Thimbl:

A Free, Decentralized Microblogging Platform and Performative Economic Fiction

by Telekommunisten

The Telekommunisten Collective thinks that people should finger each other often as possible. Maybe even several times a day, hell, why not once an hour? As often as you like!

People thrive on interaction with other people. Mutual stimulation is a deeply felt human need, a key characteristic of what makes us human. Imagine that instead of reading your status updates on Twitter or Facebook, your friends would just finger you instead.

The Finger protocol was originally developed in the 1970s as a way to publish user and status information, such as who you are, what you're working on, and what you're doing now. This is how the relatively few folks with access to networks posted pithy personal bios. From when colourful polyester pants were still groovy until the 90s people used to Finger each other all the time!

Finger evolved into a completely decentralized system, where any user could finger any other user as long as they were both on the Internet. There were no big companies in the middle to control these users, or monitor them, or try to turn their personal data into money. Fingering was a personal matter between users, direct and unmediated, and nobody really knew exactly who was fingering who. Promiscuous, right?

Sadly, these heady days of open relationships slowly came to an end. Finger software was developed before the Internet had many users, and before development was driven by commercial interests. The idea was bold, but the software was primitive.

Capitalists and their desire for profit have no interest in such freedom and promiscuity and chose to instead fund centrally controlled systems, in which they are intermediaries. Investors wanted control, so that they can commodify and monetize these relationships. Instead of users fingering each other with reckless abandon, people are now stuck with centralized, privately owned services like Facebook; chaperoning their relationships, imposing user policies on them, and monitoring and monetizing their conversation.

Back in June 2010, Telekommunisten had had enough! "People must be freed from these puritanical, controlling, consumerist, profit-seeking cults", they thought. If witchcraft, wet shaving, rocker hair and skinny jeans could make comebacks, why not Finger?

The Thimbl project was born, and immediately started working on giving the project an online identity and releasing tools to create a microblogging platform built on Finger, that groovy 70s protocol.

Join us in inscribing upon on our banners the revolutionary slogan, "Don't be a Twit, it feels good to be fingered!"

The Open Web can aspire to continue the peer-to-peer legacy of the classic internet applications. Decentralized platforms such as Usenet, email and IRC were not controlled by any one organization,

and do not directly capture profit. The web has been the focus of the commercialization of the internet due to it's client-server architecture that gives full control to the website operator. This control is required by the logic of Capitalist finance in order to capture value. Without such control profit-seeking investors do not provide funds.

However, this control comes at a cost. Centralized systems are far less efficient at managing online communications than decentralized systems. The corporate, web-based communication-platforms that emerged under the Web 2.0 monicker are hungry for more than just Capital. The huge datacenters required to run them also consume massive natural resources and energy, and cause massive amounts of pollution. Yet, desipite all, these platforms still commonly experience scaling issues and frequent outages, straining under the profit-imposed need to centralize control. And this in a world where the majority of the global population does in practical terms not have access to the internet. Of course, environmental concerns are not the only issue with overly centralized systems. Perhaps even of greater concern are the implications for privacy and freedom of speech and association when control of our social technology is held by only a few private corporations.

Lost in the hype of the Social Web is the fact that the Internet has always been about sharing: Usenet, email and IRC have for a long time enabled social connections, including citizen journalism, photo sharing, and other features of recent web-based systems.

Thimbl demonstrates the potential for integrating classic internet technologies into the Open Web. On the surface, Thimbl appears to be yet another microblogging service, similar to Twitter or identi.ca. However, Thimbl is a specialized web-based client for a User Information protocol called Finger. The Finger Protocol was orginally developed in the 1970s, and as such, is already supported by all existing server platforms.

Thimbl offers no way to sign up. It is up to your own webhost, internet service-provider or system administrator to provide accounts. Virtually every server on the intenret already has Finger server software available in its software repository. All that is required for any organisation to provide Thimbl accounts is to simply turn their Finger service on. In most cases, this would take the server administator no more than a few minutes, after which all of their users could log in to thimbl.net and participate. So Thimbl is a call to arms for users to demand this option.

Most importantly, Thimbl has embedded within it a vision for the Open Web that goes beyond the web. For the web to be truly open it must integrate pervasivaly in to the internet as a whole. The internet has always has been much more than the web.

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#Thimbl, Social Media Week, @dsearls and Economic Fiction as a Performative Artwork

Thimbl[1] has been getting some attention lately, party because of my talk at Social Media Week Berlin[2], partly because of a tweet by the legendary Doc Searls[3].

Despite being part of Transmediale 2010 and winning a distinction at the festival, many people don't seem to realize that Thimbl is an artwork.

