

WHAT'S GOING ON HERE

This zine is part of a series of footnote zines to the project “Memetic Engines of Anticapitalism.” Due to a whole lot of complications (mainly involving chronic illness) the version of this zine is at some stage of draft, not the polished and complete edition.

All of these zines will be available for free online and in perpetuity when they're finished, and updated regularly in the meantime.

If you want to follow up, the QR code on the front of this zine will take you straight to the most recent web page edition and an archive of each iteration that was separately published.

For more general updates and information on the whole project, this QR code will take you straight to memeticengines.com, where you can see the overview and any news about the works, sign up for the mailing list, or get in touch with me to ask clarifying questions.

ZINES IN THE SERIES:

Replicate, Mutate, Select
The Memetic Landscape
This Is Propaganda
Ethical Hypocrisy
Little Ideas in Memetics
Capital's Not Capitalism
What Are Pacta
Some other awful things that are inevitable under capitalism
The Third Derivative of Value
This Is George
Self-Destruct, LLC.

AND COMING SOON,

My Chronic Illness as a Case Study in the Shortcomings of Capitalism



MEMETICENGINES.COM

The Memetic Landscape

Note: Due to complications surrounding a chronic illness (see upcoming zine "My Chronic Illness as a Case Study in the Shortcomings of Capitalism") the text of several of these zines, including this one, is incomplete. Where this is the case, I've done my best to make a pamphlet that gives the general idea. As these works are completed, you'll be able to find them online at memeticengines.com.

By T.X. Watson



The role of the environment in evolution

The environmental circumstances surrounding a replicator are not just important in evolution: They're everything. Evolution is sometimes summarized as "survival of the fittest," but 'fitness' is not an abstract, quantifiable value. It refers literally to how well the replicator fits into a specific environment.

Environments generate agents that are suited to them. This is as true in memetics as it is in every other evolutionary context. And those things that grow within the environment are themselves intrinsically part of that environment: eventually, when things get complicated enough, more of the environment is made of other living things than inert matter.

Memetic Landscape

So, the memetic environment is made of raw material, like water and stone: the material of memetic entities is paper, tablets, human minds, film, computers, and so on. Those materials have a huge influence on the way that things evolve.

But the other memetic entities out there also make up a whole lot of the environment. When new things are born and begin to grow, they have to contend with the other systems that are already around, that already have a lot of impact on the environment, and that very much don't want the environment to change, because they don't want to wind up optimized for a system that used to exist.

When someone says an idea is "ahead of its time," this is what that means: that an idea was good by human standards, but that the memetic environment was extremely hostile to it.

Memetic biomes

Globally there's a general tendency towards particular kinds of ideas surviving in the world, but localized spaces are often very good at cultivating particular kinds of entities that wouldn't survive out in the open, but that have a lot of power once they have their feet under them.

Colleges are an example of this kind of space: an environment where the culture is specifically tuned to be hospitable to ideas based on the criteria of usefulness, correctness, ethics, or aesthetic value. They succeed at this goal to varying degrees and never completely, but the difference between ideas that flourish on a college campus and ideas that flourish outside that space is nonetheless significant.

But that's a positive example, and I want to be clear that memetic biomes are ethically neutral.

The other side of the coin is a place like 4chan: an environment organized around cultivating and reinforcing the narrative of white male entitlement and socially normative pressure.

Biome Engineering

Efforts to influence an environment always face pushback from that environment itself, but it's very possible to deliberately adjust them.

Hampshire College, for example, is an experimental, planned biome, designed to cultivate new approaches to higher ed. And in politics there's a name for it: the Overton Window, a moving target that describes the range of acceptable political views, illustrates the idea that pushing media attention to an extreme position can reframe other positions as reasonable by contrast.