



“Under Construction” Lives: Restorative Nostalgia and the GeoCities Archive

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A website called the “Geocities-izer” appeared in 2010, presaging the new decade’s growing appetite for 1990s-era cultural artifacts, an appetite that encompasses the digital aesthetic from that era.¹ The tool, which promises to “make any website look like it was made by a 13-year-old in 1996,” can

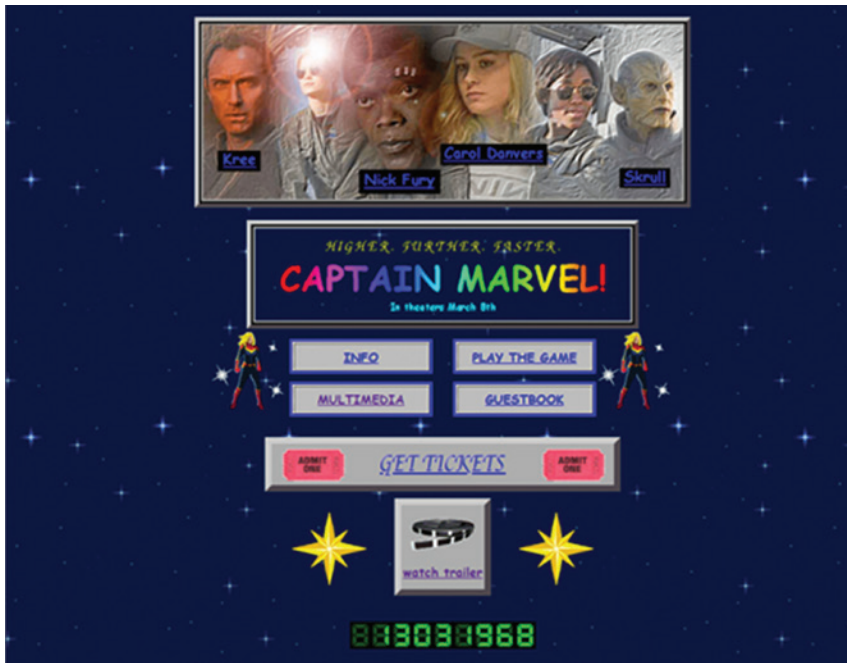


Screenshot of “The Geocities-izer” from mikelacher.com, captured Feb. 18, 2019.

populate any webpage URL with features such as colourful comic sans font, a “Netscape Now” button, pixelated animated GIFs, and MIDI files playing popular 90s hits on loop. A review of the website describes it as a “nostalgia-soaked tool” (Ostrow 2010) but doesn’t probe into the precise nature of the object of nostalgia or the nature of the nostalgia itself.

More recently, the promotional website for *Captain Marvel* (2019) garnered attention for trying to capture the aesthetic of the film’s 1990s setting. *Mashable* wrote in response, “PSA: The ‘Captain Marvel’ website will make you think it’s 1997” (Joho 2019). *AV Club* called it “a glorious ‘90s Geocities fever dream” (Hughs 2019). The website incorporates retro features like an odometer-style traffic counter and a guestbook that includes a post asking “Is anyone else concerned about Y2K?!?”

The emergence of popular culture texts like the “Geocities-izer” and the *Captain Marvel* website indicate that features like loud, clashing colours, blinking animations, and blinding layers of pixelated backgrounds, borders, and fonts have become shorthand for a specific period of web-history (the late 90s)—a period often associated with GeoCities, the era’s chosen web publishing platform.



Screenshot from the *Captain Marvel* promotional website, captured Feb. 18, 2019.

Looking at how the GeoCities aesthetic has been taken up in several Web interpretations from the 2010s, I suggest that these works isolate features of late 1990s personal homepages that serve as a visual shorthand for the amateur Web. By re-visiting and re-creating the GeoCities personal homepage, recent cultural artifacts like *Cameron's World* and *One Terabyte of Kilobyte Age* evoke a kind of nostalgia that is “a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed” (Boym “Nostalgia”). These interpretations emphasize aspects of early Web self-representation that may be seen as missing from the contemporary Internet, gesturing toward an early “Wild West” of online self-representation where both the audience and function of online identity work were still being sorted out. In the following two case studies, acts of restoration focus on the figure of the bricoleur as the kind of user that defined early Web identity practice. Further, restorative nostalgia comes to the fore as a motivating force prompting contemporary artists and researchers to re-create the Web’s lost cities.

