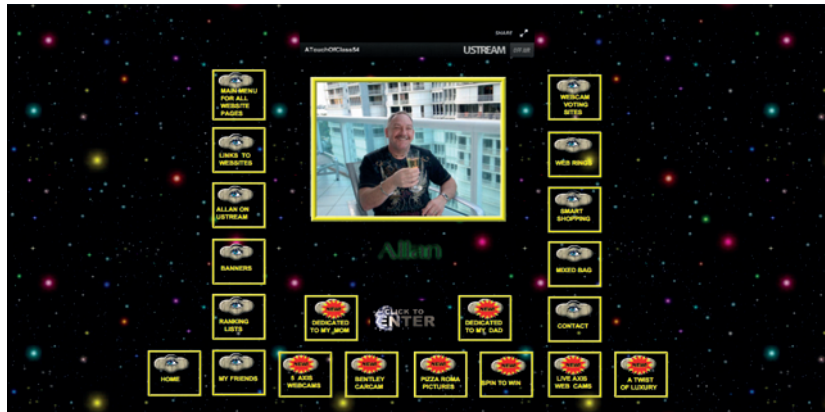
The most amazing website on the internet.com is a good example to show the time you could waste looking for links. The page is hectic and is a clutter of elements, gifs, texts, moving and blinking images. The links are hard to find and are kind of melting with the epileptic background. The way you searched for information is time consuming but rewarding if you freeze your focus on.



"CLICK THE FLOATING MAIL BOX TO EMAIL A SPECIAL MESSAGE TO A FRIEND!!! IT'S FUN!!" A moving mail box is joining the message. Instead of the conventionnal "*e-mail me links*" here the visitor has to click to send an email. The only issue with this mail box is that it's almost impossible to click on due to its rapidity. This links hunt takes the shape of an experience for the visitor, shattering completely the time notion.

Today the links lost their infrastuctural importance because the link system changed; search engines and portals made researches faster but less surprising. *"In the quest for order and hierarchy, the web changed completely. Sites with no external links at all became the norm and now constitute the facade of the mainstream web."* (A vernacular Web, Olia Lialina, p27)

Allansempire is a good example to illustrate this linking strategies and human indexing.

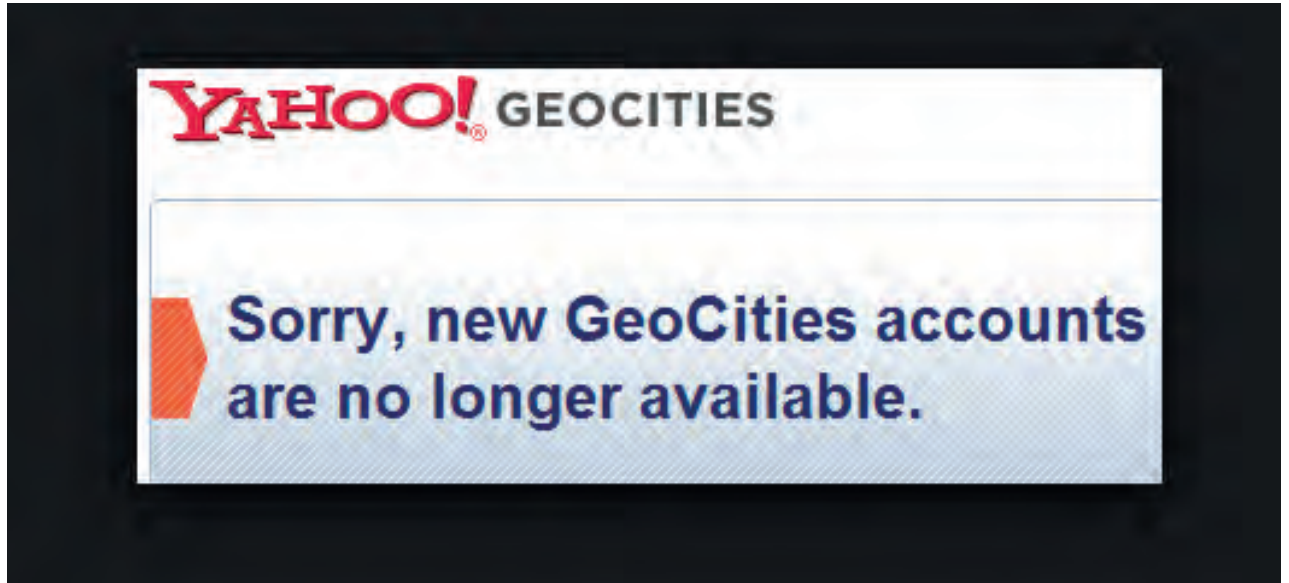


His linking system is huge and complex; links to his own page, to his friend, to others "allan's websites". The interesting thing about **Allansempire** is that the website ceased to be updated only recently, in 2014 - so a long time after the disappearance of human indexing. Today's web blogs compensate for those search engines by proposing surprise links and we can thus argue that **Allansempire** is using the linking strategies belonging to the 90's web by nostalgia. With the data explosion on the web and networks, search engines have come to replace indexing by hand which was the only solution to moderate this wildness in the internet environment. The algorithms and data processing of search engines completely blurred away human indexing.

3. The destruction of an era.

3.1. GeoCities' genocide

In October 2009, Yahoo! closed GeoCities and its closure marked the end of an era and the shift towards another chapter of internet history. Over the past decade, GeoCities had fought a long battle and at the end, it was considered outdated technology.



What is the official cause of death and what did it imply? And what exactly was killed by the disappearance of GeoCities ?

Just before the end of GeoCities, a lot of pages seemed to be frozen in an evolutionary state - there were a lot of unfinished sites, due to this under construction mind set. Everyone or almost had personal pages, but nothing could make your page stand out from the crowd, not even your great gifs. Its success was to let people run their own business but with the first Yahoo! deal, the freedom and the feeling of community disappeared. GeoCities started to show symptoms of weakness, and the boredom came gradually. It became uncool, inhabitants started to leave one by one and GeoCities turned into a deserted town. Thus, there was no reason for new citizens to invade the space; they wanted a page only if other people were there as well.

