

Userpics: Cyber Folk Art in the Early 21st Century

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[Monica Foote](#)

University of California, Berkeley

The forms of folklore available for examination and the methods of transmission by which they have spread have, in recent years, greatly expanded due to the increased ability that developments in technology have given people to communicate over great distances in short periods of time. Those who frequent chat rooms, and use instant messenger programs have developed their own folkspeech; online communities function according to their own sets of customary behavior; and people represent themselves with scraps of art cobbled together into images that distinguish themselves from their fellow users. These images, referred to as icons, are the cyber art of which my title speaks. These images, the people who use them, and the ways that cycles of these images come to be developed are our primary points of concern. It is the existence of these cycles of images that call this phenomenon to the folklorist's attention. The environment of the Internet gives us the opportunity to engage in virtual ethnography, to discover new artifacts and explore the system of ideas that has led to their creation.

The Internet must not be dismissed by researchers as merely a repository for jokes and urban legends or a new vehicle for the kinds of material that have been passed as Xeroxed copies for the past thirty years. "It is a 'virtual' home to many millions who have gone ahead and made the Net a space in which to create a lived culture" (Mason, 1996:4). Culture is not only being preserved and transmitted through the Internet like butterflies under glass, it is being actively created.

LiveJournal is a blogging community where, in addition to personal blogs, users can participate in "communities" that are centered around a vast array of topics. Users represent themselves in these communities with little 100 x 100 pixel 'icons'. Depending on one's account status, one can have between six and a hundred icons that can be changed from post to post to express moods or comment on the contents of one's post.

These icons can contain any kind of subject matter. LiveJournal officially refers to them as *userpics* (that is, user pictures). This term, as well as the frequent use of the term *avatar* to denote these pictures, suggests that it is expected that the image will represent the

user themselves. This does happen. Some users do use pictures of themselves as some or all of their icons. Some use cartoon images of themselves created by image generators that allow you to use the hair, eye shape, nose shape, etc. of your choice to create a cartoon that looks like you. Aside from these cartoonish userpics, however, icons depicting the user are relatively rare. Icons become of interest to the folklorist when they are found to occur in cycles.

LiveJournal users draw their subject matter for these icons from many different areas. One of the more striking examples of the development of an icon cycle is the “OMG racecar bling bling” cycle. The speed with which this cycle took off is unusual, but serves as a good illustration of the manner in which these ideas proliferate. OMG is an abbreviation of the exclamation “Oh, my God”.

The genesis of this particular cycle is very well documented. On February 24, 2005, the instigating post was made in the community *Metaquotes*. Metaquotes is a forum for people to post funny or insightful things that they have come across elsewhere on LiveJournal. The instigating post, made by a user called Sigma7, reads as follows:

The OMG No Child Left Behind LOL!!1! Act

Sometimes it's all in the delivery. This comment from just_3_apples absolutely amused me to the point of honking out loud.... (My first post here, apologies if I err.)

Oh my.

As most of you know, for my community service, I volunteer in a second grade classroom. I help students, clean stuff up, etc.

Today, I was going through a pile of papers, and found one with a picture that one of the children had drawn, which had a caption that read:

OMG racecar bling bling.

I am in a quandary. Several things astound me in regards to this. For one thing... "OMG." For another, "bling bling." But most puzzling of all, it was not a picture of a racecar. It was a picture of a monkey.

I'm a little disturbed by this, actually (sigma7, 2/24/2005).