The idea of restoration is important for discussions of nostalgia. Svetlana Boym suggests restorative nostalgia “attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home” (2001 xviii) as absolute truth, as opposed to reflective nostalgia, which dwells in the “ambivalences of human longing.” The uptake of the GeoCities aesthetic seems to fall somewhere in between, however. *One Terabyte* presents and reconstructs relics from the early Web, asking the viewer to meditate on potential cultural meanings of the early personal homepage while gesturing towards tropes that defined the Internet era. Projects like *The Geocities-izer*, the *Captain Marvel* website and *Cameron's World* try to indulge the nostalgic pull of GeoCities by presenting artifacts that appeal to collective memory of how the early Web looked. By invoking late-90s visual tropes to excess, these interpretations do not seem to be historicizing the early Web so much as they are inviting audiences to celebrate the features being emphasized as emblematic of how different early Web homepages were from the aesthetic and features of contemporary websites. Though Boym suggests that “restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt,” it may be that the project of restoration can also be reflective and exploratory. Indeed, Boym herself notes that this typology is “tentative” and leaves “gray areas on the outskirts of imaginary homelands.”

Part of the reason GeoCities looms large in popular imaginings of the 90s-era Web could be that archivists have had to fight to keep a historical record of it after it was wiped abruptly from the Internet in 2009. The “third most visited website” in 1999 (“Yahoo buys GeoCities” 1999), GeoCities outperformed other, similar services (e.g. Tripod and Angelfire) that entered the scene around the same time. Record of the free website hosting service can now only be found through a handful of efforts to archive and preserve memory of the site. It is difficult,

however, to find descriptions of GeoCities free from the celebratory, nostalgic tone that seems to accompany all mention of the website. Ian Milligan's historicization of GeoCities, for example, is unapologetically nostalgic at times, such as when it reflects that "it was in places like GeoCities where users would become parts of virtual communities held together by volunteers, neighbourhood watches, web rings and guest books" (137).

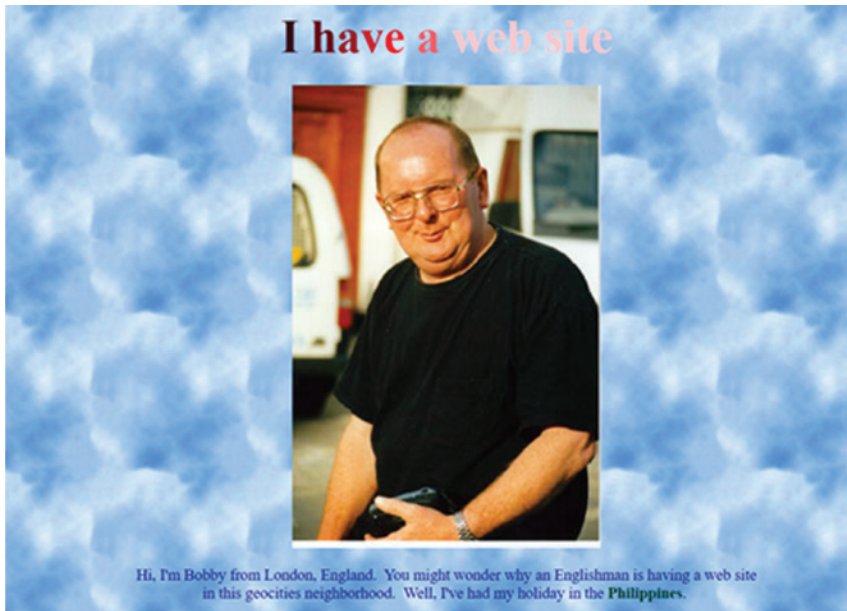
Milligan notes the centrality of the geographic metaphor of the site, where users claimed spots within specific neighborhoods loosely associated with themes and interests. He views this feature as an "explicit attempt to form community through familiar space- and place-based metaphors" and proposes such rhetoric was GeoCities' hallmark (141). The feature, he suggests, prompted users to think of the Web as "something that you could live in" (139). Milligan connects the site's decline in the new millennium to the phasing out of the neighborhood metaphor. If we recall that the term "nostalgia" itself derives from an early medical term for "homesickness" (*OED*, "nostalgia, n."), it may be that nostalgia for GeoCities is a sort of homesickness for one's first digital home, during a time when the act of creating a web presence was likened to "homesteading on the electronic frontier" (Rheingold 1993).