By closing GeoCities, Yahoo! succeeded in eliminating the first digital tribes and at the same time, the biggest amount of history in the smallest amount of time. This crime has had for consequence that millions of accounts and files disappeared - probably forever and the total destruction of a rare digital heritage. It was for millions of citizens a first experience in the world wide web, dealing with the cheap, low-cost ,accessible website and all its possibilities. GeoCities played a significant role for the human expression

on the web for almost 15 years. Web pages were revealing something about our society; countless hours of writing, editing, compiling, reflecting and creating. They represent a time of first tribes' dreams and beliefs, a lost time that some saviours will attempt to resuscitate in different ways.

4. The Web RECOLLECTION - the resurrection

In which way did the closure of GeoCities affect the internet evolution ?

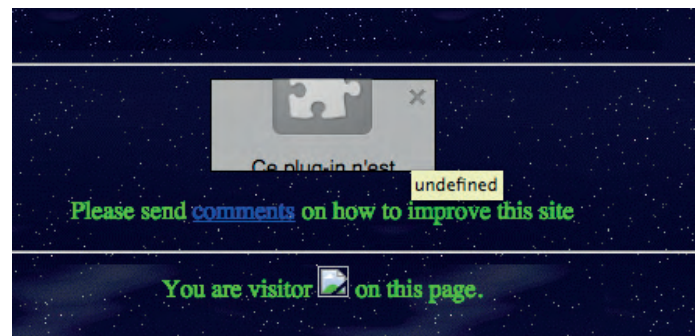
What was left on the way and what exactly is this lost value ?

How are people trying to save that part of our digital heritage ?

Which form does it take ? And what new value are they bringing to the table ?

4.1. A place of worship, the ruins left behind

The importance of the first tribes lays in the spreading of internet architecture and culture, their values and utopias. The shutting down of GeoCities reveals the end of an important period of internet history, and consequently means that what is gone belongs henceforth to the past. Between the announcement and its date of death, despite the attempt by some saviour armies to save our digital heritage, only a part of personal pages have been saved. Some pages and files are still missing - especially images; there are holes in found web sites and pages are filled with dead links. Instead of images, there is now a replacement, an icon telling the visitor that this is where an image was supposed to be and giving a hint that the site is dead.



These pages are the remains of the first digital tribes : structures that were once complete and have fallen into a state of partial of complete disrepair. Just like real ruins, "*this is due to a lack of deliberate acts of destruction. Natural disaster, war and depopulation are the most common root causes, with many structures becoming progressively derelict over time due to long-term weathering and scavenging.*" (Ruins definition, Wikipedia)

You Have Reached My Future Website

This Website Is Currently In Construction. Please Come Back When It Is Ready.

The webpages that could be saved became sort of a graveyard, or to picture it in a more positive way, they became a place of worship where you can cry on these digital monuments. They became a space where you can remember a time where movement and construction were the heart of online activity. The webpages left behind are no longer efficient, we dig up 404 messages, domains are for sale or already sold to someone else, and you need to be really lucky to find a page still maintained by its user. Sometimes you can come across the original website but it has been actualised and updated.

However, many pages have been saved and remain intact or similar since their abandon. Those pages, dating from the last century, were built and designed for monitors of the last century. Ancient animated gifs are missing, there are less frames, less images. Talking about the date of the last update, it works in the same way monuments, or graves do.

The date of the last update or of the end of the update is written on the bottom of the page, usually in small letters or in a small gifs. They are the indication of the sites death: "*last update in 1998*". You know that it won't be changed anymore, and some remain forever in their "under construction" stage. Whatever the form it has today, all that matters is that it existed once. The remains a cemetery of certain forms of communication, technologies that were new at a time but died; a *dead media*.

Last Updated: March 9, 1997

4.2 The web archeologists.

Who were the saviours army? Who are those people recollecting the web ? What disappeared and what are they unearthing? Why re-collect that lost web and which form does it take ? What are the benefits of the first tribes to their successors ?

During the announcement of Geocities's closure, a saviour army came up to rescue our digital tradition and downloaded as much content as possible. This content was not only representative of a specific decade, it was also a worthy scientific and historical source portraying our digital folklore. GeoCities became the symbol of a vernacular¹ web freed from institutions and any political structure. Thus, we can say that their aesthetic language was vernacular.

They recall the visual aesthetics of an era when it was expected that personal websites would always be under construction. Internet archeologists are unearthing digital artefacts that are as important as the cave paintings of Lascaux. Those pages show the origins of an internet culture which later became omnipresent, showcasing how it all started and what we have accomplished so far. Those artefacts are valuable sources for archivists and those who still prefer to build modular websites using available elements. Many people are celebrating this *internet of old* - and in many ways as I will show here after.

There is a paradoxical observation regarding the shutting down of GeoCities : on one hand, it was a savage assault but on the other hand, the rescue operations which lead to the effort in archiving and all the buzz it created, had as a consequence a significant opportunity to investigate the 90's web and the first tribes. The fact that this massive data base was available to everyman and researchers created a wish of another nature; they were finally able to preserve a part of their - our - history, and consequently, our digital heritage. The re-collectors are not only unearthing objects and artefacts; they are also sharing it with the world, creating webpages which differ in their forms. Those digital collections become sort of our 21th century curiosities cabinets, in the spirit of many to many, sharing objects that are both "mine" and "not mine".


1. Vernacular is a word used generally in linguistics that point out the language used by local communities, generally opposed to institutionalization.)

OOCITIES and REOCITIES

"Here lies what we could salvage from the ashes of GeoCities." (welcoming message, <http://reocities.com>)

Reocities and Oocities are an attempt out of many to save our digital heritage, acting as historians, scientists or archaeologists. They are archiving the webpages of GeoCities by neighbourhoods as it was formally shown on the website when it was still alive. They are rebuilding the walls and streets of the cities, where large numbers of early citizens of the WWW used to live, but a lot of houses have yet to be rebuilt. Their aim is *"to save those pages which are worthy and unique scientific sources or are of great public interest as well as those, which are historically representing the 90's website culture and style."*

OOCITIES *"A living memorial on early Web culture and an effort to maintain an amazingly extensive collection of information."* (<http://oocities.com>)



Account restoration in progress, some of these are still empty, tens of millions of files still have to be added

Below is the directory of top level ReoCities.

Please note that although all of the Cities are there, not all the houses are (yet), but we will continue to restore accounts until we have all of them.

