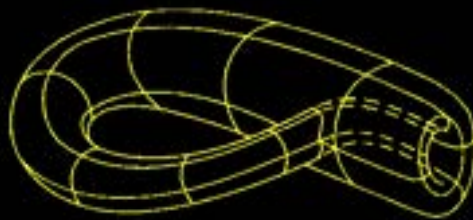LIVE PLAYERS

This fall it'll be a whole new look, new people. Because five years into the decade is when it really becomes a decade. The eighties. They'll be looking over all the people and picking the ones from the last five years that'll survive as the eighties people. It's when the people from the first five years will either become part of the future or part of the past.

ANDY WARHOL

LIVE PLAYERS

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Last year, my sister forwarded me an Andy Warhol quote.

She wasn't the only one. His understanding of culture bore a striking resemblance to my own vibe shift hypothesis. Change has a way of creeping up on us. It happens the way a man goes bankrupt: slowly, then all at once.

We're at that tipping point again—filtering out signals from the last decade, going all in on the ones we believe will win the day.

But there's a catch: this will be the first transition in living memory that happens without the guidance of a coherent elite.

BOOM
BOOM

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One ship is flying to the moon. The other is sinking to the bottom of the sea. Everyone is squinting at their boarding pass, crossing their fingers that they are boarding the right vessel. There's an affect that goes along with this, a studied indifference to consequences. Reading the news has been recoded as low status.

Sure people still post political opinions to their stories. But it has the feel of a bachelor wearing a wedding ring to the bar because he doesn't want to be bothered. Five years ago it would've been gauche to mix politics with party flyers. Now I see it all the time.

Last spring, there was a poll from *The Wall Street Journal* and NORC, the University of Chicago's Nation Opinion Research Center. They have been asking Americans which values are 'very important' to them since 1998. Patriotism, family, and religion have all been in decline since the survey began. Community engagement, which I read as a proxy for progressive politics, was on the rise—until 2023, when it collapsed from first to last place among the pack. Only money continues its steady rise, going from last to first over a quarter of a century's time.

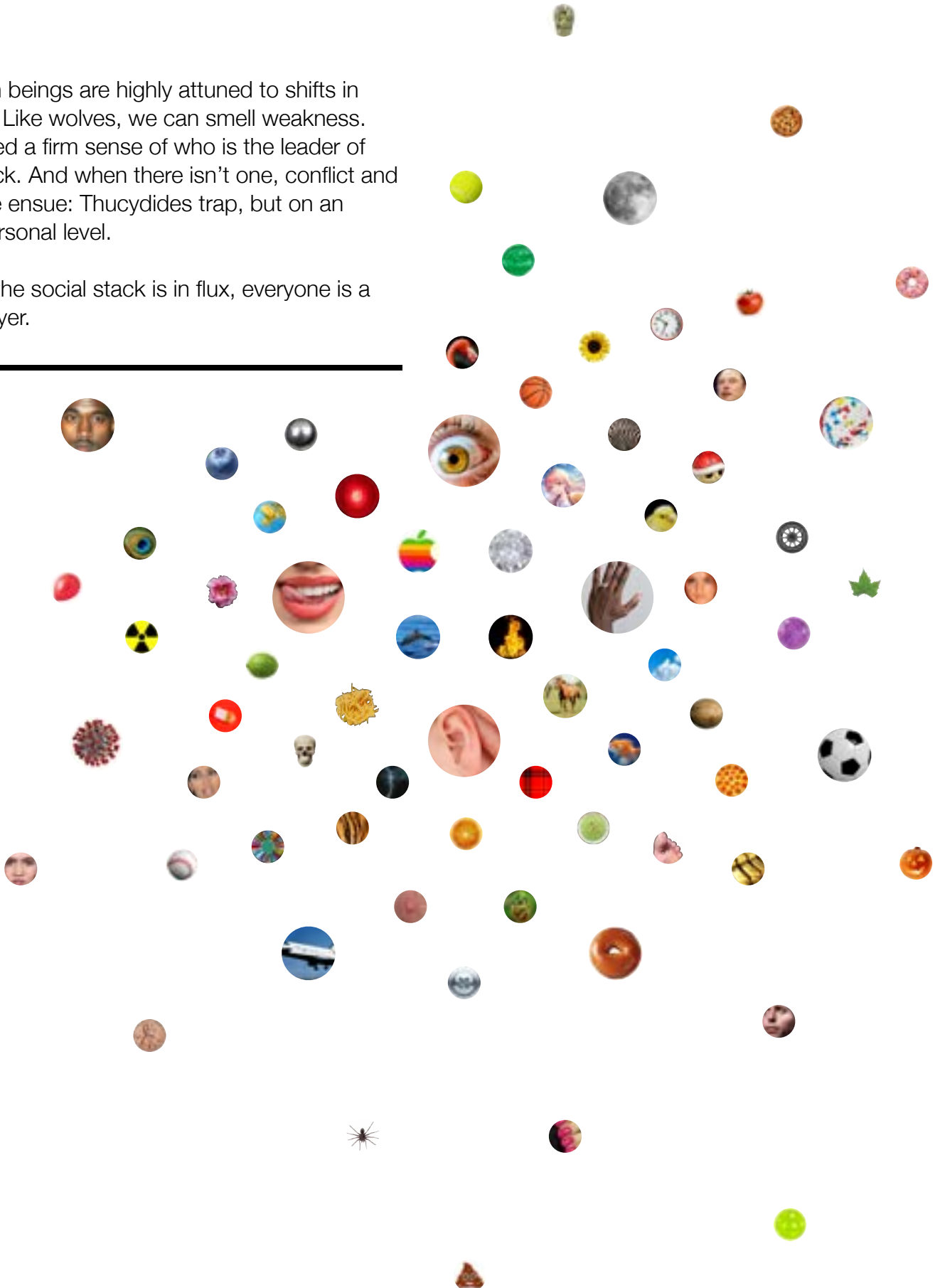Why? Money is agency—or at least our era's most legible form of it.