In a famously ill-advised financial decision, Yahoo purchased GeoCities in 1999 for 3.5 billion US dollars. Although GeoCities was at the height of its popularity at the time of purchase, changes in management ushered in by Yahoo (which included a new, fee-based premium hosting service), as well as the gradual shift to more streamlined social networks like Friendster, Myspace, and eventually Facebook, meant that the service's profitability was on the wane. In April 2009, Yahoo announced that they would be shutting down GeoCities. By October 26 of that year, it was pulled from the Web.

In response to Yahoo's announcement, a group calling themselves "The Archive Team" began the GeoCities project, aimed at capturing as much information as possible from the GeoCities servers before it went offline. Between the announcement in April and GeoCities' closure in October of the same year, The Archive Team managed to save a large portion of the GeoCities data, later making it available to anyone in the form of a 650 gb torrent (The Archive Team "Main Page").

One of the more well-known uses of the torrent is *One Terabyte of Kilobyte Age: Digging through the Geocities Torrent*, a blog produced by self-described "digital folklorists" Olia Lialina and Dragan Espenshied. Their blog documents their discoveries and reflections as they dig through the contents of the torrent, with a tendency to present their findings in the context of the history of online identity and evolutions in how we present

ourselves online. The authors restore some archived pages by fixing dead links and optimizing them for modern web browsers. The restorations aim to be true to the originals, looking only to give the user the opportunity to interact with the website as they would have in the 1990s (instead of viewing a screenshot). For example, “I have a website” comes with the caveat that “the MIDI file embedded in the page, a version of Celine Dion’s ‘My Heart Will Go On,’ is heavily damaged and produces strange noises when played back via timidity²” (“The Anniversary Restoration”).



“I Have a Website,” restored at *One Terabyte of Kilobyte Age*, captured Feb. 20, 2019.

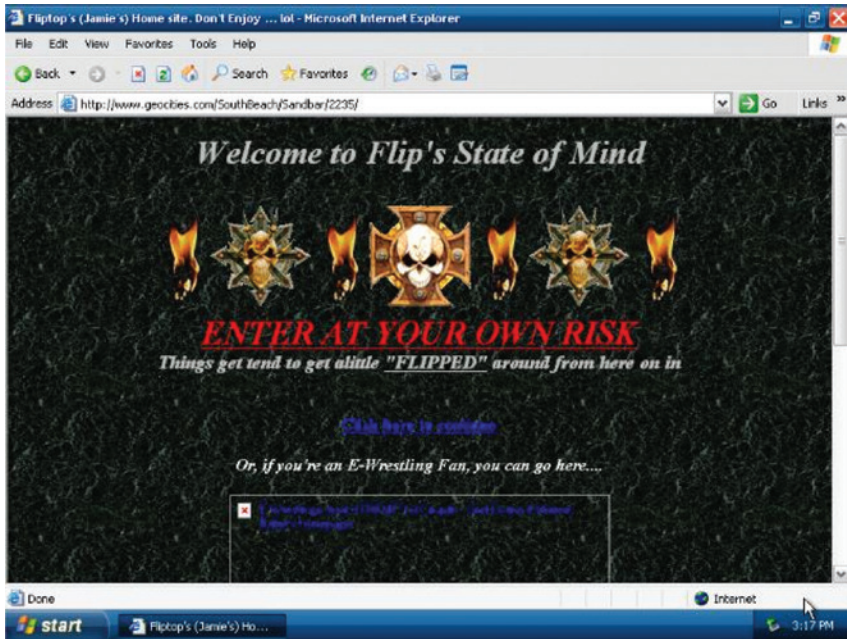
The authors use the term “digital folklore” to describe, broadly, the “the customs, traditions and elements of visual, textual and audio culture that emerged from users’ engagement with personal computer applications during the last decade of the 20th and the first decade of the 21st century” (“Preface: Do you believe in Users?”). This use of the term folklore departs somewhat from common associations of “folklore”