- Area51 --- Science fiction and fantasy
- Athens --- Education, literature, poetry, and philosophy
- Augusta --- Golf and the finer side of the fairways
- Baja --- Four-wheeling, SUVs, off-roading, adventure travel
- BourbonStreet --- Jazz, Cajun food, Southern culture
- CapeCanaveral --- Science, mathematics, aviation
- CapitolHill --- Government, politics, and lots of strong opinions
- CollegePark --- University life, from academics to extracurriculars
- Colosseum --- Sports and recreation
- EnchantedForest --- A neighborhood for and by kids
- Eureka --- Small businesses, home offices
- FashionAvenue --- Top Designers, beauty, and fashion
- Heartland --- Families, hometown values
- Hollywood --- Film and TV
- HotSprings --- Health and fitness
- MadisonAvenue --- Advertising

GeoCities Neighborhoods

Until 1999, GeoCities pages were sorted into categories using the following scheme: GeoCities.com/neighborhood/number starting with number 1000 and counting up to 9999. Thus each neighborhood (=category) or subneighborhood contains up to 9000 pages. ([Full list of GeoCities Subneighborhoods](#))

Area51	::: Science fiction & fantasy
Athens	::: Teaching, education, philosophy, reading, writing
Augusta	::: Golf
Baja	::: Off-road & adventure travel
BourbonStreet	::: Jazz, New Orleans, Cajun food, Southern United States topics
CapeCanaveral	::: Science, mathematics, aviation, technology, engineering,
CapitolHill	::: Government and Politics
CollegePark	::: University life
Colosseum	::: Athletics & sports
EnchantedForest	::: Topics of interest to children
Hollywood	::: Films
MotorCity	::: Automobiles & racing
NapaValley	::: Wine
Nashville	::: Country music
Petsburgh	::: Pets
Pipeline	::: Extreme sports
RainForest	::: Conservation
ResearchTriangle	::: Research & Development, technology
SiliconValley	::: Computers, programming, hardware & technology
SoHo	::: Art and writing
SunsetStrip	::: Music like blues, punk rock & rock n roll, grunge
TimesSquare	::: Computer & video games
TelevisionCity	::: Television

This project is captured in an ongoing form since they are still working on it trying to save more and more of our history. All the saved pages represent a wealth whose value will only become apparent over time, due to the paradoxical value of time on internet. OOCITIES and REOCITIES are a process of cleaning up pages to restore them to their former glory. *"A LIVING MEMORIAL"* captured this idea of a constant development and process in archiving well.

But why is archiving the web such an issue? The issue with archiving the net comes from the fact that it isn't that old and evolves extremely fast. It is

almost impossible to archive all its content. For instance, in 1994, there were fewer than 3000 websites online but in 2014, there were more than 1 billion. The web is unstable, contrary to the Egyptian or Greek cultural heritage. The Egyptian or Greek cultures died a long time ago. Consequently, what is left behind is static. But we are in the middle of the internet era, the web is still evolving, which makes it difficult to analyse.

The thing with the web is that it is not a place in any reliable sense of the word; *it is not a repository or a library.* (*Space Jam, Article*) Originally, it was intended to be a messaging system so the architecture of the web was built on its ephemerality. As a matter of fact, it is constantly changing and in a perpetual nowness. Digital information has a lot of benefits but when it disappears, it's for good. Culturally and therefore conceptually, the functionality of the web has changed. The Internet is now considered a place where information lives and knowledge is stitched together. Consequently, there are not yet enough robust systems to acquire and preserve our digital fossils. Historians and digital saviours agree on one fact: The early web - today's web, will be mostly lost with time. Saving something on the web does not only mean preserving websites, but also maintaining the environments in which they first appeared — the same environments that often fail, even when they're being actively maintained.

This is where the stake of Oocities and Reocities lie in. It is an attempt to gather data that has been recorded in order to make it available not only for users, but more importantly for future research. The internet is not only about making knowledge accessible, but conserving its remains for the future is about knowledge itself.

Internet archeology.

Internet Archaeology

About
Still Images
Moving Images
Collections
Netscraps
Webgrabs
Guest Galleries
^