Over martinis and oysters in Fisherman's Wharf, a friend tells me San Francisco is like Victorian London. New money chasing old money, only to be chased by even newer money, like the billboards along the 101 wheat pasting over failed crypto start-ups and replacing them with AI ventures. It's courtly, he explains. Gossip is worth its weight in gold.

LIVE PLAYERS

san francisco is like victorian london new money chasing old money only to be chased by even newer money

Human beings are highly attuned to shifts in power. Like wolves, we can smell weakness. We need a firm sense of who is the leader of the pack. And when there isn't one, conflict and intrigue ensue: Thucydides trap, but on an interpersonal level.

When the social stack is in flux, everyone is a live player.

LIVE PLAYERS

MELTDOWN
MODE

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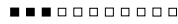
There is a triad of capital—financial, social, and cultural—and only those who hold all three forms can be considered true elites.

Financial capital, which consists of money, crypto, assets, regulatory preference (i.e. do the laws work for or against you) is capital in its most literal form: Scrooge McDuck swimming in his hoard of gold, hype dad trophy husbands flexing on TikTok with their cashmere walls. Money is prominent because it is literal. Like the t-shirt says: I'm not gay, but twenty dollars is twenty dollars. Its symbolism is sticky. The six figure salary retains its allure, despite its decline in buying power. As the only form of capital you can create individually, it's also the easiest to accrue. You can't build social or cultural capital alone. Those are team sports.

Social capital is the Holy Ghost of the Trinity, the most ephemeral of the three. It consists of trust, networks, relationships, norms, values, and purpose. Here is where our presumptive elites are stumbling. The legitimacy crisis is real. Government, academia, the media, and business have all lost the public's trust (at least in the United States). Unfortunately, this is the most difficult form of capital to build. Developmental economists have been trying to crack the code for decades with few results.

Cultural capital is the underdog of the pack. Probably because it relies entirely on knowingness. The phrase haunting every stealth wealth trend report summarizes the dynamic: money talks, wealth whispers. To talk about status or taste is to boldly admit you don't have it. Culture defines and directs our aspirations. Who are our leaders? And why?

to talk about status or taste is to admit you don't have it

THE OWO

People worry about culture because they know it sets the agenda for the future.

And who wouldn't want to be in charge of that?