The other users saw this as a fruitful subject for icon art, although it would be incomprehensible to anyone unfamiliar with the post that generated it. The very first comment in response to this post read, “Who is going to step up and make the icon?” (lots42, 2/24/2005). 25 minutes later, theiving_gypsy posted the following:



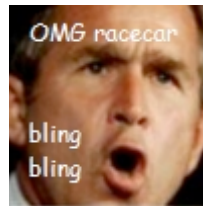
Sigma7 responded to this with “Both you and darthfox did a better job. But I found that very pic, too, and tried using it. My l33t icon skills abandon me” (2/24/2005). Sigma7’s claim that she had failed to make a similar icon from that same picture did not prevent her from contributing to the nascent icon cycle, using the following icon in the post just cited:



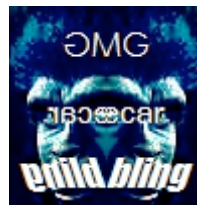
Seven minutes after theiving_gypsy’s response to the challenge to turn this post into an icon, darthfox added these:



Sixteen minutes later, from peeeeeet and playing on the popular notion amongst his detractors that President Bush looks like a chimpanzee:



And some six hours later, peeeeeet added this one:



Genepool23 posted all of these to the community *userpicks*, where people share amusing icons they have come across on the Internet. The appearance of this series in the *userpicks* community produced two further icons:



Many of these icons are still in relatively common usage over a year later.

But is it folklore? While these icons are not truly anonymous in origin, they do fit Dundes' criteria of multiple existence and variation. An even more useful way to approach this material would be to follow John Dorst's lead in his examination of joke cycles on the Internet.

It seems to me that my training as a folklorist has predisposed me to view this relatively recent phenomenon as a species of the genre JOKE, that is, as a series of separate items that can be catalogued and analyzed for recurring themes... But another way to approach this phenomenon is to consider the apposite genre not JOKE but CYCLE. From this perspective the diagnostic feature of the genre is seriality itself, the potentially infinite process of sequential displacement of one unit by its equivalent. And this is a property not only operative within a given cycle but between cycles as well, since topical cycles seem to replace one another in concert with the serial substitution of news stories in the mass media (Dorst: 1990, 183-184).

Similarly, we can approach the matter of our current items as belonging to the genre CYCLE and the species ART, rather than the other way around. The idea that the cycle is of prime importance here is reinforced by the peripheral threads of conversation that appeared in the comments to the post in which the 'OMG racecar bling bling!' phenomenon debuted on *userpicks*. Genepool23 introduces the monkey icons by saying, "**Witness...The birth of a meme...** It starts in a comment by lots42 here in metaquotes, where it is seized upon by the masses and captures the imaginations of a generation. Could this be the next 'My hed is Pastede on Yay?'" (genepool23, 2/24/2005) in reference to an Internet phenomenon that had sparked its own cycle of icons in 2004, which is still expanding in 2006.

Users recognize the seriality, variability, multiplicity and spread amongst the group that these cycles exhibit.

Genepool23 refers to the cycle as a meme.

The memetic approach, proposed by Richard Dawkins in 1976, has not been widely embraced by the academy. Indeed, Bruce Edmonds declared memetics a failed endeavor with the cessation of the *Journal of Memetics* in 2005. However, memetics has yet to be

applied in a direct and thorough way to the study of folklore, and this may still prove to be a fruitful union. For Dawkins, memes-- being analogous to their genetic counterparts, genes-- are ideas or fragments of ideas which are capable of being replicated as they pass from brain to brain and thus are subject to evolution in the form of random mutation and selection.

According to Dawkins, “examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches.” (1976: 206) The examples that Dawkins gives are strikingly similar to certain forms of folklore that our discipline has been concerned with for quite some time. The scope of study of memetics is much wider than that of folklore, as anything whatsoever created by imitation falls within the purview of it, rather than just that material which fits the narrower definitions of traditionality and belonging to the folk. That is to say, all folklore is made up of memes, but not all memes are folklore.

