Weaving Through: Digital Cowpaths and Placing the Web

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A new park is built in a neighborhood. It features well-kept grass, neat gravel paths, shading trees, and entertainment amenities, like a café and a playground for small children. On opening day, the park's designer looks on with pride as the park fills with visitors. A few months later, however, when the designer visits the park again, they are disappointed to see patches of dry grass between the gravel paths and trees. These are cowpaths. They are formed when visitors veer off the gravel path and make their way to lounge in the trees' shade on hot summer days. The designer weighs their options: one is to add signs or perhaps even fences, discouraging people from stepping on the grass. Another option might be to extend the gravel to the newly formed paths, since people are clearly taking that route already. However, the designer thinks, this might result in too much of the grass being covered, especially if visitors keep forming cowpaths wherever they desire. Although it is disappointing, the designer decides to let the problem be for now, even though it goes against their original vision and plan: this space ultimately belongs first and foremost to those using it, including those stepping on the grass.

Digital platforms can be understood as kinds of places through which users move down certain paths and in certain patterns. Along these paths, they consume content and digital products, they interact with other users, they form communities and organize, and they generate new forms of culture and meaning. Towards these ends, digital spaces offer different opportunities and obstacles than physical spaces in terms of accessibility and allowances. Digital space now accommodates a lot of the traffic previously reserved for physical spaces: shops, banks, libraries,

galleries, and various offices are expected to offer their services digitally whenever possible. Social interactions and gatherings have also taken a drastic shift online, both for maintaining old relationships and establishing new ones. As social actors move from parks to platforms, their freedom to modify digital space becomes both a site of social control as well as a point of consideration designers have to grapple with. The continuous optimization of digital procedures has become overly normalized due to the swift development and application of suitable technologies, along with their massive potential for monetary gain. This happens at the cost of play, creativity, and collective ownership of spaces. To clarify this point, I apply theories of physical space to digital contexts, with consideration to similarities as well as differences.

Movement within the digital space has long been recognized as valuable in an economic sense. Cookies and tracking-based algorithms lie in the center of discussions surrounding privacy, surveillance, internet censorship, and economic development, especially insofar as these relate to the interests of platforms in maximizing audience exposure to and interaction with advertisers' content. The value of digital movement, however, goes beyond advertisement revenue.

A growing body of literature makes connections between public, urban space and digital space. Christiane Wagner connects visual creativity and ownership of a public space with freedom, highlighting "the exercise of citizenship, which refers to the inclusion of all inhabitants through the right to participation and appropriation."[1] Shifting our conceptions of internet 'users' to 'citizens' highlights their role in shaping their inhabited digital space. One unique and central aspect of this kind of digital citizenship is data ownership. Brand et al. centralizes this notion in the context of cityscapes: "Data justice advocates' insistence that we ground social justice claims in structural, political-economic critiques and lived experiences is a clear intersection with the [right to the city]."[2] Critically, Kuntsman and Miyake point out the increasing difficulty in digital disengagement, with emphasis on its embedding "in the

[1] Wagner, *Visualizations of Urban Space,* 7.
[2] Brand et al., *Data Justice*, 5.

capitalist, neoliberal and data hungry mode of digital communication as dependent on users".[3] Through a phenomenon reminiscent of genericide (a trademarked brand name becoming generic in everyday use), private digital platforms have expanded their userbase to a degree that calls into question their reading as private entities at all. Jessa Lingel writes extensively on internet cultures, communities, and their tensions with platform design through urban/spatial metaphors. Her book *Gentrification of the Internet* (2021) begins with criticism of "an industry that prioritizes corporate profits over public good and actively pushes certain forms of online behavior as the 'right' way to use the web, while other forms of behavior get labeled backwards or out of date."[4] Emphasized here is the power of the user "to experiment or play with digital technologies, and to control how the web looks and feels."[5] Connection to digital space is experimental, playful and embodied in a way that exceeds the visual.