Wall Street and the City held the crown through economic dominance, regulatory capture, and cultural philanthropy. They faltered in 2008 and never regained their pre-crisis legitimacy. The presumptive heir to the throne, the tech industry has failed to launch time and again.

This occurred in part, because the tech industry rejected the non-quantifiable nature of social and cultural capital. Unable to find actual metrics for these things, they fell victim to Goodhart's Law. "When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure." Treating proxies for social and cultural capital (likes, follows, impressions) as the thing in itself opened up culture to scams, grifts, hacks, and psyops.

The collapse has been so complete that its no exaggeration to say that there are multiple realities co-present in the United States and we have no clear path to negotiate mutual intelligibility between the them.
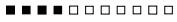
In 2023, the throne is empty.

LIVE PLAYERS

COLLECTIVE ACTION PROBLEM

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A few weeks ago, a friend in New York speculates about how many people direct global culture. Ten thousand people? One thousand people? Five hundred? Ten? It's a smaller number than a civilian would guess. You could make a good case for each. It all hinges on how much agency an individual needs to credibly claim they 'direct global culture.' With each contraction, the power level necessary to stay in the mix rises.

Culture industry roles were once much more coherent, the lines of power much more concrete. Figures like Anna Wintour and Rick Rubin gesture at this recent past. They were middle men connecting financial capital (businesses) with cultural capital (artists) to create social capital (cultural institutions). Fashion and literary editors, film and television producers, radio programmers, museum curators, restaurant critics—all shared a similar role: mediating between the avant-garde and the mass market.

They had the agency to move culture.

Last decade, the shift away from gatekeeping and toward democratization, fucked all this up.

The flight to social media flattened the distinction between legacy brand—*Vogue*, Random House, MTV, Hot 97, MoMA, even *The New York Times*—and internet personality. While this raised the individual agency or certain artists/writers/designers/whatever, it diminished the power of cultural institutions. Like so many twenty-first century trends, it left us better off individually, and worse off collectively.

The free-wheeling early days of social media

LIVE PLAYERS

seduced creative scenes into believing a new decentralized paradigm had been achieved. Who needs stuffy zombie institutions when we have Instagram?

The problem with non-hierarchical models is human beings are not non-hierarchical creatures. Like all anarchist ideals, the dream of infinite digital liberty turned out to be more corporate talking point than reality. We took the agenda-setting function away from individual power brokers and gave it to trillion dollar tech companies, whose faceless content moderators and blackbox algorithms now decide what people can and can't see.

At least it relieved our status anxiety—

It's hard to resent compute.

LIVE PLAYERS

THE CULTURAL
LIFESTYLE

We used to believe we would find agency online. Today, we know agency comes from other people. In an era of change, small groups do big things.

We can see this in the recent phenomenon of clout bombing (as Brad Troemel calls it)—the strategy of leveraging massive group photo-ops for fashion brands like Céline and Heaven by Marc Jacobs as proof of cultural relevance. Like the now defunct hype houses, internet personalities realize clout is interpersonal. They seek alliances and a seat at the literal table. (See: Gonzo Culture Pt. 2)

This is the self-selected avant-garde. You see it in New York at a gala benefit. You see it in Los Angeles at a party in the hills. You see it in London at a private dinner. Culture has a door. Culture has a list. Culture is a party.

It occurred to me at a Courrèges party in Paris, two summers ago. Hosted at a dismal rag recycling warehouse somewhere outside the Périphérique, a nod toward sustainability. Attendees were goth in vegan leather or looked like a Babylon extra from Queer as Folk. It was signature cocktails, kimchi bowls, and techno. A giant mirror emblazoned with the brand's logo loomed above the crowd while people talked about the publicist who set up Kanye West with Julia Fox, summer travel plans, and rehab.

Dancing in the crush behind the DJ booth, sunset obscured by smoke machines, my friend screams, "Isn't this amazing! This is how culture is made." Someone in a k-hole knocks over a fan and the crowd lurches sideways. She's unhurt. The sun sets and the lighting design adapts, strobing between Yves Klein blue and blood red. Disoriented, we amble out of the warehouse to an Uber and head to another party.