with traditional knowledge, beliefs, and customs passed down through generations within a particular cultural group. While the authors may simply be trying to distinguish loose historicization from a stricter academic approach, we can also think of the preservation and historicization of GeoCities itself (rather than the knowledge and culture presented through GeoCities in its heyday) as a kind of folklore. Given that no “official” or academic history of GeoCities exists, those interested in the history of GeoCities rely on narratives like the “glorious history” described on the Archive Team’s Wiki page (“GeoCities” *Archive Team*) to piece together the website’s rise and fall. Much of the extant web content about GeoCities sources its information back to the history outlined on archiveteam.org, but the main source of information for this page seems to be the collective memory of its anonymous contributors, as no official sources are named. It could also be that the act of folklorisation is tied to restorative nostalgia, where both are practices that seek to preserve knowledge of their objects through preserving narratives or recreations that may enhance or celebrate some aspects of lost practices.

The authors also make note of certain features that have developed into visual shorthand for GeoCities and the late 90s amateur Web aesthetic. Notably, they highlight the “under construction” images that seemed to decorate every home page at the time as particularly evocative of an era before it was assumed that every website would be continually updated and was therefore perpetually under construction (“What was the first Under Construction”).

One conclusion they draw is that Web 1.0 self-presentation was very different from contemporary online self-representation, which often takes place on social media, and, consequently, is heavily directed by platform-specific affordances.³ As Lialina observes in one blog post, contemporary social networks prompt us with questions like “What’s on your mind?” and “Who is in this photo?” In contrast, the personal home page was a blank page. She suggests that “making a home page required answering existential questions. Do I have something to say to the world? What can that be?” (“My Corner of the Internet” 2014).

The blog is accompanied by a “Photo Op” page, where screenshots of pages from the GeoCities torrent are automatically uploaded several times an hour. The pages appear in reverse-chronological order, presented for the most part without comment. They can be taken as mere curiosities reflecting how the Web has evolved, or read as artifacts representing the way that early web users responded to the novelty of a free space on the Web, and an anonymous audience potentially encompassing the whole world.



From “One Terabyte of Kilobyte Age Photo Op,” posted Jan. 31, 2018.

A pattern that emerges when we look at examples of GeoCities home pages is that users tended to curate or assemble images and links from other parts of the Web. In a 1998 essay on identity construction in personal home pages (published online with a distinctly “1998” web-aesthetic that combines a notepad-themed background graphic with a futuristic GIF image of a computer, which remains unchanged), Daniel Chandler adapts Strauss’ concept of the “bricoleur” (1962) to the environment of the personal home page. Chandler observes that, because bricolage can be experienced by the bricoleur as “discovery” rather than planning and execution, we might think of bricolage as “not merely a ‘reflection’ of the *bricoleur*” but a potential shaping of the bricoleur, in which the subject is shaped over time through the process of discovery and construction that constitutes bricolage.