News

5.2.11 - MAUSOLEUM II - A Holy Ground by Krist Wood

12.10.10 - Now That's What I Call MIDI

07.25.10 - Arran Ridley Guest Gallery Added

12.11.09 - XXX Collection Added

12.2.09 - YzK Collection Added

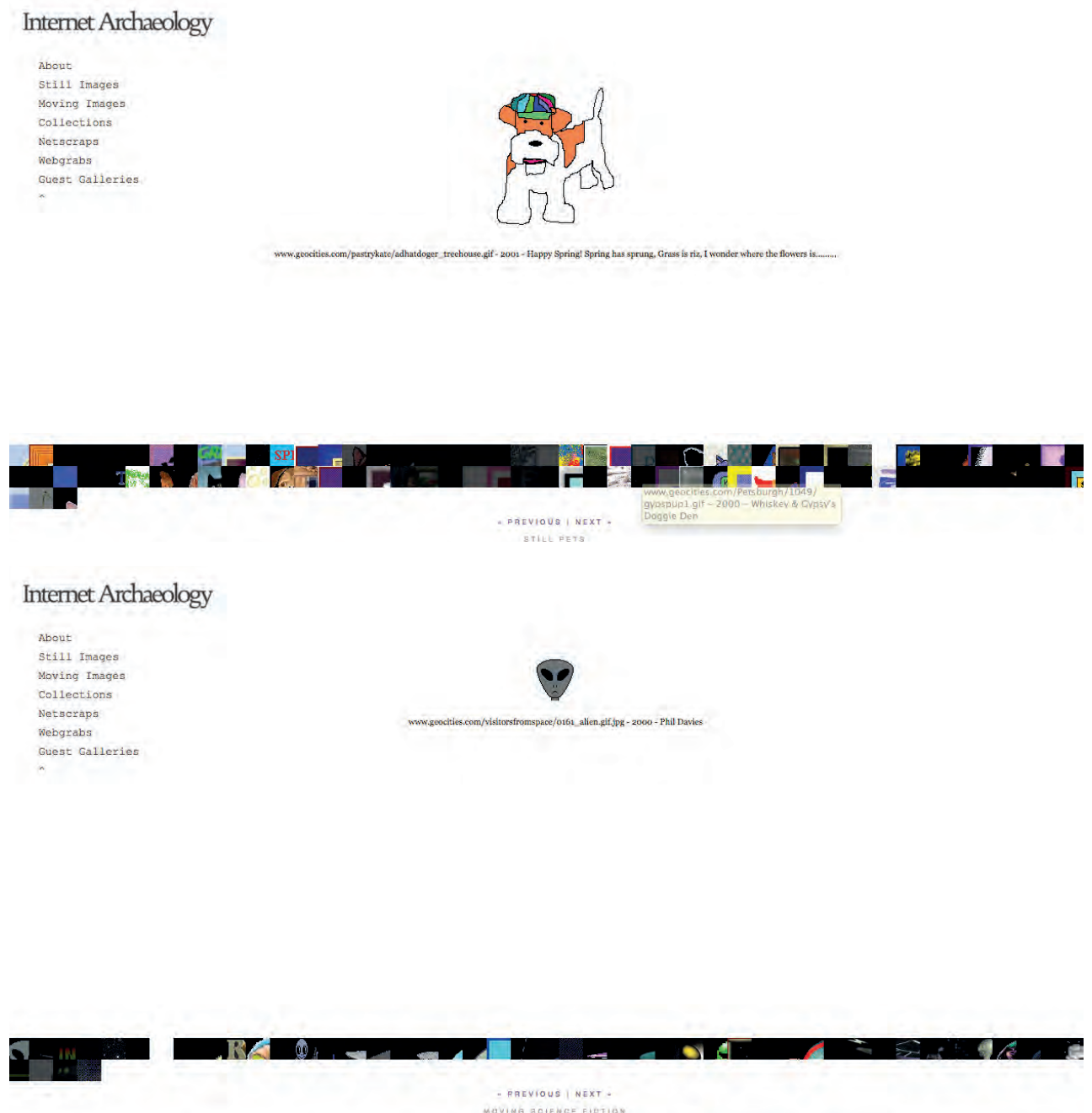
This project is lead by Ryder Rypps. *Internet archeology*, to mention it in his words "*seeks to explore, recover, archive and showcase the graphic artefacts found within earlier Internet culture*". This archivers' collective is digging into the web shallows in order to share their findings, preserve our digital background and acknowledge their importance in understanding the beginnings and the birth of an internet culture. Their main focus is graphic artefacts, such as the gifs or JPEG files found on GeoCities.

Internet Archeology constitutes the most visual attempt in archiving GeoCities content, classifying these elements into genres and sub genres. The collections are recontextualized within an exhibition or encyclopedic perspective, in the spirit of Curiosity cabinets. *Internet Archeology* is standing in between vernacular and vehicular perspectives on web folklore, like the other archiving projects.

Curiosity cabinets were collecting and showing a multitude of heterogeneous artefacts ; the exposed objects were not necessarily linked by anything other than their belonging to the past. *Internet Archeology* works in the same perspective : images are categorised by either still or moving images and organised in diverse subcategories, such as Nature, religious, science, fantasy and so on. Images are presented for their historical but mainly for their aesthetic value. They represent the curiosity cabinets of the modern technological age.

From an aesthetic point of view, *Internet Archeology* works the same way as galleries : they are all clean, white, uncluttered. The white background and spacing gives a structured look and lets the images breathe and speak for

themselves, which is paradoxical for a re-collection of this 90's web where the pages were a cluster of elements. More than being uncluttered, each image is shown individually; Out of its context, with nothing to distract the eye but the image itself and its plate underneath that links the image to its original page. This resembles the way paintings are presented on white walls. The website is organised to let us focus our attention on one image at a time, similar to what we can see in archeology catalogues : the object is extracted from its natural environment and by showing it 'alone', it is a way to reevaluate it, and therefore, give it more value.

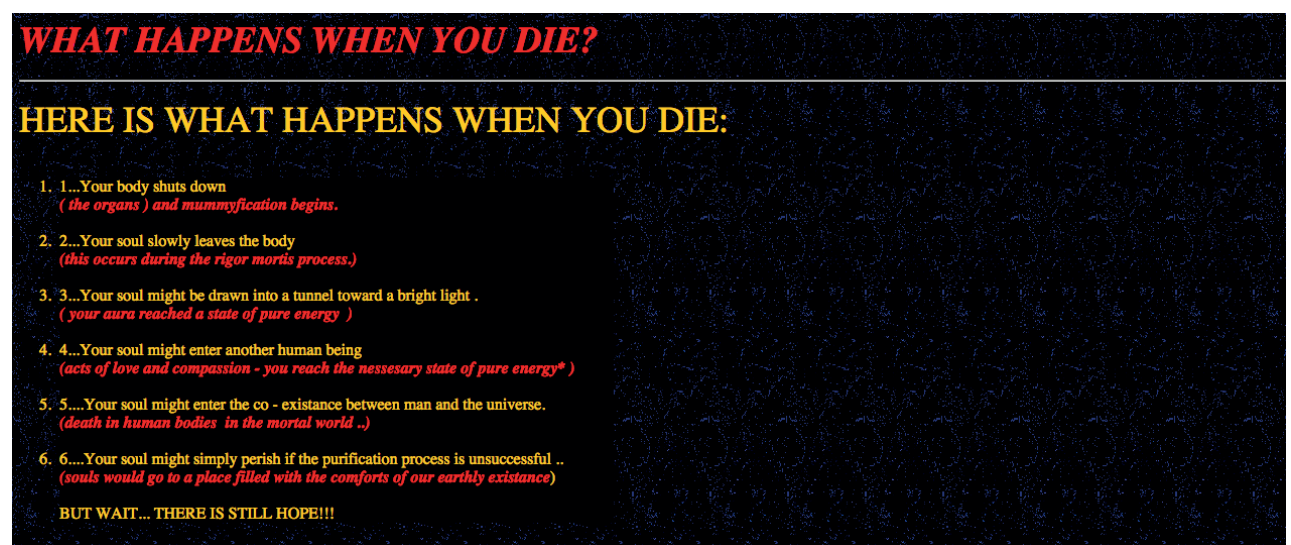


An other category in *Internet Archeology* that catches my attention is the "Guest galleries". Indeed, the similarity between galleries and this website is fully conscious. *Internet Archeology* is not only about archiving the *internet of old*, but it is also about showcasing what artists have done with its artefacts. This guest galleries are an attempt to show art works made by some artists, consciously chosen by Ryder Ripps which makes him not only an archiver

