

# **BUCOLIC LIFE IN THE DIGITAL REALM.**

EXPLORING THE  
APORIAS OF DIGITAL  
DESIGN: THE  
IMMATERIALITY OF  
DIGITAL EXPERIENCES  
AND THE DEPTH  
OF SENSORY  
ATMOSPHERES

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## ESSAY 187/12

DIGITAL DESIGN

POST-VISUAL ATMOSPHERES

DIGITAL AESTHETICS

In a time when digital environments have increasingly become abstract and disconnected, we are seeing a resurgence of natural and bucolic imagery to describe, design, and engage with the Web. These metaphors go beyond simple rhetorical devices; they represent earnest efforts to redefine the atmosphere of our digital experiences, pushing back against the sterile functionalism that characterized the early decades of digital design. By

critically examining the vibrant movement of digital humanities, this essay aims to trace the origins and potential developments of new aesthetics in digital design. Concepts like Deleuze's Rhizome, Dark Forest theory, Digital Gardens, and Solarpunk aesthetics emerge as reflections of a design ethos that seeks to reintegrate sensory, temporal, and ecological elements into spaces typically perceived as solely visual and mediated.

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, design historiography has increasingly recognized the validity of examining the digital from a historical perspective. Given the rapid developments in sophisticated computational technologies, it seems more beneficial to approach the digital through an archaeological lens before diving into historiography. The archaeological method enables us to uncover “points of insurgence” (Agamben, 2018), revealing elements from the past that may have been overlooked but can serve as a “historical apriori” (Agamben, 2018).

The evolution of digital technologies has paved an incredible path in the realms of STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), while also making significant contributions to the humanities. This growth is largely attributed to a multidisciplinary approach that has led to the emergence of the *digital humanities*. A key text in this field, “Digital Humanities” (Burdick et al., 2012), notes, “The model we have created is experimental. It moves design—information design, graphics, typography, formal and rhetorical patterning—to the center of the research questions that it poses”.

The text further explains that this model is collaborative and committed to public knowledge. It is designed for a diverse audience with varied and sometimes conflicting interests and needs. As such, it is presented as a flexible construct: both a guide for the perplexed and an invitation to engage, serving as a tool to critically examine new forms of scholarship concerning contemporary society. However, within this new focus on design, which is shaped by technology, we notice a significant absence of the sensory and synaesthetic aspects that have historically defined the field of Design. As Eskilson highlights in his essay “*Digital Design: A History*” (2023), “the digital cannot be separated from the analog. For all its talk of disruption, the digital is firmly

connected to the past,” which helps clarify the common misconceptions surrounding the real versus virtual debate. In this essay – as I stated – we’ll adopt an archaeological perspective to explore the relationship between design and the digital by tracing the evolution of representations. We move from a more practical, functional, and intuitive mode of “figurative speaking” to a symbolic approach that aims to capture the atmosphere, climate, or inherent qualities of a digital environment through the use of more intricate imagery. The metaphors and analogies that link the digital to reality are no longer simply linguistic tools or conceptual shortcuts; instead, they are intertwined with profound metaphysical themes.

#### TRANSITIONING FROM DESKTOP METAPHORS TO DIGITAL ECOSYSTEMS

In the early days, digital interfaces emerged, creating a significant reliance on physical metaphors in design. The introduction of the *Xerox Alto* in 1973 and the *Macintosh* in 1984 brought forth the desk metaphor: an easily grasped visual representation that helped translate abstract concepts into familiar objects. These pioneering interfaces were fundamentally Cartesian, characterized by neat grids, clear hierarchies, and linear relationships. They conjured an environment reminiscent of a streamlined office space, efficient yet emotionally sterile, populated by items like trash cans, folders, and files (Figure 1).