Technological advancements and their connection to potential disembodiment have piqued interest in academic research. On one hand, online interactions normalize the lack of body language and identifying markers, such as one's likeness or the sound of one's voice, where offline interactions rely more on those aspects for connection. On the other hand, thinkers like Judith Butler challenge understandings of the internet as disembodied, since the internet still requires a body to access it, and the consequences of online (inter)actions will, for better or for worse, ultimately be directed towards a physical body.[6]If the internet is not indeed disembodied, perhaps the bodies that move through the digital space leave tracks in the environment, similar to the effects of foot traffic on the pavements on streets or the lawns of parks, not to mention graffiti on walls, fingerprints on shop windows, worn paint on benches, et cetera. Philosophies of place can be utilized in web and platform analysis to inspire alternate ways of thinking about digital movement and the opportunities and responsibilities of

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[3] Kuntsman and Miyake, *Paradoxes of Digital Disengagement*, 144.
[4] Lingel, *Gentrification of the Internet,* 1.
[5] *Ibid.*
[6] Butler, *Bodies in Alliance,* 92-4.

platforms as a central part of human infrastructure. A key aspect to this approach is an understanding of belonging and ownership, as it pertains to spaces' existence on the private-public spectrum, and their placement on that spectrum affecting the rules governing that space and its inhabitants. A key aspect is understanding the economic conditions different spaces are subject to, as those conditions relate to the accumulation and investment of generated revenue. To approach allowances and freedom provided by space, one must establish who is allowed to do what in or to a space.

Understanding the embodiment of the internet is necessary in developing theories about the ways the web is used. Arguing for an embodied internet emphasizes its necessity and status as a public space, making the internet into something to be interacted with instead of passively spectated. Chad Luck's writing on ownership in American culture as expressed in literature centralizes the connection between ownership and spatiality. Luck discusses the tension between visual and tactile experiences of space. Drawing on the works of Charles Brockden Brown, Luck proposes sight as decentralized as the primary sense, and embodied touch is brought to the light: "It is touch that situates the body within, and not above, the landscape."[7] Hyperfocus on visual content is a central aspect of present-day social media platforms, which can distance digital spaces from their embodied users. Limiting our understanding of digital interaction to its economically ideal forms of retained attention and statistics for maximum revenue relies on relatively passive intake of endless visual content. Cowpaths are one way to understand embodied digital movement as *interaction* beyond preconceived, economically and hyper-visually driven iterations of the word.

Parkour Paths and Play

'Cowpath,' in a relatively simplistic and physical sense of the word, describes a path created by the motions of an individual or herd taking the same route over and over, until that route becomes visible in the ground traversed. The concept of cowpaths (also referred to as 'desire paths') has come to be used in a metaphorical sense in

[7] Luck, *The Body of Property,* 47.

fields such as UX/UI[8] design as well as the corporate world. Within business contexts (and arguably in broaded aspects of life), the saying 'don't pave the cowpath' warns against solidifying temporary solutions into standard practice, as this risks neglecting due diligence and failing to optimize processes. In design and marketing, however, 'paving the cowpath' can, in fact, be a smart strategy for centralizing user behavior down pathways with pre-established majority support, minimizing the need for tutorials or help requests.

A physical desire path is mainly motivated by efficiency, ease, or speed. Digital space lies in different dimensions, however, and the reasons for digital desire paths can vary from their physical counterparts. A cowpath can also arise as a form of active resistance or proof of popular dislike of a structure. Notably, this does not inherently imply immorality or illegality.

The threshold for when use of a space becomes misuse (or maluse, violation, etc.) is a key aspect to the mediation of that space and its norms. Vague terminology such as 'normal wear-and-tear' relies on pre-existing normative expectations and perhaps even discourage innovation and the associated risks. A sport like urban parkour, for example, is often practiced in public spaces and utilizes the infrastructures found there with the explicit purpose of moving through it in an unusual manner. Notable influences in the sport express regular disdain for gyms and graceful critiques of purpose-built parkour parks, which are too often built "by the wrong people", advocating instead for the appreciation of the sport on a social level and expressing careful optimism for community-driven legitimation of parkour in major events such as the Olympics.[9] Parkour athletes themselves (also referred to as traceurs or freerunners) have varying positions on the acceptable levels of environment modification for safety or problem-solving.