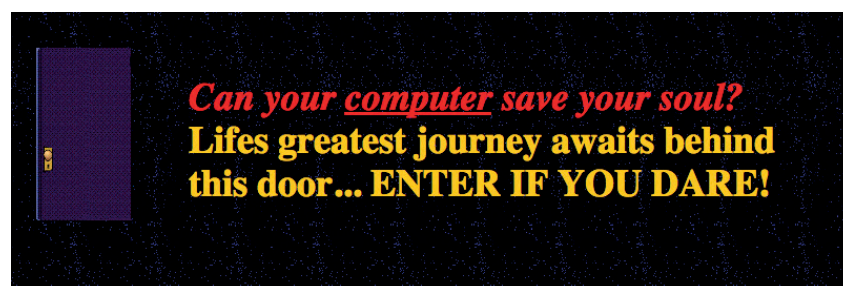
but also a curator. The works in this category have been made specifically for *Internet Archeology*. As Ryder Ripps said, " *These works are inspired by, speak to, or use elements of an earlier internet. The purpose of the Guest Galleries is to create a dialogue between old and new; enforcing the belief that digital artifacts should be preserved and showcased for their cultural, historical and aesthetic value.* "

Therefore, collecting is not only displaying items that one finds value in. It is also about learning from these items, learning about the objects and the subjects that made them and about their making-of: artists are sampling and creating new objects out of those elements and give a whole new value to the remains of this primitive web.

Regarding this, I would like to introduce the piece "heaven" from Tabor

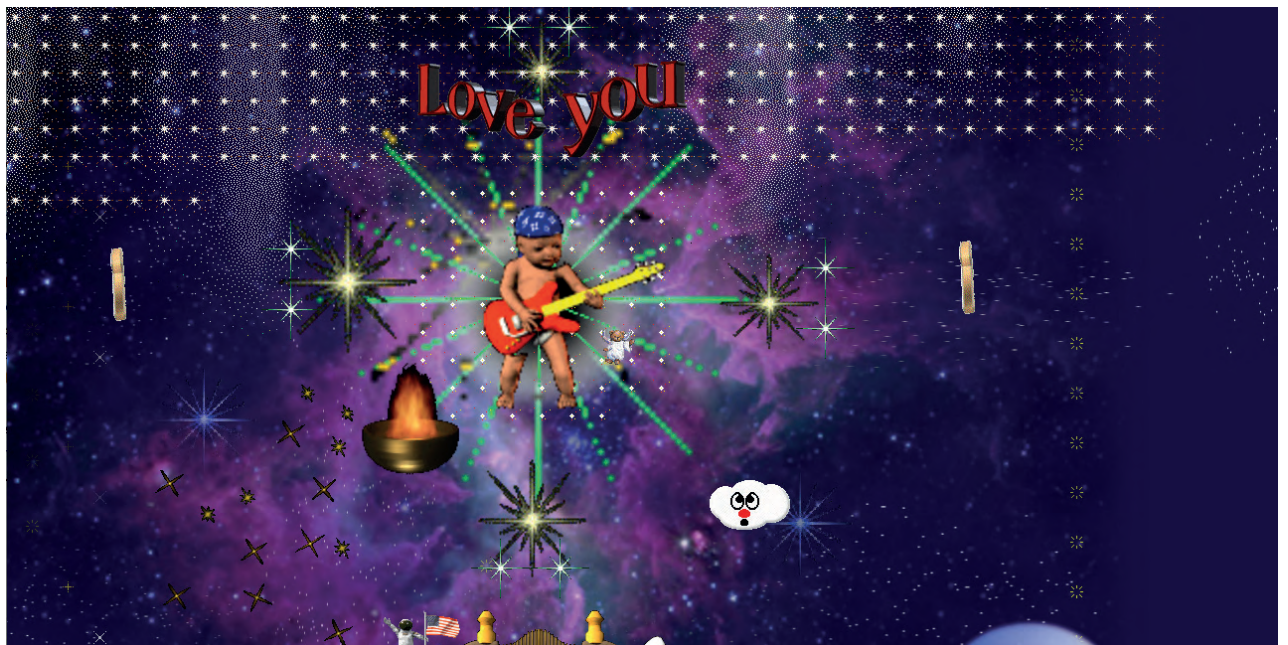
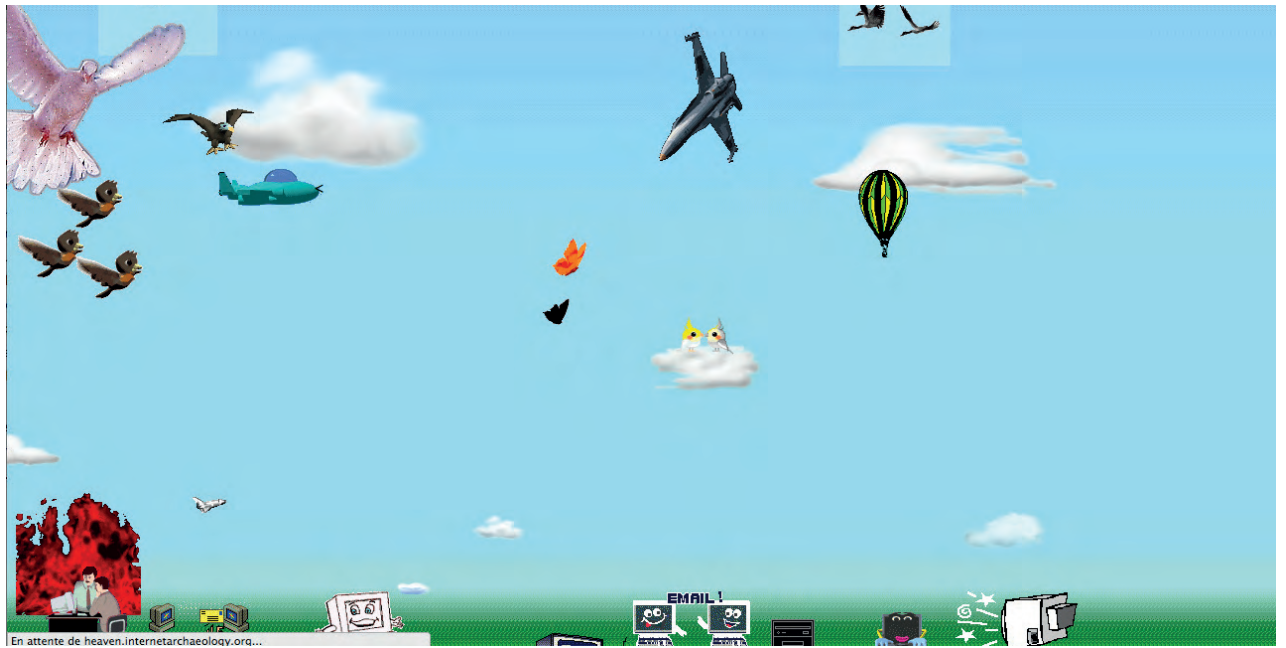