In the 1990s, a shift towards more organic design concepts began to take shape, notably through the work of pioneers like Muriel Cooper at the MIT Media Lab. She embarked on innovative explorations of three-dimensional interfaces and fluid information spaces. Her groundbreaking project, “Information Landscapes” (1994), (Figure 2) marked a significant departure from

the constraints of two-dimensional design, enabling users to “fly” through dynamic realms of information. Simultaneously, the rise of the World Wide Web began to expose the shortcomings of traditional hierarchical models, particularly the tree metaphor and its foundational decision diagrams rooted in computer science.

Alongside the frequent use of maritime metaphors such as “navigating the web” and “net”, the rapid expan-



**Fig. 1** John Feagans, Andy Finkel, Michael Tomczyk, Jeff Bruette, *Main screen of Magic Desk I*, 1983. Retrieved November 10, 2025 from wikipedia.org

sion of the internet also brought attention to the arboreal metaphor of the *rhizome*, as proposed by French post-structuralists Deleuze and Guattari. This idea began to resonate more with designers and theorists as it contrasted sharply with the rigid hierarchy of early operating systems that relied on nested folders. The Web, in its essence, offered a non-hierarchical framework, built on hyperlinks that interconnected content in a crosswise manner, allowing for a more fluid and dynamic exploration of information.

Pioneering projects like *Rhizome.org* (1996) not only embraced the concept but also integrated rhizomatic principles into their design, promoting unexpected connections and nonlinear pathways. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, ventures such as Stuart Moulthrop's "Victory Garden" and the "net.art" aesthetic intentionally delved into nonlinear structures and surprising interactions. The atmosphere in these digital spaces was distinctly different: less about control and more about exploration, marked by a sense of ongoing discovery and emerging connections.

#### THE DARK FOREST: SHELTER DESIGN IN THE AGE OF SURVEILLANCE

With the rise of centralized social media and heightened digital surveillance in the early 2010s (Zuboff, 2019; Bridle, 2018), a new metaphor has taken shape: *the dark forest*. Popularized by Yancey Strickler in 2019, though it had been around in various forms prior, this term illustrates an Internet that increasingly resembles a shadowy forest where creatures must conceal themselves to evade predators. In this context, the predators include advertisers, tracking bots, clickbait creators, attention-seeking influencers, trolls, and other malicious entities that have multiplied across the public web.

This metaphor has sparked a trend in (un)design that we might refer to as "protective atmospheres" or the "cozy web." In response to a challenging online landscape, individuals often seek refuge in their *Dark Forests*—private or semi-private spaces that allow for a sense of security. These include invitation-only *Slack* channels, *WhatsApp* groups, *Discord* chats, *Telegram* streams, private newsletters, and even exclusive discussion forums or private *Instagram* accounts (Figure 3).



**Fig. 2** Muriel Cooper, David Small, Suguru Ishizaki, Earl Rennison, Robert Silvers, Lisa Strausfeld, Jeffrey Ventrella, Yin Yin Wong. *Information Landscapes*, 1994. Retrieved November, 10, 2025 from <http://www.revue-backoffice.com/>

These spaces provide an opportunity for relaxed conversations that are free from the pressures of indexing, optimization, and gamification, which often define traditional social media platforms. They foster psychological and reputational safety, where knowing other members and having a limited audience allows individuals to express themselves without the fear of judgment or backlash. Embracing “Scandinavian” principles, these environments promote a more balanced atmosphere that prioritizes social and emotional safety, in stark contrast to the chaotic nature of the wider internet.

In the *Dark Forest*, websites and platforms operate beyond the reach of mainstream visibility. Their content is hard to discover through search engines; they aren’t designed to boost engagement or increase visibility; they

lack gamification features like point systems, rankings, or rewards; and they primarily remain hidden from the public. Access is usually limited to invited members only.

This type of radical approach to an ethical design clearly presents several challenges. These include the need to navigate governance models, ensure financial sustainability, achieve interoperability, and build a sufficient critical mass to make the alternative system effective, all while maintaining robust cybersecurity.

