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DIGITAL ADVENTURES

Time Waster Sean Connery Delivers A Line That Eventually Sparks an Internet Fad

By AARON RUTKOFF THE WALL STREET JOURNAL ONLINE November 7, 2005

On a whim, Max Goldberg created a rudimentary Web site parodying a Sean Connery film. Nearly five years later, his crude site has spawned over 160,000 imitations -- a phenomenon known by the clunky acronym YTMND.

The Gimmick

The template is simple: take a single image, overlay a few words of text, add a looping soundtrack and an adolescent sense of humor -- and some time to kill. This formula has opened an infinite universe of mockery and satire for online humorists of all stripes, prompting Mr. Goldberg to open a Web site that collects the links of his mimicking legions.

"People are taking it to whole new levels," muses Mr. Goldberg, now 23 years old. "It's like a cheap way to make a movie."

The delightfully silly YTMND entitled "Batman: Ualuealuealeual" illustrates the dynamic of creative mutation that drives the site. The same one-gag joke has been repeated over 300 times as people created their own renditions to make Ann Coulter, Michael Moore, Pee Wee Herman, Jon Stewart, Ted Kennedy, Super Mario and Terri Schiavo all perform the same weird dance.

Star Wars fans can trace the progress of another popular meme: Darth Vader's iconic "Nooooo!" scream. See the same line as imagined on the game show "Wheel of Fortune," or perhaps juxtaposed with James Earl Jones's voiceover work for CNN.

WASTING TIME?



Want to know where an unusual Web site comes from? Need help tracing the evolution of a strange Internet phenomenon? Send your Time Wasters to aaron.rutkoff@wsj.com and we'll investigate.

Recycling used parts plays a major role in the YTMND ecosystem. The footage of Michael Moore mentioned above is repurposed and combined with an audio clip from "The Simpsons" to make fun of the documentarian's girth.

"A lot of the original sites that started fads get lost. They don't get as many hits as the spin-offs they caused," Mr. Goldberg explains.

Wikipedia's YTMND entry monitors the site's fads, treating the subject with near Talmudic exactitude as it chronicles the changes.

Popular with teenagers and college students, the raw material for YTMNDs is a mix of pop culture elements dating back to the 1980s -- everything from early Nintendo games to more recent Saturday Night Live sketches -- blended with current events.

Exploration of the YTMND universe is not for the easily offended. Users' willingness to run even the most sacred of cows through the satirical blender lends YTMNDs a topicality that may refute the notion that young people are disinterested in politics and news. The same adolescent humor also leads to themes many would consider homophobic, racist, or just plain vulgar.

This dark comic sensibility is comfortable mixing Saddam Hussein's trial with the theme song from "The Jeffersons." Or skewering President Bush's much maligned response to Hurricane Katrina with a hit by the B-52s as sung by a character from the TV series "Family Guy."

The Idea

It all started with the release of the Sean Connery film "Finding Forrester" in the waning days of 2000.

In that film, Mr. Connery plays a reclusive author who befriends an inner city writing prodigy with basketball scholarship to a tony Manhattan prep school. "There was a moment in the movie when Sean Connery says, 'You're the man now, dog,'" Mr. Goldberg recalls.

Even those who did not see the film may remember this particular line of dialogue -- a bit of warmed over African-American slang intoned by the Scottish screen legend -- because it was a part of the movie's heavily-aired promotional campaign. "I was pretty amazed by it," Mr. Goldberg says, "so I bought the domain name." The only problem for the new owner of www.yourethemannowdog.com was that he "couldn't really think of what to put up."

Mr. Goldberg's solution was just as weird as his urge to buy the domain name in the first place. He deployed a single, repeating image of Mr. Connery from "Finding Forrester" beneath the dramatic, zooming text YOURE (sic) THE MAN NOW DOG.COM, and topped off his primitive creation with a repeating audio clip of Mr. Connery's memorable line.



Max Goldberg

The result is both hypnotic and grating -- and almost aggressively pointless. For more than two years, Mr. Goldberg says, the site simply sat in its dusty corner of the Internet, serving no discernible purpose other than the satisfaction of his vague impulse to create it.