Robak, which is displayed in "Guest Galleries". He finds his inspiration in the attitudes and aesthetics of an earlier internet culture. "Heaven" is exploring the relationship between the medium and its non physical message. "Heaven" is separated into two parts; an "appetizer" - heaven's door and the heaven itself. In the heaven's door, you can read a short intro about how it feels and what happens when you die as a human being. Robak ends the text with the words: "Can your computer save your soul? Life's greatest journey awaits behind this door... Enter if you dare".



Tabor Robak used the early internet vocabulary and techniques as the appetizer or the "enter if you dare"; It was a phrase often used by the first tribes in their welcoming message as a warning that you'll never know what you'll find behind the door. In the first part, he also used the same aesthetical

language and iconography than the early web: Starry moving background, brights colors, big and appealing text and so on.



In the second part - if you dare to enter - you are then able to reach the sky; old and new digital graphics elements are blended to create a celestial moving landscape and therefore, an experience for the viewer. It is simulating an ascension into heaven, travelling through the sky and reaching paradise. The space is transformed into a kind of spectacle where user's interactivity is played and acted in unforeseen ways. The trick here is that the user thinks he is a part of it and can act on the interface but it is just a semblance. The work can be viewed as a virtual portray of heaven in its traditional sense, but also as a heaven for yesterday's graphics and old internet culture. *"But wait ! there is still Hope!"* is a metaphore for a culture that died or disappeared but remains a meaningful and hopeful source for many net artists and archivers.

Ryder Rypps's role as a curator can also be seen in the "Webgraps" section. The primary focus of Webgraps is the preservation and presentation of GeoCities sites. Unlike others archivers, who are collecting and saving as many webpages as possible (OOCities and Reocities) he made a selection : only 40 webpages can be seen in "Webgraps", picked carefully for their layout, content, graphic and use.

This shows us that the stakes from purely net archivers and internet archeology are of different natures ; one is an attempt on saving our heritage in a historical perspective, the other is more a remediation and a reappropriation of a certain medium and culture in order to give it another sense and an other value. Ryder Rypps and his project are standing in between web archeologists and web tributers.

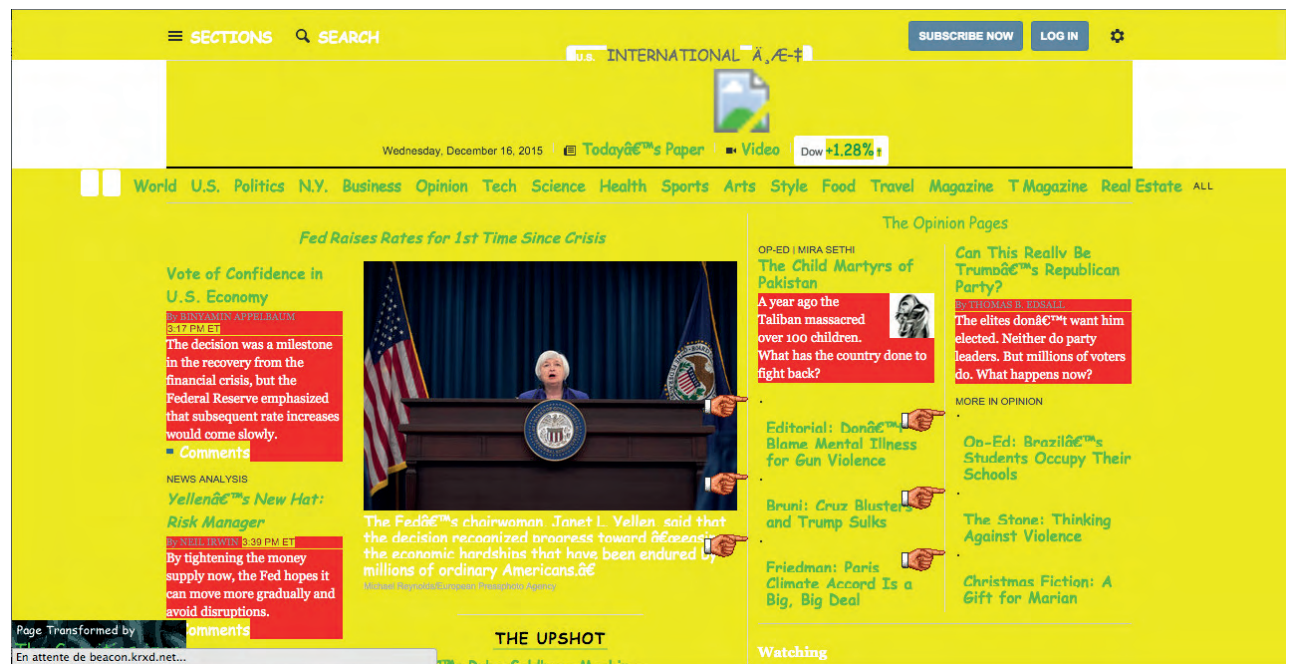
4.3 The Web tributers.

More than archiving, paying tribute to this old culture is a very important matter for some of the web 1.0 nostalgics. It goes beyond saving our digital heritage. Tributers as Net.art, Cameron's world, geocitizers and many others are showing their love and respect to the *internet of old*. Working on digital ceremonial rituals or on personal tributes, the internet tributers are in some way proving their loyalty and nostalgia to this old time. They are celebrating an internet environment that has been lost, or should I say changed - and by doing so, they are contributing to the digital folklore repossession.

I would like to highlight one of those tributes, "GEOCIT-IZERS".



