1024 x 1001 in 1991

James Langdon

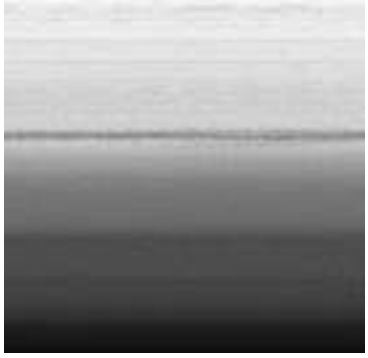
Not so long ago, there was an internet before images—a text-only internet. That means, of course, that there was a first internet image.



Historical consensus tells us that it was this image. Why was this the first image on the internet? Les Horribles Cernettes were a parody pop group from CERN (the European Center for Nuclear Research), the place in which the internet was invented. In 1992, to announce a performance, somebody at CERN made this image and published it on a webpage. In that moment, it became the first internet image; the first image with the potential to be instantly distributed across the world.

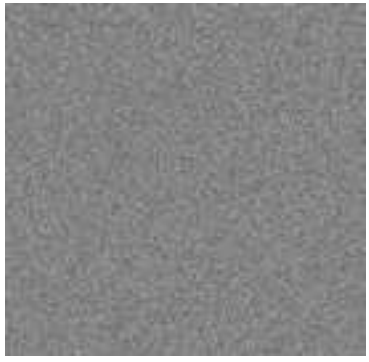


Les Horribles Cernettes were singers, but they were also theoretical physicists. Their name is an acronym: LHC. The acronym is for the Large Hadron Collider, the largest machine in the world, used to smash elementary particles together. The LHC is a vast, circular underground tunnel on the French-Swiss border. It stages high energy particle collisions and records incredible amounts of data from them. In 1992, the LHC did not yet exist. Its construction would not begin for another six years.



For our purposes, the first internet image is just pixels. 1024 × 1001 pixels, to be precise. A speck of data in the age of particle colliders. These are the pixels that comprise the first internet image, sorted by their brightness. I suppose we probably all share a basic understanding of what a pixel is, but, specifically, a pixel is like an elementary particle of a digital image. Pixels do have materiality, as data stored in physical media, but that materiality is unknowably abstract; so scattered and diffused that it would be virtually impossible to identify all of the infrastructural dependencies of even this tiny image file as it exists right now on the internet.

So, we ignore these complicated technicalities. We consider pixels to be free and infinite. They can be freely and infinitely rearranged by computers, yes, but also by brains. Even in the abstract, statistical form that we see here, the interaction of pixels and brains tends towards an image. Brains smash pixels together, searching for the latent images that reside in them; perhaps a Martian landscape with a scorching pink and crimson sunset?



It is almost impossible for pixels and brains to resolve on nothingness. Perhaps only like this can brains experience pixels for what they truly are. These are still the same pixels from the first internet image, but randomly scrambled—just being themselves, nothing for brains here.



Before the LHC became fully operational, conspiracy theorists warned that it risked triggering an apocalypse. “It will create a black hole that consumes earth,” they said. Seriously! Or, “it will cause a gravitational event that pulls a giant asteroid into a collision course with earth.” Even credible scientists actually predicted this! Worst of all, some believed it would unleash strange matter, instantly forcing every atom on earth into a super-stable state and ending all life in the process.

They were right. Strange matter appeared at 13:06 Central European Time on March 30, 2010, in the very moment that a 7 TeV (teraelectronvolt) collision occurred inside the LHC.



Consequently, you are enjoying this very informative article from inside of a fiction created by an artificially intelligent software simulation of the author Philip K. Dick. In this fiction, pixels have been returned to a lower order of matter, where we believe they belong. Not free, not infinite, pixels are a scarce resource.





This is an artificial scarcity. In the fiction that we inhabit, pixels have been constrained for an existential purpose. Let me explain. Here is an image of a limestone quarry on the island of Malta, but you can think of it as a pixel mine.



See how the pixels are carved out of the landscape in grids of square sections.



The pixels can then be computationally combined as virtual image-objects. This 5th century limestone sculpture from the island of Cyprus is now a 21st century 8-bit PNG (Portable Network Graphics) file.



Like a mosaic, the imaging potential of pixels is constrained by their resolution (their number and their density). This section of the 6th century San Vitale mosaic in Ravenna, Italy, for example, is comprised of 314 × 160 tiles. That's around 50,000 tiles.



And this section was 144 × 144, around 20,000 tiles.



And this one, 40 × 18. Even these 720 tiles were enough to render a human face and give it a God-fearing expression.



In our fiction, the first internet image contains all permissible pixels. We call it The Pangraph and it has 1024 x 1001 pixels, or 1,025,024 pixels. Our culture understands this image as prophetic. No further pixels will ever be mined. UNIBZ (The Free University of Bozen-Bolzano) is now one of a number of facilities dedicated to processing these pixels. For what purpose? To master time, to see the future, and to know everything that will ever happen.