Parkour philosophy is useful for illustrating the difference in obstructing, tolerating, or paving cowpaths: parkour is often defined in terms of paths from point A to point B and the different ways to take that path. Although directness and efficiency are valued, those values are not applied as they would be to sprinting or mass public

[8] User Experience/User Interface

[9] Storror, "WORST Parkour Parks," 0:25; "STORROR Parkour Olympics 2021," 33:28.

transport. Thomas Raymen's ethnography of parkour highlights how the 'points' of a parkour path are not comparable to, for example, stations along a railway system: there is nothing there *but* the point, and indeed, "oftentimes, traceurs derive most pleasure from touching those parts of the city which otherwise go untouched."[10] The nature of digital cowpaths is not entirely the same as parkour, but their similarity is highlighted in their shared resistance to "the purposeful hyper-regulation of our contemporary urban centres of consumption."[11] Raymen ultimately dismisses parkour's anti-capitalist potential, describing it as one of the "micro-forms of dissent and self-critique" welcomed and allowed by capitalism.[12] However, the spatial and political tensions in parkour are reflected in those on online platforms, suggesting analyses of parkour can offer valuable insights into digital movement and the potential of cowpaths in the digital realm.

Many parkour athletes have been met with hostility or violence from private persons for perceived 'useless' degradation of infrastructure, trespassing, and endangerment. The reactions of authorities called upon to obstruct parkour from happening are also often mixed. Interpersonal empathy getting in the way of enforcement might be one reason for increased reliance on various devices which, in an attempt to deter parkour athletes, end up making the sport unnecessarily dangerous, manufacturing risk at the cost of the athletes' physical wellbeing.[13] The degree to which risks are tolerated in the name of parkour is lesser in comparison to, say, in the name of other forms of exercise, protest, or celebration, i.e. that which is perceived as more necessary. This double-edged sword of safety—the enforcement of it on one hand, and the dismissing it on the other—reflects the legitimation/obstruction dilemma of space design and highlights the necessity of a certain degree of a gray-shaded tolerance.

Tolerance of seemingly nonsensical movement without interrogations to its purpose generates fruitful grounds for creative

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[10] Raymen, *Parkour, Deviance and Leisure,* 5.
[11] *Ibid.*
[12] *Id.*, 11.
[13] *Id.*, 125-127.

expression. One example of such a digital 'game', akin to playground cultures associated with small children, arose on the blogging platform Tumblr following its introduction of a polling feature. Instead of strictly gauging audience opinions or gathering other kinds of demographic information, Tumblr users began to use the polling feature to 'bake cakes' by posting polls whose voting options represented ingredients. An infamous result of one of these polls included a fictional cake comprised of 44.3% vanilla extract.[14] The Youtuber and internet historian Strange Æons then baked a cake following the ingredients and proportions provided in the poll.[15] This movement from the digital into the physical realm (and then returning to it) is not the norm however. Similar games surrounding online polling infrastructure have appeared on other platforms, including Youtube's polling feature being used to create visual shapes with progress bars.[16] This polling game, despite its similarity, has not been picked up or transformed into other kinds of content.

Games such as the ones described here tend to fly under the radar, since they have little reference to their wider media environment. As such, they can work to disrupt the usual flow of social media. While they do encourage interactions—key currency in the attention economy—they make very limited reference to posts or content outside of themselves. There will be no arguing over the cake once the user has cast their vote, and thereby tossed into the batter another fraction of vanilla extract. Neither is the cake an advertisement. The community has baked its playful cake.

The nature of such an online cake-baking game would be wildly different if it took place within an infrastructure explicitly directing users towards that end. The vanilla extract cake was not baked in a video game, which might feature illustrations of sweet treats and other thematically appropriate design elements. Tumblr's polling feature had no reference to baking of any kind, and yet the game was played. This may be testament to the unique nature of Tumblr in comparison to many other social media sites, including

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[14] relientk, "okay let's bake a cake."

[15] Strange Æons, "Tumblr's Vanilla Extract Cake."