Several alternative platforms, like *Mastodon*, have embraced the concept of creating smaller, more manageable “lobbies”—almost like small clearings in a dense digital forest. A prime example of this shift is *Are.na*, launched in 2012. This platform offers digital spaces infused with contemplative minimalism, where the lack of intrusive algorithms fosters genuine reflection and connection. *Are.na*’s design, featuring ample white space and a non-competitive atmosphere, inspires a sense of freedom and possibility that stands in stark contrast to the often stifling environment of algorithm-driven feeds.

#### DIGITAL GARDENS: A NON-LINEAR DESIGN AND ORGANIC GROWTH

In the mid-2010s, the frenetic nature of social media led to the rise of the *digital gardens* movement. This (un)design philosophy shifts away from the traditional reverse chronology and the constant urge for fresh content. Instead, it embraces a more thoughtful approach that values organic growth, continuous refinement, and a layered narrative of time. This creates a richer and more sustainable digital experience for users.

The term dates back to the early days of the Internet, specifically in 1998, when Mark Bernstein first introduced the concept of the “hypertext garden” (Figure

3). He advocated for creating online spaces that offer people the chance to explore the unknown. Bernstein described these gardens as existing “between farmland and wilderness,” noting that they are designed to be pleasurable rather than focused on commodity. Today, this idea is being revitalized by both designers and amateurs who are starting to think of their digital spaces as gardens to be nurtured, rather than mere streams that require constant feeding.

According to an article by Tanya Basu (2020) for MIT Technology Review:

“The new wave of digital gardens discuss books and movies, with introspective journal entries; others offer thoughts on philosophy and politics. Some are works of art in themselves, visual masterpieces that invite the viewer to explore; others are simpler and more utilitarian, using Google Docs or Wordpress templates to share intensely personal lists. Avid readers in particular have embraced the concept, sharing creative, beautiful digital bookshelves that illustrate their reading journey”.

Andy Matuschak, a former designer at *Apple*, has elevated these concepts with his innovative “evergreen notes” system. This interface allows notes to move laterally, resembling a three-dimensional garden. This design approach fosters an environment of spatial exploration, standing in stark contrast to the linear methods typical of conventional information management systems.

Platforms like *Roam Research* and *Notion* embrace many of these principles, crafting interfaces that foster connections between ideas in a more organic way. The atmosphere within these digital spaces is strikingly different: it feels contemplative rather than chaotic, building on what came before rather than vanishing with time, and it’s more about personal expression than algorithm-driven recommendations.

The concern is that *Digital Gardens* might become nothing more than simple “second brains,” serving solely

**Fig. 3** Maggie Appleton, Diagram of Dark Forest and Cozy Web. Retrieved November, 10, 2025 from <https://maggieappleton.com/>



as tools for managing knowledge and sharing ideas. In doing so, they risk losing their initial spontaneity and poetic essence.

The challenge lies in resisting the urge to mimic the dynamics of the mainstream web, while still maintaining the intimacy, subtlety, and collaborative spirit that define a genuine garden.

#### SOLARPUNK: TOWARD REGENERATIVE DIGITAL DESIGN

In the documentary *All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace* (BBC, 2011), British filmmaker Adam Curtis reconstructs the cultural genealogy of the idea that society and digital technologies could function like natural ecosystems: perfectly self-regulating, harmonious, and neutral systems. This imaginary, born at the intersection of cybernetics, systems theory, and the Californian ide-

**Fig. 4** *The Line, Dear Alice*, 2018 from Bjorn, E.A. (Director). (2018).



ologies of Silicon Valley, profoundly shaped the way the digital realm was conceptualized for decades.

The documentary shows how this vision transformed “nature” into a technical model: an algorithm to be imitated, a mathematical equilibrium to be achieved. In this paradigm, nature is no longer a sensory, complex, ever-changing environment, but an abstract, optimizable device. Curtis highlights how this image shaped the ideology of the early Internet and many techno-utopian narratives, contributing to the construction of digital atmospheres that appear neutral but are, in fact, deeply ideological.