During the crypto bubble, tech took a page out of the fashion and art world playbooks, realizing travel itself was the contemporary cultural lifestyle. NFT this. ETH that. There were festivals and assemblies and camps.

This fall, at Urbit Assembly in Lisbon, a Zoomer tells me, "There aren't enough hot people here. I need to join another subculture." Networking has had a comeback—which means the quality of the people define the quality of the event. A good party is something money can't buy.

Case in point: at BAYC Hong Kong, there was a mass blinding event due to the decorative use of sterilizing UV lamps—presumably because they were more expensive.

LIVE PLAYERS

LIVE PLAYERS

a good party is something money can't buy

GLOBALIZATION AESTHETICS

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LIVE PLAYERS

In *The Matrix*, we're told that 1998 was the pinnacle of human civilization. The sentiment was captured in a tweet some time ago: the decommissioned Concorde landing in front of the destroyed Twin Towers in New York. Someone comments, imagine telling someone in three years both will be gone.

The interest in the era is two-fold. First, the truism about nostalgia running on a twenty year cycle is entirely correct. Second, the turn of the century feels connected to a historical continuum in a way that our current era does not.

They say you stop maturing when you become famous. Above a certain number of social connections and the possibility of growing becomes onerous if not impossible. You not only have to change yourself, which is hard enough, you now have to renegotiate your relationships based on that change—a logistical impossibility.

This explains why former teen heartthrobs date college co-eds, as well as our broader civilizational gridlock. Jeff Goldblum's character Ian Malcolm predicts this in Michael Crighton's 1990 thriller, *Jurassic Park*:
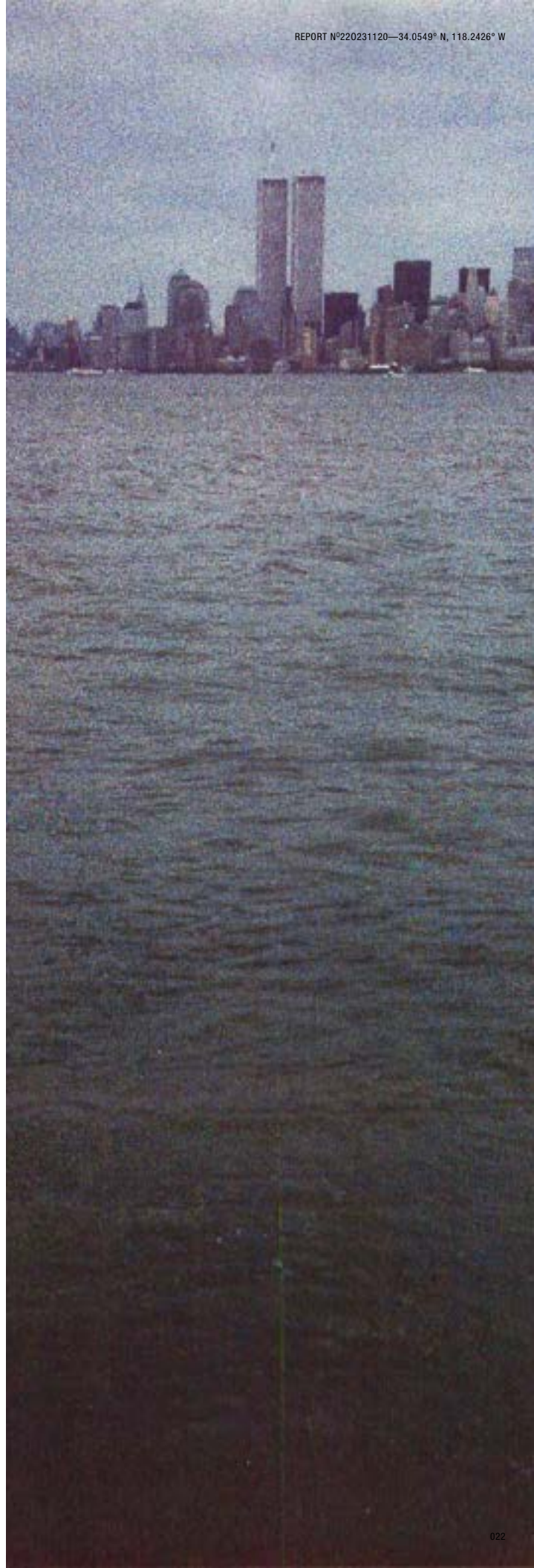
In a mass-media world, there's less of everything except the top ten books, records, movies, ideas. People worry about losing species diversity in the rain forest. But what about intellectual diversity—our most necessary resource? That's disappearing faster than trees. But we haven't figured that out, so now we're planning to put five billion people together in cyberspace. And it'll freeze the entire species. Everything will stop dead in its tracks. Everyone will think the same thing at the same time. Global uniformity.