[16] ohwell17, "Perfect E."

its design choices as well as its history with monetization and general "subcultural identity as a platform."[17] Considering the cake game as an example of a digital cowpath, its formation is certainly mediated to a degree by the so-called Tumblr soil being soft to tread as a result of the platform's cultural and infrastructural peculiarities.

The playful potential of digital movement is often glossed over: in general, either the technological side is over-emphasized, and features that are used for their unintended purposes are ignored as unintentional and too volatile to study, or the desire paths generated by users are understood strictly through the lens of illicit activity (such as torrent networks or 'jailbreaking'). However, emphasizing user creativity in utilization of digital features without the ultimate goal of weeding such behaviors out or legitimizing them through further product development or corporate meddling can unlock discussion for the creative and revolutionary power of digital space, making it truly for the people. (Dis)allowances of digital behaviors ought not to focus solely on their legality or morality as a sole divisive factor. Movement's division into intended-and-permissible and unintended-and-forbidden is unjust and antithetical to the rights of the public in signifying its spaces. This applies to digital space as well.

Paved Paradise and the Road Ahead

Playfulness aside, non-conventional digital movement can also be more serious or self-serving in nature. To provide an example, imagine user 'ally_thesportsfan99' browsing Instagram when she realizes the needs to do a quick store run. On her phone, she just so happens to be scrolling through the feed of her favorite athlete, 'sportsperson_tom.' With a single tap, she is taken to the direct message (DM) page. 'Tom' has millions of followers, a number which means it is probable that he has a social media manager, in which case the personal connection between him and the account would be minimal. 'Ally' figures that, while she's here, faced with a textbox and an app function that saves her messages for later perusal, she can use Tom's DMs to write out her shopping list. This she does. Hitting send, the message follows none of the linguistic

[17] McCracken et al., *a tumblr book*, 9.

features expected of a message between a fan and their idol, even though it is mediated through a channel which could facilitate such an exchange as well. Ally has created 'a digital cowpath'. Although this particular cowpath is not a game or much of a social interaction at all; instead, it relies on the assumption that the message *will* be ignored. Digital cowpaths, then, have to be considered beyond terms of mere playfulness.

To continue defending cowpaths beyond their play potential, one should consider in what ways they interfere with platforms' intended functions, which are to a great extent driven by algorithms or, essentially, accurate predictions of movement. Large datasets of what users are already doing can help software departments streamline future updates in a direction that retains that userbase and, ideally, increases it. In the era of platformization, the goal of any platform is to keep users on their platform specifically. This competitive nature of platforms to be all-encompassing can be seen in the rapid spread of various digital features across platforms of otherwise divergent focal points, for example 24-hour 'stories' (or a similar feature with a different name) spreading from Snapchat to Instagram, Facebook, and even WhatsApp. The most recent iteration is, of course, the never-ending stream of short-form videos. These videos play automatically and are selected based on an algorithms, which in turn make their predictions based on user interactions with previous videos. The desires and behaviors of users are more monitored and utilized than ever, raising serious questions when it comes to privacy and monetization (including data ownership). A well-functioning algorithm seems like a natural way to direct the flow of digital content between creators and consumers. It is almost as if countless cowpaths are created and moulded between a platform user and the endless streams of content. Moreover, platforms seem to sometimes go out of their way to showcase how useless they would be without these algorithms, seemingly to encourage maximal data sharing and cookie acceptance. Cowpaths, therefore, are at the core of web development, as more and more of global computing power is directed toward recording and

anticipating user behavior on a more individual rather than general level.[18]

Whereas the park designer's gripe with the dry grass of cowpaths seems straightforward, discontent towards digital cowpaths is perhaps less focused on aesthetics and more focused on perceived loss of revenue. Allowing users to form and take digital cowpaths without then encouraging more users to follow down those paths does not necessarily lead to increased demand of resources. It does mean, however, that users relying on more explicit direction on the platform might not follow the cowpaths, leading to decreased time spent on the platform. Legitimizing a cowpath would also create opportunities for novelty-based advertising. The concept of an 'ideal' digital path is therefore not straightforward, and the ideas of 'efficiency' or 'optimization' becomes more polarized between users and designers.