In the early days of the Web, the allure of these emerging digital landscapes and the thrill of a groundbreaking mass communication medium created a vibrant atmosphere that, over time, gradually faded. This story begins in the early 1980s with the rise of a distinct style in American science fiction, prominently championed by William Gibson. In his 1982 short story *Burning Chrome*, Gibson introduced the term “cyberspace.” This era also saw the release of Ridley Scott’s iconic film *Blade Runner*, which, along with influential writers like Bruce Sterling and Donna Haraway, helped solidify a new techno-dystopian aesthetic. This movement, known as *Cyberpunk*, emerged from the underground, gaining traction among web pioneers.

In recent years, however, the *Cyberpunk* aesthetic has been joined by the emerging *Solarpunk* style, which is starting to make waves in digital design. *Solarpunk* envisions a future where technology and nature coexist in a sustainable and harmonious manner. Unlike its dystopian counterpart, *Cyberpunk*, *Solarpunk* presents an optimistic picture where technology enhances human connections rather than distancing us from one another.

On September 4, 2014, Adam Flynn published notes for a *Solarpunk* manifesto in the online platform *Hieroglyph*. This initiative is part of the *Center for Science and the Imagination* at Arizona State University, aimed at promoting

science fiction visions that can spark technological innovations—such as the satellite orbits anticipated by Arthur Clarke and the robots envisioned by Isaac Asimov.

Currently, it's challenging to identify projects that align completely with this atmosphere, which largely resides in the domain of speculative design and literary creation. A striking example of this is a brief animated film created by The Line agency for Chobani in 2018. (Figure 4).

### CONCLUSIONS: BEYOND NOSTALGIA

The arboreal metaphors and design practices we examined go beyond mere aesthetics; they represent our efforts to reconnect with a lost notion of the web. As Pintarelli (2020) highlights, we're currently navigating a significant transformation in our relationship with digital spaces, caught between a sense of restorative nostalgia and reflexive nostalgia.

The core issue lies in the struggle between the longing to regain the intimacy and freedom of early online experiences and the acknowledgment that such a return is unattainable. This creates the haunting effect that Mark Fisher referred to as "Hauntology". Digital gardens, rhizomatic metaphors, and solarpunk aesthetics each represent innovative ways to grapple with this loss, turning it into a potential design opportunity.

Building on Svetlana Boym's insights (2008), our goal is not to recreate a nostalgic version of the past but to channel its imagery of freedom into innovative forms of digital design. In this context, arboreal metaphors serve as powerful tools for aesthetic resistance.

Preserving the essence of the old web is not a matter of sealing it inside a digital museum. It means keeping alive the spirit of experimentation, intimacy, and open-

ness that shaped its early explorations, and translating that legacy into a design sensibility capable of imagining new digital ecologies. The recent turn toward ecological aesthetics can be read as a response to the atmospheric impoverishment of contemporary interfaces: a desire for nature that is not escapist, but a call for sensory depth and perceptual richness — slowness, softness, care, density — qualities progressively eroded by the desktop metaphor and the logic of platformization. The Web, then, is not a territory to be conquered, but a garden to be cultivated collectively.

## NOTES

- 1 See Boudewijnse, G. (2012).
- 2 For more on the genealogy of the metaphor tree see Mattern (2024).
- 3 The hypertextual version of “The Garden of Forking Paths” created for Eastgate System in 1987.
- 4 It is possible to hypothesize a Web positivist phase and a cyber-nihilist phase that has the financial crisis of 2000, the so-called dot.com bubble, as its fault.
- 5 The term was originally coined by Jacques Derrida in his 1993 book *Spectres of Marx*.

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**Article available at**

DOI: 10.60923/issn.2724-2463/21457

**How to cite**

Rita, F. (2025). Bucolic life in the digital realm. Exploring the aporias of digital design: The immateriality of digital experiences and the depth of sensory atmospheres. *img journal*, 12, 438-453.



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