The Tipping Point

There is no way to determine what happened between the early 2001 launch of Mr. Goldberg's "Finding Forrester"-inspired site and April 2004, when YTMND.com was born.

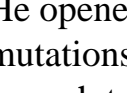
In the intervening years, he says, no effort was made to publicize its existence or to divert Web traffic to it. The search engine is a mysterious force, and visitors trickled through over time. Most probably left without a second thought.

To some surfers, however, Mr. Goldberg's creation became a template for Internet expression and a tool for parody. "People started sending me sites where they had bought a domain and copied my site exactly, except changing the image and sound to some degree," he says. "I wasn't asking people to do it or suggesting it at all. It just started happening."

To keep tabs on his imitators, Mr. Goldberg began to update a list that grew increasingly extensive as more and more spin-offs emerged. By April last year, when the phenomenon had reached a critical mass, Mr. Goldberg turned what had been strictly underground into a formal fad.

He opened YTMND.com as a searchable database, community center, and Web hosting service for these mutations of his original creation. Forums on the site help novices hone the technique -- which is simple enough to establish a very low bar for participation -- and the hosting service, run by one of Mr. Goldberg's friends, allows users to upload graphical and audio elements for free.

HOW TO



• See a YTMND showing how to create YTMNDs. **MORE YTMNDs**

• Blue Ball Machine • Tom Cruise Kills Oprah • Boil 'Em • Butt Racing Grand Prix

The name of the site, which now doubles as the term for each individual example of the genre, is an acronym for Sean Connery's film line.

On a given day, Mr. Goldberg reports, an average of 1.5 million unique viewers access one of the YTMNDs hosted within a growing empire that now includes over 160,000 submissions, with about 10,000 new YTMNDs added each month.

"I don't know what to think about it, honestly," Mr. Goldberg insists. "It wasn't something I ever thought would get this large."

The standout hit of the YTMND world, a Star Trek-inspired creation known as [The Picard Song](#), has been seen over 1.2 million times since its inception on April 25, 2004. (These details can be viewed by clicking a small red insignia in the upper-left hand corner of each YTMND.)

The Creator

A New York City resident who works in advertising, Mr. Goldberg registers a tone of dispassionate wonder at the phenomenon he has let loose on the Web and makes little attempt to explain its popularity.

Given the enthusiasm of some YTMND authors, whose profiles list dozens of titles, Mr. Goldberg appears to be far from the leading practitioner: his profile lists a total of just seven that he's made, of which one features the singer [Tom Jones](#) and another centers around a [singing loaf of bread](#).

As founder and proprietor, Mr. Goldberg has had to deal with the legal ramifications of the creations. Cease and desist orders from corporations have driven Mr. Goldberg to censor some material on YTMND.com. He also removes pornographic content.

"Warner Bros., Six Flags, whatever the company is that does Harry Potter -- they were particularly bloodthirsty," he says of his corporate critics. Six Flags was unhappy with a YTMND fad that likened the appearance of recently convicted Civil Rights era killer [Edgar Ray Killen](#) to the theme park chain's latest [advertising mascot](#).

He has experience defending his parodies. Mr. Goldberg claims to be the only person to defeat a celebrity for the rights to an eponymous domain name, following [his victory](#) over "Saved by the Bell" actor Dustin Diamond for control of www.dustindiamond.com.

"It was never intended that I would try to guess about copyright violations," he says of his approach to moderating YTMNDs. "Ninety-nine percent of the time it is fair-use parody."

This commitment to free speech also explains why he allows racist and homophobic themes to survive in the YTMND database.

"Free speech is free speech," Mr. Goldberg says. "One of the fads right now is called 'Nigga Stole My Bike' -- a reinterpretation of the cut sequence sure to be remembered by anyone who played 'Mike Tyson's Punch-Out' on the original Nintendo game system. "I don't feel it's racist."

Write to Aaron Rutkoff at aaron.rutkoff@wsj.com

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