The elimination of digital dry grass is reflective of the profit-driven strategy for spatial management. In a late-stage capitalist society, the future of places is precarious. Indeed, many of the things associated with present-day use of digital space are described by Marc Augé in relation to non-places, especially in his description of highway networks.[19] In relation to travel more broadly, Augé points out its emphasis on visual images and the importance of seeing over feeling: ". . .there are spaces in which the individual feels himself to be a spectator without paying much attention to the spectacle. As if the position of the spectator were the essence of the spectacle."[20] This is reminiscent of present-day content creation based on the attention economy and 'playbour', relying on view counts and minutes spent consuming content created by others. Another key aspect of non-places is their particular way of using directions and road signs. Augé describes driving down a highway littered with billboards, texts which "make [the landscape's] secret beauties explicit" while said landscape simultaneously "keeps its distance", creating a situation where someone traversing the space of the

[18] To provide an anecdotal example, algorithms rarely push car advertisements to a 23-year-old female user, in comparison to how often she sees them anyway when tuning into a livestream to watch her favorite motorsports.

[19] Augé, *Non-Places*, 96-107.

[20] *Id.*, 86

highway knows exactly what is around them, and becomes "absolved of the need to stop or even look."[21] Similarly, online content can function like a billboard on the side of a highway that the user scrolls down: revealing something fascinating or interesting, something that was previously hidden from the digital traveller, but that does not ultimately invite them to seek out said attraction to satisfy their own curiosity.

In relation to digital cowpaths, then, attention turns to the road and its signals. Cowpaths in general, as discussed, go directly against the intended design of a space, often in a way that is physically more convenient or comfortable. A digital cowpath might not improve convenience: Ally's shopping list is hardly better off in Tom's messages than on her Notes app. A digital cowpath however diverts the user from 'the highway of content,' which an economically ideal social media platform would direct users to follow for as long as possible. The complex relationship between (digital) design and convenience is also a matter of ability. Digital space's allowances are different from those of physical space when it comes to access and modification. In particular, mobile applications offer relatively little modification in comparison to, for example, Tumblr's blog-based design, which allows for greater freedom. Arguably digital modification is more polarized: where it is allowed, it is easy and requires little preparation or outside resources. Where modification is not allowed, it is near impossible. Compare this to a modification of a physical space, where often outside resources are required (e.g. ladders to climb fences, a prepared poster, and wheat paste, all to simply make a poster visible), but these resources are more readily available compared to acquiring prowess in breaking into the codes of major platforms.

Digital cowpaths should not be approached with polarized goals of either dissolution or legitimation. Their existence should be perceived with attention and care, even when their subject matter is seemingly not explicitly political. Perhaps approaches to digital cowpaths provide subtler insights into power-resistance struggles than simply 'find the oddities and dispose of them.' The literal re-purposing, creating new purpose, of space and infrastructure means

[21] *Id.*, 97

new meanings and connections are created. These meanings are a human resource of infinite magnitude, a renewable source of progress that exceeds the degradation of physical matter. In the present day, it is important not to dismiss physical matter in discussions of networks and connectivity. The reading of the internet as a place means theories like Augé's non-place now give potent warnings to the risks of the internet and/or its platforms becoming non-places, where the space "creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude."[22] The internet, especially as platforms are concerned, becomes further and deeper understood in terms previously confined to physical space, and the question of the immaterial meaning-making that runs through it has to be re-observed.

The politics of the internet extend beyond online activism or the pre-existing societal conditions which allow or deny access to it. The reading of the internet as a public space implies different standards of use compared to private spaces, namely greater agency and freedom to the user: this includes uses that are unconventional. Furthermore, part of the freedom related to unconventional uses is for those methods to remain unconventional: legitimation is not the only alternative to obstruction. Ultimately, accelerated development of technology relies on a linear (and preferably upward) understanding of movement, which undermines any kind of movement which defies it. Linear movement as progress relies on the removal of undesired outcomes. Embracing the kinds of sprawling outcomes that arise from playful interaction with space goes against this linearity, contributing to a more diverse understanding of progress and movement.

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[22] *Id.*, 103

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