So we return to the Y2K aesthetic and look for a way around social media induced frozen time.

I wonder if the disenchantment of the last few years has something to do with optimizing culture for the iPhone. The New Aesthetic that dominated the 2010s was flat, simplified, monochrome. It was cafes that looked better in photos than in person, logos visible from a mile away, funky vector illustrations customizable to any resolution (i.e. corporate Memphis). It was legible, but affectless. Flat. No vibe.

By contrast, the globalization aesthetic of the new millennium was perspectival. Madonna gyrating in front of time lapse traffic rushing toward the future in "Ray of Light." Zooming through Tyler Durden's CGI brain in the opening sequence of Fight Club. It was transcluscent iMacs, not glass brick iPhones. It was flight paths, urban crowds, container ships. Globalization was a horizon line. And we were going there.

Did the use of perspective and depth cultivate a culture that could handle ambiguity and nuance? Did the flattening and vectorization of iPhone aesthetics cause us to become more literal and undermine our sophistication? The haziness in the distance was never a problem that could be solved by better resolution. Can we return to looking forward, rather than down?

If people are obsessed with Elon Musk's Starship, it's because finally someone is going somewhere, even if we don't know where.

THE TECHNO-
OPTIMIST PITCH

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It was a new limitless frontier, bringing the ethos of space exploration into every home. Hence cyberspace. Only you didn't need a billion dollars and a NASA contract to begin prospecting. Any ISP would do.

The techno-optimist era was brief though, lasting roughly from the fall of the Berlin Wall to the election of Donald Trump. A flash in the pan: possibility there, then gone. The Internet, that vast web of communications infrastructure that weaves together global industrial civilization feels less like a machine and more like the mundane condition of 21st century life.

Like all consumer technology, it transited from being a radical vector for human creativity to an optimized for everyone product. (This is called scale.) Cars were once objects of beauty and design. They're now budget line items, the skeuomorphic expression of fuel efficiency regulations.

Marc Andreessen's The Techno-Optimist Manifesto encapsulates elite—or maybe, counter-elite opinion. It's broadly correct. We do live in a technological civilization. It is responsible for our unprecedented health and prosperity. Solutions to society's problems will more likely be found via innovation, not regulation…

But one error sticks out. The line: "We had a problem of isolation, so we invented the Internet."

Did the Internet solve this problem?

LIVE PLAYERS

SOCIAL SUBSTITUTION GOODS

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LIVE PLAYERS

Americans, in particular, report being lonelier than ever. The Internet did not solve isolation so much as operationalize. You can now be isolated and work. You can be isolated and date. You can be isolated and socialize. Never before in human history have so many people lived alone. Without the social substitution goods offered by the Internet (Zoom, Raya, Instagram) this would be impossible.

In a business context, digitization was just a hostile takeover. Digital substitution goods were cheaper, more convenient, and more scalable than their pre-Internet competitors. Max may be digital cable with slightly worse content, Uber may be digital cabs that price gouge you when you need them most, and Airbnb may be digital hotels run by the world's largest slumlord. But they still deliver their core offering (entertainment, transportation, hospitality).

We may grumble, but we still use the services. Our revealed preference betrays the op-eds. Like the cramped, indignant passengers flying Basic Economy on Spirit—the unhappy consumers of digital substitution goods have an easy solution to their woes. Pay for the upgrade.

With social substitution goods, the nature of the transaction complicates things. They sell one outcome, but deliver another. Their angle isn't using regulatory arbitrage to create a pricing advantage i.e. "Airbnbs aren't really hotels." It's snake oil. Tinder didn't improve the dating market, it decimated it. Twitter didn't debunk propaganda, it lowered the barriers to entry for would-be propagandists. Instagram didn't foster connection, it swapped out strong bonds (friendships) for weak ones (followers).