It's a part of Telekommnunisten's Miscommunication Technologies series along with such works as deadSwap[4] and r15n[5]. Miscommunication Technologies uncover the social relations embedded in communication technology, creating platforms that don't often work as expected, or work in unexpected ways.

I suppose the fact that Thimbl is an artwork was a surprise to the organizers of Social Media Week, and perhaps would be to Doc Searls as well. Who, like many of the people in the audience at Social Media Week might be thinking. Huh? What makes this art exactly?

The answer is surprisingly simple, it's art because it is carried out in an art context, at events like Transmediale, Hack.Fem.East, Sousevelance, and at places such the Piet Zwart Institute and the Israeli Center for Digital Art.

These works function as a kind of performative science fiction. Introducing the narrative of the political economy of the Internet into the media arts community by way of interactive artworks in the form of telephone and internet platforms. Much like the Telekommunist Manifesto introduces the same topics in text. Among the core messages that we wish to contribute to the media art dialogue is an understanding of how centralization and decentralization relate to exploitation and freedom, respectively.

Thimbl is an artwork, not really an alternative to Facebook, Twitter, or even Identi.ca, as it was billed at Social Media Week. Although programmed into the event unwittingly by the organisers, everyone was non-the-less quite pleased at the results, and with the discusion that ensued.

Thimbl is about the need for decentralized social media, and illustrates that this is something that has always been a part of the Internet, while also showing that it's not really so difficult to implement.

Even though it's ambitions are symbolic, Thimbl actually works.

Because it is decentralized, we can't know how many users it has, but you can see the global timeline of all users that we do know about on our own ThimblSinging[6] instance. If you have a finger account on any server, anywhere, with a Thimbl-compatible plan file[7], you can use this site as well, and start using Thimbl without installing anything from the Thimbl project on your own server.

Or, you can grab the code and host a instance of ThimblSinging yourself.[8] If you prefer the command line, or want to script something, Thimbl-CLI[9] is available, as is the thimblr gem that comes with ThimblSinging.

Even the GMail of Thimbl already exists; Phimbl.tk[10], where you can just sign up and have a Thimbl account.

And PageKite[11] has added support for Thimbl too, meaning you can even easily self-host your Thimbl

account, if you want to, perhaps even on your mobile device.

So, if all this exists, why is Thimbl not a real alternative?

Well, for one, we made it as an artwork because it has merit as such, wether or not it becomes a viable platform. Some ideas that emerge from science fiction become reality, and some don't, yet the predictive science doesn't directly determine the merit of the work of fiction.

However, that's not the main reason. Perhaps even calling it science fiction is misleading here. It's not Thimbl's technical viability that's speculative, but rather it's economic viability.

Thimbl is an economic fiction.

Making it work is not the greatest challenge, making it financially viable is. Thimbl does not provide investors with the ability to control it's users or their data, and as Thimbl's Manifesto[12] states "This control is required by the logic of Capitalist finance in order to capture value. Without such control profit-seeking investors do not provide funds."

For Thimbl, or any other platform with a simular vision, to become a real alternative to the capitalist financed platforms like Facebook and Twitter, we need more than running code, even more than a small, perhaps dedicated, user base. These assets are only enough to keep it going as a lively, yet marginal underground medium. A fun platform for experts and enthusiasts, unknown and unknowable to the masses.

To get beyond this and actually break the monopolizing grip of centralized social media we need to match their productive capacities. We need financing on a simular scale. so that the development, marketing, and operations budgets are comparable and sufficient to compete. That is what is required to be a true alternative, not a symbolic one. Yet, Capitalism can not provide such financing.

Just like science fiction becomes reality when science transcends the limitations that existed when the fiction was imagined, for economic fiction like Thimbl to become reality economics will need to transcend the limitations that we currently face.

We can write code, we can write texts, we can create artworks, but as a small network of artists and hackers, we can't change the economic conditions we work in by ourselves.

That is why Thimbl is an artwork; its message must transform society for its vision to become reality. It is a manifesto, written in code.

If you want to see the project succeed, join us, grab the code and ideas you want and run with them.

[1] http://thimbl.net
[2] http://bit.ly/yy6uPU
[3] http://bit.ly/zAaAlw
[4] http://deadswap.net
[5] http://docs.telekommunisten.org/r15n
[6] http://thimbl.tk
[7] http://j.mp/dotplan
[8] https://github.com/fguillen/ThimblSinging
[9] https://github.com/blippy/Thimbl-CLI
[10] http://phimbl.tk
[11] http://pagekite.net/wiki/Howto/FingerAndThimbl
[12] http://www.thimbl.net/manifesto.html

Thimbl, Unlike Us & A Pair of Inconvenient Paradoxes

The Institute for Network Cultures will be holding the 2nd Unlike Us conference (1), "Understanding Social Media Monopolies and Their Alternatives." I'll be there, representing Telekommunisten's Thimbl(2), which will be present among many other projects.