In addition to the sort of inside joke that we’ve just seen, cycles are also frequently drawn from popular culture. The line between folklore and popular culture is certainly not as clear as it might be, but for my purposes, popular culture consists of items introduced to a folk group from without (via television, music, books, etc.) whereas folklore arises organically from within the group that uses it. When popular culture is appropriated by the folk and becomes subject to modification by members of the group without losing the legitimacy that the item enjoys in the eyes of the group, then in my estimation it can be considered to have become folklore. For example, if you were to draw Mickey Mouse with pointy blue ears, orange shorts, and sandals, most Disney enthusiasts would simply say that you have drawn him wrong, rather than that you have added to the repertoire of ways in which Mickey Mouse is represented. On the other hand, enthusiasts of the bunny with a pancake on its head



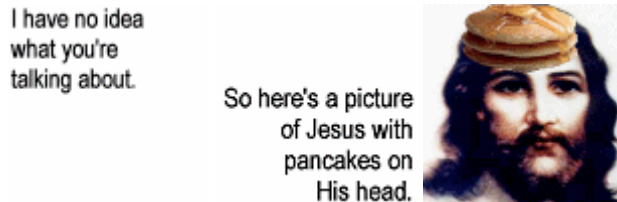
are not distressed when the bunny becomes computer generated,



turns into Severus Snape,



or Jesus,



or Buddy Christ from the movie *Dogma*.



Another major source of subject matter for these is corporate marketing. Apple computers launched a notable series of commercials in October 2003 advertising their portable mp3 player, iPod. These commercials featured silhouetted figures dancing against solid brightly colored backgrounds wearing white earbud headphones that stood out against the silhouettes. Icons that steal directly from this advertising campaign are extremely widespread on LiveJournal. The hundred and seventy such icons that I have collected are just a fraction of those that exist. iPod style icons are frequently commented upon in high traffic communities. Tutorials on the techniques necessary to create them abound.





As Charles Seeger notes (1962: 97), folklore is necessarily a product of plagiarism and, while members of the LiveJournal community are usually only concerned with this issue as it occurs within their group, the people who do hold legal rights might be reasonably expected to be concerned when those rights are infringed upon by anyone in any group. Copyright infringement is a hot-button issue in today's culture. People are very concerned that what is theirs be treated as such, particularly given the extent to which modern technology enables people to circumvent legal channels for the acquisition of intellectual property.

Apple Computers is a large corporate entity. Their capacity to enforce their intellectual property rights far surpass that of the icon maker whose clever idea was stolen by another and who threatens legal action against icon thieves. iPod sales were projected to top 4 million in the fiscal quarter ending December 2005 alone (Ozanian, 2006). The icons in this cycle blatantly steal ideas associated with one of Apple's most profitable products. Many of the icons, such as the one in which a figure has hung himself with an iPod cord, are not complementary to their product. It would require very little effort from Apple to exercise its rights to the silhouetted figure with white earbuds and lean on LiveJournal in an effort to get these icons suppressed. Why does Apple allow its material to be used in this way? It is certainly conceivable that Apple is unaware of the existence of this cycle of

images, but when the third, tenth, and fourteenth items on the first page of a Google image search for “iPod ad” are images that belong to this cycle, this is highly unlikely. Apple’s apparent indifference to this appropriation of its materials can most likely be put down to the relatively recent phenomenon of viral marketing. The encyclopedia *Wikipedia* which, being user generated, offers emic definitions of phenomena written by people who regularly encounter these phenomena, defines viral marketing as follows:

Viral marketing and viral advertising refer to marketing techniques that seek to exploit pre-existing social networks to produce exponential increases in brand awareness, through viral processes similar to the spread of an epidemic. It is word-of-mouth delivered and enhanced online; it harnesses the network effect of the Internet and can be very useful in reaching a large number of people rapidly.

...Viral marketing is sometimes used to describe some sorts of Internet-based stealth marketing campaigns, including the use of blogs, seemingly amateur web sites, and other forms of astroturfing to create word of mouth for a new product or service. Often the ultimate goal of viral marketing campaigns is to generate media coverage via "offbeat" stories worth many times more than the campaigning company's advertising budget. (Wikipedia, 4/18/2006)

The present iCon cycle acts as a marvelously discreet form of advertising for Apple’s iPod. Whether the iCons are flattering to the product or not, their existence propagates the meme of the silhouetted figure with white ear buds that no one denies belongs to the Apple iPod, regardless of whether or not they behave as though it does. Apple itself does not have to do anything to have this meme brought to the attention of thousands of bloggers. The icon makers are doing it for them.