We're experiencing a vibe shift akin to the collapse of communist faith in the late Soviet years. (Andreessen's Hail Mary piece is, after all, a manifesto.) Fellow travelers of the past had to account for Actually Existing Socialism then. Venture capitalists must deal with the Actually Existing Internet now. We can no longer speak aspirationally about what the Internet may become, only about what it is: a Potemkin reality.

THE INTERNET IS MUNDANE

LIVE PLAYERS

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LIVE PLAYERS

We're caught in the flow—dipping in and out of content all day, attention flickering between screen life and real life. Main characters, silent witnesses, crisis actors, targeted persons: some days it can be a little bit difficult to remember what's real and what's fake, where we stop and content begins.

We thought the Internet was a decisive break with last century's passive broadcast culture. Online culture was supposed to be active and participatory—but the image of the teenager has changed less in the last thirty years than we would like to think. The couch potatoes of 1993 have become the bed rotters of 2023. Both spend the evening scrambling their circadian rhythm with blue light. The only differences being the size of the screen, and whether Comcast or TikTok is curating your content for the night.

People complain of memory loss and brain fog. Is it long COVID? Is it clinical depression? Possibly. Or maybe it the inevitable consequence of outsourcing so much of our cognition to our phones. First, we let go of memory, and gave that to the cloud. Then, we let go of identity. We gave that to social media. Next, we gave up choice. That went to the algorithms. Finally, we conceded emotions. Memes now coordinate which current thing we should be upset about. Today, some are trying to outsource thought to ChatGPT—or at least the lower forms of it.

No one feels like they're getting much done. Which isn't surprising when you remember many people are devoting 5 to 12 hours per day to consuming digital content: lurking social by day, binging streaming by night.

ENTER THE
NOLIFER

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Anxiety about the Internet consuming us isn't new. Tron was a tale of a hacker zapped into a video game. The Matrix was a tale of all of humanity zapped into a video game. In the 2000s, hikikomori emerged in Japan. In the 2010s, NEETs emerged in America. In the 2020s, iPad kids are emerging everywhere.

Earlier fictional accounts of the Nolifer presume he will have to be captured. A robot army or a rogue AI will need to lock him in the metaverse. But the truth is most people would choose the Matrix, like Cypher, the traitor from the film. Most people already have chosen the Matrix. It's just not a goo-filled life support pod. It's Instagram. It's X. It's your iPhone.

The Nolifer is in decline. He's no longer part of a subculture. His transgressive activities (bed rotting) have been subsumed into self care. His lifestyle isn't futuristic, it's a corporate default (WFH). Once upon a time, his activities were defining a new human paradigm, but now he's just Mark Zuckerberg's bitch (metaverse). He can no longer sneer at normies, because unbeknownst to him, he became one during the COVID era push to digitize all of daily life.

That which is compulsory cannot be high status.

Thus the Nolifer faces a choice: he can either follow the path of the normies and become an NPC (non-player character) or seek his fortune elsewhere—beyond the apps.

LIVE PLAYERS

LIVE PLAYERS

EXIT THE LIVE PLAYER

LIVE PLAYERS

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There are two big complaints about culture. One, that it's moving too fast. And two, that it's not moving at all, or as Internet writer Paul Skallas, the Lindy Man, likes to say culture is stuck. Counterintuitively, both takes are correct.

Some days you open X, see a post, but then the timeline refreshes and it's gone forever. The ephemeral, personalized nature of the Internet makes it an anti-culture, unable to build, only able to distract.

This frustrates marketers concerned with small-c culture: novel political movements, novel sexual identities, novel content, novel Internet personalities. The hair trigger reaction time needed to engage online is not a characteristic of large-scale enterprise. And it frustrates the self-selected avant-garde. Capital-c culture: novel art movements, novel aesthetics, novel products, novel celebrities cannot percolate without due time.

For live players who think it's time to build, the Internet does not provide stable ground. Only the past can do that.

LIVE PLAYERS