Thimbl is quite different from the other projects. Conceived as an artwork, a "performative economic fiction," Thimbl is a symbolic work that artistically explores the obstacles faced by projects that seek to create an alternative to social media monopolies.

Well-meaning technologists or social media enthusiasts initiate most projects, and as a result, they start in a rather irrelevant place: technology. They start coding and architecting better solutions, to the best of their ability, yet the primary problem they face is not technological.

In Andrew Feenberg's McLuhan lecture at Transmediale 2012 (3), "10 Paradoxes of Technology," Feenberg describes what he calls the "The Paradox of the Frame," and argues that "Efficiency does not explain success; success explains efficiency."

Feenberg argues that certain technologies become efficient as a result of further development and investment. However, these technologies were chosen for development or investment in the first place for social reasons, generally the choice is motivated by political and economic reasons. The eventually successful technology was often originally chosen over more intrinsically efficient alternatives.

This paradox is perhaps nowhere more apparent than it is in social media. The Internet has always been about sharing, and decentralized sharing technologies such as usenet, IRC and finger have been and continue to be available. Yet, these technologies have not been chosen for further development and investment once capital became the driving force, centralized platforms like Facebook have.

Facebook was chosen because the choosers are venture capitalists who need to have a means of capturing profit in order to have a return on their investment. Thus, the more intrinsically efficient decentralized technologies were not chosen, since they fail to provide the very thing that capital requires; control and scarcity. As a result of being chosen by venture capitalists, Facebook could obtain the needed financing required to become efficient enough, despite the massive disadvantages poised by its centralized architecture.

Facebook's business model of capturing and monetizing user data and interaction was appealing to investors, and thus Facebook was successful at attracting investment and financing development.

So, if Facebook was chosen because it allows investors to control users and monetize their use of the platform, than newer, even better designed open and decentralized alternatives, like the many that will be presented at Unlike Us, will likewise not be chosen, as they are no more appealing to venture capitalist investors than the classic decentralized internet platforms were.

Thimbl addresses this by creating a decentralized microblogging platform based on the old finger protocol, a

platform for posting status updates that was developed in the 1970s. The explicit point of this is that the challenge faced by those working towards alternatives to social media monopolies are not technological, the technology is the easy part, the challenge is political.

The challenge is to overcome the hegemonic economic power of those that finance these monopolies.

This is not a challenge that can be programmed around, it is a challenge that requires a social solution. So long as the development of our technological platforms are directed by the profit motive, the platforms will need to engineer in the control and scarcity that capitalism requires.

In their March 2011 Monthly Review article (4), John Bellamy Foster and Robert W. McChesney, apply another paradox, The "Lauderdale Paradox" named for James Maitland, 8th Earl of Lauderdale. Foster and McChesney phrase the implications of Maitland's paradox as "Scarcity … is a necessary requirement for something to have value in exchange, and to augment private riches". Their conclusion is that the communications platforms must be removed from the domain of capital, and be made available as a public good.

> *'An innovation is commercially developed, and a market created, only by finding a way to "wall" off a sector of public wealth and effectively privatize and monopolize it, leading to huge returns. Information, which is a public good—by nature available to all and, if consumed by one person, still available to others— is, in this way, turned into a scarce private commodity through the exercise of sheer market power.'*

– John Bellamy Foster & Robert W. McChesney

This is the real problem faced by those who seek to create alternatives to social media monopolies. Any genuine alternative would need to first identify, not a new way of developing and architecting a technical solution, but a new way of financing the development at a sufficient scale to rival the capital funded platforms.

'Communication is more than an ordinary market. Indeed, it is properly not a market at all. It is more like air or water—a form of public wealth, a commons.'

– John Bellamy Foster & Robert W. McChesney

Making something into a public good is a social choice, something that society must undertake, it is not a technical innovation that software developers can develop on their own.

As I wrote following Social Media Week back in October (5): 'Just like science fiction becomes reality when science transcends the limitations that existed when the fiction was imagined, for economic fiction like Thimbl to become reality, economics will need to transcend the limitations that we currently face'

(1) http://networkcultures.org/wpmu/unlikeus/2-amsterdam/program/
(2) http://thimbl.net/manifest.html
(3) http://www.transmediale.de/node/20769
(4) http://monthlyreview.org/2011/03/01/the-internets-unholy-marriage-to-capitalism
(5) http://wp.me/p24fqL-Z
(6) http://bit.ly/buchhandlung
(7) http://xlterrestrials.org/plog/?p=8342