The viral metaphor is popular in memetics. The idea that “observable culture spreads as if it has contagious properties” (Marsden, 1998: 3) follows nicely after the notion that ideas perpetuate themselves in the same matter as genes. “Just as we do not choose to be infected with, and pass on, biological contagions, we often behave as if we have little control over the culture we become infected with and consequently spread” (ibid: 5). Many memeticists, including Dawkins, Dennett, and Blackmore, take the meme as selfish gene analogy so seriously that, in their estimation, we do not merely behave as if we had little control over the culture we interact with, we in fact have no such control at all. Blackmore goes so far as to say that there is no ‘we’ to have any control. In her estimation, what people perceive as their ‘selves’ are really complexes of memes that inhabit our heads and control our actions, passing themselves from one brain to another as often as they can replicate themselves. If we take this view, Apple’s iPod campaign truly is viral. The Apple corporation itself is no longer necessary to propagate the iPod meme.

This idea of viral marketing, which removes the “choice” of subject from the hands of the folk who are actually doing the creating, and placing it under the subtle control of corporations who offer memetic ingredients to influence folk culture and bring it in line with their marketing goals, is reminiscent of Dorson’s *fakelore*, although the direction of influence seems to have changed.

Fakelore is the presentation of spurious and synthetic writings under the claim that they are genuine folklore. These productions are not collected in the field but are rewritten from earlier literary and journalistic sources in an endless chain of regurgitation, or they may even be made out of whole cloth, as in the case of several of the “folk heroes” written up in the image of Paul Bunyan, who had at least some trickle of oral tradition at the beginning of his literary exploitation (Dorson, 2004: 285).

What has changed is the fact that the writings, or drawings in this case, are no longer spurious and synthetic. Rather, what we see before us is genuine folklore created for the promotion of an agenda by the folk, using tools handed to them by those whose agenda they promote. On the whole, this seems to have become a significantly more effective method of influencing people than dropping ready-made legends into their laps. Dorson saw fakelore as “the sentimentalizing and prettifying of folklore materials” (Dorson, 2004: 289), which he found preferable to “the ideological manipulation of folklore, a more insidious kind of fakelore which so far has made little headway in these States” (*ibid.*). Perhaps Dorson would be surprised to see the extent to which folklore is now being manipulated for the promotion of consumerism.

One of the main arguments levied against memetics by strict Darwinists who are not seduced by the notion of the evolution of ideas is that memetic evolution is inherently Lamarckian. Jean-Baptiste de Lamarck was an evolutionist who believed that acquired characteristics should be inheritable. Sexual reproduction has been proven not to be Lamarckian, (rats that have had their tails cut off do not produce tail-less offspring,) and many memeticists have treated this as a serious problem with the concept (Blackmore, 1999:59). In order to decide whether or not this is a problem for memetics as applied to folklore, we need to decide whether the evolution of memes is to be regarded as literal, as N.K. Humphrey would have it (in Dougherty, 2001:88), or metaphorical as Blackmore sees it. Dawkins himself seems unable to reach a firm conclusion on this matter (Dougherty, 2001: 88-89). If memes truly behaved in the same way as genes, Lamarckian evolution would be impossible in memes. Every change in an idea would be the result of random mutation. A singer forgets a verse of a song, a cook thinks there is supposed to be ginger in this recipe, but the next singer knows the whole song, having learned it from the same sheet

music and the next cook has read the recipe more recently and remembers that he should not use ginger.

Susan Blackmore circumvents this problem by distinguishing between ‘copy-the-instructions’ transmission and ‘copy-the-product’ transmission (1999: 61). Genetic evolution can only happen through copy-the-instructions transmission. New bodies are created according to the instructions contained within the genes and therefore only random mutation of these instructions can influence the next body produced by these instructions. Nothing that happens to a body, the genetic product, will be passed on because the influence of the instructions on the product is unidirectional. On the other hand, where ideas are concerned, the instruction and the product have a much more reciprocal relationship. There is nothing to keep one person’s product from becoming the next person’s instructions.