This webpage made by Mike Lacher is a tool that promises the visitor to "*make any website look like it was made by a 13 year-old in 1996*"

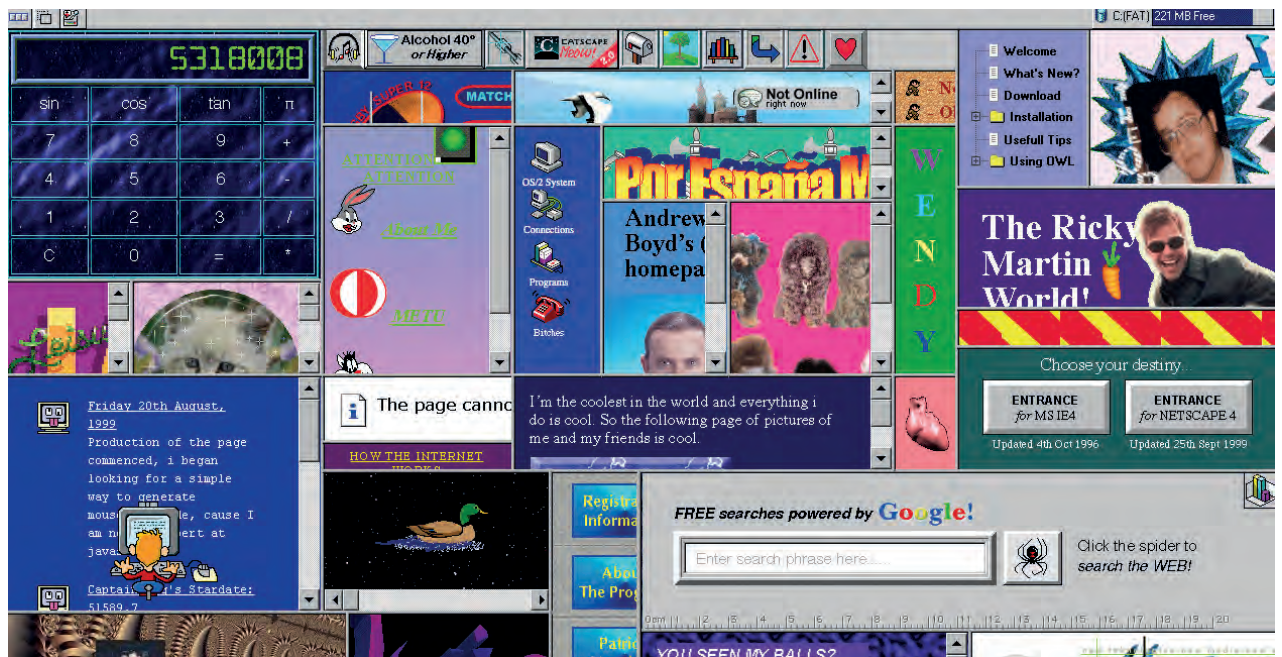


You type in the link you want to change and it turns it into how it would look as a GeoCities webpage. It works as an experience for the visitor, triggering off our nostalgic feelings; every actual web site becomes colourful, blinky, full of gifs and midi files. "*Turn your sound up for the full effect*". It recreates the 90's environment in all its details. Geocitizers is an attempt to recreate the spirit of GeoCities. It acts like a time machine, a symbolic return to the web 1.0, which was seen as a savage and primitive playing field, remediating our actual internet 2.0 into its own past.

Talking about time machines, I would like to introduce another attempt to resurrect our *internet of old* : Cameronsworld. - A love letter to the Internet of old



Cameron's World is a web-collage of text and images unearthed from the buried neighbourhoods of archived GeoCities pages (1994–2009). Cameron's World brings together archived material from thousands and thousands of these sites. In an age where we interact primarily with branded and marketed web content, Cameron's World is a tribute to the lost days of unrefined self-expression on the Internet. He stacks up and organises items borrowed from the digital folklore by categories, like a scientist : Space - fantasy - nature - love. It works in the same logical, frame than the internet archeology but the difference is that Cameron's World is not an attempt on saving our digital heritage, but more of an acknowledgment of those digital tribes, using and reinterpreting the material that archivers have tried to save for future generations.



He is repossessing, reclaiming and bringing up to date the digital folklore with this digital tribute. Graphics and texts come from various GeoCities archives and the music has been made specifically for this project. This piece is borrowing as well the page's organisation from the old time; using an enormous image database - all of them linking to an ancient web page. With the data explosion on the web, search engines have come to replace indexing by hand, which was the only solution to moderate this wildness in the internet environment. By playing around with the linking strategies of the 90's web, it gives an insight into to a DIY user culture. The idea of stacking this huge amount of images and linking data is a way to emphasis the digital folklore, and therefore celebrate it. By appropriating the techniques used by early users, Cameronsworld is in some way transferring the celebration of network technologies towards the celebration of user's techniques

Net artists are also contributing to this memorial for the *internet of old*. They are an avant-garde movement mixing different practices and ideas, including conceptual art and artists working with communication devices. However a specific group has come to symbolize the early production of the primitive users: net.art. Born in the late 90's, the group consists of various artists such as Olia Lialina, Alexei Shulgin, Vuk Cosic and others. At the outset, net.art has positioned itself as "found art" diving into the heritage of our digital culture and imitating their aesthetic. In the spirit of the Surrealist and Dada movements, they offer a view into the first tribes digital culture. Web experts - (that I place in the institutional "box")- have observed web folklore and classified it into the category of bad taste and amateur production, but net artists have a different stand point. They observed that the vernacular web is a cultural material and they take it as an object of study. By Re Collecting amateur web design, they are playing the role of archeologists of the internet history, where subcultures played an important role. Collecting is thus a key practice in repossessing the amateur web, as the organisation of these items highlights old cultural practices and subjects.

Today's collections are a rejection of glossy and professional web design which tends to blur the medium rather than celebrate it. Olia lialina's page is built in the frame of ancient websites, inspired by the 90's webpages organisations and linking strategies to build her page. She stacks up items of digital folklore - such as gifs, the traditional *welcome to my page*, bullets and buttons - and reorganises them as a labyrinth. Her webpage shows a huge starry blinking background where the visitor has to scroll and stroll to find information. This navigation system is situated in the scope of the first tribes treasure hunts. Beyond the appearance of amateur design, Olia Lialina's homepage offers a reflective exploration of the medium and consequently contributes to the repossession of this early culture. It is in that way that Olia Lialina is celebrating the network technologies and the web of the past.

One of the tributes i want to highlight is the "*1000\$ Page Award, a competition for people's personal hompages*".