The lens of time has led to the GeoCities “bricoleur” becoming the object of nostalgia for some. In the case below of *Cameron’s World*, the bricoleur is exaggerated to comedic effect, but in a way that communicates

fondness for the chaotic and weird aesthetic that has come to define the personal home page. In August 2015, a flurry of news articles and blog posts emerged announcing the appearance of *Cameron's World*, a “web-collage” made of materials collected from GeoCities archives. A *Motherboard* article invites readers to “Beat Your Eyeballs to Death with This Majestic GeoCities Tribute” (Jozuka 2015), *The Next Web* calls it “a glorious graveyard of geocities gifs” (Wright 2015), and the *Daily Dot* calls it a “nostalgia project” (Delinger 2015). The project draws on every visual trope the popular imagination has come to associate with GeoCities, including Comic Sans, blinking GIFs, and a multitude of “under construction” images.



Detail from “Cameron’s World,” captured Feb. 20, 2019.

Created by New Zealand designer Cameron Askin, *Cameron's World* proclaims itself a “love letter to the internet of old.” It consists of one very long, very crowded page of content that the visitor can scroll through, pausing to explore hidden links and clickable content dispersed throughout. A description at the bottom of the page describes *Cameron's World* as a “web-collage of text and images excavated from the buried neighbourhoods of archived GeoCities pages (1994–2009).” The artist explains that, “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.” It also evokes a conception of early online self-representation as unabashedly “weird,” perhaps out of longing for an era before the “real name web” (see Hogan 2013), ushered in by social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, made the project of self-branding more important.



Detail from “Cameron’s World,” captured Jan. 31, 2018.



Detail from “Cameron’s World,” captured Feb. 20, 2019.

One Terabyte and *Cameron’s World* point to a grey area between restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia, where representations of a longed-for home (in this case, the “home” of the GeoCities neighbourhood) can be nostalgic or exaggerated, and yet faithful to a community’s memory of the source object. *One Terabyte*’s authors choose to identify as “digital folklorists” instead of historians, drawing attention to the fact that their efforts to restore the GeoCities archive is a labour motivated, and perhaps influenced, by nostalgia. *Cameron’s World* presents a playful or tongue-in-cheek restorative nostalgia that tries to capture the specialness or distinctness of the source object by exaggerating key features understood to be representative of early Web personal homepages. Specifically, the act of bricolage is emphasized through the website’s cluttered appearance. Though *Cameron’s World* presents an extreme level of GIF-curation that few early Web home pages could rival, the excess can still be “true” to

the original, in the sense that it's a reflection of the creator's longing for the era of the early Web—truly, a love letter. Indeed, the website's enthusiastic reception suggests Askin's longing or love for the early 90s Web aesthetic is shared by many.

To say that restorative acts of nostalgia are personal reflections of an individual longing for particular elements of the longed-for object would capture only part of it, because the creators of both *Cameron's World* and *One Terabyte* both choose to highlight features of the GeoCities aesthetic they think will be easily recognized by their audiences, thereby inviting us to partake in a shared nostalgia. Both projects suggest the potential of nostalgic restoration as a creative practice that can speak to both personal and communal longing, residing in the gray area between history and myth, documentation and “love letter.”

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NOTES

- 1 *GeoCities* appears also as *Geocities* in some sources. The online meme encyclopedia *Know Your Meme* documents the boom of 90s-oriented nostalgia manifesting in "remember this?"—style video, images and lists. It notes that "in comparison to the celebration of the '80s during the first half of the 2000s, which was largely led by decade nostalgia TV programs, the ongoing resurgence of interest in the 90s pop culture is distinguished by its extended presence in the social media and online participation" (Rhoades 2014). *Buzzfeed*, for example, is notorious for churning out listicles curating things from the 90s only Millennials will remember, e.g. "48 Reasons '90s Kids Had The Best Childhood" (Sept. 10 2014).
- 2 TiMidity++, originally called TiMidity, is a software synthesizer that can play MIDI files.
- 3 Affordances are possibilities for what users can do with a platform, such as manipulating, sharing, linking, and expressing reactions to content. Don Norman adapted and popularized the term for design theory with his discussion of how physical and graphical interfaces result in "perceived affordances" in *Design of Everyday Things* (2013). The term has been used lately in auto/biography studies to prompt thinking about the features of genres, platforms, and interfaces that guide and constrain representations of identity (e.g. Morrison 2014).