Blackmore’s model is derived from the theory of F. T. Cloak, who says:

What can be called the *i-culture* of a people is the set of cultural instructions they carry in their central nervous systems. The *m-culture* of the people encompasses the material structures, relationships among material structures, and changes in these relationships which are actually brought about or maintained by behaviors of those cultural instructions. Features of a people’s m-culture thus include features of their behavior, their technology, and their social organization (and their ideology when considered as a set of verbal behaviors)(Cloak, 1975:168, italics in the original)

Blackmore’s *instructions* are equivalent to Cloak’s *i-culture*, and her products are equivalent to his *m-culture*. It is a useful concept that allowed Dawkins to clarify his idea of memetics, specifying that i-culture is more specifically what he means by meme, insofar as meme is equivalent to *gene*, whereas m-culture corresponds to Dawkins’ *meme products*, or in genetic terms, *phenotypic effects*.

Nick Rose suspects that Dawkins’ lack of clear distinction between the replicator and the phenotype in his original presentation of the idea of memes is that he realized that the evolutionary system that he was proposing had Lamarckian qualities, which were distasteful to him as a strict Darwinian (Rose, 1998: 4). Both Rose and Blackmore tentatively suggest that cultural inheritance may operate under something like a Lamarckian system, or that it may occasionally be Lamarckian, but neither seems to want to fully acknowledge that, being free from the physical realities that confine the terms of genetic inheritance, there is nothing keeping cultural inheritance from behaving in a Lamarckian fashion, and that is okay.

Indeed, in folkloristics, copy-the-product transmission – which tends to behave in a Lamarckian way – is the most important form of transmission. When people insist on copying instructions, memorizing folktales from the Grimm's collections to tell their grandchildren, and so forth, cries of 'inauthentic!' and 'folklorismus!' fill the air. To fit most views of authenticity, folklore must evolve in a Lamarckian fashion. I would go further and say that in the case of folkloristic memes, Lamarckian evolution is the scholar's ideal. Rose worries that Lamarckism results in copying infidelity and that the instructions for creating a given meme phenotype will be replaced by 'mutant' instructions that will result in 'mutant' meme phenotypes and the original meme phenotype will no longer be able to be recreated (1998: 5). Aside from the point that evolution is made possible specifically through the mutation of instructions, the idea that cultural evolution cannot be Lamarckian because evolution requires a higher degree of copying fidelity than Lamarckism provides is a flawed assumption. Cultural evolution, at least at the level of folklore, is manifestly Lamarckian. Therefore the level of copying fidelity that Lamarckian evolution of culture allows is exactly as high as it needs to be. This is a point at which it is not useful to cling too strongly to the biological metaphor. The genetic model is extremely useful as a point of departure for a theory of the transmission of ideas, but we should be wary of adopting too narrowly confined a view of memetic evolution when applying this framework to folklore. If taken too far, too literally, it can confine the scope of our thinking about folklore to the terms of the hard sciences; and while the social sciences may exhibit a predilection for borrowing from the hard sciences for the purpose of gaining institutional authority and legitimacy, the fact that they are separate areas of inquiry, and that which applies perfectly well to the one does not necessarily apply in its entirety to the other. The Lamarkian model of evolution, while not useful to biology is, as we have seen, quite useful to folklore. On the other hand, the Darwinian model of evolution is essential to biology and useful to folkloristics up until the point where it begins to cause us to dismiss some of what we observe.

Memetic theory gives us a useful model to help us look at how folklore is transmitted and how it evolves. Memetics also informs the way that many people in Internet communities conceive of their own folklore. The folklore that is to be found on the Internet does not consist merely of electronic representations of things to be found in the everyday world. The Internet contains a great deal of folklore that is proper to that memetic environment. It may take a shift of perspective for the discipline to embrace some of this material, but as the Internet increases in importance as a milieu for cultural exchange, it will be worth our time to give it our attention.

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