As the title already suggests, it consists of a digital ceremony that celebrates a "homesick" culture, a welcome to my page culture. 1000\$ a page is therefore a celebration, making the apology of another internet, a primitive internet. Via an open call, users are invited to participate in the contest with their personal webpages. The project is presented as an ongoing ceremony, where all submitted links are appearing on the website, most of the time reviewed weekly by the jury members. At the end, prizes are granted according to specific features such as *"For blinking motion"*, *"For going through love and hate relations with the personal web page issue"*, *"for his writings on the virtual self, self representation online and his enormous contribution to the development of Russian Internet culture, well documented on his personal home page."* and so on.

mypage.bluewin.ch/Ysewijn/ Thanks speech :

" This is the reason why an initiative such as the 1000\$ page contest is so valuable: because it encourages people to communicate their hopes and dreams, to share their lives with the global village in which their children will be living. Not only does it encourage more Chinese students to send emails throughout the world about what happens at Tien An Men, not only does it encourage more and more anonymous American soldiers to allow pictures of torture and humiliation scenes in Iraqi prisons to spread all over the world, but it encourages people like you and me to be heard saying "I had a dream ...". That is why I am glad, proud and thankful to receive this reward. Thank You."

The idea of giving a prize, an award, is reinforcing the cultural value of the "welcome to my home page" time. For Olia Lialina, it is a way to be thankful for the hospitality of the first home pages, but for the contributors, it is a way to be thankful for being a part of this community. But more than being a simple tribute, by using the nostalgia for that time as a purpose, 1000\$ a page is also a means to criticize the art world and the high-tech internet evolution. Exhibiting those websites under a ceremony-type of award giving - is a manner to showcase a satirical opinion about the artworld's selection process, the new cultural economy of the internet and the network evolution. The reclaim of the primitive web is an attempt to understand a new type of cultural object specific to networks; making art on the internet is something relatively new and therefore, its values are still debatable. With the 1000 \$ a page, Olia Lialina is dealing with a early internet material and recontextualizing it within the art practice, giving a meaningful value to this culture.

5. The transmission of a folklore; conclusions.

The first internet tribes have been the ones investigating the internet's virgin ground before its development. They were, in some ways, the guardians of "the crowd's genius" and the expression of a popular digital identity, specific to the development of the world wide web.

"Folklore (in a broader sense, traditional and popular folk culture) is a group oriented and tradition based creation of group or individuals reflecting the expectations of the community as an adequate expression of its cultural and social identity; its stainers and values are transmitted orally, by imitation or by other means. Its forms include among others language, literature, music, dance, games, mythology, rituals customs, handicrafts, architecture and arts" (1982 definition of Folklore, by Unesco members)

The success of this folklore transmission has played two roles ;

On one hand, The transmission of this folklore has enabled the archivers to rediscover our digital heritage by archiving GeoCities content after its closure. This was made possible thanks to the the first citizens' sharing based culture. This allowed to collect our digital artefacts, maintaining them in the present for the benefits of the future generations. The archivers revived the authenticity of a culture forgotten by the elite as a medium shaped by its users more than its inventors. Indeed, the internet changed so fast over the past 20 years, as well as its concepts and architecture. The users' roles and values have changed, It's not about being a powerful user but about powerful computers. Today, the internet tends to impose formats to its users rather than let them do their own thing. Therefore, it isn't a media for the "crowd" anymore but a media for businesses, elites and the high culture. Consequently, they made it possible to study the internet and its history from a sociological rather than technical perspective. Re-collectors permitted to highlight the originality and specificities of this folklore, but also the medium. On the one hand, they saved our digital heritage and in on the other hand, they turned it into a tradition.

Beside the productions made by the tributers, artists and others were an attempt on repossess our digital heritage in a more meaningful way - that goes beyond the aesthetic of the 90's.

The transmission of the digital folklore played an important role in spreading content on the internet. The first tribes have built the internet in a sharing perspective, therefore helping to spread their images and graphics by republishing and modification. The rescue of our digital heritage shows how it has been possible for the amateur web to emerge in the mainstream culture - in the vehicular. The huge amount of data that was left at their disposal has enabled them to recontextualise the amateur web culture. It has been an attempt to observe and study our digital heritage and its archeology with a critical eye. By repossessing it, tributers and artists have tried to evaluate internet and its content in a new way. Therefore, they have contributed to establish the identity of the internet, adding value to a time that has far too often been despised as the elite's leftovers.

Bibliography

- LIALINA Olia and ESPENSCHIED Dragan, *Digital folklore, to computer users with love and respect*, Merz Akademie, 2009
- PALOQUE-BERGES Camille, *Remediating Internet trivia : Net Art's lessons in Web folklore*, Year ??
- CARROLL Khadija, *Curating Curiosity: Wonder's Colonial Phenomenology*
- LIALINA Olia, *Art Teleportacia*, available at: <http://art.teleportacia.org>, 2015
- LIALINA Olia, *1000\$ A page*, available at: [http://art.teleportacia.org/1000\\$/page.html](http://art.teleportacia.org/1000$/page.html), 2015
- GEOCOTI-IZER, available at: <http://www.wonder-tonic.com/geocitiesizer/>, 2015
- CAMERONSWORLD, available at: *A love letter to the internet of old*, <http://www.cameronsworld.net>, 2015
- LEKTOGIRL, available at: <http://www.lektrogirl.com/ceremony/registryoffice/index.html>, 2015
- THE MOST AMAZING WEBSITE ON THE INTERNET, available at: <http://www.themostamazingwebsiteontheinternet.com>, 2015
- REOCITIES, available at: <http://reocities.com>, 2015
- OOCITIES, available at: <http://www.oocities.org/>, 2015
- INTERNET ARCHEOLOGY, available at: <http://www.internetarchaeology.org/>, 2015
- ROBAK Tabor, Heaven, available at: <http://heaven.internetarchaeology.org/heaven.html#bottom>, 2015
- MALINOWSKI Erik, (2015) *Space Jam' Forever: The Website That Wouldn't Die*, available at: <http://www.rollingstone.com/sports/features/space-jam-forever-the-website-that-wouldnt-die-20150819>, 2015
- SPACE JAM, available at: <http://www.warnerbros.com/archive/spacejam/movie/jam.htm> , 2015
- ALLAN'S EMPIRE, available at: <http://allansempire.com>, 2015