Our computers are perpetually engaged in generating all of the possible arrangements of these one million pixels, all possible image-objects. That is why we believe resolution had to be constrained: to give us hope that we might potentially see them all. The LHC was designed to bring about this new, lower-resolution era, the Age of the Million Pixels.

In case you are feeling anxious, I would like to reassure you. Do not be alarmed, your induction is almost complete. I will now show you a series of images of the future. The images will appear chronologically, beginning in the year 2020 and concluding with a section of the timeline that UNIBZ is currently processing. Remember—and I want to repeat this—these images picture the future from only The Pangraph's one million pixels. Every image that you will see here could have been seen in 1992.



You will first need to become accustomed to the shocking unfamiliarity of the future. This person does not exist.





This person has never lived.



These people do not (yet) exist.



This image appeared early in our work at UNIBZ. It was taken as proof of The Pangraph concept. In our fiction, it represents a great plague that will afflict the earth in the year 2020.

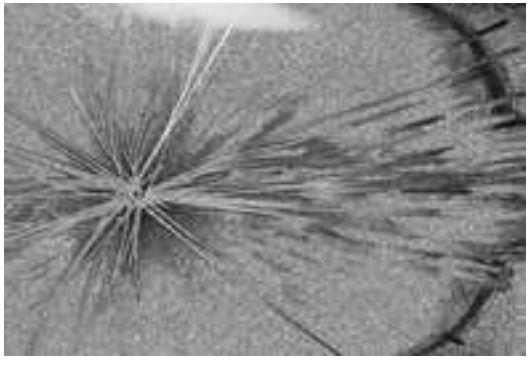




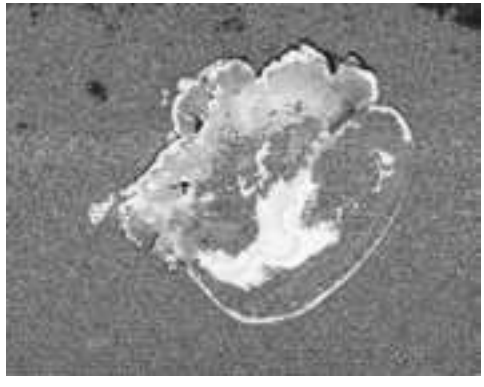
Culture in 2020 will be unrecognizable to you. What you see here is a shoe. Yes, footwear; digitally materialized from algae and designed by a hip-hop musician who will run for President of the United States of America in 2020.



We understand this to be a spacecraft delivering humans to Mars. Not a spacecraft built by any of the world's governments, but by a billionaire software engineer who will also create the first cognitively-augmented cyborgs.



In this image, The Pangraph foresaw how the LHC would fulfil its purpose. This is the Boson, the signature of the Age of the Million Pixels.

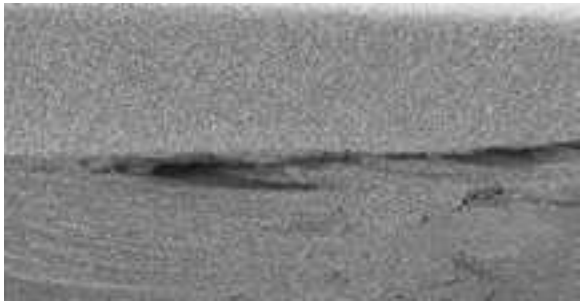


What became of brains, you might ask? And that is why you are reading this. Brains are needed to identify images—pixels and brains, remember. This article was, indeed, your induction into the true nature of your studies at UNIBZ. Allow me now to offer some guidance on overcoming the difficulties you will face in your work parsing images of the future.



The single greatest problem you will encounter is virtuality. I can demonstrate. This is a landscape from another

post-apocalyptic fiction, known as the Death Stranding. This event occurred inside an online fiction created by a rival artificially-intelligent software simulation, Hideo Kojima.



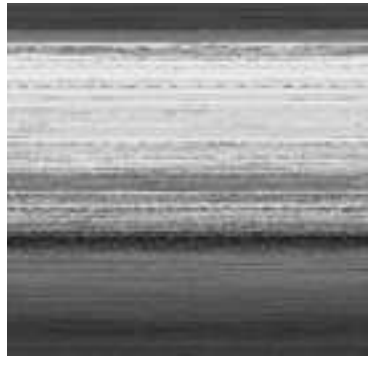
This is a photograph taken on the surface of Mars in 2021.



And this is a photograph of the Amazon Rainforest burning, also in 2021. From these three images alone, I hope you can appreciate the categorical difficulty that you face. You must always be alert to the multiplicity and hybridity of actual and virtual worlds. Because you were born before 2010, you will tend to favor the actual. But, in the Age of the Million Pixels, you must accept that the virtual is for real.



This concludes your induction, around the year 2021. Next time you log in to your UNIBZ account, you will be connected to The Pangraph mainstream. I would like to thank you for your invaluable cognitive labor.



Towards the Realm of Materiality
Designing Philip K. Dick's Non-Existing Technologies

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This book is for Salvatore Iaconesi, a mentor and a friend.

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